Sanctioning Sacrilege: Towards Rereading Judges as Christian Scripture

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Abstract

This dissertation presents fresh readings of several episodes within the book of Judges and offers hermeneutical suggestions as a way towards rereading Judges as Christian Scripture. Reading with the grain of the text, I argue that several narratives are "sanctioning sacrilege" — they are condemning the characters and their actions not only when read as part of Israel's Scriptures but also when *reread* as Christian Scripture. Chapter 1 surveys the reception of the Curse of Meroz (Judg. 5:23) in 18th century Britain and colonial America to provide a sympathetic account of how Christians in similar social settings could read and use a single verse from the book of Judges in a variety of ways. Chapter 2 offers a fresh interpretation of the Ehud narrative (Judg. 3:12-30) which rereads the protagonist as an anti-hero whose methods of deliverance are incongruous with the way YHWH has chosen to act through Israel. Ehud's violent actions, though they effect liberation, are presented in a way that may appear more sinister when read as part of Israel's Scriptures. Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of exemplarity and its resistance in early Jewish and Christian receptions of Samson. Chapter 4 continues to explore the characterisation of Samson within Israel's Scriptures. The final chapter highlights the cultic dimension of Judges 17-21 and its thematic resonances within Judges and the Deuteronomistic History to argue that the refrain is a call for Israel's leader—whoever that may be—to recommit to following YHWH and to lead Israel in doing what is right in YHWH's eyes. It is argued that the function of Judges 17-21 is to provide a retrospective analysis of the problems Israel faces within the book of Judges, namely that the corrosion of Israelite society began with the corruption of the priesthood.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Abbreviations

Where abbreviations are used, they follow the conventions as set out in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, Second Edition (SBL Press, 2014).

Declaration

This work has been submitted to Durham University in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work, and no part of it has been previously submitted to the Durham University or in any other university for a degree.

STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

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— Introduction —

The Dilemma of Reading as Christian Scripture

"Why don't we go in the middle of the night and smash their idols like Gideon did?" This was the question I asked my father as we drove by the local Buddhist temple on our way to my elementary school. He responded simply, "We don't do that, because that is not what Christians do." Setting aside the fact that this was a father speaking to his young son and was obviously not concerned with historical accuracy, the question touches on a hermeneutical problem for a Christian reading of the book of Judges. If these narratives are not for a straightforward ethical imitation in the present (as at least some other parts of Scripture presumably are), then what are they good for? How can this text continue to function as Christian Scripture when so many of its stories feature events and actions that would be viewed as reprehensible, not only in other places of the Tanakh and New Testament, but by many readers today?

The place of the book of Judges within Jewish and Christian Scripture makes it necessary for these faith communities to engage with its subject matter. The way that Judges, along with other parts of the Bible, has been used towards the promulgation of misogyny, violence, oppression, genocide, etc. makes it equally necessary for readers to engage these texts ethically and responsibly in the present. The principal difficulty is that the narratives within the book of Judges contain acts of intense violence, including assassination, child sacrifice, genocide, and rape. It is no wonder that such texts are rarely, if at all, found within the preaching or liturgy of Christian services. If they were, one could easily imagine the average churchgoer to respond to the call, "This is the word of the Lord" with a hesitant, "Thanks be to God?"

In recent times, readers of the book of Judges have generally responded in one of two ways. Believing the text to be approving of what transpires therein, certain scholars argue that readers must interpret "against the grain" of the text and *sanction* (i.e. critique or condemn) the morally reprehensible actions and/or perspectives of the characters.[1] In her now classic work, *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Trible suggests that readers must tell sad stories, thus countering the narrator, to

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[1] Or in David Clines' words, read from "Left to Right." Cf. *Interested parties: the ideology of writers and readers of the Hebrew Bible*, (Sheffield Academic, 1995), pp. 20-21.

recognise the humanity of women and take up the task to mourn the forgotten victims of the patriarchy.[2] More recently, Deryn Guest applies attachment theory and psychoanalysis in her reading of Judges to discuss the unhealthy relationship between Parent/YHWH and child/Israel.[3] Behind the text, she finds a scribe who adopts a masochistic defence mechanism in order to maintain Israel's relationship with God and "keep YHWH good."[4] Her challenge to confessional scholars is to reject such rhetoric and recognise that YHWH is a constructed character; there is no need for them to also "keep YHWH good." She concludes, "Let readers of faith come to a more profound and enlarged vision of their deity that is not boxed in by an ancient scribe's rather troubled notions."[5] Readings such as these, among the many others, highlight the difficulty of interpreting the book of Judges. Many Christians, however, would likely consider such approaches that "read against the grain" as outside the boundaries of a faithful understanding of the Old Testament as God's revelation.[6]

In contrast, others have attempted to dispel such notions and read with the grain of the text. In doing so, they tend to minimise the violence, or worse, *sanction* (i.e., approve or condone) the sacrilege. Some extreme examples of this can be found in James B. Jordan's commentary where he defends many of the actions of Judges 20-21 as appropriate. The so-called holy war against Benjamin becomes justified because God's people must be held to a higher standard.[7] The rape of the women of Shiloh is transformed bizarrely into a "delightful custom" where the virgins dance sexually so the men might "catch" them for marriage.[8] He concludes, "The book of Judges closes

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[2] P. Trible, *Texts of terror: literary-feminist readings of Biblical narratives*, (Fortress, 1984), pp. 3, 80-87, 108.

[3] D. Guest, *YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges: an object-relations analysis*, (CUP, 2019).

[4] Guest, pp. 146-147, 153-170.

[5] Guest, p. 175.

[6] This is not to say that there are not outliers. One such example can be found in G. A. Boyd, *The crucifixion of the warrior God: interpreting the Old Testament's violent portraits of God in light of the cross*, (Fortress, 2017), vols i & ii. Boyd interprets the violence in the Old Testament through a "cruciform hermeneutic" to show that the ancient authors of Israel's scriptures misunderstood the character of YHWH. The Old Testament might still function as Christian Scripture when read "with the awareness that it reflects both God acting toward us, insofar as God's people at the time could receive it, as well as God humbly allowing others to act toward him, insofar as the noncoercive heavenly missionary had to accommodate his people's fallen and culturally conditioned hearts and minds . . . the OT's violent portraits of God can be understood as testaments to the truth that God has always been willing to humbly stoop to bear the sin of his people and to thereby take on a literary semblance that mirrors the ugliness of this sin, just as he did in a historical way on the cross." (pp. 1250-51).

[7] J. B. Jordan, *Judges: God's war against humanism*, (Geneva Ministries, 1985), p. 317.

[8] Jordan, p. 325.

with a most positive picture of the goodness of God. In spite of the sins of His people, concentrated in Benjamin, which He has had to chastise most severely, God is still faithful to them. God works out a way of salvation and new life for those under the judgment of death."[9]

Not every Christian reading of Judges adopts such an approach. A much more common way finds a *positive* moral teaching out of a *troubling* story. The actions are neither commendable nor meant to be imitated in the present but are redeemed in some way. Commenting on Ehud, Dale Ralph Davis exclaims, "This is a story of *salvation*! The focus of the story is not 'Why does God get himself all mixed up with a character like Ehud?' but 'See how God delights to save his people in their afflictions!' We are not to see the problems God creates but the salvation he brings."[10] Or concerning Jephthah's vow, Michael Wilcock writes: "What he did (the sacrifice of his daughter) is a thing all Scripture condemns; why he did it (in order to keep his word) is a thing all Scripture commends."[11] There are indeed more sophisticated approaches to the book of Judges which are engaged throughout the dissertation.[12] These examples highlight the particular hermeneutical dilemma Christians appear to face when reading the book of Judges—deny or defend, condemn or condone.

In this dissertation, I argue that there is a better way forward for Christian readings, one which takes seriously the role and responsibility of readers as well as their reliance on the historical and literary dimensions of the biblical text. This study provides fresh readings of biblical texts and offers hermeneutical suggestions and theological explorations in an effort to work towards a reading of Judges as Christian Scripture. It is an attempt to read closely with the grain of the text to understand how the biblical narrative might be "sanctioning the sacrilege" it portrays, i.e., it may be condemning the actions and characters. The chapters that follow seek to understand whether the morally complex characters and ambiguous narratives are open to being read in the present day in ways that are congruous with Christian faith and practice. As the title suggests, this

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[9] Jordan, p. 326.

[10] D. R. Davis, *Judges: such a great salvation*, (Christian Focus Publications, 2000), p. 59.

[11] M. Wilcock, *The message of Judges: grace abounding*, (IVP, 1993), p. 120.

[12] A few monographs on the book of Judges have been published recently: I. Hamley, *God of Justice and Mercy: a theological commentary on judges*, (SCM, 2021); M. S. Smith and E. Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1:1-10:5*, (Fortress, 2021); D. J. D. Stulac, *Gift of the Grotesque: A Christological Companion to the Book of Judges.*, (Wipf & Stock, 2022); J. W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *The End of a Beginning: Joshua and Judges*, (Eerdmans, 2019), vol. i. Unfortunately I did not have the space to engage with them as sufficiently as I would have liked to.

reading might be better called a rereading. This signals more than a sustained effort of reading and rereading the book of Judges over the years. It recognises that Christians are *rereading* ancient Jewish texts after they have been recontextualised in the Christian Bible.[13] This is not to suggest that every Christian tradition will read the text in the same way, or that what is proposed here should be the *only* way to read the book as Christian Scripture. This dissertation presents a modest attempt *towards* this goal by offering interpretive test cases and hermeneutical reflections. It is neither the first nor the last word on this issue. These examples will hopefully, in the first instance, be found useful for reading the book of Judges within its historical and literary dimensions. A deeper goal of mine is that this research would produce new ways of reading that can constructively develop the churchgoers' warranted question into a confession of faith—thanks be to God.

Method, Structure, & Presuppositions

I am deeply interested in what Judges can add to the Church's theological understanding of God and humanity's place in the world. I am thankful for the scholars who have argued for the appropriateness of reading the Hebrew Bible theologically and demonstrated how such theological enterprises can indeed be illuminating. I would, however, not consider myself to be "doing" Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS), or at least not in same way as others have.[14] Neither is this dissertation a project of theological retrieval.[15] I may share a similar goal, and perhaps, adopt the same posture as a number of these scholars, but this interdisciplinary project is well within the field of biblical studies.

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[13] In this dissertation, the Bible I am referring to is the one used by Protestants today. This Bible differs slightly from other Christian canons among the Catholic, Orthodox, and Ethiopic traditions which accepts several more books as authoritative. Though Judges has never been in dispute in any Christian tradition, reading the book within a wider collection may shape or shift interpretations in ways that are illuminating for certain traditions but not for others.

[14] Cf. L. Smit and S. E. Fowl, *Judges & Ruth*, (Brazos, 2018). There is, of course, no one way to "do" theological interpretation, and some would resist even calling it a movement. For helpful summaries of the development and practice of Theological Interpretation of Scripture, see D. C. Spinks, *The Bible and the crisis of meaning: debates on the theological interpretation of Scripture*, (T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 3-40; D. Sarisky, *Reading the Bible theologically*, (CUP, 2019), pp. 5-56; M. Habets, '*Theological* Theological Interpretation of Scripture', *IJST*, 23/2 (2021); E. F. Davis and R. B. Hays (eds.), 'Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture', The art of reading Scripture, (Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 1-5..

[15] Cf. H. Boersma, *Scripture as real presence: sacramental exegesis in the early church*, (Baker Academic, 2017).

In this dissertation I employ the classical tools of philology and history along with narrative criticism to explore the book of Judges. I investigate the "world behind the text" via source and redaction criticism and the fields of archaeology and comparative literature. In other places, I utilise intertextuality and specific concepts from literary criticism such as modern genre theory and theories of endings. Many of my examples are taken from film or film studies. Additionally, I focus on the "world in front of the text" by exploring the reception history of certain texts and using ancient and pre-modern sources to develop my argument. All of these critical tools are used for the purpose of providing hermeneutical suggestions for those who wish to read Judges as Christian Scripture and offering modest theological reflections arising from my readings. In this way, the study is descriptive in certain parts and constructive in others.

One particular perspective that has informed my work but remains "behind the scenes," is that of Brevard Childs and his canonical approach. Though Childs did not focus much on the book of Judges, his insights on the *canon*—the collection of theologically shaped texts that witness to Israel's encounter with God as Scripture—and its hermeneutical importance for exegesis, have proved invaluable to my own conception of the Hebrew Bible.[16] Many scholars, with Childs among them, have suggested that the book of Judges is a composite text with a long and complex compositional history. What likely began as individual stories about local heroes grew into its own collection (Judg. 3:7-16:31) and was later incorporated into the so-called Deuteronomistic history where an introduction (Judg. 1:1-3:6) and an ending (Judg. 17-18) were added along with redactional edits. The final chapters (Judg. 19-21) were perhaps added in the early Persian period and other edits were made.[17] While these hypothetical reconstructions have heuristic value, it must be acknowledged that we can no longer be certain of how Judges came to look the way it does. I engage these questions of redaction more directly in certain parts of this study (chs. 4-5), but a complex compositional history is assumed throughout, even when focusing on the text's final form. Yet, paying attention to the *canon* i.e., the theological movements woven into the fabric of the

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[16] See B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (Fortress, 1979).

[17] For more comprehensive surveys of the various perspectives see: T. Römer, *The so-called Deuteronomistic history: a sociological, historical, and literary introduction*, (T & T Clark, 2007); Guest, *YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges*, pp. 63-88; K. Spronk, *Judges*, (Peeters, 2019), pp. 11-25; P. Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: the Judges*, (T & T Clark, 2004); D. J. H. Beldman, *The completion of Judges: strategies of ending in Judges 17-21*, (Eisenbrauns, 2017), pp. 10-51.

biblical text and its preservation as a discrete collection, may provide additional insights to those who wish to read Judges as Christian Scripture.[18]

The study is, of course, selective in its treatment of the narratives, as a comprehensive treatment of the book is outside the scope of even a doctoral dissertation.[19] The near episodic nature of Judges is imitated in the structure of the chapters, which each one functioning as an in-depth study on a particular narrative. There is a loose continuity between the chapters, but they can be read mostly on their own terms. For example, one of the chapters focuses on the Ehud narrative and modern genre theory, but later chapters do not necessarily build upon either the reading offered or the discussion about genre. The reason for this choice is that attempts to propose a single, comprehensive method for reading Israel's Scriptures are sure to fall short in some way or another. In recent years, there have been a number of attempts to articulate a macro-structure of Judges (chiasms[20] or ring-structures[21]) or suggest one unifying theme such as the "Canaanization of Israel"[22] or ancient political propaganda.[23] None of these have been particularly convincing. I believe this is largely due to the book's complex compositional history; the diverse and creative narratives in the book of Judges resist such overarching proposals.[24]

There are two exceptions to this episodic structure of the dissertation. The first is that chapters three and four were originally conceived as one chapter that addressed the Samson narrative. These have been broken up to allow one a singular focus on reception history while the other presents a close reading of the text. The second exception is the final chapter which draws together the themes of kingship and cult found throughout Judges and the Deuteronomistic History to suggest an alternative reading strategy. This proposal is not advocating for some

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[18] Some Christian scholars who are reading Judges for theological purposes (e.g., Daniel Block, Barry Webb, Kenneth Way, David Beldman, Laura Smit) make little use of the book's canonical shaping in their exegesis.

[19] Even so, every chapter and section in the book of Judges is referenced at least once in the dissertation.

[20] D. W. Gooding, 'The Composition of the Book of Judges', *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies*, 16 (1982).

[21] K. C. Way, *Judges and Ruth*, (Baker, 2016), pp. 2-6.

[22] D. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, (B&H, 1999), pp. 58-59.

[23] M. Z. Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, (Routledge, 2002), 111–16; C. Edenburg, *Dismembering the whole: composition and purpose of Judges 19-21*, (SBL, 2016), pp. 321-334.

[24] See also J. S. Kaminsky, 'Reflections on Associative Word Links in Judges', *JSOT*, 36/4 (2012), pp. 411-434.

"original" structure based on narrative coherence or literary artistry. Instead, I am pointing out how the book can function in light of a particular theme, now that it has reached its present shape.

At the end of each chapter, the reader will find a section with hermeneutical and/or theological reflections. Each of these reflections has arisen out of a reading of the text or by engaging with its past readers. Yet, their placement at the end can be misleading. Theological or ethical reflection is not something that can simply be tagged on to the end of a chapter or left to confessional biblical scholars and theologians. Theology and matters of faith are the very thing that is animating this project and are integral for my exegesis. My own Christian presuppositions shape the particular questions I ask and form the (sometimes hidden) motivations I have. This very thesis is predicated upon the idea that it is appropriate and even *worthwhile* to read Judges as Christian Scripture—a belief not all readers share. My presuppositions also shape particular interpretive decisions. For instance, my belief in an ethic of non-violent enemy love that I see as operative in the gospels led me to question the legitimacy of Ehud's tactics and made me sceptical of readings that did not see it as problematic.[25] In another example, my own religious upbringings, my American nationality, and my current social location in England influenced my decision to research the 18th century reception history of Judg. 5:23 in Britain and colonial America. These presuppositions and biases are not necessarily a problem for interpreters if they can be acknowledged from the start or articulated in hindsight.[26] Nevertheless, the reflections come at the end of each chapter for heuristic purposes. It is only after I have shown my work and provided a reading that I can offer a reflection.

Some final notes that may aid the reader: I prefer to use the term Israel's Scriptures when thinking wholistically about the text's canonical function as *distinct* from its later reception as the Tanakh within Judaism or Old Testament within Christianity, but I use the term Hebrew Bible when engaged in discussions about the text's compositional pre-history. In my writing of the divine name of Israel's God, I have followed the standard Jewish practice of not vocalising it and rendering

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[25] This presupposition will not be shared by every Christian tradition, and one's social location will shape how its theology is applied (e.g. the story may be read differently in times of war and peace).

[26] Jon Levenson poignantly argues that "biblical studies inevitably (indeed, by definition) involves the affirmation of certain religious judgements — if not for the present, then at least as a legacy of the past with continuing *normative* effects. Secularity is no guarantee of religious neutrality" (*The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and historical criticism: Jews and Christians in biblical studies*, (WJK, 1993), p. 126).

it as YHWH. In quoting secondary literature where the divine name appears in other ways, I have chosen to devocalise it. In the case of God's pronouns and possessives, I have kept to the masculine forms ("He," "His") found in the Hebrew Bible and they are consistently capitalised. The Hebrew text used throughout the dissertation is the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)*.

— CHAPTER 1 —

THE CURSE OF MEROZ IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: CHRISTIAN READINGS IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA

אוֹרוּ מֵרוֹז אָמַר מַלְאַךְ יְהוָֹה
אֹרוּ אָרוֹר יֹשְׁבֶיהָ
כִּי לֹא־בָאוּ לְעֶזְרַת יְהוָֹה
לְעֶזְרַת יְהוָה בַּגִּבּוֹרִים

"Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the LORD,
curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof;
because they came not to the help of the LORD,
to the help of the LORD against the mighty.
(Judg. 5:23 KJV [Oxford 1769])

The Bible in the eighteenth century was truly double edged. It sparked revivals as well as revolution. Many who drew from its teachings advocated for personal piety, social justice, and common love for mankind, yet others used it to justify rebellion and war. The eighteenth century was a liminal age in many respects. Enlightenment ideas were spreading throughout Europe and to its colonies in North America. Revivals were breaking out in New England under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Meanwhile, John Wesley and the Methodist movement were gaining momentum in England. Yet, the positive religious events of the 1740's were greatly overshadowed by various military conflicts such as the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748), the Jacobite Rising (1745), and the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). These conflicts led to the American Revolutionary War (1776-1783) as well as the French Revolution (1789).[1] Throughout this turbulent century, the Bible played a significant role in shaping attitudes and arguments in both Europe and its empires. However, many biblical passages reflect a spectrum of readings with sometimes conflicting applications. Parts of the Bible became battlegrounds in a war of interpretation, and Judges was no exception.

[1] The reasons for revolution are remarkably complex and here I am only gesturing towards the diverse richness of the period.

In a sermon preached at the end of the Revolutionary War, Nathaniel Whitaker drew upon the story of Deborah and Barak to illustrate how God had delivered America from the oppression of Great Britain. His sermon, entitled *The Reward of Toryism*, was not simply an occasion for celebration. Whitaker saw the events which transpired in ancient Israel as analogous to those of America, and thus the command to curse the inhabitants of Meroz (Judges 5:23) was equally binding for his day.[2]

> Our Independence is gained, but our danger is not over, nor is our work done. Great Britain is not yet our friend, and many of the inhabitants of Meroz are still in our land, and many who fled from us in our distress, and would afford us no help, yea assisted and comforted our enemies, are, under the patronage of Britain, seeking to return, and enjoy these privileges they used their utmost endeavors to deprive us of. The time, the proper time is now come to execute on them the command of God in my text, viz. *Curse ye Meroz. . .*[3]

For much of the sermon, Whitaker describes who are the American equivalents to the inhabitants of Meroz and prescribes how the newly formed government should treat them. Tories, or those who stayed loyal to England either by neutrality or in taking up arms against the revolutionary forces, were the subject of Whitaker's attack. James Byrd explains that how America was to treat loyalists "was one of the most urgent questions after the war," and "was one of the most difficult points of negotiation in the Treaty of Paris."[4] While the Treaty and America's Congress decided on leniency for the loyalists, Whitaker, among others, desired harsher retributive justice:

> Our cause was either right or wrong. If wrong, the guilt of all the blood lies on us; and we ought to atone for it by the sacrifice of an Hancock, and Adams, a Washington . . . if right, the tories ought to atone for it, as being the chief authors, by a sacrifice of, at least, their property now among us, and an everlasting banishment from us, if not of the lives of their principals who fall into our hands.[5]

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[2] *The reward of Toryism: A discourse on Judges V. 23. by Nathaniel Whitaker, D. D. Delivered at the tabernacle in Salem, May 1783. [Three lines from Kings]*, (1783), p. 6. I have shortened many of the long titles of 18th century works.

[3] Whitaker, *The reward of Toryism*, p. 6. Whitaker, p. 6.

[4] J. P. Byrd, *Sacred scripture, sacred war: the Bible and the American Revolution*, (OUP, 2017), p. 89.

[5] Whitaker, p. 25.

In this sermon, Whitaker expressed his "most solemn protest" against accepting the Tories back into society by appealing to his reading of Judges 5:23—the God-given command to curse the inhabitants of Meroz. Fortunately, Congress did not follow his exhortation.

Whitaker was not the only one to apply the curse of Meroz to his present circumstances. James Byrd notes that "In terms of pulpit appeal, no prophet or judge rivaled Deborah . . . The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) was the most cited passage in over a century of colonial war sermons (1675-1800)."[6] In particular, this curse of Meroz was used by many to argue against neutrality during war time. Yet, it would be a mistake to argue that this was the *only* reading and application of this text.

The identity of Meroz and the sin of its inhabitants fluctuates throughout the century, and Judges 5:23 becomes a free-standing text—a wax nose liberally shaped and stretched to accommodate whatever the situation demanded of the reader. Part of this is due to the enigmatic identity of Meroz within the biblical text. The Song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5 is primarily a victory song, and secondarily serves as a socio-political critique of the tribes who did not join the battle against Sisera (Judg. 5:15-18). Contrasted with them, stands the valiant Jael who slew the enemy commander between her feet (5:24-27). Meroz is introduced only in v. 23 but does not feature in the prose account in Judges 4, nor is it mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. It appears to be a city close to the site of the battle, whose inhabitants had some responsibility but failed to fulfil it.[7] Recently, Lauren Monroe has suggested that the word has an Akkadian cognate in râṣu, which means "to come to the aid of," and the noun rēṣu (meaning "ally"). Meroz would then be an "auxiliary force," referring to anyone who did not side with Deborah and Barak—including the aforementioned tribes in vs. 15-18.[8] Their failure to appear is perhaps what allowed Sisera to escape in the first place, prompting the curse and providing reason for Jael's blessing—

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[6] Byrd, p. 73.

[7] See T. C. Butler, *Judges*, (Zondervan, 2009), pp. 153-154; Spronk, *Judges*, p. 174. In the Talmud (Moed Katan 16a.8), Meroz is thought to be a star that refused to fight from heaven (Judg. 5:20).

[8] L. Monroe, 'Becoming Israel: The Song of Deborah and Microhistory', (2019). This paper reflects a work in progress on a manuscript entitled, *Becoming Israel: Political Formation in the Song of Deborah*, forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

she showed up when they did not.[9] While the identity of Meroz is unknown, the exhortative sense of the text is quite clear: the tribes are admonished to join the fight alongside YHWH.

In this chapter, we will explore how this verse is used by a variety of people in Great Britain and Colonial/Post-Colonial America during the eighteenth century. The sermons or texts that reference Judges 5:23 are too numerous to adequately discuss all of them here. What is covered is a representative sample of the period of how Christians have approached Israel's Scriptures as their own. While many of the reading strategies or applications of this century may be untenable for today, they nonetheless can inform our proposal for a Christian reading of Judges and identify pitfalls in interpretation.

Jonathan Edwards and The Curse of Meroz

As America's first "home-grown" theologian, Jonathan Edwards was a key figure in the First Great Awakening. Through his sermons and writings, Edwards provided pastoral momentum for revival and defended it from its wary opponents. In *The Curse of Meroz*, a sermon preached in December of 1741, Edwards draws from Judges 5:23 to address the current spiritual climate of his parish in Northampton, Massachusetts. The sermon begins with Edwards briefly explaining the context of the passage within the victory song of Deborah and Barak.[10] The inhabitants of Meroz did not fight, but instead choose to "indulge their sloth and sleep in a whole skin at home."[11] His point is "When God remarkably appears in a great work for his church and against his enemies, it is a most dangerous thing for any of his professing people to lie still and not to put to an helping hand."[12] He explains that the people of God are part of the Lord's army, and it is a necessity to fight

[9] Perhaps a good literary depiction can be found in Tolkien's *Return of the King* with the Oathbreakers or the Dead of Dunharrow. Their king had pledged their allegiance to Isildur in the fight against Sauron, but when they broke their oath, Isildur cursed them to remain without rest until they fulfilled their oath. They were finally allowed to depart in peace once they had joined the battle with Aragorn, the heir of Isildur.

[10] "The Curse of Meroz" in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, Volume 22: Sermons and Discourses 1739-1742*, (ed.) Harry S. Stout, (Yale, 2008), pp. 492-494.

[11] WJE 22:493.

[12] WJE 22:494.

alongside him when he calls.[13] There is no room for neutrality; either one is for or against the King.[14]

Next, Edwards turns to the application of this text, suggesting that this curse should be a warning for those who hinder the work of God in the present. "You that call yourselves true saints, if your practice is such as not to help forward this great work, you hinder vastly more than others. Dull, sleepy, carnal saints are especial clogs to the work."[15] For Edwards, typology is an integral component in his interpretation. Yet, this passage in Judges finds its anti-type both in the New Testament as well as Northampton. He first draws the connection between the battle with Sisera "in Taanach by the waters of Megiddo" to the battle of Armageddon in Revelation 16. "[The] Canaanites [are] types of the spiritual enemies of the church. Deborah [is] a type of the church, Barak a type of the ministry."[16] Edwards' typological reading brings the whole narrative into the present, for the Church is ever at war with evil powers. Significantly, Meroz finds its anti-type in the town of Northampton.[17] The effects of the revival that had occurred several years prior were waning. Doubt had crept in, and many wondered what to make of the more emotional and enthusiastic expressions of the revival. Turning to the final point of application, Edwards outlines several behaviours that his parishioners should avoid, lest they "expose themselves to the curse of the inhabitants of Meroz."[18] Many of these behaviours are concerned with the town's reactions to the revivals. If they have doubts, they ought not to share them, so that others might not doubt the work of God. If they find a fault with the work, they should not simply dismiss the whole work.[19] In the 1741 commencement address at Yale College entitled, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, Edwards sought to outline both the positive and negative signs of God's work

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[13] WJE 22:494.

[14] WJE 22:496.

[15] WJE 22:500.

[16] WJE 22:501.

[17] WJE 22:501, "The circumstances of the inhabitants of Meroz [are] more especially parallel with the circumstances of the inhabitants of this town. That is supposed to be the reason why the inhabitants of Meroz brought a greater curse {upon themselves: because they did not greatly exert themselves to promote the work of the Lord}. There were others that did not join {in battle}".

[18] WJE 22:506.

[19] WJE 22:507, "Much insisting on the blemishes of the work greatly tends to hinder it, for whatsoever tends to wound the reputation of the work tends [to] hinder it. 'Tis principally in these two ways that the work of God has been opposed in the land: talking suspiciously and doubtfully of great part of the work; insisting much on the blemishes."

in the present day.[20] Similar to *The Curse of Meroz,* his second application point is a warning not to oppose or hinder the work of revival. Though there may be doubts and uncertainties concerning this apparent work of God, the ministers must not be silent, but should praise God for this work.[21] Yet, he warns them: "And though some are so prudent, as not openly to oppose and reproach the work, yet 'tis to be feared, at this day when the Lord is going forth so gloriously against his enemies, that many that are silent and unactive, especially ministers, will bring that curse of the angel of the Lord upon themselves, *Judges 5:33*;[sic] 'Curse ye Meroz . . .'"[22] While many other texts are used in conjunction with Judges 5:23, most notably Matthew 12:22-32 and the "unforgiveable sin," Edwards' point is not lost—the Christian must participate in the work of revival.

Similar themes continued with *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* published in 1743. After years of bitter feuding between Old Lights and New lights—factions that opposed and supported the revivals respectively, Edwards sought to defend the common ground between them. Edwards aspired "more largely to define evangelical experience, rebuke spurious manifestations of it, refute captious criticisms against it, and urge its cordial support by all classes of Christians."[23] Edwards begins by arguing that one cannot judge the work of revival *a priori*. The work of God cannot be dismissed or approved of based upon human preconceptions of how God works. For support, Edwards looks to Scripture to show how God's acts often upend humankind's expectations. After labouring to show how the present work of revival in New England can indeed be said to be a work of God, Edwards directs his audience to the obligations demanded by this work of God. He also provides some warnings from Scripture for those who continue to doubt in the divine origin of this revival. "It is very dangerous for God's professing people to lie still, and not to come to the help of the Lord, whenever he remarkably pours out his Spirit, to carry on the work of redemption in the application of it."[24] Just as he did in *The Distinguishing Marks*, Edwards cites a number of passages to illustrate his point, one of which is the story of Deborah. He explains

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[20] "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, Volume 4: The Great Awakening*, (ed.) C.C. Goen, (Yale, 2008), p. 213.

[21] WJE 4:272.

[22] WJE 4:276.

[23] "Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival in Works" of *Jonathan Edwards Online, Volume 4: The Great Awakening*, (ed.) C.C. Goen, (Yale, 2008), p. 289.

[24] WJE 4:358.

that "almost everything about it shewed a remarkable hand of God," yet there were still people that doubted the work—the inhabitants of Meroz.[25] Edwards postulates,

> Tis very probable that one great reason why the inhabitants of Meroz were so unbelieving concerning this work, was that they argued a priori; they did not like the beginning of it, it being a woman that first led the way, and had the chief conduct in the affair; nor could they believe that such despicable instruments, as a company of unarmed slaves, were ever like to effect so great a thing; and pride and unbelief wrought together in not being willing to follow Deborah to the battle.[26]

With rhetorical flair, Edwards refers back to his earlier point of an *a priori* dismissal of the revival by his opponents. By this, he characterizes them as the inhabitants of Meroz, for they had not participated in what God was doing in New England.

A few points stand out when considering Jonathan Edwards as a Christian reader of Scripture. First, his worldview was formed by the Bible. Indebted to Calvin and the Reformed tradition (especially of the Puritans), all of Edwards' experiences were viewed through and shaped by Scripture. Secondly, the events and attitudes of his day were important to Edwards, and he sought to bring a biblical understanding to them. The revivals in New England and their continuing potency caused Edwards to write and preach. When criticisms mounted and tribalism infected his community, he returned to his work, expanded his arguments, and sought to speak afresh to these new situations. Thirdly, the entire canon can speak to present situations. Even though Edwards sometimes relied on a typological understanding of Christian Scripture to make his points, he operated under the assumption that the biblical text had something to say to his situation. For Edwards, the curse of Meroz was a sobering reminder that neutrality is not an option for the Christian. If God is working, then he is calling the Church to join. Untold pain and sorrow waited for those who do not heed this call, namely, those who were antagonistic or silent when it came to the revivals in New England.

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[25] WJE 4:363. A notable feature of Edwards' reading is his stress on the miraculous act of God in the victory. In doing so, Edwards stresses the weakness of the Israel's army.

[26] WJE 4:364. By drawing attention to Deborah's gender and the social class of the slaves, Edwards may be drawing implicit parallels with actual events during the Great Awakening, which presumably his opponents would have criticised. Yet, it is likely that Edwards accepted the inferiority of both women and slaves. In distinction to his opponents, this inferiority did not disqualify their cause as being a work of the Spirit. Cf. D. M. Gunn, *Judges Through the Centuries*, (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 62-63.

George Whitefield: An Apologist for Revival and War

The Anglican minister and revivalist preacher, George Whitefield, also drew upon Deborah's victory song in his preaching and publications. A contemporary of Edwards, Whitefield also felt inclined to respond to critics of the revivals. In *Some Remarks Upon a Late Charge Against Enthusiasm* (1744), Whitefield responds to a trans-Atlantic criticism of the revivals from the Bishop of Lichfield, Richard Smalbroke.[27] The main argument of Smalbroke (according to Whitefield) was that the inner witnessing of the Spirit as well as the empowering of the Spirit to pray and preach are "all the extraordinary Gifts and Operations of the Holy Ghost, belonging to Apostolic and primitive Times, and consequently all Pretensions to such Favours in these last Days are vain and *Enthusiastical*."[28] The miraculous and immediate acts of the Spirit were restricted to the New Testament. Jesus' promise to send the Spirit upon his disciples was fully realized at Pentecost, and thus this empowerment of the Spirit is not normative for all Christians. On this point, Whitefield pushes back using the example of Paul and the nature of prophecy. Significantly, he cites Hosea 11:1 to argue that while prophecies may have historical references (Israel), they may have multiple senses that allow them to be applied to other contexts, as evidenced by Matthew's application of this verse to Jesus Christ.[29]

The rest of Whitfield's argument against Smalbroke's charge follows along the same principle: Scripture's meaning and value is not restricted only to its historical referent. After showing how God equips his people for mission by the Spirit, Whitefield charges the bishop of arguing in the same manner as deists and papists.[30] He continues his attack, explaining that by such an argument, Smalbroke must also deny the offices of Ordination and Confirmation and forsake much of the Anglican liturgy.[31] Here, Whitfield is attempting to ground the legitimacy of the revivals in the Spirit and the Word that also undergird the whole of Anglican worship. He exhorts his readers to "remember the good Confession you made before many Witnesses when you

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[27] This piece was originally penned as a letter to the clergy in the Lichfield diocese but was later reprinted in 1746.

[28] George Whitefield, *Some remarks upon a late charge against enthusiasm*, (1746), p. 5.

[29] Whitefield, *Some Remarks*, p. 7.

[30] Whitefield, *Some Remarks*, p. 21.

[31] Whitefield, *Some Remarks*, pp. 23-28.

professed that you were inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you the Administration of the church."[32] He continues, "Think what dreadful thing it is to preach an unknown, and unfelt Christ . . . As you have received an apostolical [*sic*] Commission, labour after an apostolical Spirit—And do not set yourselves to oppose or run down his blessed Operations in others, because you do not *feel* them in yourselves—Beware of thus doing Despite to the Spirit of Grace."[33] Similar to Edwards, Whitefield also cites Judges 5:23 as a warning against failing to join in the work of God:

> The Harvest is great, very great, and the Souls are everywhere perishing for Lack of Knowledge—Why should the Labourours be so few? Think of that awful saying of the Angel of the Lord, *Curse ye Meroz* . . . Oh shew that you love Christ above all Things, by feeding his lambs and his Sheep . . . That so when the great Shepherd and Bishop shall appear, you may give up your accounts with Joy, and not with Grief.[34]

Whitefield's purpose in this work is twofold: defend the revivals from critics and encourage spiritual renewal among English clergy. While the curse of Meroz is peripheral to his argument, its use reveals that Whitefield believed it was still applicable to the church in the present. Just as the Spirit still witnessed in the hearts of true believers and empowered them to preach and pray the words of God, so did these words of God sung by Deborah continue to function normatively in Whitefield's age. His application of the text, like Edwards', was to encourage ministers to participate in the work of revival.

However, this is not the only way Whitefield applied the curse of Meroz. Writing in 1756 at the start of the Seven Years' War, Whitefield sought both to justify Christian participation in the war as well as to encourage his audience to action. With regards to the justness of the British cause, he cites the French breach of the Treaty of *Aix la Chapelle* which had ended the Austrian War of Succession; because France is the aggressor, Britain can claim that it is a defensive war.[35] Despite the justness of the cause, he is fearful of the present state of religion and prayer in England and America. He explains that it is unheard of in history, even for pagan armies, to go to war

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[32] Whitefield, *Some Remarks*, p. 28.

[33] Whitefield, *Some Remarks*, pp. 28-29.

[34] Whitefield, *Some Remarks*, p. 29.

[35] Whitefield, George. *A short address to persons of all denominations, occasioned by the alarm of an intended invasion*, (1756), pp. 7-8.

without acknowledging a deity. He exhorts his audiences to return to prayer and piety, understanding that "British Arms were never more formidable than when our Soldiers went forth in the Strength of the Lord, and with a Bible in one Hand and a Sword in the other, cheerfully fought under his banner who hath condescended to style himself a Man of War."[36]

Yet, prayer in itself will not suffice to defend Britain. With a twist on Bishop Robert Sanderson's quote, Whitefield replaces studying with fighting: "Fighting without prayer is atheism, and Prayer without fighting is presumption."[37] From this point, Whitefield acknowledges the apparent paradox of his position, "Far be it from me, who profess myself a Disciple and Minister of the Prince of Peace to sound a trumpet for war."[38] He does not seem too perturbed, however, at the prospect of participating in the cause of a *just* war.[39] Whitefield continues,

> But when the Trumpet is already sounded by a perfidious Enemy, and our King, our Country, our civil and religious Liberties are all, as it were, lying at Stake, did we not at such a season lend our Purses, our tongues, our Arms, as well as our Prayers, in defence of them, should we not justly incur that Curse . . . Curse ye Meroz . . .[40]

Here, the curse of Meroz is used positively as a call towards participating in the defence of England through a variety of means. The inhabitants of Meroz then become those who choose not to support the war effort—either by withholding financial, spiritual, or martial support.

In these examples, Whitefield utilizes the curse of Meroz as both a warning and an exhortation. His goal is to convince his audience of the appropriateness of an event, be it revival or war, and call them to participate with him in the effort. In both of these texts, Judges 5:23 is quoted in full, and in *A Short Address,* it is one of the few Scripture passages that is quoted as opposed to referring to a particular narrative or character (e.g., the narrative of Judges 4 or the characters of Deborah and Barak). But it is not necessarily interpreted within the context, nor can it be said to be a "reading" as much as it can be called an "application." More sharply than Edwards, Whitfield demonstrates how one's historical situation heavily influences his application of

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[36] Whitefield, *A Short Address*, p. 9.
[37] Whitefield, *A Short Address*, p. 9.
[38] Whitefield, *A Short Address*, p. 11.
[39] Byrd, p. 79.
[40] Whitefield, *A Short Address*, p. 11.

Scripture.[41] Whitefield's revivalist context translated the sin of Meroz into hindering revival; Whitefield's war-time context transformed that sin into impeding the war effort. Presumably, it was these situations that compelled him to turn to Scripture in the first place, but it appears Whitefield's social and political context overshadowed much of his interpretation. Additionally, his application of the curse of Meroz seems to be influenced by his understanding of the whole of Scripture and a latent theology of just war.

Showdown in Philadelphia: Just War & Pacifism in the Late 1740's

Originally founded as a "holy experiment" of Quaker theology, Pennsylvania was becoming increasingly "progressive" during the 1740's. Religious pluralism, societal expansion, and hostile neighbours contributed to this theological drift. By 1756, the Quakers had lost much of their political power. Many of those in positions of authority chose to resign rather than contribute to the war effort.[42] One issue that brought enlightenment ideas and theological conservatism (in the Quaker tradition) to a head was the arming of its citizens for defence. Writing as a "tradesman of Philadelphia" in 1747, Benjamin Franklin called for the government of Philadelphia to raise a militia for its defence. Notably, he compares the state of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia to the peaceful city of Laish in Judges 18.[43] He explains that surrounding nations may have sent spies just as the children of Dan had. Pennsylvania was much farther from Britain than Laish was from Sidon, but Franklin laments, "yet we are, if possible, more careless than the People of Laish! As the Scriptures are given for our Reproof, Instruction and Warning, may we make a due Use of this Example, before it be too late!" The subject of Franklin's critique was the pacifism of the Quakers and that they had so far disallowed the formation of a militia. Franklin presumes that these

[41] It is unfortunate that their contemporary, John Wesley did not appear to preach on this verse, though he did include a few sermons on the passage from other writers in his *A Christian Library* (first published in 1750). If he had chosen to preach on this passage, he would likely have made for an illuminating foil to both Edwards and Whitefield. The differences in theology, denominations, social locations, and attitudes towards slavery may have influenced Wesley's interpretation and application. The fact that he did not write on this passage (apart from a very brief note in his *Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible*), may perhaps reveal his ambivalence towards the type of interpretation seen in these examples.

[42] J. Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: a short history of the Quakers*, (Quaker Home Service, 1984), pp. 117-118.

[43] Benjamin Franklin, *Plain Truth,* (1747).

principles would only encourage others to attack. He proposes that Philadelphia form a militia for their own defence, stating, "The very Fame of our Strength and Readiness would be a Means of Discouraging our Enemies; for 'tis a wise and true Saying, that One Sword often keeps another in the Scabbard. The Way to secure Peace is to be prepared for War."

Shortly after Franklin's letter, Gilbert Tennent, a Presbyterian revivalist minister and a fellow Philadelphian, preached a sermon entitled *The late Association for Defence, Encourag'd, or The Lawfulness of a Defensive War*. The reading was taken from Exod. 15:3, "the Lord is a man of War." From this, Tennent infers that war is lawful if it is defensive, commenced for the "Recovery of something of great Importance unjustly taken," and when "consequently approved by God, when undertaken by the Magistrate, for the Punishment of some great injury or wrong which much affects the Credit and Interest of a Nation or People, after all softer Means for redress fail of success."[44] One of Tennent's arguments for the lawfulness of war comes from his belief that not to use force to defend oneself (when one has the means to do so) is to incur the guilt of "Self-murder." He explains: "Well, if Self-Murder be a heinous Sin, it will follow by the Law of Contraries, that Self-defence is an important Duty; surely he who is unjustly attacked, and does not endeavor by suitable Means to preserve his Life, especially if there be any probability of Success in so doing, betrays it, and so is guilty of Suicide; a Crime of the first Magnitude and deepest Dye!"[45] This idea is crucial to his reading of the sixth commandment. For Tennent, the prohibition against killing necessarily implies the lawfulness of a just war for, "if we must not kill others, much less our selves, and if we must have no Hand in our own Death, we must defend our Lives against unjust Violence, which sometimes cannot be done without WAR."[46] He sees the Old Testament Law to approve of war, and because Jesus came to uphold and fulfil the moral law (and Law of Nature), the New Testament is also understood to approve of just war.[47]

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[44] Gilbert Tennent, *The lawfulness of a defensive war*, (1748), p. 7.

[45] Tennent, p. 13.

[46] Tennent, p. 14.

[47] Tennent, p. 14. Tennent similarly explains that defensive war does not contradict the command to love one's enemies. "But here it may be farther queried, how killing of our Enemies is consistent with love to them? I answer, It is more consistent then self-murder is with love to ourselves: Seeing that love to ourselves, is proposed by God as the Standard of our love to our Neighbour, it must needs be highest in Degree. Tho' we should love our Neighbours with the same kind or truth of love we do ourselves yet not in the same Measure: We may, we must love our selves first and most, and if so, we must first consult our own Safety, and if another's come in competition with it,

While the first part of Tennent's sermon argues that the Law of Nature establishes the lawfulness of war, the rest of his sermon is filled with examples from both the Old and New Testaments that he believes to approve of just war. Following from his explanation that war is implicitly commanded in the prohibition against killing, he questions, "Why, my Brethren, should it be now a Sin to perform (in respect of Things of a moral Nature) that which was under the Jewish Dispensation a Sin to neglect?"[48] His example is from the curse of Meroz, suggesting that they did not assist their brothers in a "good cause." While he notes that there are differences between the old and the gospel dispensation, the difference is in "circumstantials" not in "substance."[49] Because defensive War was not contrary to the moral law of the Old Testament, and since God does not change, it follows that defensive war is still lawful for Christians.

At the end of his sermon, Tennent offers a few practical reflections. Not surprisingly, he encourages his audience not to be afraid to participate in war and make efforts to prepare for defence. In doing so, they are being conformed to God's nature as the Lord who is a Man of War.[50] Following this, he commends the author of Plain Truth (but does not name him as Benjamin Franklin) for his explanation of the necessity of a militia (association). Tennent reveals that the purpose of his sermon was "to shew my Approbation of the Design; as well as to essay the Encouragement of it, by attempting to remove the Scruples of such, who by their Religious Principles, are hindered from joining in the ASSOCIATION."[51] Interestingly, the sermon ends with a call to engage in spiritual warfare and to enlist under Jesus Christ and his gospel. This point, however, reads as an afterthought.

The lawfulness of defensive war was not apparent to everyone in Philadelphia. In response to Tennent's sermon, a Quaker merchant (and a theologian of sorts) named John Smith wrote a rebuttal entitled, *The Doctrine of Christianity, as held by the people called Quakers*.[52] Frederick Tolles succinctly describes Smith's method in this work:

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we must rather secure our own; if we do not so, we are ac-cessary to our own Death, and so without natural Affection;" (p. 30-31).

[48] Tennent, p. 16.

[49] Tennent, pp. 16-17.

[50] Tennent, p. 38.

[51] Tennent, p. 40.

[52] John Smith, *The doctrine of Christianity, as held by the people called Quakers, vindicated: in answer to Gilbert Tennent's sermon on the lawfulness of war*, (1748).

> Since Tennent had justified war on a Scriptural basis, Smith undertook to refute him on his own grounds; consequently much of the pamphlet consists of the citation of contrary texts, together with some exegetical comment from Mathew Poole's *Annotations upon the Holy Bible,* and quotations from Church Fathers and Quaker writers. This copious citing of authorities, dictated by the terms on which the controversy was waged, undoubtedly enhanced the effectiveness of Smith's reply in the minds of contemporaries . . . through the thicket of proof-texts and authorities, comes the clear voice of a conscientious pacifist, bearing his testimony to the Quaker ideal of peace.[53]

There are many noteworthy lines of argument in Smith's rebuttal, but there are two that I wish to highlight. First, Smith finds Tennent's explanation of self-murder and the sixth commandment untenable. To Smith, self-murder means something different—it would only apply to those who do not defend themselves from a "willful and deliberate Desire of being killed."[54] He argues that this is altogether different from one who does not defend themselves because of a theological conviction. Furthermore, he explains that often the surest way to defend one's life is to "deliver up that for which the Attack is made . . . Fighting is very often the most "Suitable Means" to destroy life when attacked."[55] Arriving at Tennent's explanation of the 6th commandment, Smith writes,

> There are such strange Absurdities in this Manner of declaiming, and drawing Conclusions, a Man must be very blind that cannot see them. A positive precept, is made to imply its direct reverse. A commandment not to kill is implied to authorize killing: And in Consequence thereof, the blessed Jesus is supposed to approve of War; whether this be agreeable to his Life and Doctrines, the Reader is desired to consult.[56]

This hints at the principal difference between Tennent and Smith—how they see the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Smith's point is sharpened in the following paragraph. He asks if this commandment is "best fulfilled or kept, by understanding the Gospel to forbid War, or to allow it?"[57] While Smith responds to Tennent's argument on its own terms (discussing why principled non-resistance is not equivalent to self-murder), here he relocates the

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[53] F. B. Tolles, 'A Literary Quaker: John Smith of Burlington and Philadelphia', The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 65/3 (1941), p. 306; Punshon, Portrait in Grey, pp. 117-118.

[54] Smith, p. 11.

[55] Smith, p. 12.

[56] Smith, p. 15-16.

[57] Smith, p. 16.

question. The Old Testament does not only speak on its own terms, but is reaffirmed and clarified by the New Testament, specifically in the life and teaching of Jesus. The sixth commandment does not necessarily undergo any real clarification or change for Smith, for he sees Tennent's understanding as deeply flawed. But if "Thou shalt not Kill" *did* originally mean "Thou shalt Defend yourself through war," then Smith questions if the Gospel would reaffirm this point. His answer is no.

The second noteworthy argument in Smith's rebuttal is how one should read these Old Testament texts. He touches on this point throughout his essay, especially when it becomes necessary to counter Tennent's argument. In the beginning of his work, Smith accepts that there were indeed wars which were commanded by God in the Old Testament, and that verses like Exod. 15:3 were intelligible then. He continues by explaining that these wars were not pursued by the will and pleasure of men, but rather, he takes them "to denote the Greatness of his Power and Superiority, and therefore the Justness and Propriety of an entire Dependence upon him—They convey an Idea of sufficiency to disappoint the Enterprizes of the most numerous Hosts, or to bless with success the Endeavours of a few at his command."[58] In other words, these examples cannot be used as proof texts for the support of war because they communicate a much richer theological meaning.

Smith also adopts a typological and/or figural reading of the Old Testament for some of his argument.[59] His example is of Solomon being a type of Christ and the temple, a "lively Figure of the Gathering of the Church in the latter Days." In light of this reading, Smith turns to discuss the character of David. He had been a man of war, and he was forbidden to build the temple on account of his bloodshed. Smith concludes, "If a Cessation from War was necessary for the building that outward Temple, how much more so is it, for the Gathering of all Nations to be Members of the Church of Christ?"[60] Smith remarks that while Moses called YHWH a man of war, Paul called him the God of love and peace.

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[58] Smith, p. 4.

[59] Smith, p. 4: "Many parts of the Old Testament have been considered by religious Writers, as Types and Figures of future times."

[60] Smith, p. 5.

Smith's argument turns to directly counter Tennent's assertion that just war may be the "last mean left to procure" justice and peace.[61] Smith questions how this relates to a doctrine of divine providence and sovereignty. He also turns once again to the Old Testament for counter examples. "It will appear from the *Jewish* History, that were there Times when, to human Appearance, there was no Way for those valuable Benefits [p. 7 of Tennant's sermon] to be preserved but by War, and yet they were delivered without the Use of this Mean—the Case of the children of Israel at the Red Sea . . . that of the coming up of *Sennacherib* . . ."[62] Here, Smith argues that the Old Testament provides examples of Israel being saved without the means of war—even when, contrary to Tennent's point, it seemed that war was the only means of defence. For Smith, these examples show that God is equally capable of delivering his people without the means of war today.[63]

It appears that in some areas, Smith sees a major discontinuity between both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament and his own situation. For Tennent, the examples of war in the Old Testament prove their lawfulness in the New Testament, and by extension, Philadelphia in the 1740's. Smith however points out the weakness in this argument. "Let us see how this extraordinary Inference will hold in other Cases; Burnt-offerings, Sacrifices, and Circumcision, were lawful under the Old Testament Dispensation, are they therefore so now?"[64] There are numerous examples of discontinuity, even in important matters.[65] Smith takes his opponent's understanding of continuity in a direction which Tennent has repeatedly guarded against. Smith suggests that both defensive and *offensive* war are commended by the Old Testament, so why is offensive war not appropriate for Christians? Smith's answer is

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[61] Tennent, p. 7.

[62] Smith, p. 6.

[63] Smith, p. 6.

[64] Smith, p. 15.

[65] In Tennent's rebuttal of Smith, he explains that he located the approval of War in the moral law. As Tennent is operating under a tripartite understanding of the Law, presumably following Calvin, Tennent would see that the ceremonial laws of sacrifice are no longer binding on the Christian. Positively, Tennent sees continuity between Jesus and the moral law, for Jesus came to uphold and fulfil such a law. See Tennent, *Defensive War Defended,* (1748), p. 42-45.

that these wars were expressly commanded by God, and thus are not analogous to his own situation.[66]

A similar point is made as Smith references Tennent's use of the curse of Meroz. As mentioned above, Tennent believes this curse of Meroz shows that it is a sin to neglect war, and thus, today, war cannot be said to be immoral. Smith objects on two accounts. First, he does not believe the moral law commands war. Secondly, the reason Meroz was cursed was (citing Poole), "'To shew the Sinfulness and Unreasonableness of their cowardly Desertion of this Cause, because it was the Cause of God; and they had the Call of God to it.'"[67] As before, he concedes that war would be lawful if the situation was parallel: "it is Sin to neglect going to War in the Cause of God, when he calls to it."[68] To Smith, however, the situation in Philadelphia is not analogous. God has not called anyone to war; this curse cannot be applied to those "who refuse Fighting, because they apprehend God hath forbidden it."[69] Surprisingly, Smith includes a lengthy footnote to ensure his readers that Quakers are not cowards as they have suffered persecution, unlike "many of the same profession with this Sermon-writer [who] hid themselves."[70] Bravery, not cowardice defines the Quakers' principled refusal to fight as well as their perseverance in persecution.

Smith's argument turns to discuss how one can make sense of the apparent disagreement between the Old and New Testaments. More precisely, how God could command War in the Old Testament and now prohibit it? He writes,

> I beseech them to remember, that he suffered and required many Things of the *Jews*, because of the Hardness of their Hearts, which were not to continue in his Church, after the bright Discovery of the Gospel was Manifested. The World was then in very great Darkness and Ignorance, and it pleased God to chuse [*sic*] a peculiar People, whom he determined to make great and famous: This was not to be the Case in the Exhibition of the Gospel: The Partition Wall between *Jew* and

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[66] Smith, p. 16-17. Contra Tennent, *Defensive War Defended,* p. 48. It is no surprise, but Tennent objects to this. The conquest of Canaan was no "unjust invasion" for God as the "absolute and original proprietor" of the land had transferred the "civil right" to Israel. The conquest was only Israel taking what was rightfully theirs and so it was a defensive war.

[67] Smith, p. 20.

[68] Smith, p. 20.

[69] Smith, p. 20. It is unclear whether Smith believes that God *could* call Christians to war in his present day. While he would most likely allow for this possibility, the question that concerns him more is in light of all that God has done and shown in Christ, *would* He now call Christians to war?

[70] Smith, p. 20. Fn.

> *Gentile was then broken down, and all Nations were invited to become the people of God.* The Kingdoms of this World were to become the Kingdoms of our Lord, and his Christ (Re. xi. 15.) Is it therefore reasonable to suppose, that this universal, glorious Design, admits of War and Fighting? Especially between such Nations as profess to be under the Government of the same Lord and Lawgiver.[71]

While such a statement carries with it anti-Jewish sentiments, Smith's rhetoric should not be overlooked. The advent of the gospel of Jesus Christ fundamentally changes things. Smith does not contest the Old Testament witness; he does not try to redeem or sanction it. Instead, he relativizes its influence for Christian ethics, privileging the Christ-event and its effects. Furthermore, he contextualizes the debate with reference to the present day Catholic-Protestant relations. Nation-states such as France, England, and Spain all fight each other under the same banner of Jesus. Smith questions the logic of such a theory of just war when your enemies are also Christians.[72]

In a lengthy response entitled *Defensive War Defended,* Tennent challenges Smith on his reading. First, Smith is said to beg the question in debate by suggesting that the moral law does not enjoin war.[73] Secondly, Smith concedes his point when he says that wars commanded by God are just wars. Tennent argues that there are numerous examples where Israel fights without the command of God and are commended for it. These may be analogous for the present day.[74] Thirdly, Tennent accuses Smith of launching an offensive war against him and slandering his character. He explains that he did not charge the Quakers with cowardice before explaining that they also fled persecution.[75] Fourthly, Tennent dismisses the analogue between Moses *allowing* divorce and the Lord *requiring* war.[76] Finally, Tennent does not see anything contradictory between the gospel dispensation and war. He reiterates the various reasons why it is lawful to engage in a defensive war, even against those who are Christians.[77] Tennent also explains that "the *Jewish*

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[71] Smith, pp. 20-21.

[72] The religious tolerance on which Pennsylvania was founded seems to be a likely influence on Smith's argument.

[73] Tennent, *Defensive War Defended*, pp. 51-52.

[74] Tennent, *Defensive War Defended*, pp. 53-54.

[75] Tennent, *Defensive War Defended*, pp. 54-55.

[76] Tennent, *Defensive War Defended*, pp. 55-58.

[77] Tennent, *Defensive War Defended*, pp. 58-60.

Church enjoyed the *Gospel* as well as we, the very same *Substance*. He references the appendix of his original sermon as proof. There he had elaborated on the principal difference between the old and new covenants/dispensations. It is not an "essential" difference, but "circumstantial" or "accidental."[78] He clarifies by saying that the two dispensations differ in degree of clearness, perfection, liberty, and ease with regard to obedience.[79] For Tennent, the two testaments of Christian Scripture share an essential continuity in substance, but differ in circumstances, namely, the messiah had now come.

It is fair to say that both of these authors talk past each other. This back-and-forth proved fruitless as Tennent and Smith frequently misinterpret the other, with neither conceding their presuppositions—that defensive war is/is not lawful for Christians. This major disagreement between Tennent and Smith was not reached by reading a particular set of biblical passages. Instead, they arrived at their positions from how they saw the parts of the whole functioning together and how the Old and New Testaments relate, i.e., their understanding of canon and the rule of faith. The collision occurred when they believed themselves to be arguing on common ground. The differing canonical understandings of the authors shaped their reading of the text or how much importance they attached to the verse. Operating from a thoroughly Reformed perspective, Tennent saw defensive war being encouraged in the Old Testament and in the case of Deborah and Barak, even commanded. Seeing a strong "essential" continuity between the testaments, defensive war is upheld by the New Testament. The Old Testament text retains its "original" meaning and finds its continuation or extension in the New Testament. Repeatedly, Tennent cites Matthew 5:17 to show that the Christ-event reaffirms the Old Testament *moral* law, with the ceremonial and civic dimensions of the law functioning as types and shadows of Christ.

As a Quaker, Smith configures the canon very differently. While Quaker theology was in flux for much of the 17th and 18th centuries, Robert Barclay (d. 1690) was a prominent theologian. It is clear from Smith's work that he was influenced by Barclay's *Apology* (1676) which stands as a comprehensive Quaker systematic theology. For Quakers, the Bible was authoritative, but its

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[78] Tennent, *The Lawfulness of a Defensive War*, p. 59.
[79] Tennent, *The Lawfulness of a Defensive War*, pp. 59-64.

authority is derivative from the Holy Spirit. Thus, the canon is not principally a rule of faith and life, but one consequently as it is mediated by the Spirit.[80] As Scripture has its source in the Spirit, it cannot truly be in contradiction with it.[81] What is revealed by the Spirit is the knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.[82] For Smith, the Christ-event marks a new dispensation of God's actions. While the Old Testament continues to function as authoritative Scripture, its normative function is relativized by Jesus Christ and his teachings. As evidenced by Smith's comments on the Meroz passage, the ethics of war *were appropriate* under the old dispensation. With the advent of Christ and his teachings, these ethics of war are no longer normative for the Christian, for Jesus has revealed the best way to fulfil the moral law.[83]

This exchange highlights a few things with regard to how one may approach Judges as Christian Scripture. As with Edwards and Whitefield, one's social and political situation influences interpretation. It was wartime and the politics of peace and pacifism that had governed Pennsylvania since its inception seemed increasingly naïve. Tennent preached his sermon to encourage people to support and join the newly formed militia in Philadelphia. Smith writes his pamphlet partly to critique Tennent's sermon, but perhaps more importantly, to defend the quickly waning Quaker influence in the colony. Both turn to the Bible and take up the pen to advocate for a different reality in the present.

This exchange also reveals that there is perhaps a deeper influence on interpretation than one's social and political situations. Even when occupying roughly the same social location, Tennent and Smith came to different conclusions based on their theological convictions. Their disagreement arose not on the specifics of particular passages, but how they functioned in light of the whole Bible. A Christian reading of Judges is inherently concerned with how the text operates within the Christian canon. It must address the question of continuity with the New Testament as well as explicate the degree of influence the Christ-event has on interpretation of the Old Testament. Finally, this convoluted debate showcases the theological and ethical dimensions of

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[80] Barclay, *Apology*, 3.2. "If by the Spirit we can only come to the true knowledge of God; if by the Spirit we are to be led into all Truth, and so be taught of all things; then the Spirit, and not the Scriptures, is the foundation and ground of all Truth and knowledge, and the primary rule of faith and manners."

[81] Barclay, *Apology*, 3.6.

[82] Barclay, *Apology, 2.6.*

[83] Smith, p. 44.

interpretation. They do not read Judges 5:23 simply in its historical context, but rather they *use* the curse of Meroz to make a larger theological and ethical point. For Tennent, this passage in its larger canonical context reveals the continuing lawfulness of war (a larger theological truth), and it is used to advocate for the support of the Philadelphia militia (a larger ethical implication). Smith's counterargument concedes to Tennent's *historical* reading, put pushes back on the theological and ethical implications. What constitutes a Christian reading of the Old Testament, as it appears in these authors, are the inseparable operations of interpretation and application—its implications for the life of faith in the present. It appears that Christian engagement with Judges then ought to address these wider theological and ethical concerns of violence and warfare both as they appear in the Bible and in the world today.

The Curse of Meroz in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century

Throughout the various conflicts and wars in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the curse of Meroz is read and applied in various ways.[84] During the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), Samuel Finley preached a sermon on the curse of Meroz entitled, *The Danger of Neutrality*.[85] Here, Finley explains:

> The Inhabitants of *Meroz*, were *Conscience*-bound against *Fighting*, and had recourse to various *Pleas* for their *Justification*.—Nay—for their *Commendation*. They would be esteemed, forsooth, more *peaceable* than their *Neighbours*; and would have no cruel Hand in shedding Blood. ---But all their Pleas are over-ruled by the supreme *Judge*; and a fearful *Curse* is denounced upon them, for their criminal Neglect.[86]

Finley does not explicitly condemn Quakers, but as he is preaching in Pennsylvania, he does not have to. Many Quakers had resigned from government at the start of the war due to their

[84] There are many other examples of reception in the eighteenth century. More or less however, they share similar principles of interpretation and application.

[85] Samuel Finley, *The danger of neutrality,* (1757). Notably, Gilbert Tennent writes the preface to this publication and wholeheartedly endorses this sermon.

[86] Finley, p. 13.

conscientious objection to warfare. Finley applies this curse to them and those who do not join in the British war effort against the French.[87]

At the start of the American Revolutionary War, Samuel West preached a sermon before the House of Representatives of the Massachusetts-bay colony. West paints a grim picture of what British victory might mean for the colonies. His purpose is to encourage these congressmen in their revolutionary cause, and he does so by offering various proofs of why this war is justified. Towards the end of his sermon, he draws parallels between the revolution and Deborah and Barak's war with Jabin. [88] He explains that if such a curse was placed on those who did not assist Deborah, then there must be a greater a curse levelled against those who oppose the revolution and favour the British Parliament.[89] He continues by applying the curse of Meroz to those who object to fighting out of principle, as well as denouncing pacifism as a sin of omission "as it looks on quietly as friends and brothers are killed by their enemies."[90] It seems that the curse of Meroz was liberally applied to all who stood in the way of the war effort.[91]

There are, however, a few examples during the latter half of the century where the curse of Meroz is applied outside the context of war. Much like the example of Edwards, some sermons spiritualize the warfare, or apply the curse to those who do not participate in the work of God.[92] Notably, a few missionary organizations pronounce the curse on those who hinder the support of preaching the gospel at home or abroad.[93] Others use the example of Deborah and the curse of Meroz to call for doctrinal unity within the church.[94]

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[87] Finley, pp. 22-23. "The principal *Inference,* which I intend to prosecute, is this, that *British Subjects*, who refuse to assist their laboring *Country*, in the present *War*, are obnoxious to the *Curse of Meroz*. This will be evident, by shewing, that we are engaged in a *good* CAUSE, and so are *on the Lord's Side*: Consequently, *they* who do not *help to support this Cause, do not help the Lord*."

[88] Samuel West, *A sermon preached before the Honorable Council,* (1776), p. 55.

[89] West, p. 55.

[90] West, pp. 58-59.

[91] See also, Nathaniel Whitaker, *An antidote against Toryism*, (1777); Thomas Brockway, *America saved,* (1784); A single example of a British minister applying this text to the war effort can be found in: Caesar Morgan, *The duty of patriotism vindicated and enforced,* (1780).

[92] Thomas Bennet, *Sermons on the forty-fifth psalm,* (1781), p. 158; George Thomson, *The church's song of triumph,* (1780), p. 4.

[93] John Jamieson, *The certainty of the Gospel being sent to the heathen,* (1799), p. 18; John McDiarmid, *The propagation of the gospel important and necessary,* (1799), p. 32.

[94] Baptist Church, Northamptonshire Association, *Christian patience,* (1790).

We began this exploration with a rather shocking example from Nathaniel Whitaker right after the end of the American Revolutionary War. Perhaps, it is best to end where we began, a few years after the end of the same war. In 1785, Scottish minister, Archibald Bruce published a sermon he had delivered before the Associate synod (Presbyterian) a few years earlier.[95] It was entitled *True Patriotism,* and the sermon text was Judges 5:23. The sermon's main points are similar to many others: God has a cause in which his people must join; there are enemies of God's cause, and they must be resisted by God's people. The sermon does take a surprising turn under his fourth point wherein Bruce acknowledges the necessity of Christians to contribute to the public good. "In the common danger, every man should be a soldier; every one should look on the public cause as his own, and be ready to run all hazards with it . . . Generously to watch, to labour, to fight and, above all, to die for one's country, is reckoned truly noble and heroic."[96] Yet, Bruce contrasts this general patriotism with a religious "patriotism," one that "without controversy deserves the preference of any other; as it is employed about the best of causes, that of heaven, and the highest interests of men. As far as heaven transcends the earth, and eternity outmeasures time, so far doth this excel that of another kind: And to this the professors of religion are under manifold obligations."[97] Bruce explains that what is required of such religious patriotism is a concern for the advancement of God's glory "by dutiful regard to his worship, truths, and laws, and by an active promoting of his spiritual kingdom."[98] His description of the this duty is very different than that of Whitaker or Finley, but he is by no means a pacifist. In fact, he grounds the value of religious patriotism and its duty in the general patriotism of his day.

