

A COMMENTARY ON  
**JUDGES AND RUTH**



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**JUDGES AND RUTH**

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

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*Academic*

*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*

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ISBN 978–0–8254–2556–1

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 / 5 4 3 2 1

To my children—

Doug,  
who has always enjoyed  
rousing stories of heroism,

Stephanie,  
who, like Acsah of old, has always known  
how to charm her daddy,

Jenny,  
who, since joining our family's story,  
has brightened our lives,

and Chip,  
who, like Othniel of old, is an able son-in-law  
who values his wife



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# ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta biblica
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
AYBC	Anchor Yale Bible Commentary
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament. Oxford, 1907.
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BibInt	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BkBC	Blackwell Bible Commentaries
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BNEAS	<i>Bulletin of the Near East Archaeological Society</i>
BO	Berit Olam commentary series
BRev	<i>Bible Review</i>

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Concordia Commentary
<i>ConJ</i>	<i>Concordia Journal</i>
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger Jr. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997-2000.
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CurBS</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>DNWSI</i>	<i>Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions</i>
Dtr	Deuteronomist
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ErIsr</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
FCBSS	Feminist Companion to the Bible: Second Series
<i>GCAJS</i>	<i>Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies</i>
GKC	Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar. Edited by E. Kautzsch, translated by A. E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford, 1910.
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994-1999.
<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
Heb.	Hebrew
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IBHS</i>	<i>Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBQ</i>	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JOTT</i>	<i>Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics</i>
JPSBC	JPS Bible Commentary
<i>JSem</i>	<i>Journal for Semitics</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KJV	King James Version
LBH	late biblical Hebrew
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NET	New English Translation
<i>NIB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by W. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>Or</i>	<i>Orientalia</i>
<i>OTE</i>	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>OTWSA</i>	<i>Ou Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap van Suid-Afrika</i>
PEGLMBS	Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PIBA	Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Proof</i>	<i>Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i>
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>SBH</i>	standard biblical Hebrew
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SHBC</i>	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TBT</i>	<i>The Bible Today</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
<i>VE</i>	<i>Vox evangelica</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	Vetus Testamentum: Supplement Series
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

# PREFACE

Some readers of the Bible shy away from the book of Judges. After all, it's filled with violence and doesn't seem very spiritually uplifting. If Hollywood were to do a movie of the book, it would probably get an X rating for its scenes of mutilation, child sacrifice, and gang rape, not to mention the bloodshed that appears on almost every page. But the book is in the Bible for a good reason. It illustrates how corrupt human nature really is and how far a society can fall when it turns its back on God and his moral standards. On a more positive note, in the midst of the moral chaos depicted in the book, we see a God who is patient and compassionate as he disciplines and preserves his covenant people.

As we move from the book of Judges to the book of Ruth, a bright light suddenly shines against the dark backdrop of a morally corrupt time period. Indeed, the book of Ruth is a fresh breath of air after reading Judges. Its story of God's concern for two widows and of Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law and first husband is inspiring and foreshadows the sacrificial love of the Savior. It is probably one of the most "preachable" books in the entire Old Testament.

Preaching is important to me and I have designed this commentary with pastors and teachers in mind. Accurate, relevant exposition of the Bible needs to answer three important questions: (1) What did the text mean in its ancient Israelite context? (2) What theological principles

## PREFACE

emerge from or are illustrated by a thematic analysis of the text? (3) How is the message of the text relevant to the church? In this commentary I attempt to answer these questions through a three-step process: (1) I begin with a close exegetical-literary reading of the text that surfaces the thematic emphases of each major literary unit. Such analysis yields an exegetical idea for each unit that succinctly captures the message of that unit in its cultural-historical context. (2) In step two I move outside the boundaries of the specific text being studied and develop a theological idea for each literary unit. These theological ideas express the enduring principles or truths that are rooted in the text and are relevant for a modern audience. (3) In the third step I develop homiletical trajectories from the theological idea of the passage. These trajectories begin from thematic vantage points that reflect the overall message of the book of Judges. Following the trajectories enables us to produce one or more preaching ideas for each literary unit. If this process is done with skill and savvy, the audience will be able to see how the ancient text yields the principles and how they, the audience, both individually and corporately, should and can appropriate the principles in their own experience and in the life of the church.

