
Judges

LEADERSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS—*JUDGES*

JUDGES MARKS THE beginning of the lengthy and unsparing critique of Israel's national leadership that is so central to both Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isaiah through Malachi in the Hebrew canon). The judges whose stories are told here appear more often on the battlefield than in court proceedings. They are leaders of the people, charismatically chosen, competent or (more often) foolish. Accordingly, a major theme in this book is how God's will may be known and carried out by those in positions of responsibility. This traditional prayer for the grace to do God's will could have been directly inspired by Judges:

Almighty God, *who hast given us this good land for our heritage*: We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. . . . *Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. . . . Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government*, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and *in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail. . . . Amen.*¹

These are in fact the central themes of Judges: *a people settled in a good land*, who nonetheless—or perhaps therefore—*need to be saved from their own tendency to violence, discord, and arrogance*; who *need wise governance*, together with *unwavering trust in God when the day of trouble comes*. These same themes fit the experience and needs of contemporary North Americans, and peoples of every land. When we scratch the antique surface of this book, the relevance of Judges is startling.

The final section of the book (Judg 17–21), which commentators sometimes mistakenly call an “appendix,” gives insight into the direction in which the whole moves. The section is bracketed on either side by the most famous line in Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone would do what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). That framing declaration summarizes the state of things at the end of the period of the judges and anticipates the history of the kings that lies just ahead; less obviously, it also looks back to the last book of Torah. Moses’s final teaching to Israel in Deuteronomy forms the basis for the prophetic critique of leadership that runs through the books that narrate this history of Israel in the land. The narrator’s repeated statement in Judges sounds like a disappointed echo of what Moses told the Israelites on the other side of the Jordan:

You shall keep carefully the commandments of YHWH your God and his testimonies and statutes which he commanded you. *You shall do what is right and good in the eyes of YHWH*, in order that it may go well for you, and you may enter and take possession of the good land that YHWH promised to your ancestors. (Deut 6:17–18; cf. Exod 15:26)

The echo in Judges reveals that in Canaan, the situation is now directly contrary to what it should be; the norm for behavior is not YHWH’s will but the will of each individual Israelite.

I saw the contemporary relevance of Judges clearly for the first time while leading a workshop in South Sudan in the summer of 2011, just days before the official establishment of the new nation. Our topic was using the Bible for moral discernment, and Bishop Hilary Garang Deng of Malakal explained why it was crucial: “We have lost everything: social structure, villages, tribal traditions. If we don’t have the Bible to guide us, we will have nothing at all, and everyone will do the one thing that seems good to them right now.” Together, we repeated the line from Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone would do what was right in his own eyes.” What Bishop Hilary feared has since been realized. His land was destroyed, first in a half century of war with Northern Sudan, and then a second time in civil war among South Sudanese tribes. His own city, Malakal, the regional center for the oil industry, was especially targeted by both sides and reduced to a ghost town. The peoples of South Sudan are now living in the middle of the book of Judges. Theirs is an extreme situation, but very many peoples in our time are experiencing a profound loss of community structures and values, even if the circumstances are less dramatic. Everyone choosing his or her own immediate self-interest—that social norm is sadly familiar to most of us.

Judges is a violent book—from one perspective, a “text of terror,” as it has famously been called.² Yet in order to interpret the book accurately, it is crucial to note the perspective from which the story is told, to see that a strong note of

negative judgment informs the way the story develops and builds to a climax in the final section, where the rampant violence committed by Israelites is clearly viewed as an atrocity.³ The narrative as a whole is a story of deterioration of the corporate character of the people Israel, which to a great extent mirrors the inadequacy of its leaders. There is a subtle and tragic irony at work throughout. Israel's military heroes and other leaders may be ostensibly, even ostentatiously pious: Jephthah is visited by the spirit of YHWH and swears a solemn oath (Judg 11:29–31); Gideon builds an altar (6:24) and seeks signs from YHWH (6:17, 36–40); Samson lives under a vow of renunciation. Yet after a hopeful beginning with Deborah, Israel's judges gradually and more or less steadily lead the people away from God and into the horrors of civil war and violence against women.