> If those are esteemed deliverers and friends of mankind who successfully assert the cause of external liberty, who rescue their fellow-creatures from dungeons, . . . who secure their property and rights from the grasp of avarice, rapine, and the encroachments of lawless power; *how much more* those who have a hand in extricating men from a worse than Egyptian slavery and emancipating consciences from all sorts of spiritual despotism? [99]

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[95] Archibald Bruce, *True patriotism,* (1785).
[96] Bruce, p. 17.
[97] Bruce, p. 18.
[98] Bruce, p. 19.
[99] Bruce, p. 22. Emphasis mine.

Bruce no doubt is referring at some level to the war time efforts of Great Britain. These efforts and the admiration they produce are transcended by those who participate in spiritual activity. Bruce continues to describe the activity of ministers and Christians as they engage in spiritual warfare for a spiritual kingdom. He laments to see such religious duty neglected in his time, to see "the lukewarm spirit of Laodicea, and the cursed disposition of Meroz."[100] Again, he makes a sharp distinction between the two patriotisms:

> Talk they of patriotism and public spirit, they refer to something very different from these most valuable and important of all objects; without which these boasted names are mere empty shadow and vain rhodomontade: the models of such patriotism they are more ambitious of taking, and indeed with greater propriety, from pagan Greece and Rome, than from the truly heroic and thrice noble spirits, held up to view, and handed down to immortality in Jewish or Christian story.[101]

Those who neglect this religious patriotism for God's kingdom are placed under the curse of Meroz. As the situation of cowardice and neglect is the same, so "the menacing words of the angel of the Lord are still accompanied with all their originals emphasis and terror as when uttered against the inhabitants of Meroz."[102]

True Patriotism represents a very different application of the curse of Meroz than Whitaker's. While American ministers are applying this verse, among others, to Quakers, pacifists, and Tories, Bruce attends to a more spiritual purpose. This sermon serves as a sharp criticism of his own countrymen, who concerned themselves with national patriotism at the neglect of spiritual patriotism for the kingdom of God. The common good is not neglected by attending to spiritual concerns; the true common good is secured through these religious duties. The curse of Meroz operates as a prophetic warning for those neglecters of spiritual patriotism rather than as Whitaker had suggested: a divine command to punish those neglecters of national patriotism during wartime.

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[100] Bruce, p. 110.
[101] Bruce, p. 110.
[102] Bruce, p. 125.

The Curse of Meroz and a Christian Reading of Judges

I have tried to provide a sympathetic account of how Christians in similar social settings could read and use a single verse from Judges in a variety of ways. In summary, the curse of Meroz during the eighteenth century became a springboard for discussing the work of God and those who would dare work against Him. Rarely was the plain reading of the text in contest, even in the debate between Tennent and Smith. Most of the disagreements were as to *why* the inhabitants of Meroz did not join the battle. Some thought that it was due to their sloth, or laziness or that they doubted God's call on Barak (Edwards). Others assumed it was because of cowardice (Whitefield), their ambivalence towards the fight, their beliefs towards violence (i.e., pacifism), or their collusion with the enemy (Whitaker, Finley, and West). Even with this diversity, the main point of the passage remained consistent throughout the century: respond to the call of God and participate in his mission (mission being broadly defined). The substantial differences between the interpreters came from the way the text was applied to the author's context. Both Edwards and Whitefield used the curse to warn against hindering the work of God during the revivals of the First Great Awakening. Missionaries and ministers also warned against disunity in the church at home and withdrawing support of the church abroad. This text became a spiritual judgement on those who were lukewarm in the faith and those who neglected all matters of personal religion. The curse of Meroz was also used by many to launch into an apology for just war. It was frequently used to rally troops, to advocate enlistment, encourage revolution, and condemn the enemies of the state.

What can these differing examples tell us about a reading Judges as Christian Scripture? I have already made a few observations stemming from specific examples. I suggested that interpretation is heavily influenced by social and political situations, and that these situations may prompt an interpretation in the first place. We learned from the debate between Smith and Tennent, however, that there are deeper influences than social and political situations. Considerations must be taken to how one views the relationship between the Old and New Testament. They also revealed that to engage the book of Judges, one must also address larger theological doctrines and ethical concerns, such as Christian engagement with violence and warfare.

Viewing these examples as a whole allows us to see a more substantial point. They reveal that the criteria for evaluating an interpretation, especially its theological and ethical applications, are not always, or only, to be found within the immediate text itself. Many readers today would be appalled at some of these examples. Those using the curse of Meroz to call others to war or suggesting that conscientious objectors have their land, and perhaps their lives, taken away would be swiftly condemned as fanatical. But these examples are hardly *surprising*. It is, after all, a text about warfare, and it explicitly condemns those who do not join the war on the side of YHWH. It was then not a matter of *if* the text should be applied to their eighteenth-century military conflicts, but *how*.

Our discomfort with these examples lies not in the interpretation of the text *per se* but in its application to the present circumstance. The readings that spiritualized either the warfare itself or the application would no doubt be preferred to the others, even if such readings lie beyond the horizons of the text. Thus, reading the text "on its own terms" is hardly a straightforward option for the Christian interpreter. A Christian reading cannot be judged solely on how closely it follows the historical or literary context of the text, for it is not constrained only to these contexts. The canonical context of both the Old and New Testaments and how the text is to be applied to present circumstances is also of interpretive importance. Taken together, this is what a text *means* within a Christian frame of reference.

A Christian reading of Judges must establish the criteria for the evaluation of an interpretation. To do so, it must take seriously the canonical context of Judges. This includes, but is not limited to, its historical and literary context, but also its rhetorical strategies and its complex compositional/redactional history. It also includes how the text has been received by communities of faith and appropriated as part of the Church's scriptures and rule of faith. The threads of various contexts weave together a tapestry that display not simply what the text meant at a singular point in history, or what it meant to different communities at various moments in time, but also what it may say to us today. Its appropriation in the present is fundamentally part of the interpretive enterprise. Out of necessity, there will always be a negotiation between the world of the text and the world of today, just as there is a dialogical relationship between history and literature, text and canon, scripture and its readers. Both worlds have their own complexities, and as a result, there are bound to be a plurality of appropriate readings and applications. As the text allows for these

multiple senses, particular readings and applications need not always be in competition with one another (though some might be said to be outside a Christian frame of reference). To engage with Judges as Christian Scripture is to engage it in the here and now—to hear its words and the reverberant echoes of the saints directed to our own situations.

— CHAPTER 2 —

TAKING A STAB AT A CHRISTIAN READING: EHUD, ASSASSINATIONS, AND GENRE

> The truth is . . . you're the weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men.
> But I'm trying, Ringo. I'm trying *real hard* to be the shepherd.
> (*Pulp Fiction)*

There are few stories in Israel's Scriptures that are more audacious than the Ehud narrative (Judg. 3:12-30). Israel is in bondage to their neighbour to the east, under the rule of Eglon, the king of Moab. Posing as a prophet, the left-handed Ehud assassinates the expectant king and escapes the palace in dramatic fashion. He rallies his countrymen to battle and secures Israel's liberation. Reflecting an ancient rivalry typical of neighbouring communities, the story features many humorous elements which demean the Moabite overlords. Quite differently than other narratives of deliverance, the role of Israel's deity is limited; YHWH is only present in the opening exposition where he strengthens Eglon and raises up Ehud (Judg. 3:12, 15). For Christian readers, the violent means of Israel's salvation by the underhanded actions of Ehud raise certain ethical questions. How should a story wherein the main character assassinates his enemy be read in the larger canonical context of Christian Scripture? How should it be read alongside the example and teaching of Jesus in the gospels (e.g., commands to love your enemy)? But more than just moral issues are raised. Multiple ambiguities frustrate a clear understanding of the text, and as a result, interpretations vary by focusing on different narrative elements. While there is only one Ehud narrative as it exists in its final form, the ambiguities of the narrative allow for a number of Ehud stories. As I will argue, how readers adjudicate between the variety of interpretive options stem more from their expectations of the narrative and how the story ought to unfold than from any clear characterization in the text. I will outline these various readings of Judges 3:12-30 and place them on a spectrum for analysis. After which, I will offer my own reading and provide a few reflections on the nature of reading Judges as Christian Scripture.

Ehud and His Many Stories

Perhaps a good place to begin is how this narrative is likely to be encountered in an ecclesial setting. As Judges 3:12-30 does not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary, it is likely only a small number of Christians have heard a sermon on this passage. The number of evangelical or non-denominational churches that have preached on the passage is likely still smaller as Judges is not the first choice of pastors who wish to preach from the Old Testament.[1] Representative of a particular evangelical reading of the passage, Donald Sunukjian offers us a homiletical example in which elements of the story are metaphorized.[2] The narrative details he attaches significant importance to are the "left-handedness" of Ehud and the objects at Gilgal he turns from. Sunukjian views Ehud's left-handedness as a special attribute, through which God can work to deliver Israel. Yet, Ehud fails to act in 3:19a:

> But when the opportunity presents itself, Ehud fails to act and leaves the palace discouraged and defeated. But as Ehud goes by them on his way home, he stops and looks at the pile of stones. And their original meaning comes back to him. He is struck again by what they stand for — These stones mean that God has given us this land, not Moab. Moab has no right to be here. This is our land. God gave it to us forever.[3]

Here, Sunukjian interprets the פְּסִילִים at Gilgal to be the same stones erected by Joshua (Josh 4:20). These stones remind Ehud of God's miraculous act of bringing the Israelites across the Jordan. This "landmark" gives Ehud the strength to return to Eglon's palace and finish the job he came to do. Sunukjian's take away message for an assumed congregation centres around encouraging a

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[1] A quick search on websites that curate sermons from many different denominations turned up a negligible amount for Ehud. "Sermon Central" boasted 134 entries, a small amount when compared with the 22,999 entries for Isaiah or 1,977 entries for Gideon (https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/sermons-about-ehud/?CheckedTranslation=&checkedMultimediaTypeIds=&keyword=ehud&searchPhrase=ehud). "Sermon Audio" had 151 entries (https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons.asp?keyword=ehud); "Sermon Search" had only 35 entries (https://www.sermonsearch.com/advancedsearch.aspx).

[2] I first heard this example from an Old Testament Research Seminar at Talbot School of Theology in the spring semester of 2016. Sunukjian is the department chair of Homiletics at Talbot. He was giving a lecture on how to preach from Old Testament narratives and selected Judges 3 as one of his examples. What I have reproduced here, I have done from my memory of this seminar and from a magazine article he wrote for Biola in the fall of 2007. Both of these accounts are very similar.

[3] D. Sunukjian, 'Remember Your Landmark and Your Left Hand'.

Christian to remember what God has done in their past and respond appropriately using the distinct gifts they have been given.

> My friend, you too have landmark moments in your life, memorial times when you came face to face with the power of God . . . Out of those landmark moments, God calls you to his service. And he has given you some unique ability, some special skill to do something for him that others cannot do. You have a "left hand" that God's people need, and he calls you to serve his people with it. Remember your landmark and your left hand.[4]

Sunukjian's metaphorizing approach is not novel but finds certain commonalities with ancient Christian readers. Origen for instance compares the "sword" of Ehud and the "plough" of Shamgar noting, "a judge of the Church may not always brandish a sword, that is to say, he may not always use the harshness of a word and sharpness of a reproof, sometimes he may even imitate the farmer and, furrowing the land of the soul as if with a plough and breaking it open more often by a gentle admonition, he may make it suitable for receiving seeds."[5] Like the weapons of the judges, Israel's enemies are metaphorized (or spiritualized) for the Christian, becoming vices and sins to be killed and overcome.

These readings may seem oversimplified and lacking in certain respects, but their approach and what they have attached significance to is not a far cry from what can be found in other commentators. Many Christian readers have noted that while these deliverers may have some admirable qualities, they should not be considered role models.[6] Surprisingly, the majority of interpreters—Christian or otherwise—treat Ehud as atypical and unorthodox, but nevertheless an essentially positive moral agent—one whom God uses to liberate his people. While others do not moralize the story for individual application as Sunukjian does (Discover your 'left hand' and use it to serve God), the major theme of most of these readings is that Ehud is the unlikely/unexpected candidate through whom God will deliver his people from oppression. Overall, Judges 3 is a positive narrative. To arrive at this positive reading, however, one must understand the textual

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[4] Sunukjian, 'Remember Your Landmark and Your Left Hand'.

[5] Origen, *Homilies on Judges*, (Catholic University of America, 2010), pp. 71-72.

[6] K. L. Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, (Zondervan, 2002), p. 44; S. Mathewson, 'The Story of the Left-Handed Assassin and the Obese King', in H. Robinson, P. Batten (eds.), Models of Biblical Preaching, (Baker, 2014) [47]. Matthewson approaches the Ehud story in nearly the same manner as Sunukjian, but he understands the main message of the text to be that "God delivers his people from hopeless situations in unexpected ways" (48).

ambiguities in a certain way. Three ambiguities in particular — the characterization of Ehud, the physical size of Eglon, and the nature of the פְּסִילִים at Gilgal — do more to shape a particular configuration of the story than anything else.

The Characterisation of Ehud and his Left Hand

Early in the story (3:15), readers encounter an intriguing description of Ehud where the narrator reports that he is "left-handed" or as the MT reads אִישׁ אִטֵּר יַד־יְמִינוֹ, which is typically read as "a man bound in his right hand." The difficulty of the statement lies not in its translation *per se* but in its interpretation. The phrase is found only here and in Judg. 20:16 which describes an elite force of Benjaminite warriors. The apparent root אטר appears as a Qal imperfect in Psalm 69:16 with the meaning "to shut" or "to close."[7] This phrase may only be an idiomatic expression of left-handedness, though the question of why the biblical author did not simply use the more common שְׂמאל (as they do in Judg. 3:21) may suggest otherwise.[8]

The variety in the ancient translations reveal that this description is important for interpretation. The LXX reads "ambidextrous" (ἀμφοτεροδέξιον), which is followed by the Old Latin and Vulgate.[9] The Targum reads: גֶּבְרָא גְמִיד בִּידֵיה דְיַמִּינָא. The key word (גְמִיד) is also rare, appearing only here and in the Targum of Judg. 20:16. Its root is likely גמד meaning "to contract" or "to shrink."[10] Perhaps it is suggestive of atrophy.[11] The Syriac completes this picture with ܐܦܝܫ meaning maimed or "crippled."[12] As it is clear from the narrative Ehud uses his left hand, "left-

[7] This is the only other use of the אטר in the HB apart from its use as a proper name in Ezra 2:16; 2:42; Neh. 7:21, 45; 10:18.

[8] שְׂמאל and its cognates appear throughout the HB. Interestingly, the root appears in 1 Chron. 12:2 to describe an elite force of benjaminite bowmen who assisted David.

[9] Lindars notes that this may also be an idiomatic phrase for being left-handed, (B. Lindars, *Judges 1 - 5: a new translation and commentary*, (T&T Clark, 1995), p. 141).

[10] CAL; Jastrow; *BT Ḥul 43a (37); TgJ 1Sam17:43tos; BT Yoma* 69a; The Targum of Psa. 69:16 retains the same sense of the MT—that the mouth of the pit (Gehenna in Tg) would swallow the psalmist—but uses פתח in the Ithpeel, meaning "to open."

[11] Smelik translates it as "a man with an emaciated right hand," W. F. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, (Brill, 1995), p. 372.

[12] *BHQ*, p. 49*.

handed" may be a suitable translation. The more important question, however, is what is *meant* by the narrator's description.

Similar to Sunukjian's positive reading, Laura Smit suggests, "Ehud is not weak but a great warrior; he really is just 'differently abled.' As a lefthanded man, his strength comes from an unexpected direction."[13] John Goldingay in his *Judges for Everyone* commentary also focuses on Ehud's left-handedness. Yet rather than a unique ability, it is a disability.[14] "God is not bound by ableism. Ehud couldn't use his right hand. It is thus ironical that he was a Benjaminite, because *Benjamin* means 'son of the right hand.' He couldn't even live up to his own clan's name . . . but his inability to use his right hand becomes God's means of making him Israel's deliverer."[15] Graeme Auld likewise notes the play on words with the left-handed Ehud being from Benjamin. According to Auld, however, Ehud's disability is more of a social stigma than a physical disability. "In many societies, left-handed people have suffered great disadvantages. To be made to conform to the majority is bad enough. To suffer as being 'sinister' is much worse. However, for God, Ehud's 'handicap' was a positive advantage: it gave him the benefit of surprise, like a left-handed tennis player."[16] In contrast, Suzie Park notes that one of the many things left-handedness is often associated with in ancient cultures is femininity *qua* weakness. Thus, a number of Ehud's actions (as well as other Benjaminites') may be gendered— "Ehud is depicted as fighting similarly to Jael, and in Judg. 19–21, the Benjaminites' sexual insecurity leads, at the end, to their utter feminization. The emphasis on the tribe's left-handedness further 'feminizes' this tribe."[17] David Chalcraft offers a sociological retelling of the story through the lens of the social model of disability. Through this

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[13] Smit and Fowl, *Judges* p. 65; Cf. M. L. Conway, *Judging the Judges: a narrative appraisal analysis*, (Eisenbrauns, 2020) pp. 96-97. Conway understands the left handedness of Ehud to be a positive characterization with regard to Ehud's capacity as a warrior. She acknowledges that it might speak to his disability or his strength. Regardless, Ehud's left-handedness leads to his success.

[14] John Rogerson argues that the form of אִטֵּר (*Qittil/Qittîl*) is used elsewhere to denote a physical disability (*A theology of the Old Testament: cultural memory, communication, and being human*, (Fortress, 2010) pp. 32, 180-183. He cites M. T. Segal, *A grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew*, (Wipf & Stock, 2001) pp. 108-109.

[15] J. Goldingay, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth for everyone*, (SPCK, 2011) p. 97. Cf. C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes*, (1920) pp. 69-70; J. A. Soggin, *Judges, a commentary*, (WJK, 1981) p. 50; Wilcock, *The message of Judges* p. 41.

[16] A. Graeme Auld, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Daily study Bible--Old Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 149. Cf. B. G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, (Eerdmans, 2012), p. 171.

[17] S. Park, 'Left-Handed Benjaminites and the Shadow of Saul', *JBL*, 134/4 (2015), pp. 705, 710, 719.

lens, Ehud is "doubly stigmatized" as his physical impairment forces him to use his left-hand.[18] His disability includes both his physical impairment and the stigma of left-handedness. Chalcraft imaginatively explores the range of cultural meanings and consequences of Ehud's disability. Perhaps Ehud tried to hide his impairment and thus act able-bodied, or if he lost it in combat, perhaps his kinsmen regarded him with a veteran's honour.[19] Ehud might have been selected to offer tribute because he was considered "dispensable," a reassurance to Eglon of Israel's weak subservience, an "insult" to Eglon, or as "a metaphor for an incapacitated Israel."[20] Perhaps he simply volunteered or was chosen because he "was particularly adept at performing the correct degrees of humility and obeisance, having learned these attributes in his social encounters."[21] In a more devotional mode, Tim Keller views left-handedness as a possible disability, but understands it to be a weakness that points readers to Jesus' defeat of his enemies through weakness.[22] More recently, Isabelle Hamley sees the left-handedness of Ehud as a challenge to the normative assumptions of worth and value. She writes, "Indeed, one of the messages of the story is that glory is not found in expected places, and a gap is created between the characters' expectations (that Eglon is esteemed as king, while Ehud is a shamed member of an oppressed group bringing tribute to his conqueror) and the readers, who already know that Ehud is YHWH's chosen deliverer."[23]

Not everyone interprets left handedness as a disability, social disadvantage, or weakness. To James Jordan, left-handedness carries no social stigma as Ehud is an established leader in Israel. He presents the tribute, is honoured with a private conference with Eglon, and is followed by Israel's army.[24] J. Clinton McCann interprets the Benjamin/left-handed wordplay as indicative of Ehud's "trickster" identity.[25] His actions are unexpected, and his mission is accomplished through trickery.

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[18] 'Ehud, Stigma, and the Management of Spoiled Identity: A Sociological Retelling of Judges 3: 12–30', *Postscripts*, 11/2 (2021), p. 218.

[19] Chalcroft, p. 221.

[20] Chalcroft, p. 226.

[21] Chalcroft, p. 226.

[22] T. Keller, *Judges for you*, (The Good Book Co., 2013), p. 47.

[23] Hamley, *God of Justice and Mercy*, pp. 32-33.

[24] Jordan, *Judges*, pp. 60-61.

[25] J. C. McCann, *Judges*, (WJK, 2002), p. 44.

Ehud's left-handedness, however, may actually describe his lethality rather than his disability. As already noted, the LXX translates the phrase "ambidextrous" (ἀμφοτεροδέξιον). Way uses this information, along with the note in Judges 20:16 about 700 left-handed slingers, to suggest that as a trained assassin, Ehud serves as Israel's "secret weapon."[26] Jack Sasson takes a similar view, "But rather than making him ambidextrous (LXX), shrivel-armed (Targum), left-handed (most modern translations), or in any other way handicapped, this notice highlights his special training . . . So, Ehud had skills that will serve him well for the task at hand."[27] Rather than a disabled underdog, or a social outcast turned opportunist, Ehud becomes an elite warrior-assassin, trained to fight using either hand—a force to be reckoned with.[28] This ambiguity may give some pause to the Christian interpretations that attach significance to Ehud's presumed disadvantage.

The message of God choosing the weak or unexpected to accomplish redemption is thus not self-evident from the text, but it still remains a plausible construal based on certain socio-cultural resonances. Sunukjian's reading that metaphorizes certain details of the narrative to encourage Christians to find their particular skill in their service to God remains tenable, even if it is not the only reading. The narrator's description of Ehud is suggestive of a plurality of characterizations without determining the precise one for readers.

The Characterisation of Eglon's body

The narrator also describes the body of the Moabite tyrant: וְעֶגְלוֹן אִישׁ בָּרִיא מְאֹד. Typically, this is rendered as "Now Eglon was very fat." This "fatness" has been understood by many as obesity, with the description as obscene and suggestive of the grotesque—perhaps an ancient version of

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[26] Way, *Judges*, p. 36. Cf. C. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, (WJK, 2002), pp. 147-148; Block, *Judges*, p. 161.

[27] J. M. Sasson, 'Ethically Cultured Interpretations: The Case of Eglon's Murder (Judges 3)', in A. Millard, M. (Mark) Geller, G. Gershon (eds.), Homeland and Exile, (Brill, 2009), p. 574. Cf. J. M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: a new translation with introduction and commentary*, (YUP, 2014), p. 227.

[28] For others who take this view, see E. Christianson, 'A Fistful Of Shekels: Scrutinizing Ehud's Entertaining Violence (Judges 3:12-30)', *Biblical Interpretation*, 11/1 (2003), p. 61; B. Halpern, *The first historians: the Hebrew Bible and history*, (Pennsylvania State University, 1996), p. 41.

Jabba the Hut.[29] Understanding the story to be satirical (which we will discuss later), Webb describes him as obese and "By fattening himself on the tribute (*minḥâ*) he has extorted from Israel (it was probably agricultural produce), Eglon has turned himself into a large, slow-moving target and a helpless sacrificial animal. His obesity symbolizes his greed and his vulnerability to Ehud's sharp blade (v. 21)."[30] Eglon is seen as this corpulent monstrosity, whose immense weight causes him to struggle to stand. But as Lawson Stone points out, nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does בָּרִיא imply such negative connotations.[31] One example is found in Genesis 41, when Pharaoh dreams of impending famine. There בָּרִיא describes the seven "fat" cows and the seven "fat" ears of corn. בָּרִיא is used in conjunction with יפה (beautiful) to describe the cows and with טוב (good) to describe the corn. בָּרִיא is also used to describe Daniel and his friends at the end of the 10 days in which they ate only vegetables.[32] So it would seem that, on its own, בָּרִיא more likely means healthy or fit and has positive connotations. Ken Way explains that modern-day conceptions of obesity are not in view. "The narrator is thus informing us that Eglon is not an easy target but rather a 'beefy' or 'strapping' man, which explains why he would have little need for guards and heightens the dramatic impact of God's deliverance through Ehud."[33] Yet, the addition of מְאֹד to the description does raise the possibility of a pejorative reading. Taken together with the narrator's description of the violence in 3:21-22, the plausibility of Webb's satirical reading increases. [34]

Such readings, however, appear to be missing from the earliest versions. The LXX has rendered בָּרִיא as ἁστεῖος, meaning "beautiful."[35] The Targum has פַּטִים which elsewhere indicates

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[29] R. J. Ryan, *Judges*, (Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), pp. 22-23; A. H. Lewis, *Judges/Ruth*, (Moody, 1979), p. 33. I do not know who was the first to draw this comparison, but it has become common.

[30] Webb, pp. 165-166.

[31] 'Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration', *JBL*, 128/4 (2009), p. 651.

[32] Cf. Stone, pp. 651-54.

[33] Way, p. 37.

[34] So, the description of the fat closing over the blade in Judg. 3:22 (וַיִּסְגֹּר הַחֵלֶב בְּעַד הַלַּהַב) may be meant to demean Eglon's corpulence. Stone argues that the narrator's description in 3:21-22 points more Ehud's violence. The sword actually pierces *through* and out Eglon's back ('Judges', in P. W. Comfort (ed.), Joshua, Judges, Ruth, (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale House, 2005), p. 242). He also notes that חלב simply connotes internal organs rather than an obscene amount of flesh. Neither is Ehud prevented from withdrawing his sword by fat, as it is commonly read. The כי instead functions in an explanatory way: the fat closed over the blade *because* Ehud did not withdraw it ("Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade," pp. 652-654).

[35] BHQ suggests that the translators misunderstood the word to be from ברא (to create), thus meaning here, "well made" (49*).

health (e.g., the fattened calves of Gen. 41).[36] Later in the Ehud narrative, the men of Moab who are killed by the Israelite forces are also described as "fat" (שָׁמַן) and "men of strength" (אִישׁ חָיִל). In Josephus' account of the story (*Ant.* 5.4.2), there is no mention of Eglon's physical size. Likewise, the rabbis are mostly silent on Eglon's weight, seeing more significance in his standing up than in anything else. Eglon's physical size seems to play little part in the interpretation of the story as depicted in medieval and early modern art (See Plate 1).

[36] Cf. Jastrow 1155.

Plate 1 Ehud Slays Eglon: (a) The Crusader Bible of Louis IX, (1244–1254); (b) *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Ausberg, 1476); (c) *The Luther Bible* (1594); (d) Masters of Otto van Moerdrecht (1430); (e) *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Cologne, 1360); (f) Gabriel Angler (Munich, 1450?).

It would seem then that "fat" does not always connote something negative or even noteworthy for the story. This detail may hint at the humour of the story, or its satirical critique as suggested by Webb and others. But it might not. It may describe the physical prowess of the story's villain. Once again, the narrator has not given us a clear picture.

Ehud and the פְּסִילִים

Another ambiguity that complicates interpretation can be found in the objects Ehud turns back at: הַפְּסִילִים אֲשֶׁר אֶת־הַגִּלְגָּל. From the root פָּסַל meaning "to hew," פְּסִילִים could simply refer to anything that is carved or shaped, with the material most likely being stone or wood.[37] However, in every other nominative use of פֶּסֶל and פָּסִיל in the Hebrew Bible, it means an idolatrous object—it is always used negatively.[38] With the geo-historical referent of Gilgal, these פְּסִילִים could represent the same memorial stones erected by Joshua (Josh 4). They could also be boundary stones marking the edge of Moabite governance; they could simply be "monoliths."[39]

The ambiguous nature of the "monoliths" has not surprisingly produced a less than monolithic set of readings. Some readings view the פְּסִילִים as identical to Joshua's אֲבָנִים, the memorial stones taken from the Jordan which has reminded Ehud of YHWH's past deeds.[40] James B. Jordan, draws the connection to Joshua 4, but suggests that it is more likely that "Moab had defiled Gilgal with idols."[41] J. Clinton McCann understands the פְּסִילִים to be Moabite idols, perhaps images of Chemosh. This is significant because, he writes, "Eglon would have known

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[37] BDB. Hence the Targum's מַחְצְבָיָא (quarries) or the common translation of "sculptured stones" or "quarries." See Y. Amit, *The book of Judges: the art of editing*, (Brill, 1999), pp. 186-187.

[38] 31x in the singular and 23x in the plural. This point is strengthened by the LXX^{A} which reads γλυπτῶν. Elsewhere in LXX it means an idol (Exod. 34:13; Lev. 26:1; Deut. 4:16, 23, 25). Cf. Butler, Judges, p. 54. Butler explains that the "LXX^{A} makes 'Eglon' the subject, apparently to avoid connecting Ehud with contact of any kind with pagan images. This necessitates making 'Ehud' the specific subject of 'he said' later in the verse."

[39] Burney, p. 71; See G. Mobley, *The empty men: the heroic tradition of ancient Israel*, (YUP, 2007), pp. 79, 95-101. Mobley provides an intriguing interpretation of these monoliths as sacred space, marking the limen between earth and the underworld. Ehud passes through these "gates of death" to defeat a "chthonic deity." With the mission accomplished, Ehud returns through a "different kind of limen, a victory arch, the 'Gates of Righteousness.'"

[40] A. E. Cundall and L. Morris, *Judges and Ruth: an introduction and commentary*, (IVP, 2008), p. 78; Smit and Fowl, *Judges*, p. 70; Ryan, *Judges*, p. 21; Sunukjian, 'Remember Your Landmark and Your Left Hand'; Soggin, *Judges*, p. 51.

[41] Jordan, p. 61. Cf. A. R. Fausset, *A Critical and Expository Commentary on the Book of Judges*, (James & Klock, 1885), p. 63.

Ehud had crossed the Jordan to deliver the tribute, Eglon may even have been expecting from Ehud a favourable word from Eglon's own god, Chemosh. In any case, he is tricked."[42] Jack Sasson explains that Eglon may have simply appropriated the memorial stones, rather than setting up his own images. The stones then have become idols with some sort of cultic or oracular significance for Eglon.[43] Webb explains that Gilgal had become an Israelite shrine. He writes, "The presence of idols there is not surprising considering Israel's apostasy referred to back in verse 12. More significantly, Ehud's returning from these stones may well have been deliberately intended to deceive Eglon into thinking that he had returned with an oracle."[44] The stones are Israelite idols and Ehud "visits" them in order to trick Eglon. Leigh Trevaskis argues that these פְּסִילִים at Gilgal highlight Israel's idolatry. He also argues that on the basis of Ehud killing Elgon between the twin references to פְּסִילִים, Ehud represents an "anti-idolatrous leader."[45] Carolyn Pressler makes a similar anti-idolatrous comment, "If the stones are graven images, they serve a symbolic function. Ehud turns away from such ensnaring idols (cf. 2:3). By the end of the story, he has moved far beyond them."[46] Mary Conway takes this a step further: "There is no evidence that Ehud allows, sets up, or condones the idols; the lexis (שׁוּב, עבר) and context imply that he repudiates idolatry and the pleonastic pronoun [הוּא] emphasises Ehud's distinctive role in dealing with the idols that contrasts with the apostasy of Israel. As we shall see, Ehud's attitude to the idols also contrasts with the eagerness of Eglon to engage with them."[47] In contrast, O'Connell has suggested that these idols are suggestive of the larger deuteronomistic concern with proper cultic worship. Ehud's failure "to remove the idols characterizes negatively both Ehud (as microcosm) and the tribe whom he delivers (as macrocosm) and ostensibly leads to the religious apostasy that begins the following deliverer account."[48] What these readings have in common is that they attempt to give meaning to

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[42] McCann, p. 44.

[43] Sasson, p. 231. Cf. R. D. Nelson, *Judges: a critical and rhetorical commentary*, (T&T Clark, 2018), p. 62.

[44] Webb, pp. 172-173; Hamley, p. 34; Block, pp. 163-165. Block believes these פְּסִילִים to represent Israel's syncretistic worship, but he does not mention whether or not they play any significant part in the assassination plot.

[45] Leigh M. Trevaskis, "Credit Where Credit's Due: Ehud As Anti-Idolatrous Leader" (paper presented at the summer meeting of SOTS, Durham, UK, 2018).

[46] Pressler, p. 148.

[47] Conway, p. 101. Cf. R. Polzin and R. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges*, (Seabury, 1980), p. 160.

[48] R. H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, (Brill, 1996), p. 84. O'Connell explains that this perspective derives from the recontextualization of the story in the book of Judges which aligns with a broader

an otherwise laconic description of the פְּסִילִים and connect these objects with a larger backstory of Ehud, Israel, or Eglon.

The Spectrum of Stories and their Assessments

These three ambiguities outlined above create and give rise to a number of readings which significantly deviate from one another. How one understands the ambiguous descriptions of Ehud and Eglon and the significance of the פְּסִילִים will affect the overall tone of the story and its rhetorical purpose. In a sense, there are many different Ehud stories as each reader (re)configures the textual data—both historical and philological— to create a meaningful and, to them, a coherent narrative. For example, there is one story about an unlikely hero, whose God-given, special talent is the very thing that saves a nation (Sunukjian). There is another story that is also about an unlikely hero, though this time, he has a disability or is a social outcast (Goldingay, Auld, Keller, Chalcraft, Smit, Conway). In the end, he is exactly the hero Israel needed as God worked specifically through his weakness to save his people. There is yet another tale, one filled with delicious irony and satisfying satire, where the "trickster" liberates his people by dispatching the grotesquely obese king (Alter, Block, Webb, Davis). However, there is also a dissenting and serious story, full of danger and peril, where Ehud is a well-trained super-assassin and his opponent is a "beefy" warrior-king, a formidable opponent (Sasson, Stone, Halpern, Christianson, Way). Thus, it appears that the skill of Ehud is directly proportionate to the size of Eglon. The characterisation of one is bound up in the other—though the ambiguities of the text could equally be read in other ways. There is nothing within the text that suggests this proportionality of characterisations to be a necessity.

Likewise, the way one understands what is meant by פְּסִילִים directly impacts the characterization of both Ehud and Israel, as well as their assessment. We can see this more clearly by placing the above possible readings on a spectrum arranged from positive to negative. On the positive end of the spectrum lies Sunukjian, who views these פְּסִילִים as the same stones erected by

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rhetorical strategy of advocating a Davidic monarchy at the expense of a Saulide dynasty. The idols in the Ehud story point to Saul's cultic transgressions and serve to depict the "disadvantages" of non-Judahite leadership. For O'Connell, it is only the references to idols that implicitly and vaguely point to this anti-Saul rhetoric, not any other actions of Ehud.

Joshua, and thus, they remind Ehud of YHWH's mighty acts. Moving in a negative direction, the next reading views these פְּסִילִים as memorial stones that have been appropriated by a Moabite cult, or these stones have been replaced by Moabite idols. Ehud worships YHWH but visits the Moabite idols to trick Eglon. Continuing in a negative direction, another reading suggests that these פְּסִילִים form part of an Israelite shrine, devoted to a syncretistic worship of YHWH or of foreign deities. Yet, Ehud visits them still in order to trick Eglon; it is part of his plan to assassinate him. Just beyond this reading there is a negative, but redemptive reading that sees the פְּסִילִים to be syncretistic Israelite idolatry but Ehud as an anti-idolatrous leader who delivers Israel from that idolatry (Trevaskis, Pressler, Conway). Lying at the far end of our spectrum, a final assessment understands the פְּסִילִים to suggest an implicit indictment of Ehud *qua* Israel—he is criticised for not removing these idols (O'Connell). This more negative reading, however, only assesses what does *not* occur in the narrative. No negative comment is made regarding Ehud's actions.

Despite this positive-negative spectrum, Ehud's characterization remains virtually untarnished as he escapes the idolatry that has ensnared the whole of Israel.[49] Even when he "intentionally" visits the site, he only does so to trick Eglon. The bodily assessments of Ehud and Eglon has spawned several conflicting narratives, but their conclusion is roughly the same: Ehud is a positive moral agent who affects deliverance for Israel by the power of God. There is, perhaps, another way to read the story.

Ehud and Genre

Why has Ehud in recent times been treated fairly positively? There is plenty of ambiguity within the narrative, and as evidenced by recent commentators, there are many ways one could configure

[49] A notable exception is to be found in Block: "Prior to v. 28 there is no hint of any spiritual sensitivity in Ehud's here nor any sense of divine calling. On the contrary, Ehud operates like a typical Canaanite of his time—cleverly, opportunistically, and violently, apparently for his own glory" (p. 171). Yet, one significant feature of Block's commentary is that the narratives are filtered through what he presumes to be the book's main theme: the Canaanization of Israel. Here is a fitting example. There is nothing in this story to explicitly indicate that Ehud was doing any of this for self-servient ends, but in light of the whole book of Judges, readers might come to the understanding (after many rereading's) of the negative assessment of Ehud. However, it appears that in this example Ehud is criticized by Block simply because he is a character within the book of Judges—a book with only negative characters. Later in our discussion of Ehud, we may likewise come to understand that Ehud is a morally ambiguous character who specifically acts in contrast to God's redemptive plans, yet we will do so for different reasons.

the data. There exists then, the possibility of an Ehud story in which the central character is read in a negative light, i.e., that Ehud's actions are not to be viewed favourably. It may be that Ehud is not truly such a light in the darkness of Israel's apostasy.

The reason for this positively oriented assessment of Ehud (and indeed the many different readings) is due in part to the presumed genre of the text, or how readers have expected the story to go. From the broader literary context, one would reasonably expect Ehud to function as a deliverer, raised up by YHWH just as Othniel had been (Judg. 3:6-11). Yet, readers will later be introduced to morally ambiguous and down-right degenerate deliverers. We cannot be so quick to rule out a similar depiction here. Focusing on the Ehud narrative itself, it is not precisely clear what kind of story it is. As I will argue, it is the reader's estimation of its genre that is the prime animating force of interpretation, rather than any particular element within the text. At times, the presumed genre of the story exerts totalising interpretive control and thereby excludes other plausible readings. Such readings "compete" on the grounds of the same data, and in the case of Ehud, it is the readers' construal of the ambiguity that creates such meaning.

In the most basic sense, genre is a system of classification which orients readers to the overall design or strategy of the composition. The material used by the reader to (re)construct the story (i.e., to interpret it) may derive from a number of sources—history, archaeology, texts, inter-texts, etc.—but the reader organises the material on the basis of what they believe the story to be. The puzzle of interpretation is assembled according to the picture on the box. Literary theorist, Tzvetan Todorov writes that "In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties."[50] Genres are a way for readers to make sense of the text through classification. Their decisions are based on an aggregate of texts and the discursive properties shared by them. This codification is done by the reader, and more precisely, by a community of readers. Thus, Todorov continues, "It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors."[51] So

[50] T. Todorov, *Genres in discourse*, (CUP, 1990), pp. 17-18.
[51] Todorov, p. 18.

even though an author might infuse their narrative with a specific genre (or choose to subvert a genre) they do so by appealing to a pre-existing conception of how a story ought to go. The production of a generic text (the "models of writing") is based on the ability of the reader to identify it. So, in our puzzle analogy, the individual puzzle pieces, with their shape and colours function as the discursive elements and the picture of the completed puzzle on the box functions as the "horizons of expectations." Before continuing our discussion of genre, let us explore how the Ehud story has been treated as a specific genre.

Ehud as Satire

While these are not in themselves, mutually exclusive categories, Judges 3:12-30 tends to be treated as a dramatic hero story or a comedic satire.[52] So far, I have been discussing a dramatic telling of the story wherein Ehud is the hero who overcomes a formidable opponent. Now we turn to discuss the Ehud narrative as a satire. In this genre, Ehud is still the hero, but his character is not so much elevated as is Eglon's character diminished. It is through mockery and denigration of the villain (Eglon and the Moabites) that Ehud is cast as victorious. Reading the story as satire, however, does not rest on a single interpretive insight, but is a schema of reading (the "horizons of expectations") that understands several features of the narrative to collectively function in humorous and satirical way (as opposed to the more dramatic tone of the heroic story).[53] To use Northrop Frye's succinct definition of satire, it is "militant irony."[54] Satire as a genre requires two things, "one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack."[55] The attack is not simply a critique or a hidden polemic. If comedy is laughing

[52] These are larger genre categories that could easily be broken down into sub-genres. A "Hero story" for instance could refer to myth, folklore, or historiography. Each of these would entail its own strategy of reading, but all would understand the story and its purpose to be operating in ways different than a satire. My concern, however, is different than the more common concern to depict the narratives relationship to history (cf. Halpern, pp. 39-75), which itself comes with its own "horizons of expectations."

[53] Humour does not properly belong to any one genre—every tale can have its jokes. Those who understand Ehud to contain ethnic humour or comedic elements may still interpret the story in a heroic fashion rather than as a satire. The principal difference between the two is one of emphasis rather than content.

[54] N. Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: four essays*, (Princeton Univ., 1990), p. 223.

[55] Frye, 224.

with then satire is laughing *at*.[56] It is a laughing at the *other;* the narrative and its rhetoric draws the reader in, leading them to mocking derision.[57] This authorial impetus is what defines the genre; to suggest that the story *is* a satire is to argue for a certain historical purpose. As I will suggest later, this is different from suggesting that certain literary elements function or have the potential to function in a *satirical* way.

Lawson Stone contends that this satirical reading of Judges 3:12-30 only began with Matthew Henry and was later popularized by Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.[58] The satire is founded upon the seemingly humorous characterization of Eglon and the portrayal of the Moabites as stupid.[59] Alter's analysis of the satire is similar to Webb's quoted above, but is worth mentioning here:

> What emerges is not simply a circumstantial account of the Moabite king's destruction but a satiric vision of it, at once shrewd and jubilant. The writer's imagination of the event is informed by an implicit etymologizing of Eglon's name, which suggests the Hebrew 'egel, calf. The ruler of the occupying Moabite power turns out to be a fatted calf readied for slaughter . . . Eglon's fat is both the token of his physical ponderousness, his vulnerability to Ehud's sudden blade, and the emblem of his regal stupidity. Perhaps it may also hint at a kind of grotesque feminization of the Moabite leader.[60]

Eglon is inflated to be a larger-than-life villain—one that is not tall, but wide. McCann likewise has noted the sacrificial overtones, "Eglon, the one who exacted *tribute* from Israel, ends up, in essence, being slaughtered as if he were Israel's sacrificial *offering* to God."[61] From Eglon's name

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[56] T. Jemielity, 'Ancient Biblical Satire', in R. Quintero (ed.), A Companion to Satire, (Blackwell, 2007), p. 16.

[57] Cf. Uriah Y. Kim, "Postcolonial Criticism: Who is the Other in the Book of Judges" in *Judges and Method,* Gale Yee (ed.) (Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 161-182.

[58] Stone, "Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration," p. 649; O'Connell, p. 84. Cf. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (Basic Books, 2011), pp. 43-47; Gunn, *Judges Through the Centuries*, pp. 38-51. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible,* (1706).

[59] L. K. Handy, 'Uneasy laughter: Ehud and Eglon as ethnic humor', *SJOT*, 6/2 (1992), pp. 233-246. Handy labels the genre of the story as "ethnic humor," but this reasonably could be labelled as a sub-genre of satire, as its purpose is to demean Moabites. Handy writes, "the narrative is intended to be primarily funny and it is based on the ethnic stupidity of the entire Moabite populace which is vehemently displayed here. This is an ethnic joke" (p. 242). Cf. Ryan, p. 23.

[60] Alter, p. 45. Cf. A. Brenner, 'Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who's Afraid of Biblical Humour? the Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible', *JSOT*, 19/63 (1994), pp. 44-45.

[61] McCann, p. 45.

which means "calf," or "little calf," to his apparent obesity, and even to his gullibility in rising to hear this divine word, all of this is aimed at satirizing the enemy—both the Moabites and their king. Alter writes,

> An enemy's obtuseness is always an inviting target for satire in time of war, but here the exposure of Moabite stupidity has a double thematic function: to show the blundering helplessness of the pagan oppressor when faced with a liberator raised up by the all-knowing God of Israel, and to demonstrate how these gullible Moabites, deprived of a leader, are bound to be inept in the war that immediately ensues.[62]

Thus, the accumulation of these discursive elements signal to the reader that the narrative is a satire.

Expanding on Alter's reading, others have gleefully sensed an element of homoeroticism within the story. Deryn Guest in the *Queer Bible Commentary,* presents a reading of Judges 3:12-30 that emphasises the sexual dynamics of the tale to reconfigure it as a male rape scene.[63] Ehud's "dagger" strapped to his leg is a phallic euphemism, as is the repetition of יד (hand).[64] The expression בוא (Ehud "came to" the king) is suggestive of sexual intercourse, and as Alter notes, "there is something hideously sexual about the description of the dagger-thrust."[65] Geoffrey Miller imagines that Eglon expects a "homosexual liaison," and Ehud takes advantage of this desire. To Eglon's surprise (and the audience's delight) Ehud's phallic object turns out to be a sword![66] Eglon is thus feminised and emasculated, being dominated physically and sexually penetrated, if only in a figurative sense.[67] The dehumanising portrayal of the Moabite King who is metaphorically raped by Ehud, or to borrow Cheryl Exum's phrase, "raped by the pen," provides the comic opportunity

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[62] Alter, p. 46.

[63] D. Guest, 'Judges', in D. Guest, R. E. Shore-Gross, M. West, T. Bohache (eds.), The Queer Bible Commentary, (SCM, 2006), pp. 167-173.

64 Guest, p. 169; Marc Brettler, "Never the Twain Shall Meet? The Ehud Story as History and Literature," HUCA 62 (1991), pp. 295-296. Brettler understands that the inclusion of hand in vs. 30 deviates from the pattern of ending and suggests that this choice "was informed by an awareness that at one level the chapter is depicting the sexual subjugation of the Moabites to the Israelites" (p. 296).

[65] Brettler, p. 31; Alter, p. 45.

[66] G. P. Miller, 'Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible: Judges 3:12-30 and 19-21', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 55/2 (1996), pp. 114-115.

[67] Guest, p. 170. Cf. M. L. Garcia Bachmann, *Judges*, (Michael Glazier, 2018), p. 36.

to gleefully rejoice at the misfortune of Israelite enemies.[68] The aftermath of the murder, with the crass "toilet humour" and the complete rout of the Moabite army, only increases the comical nature of the tale. The laughter, however, can turn to horror for LGBTQ+ readers. Guest writes,

> this text assumes that to be caricatured as a passive recipient of anal rape is one of the most derogatory insults that one can direct towards a person/group. The text thus requires a shared contempt for any man who is penetrated by another and for the act itself. It also assumes that people like Eglon *deserve* to be violated/eliminated from society, and let us not play down the immoderate relish with which the narrator seems to savour Ehud's rape/murder of Eglon. Indeed the ideology of the text implies that the deity of the Hebrew scriptures not only condones but is glorified in the violation and elimination of Eglon and, further, that his elimination can bring its reward to the nation carrying out such acts, so long as it is done for appropriate reasons such as patriotic zeal.[69]

According to Guest, such uncritical emphasis on the perceived homoerotic elements within the Ehud story can recast it as "text of terror" for gay/queer men in the present. The satire of Judges 3:12-30, whether its target is some form of ethnicity or queer sexual identity, is believed to be evident in the narrative. The assumption of these scholars is that this rhetoric would have been warmly accepted by an Israelite audience (and certainly not funny to a Moabite one), but the same rhetoric should be resisted by readers today.

The Problem with Genre as an Interpretive Tool

Two realties, however, complicate our genre analogy with the puzzle and box top. They question the usefulness of genre for interpreting texts (and especially ancient texts) and the confidence with which scholars have labelled the Ehud narrative as a satire. First, what happens if we have lost the picture on the box? If genres, both in terms of authorial production and readerly reception, function on the basis of an institutionalised norm of codification, i.e., a distinct historical and cultural setting, what happens if our access to such a "world-behind-the-text" is limited? To properly

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[68] J. C. Exum, *Fragmented women: feminist (sub)versions of Biblical narratives*, (Sheffield Academic, 1993), p. 170. Cf. S. Frolov, 'Sleeping with the Enemy: Recent Scholarship on Sexuality in the Book of Judges', *Currents in Biblical Research*, 11/3 (2013), p. 320.

[69] Guest, p. 172.

understand how a text is functioning on its own and in relation to other texts, how authors are using or subverting genres, readers must be familiar with the conventions that lay behind them or at least make plausible proposals that don't ring false in reading.[70] To suggest that an ancient text is either the paradigmatic form or the transgression of a genre, requires a law (to use Todorov's term) which is accessible to the reader.[71]

As a fairly well-defined genre, satire requires a number of historical, cultural, and linguistic probabilities. Since it is a sub-genre of comedy and utilises humour (broadly defined) to critique a specific historical or cultural reality, it is expected that readers can discern between what is meant to constitute the humour and what is meant to be taken as part of the straightforward narration. For example, if Ehud's left-handedness signals weakness, uncleanness, or sinisterness, could this also form part of a satire against *Israel*—that they could only be delivered by such a based individual? Perhaps, but this is a readerly judgement that goes beyond the text. Determining a narrowly defined genre like satire is rendered difficult in the case of Judges, partly because the text is underdetermined and is open to being read in more than one way, and it is partly due to the subjective nature of humour and the reality that what one person finds funny another person might not.[72] Too often, readers find comedy within the biblical text that mirrors their own sense of humour; usually only slim justifications are given for why an ancient reader and/or audience would find it funny.

Readers must not only be adept at picking up the satirical and humorous clues within the text, but also be able to draw connections between the text and what is signified by it. Jack Sasson explains, "satires are by definition intentional, and they require a conspiracy of shared assumptions before they can unravel successfully: The author must own a stance from which to launch barbs,

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[70] Alter makes a similar point using the example of western films and the convention of a quick-drawing sheriff-hero. Rather than seeing conventions as evidence of different sources, they might point to a type-scene. In his imaginative example, the variation of the convention (e.g., a sheriff with a withered right hand who trains to shoot with his left) would be recognisable only to those who know the wider conventions of the western. "With our easy knowledge of the convention, moreover, we naturally see a point in the twelfth, exceptional film that would be invisible to the historical scholars. For in this case, we recognize that the convention of the quick-drawing hero is present through its deliberate suppression" (pp. 56-57).

[71] Todorov, p. 14.

[72] Cf. A. Brenner-Idan, 'On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament', in A. Brenner-Idan, Y. T. Radday, M. Davies (eds.), On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible., (Bloomsbury, 1990), pp. 39-58; J. W. Whedbee, *The Bible and the comic vision*, (CUP, 1998), pp. 1-13.

the target must to some degree be transparent and focused, and the audience must be savvy enough to appreciate when details have moved away from the descriptive to the imaginative."[73] What is targeted by the satire thus dominates the interpretive activity of the reader and the significance of the text. If we designate that the text *is* a satire against Israelite neighbours, then this limits the text's interpretative significance within an historical mode. It can *only* be a satire in a generic sense, and thus our comments must be directed towards the target of the satire and how the author(s) have/have not achieved the desired effect. These comments require a hypothetical *Sitz im Leben* that is almost inevitably an imaginative construct. So, as suggested by Guillame, the narrative functions as a traumatic response to the events depicted in the 8th century Mesha Stele.[74] Israel processes their defeat through what Jacqueline Bussie calls "tragic laughter."[75] Thus, the humour and irony that forms the satire of Ehud is a way to resist Moabite oppression.

While this imaginative world-behind-the-text is *plausible* (though not the only one), suggesting that the author wrote it as a satire requires further historical data, namely in its composition style.[76] In researching the use of Greek genres by Jewish authors during Hellenistic and Roman eras (which includes some New Testament authors), Sean Adams comments that "satire was widely viewed in antiquity as a Latin genre, and participation in it by Greek authors, or Greek versions of the genre during the Hellenistic era, is not well attested."[77] He identifies only two Jewish texts (Bel and the Dragon and Pseudo-Clement, *Hom.* 4.7– 6.25) that participate in

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[73] Sasson, Judges, p. 248.

[74] Guillame explains that the Mesha stele (c. 845 BCE) reveals the beginning of the Moabite state. The events depicted in Judges 3 could not have happened in the narrative setting of early Iron Age I. Following Knauf's dating of the *Richterbuch* (c. 720 BCE), Guillame suggests that the Ehud story is an imaginative response to the historical trauma inflicted by Mesha a century earlier (*Waiting for Josiah*, pp. 28-29. Cf. Brettler, *Judges,* p. 33.

[75] *The laughter of the oppressed: ethical and theological resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo*, (T & T Clark, 2007). For a good example of how one might read the biblical text through this lens without limiting the book to its genre, see L. J. Claassens, 'Tragic Laughter: Laughter as Resistance in the Book of Job', *Interpretation*, 69/2 (2015); 'Rethinking humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic laughter as resistance in the context of trauma', *OTE*, 28/3 (2015).

[76] This is perhaps moving away from Alter's proposal that is significantly less determined by a precise historical situation. His satire only needs a general Israelite context, one in which Israel pokes fun at their neighbour. I would argue, however, that his plausible suggestion is based more on readerly decisions than on available historical data.

[77] *Greek genres and Jewish authors: negotiating literary culture in the Greco-Roman era*, (Baylor University, 2020), p. 196. He also cites Horace, *Sat.* 1.4, 10; 2.1 There is of course the Greek Menippean Satire, which dates to the third century BC. See M. Bakhtin's analysis of the genre in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973), pp. 112-121.

satire but explains that this genre appears to have been largely avoided.[78] To suggest that the Ehud narrative is a satire (in an historical and authorial sense) goes beyond our limited data. We don't have a complete box-top that will assist us in the task of interpretation. Even if we could be relatively certain about the originating historical context, this would not explain how the satire functions as part of a non-satirical collection, book, or literary corpus.[79] Neither would this hypothesis explain why later tradents would be inclined to retain such a time-bound satire as part of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, a point that is our principal concern.

The second reality that complicates our analogy is if our classifications of texts are based on the discursive elements of a genre, what happens when such discursive elements indicate more than one genre? In this case, our analogy must slightly shift, perhaps to Irenaeus' mosaic, whose pieces might be configured in the shape of a king or of a fox.[80] The discursive elements i.e., the gems and mosaic tiles, do not change *per se*, but are rearranged to create a different picture. These elements no longer "belong" to any particular genre. This is voiced famously by Jacques Derrida in his essay, "The Law of Genre," in which he suggests that while the accumulation of discursive elements may orient the reader towards a particular genre, the individual discursive elements are not constitutive of the genre in themselves.[81] He writes, "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging."[82] Moreover, as genres are "open-ended sets," texts can participate in them without ever adhering to an "ideal" form—the lack of adherence might actually expand the genre or create a new one, thus altering the "horizons of expectations" argued for by Todorov.

A good example of this might be found in looking at the western film genre. Any number of elements might adequately describe the genre including, but not limited to a hero (sheriff or outlaw), horse riding, a shoot-out, set in an open country (reminiscent of the American west or

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[78] Adams, pp. 296-297.

[79] While such a satire could make sense within Knauf's *Richterbuch*—a collection of local/tribal hero stories—no one, for instance, would argue that the entire book of Judges is a satire.

[80] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1:8:1

[81] 'The Law of Genre', in D. Duff (ed.) A. Ronell (tran.), Modern genre theory, (Routledge, 2000).

[82] Derrida, p. 230. Derrida has intentionally adopted an obtuse and clunky style in this essay. This sentence is one of his more straightforward points.

southwest) or in a dusty desert town. The film would include themes such as bravery, justice, masculine identity, etc. Collectively, these generally describe the genre, but the individual discursive element does not in itself constitute the western genre. Other films that are not westerns may feature horse-riding, a shoot-out, or a desert town (e.g., Indiana Jones). Additionally, a film may be considered a western and *not* include some of these specific discursive elements. The desert town might be located on Dune's Arrakis or Star Wars' Tatooine and the horse might be replaced by any number of animals or spaceships. So even things that readers can pinpoint as discursive elements of a genre may not necessarily indicate that genre, for a text can participate in multiple genres without belonging to any of them. In a similar manner, just because there is a joke, does not mean it is a comedy; the presence of satirical elements or irony does not mean the story is necessarily a satire.

In the case of Ehud, several of the discursive elements used to argue for a specific genre are ambiguous, and thus can be seen to signify other genres or participate in multiple genres. As we have already seen, בָּרִיא may signal Eglon's "comical" obesity (whether or not one finds such obesity something to be scornful of is another matter). In contrast, it might signify Eglon's strength. Elements which point to the "scatological reading" may only be straightforward narration meant to produce disgust rather than laughter.[83] This is especially the case with the queer readings of Ehud and Eglon. Guest and Brettler suggest that the *leitword* יד can be a euphemism for penis. It *might* be a euphemism, but it does not need to be, and even in these queer readings, יד does not always mean "penis". Surely, אֲשֶׁר יַד־יְמִינוֹ cannot mean "bound in the right penis," and even if it *did* signify sexual deviancy vis a vis homosexuality as Guest and Miller suggest, wouldn't the term better signal sexual *impotency*? Perhaps Ehud is a eunuch and is allowed into Eglon's palace because he is not a sexual threat.[84] In his critique of such sexualised readings, Frolov explains that in only two examples (Isa. 57.8; Cant. 5:3) out of more than 1600 occurrences can יד seen euphemistically.[85] But it is not only a hand that is a penis, but also a sword (חֶרֶב), a thigh (יֶרֶךְ), and

[83] For scatological reading, see T. A. Jull, 'מקרה In Judges 3: a Scatological Reading', *JSOT*, 23/81 (1998).
[84] This queer reading might still be considered satirical along similar lines as Guest, Brettler, and Miller.
[85] Frolov, p. 315.

feet.[86] This phallic accumulation, if taken to its possible limits, renders Judges 3:21 unintelligible: "and Ehud stretched out his left penis and took the penis from his right penis and thrust it into his belly." By what criteria can interpreters adjudicate between the common meaning of the word and its rare use as a euphemism?[87] Such satirical and queer readings mistake generic participation for belonging. These discursive elements can plausibly orient us towards a satirical reading of the text (participating to some degree or another), but they do not *necessitate* such readings because they do not inherently belong to any one genre. These ambiguities coupled with the lack of historical and cultural data frustrate any clear or simple genre classification.

Guessing at Genre: A Way Forward

While these realities complicate the use of genre for interpretation, they do not render it useless. Some texts demonstrate more philological and textual stability; there is more historical and cultural data to support our classifications (in an historic mode).[88] This is especially the case with modern texts and films. To some degree or another, we understand the history and cultural context behind these works; if we do not, our access to them is not impeded in the same way as with ancient texts. Even so, the genre of a text must be "guessed" by the reader as it is not the usual practise of the author/editor to explicitly identify it.[89] Even if a text is explicitly identified as a particular genre, it might be the case that the author is simply misleading the reader (e.g. purporting a fictional story to be historical) or trying to establish for them particular expectations that will be challenged by the narrative (e.g. mislabelling the story). Frow explains, "genre is not a *property* of a text but is a function of reading. Genre is a category that we *impute* to texts, and under different circumstances this imputation may change."[90] By imputing a genre, readers alter for themselves the horizons of expectations. If they are not careful, they may essentially engage in circular hermeneutical

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[86] Cf. Miller, p. 115. "Feet" is understood as a euphemism for both sexual activity (Exod. 4:25; Ruth 3:47), and the phrase, "cover the feet" as in Judge 3.24, to mean defecation (1 Sam. 24.4 (MT)).

[87] Similar arguments would apply to the understanding that בוא indicates a sexual encounter here. Cf. Frolov, p. 317.

[88] E.g. the examples in Adams, *Greek genres and Jewish authors*..

[89] E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in interpretation*, (YUP, 1979), p.88. Cited in J. Frow, *Genre*, (Routledge, 2006), pp. 101-102.

[90] Frow, p. 102.

reasoning when they attempt to classify the text: the discursive elements are said to indicate a particular genre, but the assumed genre pressures the reader to interpret other discursive elements to cohere to that genre. The problem is compounded in the case of Ehud as the discursive elements are ambiguous and open to being read in more than one way.

Though there is a dialogical reality to navigate between author, text, reader, and community, the act of genre-fying (or genrefication) by the reader imposes upon the text particular "horizons of expectation," which may or may not be congenial to the author's original purposes or the rhetorical force of the text. As readers we have the freedom to adopt, reject, or revise the author's views or even the rhetorical force of the text—though the dynamics will be different when the text functions as Scripture. We may read a text in generic ways that were not envisaged by the originating context. To do so, may open the text to illuminating readings and fruitful dialogues.[91] But this imputation of genre is quite different than arguing that a text *is* or *belongs to* a certain genre. Frow writes, "neither authors nor readers act as autonomous agents in relation to the structures of genre, since these structures are the shared property of a community. Readers and writers negotiate the generic status of particular texts but do not have the power to make their ascriptions an inherent property of those texts."[92] It is better to suggest that a text "behaves" in similar ways to this genre or that, while recognising that such classification is the activity of the reader rather than a function of a text. Guessing at genre is a reality readers face, and not necessarily a problem to overcome. As long as a particular genre is not made to exert totalizing interpretive control over a text, the concept of genre may still have an accumulative heuristic value by shaping reader's expectations based on particular relation of the discursive parts to the narrative whole.

This act of guessing is not simply a shot in the dark. There are indeed clues and constraints offered by the historical-cultural setting and the particularities in the narrative—though this is complicated when it comes to ancient texts. Our criteria must be a resourceful use of the text and its *available* context(s). Even if the puzzle's box top is missing and the pieces are all jumbled together, progress in interpretation may still be made. As readers, we can make an educated guess

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[91] For an example of how reading biblical texts as a particular genre (e.g., horror film) can be illuminating to interpretation, see Andrew Judd, *Playing with Scripture*, (PhD. Dissertation, Sydney University, 2021).

[92] Frow, p. 109.

as to the genre of an ancient text based on historical data (the world behind the text) and textual data (the world within the text). At times our guesses may not be as precise as we would like them to be—our confidence may only extend to a basic classification like "Hebrew narrative." Our evaluations might only be negative by ruling out certain genres, but this is still helpful. In the end, the puzzle might not be complete, but we can have a good idea about what the picture is supposed to be. From there, we can move into important task of discussing how this portrait of the text's subject matter might speak to us and our world in the present.

Rereading Ehud as an Anti-Hero

I wish to propose another reading of the story, one that expands the spectrum to include the possibility of a negative assessment of Ehud by the final form of the text. If the complexities and ambiguities of the narrative allow for the possibility of multiple readings, albeit some are more illuminating than others, then it follows that Ehud could be understood as an anti-hero. Anti-heroes can come in many shapes and sizes, though they are typically found in narratives with a longer character arc than we find in Judges 3:12-30. As an anti-hero, Ehud is the protagonist whom the audience/reader is rooting for, even though he is not presented as a positive moral agent. Ehud as an anti-hero is not exemplary—he is neither a hero nor a villain. Though he delivers Israel, his methods are, at best, questionable, and at worst, they are incongruous with the way YHWH has chosen to act through Israel. To arrive at this negative reading, we must first reconsider the expectations set by the available historical and literary contexts with the text's surprises or reversals. As I will argue, the assassination of Eglon is unexpected within an historical and canonical context. Such a surprising mode of deliverance by Ehud may provide space for ethical and theological reflection that does not require metaphorizing.

Ancient Assassinations and Modern Assumptions

While both genres—satire and the hero story—take the narrative in different directions, both assume a particular historical reality. It is widely assumed that assassinations of this calibre and kind occur in the ancient world with some frequency. So, Block comments, "heretofore his

assassination of Eglon has been portrayed as a typical ancient Near Easter coup—the result of a carefully designed and meticulously executed human scheme, like a leaf from a Canaanite textbook."[93] Ehud is imagined as ancient "James Bond."[94] Many commentators explain that Ehud hides his dagger on his left side in order to sneak it past the guards. Some envisage Eglon surrounded by an ancient version of the secret service who pat down visitors for weapons as if they are alert to a would-be assassin.[95] Why these guards simply wouldn't check Ehud's other side is left unexplained. While it is plausible that there were guards around the palace, it is unlikely they would have been concerned by an assassination attempt by a foreign agent. This is because such an event is *unprecedented* in the ancient world, both in terms of literature and history. Political assassinations occur with abundant frequency, but to the best of my knowledge based on extent sources, none resemble the kind that is found in Judges 3. Furthermore, ancient writers appear not to have even imagined this possibility. To clarify, the type of assassination that is unprecedented is one that 1) is carried out by a foreign agent, 2) targets a high-ranking political figure, and 3) does not take place as a military operation during a formal war. Allowing these historical and literary examples to disrupt our generic presuppositions will allow us to reconfigure Ehud as an anti-hero.

One of the earliest records of assassination comes from Egypt during the Middle Kingdom. In *The Instruction of King Amenemhet I For His Son Sesostris I,* the deceased King Amenemhet speaks to his son in a dream in order to instruct him.[96] He recounts his own assassination:

> It was after supper, night had come. I was taking an hour of rest, lying on my bed, for I was weary. As my heart began to follow sleep, weapons for my protection were turned against me, while I was like a snake of the desert. I awoke at the fighting, alert, and found it was a combat of the guard. Had I quickly seized weapons in my

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[93] Block, p. 170. Cf. Sasson, *Judges*, p. 234.

[94] Halpern, p. 43

[95] Amit, p. 182; Butler, p. 70; Chalcroft, p. 229; J. F. D. Creach, *Violence in scripture*, (WJK, 2013), p. 134. J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, (Eerdmans, 1986), p. 250. Halpern, pp. 39–75; Hamley, p. 33; D. Mauss (ed.), *The Action Bible: God's redemptive story*, (David C. Cook, 2010), pp. 210-11. McCann, p. 44; Miller, p. 114; Mobley, p. 76; G. F. Moore, *Judges*, (T & T Clark, 1895), p. 93; S. Niditch, *Judges: a commentary*, (WJK, 2008), p. 57. Park, p. 708; Pressler, p. 148; Billie Anne Robinson, *Laughing In The Face of Violence: Theological Implications of the Inter-relationships between Violence and Humour in the Book of Judges,* ThD dissertation at Toronto School of Theology (2019), p. 170; Webb, p. 166; van Wijk-Bos, *The End of a Beginning: Joshua and Judges*, pp. 144-145. Younger, p. 114.