The commentary includes my own translation of the books. The translation is a slightly revised version of the one I prepared for the NET Bible. I wish to thank Bible.org and its Executive Director Michael Garrett for granting me permission to use my work for the NET Bible. In the commentary I have arranged the translation in a format that may seem strange to readers. Yet I think that the arrangement is helpful because it reflects the clausal structure of the original Hebrew text and allows us to see the text's contours as envisioned by the author. I distinguish between the three main elements of a narrative: (1) mainline clauses, (2) offline clauses (highlighted in bold), and (3) quotations (or discourse). All mainline and offline clauses in the narrative framework are classified. Clauses within quotations are not analyzed; quotations are simply set apart by italics. I explain the method of categorization in more detail in the introductions to both Judges and Ruth.

For the most part, the commentary is based on the traditional Hebrew text. With some notable exceptions, I do not interact with the various versions or provide extensive text-critical analysis. For this type of analysis, I would point readers to more technical works, such as Trent Butler's WBC commentary on Judges and Frederic Bush's WBC commentary on Ruth

I have chosen to use a literary-theological method that is sensitive to the author's literary strategies and techniques and seeks to identify

## PREFACE

the text's theological message. I have chosen not to use speculative diachronic methods that seek to isolate alleged sources and to reconstruct the supposed evolution of the text. Since we are not in a position to trace the book's literary evolution with any degree of confidence, I prefer to focus on the book's canonical form and to understand its various parts within this literary framework. I believe that the book, when examined in its canonical form, is a unified work. Such an approach is preferable to diachronic methods because it deals with the text as we have it and consequently is not as susceptible to the kind of speculative fancy that litters the history of biblical higher criticism. The individual stories may have functioned within specific geographical and temporal frameworks at one time, but we are not in a position to resurrect those contexts. The stories are now part of a larger entity. The book has an anthological appearance, but it is not purely anthological. The presence of the formulaic framework in the central section creates at least the semblance of a macroplot. Furthermore, as synchronic critics have shown, the placement of the stories is strategic and certain themes emerge and develop, linking them together. While the stories are juxtaposed, they are integrated thematically. Like paintings on a theme in a wing of an art gallery, they illustrate themes and contribute to the book's overall purposes and message.

In presenting my interpretive conclusions I interact with other commentaries that a pastor or teacher may be consulting. In fact, in the introductions to both Judges and Ruth, I include a list and brief assessment of the most helpful commentaries. Knowing that busy pastors do not always have ready access to periodical literature, I have also interacted with many specialized studies on Judges and Ruth. However, I concluded my research, for the most part, in 2010, when I sent the commentary to the publisher. Consequently, those who keep abreast of research on Judges-Ruth will notice that I do not interact with the very latest material. Perhaps the most notable omission is Barry Webb's fine commentary on Judges in the NICOT series. Fortunately, I was able to interact with and benefit from Webb's earlier work on Judges.

I want to thank several individuals for their assistance and encouragement. Over the past thirty years I have taught Judges and Ruth at Dallas Theological Seminary and benefited greatly from the insights offered by dozens of students. Special thanks go to my very first research assistant, Brian Leicht, who did bibliographical research for me on Judges, and to my former student Greg Wong, who has gone on to publish extensively on Judges. Over the past several years Greg and I have enjoyed an ongoing dialogue about the interpretation of the book. I also want to express my gratitude to David Howard, who edited

## PREFACE

the commentary. David's constructive criticism, penetrating questions, and valuable insights have improved the quality of my work. I also appreciate my friend Jim Weaver, formerly of Kregel Academic, for his encouragement over the years and his commitment to making this commentary beneficial to pastors. Thanks also to Dennis Hillman and Paul Hillman at Kregel Academic, who believed in the project and have seen it through to publication. Special thanks to my wife Deb, my son Doug, and my daughter Stephanie for their moral support and for the joy they have given me. Each has shown me the kind of unconditional, sacrificial love that would make Ruth and our Savior smile. Finally, all praise is due to the one who has delivered us from the bondage of sin through his sacrificial love and atoning work.

