

# JUDGES & RUTH

L A U R A A . S M I T  
A N D S T E P H E N E . F O W L



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## **Judges**

In memory of John H. Stek (1925–2009)  
and Kenneth E. Bailey (1930–2016)

## **Ruth**

To Sarah and Don Stevens-Rayburn

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## SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure

for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.<sup>1</sup>

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day.”<sup>3</sup> The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”<sup>4</sup> We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think of him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”<sup>5</sup> In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.<sup>6</sup> To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”<sup>7</sup> The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” 340.

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading—an interpretation unprejudiced—the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems.

The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”<sup>8</sup> This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars produce monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army has been fragmented, and various corps have retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis.

8. *Sermon 212.2.*

Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadowboxing of theological concepts.

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible endorses a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, and in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not

reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

# ABBREVIATIONS

## General

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| CCSL        | Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–   |
| <i>JSOT</i> | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>   |
| JSOTSup     | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series  |
| LXX         | Septuagint  |
| MT          | Masoretic Text  |
| NRSV        | New Revised Standard Version  |
| PL          | Patrologia Latina [= <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> : Series Latina]. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–1864 |
| <i>VT</i>   | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>  |

## Biblical

### *Old Testament*

|          |             |            |                 |
|----------|-------------|------------|-----------------|
| Gen.     | Genesis     | 1–2 Chron. | 1–2 Chronicles  |
| Exod.    | Exodus      | Ezra       | Ezra            |
| Lev.     | Leviticus   | Neh.       | Nehemiah        |
| Num.     | Numbers     | Esther     | Esther          |
| Deut.    | Deuteronomy | Job        | Job             |
| Josh.    | Joshua      | Ps. (Pss.) | Psalms (Psalms) |
| Judg.    | Judges      | Prov.      | Proverbs        |
| Ruth     | Ruth        | Eccles.    | Ecclesiastes    |
| 1–2 Sam. | 1–2 Samuel  | Song       | Song of Songs   |
| 1–2 Kgs. | 1–2 Kings   | Isa.       | Isaiah          |

|       |              |       |           |
|-------|--------------|-------|-----------|
| Jer.  | Jeremiah     | Jon.  | Jonah     |
| Lam.  | Lamentations | Mic.  | Micah     |
| Ezek. | Ezekiel      | Nah.  | Nahum     |
| Dan.  | Daniel       | Hab.  | Habakkuk  |
| Hosea | Hosea        | Zeph. | Zephaniah |
| Joel  | Joel         | Hag.  | Haggai    |
| Amos  | Amos         | Zech. | Zechariah |
| Obad. | Obadiah      | Mal.  | Malachi   |

***Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal***

|      |        |
|------|--------|
| Sir. | Sirach |
|------|--------|

***New Testament***

|          |                 |            |                   |
|----------|-----------------|------------|-------------------|
| Matt.    | Matthew         | 1–2 Thess. | 1–2 Thessalonians |
| Mark     | Mark            | 1–2 Tim.   | 1–2 Timothy       |
| Luke     | Luke            | Titus      | Titus             |
| John     | John            | Philem.    | Philemon          |
| Acts     | Acts            | Heb.       | Hebrews           |
| Rom.     | Romans          | Jas.       | James             |
| 1–2 Cor. | 1–2 Corinthians | 1–2 Pet.   | 1–2 Peter         |
| Gal.     | Galatians       | 1–3 John   | 1–3 John          |
| Eph.     | Ephesians       | Jude       | Jude              |
| Phil.    | Philippians     | Rev.       | Revelation        |
| Col.     | Colossians      |            |                   |



# JUDGES



by Laura A. Smit

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Over the years that I have spent writing this commentary, many people have helped me to understand the book of Judges more clearly. Rusty Reno initially pushed me to be much bolder than I wanted to be in moving from exegesis to theology, which was painful but helpful. At the last, he gave me nothing but encouragement. Dave Nelson and the rest of the team at Baker have consistently demonstrated kindness and patience. I am especially indebted to Dwight Baker, who has frequently sat through my preaching on the book of Judges without ever once succumbing to the temptation to ask me when I was going to finish writing already.

The following groups gave me opportunities to test what I was thinking: the congregations of Forest Hills Presbyterian Church and Calvin Christian Reformed Church, both in Grand Rapids, who have heard many sermons on Judges, some at early stages when I was not yet clear in my own mind what I thought about the book; the members of the class on Judges that I taught in the spring of 2010 as part of the Calvin College Academy of Lifelong Learning, who patiently let me teach them and in turn taught me; and the participants in my six-day class on the book of Judges at the New Wilmington Mission Conference in the summer of 2014, whose enthusiastic response led me to hope that I was close to finished.

I have had more conversations about Judges with gracious individuals than I can possibly remember, but the following people have been especially helpful to me, though some of them may have no idea that I found our conversations significant: Jerry Andrews, Jill Carattini, Phil Cary, David Crump, Christiana de Groot, Elizabeth Holmlund, Brandon Hurlbert, John Jarik, Donna La Rue, Arie Leder, Won Lee, Peter Leithart, Darian Lockett, Margaret Manning, Jodi MacLean, Richard Muller, John Natelborg, Ken Pomykala, Carolyn Potet, Rebecca

Sitsapesan, John Thompson, Raymond Van Leeuwen, Richard Whitekettle, and Bryce Wiebe. My family have also been very supportive of my Judges obsession.

Finally, I have dedicated this commentary to the memory of two great teachers of the Bible. John Stek was my Old Testament professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, and he was the first person to show me how important structure is when reading Hebrew narrative. He is cited in the chapter on Deborah, but his influence is in every chiasm. Ken Bailey sat in on my New Wilmington Mission Conference class on Judges at a point where I needed reassurance, which he was gracious enough to give me. He told me that a good commentary needs to “marinate,” which is why it is wise to take upwards of ten years to write one.