[96] "The Instruction of King Amenemhet I For His Son Sesostris I" (*AEL* 1:135).

> hand, I would have made the cowards retreat in haste. But no one is strong at night; no one can fight alone; no success is achieved without a helper.[97]

The assassination of Amenemhet was carried out when the king was vulnerable and by those known to him i.e., his own guards. The implied purpose of this text is to instruct the new king to be on his guard; he is not to trust anyone, specifically those closest to him: soldiers, servants, friends, and even family members.

Another early record of assassination can be found in the Harem Conspiracy of Ramses III. The record can be found in two documents: The Judicial Papyrus of Turin which is a record of the court proceedings, and Papyrus Lee and Papyrus Rollin which detail the magic used in the conspiracy.[98] It seems that Tiy, one of Ramses III's wives, wanted to secure the kingship for her son Pentewere. The plot appears to have included multiple women in the king's harem and a great number of others, including, butlers, harem guards, scribes, and military officers. Papyrus Lee and Papyrus Rollin are fragmentary, and while it is unknown who is being accused, one can assume that the accused is a court magician as the text is concerned with the magic used to support the conspiracy.[99] The conspiracy of Pentewere ultimately failed as he was discovered and condemned—he would not be king. While it is unclear in the text whether the assassination of Ramses III was successful, a recent study completed a CT scan on the mummy of Ramses III which revealed a deep 70mm cut on his throat, the likely cause of his death.[100] Like the previous example, assassinations are carried out by those known to the victim. Servants, guards, and even kin are involved, and such a plot relied on magic and curses to succeed. Ultimately, they failed, which demonstrates just how difficult it was to pull off an assassination of a king in ancient Egypt.

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[97] "The Instruction of King Amenemhet I" (*AEL* 1:137).

[98] "Harem Conspiracy of Ramses III" (*ARE* 4: §416 fn. a.) The latter two were originally one document.

[99] The use of magic here is interesting. Presumably, a conspiracy of this magnitude would have a high chance of success. However, the conspirators enlisted the help of the magicians to "make magic rolls for hindering and terrifying, and to make some gods of wax, and some people, for enfeebling the limbs of people." This speaks to the extreme difficulty of a successful assassination of a king. "Harem Conspiracy of Ramses III" (*ARE* 4: §§454-456).

[100] Z. Hawass, S. Ismail, A. Selim, S. N. Saleem, D. Fathalla, S. Wasef, A. Z. Gad, R. Saad, S. Fares, H. Amer, P. Gostner, Y. Z. Gad, C. M. Pusch, and A. R. Zink, 'Revisiting the harem conspiracy and death of Ramesses III: anthropological, forensic, radiological, and genetic study', *BMJ*, 345/dec14 14 (2012). The study also tested the genetic kinship between Ramses III and unknown "Man E" and concluded "the identical Y chromosomal DNA and autosomal half allele sharing of the two male mummies strongly suggest a father-son relationship." The unusual state of the mummy—screaming facial expression, incomplete mummification process, and corpse wrapped in ritually impure goat skin—suggest a man who died in disgrace. Thus, unknown Man E is likely the conspirator Pentewere.

Another example of assassination can be found in Herodotus' account of the succession of Darius. After the death of Persian king Cambyses II, a Median magus usurped the throne by pretending to be Cambyses' deceased brother Smerdis. This prompts Darius, along with a few others who know the truth of the pretender, to embark on an assassination mission to reclaim the throne. Discussing the plot, Otanes asks how they plan to get past the guards. Darius assures him that the guards are easy to pass, and that they will allow him to pass because they know him.[101] Encouraged by a good omen, they carry out their plan, and Herodotus notes, "When they reached the gates, everything happened more or less as Darius had predicted. The guards were very respectful of such eminent Persians and, without suspecting them of anything underhand, sent them on their divinely appointed way; not one of them asked the conspirators any questions."[102] It was when they were later stopped by some eunuchs that they drew their knives, and fought with the remaining guards before killing the magus-king. This example from Herodotus shows that the assassins were not very concerned about guards or a weapon's check, based on their status of being familiar to the king. It also shows that it very naturally takes several men to accomplish an assassination—Darius is no "lone ranger."

An example which bears some resemblance to Ehud is found in Gaius Mucias' unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Etruscan king Porsena.[103] With Rome blockaded and starvation threatening the city, Mucias decides to liberate his people by assassinating the enemy king.[104] He is careful to tell his plan to the senate so that he would not be accused of deserting. Having infiltrated the enemy camp, he conceals a sword/dagger under his robe. It was pay-day, when the soldiers lined up to receive their wages before the king and his secretary. The problem was that both men were dressed in similar attire, and Mucias could not tell between them who was the king. "Mucius was afraid to ask which was Porsena, lest his ignorance of the king's identity should betray his own, and following the blind guidance of Fortune, slew the secretary instead of the king."[105]

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[101] Hdt. 3.72.1-5.

[102] Hdt. 3.77.1-2.

[103] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 2.12-13.

[104] Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* is dated to the late 1st century BCE, but the events mentioned occurred around 508-9 BCE.

[105] *Ab Urbe Condita 2.12.7*

He is captured, but is released by the King on account of his bravery which included a spectacle of Mucias holding his right hand over a fire without flinching. It was because of this, that Mucias was known as Scaevola (left-handed). Grottanelli is the only scholar to draw a connection between Ehud and Mucius, but he overstates some of the similarities which he sees as "no mere chance coincidence."[106] The crucial differences between the two accounts are that Mucias fails to kill the king and he fails because fortune was not on his side. It also worth noting that Mucias rejects the idea of going without permission from the senate. In Ehud's story, it appears that no one else knew of the plot.

There are other examples of assassinations in the ancient Near East, but many of them appear without extended narratives. The 11th century BCE Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I is assassinated by his son.[107] The Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib is also killed by his sons.[108] Ironically, the deaths of both kings were thought to have occurred because they had sacked Babylon and offended the gods. Herodotus tells the story of Candaules who is assassinated by Gyges, his chief bodyguard. The plot, however, is made by Candaules' wife, as she wanted revenge on her husband.[109] None of these examples quite resemble the assassination in Judges 3.

There are other examples from Jewish literature such as the assassination of Holofernes by Judith. This later story, however, can be said to be reflecting stories such as Ehud and Jael. Even the story of Jael, albeit a surprising turn of events, does not fit the criteria as it occurs during a time of war. Jael in some manner seems to be known to Sisera and may not be foreign in the same way as Ehud. Without denying the narrative artistry of Judges 4-5, this example does appear *after* Ehud. It thus cannot provide narrative or generic expectations for the reader in the first instance.

There are a few other examples in Israel's Scriptures, but these do not fit the criteria either. The assassination of Abner by Joab and Abishai in 2 Samuel 3 for instance occurs during a time

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[106] C. Grottanelli, *Kings & prophets: monarchic power, inspired leadership, & sacred text in biblical narrative*, (OUP, 1999), p. 52. He points to the left-handedness/restricted in the right hand of both characters. Yet, Mucias only becomes left-handed *after* the attempted assassination. He does not specify here if he believes there to be literary dependence.

[107] J. J. Mark, 'Tukulti-Ninurta I'.

[108] 2 Kgs. 19:37; COS 3.95; J. J. Mark, 'Sennacherib'.

[109] Hdt. 1.8.1-1.12.2. Gyges' kingship (and presumably the moral justification for the killing) is confirmed by the Delphic oracle. In another version of the events, the Gyges is aided by a magic ring that renders him invisible (In Herodotus' account, he only hides behind a door). See K. F. Smith, 'The Tale of Gyges and the King of Lydia', *The American Journal of Philology*, 23/4 (1902).

of civil war, is carried out by multiple people (cf. 2 Samuel 3:30), and the assassins are known to the victim—which is why Abner trusts them.[110] The assassination of Ish-Bosheth in 2 Samuel 4 is also carried out during a time of war by multiple people known to the victim. Interestingly, both of these examples of assassination are viewed negatively by the character of David, which is presumably the perspective the author wishes his readers to adopt (1 Kgs. 2:5-6). Another example might be found in Jehu's killing of Joram and Ahaziah in 2 Kings 9. This example, however, is different in that Jehu is not alone, and Jehu is well known to both of the kings and their guards. Joash in 2 Kings 12 is assassinated by his servants. The conspiracy against Amaziah in 2 Kgs. 14:17-21 is carried out by multiple people, and almost does not work. 2 Kgs. 15:8-15 contain two brief statements regarding the assassination of Zechariah by Shallum and the assassination of Shallum by Menahem. These accounts may fit the criteria, but there is not enough information to tell for certain. The conspiracy against Pekahiah in 2 Kgs. 15:25 was made by his officer, Pekah, and 50 other men. Pekah was then later assassinated by a conspiracy led by Hoshea (2 Kgs. 15:30). After being warned of the threat, Gedaliah is assassinated by Ishmael and his men (2 Kgs. 25:25; Jeremiah 40:13-41:3). None of these examples resemble the assassination of Eglon in ways that might be illuminating for interpretation.[111]

By surveying the limited historical backgrounds of assassination, one can better appreciate the historical and literary anomaly that is the story of Ehud. In nearly every direction you look in the ancient world, Ehud stands apart from the rest. Not only does it appear to be one of the earliest narratives of assassination, but its content also appears to be unprecedented in the ancient world. It also appears that such an event was outside of the imagination of ancient writers. In the available examples, assassinations are only attempted by groups made up of several people who are known by the victim, usually the king's own guards, servants, or family. In two of the examples, the

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[110] Gregory T.K. Wong sees a number of parallels between these accounts. Wong includes the murder of Amasa (2 Sam 20:4-10), which admittedly bear some resemblance to Judges 3 (e.g., use of deception, left hand, description of the wound). There are crucial differences, however—the two know each other because they are related (1 Sam 17:25) and Joab is motivated by jealously rather than liberation. Wong suggests that the Joab narratives are dependent on the earlier Ehud narrative, but that the allusions may point to a negative evaluation of the earlier story ("Ehud and Joab: Separated at Birth? VT 56.3 (2006), p. 410.

[111] There are additional records of assassination from ancient India and China which further confirm our analysis. Assassination as a well-articulated means of statecraft does not appear until Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in the late fourth century BCE. Even then, the plots were inordinately complex, meticulously planned, and executed by several people.

assassins are aided by magic or positive omens, but even these do not guarantee success. While political assassinations are a well attested historical reality, there are not enough literary representations to classify as a genre that would be meaningful for interpretation. Without such a genre, there are no such "horizons of expectations" to guide the reader. We cannot map our expectations of how an assassination narrative ought to conclude onto the Ehud story. *We* may be able to imagine him as James Bond, but it seems very unlikely that an ancient audience would have done the same.[112] While such depictions of Ehud as a spy, guerrilla fighter, or super assassin may hold heuristic value for modern readers, they must be tempered with the knowledge that the assassination of Eglon would likely have come as a shock to ancient readers. This disruption to our expectations as readers affords us the opportunity to reread the narrative in a different and, perhaps, a more ominous light.[113]

The Devious דבר and Canonical Expectations

If the assassination itself would have been surprising, perhaps contemporary readers must slow down and look for other ways the text might upset expectations. Without denying other legitimate readings, the many ambiguities of the text may reconfigure the narrative in different ways, one of which is to portray Ehud as a duplicitous anti-hero. The wordplay around Ehud's tribe and body point to an incongruity between his name and character.[114] He is not who we are to expect. Ehud

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[112] This reality might make better sense of the changes in Josephus's account. In *Jewish Antiquities* 5.188-197, he adds or changes numerous details. Contrary to the satirical reading, Josephus makes no mention of Eglon's size, and is stabbed through the heart, rather than the belly. This may be a result of Josephus's attempt to make the story less crude, and thus, less disrespectful to non-Jewish rulers. Alternatively, he may not have interpreted the story to be making such a point, and thus he has not omitted anything that he considered significant. The change from Ehud stabbing Eglon in the belly to the heart may only reflect Josephus's desire to make Ehud more valiant. It also appears that Ehud *was known* to Eglon and the guards as he frequented the palace. He was able to smuggle the dagger in because the guards were resting. Such changes would have likely made the story more palatable for his non-Jewish audience and more suited for his apologetic purpose. Cf. L. Feldman, 'Josephus's Portrait of Ehud', in J. Kampen, J. C. Reeves (eds.), Pursuing the Text: Studies in Honor of Ben Zion Wacholder on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, (Sheffield Academic, 1994). Josephus might have made the changes, however, to make the story more *believable* to his audience.

[113] So far, Ehud is only an atypical hero and not yet an Anti-hero. The historical background of assassinations serves as a check to our assumptions, causing us to slow down and pay attention to a familiar narrative.

[114] G. T. K. Wong, *Compositional strategy of the book of Judges: an inductive, rhetorical study*, (Brill, 2006), pp. 114-120. Here, Wong highlights the rare use of the gentilic form of בֶּן־הַיְמִינִי, seeing its connection with the equally rare אִטֵּר as rhetorically significant. The left-handedness of a Benjaminite serves to show an incongruity between

also makes for himself חֶרֶב וְלָהּ שְׁנֵי פִּיוֹת, a "sword with two mouths." Gregory T.K. Wong lists the various associations between חרב and mouth/speech. These connections lead him to see the "double-mouthed sword" as a foreshadowing of Ehud's reliance on "the deceptive use of words with double meaning to accomplish his mission."[115] The act of hiding the dagger beneath his clothes also serves as foreshadowing, but not in the way it is generally assumed. As argued, assassination by a foreign agent was not a normal occurrence and often resulted in the death of the would-be assassin. Much like Chekhov's gun, the weapon only hints that ominous trouble is ahead without specifying any particular outcome. The act of hiding the dagger beneath his clothes communicates more in relation to Ehud's duplicitous character rather than his violent intentions.

Ehud's duplicity is fully revealed in his address to the king. Many have noted the ironic ambiguity of the wordplay of דְּבַר־סֵתֶר and דְּבַר־אֱלֹהִים. By using דָּבָר, which can mean "word" or "thing," Ehud may lead Eglon to expect some sort of message from a deity, whereas the reader can enjoy knowing that the דָּבָר on offer is actually the hidden dagger.[116] Some have understood that the "message" from God was in fact the proceeding violence. Pressler writes, "In another double entendre, Ehud says he has a message from the gods, or from God. Eglon expects an oracle, but God's word for Elgon is death."[117] James Jordan puts it less delicately: "Ehud deceived Eglon by leading him to think that he had a verbal message from God for him, whereas in reality the message was the judgment of cold iron."[118] The hero even comes with a catchphrase. While these assumptions may be appropriate for the story, they likely stem from our overfamiliarity with assassinations and secret agent stories. But should we assume that Ehud is lying in the first place?

Ehud's character and expected societal norms. "Instead of simply highlighting Ehud's left-handedness, the incongruity revealed by the wordplay may carry deeper symbolic significance in portraying Ehud as someone whose actions and choices are liable to fall short of the standard expected of him on the basis of who he is" (p. 120).

[115] Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, p. 122. This point is part of a larger discussion concerning echoes of the major Judges within Judges 17-21. He draws connections between the incongruent use of deception of Ehud with the Benjaminites decision to support the Gibeathites.

[116] In slight contrast, Karolien Vermeulen has suggested that the polysemy works both in the narrative as well as outside of it. The interpreters are also faced with the same problem as Eglon in deciding which meaning is the 'correct' one. She argues that Ehud uses polysemy as a way to get out of an impossible situation. ('The Intentional Use of Polysemy: A Case Study of דבר סתר (Judg 3:19)', in K. Smelik, K. Vermeulen (eds.), *Approaches to literary readings of ancient Jewish writings*, (Brill, 2014). The Targum erases this word play by adding "to speak" (לְמַלָּלָא)

[117] Pressler, p. 149. Cf. L. R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the book of Judges*, (Almond, 1988), pp. 37-38.

[118] Jordan, p. 62.

Perhaps this assumption comes from what readers infer about Ehud's turning back at the פְּסִילִים. The text does not specify any action, but this has not stopped commentators from creatively filling in the story. As noted earlier, Ehud is said to visit the shrine (Israelite or Moabite) in order to trick the king. How Eglon is supposed to have known this detail is left unstated, though it may only be an ellipsis in the storytelling which allows readers to draw this inference. Still, the openness of the text allows for other readings wherein Ehud is simply idolatrous or engaged in religious syncretism. Ehud may be feigning a religious experience at the פְּסִילִים, or it is simply that he is the anti-hero who hangs out around illicit cultic centres. His use of אֱלֹהִים may be part of his plan to appeal to Eglon's religious views, but it might reflect his own religious syncretism and/or idolatry.

While the rising of Eglon in response to Ehud's offer can imply many things—shock, confusion, politeness, etc.—it can also be viewed positively. Interestingly, it is Eglon's deed, rather than Ehud's, that is centred in Jewish interpretation. *Ruth Rabbah* for instance explains that because Eglon stood to hear God's word, God would grant kingship to Eglon's descendants. This was thought to have been fulfilled in David and Solomon, as Ruth was surmised to be Eglon's daughter.[119] Eglon is also lauded as an unlikely exemplar for Jewish worship. If an uncircumcised gentile could stand in reverence for the word of God, Jews likewise should stand for the recitation of God's word, when hearing the divine name, and when saying the Kaddish.[120] Perhaps Eglon's rising represents a more fundamental part of the plot than modern commentators have otherwise noticed.[121] It may be that Eglon's sensitivity to divine speech portrays him in less villainous ways. He isn't the caricature like Jabba the Hutt but possesses a humanising quality. If this is the case, it would cast doubt on the appropriateness of Ehud's actions as portrayed by the narrative.[122]

What follows Eglon's rising is an explosion of violence in literary slow-motion. While Hebrew narrative often favours reticence in place of the gory details, here, the narrator slows down

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[119] *Ruth Rabbah 2:9,* cited in Gunn, p. 35; Cf. Sanhedrin 105b:12; Sotah 47a:3; Nazir 23b:10; Horayot 10b:18; Midrash Tanchuma, Vayechi 14:7; Targum to Ruth 1:4; Rashi on Ruth 1:2:1; Rashi on Judges 3:20:3

[120] Sanhedrin 60a:12; Kitzur Shulchan Arukh 15:6.

[121] Similar comments about Eglon's rising are made by Christian readers like the English Puritans. See Gunn, pp. 39-41.

[122] This is a different discussion from the moral and ethical implications of the text (e.g., is assassination appropriate or lawful for Jews and Christians today). For the overwhelming majority of Jewish and Christian interpretation of this passage, Ehud's actions have been considered morally problematic, and were done only under special circumstances.

the pace of the story and provides a close-up of the violence. Ehud stretches (שלח) out his left hand. He grabs (לקח) the dagger from his right thigh, and he thrusts (תקע) it into Eglon's belly. Readers learn that the handle went all the way in after the blade and it stayed there. Though it remains difficult to translate, וַיֵּצֵא הַפַּרְשְׁדֹנָה likely points to additional images of the grotesque.[123] The floor is covered in bodily fluids—perhaps a disgusting mixture of diarrhoea and blood—the smell of which causes the servants to believe Eglon is relieving himself (vs 24). Finally becoming embarrassed, they unlocked the doors and are shocked to discover their king dead on the floor.[124] This description of Eglon's death seems excessive when compared to other depictions of violence in Hebrew narrative.[125] This extravagant violence may be part of the grotesque humour of the story, which is meant to viscerally portray the Moabite king as humiliated and utterly defeated. Yet, when compared to Eglon's act of rising to hear God's word, the over-the-top violence seems like an overreaction. What may have begun as humour finishes as horror.[126] This incongruity between Ehud and Eglon may serve to further question the appropriateness of Ehud's violence.

There also seems to be an incongruity between Ehud's speech and the narrator's report. The divine name is reintroduced in Ehud's rally cry to the Ephraimites, "Follow after me, for YHWH has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand" (vs. 28). Apart from the exposition in vss. 13-15 where Israel's God strengthens Moab and raises up Ehud, YHWH has been absent from the narrative. Unlike Othniel, there is no רוּחַ־יְהוָה that comes upon him, and unlike elsewhere in the book of Judges, YHWH is not said to be active on the battlefield.[127] Many understand this absence to be intentional by the narrator. In recent years, one of the primary theological meanings

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[123] Cf. Stulac, *Gift of the Grotesque*, p. 22-23.

[124] The use of הִנֵּה represents a sudden dramatic shift in focus for the character and/or the audience (as if viewing the situation from their perspective). The fact that the servants did not sense any danger during this time, might further point to the unimaginable reality that Ehud could pose any threat.

[125] Depictions of violence in Hebrew narrative are often summaries of what happened. Even in situations of extreme violence (in scope and intensity), narrators normally summarize the event. (E.g., 1 Kgs. 18:40). Some notable examples of when the narrator provides a similar amount of detail are the death of Goliath (1 Sam. 17:49), the death of Ahab (1 Kgs. 22:35-38), the death of Jezebel (2 Kgs. 9:33-37).

[126] The aesthetic function of the violence, both in literature and art, is not limited in its communication. Violence can be understood in a variety of ways, not least as comedic and/or disturbing by different audiences. Cf. A. C. Cottrill, 'A Reading of Ehud and Jael through the Lens of Affect Theory', *Biblical Interpretation*, 22/4–5 (2014). For a worked example on Judges 19, see B. M. Hurlbert, 'Cut & Splice: Reading Judges 19 Cinematically', *Biblical Interpretation*, 30/2 (2020).

[127] Judg. 4:15; 5:4-5, 20-21; 7:22.

of this text is about human-divine dual agency and how God providentially arranges redemption through unexpected ways.[128] Indeed, the Moabites are defeated, and Israel is delivered, but does the narrative attribute this victory to YHWH?

It is interesting that YHWH only appears in Ehud's speech, which is understood to be a positive and truthful statement.[129] Yet, why should the reader be predisposed to trust Ehud? The protagonist has so far shown himself to be deceitful in both word and deed. He has already lied about having a word of God and thus it is entirely possible that his claim about YHWH is for manipulative and self-serving purposes. In vs 30, the narrator gives the conclusion: "Moab was subdued that day under the *hand of Israel* and the land was quiet for 80 years."[130] What is strange about this verse is that YHWH is not credited with the victory as one would expect. All of the major Judges' cycles (save for Samson's) explain that it was the Lord who gave the enemy into their hands.[131] In the Gideon narrative, where the protagonist is the least certain (and most concerned) about his divine calling, God repeatedly assures Gideon that He is with him. The narrative closes with "So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more." (Judg. 8:28). What is significant is the lack of Israelite agency as there is no reference to Israelite hands like in Judg. 3:30.[132] Klein comments, "It has been argued that Ehud must be an ethical judge because he claims YHWH's support and achieves success . . . YHWH's support can only be ascertained when *YHWH* has confirmed it. Israel's perception is often clouded by earthly concerns; the judges (hence, Israel) are often unethical, anti-Yahwist, manipulatively dishonest. And success in battle is no indication of YHWH's guidance."[133] This incongruity between what Ehud claims and what the narrator reports opens up the possibility for the reader to view Ehud's actions in a less than positive light.

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[128] Amit, *Judges*, p. 195; M. E. Biddle, *Reading Judges: a literary and theological commentary*, (Smyth & Helwys, 2012), p. 50; Block, *Judges*, p. 171-172; Nelson, *Judges*, p. 66; Pressler, *Judges*, p. 150; Way, *Judges*, pp. 38-40.

[129] Cf. Webb, pp. 168-169.

[130] Emphasis added.

[131] Judg. 3:12; 4:23-24; 7:9; 7:22; 11:32.

[132] It is only a few verses later that the narrator explains that Israel turned to foreign gods because they had forgotten their God, "the one who had delivered them from the hand of their enemies from every side." (Judg. 8:34).

[133] Klein, p. 216, n. 7.

There is another irregularity in the conclusion that might further disrupt the positive-oriented spectrum of readings. While the narrative concludes in 3:30, it isn't until Judg. 4:1, that we hear of Ehud's death. A discernible pattern in the book of Judges is that Israel turns away from YHWH and proper worship after the judge has died. In the prologue (Judg. 1-3:6), this is pre-figured by the death of Joshua. It is only after Joshua and his generation die that the new generation does evil. The "logic" of their idolatry is that they did not know the YHWH or his works (Judg. 2:10). For example, Othniel dies (3:11), and then Israel does evil (3:12). This pattern is followed by Gideon (8:33), Jephthah (12:7), and the minor Judges (10:1-5; 12:8-15).[134] Ehud, though, does not follow this pattern. His death is the only one to be reported *after* Israel forsakes the Lord. "And Israel again did evil in the eyes of YHWH and Ehud died. (וַיֹּסִפוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה וְאֵהוּד מֵת). The Targum and LXX^{B} follows the MT, but Ehud's death is lacking here in LXX^{A}. Both Greek versions have an additional phrase in Judg. 3:30 reading "and Ehud judged them until he died." Most translations of 4:1, however, follow the Vulgate which understands the final clause to be operating circumstantially (i.e., "and after Ehud died, Israel again did evil…"). This is philologically possible, though the contemporaneous action of a circumstantial clause is normally represented by the participle.[135] Even so, the typical way of expressing this death is the waw-consecutive of מוּת followed by the name of the judge (e.g., וַיָּמָת עָתְנִיאֵל [Judg.3:11]).[136] It may simply be an editorial aside (or insertion) that provides clarification for why Israel has turned away from God (. . . for Ehud had died). Reading from a wider perspective afforded by the book, this disruption to the pattern might signal that Ehud's leadership did nothing to address Israel's spiritual problems. The so-called Judges cycle may have already restarted *during* Ehud's lifetime.[137]

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[134] It is not said that Deborah or Barak die, but there is a clear disjunction between the victory song in Judges 5 with its editorial conclusion (vs. 31c) and the opening verses of Judges 6 which tell of the Midianite threat. As the last judge mentioned in the book, Samson does not follow this pattern either.

[135] GKC §141.2.2; The form of מֵת can be either a Qal perfect 3ms or a Qal participle as in Gen. 23:3. Even if contemporaneous action was intended, this is not the most straightforward way of putting it.

[136] Cf. 8:32 (Gideon); 10:5 (Jair); 12:7 (Jephthah); 12:10 (Ibzan); 12:12 (Elon); 12:15 (Abdon).

[137] One other ancient reading may be beneficial to note. In *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum,* Pseudo-Philo omits the entire episode altogether. The Zebul narrative (*LAB* 29) occupies the space where Ehud should be, but it bears no resemblance to Judges 3:12-30. There is, however, a story involving a character named Aod from the Greek spelling of Ehud: Ἀὼδ (*LAB* 34). Searching the name on TLG reveals that Ἀὼδ only refers to Ehud. This character is not an Israelite hero but Midianite villain, a wizard who leads all of Israel astray after false gods. As with most things in *LAB,* it is impossible to say *why* Pseudo-Philo made this change or if it is even significant to our reading of Judges. This reception of the biblical text does stand to make at least one point: the author was no admirer of Ehud.

This might be hinted with the inclusion of verse 31 which introduces the mysterious Shamgar with his non-Israelite sounding name.[138] While it is likely an editorial addition at some later stage in the book's development, the placement of the minor judge *before* the stated death of the previous judge is interesting.[139] Israel needed saving once again, but the Israelite judge has receded into the background of his own story [140] By this inclusion, the editor(s) may have sought to diminish Ehud's accomplishments or to redirect the reader's focus.[141] Perhaps, they could not fathom that the way of YHWH would be congruous with the way of Ehud.

By reconsidering the data, we arrive at a very different Ehud story. The story becomes about how an idolatrous assassin infiltrates a palace by masquerading as a prophet/oracle. When his target, a warrior king, rose in reverence to hear that word of God offered by the incognito assassin, he was murdered disgracefully. Eglon was offered the word of God, but he received only death. What might readers hear through *this* story? If the canonical context of Israel's Scriptures is allowed to inform interpretation, readers may also be surprised at Ehud's deception. Deception, or what Susan Niditch describes as the "ideology of tricksterism," is commonplace in Hebrew narratives both during wartime and peace. This concept, however, is more than simply outmanoeuvring the enemy (e.g., Judg. 20) during battle. Different from the "bardic" or heroic ideology, tricksterism utilises guerrilla tactics and has neither guilt or regard for traditional honour during battle.[142] Along with the Ehud narrative, Niditch analyses stories like the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34), Jael and Sisera (Judg. 4), Samson (Judg. 14-16), and Esther. What sets Ehud apart from these other examples of tricksterism is what he lies about: having a word from God. That

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[138] See Sasson, *Judges*, pp. 242-243.

[139] *BHQ* p. 51*. Some manuscripts and traditions place the Shamgar material after the death of Samson in Judges 16. This is likely because both of these characters struggle against the Philistines.

[140] Abraham Kuruvilla understands Shamgar to act as positive foil for Ehud. He argues that in ironic contrast to Ehud's tribal pedigree, combat skills, and meticulous plans, Shamgar—a foreigner without troops, and amateur fighter without a special weapon, and, apparently, a man without a plan—he *too* delivers Israel: *Judges: a theological commentary for preachers*, (Cascade Books, 2017), pp. 81-83. While I agree with Kuruvilla that the placement of this verse does appear important (to a relative degree) for interpreting the Ehud story, I do not think this short verse can do the heavy lifting that is required for Kuruvilla's reading. The reader can understand Ehud to be an anti-hero with or without the Shamgar material.

[141] The ending of the Ehud's narrative in vs. 30 perhaps indicates that some amount of good did result from Ehud's actions—the land was quiet for 80 years, double the ideal amount of 40. This complicates a strictly negative assessment of the narrative, but it does not necessitate a wholly positive reading as some have suggested.

[142] *War in the Hebrew Bible: a study in the ethics of violence*, (OUP, 1993), pp. 106, 153.

Ehud uses this deception to assassinate Eglon stands alone in Israel's Scriptures, as nowhere else does assassination function as a means of deliverance.[143] Ironically, it is the *word* of God that appears more central in other narratives of deliverance.

For example, in the Exodus narrative YHWH delivered his people from oppression through miraculous acts. Moses had tried once before to save his people by secretly murdering an Egyptian, but this affected nothing but his own exile (Exod. 2:11-15). Before God sent plagues to secure Israel's liberation, He sent Moses first in order to *speak* to Pharaoh. One of the primary purposes of God's deliverance of his people was revelation—that both the Egyptians and the enslaved Israelites would know YHWH.[144] In a sense, Moses was interpreting the destructive events taking place in Egypt, communicating to Pharaoh God's command to release his people. This is not to suggest that YHWH eschews violence in all of its forms. After all, the heart of Pharaoh is hardened against Moses' words and YHWH's wonders; drastic action was required. Differently than in Judges 3, it is by *divine* action that the firstborn of the Egyptians are struck down. The point is that in one of the most significant moments in Israel's history, YHWH fights and Moses speaks.

It may perhaps be better to compare Ehud's actions with an example of human violence. The account of David's battle with Goliath (1 Sam 17) provides many points of comparison, especially with the more heroic readings of Ehud. The origin story of Israel's king is the quintessential underdog story. David is a shepherd while the giant Goliath is a battle-hardened warrior. David's method of fighting is unorthodox, but it is his shepherding skill that secures him victory.[145] The depictions of the violence are given in a similarly detailed fashion (though not as grotesque as in Judges). David stretches (שלח) out his hand. He grabs (לקח) the stone. He slings it and it strikes (נכה) Goliath in the forehead. The grisly comment about how the stone sank into the forehead finds some analogy with Ehud's sword being lodged deep into Eglon's body.

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[143] A close example would be Jael killing Sisera (Judges 4). As discussed earlier, this act is different than Ehud's assassination. The effect of the killing is also different than Ehud's as it seems that deliverance had already been achieved (or mostly) beforehand by Barak and his army (Judg. 4:16).

[144] Exod. 7:5, 17; 8:10; 9:16; 10:2; 14:8, 31.

[145] Steven Chapman notes that it is ironic that David uses a sling in contrast to Saul's weapons, as this weapon was identified with the Benjaminites (i.e. Saul's tribe), *1 Samuel as Christian scripture: a theological commentary*, (Eerdmans, 2016), p. 155.

The principal difference between these two accounts is that David *speaks*, and by speaking, he defends YHWH's honour.[146] David volunteers for battle because Goliath taunts Israel and by extension, their God (vs. 25-26, 36-37). David vocalises his trust in God's provision—He will keep David safe (vs. 37). In front of Goliath, David's response to curses and mockery is powerful:

> You come to me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come to you in the name of YHWH of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the YHWH will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God for Israel, and that all this assembly may know that YHWH saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is YHWH's, and he will give you into our hand (vs. 45-47).

Like Moses, David's speech provides the interpretation of the events which will momentarily transpire. If this shepherd boy can defeat the enemy champion, then the nations will know that the YHWH is with Israel. In turn, Israel would learn that salvation comes not through human means, but by YHWH.[147]

In another account especially relevant to the Ehud story, the Moabite king Balak hires a prophet to curse Israel (Num. 22-24). Balaam becomes a prophetic hitman of sorts, one that uses his oracular capacities to disable or destroy his opponents. At the direction of YHWH, each time Balaam speaks, he ends up blessing Israel instead of cursing them. Every time, and in multiple ways, Balaam responds to his frustrated client that he must only speak what the Lord has spoken (Num. 22:35, 38; 23:3, 12, 16, etc.).[148] The last time Israel faced off with Moab, it was through *words* that the Lord delivered them.

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[146] The tone of these two narratives is also different. In David's story, Goliath is monstrous and blasphemous. In the world of the narrative, Goliath gets what is coming to him. With David's "surprising" victory, the tone of story is triumphant. David is clearly portrayed in a heroic fashion even as the narrator repeatedly points the reader back to the divine origin of his success.

[147] This is reminiscent of Moses words to Israel as the Egyptians are closing in, "YHWH will fight for you; you only have to be silent" (Exod. 14:14).

[148] Interestingly, in Num. 24:2, the רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים comes upon Balaam before he prophesies for the third time. While some of the judges, Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, experience the רוּחַ־יְהוָה, this should not be considered altogether different than what happens to Balaam. It is perhaps significant that Ehud does not experience either רוּחַ.

What is surprising, therefore, is that Ehud does not speak to Eglon. From a literary perspective, there is no climatic showdown between the characters as one might have expected. Any heroism on Ehud's part is cut short as the confrontation is finished before it starts—the heavyweight goes down with the first blow.[149] The tension of the narrative is short-circuited in a way that can prompt the reader to question Ehud's actions. From a canonical-theological perspective, Ehud offers divine revelation, but instead of proclaiming that promised word, he assassinates him. Lillian Klein explains, "apparently unwilling to rely on YHWH Ehud practices deception and trickery, achieving the Israelite goal of freedom from oppression but ironically negating the higher goal: contact with YHWH."[150] In these examples, YHWH fights for his oppressed people and confounds the enemies' plans; God calls his people to follow him and speak his words. Ehud does neither. While the oppression of Israel has ended, the larger mission of Israel—to be a light to the nations, has failed. This failure, unfortunately, only continues in the stories that follow in the book of Judges.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by asking what kind of story is being told in Judges 3:13-30. Some suggested that it was a heroic tale; others understood more in line with comedy (though as suggested, these were not mutually exclusive). The multiple ambiguities and historical-grammatical complexities within the narrative gave rise to a spectrum of readings, and yet, Ehud remained for the majority of scholars a positive moral agent. I argued that the text allows room for a reading wherein Ehud is an anti-hero, and thus the reader can remain ethically suspicious of the protagonist without labelling him as villain or negative exemplar. By surveying the limited historical and literary backgrounds of assassinations, the Ehud account appears to be an anomaly in the ancient world. This data disrupts our modern assumptions of how stories of assassination

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[149] This is yet another departure from the assassin-spy genre where every villain is given a lengthy monologue in which they tell Bond their plot to destroy the world.

[150] Klein, p. 46. Again, the critical issue here is not that Ehud uses deception and trickery. Marginalised and oppressed groups must often rely on such tactics to survive. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, certain characters are praised for their deception (e.g. the midwives in Exod. 1). What is surprising about this narrative is not *that* Ehud lies, but *what* he lies about—that he has a divine word.

ought to go, and especially the ones that saw reflected in Ehud some ancient version of James Bond. Not only is genre difficult to adjudicate in the case of the Ehud narrative, but letting genre control the interpretive process provided a particular set of expectations which led many to miss the surprising features of the story. Turning to the details of the narrative, we discussed the incongruities between the actions of Ehud and Eglon and the speech of Ehud and the narration. I argued that when the reader compared the story to other Hebrew narratives, the feature that stood out as surprising was that Ehud does not speak to Eglon. In contrast to other accounts of YHWH delivering his people, Ehud takes matters into his own hands and murders a king willing to listen to the word of God. While he affects liberation for Israel, he does so without the involvement of YHWH.

What sort of readerly response is afforded by understanding Ehud as an anti-hero? Instead of the triumphant cheering or jeering afforded by the heroic and satirical readings of the story, perhaps *this* story leaves the reader in silence. The explosion of violence in response to Eglon's wordless rising is shocking. As an anti-hero, Ehud's *modus operandi* is analogous to "shoot first and ask questions later." But we may be left wondering what might have transpired had Ehud spoken to Eglon. It is more than likely that in its originating context, the Ehud narrative was meant to reinscribe Israel's dominance over their neighbours by mocking their king.[151] On its own literary terms, the protagonist of the short story is clearly a hero regardless of whether the story is meant to be taken as serious or comedically. As such, Ehud's actions can appear both necessary and heroically virtuous. Even if Ehud's actions are not for ethical imitation by readers, the story-world represents him as a positive moral agent according to some interpretations. Barry Webb for instance suggests, that "the grotesquely comic character of the story makes moral judgements irrelevant. We are clearly meant to identify with the protagonist and enjoy the sheer virtuosity of this performance. It is a classic example of the underdog coming out on top, a scenario with universal comic appeal."[152] Readers, however, no longer encounter the story in isolation; Ehud is a character in a larger story in the book of Judges—and the discrete story has likely been repurposed by a later editor. Even if Ehud was presented as a positive moral agent, this would only be a

[151] Or a literary construct of their king.

[152] Webb, p. 168. Webb later suggests that "ideological twist" in the entertaining story centres on the inscrutability of God's choice of saviour.

presentation by the narrator. It would still be open to debate how this presentation was meant to be understood.[153] Hamley helpfully explains that,

> this is the nature of the text, and its power: instead of telling readers what to think, it invites them to wrestle with it and ask themselves questions both about the characters and their actions, and also about their own reactions to the narrative. Each episode can be looked at on its own, and in this particular case the reader can conclude that Ehud is a 'good' judge. Setting him within the trajectory of the book as a whole problematizes his legacy: He is set into a deteriorating spiral; he does not address moral and spiritual degeneracy; underlying questions in Judges about the nature of justice, and its interweaving with mercy, prompt uneasy reflections.[154]

It is this openness of the narrative that allows us to read Ehud as an anti-hero. His violent actions, though they effect liberation, are presented in a way that may appear more sinister when read as part of Israel's Scriptures.

Reflections on Ehud and reading as Christian Scripture

There are indeed a number of theological implications or ethical applications that could be drawn from this passage, and they would naturally depend on which Ehud story interpreters are reading. In this chapter, I wanted to present a reading that refrained from the approach illustrated by Sunukjian and Origen in order to demonstrate that a Christian reading does not always need to metaphorize violent narratives. I instead paired the classic tools of philology and history with the insights of modern genre theory to argue that Ehud might possibly be understood as an anti-hero. From this reading, we might suggest that the story is about how the ends do not justify the means when it comes to God's plans—there are some actions that are "out of bounds" for YHWH's people. It might also speak to the necessity of divine participation in human plans, without which humanity is bound to overreact to the needs of their community at the expense of their enemy. It

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[153] Eric Christianson hints at this in his essay. He compares Ehud to the anti-hero in a Spaghetti western film, focusing on Clint Eastwood's character in Sergio Leone's "Dollars trilogy". Christianson explores the possibility that as the Spaghetti western was itself a social commentary on the fantasy of the American west and its myth of 'good' violence found in the earlier Westerns of the 1950's (e.g., John Wayne), so too might Ehud be questioning the justice of frontier violence. This meta-critique of cinematic violence *within* the western genre can be seen especially in Clint Eastwood's later film *Unforgiven* (1992), which Christianson references.

[154] Hamley, *God of Justice and Mercy*, pp. 37-38.

might even be understood as the negative image of what Jesus commands positively in the Gospels—that the meek shall inherit the earth and that God's people are to love their enemies.[155] We could likely come up with many others, but perhaps it is worth reflecting more broadly on the nature of rereading Judges as Christian Scripture. From our reading, there arise two principles. The first compares a Christian reading to a matter of genre. The second reflects on the relationship between reading and history.

It is interesting that in its use as Christian Scripture, the Ehud narrative has only rarely been made to support arguments for or justifications of assassination. The actions of Ehud have been spiritualised by earlier readers like Origen or Cassian. Medieval and modern interpreters have justified the assassination on the basis that God gave Ehud special permission that would not be applicable in the present.[156] Unlike the reception of the Curse of Meroz that we explored in chapter one, Ehud's violent methods are celebrated (to some degree) but rarely appropriated.[157] Few readers understood assassination to be appropriate for Christians today. Why is this the case, or rather, why have both Jews and Christians throughout the centuries refrained from adopting Ehud's methods of deliverance as their own?

Presumably it is because this narrative has been read as part of a sacred scripture belonging to both Jews and Christians. This larger collection of texts has provided the reader with additional clues to guide in interpretation and application. This canon has functioned as a sort of *genre*. Returning to our metaphor of the puzzle (or of Irenaeus' mosaic), the canon and its *regula fidei* can function in a similar way to genre. It can provide an organising picture that allows readers to situate the narrative and compare it to others within Christian Scripture. This "canonical genre" is not inherent to the texts, but a function of reading. To read the book of Judges *as* Christian Scripture is not to suggest that there are some discursive elements within the text that are distinctly Christian and can only be read as such. It can equally be read *as* Jewish Scripture or *as* ancient heroic folklore. The text and its features are open to being read in a number of ways, and as suggested earlier, we

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[155] Which would very likely mean that Christians should not assassinate their enemies.

[156] E.g., Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The commentarie of Ma|ster Peter Martyr vpon the Booke of Iudges.*

[157] John Milton (1608-74) is a notable example as he argued for and defended the regicide of Charles I (Cited in Gunn, pp. 38-39). Another example which is likely in response to Milton's arguments is the pseudonymous *Killing No Murder* (1657), which advocated for the assassination of Oliver Cromwell.

have to "guess" at the genre based on the *available* contexts. Such available contexts for the Christian reader include the canon (Old and New Testaments) and Christian faith. These both can provide the "box-top picture," which helps organise the interpretation by setting forth a set of expectations. This Christian *genre* will prompt the reader to ask different questions and to prioritise certain textual realities over others, all of which may bring illumination to the narrative in ways which other genres or approaches might not.

When reading the Ehud narrative *as Christian Scripture*, i.e., within this canonical genre, Ehud may be of only relative use as a positive moral example when one adopts a metaphorizing approach. If a reader wishes to interpret in a non-metaphorizing way as I have in this chapter, they may find that Ehud's actions are outside the boundaries of Christian ethics and beyond the teaching of Jesus as presented by the gospels.[158] It would seem difficult to "love your enemy" and also assassinate them. This set of expectations will necessarily influence one's reading of the Ehud story. Just like any other genre, this "canonical genre" is something neither intrinsic nor original to the text but rather a set of judgements that are applied by the community and reader, and which can be illuminating for interpretation. Even if the narrative is presented in a heroic mode, with Ehud as the triumphant leader, a Christian understanding may sense in the story a tragic dimension. Why did Eglon stand? In one possible reading, he may have been open to hearing *and receiving* God's word, but he was killed without the chance. The story may be heard to speak in a similar register to Jesus' parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost sons in Luke 15, with one implication being that there is nothing too lost to be found and no one is too wicked to receive God's mercy. Larger questions remain regarding the proper relationship between Christians, violence, and reconciliation. The biblical text remains as complex as the real world and it offers no naïve or simple solutions to geo-political or personal problems.[159] Here in the Ehud narrative,

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[158] I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter that Israel's Scriptures *themselves* provide plenty of material that can reshape our understanding of the Ehud story. It is not always necessary to refer to the New Testament when discussing what makes for good *Christian* readings of Israel's Scriptures. In some cases, this move might negatively short-circuit the interpretation and circumvent the Old Testament's more complex and ambiguous presentation.

[159] As I finish this chapter, Russia has invaded Ukraine in an unprovoked act of war. Many Orthodox Christians in Ukraine have taken up arms to defend their homeland, while the Patriarch of Moscow has blessed and sanctioned Putin's actions. There is a certain tension between celebrating the failures of the Russian army while recognising that many who have died in the invasion have been young men who have been lied to by Russian state media.

Christians can practice reticence by not adopting too quickly a reading that uncritically celebrates the death of an enemy.

Another reflection about Christian readings of Judges concerns its relationship to history. Even though we are relocating genre and canon to a function of reception and reading, this does not mean that a Christian reading ignores historical-grammatical concerns. As I argued in this chapter, a glaring omission in the commentaries—even the ones that focused on the philological data and historical backgrounds—was any comparison of the Ehud narrative with other assassination accounts in the ancient world. We saw that the anomaly of Ehud's assassination of Eglon disrupted our generic assumptions of how the story ought to go. Likewise, the world-behind-the-text can and should disrupt our readings of familiar passages. This is what the proponents and practitioners of "higher criticism" laboured for—a renewal and deepening of our understanding of the biblical text. This is also what a Christian reading seeks. Even if we can no longer be as confident about the historical backgrounds as we once were, readers should utilize the *available* contexts that are considered appropriate for the interpretive task. For the Christian reader that remains the canon—as text and rule of faith. This canon is not in competition with history, but in fruitful conversation with it. We can acknowledge that the historical backgrounds can shape our understanding of the text without letting it exhaust its meaning. Like genre, the historical backgrounds can be a useful tool for interpretation, and I would argue that it is a necessary one. But it cannot be made to exert totalising interpretive control over the text and thereby exclude the concerns of readers—Jewish, Christian, or otherwise.

— CHAPTER 3 —

EXEMPLARITY AND ITS RESISTANCE IN THE EARLY RECEPTION OF SAMSON

> And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of
> Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah,
> of David and Samuel and the prophets
> (Hebrews 11:32)

As one of the longest, and arguably, the most engaging narratives in the book of Judges, episodes of the Samson narrative can be found in medieval art, early modern literature, 20th century film, pop-culture, and even contemporary political discourse.[1] His super-human strength coupled with his tantalising love affair has led many readers to view Samson as a hero to some degree. Though Samson can be presented as flawed, his finale in the temple of Dagon may speak to his redemption. He may not be the type of hero readers expect, but in many ways, Samson's character is deeply relatable and may offer the reader some ethical guidance. It is this characterisation of Samson that most readers today, including Christians, understand the narrative to be portraying Samson as a troubled hero who, in the end, brings deliverance to his people through his sacrifice.

In recent scholarship more attention has been paid to the world *behind* the Samson narrative. Much has been said about the text's historical and literary dimensions, including the various construals of its redaction and formation. For instance, the Samson narrative appears to have once been an early Israelite (or conceivably, a Philistine) folktale.[2] The many-faced hero has been characterised as an embodiment of the "Wild-man" motif common in ancient folklore.[3] Others have attempted to locate Samson among Greek mythology noting the similarities between

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[1] In a far-right political cartoon created by Ben Garrison, the former US president Donald Trump was depicted as a "modern day Samson" pulling down the temple of his enemies, which included TV and print news outlet, the Clintons, the Bushes, the CIA, the United Nations, and others [B. Garrison, *Modern Day Samson*]. Evangelical Author and speaker Lance Wallnau has also positively compared Trump to Samson at a summit for the conservative Family Research Council in 2018. See, B. Showalter, 'Trump Like Samson, God's Chosen Strongman, Awakening Will Come if Christians Support: Lance Wallnau', (2018).

[2] S. Ackerman, 'What if Judges had been Written by a Philistine?', *Biblical Interpretation*, 8/1–2 (2000), pp. 33-44.

[3] Parallels can be drawn between Samson and Enkidu of the Gilgamesh Epic.

him and Hercules.[4] In contrast, Gregory Mobley views Samson as a "liminal hero"—a character that resists helpful delineation. "When Samson comes down from Dan into Timnah. a bundle of oppositions comes into play: Israelite/Philistine, highland/lowland, inland/coastal, and rural/urban. Samson crosses all of these boundaries and yet is defined by none of them. We might say that it is this border-crossing, this liminality, that defines him."[5] Yet, discovering the foundational identity of Samson, be it in folklore, myth, or liminality, is not the same as understanding his place within the narrative itself or when it is read as Scripture.

The Samson narrative exhibits traits of being both a composite text (a miraculous birth story [Ch. 13] + feats of strength [Ch. 14-15] + downfall and death of a hero [Ch. 16]) and may be a later addition to the book of Judges. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the composite and episodic nature of the text might account for some of the idiosyncrasies of the narrative. Parsing out the sources of a text and pointing out its seams is a necessary endeavour in so far as one is interested in the historical-critical questions, but is not, however, a sufficient mode of enquiry for reading as scripture. Additionally, many of the proposed *Sitze im Leben* of the text are plausible, but few speak to the reality that these individual stories were repurposed for the larger literary construct of the book of Judges and were recontextualised as part of Jewish and Christian Scripture. For example, to suggest that one of the purposes of the text is to argue for the legitimacy and necessity of a king is eminently plausible.[6] The various episodes that speak of the limited success (and even the disastrous consequences) of the judges leads one to suspect that the final tradent(s) did not view this chapter in Israel's history favourably. One could further argue a more particular setting that seeks to not only argue for monarchy, but even for a particular type of king: David rather than Saul.[7] Certain construals of the Samson narrative, however, present the opposite point. The men of Judah in 15:9-13 are anything but heroic. They are afraid of the Philistines, acquiesce to their demands, and even tie up the protagonist. Additionally, the demise of Samson

[4] For a comprehensive survey of the various attempts to define Samson in folklore studies and/or comparative literature, see G. Mobley, *Samson and the liminal hero in the ancient Near East*, (T & T Clark, 2006), pp. 1-33.

[5] Mobley, *Samson and the liminal hero*, p. 30.

[6] I will address this issue in the final chapter.

[7] This is particularly evident as many have argued in Judges 19-21.

finds certain parallels with Zedekiah, Judah's final king, as both are blinded, bound in bronze shackles, and carried off into captivity. Such characterisation might reveal an anti-Judah polemic.

The question these suggestions do not answer (and perhaps cannot) is: what religious and theological value is there in political propaganda that was already outdated at the time of the text's final formation?[8] In what sense is a narrative like this meaningful as a sacred text for Israel, not only in the Babylonian and Persian periods but also for the generations that followed? To address the text's theological-canonical value is to inevitably discuss both the way the narratives began *and have continued* to function as sacred within certain faith communities.

In the case of the Samson narrative, this task is difficult. Our knowledge of the canonical process that led to the formation of the Jewish canon is limited. In the precise time period where we need the most clarity and knowledge exists only a black hole. What we can be certain of is the final form of the text that shows signs of an editorial hand—one which has not only shaped the character of Samson but also how his story functions in the overarching narrative of Judges and the so-called Deuteronomistic History. While the author/redactor may have incorporated earlier sources, myths, or folklore, Judges 13-16 and the character of Samson transcends the boundaries of these categories and literature. These stories have become something distinct as they have been taken up into a larger narrative unit. For both the Jewish and Christian reader, the Samson narrative comes as a story that engages the imagination with respect to life and God, a rich story embedded in Israel's history with God. To provide a Christian reading will require one to take seriously the historical and literary distinctness of the Samson story. Of greater necessity is the requirement to understand the text's canonical particularities as it relates to its enduring theological and religious value for multiple faith communities.

These efforts to interpret the story of Samson as Christian Scripture are hindered by a complex and ambiguous characterisation of its protagonist. How readers are meant to understand and evaluate the character and actions of Samson will depend on how they think he is portrayed

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[8] Cf. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and historical criticism*, pp. 110-117. "This is the temptation to interpret the text as *ideology*, that is, as only a justification for political arrangements . . . the danger for the integrity of biblical studies, is that the text will again come to be seen as dispensable, that the Bible will once more recede from biblical studies, this time because it is conceived as only a series of ciphers for political power (p. 111).

in the narrative. The violent and lewd actions of Samson can hardly be described as *moral*. His act of pulling down the temple of Dagon in an effort to avenge himself might be akin to the actions of a suicide bomber. Despite the expectations set by the announcement of his birth by the Angel of YHWH, Samson does not seem to meet them. For scriptural readers, Samson appears to be the antithesis of both the Torah and the teachings and example of Jesus. What value, if any, does this story hold for communities of faith today?

Like many of the stories in the book of Judges, the narrator has left no explicit evaluation. Unlike many later characters in the Deuteronomistic History, Samson receives neither a positive nor negative judgement from the text. The reader is instead met by a confusing silence that lingers after the dust of Dagon's temple settles. Even without such explicit comment, there are still clues in the text that point to a particular evaluation of Samson. To discover what that might be, readers must first understand the characterisation of Samson. How are he and his actions portrayed in the text?

There are several angles or ways in that might help us answer that question. Many of these points have been raised before by scholars and theologians down the ages. Clues to Samson's characterisation by the narrative have usually been found by looking at the activity of the Spirit of YHWH in the rushing on Samson or on the supposed incongruity between Samson's actions and his Nazirite identity. These clues and others will be addressed in detail in the next chapter. In this chapter, our focus will be upon the concept of exemplarity and whether it can be found within early Jewish and Christian receptions of this story. Treating Samson as a moral exemplar (positively or negatively) is generally how the story is read today within Christian circles. Daniel Block suggests that "Hebrews 11:32 has exercised a profound and pervasive influence . . . with a hermeneutic that tends to read the Old Testament in light of the New, to this day many readers understand the book as a collection of stirring tales of the exploits of genuinely virtuous heroes, mighty men of God. These personalities are held up as models after whom Christians should pattern their lives."[9] This interpretive tendency has been rightfully challenged in different ways by recent scholars, Block being among them. Some, however, have perhaps assumed that this

[9] Block, *Judges,* p. 71; Cf. Smit and Fowl, *Judges*, p. 10.

exemplaric reading was the only way this text was read in the early stages of its reception.[10] Commenting on Hebrews 11:32, Block explains that the author of Hebrews is reading Israel's Scriptures in the "idealizing tendency" found in Jewish writings of that time.[11] Exploring early Jewish and Christian readings, however, will reveal that there were diverse interpretations of Samson—some of which resisted exemplarity.

The possibility of examining the whole of the Samson narrative is beyond the scope of this section. Instead, I will focus only on the characterization of Samson in early reception. Was he hailed as a hero or something else? By examining early Jewish and Christian readings of this narrative, we may, in the present, realign ourselves with the issues that were most pertinent to Samson's early interpreters. We will begin by briefly explaining the concept of exemplarity. Next, we will look at three Jewish texts: Josephus' account of the Samson narrative in his *Jewish Antiquities,* Pseudo-Philo and his account in *Biblical Antiquities,* and a Pseudo-Philonic work entitled *On Samson.* Following this, we will discuss the various portraits and portrayals of Samson in the early Church Fathers. By comparing and contrasting early Jewish and Christian interpretations of Samson, we will hopefully come to a better understanding of the particularity of reading Judges as Christian Scripture.

Exemplarity & Ancient Readers

Exemplarity is a well attested phenomenon in the ancient world that understands real or imagined figures to function as didactic models and provide ethical norms for the present day.[12] Writing of Roman exemplarity, Mathew Roller argues, "The ancient Romans were enthusiastic users of examples – *exempla*, in Latin – and above all, examples set by figures from the past who were famed for performing great deeds for the benefit of the community. Such exempla were persuasive thanks

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[10] I use the word "exemplaric" or "exemplarically" in this chapter to describe the way people read and "exemplar" or "exemplary" to describe the figure. So, "exemplarity" describes the concept of the practice of reading (i.e., an exemplaric way of reading) figures as exemplars.

[11] Block, p. 70. He cites Ben Sirach and Josephus for support. Block here is commenting on the book Judges as a whole, not specifically on Samson.

[12] For an overview of this concept applied to a biblical figure, see A. Y. Reed, 'The Construction and Subversion of Patriarchal Perfection: Abraham and Exemplarity in Philo, Josephus, and the Testament of Abraham', *JSJ*, 40/2 (2009).

to their moral authority: they provided norms for others to accept as their own and models for them to imitate."[13] Representing literary characters or historical figures as ethical/moral examples became a rhetorical strategy of authors as they sought to impress upon their audiences a particular norm. In so far as we are able to plausibly reconstruct an author's rhetorical strategy and purpose of writing, we may suggest that figures and characters—real or imagined— may function as exemplars for political, ideological, and ethical reasons. Within Israel's Scriptures, there are numerous exemplars that are offered to the reader as worthy of imitation (e.g., Abraham, Moses, David, etc.). In some places, figures such as Achan (Joshua 7) or Ahab are offered as anti-exemplars, as prime examples of how one should *not* act. The concept of exemplarity suggests more than positive or negative moral examples; it is more than what one would find in certain children's tales designed to reinforce particular behaviours (e.g., to brush your teeth, tidy your room, etc). Though it is probably better thought of as existing on a spectrum, exemplarity represents foundational or prime examples—they are representative and the embodiment of certain virtues or vices.[14]

Exemplarity is also a product and function of reading. Within early Judaism and Christianity, certain biblical figures become "sites" of exemplarity. These figures, argues Carson Bay, "did not have set meanings, but could be put to various purposes; however, their popularity guaranteed their familiarity to diverse audiences and ensured a measure of authority."[15] Describing these figures as "sites" connotes a space by which readers may construct meaning. Certain figures, such as Abraham or Moses, provided Philo with plenty of building material within the textual traditions.[16] In other cases, figures like Adam or Enoch provided relatively little with which to "build." Though rather than limiting the figure's use as an exemplar, the lack of material provided imaginative freedom for the reader.[17]

Exemplarity is an intersectional reality which at times combines authorial production of texts with the function of reading. In second-temple Judaism exemplars were also generative of

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[13] M. B. Roller, *Models from the past in Roman culture a world of exempla*, (CUP, 2018), p. 1.

[14] Exemplarity and Anti-Exemplarity are two sides of the same coin.

[15] C. Bay, 'Exemplarity, Exegesis, & Ethnography: Abraham in Pseudo-Hegesippus as a Test Case for Biblical Reception in Christian Late Antiquity', *Journal of the Bible and its Reception*, 8/1 (2021), p. 41.

[16] E.g., *On the Life of Moses (De Vita Mosis)* and *On Abraham (De Abrahamo)*

[17] E.g., *Jubilees* 4:16-26 and *Life of Adam and Eve* (or its Greek version, *Apocalypse of Moses*).

texts. The exemplar—be it Enoch, Ezra, David, Solomon, the Patriarchs, etc.—became responsible for a new tradition intended to be revelatory and authoritative.[18] As Hindy Najman has suggested, Jubilees features both a founding figure of the tradition that is exemplary (in the case, Moses and the Angel), but also certain tradents of the tradition that become "embedded" exemplars.[19] In these cases, exemplarity intersects with reader and author, but the "site" of these activities remains what we would call the "biblical" tradition of a figure, even if that tradition is later developed and expanded by exemplaric readings.[20] In all of these modes of exemplarity, the goal is the same: that the reader would adopt the attitudes and actions of the figure (and sometimes accept a new tradition as authoritative).[21]

Exemplarity, however, was only one way to understand narrated figures in antiquity. Not everyone took the works of Homer or Hesiod at face value.[22] As early as the 5th century BCE, Xenophanes objected to the anthropomorphic depictions of the gods. Worse, in his estimation, was that the poets "have attributed to the gods all things that among men are sources of blame and censure: thieving, committing adultery, and deceiving each other."[23] Even the actions of the gods did not elicit ethical imitation. In Book 2 of *The Republic,* Socrates is discussing justice by his analogy of an ideal city.[24] Those tasked with protecting the city (the guardians) must be especially

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[18] See H. Najman, *Seconding Sinai: the development of Mosaic discourse in Second Temple Judaism*, (Brill, 2003); E. Mroczek, *The literary imagination in Jewish antiquity*, (OUP, 2016).

[19] H. Najman, 'Reconsidering Jubilees: Prophecy and Exemplarity', in G. Boccaccini, G. Ibba (eds.), *Enoch and the Mosaic Torah: The Evidence of Jubilees*, (Eerdmans, 2009).

[20] E.g., the growth of traditions like Enoch or Ezra.

[21] For examples of how exemplarity continued into rabbinic Judaism see T. Novick, 'Etiquette and Exemplarity in Judaism', in C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, W. Fleeson (eds.), Character: new directions from philosophy, psychology, and theology, (OUP, 2015). For a different perspective see D. Lambert, 'Biblical Narrative as Ethics?: The Limits of Exemplarity in Ancient Jewish Literature', *Dead Sea Discoveries*, 28/3 (2021). He explains that while ethical appropriation might be inferred from some narrative examples, there are few explicit markers of exemplarity in ancient Jewish literature. Lambert suggests that Jewish readers engaged in an "alternative practice of memorializing and preserving past selves" (p. 428). This memorializing might help explain certain literary features and why some Jewish texts do not explicate the ethical function of the exemplars but instead serve as a witness to God's faithfulness (e.g., *Ant.* 2.212-15).

[22] The question of whether or not the Greeks believed their myths is an intriguing one. For an extended treatment see P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths? an essay on the constitutive imagination*, (University of Chicago, 1988).

[23] *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume III: Early Ionian Thinkers, Part 2,* (LCL 526:26-27). This is echoed by Aristotle in *Poetics* (LCL 199:128-29).

[24] These are purported to be the words of Socrates, but in reality, his speech is only available to us as Plato mediates it.

trained for defence *and* educated in virtue, so that they maintain justice (i.e., what is good for the city). The guardian's education, however, must be carefully curated so that the young minds are not corrupted by false ideas. Homer and Hesiod are again used as poor examples when it comes to speaking truthfully about the gods.[25] The principal concern is that if children hear stories about wars between gods or fighting between family members, they might turn on their own countryman when they are grown.[26] According to this dialogue, children naturally "read" exemplarically, and this way of reading can positively form virtue depending on the truthfulness of the texts. The dialogue also shows that such exemplarity can be resisted by mature readers who are the ones censuring and selecting the texts.[27]

Writing in the first century CE, Plutarch provides an insightful hermeneutical discussion in *How to Study Poetry (De Audiendis Poetis)*. After briefly suggesting that poets did not actually believe in all that they wrote, the author turns to discussing *mimesis*. Comparing poetry to painting, Plutarch explains that there is a great difference between imitating something beautiful and imitating something beautifully.[28] The former has to do with the content, the latter with the form. He writes, "the young man, as he reads what Thersites the buffoon, or Sisyphus the seducer of women, or Batrachus the bawd, is represented as saying or doing, must be taught to commend the faculty and art which imitates these things, but to repudiate and condemn the disposition and the actions which it imitates."[29] He goes on to warn his reader to pay attention to whether the poet has given them any hints regarding "the sentiments expressed to indicate that they are distasteful to himself."[30] The poet (i.e. the author) was capable of resisting exemplarity in their writing, but for Plutarch exemplarity ought also to be resisted by the reader. "Now since this is so, let the young man, when we set him to reading poems, not be prepossessed with any such opinions about those

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[25] 376e–378e. (LCL 237:190-201).

[26] Justin Martyr in his *Discourse to the Greeks* makes this point rather crudely: "And this further I would say to you, why are you, being a Greek, indignant at your son when he imitates Jupiter, and rises against you and defrauds you of your own wife? Why do you count him your enemy, and yet worship one that is like him?" Translated by M. Dods. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. (ed.) A. Roberts et al. (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

[27] The discussion continues into Book 3 of *The Republic.*

[28] Plutarch is likely expanding on Aristotle's understanding of mimesis in *Poetics*

[29] Plutarch, *How to Study Poetry,* in *Moralia Vol. 1, §18.C-D* (LCL *197:94-95).*

[30] Plutarch, §19.A (LCL 197:96-97).

good and great names, as for instance, that the men were wise and honest, consummate kings, and standards of all virtue and uprightness. For he will be greatly injured if he approves everything, and is in a state of wonderment over it, but resents nothing . . ."[31] The young man is encouraged to resist exemplarity—he is not to approve of every action, nor make excuses for a character's misdeeds. They are to enjoy poetry in so far as it imitates "character and life, and of men who are not perfect or spotless or unassailable in all respects, but pervaded by emotions, false opinions, and sundry forms of ignorance, who yet through inborn goodness frequently change their ways for the better."[32] What Plutarch shows is that there were indeed other ways to read in antiquity. Not every character was an exemplar, and not every action depicted in art or poetry was commendable. The ideal reader for Plutarch, the young man in the text, can rightly distinguish between the beautiful and what is imitated *beautifully*.

In this section, I wanted to highlight the broad range of hermeneutical options available to readers in antiquity. Just as modern readers can distinguish between truth and fiction, so could the ancients. More to our point, these ancient readers could also distinguish base actions unworthy of imitation and the *exempla.* Not every element of the text was didactic and not every character was exemplary. There is some degree of difference between how exemplarity functions in the interpretation of sacred or authoritative texts. Greco-Roman myths and their poets did not have the same status as Israel's Scriptures, even if their traditions influenced cultural and religious practices. Despite these important distinctions, the authors and texts that are the focus of this chapter occupy the intersectional space of Greek, Roman, and Jewish interpretive practices. The practice of exemplarity and its resistance were both available as hermeneutical options to these ancient authors and readers. Turning now to this early reception, was Samson viewed as an *exemplum,* or did his character resist such exemplarity?[33]

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[31] Plutarch, §25.E (LCL 197:134-35).

[32] Plutarch, §26.A (LCL 197:136-37).