Trouble in the Land

All the trouble in Judges begins with culpable ignorance. After the death of Joshua's generation, "there arose another generation after them that did not know YHWH or the work that he had done for Israel" (Judg 2:10). Knowing (or not) the signature work of God is a recurrent theme in the account of Israel's history. In Exodus, YHWH's action for the sake of Israel—deliverance from bondage (Exod 6:7), striking Egypt with plagues (7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2), providing manna and meat in the wilderness (16:12)—has an educational purpose: "so you may know that I am YHWH." In the end, even Egypt, contrary to its own will, will know God's glorious power (14:18). Now, when Israelites newly settled in the land of promise do not know what YHWH has done, it is as though all that instructional history has never happened. The people have intermarried with Canaanites and worshiped their gods, just as Deuteronomy said they would do (Judg 3:6; Deut 7:3–4).

From that failing follows the standard pattern of events that provides the basic plot line for much of Judges:

1. Israel sins: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of YHWH; they forgot YHWH their God and served the Baalim and the Asherot" (Judg 3:7).
2. YHWH becomes angry: "And the anger of YHWH burned against Israel . . ." (3:8a).
3. YHWH hands Israel over to their enemies: ". . . and he sold them into the hand of Cushan Rishatayim ["Ethiopian of Double-wickedness"?], king of Aram Naharayim, and the Israelites were slaves to Cushan Rishatayim for eight years" (3:8b).
4. Israel cries out to YHWH: "The Israelites cried to YHWH . . ." (3:9a).
5. YHWH raises up a military deliverer and leader: ". . . and YHWH raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, and he delivered them—Othniel son of Kenaz,

the younger brother of Caleb. The Spirit of YHWH was upon him, and he judged Israel and went out to war, and YHWH gave into his hand Cushan Rishatayim, king of Aram” (3:9b–10a).

6. There is a period of “quiet”: “The land was quiet for forty years, and Othniel son of Kenaz died” (3:11).

This is the standard pattern (with variations) during the tenure of the judges for whom we have narrative accounts.

What is missing throughout the book is Israel’s repentance. There is just one mention of an attempt by Israel to repudiate foreign gods, but YHWH is not impressed with the effort:

They removed the foreign gods from among them and served YHWH—but he became short-tempered with Israel’s trouble. (Judg 10:16)

The divine response comes as a surprise; the verb phrase literally reads “and his *nefesh*/being became short.” Some translators render that as an expression of sympathy: “and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer” (NRSV). However, in its three other occurrences in the Bible,⁴ the phrase clearly denotes impatience, as we see a few chapters later in this book, in the scene with Samson and Delilah:

And since she pressed him with her words all the time and kept at him, *his spirit became short* enough to die. (16:16)

The double occurrence of the uncommon phrase just a few chapters apart suggests a curious parallel between God and Samson, as well as between Israel and Delilah. Notably, Delilah is the only person Samson is ever said to love (16:4; cf. 16:15); in like fashion, the tradition the Deuteronomists inherited affirms that YHWH has chosen Israel out of love (Deut 7:8). Yet Samson is unlucky in love; he chooses someone who gives his spirit no peace and ultimately betrays him. Is the narrator in Judges hinting to us that YHWH may be similarly troubled by the beloved “he” has chosen?

Putting Women at the Center

Delilah is one of numerous memorable women in Judges. The strategic use of women is one of the outstanding characteristics of the book, even though most of these unforgettable women appear in just single scenes. There are probably both historical and literary reasons for the prominence of women in Judges. Historically, the setting is the tribal period (Early Iron Age, 1200–1000 BCE), the time when Israel’s social structure was decentralized and most egalitarian.

Nearly everyone relied on subsistence farming, and in the task of providing for the household, women were full partners with men.⁵ Literarily, the use of women here as central figures serves to highlight the drama of Israel's deterioration that is the main plot line of Judges.

The book begins with a series of strong women. At the outset comes Achsah the daughter of Caleb, who negotiates successfully with her military hero father for a better piece of land as a marriage gift (Judg 1:12–15). It is notable that after Achsah, nearly every story of a woman is a story of violence. Next come the warrior women Deborah and Yael (Judg 4–5) and then the woman of Tebez, who saves her besieged city by dropping a millstone, a woman's tool, on the head of the villainous attacker Abimelech (9:50–54). Those three might be seen as positive counterparts to Delilah (16:4–21). All four of them defeat strong men, but in doing so the first three build Israel up; Delilah brings it down, under Philistine hegemony. Apart from these early figures, most of the women in the book may be seen as victims of violence, either directly or indirectly.