# 1

## THE BIG PICTURE

### **Method**

My first job out of seminary was directing a youth program. I soon discovered that the junior-high and high-school students for whom I was responsible had a strong knowledge of Bible stories. If presented with a collection of Sunday school flannelgraph pictures, any one of them could have stood in front of the group and retold the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, or the story of Jesus confronting Zacchaeus, or the story of Jesus dying on the cross and coming back to life three days later. And yet these students had absolutely no understanding of Christianity. They could not tell me what any of these stories had to do with their own lives, not even the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. They had some vague sense that Jesus had “saved” them, but no ability to talk about what that meant or why the event recounted in this old story should make a difference in their lives today. Prior to that experience as a youth director, I had been inclined to trust the stories of the Bible to “speak for themselves” and was rather enamored of narrative preaching. After that experience, I decided that my preaching needed to include theology and doctrine as well as narrative.

The book of Judges is full of stories that make for thrilling Sunday school lessons, but few of the Christian people with whom I have spoken about those stories over the years that I have been working on this project have any idea of what they might mean. For most Christians I have encountered, the stories in

the book of Judges are interesting curiosities that may be entertaining, exciting, or horrifying. But they are not meaningful. They are not relevant. They have no message for how we should live our faith today.

Some scholars of the book of Judges are content to be entertained. David Gunn observes, “It is my belief that much of the Old Testament narrative belongs naturally to the life-sphere of art and entertainment.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in her introduction to the book of Judges, Ailish Ferguson Eves comments that “in its pathos and humor as well as its horror this kind of storytelling is the generic ancestor of modern action or adventure films. The most pressing question is what led the Hebrew people to preserve among their holy books these accounts of their ancestors’ immorality, oppression and violence.”<sup>2</sup> Because Eves understands the stories only as stories, she is at a loss to understand what meaning they might have that would explain their preservation, given that many of the stories reflect poorly on the people of Israel.

While it is tempting to package the message as a great adventure story, especially when trying to engage the attention of children and young adults, we should resist this temptation to read Judges from the voyeuristic, dramatic perspective appropriate to contemporary popular literature, thereby missing the prophetic nature of the book. The book of Judges was not written to entertain, nor is its primary meaning the preservation of the history of Israel. This is a book of prophetic proclamation, intended to communicate truth that is essential for faith and life. In other words, these stories are deeply meaningful. As a book of *prophetic* proclamation, the meaning that it contains is authoritative, for it is a message from God Himself.<sup>3</sup> The unflattering portrait of the people of Israel painted by the book of Judges makes sense when we remember that these stories were not written only by the people of Israel. God is the primary author, as well as being the chief actor in the book.

1. David Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, JSOTSup 14 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 11, quoted in Marty Alan Michelson, *Reconciling Violence and Kingship: A Study of Judges and 1 Samuel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 25n30.

2. Ailish Ferguson Eves, “Judges,” in *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 128.

3. I mean no offense by using masculine language for God. I am well aware that God is not male; I capitalize pronouns referring to God in order to underscore the analogical nature of this language. I have tried other approaches to speaking and writing about God but have found that my current approach is the least bad in terms of its effects on how I think about God. I understand that language affects different people differently and that others may make other choices that are responsible and God-honoring. For an in-depth explanation of my choices, please see the section on language in “Who Is God?” in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva, 2005), 95–98.

To find the meaning in Judges, it is necessary to place this book in the context of God's entire message to us, connecting it to the unified revelation of the Christian Bible. I am aware that different parts of the Bible were written at different times, by different human authors, and in different contexts. In the field of biblical studies, particularly for those scholars whose interest is primarily historical or literary, it may make sense to focus on books of the Bible as independent units, without immediately (or ever) connecting the whole collection of books into one grand narrative. However, the *theology* of the book of Judges can only be understood by putting this book in the context of the whole of scripture. Judges can be a depressing book, documenting as it does a spiral into deeper and deeper sin, rebellion, and degradation. If it is considered apart from the entire sweep of salvation history, I see no way to interpret it as good news. But set within the grand narrative of scripture, Judges fills an essential role. If scripture is a long, coherent argument or presentation, then Judges is one necessary proposition in that argument, but not the conclusion. If scripture is a long drama with a happy ending, Judges is that moment in the first act when it seems that all is lost.

This unified approach to reading the Bible is not as natural for us as it was for people of earlier eras, in part because we do not know the Bible nearly as well. The thirteenth-century theologian Bonaventure once said that the difficulty with interpreting scripture accurately is needing to have so much of it memorized before one can even begin. "No one will find this an easy task unless, by constant reading, he has fixed in his memory the text of the Bible to the very letter; not otherwise shall he ever have the ability to interpret Scripture."<sup>4</sup> Bonaventure assumed that the Bible can only be understood in light of itself, and that such understanding requires having a great deal of scripture in one's memory so that, as one reads along, word associations and connections will leap to mind. Our easy access to the printed word, so easy that now many of us have searchable copies of the Bible with us at all times on our phones and tablets, is a great gift, but such access discourages memory, meaning that we often miss the interconnectedness of the text. When we read that an event in the biblical narrative took place at Shechem, most of us do not immediately remember all the other events that occurred at Shechem in the course of biblical history. The first writers, readers, and hearers of the texts would have thought of those connections.

Those first writers, readers, and hearers were immersed in a great system of symbols that enriched their communication and their understanding of the world.

4. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 18.

Most of us are deaf to that system of symbols as we read the Bible, and we therefore miss large portions of the meaning. When we read a story about Gideon putting out a fleece and inspecting the dew that had fallen or had not fallen on it, we need to be aware of the meaning of a fleece and the meaning of the dew if we are to hear all that was there for the first hearers. I make no claim to having mastered this system of symbols, but I have caught enough hints of it to believe that it cannot be learned apart from approaching the Bible as a unified whole.