[33] There is a deliberate slippage between the worlds behind, in, and in front of the text. As argued above, exemplarity is generative of texts and thus, a practice of authors; it is embedded within textual features and figures, and it is a strategy of reading. Even so, the boundaries between these worlds are fuzzy, and at times, dialogical. The author shapes certain heroic figures according to how they wish their readers to imitate them. Readers respond to the signs within the text that will be marked as heroic (these must be negotiated by the reader). Exemplaric resistance may be thought to occur in author/editor as they create their narrative. It may occur within the text as the character is not sufficiently marked as exemplaric, and this is especially the case when the text is open to being read in multiple ways

Josephus' Portrait of Samson

Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* is an invaluable source of reception history. In this work, Josephus retells the events of biblical history beginning with Adam. He traces the development of the Jewish people through the exile, second-temple period and ends with the Jewish War (69-73CE). Writing his account of history as an *apologia* for non-Jewish readers, Josephus seeks to defend not only the antiquity of Jewish religion but also to combat anti-Semitic/Anti-Jewish rhetoric and rumours.[34] One of his approaches was to portray biblical characters as heroic and virtuous, not unlike the various heroes from Greco-Roman myths. While many of these characters are read exemplarically, in book five of *Jewish Antiquities* Josephus seems genuinely conflicted over the character of Samson. Josephus is certain of Samson's praiseworthiness—his valour and strength, yet he does not hide the fact that Samson is a flawed character.[35] At certain points, Josephus bends his narrative to highlight the admirability of Samson (or his parents) or omits information that may damage his portrayal of Samson. Yet, in this strategy, Josephus is not consistent. In other places, Samson's less than pious deeds are exaggerated, going beyond the biblical account. The narrator further connects Samson's actions to the negative actions of Israel as a whole. What follows is an attempt to separate the two divergent portrayals of Samson in *Ant*. 5.275-317. Acknowledging the difficulty in determining authorial motivations from ancient texts and the problems that arise from using simplistic and subjective terms, I have chosen to adopt the language of positive and negative portraits. In doing so, I hope to highlight that such binary descriptions do not adequately reflect this part of *Jewish Antiquities.* Instead, Josephus' attempt to recount the biblical narrative for his

due to ambiguity. Finally, exemplaric resistance may be said to be achieved by the reader. *They* may follow the author's leading or deviate from those expectations and resist the exemplarity of the characters (this movement is often the conclusion of those who approach ancient texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion). In the sections that follow, I will speak of exemplarity and its resistance as a phenomenon that occurs in these three modes without trying to specify between them unless it is necessary.

[34] Cf. L. H. Feldman, *Josephus's interpretation of the Bible*, (University of California, 1998), p. 132-162.

[35] *Ant.* 5.317. "And it is but right to admire the man for his valour, his strength, and the grandeur of his end, as also for the wrath which he cherished to the last against his enemies. That he let himself be ensnared by a woman must be imputed to human nature which succumbs to sins; but testimony is due to him for his surpassing excellence in all the rest." All translations are from the online Loeb Classical Library: Flavius Josephus, Henry St. John Thackeray (transl.) and Ralph Marcus (transl.), *Jewish Antiquities,* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

own purposes appear to be frustrated by a morally ambiguous — if not deeply flawed — protagonist.

Josephus's Positive Portrait of Samson

Following the biblical narrative in Judges 13, Josephus begins with Samson's birth narrative. In distinction from the biblical Judges, the honour of Samson's parents is strengthened. The father, Μανώχης (LXX: Μανῶε), is described as "among the most notable of the Danites and without question the first in his native place."[36] Samson's mother, unnamed as in the Judges account, is also said to be extremely beautiful. Josephus also paints the couple as pious—they frequently are entreating God to give them a child. In Feldman's analysis, Josephus "increases the stature of Samson by stressing, in particular, precisely those qualities which would appeal to a Greek audience . . . namely the external ones of good birth and handsome appearance . . ." [37] In the angel's pronouncement to the woman, Samson is promised to be "goodly and illustrious for strength, by whom, on his reaching man's estate, the Philistines would be afflicted."[38]

Oddly enough, Josephus does not refer to Samson as a Nazirite. In Judges, Samson's Nazirite identity is certain.[39] While the biblical account has Samson confessing his Nazirite identity as the source of his strength to Delilah (Judg.16:17), Josephus' account reads, "I am under God's care: and under His providence since birth, I nurse these locks, God having enjoined upon me not to cut them, for that my strength is measured by their growth and preservation."[40] Instead of identifying him as a Nazirite, Josephus explains that he is a prophet.[41] What is the purpose of this subtle change? Why does he remove the Nazirite identity but keep the vow? It is unlikely that this stems from Josephus' concerns for his non-Jewish audience. Earlier in book IV, Josephus explained the concept of a Nazirite. He relates the prohibitions against drinking wine and cutting

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[36] *Ant.* 5.276

[37] L. H. Feldman, 'Josephus' Version of Samson', *JSJ*, 19/2 (1988), p.173.

[38] *Ant.* 5.277-78.

[39] In Judges 13:7 and 16:17, LXX^{B} reads ἅγιον/ ἅγιος instead of ναζιραῖον/ ναζιραῖος as in LXX^{A}. However, the MT, LXX, and T describe Samson as a Nazirite in Judg. 13:5.

[40] *Ant.* 5.312.

[41] *Ant.* 5.285.

hair, but he omits the prohibitions against coming into contact with dead bodies (Num. 6:6-8).[42] Here, Josephus has introduced the Nazirite vow in a way that will not cause interpretive issues in the Samson narrative. To Josephus' non-Jewish audience, Samson's Nazirite identity is of no consequence.[43] The story proceeds unhindered as nothing is gained or lost by Josephus's change. The serious consequences of Samson's vow being broken are just as integral to Josephus' account as they are to the narrative of Judges.

The omission is perhaps a result arising from Josephus' own difficulty to interpret the biblical text: how can Samson be a Nazirite and effect salvation for Israel through violent liberation? The amount of violence (and revenge) in the text causes Samson to be in a near constant state of ritual defilement. Yet, there only seems to be consequences when his hair is cut. This incongruity is highlighted by the Mishnah which explains the difference between a life-long Nazirite and a Nazirite like Samson: a Nazirite like Samson cannot cut his hair if it becomes too heavy (unlike a נָזִיר עוֹלָם), but if he becomes unclean, he does not have to present the offering of uncleanness.[44] Accordingly Samson would still be considered unclean, but it would explain why the text does not record him offering the purification offerings required by Num. 6:9-12. Though it is unclear whether Josephus is reflecting a similar rabbinic tradition, this passage in the Mishnah demonstrates that Samson's Nazirite identity was a cause of concern for other early Jewish readers.[45] Admittedly, the reasons for Josephus' omissions regarding Nazirites in *Ant.* 4.72 and in the Samson narrative are speculative. He may not be presenting Samson in a more positive light. It does seem however that the omission stems from an incongruity in the biblical text and Josephus' own struggle to interpret it.

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[42] *Ant.* 4.72.

[43] See S. D. Chepey, *Nazirites in late Second Temple Judaism: a survey of ancient Jewish writings, the New Testament, archaeological evidence, and other writings from late antiquity*, (Brill, 2005), pp. 63-67. Chepey offers a few reasons for the change which focus on Josephus' concerns for his audience. "Josephus may have wished to avoid Samson's religious technical identification as found in the Bible so as to disassociate him from the contemporary figures introduced just one book previously" (66).

[44] Mishnah Nazir 1.2.

[45] Cf. Feldman, *Josephus's interpretation of the Bible*, pp. 63-67. See also the exchange(s) between Louis Feldman and Mark Roncace in Feldman, 'Josephus' Version of Samson'; M. Roncace, 'Another Portrait of Josephus' Portrait of Samson', *JSJ*, 35/2 (2004).

There are other small changes made by Josephus that arguably improve the character of Samson. Samson falls in love with a virgin (παρθένος) who was among the Philistines as opposed to one of the daughters of the Philistines.[46] Josephus omits the rhetorical question of Samson's parents, presumably to also omit the pejorative "uncircumcised Philistines" for his Greek audience.[47] He also gives reason to the thirty men mentioned in Judg. 14.11, reporting that they were stationed as guards "from fear of this young man's strength."[48] Samson is reported to have stayed the night at an inn in Gaza rather than with a prostitute.[49] All of these add to Samson's positive and possibly exemplaric characterization.

A rather telling reworking of the biblical material by Josephus can be seen in the aftermath of Samson's riddle. After the weddinggoers guess Samson's riddle, Josephus reports "And he gave them what he had promised, after despoiling certain Ascalonites who encountered him on the road (these too being Philistines); but he renounced those nuptials, and the girl, scorning him for his wrath, was united to that friend of his who had given her away."[50] Josephus accomplishes two things here. First, he softens the violent imagery of Samson's debt repayment. The biblical account has Samson killing thirty men to obtain the garments and clothes, envisaging Samson returning with the blood-splattered clothes (Judg. 14:19). In contrast, Josephus only has Samson robbing certain Philistines.

Secondly, Josephus maintains Samson's honour by reworking the narrative to have Samson be the one to "annul" the marriage. The biblical account has Samson returning to his wife only to discover that she had been given away to his friend. The father is very apologetic, and he offers his younger daughter in marriage. Samson rejects the offer and instead burns the Philistines' crops, which in turn causes the Philistines to burn the woman and her father (Judg. 14:20-15:1-6). In

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[46] *Ant.* 5.286. MT: מִבְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים […] אִשָּׁה. LXX: γυναῖκα […] θυγατέρων τῶν ἀλλοφύλων

[47] C. Begg, *Judean antiquities books 5 - 7*, (Brill, 2005), vol. iv, p. 72 fn. 801.

[48] *Ant. 5.289*. LXX^{A} reads: καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ φοβεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς αὐτὸν.

[49] *Ant.* 5.304; Judges 16.1. Cf. Begg, *Judean antiquities books 5 - 7*, p. 76 fn. 861. Begg notes that *Ant.* 5.7 also has the spies staying at Rahab's inn and Rahab is not a prostitute. "Josephus' designation of her establishment corresponds to one meaning ('innkeeper') of the Aramaic term פונרקיתא used of Rahab's profession in the Tg. of Josh 2:1b (the term also, however, may have the sense of 'harlot.'" Though, if Josephus wanted to omit completely Samson's explicit sexual deeds, then it is odd that he does not do the same in *Ant.* 5.306. when he characterises Delilah as a prostitute. It may be that he wishes to reduce Samson's pattern of sexual misdeeds to a one-off misstep.

[50] *Ant.* 5.294.

stark contrast, the Josephian Samson is spited by the woman, but he reclaims his honour by burning the Philistines' crops, causing them to retaliate against the woman and her family.[51] Feldman gives reason to this omission: "Josephus evidently felt that the mighty, impetuous Samson ought not to be depicted as a meek weakling being stopped by her father from visiting her."[52] While this may be right, Josephus seems more concerned with saving Samson's moral character. It appears he is disturbed by the biblical account which puts the blame of the woman's remarriage and her death (along with the woman's father) squarely on Samson. The woman and her father are innocent; they are the victims in a retaliatory cycle of ever-increasing violence between Samson and the Philistines. Josephus, however, has recast the woman from victim to villain. Samson cunningly gets his revenge on both his would-be bride and the Philistines. In the end, she got what she deserved, and Samson is kept in a relatively positive light.

Josephus's Negative Portrait of Samson

Josephus' effort to cast Samson in a positive light is far from consistent. Mark Roncace has provided a helpful rejoinder to Feldman's proposal of a positive portrait of Samson in Josephus's work. He explains that Josephus portrays Samson in much the same way that the biblical account does, that is, in a negative light.[53] Stranger yet, Josephus actually seems to emend the biblical narrative to strengthen a negative portrait of Samson. To begin, Josephus embellishes the character of Manoah, making him jealous and insecure of the handsome angel that appears to his wife.[54] Roncace explains:

> Feldman discusses at length how Manoah's jealousy of his wife and increased suspicion of the messenger serve to add dramatic and romantic motifs (pp. 475-477), but he fails to see that Manoah's jealousies and suspicions also serve to depict him more negatively than the biblical version because they obscure his ability to perceive the good news about the birth of their son.[55]

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[51] *Ant.* 5.295-96.

52 Feldman, 'Josephus' Version of Samson', p. 184. Cf. C. Begg, 'Samson's Initial Exploits According to Josephus', Liber Annuus, 57 (2007), pp. 328-329.

[53] Roncace, 'Another Portrait of Josephus' Portrait of Samson', pp. 189-190, 207.

[54] *Ant.* 5.277.

[55] Roncace, p. 191.

If Josephus was trying to reconfigure Samson's character for a Greek audience by making him "well-born," then why does he add these details?

Another instance where Josephus muddies the waters is in the Judahites' reproach of Samson. The Philistines had taken control of part of Judah in response to Samson's aggravations. The Judahites protest this unjust treatment and then seek to turn Samson over to the Philistines. Taking 3,000 men, they approach Samson and "after roundly rebuking him for his outrageous treatment of the Philistines, people powerful enough to bring ruin upon the whole race of the Hebrews, and telling him that they were come to take and deliver him into their hands, they besought him to submit to this of his own free will."[56] Not only has Josephus expanded the Judahites' accusations of putting "the whole Hebrew race" in danger, but Josephus also omits Samson's direct response which provides his justification for his actions: "As they did to me, so have I done to them."[57] This is a bizarre strategy if Josephus wishes to make Samson a positive figure in the eyes of his contemporaries. Samson's personal vendetta is the cause of the occupation of Judah, but moreover, the disastrous consequences of his actions may move beyond Judah and affect the Hebrew people as a whole. Rather than stressing Samson's courage and the Judahites' cowardly subservience as Feldman has argued, perhaps Josephus is critically aware of how this story might be received by those living after the Jewish revolt and the destruction of the temple.[58] I think it is rather likely that, by adding the Judahites' reproach of Samson, Josephus attempts to distance his own first century Jewish community from earlier revolutionaries.[59] In doing so, Samson becomes a dangerous fool who jeopardizes the safety of his people in order to get even with his enemies.

Josephus has no qualms about omitting a character's flaws. Earlier in book V, he completely leaves out that Gideon made an idolatrous ephod in relation to which "And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family."[60] In the case of Samson however,

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[56] *Ant*. 5.298.

[57] Judges 15:11.

[58] Feldman, *Josephus's interpretation of the Bible*, p. 179.

[59] Feldman, *Josephus's interpretation of the Bible*, pp. 148-157. Feldman sees this explicitly in Josephus' reworking of Ezra and Nehemiah.

[60] Judges 8:27.

Josephus actually strengthens his negative portrait. He writes, "Howbeit he was already transgressing the laws of his forefathers and debasing his own rule of life by the imitation of foreign usages; and this proved the beginning of his disaster. For, being enamoured of a woman who was a harlot among the Philistines, Dalala by name, he consorted with her."[61] With this paragraph, Josephus provides commentary on Samson's previous actions, suggesting the reader view them negatively to some degree. Josephus' comments also echo Joshua's farewell speech and the narrator's repeated explanation of how Israel sinned; Samson, like Israel, has sinned in his imitation of the foreign nations.[62] He becomes an image of Israelite unfaithfulness; Samson's calamity begins long before he meets Delilah.

In contrast to the biblical Delilah episode where Samson's sin is inferred, Josephus makes it explicit. Samson's love for a woman is transformed into an affair with a prostitute.[63] Delilah attempts and succeeds at getting Samson drunk, causing him to break his vow.[64] Feldman argues that "whereas in the Bible Samson appears rather weak-witted, Josephus (Ant. 5.308) reports that Samson, whose wits were yet robust . . . countered [Delilah's] ruse by another."[65] Roncace dismisses this reading by pointing out the obvious—Samson is eventually outwitted by Delilah.[66] While it would be difficult for Josephus to omit such a significant part of the narrative, his embellishments serve only to characterize Samson more negatively than the biblical account does.

Josephus' conflicted portrait of Samson

While I have attempted to place Josephus' inconsistent characterizations into positive and negative categories, there is one example which resists binary classification. This example is found in how Josephus repeatedly omits any reference to the Spirit of God/YHWH. While Josephus consistently omits this phrase from his section on Judges, his reasons for doing so are unclear. Ernest Best has

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[61] *Ant.* 5.306-07.

[62] *Ant.* 5.98, 179, 198, 200, 255.

[63] *Ant.* 5.307. Begg explains that the only other use of ἑταιρίζω in Josephus is in *Ant.* 8.417 with reference to prostitutes (*Judean antiquities books 5 - 7*, p. 77 fn. 867.)

[64] *Ant.* 5.307, 309. Cf. Roncace, p. 199.

[65] Feldman, "Josephus' Version of Samson," p. 178.

[66] Roncace, p. 194.

suggested that translating רוּחַ to πνεῦμα as the LXX have done, risks misconstruing the Hebraic meaning of רוּחַ to a non-Jewish audience.[67] John Levison likewise explains that Josephus tailors his account of the operations of the divine spirit to appeal to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. In the Balaam account where the divine Spirit is first introduced by Josephus, Levison argues that Josephus presents the divine Spirit as possessing Balaam, speaking through him like a ventriloquist does with a dummy or a musician does with an instrument.[68] It is for this reason that Levison believes that Josephus limited his explicit use of the divine Spirit to negative contexts such as Balaam and Saul's envoys (1 Sam. 19:18-21).[69] Levison also explains that Josephus may have some hesitancy in portraying the Spirit's direct actions as some Greek understandings of the operations of πνεῦμα were akin to sexual penetration.[70] For Levison, Josephus' motivations for removing many of the references of the Spirit of YHWH/God are many, but his central motivation is to omit "references to the divine spirit which can be misinterpreted contrary to his understanding and replaces them with an emphasis upon human achievement."[71]

While this analysis may ring true in significant places in *Jewish Antiquities,* it does not sound as convincing in the Samson narrative. In describing Samson's victory over the Philistines with a donkey's jawbone (Judg. 15:14-20), Josephus omits the Spirit's participation (15:14). This cannot be because Josephus wanted to emphasise human achievement or Samson's strength. The victory hymn in Judg. 15:16 is recast as arrogant: "unduly proud of this feat, did not say that it was God's assistance that had brought it to pass, but ascribed the issue to his own valour, boasting of having with a jawbone prostrated some of his enemies and put the rest to rout through the terror that he inspired."[72] Josephus continues to eschew praising Samson's human strength or courage in the next paragraph. "But, being seized with a mighty thirst and recognizing that human valour is a thing of naught, he acknowledged that all was attributable to God and implored Him not, in anger at any words of his, to deliver him into his enemies' hands, but to lend him aid in his dire

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[67] E. Best, 'The Use and Non-Use of Pneuma by Josephus', *Novum Testamentum*, 3/3 (1959), pp. 218-225.
[68] J. Levison, 'Josephus' Interpretation of the Divine Spirit', *JJS*, 47/2 (1996), pp. 235-240.
[69] *Ant.* 6.222-23.
[70] Levison, p. 251.
[71] Levison, pp. 253-254.
[72] *Ant.* 5.301.

need and to rescue him from his distress." Not only does Josephus interpret Samson's song as boastful, but he amplifies Samson's cry as deeply penitent. And what does he repent of? Believing human valour (ἀρετὴ) to be chiefly valuable—exactly the thing Josephus is supposedly trying to emphasize! Thus, Josephus' omission of the Spirit in this narrative cannot be for the purpose of emphasising Samson's courage or strength.

Perhaps Josephus is trying to emphasize Samson's piety and the power of his prayers as he explains that God was "moved by his supplications."[73] Yet, in order to highlight Samson's piety in repentance, Josephus has to first highlight Samson's lack of piety. The biblical narrative is more ambiguous regarding Samson's pride or piety than it appears in Josephus's account. It seems as if Josephus is thickening the interpretation of the text to allow for the possibility of Samson's shortcomings while also highlighting his repentance and his redemption.

Again, the question still remains: why does Josephus omit the Spirit's role in this account? It is clear that Josephus is far from systematic in his approach to writing *Jewish Antiquities*. I believe it is fair to suggest that Josephus is handling each reference to the Spirit as it presents itself in the narrative. Josephus's reasons for these omissions here may not extend past the Samson narrative. The reason for the omission might be similar to the one I have argued for regarding Josephus's omission of Samson's Nazirite identity. The Spirit's actions in the biblical narrative severely complicate interpretation. As is clear in his conclusion, Josephus does view Samson as a positive moral figure, albeit a flawed one. However, Josephus may be perplexed how the Spirit's operations do not affect significant change within Samson. By removing the Spirit's role in Samson's actions, Josephus retains the human agency of his hero. Samson is then free to fail morally as he does, without complicating God's involvement in the narrative. This can be further seen in that Josephus omits Samson's final prayer (Judg. 16:28), leaving his death, and the victory gained by it, completely to Samson's valour and strength.

In the end, Josephus' portrait of Samson is a mixture of positive and negative qualities. Unlike other portraits of the Judges, Josephus has no problem showcasing, and even embellishing the failures of his hero. In several places, he amends the portrait of the biblical text to clarify and soften some of the ambiguities found in the narrative. The oscillation between these divergent

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[73] *Ant.* 5.303.

portraits of Samson reveals Josephus' own struggle to interpret the biblical narrative with all of its complexities and ambiguities. His "eulogy" of Samson guides his reader toward sympathy for the character without completely exonerating or condemning him. In Josephus's reading, Samson is not straightforwardly exemplary.

Pseudo-Philo's Portrait of Samson

In *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 25-48, Pseudo-Philo creatively reworks the narratives of Judges in a variety of ways.[74] Unlike Josephus's writing, the nature and purpose of LAB is unknown. While many have ascribed to LAB the moniker "rewritten bible", this may not be a helpful description.[75] It is clear that Pseudo-Philo is working with some form of Judges, and perhaps, even with a number of translations and versions. In some places he follows the biblical text closely, and when he does depart from it, he often incorporates other canonical material in his reworking of the biblical narrative. In many other places, the author appears to freely elaborate, omit, rearrange, rename, and apparently, even invents stories. What is chiefly unclear, and what makes LAB a difficult dialogical partner, is that we can only speculate *why* Pseudo-Philo constructs his narrative the way he does. To speak of "changes" or "omissions" is to suggest that we may have insight into Pseudo-Philo's creative method–something which we as readers do not have.[76] However, LAB may still be a fruitful dialogue partner as it is a reception of Judges. We may not be able to give a reason for such differences between the LAB and the canonical book of Judges, but we may take LAB's account of Judges as a whole to understand what kind of story is being told. Our goal is to move past the obvious differences in the details and ask in what way are they different and what attitudes towards and/or readings of the book of Judges may have prompted Pseudo-Philo's work.

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[74] LAB from here on. The English translation is from Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary On Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, With Latin Text And English Translation* Leiden: Brill, 1996.

[75] Cf. Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*. Mroczek raises some significant points about the need to resist ideas about canonicity when analyzing proto-canonical texts. While her book does not specifically address Pseudo-Philo, presumably because Mroczek focuses on texts written much earlier, nevertheless, her insights can still be of value here.

[76] Of course, there is always the possibility that Pseudo-Philo is a forgetful or sloppy storyteller. However, if this is true, then it becomes impossible to discern which adaptations, changes, omissions, *et al,* are meaningful in a dialogical way and which ones are the result of poor writing.

We may arrive at a tentative hypothesis by analysing not necessarily the details, but the whole, and especially the repeated patterns in the Judges sequence.

While our focus will remain on Samson, it is worth noting two things about how Pseudo-Philo constructs his own Judges narrative. First, there are plenty of exemplary figures within LAB. Some of them, like Cenaz or Zebul, are invented characters that are modelled after other biblical characters with their narratives reusing canonical material. So, the biblical Othniel is replaced by Cenaz, a worthy leader after the likes of Moses and Joshua. His leadership brings national repentance and secures victory over Israel's enemies. Various narrative tropes feature in Cenaz's account such as casting lots/consulting Urim and Thummim to determine sin (Josh. 7), placing objects in the ark, the leader's authority being questioned by his people and then vindicated by miraculous deeds (Num. 12; 16), a farewell speech, and even a covenant renewal ceremony.[77] Other biblical characters such as Deborah and Phineas also receive exemplaric treatment as their narratives contain similar features.

Secondly, the majority of biblical characters that feature in the LAB Judges narrative are treated as anti-exemplars.[78] Much of the Gideon material is omitted as Pseudo Philo focuses on his idolatry. Jair, a minor judge within the canonical account, is refashioned as idolatrous leader who oppresses his fellow Israelites. Most strangely, is that Ehud is transformed into a Midianite priest/magician who leads the Israelites astray by performing magic which caused the sun to shine at night.[79] Perhaps this narrative serves as an explanation for how Israel could have turned away so quickly to idolatry after Deborah, and thus, it represents Pseudo-Philo's attempt to bridge the gap in the biblical narrative. However, the identification of Israel's enemies with the morally ambiguous characters found in the biblical account by Pseudo-Philo might speak more to his

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[77] LAB 25-28.

[78] The exceptions include Deborah, Abdon, and Phineas. In the case of Abdon, his narrative is expanded in a way similar to others in LAB.

[79] Feldman suggests this is reminiscent of the works of the Anti-Christ mentioned in the *Ascension of Isaiah* 4:5 (*The Biblical antiquities of Philo*, (Ktav Pub. House, 1971), p. 180). Αωδ, the Greek rendering of Ehud, is not a common name. The majority of the time it is found in extant Greek literature, it is only used for the biblical character of Ehud. Jacobson offers a suggestion that the wizard may have intended to be anonymous and represents a scribal error (p. 907).

understanding of the characterisations of the judges within Israel's Scriptures—a point that may prove illuminating for understanding early exemplaric readings of Samson.

Samson in LAB

LAB 42-43 comprises the annunciation of the birth of Samson to Manoah and Eluma (Samson's mother) and the exploits of Samson. Pseudo-Philo chooses to focus only on the Gaza incident (Judg. 16:1-3) and Samson's downfall (16:4-31). Interestingly, almost every element of Judges 14-16 is present in abbreviated form. LAB 43.1 speaks of Samson's divine empowerment, taking a Philistine wife, Samson humiliating the Philistines, and that the Philistines burned her. After the narration of the Gaza incident, LAB 43.4 backtracks by summarising the events that have been skipped: killing of the lion (Judg. 14:6), using a jawbone to defeat the Philistines (Judg. 15:15), his bonds breaking off (Judg. 15:14), and the catching of the foxes (Judg. 15.4-5). These events are omitted, presumably because LAB assumes the reader has access to or least knowledge of the book of Judges. What is perplexing is that for no apparent reason, these events are in a different order than the book of Judges. LAB also omits any reference to Samson's riddle.

There are significant differences in the Gaza incident as well. First, there is no mention of a prostitute. Instead, Samson is angry with Gaza. The narrative skips quickly to the actions of the Philistines as they shut him in. The omission of a prostitute together with the narrative ellipses make the story confusing. Pseudo-Philo includes a prayer of Samson asking for God's help against his enemies. The most notable difference is Samson's victory over the Philistines. He does not simply lift the gates and set them on hill near Hebron as he does in the biblical account. In LAB 43.3, Samson uses one of the doors of the gate as a weapon, killing with it 25,000 men. While the biblical account lacks a motivation for Samson, LAB provides one (that Samson was angry at Gaza), even if the reason behind it is unclear or imprecise. The inclusion of a speech/prayer by Samson introduces YHWH, or at least the desire for his presence and action, into a narrative where he is biblically absent.

It is unclear what Pseudo-Philo is attempting by these omissions and additions as he will direct his readers back to some version of Judges in the same chapter. This suggests that at least in this section, his changes are a result of his interpretation of the biblical text. It would make little

sense for example, to alter the narrative, omitting details in order to make Samson appear more pious than he really was if the author is simply going to reference the actual story. Take for instance the omission of the prostitute in Gaza. The omission does little to improve Samson's character as Delilah in the next section is said to be a harlot. The omission confuses the narrative; Samson's anger does not offer a logical explanation of why he suddenly is trapped in Gaza.[80] Perhaps Pseudo-Philo is trying to provide a reason for Samson's actions, and he has interpreted Samson's visit with the prostitute as part of a larger scheme against the Philistines.[81]

The final scenes with Delilah and Samson also undergo minor and major revisions.[82] The most notable difference is the addition of a lengthy divine speech. The speech is addressed to no one in particular, so perhaps the speech-act functions as Pseudo-Philo's own interpretation of Samson. It is a speech of judgement; God condemns Samson for being led astray by his eyes and not remembering God's mighty works. God also contrasts Samson with Joseph saying that "he has mingled with the daughters of the Philistines and has not paid attention to Joseph my servant who was in a foreign land and became the crown of his brothers because he was not willing to profane his seed."[83] God does promise to remember him in the end and "avenge him upon the Philistines just this once." This judgement of God is echoed in part in Samson's prayer in LAB 43.7 "Lord God of my fathers, hear me *just this once* and strengthen me in order that I may die with these Philistines, because the sight that they took from me was given freely to me by you."[84] It seems the singular issue for Pseudo-Philo is having sexual relations with foreign women. There does not, however, seem to be the deuteronomic stress that foreign wives lead to foreign gods. Pseudo-Philo is content to keep Samson focused on his sight in his impassioned plea, but Samson provides God a reason other than vengeance. It seems that by taking Samson's eyes, the Philistines had actually taken something that was given by God. The logic of this does not seem apparent, for it was

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[80] The biblical account does not explain why Samson went to Gaza, but only why he stayed overnight.

[81] Pseudo-Philo has done this already LAB 43.1. "When he had begun to grow up and sought to fight against the Philistines, he took for himself a wife from the Philistines." The biblical account portrays Samson as almost stumbling into and through a divine plan.

[82] E.g., Delilah becomes both a harlot and Samson's wife; the account is shortened in ways that assume the biblical account; Samson's Nazirite identity is muted or even missing from the narrative (*pace* Jacobson, p. 984)

[83] LAB 43.5. Once again, Pseudo-Philo expects his readers to have some knowledge of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife which is not included in LAB 8.9-10.

[84] Italics mine. In Ju 16:28, Samson asks God to strengthen him just this once.

Samson's eyes that led him astray and God had already said that this would be his downfall. The short story of Samson ends in the same way as recorded in Judges.

Exemplaric Resistance in Pseudo-Philo

This fascinating text is filled with creative retellings and interpretations of the biblical narrative that reveal an author who was familiar with the scriptural story. What are we to make of Pseudo-Philo's version of the Judges narrative as a whole? It would appear that the author of this text does not feel constrained by any existing version of the Judges narrative. While heavily reliant on the biblical version, LAB freely invents characters and episodes, as well as subvert existing characters and narratives. Sometimes, the author resists the ambiguity found in the biblical text, opting to provide theological explanations to the events of the narrative. At other times, the author draws casual links between actions or narratives to provide justification or explanation.[85]

Finally, and most significantly, the characters in the Judges narrative do not function as exemplars in LAB. Pseudo-Philo has no problem with exemplarity. LAB contains many positive characters and moral exemplars; it is just that these are not the same ones found in Judges. Apart from Deborah and Phineas, the moral exemplars are either created from scratch or are embellishments of characters about whom we know very little.[86] Characters like Gideon and Jephthah are disparaged as moral failures, despite the biblical text evidencing at least some virtue. Characters such as these have fared well in reception history, but in LAB, they are reduced to their shortcomings, and others like Ehud and Jair are transformed into evil, one-dimensional characters. The biblical account of the Judges period affords no positive exemplar for Pseudo-Philo.

The biblical judges that feature in LAB are not anti-exemplars either. They may be negative moral examples, and from their stories one may draw a moral lesson that idolatry or sexual

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[85] LAB 34 is a good example. The implicit concern which LAB seems to be addressing is, "how could Israel fall away so easily if Deborah was such a great leader?" Pseudo-Philo answers this by creating a diabolical character that can lead all of Israel astray without denigrating Deborah's leadership.

[86] This is not to say that Judges or other parts of the Hebrew Bible do not influence Pseudo-Philo's account. Certain elements of the characters or stories are clear appropriations of other canonical material. A fitting example is in LAB 6.16-18, where Abraham is thrown into a fiery furnace.

immorality does not pay off in the end, but these characters are not exemplars of evil.[87] The terse fashion with which Pseudo-Philo treats the reappropriations of his biblical characters precludes the possibility of such exemplarity. A fitting example is the Jair narrative in LAB 38. The minor judge of Judges 10:3-5 is recast as an evil character, but there is nothing in the brief narrative to suggest that Pseudo-Philo considers him to be the epitome of evil. The story however features Deborah as an exemplar whose commandments the faithful Israelites invoke in their defence to Jair. So, while Jair is an evil character, the story revolves more around how one ought to act in the positive sense, rather than how one should not act. This story can easily be read as an encouragement to those living under persecution, and perhaps initially to diaspora Jews in particular, to remain faithful to God even under the threat of death.[88] In this way, the narrative as a whole can be seen to offer up positive moral examples who act in accordance with greater moral exemplars (Abraham, Moses, Deborah). The negative moral actions of LAB's characters are not anti-exemplary, but only a failure to imitate the positive exemplars.

Samson in LAB also resists exemplarity. His brief narrative focuses on his strength in the first episode and his sexual immorality and death in the second. Outside of the spectacular feat of strength, there is not much ethical or narrative value in LAB's Gaza incident. In the Delilah episode, Pseudo-Philo makes no mention of Samson's Nazarite identity or his failure to uphold his vows. This may represent a shortcoming in the biblical narrative (or Samson's) as the Nazarite vow seems unimportant, or it could be that Pseudo-Philo thought there to be a more important matter at hand. This singular issue in LAB seems to be Samson's sexual immorality, and more specifically, being led astray after foreign women. Yet, his trespass is contrasted with another biblical exemplar, Joseph, who resisted the sexual advances of a foreign woman. In the end, Samson is a muted character. He lacks the passion and zeal of the biblical version, even when Pseudo Philo attempts to make him more interesting. Samson is neither a tragic hero nor an evil villain; he

[87] A case could be made that Micah is an anti-exemplar. This is evidenced in LAB 47.7, "There rose up Micah who caused you to transgress by the things that he and his mother made. Their deeds were sinful and wicked such that no one before had devised, but by his own craftiness he made graven images such as have not been made until this day."

[88] This story bears strong resemblance to other post-exilic narratives of resistance such as the book of Daniel and 2 Maccabees 7. Note particularly the seven men unwilling to sacrifice and the reference to Deborah as their "mother".

remains somewhere in between. In LAB, Samson is not an exemplary figure. The exemplaric resistance of Pseudo-Philo may be a helpful insight to early Jewish interpretation of the book of Judges. To read the biblical account and find only heroes or only villains might just make exemplars out of figures that never were as such. Instead, LAB challenges the reader to pay closer attention to the ambiguities of the narrative which led one interpreter to create villains out of "heroes" and heroes out of nothing.

A Jewish Preacher's Portrait of Samson

In another Pseudo-Philonic work entitled *On Samson*, the portrait of Samson is shaped in a very different way. *On Samson* is self-described as a homily, and was probably read orally in the synagogue where it may have been coupled with Numbers 4:21-7:89 as part of the weekly Torah readings.[89] The text was originally written in Greek, but the only surviving manuscripts are in old Armenian which date to the late 13th century.[90] This homily and another entitled *On Jonah* were included with other works by Philo, but were not written by him. Neither were they written by Pseudo-Philo, the author of LAB, though as Muradyan and Topchyan note, these homilies "seem to have been translated from Greek by the same person who translated Philo's works (probably in the late 5th century); this is apparent from his style, which literally imitates certain linguistic features of Greek."[91] As with most ancient pseudonymous writing, we can only guess as to when it was written and when it became attached to the work of Philo.[92] Despite the uncertainty of authorship and date, this work represents an interesting reception of Samson—it may be one of the earliest written homilies on Samson and one of the earliest *Jewish* homilies.[93]

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[89] G. Muradyan and A. Topchyan, 'Pseudo-Philo, On Samson And On Jonah', in L. H. Feldman, J. L. Kugel, L. H. Schiffman (eds.), Outside the Bible: ancient Jewish writings related to Scripture, (The Jewish Publication Society, 2013), p. 751.

[90] Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 750

[91] Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 750.

[92] Jerome does not include either homily in his list of Philo's work (*De Viris Illustribus* 11), but this list is not complete.

[93] It appears to be a Jewish text for a few reasons: It is spuriously attributed to Philo. It lacks reference to Jesus or anything else distinctly Christian. Furthermore, in 1.2 there is a pejorative use of a cross which would be out of place for a Christian text.

In *On Samson,* the author appears to be wrestling with God's choice of saviour. Why would he choose Samson, a man who would be so easily led astray in the end, to be a saviour of Israel? Most of *On Samson* retells the events of Judges 13-14, but it begins with Samson's downfall with Delilah.[94] Lust was the undoing of Samson, for by temptation, he gave up his secret: "No razor must come upon my head."[95] Delilah "shaves off his chastity" as well as Samson's hair, and by this act, Satan cuts off his strength and "made him one of the sinful men."[96] The author of this text does not explicitly mention how Samson was blinded or how he took vengeance on the Philistines by bringing down the temple, though there is an oblique refence to these in chapter 3. Instead, his introduction sets the scene for a larger discussion: how the strength of Samson was a gift rather than a reward, and how God's grace remained with Samson. A key point is made by the author in chapter 2, which I will quote in full:

> Now, since God displays through Samson all His benevolence and humaneness, He made this evident by giving him divine gifts already before his birth. For if he were pleasing to the living God [only] after being born, his strength would doubtlessly be a reward for just deeds. But since what had been recently seeded was concealed in his mother's pregnancy, therefore the gift from above came into being before the birth of its receiver, so the grace and the philanthropic reward were not for just deeds.[97]

This serves to reveal the author's key interpretive point in his reading of the narrative: Samson's strength was not his own. Within Judges 14-16, there are moments when the Spirit rushes on Samson, presumably allowing him to complete super-human feats of strength (Judg. 14:6, 19; 15:14-15).[98] There are other times however, where similar feats of strength are unaccompanied by the activity of the Spirit (Judg. 14:4; 16:3, 9, 12, 14, 30). In this homily, the author wishes to stress that all of Samson's strength was given by God as a gift. Not only this, but the author takes this

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[94] The text does not mention Delilah by name, but it is clear from context.

[95] *On Samson,* 1.4 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 754)

[96] *On Samson, 1.6* (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 754). Siegert suggests that this may be Christian gloss (Folker Siegert and Jacques de Roulet, *Prédications synagogales*, Sources chrétiennes no 435 (Paris: Cerf, 1999), p. 106 fn. 3).

[97] *On Samson* 2.2-4 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 754)

[98] This will be further explored in the following chapter.

moment to focus on, in the language of John Barclay, the *priority* of the gift—that God's gift of strength is not a reward but given before Samson was even born.[99]

With this in mind, the author turns to answer a considerable objection: did Samson forfeit God's grace by his actions? The author explains that God's gift remains as long as Samson obeyed the commands (this is left unspecified), but when he disobeyed, God "imposed a punishment on him for his transgressions."[100] This, however, is not the end of the story. The author continues, "Then He returns again to His love for humans but does not grant all the gifts to him, for it would be unfair to crown the defeated one. Therefore, God provides just a drop of grace, so that, with His utmost humaneness, He should ultimately nullify the death sentence and prevent His gifts from complete extinguishment."[101] It seems that in one sense, God's grace is dependent on human obedience, and in another, God's love for humanity moves him to rescue his people. This "drop of grace" is apparently given on the basis of God's benevolence and for the purpose of sustaining his plan for Israel's redemption (i.e., the *efficacy* of the gift). The gift of God may be hindered by human disobedience, but it will not be rendered ineffective by it. However, this gift may not be described as *incongruous*, for it remains dependent on and given in proportional measurement to human "righteousness." This may explain why Samson appears to forfeit his gift of strength but not be totally lost.

Discussing Samson and the Timnite Woman (Judg. 14:1-4), the author continues to wrestle with the apparent conflict between divine freedom and human (dis)obedience, between the sin of Samson and the grace of God. Samson has turned his gaze to a foreign woman and despite his parents' pleading, he persists in marrying her. This situation was however part of YHWH's larger plan for the Philistines.[102] For the author, and apparently among his contemporary interpreters, this posed a theological problem: in what way does God use Samson's lust for his own purposes? "Some sages," says the author, believe that God caused Samson's passion for the Timnite

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[99] Cf. J. M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the gift*, (Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 70-75.

[100] *On Samson* 3.5 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 754).

[101] *On Samson* 3.6-7 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 754).

[102] "His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines" (Judg. 14:4) This is addressed in detail in the following chapter.

woman, and others say that God "turned Samson's sin into the punishment of the Philistines."[103] It appears that the main interlocutors of this theological problem are those who suggest that Samson sins while possessing the Spirit, and thus, they "transform Samson's sin into an accusation of the Spirit."[104] The interpretive manoeuvre used to counter this accusation with the interlocutors is done in two steps. First, the author separates the operations or blessings of the Spirit into various attributes. "For to one the spirit of wisdom is sent, to another one, of knowledge and understanding, to a third one, of strength and might, and to a fourth one, of the fear of God."[105] These spirits are themselves a gift of God, separate in nature but still derivative of God. This grace is given in proper measurements.[106] Samson was only given the gift of strength, and therefore should not be condemned for failing to act justly for he did not receive that gift.[107] The author references several biblical characters to discuss the various spirits in order to illustrate his point.[108] He presents a rebuttal to his point, perhaps from his opponents, "'Yes,' [the opponent] says, 'but when Samson sinned, the spirit should have withdrawn, in order not to assist the sinner.'"[109] The author explains that if this had happened, the promise would have been lost.

> Where, then, could one look for the fulfilment of the divine promise? Are you not the most sworn enemies of the Holy Scripture? For the child's parents had been given the promise of power — God had sent, and the angel had conveyed it — but he was overcome by the lust for the woman before demonstrating strength by his

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[103] *On Samson* 23.1-2 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 765).

[104] *On Samson* 24.1 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 765).

[105] *On Samson* 24.6 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 765). The author may be drawing on Isaiah 11:2, where the Spirit of the Lord would rest on Israel's Messiah—a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, a Spirit of counsel and might, a Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

[106] *On Samson 24.5* (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 765).

[107] *On Samson 24.3-4* (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 765). "For if he had got the spirit of justice or sagacity, their accusation would be fair, but he had the spirit of strength: what [else could he do]? Justice, not strength could prevent the sin, but Samson had not got this spirit together with the latter; why, disregarding the man, you reproach the spirit of strength, requiring acts of justice from him?"

[108] Abraham (Justice), Joseph (chastity), Simeon and Levi (Jealousy [for killing the Shechemites]), Judah (Just judgement), Samson (Strength).

[109] *On Samson* 26.1 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 766). Siegert and Roulet, *Prédications synagogales*, p. 121. the French translation reads: "Certes, dit l'Écriture, c'est á bon droit que l'ésprit abandonna Samson quand il pécha; il ne pouvait pas aider un transgresseur. Mais y avait-il une action conforme á la promesse divine?" (Certainly, says the Scripture, the Spirit rightly abandoned Samson when he sinned; it could not help a transgressor. But was there any action that was in keeping with God's promise?)

> deeds. Now if the spirit of strength had withdrawn because of Samson's lust, the promise would have been lost.[110]

This suggestion, according to the author, slanders both Holy Scripture and God himself. Unlike Josephus and Pseudo-Philo in *LAB* who both omit the actions of the Spirit in relation to Samson, this author provides a defence of the Spirit. He does so by limiting the effect of the Spirit, confining the grace only to Samson's strength. In this regard, the promise of God is fulfilled, for Samson demonstrated *this* gift through his feats of strength. Despite Samson's failure, the Spirit remains in order to fulfil the promise already given. Though this is a digression in the homily, as the author makes clear in 26.7, it provides an insight into the author's concerns with the promise of God being fulfilled in a man like Samson. He does not minimize Samson's sin in the case of Delilah nor his folly in trusting the Timnite woman with the answer to the riddle.[111] The author says elsewhere that his purpose is "not to present the imprudent man as prudent, but first to reproach the Philistines and show their guileful character and second to make this work useful to us."[112] The failures of Samson are useful, in that they provide ethical instructions for later generations, "for the vices of the ancestors are a guarantee of the decent prudence of the descendants, since life is one, human nature is the same, snares are all alike, and everyone's vices are similar. Speaking on such things is purposeful, and though our words concern one who was in the beginning, they are of use for the descendants destined to live with the same illusions."[113] To this point, the author treats Samson as a figure who displays both positive and negative qualities. He, however, is not an exemplar. Samson's story provides its readers with only a common example which can relate to them in a universal manner. The narrative provides the author with a surplus of ethical and moral lessons to relate to his contemporary audience, and he is not afraid to discuss the flaws of Samson's choices or defend the goodness and wisdom of God.

It is puzzling then that the author omits any mention of the Spirit when he is attempting to justify Samson's killing of the thirty men. The account found in Judges 14:19 is difficult due to its abruptness and ethical ambiguity. The Spirit of YHWH rushes upon Samson, and he smites

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[110] *On Samson* 26.2-4 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 766).
[111] *On Samson* 34 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 770).
[112] *On Samson* 35.2 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 770).
[113] *On Samson* 35.3-4 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 770).

thirty men (who have nothing to do with the events of chapter 14). He takes their clothes and uses them to cover his wager to his wedding guests. Whether this is an appropriate response to the Spirit's actions or a wise and ethical response to the situation is left unspecified. According to our preacher, these actions of Samson are just. The violence did not represent vengeful lashing out against those who cheated him, but a cunning repayment of a debt incurred through an unfair victory.[114] The author explains, "He acted so both for justice and according to the will of the divine Scripture, because Scripture clearly says somewhere: 'He who digs a pit shall fall into it.'"[115] The issue of concern for the author is not necessarily the violence, but that Samson repaid his debt without conceding defeat to the Philistines. "He did no wrong at the time of the bet and was not blamed for not keeping his word; nor did he afterward forgive them, gaining ill repute as a coward but, as befitted a wise and equally just man, he gave without a loss and was not deemed greedy and thankless when he seized others' possessions."[116] Why does the author not ground the justification of Samson's act in the activity of the Spirit? The preacher has thus far defended the operations of the Spirit upon a flawed Samson. Here, the reference to the Spirit is omitted, and Samson's act of slaughtering thirty *innocent* men is still justified.

For this author, Samson does represent a positive moral figure whose story of failures and triumphs remains beneficial and applicable for later audiences. There exists a certain amount of moralizing in the homily, especially concerning the deceitfulness of women and the vigilance required of men against them, but the author does not reduce the story to its moral(s).[117] Instead, the author resists exemplarity by using the negative events of the narrative as a foil. He locates Samson's goodness and strength in the grace of God. This gift comes not as a result of Samson's goodness, but before he had even been born. Even with Samson's moral failures, God does not truly abandon Samson because He will not abandon his promise. By imparting a small drop of grace to Samson, YHWH is able to save Israel from its oppressors.

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[114] *On Samson* 43.5-6 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 774). ". . . he did not kill them madly: let no one accuse the sage! He did it out of pity for the woman who had been menaced by the Philistines; they had compelled her to betray Samson and had threatened to burn the woman's house."

[115] *On Samson* 44.1 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 774).

[116] *On Samson* 45.4 (Muradyan and Topchyan, pp. 774-5).

[117] *On Samson* 34.1-10 (Muradyan and Topchyan, p. 770).

In contrast to the earlier sections of the homily, this final section makes no reference to God. This might be due to the author's homiletical technique, or that he has already established the fact that Samson's strength comes from God. Another way to interpret this contrast is to see it as evidence of the author's theological concerns being complicated or frustrated by the narrative. The focus on God's grace becomes muted and blurred as Samson's failures are brought to the forefront. What is morally ambiguous in the story—Samson slaughtering thirty innocent men to repay his debt—is justified in a way inconsistent with the author's previous reasoning. This may point to the difficulty in interpreting the Samson narrative. God's grace is present, but it is not visibly present everywhere in this story. For this author, the character of Samson presents an homiletic opportunity to defend the wisdom and grace of God in choosing flawed characters to enact his salvation for Israel.

Samson in the Early Church Fathers

The chief difficulty Jewish interpreters tried to overcome was the apparent incongruity between Samson's character and the presence of the divine Spirit. We have seen Josephus omit certain elements of the story, Pseudo-Philo is content to condemn the hero, and the author of *On Samson* views the story through a lens of grace—despite his numerous flaws, Samson can still be a moral example for the present-day community of faith. In each of these examples, the character of Samson resists the type of exemplarity applied to other biblical figures in antiquity. Even so, the story remains beneficial for contemporary readers as part of Jewish Scripture.[118]

For the early Church Fathers, understanding Samson within *Christian* Scripture was similarly a difficult task. Like their Jewish counterparts, they did not read the Samson story as if it was only ancient Israelite history. Many prefer to read the story typologically or allegorically, seeing characters and actions in the historical narrative as pointing beyond themselves to Christ or the life of the Church.[119] These typological interpretations however are not uniform. The diversity

[118] This might not be the case for Pseudo-Philo.

[119] I am aware that there has been much discussion regarding the similarities and differences of these two types of interpretive reading strategies. These larger discussions are useful in understanding patristic exegesis. For the texts in discussion here, these distinctions do not seem as meaningful.

arises from the Father's purpose in writing. The Samson narrative is used by many to show Christ in the Old Testament, some use it to argue for the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, and others utilise it to discuss Christian ethics. Unfortunately, the Samson narrative as well as the rest of the book of Judges is not referenced many times in the writings of early Church Fathers. When it is referenced, it usually is only a brief example among many. In many of these cases, nothing substantive or meaningful can be deduced from the reception history, but only that early Christian interpreters were reading and referencing this story for a variety of purposes.[120] Throughout the interpretive diversity there remains a near constant: the exemplarity of Samson. Whether he functions as a type of Christ, a type of the Christian, or a positive or negative role model, Samson is an exemplar for the Christian reader. What follows are examples from the early Church Fathers in how they read Samson and found Christ, the Church, or confusion.

Reading Samson, Finding Christ

In *Contra Faustum*, Augustine attempts to refute the Manichean teachings of Bishop Faustus. Many Manichean doctrines are discussed in this text, but for our proposes we will focus on book twelve, where Augustine responds to the challenge that the Old Testament prophets do not prophesy about Christ.[121] After some brief remarks about how Faustus is inconsistent in his belief in the apostles but not the prophets, Augustine turns to address the Old Testament text. He explains that,

> the whole contents of these Scriptures are either directly or indirectly about Christ. Often the reference is allegorical or enigmatical, perhaps in a verbal allusion, or in a historical narrative, requiring diligence in the student, and rewarding him with the pleasure of discovery. Other passages, again, are plain; for, without the help of what is clear, we could not understand what is obscure. And even the figurative

[120] Ephrem the Syrian is a good example. In Hymn 53, death and Satan/Sin argue over who is greater. In the case of Samson, death is defeated in the lion, but Sin reigns victorious through Delilah. In Hymn 8 on the Nativity, Samson is a type of Christ who "tore the lion, the image of death, whom You destroyed, and caused to go forth from his bitterness the sweetness of life for men." In Nisibene Hymn 6, Samson's jealousy for his wife is a fitting picture for God's love for his church. These poetic examples from Ephrem the Syrian are imaginative but far from systematic.

[121] *Contra Faustum* 12.1, Translated by Richard Stothert, From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 4. (ed.) P. Schaff, (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887,) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

> passages, when brought together, will be found so harmonious in their testimony to Christ as to put to shame the obtuseness of the sceptic.[122]

This introductory passage gives some insight to how Augustine will approach the text. For Augustine, Christ is the prime referent of the Old Testament. The events contain their own sense of reality or history, but they prefigure the actions of Christ. This includes the Church, or the body of Christ. The figures or types also include the shadow, that which is not Christ, so that all of Scripture, in one way or another, points to Christ.

Following this, Augustine begins in Genesis and works his way through Israel's Scriptures to show that at a fundamental level, they point beyond themselves to Jesus Christ. After discussing a few "prophecies" in the Joshua narrative, he arrives in Judges:

> And under both the judges and the kings he will see Christ and the Church repeatedly prefigured in many and various ways. Who was in Samson, when he killed the lion that met him as he went to get a wife among strangers, but He who, when going to call His Church from among the Gentiles, said, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world?" [John 16:33][123]

Here, Samson's problematic action of seeking a wife among the Philistines is recast positively. These actions prefigure those of Christ in that his "Bride" was also found among the Gentiles.

This point is perhaps better illustrated by Augustine in *Sermon 364* on Samson.[124] In his reading, Augustine first attributes Samson's strength to grace rather than nature, for it was the Spirit who was acting. "In Samson we have a vessel, in the Spirit we have what fills it."[125] When Samson's actions prove problematic for Augustine, he explains that they were, in reality, prophetic and justified.[126]

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[122] *Contra Faustum* 12.7.

[123] *Contra Faustum* 12.32.

[124] This sermon has thought to have been spuriously attributed to him (Sermon 364 in *Sermons (341-400)*, (New City, 1990), vol. x, p. 281 n.1]. However, many of the interpretive points made in the sermon are found elsewhere in Augustine's writings (cf. *Exposition on Psalm 80*, *Exposition 1 on Psalm 88*, and *Sermon 138*).

[125] *Sermon* 364, p. 276.

[126] *Sermon* 364, p. 276. "Whether he is a just man is wholly uncertain; the justice of this man is profoundly obscure . . . that he was overcome by a woman's coaxing and that he went into a harlot, all seems, to those who have a limited understanding of the hidden ways of truth, to call his merits in question. Well a prophet too was ordered by the Lord's command to take a harlot to wife. Perhaps we will be able to say that these things were not criminal or reprehensible in the Old Testament, seeing that what he either said or did was all prophetic."

Augustine continues by presenting his thesis that Samson represents Christ. Interestingly, he presents what he presumes will be the pushback of his congregation: "And is Christ overcome by a woman's blandishments? And how can Christ be said to be understood to have gone into a harlot? Then again, when does Christ have his head shaved, his locks shorn . . ."[127] His response is twofold. First, the strength of Samson corresponds to the power of the Son of God; his weakness corresponds to the weakness in suffering of the Son of Man. Secondly, Christ is *both* the head and the body. Thus, for Augustine, Samson can dually represent both Christ and the Church. Within the Church is contained both strong and weak members, just and unjust. "So Samson did some things in the role of the head, some in the role of the body, everything, however, in the role of Christ."[128] The just and unjust actions of Samson are then compartmentalised into these two representative groups: Jesus himself and the sinners in the church.

As the sermon continues, Augustine's interpretation becomes more allegorical. The riddle signifies resurrection of Christ, from which Gentiles obtain the sweetness of the gospel out of the death of Jesus.[129] The companions of Samson represent heretics, specifically Donatus, Arius, and Mani, "who have divided the Church [and] have wished to elope with and marry YHWH's wife."[130] Samson's catching of the foxes is then interpreted as refuting heresy in the Church. The harlot's house is representative of Hell, and as a prophetic picture of Christ, Samson rises from Hell, taking the gates with him and depriving "death of its dominion."[131] Samson's hair was a veil which represents the Law. His blindness signifies those who reject Christ, especially the Jews. The pillars that Samson leans against to bring down the temple are in fact, the two beams of the cross, by which Christ overthrew his enemies and secured redemption.

This sermon highlights the tendency to create an exemplar out of Samson. The exemplarity, however, finds its true form in Christ. Even when the unsavoury actions of Samson are discussed, they are reassigned as anti-exemplaric—they represent the sinful actions of those in the Church. Augustine is not consistent in these points. He still finds a way to read these sinful

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[127] *Sermon 364,* p. 277.
[128] *Sermon 364,* p. 277.
[129] *Sermon 364,* p. 278.
[130] *Sermon 364,* p. 278.
[131] *Sermon 364,* p. 280.

actions as prophetically and positively fulfilled in Christ. These actions of Samson may be rebuked in present, but in the biblical story they are sanctioned because they point to Christ.

Reading Samson, Finding the Church

Two fragments of Irenaeus reveal that Samson's exemplarity was elsewhere limited to how humanity relates to God and his people.[132] Irenaeus' reading of the narrative is much more subtle than Augustine's, but he also views the text of Scripture as full of symbols and types. In Fragment 27 Irenaeus writes,

> The little boy, therefore, who guided Samson by the hand, Judges 16:26 pre-typified John the Baptist, who showed to the people the faith in Christ. And the house in which they were assembled signifies the world, in which dwell the various heathen and unbelieving nations, offering sacrifice to their idols. Moreover, the two pillars are the two covenants. The fact, then, of Samson leaning himself upon the pillars, [indicates] this, that the people, when instructed, recognized the mystery of Christ.[133]

Samson becomes not a type of Christ, but a type of one who believes in Christ.

In Fragment 41, Irenaeus will relate Samson's struggle against the Philistines to the persecution of the Church.[134] Samson represents the faithful Christian who stands firm under persecution. Interestingly, Irenaeus mentions that Samson suffers this persecution but trusts that "there would be a retaliation against those waging this war." Within the text of Judges, the retaliation of Samson comes almost immediately—he slays 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey. Irenaeus has a different and less violent means of retaliation in mind. Representing the persecuted Christian, Samson retaliates first by "betaking himself to the Rock," i.e., by trusting himself to Jesus Christ.[135] Secondly, he retaliates by finding the jawbone, which typifies the body

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[132] Due to the fragmentary nature of these writings, we cannot know how much Irenaeus wrote about Samson.

[133] *The Lost Fragments of Irenaeus,* (transl.) A. Roberts. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, (ed.) A. Roberts et al. (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

[134] This is safe to assume as the text immediately referenced is Judges 15:11. It is unclear, however, if Irenaeus also points to the binding of Samson by the men of Judah as representing persecution.

[135] A reference to the Rock of Etam in Judges 15:11 and the interpretive move of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4 where he declares that Jesus was the Rock that gave water to the Israelites in their wanderings.

of Christ. The exemplaric violence of the text is drastically reconfigured with spiritual and social actions. The persecuted Christian should, in one sense, imitate Samson, but in another sense, they must act quite differently than Samson. The persecuted believer retaliates by seeking Christ, the Rock "not cognizable to the senses," and joining themselves to those who do the same.

Unfortunately, these texts are very fragmentary, so it is unclear what more Irenaeus might say regarding Samson. It appears that in the interpretive context of Fragment 41, Irenaeus engages the pertinent issue of what should be the Christian's proper response to persecution. This may have weighed on Irenaeus in the wake of persecution in the latter part of the second century, especially around his home in Lyons. For this reason, Irenaeus may have wanted to focus on the typological humanity of Samson rather than view him as a type of Christ. The figure of Samson is exemplaric but for different reasons.

Reading Samson, Finding Confusion.

For some of the Church Fathers, Samson's sinful exploits and failings made him a questionable exemplar for Christians. In a sermon on Hebrews 11, Chrysostom recognises the difficulty of Samson's inclusion in a chapter on righteous faith. "Some find fault with Paul [the presumed author of Hebrews], because he puts Barak, and Samson, and Jephthah in these places. What do you say? After having introduced the harlot, shall he not introduce these? For do not tell me of the rest of their life, but only whether they did not believe and shine in Faith."[136] Jerome too sees Samson's exemplarity as questionable. In *Against Jovinius* 1.23, Jerome counters his opponent's praise for Samson by explaining that Samson was shaved by a woman. Like Augustine, Jerome allows Samson to be a type of Christ, but quite differently, Samson resists exemplarity because he "does not set an example of conjugal chastity."[137]

In the second *Epistle on Virginity*, spuriously attributed to Clement of Rome, the author makes a similar point. The epistle begins by discussing how celibate men should interact with

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[136] Homily 27 on Hebrews, (transl.) F. Gardiner, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series,* Vol. 14, (ed.) by P. Schaff. (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889).

[137] Against Jovinianus (Book I), (transl.) W.H. Fremantle et al., from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 6, (ed.) P. Schaff and H. Wace. (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893).

women in various situations. One such example is that if there is only one believing woman in a house, the brethren should not stop, stay, or even pray there. Instead, the author instructs his readers to "flee as from before the face of a serpent, and as from before the face of sin. Not that we disdain the believing woman—far be it from us to be so minded towards our brethren in Christ!—but, because she is alone, we are afraid lest any one should make insinuations against us in words of falsehood."[138] The author continues by referencing several examples from the Old Testament (including the story of Susanna). Samson is his second example after Joseph. The author describes Samson as being accompanied by the Spirit, a man of great strength, a Nazirite, consecrated to God, and gifted with strength and might. The heaped-up adjectives only serve as a foil, as "a woman brought to ruin with her wretched body, and with her vile passion."[139] The example serves as a comparison between the superior strength of Samson (and his failure despite this strength) and the moral strength of the brethren to resist temptation. "Are you, perchance, such a man as he? Know yourself, and know the measure of your strength. The married woman catches precious souls. Therefore, we do not allow any man whatsoever to sit with a married woman; much less to live in the same house with a maiden who has taken the vow, or to sleep where she sleeps, or to be constantly with her."[140] This example shows Samson's exemplarity in two ways. First, Samson's strength is emphasised here in a way that is exemplified. Secondly, this exemplified strength leads to the author portraying Samson's failure as anti-exemplaric for his readers.

Different from his earlier work, Augustine also finds the example of Samson problematic for the Christian reader. In *City of God* 1.21, Augustine explains the exceptions to "thou shall not kill." They are exempt if someone is operating under the jurisdiction of laws or authority granted, or if they are obeying a divine command. "Samson, too, who drew down the house on himself and his foes together, is justified only on this ground, that the Spirit who wrought wonders by him had given him secret instructions to do this."[141] Again, this also applies to those questions regarding suicide in the face of persecution. Samson had a special command from God: "It may be they

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[138] *Two Epistles on Virginity 2.5*, (transl.) B.P. Pratten, from Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8, (ed.) A. Roberts et al., (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886).

[139] *Two Epistles on Virginity 2.9.*

[140] *Two Epistles on Virginity 2.9.*

[141] *City of God 1.21*, (transl.) M. Dods, from Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 2, (ed.) P. Schaff, (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).

[martyrs] were not deceived by human judgment, but prompted by divine wisdom, to their act of self-destruction. We know that this was the case with Samson. And when God enjoins any act, and intimates by plain evidence that He has enjoined it, who will call obedience criminal?"[142] This does not allow for everyone to commit suicide, or in another example, offer their son as a sacrifice (e.g., the *Aqedah*). Within Augustine's reading the possible negative reading of Samson (that he committed suicide) is mitigated by a divine command.[143] Samson's actions here no longer function as a normative example for Christian readers in that they are neither a negative action to be avoided or a positive action to be imitated. Only if, like Augustine's Samson, the believer is prompted by the Holy Spirit may they take their own life in the face of persecution. Here is a rare example from the Church Fathers of exemplaric resistance.

Reading Samson, Finding Exemplarity

Samson was a complex character in the writings of the early Church Fathers. In some ways, he reminded these early Christian interpreters of Jesus Christ. These narratives were not only historical, but they pointed beyond themselves to a deeper, Christian reality. The various elements of the story all played their part in symbolising the whole gospel, from crucifixion to resurrection. At times, the actions of Samson formed positive and negative examples for the early Church. In some cases, Samson presented an ethical dilemma which was overcome by different means. Such re-readings of what was (and still is) fundamentally *Jewish* Scripture show the imaginative creativity of the Fathers and the interpretive difficulty of the Judges narrative. All of these examples do point to one particular approach to reading Judges as Christian Scripture, namely, that this Old Testament narrative has a purpose other than to retell sacred history. In these writings, Samson is an exemplar in ways that he is not in Josephus and Pseudo-Philo. The exemplary Samson serves to inform the Church of their saviour and how they are and are not to live. For these Christian readers, this story becomes more than just about an Old Testament exemplar – the story becomes about Jesus Christ.

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[142] *City of God 1.26.*

[143] The biblical account records no explicit command given by God. Augustine is perhaps inferring that the Spirit must have approved of Samson's desire for vengeance because Samson is strengthened for the task.

Summary

We began this chapter by exploring the concept of exemplarity and its resistance within Greco-Roman and Jewish writings in antiquity. Ancient readers, like their modern counterparts, could distinguish between exemplaric and anti-exemplaric figures/actions within texts. They also were able to resist exemplarity, noting that art could be appreciated without being imitated. From the reception history we have seen how Jewish and Christian readers approached the text similarly as scripture but arrived at different results. Readers of both faiths understood that there was an enduring quality to these texts. These early interpreters were not content to view the Samson narrative simply as a story which represented a historical "once upon a time." The repeated and frustrated attempts to view Samson as an exemplar can be explained by the authors' commitment to viewing this story as scripture. It had theological and ethical dimensions to it, which made its appropriation in their present a natural outworking of reading. There was something to *this* story and its literary location within the book of Judges, itself within the larger Jewish canon that was adopted by the early Christians.

Josephus and Pseudo-Philo saw Samson as a complex figure of Jewish history, but one whose exemplarity was questionable and could be resisted. The author of *On Samson* found ample theological material to work with in the story. Samson's story was one which exhibited the grace of God. The grace was limited according to Samson's failures but still spoke to God's faithfulness to Israel—a point that was relevant both to the synagogue then and for believers today. The early Church Fathers also approached the text as scripture but saw the exemplarity of Samson more in focus. The Fathers did not primarily locate the Samson narrative in its historical location or with the people of Israel as its main protagonist.[144] Instead the Samson narrative points beyond itself to distinctly *Christian* realities, namely Jesus Christ and his Church. Their analysis was not without its difficulties for Samson's very apparent flaws complicated his allegorical identification with certain New Testament priorities. While it is fair to say that reading Samson as an exemplar (positive or negative) was the predominate approach taken by the Church Fathers, this exemplarity

[144] I presume that they would not deny these realties, but that the importance of the historical particularities of the text would be relativized. Cf. Origen's sermons on Judges.

did not take on a uniformity. Samson was understood in a variety of ways—he was a positive example of Christ and also a negative example for the Church. In one case, Samson's actions resisted exemplarity. For both Jewish and Christian readers, exemplarity was just one hermeneutical option among many. When it came to reading Samson, however, there was a certain degree of reticence in treating him exemplarically.

Rereading Samson as Christian Scripture: Hebrews 11 and Exemplaric Resistance

Were it not for Hebrews 11:32, figures in the book of Judges like Samson, would likely have been interpreted differently by Christians. Speaking of faith, the author of Hebrews includes Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah into his list of exemplars. Many Christian readers have questioned what value this verse has for interpreting Judges.[145] As previously mentioned, Daniel Block believed that the author of Hebrews was reading Israel's Scriptures in the "idealizing tendency" found in Jewish writings of that time, and that this exemplaric treatment of the book was to be resisted by Christian readers.[146] As we have explored in this chapter, Jewish readers resisted treating Samson exemplarically, and when later Christian interpreters did see in Samson an exemplar, that exemplarity was polyvalent.[147] In contrast to Block and others, Barry Webb explains in his commentary that "the New Testament does not give us the option of simply disowning the judges as Jewish, or as belonging to a barbaric age in which mistakes were made because people had wrong ideas about God. The letter to the Hebrews does not put us in the position of being able to 'judge

[145] I would argue that the exemplarity of all the characters mentioned is muted in Heb. 11:39-40 and relativised in Heb. 12:2. Despite all of exemplaric faith of these figures, the author makes clear that they did not receive the promise. The degree to which the believer might imitate them is thus reduced to a degree. In 12:2, the exemplaric status of these figures is relativized and reconfigured to a "cloud of witnesses". The believer is not really following them; they are looking at the believer. Instead, the exhortation is that the believer would fix their eyes on Jesus. The exemplarity has shifted from figures in Israel's Scriptures and traditions to Christ and his example. This movement and change in tone is not usually acknowledged in this particular discussion, though the value of this chapter for interpreting Judges has been challenged on a literary reading of Hebrews. See Younger, pp. 326-327; Daniel Stulac. cf. *Gift of the Grotesque*, pp. 19-20.