The story of Deborah and Yael is intriguing because, uniquely in biblical narrative, it is judged important enough to be told in two versions, first in prose (Judg 4) and then in poetry (Judg 5). Many consider the latter to be one of the oldest compositions in the Bible. It has the style of oral tradition, with a proliferation of evocative images but a sketchy storyline, since the audience is expected to be familiar with the story already.⁶ The prose narrative fills in missing details and makes some changes, as though trying to make better sense of the inherited tradition. So, for instance, the poem suggests that Yael fells Sisera from a standing position (5:27), whereas the prose account has something easier to conceive: he is fast asleep when she strikes him (4:21). Again, the poem indicates that some tribes are summoned to war by Deborah but hang back (5:14–17), while the presumably later prose account makes no mention of slackers but gives the more positive impression that the whole nation rises to its own defense.

The most consequential difference between the poetic and prose versions lies in how each ends. The prose account closes on a note of military triumph: Yael shows the general Barak the dead body of the enemy commander, and “the hand of the Israelites kept growing harder against Yabin the king of Canaan, until they had cut off Yabin the king of Canaan” (4:24). By contrast, the poem makes an unsettling scene change. No sooner has Sisera “fallen ruined” (5:27) than the poetic narrator takes us to an elegant house in Canaanite territory, where the enemy commander's mother waits by the window for his returning chariot. In a surprising shift in point of view, we are admitted to the thoughts of someone we would never expect to know; through her, we see manifested the multiple and conflicting cruelties of war. With one side of her thoughts, Sisera's mother is the heartless enemy, relishing the picture of his men dividing up the sexual

spoils of war—Israelite women, “a womb or two for every chieftain” (5:30). Yet at the same time, she is a woman longing for her son, puzzled that his chariot is “shamefully slow to come” (5:28), more fearful than she admits to herself and her female attendants. This arresting vignette, entirely unique in the Bible, is the first hint of a theme that recurs through the rest of the book: the complex interaction between violence and love as a central force in the lives of women—shaping, distorting, and destroying.

At the last moment, the biblical narrator closes by pulling back from the scene with a vengeful cry: “So may all your enemies perish, YHWH!” (5:31)—thus coming close to the ending of the prose account. A completely different kind of ending is created by the distinguished Israeli poet Haim Gouri, whose poem *Immo*, “His Mother” (1960), realizes more fully the potential for sympathy that is latent in the biblical text. He hears “the silence of Sisera’s chariot that is shamefully slow to come” and looks at the commander’s mother, “a woman with a streak of silver in her hair.”⁷ The reader of Judges knows what Sisera’s mother does not know, and so the mind of Gouri’s narrator goes to the tent where her son lies, “as though fast asleep.” He notices the sort of detail a mother might notice, that her sleeping boy has a dirty chin, but in this case, the traces are “of milk, butter, and blood.” Gouri’s poem now moves toward its end, as the young women of the household go silent, “one after another.” Citing the concluding words of the biblical account, Gouri’s narrator tells us, “For forty years the land was quiet”—and then adds a detail the Bible does not mention: “But she died, a short time after the death of her son.” Gouri gives us a point of view we did not know we needed to have.

The Decline of Faithfulness

After Deborah, there is no unambiguously good report of any judge of Israel. The first lengthy saga is that of Gideon (Judg 6–8). There are positive elements to his story: he destroys the idolatrous altar and shrine in his hometown of Ofra, is clothed in the spirit of YHWH, delivers Israel from Midianite oppression, and piously opposes the people’s desire to make him king:

I am not the one who shall rule over you, and my son shall not rule over you; YHWH shall rule over you. (Judg 8:23)

All of that is as it should be, except that immediately thereafter, Gideon collects from the Midianite spoils an immense amount of gold and makes it into an ephod, a priestly garment, which he puts on public display in Ofra, “and all Israel whored after it there” (8:27). Despite that failing, Gideon lives to “a good old age”

(8:32), and in his time Israel has forty years of quiet (8:28), the ultimate accolade for any leader in this book.