To find the meaning in Judges, it is also necessary to determine the book's genre. Judges is a historical book, as evidenced by the effort to locate events at specific times and places and by the frequent references to current commemorative markers or place names. So, for instance, we are told that Judah attacked the Canaanites living in the town now known as Hebron, then known as Kiriath-arba (1:10). However, the primary genre of the book of Judges is not history; it is prophecy. The book of Judges is rightly categorized as one of the former prophets. That is to say that the narrator of Judges is not so much concerned to give an accurate historical account of a particular era as to present that story in a prophetic way, a way that conveys meaning and a message. The book of Judges has an undisguised perspective, which is part of this prophetic nature. As Daniel Block observes:

The author's intent is not to produce a cold, rational, and objective record of events; this is literary rhetoric, the language of persuasion, designed to challenge prevailing notions and effect a spiritual and moral transformation in readers of the composition. The book represents an extended sermon, or a series of sermons, that draws its "texts" from the real historical experiences of the Israelites in the premonarchic period. But like a modern preacher, the biblical author selects, organizes, arranges, shapes, and crafts his material for maximum effect. Recognizing this guards the readers against *the fallacy of misplaced literalism*, by which we force the text to carry freight it was not intended to carry. (Block 1999: 52–53)

This does not mean that the text is an invention or fiction; it is history, but prophetic history. The telling of the historic events has been shaped by a particular message, and so the literary structure and rhetorical effect of the account should be understood as deliberately serving the prophetic message. Part of the book's prophetic nature is seen precisely in its incisive application to and interpretation of real historical events, but those events may be told out of chronological order, emphasize the actions of a person who would have seemed unimportant to many bystanders, or connect the historical events to other events that would happen hundreds of years later. Events that happened during the same time period but

that do not contribute to the book's message—such as the stories of Ruth and Samuel—are omitted from Judges and find their home elsewhere in the canon. Furthermore, the narrator has access to God's judgments, feelings, plans, and reactions—which marks the book as prophetic. Bruce Waltke observes, “The implied author's omniscience and omnipresence, apart from modern demands of documentation, are due to his heavenly inspiration, not his fictitious inventiveness” (2004: 36).

To see how this works, consider one of the secondary messages our prophet is communicating to us: that God has chosen Judah over Benjamin, which is to say David over Saul. In the service of this message, Judah is credited with taking the city of Jerusalem, and Benjamin is blamed for the failure to make that conquest permanent (or perhaps failure to conquer a different section of the city). This is not how the story is told in the book of Joshua, which has a different prophetic agenda. There we read that it was the tribe of Judah who failed to drive the Jebusites out of Jerusalem (15:63). The historical truth, as we would understand it in our post-Enlightenment terms, was probably some combination of these stories: since Jerusalem is on the border of the territory of Judah and Benjamin, it is likely that both tribes shared credit for its capture and blame for its loss. But since Judges is in part a prophecy against Benjamin, the failures of Benjamin are highlighted.

However, the choosing of Judah is not without qualification. Throughout the book, Judah's role degrades from being the leader of the occupation to being the betrayer of Samson to being the leader in civil war. More basically, the book of Judges offers a criticism of both David and Saul, since at the heart of Judges is a claim that only YHWH is King of Israel and that for Israel to have any other king is a failure in keeping covenant. The fact that Judges in its canonical form was almost certainly compiled during the time of the exile helps us understand this theme. From the perspective of the exile, the ultimate inadequacy of human kingship has become clear. The coming of Jesus as Messiah reveals that the only legitimate human king, the only king who can secure for us both freedom and a lasting homeland, is the Incarnate One, who is YHWH Himself.

Prophetic literature is uncomfortable literature, and the book of Judges certainly creates discomfort in many readers. Prophecy brings us into contact with the normative word of God, and when we are out of harmony with that word (as, thanks to our sin, we always are to a greater or lesser extent), the contact can be painful. This is not because God has it in for us or enjoys seeing our pain. Rather, the way the world is constructed is such that sin produces pain, because

sin drives us away from God, who is the source of all goodness, fullness of joy, and everlasting pleasure (Ps. 16:11).

Even though the book contains few morally exemplary stories, several characters from Judges rate a mention in the “heroes of faith” list of Heb. 11. This has led many preachers to try to rehabilitate the characters in Judges. I have listened to many sermons that attempt to explain away the apparent failings of Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. But the list in Hebrews is not describing heroes of the law, people whose virtue earns them a place on a list of moral exemplars. Rather, the list in Hebrews is describing heroes of *faith*, people whose lives made clear that the law cannot save and who were driven to a desperate hope in a God of grace. These are people who clung to God and His promises in the midst of dark times, especially the dark times brought about by their own sin, from which they could not free themselves. Their inclusion in Heb. 11 does not set them beyond moral criticism any more than contemporary Christians’ assurance of membership in the covenant community of the church sets us beyond moral criticism.

Most of the moral lessons in the book of Judges concern examples of what *not* to do. In the children’s book *The Bike Lesson*, by Stan and Jan Berenstain, a father bear attempts to teach his son how to ride a bike; however, the father’s own bike riding leaves a good deal to be desired. He is constantly ending up in disastrous situations, after which he says to his son, “This is what you should not do.”<sup>5</sup> Or consider the terrifying films often shown as part of driver’s education courses in which the consequences of failing to wear one’s seat belt are portrayed in bloody detail. The book of Judges may function in this way for us. It is a warning or counter-example. Eugene Merrill observes, “It is fair to say that the book is an account of how not to live out the creation mandate as it was placed in the custody of God’s chosen nation Israel.”<sup>6</sup> The anarchy of the end of the book is where we will end up if we fail to honor our covenant with God, fail to practice right worship, fail to live courageously, and fail to recognize God’s authority over all of life. More than that, this anarchy is where we in fact are located apart from God’s grace. We are not invited to read the book of Judges from a perspective of distance or superiority; we are invited to see it as our own frightening story.

The people of Israel spent forty years under Moses’s leadership in the wilderness, learning how to be YHWH’s covenant people. They had received the law

5. Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain, *The Bike Lesson* (New York: Random House, 1964).

6. Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 421.

at Sinai, including detailed instructions for a system of worship that included feasting, sacrifice, prayer, and priesthood. YHWH governed them closely during that time, taking care of their daily needs by sending manna and quail, making sure that their clothing did not wear out, and giving Moses meticulous guidance about their oversight. Once the people crossed into the land of Canaan under Joshua's leadership, they began to step toward more independence. For instance, the manna and quail ceased, and they needed to think about how to cultivate food. And yet they still had a parental leader who spoke with YHWH directly and implemented His will for them in great detail. Or, to use a different metaphor, they moved from a tutorial about the law into an apprenticeship or internship, with Joshua as their mentor and supervisor. With the death of Joshua, the people of Israel are meant to enter a more adult stage of their covenantal life, living out the law that they have been taught under Moses and Joshua.

At the heart of the book of Judges are the twin claims that YHWH Himself is both King (8:23) and Judge (11:27) in Israel. With the occupation of the land, YHWH intends to rule His people directly, without a central mediator. Moses was a tutor, Joshua a mentor, but now, after forty years of wandering, they have come back into the promised land, where they are again given the commission to fill and subdue the land. Each person in Israel is now in a direct covenantal relationship with YHWH, which is to be lived out in the claiming of the land. This is the test of their adulthood, a test that they are about to fail.

The book of Judges is thus an extensive proof of the ineffectiveness of the law to save and of God's people's ongoing need for His gracious intervention generally and for the sending of a mediating deliverer specifically. As Paul tells us, "But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied" (Rom. 5:20). In Judges we will be watching as sin increases all the more, underscoring that the people of Israel cannot save themselves. More significantly, they cannot keep the law on their own power. Like all of us, they are prone to wander. Their slavery is not to foreign powers but to idolatry.

Unlike the first readers or hearers of Judges, we come to these scenes already knowing the next act of the play. It is futile for a Christian to read the Old Testament as if unaware of the gift of Jesus Christ. Given that Jesus, the Son of God, is also the Logos, the Word that is spoken, the fullness of God's law revealed in a human life, we should expect the written word of God to testify to Him. As a Christian reader of the Old Testament, I also assume that when the scriptures speak of God, or YHWH, or the Lord, without specifying one of the three persons of the Trinity, then it is the triune God who is meant, for there is no other God who

could be intended. So I do not believe that the God of Israel is solely the Father of Jesus Christ; rather, the God of Israel is the one God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For this reason I also take references to the Spirit in the Old Testament and specifically in the book of Judges to be references to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, even though I am aware that the first readers of this text could have had no such idea.

In Judges in particular, Jesus is also present in two additional ways. First, in common with much Christian tradition, I take it that the Angel or Messenger of the LORD who appears at Bochim, then later to Gideon, and finally to Manoah's wife and to Manoah, simply *is* the Second Person of the Trinity. We will consider this in more detail as we come to those episodes.

Second, there is a long tradition of seeing all or most of the judges as types of Christ, pointing forward to His saving work. Insofar as the judges act as saviors or deliverers of their nation, that may perhaps be appropriate. I believe that most basically the judges are to be understood as Israel in microcosm—the whole people being reflected in their leader. They should only be understood as types of Christ at moments when Israel as a whole can be understood as a type of Christ. I am not convinced that such instances occur often in the book of Judges, if at all, since this book generally presents the people of Israel as YHWH's unfaithful bride. Some judges may do particular things that can be seen as prefiguring Christ, but other parts of their stories do not fit well into such typology. There are, however, several characters whose interactions with Israel or with the judges who represent Israel appear to me to point to Christ: Achsah, Jael, Jephthah's daughter, and the unnamed concubine, to name the most probable. Even though all these characters are women, my own reading of this book is neither especially feminine nor feminist. I am simply open to the idea that both men and women are made in God's image and can reflect Christ's glory, and therefore to the possibility that types of Christ may as easily be female as male. Being closed to that possibility has led to some very odd interpretation in the past, particularly of this book. Again, we will consider ways in which these characters foreshadow Christ as we come to them in the text.

## The Book as a Whole

In the chapters that follow, we will consider each episode of the book of Judges, but first it makes sense to consider the book in its entirety, both in terms of themes that are present throughout and in terms of the book's overall structure.

### *Occupying the Land*

Throughout the scriptures, the promise of rest in the promised land has multiple layers of meaning. There is a strictly literal promise of a place in which the people of Israel will be able to live in social and political security. But the promise of the new land is also a promise of a new way of living, a way of living in union with God as His set-apart and holy people.

Eden was a holy land made for holy people. It was not only a land externally, where humans were meant to move about physically; it was also a holy land in which they were to live spiritually, in a relationship with God that Jesus will characterize as “abiding” in the Gospel of John (15:4–10). This relationship of abiding is transformative, making God’s people into *holy* people. Not only do they abide in the holy land, which is God’s own presence, but God abides in them, making them into His image and likeness (John 14:20–23). This was the Edenic design, restored and completed in Christ. The Bible thus presents holiness in two ways. From the side of its cause, holiness comes from God’s interior presence in the person within the relationship of true worship of God (holy land). From the side of its effect, holiness is the justice or righteousness manifested by the person and community (holy people). The fall signals the loss of holiness, the loss of both holy land and holy people; it is no wonder that at the east “gate” of the garden of Eden there are now found “cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).<sup>7</sup>

The covenant with Abraham is a promise of a new land, a promise that Abraham’s descendants will be a holy people living in a holy land. This is more than a geographical and political promise. It is a promise to restore the abiding relationship with God in which God’s people live in a constant state of intimacy with Him that then transforms them into holiness. The covenant at Sinai offers Abraham’s descendants the tools they need for this promise to come true: the law and the tabernacle. The law allows them to become a holy people, and the tabernacle is an in-breaking of the holy land, the place where YHWH meets with his people. The structures of worship that are given at Sinai are structures that allow for the expansion of this land, so that all of life becomes a place of holy encounter with the holy God. The promise of the land of Canaan is that it will be a great tabernacle where YHWH will dwell among His people, a foretaste of the new creation. “The Law and the tabernacle/ark make clear that it is not

7. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Holy People, Holy Land: A Theological Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 58. Also Arie Leder, “Holy God, Holy People, Holy Worship,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 43, no. 2 (November 2008): 213–33.

land and descendants per se that God intends to provide; rather, it is 'holy land,' symbolized by God's presence with the people in the ark of the covenant that dwells in the tabernacle, and 'holy people,' informed and governed by divine Law."<sup>8</sup> It is because the land is holy that everything and everyone not holy, not dedicated to YHWH, will be removed.