[146] Block, p. 70-71. Block's second point, that we should resist the reading approach of Hebrews, is echoed by R. B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books: an exegetical handbook*, (Kregel, 2006), vol. ii, p. 188. K. C. Way, 'Handling "Heroes" in Hebrews 11', (2011). H. Dharamraj, 'Judges', in B. C. Wintle (ed.), South Asia Bible commentary, (Zondervan, 2015), p. 322.

[147] It could be argued that Hebrews 11 is the reason for the exemplaric readings of Judges by the Church Fathers.

the judges,' so to speak."[148] For Webb, the inclusion of these judges within the exemplaric reading of Hebrews 11 reveals that such an approach is normative for Christian interpretation. He writes, "It would be inappropriate, therefore, in reading the stories of the judges, simply to point out their faults and leave it as that. If we do not find "faith" in them, then, according to letter to the Hebrews, we are missing something — perhaps even missing what is most important."[149] He does note that this does not diminish the discrete witness of the book of Judges, nor does it allow for the characters to be transformed into saints— "paragon of virtue and models in all respects for Christian behavior."[150]

How much influence, if any, should Hebrews 11 and its exemplaric approach have in our interpretation of the book of Judges?[151] Christian readings of Judges do not need to allow the discrete witness of Israel's Scriptures to be displaced by the reading strategies of early Christianity. The New Testament witness can be authoritative for Christian life and faith without becoming authoritarian in its particular reading approaches. For the Christian reader of Judges, exemplarity is a hermeneutical *option*. They may choose to adopt or resist exemplarity because Judges (more than other texts) allows them the freedom to do so. Narratives like Samson's are open to being read in different ways, and Christians would do well to listen to Jewish interpreters as well as their own tradition. The polyvalency of Jewish and Christian interpretation opens for the reader a range of hermeneutical options rather than predetermining the interpretive outcome and its appropriation in the present.

An important and beneficial part of reading within a Christian frame of reference is that we read as part of a long interpretive tradition. Approaching the text through the question of exemplarity can provide the reader with insights (or questions) that they might not otherwise have. By paying close attention to whether a character has resisted or prompted exemplarity in its reception may be a way to discuss characterization without presuming to know authorial intention. It may also direct our attention to portions of the text which other readers saw as pertinent to its

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[148] Webb, *Judges*, p. 56.

[149] Webb, p. 56.

[150] Webb, p. 57.

[151] A closely related question would be to what extent does exemplarity apply to the book of Judges as a whole? Should the characters not mentioned in Heb. 11:32 be seen in a similar way?

interpretation. Perhaps, we can give special attention to the ways Jewish and Christian tradition have understood figures within Israel's Scriptures to be exemplaric. As we will explore in the following chapter, a few features stand out in the Samson narrative: the role of YHWH within the narrative, Samson's Nazirite identity, and Samson's love of foreign women. The exemplarity does not need to be necessarily embraced in our contemporary context, but neither should it be dismissed outright. The insights of ancient readers may yet hold a hermeneutical clue to understanding the Samson narrative today.

— Chapter 4 —

The Characterisation of Samson in Israel's Scriptures

וְאָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי מֵיְהוָה הִיא
כִּי־תֹאֲנָה הוּא־מְבַקֵּשׁ מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים
וּבָעֵת הַהִיא פְּלִשְׁתִּים מֹשְׁלִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

But his father and his mother did not know that she was from YHWH,
for He was seeking an opportunity from the Philistines.
At that time, the Philistines were ruling over Israel.
(Judg. 14:4)

The point of revenge wasn't to heal, the point was that the exhilaration,
however temporary, drowned out the hurt.
(R.F. Kuang, *The Burning God*)

In the previous chapter, I explored how early Jewish and Christian readers similarly approached the Samson narrative as scripture but arrived at different results. I argued that the exemplarity found in Hebrews 11 was just one strategy of reading in the ancient world. It was adopted by only some early interpreters — mostly the early Church fathers — and even then, there was diversity in that Samson became a type of Christ, a Christian, or a sinner. The reception history has also underscored the importance of the characterisation of Samson for understanding the narrative. How one understands his actions will affect the interpretation of the whole and determine its use in matters of faith.

In this chapter, I will focus on the narrative itself to explore how Samson is portrayed. While the annunciation of Samson's birth in chapter 13 sets forth certain expectations for the reader, it is the ensuing events of chapters 14-16 that colour in the character of Samson. The wedding at Timnah becomes the epicentre of the resulting shockwaves of violence that follow in chapters 15-16. The nature of this violence is cyclical, with Samson matching each turn of violence from the Philistines with more violence. In the end, Samson's vengeance will lead him to commit

suicide in order to destroy the Philistines. As the events unfold, the reader is left to ponder whether or not their expectations were met. To this end, a key interpretive question is whether the narrator views the events of the narratives positively or negatively. Is the reader meant to see Samson's vengeance as part of his divine mission to "begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (Judg. 13:5)? Or is this cycle of violence emblematic of Samson's failure to fulfil his mission? The biblical narrator gives us no straightforward answer.

As mentioned previously, there are a few different angles or ways in by which we can explore this question. Our reception history has already highlighted two of these which will be elaborated on. First, I will examine the role Israel's deity plays within the narrative. The repeated intrusions of the Spirit of YHWH into the narrative reveals that God is certainly at work—but what is He up to? Samson's violence and feats of strength are often attributed to YHWH's power and will. YHWH's silence at the end of the narrative, however, might be cause to rethink this view. Secondly, I will discuss Samson's Nazirite identity and whether or not this was the source of his strength. At certain parts of the narrative, Samson's Nazirite identity appears integral to the development of the plot. But for most of the narrative, no mention is made of Samson being a Nazirite. In fact, Samson's chief exploits explicitly break his Nazirite vow. Is this, as some have suggested, merely an unfortunate feature of a composite text, or could this be part of the narrator's evaluation of Samson?

Moving back and behind the early reception history of the previous chapter, perhaps an answer may be found by turning to the canonical context of the Samson story that are circumscribed by the Hebrew Bible itself. In the end, what do Samson's life and death accomplish? The narrative that follows in Judges 17-18 explains that the Danites do not seize the opportunity that Samson has created. Rather than conquering the Philistines and gaining a land of their own, they travel north and massacre a city. Furthermore, the Philistines continue to be a hostile nation to Israel throughout the early monarchy. What shall be argued is that each of these ways in are helpful yet underdetermined, and thus cannot give readers a clear picture of Samson's characterisation.

The Role and Perspective of YHWH

The role that YHWH plays in the narrative is perhaps what makes Judges 13-16 so difficult to interpret. Apart from the Angel of YHWH's appearances to Samsons parents (Judg. 13), YHWH's actions are given limited or ambiguous description. This is especially true of the four references to the רוּחַ יְהוָה (Spirit of YHWH). It is clear that *something* happens when the Spirit of YHWH rushes upon Samson, but what that something entails is difficult to articulate. These four references have long puzzled interpreters, perhaps because there does not seem to be a direct connection between the action of the Spirit and how Samson responds. Additionally, there is an incongruity in the storytelling when it comes to the source of Samson's strength. With regard to the references to the רוּחַ יְהוָה, it appears that Samson's strength comes from YHWH. Yet, at other times, Samson performs great feats of strength without divine intervention or empowerment. According to Samson's own confession to Delilah—and apparently confirmed by the narrator in Judg. 16:22—his strength comes from his hair.

I will address these incongruities in the next section about Samson's Nazirite identity, but they are mentioned here because they complicate our understanding of the narrative as well as YHWH's role in it. Understanding *how* YHWH acts within this narrative is crucial to answering our question of how the reader is meant to view the character and actions of Samson. If for instance, these repeated references implied that Samson was possessed by the divine Spirit, it might signal that the reader is being led to view Samson's violent and vengeful actions positively. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the omission of the πνεῦμα by Josephus may point to an ancient discomfort with this reading.[1] If, however, the Spirit's role is only to empower Samson, then his actions are his own. The narrator might be understood as ambivalent towards the violence and the vengeance, proving any ethical evaluation by the reader difficult. To explore these questions more, I will first look at the earlier references to the Spirit in the book of Judges before turning to the Samson narrative.

[1] See the discussion on pp. 97-100.

The* רוּחַ יְהוָה *in the book of Judges

The first recipient of the Spirit of YHWH is Othniel, Israel's first judge and widely considered to be paradigmatic (Judg. 3:10). The second example is that of Gideon, who is said to be "clothed by the Spirit" (Judg. 6:34). The third description of Jephthah is similar to Othniel (Judg. 11:29).

וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ־יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
And the Spirit of YHWH *was upon him and he judged Israel* (Judg. 3:10)
וְרוּחַ יְהוָה לָבְשָׁה אֶת־גִּדְעוֹן
The Spirit of YHWH *clothed Gideon* . . . (Judg. 6:34)
וַתְּהִי עַל־יִפְתָּח רוּחַ יְהוָה
The Spirit of YHWH *was upon Jephthah* (Judg. 11:29)

In the case of Othniel and Jephthah, the Spirit's role may be considered passive. As a blessing is spoken of being "upon" someone, so the Spirit could be considered a dispensation of God's wisdom, power, or favour upon the person. In the case of Gideon, the Spirit seems to be more involved. The object (Gideon) is the recipient of an active verb (to clothe). This allows for the possibility of the Spirit possessing Gideon.[2] The use of לָבַשׁ in this context is attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Cf. 1 Chron. 12:19 ET; 2 Chron. 24:20). In each of these examples, though, it is not clear whether the Spirit takes control of an agent or simply empowers them to act.[3]
The remaining four references to the רוּחַ יְהוָה in Judges occur in the Samson narrative.

וַתָּחֶל רוּחַ יְהוָה לְפַעֲמוֹ בְּמַחֲנֵה־דָן בֵּין צָרְעָה וּבֵין אֶשְׁתָּאֹל
And the Spirit of YHWH *began to stir him in Mahaneh-Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol* (Judg. 13:25)

[2] Cf. Moore, *Judges*, p. 197. LXX^{A} has ἐνεδυνάμωσεν (and the Spirit of the Lord strengthened Gideon).

[3] Another use of לָבַשׁ in this way is in Job 29:14 (though it lacks the Spirit of the Lord): צֶדֶק לָבַשְׁתִּי וַיִּלְבָּשֵׁנִי כְּמְעִיל וְצָנִיף מִשְׁפָּטִי (I wore righteousness and it clothed me; Like a robe or a turban was my justice). Here, righteousness and justice are things that clothe Job, i.e., these things characterize his actions.

The verbal form of פַּעַם is very rare and only occurs in the Qal here.[4] The LXX reads συνεκπορεύεσθαι or συμπορεύεσθαι (to accompany) and the Vulgate has *esse cum eo* (was with him). Unless there is a different *vorlage,* these versions seem to simplify the MT. If there is to be a connection in meaning between the verb פָּעַם and noun פַּעַם, it may suggest a repetitive beat or a pounding heart.[5] The meaning then is less about the Spirit taking control of Samson's mental or physical capacities, but of stirring or "drumming up" something deep within him. Amit suggests that this verse implies the Spirit's presence is "not a one-time event, but that there is a beginning and continuation to its occurrences."[6]

וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיְשַׁסְּעֵהוּ כְּשַׁסַּע הַגְּדִי

And the Spirit of YHWH *rushed upon him and he tore it [the lion] as one tears a young goat* (Judg. 14:6a)

וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיֵּרֶד אַשְׁקְלוֹן וַיַּךְ מֵהֶם שְׁלֹשִׁים אִישׁ

And the Spirit of YHWH *rushed upon him and he went down to Ashkelon and he struck down from them 30 men* (Judg. 14:19)

In these two instances, the Spirit of YHWH rushes upon Samson, but it is Samson who acts. This is made clear by the syntax. The feminine רוּחַ rushes (וַתִּצְלַח), but Samson, indicated by the switch to the masculine, tears apart the lion (וַיְשַׁסְּעֵהוּ) or goes down to Ashkelon (וַיֵּרֶד) and smites thirty men (וַיַּךְ). There seems to be an ellipsis in the narrator's description which leaves the Spirit's actions

[4] Cf. BDB; GKC §61c Robert Alter understands this to be in a transitive Piel form meaning "to drive" ('Samson without Folklore', in S. Niditch (ed.), Text and tradition: the Hebrew Bible and folklore, (Scholars Press, 1990), p. 49).

[5] The word has a wide semantic range, but its usage suggests a central concept of time and repetition (cf. Psa. 17:5; Prov. 7:12). It's used poetically in Judg. 5:28 to mean the hoof-beats of horses. The other times it appears in its verbal form, it is in the Niphal (Gen. 41:8; Psa. 77:5; Dan. 2:3) or the Hithpael (Dan. 2:1). The context is that of being disturbed or troubled in sleep. In Psalm 77:5, the psalmist is experiencing anxiety which prohibits him from sleeping. In the other cases, the kings have awoken from a dream and are unable to sleep. These contexts might suggest that there is a repetitive beating keeping them awake, which may well be the phenomenon of a rapidly beating heart caused by an increase in adrenaline. Gary Yates & Jillian Ross understand the term to suggest a "negative disturbance rather than a positive stirring," ('Does YHWH approve of Samson's Marriage in Judges 14? An Analysis of "from YHWH"', (2021).

[6] Amit, *Judges*, p. 278.

underdetermined. While these feats would normally take extraordinary strength, the narrator does not explicitly report that YHWH empowered Samson.[7]

וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וַתִּהְיֶינָה הָעֲבֹתִים אֲשֶׁר עַל־זְרוֹעוֹתָיו כַּפִּשְׁתִּים אֲשֶׁר בָּעֲרוּ בָאֵשׁ וַיִּמַּסוּ אֱסוּרָיו מֵעַל יָדָיו

And the Spirit of YHWH rushed upon him and the rope that was upon his arms became like linen that has caught fire and his bonds melted off his hands (Judg. 15:14).

The results of the third instance of the Spirit's rushing are described poetically by the narrator, but they do not give much insight into the Spirit's role. It could be that this creative description implies that the Spirit empowers Samson to break his bonds easily. It could also mean that the Spirit caused the bonds to break, allowing Samson a fighting chance. In the second part of the description, the bonds are the subject of the niphal passive verb יִּמַּסוּ (to melt). While this may be part of the poetics, it seems to imply that Spirit, rather than Samson, is responsible for this. In the next verse, Samson is once again the subject of active verbs. He finds (וַיִּמְצָא), he stretches forth his hand (וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ), he takes (וַיִּקָּחֶהָ), and he smites (וַיַּךְ). Once again, there is an ellipsis in the description. Killing 1,000 men armed only with a donkey's jawbone seems like a miraculous act of YHWH (or at least comparable to a cinematic battle scene), but neither the narrator nor Samson in his victory song (15:16) make this point.[8]

Descriptions of the Spirit's work elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible give the reader more information. In Exod. 31:3 (Cf. Exod. 35:31), YHWH tells Moses that he has filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים). What this means for Bezalel is clarified by the next clause: he gains wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and all craftsmanship required to build the tabernacle. In this example, the Spirit appears to empower Bezalel as he oversees the construction of the tabernacle.

In contrast, a few of Saul's experiences with the Spirit look more like possession (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 18:10). These examples are especially relevant to understanding Samson as the Spirit is

[7] These feats of strength could reasonably be performed by Samson without the empowerment of the Spirit.

[8] Instead, the reader's attention is focused on Samson's pun. That with the jawbone of an ass he has made asses out of the one thousand men. There are a variety of films in several genres which feature a protagonist-hero who vanquishes a seemingly un-ending horde of villains. Such examples might include Aragorn in *Lord of the Rings*: *The Return of the King*, The Bride in *Kill Bill Vol. 1,* The Man with no Name in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,* and Leonidas in *300*.

said to "rush" (וְצָלְחָה) upon Saul. The first two instances indicate a possession by the Spirit who will cause the agent to do something extraordinary. In this case, Saul will begin to prophesy with a group of prophets. Samuel explains that he will prophesy (וְהִתְנַבִּיתָ) and be changed into another man (וְנֶהְפַּכְתָּ לְאִישׁ אַחֵר). This second clause with its main verb in the niphal indicates a passive relationship between Saul and the Spirit. In 1 Sam. 18:10, an evil spirit rushes to Saul (אֶל as opposed to עַל) which results in him prophesying again (וַיִּתְנַבֵּא). Though the hithpael often represents the reflexive meaning of the piel, נבא only occurs in the niphal and hithpael and is often translated as an active verb.[9] In the context of these passages, the correlation between the Spirit's rushing and Saul's prophesying appears to be that one action causes the other. Thus, possession may be what is indicated by these examples as Saul appears to lose control of his body.[10]

Returning to the examples of Samson, there seems to be no indication that the Spirit causes a specific action. In Judg. 14:6 and 14:9a, active verbs are used to describe what Samson does in response. He kills a lion, and he goes down to Ashkelon and kills 30 men. In Judg. 15:14, a passive verb is used (יִמַּסוּ in the niphal) but it is in reference to Samson's bonds. This represents a very creative and poetic description of the Spirit's power—that the bonds melted off like linen when it catches flame—but its purpose is to emphasize Samson's freedom from bondage rather than his possession by the Spirit. It seems then that in each of these circumstances, the Spirit's actions do not necessitate the negation of Samson's desires, nor do they mean that Samson's actions that follow can be directly attributed to — and thus approved by — YHWH. The role of the רוּחַ יְהוָה in the narrative is underdetermined.

Other actions of YHWH in the Samson narrative

YHWH is mentioned in three other places in the narrative. After the massacre at Ramath-Lehi, Samson cries out to YHWH to provide him with water (Judg. 15:18-20). Despite the previous encounters with the Spirit of YHWH, this is the first time in the narrative that Samson prays or

[9] E.g., Jer. 19:24; Ezek. 4:7; etc.

[10] Another example of this prophetic possession is in 1 Samuel 19:19-23, where Saul sends men to capture David. Three times, these men are thwarted when the Spirit of God comes upon them, and they begin prophesying. Saul goes himself, and also ends up prophesying before collapsing naked before Samuel.

acknowledges Israel's God as his own. He is thirsty and desires water after a very long battle. Samson's request, however, sounds more like an accusation or a desperate plea: "are you going to let me die?" It is difficult to measure the level of sincerity in Samson's plea, though scholars have not been slow to judge him both positively and negatively.[11] Butler aptly warns against rushing to judgement, "Samson has enough problems without Bible students giving him those he may not deserve. In the moment of tragedy, he knows to whom to turn for help. At least a bit of faith in and respect for God lies buried in his troubled breast."[12] Whatever Samson's motivation, the narrator is apparently not interested in the issue. Instead, he matches Samson's bluntness with his own. God (אֱלֹהִים) responds by opening a spring and providing Samson with water.[13] Such an innocuous description of the events seems out of place for this biblical narrator—where are the poetics of Judg. 15:14? But perhaps this serves as an intentional ambiguity, allowing the narrator to retain their neutrality. It is up to the reader to decide whether this act constitutes YHWH's approval of Samson's actions or only his gracious provision for him.[14]

The narrator has revealed that YHWH is willing to provide for Samson in his time of need. In Judg. 16:20, the narrator reveals that YHWH is also willing to forsake Samson in his time of need. After Delilah cuts his hair, she awakens him with shouts that the Philistines are upon him once more. The narrator provides Samson's inner thoughts: "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." To the reader the narrator reveals that YHWH had left Samson—something Samson himself is unaware of. He is captured and blinded by the Philistines; YHWH had forsaken him.[15]

The final reference to YHWH is in Samson's prayer in the temple of Dagon. This is the second prayer of Samson, and represents, at least at face value, one of the most pious moments in

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[11] For those who view Samson's prayer as sincere, see Jordan, *Judges*, pp. 260-261; McCann, *Judges*, p. 106; D. Olson, 'The Book of Judges', The New Interpreter's Bible, (Abingdon, 1998), p. 853; Ryan, *Judges*, pp. 116-117; Webb, *Judges*, pp. 389-390; Wilcock, *The message of Judges*, p. 143. For those who view Samson's prayer as insincere or selfish, see Block, *Judges*, pp. 446-447; Way, *Judges*, p. 132; Wong, *Compositional strategy*, pp. 163-165.

[12] Butler, *Judges*, p. 344.

[13] Perhaps as Greenstein has suggested, this evokes other canonical traditions where God provides Israel with water in the desert (e.g. Exod. 15:22-25). Greenstein argues that the Samson story can be understood as "a kind of allegory" where Samson becomes the "epitomization of Israel" ('The Riddle of Samson', *Prooftexts*, 1/3 (1981), pp. 251-252, 254).

[14] Recall here the perspective offered in *On Samson* in the previous chapter.

[15] Similar wording is used in 1 Sam 28:16 to describe how the Lord had left Saul and become his enemy.

the book of Judges.[16] There is an accumulation of divine epithets: the narrator reports that Samson cried out to YHWH, Samson's prayer begins with אֲדֹנָי יֱהוִה, he includes הָאֱלֹהִים in an interjection, but some of the textual witnesses omit this word.[17] Even with this pious language, Samson's prayer arguably is self-centred. He asks for neither deliverance nor judgment, but strength to avenge himself upon the Philistines. But for many readers, Samson's prayer marks a turning point in his journey. God's answer to his prayer means that Samson would become a tragic hero rather than a tragic failure. Webb suggests that Samson's words are "the language of a beggar" and that "it is an appeal to God to act on the basis of the special relationship he had established with Samson even before he was born."[18] Though he acknowledges the potential for Samson's prayer to be read as only self-serving, Keller writes: "For perhaps the first time, he is exercising faith . . . Samson recognizes that the God of Israel is sovereign (adonai)—remember, he is standing in the temple of the god whose followers he has spent his adult life sleeping with. Further, Samson knows not only that God is his God (elohim), but also that he is the saving, covenantal, relational God of his people, Israel (YHWH)."[19]

In characteristic contrast, Block views Samson's final prayer in a negative light. He views the prayer as utterly self-centred, "the reader must be struck by its ego-centricity." This is reflected by the occurrence of the first-person pronoun five times in a short prayer which, he argues, "mirrors the Philistines' song."[20] Additionally, Samson has no concern for "the nation he is supposed to be delivering, let along for YHWH whose name/reputation has been denigrated by this turn of events."[21] Block views Samson's final cry to die with the Philistines as Samson's "total and final identification with the enemy . . . The Nazirite, set apart for the service of God, wants to die with

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[16] The other examples where pious language is used by a character is the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5) and Gideon's exclamation in Judg. 6:22.

[17] It is missing in the LXX and Vulgate but is present in the Targum. *BHQ* suggests that the *vorlage* of the LXX probably did not have הָאֱלֹהִים and was inserted later into the MT as a gloss (99*).

[18] Webb, pp. 413-414.

[19] Keller, *Judges for you*, p. 161. Cf. Amit, *Judges*, p. 306; J. L. Crenshaw, *Samson: a secret betrayed, a vow ignored*, (2005), p. 135; Greenstein, 'The Riddle of Samson', p. 252; Jordan, *Judges*, p. 276; Ryan, *Judges*, p. 128.

[20] Block, p. 468.

[21] Block, p. 468.

the uncircumcised Philistines."[22] Samson ends his life in disgrace. Block leaves us with a final note, "if anything positive comes of Samson's life, it is due to the gracious intervention of YHWH."[23]

If Samson's prayer can be read in more than one way, perhaps more is revealed about Samson's character by what the text leaves unsaid. Samson's strength returns, but does YHWH? James Crenshaw traces several motifs common to folklore, one of which is the "death wish of a hero." He identifies four elements that comprise this motif: (1) someone finds himself or herself in desperate straits; (2) she or he requests death from God; (3) the deity sustains or reasons with the person asking to die; (4) he or she chooses to continue living.[24] Crenshaw finds this motif in the Elijah cycle as he flees from Jezebel (1 Kgs. 19:1-18), in the story of Jonah (Jonah 4), and two examples in Tobit.[25] What is clearly missing in the Samson story, as Crenshaw notes, is that God does not reason with the hero and Samson does not continue to live. If this common folklore motif is in view here, then YHWH's silence and Samson's suicide may subvert the reader's expectations.

There are additional features that complicate YHWH's involvement. As we have seen, YHWH responds to Samson's first prayer in concrete terms which are reported by the narrator. He does not speak to Samson, but He still acts. In contrast, YHWH is silent in the end and the narrator does not report that YHWH acts. Instead, he reports that Samson stretched out his hands with strength (וַיֵּט בְּכֹחַ) and that the temple fell on the crowds. Furthermore, the narrator has reported in no uncertain terms that YHWH had left Samson (Judg. 16:20). If YHWH has returned to Samson, then the narrator has chosen to leave this unstated. The presence of the רוּחַ יְהוָה that featured earlier in the narrative is missing here as well.[26] Instead, readers must infer *from silence* that YHWH has returned to the narrative simply because Samson is strong again. Elsewhere in the narrative, Samson completes great feats of strength without any stated involvement of YHWH or the רוּחַ יְהוָה. He catches 300 foxes (15:4), kills an unknown number of Philistines (15:8), and carries off the gates of Gaza (16:3), all without YHWH's direct involvement. Readers are not given enough

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[22] Block, p. 469.

[23] Block, p. 471.

[24] Crenshaw, p. 46.

[25] Crenshaw, pp. 46-48. Olson provides more examples: Moses (Num.11:10-15), Jeremiah (Jer. 20:17) ('Judges', p. 860.)

[26] This may be explained by a division of sources.

information to determine the precise relationship between Samson and the Spirit or whether his strength is of supernatural origin.

The role YHWH and the רוּחַ יְהוָה is underdetermined in the narrative and the silence at the end complicates our reading. Though the רוּחַ יְהוָה repeatedly comes upon Samson, the narrator has not clarified what this means for our would-be hero. The dissimilarity between the occurrences here in the Samson narrative and the rest of the book of Judges should give the reader pause. God's actions within the Samson narrative reveal that he is willing to listen to the cries of his people and provide for them, as he has shown repeatedly throughout the whole of the book of Judges. Equally so, YHWH is willing to give them over to their enemies. Apparently in Samson's case, he only had to remove his presence. At the end of the story, YHWH is silent. There is no speech, no reasoning against Samson's death wish, and no stated action given to us by the narrator. Perhaps YHWH's silence is the means by which the narrator has chosen to communicate his characterization of Samson, but what that silence might signal is beyond the ability of the text to communicate. The reader must find their answer elsewhere.

Samson's Nazirite Identity

Samson's identity as a Nazirite has been yet another source of puzzlement for readers. Both ancient and modern interpreters have noticed the incongruity between Samson's calling and his actions. If one chooses to read the Samson narrative alongside Numbers 6, then they will immediately encounter a problem. The Nazirite vow as outlined in Numbers 6 precludes a person from 1) drinking alcohol 2) cutting their hair, and 3) coming into contact with corpses.[27] It is relatively clear that Samson breaks all three of these injunctions. His wedding is described as a "drinking feast" (מִשְׁתֶּה). His hair is cut by Delilah, and in almost every scene, Samson is defiled by the bodies he has slain. The ease and clarity with which the narrator demonstrates the breaking of Samson's vows raises an interesting question: how does the meaning of Nazirite in the narrative relate to that in the legal text?

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[27] Num. 6:1-21. This is not to say that the author(s) of the Samson narrative were drawing on this text *per se,* but likely are aware of a Nazirite code and/or tradition that resembles the one found in Numbers.

In a historical-critical sense, these two texts might simply reflect two disparate traditions related to an ancient ritual. Alternatively, if one Nazirite tradition was modelled after the other, it would be impossible to determine which was the original. In effect, Numbers 6 does not have to affect one's reading of Judges. As discussed previously, Josephus and Pseudo-Philo do not include Samson's Nazirite identity, while the Mishnah differentiated between a life-long Nazirite and a Nazirite like Samson. These early examples highlight the difficulty in reconciling these two texts. There is a complexity in the characterisation of Samson that resists to some extent an intertextual reading with Numbers 6.

There may be another way to read this narrative holistically that takes seriously its distinctiveness. There is good evidence that the Samson narrative is a composite text, deriving from three major sources: Judg. 13:2-24; 14:1-15:20; and 16:1-31.[28] These narratives were later edited together, and with some polishing, the Samson narrative could be read as a text in its own right.[29] The story makes good sense, even if some of its editorial seams are showing. One such seam is the reduplication of the length of Samson's tenure as judge (15:20 and 16:31). Elsewhere in the book of Judges, this signalled the ending of the judges' cycle. Samson's story then ends twice—once with the battle at Lehi and the other in temple of Dagon.

The largest and most visible seam is this incongruity of Samson's Nazirite status and where his strength comes from. The birth announcement in Judges 13 focuses mainly on how Samson was to be raised as a Nazirite and what he would begin to accomplish. The Nazirite theme is not revisited until 16:17, where Samson finally discloses his secret to Delilah. The narrator also reports that Samson's hair begins to grow back during his time of imprisonment in 16:22. Presumably, this is supposed to signal to the reader that Samson's fate would be reversed, for it is his hair that gives him supernatural strength. While this might be the logic of Judges 16, nothing in the narrative so far has suggested or hinted at this. In Judges 14-15, Samson's hair and his Nazirite identity are nowhere to be found. Instead, Samson neglects what was said by the Angel before his birth, but it is unclear whether this is due to his ignorance or apathy. Samson's strength seems to

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[28] For a nice summary, see Brettler, *Judges*, pp. 41-44.

[29] Moore discusses the narrative's composite nature, but suggests "as we have them, they are in substance and form so similar that we must attribute them to the same writer." (p. 314).

come either from YHWH—both indirectly and directly from the Spirit's rushing upon him—or from Samson's own physical prowess.[30]

These discrepancies within the narrative might encourage one to conclude that Samson's Nazirite identity is *ex post facto* to a more foundational tradition or folklore of the strong wild man.[31] This "original" story would have featured a strong man whose strength did come from his locks of hair.[32] The annunciation scene in chapter 13, with or without the Nazirite instructions, might represent an old tradition that was fitted to an existing Samson narrative.[33] It might be that the Nazirite code of Numbers 6 presents an altogether different tradition than the one found here. While this might represent a plausible reconstruction of the text's compositional history, it does not provide much insight for those who wish to read the story as it now exists in its final form. Particularly, it does not explain why an editor, who clearly is a creative and talented storyteller, would leave such a wide seam that threatens to tear the narrative into thirds.

If these narratives were originally separate sources, we can see evidence of an editor attempting to unify the disparate traditions. Though the רוּחַ יְהוָה belongs to the narratives in Judg. 14-15, it appears also in 13:25 to bridge the two parts. Additionally, the references to Zorah (13:2, 25; 16:31), Eshtaol (13:25; 16:31) and the Camp of Dan (מַחֲנֵה־דָן Judg. 13:25) serve to connect a hero that primarily operates within the tribal land of Judah with the tribe of Dan. Samson's confrontation with the men of Judah takes on further significance if Samson is a Danite. His actions endanger not only himself and his tribe, but also the tribe of Judah in whose territory the Danites are living. It would be analogous to a house guest assaulting the neighbours. This

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[30] Way suggests that the Philistine's quest for the source of Samson's strength implies that Samson does not appear strong or muscular (p. 138). This is an interesting theory that would complicate a millennia or more of artistic renderings of Samson. Even if Samson were muscular, his feats of strength and his successes in combat might still be viewed as magical or divinely empowered by the Philistines.

[31] Cf. G. Mobley, 'The Wild Man in the Bible and the Ancient near East', *JBL*, 116/2 (1997).

[32] For numerous examples of hair or "magic strength resides in hair" as a significant folklore motif, see D. G. Kamrada, *Heroines, heroes and deity: three narratives of the biblical heroic tradition*, (Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 66-104.

[33] There is very little information present in Judges 13:2-24 that is particular to the Samson narrative. Other than Manoah's city and tribe in 13:2 and Samson's name in 13:24, the narrative could be applied freely. Paola Mollo details the similarities between Samson and Samuel's birth narratives ("Did It Please God to Kill Them? Literary Comparison between the Birth Accounts of Samson and Samuel," *Henoch* 36 (2014)). Thomas Römer suggests that an exilic edition of Judges actually featured Samuel—rather than Samson—as the twelfth judge. The Samson narratives represent Hellenistic influences and were likely incorporated in the post-exilic period along with Judges 17-21 (*The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 138, 182).

significant detail only comes into focus with the repeated references to the tribe of Dan, as the men of Judah do not frame their complaint as a matter of boundary crossing i.e., the outsider has disturbed the insiders. Instead, they imply that Samson is one of them (Judg. 15:11).[34]

These examples point towards the careful activity of an editor who saw that there was work to be done if the Samson stories were to be read as a coherent narrative. Yet, the puzzle remains as to why this editor was content to leave such obvious inconsistencies in the final edition. May it be then that the incongruity between Samson's Nazirite identity and his very un-Nazirite actions are an intentional feature of this narrative rather than a haphazard construction of a careless editor? The function of his Nazirite identity may remain a mystery, but it points to the complexity of Samson's characterization. These inconsistencies may serve to cast doubt on certain positive evaluations of Samson's actions—both in Judges 14-15 as well as in Judges 16, but they cannot be used with confidence to definitively characterize Samson either positively or negatively. The reader must again look elsewhere for the answer.

The Forgotten Legacy of Samson

Moving beyond the two issues raised by the reception history, a third way we can explore the narrator's view of Samson is by turning to the literary and canonical context of the Samson narrative to see if Samson's suicide/martyrdom accomplished anything of lasting value. As will be argued, Samson's legacy is largely forgotten, a point that complicates Samson's status as an exemplar within the Hebrew Bible and beyond. The principal evaluation the narrator reports in Judges 16:30 is that Samson killed more people in his death than in his life—hardly a glowing review.[35] The typical concluding evaluation found elsewhere in Judges is missing—there is no mention of any period of peace or quiet.[36] With the death of so many high-ranking political and religious Philistine leaders, Samson has effectively created a power vacuum large enough for Israel

[34] Brettler suggests that Judges 13:25 "was written after 13-16, and perhaps even 13-18, had come together, and attempts (successfully) to help tie these disparate chapters together" (*Judges*, p. 43).

[35] There seems to be a deliberate ambiguity here. One could view the statement positively: that by Samson's self-sacrifice, he accomplished even more than he did during his life. Yet, the statement might read another way: dying was greatest thing Samson ever accomplished.

[36] Cf. Judg. 3:11; 3:30; 5:31; 8:28.

to take control. This would have been a significant contribution to Israel's own political and religious future. With its temple destroyed and federation of city-states now leaderless, the Philistine territories were available for the taking. Samson's own tribe of Dan may have been able to settle down after being unable to take control of their inheritance.[37] Samson's self-sacrifice could then be understood as heroic—winning a strategic battle in a larger war.[38] The narrative events which follow in literary sequence in Judges 17-18 reveal that very little is made of Samson's sacrifice.[39] Instead, what readers encounter in the chapters that follow is the account of how the Danites relocate to the northern city of Laish and establish an illicit cult. The repeated place names of Zorah, Eshtaol, and the Camp of Dan suggest a similar time and setting as found in Judg. 13-16. In the final form of the book of Judges, chapters 17-18 illustrate the futility of Samson's final act as it brought about no meaningful change.

More evidence that Samson's actions had little impact is the continued threat of the Philistines in 1-2 Samuel. They defeat Israel and capture the ark of the covenant (4:10). The Philistine dominion seems to have grown larger since Samson, as Samuel fights them near Mizpah in Benjamin (7:13). There is a garrison of soldiers stationed near Gibeah–Elohim (10:5). The events of 1 Samuel 13-14 recount that Israel was able to push back the Philistines into their own territory under Saul's leadership (14:46). The Philistines continue to attack Israel throughout the earl days of the monarchy; they even manage to kill Saul in battle. David fares much better against the Philistines, but it is not until Solomon's reign that the Philistines are subdued (1 Kgs. 4:21). Despite this near constant aggression from the Philistines, there is no attempt made by the author/editor to reference or allude to Samson's so-called victory in the temple of Dagon.

Though there are very few references in the Hebrew Bible to any of the judges, there is one text that mentions a few of them by name. Samson, however, is conspicuously missing. In Samuel's speech to Israel warning them of the dangers of a king, Samuel recounts to them "all the righteous

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[37] Cf. Josh. 19:47; Judg. 1:34-35.

[38] History and literature are filled with examples of small acts of heroism which led to victory or change on a grand scale.

[39] As noted, there are numerous complexities that impede our understanding of how the book of Judges came to resemble its final form. It could be that a later editor added the final chapters (17-21) to an earlier edition of the book, meaning that the author of the Samson story may never have intended it to be read alongside Judges 17-18. Even so, the final editor of the text who brought these disparate traditions together (if that is the case) understood that a text's theological meaning is not restricted to its originating context.

acts of YHWH that he has done for you and your ancestors" (1 Sam. 12:7). He recounts the period of unfaithfulness during the time of the judges and makes with explicit reference to some of them:

וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת־יְרֻבַּעַל וְאֶת־בְּדָן וְאֶת־יִפְתָּח וְאֶת־שְׁמוּאֵל וַיַּצֵּל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד אֹיְבֵיכֶם מִסָּבִיב וַתֵּשְׁבוּ בֶּטַח׃

And YHWH sent Jerubbaal, Bedan, Jephthah, and Samuel. They delivered you from the hand of your enemies from every side and you dwelt in safety (1 Sam. 12:11).[40]

There are two difficulties with this verse. First, the name Bedan does not appear in the book of Judges. Secondly, it is odd that Samuel lists himself here among the judges. Both LXX^{A} and LXX^{B} read Barak instead Bedan.[41] The Targum has Gideon instead of Jerubbaal and Samson in place of Bedan.[42] Later Rabbinic tradition saw Bedan as "son of Dan" (בֶּן דָּן), meaning Samson.[43] As Sisera is mentioned two verses earlier, it is likely that Bedan is only a corruption of Barak, though it is hard to imagine how the harder reading of Bedan would have persisted.[44] In contrast, Howard Jacobson has argued that Bedan may have originally been the "Abdon" of Judg. 12:13-15.[45] Bedan's only other appearance in the Hebrew Bible is in 1 Chron. 7:17, which lists him as a descendent of Manasseh. This has led Serge Frolov to argue that Bedan in the MT is original and does reflect an actual person of Transjordanian heritage. This oblique reference to Bedan alongside two other Transjordan heroes strengthens Samuel's rhetoric: "by grouping himself with Jerubbaal/Gideon, Bedan, and Jephthah, Samuel transparently hints that his geopolitical priority is dealing with the type of threat represented by Nahash rather than with the Cisjordanian oppressors listed in v. 9 and including the Philistines."[46] Whoever Bedan might have been or whatever the scribe might

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[40] NRSV reads Barak instead of Bedan and Samson instead of Samuel.

[41] LXX^{B} mistakenly has Jeroboam instead of Jerubbaal. Unfortunately, Origen's Hexapla gives us no other options.

[42] There are variants which have Jerubbaal and Bedan.

[43] Rashi on 1 Samuel 12:11.

[44] Cf. J. Day, 'Bedan, Abdon or Barak in 1 Samuel Xii 11?', *VT*, 43/2 (1993). Day suggests that Barak is intended.

[45] H. Jacobson, 'The Judge Bedan (1 Samuel Xii 11)', *VT*, 42/1 (1992), pp. 123-124. He cites LAB 42:1, which tells of the judge Addo (Abdon) and his wars with the Moabites, as evidence of non-canonical traditions that inform Samuel's speech. Cf. H. Jacobson, 'Bedan and Barak Reconsidered', *VT*, 44/1 (1994).

[46] S. Frolov, 'Bedan: A Riddle in Context', *JBL*, 126/1 (2007), p. 166. Part of Frolov's argument rests on the rhetorical effectiveness of Samuel mentioning Bedan, but it seems very unlikely that any reader would associate an "obscure ancestor" with an unknown judge.

have meant, Samson is not mentioned here. Instead, we have an unknown judge and Samuel listed as Israel's saviours during the Judges period.

One interesting contrast between the accounts of Samson and Samuel is the explicit activity of YHWH in defeating the Philistines. In 1 Samuel 7:15-17, Samuel is twice said to have judged Israel. The narrative in 7:2-14 reveals that Samuel's judgeship was very different to the examples in the book of Judges. Unlike the other judges, Samuel musters Israel not for battle but for repentance. As the Philistines approach Israel gathered at Mizpah for battle, Samuel offers a sacrifice to YHWH and cries out to YHWH for deliverance (7:9). The narrator reports: "and YHWH answered him." Just before the Philistines attack, YHWH "thundered with a great voice that day against the Philistines" (וַיהוָה ׀ רָעַם בְּקוֹל־גָּדוֹל בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל־פְּלִשְׁתִּים). The depiction of YHWH as a divine warrior here signals his unequivocal presence and activity. The reader is to understand that YHWH is responsible for Israel's salvation. This is further emphasized by Samuel raising a memorial stone, the Ebenezer. This account ends with an explanatory note: the Philistines were subdued, and YHWH's hand was against the Philistines. Comparing this episode with that of Samson may highlight the narrator's ambivalence towards the exploits of Samson.

Does the lack of reference to Samson necessarily mean his self-sacrifice is of diminished significance? Surely the number of times a character is mentioned has some bearing on their importance. This, however, is not always the case. There are many characters and stories within the Hebrew Bible that appear only once. Foundational narratives/texts such as the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22), the priestly blessing (Num. 6:23-27), and the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) do not reappear in the Hebrew Bible. Compare these texts to the repeated references to YHWH saving Israel from Egypt or YHWH's self-description in Exodus 34. Thus, the number of times a passage or character is mentioned does not necessarily signify its importance. We can say with confidence that Samson does not appear as an exemplary figure anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, but to suggest *why* that is, is to argue from ambiguity or silence.

Summary

These three different angles have so far provided minimal assistance in understanding the characterization of Samson. Following the cues from reception history, we paid close attention to

the role and actions of YHWH in the narrative which revealed a higher level of ambiguity than some commentators had noticed. The effect of the Spirit's rushing upon Samson is underdetermined. Likewise, YHWH's silence at the end of the narrative can be understood as communication, but what it might be saying is beyond the text. The incongruity between Samson's Nazirite identity and the breaking of his Nazirite vow was suggested to be an intentional signal of the narrator's negative evaluation as opposed to the work of a careless editor. Finally, Samson's death was shown to be ineffectual in liberating Israel from Philistine oppression—both in the immediate context of Judges 17-18 and its literary/canonical context in the Hebrew Bible. These three approaches on their own, however, do not fully answer our question but leave the evaluation of Samson open. Taken together, they may shift the evaluation away from an overtly positive reading of the story and point to the possibility of reading the Samson story in another way.

A Way Forward: Perspective Shifting in the Samson Narrative

There is another angle from which we can approach this text that may help answer our question. "Seeing" is a recurring theme in the Samson story.[47] Israel does what is evil in YHWH's eyes (13:1). Samson's father is terrified after realising that he had been speaking with the Angel of YHWH, crying out to his wife, "We will surely die, for we have *seen* God!" (13:22). Indeed, Samson's story begins with him *seeing* the Timnite woman and declaring that she was "right in his eyes" (14:3). Later in the story, Samson sees the woman in Gaza and desires her. But the story is just as much about what Samson *doesn't see.* He fails to see through Delilah's deception. When finally captured, he is blinded by the Philistines. Samson will die as he avenges himself against the Philistines for his eyes.

Seeing is more than a theme or a *Leitwort* in the Samson story; it is an integral part of how the story is told. Throughout Judg. 13-16, the narrator employs a story-telling technique called "perspective shifting." Similar to how a film constructs meaning using multiple camera angles, the biblical narrator provides certain perspectives to the reader so that they might understand the

[47] Seeing here is meant as a shorthand for all matter of sight, eyes, etc. It also has to do with knowledge and perspective.

events.[48] This is normally the perspective of the protagonist.[49] At key moments, however, the perspective shifts. The reader is allowed access to a previously unknown viewpoint, and with it comes a deeper understanding of the events and a new set of expectations.[50] While Samson is clearly the protagonist of this story, the reader does not view the events from his eyes alone. Readers are additionally provided with the perspective of YHWH, the Timnite woman, Samson's father-in-law, the men of Judah, and the Philistines. Tracing how these various perspectives affect the reader's expectations is, I propose, the key to understanding Samson's characterization in the narrative.

Elsewhere in Judges, the events of the story are usually told from or in relation to the protagonist's perspective, with supplemental comments by the omniscient narrator. It is not often that the reader is given the perspective of Israel's enemies or of secondary characters in a way that proves foundational to the plot.[51] In the Samson narrative there is a surplus of oscillating perspectives from both major and minor characters—Israelite as well as Philistine. These perspectives are often unknown to the other characters, and importantly for the narrative, they are unknown to Samson. Additionally, the perspectives provide an alternative interpretation of the same event. The reader is not necessarily meant to understand the story only from the viewpoint of Samson. Instead, this perspective shifting technique allows readers to holistically understand the causality of the narrative's events and Samson's role in them. As a roadmap for this section, I will work through the narrative and highlight these shifts in perspective when they arise. Not every

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[48] I more fully develop this cinematic perspective in 'Alternate Eyes: Perspective Shifting in the Samson Narrative and Black Mirror', in A. Bowen, J. A. Dunne (eds.), Theology and Black mirror, (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022). Cf. A. Berlin, *Poetics and interpretation of biblical narrative*, (Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 44-47.

[49] Much of Hebrew narrative is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who has access to events a real-life observer could not have. Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 195-198.

[50] A helpful example of how new perspectives can create different expectations can be found in the way horror movies are filmed. If the director simply wants to scare their audience and make them jump, all they need is for the monster to suddenly appear with no prior warning. If, however, they want to produce a growing sense of dread in their audience, they may choose to film the scene from multiple perspectives. The audience can watch the monster lurk around in the dark basement. They feel the suspense as they watch the protagonist foolishly volunteer to go and check out the noise coming from below. The film's score also plays an important role in heightening the suspense. The audience is on the edge of their seat because they know something that the hero does not. By giving the audience multiple perspectives, the director has created new expectations for them.

[51] A striking example of this in the Hebrew Bible would be the dialogues between Balaam and Balak in Numbers 22-24. There is no explanation of how the narrator came to this knowledge, and neither does it appear that Israel is aware of Balaam's actions as they camp in the plains of Moab.

perspective is given equal treatment, as some are more important than others. This is particularly the case with Judg. 14:4, which I will argue is the interpretive key to this story. As will be seen, many of the themes addressed previously in this chapter will appear again, but I will not be readdressing the various scholarly conversations here.

Judges 13: A Son will be Born

Samson's story begins with the annunciation of his birth. The Angel of YHWH announces to the unnamed woman (Manoah's wife) that she would bear a son who would "begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5). Both the mother and the son were under strict commands; they were both to abstain from alcohol and unclean food. As a Nazirite, Samson would additionally abstain from cutting his hair.[52] Samson is thus set apart from birth by a strict code of ritual purity. This purity is confirmed by YHWH's blessing and stirring by his Spirit (13:24-25), a point which is given from the perspective of the omniscient narrator. What the narrator withholds from his readers is how much Samson is aware of the events of Judges 13 and if he knows of his destiny.

How this section functions within the Samson story is to create a certain set of expectations of Samson for the reader. Focusing solely on Judges 13, the reader is led to view Samson's birth as miraculous and divinely ordained. Whether he knows it or not, Samson is devoted to serving YHWH in his capacity as a Nazirite. Furthermore, he will begin to bring about deliverance from Israel's oppressors.[53] Reading in the wider literary-canonical context however opens up other possible echoes and creates a wider set of expectations. A barren woman suddenly conceiving hearkens back to Sarah's miraculous birth of Isaac (Gen. 18), and points forward to Hannah's

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[52] There are numerous difficulties in determining what precisely is commanded of Samson and his mother.

[53] Perhaps this promise to "begin" [יָחֵל] to save Israel is ominous. It might allude to the fact that Samson will be unable to bring about full deliverance (Cf. Block, *Judges*, p. 404; Conway, *Judging the Judges*, p. 185; McCann, *Judges*, p. 99; Webb, *Judges*, p. 352). Whether he is destined to be Israel's saviour, or simply, destined to fail in that capacity, commentators might be reading too much into the use of "begin" in this context. From the hiphil of III-חלל, this word is used four times in the Samson story (13:5, 25; 16:19, 25) and signals an *inclusio* of sorts—the promise and fulfilment in Ch. 13, and the weakening and strengthening in Ch. 16. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, III-חלל in the hiphil is normally joined with an infinitive construct and indicates the start of an action without any view to its end. Take for instance YHWH's promise to Joshua that "Today, I will begin to exalt you [אָחֵל גַּדֶּלְךָ] in the eyes of all Israel" (Josh. 3:7). One would struggle to find any ominous threat of failure in this context. Any sense of foreboding readers feel when reading Judges 13, likely comes from having already read the story.

conception of Samuel (1 Sam. 2). Christian readers will notice the similarities with John the Baptist and even Jesus. There are additional connections one can draw with the call of Gideon (Judg. 6:11-24). Both feature an Angel of YHWH, a promise of victory, an offering of food, and a fiery disappearance of the angel. Perhaps not all of these echoes are heard at the same volume, but nonetheless, the character of Samson is freighted with destiny from his birth. He is meant to do great things and the reader should have high expectations.

What Does YHWH Seek in Judges 14:4?

The expectations set by Judges 13 are quickly threatened by the events of Judges 14. Much to his parents' surprise, Samson desires a Philistine woman from Timnah, and even asks them to arrange the marriage! Much to the reader's surprise, the narrator interrupts to clarify the situation: "But his father and mother did not know that it was from YHWH, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel" (14:4 ESV). Samson's desire for foreign women, a recurring snare for Israel, is explained here as part of the plot. YHWH is working to save Israel through some extraordinary means indeed. Here, the narrator has shifted the perspective from Samson and his parents to YHWH. This narrative intrusion benefits only the reader as it provides knowledge that is unknown to the characters of the story.

While a number of commentators note the supreme narratological and theological importance of the narrator's comment, only few have pointed out the philological and syntactic difficulties of the statement.[54] The comments, if there are any, usually focus on the issues of divine sovereignty and human agency, as well as how exactly YHWH's plan fits with what has been said elsewhere about foreign women.[55] Yet, these comments rarely factor into the interpretation of the narrative as a whole. Before addressing why this verse may be important for interpreting the

[54] Those who discuss the verse in detail: Moore, *Judges*, pp. 328-329; Yates and Ross, 'Does YHWH approve of Samson's Marriage in Judges 14? An Analysis of 'from Yahweh", p. 15; S. J. Foster, 'Judges 14:4' Yahweh uses Samson to provoke the Philistines', *Old Testament Essays*, 25 (2012), p. 298; C. T. Paris, 'The Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4', Narrative obtrusion in the Hebrew Bible, (Fortress, 2014).

[55] Block, p. 426; Brettler, pp. 50-51; Goldingay, p. 138; Jordan, p. 244; Keller, p. 142; McCann, 102; Brian Neil Peterson, "Samson: Hero or Villain?: The Samson Narrative in Light of David and Saul," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174.693 (2017), pp. 28-31; Way, p. 126; Webb, p. 366; Yates & Ross, pp. 16-19.

narrative, let us first address its numerous ambiguities and complexities. First, who or what is from YHWH in the first clause? The MT reads:

וְאָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי מֵיְהוָה הִיא

The object that is from YHWH is represented as a 3rd feminine singular pronoun. As Hebrew does not have a neuter case, the pronoun could be an "it," meaning Samson's desire and/or the situation. As this statement follows immediately from כִּי־הִיא יָשְׁרָה בְעֵינָי, a case could be made for Samson's desire.[56] This would however be an abstraction of יָשְׁרָה בְעֵינָי that ignores the "object" of Samson's desire. The pronoun could also be a "she," meaning the Timnite woman. This is the clearest referent, for in the narrator's description and in Samson's dialogue with his parents, אִשָּׁה is used five times and is qualified by בְּנוֹת three times. The problem here is resoundingly feminine. It then would be odd to read the pronoun as pointing to an abstract desire of Samson rather than the Timnite woman that has been the focus of the conversation. Thus, it seems likely that the reader is meant to understand that this Timnite woman is from YHWH.

A second ambiguity is the identity of the seeker, is it YHWH or Samson? Like the object, the agent also is represented as a pronoun (כִּי־תֹאֲנָה הוּא־מְבַקֵּשׁ מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים). The 19th century commentator, A.R. Fausset, explains that it was *Samson* who was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. "Samson, in his the old fleshy nature, was seeking his own self-gratification: but the higher impulses in him from the Spirit of God . . . whatever may have been Samson' carnal purpose, *in effect* he sought an occasion against the oppressors. It would hardly be fit language, to say, as the

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[56] GKC §135*p*. Cf. Paris, 'The Narrative Obtrusion of Judges 14:4', p. 83-84. Though Paris devotes more space to this verse than any of the commentators, he only understands this verse to be talking about Samson's desire. Yates & Ross note that the pronoun could be "she," but likewise understand the verse to refer to Samson's desire. They explore the various occurrences of the phrase "from the Lord" in the Hebrew Bible to argue that Samson's marriage was not condoned by YHWH. Foster also notes the ambiguity, but says that "neither option much changes the point, (p. 297); Garcia Bachmann, *Judges*, p. 167. Bachmann notes that the pronoun can be both she/this, but does not develop the argument. In her gender-perspective reading, Marianne Grohmann surprisingly says that "as both possibilities hint at the intention of YHWH sending the woman, the semantic difference between these two translations is not significant for the story," ('The Philistine Woman from Timnah in Judges 14:1-15:8: Gender perspectives on the "Philistine" as Stereotype "Others" and 'Foreigners", in A. Berlejung, M. Grohmann (eds.), *Foreign women – women in foreign lands: studies on foreignness and gender in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East in the first millennium BCE*, (Mohr Siebeck, 2019), p. 66. I have only seen the pronoun translated as "She" in C. V. Camp, *Wise, strange, and holy: the strange woman and the making of the Bible*, (Sheffield Academic, 2009), p. 116. Treating the pronoun as an "it" referring to the situation or Samson's desire is the most common way of translating the pronoun as is evidenced by early modern to contemporary English Bibles.

Speaker's commentary, '*YHWH sought* occasion.' This applies to *man*, not to God."[57] This reading is syntactically difficult, though not impossible. Pronouns usually find their referent in the closest noun that precedes them. This would be YHWH. It could refer to Samson indicated by the 3ms suffix, but the verse appears to be explicating an alternative divine perspective. Thus, it seems preferable to view YHWH as the agent who is seeking.

A third difficulty is that the "object" which YHWH seeks from the Philistines, תֹּאָנָה, is a hapax legomenon.[58] It is typically read as "pretext," "occasion," or "opportunity." Each of these translations struggle to connect this word with מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים. A number of English translations add an infinitive (e.g., NSRV: "to act," NIV: "to confront"). In these versions, the preposition מִן־ is translated as "against," which is an unlikely meaning.[59] BDB understands the hapax to mean "ground of quarrel," which would fit well with מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים: "Because he was seeking a ground of quarrel *from* the Philistines." The verbal root is apparently אָנָה-III, "to be opportune, meet, encounter opportunely."[60] It is rare, occurring only four times.[61] In these verses, only 2 Kgs. 5:7 provides a helpful analogue. The king of Aram sends his servant Naaman to the King of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. As the king of Israel reads the letter that accompanies Naaman, he becomes incensed, and perhaps fearful as well. *He* cannot cure this man's leprosy. The narrative reports his speech: "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me (כִּי־מִתְאַנֶּה הוּא לִי)." The crucial difference here is the ל preposition instead of מִן־.[62] In the context of 2 Kings 5, the hithpael of אָנָה-III is idiomatic; a more literal rendering would be, "for he is causing himself to meet me."[63] This idiomatic phrase is relatively clear from the context, but one should be careful to not overstate the connection between the rare idiomatic usage of a verb and a hapax legomenon noun derived from the same root.

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[57] Fausset, p. 227. Cf. Jordan, p. 244.

[58] Neither *BHS* or *BHQ* list any variants or suggestions regarding this word.

[59] Also, Foster, p. 298.

[60] BDB.

[61] 1x in the Piel (Exod. 21:13); 2x in the Pual (Prov. 12:21; Ps. 91:10); 1x in the Hithpael (2 Kgs. 5:7).

[62] Also, Foster, p. 298.

[63] Rendered in today's parlance: He is getting all up in my face.

These difficulties of translation are exemplified in the various versions. For this phrase, Targum Jonathan reads: אֲרֵי תּוּסקְפָא הוּא בָּעֵי לְאִתגָּרָאָה בִּפלִשׁתָּאֵי . It keeps the "occasion" but adds "to incite/attack," making explicit what God intends to do.[64] However, it shifted the preposition from a מן to a ב. This causes the preposition to function as either a direct object marker or as an adversative (i.e., against the Philistines). Interestingly, both versions of LXX do something similar to one another:

LXX[a] - ὅτι ἐκδίκησιν αὐτὸς ζητεῖ ἐκ τῶν ἀλλοφύλων.
LXX[b] - ὅτι ἀνταπόδομα αὐτὸς ἐκζητεῖ ἐκ τῶν ἀλλοφύλων·

Both texts have a clear action in place of the vague and idiomatic usage of the Hebrew. God is seeking either vengeance or repayment from the Philistines. Both of these readings have retained the מן preposition in the form of ἐκ. While the Targum has kept the hapax noun and changed the preposition to make the clause work, the LXX has changed the noun, but kept the preposition. Interestingly, the two versions opt for slightly different words. In Deut. 32:35, these words (or at least their verbal forms) appear in the same line: ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἐκδικήσεως ἀνταποδώσω (In the day of vengeance, I will pay back). Though this line is different from the MT and its quotation in the New Testament, it is worth noting the Hebrew verbs that are translated: נָקַם and שָׁלַם.[65] These may suggest a different Hebrew *Vorlage*.

Origen notes that for Judges 14:4, Aquila's version reads: πρόφασις, meaning pretext (Cf. Hosea 10:4, Acts 27:30). Furthermore, the Vulgate reads: *et quaereret occasionem contra Philisthim*. Jerome has retained the hapax noun but has rendered the מן preposition adversatively. What is

[64] The targum of 2 Kgs. 5:7 also reads בָּעֵי לְאִתגָּרָאָה (seeking to attack).

[65] The quotations of this verse in the New Testament appear to be translated from the Hebrew or another version. Both Rom. 12:19 and Heb. 10:30 read *ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω*. There is nothing noted in Origen's Hexapla about this phrase. It is worth noting that ἐκδίκησις is also translated from נָקַם in Judg. 11:36 and Ezek. 25:4, while in Ezek. 16:38; 23:45 it is translated from מִשְׁפָּט. ἀνταπόδομα is typically rendered from גָּמַל; Cf. Gen. 50:15; 2 Chron. 32:25; Ps. 27:4 (LXX). The verb used in Deut. 32:35, from ἀνταποδίδωμι, is typically rendered from שׁוּב or שָׁלַם; Cf. Gen. 44:4; 50:15. Lev. 18:25 contains the same word, yet rendered from פָּקַד, which may be how one could understand the thinking behind Judg. 14:4. תּוֹאֲנָה could mean an occasion to meet (understood idiomatically); פָּקַד elsewhere is used idiomatically to mean a visit, but in a number of occasions, punishment is in view. Thus, the translator saw that תּוֹאֲנָה had a similar idiomatic meaning to פָּקַד and decided to translate it in the same way to communicate punishment.

apparent from the ancient versions is the difficulty of this clause. Yet, the unifying feature in these translations (including the modern English ones) is that they all view this תֹּאֲנָה as engendering negative consequences for the Philistines.[66]

Perhaps the meaning of תֹּאֲנָה can be illumined by looking at מְבַקֵּשׁ, the main verb of the clause. Is it normal for YHWH to בִּקֵּשׁ, and if so, what does he normally seek? Of the 225 times that בִּקֵּשׁ is used in the Hebrew Bible, only eleven of them have the God of Israel as their subject.[67] I shall go through each occurrence briefly and categorize them according to their objects.

The first category is בִּקֵּשׁ + an infinitive construct. Exod. 4:24—the mysterious Bridegroom of Blood passage—has YHWH seeking to kill Moses (וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיְבַקֵּשׁ הֲמִיתוֹ). A similar construction occurs in In Zech. 12:9, where YHWH promises to rescue Israel and he seeks to destroy their enemies (אֲבַקֵּשׁ לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם). In both of these instances, the object of YHWH's seeking is rendered as a Hiphil infinitive construct. The goal of YHWH's seeking is violent; Moses will die, and the nations will be destroyed.[68]

A second category is בִּקֵּשׁ with no object. In a speech made by the Transjordan tribes to Joshua regarding the "illicit" altar, they suggest that if they were offering sacrifices on it, YHWH would seek (יְהוָה הוּא יְבַקֵּשׁ).[69] Here, there is no direct object, so its meaning must be inferred from the context of the impassioned defence of the Transjordan tribes. With good confidence in their innocence, they suggest that "If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith toward YHWH, do not

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[66] There are two notable exceptions. The 17th century Jesuit scholar, Cornelius a Lapide understands Samson's request to function in two ways. Either the Philistines will deny him a wife and Samson can then fight them or they will allow him to marry and this union would advantageous to Israel in that the Philistines might be kinder to them (*Commentaria in Librum Judicum*, (Apud Tonna, Banchi & Soc., 1843), vol. ii, p. 171. For this point, Lapide cites Ambrose's letter to Vigilius, which uses Samson as a negative example of the dangers of marrying outside the faith (cf. Ambrose, 'Ambrose to Vigilius (35/385)', in M. M. Beyenka (tran.), Letters: 1 - 91, (Catholic Univ. of America, 2001), p. 179. The second comes from an obscure 2011 translation called the International Standard Version (ISV) which translates the verse as: "Meanwhile, his father and mother did not know that she was from the Lord, because he had been seeking a favorable opportunity concerning the Philistines, since the Philistines were dominating Israel at that time." There is no explanation in the text and no translation notes are available. Their website is no longer active, but I did manage to find the names of some members of the translation committee. One of which was Arthur H. Lewis who has elsewhere served on the NIV translation committee. If he is responsible for this translation decision in the ISV, it would be a departure from his earlier work (Cf. *Judges*, pp. 77-79).

[67] This includes YHWH, Elohim, El, and YH. Exod. 4:24; Josh. 22:23; 1 Sam. 13:14; 20:16; Eccl. 3:15; Ezek. 3:18, 20; 22:30; 33:8; Zech. 12:9; Mal. 2:15.

[68] That is unless drastic actions are taken.

[69] The ESV and NRSV include the word "vengeance."

spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following YHWH; or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or offerings of well-being on it may YHWH himself seek [יְהוָה הוּא יְבַקֵּשׁ]" (Josh. 22:22-23). One can see the parallel between "do not spare us" (אַל־תּוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ) and "may YHWH himself seek" (יְהוָה הוּא יְבַקֵּשׁ). It seems likely then that the object of YHWH's seeking will thematically rhyme with "do not spare." Perhaps בִּקֵּשׁ without an object represents an idiom which has to do with judgement resulting in punishment or destruction.

A third category has בִּקֵּשׁ + מִיַּד. There are three identical constructions in Ezekiel 3:18, 20; 33:8: וְדָמוֹ מִיָּדְךָ אֲבַקֵּשׁ (But I will seek/require the blood from your hands). YHWH is explaining the prophetic commitment—what He says must be communicated. The prophet is under obligation only to speak these words; the responsibility of changing minds and actions is beyond them. If the prophet fails to proclaim what YHWH says, or in the case of the righteous person turning away, fails to remind them of what YHWH has previously said, these people will die in their iniquity. What YHWH makes clear, however, is that in these cases, the prophet will bear the responsibility. In Ezek. 33:1-6, an illustration is given. If a watchman blows the trumpet to warn of an attack, but no one listens, the watchman is innocent—the blood is upon those who did nothing. But if he does not warn the people, and they are killed, then the watchman is guilty. YHWH will require the blood from the watchman's hand.[70]

An analogous logic is perhaps at play in Genesis 9:5-6, which expresses a similar requirement of blood from the hands that take life. This command in Genesis has provided the basis for retributive justice in a legal or moral sense, though its aim is in fact to limit violence rather than justify it. This command also provides a cultic logic: the spilled life-blood needs a corresponding spilling of life-blood. It is this blood equilibrium that needs to be rectified whether by the one who spilled it (i.e., the murderer) or by a substitute.[71] Returning to Ezekiel, the blood required by YHWH appears to be symbolic of justice. The blood is on the hands of the prophet who does not declare the words of YHWH. The wicked will die in their sins, but God's judgement will fall on the prophet. Thus, וְדָמוֹ מִיָּדְךָ אֲבַקֵּשׁ means that the object YHWH will seek is justice.

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[70] The word used here is דָּרַשׁ which has a similar meaning to בִּקֵּשׁ, but with a wider semantic range.

[71] This can be seen in a number of the cultic commandments about purity and sacrifice. One law worth mentioning found in Deut. 21:1-9 concerns what Israel must do if there is an unsolved homicide. It appears that a heifer acts as a substitute and is put to death in place of the murderer. This is framed in terms of purifying or absolving Israel of the blood debt.

1 Samuel 20:16 includes this same construction, but as an idiom. Jonathan makes a covenant with David saying, "May YHWH seek from the hand of David's enemies." (וּבִקֵּשׁ יְהוָה מִיַּד אֹיְבֵי דָוִד). Unlike the Ezekiel passages, there is no true object that is required from the hands of David's enemies. The LXX has omitted "hands" from the clause, which points to the strangeness of this construction. Yet, the sense of Jonathan's covenantal declaration is straightforward—YHWH will avenge David's death upon his enemies. Similar to the context of the passages in Ezekiel, Jonathan is promising to warn David of Saul's actions so that he can escape in time. It seems likely therefore that בִּקֵּשׁ + מִיַּד is an idiomatic shorthand that speaks of God's requirement and pursuit of justice.