The most notorious failure among the judges comes when Jephthah, summoned by Israel to do battle with the Ammonites, fulfills his carelessly worded vow to offer up “the one that comes out to meet me when I return safely from the Ammonites” (11:31). Surely he is expecting to be greeted by one of the several domestic animals that would reside with humans in the typical Israelite dwelling. When instead his daughter dances out the door, with a sick rigidity he sacrifices his child to his expectations. His words to her make this a textbook case of blaming the victim:

Oh, my daughter, you have brought me so far down; now you have become one of those causing me trouble, since I am the one who opened my mouth to YHWH and cannot take it back. (Judg 11:35)

Yet Jephthah is visited by the spirit of YHWH (11:29) immediately before he makes the foolish vow, an apparent confirmation of his leadership. Thus, this story raises a question that will recur again (with the story of Saul): Is every recorded visitation by the spirit genuine—and if genuine, is it beneficial? The Bible does not endorse an uncritical attitude toward either charismatically chosen leadership or spirit-engendered acts of power. Rather, unlike many moderns, it takes such spiritual phenomena seriously and at the same time recognizes that the consequences are not always godly.

The small-scale atrocity of Jephthah's sacrifice of his own child has its parallel in the large-scale atrocity that constitutes the final word on his military exploits: this leader of Israel kills an astonishing 42,000 Ephraimites, northerners (12:6). Across the whole book, Israelites kill more of their kinfolk than of their oppressors. The foolishness and violence of Jephthah's brief judgeship foreshadow the horrors against women that figure so prominently in the final chapters of the book. There is an implied judgment in the length of his judgeship—just six years (12:7)—the shortest for any legitimate leader in the book.⁸ Moreover, the standard notice about the land enjoying quiet is missing with this judge. It is therefore curious that the larger scriptural tradition fails to register a negative judgment on Jephthah but instead misleadingly counts him as one of the heroes of Israel (cf. 1 Sam 12:11; Heb 11:32–34).

The longest and most complex account of the exploits and character of any judge is the Samson saga (Judg 13–16), which is not a simple adventure story but something far more ambiguous and troubling. It is hard to know what to make of Samson. One possibility is that he is simply a fool, who falls repeatedly for Philistine women instead of a nice Israelite girl, as his parents hope (14:3); he

plays with fire and finally is burned to death. Another possibility is that he is a flawed agent of God, whose very weakness for Philistine women creates an “opportunity” for YHWH to work the destruction of the Philistines from within their own camp (14:4).

The ambiguous portrayal may well reflect social reality: Israel’s historical ambivalence toward their Philistine neighbors, who were economically and militarily powerful, technologically and culturally advanced. Israelites lived for centuries in close proximity to the Philistines as both threat and attraction, and doubtless there was more than one view of how best to deal with them. Thus, on the one hand, the Samson saga seems to advocate total separation: Don’t get mixed up with Philistines; that way lies disaster. On the other hand, there is a playful celebration of how Samson becomes a terrorist and succeeds in disrupting the system from within. He dies in the manner of a suicide bomber, taking down with him a whole crowd of Philistines gathered for a religious festival, “and the dead he killed in his death were more than he had killed in his lifetime” (16:30). That statement is carefully measured, neither laudatory nor condemnatory. Samson judged Israel for twenty years (15:20; 16:31), but as with Jephthah, there is no notice that the land experienced quiet under his leadership.

Samson fell short of the divine promise that attended his conception and the vow that his mother accepted on his behalf: “A razor shall not touch his head . . . , and he will begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (13:5). Yet deliverance never came to pass, despite Samson’s phenomenal physical strength and multiple visitations by the spirit of YHWH (14:6, 19; 15:14). Samson died a captive of the Philistines, at whose hands he endured the ultimate indignity: they dug out his eyes (16:21). Blinding prisoners of war was common in the ancient world (cf. 2 Kgs 25:7), but in this case, Samson’s sightlessness is emblematic of his way of life. Although marked from before birth for a dedicated life, he never saw clearly what his special responsibility to God and Israel required of him.

A pattern can be traced through Samson’s ultimately failed judgeship by noting his interactions with the four women who appear in his story, all of whom are minor characters. With the exception of his mother, none appears in more than one scene or speaks more than a few words; with the exception of Delilah, none has a name. However, as Uriel Simon observes, the countless undeveloped characters in biblical narrative are not throwaways; most often, they illumine something important about the relatively few developed characters.⁹ In this case, women serve as a mirror reflecting the steady erosion of Samson’s initial promise to be a deliverer of Israel; through them, we might measure in four movements the deterioration of his commitment to God and Israel—or indeed, to anything other than his immediate desires:

- *Samson's mother.* The mother of Samson displays the highest degree of religious commitment. Although named only in relation to her husband, Manoah (Judg 13:2), she is more spiritually alert than he, which is probably why YHWH's messenger initially appears to her to announce the end of her barrenness (13:3). The first clue that Samson's mother is the exemplum of faithfulness in this story is the fact that from the moment of her son's conception, she herself is charged to participate in the vow of renunciation he will be expected to live out, refraining from strong drink and impure meat (13:7). Not until Gabriel comes to Mary in Nazareth will a divine messenger make such a strong identification between a woman's capacity for faithfulness and God's intention for the child in her womb (cf. Luke 1:30–38). Even when Manoah sees the messenger, he at first fails to recognize divine presence (Judg 13:16) and then completely misinterprets its significance:

Manoah said to his wife, "We'll die for sure, now that we have seen God." But his wife said to him, "If YHWH wanted to kill us, he would not have taken from our hand the burnt offering and the grain offering, and he would not have shown us all these things, or now let us hear anything like this." (Judg 13:22–23)

- *A Philistine woman.* Samson's mother sets the standard of faithfulness from which the decline can be measured, starting with Samson's expressed desire to marry a Philistine woman of Timnah, over his parents' opposition (Judg 14:1–3). As with each of Samson's (potential) sexual partners, the question of loyalty to YHWH is never mentioned, but the story highlights the question of personal loyalty, the woman's and Samson's, at several points. To celebrate the marriage, Samson throws a week-long "drinking party" (*mishteh*), "since that is what young men would do" (14:10)—presumably, those not pledged to refrain from wine and beer—and poses his famous riddle to the Philistine guests, with a ruinously high price attached if they fail to solve it. After three days of drinking and no breakthrough, they threaten to set the house on fire unless the bride wheedles the answer out of Samson, pressure to which she yields for the sake of saving her life and theirs. Petulant Samson leaves the party and the bride, whose marriage has evidently not been consummated (14:20), and goes home. When he returns some time later to find that the abandoned bride has married the groomsman, Samson strikes back savagely, setting fire to the fields with the harvest still in them. In the end, the woman is burned alive by her own people (15:6), part of the collateral damage in the contest of wit and strength, honor and ego, between Samson and the Philistines. One of the most perceptive commentaries on the story is Rembrandt's painting *Samson's*

Wedding Feast. In a visual quotation of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Rembrandt places the unsuspecting bride squarely at the center of the table, in the position of Christ, with Samson nearby in the posture of Judas. The viewer can infer the message: she is about to be crucified, betrayed with a kiss.

- *A prostitute.* The third woman mentioned in the story is another Philistine, a prostitute in Gaza (Judg 16:1–3), whose name, story, and personal connections all remain unknown to us—and presumably to Samson himself, who stays with her just a few hours and then departs, taking the city gate with him. His encounter with her might represent the point of complete neutrality on the loyalty scale; there is no attachment and no betrayal on either side.
- *Delilah.* The final woman is Delilah, the only person Samson is ever said to love (Judg 16:4). Living in the Valley of Soreq, between the Philistine plain and the Israelite uplands, she might belong to either people, and she shows no loyalty to either side. If she is an Israelite, she is a turncoat; if a Philistine, she is an extortionist from her own people. The 5,500 shekels of silver that the Philistine overlords give her as bounty for delivering Samson into their hands is an astronomical sum, which must have emptied the city treasuries. Delilah herself breaks the final part of Samson's vow, calling for the razor as he lies sleeping in her lap. As the agent of vow breaking and death, Delilah stands as the polar opposite of Samson's mother, the original agent of the vow, the mediator of life and divine blessing (13:24) for him; she represents the low point on the loyalty scale.

The stories of the judges end with Samson's saga. If Samson fails to deliver Israel from the Philistines, it is not because he is wicked but because he has no regard for the essential claims laid upon him. Samson's self-absorption is evident from this blunt, even crude exchange with his parents:

His father and his mother said to him, "Is there none among the daughters of your kin, and among all my people, no woman—that you are going off to take a wife from among the Philistine schmucks [literally, the foreskinned Philistines]?" But Samson said to his father, "*Her get for me; for she is right in my eyes.*" (Judg 14:3)

The narrator immediately covers for Samson—"Now his father and his mother did not know that it was from YHWH" (14:4)—but reading on, the alert reader discovers that Samson's failing is the failing of every Israelite when there is no king and everyone does what is right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25). What remains to be seen is how much that will change when there are kings in Israel and Judah. How many of them will do "what is right in the eyes of YHWH"?