This promise is brought to pass through YHWH's work, by means of His word, and not by the work of the people of Israel. Deuteronomy thus foresees a time when the people will live in "a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant" (Deut. 6:10–11). Meditating on this text, Walter Brueggemann says:

The rhetoric at the boundary [i.e., at the Jordan, before entering Canaan] is that of pure gift, radical grace. There is no hint of achievement or merit or even planning. It is all given by the giver of good gifts and the speaker of faithful words. At the boundary Israel affirms that being landed is *sola gratia*: You did not build . . . ; you did not fill . . . ; you did not hew . . . ; you did not plant. The new land is in a peculiar way like the wilderness. It wells up with life-giving power, unplanned by Israel, in inscrutable ways. Deuteronomy reflects early: Israel cannot and does not and need not secure its existence for itself. It is all done for it by the same One who gave manna, quail, and water. Only now the gifts are enduring and not so precarious.<sup>9</sup>

Brueggemann goes on to observe that because the land is gift, under the care not of Israel but of YHWH Himself, it is also inscribed with the words of covenant. "The gifted land is covenanted land. It is not only nourishing space. It is also covenanted place."<sup>10</sup>

For New Testament people, the land of Canaan thus becomes a type of the new life of union with Christ into which we are invited through the in-breaking of God in the new tabernacle that is the incarnation. The book of Hebrews makes this explicit:

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

8. Dauphinais and Levering, *Holy People, Holy Land*, 59.

9. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 4

10. Brueggemann, *The Land*, 52.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. (Heb. 4:8–14)

There is no change of subject when the author of Hebrews moves from the discussion of rest to the discussion of God’s word and then to a discussion of our High Priest in heaven, for it is God’s word that guarantees and makes possible our rest in the true promised land, which is union with Christ in heaven. He has made a safe path for us into the presence of the Father, a path that we can only travel by being united with Him, which can only happen through the work of the Holy Spirit. So, then, when the Spirit unites us with Christ and we, in union with Him, travel the path through the heavens into the presence of the Father, we find ourselves embraced and surrounded by the overflowing love of the three persons, resting in the very nature of God. When, in the Gospel of John, Jesus promises to “prepare a place” for us in His Father’s house (14:2), this is the place that He is promising. Earlier in the Gospel, John tells us that when Jesus spoke of His “Father’s house,” He was speaking of His own body (2:21). The place that Jesus prepares for us in His Father’s house is a place of union with and as His body.

For Christians, as for the people of Israel, this process of being brought into the promised land of union with God is something we pursue by means of right, God-ordained worship. Thus the almost complete absence of right worship in the book of Judges is ominously significant. The people have come into the land in a literal way, but they are not coming into the holy land of union with YHWH by means of the worship structures He established on Sinai. The tabernacle is *never* mentioned in the book of Judges, and the ark is mentioned only at the very end of the book. Wrong worship—worship of Baal, but also twisted versions of YHWH worship—is characteristic of the people of Israel in every episode throughout the book and is even characteristic of Israel’s leaders in the stories contained in the second half, from Gideon onward. Without right worship at the heart of their communal life, the people of Israel will not find rest in Canaan, because without right worship—no matter how effectively they may conquer territory—they will not be living as holy people in a holy land.

### *Reversing the Fall*

Judges thus recounts a failed venture. Behind the failure to inhabit the land of Canaan as a holy land lies the ongoing reality of the fall. The book of Judges shows the people of Israel attempting to undo the double effects of sin articulated by God in the double curse on Adam and Eve. Adam's sin had brought down a curse regarding his relationship to the land, and in the book of Judges we see the people of Israel beginning but ultimately failing to restore an appropriate dominion over the land. Eve's sin had brought down a curse regarding her relationship to Adam, and in the book of Judges we see the people of Israel beginning but ultimately failing to restore a life-giving relationship between women and men. These two themes—the broken relationship of Israel to the land and the broken relationship of women to men—each wind through the entire book from beginning to end. They are related to the two great sins of Israel in the book of Judges: idolatry and intermarriage with the Canaanites.

In the beginning, Adam was made to be a priest to the creation, a steward of God's blessings who names the animals brought before him. As George Herbert taught in his poem "Praise,"

Of all the creatures both in sea and land  
Only to man Thou has made known Thy ways,  
And put the pen alone into his hand,  
And made him secretary of Thy praise.

Man is the world's high priest: he doth present  
The sacrifice for all; while they below  
Unto the service mutter an asset,  
Such as springs use that fall, and winds that blow.<sup>11</sup>

Both creation accounts give testimony to this priestly role. In the first creation account, Adam and Eve are told to have dominion over the earth, but it is a dominion that is to result in the fruitful flourishing of the creatures that they rule. They are named as God's image, or representative (Gen. 1:26–28). In the second account, Adam is described as being made from the dust of the earth and from the breath of God, as one who stands between the creation and the Creator. He is placed in the garden in order to tend it and "serve" the soil. He is given the task of naming the animals, reflecting analogically God's own act of speaking in

11. *Lyra Sacra: A Book of Religious Verse*, ed. Henry Charles Beeching (London: Methuen, 1895), 82, lines 5–12.

the creation (Gen. 2:7–8, 15–20). In all these ways, Adam is seen as a mediator between God and the nonhuman creation.