A final category is בִּקֵּשׁ + an object. In 1 Sam. 13:14, Samuel explains to Saul that his kingship will not be dynastic, for YHWH has sought a man after his own heart (בִּקֵּשׁ יְהוָה לוֹ אִישׁ כִּלְבָבוֹ).[72] Akin to YHWH's aims elsewhere, the man God seeks would rectify the situation. Saul had already made a mess of things, and David as Israel's future king would fix the problems. A similar use is found in Ezek. 22:30. YHWH seeks someone to "stand in the breach" to turn away his wrath (וָאֲבַקֵּשׁ מֵהֶם אִישׁ גֹּדֵר־גָּדֵר וְעֹמֵד בַּפֶּרֶץ לְפָנַי בְּעַד הָאָרֶץ לְבִלְתִּי שַׁחֲתָהּ). Here, the author has included much more detail concerning the object of YHWH's seeking. First, it is a person rather than a thing. Secondly, the text describes the *actions* of this person. They will 1) repair the wall, 2) stand in the breach before YHWH, and 3) they will do so on behalf of the land (the land being Israel). Thirdly, the author explains the *effect* of their actions: they will avert the wrath of YHWH. Finally, the author describes the *location* of where YHWH will seek: מֵהֶם. This refers back to the "people of the land" in vs 29. The issue still revolves around the notion of justice. This person that YHWH seeks would rectify a broken situation, namely the corruption of the priesthood and the oppression of the vulnerable. Unfortunately, YHWH cannot find such a person and brings judgement and wrath upon his people.

In Ezekiel 34, YHWH pronounces judgement upon the leaders of Israel. They have been like shepherds who neglect and even kill the sheep rather than protecting them. YHWH explicitly

[72] It should be noted that כִּלְבָבוֹ describes the Lord's actions rather than the character of David. The Lord will choose according to his own desire as opposed to the conventional options: dynastic kingship or a rebellion.

condemns them by saying, "you have not sought the lost" (וְאֶת־הָאֹבֶדֶת לֹא בִקַּשְׁתֶּם).[73] These sheep have been scattered all over the earth and there is no one seeking or searching (וְאֵין דּוֹרֵשׁ וְאֵין מְבַקֵּשׁ).[74] Yet, YHWH graciously promises to act. He will bring back his lost sheep from exile and be their shepherd. "I will seek the lost (אֶת־הָאֹבֶדֶת אְבַקֵּשׁ), and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . . (Ezek. 34:16).[75] Again, the fundamental issue here is justice. God will bring back his people from exile and will be their leader. He will seek and heal the wounded whilst bringing judgement upon the perpetrators. YHWH will shepherd his people according to what is just (אֶרְעֶנָּה בְמִשְׁפָּט).

A final example can be found in Mal. 2:15.[76] Here, the prophet is discussing marriage and Judah's unfaithfulness. The prophet exhorts his listeners to be faithful to their wives (and presumably to YHWH of the covenant as well) because YHWH seeks godly offspring (וּמָה הָאֶחָד מְבַקֵּשׁ זֶרַע אֱלֹהִים). Like the passages beforehand, the issue here in Malachi concerns justice. YHWH desires a people who are faithful to Him and who act justly toward their neighbours.

To summarize: By looking at the various objects and constructions of בִּקֵּשׁ we can readily see a recurring and unifying theme. The God of Israel seeks justice which is accomplished in two ways: judgement and reconciliation.[77] In the first construction, בִּקֵּשׁ + an infinitive construct, it is clear that justice will come through YHWH's judgement. In the second construction, בִּקֵּשׁ without an object, it was argued that the phrase was understood idiomatically. YHWH would seek judgement. The third construction, בִּקֵּשׁ + מִיַּד, is also idiomatic. In three of the four cases, blood was the object being sought. This represented God's justice, both judgement against the wrong-doer and reconciliation in that the blood equilibrium was symbolically restored. The other instance

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[73] Ezek. 34:4.

[74] Ezek. 34:6.

[75] These actions are the undoing of those in Ezek. 34:1-6.

[76] There is another usage in Eccl. 3:15 which reads: מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה כְּבָר הוּא וַאֲשֶׁר לִהְיוֹת כְּבָר הָיָה וְהָאֱלֹהִים יְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת־נִרְדָּף (That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by). It also has בִּקֵּשׁ + an object, but the verse is difficult to understand. The object that God seeks is the niphal participle of רָדַף. BDB explains "God seeketh the pursued (i.e., what has disappeared, is past, but dub.)." The object of God's seeking is described neutrally with no more information about *why* God seeks it. Perhaps it is as Stuart Weeks has suggested, that Qohelet's emphasis is on God and his activity (*Ecclesiastes 1–5: a critical and exegetical commentary*, (T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 526-530.

[77] It is perhaps best to see judgement and reconciliation not as opposites but complimentary modes of enacting justice. Often times, reconciliation comes through judgement, and vice versa. In Ezek. 34, YHWH reconciled his people to himself which was its own judgement on Israel's leaders.

did not contain blood as an object, but only "from the hand." This can be understood as a shorthand of the idiom. The fourth construction, בִּקֵּשׁ + an object, was quite different. It was not idiomatic or abstract in its meaning, and it did not convey vengeance, punishment, or judgment. Instead, the "object" was a person. This person would either be an agent or a recipient of reconciliation. As an agent, like David in 1 Sam. 13, the prophet/priest in Ezek. 22, or the godly offspring in Mal. 2, they would affect justice where there was injustice. YHWH's justice would be established through the faithfulness of his people. As a recipient, like the exiled and lost sheep of Israel, they would be the beneficiary of YHWH's establishing justice and peace.

Having categorized the various constructions of the word בָּקַשׁ, let us return to Judges 14:4 to see which meaning is best understood. As the clause has an object, the תְּאֵנָה in question, constructions 1 and 2 can safely be excluded. As the clause neither contains the phrase מִיַּד or blood as its object, construction 3 can also be excluded. This means it is unlikely that the phrase is idiomatic, or that it suggests that YHWH is seeking vengeance. It seems that construction 4 is the best option as the clause contains an object. It also is similar to Ezek. 22:30 as it describes the location: from the Philistines. Perhaps dissimilar to the other examples, the object does not seem to be a person.[78] If the "objects" of the other examples were either the agents or the recipients of YHWH's reconciliatory justice, what does this mean for the תְּאֵנָה of Judges 14:4?

In Judges 14:4, the narrator has taken the reader behind the scenes. The perspective has shifted, and in effect, the audience can look not only behind the curtain but into the very mind of God. Yet, the vision is by no means clear as the difficulty is in the interpreting. Difficulties such as the hapax legonomen, its apparent rare root, the difficulty in fitting the verb and noun with the preposition, and the rare use of Israel's God being the subject of the verb בָּקַשׁ should, at the very least, give the reader pause. These difficulties, however, may open the text to be read from other perspectives. One such reading may be that the תְּאֵנָה that YHWH was seeking from the Philistines refers indirectly to a person. The feminine form may indicate that it is connected to the feminine pronoun in the clause before. The תְּאֵנָה, then, may refer to the Timnite woman. This woman from

[78] The exception is found in Ecclesiastes 3:15 where the Lord seeks an impersonal object.

Timnah is also from YHWH, and through her connection with Samson, YHWH is planning something.[79]

Expectations Set: Foreign Women & Canonical Resonances

There is an apparent discrepancy between Judges 14:4 and other deuteronomic prohibitions against marrying foreign women. The theological meaning of this verse, some suggest is that YHWH uses Samson's lust for his own higher purposes. Wong sees a potential analogy with Joseph and his brothers in Gen. 45:5-8; 50:19-20. The actions of Joseph's brothers were not justified, even though God used them to bring about his ultimate purpose. In the case of Samson, "the objection of Samson's parents would remain valid, and Samson's choice of marriage partner on the basis of what he saw would be regarded as an inferior choice in light of the available alternative of choosing from among his own people."[80] This reading coheres with what is said in Judges 3:1-4, that YHWH left the Canaanites (and other nations including the Philistines) in order to test Israel.[81] YHWH is free to work through sinners and their evil actions/intents in order to bring good.

Though such theological reasonings may be valid, they are not in focus here. As argued previously, it is most likely the woman, not Samson's desire, that is from YHWH. The narrator's statement provides a counter-interpretation to the deuteronomistic perspective of Samson's parents, which reassures the reader that the woman is from YHWH. As it is also unlikely that תִּמְנָה indicates judgement against the Philistines, it is valid then to view the woman as somehow connected to YHWH's reconciliatory intentions, perhaps has either an agent or recipient of justice. Though marriage to foreign women is generally condemned throughout much of Israel's Scripture, it is not always. Moses for instance takes a wife from Cush (Num. 12:1). Rahab and Ruth are both foreigners who are incorporated into the people of Israel through their allegiance and worship to YHWH. Perhaps then, this Timnite woman will be an agent of God's deliverance. Through her

[79] As for translating the verse, there is no clear way around the difficulty. I would opt for: "But his father and his mother did not know that she was from YHWH, for He was seeking an opportunity from the Philistines. At that time, they were ruling over Israel." In explanation, I would attempt to make clear the ambiguity of the verse.

[80] Wong, p. 102.

[81] Elsewhere, the Lord would use foreign nations to punish and exile Israel. These disastrous events were understood to be YHWH's prerogative and under his control. This did not mean though that the nations who carried out his will were blameless with respect to their actions.

marriage to Samson, she may provide liberation for Israel, or even better, her whole people may encounter the God of Israel. Through this brief interjection and shift in perspective, the narrator has created certain expectations for the reader, namely that this foreign woman and Samson's marriage to her may become the epicentre for God's salvation.

The beginning of the Samson narrative shares some resemblance to the strange story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. While most commentators make no reference or connection—literary or otherwise—between these two narratives, there is some precedence for it in the Talmud.[82] While they may be wholly unintentional, the links between these two narratives allow the reader to draw intertextual inferences which may be significant for reading the text as Scripture. The obvious connection can be seen in that both narratives take place around Timnah, but it is unlikely that they represent the same town historically.[83] In Judah's allotment recorded in Joshua 15, Timnah is listed twice, once among the northwest Judean border (15:10) and another among the towns allotted to Judah located in the hill country (15:57). Thus, Judah's journey from Adullam in the Shephelah to the Judean Timnah in the hill country is described as an ascent (Gen. 38:12).[84] Even if the cities are historically different, there is warrant to view the name as imaginatively suggestive in the case of the Samson story.

Another connection can be found in the events of the narrative, particularly around the theme of "seeing." Just as Samson goes to Timnah and "sees" the woman who is right in his "eyes," Judah is on his way to Timnah, and he "sees" Tamar (who he mistakes to be a prostitute) sitting in the entrance to Enaim. This place name עֵינַיִם derives from עַיִן meaning "eye" or "spring."[85]

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[82] *Sotah* 9b-10a discusses why Samson "goes down" to Timnah while Judah "goes up" to it. The William Davidson Talmud, https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah?lang=bi&p2=Sotah.10a.21&lang2=en.

[83] G. L. Kelm and A. Mazar, *Timnah: a Biblical city in the Sorek Valley*, (Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 91-104. Cf. Boling, p. 229; Buttler, p. 332; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, (Metheun, 1911), p. 329; G. von Rad, *Genesis*, (WJK, 1973), p. 359; N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, (Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 267. None of these draw any connection between the two narratives.

[84] It is difficult to determine precisely where a number of these cities are located and to whom are they allotted. There are a few times where a town is allotted to two different tribes, and there is no reason to suspect that the duplicate names refer to two different locations. Such is the case with Gibeah, allotted to both Judah (15:57) and to Benjamin (18:28); Jebus/Jerusalem, allotted to Judah (15:8, 63) and to Benjamin (18:28); Zorah and Eshtaol are allotted to Judah (15:33) and to Dan (19:41). We cannot rule out the possibility that the Timnah of Genesis 38 is the same as the one mentioned in Judges 14.

[85] Though it appears to be in the dual form, suggesting a pair of springs, its ending only reflects an expansion of its original plural ending Cf. GKC §88c.

Perhaps this location refers to settlement near a well or spring. If so, it would signal what Robert Alter calls a "betrothal type-scene," or a variation of it, which is common in the Patriarchal narratives.[86] The theme of sight continues when Tamar is about to be executed for her harlotry. In the final tense moments before her death, she reveals the objects given by Judah as a pledge so that he would recognize them. With calculated risk, she has not given Judah an ultimatum but a choice. In another sense, Tamar has given him an opportunity to *see* her and recognize the plight that he has caused.

A connection can be seen in the threat of a fiery death. Judah does not hesitate to pronounce judgement on his daughter-in-law whom he thought had been unfaithful. She was to be burned. This punishment does not seem to be a typical one in the Hebrew Bible. Only twice in the Levitical laws are the people directed to use fire as a penalty for wrongdoing.[87] In both of these cases, the penalty is issued for illicit sexual unions. The punishment of Achan—who happens to be a descendant of Judah and Tamar—is death by fire (Josh. 7:15, 25). In the book of Judges, the Ephraimites threaten to burn Jephthah's house down over him (Judg. 12:1). Though fire is used generally to destroy cities during wartime, fire is not typically used for capital punishment. Thus, this punishment by means of burning should be regarded as rare in the Hebrew Bible. There are surprisingly a number of references to fire in the Samson saga. During the wedding feast in Timnah, Samson's new bride is also faced with fiery threats if she does not disclose the answer to the riddle (14:15). Samson uses 300 foxes to burn the harvest of the Philistines (15:5).[88] In retaliation, the Philistines burn the Timnite woman and her father (15:6).

A final similarity between the two narratives is the role of foreign women. Throughout the patriarchal narratives, there is a recurring theme concerning the avoidance of foreign women. Abraham makes sure Isaac would not marry a Canaanite woman. The narrator reports Esau's marriage to two Hittite woman as something that caused strife for Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:34-

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[86] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 65-74. As Alter notes, neither Genesis 38 nor Judges 14 fulfils the type-scene (p. 74). But it is the subversion of this type-scene that is important. Interestingly, Jillian Ross has argued that Judg. 14:1-4 "exhibits various suppressions and reversals" of a "quest for a Bride" type scene but only compares the Samson narrative with Esau ('Type-Casting the Samson Family: Genesis Parodies in Judges 13–14', *JETS*, 64/2 (2021), pp. 245-50.

[87] Lev. 20:14; 21:19. There are other times in the Torah where the Lord's wrath breaks out against people in the form of fire (Lev. 10:6; Num. 16:35).

[88] The word here, בָּעַר, is different from the other instances.

35). Later, Esau overhears his father commanding Jacob, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother" (Gen. 28:1-2). Hearing this, Esau apparently decides to spite his parents by taking more foreign wives (Gen. 28:8-9). The rape of Dinah by Shechem the Hivite represented another situation to be wary of intermarrying with foreigners. In Genesis 38, Judah moves away from his family and takes a Canaanite wife. Presumably, Tamar is also a Canaanite.[89] Reading canonically, these literary features—the location of Timnah, the threat/reality of a fiery death, and the protagonists' action of seeing and desiring a foreign woman—strengthen the possible literary and theological connections between Genesis 38 and Judges 14.

What do these connections point to? Genesis 38 is a strange narrative of Tamar deceiving Judah in order to receive justice. Though this narrative does not neatly fit within the Joseph story (37-45), it does arguably signal a change in the character of Judah. He had averted his brothers' desire to murder Joseph by suggesting that they sell him into slavery in Ch. 37, and in Ch. 44, he had offered to take Benjamin's place as Joseph's prisoner. Between these two scenes, in Gen. 38, he moves from a deceptive and unjust father-in-law to a man who is deceived and administers justice. Recognizing the objects he gave to Tamar as a pledge, he proclaims, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen. 38:26). This interruption in the narrative, like the massacre of Shechem and his family in Genesis 34, presents the question: what is justice? The surprising answer is not found in the patriarchal and societal norms that are later codified in the Torah but in Judah's response. Even in her deceptive harlotry, Tamar was more righteous than Judah. It was in this way that Tamar solidified herself as part of Israel. Justice in

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[89] The early reception of this narrative is interesting. The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a pseudepigraphal text dated to the 2nd century BCE, explains that Tamar is not from Canaan but from Aram in Mesopotamia (10.1). This would make her similar to Rebekah (Gen. 22:20-24; 24:10), a distant relative to Judah. Tamar is treated poorly by Er and Onan at the direction of their mother Saba because she is not a Canaanite. Jubilees similarly reports that Tamar is an Aramean and that Er would not sleep with her because he wanted a Canaanite wife (41:1-2). Alternatively, Pseudo-Philo in *Biblical Antiquities* 9.5-6 provides Tamar's mental reasoning: "for her intent was not to fornication, but because she would not separate herself from the sons of Israel she took thought and said: It is better for me to die for sinning with my father-in-law than to be joined to Gentiles." This implies that Tamar was indeed a foreigner, but one who chose to align themselves with God's people. Josephus omits this narrative entirely from his *Jewish Antiquities*. For a fuller treatment see C. Wassén, 'The Story of Judah and Tamar in the Eyes of the Earliest Interpreters', *Literature and Theology*, 8/4 (1994).

this narrative is characterized by reconciliation, not punishment. Tamar's execution is stayed, but even more, she is brought into the people of Israel. From the perspective of later history, Tamar would become a matriarch of the royal line of David, and even of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3). This type-scene has been subverted here in Genesis—the woman at the well is not the promised wife of Abrahamic descent like in the case of Rebekah. Instead, she is a foreigner—a foreigner who would nonetheless be instrumental in the formational history of God's chosen people.

Returning to Judges 14, one notices more clearly the type-scene. Samson goes down to Timnah and sees a foreign woman. He desires her, but his parents (rightfully so) encourage him to take a wife from among his own people. Yet, the narrator introduces the divine perspective. Foreign or not, this woman was from YHWH and through her, the Philistine oppression would end. This perspective is given only to the reader—neither Samson nor his parents are aware of this. Reading this scene through the canonical lens of Genesis 38 brings into question the prohibition against marrying foreign women. The last time the scene was set in Timnah, it was a foreign woman named Tamar that was declared more righteous than a son of Israel. It was through her that Judah's line would continue. Through this perspective shift, the reader's expectations have changed. They should be hopeful for what God is planning to do through this Philistine woman. Reconciliation may be the means by which God plans to deliver Israel. If Judah (and Dan) could not drive the Philistines out of the land, then God would drive the Philistines to proper worship and incorporate them into his people.

Expectations Unmet: The Cycles of Violence in Judges 14–15

With expectations set high, the wedding at Timnah is meant to be the epicentre of God's deliverance of Israel, and possibly, the reconciliation of the Philistines. Samson and his bride are apparently destined to be agents of YHWH, even if they are unaware of it. The narrator has, after all, only given YHWH's perspective to the reader. Unfortunately, the wedding at Timnah will begin a series of events which shatter the expectations. Though many of Samson's actions can be interpreted in more than one way, clues to his characterisation can be found by paying attention to the shifts in perspective.

The narrative continues with the incident of the lion and the honeybees (Judg. 14:5-9). Twice, the narrator explains that Samson did not tell his parents what had happened (Judg. 14:6, 9). Here, only Samson and the reader are aware of these events. In Judg. 14:10, the narrator explains to the reader the ancient custom of a wedding feast that is likely of Philistine origin and thus, no longer known to the first readers. During this feast, Samson proposes a riddle that, at first glance, seems unsolvable for the Philistines. James Crenshaw has argued that the riddle depends on ambiguity and the polyvalency of Samson's imagery. The answer could be "vomit," speaking of the young men's inability to hold their liquor after a long drinking feast.[90] The answer could also refer to sex, a fitting, but lewd, answer given at a wedding feast.[91] J.R. Porter notes that the word for "honey" rendered as דבש in Judg. 14:18 may have originally read ארי (derived from a Ugaritic word for "honey").[92] In response to Samson's wordplay of "out of the eater came something to eat" (מֵהָאֹכֵל יָצָא מַאֲכָל), the Philistines reply with matching wordplay: "What is sweeter than honey (ארי)? and what is stronger than a lion (אֲרִי)?" It seems plausible then, that the narrator seeks to accommodate to his readers by changing the unfamiliar word to one they would have understood.[93] Whatever we are to make of these proposals, the answer to Samson's riddle remains quite obvious to the reader, even if they would articulate the answer less poetically than the Philistines. The reader is given a perspective that other characters are not. Furthermore, the reader is *aware* of the differentiation of knowledge between themselves and the Philistines.

In verse 15, the narrator shifts the perspective, this time to Samson's wife and to the Philistines. Unbeknownst to Samson, the weddinggoers corner the bride and threaten to burn her and her father's household to death if she cannot obtain the answer to the riddle before the end of the feast. Thus, the reader is *more* aware of the danger than Samson. The woman's cries appear

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[90] Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 114.

[91] Crenshaw, p. 115.

[92] J. R. Porter, 'SAMSON'S RIDDLE: JUDGES XIV. 14, 18', *JTS*, 13/1 (1962), p. 107.

[93] This presents an interesting interpretive question: In what language or dialect was this riddle asked? Most narratives, Hebrew or otherwise, are written in the language of the target audience irrespective of what language they might have spoken. Here, the narrator renders the Philistine speech into Hebrew for his readers even though this obscures the wordplay necessary to understand Samson's riddle. For this reason, Porter believes that the lion and honeybee incident (Judg. 14:5-9) is secondary to the riddle. "It is best not to attempt the desperate task of harmonizing perfectly the episode of the lion-slaying with that of the finding of the honey, but to regard the latter as a subsequent explanation of Samson's riddle when, with the substitution of דבש for ארי, its correct original meaning could no longer be glimpsed" (p. 109).

genuine to Samson, but the reader can hear in the deception the woman's desperation as she tries to save her family. Another perspective is presented in the Philistines' speech. "Have you invited us here to impoverish us?" While weddings between foreign peoples generally are meant to strengthen a bond between the two parties, Samson's riddle and wager threaten this alliance before it even begins. The Philistines accuse this woman of betraying her people. The threat of impoverishment (or dispossession) might be hyperbolic but could just as easily be understood to represent a real economic danger: they would be in the debt of a foreign Israelite.[94] When the Philistines answer the riddle correctly, Samson understands that they could only have gotten the answer from his wife. What he does not know is that she did so only under the threat of death. He also does not know that his riddle may well have caused significant anxiety to his new kinsmen. The text does not provide the reader with Samson's inner thoughts—whether he feels betrayed by his wife or only cheated by his new community—but his response is to repay the debt by murdering 30 innocent Philistines from a different town and taking their clothes.[95] Samson returns to his father's house in anger, having left his wife behind.

In Judges 15, the reader is given a variety of competing perspectives, that of Samson, his father-in-law, the Philistines, and the Judahites. Each of these perspectives are both incomplete in themselves and, at times, unknown to each other. For clarity, I will outline the events of this chapter from each vantage point separately. From Samson's point of view, he returns to his wife only to find that she has been given to another Philistine. Enraged, he ties foxes together by the tail and sets them on fire, which destroys the entire harvest of grain, wine, and olives. He then learns that the Philistines have murdered his wife, so he responds by slaughtering an unknown number of the Philistines before hiding out in a cave, presumably located in Judahite territory. The narrator reports his reasoning: "If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit." When he learns that his actions have endangered his countrymen, he agrees to be

[94] Worth noting is that the word rendered "impoverish" by the ESV and NRSV or "steal" by the NIV, comes from the יָרַשׁ. When it is appears as an infinitive construct as it does here, it almost always is in reference to taking possession of the land (Gen. 15:7; 28:4; Deut. 3:18; 4:5; etc.).

[95] It is unclear whether the weddinggoers know where their clothes came from. From the description, however, one can imagine the clothes covered in blood.

taken captive to the Philistines. After his bonds are miraculously broken, he finds a weapon and massacres 1,000 men.[96]

From the father-in-law's point of view, the events of the narrative are quite different. He was surprised that Samson would return to his daughter after storming off from the wedding. He thought Samson hated her and had abandoned her (Judg. 15:1). Because of this, the father-in-law gives the daughter away to another Philistine, likely as a means to avoid embarrassment in the eyes of his community as well as to make sure his daughter was taken care of. Though Samson is no longer married to his daughter, the father-in-law does not wish to sever ties with him completely. He offers him his younger daughter which Samson declines by seeking revenge. In the end, the father-in-law and his daughter are executed for Samson's exploits.

From the Philistines' point of view, Samson is a dangerous individual. After discovering that their entire harvest is destroyed, they seek out the perpetrator. This event likely would cripple their economy and destabilize their power in the region. They are told it was, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion." (Judg. 15:6). The reader is aware that this explanation is only half true. Samson had abandoned his wife and his father-in-law believed he had left for good. The Philistines do not attempt to understand the father's perspective, but instead, execute him and his family. After suffering Samson's retribution, they pursue him into Judahite territory and attack Lehi. When questioned by the men of Judah why they are being attacked, they respond: "We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us" (Judg. 15:10). As the bound Samson is being led back to the Lehi, the Philistines rejoice and believe that their troubles are over. Instead, they suffer heavy losses as Samson miraculously breaks free of his fetters.

From the men of Judah's point of view, Samson's actions threaten the peace and stability of the region. They find themselves being attacked by the Philistines, but they do not know why. After discovering that Samson has wreaked havoc in Philistia and the Philistines are seeking

[96] The narrator does not explicitly state if the 1,000 men were exclusively Philistines. We should not rule out the possibility that among the slaughtered Philistines lie some of the men from Judah that were delivering him. Killing some of the Judahites that turned him over would be consistent with the theme of vengeance.

vengeance, they set out to deliver Samson.[97] Reaching Samson, they demand to know why the relative peace has been upset. Samson only replies, "As they have done to me, so I have done to them." Interestingly, the men of Judah are the only characters that receive multiple perspectives in addition to their own. They know the Philistines perspective (they are repaying Samson for what he has done) and they know Samson's perspective (that he is repaying the Philistines for what they have done), but they do not seek further explanation from either party. Instead, they are prepared to hand Samson over to the Philistines.

All of these perspectives are presented to the reader. They are aware of the reasons for which every character acts, even if they might not understand them completely. The characters, on the other hand, are unaware of these competing perspectives. Had they known or accepted another character's perspective, the narrative likely would have turned out quite differently. Had the father-in-law known Samson would return, he likely wouldn't have given away his daughter to another man. Had the Philistines questioned the father-in-law, they likely would have realized he was not at fault for Samson's actions and that he even tried to make amends. Had the men of Judah investigated further, they would have been in a prime position to mediate between the offended parties and restore peace to the region.[98] It seems likely that by providing these alternative perspectives, the reader is meant to question the supposed inevitability of the narrative's events. Even so, the cyclical violence, the devastation of the land, and the destruction of the innocent reveal that Samson has not met the expectations set for the reader. Quite the opposite: he is in many respects, responsible for the death of the Timnite woman who was from YHWH. A wedding that might have reconciled the Philistines and freed the Israelites results only in strengthening the divide between them. Fortunately, there is a final chapter to this story. Perhaps, Samson will redeem himself and rise to meet the high expectations that have been set for him.

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[97] It is not explicitly stated that the men of Judah know exactly what has transpired between Samson and the Philistines.

[98] Block views the actions of Judah as cowardly and unbecoming of their call to worship only YHWH (p. 444). Though, as Butler rightly points out, "negotiations prove that the problem lies not with Judah but with Samson. Samson may be God's instrument to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines, but, for Judah, Samson is just a hot-headed strong boy who has no leadership claims on them" (p. 342).

The Incident at Gaza

The brief but memorable incident in Gaza features Samson outwitting the Gazites in the middle of the night. No mention is made of how Samson learned of the Philistines' plot, but the narrator is more concerned with revealing their plan to the reader alone. The perspective shifts from the room where Samson sleeps, to the men lying in ambush (and struggling to keep quiet), and then back again to Samson who rises in the middle of the night to escape with the gates of the city on his shoulders. All of this narration is accomplished with such brevity that the would-be ambushers have disappeared from the story. The details are sparse, but the intention of the ambushers is made explicit in their reported speech: they will kill Samson. Despite its length, this story repeats a number of key themes: "seeing," desiring a foreign woman, and Samson's strength. It also reveals that there is no resting for Samson—the Philistines are hunting him. The cyclical pattern of violence that begun in Ch. 14 has not reached its equilibrium yet. Having been outsmarted and outmatched once again, the Philistines will try a different strategy.

Bound and Blind: The End of Samson

The final chapter of the Samson narrative contains numerous examples of perspective shifting. The reader is made aware of Delilah's deal with the Philistines to discover the source of Samson's strength.[99] Interestingly, the insight not afforded to the reader is whether Samson knows Delilah is deceiving him.[100] It seems that he is simply toying with her rather than afraid to tell his secret, as evidenced by how he is convinced to tell her in the end. How is the reader to envisage this scene? It appears that Samson does not know that Delilah has men waiting in ambush in the other room (16:9, 12). Each time Delilah thinks she has subdued him, she calls out to Samson, who awakens and reveals that his strength remains. Crucial to the Philistines' plan, the men continue to wait in hiding until they are sure Samson is weak. The revelation of Samson's secret is also puzzling. Did he believe that his strength came from his Nazirite vow? Nowhere before in the narrative has

[99] A further example of the theme of seeing: the Philistines ask Delilah *to see* where his strength comes from (וּרְאִי בַּמֶּה כֹּחוֹ גָדוֹל).

[100] It is difficult to know whether Delilah's request of Samson was convincing.

Samson's strength been attributed to his Nazirite identity. It is unclear if Samson knows that his head has been shaven when he gets up, but either way, he is confident that he will be able to free himself.[101] The reader is again given an alternative perspective in verse 20: "But he did not know that YHWH had left him." Throughout this narrative, the Spirit of YHWH has empowered Samson. Here, Samson shows no knowledge of this fact. Ken Way puts it well: "Thus Samson's foolish error is not that he has disclosed the secret of his strength *per se*. Instead, he foolishly presumes (or perhaps gambles with the hypothesis) that he is invincible because God's power always seems to be present regardless of his apathetic behavior. He probably thinks that shaving will have no consequences since he frequently compromises his Nazirite status."[102] Whatever his reasoning or lack thereof, Samson is defeated. His eyes are gouged out and he is made a prisoner.

The final scene in the temple of Dagon has all the makings of a Hollywood film (and has indeed influenced a few). Its artistry comes from the perspective shifting technique that the narrator has employed throughout. Before Samson is led in as the evening's entertainment (16:25), the Philistines participate in a service of thanksgiving (Judg. 16:23-24). They praise their god for delivering Samson to them. In what appears to be a hymn of praise, they say "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us (16:24)." The reader knows that it was YHWH, not Dagon, who had delivered Samson; they also know that Samson is indeed guilty of these charges.

Crowds of people have gathered to watch the spectacle of an imprisoned Samson. In 16:24, there is a surprising example of the seeing motif. The Philistines see Samson, and in response, they worship their god. It will inevitably lead to their doom, as Samson will push the pillars aside and bring down building on top of everyone. Before he does this, there is another perspective shift. We hear Samson's languishing cry to God.

וַיִּקְרָא שִׁמְשׁוֹן אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמַר אֲדֹנָי יֱהוִה זָכְרֵנִי נָא וְחַזְּקֵנִי נָא אַךְ הַפַּעַם הַזֶּה הָאֱלֹהִים
וְאִנָּקְמָה נְקָם־אַחַת מִשְּׁתֵי עֵינַי מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים

[101] It is hard to imagine that after keeping his hair uncut for his entire life, Samson would be unaware that something is different.

[102] Way, p. 138.

> And Samson cried out to YHWH, 'My Lord YHWH, please remember me, and please strengthen me now, only this time, O God, and let me avenge (this) one vengeance from the Philistines for my two eyes (Judg. 16:28).[103]

Samson reveals his primary motivation: He asks not for deliverance but revenge. This revenge is not the culmination of the narrative events—He isn't paying the Philistines back for all that has happened to him. No, this act of vengeance is only for his eyes. Moreover, Samson requests that God strengthen him "only this time" or "just this once." This suggests that he has misunderstood YHWH's previous involvement in the narrative. In the moments before his death, he reveals himself to be focused on his own self-interests and in repaying the wrong done to him.

Summary

Samson's story is not his alone. He shares his narrative with many other characters, each offering the reader a competing vision which complicates the interpretation of Judges 13-16. Which perspective does one privilege? From the way the story oscillates freely between various points of view, it seems that the reader is not meant to adopt Samson's perspective uncritically. In many cases, the reader does not need to guess how Samson's actions affected others. The narrator details their cause and effect. Beginning with a wedding and ending in a funeral, Samson's life was overshadowed by his unfulfilled destiny. Like many a good story, the narrator allows for enough ambiguity to leave the evaluation of Samson's character open-ended. Samson is neither a villain or a hero; the story is neither a comedy nor a tragedy.

This is not to say, however, that the narrative gives no clues as to the characterization of Samson. I argued in the earlier sections that the activity of YHWH in the narrative, Samson's Nazirite identity, and the forgotten legacy of Samson did not, on their own merit, provide readers with a clear view of Samson's characterization. When taken together, these three "ways in" might shift the evaluation away from an overtly positive reading of the story. I have argued in this section

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[103] Moore translates it as: "That I may avenge myself on the Philistines for one of my two eyes." He explains that "the greatest evil he could inflict on them would be but partial retribution for the loss of his sight" (p. 362). LXX reads καὶ ἐκδικήσω ἐκδίκησιν μίαν ἀντὶ τῶν δύο ὀφθαλμῶν μου" (and I will avenge a vengeance for my two eyes).

that there was another "way in" that paid attention to how the story was being told. By attending to the alternative perspectives in the narrative, the reader can view Samson's actions holistically. The reader is allowed access to a previously unknown viewpoint, and with it comes a deeper understanding of the events and a new set of expectations. One of the key texts that features a perspective shift is Judg. 14:4. I proposed that the Timnite woman was from YHWH and the object he was seeking from the Philistines could be understood positively, i.e., that Israel's God was seeking reconciliation. Rather than judgment, YHWH was seeking to save them, and he was going to use Samson and this woman to do so.

In the end, Samson does not meet the expectations set out for him by the narrative. The cycles of violence in Judg. 14-15 result in the death of innocent people, most tragically, his wife. Samson's misfortunes are caused by his quest for vengeance that only ends in his death. The Philistines are not reconciled to Israel or to Israel's God. Quite the opposite, the humiliation of Samson only fosters greater reverence for Dagon prior to the collapse of the building, and the Philistines will continue to war with Israel until the time of Solomon. Taken together, these four approaches reveal that the readers' expectations of divine deliverance from or salvation for the Philistines were unmet. The hope given in Judges 13 and the narrator's comment in Judg. 14:4 was undone by the actions of Samson. The complexity of the character, the reticence of the narrator, and the vivid images of lions, honeybees, jawbones, and temple pillars all contribute to the greatness of this story. Samson is among the memorable figures of the Hebrew Bible, and his narrative has enduing value as part of Jewish and Christian Scripture. In the end, however, his story is one of failure.

Seeing Samson with Christian Eyes

In the previous chapter, I argued that the type of exemplarity found in Heb. 11:32 was a hermeneutical *option* for a Christian reading but did not represent the only way to read the Samson narrative. In this chapter, I focused on how the narrative presents the actions of Samson in order to discuss his characterisation. I took cues from reception history, particularly by looking at the role of YHWH and Samson's Nazirite identity, but my argument moved beyond them to explore what effect Samson's forgotten legacy might have on reading the ending. I also suggested that

paying close attention to the various perspectives offered to the reader may provide a clearer picture of Samson's characterisation. In reflecting on what reading Judges as Christian Scripture might look like, this chapter hardly presents anything new or distinctly *Christian* with respect to hermeneutics. In one sense, I was simply paying close attention to the text as many scholars and people of faith have done before me. As I argued at the end of chapter two, a Christian reading does not need to ignore or be in competition with one that centres historical or philological concerns. My argument in this chapter did focus more on the philological and literary dimensions of the narrative, i.e., the world within the text. Differently than others have, I chose to focus on perspective shifting and Judg. 14:4 which has produced a different reading. Yet, in another sense, I was not simply reading the text "on its own terms." Not only did I incorporate nuanced intertextual readings, but as suggested in chapters one and two, my reading strategy is influenced by my social locations and my theological presuppositions (i.e., the canon). The reasons I focused on these particular questions can be directly attributed to my own ideological bias that comes with being a Christian. I was not content with the "Sunday school" type of readings that are inclined to *view* Samson's death as a tragic, heroic martyrdom and *see* the women in the story primarily as sexual temptations to be overcome. I believed that I was reading against the grain of the text, but I instead discovered it was only against the grain of Christian interpretation. The biblical narrative was far more mindful in its presentation of the *other* and how Samson's actions negatively affected them. In the end, readers are left with the silence of Israel's God and a defeated hero. For those who desire to continue to read this story as part of their scripture, how might they raise a meaningful theological and ethical framework from the rubble left in Samson's wake?

From my reading of the Samson narrative, I would like to identify three points that find resonance with the Christian canon, particularly with Jesus' teaching and example as recorded in the New Testament. Reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture does not, in my opinion, necessitate such a connection, but it does allow for such a move. In my estimation, there appears to be a strong continuity between Jesus and the Samson story: it is analogous to Jesus' own critique of Lex Talionis (Matt. 5:38-42), an embodiment of his teaching that "those who live by the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52), and finally, a demonstration of the enemy-love ethic of Jesus as the reader is invited to understand narrative events from the viewpoint of the outsider, and even, Israel's enemy.

An Eye for and Eye Makes the Whole World Blind

One of the principal concerns of the Samson story is the nature of justice. At several points throughout the narrative, Samson acts in order to avenge himself against the Philistines (14:19; 15:3; 15:7; 15:11; 16:28). The reader, however, understands that these actions have serious consequences for both the Philistines and the Judahites—consequences that engender further acts of violence which end in the mutual destruction of Samson and the Philistines. The inclusion of alternative perspectives complicates ethical judgements. Whether an action is seen to be justified or not, will largely depend on one's perspective. To be sure, the Philistines are not characterized by the narrator as a just society, but nevertheless, the reader is invited to view Samson's actions from their perspective. The actions on both sides can be understood as a vengeful rivalry between two wounded parties. Each side has legitimate claims for justice, but both pursue this end solely by means of retributive violence.

Both parties express their claims for justice in a way that finds canonical resonances with the well-known "Eye for an Eye" passages in Exod. 21. The critique of the Samson narrative then may well be aimed at the *Lex Talionis* principle that governs both Samson and the Philistines. Helen Paynter presents a compelling case for why Samson's action cannot be considered in accordance with *Lex Talionis*.[104] The primary goal of the well-known "eye for an eye" principle that can be found in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere in ancient near eastern literature, Paynter argues, is for the preservation of life rather than a quasi-legal way to settle a blood feud. The hallmarks of this law according to the Torah are "proportionality; judicial action exercised within the covenant community; and reciprocity."[105] The events of the narrative, however, do not even loosely resemble *Lex Talionis.* Every action of Samson goes above and beyond what can be considered proportionate or reciprocal. He first kills 30 men for losing a bet. Next, he destroys the agricultural economy of the Philistines because, in effect, his wife left him. He kills an unknown number of Philistines for the murder of his ex-wife (15:8). He slays 1,000 men because he was

[104] '"Revenge for My Two Eyes": Talion and Mimesis in the Samson Narrative', *Biblical Interpretation*, 26/2 (2018), p. 141. Paynter's focus is to present a Girardian reading of the Samson narrative that raises some interesting interpretive questions.

[105] Paynter, p. 139.

captured. Finally, he kills 3,000 people as repayment for his eyes. Paynter suggests that though Samson claims to be pursuing judicial vengeance, the narrator makes no such claim.[106] There is a significant difference between what the character *thinks* they are doing and what they are in fact accomplishing. Instead, the narrator shows Samson to be acting according to his desire for vengeance. The violence exchanged between Samson and the Philistines is not equal but exponential.

These canonical resonances extend to the New Testament and are heard in Jesus' own criticisms of *Lex Talionis*. He says in the gospel of Matthew, "You have heard it said, 'an eye for and eye and a tooth for a tooth', but I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil (Matt. 5:38-39)." He continues to explain to his listeners that they are to go above and beyond what is socially required of them and instead, love and serve their enemies. "Do unto others as you would have them do to you—this is the Law and Prophets" (Matt. 7:12). In stark contrast, Samson and the Philistines seek to justify their actions to the men of Judah who have been caught in this crossfire. In near identical explanations, they both are doing just as the other had done to them (Judg. 15:10-11). Within a Christian frame of reference, one can hear Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount.

The story of Samson can be read as a demonstration of the alternative to Jesus' teaching and the embodiment of the popular saying, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." It is a haunting picture of how unrestrained vengeance can destroy not just the guilty but the innocent, not just your enemy but your neighbour, not just the other but yourself. Samson's blindness manifests itself more than just physically. His quest for revenge prevented him from seeing his actions from the perspective of another. The same could be said for the Philistines, who were too mesmerized by the spectacle of Samson to notice his hands on the pillar and the hatred in his heart. The inability to see and learn from another perspective is what undergirds these actions.

Those who Live by the Sword Die By the Sword.

In a closely connected way, the Samson story also demonstrates the *futility* of violence and human vengeance. In the end, Samson's quest for vengeance leads him to take his own life. At no point

[106] Paynter, p. 141.

in the narrative does Samson (or any of the characters) reflect on the cost of their actions. Each act of violence, the narrative reveals, will lead to only more death and heartbreak. As Jesus is betrayed by Judas in Gethsemane, Peter draws his sword and mounts a last-ditch defence. Jesus rebukes him, explaining that "those who live by the sword will dies by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). This principle and proverb rings true within the Samson story. It is the very thing that animates Samson, i.e., his vengeance, that becomes his undoing. The same can also be said for the Philistines. The alternative to human vengeance, according to Jesus's words, is to trust in God's provision and to love one's enemies.

The Enemy Love of YHWH

A recurring trend in Christian interpretation is to narrowly focus on Samson's love (or lust) for foreign women. Yet, some early Church fathers saw prefigured in Samson the saving act of Christ who would do anything for his Gentile bride. Surprisingly, this is not too far from the kingdom. The narrator has expressed YHWH's own desire to save the Philistines in Judg. 14:4. Even if unconventional, there is precedent in Israel's Scriptures of foreign women aligning themselves with the God of Israel—one such example was the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. Israel's God would choose to be the God of foreigners as well, even if they were the enemy. In much the same way, Jesus embodied this ethic of enemy love. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is found with the "sinners," many of whom look similar to the female characters in the Samson narrative. In Jesus' interactions with the Samaritan woman (John 4) and the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30) we find the actualisation of the expectations found in Judg. 14:4. What was only a hope in the Samson story has become reality in the gospels.[107]

In constructing a Christian ethic, Samson's story presents its readers with an exercise in seeing. As argued earlier, the narrative presents the reader with a variety of viewpoints which gives the reader a holistic picture of the story. We can see the cause and effect of the character's actions, even the actions and thoughts of non-Israelite characters. In reading this story, we learn how to

[107] This more inclusive hope for salvation as well as its realisation is found elsewhere in Israel's Scriptures. I do not wish to create unnecessary competition between Jewish and Christian frames of reference here, but rather, show how they are suggesting the same end.

adopt the perspective of another. This act of seeing is the first step towards Christian charity. As a love that seeks understanding, charity is found first in one's seeing. The goal is not simply to see the Other—whoever that might be—but to see *as* the Other would see the world. This act of perspective-taking is the beginning of love, a love which is the centre of Christian faith and practice and the end of Christian interpretation.[108] The incarnational activity of Jesus includes this alternative vision—He sees *as* a human. In Christ, YHWH has taken on the human perspective. If Christians are to embody the teachings and example of Jesus, then they must also practice this act of perspective-taking which is integral to the Samson story.

[108] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* I.35-36, (transl.) J. Shaw, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series,* Vol. 2. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

— Chapter 5 —

Cultic Conclusion and Royal Refrain: The Function of Judges 17-21 and its Vision of Leadership

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה

In those days there was no king in Israel;
everyone did what was right in their own eyes
(Judg. 17:6; 21:25)

The final chapters of the book of Judges (Judg. 17-21) mark a departure from the so-called typical Judges cycle. Here, the reader is not confronted with an apostate Israel crying out for God's deliverance. They will not find in these chapters a judge or any God-appointed leader. There are both named and unnamed characters as in the previous chapters, but they are not saviours. The character of Micah has his story wrested away from him just as the marauding Danites strip him of his cultic objects and his Levite-priest. So also, in Judges 19 does the narrative seem to focus on an individual—a Levite as well—and his tragic quest to reclaim his *Pilegesh*. Neither this Levite nor the *Pilegesh* become the protagonists of Judg. 19-21. Her body and his story become instrumentalised for purposes of war, and by the close of the narrative, Israel seems to have forgotten all about them.

The reader, on the other hand, is haunted by these narratives and left without any apparent hope for Israel's redemption. The rape and dismemberment of the *Pilegesh* in Judges 19 is one of most harrowing stories in all biblical literature. Its terror only spills over into the following chapters as the tribe of Benjamin is nearly annihilated in the civil war. Their salvation comes through a cunning circumvention of vows which results in the abduction of women from Shiloh. Most troubling in this text is that unlike earlier, the narrator does not give an explicit evaluation of the state of the events.[1] There is no, "and the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judg. 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). This comment is replaced with a more ambiguous statement: "In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

[1] There is little *explicit* evaluation in the book of Judges when it comes to the main characters.

(Judg. 17:6; 21:25). This refrain is repeated in abbreviated form in Judg. 18:1 & 19:1, tying these two narratives together.

Pertinent to our exploration of how these stories can be read as Christian Scripture today is to understand the purpose of this literary departure and how, if at all, do these stories explicate the meaning and strategy of the book as a whole. A common interpretive move is to locate this meaning primarily within the refrain. Judges 17–21, then, has something to do with kingship, leading scholars to argue for and against a variety of ideological stances stemming from complex and conflicting compositional/editorial histories. We will begin our inquiry by outlining some of the ways scholars in recent years have seen kingship in Judges 17–21.

Reading the Refrain: Kingship in Judges 17-21

It has been extensively argued that the explanation for the chaos and violence within the book of Judges can be found in the refrain "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It is thought that this refrain, along with the events of Judges 17–21, form a narratological argument for kingship which sets up the reader for the events of 1 Samuel. "The point of view of the editor of this section is crystal clear," writes A.E. Cundall, "[The author] writes as one *within* the period of the monarchy, when it effectively secured peace, stability and justice in the land, as much as to say, 'Things like that couldn't happen nowadays.'"[2] For Cundall, the events of the Judges 17–21 represent what happens without the institution of the monarchy. The former perilous days of the Judges have been supplanted by the Davidic dynasty. This new kingdom had secured the unity, peace, prosperity, security, justice, and righteousness that were strikingly absent in the Judges period.[3] Taken together with other parts of Judges, the rhetoric of these final chapters, function as an apology for the monarchy. For this reason, Cundall sees no reason for assigning a late date for this part of the book (though he does acknowledge that there may have been editing at the time of the book's compilation into a larger historical work).[4] Speaking generally, A.D.H. Mayes writes: "The inverted pattern of the refrain holds both stories together

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[2] A.E. Cundall, "Judges—An Apology for the Monarchy?," *The Expository Times* 81.6 (1970), p. 180.
[3] Cundall, p. 180.
[4] Cundall, p. 180.

as evident illustrations of the religious and social anarchy to which Israel was subject without the centralizing control of the monarchic institution. The argument for the monarchy could scarcely be put in a stronger, more persuasive, form."[5]

It has however, also been argued that many of the events of Judges 19-21 bear striking resemblance to the later actions of Saul—a point that seems to suggest that kingship, or at least Saul's kingship, is *not* a remedy for the chaos in these chapters but its principal cause.[6] Sara Millstein has argued that there exists within the text traces of an older, more positive portrait of Saul. Judges 20-21 was a war tradition that was attached to an older version of 1 Samuel 1 that featured Saul, rather than Samuel, as the protagonist in this "rags to riches" story.[7] This "pro-Saul complex" is subverted by Judges 19:1-20:13 which functions as a "revision through introduction."[8] Taking this idea further, some scholars understand Judges to have not simply an anti-Saulide/Benjamin slant, but also pro-Judah polemic.[9] O'Connell writes, "it would appear that the ostensible religious-political situation of Judges' compilation/redaction best aligns with that described in 2 Samuel 1-4. The strategy of Judges, which entails an anti-Benjaminite but pro-Judahite rhetoric of entrapment, implicitly spurns the monarchy of Saul but idealises the monarchy of David."[10] This suggests that the rhetoric is not restricted to the question: "which government is best—Monarchy or Judgeship?" It is instead focused on arguing *who* would be a better king: Saul or David?

It is no straightforward task for those who wish to connect a specific "hidden polemic" with a *Sitz im Leben* of the text and the redactional strategy of the editor.[11] Judges 17–21 (and

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[5] "Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17–21," *Biblical Interpretation* 9.3 (2001): 241–58, p. 242. For other scholars who view the refrain as pro-monarchic, see M. Buber, *Kingship of God*, (Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 77-81; T. J. Schneider, *Judges*, (Liturgical, 2000), p.284; Webb, *Judges*, p. 426.

[6] M. Güdemann, *Tendenz und abfassungszeit der letzten Kapitel des Buches der Richter*, (1869); S. Milstein, 'Saul the Levite and His Concubine: The "Allusive" Quality of Judges 19', *VT*, 66 (2016); J. Unterman, 'The literary Influence of "The Binding of Isaac" (Genesis 22) on "The outrage at Gibeah" (Judges 19)', *Hebrew Annual Review*, 4 (1980) [165].

[7] S. J. Milstein, *Tracking the master scribe: revision through introduction in biblical and Mesopotamian literature*, (OUP, 2016), pp. 185-192.

[8] Milstein, *Tracking the master scribe*, pp. 192-200.

[9] Brettler, *Judges*, pp. 11-116; Butler, *Judges*, p. 474; O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, p. 268.

[10] O'Connell, p. 342.

[11] Cf. Y. Amit, 'Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan: Judges Xvii-Xviii', *VT*, 40/1 (1990). Amit argues that the cult at Bethel is the primary target of a hidden polemic in Judges 17-18. She concludes that the story is likely

particularly 19–21) are typically seen to be a later addition to the book of Judges and the so-called Deuteronomistic History.[12] With the monarchy proven to be both disastrous and destroyed, this later (and likely post-exilic) editor would have little need to retain such polemic and even less to reinforce it.[13]

Some scholars have sought to find such a *Sitz im Leben* that might accommodate a post-exilic setting. W.J. Dumbrell has argued against a pro-monarchical reading of the refrain on the basis of an exilic redaction and other negative statements of kingship in Judges.[14] Dumbrell suggests that the text addresses a post-exilic community who find themselves in a similar position to that of Israel in the time of the Judges. He relies heavily on Boling's commentary which suggests that a later redactor viewed Israel's actions *positively*. Boling writes, "The [refrain] has a positive thrust after the ingenious solution of problems in the final scenes . . . it meant that the time had arrived once again for every man to do what was right before YHWH without any sacral political apparatus to get in the way."[15] Dumbrell takes this in a slightly different direction: "The ideal of Israel had been preserved throughout this period *in spite of* Israel."[16] Israel's God had graciously intervened, and it was now revealed that neither the monarchy nor any other type of leadership was needed for deliverance, but only Israel's obedience to YHWH. The post-exilic community, who like the Israel of old, find themselves without the very things that identify them as Israel. Dumbrell suggests that "The response of the writer is to point back to a time when the political accoutrements with which Israel became identified were in process of being acquired, when not even the land had been totally secured, when Israel was principally a tenuous theological ideal rather than a firm political reality. God alone had preserved the concept of Israel then, God alone

written after the exile of Dan in 732 BCE but before Josiah's reform in 622 BCE. "At that time devastated Dan was openly censured, while Beth-el, active and sanctified, received a hidden censure" (p. 19).

[12] So J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments:*, (DE GRUYTER, 1963), pp. 232-323; Moore, *Judges*, pp xxxiv-xxxvii; Römer, *The so-called Deuteronomistic history*, pp. 138, 182. For a concise summary, see Guest, *YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges*, pp. 63-88. Guest herself dates the book of Judges to the late Persian or Early Hellenistic period (p. 88).

[13] Wong, *Compositional strategy*, p. 211. Cf. Block, *Judges*, pp. 59, 583 n.411.

[14] 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).

[15] R. G. Boling, *Judges*, (Doubleday, 1975), p. 293.

[16] Dumbrell, p. 31.

in exile would do it again."[17] This broader theological point is certainly at home in the Hebrew Bible but seems out of place in Judges 19-21.

Cynthia Edenburg argues that the anti-Benjamin polemic in Judges 19-21 fits the post-exilic community in Yehud. She suggests that Gibeah represents the "archetype of a town" that had flourished during the Babylonian exile.[18] During this period, Mizpah replaced the ruined Jerusalem as the economic and administrative centre. With the return of the exiles, there may have been rival interests that could be delineated between tribal heritage.[19] These rival interests, Edenburg argues, is between "those who advanced the restoration of Jerusalem against those who backed the relatively new pre-eminence of Benjaminite towns."[20] One wonders, however, if Edenburg hasn't simply replaced one speculative polemic with another, swapping a pre-exilic compositional motive for a post-exilic one. She does offer a caveat to her conclusion which I will quote in full:

> Admittedly, the author's purpose might have been served better by targeting one of Benjamin's principal cities, such as Mizpah or Bethel. Instead, both these cities receive favourable treatment in the story. The positive attitude toward Mizpah and Bethel in the story might have stemmed from the standing of these towns in the author's time. Indeed, the representation of Bethel as a *legitimate* cult site indicates that no layer of the story is driven by the ideology of cult centralization. This probably is a further indication that comprehensive narrative [*sic*] was composed prior to the restoration of the Jerusalem temple. Gibeah, however, was abandoned about one generation into the Persian period. Furthermore, the choice of Gibeah as the target of the story might have been motivated by the existence of a prior poetic source about a war that took place there. Thus, the availability of a prior source dealing with a long-forgotten event may have been a leading factor in choosing Gibeah to represent the Benjaminite 'Sodom'[21]

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[17] Dumbrell, pp. 31-32.

[18] *Dismembering the whole*, p. 328.

[19] Cf. D. Edelman, 'Did Saulide-Davidic Rivalry Resurface in Early Persian Yehud?', The land that I will show you: essays on the history and archaeology of the ancient Near East in honour of J. Maxwell Miller, (Sheffield Academic, 2001). Edelman focuses on 1-2 Samuel and argues that the rival interests are centred on whether a Saulide or Davidide would be in charge (p. 90).

[20] Edenburg, p. 330.

[21] Edenburg, p. 329. For context, these conclusions regarding the context and purpose of Judges 19-21 take up less than ten pages.

Like the other readings of Judges 19-21 that see its polemic as pro-monarchy or anti-Saulide, Edenburg's interpretation similarly struggles to account for all the data of the text. Not only would the polemic have been better addressed to towns that are portrayed positively by the narrative, but Gibeah itself was abandoned within *one generation into the Persian period.*[22] Perhaps this signals the extreme effectiveness of Judges 19-21, but it more than likely points to the unlikeliness of Edenburg's proposal. This suggestion shifts the narrow historical setting from the time of David and his ascent to the throne to shortly after the return of the exiles as envisaged in Ezra-Nehemiah. As Edenburg sees two major tradents behind Judges 19-21—N^1 as the main narrative (post-Deuteronomistic) and R^2 as a secondary revision that introduced Priestly language—her proposal requires these edits to have been made shortly after its initial composition but before the conflict is resolved.

Surprisingly, the refrain is only briefly treated in the monograph. She views it to be of deuteronomic origin and out of place within Judges 19-21. "The idiom [they did what was right in their own eyes] nearly always occurs in the Deuteronomistic History in connection with (in)fidelity to YHWH; however, the theme of apostasy is totally missing from Judg. 19-21."[23] The refrain is discussed in brief before she concludes that it was "affixed to frame the Gibeah story, with the purpose of creating a semblance of continuity between the adjacent narratives."[24] Edenburg does not specify if this editor is the same as R^2, but it seems reasonable to assume that she envisages a later compiler who introduces the refrain to Judges 19-21 to help it fit better in the narrative. While Edenburg's monograph is extremely thorough and illuminating in many places, her proposal as to the purpose and context of Judges 19-21 feels thin. In his review, Serge Frolov helpfully points out, "the power struggle between Jerusalem and Mizpah that allegedly seethed two and a half millennia ago is of interest neither for the faith communities that consider the Hebrew Bible (a part of) their holy Scripture nor for those who value it as a literary masterpiece."[25] Such narrowly defined historical contexts, whether they are pre-exilic or post-exilic, do little to answer

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[22] I. Finkelstein, 'Tell el-Ful Revisited: The Assyrian and Hellenistic Periods (with a New Identification)', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 143/2 (2011), p. 113; P. W. Lapp, 'Tell el-Fûl', *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 28/1 (1965).

[23] Edenburg, p. 322

[24] Edenburg, p. 297. The discussion of the refrain is on pp. 295-297.

[25] 'DISMEMBERING JUDGES', *Hebrew Studies*, 57 (2016), p. 436.

the question of *why* such texts continued to be read well after the assumed political situation had changed.[26] Moreover, they do not answer why such texts would have continued to be read *as* Scripture.

Adopting an intertextual reading, others have seen a theological purpose buried within the refrain, which refers to not to a human king, but a divine one. YHWH was Israel's true king, and the events of the narrative demonstrate that Israel was far from his rule. At the end of the book, "God is not recognised as King anymore in Israel. Israel reigns over itself, and God is on the outside."[27] Wong argues for this view by establishing that the kingship of YHWH is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, notably in a wide variety of sources including the book of Judges.[28] Next, Wong connects the first part of the refrain with the second part. Drawing on Deut. 12:8, he suggests that Israel's choosing to do what was right in their own eyes (in contrast to doing what was right in YHWH's eyes), speaks to Israel's relationship with their God. "Thus, it would make perfect sense to understand the refrain . . . as referring to Israel's non-honouring of YHWH's kingship."[29]

Continuing, Wong turns to a surprising place—Azariah's speech in 2 Chron 15:1-7. There, the prophet reminds the King that YHWH would be with them if they remained loyal. To clarify his point, Azariah turns to Israel's history. "For a long time, Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest and without the law, but when in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought him, He was found by them" (2 Chron. 15:3-4). After offering some loose examples of how one might connect Judges with this speech, Wong writes, "although there was no significant verbal correspondence . . . there seems to be sufficient parallels between the two to warrant identifying the period referred to in 2 Chron. 15:3-6 as the period of the judges."[30] Wong proceeds to explain that the absence of God, priests, and Torah refers to the "non-honouring of YHWH in a society that has wilfully rejected him."[31] Wong concludes:

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[26] For Edenburg's proposal, this happened within only a generation of the text's initial composition. It might have even occurred within author's (N^1) lifetime.

[27] Way, *Judges*, p. 175.

[28] *Compositional strategy*, pp. 212-223.

[29] Wong, p. 216.

[30] Wong, p. 221.

[31] Wong, p. 223.

> 2 Chron. 15:3-6 confirms an understanding of Judges' refrain that takes מלך as referring to YHWH rather than a human king. For by characterising the period as one when [*sic*] אין מלך בישׂראכל, the author of Judges' refrain may in fact be saying the exact same thing the author of Chronicles . . . מלך in Judges' refrain, then, would simply be a divine epithet that is referentially equivalent to אלהי אמת in 2 Chron. 15:3.[32]

There are several issues with Wong's argument, but the overarching problem is with this theological interpretation.

While such theological points as YHWH's kingship, His sovereignty over all things, and specifically, His ruling over Israel can certainly be found in the DH and other texts in the Hebrew Bible, they are likely not in focus here in the refrain. This theological reading requires the refrain to withstand several levels of abstraction—a weight which cannot be supported by the grammar of the text.

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה

In those days there was no king in Israel;
everyone did what was right in their own eyes
(Judg. 17:6; 21:25)

Rather than seeing the first clause as a temporal marker (as a similar clause functions in Ruth 1:1) or speaking of a human king, this theological reading reads YHWH as referent of מלך.[33] At first glance this seems a very plausible interpretation when read with the second clause. As Wong noted, one can understand the contrast by reading this alongside Deut. 12:8; Israel is supposed to do what is right in *YHWH's* eyes, not their own. Achieving this reading is, however, not as simple as swapping out מלך for יהוה. This would only serve to complicate the sentence theologically (In those days there was no YHWH in Israel). Neither can מלך simply be made to refer generically to YHWH's kingship/reign, as we would have a similar problem (In those days YHWH was not King in Israel

[32] Wong, p. 223

[33] Cf. S. Talmon, *King, cult, and calendar in ancient Israel: collected studies*, (Magnes, 1986), pp. 47-52. Talmon's proposal takes a similar approach as he suggests that מלך really meant the *judge*.

or perhaps, YHWH was not ruling in Israel).[34] So this theological interpretation requires further abstraction. The "there was no King in Israel" in the original refrain must now mean "YHWH was not recognised as king in Israel."[35] Quite a gloss for מלך.

Part of the issue in interpreting the refrain stems from two assumptions which are evident across much of the literature. The first assumption is that monarchy in the ancient world is only a *political* institution that is meant to rectify any political problems Israel faces. The second assumption is that what is proposed as the principal problem Israel faces in Judges 17-21 is primarily *political*. Are these assumptions warranted and do they help us make the best sense of the narrative of Judges and its literary-canonical context?

My argument, very simply, is that the answer to both these questions is no. The underlying issue as exemplified in Judges 17–21 is more *cultic* than political.[36] The issue is that the priesthood (and Israel's religious identity with it) has been corrupt from the start, and the effects of that cultic corruption can be seen throughout the Judges period and well into the reign of Saul. The argument being made in these final chapters is not so much about which type of leadership is preferable (i.e., a king over a judge), but that Israel's leader must exhibit a particular quality (i.e., a proper cultic relationship with YHWH). If their leader lacks this quality, Israel can expect to experience similar amounts of chaos and violence.

In the sections that follow, I will discuss the cultic dimension of kingship depicted in the Deuteronomistic History. Next, I will argue that the problems Israel faces in Judges 17-21 are better understood within a cultic dimension. I will argue that this reading fits better with the overall narrative of Judges and its position within the so-called Deuteronomistic History. I will suggest that the underlying issues of the beginning of 1 Samuel are indistinguishable to those of Judges. The thematic link between the rejection of Eli as priest, Samuel as dynastic judge, and Saul as king

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[34] This is not too far off from what Exum suggests (and from what Wong seeks to avoid). Exum writes, "In Judges 17-21, YHWH's rule is ineffectual, either because YHWH does not intervene in events or because YHWH intervenes in ways that result in destruction rather than benefit ('The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges', *CBQ*, 52/3 (1990), p. 431.

[35] Cf. Smit and Fowl, *Judges*, p. 178.

[36] I'm not trying to imply too much with a word like "cultic". One could easily swap it out for other words like ritual, religious, theological, or priestly. I choose not to use those words because they can carry the extra-weight of hermeneutical approaches or compositional theories. In my use of the word cultic, I only mean it as a shorthand for the arena of proper worship of YHWH, which would include the priesthood, sacrifices, respecting ritual boundaries, and Torah obedience.

is the very problem exemplified by Judges 17–21. Israel's greatest need is not for a change in governance, but that its leader, whether a prophet, priest, judge, or king, must appropriately worship YHWH and lead Israel to do the same.

The Cultic Dimension of Kingship

In the ancient world, religious life and practice were inexorably intertwined with how society operated. To be a king meant presiding over all aspects of the nation's life—its economy, its law courts, its military, and its *cult*. Kings would be the patrons of temples, sometimes portrayed as a priest offering sacrifices in temple reliefs, and even be called priests.[37] Their responsibility to maintain and encourage religious life was one aspect of caring for the needs of their city or nation. If kings were to be successful in war and conquest, they had to make sure that the gods were pleased with them. They built temples and made certain that worship and sacrifices were happening properly. The nation's prosperity and well-being were seen as dependent on their cultic activity. If the gods were happy, the king could defeat his enemies in war. If he was losing his battles, it's likely he had done something wrong.

This phenomenon can be observed across a variety of cultures in the ancient Near East. Among the ritual texts discovered in Ugarit, the vast majority of them "arise from royal concerns, either from the sacrificial cult, where the king himself was the primary actor, or from various groups that surrounded the king and who were the guardians and the transmitters of the royal ideology and its accompanying theology."[38] In Egyptian temple reliefs kings were portrayed as priests.[39] Often, pharaohs adopted the title of high priest, were described as offering sacrifices, and prided

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[37] K. M. Heim, 'Kings and Kingship', (2005), pp. 610-612; K. Whitelam, 'King and Kingship', (1985), p. 46.

[38] D. Pardee, *Ritual and cult at Ugarit*, (Brill, 2002), p. 2. There are many examples of the king offering a sacrifice or being involved in the ritual. Cf. RS 24.256; RS 24.266; RS 1.003/RS 18.056; KTU 1.14 ii 12-27 (in N. Wyatt, *Religious texts from Ugarit*, (Sheffield Academic, 2002), pp. 186-188.

[39] Cf. "Akhenaten sacrificing a duck" in *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, Metropolitan Museum of art (2001), pp. 96; "West wall from a chapel built by Sety I for his father, Ramesses I" in *the Art of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 103-104.

themselves on how much they gave to the gods.[40] Likewise, there was a priestly component to Assyrian and Babylonian kingship.[41]

A similar cultic dimension can be found in Israel's idea of kingship as described in the Deuteronomistic History. In the deuteronomic law of kingship in Deut. 17:14-20, there are several qualifications for Israel's king: they are not to be a foreigner, not to spend all their money on the military, not to multiply wives, etc. A number of these could be classified as the *political* dimension of kingship. The king, however, is also called to obey and practice Torah. He is to write a copy of this law in the presence of priests. Interestingly, this law of kingship is situated in the midst of priestly legal codes which speak of adjudicating cases of covenantal unfaithfulness and provisions for the priestly class. This can be seen as the *cultic* dimension of kingship.

