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JUDGES

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Introduction

Judges, along with Joshua, marks a pivotal point in the story extending from Genesis to 2 Kings. This larger story, completed during Israel's captivity in Babylon, tells of Yahweh's promise and gift of the land of Canaan and Israel's subsequent loss of it. Here at the center the promise is being fulfilled; the Israelites take possession of the gift only to reveal themselves to be no better caretakers of the land and their community within it than the Canaanites before them.

Introducing the book, Judg. 1:1-3:6 recounts the final stages of settlement. The Israelites, however, have been less successful at dispossessing the Canaanites (1:27-36) than the book of Joshua would have us believe. The theological ramifications of this failure are grave, for Israel's tolerance of the Canaanites threatens its identity and relationship with Yahweh (2:11-19).

In the main body of the book, 3:7-16:31, Israel's destiny unfolds through extended accounts and brief notices of judges who judge Israel or who deliver the people from oppression. The rhetorical framework introduced in 2:11-19 (cf. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1) forms a common pattern for each story: Israel does evil in Yahweh's sight; Yahweh gives the people into the hand of oppressors; Israel cries to Yahweh; Yahweh raises up a deliverer; the deliverer defeats the oppressor; the people are faithful while the deliverer is alive and the land has rest.

In actuality this formula is inconsistent and its variations telling. The "deliverer" in the Deborah and Barak story is not explicitly identified. The people do not remain faithful to Yahweh during Gideon's lifetime; rather, Gideon's own construction of a golden ephod becomes a snare both to him and to them. By the time of Jephthah, the list of Israel's

apostasies is considerably expanded (10:6), and when the people first cry out in repentance, Yahweh refuses to deliver them. Neither the Jephthah story nor the Samson story depicts the land as regaining "rest," nor do the people of Samson's time bother to cry to Yahweh. Furthermore, Samson himself dies in captivity to the oppressor. Thus, the formula deteriorates and so ominously foreshadows Israel's future.

The stories themselves also illustrate a downward spiral for Israel and its leaders. The first judge, Othniel, is an ideal hero of notable lineage (a nephew of Caleb, the only one of the wilderness generation besides Joshua allowed to enter the promised land) who delivers Israel, with Yahweh's explicit help, from an ideal villain: Cushan-rishathaim, "Cushan, double evil."

After Othniel, Yahweh uses more unlikely deliverers. Ehud, the left-handed Benjamite, kills Eglon ("Fat Calf") and frees his people from Moabite bondage. The woman Deborah rallies Israel to fight against the Canaanites, and the woman Jael, who is not even an Israelite, kills the Canaanite commander herself.

Gideon, too, is an unlikely candidate ("How can I deliver Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family" [6:15]; all translations are the author's), but he regresses to the category of the unfit. Not only does he insist on one divine sign after another before he is willing to fight the Midianites, but he wreaks vengeance on the Israelite cities who do not support his campaign. Persuaded reluctantly to become Israel's ruler, he immediately sets up an idol that leads his people into apostasy.

Not only is the lineage of Jephthah the Gileadite in question, but so are his motives for

leading Israel's army. He fights the Ammonites not out of zeal for Yahweh or concern for Israel's oppression but out of a need to show himself superior to the community that ostracized him in his youth. So obsessed is he with personal victory and political authority that he seeks to secure God's power with a vow that costs his daughter her life.

Samson's story (chaps. 13-16) begins with promise, as a divine annunciation affirms his special birth. His confrontation with the Philistines, however, is not unlike Jephthah's bout with the Ammonites. Conflict does not arise from theological conviction or regard for his people. Rather, it is jealousy and vengeance ensuing from his infatuation with Philistine women that induce most of his violence. He lives his life in violation of Yahweh's covenant, and it is soon clear that whatever liberation Samson effects for Israel is done in spite of himself and not because of any special merit on his own part.

Israel's leadership sinks a long way from Moses to Samson. The people too show their

decline. Quickly forgetting their commitment to the covenant, they call on Yahweh only when in dire straits or wanting to take vengeance on others. Even then Yahweh is often a last resort. In several cases, eighteen, twenty, even forty years of oppression go by before the people turn to God. By the time of Philistine oppression, the people would rather live in subservience than petition Yahweh for help.

The concluding chapters, 17-21, are often viewed as merely a supplement; however, they bring appropriate completion to the story of Israel's decline. As the people conduct their own worship (chaps. 17-18), plan their own wars (chaps. 18; 20-21), abuse their own citizens, even their very family members (chaps. 19-21), no longer is the "sight of Yahweh" the standard of behavior. The old rhetorical formula gives way to a new one: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1). As the book closes, the people recognize no leadership, either human or divine, and their community has degenerated into chaos.