On the seventh day God rests, which is to say that He takes His seat to rule over this new world. Adam and Eve are at rest because they are in harmony with that rule. This is what it is for them to be at rest in the land. Being a Presbyterian, I think of this rest in terms of the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Adam and Eve are at rest when they are living toward their “chief end,” the purpose for which they have been made, and this end is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Resting in the land is possible for Adam and Eve because in a state of holiness they are achieving their end by living in a right relationship of abiding with God.

After the fall into sin, the curse on Adam reflects the disruption of this relationship and also the disruption of his priestly vocation. When Adam and Eve hear God approaching “as the Spirit of the day” (which is to say, the day of judgment), they hide from Him (Gen. 3:8).<sup>12</sup> They have a new fear of God, a fear rooted in disobedience and shame. They are alienated from God, and therefore they are also alienated from their own nature. They are no longer living as “spiritual bodies” (1 Cor. 15:44) in which their physical existence is intimately maintained by their abiding within God’s life-giving grace. Instead, they have become perishable bodies, drawing their life from the creation rather than from their Creator. They have become people “of dust” (1 Cor. 15:49), and death is now their future.

Sin has alienated Adam from God, but it has also alienated him from the land. The very dust from which he himself was taken will now rebel against him as he tries to make it into a garden, a place of fruitfulness. His work of serving and tending will now be met by thorns. He will be in harmony with the land only in his death, when he returns to it (Gen. 3:17–23).

There is, however, a promise that one of Eve’s descendants will crush the serpent’s head and break the curse (Gen. 3:15). Could it be that Joshua, whose very name is salvation, is that one? Could it be that the move into the promised land is the restoration long hoped for? The book of Judges explores this possibility and demonstrates with no room for doubt that the promise is not fulfilled. By the end of the book, it is obvious that (despite several heads having been crushed) the curse has not been rolled back, the effects of sin are not diminished, and the people of Israel are not yet at rest in the land. If education and self-discipline could have led

12. Meredith G. Kline, “Primal Parousia,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 245. See chap. 4 on Othniel for a further discussion of this understanding of the Spirit’s presence in the Old Testament.

to salvation from sin and the restoration of the order of creation, this should have been the moment. Instead, the book of Judges is a lived-out proof of the doctrine of original sin, of the fact that human beings cannot save ourselves because we are dead in our sin. We need a Savior who offers more than education and law, more even than a divinely given education and a divinely given law. We need a Savior who offers a new creation.

For a brief while at the beginning of the book, things look hopeful. The first judge, Othniel, conquers the Canaanites and receives from Caleb good land, with springs of water, along with a faithful wife with whom he can be fruitful and multiply. Later, when Deborah and Barak go to battle against Sisera, the creation joins in fighting at their side. The river and the stars fight for them (5:20–21). The head of their adversary is literally crushed (4:21). Perhaps the creational harmony of human beings with the natural world is being restored.

But by the time of Gideon things are already growing more dire. The Midianites attack the crops of Israel and are likened to swarms of locusts destroying the land (6:3–5). Gideon is first seen in the midst of an awkward harvest, separating wheat from chaff while hiding in a winepress (6:11). Gideon wins a great victory over the Midianites but then turns his wrath on his fellow Israelites, whom he attacks using thorns and briars (8:16), the emblems of an untamed land in God's curse on Adam (Gen. 3:18). By the end of Gideon's story, he—like fallen Adam—is so alienated from God that he sets up his own form of worship, which leads his people into idolatry. Gideon's son Abimelech is likened to a thornbush (9:15), and in Abimelech's attempts to make himself king the people of Israel continue to experience the punishing effects of Gideon's wrath and disobedience. By the time we arrive at Samson, things have grown yet worse. Samson's relationship with the creation is consistently disordered and marked by death: he eats honey taken from a lion's corpse (14:8–9), he destroys crops by setting foxes on fire (15:4–5), and he kills his enemies with the jawbone of a donkey (15:15–17). The last two stories in the book are about people who cannot keep still, who are traveling and relocating, who are anything but at rest. All of which culminates in a civil war, in which it becomes clear that the land must be cleansed of the people of Israel as much as the people of Canaan. The first curse, the curse on Adam and the land, remains in effect.

In the beginning, Eve was made to be a priest to Adam. In the second creation account, Adam is made before Eve, and his state of aloneness is the first thing in this sinless creation that God identifies as “not good” (Gen. 2:18). Our familiarity with the story may make it difficult to see how odd this is. Adam is in a state

of sinless communion with God Himself. Shouldn't a relationship with God be enough for us? How is it that Adam is described as alone in a not-good way? Furthermore, God is our Help, the original Help from whom all other help derives. This is a common theme throughout the Bible.<sup>13</sup> How is it that Adam needs another helper? Eve's creation suggests that our need to encounter God's helping presence in human form, that is, our need for the incarnation, is not simply a response to sin. Even apart from sin, Adam needs to encounter God in one who is bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23).<sup>14</sup>

In the first creation account, Eve shares Adam's commission to be God's image in the world He has made. In the second creation account, the particular way in which Eve is to do this is made explicit, even as the particular way that Adam is to do it is made explicit. Adam is made from the earth; Eve is made from Adam. Adam is the mediator to the land from which he is made; Eve is the mediator to Adam from whom she is made. Adam is priest for the creation; Eve is priest for Adam. She is the one who is named the *ezer* or helper, a word used over and over in the Old Testament to describe God. She is created as a type of Christ, a forerunner of the incarnation. Her calling is to embody God's word to Adam.<sup>15</sup>

The fall into sin is initiated because Eve fails in this calling and fails spectacularly. Instead of bringing God's word to Adam, she brings the word of the serpent. Because she is his bone and flesh, Adam receives that lie in the place of God's truth and acts on it. The curse on Eve is twofold, changing her relationship with her children and with her husband. God tells her, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). Up until this point in the story, if there is a hierarchy between Adam and Eve, Eve is at the top of that hierarchy. It may be that other passages of scripture, such as Gal. 3:28, give us reason to assume that there was no hierarchy in the sinless creation and that Adam was meant to be a priestly helpmeet back to Eve in a mutual showing forth of God's presence, but Gen. 2 alone makes no such suggestion. After the fall, however, a hierarchy is definitely established by the new experience of sin. From now on, husbands will rule over their wives, and women's needy desires will make them complicit in their own subordination. And from now on through the whole of

13. For a start, see Pss. 54:4; 121:2; Heb. 13:6.

14. I take this as evidence that the incarnation would have been fitting anyway, even if there had been no sin, though of course that is not the same as saying that it would have been necessary.