Much the same is true for the second part of the refrain: "And everyone did what was right in their own eyes." As many have pointed out, this language seems to evoke Deut. 12:8. This passage, however, has little to do with generic moral choices as it has been portrayed. Here, Moses explains that Israelite worship will evolve once they have secured the land. They were not forever to "do whatever they pleased" with regard to offering sacrifices, but in the future, God would cause his name to dwell in a particular location—there they would worship and offer sacrifices. In the meantime, they were to be careful to worship YHWH appropriately and avoid the type of idolatrous worship of the surrounding nations. If the refrain in Judges is meant to invoke such Deuteronomistic ideology, then it further clarifies this connection between kingship and concern for Israel's cultic responsibilities.

In his analysis of the Deuteronomist's conception of kingship, Gerald Eddie Gerbrandt suggests that covenant and land are crucial to understanding Israel's king.[42] He writes, "It was up to the king to insure the continued existence of Israel as a people and a nation on the land which

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[40] "The Later Boundary Stelae of Amenhotep IV Akhenaten" (AEL 2:48-49); "The Kadesh Battle Inscriptions of Ramses II" (AEL 2:57-71 [p. 65]; Papyrus Harris (List of accomplishments of Ramses III) *Ancient Records of Egypt* Vol. IV, Breasted, §151-412 [§187-222] (Also ANET:260-262).

[41] In *A Prayer from A Coronation Ritual of The Time of Tukulti-Ninurta I* (COS 1:140); *Inscription of Sargon*, (COS:2.89); *Annals: Assur Clay Tablets (*COS *2:113b)*. Cf. "Relief of King Ashurnasirpal II" in Kim Benzel, *Art of the Ancient Near East: A resource for Educators*, pp. 88-89; T. J. Schneider, *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*, (Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 106-108. For more examples see, *Weight Inscriptions* (COS 2:126 [126j]) *The "Sun Disk" Tablet of Nabu-Apla-Iddina* (COS 2.135).

[42] *Kingship according to the Deuteronomistic History*, (Scholars, 1986), pp. 96-102.

YHWH had given it."[43] This meant, to some extent, that Israel's king should be successful in war and promote social justice—they have to be able to stay in the land and live well in it. These concerns are echoed by Israel in 1 Sam. 8:19-20: they wanted a king like all the other nations who "will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles." Again, this is the *political* dimension. Gerbrandt sees another role at play, "Since Israel's continued existence as a people on the land was dependent on her obedience to the covenant, and since the King's ultimate responsibility was to ensure this continued existence, the king's role was then to make sure that the covenant was observed in Israel. Practically, he could be called the *covenant administrator*."[44] One of the responsibilities of the king was to facilitate in Israel the proper worship of YHWH. This can be seen throughout the Deuteronomistic history in the evaluation of the kings. The historian was not concerned with how well the economy was doing; there is no mention of ancient equivalents of the stock market or low unemployment rates. Instead, the historian's judgement is primarily focused on the king's religious achievements, i.e., how well did he love and serve the Lord. One of the markers for a successful king is in this *cultic* dimension—did he remove the high places, or did he set up idols and shrines?

In the section on Judges 17-21, Gerbrandt spends much of his time discussing whether these chapters can be used to construct the Deuteronomist's view of kingship. He thinks they would fit very well theologically and even suggests that the case for a late redaction by Noth and others is perhaps overstated. The politics of source criticism aside, this concept of King as covenant administrator with its cultic dimension fits very well in the final form of Judges.

The refrain in Judges 17-21 is about kingship, but it is not an unqualified endorsement of the monarchy—generic or particular.[45] It is a diagnostic statement from the author/editor, who thought that kingship would have been of some help to Israel. However, our hearing of that refrain and thus our interpretation of it might suffer from a historical distance. Readers today likely do not conceive of kingship in the way ancient authors did. Today, when we hear "king", we primarily

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[43] Gerbrandt, p. 98.

[44] Gerbrandt, p. 99.

[45] Cf. M. L. Conway, 'Monarchy in Judges: Positive or Negative?', *JBTS*, 4/1 (2019), p. 40; P. E. Satterthwaite, '"No King in Israel": Narrative Criticism and Judges 17-21', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 44/1 (1993), p. 88; A. T. Abernethy and G. Goswell, *God's Messiah in the Old Testament: expectations of a Coming King*, (Baker Academic, 2020), p. 34.

think of the role in its *political* dimension. The monarch is responsible for governing and organising the city or the nation. Yet, as I have argued, kingship in the ancient world also included a *cultic* dimension where matters of religion and worship were part of the king's duties. So then, to say "king" meant more than just "the guy who sits on the throne." The monarch's identity was defined by both their political and cultic roles.

This conceptual singularity of Kingship then is what complexifies the reading of this refrain in the present. Interpretation has opted to read king as narrowly signalling the *political* dimension. Not to swing the pendulum too far in the other direction but only to provide the proper balance, the rest of this chapter will focus on highlighting the cultic dimension of kingship in these texts. The distinction between these two dimensions is a modern one—to discuss the *political* without mention of the *cultic* (and vice versa) is to already leave the conceptual world of the ancient Near East and the Deuteronomistic History. But this separation is necessary in the present in order to hear more clearly the words, "In those days there was no *king* in Israel."

The Cultic Dimension of Judges 17-21

By way of an interconnected series of short stories, the reader is given the diagnosis for Israel's shortcomings that they have witnessed in chapters 3-16. By way of the refrain, the reader is given the solution. As shown, many have seen this diagnosis to be oriented to Israel's *political* leadership. Their issue is that they lacked some quality that a *political* leader could fix. For example, if inter-tribal unity is the "good" that is thought to be missing from Israel (as seen in the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:14-18, 23) and in the increasingly strained relationship between the Ephraimites and other tribes (Judg. 8:1-3; 12:1-7)), then one would expect to find this theme more pronounced in Judges 17-21. I will argue in this section that the problem in Judges 17-21 is overwhelmingly *cultic*, and thus, the solution envisaged in kingship must be one that will rectify these cultic problems.

Judges 17-18

The salient feature that is shared between the stories in Chs. 17-18 and Chs. 19-21 is a corrupt or negligent priesthood. What likely was once a cultic aetiology of a holy site in northern Palestine, or perhaps, an explanation or expansion of the tribal allotments in Josh. 19:40-48, the narrative as it now stands in Judges 17-18, functions quite baldly as a critique of the numerous *cultic* infractions therein.[46] To avert his mother's curse, Micah confesses to stealing the family's silver. The forgiving mother dedicates the returned silver to YHWH and commissions an idol to be made.[47] The narrator piles up cultic descriptions: the money is given to make a carved image (פֶּסֶל) and a molten image (מַסֵּכָה).[48] Micah sets them up in a shrine (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים) and makes other cultic/divinatory objects: an ephod and some תְּרָפִים for good measure. Great were Micah's aspirations, but they were made complete when a wandering Levite — later revealed to be a descendent of Moses — agreed to become his priest. What is most problematic in this chapter is that all this illicit cultic action is directed unto YHWH. Ken Way puts it like this: "Here it is evident that 'doing what is right in one's own eyes' is not so much about worshipping other gods but about worshiping God in the wrong way. YHWH is the only deity present in this story, and this is precisely the problem."[49] Israel's recurring problem of worshipping other gods as depicted in Judges 3-16 is framed here as religious syncretism.

The narrative transitions in Judges 18 to the tribe of Dan and their quest to find a permanent home after having been unable to secure their inheritance. Before conquering Laish, they rob Micah of his priest and his idol. After decimating the inhabitants of the unsuspecting

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[46] Cf. Moore, *Judges*, pp. 366-368. For a comprehensive study of Dan in the biblical traditions, see M. W. Bartusch, *Understanding Dan: an exegetical study of a Biblical city, tribe and ancestor*, (Sheffield Academic, 2003), pp. 170-202.

[47] Ironically, the mother dedicates the silver, but only 200 pieces of the 1,100 are used for the idol.

[48] Likely, only one idol is crafted here. It was first made of wood or stone and then overlaid with silver. cf. Way p. 146. The idol would have been relatively small if had been pure silver. As 200 shekels of silver is approximately 2.3kg, if we were to factor the standard density of the metal, assuming it truly was pure silver ore, it would only yield 230 cm^3 of silver. This would equate to approximately 15cm tall stature, based on the average human size ratios (Thank you to Seth Price for helping me with the calculations). This agrees with the average size of silver images we have found in the ANE. Cf. O. Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal: an archaeological study of ancient Syro-Palestinian figurines*, (Tel Aviv University, 1976), pp. 14-16 (Fig. 17 [72] and 19 [96]).

[49] Way, p. 148.

Laish, the Danites rename the city after their namesake and set up the looted idol(s) and establish a sanctuary and priesthood. This cultic aetiology of the northern sanctuary of Dan resembles the story of Jericho (Joshua 6) but with some obvious differences. Jericho is heavily fortified and armed, while Laish is described as quiet and trusting. [50] YHWH is credited with the victory in the Joshua account, but no mention is made of YHWH's involvement in the battle here. One important distinction between these accounts is their divergent treatment of priests. Commanded by YHWH, the priests are an integral part of the battle plan as they march around Jericho with the ark. In Judges 18, the Danites first steal all of Micah's cultic paraphernalia, and then, almost as an afterthought, convince the Levite to be their priest. The presence of the idols and the priest seems to make no difference in the battle for Laish. Furthermore, all references to YHWH drop out in the latter part of this chapter. Has the syncretism of chapter 17 rapidly devolved into worship of foreign gods? In Joshua, the cult was utilised; in Judges it was instrumentalised. Having a Levite as a priest was a luxury neither Micah nor the Danites could pass up. In the quest for spiritual significance and divine blessing, they would need all the talismans they could collect. And the Levite, who is now revealed to be the grandson of Moses (18:30), is quite happy to accept this promotion; he has no problem being added to the Danite's collection.

Continuing with her penchant for discovering a hidden polemic, Yariah Amit suggests that this narrative critiques not only the northern sanctuary of Dan and the anarchic state that allowed it—the "open polemic"—but also the cultic site at Beth-el.[51] Amit helpfully marks out four criteria for determining if a text has a hidden polemic, so as to be sure that it is not "the wild invention of the later commentator, interested in assigning to the text a specific meaning to suit his purpose."[52] First, a text must not explicitly reference the object of the polemic—it would not be *hidden* if that were the case. Secondly, there must be enough "signs, even including the odd and the difficult,

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[50] This may not cohere with the archaeological data *per se*. The ancient city of Laish identified as Tel-Dan (Tell el-Qadi), shows extensive fortifications during the Middle to Late Bronze age, with a four-part gate and ramparts. A destruction layer dating to the 12th-centruy BCE followed by a change in material culture might be attributed to the Danite migration, Cf. A. Biran, 'Dan', in E. Stern (ed.), New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Evacuations in the Holy Land, (1993), pp. 179-181. Bartusch argues against Biran's interpretation explaining that the different structures and pottery found in Strata VI & Strata V do not necessarily indicate the inhabitants were Israelite. Instead, the semi-nomadic structures would be consistent with a community trying to rebuild after the destruction of their city (Bartusch, *Understanding Dan*, pp. 179-181).

[51] Amit, 'Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan', pp. 4-20.

[52] Amit, 'Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan', p. 11.

used by the author to lead to the polemic." In other words, the polemic must not be so hidden that the intended reader cannot discover it. Thirdly, the hidden polemic ought to be found elsewhere in the biblical corpus as an open critique. Fourthly, the object of censure should be found in the exegetical tradition.[53]

Having set out these criteria, Amit proceeds to reveal the signs within the narrative that point to Bethel being the object of the hidden polemic. Referring to the region—the mountains of Ephraim—rather than Bethel, is one such example. She argues that this region elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is a synonym for Bethel.[54] Perhaps the strongest piece of evidence is that there is a connection between Judges 17:5 and the Jacob/Bethel narrative in Genesis 28. A "shrine" (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים) is listed in Judges 17:5 as one of the many things created by Micah in this undetermined place in the mountainous region of Ephraim. This "house of god(s)" (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים) without the definite article or any possessive suffixes only occurs here and in Gen. 28:17, 22.[55] Amit also notes that the extended introduction of Micah in chapter 17 suggests that more than just the Danites are being censured here.[56]

Amit's work is important for it demonstrates that *cultic* concerns are at the heart of this narrative. Judges 17-18 is not a generic critique of idolatry; it is pointed at particular cultic centres. Amit suggests that the text originates sometime after the exile of the northern kingdom but before Josiah's reforms.[57] While Dan could be lambasted openly, Bethel remained an important cultic centre and thus needed to be censured in a subtle way.[58] If this text is meant to critique the illicit cultic centres of Bethel and Dan which were set up by Jeroboam I, then the refrain points to the

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[53] Amit, 'Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan', pp. 11-12.

[54] For evidence, Amit cites Jer. 4:15 which connects Mount Ephraim to Dan. She further connects Bethel to Beth-Aven, presumably with inclusion of "וּמַשְׁמִיעַ אָוֶן מֵהַר אֶפְרָיִם". She does not cite them, but a few passages in Hosea point to Beth-Aven as an epithet for Bethel, strengthening her point (cf. Hos. 4:15; 5:8; 10:5, 8).

[55] Amit, p. 13. Other pieces of evidence include Bethel being an "associative appendage of Dan," the similarity between Micah's molten image and the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, and the appointment of priests. While some of these points may not be as strong as others, taken together, her case is convincing.

[56] Amit, pp. 15-16.

[57] Amit, p. 19.

[58] In contrast, Webb points to *Shiloh* as the hidden identity of Micah's shrine (pp. 449-450). Both are located in the Ephraimite hill country. The narratives end with a reference to Shiloh in Judg. 18:31 and includes a similar phrase to Judg. 17:5—the בֵּית־הָאֱלֹהִים. The censure of Shiloh would fit very well with what follows in Judg. 21 and 1 Samuel 1-6. Unfortunately, Webb does not interact with Amit's work here.

cultic dimension of kingship. Whatever the originating context may be, its recontextualization as part of the Former Prophets allows readers a better vantage point to recognise this "hidden" polemic. Such cultic infractions were by and large the *result* of the monarchy. If Israel was to follow YHWH, they needed a leader who would establish proper and faithful worship.

Judges 19-21

Even if other themes are foregrounded in chapter 19, the cultic dimension is still present.[59] Signalling the events of chapters 17-18, the protagonist is a Levite from the same vicinity of Micah's shrine who goes to retrieve his *Pilegesh* from Bethlehem of Judah, the same town as that of Micah's Levite. The similar introduction might cause readers to expect a reversal in the narrative, that *this* Levite might set things straight. As the story and the relationships in it unravel, the readers encounter not a divinely appointed saviour but a villain. The callousness of the Levite is only outmatched by his grotesque act in which he dismembers the woman. Here, in perhaps disturbing irony, his actions might be read in a sacrificial sense.[60]

There is a text-critical problem that might provide an additional link to the cultic dimension. When questioned by the old man in Gibeah, the Levite explains his journey: "We are passing through from Bethlehem of Judah to remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I have come. I went to Bethlehem of Judah, and to the *House of YHWH* I am going, but there is no one who has taken me into their house" (Judg. 19:18). In place of בֵּית יְהוָה, the LXX reads "my home" (τον οἰκον μου), whereas the Targum reads the "sanctuary/temple of the LORD" (וְלֹבֵית מַקדְשָׁא דַיְיָ).[61] The MT may represent a scribal error or, alternatively, the LXX may only be an attempt to harmonise this verse with what comes in Judg. 19:29 where the Levite returns to his

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[59] A significant theme in Judges 19 is the poor treatment of women and gender-based violence. Space precludes me from commenting in depth on this very important issue. For a more thorough treatment of this chapter and its issues, see my 'Cut & Splice: Reading Judges 19 Cinematically'. Cf. R. Graybill, *Texts after terror: rape, sexual violence, and the Hebrew Bible*, (OUP, 2021), pp. 144-170; J. E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: hearing women's stories in the Old Testament*, (WJK, 2005); H. Paynter, *Telling terror in Judges 19: rape and reparation for the Levite's wife*, (Routledge, 2020).

[60] נתח, which occurs only in the Piel is used regularly in the Priestly literature to describe ritual sacrifice (e.g. Exod. 29:17; Lev. 1:6; 1:12; 8:20). Cf. J. Matheny, 'A Grotesque Presentation: the use of women's bodies in Judges 19-21'; T. Sutskover, 'The Frame of Sacrificing in Judges', *VT*, 64/2 (2014), p. 273.

[61] This is supported by the Vulgate and Syriac. Cf. the discussion in *BHQ*, p. 108.

house.[62] It could also be a scheme on part of the character. This inclusion of a divine mission (or a destination, at the very least), might simply be a strategic "name drop" to secure lodging for the night. How else would the old man know he was a Levite?[63] This coheres with the Levite's later testimony that is filled with half-truths (Judg. 20:4-7). Both of these views aim to provide a reasonable explanation for the Levite's response. He has not mentioned this shrine before and, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that he is not the ideal portrait of a country priest.

An alternative suggestion is that this discrepancy between speech and action is part of the narrator's polemic. The incongruence is intentional. In Judg. 17-18, Micah has built a בֵּית אֱלֹהִים in the hill country of Ephraim. Though unnamed, this shrine might be identified as Bethel (or perhaps Shiloh). Either one is plausible for both of these cultic centres are mentioned in Judges 20-21. Here, in Judges 19, the Levite says that he is returning to a בֵּית יְהוָה in a similar location. A similar strategy of a hidden polemic might be seen to be in effect here as well. The author(s) may have wanted to intensify the critique by stacking bad example upon bad example but did so without explicitly naming the sites. This is why different words are being used. Is the בֵּית יְהוָה in Judg. 19:18 Shiloh or Bethel? The ambiguity and the literary context would allow both, but perhaps this is the way the text is able to indiscriminately critique idolatry and the leaders that have allowed it.

The cultic dimension comes back into focus in Judges 20. With all of Israel gathered for civil war with Benjamin, the people go up to Bethel to inquire of YHWH. After two promises of victory, they are soundly defeated twice by the vastly outnumbered Benjaminite force.[64] Israel then breaks out all the stops, bringing the ark and its priest, Phineas (this time, it is a descendent of Aaron). The final battle ends with Israel massacring the tribe of Benjamin, leaving only 600 men—a result directly attributed to the God of Israel.

Many scholars view Israel's cultic actions as sincere and a demonstration of repentant faith. Susan Niditch, for example, explains that these accounts serve "to re-emphasize that though the victory may be difficult to achieve, God is behind justified holy war and guarantees eventual

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[62] Block (p. 531 n. 227) argues, along with O'Connell, that a scribe likely mistook the 1cs pronominal suffix of ביתי for the abbreviated form of יהוה (O'Connell, p. 483). Cf. Burney, *Judges*, pp. 466-467; Boling, *Judges*, p. 275; Soggin, *Judges*, p. 287.

[63] Schneider, *Judges*, p. 259; Butler, *Judges*, p. 408; Way, *Judges*, p. 160.

[64] These "promises" are very ambiguous and open to being read in more than one way. Lapsley illustrates this point well, pp. 53-55.

success."[65] Unlike the previous narratives, Lillian Klein sees no irony here. She comments, "Only when all the people return to YHWH at Bethel and petition through a faithful priest does his answer have certitude."[66] In addition to depicting proper worship, Butler sees in it a subtle critique against the northern kingdom and Bethel: "The narrator grants that at one time Bethel was God's chosen place of worship, but only when it could claim the proper religious accoutrements, namely, the proper sacrifices, the proper symbols of divine presence, and the proper priesthood."[67] But do these verses indicate proper worship of YHWH?

Throughout Judges 20, there are a number of linguistic and narratival irregularities, which should give the reader some pause.[68] For example, after receiving the Levite's "message," Israel assembles "to the Lord at Mizpah" (אל־יהוה המצפה). This construction (קהל + אל־יהוה) is unrepeated in the Hebrew Bible as is the use of אל־יהוה to describe a gathering of Israel.[69] Another linguistic anomaly is in the phrase "the assembly of the people of God" (בקהל עם האלהים). The Levite's story also deviates from the narrator's account in Judges 19 in significant ways. The Levite removes all amount of blame from himself and places it upon the lords of the city as opposed to the "sons of Belial." He also makes sure to add that his *Pilegesh* was dead before he cut her up, a point that the narrator leaves ambiguous. Another deviation is found in the first oracular inquiry of Israel in that they direct their question to God (אלהים) but receive a response from YHWH.[70]

Israel's third inquiry of YHWH, complete with fasting, weeping, and sacrificing, seems to change things. There is a parenthetical clause which explains to the reader about Phineas and the ark, but it has problematic intertextual resonances. First, the cultic item is named as "the ark of the

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[65] 'The "Sodomite" Theme in Judges 19-20: Family, Community; and Social Disintegration', *CBQ*, 44/3 (1982), p. 374.

[66] Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, p. 182. For more interpretations that see the cultic actions of Israel as sincere, see B. E. Organ, 'Pursuing Phinehas: A Synchronic Reading', *CBQ*, 63/2 (2001), p. 216 (cited in Smit, p. 187). Boling, *Judges*, p. 288; Davis, *Judges*, p. 22; Jordan, *Judges*, pp. 303-328; Schneider, *Judges*, p. 275; Smit and Fowl, *Judges*, p. 186; Webb, *Judges*, p. 486; Wilcock, *The message of Judges*, pp. 171-172.

[67] Butler, p. 446.

[68] Cf. B. Hurlbert, 'Taking the Absurdity Seriously: Questioning the Complicity of YHWH in Judges 20-21', in H. Paynter, T. Lawrence (eds.), The Hermeneutics of Violence, (Sheffield Phoenix Press, forthcoming). Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, I argue that such irregularities are diagnostic indicators of the absurd. Several other absurdities in the narrative allow the reader to question the complicity of YHWH in the violence against the Benjaminites.

[69] The typical phrase is לפני יהוה as is illustrated by the Targum.

[70] The other two inquires (Judg. 20:23, 27-28) are made to YHWH.

covenant of God" (אֲרוֹן בְּרִית הָאֱלֹהִים), a designation occurring only four times, here being the first.[71] Significantly, the second use of this phrase in 1 Sam. 4:4 occurs in a similar war-time context. Eli's corrupt son, Phineas, uses the ark as a talisman to secure victory for Israel against the Philistines, but Israel's attempt to manipulate YHWH through the cultic objects fail when YHWH does not show up.[72] Secondly, the location of the ark at Bethel is suspect. In Judg. 18:31, the narrator reports that the house of God was located at Shiloh, presumably with the ark there as well.[73] At the end of the Judges period the ark along with the house of God is located at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1). Did Israel transport the ark to Bethel specifically for this war?[74] Thirdly, was the ark present during the first two oracular consultations? The text reports that the ark was there "in those days," conveying that the ark had been there sometime.[75] If this is the case, then one wonders why Israel did not consult it sooner, or if they had, why was YHWH wrong twice?[76] Fourthly, there is yet another linguistic abnormality. Phineas is said to have been ministering (*lit*. standing) before the ark (עמד לפניו).[77] While the ark symbolizes the presence of YHWH and thus it is appropriate to perform cultic rituals before it, the priests are meant to use the objects to minster before YHWH, not minister to the objects.[78] All of these details leave open the possibility that Israel has an improper disposition towards the cultic objects, even if their piety appears sincere.

The final chapter in the book of Judges tells of the immediate regret Israel had for nearly annihilating Benjamin. Unbeknownst to the reader, they had earlier made an oath not to give their daughters to Benjamin, seemingly sealing the fate of their kinsman. After weeping they set to

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[71] Block, p. 561.

[72] W. J. Deane and T. Kirk, *Studies in the first book of Samuel*, (Klock & Klock, 1983), p. 37.

[73] O'Connell argues for a textual emendation from "the exile of the land" to "the exile of the ark" in 18:30 (p. 481f n. 107).

[74] Boling suggests that בית־אל is a sanctuary at Mizpah (pp. 281, 285). Israel would then not be traveling back and forth between sites (cf. Soggin, pp. 292-293). Butler views the mention of Bethel as an apology for proper cultic worship (p. 446).

[75] The phrase "in those days" is missing from verse 27 in LXX^{B}. Perhaps this is due to dittography, but it is difficult to say which came first. Whatever the case may be, the fact that Israel did not consult the high priest either before the third day of battle or during the reconstruction (especially in Israel's deliberation over how to provide wives for Benjamin) only serves to sharpen the absurdity.

[76] Cf. McCann, *Judges*, p. 132.

[77] The ark (as opposed to YHWH) is the only reasonable referent of the third person singular suffix.

[78] See especially Deut. 10:8: At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD to stand *before the LORD* to minister to *him* and to bless in his name, to this day" (emphasis mine).

scheming and commit more violence against other Israelites to secure some wives for Benjamin. When there were not enough, they plan to allow the Benjaminites to kidnap and (subsequently rape) the daughters of Shiloh who have gathered for the annual festival of YHWH (חַג־יְהוָה). Ironically, and showcasing the larger cultic issue, Israel must give the would-be rapists directions to Shiloh because they don't know where it is, meaning, they don't know where the house of YHWH is.

Many things have gone wrong in these chapters: lying, theft, murder, rape, sexual violence, civil war, kidnapping, and a general sense of being unneighbourly. In short, the distinguishing feature of Israel — YHWH and his *Torah* are conspicuously absent in these final chapters. When they do show up briefly, their appearance is obscured by the awkwardness of the language and the appalling context: Do you, O Lord, really want us to kill our brethren? But throughout these chapters, explicitly and implicitly—hidden or not—the cultic issues keep reappearing.

What would have changed had a king been ruling in Israel during the events of Judges 17-21? Likely, very little in the political dimension. Though the Danites were unable to drive out the Amorites and claim their allotment (Judg. 1:34; Josh. 19:40-48), they effectively mobilised and conquered Laish without a king. The events of Judges 19 would have likely still happened—a centralised government does not bring an immediate end to all crime. The civil war that follows this abhorrent crime unites Israel—both in its judicial punishment of Gibeah and in its reconciliation with Benjamin in chapter 21. Amit's comment here is particularly noteworthy: "In the world described in Chapters 19-21, the social function of the king is superfluous. The tribal institutions are shown as capable of being organised and organising the people as one man of uprooting evil from Israel, and of controlling the cultic and moral situation."[79]

This is a very positive construal of the narrative by Amit, with which there is plenty room for disagreement. Her observation, however, highlights that the issue in these chapters is predominately cultic and moral, rather than a social one (to use her words). Judges 17-21 presents a very troubling picture of an Israel without a functioning or faithful priesthood. A king, in its narrowly defined political sense, wouldn't do any better or anything altogether different. But a king committed to YHWH, one who ensures that Israel and her priests are worshipping properly, a king

[79] *The book of Judges*, (Brill, 1999), p. 348.

who fulfils his cultic responsibilities and observes the Torah—had this type of king been present "in those days", then the story could reasonably be reckoned to have turned out differently. In the next section, we will briefly explore how similar cultic issues can be seen to plague Israel in the rest of the book of Judges.

The Cultic Dimension in the Book of Judges

Like Judges 17-21, the underlying problem of the rest of the book of Judges is predominantly cultic. The repeated Deuteronomic cycle of apostasy, oppression, repentance, and deliverance through a judge characterises the shape and plot of Judges (Judges 2). What initiates that cycle each time is a *cultic* problem—Israel turns away from YHWH and worships foreign gods, which subsequently results in a *political* problem—Israel is oppressed by a foreign nation. God raises up a judge to deliver them from their enemies, but the problem of oppression (and with it, the *political* dimension) is secondary. The interplay between the cultic and political dimensions of kingship and the blurring of these categories can be seen the most clearly in the Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah cycles.

Gideon: The Priestly Judge

Beginning with the call of YHWH, Gideon's judgeship is fraught with cultic problems (not all of which are Gideon's fault). First, Gideon repeatedly doubts YHWH's character and promises (Judg. 6:13).[80] Secondly, his treatment of the angelic messenger betrays latent syncretistic or idolatrous worship.[81] Thirdly, he tears down his father's altar of Baal and the Asherah shrine. Fourthly,

[80] To use the canonical term, his covenant. Gideon's honest complaint against the Lord's real or perceived abandonment is elsewhere echoed in the Psalms and Prophets. It may be that Gideon's cries represent an appropriate response to tragedy and a faith in the throes of desperation. His sincerity is underscored by the fact that he does not know the true identity of the messenger. The transformation of his character, however, is muted by the repeated doubts.

[81] E. Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives (Judg 6-12)*, (Brill, 2005), pp. 37-38. "Gideon's cultic association is not worship of God, but idolatrous worship . . . The place where the offering is presented is cited here for good reason. Through reference to the terebinth, the idolatrous context is underscored. This element is a preliminary indication of the Baal worship that will come in

Gideon asks for three separate signs, which were meant to confirm his calling.[82] Fifthly, despite these signs, Gideon still doubts YHWH's presence with him and is only finally convinced by a Midianite's dream omen (Judg. 7:13-15).[83]

One can also see Gideon facing social and political issues. Israel's unity is tested as the Ephraimites feel snubbed by Gideon's late invitation to the battle. It says they contend with him fiercely, but Gideon can placate them through diplomatic means. As Gideon chases the remaining kings of Midian, the men of Succoth and Penuel refuse to give him any support. Nonetheless, he captures Zebah and Zalmunna without their help and returns to punish them with violence. In the description of the punitive violence against Succoth, Gideon is said to have captured a young boy who wrote down the names of the rulers. This tactic of capturing an inhabitant of city for intelligence purposes has been used elsewhere by Israel, notably against Luz/Bethel (Judg. 1:22-26). Here, Gideon applies a similar tactic against his own people.[84]

After his victory, Israel asks Gideon to be a dynastic ruler. As many have noted, though neither *melek* nor *malak* is used, kingship is in view. Surprisingly, Gideon rejects the offer and utters perhaps the most theological statement in the whole book, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; YHWH will rule over you" (Judg. 8:23). Yet, as the next chapter will make clear, his son is named Abimelech (*lit.* my father is king) and has a murderous ambition to rule. Wong takes this to suggest that "Gideon's rejection of the kingship offer may not be all it appears."[85] Gideon's statement coupled with the very negative portrayal of Abimelech's kingship has been understood to represent a *de facto* anti-monarchic ideology. As some have argued, this might reflect the Deuteronomistic History's larger anti-monarchic stance. The narrative certainly can be read that way. But between Gideon's rejection of kingship and Abimelech's reign of terror is another cultic issue. Much like Aaron in Exodus 32, or perhaps more like Micah in Judges 17, Gideon takes the people's gold and makes for himself a permanent divinatory device in the form

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the next section of the account [Judg. 6:25-32]. However, the use of the idolatrous associations in Gideon's action indicates the extent of Gideon's alienation from God and even Gideon's involvement in idolatry."

[82] The acceptance of the meal by the Angel of the Lord in 6:21 and the two fleece tests in 6:36-40

[83] Way, p. 67.

[84] Assis argues that "Gideon is motived by injury to his honour" (p. 95).

[85] Wong, p. 90.

of a golden ephod. In effect, he establishes an illicit cult.[86] The narrator gives us his judgement: "And all Israel prostituted after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family" (Judg. 8:27). Ian Wilson notes, "After refusing to establish a dynasty, Gideon nevertheless acts very kingly, at least according to ancient Near Eastern conventions. He subdues his enemies for forty years, collects copious amounts of gold, acts as a cultic leader, and produces a coterie of children with many wives (8:24-32). Gideon essentially becomes an anti-Deuteronomic king."[87] Even so, what Gideon is explicitly censured for is that his cultic actions lead Israel into apostasy.

Abimelech: The Temple King

Abimelech's kingship was almost certainly a local phenomenon as opposed to a national one, which is perhaps why he is never recognized as a legitimate king (or even as the first) in Israel's history. His rule is fraught with familial conflict as he secures his "royal" position by murdering his brothers and aligning with his kinsman at Shechem. Jotham's fable adds to the anti-monarchic sentiment of the Gideon-Abimelech narratives, but the polemic appears to be aimed at the character of Abimelech rather than at the monarchy as a whole.[88] At first glance, the cultic dimension does not appear in a meaningful way as it does elsewhere in Judges. The scholarship on Abimelech is typically focused upon the question of leadership posed by Jotham's fable or how the narrative does (or does not) relate to the Gideon cycle. Upon closer inspection, however, there are a few elements within the narrative that allow the story to be envisaged in this cultic dimension.

After the death of Gideon, Israel quickly turns to worshipping foreign gods, including an enigmatic בַּעַל בְּרִית (Lord of the Covenant). The turn to syncretistic worship appears to be widespread. However, the following narrative in Judges 9 focuses only on the area of Shechem,

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[86] Assis suggests that the inclusion of the "crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian" among the things donated to create the ephod underscore the royal nature of the object, p. 106. Perhaps this is further evidence of a blurring between the offices of a priest and a king.

[87] I. D. Wilson, *Kingship and memory in ancient Judah*, (OUP, 2017), p. 90.

[88] Cf. Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, Biblical Interpretation Series v. 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 106-107; Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest*, p. 146; Block, pp. 321, 336; Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 131-132.

which previously did not significantly feature in the Gideon narrative. The shift in location is grounded in Abimelech's mixed parentage—his mother's clan was from Shechem, but this does not necessarily clarify the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of Shechem. The introduction of Gaal in vs. 26 and his calls for revolt based on ancient family ties may indicate that Abimelech has established his throne by means of a Canaanite alliance.[89] Apart from the narrator's charges of idolatry in 8:33, the first major signal of a cultic dimension is found in 9:4. Having convinced the ruling elders of his cunning, Abimelech secures funding from the temple treasury for his treacherous plan. Abimelech murdering his 70 brothers "on one stone" may signal a ritualized or sacrificial killing (9:5).[90]

Shechem in the wider literary-canonical context

The location of Abimelech's coronation in vs. 6 is described in a peculiar manner: עִם־אֵלוֹן מֵצַּב אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁכֶם (*lit.* by the terebinth caused to stand which is at Shechem). As seen in the Septuagint versions and noted by Moore, the hophal participle (מֵצַּב) likely refers to a pillar or standing stone (מַצֵּבָה) which has some religious or cultic significance.[91] These objects and their location at Shechem might also allow for the canonical reader to find deeper resonances and a surplus of meaning.

Shechem has a rich cultic tradition within the Hebrew Bible. It is here that YHWH first appears to Abra(ha)m and promises his offspring the land (Gen. 12:6-7). This would mark the first appearance of YHWH in narrative sequence in Israel's Scriptures. Abra(ha)m builds an altar

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[89] Cf. Stone, 'Judges', p. 304. This would mean that Abimelech functions as an anti-judge in that he does not deliver Israel from their oppressors but to their oppressors. Gaal traces his ancestry back to "Hamor" which may refer to an underlying tradition of Genesis 34. Following earlier scholars and evidence from Mari, Ken Way suggests that Hamor may refer to "an honorific title acquired later that alludes to the practice of treaty/covenant ratification by means of slaughtering donkeys" (p. 84). Several scholars have seen Judges 9 to be made up of earlier sources that featured various Canaanite elements (Cf. Klaas Spronk, *Judges*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), p. 261).

[90] Boling, p. 171; Klein, p. 71; Spronk, *Judges*, p. 270-271.

[91] As Moore notes (pp. 243-44), the hophal form makes little sense if applied to the terebinth (i.e., the terebinth that was caused to stand in Shechem). Cf. *BHQ*, p. 75*. Within the Israel's own history, such objects had both positive and negative significance. In Gen. 35:14, Jacob sets up a pillar to mark the spot of a divine appearance. In Hosea 3:4, the prophet proclaims that Israel will face a period of time "without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar (מַצֵּבָה), without ephod or teraphim." (cf. Lev. 26:1; Deut. 16:22; 1 Kgs. 14:23; 17:10; 18:4; 23:14; 2 Chron. 14:2; 31:1; Hos. 10:1-2; Mic. 5:12;). In discussing *massebot* in the Hebrew Bible and Israelite religion, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith skips over both Joshua and Judges as neither of them, in her estimation, mentions *massebot*, 'Massebot Standing for YHWH: The Fall of a Yhwistic Cult Symbol', in J. J. Collins, T. M. Lemos, S. M. Olyan (eds.), Worship, women, and war: essays in honor of Susan Niditch, (Brown University, 2015), p. 108.

to commemorate this event, presumably near the "oak of teaching" mentioned in vs. 6. Jacob also built an altar near Shechem (Gen. 33:19) before the rape of Dinah his daughter and the vengeful slaughter of the inhabitants of the city by his sons (Gen. 34). In the following narrative, Jacob gathers his household gods and the family's earrings and proceeds to bury them beneath the oak/terebinth near Shechem (Gen. 35:4).[92] Shechem is doubly designated as a city of refuge (Josh. 20:7—a strongly ironic point in the case of Abimelech) and as an allotment for the Levites (Josh. 21:21). Upon Mt. Ebal, Joshua builds an altar and erects stones on which he writes the Torah. The community reads the Torah, proclaiming for the people its blessings and curses somewhere near Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Josh. 8:30-35). Apparently, Moses had commanded these acts and the narrator of Joshua sought to emphasize this point for the reader.[93] Though the tabernacle is located in Shiloh during the conquest (Josh. 18:1), Joshua renews the covenant with Israel at Shechem (Josh. 24:1). This may serve to counter the positive vision of Israel in Josh. 8:30-35. Israel goes to Shechem, not because they are necessarily obedient, but because they will inevitably break the covenant (Josh. 24:19). After recounting Israel's history and charging the people to worship YHWH faithfully in the ways he had commanded them, Joshua sets up a large stone as a witness:

וַיִּקַּח אֶבֶן גְּדוֹלָה וַיְקִימֶהָ שָׁם תַּחַת הָאַלָּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִקְדַּשׁ יְהוָה

And he took a large stone and he set it up there,
underneath the tree which is near the sanctuary of YHWH
(Josh. 24:26)

[92] The cultic connection, if any, between the foreign gods and the earrings is unclear. נֶזֶם twice appears in the Golden Calf incident (Exod. 32) and again in Exod. 35:22, where the gold is used to create cultic objects. Interestingly, the other time it appears in a narrative context is in Judg. 8:24-26, where the people donate the spoils of war (i.e., the earrings of the Midianites) to Gideon so that he can create the ephod.

[93] The relationship between these two passages and their interpretation on the basis of their compositional history and literary context, is anything but straightforward. Adding to these complexities are the differences in the textual witnesses of Joshua 8. Specifically, the cultic ceremony appears in different places in the MT, LXX (after MT 9:1-2) and 4QJosh^{A} (appears after MT 5:1 where it is (re)located to the Jordan river). Furthermore, the Samaritan Pentateuch has Moses commanding that the altar be built on Mt. Gerizim instead of Mt. Ebal (Deut. 27:4). For a thorough treatment of these issues, see the discussion in T. B. Dozeman (ed.), *Joshua 1-12: a new translation with introduction and commentary*, (YUP, 2015), pp. 364-383, 391-396.

Though almost every word in this clause is different than the one in Judg. 9:6, they indicate nearly the exact same location, both geographically and within the world of the story.[94] Shechem reappears in 1 Kings 12, with Rehoboam going there to be made king (1 Kgs. 12:1). After Israel rebels against his harsh leadership, Jeroboam rebuilds Shechem before turning his attention to creating the cultic centres of Bethel and Dan (1 Kgs. 12:25-33).

Shechem in the wider historical context

The excavations from Tel Balâtah (Shechem) in the 20th century may corroborate some of the features of the text and illuminate the cultic dimension. From about the middle Bronze age (MB IIB; ≈ 1750BCE-1650BCE) to the early Iron age, Shechem's sacred sites evolved into several cultic sites, including an impressive Fortress Temple in MB IIC.[95] It had two large towers, a large central room and featured a forecourt with an altar and a *massebah*. This is likely the type of building referred to as a מִגְדַּל in 9:46.[96] Designated "Temple 7300," a small open-air shrine appears to have functioned as a private chapel at the back the Fortress Temple before it was modified as part of the wall defences in the later part of the 14th century. A possible third cultic site, Tananir, was located outside the city on the lower slopes of Mt. Gerizim, 300m from the east gate and 500m from the Fortress Temple.[97] It was an 18x18m, multi-roomed complex with a central court that had a pillar at its centre. This may have supported a roof or had cultic significance.[98] The entire city was destroyed and abandoned in 1550-1450BCE during the Egyptian raids against the

[94] It should be noted that there are limits as to what archeology can confirm. The cultic significance of sacred trees is well attested to in the ancient world, including the Hebrew Bible, but it is unlikely that one could be discovered and analyzed in the same way that other material culture could be.

[95] G. E. Wright, *Shechem: A Biography of a Biblical City*, (McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 108-109. Wright suggested that a set of buildings form MB IIB were "Courtyard Temples". These featured a walled off courtyard with bases for freestanding pillars, suggesting a cultic purpose. It appears that this central courtyard lay directly beneath the altar and *massebah* of the later Fortress Temple. Cf. the discussion in E. F. Cambell Jr., *Shechem III: The Stratigraphy and Architecture of Shechem (Tel Balâtah)*, (American Schools of Oriental Research, 2002), pp. 93-96.

[96] Campbell, p. 151. This is perhaps what is envisaged in Judg. 9:46.

[97] Campbell, p. 154.

[98] Campbell, pp. 160–161. Boling suggests that this site may have been a cultic centre which rivalled those in the city. He suggests that this may have been where Jotham stood and delivered his speech in Judges. 9:7 (p. 172). In contrast, Lawrence Toombs, argues, "However, the shrine could hardly have functioned in plain sight of the city without the approval and support of its governing authorities. If the building was indeed a tribal shrine, its presence indicates a cordial relationship between the urban and rural populations" ('Shechem (Place)', (1992), p. 1181.

Hyksos.[99] Following this, during LB to Iron-I, the city with its fortifications and temples was systematically rebuilt. The LB temple was positioned over the earlier Fortress Temple, and its cultic objects were also placed in similar places as their predecessors.[100]

It was during this period when a figure named Labʾayu ruled in Shechem.[101] Our knowledge of him and his exploits comes only from the Amarna Letters. Some of them are written by other vassal kings in the region, complaining to the Pharaoh about him and his family. Labʾayu and his sons appear to have been attacking other cities such as Gezer and Megiddo, disrupting agriculture and commerce (EA 244). A king named Biridiyu writes to inform Pharaoh that the two sons of Labʾayu have hired *ʿApiru* to attack his cities (EA 246). Some of the letters were written by Lab'ayu himself (or at least by his scribe). In his three letters, he asks for advice concerning an unknown local matter, he protests his innocence against the suspicion that he has rebelled, and furthermore, he denies knowing that his sons had hired *ʿApiru* (EA 254:30-37). These *ʿApiru* may perhaps refer to the Israelites at some point in their history (though this, of course, is contestable). Under the rule of Lab'ayu and his sons, Shechem appears to have prospered in the 14th century. Sadly, that prosperity ended as Shechem was destroyed by unknown enemies (unknown to us) in the late 14th century (LB IIA). The city was rebuilt before it was again destroyed and abandoned in the late 12th century (LB/Iron I).[102] It is difficult to know whether this destruction layer points to the historicity of the Abimelech account.[103]

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[99] Stone, p. 311; *ABD* V.1174–1186.

[100] This has been called into question recently by Lawrence Stager. It may be that the same MB Fortress temple remained intact until the twelfth century (L. Stager, 'The Fortress-Temple at Shechem and the "House of El, Lord of the Covenant', in E. F. Campbell, P. H. Williams, T. Hiebert (eds.), Realia Dei: Essay in Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Edward F. Campbell Jr. at His Retirement, (Scholars, 1999).

[101] This is widely accepted, though the basis of this historical assumption comes from EA 289:21-24 which describes Lab'ayu giving away the land of Shechem (KUR Ša-ak-mi) to the *ʿApiru*. The clay of EA 252, written by Lab'ayu, is thought to have come from around Shechem. See A. F. Rainey and W. M. Schniedewind (eds.), *The El-Amarna correspondence: a new edition of the cuneiform letters from the site of El-Amarna based on collations of all extant tablets*, (Brill, 2015), vol. cx, pp. 24-26, 1568, 1595.

[102] Campbell, p. 185.

[103] Boling is confident that this data can "only be correlated with the Abimelech story," p. 184.

Cult and Coronation in Judges 9

Within both canonical and historical frames of reference, the kingship of Abimelech is punctuated with cultic and covenantal significance by this simple phrase—made king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem. The coronation is not merely a *political* act, but a *cultic* one as well. He is crowned king at one of Canaan's/Israel's most historic and most important cultic centres, in front of the "very" objects which bear witness to Israel's covenantal fealty. This is either a brazen act of Israel's idolatry or an exemplary account of unintended religious syncretism. The intermingling of political and cultic matters only continues in the story as the confrontation between Abimelech and Gaal/rulers of Shechem begins in the בֵּית אֱלֹהֵיהֶם during a religious feast (9:27) and ends by Abimelech burning down the מִגְדַּל, i.e., the Fortress Temple (9:49).[104] Ironically, the temple was destroyed by the very man financed by its coffers.[105]

There is, however, a glaring omission in this chapter. If Shechem has such a rich tradition as a cultic centre in pre-Israelite and Israelite history, then where are the priests? If Shechem is a Levitical city, then where are the Levites? There is not even a trace of them in this narrative—a story that has cultic objects and a temple by many names. Indeed, at every instance where one might expect to find a priest (e.g., at the temple in 9:3-4, 6, 26-27, 46), they encounter the בַּעֲלֵי שְׁכֶם. This neutral term for the rulers can perhaps take on additional cultic significance here. The lack of explicit censure of these syncretistic practices may point to the pre-deuteronomic origins of the story.[106] In contrast, such an absence might be the *result* of deuteronomic or priestly redaction as they attempt to distance their ideological beliefs from such idolatrous practice. Furthermore,

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[104] There are number of cultic sites mentioned in this chapter (Baal-Berith, El-Berith, Beth-Millo, the Tower of Shechem), which has led to many scholarly guesses as to the relationship between them. If the story world is meant to resemble the canonical witness and/or the historical city, then it is best to see these various places as indicating the same cultic location. Within the narrative itself, the various terms may serve a theological purpose, namely, the polyphony both multiplies the idolatry while highlighting the syncretism.

[105] Jordan, p. 159.

[106] This was Wellhausen's general observation regarding the priority of the historical books over the Torah, namely that the former exhibited little awareness of the latter. "The period of the Judges presents itself to us as a confused chaos, out of which order and coherence are gradually evolved under the pressure of external circumstances, but perfectly naturally and without the faintest reminiscence of a sacred unifying constitution that had formerly existed. Hebrew antiquity shows absolutely no tendencies towards a hierocracy; power is wielded solely by the heads of families and of tribes, and by the kings, who exercise control over religious worship also, and appoint and depose its priests" (*Prolegomena to the history of Israel: with a reprint of the article 'Israel' from the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (2013), p. 5).

this episode could find resonances with later post-exilic readers, perhaps functioning as a critique against the Samaritans of Shechem and Mt. Gerizim.[107] Why the narrative was not *equally shaped* to promote proper cultic ideology—the theological statement by the narrator in 9:56-57 addresses only the violence—may suggest that the absence is meant to be *felt* by the canonical reader.[108] While the question of leadership remains at the centre of these narratives, perhaps we are beginning to pull on a loose thread that seems to connect the book of Judges at a deeper level.

My argument may underscore the importance of reading the biblical narrative in relation to its wider historical and canonical contexts. The cultic dimension of this text is muted and is easily obscured by a narrow focus on other elements within story (e.g., Jotham's fable). The geographical clues that point to this cultic dimension might be considered superfluous to a straightforward reading of the story. These details, however, are not added haphazardly, but serve to create a *theological* topography of sorts. The mountain peaks, the city of Shechem, the oak, and the pillar all invoke in the reader particular memories—real or imagined—that add additional cultic significance to Judges 9. The cultic dimension provides for the Abimelech story a backdrop, adding colour to the plot and its actors in varying shades of the holy and profane.

There are limitations in relating the biblical narrative *only* to its historical context, or to the exclusion of its canonical context. The extensive excavations at Tel Balâtah, do not give the reader a guarantee that the archaeological findings relate directly to the description provided by the narrator. Even *if* we could be relatively certain of the correlation between the ancient world and the world of the text, the significance of these geographical/topographical features must be interpreted. But rather than seeing the historical and canonical contexts as competitive, it seems preferable to understand their relationship as complementary modes of reading. Both allow the narrative to take on deeper additional significance in their respective ways. As different projects

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[107] Guest, p. 81; Y. Amit, 'Who was interested in the book of Judges in the Persian-Hellenistic Periods?', in D. V. Edelman (ed.), *Deuteronomy - Kings as emerging authoritative books: a conversation*, (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), p. 109 (Cited by Guest).

[108] If one dates the final redaction of Judges to the late Persian period, as argued for by Guest and others, it would imply that these edits come after the Priestly writer. Thus, the absence of priests in the narrative appears even more intentional using an author-hermeneutic. This, however, is not the type of argument I am making. Because the compositional date, the extent of redactional activity, the historical audience, and the author's intended purposes remain elusive to today's readers, even the best attempts are only speculations.

will require different tools, so the different contexts (and their particular questions) can be used together for the task of interpretation.

Jephthah: The Cultic Fool

Like the previous narratives, the Jephthah cycle also seems to focus on leadership. The conflict begins with his exile from Gilead at the hands of his half-brothers (Judg. 11:3). In need of a deliverer and with none in sight from YHWH, the elders offer him the chance to lead them (Judg. 11:6-11).[109] It appears his quest for power leads Jephthah to make a vow that will ultimately take his daughter's life. The "tragedy" of Jephthah's vow, at least in his estimation, is that in his quest for authority and power, he must sacrifice his only chance of a dynasty.[110] As in the Gideon cycle, the Ephraimites are angry for not being called for battle. This time, however, they express their frustration with violence. Jephthah and his men seize the fords of the Jordan and slaughter 42,000 Ephraimites (Judg. 12:1-6).

Similar to the previous narratives, the political dimension sits comfortably alongside the cultic dimension. The instalment of Jephthah as leader and his speaking "before YHWH" envisages a cultic centre at Mizpah (11:7). The negotiations with the king of Ammon feature both a political and a theological argument. The vow (which also appears to be made at Mizpah) engages in the cultic for the sake of political/martial victory. The cultic dimension of Judges 11 is underscored by the private conversations between Jephthah and his daughter concerning his (cultic) vow, the near-ritual preparation and mourning, and the ambiguous sacrificial fulfilment. Differently than the previous episodes, the cultic concerns are foregrounded and in focus.

Not surprisingly, this cultic dimension, and the questions raised by it are seen by some as a problem for a coherent literary reading. There is indeed a considerable incongruity between Jephthah's status as a Spirit-empowered deliverer and his needless vow and subsequent sacrifice of

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[109] The elders of Gilead first offer Jephthah the position of קצין (ruler, military commander, Cf. Josh. 10:24; Isa. 3:6-7). Jephthah's hesitant response suggests his own woundedness. He rejects because he has been rejected. This causes them to adapt their offer, Jephthah would become their head (ראש). In verse 11, the two titles are applied to Jephthah. Whatever the difference in prestige or authority was between these two titles seems to be minimized by the narrator.

[110] There are indeed many other important aspects and concerns in the narrative, not least the feminist critiques of Trible, Exum, Mieke Bal, and others.

his daughter. Also troubling is the lack of continuity between the events of Judg. 11 and 12:1-6.[111] The narrator provides no ethical judgment but leaves the task to the reader. Some have taken the silence, both of the narrator and of the deity, to indicate a positive construal of the events and reflecting a patriarchal ideology.[112] The vow may be foolish but his fulfilment of it speaks to his sincere faith and integrity.[113]

Many have suggested there to be a variety of redactional layers, stretching from an old oral tale to a Hellenistic insertion, which could explain some of these inconsistencies.[114] Thomas Römer questions the assumption that the vow story was part of an older tradition that was incorporated into the DtrH.[115] He cannot understand why the Deuteronomist would wish to exemplify such a leader whose actions transgress the prohibitions in Deuteronomy (12:29-31; 18:10), when elsewhere the same writer would censure similar actions of child sacrifice (e.g. 2 Kgs. 3:27; 16:3; 17:17; 21:6). Römer's proposal is that this vow-story is a post-exilic insertion which reflects Hellenistic influence, imitating the myth of Iphigenia.[116] The story, according to Römer, serves to criticize "the official Dtr theology" and creates "an open and ambiguous text" by making Jephthah less heroic.[117] He writes, "By making the Hebrew Iphigenia accept her sacrifice the narrator sacrifices the Dtr ideology of divine pedagogics and confronts the reader of the DtrH with theological problems which have still not been solved and might never be solved." By contrast, David Janzen posits that such theological criticisms fit neatly within the DtrH and can reasonably be credited to the deuteronomistic historian. The actions of characters are meant to showcase an Israel that does not follow the Torah, or in his words: "when Israel worships like foreigners, it will

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[111] For instance, the Ephraimites threaten to burn Jephthah's house with fire (12:1). This hardly makes sense unless the threat is meant to be taken literally (i.e., his physical house) or the writer had no knowledge of the events of 11:34-40.

[112] So Trible, *Texts of terror*, p. 97; J. C. Exum, *Tragedy and biblical narrative: arrows of the Almighty*, (CUP, 1996), p. 66.

[113] Boling, p. 210. In contrast, Block understands the vow (along with nearly all of Jephthah's actions) to be an attempt to manipulate YHWH (p. 367).

[114] See the chart in I. Finkelstein, 'The Old Jephthah Tale in Judges: Geographical and Historical Considerations', *Biblica*, 97/1 (2016) [8].

[115] T. C. Römer, 'Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell About the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter?', *JSOT*, 23/77 (1998), pp. 29-30.

[116] Römer, "Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell," pp. 34-36.

[117] Römer, "Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell," p. 38.

act like foreigners."[118] This tale has no true tragic dimension, but all its characters— including the daughter—are implicated in the cultic failure that would become paradigmatic of Israel's leaders: sacrifice is never greater than obedience.[119]

Janzen's proposal raises important questions concerning the implied reader and what kind of story it is. Is Judges 11 a morality tale against making rash vows?[120] If so, the tragic elements and imagery (e.g., Jephthah tearing his clothes) might reflect an implied reader who *feels* and lets their emotions guide them to the ethical ideal. Is the reader, for instance, meant to mimic the daughters of Israel in remembering the daughter and/or her sacrifice (Judg. 11:39-40)? What exactly are they meant to "take away" from the story? For Janzen, they are meant to find the story *as a sincere warning*. Such a vow is clearly wrongheaded in the literary context of the DtrH; that it is passively accepted by the daughter, fulfilled without any pushback, and consecrated by ritual remembrance demonstrates the further decline of Israel.[121]

Here, Wellhausen's initial hypothesis is felt most acutely.[122] If the deuteronomic and priestly laws are written later than this narrative, what might be its meaning? Perhaps, Jephthah's story, along with the sacrifice of his daughter, is merely the way things were in the late Bronze age. The fortunes and fates of ancient heroes were decided by the gods who were known by their cruel expectations, and Israel's deity was no different. Great victory requires great sacrifice. The tragedy beset upon the daughter could not conceivably be undone—there was yet no Law or priesthood to intervene, and wisdom would only be found in retrospection.[123]

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[118] 'Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter', *JSOT*, 29/3 (2005), p. 341.

[119] Janzen, pp. 354-355.

[120] This is a common understanding within the reception history, see Gunn, 142-146 and J. L. Thompson, *Writing the wrongs: women of the Old Testament among biblical commentators from Philo through the Reformation*, (OUP, 2001), pp. 112, 117-121. 154-178.

[121] Janzen, p. 355.

[122] Admittedly, Wellhausen is a bit dated. More recent explanations of Judges' compositional history, especially the notion that the DtrH went through multiple exilic and post-exilic redactions, complicate an outright dismissal of attempts to read the story canonically, both historically and theologically. Attempts to reconstruct through diachronic analysis what is thought to be the "original" story are speculative. For an overview of these approaches, see Spronk, *Judges*, pp. 320-323.

[123] Cf. Logan, 'Rehabilitating Jephthah', *JBL*, 128/4 (2009). Logan argues that such a vow, even one that intended child sacrifice, would have been commonplace in the ancient world. Drawing on West Semitic customs, Israel's own war vow traditions (e.g.) and the strict חרם laws, she suggests that the original audience would have expected Jephthah to make such a sacrifice in his role as leader (pp. 676-683). There may also have been an expectation, though not a strict guarantee, that Israel's God would "surprise Jephthah and *not* demand his due," i.e., the choice of

Cheryl Exum, by contrast, points to the acceptance of the underlying patriarchal ideology as the story's principal goal. She writes, "The androcentric message of the story of Jephthah's daughter is, I suggest, submit to paternal authority. You may have to sacrifice your autonomy; you may lose your life, and even your name, but your sacrifice will be remembered, indeed celebrated, for generations to come."[124] The implied reader then is meant to understand Jephthah's sacrifice as tragic but necessary. To resist such ideology in the present, one must read quite roughly against the grain of the text. Phyllis Trible, while also observing the patriarchal ideology undergirding the text, views the ritual remembrance of the daughter as offering a resistance to this ideology *within the text*.[125]

The story can be read in yet another way. If one takes into consideration the broader canonical context, specifically a) prohibitions against child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10) and b) the redemption of rash vows (Lev. 5; 27:1-8), then the characters might appear more foolish than tragic.[126] The tone of the narrative may be heard as mocking rather than serious. Is the implied reader meant to identify *with* the characters or be allied *against* them? Reading canonically, the strategy of the narrative is accomplished by irony, its expectation is that the reader is aware of something that the characters are not, namely the Torah.

That the lack of knowledge can be seen as ironic and not simply explained by historical and/or compositional ignorance is a result of previous examples of Jephthah's knowledge of Torah. In a lengthy speech to the Ammonite king, he confidently recounts Israel's history and invokes YHWH as the Judge (Judg. 11:15-27). Though his knowledge might be incomplete (he wrongfully attributes the Moabite deity Chemosh to the Ammonites), it is nevertheless informed by what also may be found in the Torah. The construction of his vow has parallels elsewhere in Israel's Scriptures.[127] The closest parallel is found in Numbers 21:2, where Israel also "vows a vow to

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sacrificial victim was given to God through the calculated ambiguity of the vow (p. 678). Thus, Jephthah's actions, along with his daughter's acceptance, are viewed positively by Logan.

[124] Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 66.

[125] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. 106 Trible translates וַתְּהִי־חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל as '*She* became a tradition in Israel'.

[126] The same could be true within a historical frame of reference as this part of the narrative is generally considered to be a later addition to the DtrH, and perhaps, even later than the Priestly writer.

[127] Gen. 28:20-22, Num. 21:2; 1 Sam. 1:11; 2 Sam. 15:7-8. Interestingly, all these vows concern cultic worship.

YHWH" and promises to put their enemies to the ban (חרם) if the Lord "will truly give this people into my hands."[128] The reader might also notice echoes of the *Aqedah* (Gen. 22), a story which surely points to Abraham's piety rather than the repeatability of his actions.[129] Even so, the differences are many and important—YHWH does not speak, test, intervene, or bless. The daughter's acquiescence and the community's commemoration function almost as a repeated punchline: "If only there was something that could be done!" Everyone bemoans the tragedy that can so easily be avoided. The implied reader, on the other hand, gets the irony. The daughter's death is not immediate. The reader waits in anticipation to see if someone, anyone, will provide a very simple explanation about YHWH's displeasure with child sacrifice. That no voice from heaven comes to stay Jephthah's hand certainly indicates his failure as a father, but also his folly as a judge. Jephthah is the cultic fool because he cannot see the absurdity of his actions, namely, that in fulfilling the vow he will break the very Torah that he is trying to obey. By sacrificing his daughter, he is offending the very deity he is trying to honour.

Such diverse interpretations about what the story can impress upon its readers—whether to warn against breaking the Torah, mock its cultic absurdities, adopt its patriarchal assumptions, or to prophetically resist them—highlights the elasticity of the narrative. The ambiguity within the story as well as the incongruity between Jephthah's status as judge and his actions can clearly be read in more ways than one.

The ambiguity and incongruity are also noticed by premodern exegetes, particularly the rabbis. David Thompson has shown that while not monolithic, Jephthah's vow and violence were generally condemned by both Jews and Christians.[130] Wrestling with the apparent incongruity between human sacrifice and Jephthah's religious piety, the medieval rabbinic commentator, David Kimchi, introduces a paradigmatic shift that is followed by many later Christian readers—what if

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[128] The syntactical structure of the vows is nearly identical (cf. Block, p. 366 n. 86). Block suggests a lack of connection between the object and consequence of the vow. "On the analogy of Num. 21:2 he should have offered the inhabitants of the cities he would conquer. Instead, he would offer the on who should have helped him celebrate a safe return from battle (p. 368).

[129] Cf. Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, p. 95; B. Miller, *Tell it on the mountain: the daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11*, (Liturgical, 2005), pp. 36-38. Interestingly, Whedbee considers Genesis 22 to have a comic dimension, but sees Jephthah straightforwardly as a tragedy (Whedbee, *The Bible and the comic vision*, p. 84).

[130] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs,* pp. 100-178; For other works of reception history on this narrative see M. Sjöberg, *Wrestling with textual violence: the Jephthah narrative in antiquity and modernity*, (Sheffield Phoenix, 2006); Miller, *Tell it on the mountain*, pp. 62-105.

Jephthah didn't kill his daughter but only devoted her to God?[131] Kimchi's argument was a grammatical one, made on the basis of a disjunctive waw in Judg. 11:31 (וְהָיָה לַיהוָה וְהַעֲלִיתִהוּ עוֹלָה) which leaves Jephthah the option to devote the person to the Lord *or* sacrifice the animal. Some later Christian readers would arrive at the same conclusion, but on the basis of a literary or theological argument. Drawing from Hebrews 11, where Jephthah is listed as a man of faith, many could not fathom that such a man would be included among the faithful if he had sacrificed his daughter. Others have noticed the parallels between Hannah devoting Samuel to the temple in 1 Sam. 1-2; perhaps Jephthah did the same.[132]

Along a similar cultic focus, some early interpreters raised the illuminating question: Did Jephthah know the Torah and, if not, why did he not consult a priest? As mentioned before, the Torah contained many condemnations of human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10), and there existed in the Torah provisions for the redemption of rash vows (Lev. 5; 27:1-8). In *Biblical Antiquities,* Pseudo-Philo includes an internal speech by YHWH, who is very angry at the ambiguity of Jephthah's vow: "Now therefore if a dog meet with Jepthan [*sic*] first, shall a dog be offered unto me? And now let the vow of Jepthan [*sic*] be upon his firstborn, even upon the fruit of his body, and his prayer upon his only begotten daughter. But I will verily deliver my people at this time, not for his sake, but for the prayer which Israel hath prayed."[133] Josephus's account also is explicitly critical of Jephthah's sacrifice: "offering such an oblation as was neither conformable to the law, nor acceptable to God; not weighing with himself what opinion the

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[131] Gunn, *Judges*, pp. 140-41.

[132] Gunn, pp. 147-153. As for recent commentators who believe Jephthah did *not* sacrifice his daughter, cf. Jordan, pp. 203f; Stone, pp. 354-55; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, (T&T Clark, 1869), pp. 388-95; D. Marcus, *Jephthah and his vow*, (Texas Tech Press, 1986), p. 43, 52-55; P. T. Reis, 'Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter', *Prooftexts*, 17/3 (1997). Reis's article stands alone in her estimation that Jephthah's daughter represents a spoiled child who knows the repercussions of the vow but believes that her father will not fulfil his word (p. 290). The daughter is not sacrificed, but devoted to the Lord meaning that she will never marry but live an in relative independence at the expense of her father (pp. 290-291). While Reis succeeds in liberating the daughter from the stereotype of passive female victim, her reading participates in victim blaming (p. 292). In response, Mikael Sjöberg writes, "Paradoxically, Reis also confirms stereotypes, albeit different ones, such as the provocative teenage daughter and the *laissez-faire* father . . . thereby, she takes part in the not-yet-obsolete exegetical tradition of blaming biblical female characters, such as Eve or Jephthah's daughter, for their own suffering and subordination" (*Wrestling with textual violence*, p. 211 fn 8).

[133] *LAB* 39.11. *Leviticus Rabbah* 37.4 asks what if a camel or a donkey or a dog should meet him. *Genesis Rabbah* 60.3 includes a cat to the list.

hearers would have of such a practice."[134] The Targum for 11:39 suggests that Jephthah should have asked Phinehas, the high Priest, who would have let him redeem the vow. *Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah* (10:5) imagines just this scenario, but explains why the two might not have met: "Jephthah remarked, 'Shall I, a chieftain and ruler in Israel, go to Phinehas!' and Phinehas remarked, 'Shall I, the High Priest and the son of a High Priest, go to an ignorant person?'"[135] *Leviticus Rabbah* 37.4 explains that because they did not speak, the Spirit of the Lord departed Phineas and Jephthah's body was scattered across the cities of Gilead as punishment. Another midrash has Jephthah's daughter trying to educate her father on why his vow was foolish, but to no avail.[136] Here too, the Spirit speaks to Jephthah, reprimanding him for the sacrifice by drawing an analogy to Abraham and Isaac as well as to Hannah dedicating Samuel. The midrash ends by asking, "Who caused Jephthah to kill his daughter?" The answer was clear: Jephthah was to blame, for he had not studied Torah.[137]

The Cultic Dimension of 1 Samuel 1-15

The cultic issues found throughout the book of Judges and emphasised in its final chapters continue in 1 Samuel. Its opening chapters resonate deeply with the book of Judges. As the narrative of Judges finished at a religious festival at Shiloh, so 1 Samuel opens with a religious festival at Shiloh, but with significant differences. While the events of Judges 20-21 take place on the macro-scale, concerning all of Israel and the future of one of its tribes, 1 Samuel 1 zooms in on a family. Similar to Micah and the unnamed Levite, Elkanah is also from the hill country of Ephraim. Quite unlike the other men, he appears to be faithful to YHWH and one who cares for his wife, Hannah. As Judges ended with the rape and abduction of several hundred virgins for the explicit purposes of re-population, events of 1 Samuel 1 focus on a barren woman and her prayers for a son. In her pleas to the Lord, echoes are heard of the Jephthah and Samson narratives. Some

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[134] *Ant.* 5.7.10 [5.266b]. For an extended treatment and comparison of Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, and the biblical account, see C. Begg, 'The Josephan Judge Jephthah', *SJOT*, 20/2 (2006), pp. 161-188.