Robert Chisholm  
September 2013



# INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

**T**he book of Judges is part of a history that begins in Deuteronomy with a vision of a unified covenant community obedient to the God who delivered his people from bondage and oppression. As this history unfolds, Israel succeeded in defeating their enemies and establishing a foothold in the promised land. But the challenge of actually occupying the land remained as Joshua passed from the scene. Judges picks up the story at this point. It tells how the covenant community disintegrated morally and socially as it assimilated Canaanite culture and beliefs. God both punished and delivered wayward Israel, but the downward spiral continued. The need for competent, godly leadership becomes apparent, paving the way for the next part of the story, recorded in Samuel–Kings.

## **LITERARY STRUCTURE AND THEMES**

The book of Judges exhibits three main literary units: a prologue (1:1–3:6), a central section containing several accounts of individual judges (3:7–16:31), and an epilogue (17:1–21:25).

The prologue contains two parallel, complementary subunits. The first (1:1–2:5) describes what happened following the death of Joshua

## INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

(1:1; cf. Josh. 24:29).<sup>1</sup> Chapter one is primarily descriptive, reflecting for the most part an observer's perspective of what transpired.<sup>2</sup> The narrator does give a theological perspective at points (vv. 19a, 22), but this seems to be for rhetorical purposes, since he allows the people's perspective to dominate (v. 19b; see the commentary below). The matter-of-fact description of Israel's failure to carry out God's commission prompts the reader to ask: Why did the people fail?<sup>3</sup> The account of the incident at Bokim (2:1–5) provides at least a partial answer by making it clear that Israel's failure was not really due to Canaanite military power and persistence (the impression given by 1:19, 27, 35), but was the result of assimilation to Canaanite culture and idolatry. Through his messenger, the Lord reminded Israel of his warning that he would not drive out the nations if the people engaged in idolatry.

The second subunit in the prologue (2:6–3:6) begins with a flashback to the time when Joshua was still alive. The opening verses (2:6–10) reiterate Joshua 24:28–31 and continue the story from that point. When compared to 1:1–2:5, this account is more theological and evaluative in its orientation, reflecting God's perspective on what took place.<sup>4</sup> Picking up on the theme of 2:1–5, the narrator identifies idolatry as Israel's fundamental problem (2:11–13). He gives an overview of the period, which displays a cyclical pattern. During this period Israel would sin, prompting the Lord to hand them over to enemies for disciplinary purposes (vv. 14–15). When the people cried out in their pain (v. 18b), the Lord provided deliverers ("judges") to rescue them (vv. 16, 18a).<sup>5</sup> These judges, who also performed a prophetic function, brought some stability for a time, but the people persisted in their ways (vv.

- 
1. Despite the chronological notation, some consider Judges 1 to be an account of the invasion of Canaan that parallels the book of Joshua. See, for example, Moore 1895, 7–10; and Burney 1970, 2–3. Soggin treats verse 1 as an interpolation (1981, 20). *BHS* even suggests that we replace "Joshua" with "Moses." However, as it stands chapter one relates what happened after Joshua's death.
  2. Polzin points out that 1:1–2:5 "is narrated from a psychological point of view *external* to the characters of the story." He adds: "What we are told is what any onlooker could have experienced, known, or surmised were he present at the events described" (1980, 149).
  3. On the narrator's strategy in chapter one, see Eslinger 1989, 56–61, especially p. 61.
  4. See Polzin 1980, 150.
  5. This cyclical pattern of disobedience-punishment-contrition-deliverance is attested as early as the second half of the second millennium B.C. See Kitchen, who cites parallels from Egypt (2003, 217–18).

## INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

17, 19). Israel's persistence in sin prompted the Lord to announce that he would no longer drive out the nations, but would use them to test Israel's loyalty (2:20–3:4).

A summary of the period appears in 3:5–6. Verse five reflects the descriptive style of chapter one and reiterates its main theme (Israel lived among the native peoples). Like chapter two, verse six is more theological and evaluative in tone, identifying Israel's underlying problem as its assimilation to Canaanite culture, including its idolatry.

The central section of the book utilizes a structural framework based on the statement in 2:11a: וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָרָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה, "Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." Each subunit within the central section begins with this same statement (see 3:7; 6:1) or a slightly altered form of it (וַיִּסְכּוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הָרָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה), "the Israelites again did evil [or "continued to do evil"] in the eyes of the Lord," see 3:12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1). Following this introductory statement, each of the accounts describes how the Lord, in response to Israel's sin, handed Israel over to an oppressive enemy. When Israel cried out, a deliverer appeared. An account of how the deliverer rescued Israel then follows. Each story has a formal conclusion, though these conclusions differ in content (see below). Other literary forms, such as a song of celebration (chapter 5) and reports of so-called minor judges (10:1–5; 12:7–15), are integrated into this basic framework. The following chart outlines the structure of the central portion of the book:<sup>6</sup>

(1) The Account of Othniel (3:7–11)

Israel did evil (v. 7)

The Lord handed Israel over to an enemy (v. 8)

Israel cried out to the Lord (v. 9a)

---

6. Building on a proposal that originated in the nineteenth century, Wong attempts to show that the central section includes representative judges for all twelve tribes arranged in a roughly south to north pattern (2006a, 239–46). To make this theory work, he must make the following arguments, at least some of which appear to be tenuous: (1) The Gileadites Jair and Jephthah represent the Transjordanian tribes, despite the fact that their tribal designations are not specified. (2) Ibzan is from Bethlehem of Zebulun (cf. Josh. 19:15), not Judah, and serves as a "surrogate Asherite" (239). (3) The omission of a Simeonite judge is explained by Simeon's close association with Judah (cf. Judg. 1:3). (4) The apparent transposition of Barak of Naphtali and Abdon of Ephraim can be attributed to a complex and subtle rhetorical purpose. (5) Samson of Dan is placed last (even though he lived in the south) because the tribe of Dan "eventually ended up being the northernmost tribe" (246).

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The Lord provided a deliverer (v. 9b)  
Account of deliverer's deeds (v. 10)  
The land had rest (v. 11a)  
Summary of deliverer's death (v. 11b)

### (2) The Account of Ehud (3:12–31)

Israel did evil (v. 12a)  
The Lord handed Israel over to an enemy (vv. 12b–14)  
Israel cried out to the Lord (v. 15a)  
The Lord provided a deliverer (v. 15b)  
Account of deliverer's deeds (vv. 16–29)  
Summary of Israel's victory (v. 30a)  
The land had rest (v. 30b)  
Appendix: Shamgar (v. 31)

### (3) The Account of Deborah and Barak (4:1–5:31)

Israel did evil (4:1)  
The Lord handed Israel over to an enemy (4:2)  
Israel cried out to the Lord (4:3)  
Introduction of deliverer (4:4–7)  
Account of deliverer's deeds (4:8–22)  
Summary of Israel's victory (4:23)  
Song of celebration (5:1–31a)  
The land had rest (5:31b)

### (4) The Account of Gideon (6:1–10:5)

Israel did evil (6:1a)  
The Lord handed Israel over to an enemy (6:1b–6a)  
Israel cried out to the Lord (6:6b)  
The Lord confronted his people concerning their sin (6:7–10)  
Introduction of deliverer (6:11)  
Account of deliverer's deeds (6:12–8:27)  
Summary of Israel's victory (8:28a)  
The land had rest (8:28b)  
Summary of deliverer's career, death, and burial (8:29–32)  
Sequel: The story of Abimelech (8:33–9:57)  
Reports of minor judges (10:1–5)