15. Also see Laura A. Smit, *Loves Me, Loves Me Not: The Ethics of Unrequited Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), chap. 2.

the Old Testament, though women may occasionally function as prophets and as rulers, no women will serve as priests in Israel's worship.

But again, Gen. 3:15 promises that the disordered state of alienation reflected in the curse on Eve will not endure forever, any more than the alienation from the land reflected in the curse on Adam will. Could it be that the new life in Canaan will be a life in which this curse is rolled back?

Again, things begin positively. At the very beginning of the book, we have the figure of Achsah, who fulfills the role with her husband Othniel that Eve failed to fill with Adam. Othniel is the faithful, victorious one (Rev. 2:26–29) to whom Caleb, the father, gives his child as a spouse. Achsah then intercedes with her father on behalf of the man she has married, so that Caleb gives Othniel good land with springs of water. Here we have a woman fulfilling the role of the priestly helpmeet, serving as a type of the High Priest who is also the Bridegroom, who intercedes with His Father for His bride and who comes to the marriage with the gift of living water. We also see Othniel fulfilling the role toward Achsah that Adam failed to fulfill with Eve. Othniel uses his power to dominate the powers of evil rather than living into the post-fall paradigm of dominating his wife.

There are many women in the book of Judges, and Achsah is the benchmark against whom they are to be measured. Deborah and Jael seem to come close. At the beginning of Deborah's story, she is recognized as a prophet and a judge. Barak, the Levite, is reluctant to perform his priestly duty of leading the army into battle unless Deborah joins him in this role as well, and so she does. The battle is waged against Sisera, who can be understood as an embodiment of the curse on Eve. His own mother testifies (with approval) to his use of rape as a routine weapon in war. He is oblivious to the very existence of Deborah and to the threat of Jael. Dominating and ruling over women is central to how he is portrayed in the story. Ultimately, Jael, the seed of the woman, crushes his head with a tent peg (5:26–27). Barak and Deborah join together to sing a song of triumph summing up this victory, in which Deborah is described as "a mother in Israel" who has cared for the people of Israel so that they have enough to eat (5:7). There is much here that appears to be an undoing of the curse on Eve, and yet it is all done in an atmosphere of threatening violence that is far removed from the Edenic ideal. Although Deborah and Jael measure up to the benchmark of Achsah, their circumstances do not. This is also true of the next story featuring a woman: the false king Abimelech is killed by a woman dropping a millstone on him, crushing his skull (9:52–54), again an echo of the promise in Genesis that the serpent's head will be crushed.

Beginning with chapter 11, however, women prefigure Christ not by being priestly helpmeets but by being sacrifices. Jephthah's daughter is sacrificed by her father, in sharp contrast to the loving treatment that Achsah receives from her father Caleb. Samson's wife is burned to death by the Philistines, and her father is burned with her (15:6). The Levite sacrifices his concubine to protect himself (19:25), and after she has been raped to death, he cuts her body into pieces and distributes them to all the tribes of Israel (19:29).

The final story in Judges shows two groups of young women taken by force to be the wives of the Benjaminites, with whom the army of Israel has been at war. First, four hundred young virgins from Jabesh-gilead are taken, after the inhabitants of the city are slaughtered by the men of Israel (21:8–14). Then two hundred of the daughters of Shiloh are abducted by the remnant of the tribe of Benjamin with the collusion of the other tribes (21:15–23). The pairing of violence and marriage takes place on a grand scale. It is clear that the curse on Eve has not been undone any more than has the curse on Adam. These stories of horror in the last part of the book demonstrate the ongoing reality of men dominating women in ways that lead to death. Most of the women in the last part of the book are unnamed and do not speak, clearly not fulfilling the role of priestly helpmeets.

But the male priests also fail to fulfill this helpmeet role. Barak is a timid Levite who needs to be cajoled into doing his job. The Levite who serves as Micah's priest in chapters 17 and 18 is leading worship of an idol, and the Levite who sacrifices and then cuts up his concubine in chapter 19 leads the tribes of Israel into war while denying his own cowardice. In the last half of the book, there is no faithful priestly presence in Israel, no one—male or female—who speaks the word of God and embodies His helping presence, other than an indirect reference to Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, who is still serving before the ark at Bethel (20:28).

The coming of Jesus addresses both the curse on Adam and the curse on Eve. Jesus is the second Adam who leads us into rest (Heb. 4). In the new heaven and the new earth, our right relationship with the creation will be restored, and already now the power of Christ allows us to anticipate that restoration. Jesus is also the second Eve, our great High Priest who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. The reconfiguring of marriage in the New Testament as a relationship of mutual submission is a step toward the rolling back of the curse, as is the new creation promise that in Christ there is neither male nor female, for all Christians are united into one body, a promise that begins to work itself out in the new creation reality of the church, where men and women work together as brothers

and sisters, as equals. While a direct reflection of the curse on Eve is seen in that there are no women priests in the Old Testament, in the New Testament our only priest is Christ, but men and women alike receive His Spirit, are transformed into His likeness, and share in His offices. Jesus also transforms the role of the sacrifice into a role of power, for in His person He combines the role of the priest with the role of the one who is offered up.