Comment

Relating Women

How, precisely, do the women of Judges fit into this overall picture of decline? The construction and destruction of female characters and their relationships form a pattern that mirrors the deterioration of Israel's relation to Yahweh.

Father and daughter: The gift of life (1:11-15). The first woman appearing in Judges is one who has been encountered before (Joshua 15). As Israel enters the land, Caleb, rallying a war effort, offers his daughter Achsah as the prize for military heroism. Though hardly suiting modern tastes for equality, this is the stuff traditional fairy tales are made of, a plot motif certainly acceptable in ancient culture. Achsah's hand in marriage is offered to an ideal hero, Othniel, who of all the deliverers in Judges is of impeccable lineage and unquestionable integrity. When Achsah joins her new husband, she persuades him (some translations emend to read "he persuaded her") to ask her father for land. The text implies that the field is granted, because Achsah returns in the next scene to confront her father with an additional request. "Give me a blessing," she insists. "Since you have given me desert land, you should give me springs of water." Caleb complies by giving her

the upper and lower springs. Achsah is a woman who understands the importance of the land and its life-giving water. She recognizes that the land is a gift, and she takes the initiative to secure the water that will sustain life in the land.

Against this positive paradigm of a daughter being given to an ideal hero is juxtaposed the notice of Israel's apostasy of intermarriage with the inhabitants of the land (3:6). Rather than being allowed to marry within the tribe, the daughters of Israel are given to foreigners. For these daughters, the gift of the land will never be theirs. They are in essence dispossessed, and their fate foreshadows not only the plight of other women in Judges but the later dispossession of the people from the land in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles.

Voices of authority and victims of violence (chaps. 4-5). In the second story involving women, there is a call for battle as in the days of Achsah and Caleb, but the situation differs greatly. The war now is defensive rather than offensive. The Israelites, having done evil in Yahweh's sight, have been oppressed by the Canaanites for twenty years.

Deborah is introduced as the wife of

Lappidoth. It is not, however, Deborah's relationship to her husband that will prove significant, but her relationship to Israel and to her appointed commander. Linguistically, the phrase "wife of Lappidoth" could also be translated "woman of fire," a designation that says more about Deborah's character than any familial relationship implies.

Deborah is a prophet and a judge, who settles disputes for Israel beneath a palm in the hills of Ephraim. Her relationship to Israel has public dimensions, both religious and judicial, but it is not without its familial dimensions as well. Later she will be called a "mother in Israel" (5:7) and in the context of this story one might well envision a Spartan mother who goads her children to fight. Allusion too may say something of Deborah's relationship to Israel. The only other Deborah in the Hebrew Scriptures, Rebekah's nurse, is also associated with a tree in this same territory (Gen. 35:8). Hence one is invited to see Deborah the judge as nursemaid to a politically incapacitated Israel.

Deborah summons Barak, the son of Abinoam, and instructs him, on the word of Yahweh, to raise a large army from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and to fight the Canaanite army of Sisera at the Wadi Kishon. Barak responds cautiously, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (4:8). It is unclear whether Barak's response indicates cowardice, lack of self-confidence (the Greek text adds here "for I do not know the day that the messenger of Yahweh will grant me success"), or distrust of Deborah's authority. The response is, however, in keeping with the changed times. In Caleb's day all the people heard God's command to conquer the land, and Israel was assured of victory (1:2). One can imagine, on the other hand, that Deborah's authority, though well recognized, is hardly a match for the commanding voices of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. Neither Barak nor any of the people has heard Yahweh speak. He has only this woman's word for it, a word that has come out of the blue after twenty years of persecution, a word backed by no military experience, a word that is strategically naïve, that hardly takes into account the Canaanites' nine hundred iron chariots. Barak may well be testing Deborah. If she will stake her own life on this message from God, then so will he.

Deborah mocks his hesitance: "I will indeed go with you, but the path you take will not lead to your glory, for Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9). How far this is from

the story of Caleb, Achsah, and Othniel! A woman rather than a man raises the rallying cry; a hesitant hero replaces an eager one; and a woman, not a man, will win the glory.

In the meantime, Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, hears of Barak's forces gathering at Mount Tabor. One might well visualize Sisera, in his haste and arrogance, leading his chariots down the dry riverbed to his destination. Barak's troops swarm down the steep banks, trapping the chariots where they cannot maneuver. Sisera's only means of escape is to abandon his chariot and flee on foot (4:12-16).