### (5) The Account of Jephthah (10:6–12:15)

Israel did evil (10:6)  
The Lord handed Israel over to an enemy (10:7–9)  
Israel cried out to the Lord (10:10)

## INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

The Lord refused to deliver (10:11–14)  
Israel appealed to the Lord again (10:15)  
The Lord softened his stance (10:16)  
Israel chose a deliverer (10:17–11:11)  
Account of deliverer's deeds (11:12–12:6)  
Summary of deliverer's career, death, and burial (12:7)  
Reports of minor judges (12:8–15)

- (6) The Account of Samson (13:1–16:31)  
Israel did evil (13:1a)  
The Lord handed Israel over to an enemy (13:1b)  
Account of deliverer's birth (13:2–25)  
Account of deliverer's deeds (14:1–15:19)  
Summary of deliverer's career (15:20)  
Account of deliverer's death (16:1–30)  
Summary of deliverer's burial and career (16:31)

Though these stories illustrate the basic pattern outlined in chapter two (sin—punishment—painful cry—deliverance), they are not structurally identical. Significant variations appear within this template, especially in the stories of Jephthah and Samson:<sup>7</sup>

(1) The precise terminology used to describe divine punishment differs in the stories: note, *וַיִּחַזֵּק* “(The Lord) moved,” in 3:12; *וַיִּתֵּן*, “(the LORD) handed them over,” in 6:1 and 13:1; and *וַיִּסְכַּר*, “(The Lord) turned them over,” in 3:8, 4:2, and 10:7. In 3:8 and 10:7 a reference to the Lord's anger precedes (Greenspahn 1986, 87).

(2) In contrast to the account of Othniel (3:9) and the story of Ehud (3:15), there is no formal statement of the Lord providing a deliverer in the stories that follow. In the story of Deborah and Barak, the narrator simply introduces Deborah, who on God's behalf commissions the warrior Barak to fight the oppressor. The story of Gideon omits a formal statement about the Lord providing a deliverer, though it does include a commissioning account in which the Lord commands Gideon to deliver Israel (6:14). There is no indication that the Lord raised up Jephthah or even commissioned him for battle, though he did energize him for war (11:29). Finally, though no formal statement about the Lord raising up Samson appears, the Lord made it clear to his mother

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7. In this regard see Gunn 1987, 105, as well as Greenspahn 1986, 387–88, and Olson 1998, 763–64.

## INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

that he was to deliver Israel (13:5) and the Lord later empowered him toward that end.

(3) The introduction to Jephthah's story differs from earlier accounts in that the Lord initially refused to respond to Israel's cry (Mullen 1982, 197–98). While the Lord seemed to soften when Israel persisted in seeking his aid (10:16), the text stops short of attributing Jephthah's rise to leadership to divine action or commissioning.

(4) In the Samson story there is no reference to Israel crying out to the Lord. Despite the people's apathy (see 15:11–12) and Samson's subsequent failure to understand his role, the Lord was determined to deliver them anyway.

Other structural variations occur within the book's central section. In the Othniel, Ehud, Deborah-Barak, and Gideon accounts there is no summarizing reference to a leader "judging" Israel for a specified number of years. The land simply has "rest" for a period of time (see 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28). This changes with the minor judges listed in chapter 10. From this point on summary statements appear for each leader, telling us that he "judged" Israel for a specified time period (see 10:2–3; 12:7, 9, 11, 14; 15:20; 16:31) (Mullen 1982, 194–95). After Gideon there are no more references to the land having rest. Following the account of the civil turmoil introduced by Abimelech and perpetuated by Jephthah, the narrator decides not to depict the land as experiencing genuine peace. This alarming change prepares us for the epilogue, where civil discord is the order of the day.<sup>8</sup>