The book of Judges serves to demonstrate with stark clarity how deep is our need for a Savior who will rescue us from the effects of our sin, specifically sin manifested according to these two patterns. In so doing, this book prepares us for the good news of the New Testament. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that, in order to know the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ, I must first know “the greatness of my sin and wretchedness.”<sup>16</sup> When Paul unpacks the mystery of salvation in the book of Romans, he begins by spending significant time driving home the depth and breadth of sin in a straightforward and dogmatic way. Judges makes the same point, but more viscerally. Our sin and misery are very great. The consequences of sin articulated in the curse on Eve and the curse on Adam continue to spin out in vast patterns of destruction throughout human history, and our own power is not sufficient to stop the spinning.

### Structure

The artistry of the book of Judges contributes to its searing impact. A didactic warning about idolatry would not have the power of this carefully structured telling of horrific events in which we are invited to participate imaginatively. The intentional patterning of the book overall and of each episode invites us into this imaginative participation, shaping our reaction to the stories, whether or not we are aware of that pattern consciously. When we enter imaginatively into the world of Judges, the horizon of our worldview fuses with the horizon of ancient Israel, so that this story becomes our story. This is exactly the right reaction to the book, for this story of sin, idolatry, and rebellion against God really *is* our story, and the primary prophetic goal of the book is to bring us to that realization.

Every chapter in this commentary thus begins with a section on literary structure. Such structural analysis is immensely fruitful, especially in preaching. First, structure reveals meaning. The typical structural approach of Hebrew narrative is the chiasm, in which the passage’s key idea is placed *centrally*, framed by parallel

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16. “The Heidelberg Catechism,” *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva, 1999), Q/A 2, p. 59.

structures before and after. English literature does not typically follow this pattern, so it takes practice for people whose reading experience is mostly in English to see it. Once we develop that ability, we can see much more clearly what the passage is supposed to be about. For instance, it is significant that Gideon is the figure in the middle of the book of Judges; the Gideon story with its focus on YHWH's kingship is central to the meaning of the book.

Second, in my experience as a preacher, analyzing the structure of a passage often makes obvious what is the best way to structure a sermon on that passage. It becomes easier to see where the units are within the story, and these units typically translate into the main points of the sermon. It becomes easier to see parallels and contrasts, which typically reveal a lot about whether an action is one we should imitate or one we should condemn. It becomes easier to understand what the point of the story was intended to be.

Third, most thoughtful adults can learn to think about a text in terms of its structure, and that makes this approach especially useful for homiletics. When the sermon depends on knowledge of languages or history not available to people in the pew, it is easy to send a message that understanding the Bible is a special form of secret knowledge only available to educated clergy. I have had people in the church tell me that they have stopped trying to read the Bible for themselves precisely because they so admire their pastor's depth of knowledge and know that they cannot replicate it. This is not the message any good preacher wants to send. If instead we can communicate that the keys to understanding the Bible as a guide to faith and life are paying attention to the structure of the text (which is generally perfectly discernible even in translation) and knowing the Bible well enough to notice cross-references, then we are inviting members of the congregation into an accessible sort of study. This is not secret knowledge. This is knowledge available to anyone who reads persistently and with loving attention.

D. W. Gooding has identified a chiasmic structure to the entire book of Judges, an identification that is now widely, though not universally, accepted.

Introduction: Part I (1:1–2:5)

Introduction: Part II (2:6–3:6)

Othniel (3:7–11)

Ehud + Shamgar (3:12–21)

Deborah (4:1–5:31)

Gideon (6:1–8:32)

Abimelech + Tola + Jair (8:33–10:5)

Jephthah + Ibzan, Elon, Abdon (10:6–12:15)

Samson (13:1–16:31)

Epilogue: Part I (17:1–18:31)

Epilogue: Part II (19:1–21:25)<sup>17</sup>

Marc Zvi Brettler, among others, has complained that this structure is unrealistic because the parallel sections are not of equal length, so that the judgeship of Othniel, which is four verses long, is set in parallel with the judgeship of Samson, which is four chapters long. As we move through the book, we will need to consider just why that is so, but the parallels are so theologically and exegetically fruitful that I cannot dismiss Gooding's theory. When the book is examined in light of this structure, the truly beautiful nature of its literary composition becomes obvious, and new levels of meaning are exposed.

In addition to this primary and basic chiasmic structure, there are two other overlapping structures: first, a through structure, which moves from beginning to end, demonstrating a trajectory of decline into apostasy (which we have already begun to consider in the previous section); second, a parallel structure, in which the first half of the book is recapitulated and developed in the second half of the book. There are also smaller patterns that cut across these structures, such as several sets of three that run throughout the book: three appearances by the messenger of YHWH, three times when women attack men's heads, three prophetic speeches, and three encounters with the tribe of Ephraim at the Jordan.

Some contemporary readers find it difficult to imagine that all these structural pieces are really there, really intended by the author or editor of the book. I believe they are intentional, meaningful, and elegant. I am not a great stylist, but even I am capable of writing a sentence that has meaning on more than one level. Even I am capable of constructing parallels and patterns in my writing that convey meaning. The author or editor of the book of Judges is a very great stylist. But more than that, the ultimate Author of this book, as of all of scripture, is the Holy Spirit, who is more than able to embed many levels of meaning into

17. D. W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," *Eretz Israel* 16 (1982): 70–79, cited approvingly by Daniel Block (1999: 49), Bruce Waltke (2004: 190), and many others. An alternate organization that some find persuasive is suggested by Jay G. Williams in his article "The Structure of Judges 2:6–16:31," *JOT* 49 (1991): 77–86. Williams identifies a more complex structure of interrelation between all twelve of the judges according to the four seasons.

the text, including meanings that may not have been clear or comprehensible to the first readers or even to the human authors themselves. The book of Judges is a sophisticated piece of writing, constructed with a careful view toward maximizing meaning through structure, and paying attention to structure will therefore be central to our examination.