While his army is being slaughtered, Sisera flees to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite ("Joiner the Smith"). In an earlier aside (4:11), the narrator noted that Heber had moved away from the other Kenites and had camped near the Canaanites. The latter, with their iron chariotry, no doubt provided the smith ample trade. An alliance with the smith ("peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite" [4:17]) assures Sisera that he can find asylum with Heber's wife, Jael.

Jael, however, has more pressing matters to consider than an obsolete political and economic alliance between her husband and this defeated commander. Though her thoughts are never revealed, she is clearly a woman caught in the middle. The Israelites have obviously won. They cannot be far behind Sisera, and they are unlikely to take kindly to a family that has allied itself with the enemy—especially if found to be hiding the Canaanite commander. Jael does what she has to do. She offers Sisera a seductive welcome, treats him with maternal care, and when he falls asleep assured of his safety, drives a tent peg through his mouth (*raqaq* = "parted lips," often translated misleadingly as "temple"), severing his spinal column, leaving him to die a convulsive death.

Intercepting the approaching Israelite forces, Jael leads them to their quarry. The sight of the dead man placates the victorious army and guarantees her that she faces no peril from the men of Israel. Jael wins not only her security, but in the song of Deborah and Barak, she wins Israel's praise as well (5:24-27). In their description of her feat, her violent act becomes larger than life. No seduction and deceit here. No ambush of a sleeping giant. In the song, Jael does combat with a standing Sisera. The killing and the dying take place in slow motion with Sisera falling between her legs, ravaged.

As the song continues, the graphically violent and rapacious imagery colors Sisera's downfall with poetic justice. Deborah and Barak move from Jael and Sisera to imagine Sisera's mother standing at her window awaiting her son. As soon as the listener is captured by the poignancy of the scene, the singers wrench sympathy away by attributing to the mother words that make the blood run cold: "Are they not finding and splitting the spoil?—A womb, two wombs, per head, per hero . . . ?" (5:30a).

On the one hand, the speech makes explicit what has been implicit in the story, that is, the threat to women during war. Women on the losing side can expect to be captured and raped if not killed. Hence the poetic justice with which the Israelite singers depict Sisera's death: the one who would threaten their women, and perhaps has threatened them in the past, is himself ravaged by a woman. On the other hand, by attributing to Sisera's mother such a casual approval of rape, they show her to be deserving of violation herself. The hoofbeats for which she listens will not be those of her son but those of the Israelite army. Whatever violence the Israelites use, it is justified in the rhetoric of the song. They will do to the Canaanites what the Canaanites would have done to them.

As Deborah and Barak contend that Sisera and his mother get what they deserve, the reader might surmise that in the end the difference between Israel and Canaan is not so vast after all. Israel, though now identified as Yahweh's friend (5:31), has been and will be again Yahweh's enemy. In forty years' time they will again do evil in the sight of Yahweh, and the cycle will begin again. And though she stands outside the window, Deborah, Israelite mother, envisions a Canaanite mother not unlike herself. Deborah is a bellicose mother who pushes her "children" to victory; hence, she easily invents the callous Canaanite mother eagerly awaiting the spoils of war. One mother reduces her enemy to a "womb"; the other reduces hers to a caricature of moral insensitivity. Each mother has justified the violence of her "children" by dehumanizing their victims.

And what of Jael, the woman who mothers Sisera to death? Some might call her a hero; others have labeled her sinister. More likely she is simply a survivor, a victim of her husband's politics who acts as she must in order to save herself and the remnant of her family.

The relationships depicted in this story may also reflect the evolving relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Yahweh's authority, like that of Deborah, is questioned (4:1: "The Israelites again did evil in the sight of Yahweh"; 5:8: "new gods were chosen"). When people find themselves in dire straits, they appeal to Yahweh, just as Jael appeals to violence. And like Jael, perhaps Yahweh too does what must be done in order to save the family of Israel and is lauded, like Jael, not for who he is but for what he has done to benefit Israel.

Father and daughter: The sentence of death (chap. 11). Judges 11 presents another father who gives his daughter as a reward for military victory. This story, however, falls far short of the ideal enacted by Caleb and Achsah. Their world is, no doubt, guided by patriarchal values, but it is not without respect for human worth. Jephthah and his daughter live in no such world. Jephthah's story begins with the hypocrisy of patriarchy. Blurring the person Gilead with the town, the narrator suggests that Jephthah's father might be any man in the town of Gilead. The town sires him by a prostitute and then kicks him out because he is a prostitute's son. The child becomes a man; he lives the life of an outlaw gathering about himself a raiding party of other "empty men" (11:1–3).