The central portion of the book illustrates the dominant themes of the prologue—Israel's propensity to sin, the Lord's disciplinary judgment, and the Lord's willingness to deliver his people from their oppressors. The prologue pictures God reminding his people that idolatry would jeopardize the conquest of the land (2:1–5). He then announced that the conquest would be put on hold until he had tested Israel's

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8. This does not mean that the sequence is chronological. The Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson accounts may actually overlap chronologically with earlier accounts (see the discussion of the book's chronological framework below, as well as Chisholm 2009a and Chisholm 2010d). Furthermore, the epilogue appears to record events that occurred at the very beginning of the Judges period (see below). It appears that the transition from the land having rest to the absence of rest and then to the chaos described in the epilogue has a rhetorical function.

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loyalty (2:20–3:4). The book's central section gives specific evidence for why this decision was necessary, as it depicts persistent or recurring idolatry and an increasing alienation between God and his people.

The stories also clarify the prologue's simple prayer-divine response model by showing that God cannot be manipulated like some good luck charm and that he often operates outside the expected norms. In the Gideon story he confronts his people with their sin before commissioning a deliverer; in the Jephthah story he wearies of intervening, even when they persist in crying out to him and seemingly repent of their idolatry. But in the Samson story he decides to deliver even though no one asks for his help. The prologue depicts God delivering his people through his chosen instruments; the stories show that deliverance often comes in unexpected ways, even through flawed instruments.

While the stories illustrate the prologue's thematic concerns, they are not restricted to this literary role. Several themes surface in the stories that do not appear in the prologue:

(1) The prologue describes the judges in fairly positive terms as instruments of God who attempted to give the people moral guidance (see 2:17).<sup>9</sup> The stories depict them as victorious warriors energized by God, but portray their flaws as well. In fact, one can trace a pattern of declining quality in the judges, culminating in Samson.<sup>10</sup> The prologue indirectly contributes to this thematic development by providing paradigms of competent, godly leadership in Joshua and Caleb, who become foils for the failed leaders presented in the stories. But the prologue does not speak of the judges in negative terms. This theme of failed leadership, rather than emerging from the prologue, arises in the stories and paves the way for the epilogue, which specifically laments the

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9. Regarding the portrayal of the judges in the prologue, Gillmayr-Bucher (2009, 690) observes: "The personality of the judges does not come into focus, nor does their faith or their loyalty to  $\Upsilon\eta\omega\upsilon\varsigma$ , or their individual contributions. The focus lies yet again on God. God raises the judge and is with him; thus, it is God who saves. Furthermore, the cause for this change in God's behavior lies only within God himself; he acts because he is moved by pity."

10. This pattern of declining leadership runs concurrently with the subtheme of changing female roles. See Chisholm 1994b, 34–46. For a summary of how these themes interrelate see the section below, entitled "What Role Do the Female Characters Play?"

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moral condition that overtook the land because of the leadership void (see 17:6; 21:25; as well as 18:1 and 19:1).

(2) The stories also portray escalating civil conflict, a theme that is not present in the prologue, at least in a direct way. Deborah's and Barak's victory song criticizes some tribes for not contributing to the common cause (5:15b–17), while Gideon faced opposition from his own countrymen in the aftermath of his victory over the Midianites (7:24–8:17).<sup>11</sup> Gideon's son Abimelech instigated a civil war (chapter 9) and Jephthah massacred the Ephraimites in the aftermath of his victory over the Ammonites (12:1–6). In Samson's story, the men of Judah hand Samson the Danite over to the Philistines. All of this paves the way for the epilogue, where civil conflict is the order of the day.

This comparison of the stories with the prologue reveals that the latter is not an all-encompassing overview of the book, but rather an extension of the book of Joshua (esp. chapter 24), which emphasizes the need for Israel to maintain its covenantal distinctiveness and loyalty to God as prerequisites to the complete conquest of the land. The prologue facilitates the transition from Joshua's era to the Judges period and provides a structural pattern for the frame of the stories that integrates them with Joshua thematically. But the stories surface other themes as well and facilitate a transition to the book's epilogue and its thematic focus.