[135] Cited in Gunn, p. 135.

[136] *Midrash Tanhuma Buber Behuqqotay 10,* cited in Spronk, p. 319; Cf. L. Ginzberg, *The legends of the Jews*, (Jewish Publ. Soc. of America, 1989), vol. ii, p. 875-877.

[137] Same text as Spronk's, but different numeration. *Midrash Tanhuma Buber Behuqqotay 7.1*

elements of Hannah's prayer can be traced back to the Song of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5). There is a sense of continuity with Judges and yet, the birth and dedication of Samuel to YHWH signals that the times they are a-changing.

In stark contrast to the piety of Elkanah and Hannah stand Eli and his sons. In chapter 2, the narrative stresses this contrast by jumping back and forth between Samuel and Eli's sons in what Chapman describes as "cross-cutting."[138] If Samuel and his family represent the bright future of a renewed Israel, then Eli and his sons represent its dark past. The cult at Shiloh is shown to be led by a negligent priest and his corrupt sons.[139] The narrator's comment in 1 Sam. 3:1 is particularly damning: the word of the Lord was rare *in those days*.[140] Eli's eyesight is failing, and with it, is his awareness of God's presence.[141] He first confuses Hannah's prayer for drunkenness (1:14). When Samuel comes to him in the middle of the night, he does not recognise that it is YHWH who is speaking to the boy until the third time (3:4-9). Most significant in these early chapters is the prophetic judgement against Eli and his sons in 2:27-36. We are told that YHWH will raise up a faithful priest, presumably because this is exactly what Eli is not and exactly what Israel needs most.

The failure of Israel's priesthood is felt most acutely in the Ark Narrative of 1 Samuel 4-6. The instrumentalising of cultic objects and seeking to manipulate/control the deity through ritual practices, i.e., the very same cultic problems in Judges 17-18 & 20, are all present here. Ironically and surely part of the tongue-in-cheek satire of author, the Philistines who capture the ark exhibit a greater reverence for it than Israel. When the ark does return to Beth-Shemesh, the men of the town continue to exhibit their cultic ignorance and go on to look inside the ark! The primary issue of these chapters is cultic.

Lurking in the background of the narrative is the identity of the faithful priest mentioned in 1 Sam. 2:35. Is it Samuel? It certainly seems that way from how the story is crafted. The repeated

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[138] Chapman, *1 Samuel*, p. 82.

[139] In *Samaritan Chronicle II* (Sepher Ha-Yamim), an obscure text reflecting ancient Samaritan ideology, Eli and his house at Shiloh are the aberrant cult that has separated from YHWH's true place of worship at Mt. Gerizim Bethel. For Hebrew text, translation, and analysis see J. Macdonald, *The Samaritan Chronicle No. II (or: Sepher Ha-Yamim): From Joshua to Nebuchadnezzar*, (DE GRUYTER, 1969).

[140] This seems to imitate the refrain in Judges.

[141] 1 Samuel 3:1. Eli's failing eyesight might be symbolic for Israel's spiritual blindness.

contrasts suggest that he will be the one to replace the Elide priesthood. The progression of Samuel's cultic activity in these beginning chapters and his representation as a priestly figure elsewhere point to this conclusion. But the narrator nowhere calls Samuel a priest. Rather he is called a prophet (3:20), judge (7:6, 15-17), and a seer (9:9, 11, 19; cf. 1 Chron. 9:22) His sons are also judges (8:1), and their corruption is what prompts Israel to request a king. Though he performs sacrifices and other cultic rituals, this better speaks to the fluidity of the political and cultic dimensions.[142]

This same fluidity or blurring between the dimensions also can be seen in the case of Saul where he is at several points described in priestly terms.[143] Samuel invites him to go up before him to the high place (1 Sam. 9:19). Saul is set at the head of the table and given the priest's portion of the sacrificial meal (9:22-24).[144] Though anointing is often seen having royal connotations, it can additionally have cultic ones. It is used frequently in the Pentateuch to describe the consecration of priests and holy objects.[145] Within a canonical frame of reference, the dismembering of the oxen and the rescue of Jabesh Gilead (1 Sam. 11) would recall the events of Judges 19-21. Here, readers would be invited to compare Saul with the Levite, and in one sense, understand that Saul "undoes" the actions of Israel in the Judges period.[146]

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[142] There are canonical difficulties of Samuel being a priest as he is not a Levite, but an Ephraimite. This difficulty was noticed by a later post-exilic writer. For example, 1 Chron. 6:23-38 (ET) lists Elkanah and Samuel among the Kohathite clan of the Levites. The genealogy lists three different persons named Elkanah and abruptly introduces Samuel and his sons (6:28 ET). The second genealogy in 6:33-38 (ET), this time in ascending order via sonship, adheres more closely to the genealogy in 1 Sam. 1:1. The differences between Eliel (אֱלִיאֵל) for Elihu (אֱלִיהוּא) and Toah (תּוֹחַ) for Tohu (תֹּחוּ) are slight. Interestingly, there is no record of Eli being a Levite in these later genealogies. The only clue to his family heritage is found in 1 Sam. 2:28, which vaguely places him among the Levites. It is entirely possible that the Chronicler has excised him from the genealogy.

[143] Saul is also painted as a prophet in 1 Sam. 10:10-12. These polyvalent descriptions demonstrate the fluidity of these mytho-typological boundaries. One need not exclude the other.

[144] Lev. 7:32-34; Cf. J. H. Walton, V. H. Matthews, and M. W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament*, (IVP, 2000), p. 294; P. K. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, (Doubleday, 2000), p. 180. McCarter is surprised at the treatment of Saul as a priest.

[145] Gen. 31:13; Exod. 29:36; 28:41; 29:7; 30:26, 30; 40:9-11, 13, 15 (3x); Lev. 7:36; 8:10-11; 16:32; Num. 35:25.

[146] There are indeed other ways to configure the compositional and historical relationship between the two accounts. See Milstein, *Tracking the master scribe*, pp. 174-206. She argues that Judges 19-21 is reacting to early pro-Saul traditions which are faintly present in 1 Samuel. The scribe is mimicking and denigrating those narratives to produce a vehemently anti-Saul account.

The Cultic Rejection of Saul

While Israel makes their case for kingship in predominantly *political* terms — that they would be like the nations, and that their king may judge them and fight their battles — Saul's rejection in chapters 13-15 can be seen in the cultic dimension.[147] Saul is rejected by YHWH as a dynastic ruler in chapter 13, after he sacrifices before the battle.[148] It seems that Saul, seeing his troops (and his chances at victory) desert him, believes that he cannot go into battle without such a sacrifice. *Why* he believes that is left unanswered. The narrative is open to being read in more than one way: Saul's sacrifice might speak to his sincere desire to entreat YHWH before the battle.[149] His faith is primarily not in the strength of his army, but in the Lord. Yet, YHWH's rejection of Saul seems to point in another direction. Perhaps, the sacrifice was meant to manipulate the deity into blessing his military efforts. It would be similar to what happens to Eli's sons in 1 Samuel 4. The narrative, however, does not make this explicit.

Saul's motivations become clearer in the next two chapters. In chapter 14, Saul is very careful and very technical when it comes to cultic matters—He has the priest (with an impressive quadruple pedigree), he uses the ephod/the ark; he swears an oath, and even when this backfires and causes more cultic infractions, Saul is quick to build an altar and set things right. He is very reticent to go into battle without divine assurance, and this can be understood in different ways.[150]

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[147] Again, this distinction is a modern one. The impetus for Israel's request comes about because Samuel's sons "do not walk in his ways." This is an evocation of a deuteronomic phrase which refers to Torah obedience and proper worship of YHWH (Cf. Deut. 8:6; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; 30:16). This phrase is also used by the historian to evaluate Israel's kings (1 Kgs. 11:23; 15:26, etc).

[148] Much has been written on the rejection of Saul in these narratives. For a good overview, see D. M. Gunn, *The fate of King Saul: an interpretation of a Biblical story*, (Sheffield Academic, 1980), vol. xiv.

[149] This is Saul's explanation to Samuel in 1 Sam. 13:12.

[150] Saul could be seen as committed to proper worship, calculated with respect to cultic practice (i.e., he might be trying to manipulate the deity as Israel does in 1 Sam. 4), or simply be afraid of the battle. All of these are possible from the text. These difficulties are not at all dissimilar to the example of Barak when he refuses to go to battle unless the prophetess Deborah goes with him. Her response—that she would indeed go but that the victory would be given to a woman—has been understood to denigrate Barak. For many, Barak is judged by the reader on the basis of stereotypical gender roles. Barak is seen as *unmanly* and so (as punishment) the victory will be given to a woman. Block writes, "On the surface his reaction . . . appears cowardly. He will not enter the fray unless he has this woman beside him holding his hand. And this impression is reinforced by Deborah's response. But at a deeper level the objection reflects a recognition of Deborah's status. The request to be accompanied by the prophet is a plea for the presence of God" (p. 199). Even while he acknowledges that Barak might be demonstrating some type of faith, he can only see Barak in a negative light. "Though Deborah had predicted that the honor of victory would elude his grasp and be seized by a woman, the narrator portrays him as doing everything in his power to negate the divine word . . . the man

Even when he has the Philistines on the back foot, he stalls (and indeed loses the opportunity) by inquiring of God in 14:36. After discovering that YHWH is silent because Jonathan broke his oath, Saul is even ready to kill him.

Contrast this with Jonathan, who exhibits an almost cavalier attitude towards the battle, "Let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised, *perhaps* YHWH will work for us, for there is no hindrance for the Lord to save by many or by few (14:6)." Though he will set up a test to further determine God's will, Jonathan isn't calculating in the same way as his father. When he finds out that he had broken Saul's oath, he shrugs it off, even saying that his father troubles the land (עָכַר אָבִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ). Interestingly, this word עָכַר is also found in Judges 11:35, where Jephthah calls his daughter his 'troubler'. This word also appears in Josh. 6:18; 7:25, where Achan is said to bring trouble on Israel. Both of these situations are within the cultic dimension. Saul's oath, which he made in order to secure God's blessing and military victory, actually ends up working against him. His men are weak from hunger. They ravenously devour the animals, breaking proper ritual codes. Saul is further prevented from pursuing the Philistines, and after discovering that it was his son Jonathan who broke the oath, Saul is quick to condemn him death. Saul's vow is almost his undoing, but unlike in the story of Jephthah, the community speaks in defence of Jonathan.

Saul's rejection in chapter 15 is also a result of cultic transgression as he fails to obey the Lord's command of *herem*. Even though Saul's intentions might be interpreted as sincere—he really does want to sacrifice the best of the spoils to God (and indeed, the LXX in 15:12 notes that he did make the proper sacrifices)—his cultic understanding looks very similar to Micah, the Danites, and Israel. Though he will protest in deuteronomic terms— "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord; I have walked in the way he has sent me" (אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּקוֹל יְהוָה וָאֵלֵךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־שְׁלָחַנִי יְהוָה)—Samuel characterizes his disobedience as akin to divination and idolatry. Stephen Chapman helpfully comments, "by definition, then, worship not of the heart, even if conducted as worship

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who had hesitated to heed the call of God in the beginning succumbs to the call of ambition. Barak is not only running after Sisera; he is running after glory! The final scene bursts his egotistical balloon" (p. 208). Such judgements are entirely possible from the vantage of the reader, but they represent an argument from silence and ambiguity rather than a charitable reading of the text. Those who wish to understand the characterization of Barak, or the rejection of Saul, must observe the complexities and ambiguities of the text with charity. Many others understand Barak in a negative way. Cf. M. Bal, *Death & dissymmetry: the politics of coherence in the Book of Judges*, (University of Chicago, 1988), p. 118; Conway, *Judging the Judges*, p. 115; Webb, *Judges*, p. 184.

of the God of Israel, is the equivalent of idolatry. When worship becomes the worship of worship, worship itself has becomes a false god."[151]

It appears that Saul's rejection is more of a *cultic* affair. In the *political* dimension, Saul is an outstanding king. Thus far in the story, he has won every battle despite being out-numbered and "out-gunned." He's shown mercy to his political opponents (1 Sam. 11:13) and successfully rallied Israel to war — two specific problems Israel faced during the Judges period. Even though he nearly kills his son with his vow, Saul is politically savvy enough to know when to back down, which is more than one could say for Jephthah. Seeing Saul's kingship in the *cultic* dimension allows the reader to understand why he is rejected by YHWH — he has neglected to maintain a proper relationship with the God to whom he sacrifices. His enthusiasm for the cultic rituals did not translate into the type of worshipful obedience which is expected of Israel's kings.

Summary: A Conspicuous Absence

Cultic issues are a recurring and unifying theme in the book of Judges and in 1 Samuel 1-15. Political matters are present but are generally of secondary importance to the narrative. By envisaging the narratives within the cultic dimension, one can more readily see the continuity of errors between these narratives. Israel time and time again in the book of Judges chooses idolatry, and their leaders likewise struggle with cultic loyalty. For example, the interpreters who sought to read the Jephthah narrative as scripture, wrestled with ambiguity and the incongruity between the character of the judge and human sacrifice. They noticed that something was not quite right. Jephthah should have known better; he should have read the Torah. Some of the earlier interpreters assigned partial blame to the priesthood; Phineas should have intervened. Arguing from the same presupposition, later readers suggested that he did in fact obey the Torah—a Yahwist like Jephthah would have never *really* sacrificed his daughter, he only dedicated her to the cultic centre. The priesthood this time provided an escape from judgement.

As in the story of Abimelech, there is a glaring omission. Where are the priests and where is the sanctuary of the YHWH? Returning to the implied reader of this story, it is entirely possible

[151] Chapman, *1 Samuel*, pp. 140-141.

that they are being led to reflect on these precise questions. In reflecting on this cultic dimension, they slowly realize that both priests and an official Israelite sanctuary *have been conspicuously absent from Judges 1-16*. Indeed, a Levite does not appear until Judges 17:7, where he serves as a priest-for-hire at two different illicit shrines. Interestingly enough, the location of Micah's shrine and the home of the unnamed Levite in Judges 19 is described as being in the hill country of Ephraim. Previously, I suggested that this might refer to Shiloh or Bethel, but Shechem could be another viable option. All three cities are mentioned in Judges 21:19 as Benjamin receive directions to the festival. Mizpah is also mentioned in Judg. 20:1 where Israel assembles *to YHWH,* and again in 21.1 where the narrator reports that they had sworn a vow there. Though this Mizpah is located in Benjamin and is different from Jephthah's Mizpah, the name imaginatively connects the narratives.[152]

More than just place names, the events of Judges 17-21 reflect many of the earlier narratives (e.g., the setting up cultic sites, inter-tribal strife, fratricidal civil war, rash vows, and the abuse of women). The interconnectedness between these narratives and ending of the book, or what Gregory Wong calls the "echoes of the major judges," suggests that the issues plaguing Israel in 17-21 are not altogether different than the problems they face in chapters 3-16.[153] It may be that the political problems Israel faces in chapters 3-16 might be *explained by the cultic problems in Judges 17-21*. The opening chapters of 1 Samuel depict a corrupted priesthood, whose foolish actions endanger Israel. The rise and rejection of Saul as king demonstrate that the issues that Israel faces in the book of Judges are not resolved by a king. As argued in the beginning of this chapter, this continuity is strange if Judges 17-21 is meant to advocate for a change in *political* leadership. In the final section we will explore the function of the ending of the book of Judges and its refrain.

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[152] Later in the Deuteronomistic History, Mizpah (of Benjamin) will become a cultic centre of sorts and feature in the rise of Saul (1 Sam. 7:5-17; 10:17). Quite different than Abimelech's Shechem, Jephthah's Mizpah is unburdened by notoriety.

[153] Cf. Beldman, *The completion of Judges*, pp. 84-107. He describes the ending strategy of Judges 17-21 as one of circularity, in that it invokes previous narratives "to expose the deeply problematic behavior and situation of Israel at the end of the book (p. 107). This is explored more in the following sections.

Conclusion: Back to the Beginning

Having explored the various ways that cultic issues undergird the narrative of Judges 1-16 and the beginning of 1 Samuel, we return once again to the ending and its refrain that lies between them. I will discuss the work of David Beldman and his analysis of the ending strategies that are present in Judges 17-21. In particular, I will focus on how the narrative employs a strategy of entrapment—both thematically and temporally—to cause the reader to revaluate the book of Judges. I will conclude with a brief reflection on what it may mean to engage these chapters as Christian Scripture.

Strategies of Ending and Judges 17-21

In his recent monograph, David Beldman explores how Judges 17-21 constitutes an ending. Drawing from literary criticism, particularly Marianna Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel*, Beldman connects a few strategies of ending to the rhetoric of the book of Judges. He connects Torgovnick's classification of "Parallelism" with a "strategy of Completion."[154] This is, as Beldman suggests, the most common way narratives end—themes, plotlines, characters, motifs, etc. appear and develop throughout the story and are brought to a "close" in the end.[155] A second strategy of ending is Circularity, which Torgovnick describes as "When the ending of a novel clearly recalls the beginning in language, in situation, in the grouping of characters, or in several of these ways."[156] Beldman uses this to explain the similarities between the exposition of Judges (1:1-3:6) and the ending. He draws from Wong's work and helpfully identifies a dozen or so connections.[157] The third strategy which Beldman sees at work in Judges 17-21 is what he calls "the Strategy of

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[154] *Closure in the Novel*, (Princeton University, 2017), p. 13. "When language, situation, or the grouping of characters refers not just to the beginning of the work but to a series of points in the text, we may speak of parallelism as the novel's closural pattern. Often less obvious than circularity, parallelism sometimes becomes clear only upon retrospective analysis."

[155] Beldman, *The completion of Judges*, pp. 78-83.

[156] Torgovnick, p. 13. These strategies of endings are described as a "geometric metaphor" by Torgovnick, which Beldman suggests with respect to circularity, "does not necessarily resolve the conflict but balances the 'geometry' of the narrative" (p. 84).

[157] Beldman, pp. 87-107. Cf. Wong, *Compositional Strategies,* pp. 80-141.

Entrapment." This relates broadly to Torgovnick's "tangential ending," which normally introduces a new topic unrelated to the rest of the narrative.[158] The ending is not properly *tangential* because the two themes identified as "new", kingship and cult, appear throughout the book—a point I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter. Acknowledging this, Beldman writes that, "they do emerge in the end section in a way that may at first catch readers off guard or perhaps disorient them. This should cause readers to consider what the narrator's late concern for kingship and cult has to do with the aims previously expressed in the book of Judges."[159] Beldman additionally acknowledges that other strategies of completion and circularity might also be at work with regard to kingship and cult but reiterates that there is something unexpected with how the narrative addresses these topics in the end chapters. Beldman prefers the language of "entrapment," drawing from Robert O'Connell's *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*. O'Connell explains that the ending of Judges:

> entangles the reader with the need to make a reassessment of first impressions and binds upon the reader the conviction that he or she has been subjected to a rhetorical strategy of entrapment. Thus, as for the book's characters so for its readers: things are not as right as they at first appear . . . This rhetorical strategy, by which the compiler/redactor withheld essential information until the dénouement [Judges 17-21], seems to have been designed to entrap the reader into a premature assessment of Judges' hero stories so as to invite a retroactive reassessment of the book's characters (if not of the reader's perceptions of leadership in Israel).[160]

This strategy of entrapment is accomplished by withholding crucial information from the reader until the end which causes a revaluation of the narrative as a whole by the ideal reader.[161] The

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[158] Torgovnick, 13-14.

[159] Beldman, p. 108.

[160] O'Connell, pp. 6-7. Cited also in Beldman, p. 123. Interestingly, neither O'Connell nor Beldman explicitly define what is meant by "entrapment." Only later in his commentary does O'Connell provide a clearer explanation: "The fact that this monarchical perspective on the period is disclosed only at the end of the book suggests that its disclosure was designed to achieve a retroactive rhetorical effect. This retroactive effect conforms to a rhetorical pattern of entrapment found in other contexts of the Hebrew Bible whereby the text delays specifying the situation of comparison until the hearer has already endorsed the principle that will apply to that situation" (p. 269-70). For O'Connell, this rhetorical strategy is utilized by the author/redactor to idealize "the monarchy of Judah at the expense of that of Benjamin" which implies the rivalry between the Saulide and Davidic houses portrayed in 2 Samuel 1-4 (p. 268).

[161] This experience of entrapment may not ring true to every reader, as is evidenced by the novelty of Beldman's argument. Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate that it is at the very least reasonable to suggest that the *ideal* reader of Judges is meant to sense this strategy of entrapment in its final form.

"entrapment" is the way the story is told, creating by it two distinct narratives: Narrative A is where the reader *thinks* the story is going and Narrative B is the recontextualization of Narrative A by the ending. Within the Hebrew Bible, Nathan's parable about the rich man stealing his poor neighbour's lamb successfully entraps David into condemning himself. The parable is at once two separate narratives: a story about a lamb and a story about David's sin. Nathan's declaration "Thou art the man!" recontextualizes the story for David.[162] Perhaps a better example of how the strategy of entrapment can be achieved in the reader is M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*. Malcom Crowe (played by Bruce Willis) is a child psychologist who is attempting to help a troubled boy who sees ghosts that don't know they are dead. In the final scenes, Malcom Crowe (along with the audience) comes to the realization that he has been dead throughout the entire film. Scenes from earlier in the film are replayed at the close, allowing the audience time to revaluate the narrative. Clues to this ending can be seen throughout, but the audience only comes to the realization by the ending.[163] Such endings might help explain why the focus or perspective appears to shift in exactly the place one would expect closure or narrative completion.

In the case of the book of Judges, what is the crucial information that is withheld from the reader until Judges 17-21? The answer is twofold: First, Israel's priesthood and religious authority is corrupt and has ceased to follow YHWH according to the Torah. This has resulted in catastrophic loss of life and dignity—particularly for women. As argued earlier in this chapter, echoes of the cult and its priesthood can be heard in the narratives that comprise Judges 3-16. The stories of

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[162] This strategy of entrapment only applies to the character of David, for the literary/canonical reader is already aware both of David's actions and the Lord's displeasure (2 Sam. 11:27).

[163] There are important differences between the book of Judges and both of these examples with regards to the compositional history. Judges is likely the work of multiple tradents and thus the ending may take the narrative in directions never imagined by the earlier writers. The final form of the text provides the reader the opportunity to read and reread Judges as a coherent narrative which may amplify the effect of the ending. Though they are distinct media, Film and the biblical text are perhaps more similar in that the perceived unity of a film is really the product of numerous creative forces. According to Auteur theory, a film can be considered and analyzed as the work of a single mind, i.e., the director (M. Night Shyamalan in this case). This theory has been criticized and modified since its inception in the 1960's to acknowledge that there are many perspectives and persons that are involved in the film making process. Certain critiques focused on the social and political shortcomings of the theory, as the creative input of certain individuals (especially women and minorities) often went unacknowledged. An *auteur* may still be a heuristic label in discussing a film and creative force(s) behind it. See D. Andrews, 'No Start, No End: Auteurism and the Auteur Theory', *Theorizing Art Cinemas*, (University of Texas, 2013). With respect to the rhetorical strategy of the ending of Judges, we may likewise attribute it to an ancient *auteur* without denying the complex compositional history behind the text.

Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah are inundated with cultic concerns. There is, however, a conspicuous absence of the priesthood, not only from these stories but from Judges 1-16 as well. The multiplicity of cultic sites in the final chapters (Bethel, Shiloh, Mizpah, and possibly Shechem) raise the possibility that Israel's own understanding of where the presence of YHWH is located might not be so straightforward.[164] Even so, the more traditional cultic sites of Bethel and Shiloh are absent from the core narrative of Judges 3-16 and the cultic dimension of Shechem and Jephthah's Mizpah is backgrounded and appear tangential to these earlier narratives. In Judges 17-18, the reader is suddenly introduced to Levites, idols, shrines, and shifting cultic loyalties. In Judges 19-21, there is a concentration of cultic terminology and identities, all of which provide the religious logic and justification for civil war and the brutal acts of violence that accompany it. What is the effect of telling the story in this way? Beldman puts it well:

> The virtual absence of proper cultic practice throughout the book of Judges may not be conspicuous until the emergence of cultic matters in the end section . . . By bringing them into special focus at the end, the narrator identifies the vital aspects of Israelite religion and society that have been missing in the previous narratives . . .[165]

There is no doubt that the narrative casts aspersion upon the Levites in Judges 17-21, but as mentioned previously, the cultic legitimacy of the actions of Phineas is open to being read in different ways (20:27-28). As stated earlier, many scholars view Israel's actions as a sincere demonstration of repentance.[166] Finally and for the first time in the book, the cult is functioning as it should; Judg. 20:26-28 depicts proper worship of YHWH. Even with the final promise of victory in 20:28, the events which follow cast doubt on such a positive reading. The repetition of the word "brother" suggests some hesitancy from Israel, but the near massacre of the Benjaminites surely signals that something has gone terribly wrong.[167] That Israel's (and Benjamin's) problems are only exacerbated by one foolish vow (21:1) and then providentially solved by another (21:5) suggests that Israel did not have a clear understanding of Torah. Moreover, the mass rape and

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[164] A few texts (Josh 18:1; 19:51; Judg. 18.31) presents Israel's cultic centre as located at Shiloh, but this is complicated by other canonical accounts that have Israel worshiping in other locations.

[165] Beldman, p. 113.

[166] See my earlier footnote on p. 187 fn. 66.

[167] Wong, p. 68.

kidnapping take place *at a religious festival at Shiloh*. The motivations of Israel may be sincere, but these events speak more to how the cult is utilized in acts of barbaric violence. As argued, cultic issues are a recurring and unifying theme throughout the book of Judges and only persist in 1 Samuel 1-15. Does the presence of Phineas and the ark in Judg. 20:27-28 represent the singular occurrence of faithful Yahwistic worship in the entire book, despite leading to the near massacre of a tribe and the rape of 1,000 women? Or might it be more likely that what is depicted here is yet another example of the clear pattern of an improper cultic relationship to YHWH on the part of Israel and her leaders? If we are attempting to read the book of Judges as a coherent literary work, then it seems that the latter is more likely.

This leads us to the second piece of information that is withheld from the reader: the events of Judges 17-21 which depict the corruption of the priesthood have actually occurred at the beginning of the Judges period, shortly after the death of Joshua. The ending reconfigures the preceding narratives as a non-linear story. The narratives of Judges 17-18 and 19-21 lack clear historical or literary temporal markers, such that the stories could conceivably have occurred at any time between the death of Joshua and the events of 1 Samuel. That is, with one exception in each story. In Judges 18:30 and 20:28, the narrator includes the names of the Levite and priest serving the cultic centres, explaining that they are grandsons of Moses and Aaron respectively.[168] It is possible that the genealogical connections might be telescoped, and thus the priests are not grandsons but only distant descendants.[169] Nonetheless, the effect of naming these characters connects the narratives of Judges 17-21 to the generation after Joshua envisaged in Judg. 2:10.[170] This delayed naming of the Levite adds to the sense of entrapment within these stories. Judges

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[168] In the Masoretic tradition, the word משה contains a superscripted Nun so that the word is read as מנשה (i.e., Manasseh). It appears that such a description of a descendant of Moses presiding over an illicit cult was too scandalous for scribe. Cf. *BHQ* 104*–105*. S. Weitzman, 'Reopening the Case of the Suspiciously Suspended Nun in Judges 18:30', *CBQ*, 61/3 (1999). explores the possibility that the Manasseh created by the suspended nun might represent a counter-history and polemic against Samaritan theology/identity vis-à-vis the first Samaritan High priest Manasseh—a "curious coincidence" pointed out by Moore (p. 401-402)

[169] Webb, p. 448; On the basis that Judges 20:28 does not appear to be telescoped (Cf. Exod. 6:25; Num. 25:7), it seems preferable to see Judg. 18:30 as representing a non-telescoped genealogy.

[170] Beldman, p. 133-34; Cf. Boling, p. 286. It is possible these verses are a later editorial gloss, Cf. Amit, *Judges*, p. 352; Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, pp. 142, 207-208, 242, Figure 8 on p. 256; V. H. Matthews, 'Looking for Levites in the Book of Judges', *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 35/2 (2013), p. 144; Moore, *Judges*, p. 434. The rhetorical effect of identifying the priest as a grandson of Moses remains in the final form and may be felt by the reader.

17-18 proceeds as any other story does in the book. Though lacking the respectable moral qualities, Micah appears to be the next God-ordained and Spirit-empowered saviour. But he's not. His story is quickly taken over by an unnamed Levite and a marauding band of Danites. Apart from the explicit mention of the Levite and the narrowed focus on cultic objects, other aspects of the story, especially the theme of intra-tribal conflict, fit neatly into the larger narrative context, and much the same is true for Judges 19-21. It is only by the revelation of the name that reader realizes the truth, like Malcom Crowe in *The Sixth Sense,* Israel had been *spiritually* dead the whole time.

By setting these stories at the start of the Judges period, the editor/redactor has also reconfigured the book's relative chronology for the reader.[171] Samson, considered to be the final judge due to the continuity of Philistine oppression in 1 Samuel, is now reconfigured as one of the first judges, with the narrative events taking place before the events Judges 17-18.[172] Not only this, but earlier narratives are given additional colour. For example, closer connections can be drawn between Ehud, the men of Gibeah (Judg. 19) and the 600 Benjaminite survivors (20:47).[173] Perhaps this can add to the negative characterization of Ehud I argued for in chapter two. The "dyschronology" or non-linear story telling of Judges complicates any assessment of the book which views the overall plot as depicting a progressive moral deterioration of Israel.[174] While things do seem to get worse for Israel as the story progresses, this is only the *impression* the book gives, as Beldman has suggested.[175] The recontextualizing or re-chronologizing effect of the final chapters reveal that the *worst* of Israel's actions happened not at the end of the Judges period but at its

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[171] A number of premodern readers have also noticed this. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 5.136-178; Seder O'lam Rabbah 12.2 which locates the events of Judges 17-21 in the days of Cushan-Rishathaim (Judg. 3:8); Theodoret of Cyrus, *The questions on the Octateuch*, (Catholic University of America, 2007), pp. 357-361 [Q. 27].

[172] The locations of Zorah and Eshtaol (13:25; 18:2, 12), Timnah (14:1) and Gaza (16:1), tie the events of the two narratives to southwest Palestine. References to מַחֲנֵה־דָ֑ן in 13:25 and 18:12 seem to suggest that they occur roughly around the same time. See also Beldman, pp. 128-129; Cf. Butler's relative chronology pp. 490.

[173] Seder O'lam Rabbah 12.2 locates the events of Judges 17-21 in the days of Cushan-Rishathaim (Judg. 3:8) but immediately before Ehud.

[174] Cf. Block, p. 132. See also his illustration on the same page. Ken Way has applied the work of Mary Douglas and proposed that Judges is arranged as a ring composition which begins on a higher moral plane that spirals downward as the story progresses, 'The Literary Structure of Judges Revisited: Judges as a Ring Composition', in B. T. Arnold, N. L. Erickson, J. H. Walton (eds.), Windows to the ancient world of the Hebrew Bible: essays in honor of Samuel Greengus, (Eisenbrauns, 2014).

[175] Beldman, pp. 137, 141-42.

inception.[176] Perhaps the reason many have drawn connections between the ending of Judges and the introduction (Judg. 1-3:6), i.e., the effect of circularity, is because the ending is, in a sense, also *the beginning*. Beldman writes, "As an analepsis, drawing the reader back to an earlier time, they [the events of Chs. 17-21] prompt a retrospective revaluation of the whole period represented in the book. Moreover, the refrain prods the reader to grapple with the notion of kingship and its apparent solution to the problems of the period represented in Judges."[177] By way of an interconnected series of short stories, the reader is given the diagnosis for Israel's shortcomings that they have witnessed in chapters 3-16. By way of the refrain, the reader is given the solution.

The function of Judges 17-21 is to provide a retrospective analysis of the problems Israel faces within the book of Judges. It probes deeper than the deuteronomic explanations offered in Judges 3-16, which gave a theological explanation for Israel's cyclical oppressions. Israel's occupation and oppression was a result of their failure to obey Torah and follow YHWH. But *why* does the cycle persist? *Why* does Israel continue to stray from following their God and return to the religious syncretism? The answer is given to the reader in these final chapters: the priesthood is corrupt and has neglected their duties to instruct Israel in the ways of the Lord. By reading the text as a coherent narrative, this ending helps fill in a gap by explaining the conspicuous absence of the priesthood in the earlier narratives. There was no one to help sort Israel's cultic problem because the people who were given that responsibility had abandoned YHWH. With this corrupting turn to religious syncretism, the cult and its priests were able to be utilized by Israel and her leaders in disastrous ways.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, kingship has both a cultic and political dimension. In addition to protecting the state and providing for society, kings and rulers were expected to maintain, support, and in some cases, even participate in the cult, i.e., the religious life of the nation. Within deuteronomistic ideology, they could be described as the covenant

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[176] Block's understanding of the structure of the book also rests on a subjective assessment of the individual Judges. Aside from Othniel and Deborah, Block is accustomed to finding fault with every character. Even so, it would be hard to discern in an identifiable way how Barak is any worse than Ehud, or how Jephthah is worse than Abimelech, or how Samson is worse than Jephthah. Moreover, the ending creates a new relative chronology of the stories, showing again, that there is not a progressive deterioration, but simply a pattern of apostasy.

[177] Beldman, p. 72

administrator, responsible for ensuring Israel's continued existence and flourishing in the land.[178] If neglected by Israel's king, the cult and Israel's religious life with it, would be in jeopardy. It seems that the fate of these entities—the king, the cult, and the people (Israel)—are intertwined in these final chapters. Neglect in one area will lead to neglect of the rest. This is precisely what happens in Judges 17-21. The corruption and sin of the priesthood perpetuate the same disorder in society to an egregious effect: women are violated, and innocent civilians are slaughtered.

All actors in this narrative are indicted in the offenses, events which would only be replicated in a variety of ways during Israel's monarchy. These chapters can function as a criticism of both Israel's cultic and political leaders. At the near centre of these chapters is a call to reflect on the woman's broken body and to speak out (Judg. 19:30). This graphic, yet intimate picture reveals the true cost of Israel's negligence: the barbarous death of the innocent. This is what will happen when proper worship of YHWH is abandoned. The refrain is a call for Israel's leader—whoever that may be—to recommit to following YHWH and to lead Israel in doing what is right in YHWH's eyes.

Reflections on Judges 17-21 and reading as Christian Scripture

I wish to explore two things that resonate with our examination of what it means to read the book of Judges as Christian Scripture. The first discusses "recontextualization" as a fundamental movement within the text and as something applied to the book of Judges. This principle of interpretation is crucial to reading Judges and other texts within the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture. The second point is an application of this principle that traces how the horizons of Judges 17-21 may be broadened to include other voices in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The chorus of recontextualized voices may be heard to speak to our world today.

[178] Gerbrandt, pp. 98-99.

Recontextualization

Much ink has been spilled discussing the compositional history of the book of Judges. Earlier accountings found a natural accumulation of heroic stories that eventually were compiled as Book of Saviours. The introduction (Judg. 1:1-3:6) and ending (Judg. 17-18) were added a later date. Some proposals sought to locate various editorial strata in certain discrete historical situations with a view towards their redactional strategy (e.g., the Saulide-Davidic rivalry of 2 Sam. 1-4; the reigns of Hezekiah or Josiah; an exilic version of the Deuteronomistic History; a Mizpah-Jerusalem rivalry in Persian Yehud). These redactional strata are conjectural and speculative (some more than others), but the composite nature of the book of Judges is more than likely, even if we cannot be certain of its *precise* compositional history. Here is my suggestion of how the book came to look the way it does today:

> Older material has been systematically reworked by several hands over successive centuries. What was once a free-floating cultic and/or cultural aetiology was connected to a local hero which was placed in a collection of hero stories. This, in turn, was reshaped by a critical hand who expanded the tradition to provide the necessary counterbalance to their heroic (mis)deeds. All of this was repackaged to serve the ideological purposes of a particular community (or several communities in different times). At some point in this process, this edited text was included into a larger collection, where it underwent more editing.

It seems very likely that Judges 17-21 (or at least 19-21) were added at a later date to further elucidate the themes and message of the book of Judges. While the ending does provide new information and causes retrospective analysis in the reader, this movement is best described in terms of *recontextualization*. The ending resituates the narrative in a broader context, thereby expanding its potential for meaning. In certain respects, a recontextualized narrative can provide a counter-interpretation (much like the introduction of Judges does to Joshua). In other ways, the recontextualized material serves to assist the reader in understanding the pre-existing narrative, filling out its silences, clarifying its ambiguities, or even smoothing out its complexities. I argued that with their focus on the cult, the end chapters were addressing the conspicuous absence of the priesthood earlier in the narrative. The recontextualizing of the narrative may appear at odds with what has been said earlier, or perhaps less drastically, it may shift the emphasis of a text. Take

Jephthah for example: it may have once begun as a tale where the hero makes the ultimate sacrifice for the nation. Its larger literary context, namely the massacre of the Ephraimites (Judges 12) and its inclusion into the book of Judges as a whole, may however change how the reader understands the character of Jephthah. Judges 17-21 likewise broadens the horizons of the narrative, giving license to the reader to discover additional meanings that might not otherwise be found in the originating context(s).

These movements of recontextualization occur within the book of Judges. They are a feature endemic to the text. Recontextualization, however, is also something that *happens to the book of Judges.* While parts or the whole of the book may have at one point stood in isolation, its inclusion into Jewish Scriptures brings its various narratives into dialogue with other texts. Viewing the Levites in Judges 17-21 as corrupt or seeing them function as a "hidden polemic" against a particular cultic centre occurs when the narrative is viewed in a broader frame of reference (i.e., Leviticus and the Priestly material or 1 Kings). Understanding that criticisms of the Benjaminites in Judges 19-21 might also be applied to Saul, his descendants, or even post-exilic Yehud is to recontextualize them within the Hebrew Bible, allowing them to take on additional significance.

The same is true for reading Judges as *Christian* Scripture. These narratives are recontextualized, placed not only in the context of the Tanakh, but the larger context of the Christian Bible. There, the book of Judges *becomes* the Old Testament and may take on additional meanings as it interacts and dialogues with the New Testament and Christian tradition. Part of what it means to read these texts as *scripture* is to view them, in some way, as authoritative for the life of faith in the present. To allow these ancient texts to speak to the issues of today is to participate in the process of recontextualization where readers, once more, may find meanings and significance previously unimagined by its originating context. Yet, the word of God comes to us. Just as at Sinai and Golgotha, it requires engagement with and a response to its subject matter. There is a dialogical movement of recontextualization between the past and present, between our world and the world of the Bible with its vision of our lives before God.

By framing the discussion in these terms, multiple modes or (re)contexts of reading may exist in a non-competitive way. As far as we are able to discern the movements of recontextualization—whether as encoded *in* the text or as something done *to* the text—we are able to speak of a variety of meanings within discrete frames of reference. The "original" meaning(s) of

a text stay intact—given in some degree or another—influencing but not necessarily determining how the text can be read in the present by an interested reader. Some of these "meanings" might exert more pressure on the reader or be considered by them as greater in value and/or authority than others. These judgements are already operative within the final form of the book of Judges and are to be expected in the appropriation of the text as Scripture. That Judges once may have been an argument for a particular king or a critique against a particular cultic centre, does not determine or limit Christian interpretation to these (possible) originating contexts. But neither does this approach *deny* the reality of these meanings within their frames of reference. Readers interested in discerning ancient Israelite religion may find helpful portraits here, even if the final form of Judges no longer emphasizes or supports those earlier sentiments.

Perhaps the same is true for Jewish and Christian readings. What was once emphasised in Israel's Scriptures becomes decentred in the New Testament. At times these recontextualizations are dramatic as is evidenced by the reception of Jesus' teaching by the religious leaders of his day.[179] Recontextualization must not always imply a sharp contrast as this movement is quite germane to the Bible's own representation of its past. Echoes of Abraham, Sinai, or the Exile are heard throughout the Old Testament, giving shape and substance to later events. One can identify the same kind of recontextualizations in the New Testament.[180] Framing the discussion in this way may help explain the continuities between Israel's Scriptures and the New Testament and explain that disagreements between Jews and Christians are best thought of not only as a matter of interpretation but also as a matter of contexts.

Judges 17-21: True religion, Christian Nationalism, and #ChurchToo

In this final section, I wish to give a demonstration of how the text and meaning of Judges 17-21 might be recontextualised in various movements. The narratives of Judges 17-21 focus on the

[179] A good example of this would be in the reappropriation of temple (and cultic) imagery in the Gospel of John. The centrality of the cult continues to be emphasised, but its referent is shifted to the body of Jesus. Such a radical transformation of the cult and all that it symbolized is what created such confusion about Jesus' identity (John 7:37-52).

[180] E.g., the figure of John the Baptist as a type of Elijah, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan as symbolic of the Israelites crossing the Jordan (Josh. 3), etc.

corruption of the priesthood and depict the consequences of neglecting proper worship of YHWH. Throughout the book of Judges, the cult is utilized by those in power to achieve military victory over their enemies as well as their brothers. Devotion to YHWH is weaponized, and the casualties are comprised largely of innocent women and non-combatants. The reader is forced to contemplate these cultic failures in the fate of the woman of chapter 19, and again in the rape of the women of Shiloh. Surely, this is not what YHWH requires of Israel.

If these narratives are read together with the rest of Israel's Scriptures—where they have been recontextualized—then one may find deep intertextual resonances with the repeated indictments of Israel's prophetic tradition. Enraged by the cavalier attitude of the Jerusalem nobility towards their religious and social responsibilities, Micah accuses them of "eating the flesh of the people" (Mic. 3:3) and with "building Zion with blood" (3:10). The wealthy landowners had seized inheritances, driven women from their homes, and in some way, have taken God's glory from their children (2:9). He accuses the rulers with taking bribes and perverting justice, the priests with charging for their teaching, and prophets delivering oracles for money. Even then, they continue to claim divine favour: "Is not the Lord in our midst? No evil shall come upon us" (3:11). Because of this presumption, says Micah, disaster will fall upon Jerusalem. In chapter 6, the Lord speaks as both plaintiff and judge against Israel in a divine courtroom drama. The earth stands as his witness. What had the Lord done to deserve this corrupted worship with its societal injustice? Had he not delivered Israel from Egypt (6:4)? In verses 6-7, the prophet voices Israel's sardonic reply: "With what shall bring before YHWH? A lamb? Two calves? A thousand rams? 10,000 rivers of oil? How about my firstborn son? Will that be enough for YHWH?" For Micah, God's answer has always been clear: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what YHWH is seeking from you is but only to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Within such a response, Israel's cultic obligations are reframed as love and justice. Though idolatry is critiqued earlier (1:7), Israel's religious corruption is spoken more in terms of how her rulers have treated the people. The true religion of Israel is best expressed, not their cultic activities, but in how they show YHWH's loving kindness to their neighbour.

Similar sentiments can be found elsewhere among the prophetic literature. Amos repeatedly critiques the incongruity between Israel's cultic practices and their treatment of the poor. Though they loved to offer sacrifices and praise, they did not enact justice for those in need

(Amos 2:6-7; 4:1-5). In a startling proclamation, YHWH declares that he *despises* their feasts and does not delight in their sacrifices: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a raging torrent" (Amos 5:23-24). If something did not change in the northern Kingdom—if Jeroboam II and the priesthood at Bethel did not lead Israel to do justice—they would be exiled. Perhaps less critical of the cult, the prophet Joel calls Israel to return to the Lord "with all their heart," with fasting and weeping. He, however, is careful to add "but rend your hearts and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). Here, the prophet does not denigrate ritual—his call for repentance would necessitate the activity of priests (2:17). Instead, ritual is proper to repentance when it is connected with heartfelt devotion.[181]

When these narratives are read together with the New Testament—where they also have been recontextualized as part of Christian Scripture—one may find additional resonances with certain Gospel passages. The gospel writers present Jesus in near constant disagreement with the religious authorities of his day. Jesus' scathing indictments of the Pharisees and the scribes at times, rival the rhetoric of the ancient prophets. Regrettably, these passages have been used in a variety of ways that often denigrate Jews or Judaism, and especially the relationship between ritual and religion.[182] In recent times, New Testament scholars have provided helpful reconstructions of first century Jewish belief and practice that highlight the many continuities between Jesus (or Paul) and Judaism.[183] Jesus' discussions and condemnations of these religious leaders may have been more of an "in-house debate." Some of Jesus' halakic reasonings may also be found in other Jewish writings. Even so, there still exists disagreements between Jesus and these religious leaders, and some of them are difficult to read in light of the long history of the oppression of Jews at the hand of Christians.

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[181] Like, Amos, Psalm 51 appears to be very critical of sacrifice, or at least the type of sacrifice that envisaged by Amos. But like Joel, the psalmist connects true worship with heartfelt devotion to God and a contrition over sin (Psalm 51:16-17 ET).

[182] This denigration of ritual has also been applied to certain Catholic practices during the Reformation and again to a broader Christian context during the first and second Great Awakenings.

[183] See M. Thiessen, *Jesus and the forces of death: the gospels' portrayal of ritual impurity within first-century Judaism*, (Baker Academic, 2020); J. B. Tucker, *Reading Romans after supersessionism: the continuation of Jewish covenantal identity*, (Cascade Books, 2018); J. Sievers and A.-J. Levine (eds.), *The Pharisees*, (Eerdmans, 2021).

Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus also sees proper worship and fulfilment of the law as being expressed chiefly by loving God and neighbour.[184] Worship of God will lead to caring for others. In Mathew's gospel, the discussion over which is the greatest commandment is one of several questions asked of Jesus. These halakhic dialogues serve to show Jesus' mastery in the Torah and present him as superior to these religious leaders. In this context does he utter the seven "Woes" against his opponents. Addressed to the Pharisees and the Scribes, Matthew 23 is a rebuke to a particular way of fulfilling the law. Much of Jesus' words concern the apparent hypocrisy of these religious leaders. Jesus commends what they are saying but tells his audience not to follow their example (23:2). Part of the rebuke is focused on the individual's personal attitude (i.e., their pride or motivations) (Matt. 23:5-7). Other parts of Jesus' condemnation concern the effect of such law observance—it becomes a burden rather than a source of life (23:4, 15). These leaders appear devout, even tithing their herbs and spices, yet Jesus accuses them of "neglecting the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith," saying, "It is these you ought to have done without neglecting the others" (23:23).[185]

This account in the gospel of Mark (12:28-40) is shorter but similar enough. Though the same questions are asked as in Matthew's account, Mark records it as a dialogue between the scribe and Jesus. After Jesus responds, this scribe says that Jesus is correct for these "are more important than all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices." To this wise response Jesus declares that he is "not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Following this exchange, however, Jesus warns of the scribes who seek after their own honour and devour widows' houses (12:38-40). As if for illustration of these principles, Mark continues with the story of the Widow's Mite (12:41-44). The widow gives two small coins, but these are worth more than the larger donations of the wealthy patrons, for she gives out of her poverty rather than abundance. The subtext appears to be that the widow's sacrifice represents true faith and worship while the contributions of the wealthy are merely done for show and for the purpose of gaining honour.

The gospel of Luke largely follows Mark in that the halakhic dialogues are proceeded by the warning against the scribes and the story of the widow's mite (20:1-21:4). Differently than

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[184] Matthew 22:37-40; Something similar is expressed by Hillel the elder in *B. Shabbat* 31a

[185] This should be read as Jesus *affirming* Torah observance, not denying it.

both Matthew and Mark, Luke has placed the "greatest commandment" discourse in a different context. Jesus is approached by a lawyer who asks how he may inherit eternal life.[186] In this account, it is actually the lawyer who responds with what Jesus answers elsewhere: Love God and love your neighbour.[187] But Luke seems more concerned with what follows: "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "and who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29). Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37). Notably for our purposes, the story features both a Levite and a priest, both of whom do not fulfil what Jesus believes to be the more important matters of the law.[188] Given the well-known rivalry between Jews and Samaritans, the fact that the one who exercises compassion on the man is a Samaritan must be a criticism of some sort: *this* type of person knew the essence of the Law when Israel's own priests did not.[189] This story represents the only explicit mention of a Levite in the gospels. It seems likely then that the Levite (and the priest) is a stand-in for Israel's religious leaders. As in Matthew and Mark, Jesus' criticism against these leaders is that their law observance does not produce in them or their community the actions and attitudes it is meant to. Additionally, this story serves to broaden the scope of neighbourly love. Compassion is not to be limited to one's family or tribe but extended to include even one's perceived enemies.[190]

Not unlike the prophets in Israel's Scriptures, the Gospel writers portray Jesus as critical of a cultic system that has lost sight of its purpose. While affirming in no uncertain terms the importance of Torah and its observance (e.g., Matt. 5:17-20), Jesus remains critical of actions or attitudes that approach worship to God in ways that ultimately harm others. True fulfilment of Torah is best expressed by imitating God and acting with love and compassion towards our neighbours and enemies, especially the poor and needy. In Judges 17-18, we saw both Micah and the Danites view cultic objects and the Levite as a means to secure divine favour. The story ended with a complete destruction of Dan—a city of quiet and trusting people—and the establishment

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[186] This character seems to have changed from Mark's scribe in exactly the same way as it does in Matthew.

[187] Perhaps the author of Luke was seeking to avoid Jesus' double-barrelled answer when he has been asked to choose the greatest.

[188] Matthew Theissen has recently explored this story through the theme of ritual impurity to suggest that Jesus' story is not a critique of Jewish legalism or Torah observance (*Jesus and the forces of death*, pp. 95-98).

[189] In Luke 17:11-19, a Samaritan is also used as foil to the Jewish lepers.

[190] This notion of enemy love is perhaps better expressed in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43-48).

of an illicit cultic centre. When we look once more at Judges 19-21, the critique against the priesthood and Israel's leaders stands in sharp relief. In dealing with Gibeah and the Benjaminites, Israel seemingly did everything correct. They confronted those responsible, they called for justice, and they even went to war to achieve it. When all things seemed lost after two defeats, Israel turned to YHWH with weeping and sacrifices. They brought the ark and consulted the high priest and God's answer was clear: Go and kill your brother. They did not simply kill their brother, they annihilated them—leaving only 600 men. These Israelites even remained faithful to their vows rather than breaking them, preferring to perform *herem* on Israelites and allow mass rape of their daughters—the very reason they went to war in the first place. And in a distant sense, they fulfilled Torah.

When Judges 17-21 is read in this wider context of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, it can be understood that Israel has neglected the weightier matters of the law. Their cultic actions are directed towards YHWH but convey the reality that they have misunderstood the purpose of them. Even worse, their actions suggest that they have misunderstood the character of YHWH. The way the cult is utilized by Israel in these final chapters is to legitimate the war against their brothers. They have kept one law at the expense of another, and the danger is that there is no one to suggest otherwise. There is none who speak up for women and the innocent, none who suggest that on the basis of the Law they are trying so hard to keep, there is another option that leads to life. This is the result of the corruption of the priesthood and the reality that Israel has no king or ruler to change things. Recontextualizing the book of Judges—even within a *Christian* frame of reference—can elucidate the text in ways sympathetic to Jewish readings. We find a continuity of critique—a criticism of leaders who utilize ritual and religion without fulfilling the weightier matters of the law, namely the call to love God and love one's neighbour.

These ancient texts are remarkably relevant for our world today. In various political situations and administrations, religion is widely used to justify one group's position over and against others. In the best of times, impassioned pleas fuelled by religious rhetoric may lead governments to pursue peace and social justice. These past few years, however, have arguably been the worst of times. The fusion of Christian faith and nationalistic dogma has always had a place in American discourse. Since its inception, America's civil religion has been Christian nationalism,

appearing more Christian in word than in deed.[191] Expressions of this religion can be seen in American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny in the 19th century or the repeated invocation of "a city on a hill" by several presidents in the 20th and 21st centuries.[192] In recent years with the rise of the Trump administration and increased polarity of partisan politics, the disastrous effects of Christian nationalism are being showcased on a near weekly basis. Religious symbols and bible verses have been weaponised by politicians and clergy in service towards partisan issues. Things have only been made worse with the COVID-19 pandemic, as churches and pastors have used the Bible to protest against the lockdowns, mask-wearing, and even taking the vaccine. One egregious example of Christian nationalism occurred in the summer of 2020 during the Black Lives Matter protest that erupted after the murder of George Floyd. In order to show himself as a "Law and Order" President, Trump marched to St John's Episcopal Church for a photo-op with a Bible outside this historic church.[193] To do so, however, the law enforcement had to clear the 1,000 peaceful protestors who had gathered in Lafayette Park in front of the church. The protesters were dispersed by violent means such as batons, rubber bullets, and tear gas.[194] Clergy too were forced to leave, abandoning their mission to provide pastoral care and medical help to those who needed it. All of this was done for a photo with a Bible, sending the message that Trump and his Law & Order policies were in some way blessed by the God of the Bible.[195] These types of displays only

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[191] In *Taking America Back for God*, Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry define Christian nationalism as "a cultural framework that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity, viewing the two as closely related and seeking to enhance and preserve their union. It is undergirded by identification with a conservative political orientation (though not necessarily a political party), Bible belief, premillennial visions of moral decay, and divine sanction for conquest. Finally, its conception of morality centers exclusively on fidelity to religion and fidelity to the nation" (p. 15).

[192] Taken from Jesus' words in Matt. 5:14, this phrase was first applied to America by English Puritan, John Winthrop. His sermon was entitled, "A Model of Christian Charity", and it was delivered in 1630 on the ship which carried the Massachusetts Bay colonists who would settle Boston. As Daniel T. Rodgers argues, the significance of Winthrop's sermon is largely a late 20th century invention, with it being repurposed for American identity during the Cold War (Cf. *As a City on a Hill*, (Princeton University, 2018). *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon,* Princeton University Press, 2018). Presidents that have utilized this image include, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama.

[193] Many politicians have used the phrase "Law and Order", often in racialised ways, to signal that they are "tough on crime." Recently, Aaron Griffith has explored how this term can be situated in American Evangelical culture. See *God's Law and Order*, (Harvard University, 2020).

[194] Z. Beauchamp, 'Officers fire tear gas on peaceful protesters to clear the way for Trump's photo op', (2020).

[195] In response, the Rt. Revd. Marrian Budde, bishop of Washington, remarked: "The symbolism of him holding a Bible … as a prop and standing in front of our church as a backdrop when everything that he has said is

continued afterwards, culminating in the January 6th attack on the US Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump who sought to overturn the election. Amidst the rioting crowds and the white-supremacist symbols, religious symbols and messages could also be seen, such as a cross, Christian flags, and "Jesus Saves" or "Jesus 2020" banners. When the mob finally made their way to the now empty Senate floor, one member stood on the dais and called for a "prayer in this sacred space." His prayer is filled with Christian vocabulary, white supremacist imagery, and he finishes by invoking the name of Christ.[196]

There is an interesting parallel between the increased visibility of Christian nationalism and exposure of sexual abuse cases among churches and clergy. In the early 2000's, the Catholic Church was found to have mishandled thousands of abuse cases and had shuffled those responsible to different churches or paid out settlements to cover up the crimes.[197] There was global outrage, but it wouldn't be until years later that secular culture would also be scrutinised in the same way. The rise of the #MeToo movement in October of 2017, wherein survivors responded on social media with stories of their own experiences with sexual assault and trauma, brought the issue back to national attention.[198] The movement would lead to global awareness and influence high-profile accusations and convictions of Hollywood moguls, athletes, U.S. Politicians, and Supreme Court Nominees. It wasn't long, however, before a new hashtag began to trend. With #ChurchToo, survivors spoke out about how the *Church* was explicitly involved in perpetrating, allowing, and even covering up sexual abuse.[199] Far from it being an isolated ecclesial or secular issue, this

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antithetical to the teachings of our traditions and what we stand for as a church—I was horrified" (J. Jenkins, 'Ahead of Trump Bible photo op, police forcibly expel priest from St. John's church near White House', (2020).

[196] You can find the full video of this prayer at 'A Reporter's Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege', (2021). For further analysis of Christian nationalism and the capitol insurrection see T. B. Edsall, '"The Capitol Insurrection Was as Christian Nationalist as It Gets."', (2021).

[197] See the Pulitzer Prize winning reporting from the 2002 Boston Globe report on the Catholic Church abuse crisis. The 2015 film, *Spotlight*, follows the investigative journalist team who uncovered the abuse. The film won Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay, highlighting the importance of the film and the subject matter.

[198] The origin of the "Me Too" movement began in 2006 by activist and survivor, Tarana Burke. See A. Ohlheiser, 'The woman behind "Me Too" knew the power of the phrase when she created it — 10 years ago', (2017).

[199] C. Quackenbush, 'The Religious Community Is Speaking Out Against Sexual Violence With #ChurchToo', (2017).

movement highlights the pervasiveness of abuse within the Church, and it points to what may even be called a *rape culture*.[200]

By recontextualising Judges 17-21 in Israel's Scriptures, the New Testament, and our present world, readers can see that national idolatry and ecclesial/cultic corruption are the thematic ties holding them together. Judges 17-21 is an example of what can happen when Israel's cult ceases to maintain proper worship to YHWH — it leads to the rape and the destruction of women.[201] Though Israel repents with sacrifices and weeping, though they inquire of YHWH in the presence of the ark and with the high priest, their motivations suggest something other than proper worship. That they should even consider beginning a civil war—that they would fight their brothers and traffic their own daughters—betrays their unfamiliarity with the God they attempt to worship. There is no justice as imagined by the prophets and Jesus' greatest commandment finds no expression. Instead, the cult is used as a prop and a talisman to serve national and personal interests. The story serves as a grotesque depiction of the antithesis of what the Bible deems as proper worship of the Lord. The story also depicts the perpetuation of rape culture in Israel by its priests. Similar to the church's cover up of sexual abuse, the Levite covers up his own misdeeds when he tells of what happened that night in Gibeah.[202] From his story, the rape of one woman results in the rape of 1,000 more. When the horizons of the biblical text are expanded to include our own, we can see an analogy between Israel's relationship with the cult and Christian nationalism's relationship with religion. It may also suggest a closer relationship between Christian nationalism and sexual abuse in the Church.

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[200] For extended discussion on the intersection of religion, rape culture, and spiritual abuse, see J. Stiebert, *Rape myths, the Bible and #MeToo*, (Routledge, 2020); C. Blyth, *Rape culture, purity culture, and coercive control in teen girl Bibles*, (Routledge, 2021); R. Graybill (ed.), *Rape culture and religious studies: critical and pedagogical engagements*, (Lexington Books, 2019); G. Messina-Dysert, *Rape culture and spiritual violence: religion, testimony, and visions of healing*, (Routledge, 2014). Additionally, Higher education and even our own field of Biblical studies has contributed to this rape culture. The high-profile demise of Jerry Falwell Jr., the former president of Liberty University, revealed the hypocrisy of evangelical purity culture (Cf. Season 3 of the documentary podcast, Z. Levitt and A. Jenks, 'Gangster Capitialism'. Within our discipline, we may point to the recent conviction of Jan Joosten for possessing over 27,000 pictures of child pornography.

[201] In her chapter on Judges 19, Graybill presents an important warning for readers: they must not accept the misogynistic logic that rape is equivalent to death or a fate worse than death (*Texts after terror*, p. 161).

[202] Seeking a reparative hermeneutic, Helen Paynter draws numerous connections between the woman of Judges 19 and stories from our own context. See *Telling terror in Judges 19*, pp. 58-65.

The refrain in Judges 17-21 spoke of a king and suggested implicitly that something could change for Israel, both spiritually and socially. The vision for leadership is that Israel's king would be formed by the Torah and obedient to YHWH. They would support the cult by facilitating and maintaining proper worship. This worship would be characterised chiefly by social justice and love of neighbour. In *these* days, we too lack this quality of leadership in the world and in the Church. If we are to remedy the woes of Christian nationalism and a culture of sexual violence and spiritual abuse, our leaders must adopt Scripture's vision for leadership with a view to returning to proper worship of God through love and justice.

— Conclusion —

For those who wish to read the book of Judges as Christian Scripture, the way forward is difficult and treacherous. There are many pitfalls along the journey — some are ethical; others are historical — and our vision is clouded by the many ambiguities and incongruities within the narratives. This study has offered new readings and hermeneutical suggestions as a way towards rereading Judges as Christian Scripture. Reading with the grain of the text, I argued that several narratives were "sanctioning sacrilege" — they were condemning the characters and their actions not only when read as part of Israel's Scriptures but also when *reread* as Christian Scripture.

I provided in chapter one a sympathetic account of how Christians in similar social settings could read and use a single verse from the book of Judges in a variety of ways. When I surveyed the reception of the Curse of Meroz (Judg. 5:23) in 18th century Britain and colonial America, I found that this verse was used primarily to encourage religious unity but took on an explicit martial ethic during periods of conflict. I focused on the "showdown in Philadelphia," an argument between Gilbert Tennent and John Smith for the religious future of the city. While Tennent used Scripture to advocate for a defensive militia, Smith argued against the lawfulness of defensive war. I suggested that their disagreement arises primarily from their understanding of how the Old Testament functions as part of the Christian canon. The textual meaning of Judg. 5:23 was rarely in question in the 18th century. The differences came from how this verse was to be applied to the present day. These historical examples, as well as others that explicitly call for violence on the basis of Judg. 5:23, reveal that interpretation is heavily influenced by social and political situations. These situations may prompt an interpretation in the first place, as Christians have turned to their Scriptures to better understand and respond to their present-day circumstances. I suggested that the threads of various contexts (history, canon, reception) weave together a tapestry that display not simply what the text meant at a singular point in history, or what it meant to different communities at various moments in time, but also what it may say to us today. Its engagement in the present is fundamentally part of the interpretive enterprise.

In chapter two, I provided a fresh interpretation of the Ehud narrative (Judg. 3:12-30) which reread the protagonist as an anti-hero whose methods of deliverance are incongruous with the way YHWH has chosen to act through Israel. Ehud's violent actions, though they effect

liberation, are presented in a way that may appear more sinister when read as part of Israel's Scriptures. From this reading, I suggested that the Christian canon and its *regula fidei* may function as a sort of genre which may prompt the reader to ask different questions and to prioritise certain textual realities over others, all of which may bring illumination to the narrative in ways which other genres or approaches might not. I also argued that a theological reading does not need to reject historical concerns about the world-behind-the-text; the canon is not in competition with history, but in fruitful conversation. Christians can acknowledge that the historical backgrounds can shape their understanding of the text without letting it exhaust its meaning as Scripture.

In chapter three I discussed how the reading practice of exemplarity was only one option among many in antiquity. This could be observed in how Jews and Christians viewed Samson differently in the text's early reception. In Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities,* Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum,* and a Jewish homily, *On Samson*, Samson was treated as a complex figure whose exemplarity was questionable and could be resisted. In contrast, the early Church Fathers understood the text to point beyond itself to distinctly *Christian* realities. Samson was thus treated as an exemplar, but not always in the same way. He was a positive example of Christ, a negative example for the Church, and in one case, Samson's actions resisted exemplarity altogether. I argued that Christian readings of Judges do not need to allow the discrete witness of Israel's Scriptures to be displaced by the reading strategies of early Christianity. The New Testament witness can be authoritative for Christian life and faith without becoming authoritarian in its particular reading approaches. For the Christian reader of Judges, exemplarity is a hermeneutical *option*.

Embracing this interpretive freedom, in chapter four I examined how Samson is characterised by the final form of the narrative. I argued that the activity of YHWH in the narrative, Samson's Nazirite identity, and the forgotten legacy of Samson did not, on their own merit, provide readers with a clear view of Samson's characterization. Taken together, these three "ways in" might shift the evaluation away from an overtly positive reading of the story. I argued that the hermeneutical key that unlocks the narrative was attending to how the story was being told, i.e., the perspective-shifting technique. Readers are invited to *see* Samson from the vantage point of a variety of different characters. In sharp contrast to other readings, I proposed that the narrator's intrusion in Judg. 14:4 indicates that the Timnite woman was from YHWH and the object he was seeking from the Philistines could be understood positively, i.e., that Israel's God was seeking

reconciliation rather than judgement. This possibility was strengthened by an intertextual reading with Genesis 38. Samson does not meet the expectations set out for him, for in the following narratives, the cycles of violence do not bring deliverance but only destroy innocent lives. I offered three brief reflections on the text that found resonance with Jesus' teaching and example as recorded in the gospels.

In the final chapter, I highlighted the cultic dimension of Judges 17-21 and its thematic resonances within Judges and the Deuteronomistic History. I argued that the refrain is a call for Israel's leader—whoever that may be—to recommit to following YHWH and to lead Israel in doing what is right in YHWH's eyes. The function of Judges 17-21 is to provide a retrospective analysis of the problems Israel faces within the book of Judges. The corrosion of Israelite society began with the corruption of the priesthood. From this reading, I suggested that recontextualization is a feature within the book of Judges and is something that also happens to it. Just as these narratives were recontextualised as Israel's Scriptures, and then later again as the Tanakh, so too are they recontextualised as part of Christian Scripture. It is this movement by readers that transforms Israel's Scriptures into the Old Testament. These multiple modes or (re)contexts of reading can exist in a non-competitive way, providing a fresh hermeneutical pathway for fruitful Jewish-Christian dialogues. I offered an example of recontextualization by drawing intertextual and theological connections with Israel's prophetic tradition and several of Jesus's dialogues. In light of these readings, I concluded by reflecting theologically on Christian Nationalism in the United States and the #ChurchToo movement.

The hermeneutical suggestions offered in this dissertation are a way towards a Christian reading of *Judges*. They are not intended to be a method, nor can they be applied to every biblical text in the same way. They also do not represent a comprehensive reflection on the book of Judges. Had there been more space, I would have examined the many issues of Judges 4-5 or pushed deeper into the effect the dual introduction has on the reading of Judges and a rereading of Joshua. As for the implications of this study, I believe it illuminates the enduring value of Israel's Scriptures in their ability to address today's realities. Some of the reading practices exemplified here might perhaps cause others to revaluate commonly held assumptions regarding the genre of a text or its reception in a particular era. More importantly, the hermeneutical suggestions can allow Christians to reflect deeply on their reading practices and provide the necessary tools to engage in Jewish-

Christian dialogue and construct a post-supersessionist theology. They might also prompt within wider contemporary culture a reassessment of the book's perceived ethical approval of religious violence. To this end, Christians may more boldly proclaim that the book of Judges is indeed the word of the Lord — Thanks be to God!

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