When the Ammonites threaten Gilead, the elders cast about for someone to fight for them. Jephthah emerges as a likely candidate. He is a proven warrior and, no doubt in their view, expendable to the community should he fall in battle. The elders petition him to become their general, but Jephthah holds out for a more permanent political position (11:9–11). He then tries his negotiating skills on the king of Ammon, but to little avail. When his speech fails, Jephthah prepares for war.

As Jephthah returns to his hometown of Mizpah to rally his troops, Yahweh's spirit, a sure sign of divine favor, comes upon him. Perhaps not recognizing the spirit's presence, perhaps not satisfied with its power, perhaps driven by it, Jephthah proceeds to bargain with God. For assured victory he trades the life of whoever (or whatever) comes first to meet him when he returns home (11:29–31). It is not clear whether his vow is made in public or in private or whether he has someone in mind, but once the battle is won, Jephthah returns home to be greeted by his daughter, his only child, coming out to meet him. He appears to respond with

genuine surprise and sorrow. Since most interpreters have understood her to have stumbled unwittingly into her father's vow, his remark to her is often seen as a classic case of blaming the victim: "Alas, my daughter, you have brought me down. You are among my troublers. I have opened my mouth to Yahweh and I cannot recant" (11:35).

As an unwitting victim the daughter, though courageous and tragic, embodies the ultimate patriarchal value, that of women being submissive unto death. This act of self-sacrifice has received no little praise from male commentators. As one turn-of-the-century interpreter wrote concerning the young women who yearly mourned Jephthah's daughter:

[They] came back to be far better daughters than they went out. They came back softened, and purified, and sobered at heart. They came back ready to die for their fathers, and for their brothers, and for their husbands, and for their God. (Alexander Whyte, cited in Beal and Gunn)

An unknowing character who had no option but obedience is not, however, the only possible reading. Jephthah's vow was most likely made at Mizpah and not necessarily in secret. The daughter could very well have known the substance of her father's bargain. Indeed, when she responds to her father, she seems quite aware of what his vow entails. Rather than reading her answer as innocent submission, one might hear a tone of ironic judgment: "My father, you have opened your mouth to Yahweh. Do to me that which has gone forth from your mouth. After all, Yahweh has given you vengeance over your enemies, the Ammonites" (11:36).

Perhaps Jephthah had intended that his daughter hear the vow, to warn her against coming out first. Perhaps he had in mind forfeiting a servant or a bodyguard left behind to protect his home. In that case the daughter intends her greeting. She is one of Jephthah's troublers because, as she steps forth, she takes the place of someone whom he has considered expendable. She thereby passes judgment on her father's willingness to bargain for glory with the life of another. Her action condemns his priorities, and perhaps those of all Israel. In this sense she is not unlike Achsah confronting her father with the shortsightedness of his promise of dry land.

Some interpreters may have difficulty seeing such powerful initiative in this young woman, but it is in character with her subsequent

speech and action. She, not her father, takes control of the situation. A reprieve of two months is requested and granted; she and her female companions retreat to the mountains to mourn her young womanhood. She chooses to take upon herself his vow, but she does not choose his company. She spends her remaining days with other young women who know her, who know what it is like to be a young woman in the midst of a violent society, and who, in the end, will not forget what she has done. After she returns to her father to be burned, she becomes a tradition in Israel. For four days every year, the women of Israel, young and old, would go forth to recount the story of the daughter of Jephthah (11:40). The song of Deborah had "recounted" the triumphs of Yahweh (5:11, the only other occurrence of this verb), but the songs of these women retell a sadder story, a story that is, no doubt, more in keeping with the state of Israel's affairs.

The male-oriented narrator, who has all along neglected to reveal the young woman's name, is now concerned to tell us that she had never known a man (11:39), as if this somehow makes her end more tragic. A woman reader might reply that she had known men, at least one all too well, and that is the heart of her tragedy.

And what of Jephthah, the abused child who grew up to murder his own daughter? He continues, for a while, to be a man of violence, victory, and verbal manipulation, but after only six years he dies and is buried in the same obscurity in which he was born. Just as (all of) Gilead is his father (11:1), he is buried (somewhere) in the towns of Gilead (12:7), high price for such short-lived glory.