The epilogue (chapters 17–21) contains two stories. The first of these (17:1–19:1a) tells of Micah's homemade shrine and how the Danites confiscated his cultic equipment and his priest and set up their own private tribal cult in the distant north, far from the land they had been allotted. The second story (19:1b–21:25) is a sordid account of

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11. I use the term “tribe(s)” here and later as a traditional label that reflects usage in Joshua. However, Judges does not use this designation often or in a consistent manner. The term  $\text{לְבֵיטָא}$ , “tribe,” does not appear in Judges, but  $\text{מִטְבֵּי}$ , “tribe” is used in the singular of Dan (18:1, 19, 30), Benjamin (21:3, 6, 17), and each Israelite tribe (21:24), and in the plural of the Israelite tribes (18:1; 20:2, 10, 12; 21:5, 8, 15), as well as the “tribes” (= subtribal groups?) within Benjamin (20:12; cf. 1 Sam. 9:21).  $\text{בְּיָהוּדָה}$ , “clan,” is used of Dan (13:2; 18:2, 11) and Judah (17:7). It appears to refer to a clan within a larger tribal group in 9:1; 18:19; and 21:24. For a survey of the use of these terms in Judges, see Auld, 1998a, 72–73. Of course, the concept that early Israel was a tribal confederation is not problematic in theory, as Kitchen has demonstrated from ancient Near Eastern parallels dating to the second millennium B.C. (2003, 220–21).



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rape and murder in Gibeah that precipitated a civil war in Israel. The war nearly wiped out the tribe of Benjamin and resulted in further atrocities against Israelite women.<sup>12</sup>

The events recorded in the epilogue appear to have occurred early in the Judges period. Judges 18:30 identifies the Levite who set up the Danite cult as “Jonathan son of Gershom son of Moses” (literal translation). He may have been a grandson of Moses, in which case the events described in chapters 17–18 occurred within two generations of Moses. However, it is possible that יָנָן, “son,” indicates he was a descendant of Gershom, not his son *per se*.<sup>13</sup> In this case there may have been several generations between Gershom and Jonathan, making it possible that the events of chapters 17–18 occurred later in the period. We can be more certain concerning the dating of the events recorded in chapters 19–21. Judges 20:28 indicates that Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron was the priest at Bethel at this time. Phinehas was a contemporary of Moses and Joshua (see Exod. 6:25; Num. 25:7, 11; 31:6; Josh. 22:13, 30–32; 24:33; 1 Chron. 6:4, 50; 9:20; Ezra 7:5), so the Benjaminite civil war must have occurred very early in the period.

If the events of chapters 17–21 did indeed occur relatively early in the period, this means that the narrator of Judges has not followed a strictly chronological sequence. Instead he has arranged his material thematically. After an overview of the period in the prologue, he gives accounts of various individual judges and then concludes in the epilogue with stories that epitomize the period.

The theme of the epilogue appears in 17:6 and 21:25 (see as well the abridged version of this in 18:1 and 19:1). The epilogue’s two accounts illustrate what happened in Israelite society when there was an absence of competent, godly leadership and show why Israel needed an ideal king (see Deut. 17:14–20). The epilogue describes the violation of all Ten Commandments (Olson 1998, 864–65). The ideal king depicted in Deuteronomy 17 was to promote God’s law and guide the covenantal community down the right moral and ethical path. The epilogue brings the leadership theme of the stories to its alarming conclusion and thus paves the way for 1 Samuel, which describes how the Lord restored godly, Joshua/Caleb-like leadership to Israel.

Wong argues that the epilogue contains several subtle allusions to the stories of the central section. As such, it provides additional support

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12. Levites play a prominent role in both stories. On the parallels between the two stories, see Olson 1998, 863–64.

13. 1 Chronicles 23:16, though mentioning the “sons of Gershom,” lists only one son, Shebuel (cf. 1 Chron. 26:24).