A reader who recalls God's last-minute deliverance of Isaac in Genesis 22 might legitimately ask, Where is God in this story? Or one who remembers Saul's willingness to keep his vow and execute his son Jonathan (1 Samuel 14) might question, Where are the people who, as in Saul's case, might stay a violent father's hand? Do these parallels suggest that sons are valued more highly than daughters, by both God and society? Perhaps that is the prejudice of the communities that told these stories. Perhaps, too, the death of the daughter, the silence of God, and the absence of the people are but signs of something rotten with the state of Israel. God has been abandoned so many times by Israel and remembered again only when the people are under major threat that, by the time of Jephthah, God has grown impatient

with the troubling of Israel (10:16; an alternative translation to NRSV "he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer"). Yahweh, like Jephthah, has been cast out and is only recalled when there is fighting to be done. Yahweh is merely another party to be bargained with and, once the victory is granted, to be dispensed with, like the daughter.

Women among men: Promises, threats, and bribes (chaps. 13-16). In Judges 13 the narrative turns from father and daughter to a mother and her son. An angel of Yahweh appears to the barren and unnamed wife of Manoah the Danite and announces that she will bear a son. He instructs her to abstain from strong drink and unclean food. Once the boy is born, the angel charges, no razor is to touch his head. The child is to be a nazirite "from the womb" and will begin to deliver Israel from the oppressive Philistines.

The woman tells her husband Manoah about the visit from the strange "man of God," who had revealed neither his name nor his origin. She repeats his promise of a nazirite son and the instructions concerning food and drink. She mentions neither the razor nor the boy's destiny. She seems to understand that her son's heroism will be incomplete, for when she reports that he will be a nazirite "from the womb," she ominously, and perhaps prophetically, adds "to the day of his death" (13:7; cf. 13:5).

Though the woman has received a message from God, the husband, like Barak before him, questions the woman's authority. Disregarding the instructions already received by the woman, Manoah prays to Yahweh, asking that the man of God might return "to teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born" (13:8). The angel, eluding Manoah, reappears to the woman as she sits alone. She fetches her husband and, though she identifies the man as the previous visitor, Manoah must ask that question for himself. Once the man has confirmed who he is, Manoah makes his superfluous inquiry, "What guideline will there be for the boy? What is he to do?" (13:12). The angel, much to Manoah's frustration and perhaps intentionally so, reveals less to Manoah than earlier to the woman, merely repeating the dietary instructions and adding with an air of mystery, "Let the woman heed all that I told her."

Manoah, not perceiving the true identity of his wife's guest and not willing to let the man go, insists that he stay for a meal. The angel

instructs him to offer the food as a burnt offering to Yahweh instead. Manoah, still unenlightened, asks the man's name, but the angel declines to answer, saying, "It is too extraordinary." It is not until the angel ascends in the flame of the offering that Manoah realizes who the stranger is. "We shall surely die," he says to his wife, "for we have seen God." The wife, clearly the wiser of the two, points out the absurdity of this assumption: "If Yahweh had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted [our] offering . . . or revealed to us all these things, or now proclaimed such things as these" (13:23). In the course of time the woman bears a son and names him Samson.

When Samson grows up he becomes quite taken with a Philistine woman from the vineyard country of Timnah. On one of his trips to court her, he is attacked by a lion which he kills bare-handed. On a later excursion he comes upon the lion's carcass and finds its cavity filled with bees and honey. He eats some of the honey and shares the rest with his parents (14:1-9).

Loving a Philistine woman, spending his time in wine country, handling dead carcasses and eating unclean food all hardly bode well for a nazirite who is to be Israel's champion against the Philistines (cf. Num. 6:1-8). Just as Samson "breaks the rules," so this story breaks many of the plot patterns established thus far in Judges. Samson is not to be a military hero, for Israel is not keen to take up arms against the oppressor. Israel seems, in fact, to want no deliverer at all, whether divine or human. The people do not cry to Yahweh for help; they even chide Samson for stirring up trouble: "Do you not know that the Philistines are lords over us? What then have you done to us?" (15:11). Indeed, Israel seems quite satisfied with its lot.

So God has a problem: How does one deliver people who do not want to be delivered? Here the answer seems to come in the form of the unexpected—a nazirite who breaks the rules, an Israelite who loves the enemy, a mighty fighter who is no leader, a deliverer who, in fact, does not seem to know that he is meant to deliver.

It is Samson's propensity to "break rules" that allows the plot to develop. At his wedding feast he poses a wager and riddle to his thirty Philistine companions. Thirty garments he will give for the answer to the riddle: "Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet" (14:14). Despite the many feasible answers that would have reflected the sexually laden atmosphere of a wedding feast, the "right" answer comes, of course, from