The Bitter End

The final section of the book (Judg 17–21) has nothing to say of national leadership or external oppression for Israel. Rather, it is a collection of stories that shows a people dissolving into chaos, idolatry and false piety, familial exploitation, and violence at both local and tribal levels. It returns to themes that were adumbrated in the account of Jephthah's deeds: brutal domestic violence (Judg 19) and ensuing civil war among Israelites (Judg 20), a foolish religious vow that leads to more violence (Judg 21). In every instance, women are especially targeted for exploitation or destruction. The cumulative witness of these culminating stories is that the abuse of Israelite women by Israelite men epitomizes the nation's self-delusion, self-destructiveness, and falseness to God.

This is most evident in the dismemberment of the nameless concubine woman from Bethlehem, who is gang-raped by the townspeople in Gibeah, after which “the man who was her lord”—a Levite—“hacked her to her bones into twelve pieces and distributed her through the whole territory of Israel” (19:26, 29). It is the single most grotesque scene in the Bible; if read literally, the violence is pornographic. Yet there are strong internal indications that the story is not to be taken only or primarily at the literal level. Marc Brettler finds one negative clue in the extreme historical improbability of the culminating event of human body parts distributed through the whole territory of Israel.¹⁰ He argues that the story is a pro-Davidic political allegory that casts a negative light on Gibeah, the ancestral seat of Saul's house and his own royal seat. The geographic specificity of the story is central to his argument. The woman is from Bethlehem, David's city, where both man and woman receive proper hospitality. When they leave there, they pass up the Jebusite city (Jerusalem) and Ramah, the city of Samuel, and make the disastrous choice of Gibeah. If Brettler is correct to find a polemic against the house of Saul here, then Judges is already dealing with what will prove to be the most difficult theological problem in the book of Samuel—namely, God's choosing Saul, only to reject him thereafter.

Brettler's argument is plausible, although the target of criticism should be expanded beyond the house of Saul to include the whole leadership structure of Israel. All those who should protect the vulnerable body politic fail to do so, and even participate in “her” dismemberment: her husband, a Levitical priest; her father in Bethlehem; the host in Gibeah, an elder and householder and therefore a citizen with a say in community life; the attackers, who are not riffraff but citizens—literally, “owners” of the city (*baalim*, 20:5). Thus, both royal houses are implicated, and the whole social-political-religious structure is indicted. Moreover, such a comprehensive judgment might be reflected also in the story's pronounced emphasis on the *house* in Gibeah as a (supposed) place of safety for

the Levite and his concubine wife. The physical house that fails to provide protection against real and present dangers points to the “house of Israel,” the leadership structure that the prophets regularly condemn (e.g., Isa 5:7; Hos 1:4, 6; Amos 5:1; Mic 1:5).

The notion that the story is meant to be read at a level that is more than literal or historical is suggested also by the many thematic and verbal echoes with other parts of the larger scriptural story. There is a strong link with the threatened gang-rape scene in Sodom (Gen 19), where likewise women are offered in place of the desired male(s). The message in Judges is that the house of Israel has returned the land to its pre-Abrahamic condition; Gibeah is another Sodom, a whole city of moral idiots. This time, however, there are no angels of deliverance to prevent their intention from being fulfilled. Another echo, this one pointing forward: the graphic language of the female body “hacked” and “distributed” in twelve pieces “through the whole territory of Israel” anticipates the story of Saul—moved, like the leaders in Judges, by the spirit of God—sending out the dismembered bodies of cattle to summon the tribes to war (1 Sam 11:6–7). In both cases, the Israelites get the message and respond “as one person” (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 11:7).

Yet there is an incalculably great difference between the body of a woman and the bodies of cattle. The writer is working shocking changes on stories that are known,¹¹ in order to work on the imagination of the audience, which now includes ourselves. It is not incidental that the abused body is that of a woman, but neither does that mean that the story is about the abuse of women exclusively. Rather, through the artistic imagination that shapes the book of Judges, unforgettable stories of female victims speak for and about women, but also for and about others who are most vulnerable to the failures of the power structure. In the social structure of ancient Israel, that was arguably most people. There was no middle class but rather a tiny elite class served by a somewhat larger group of managers and maintainers, including priests and court prophets—and then everybody else, most of them living in villages, existing at subsistence level, or little more. Reflecting such a situation, the vulnerable women in the Bible might be seen as the “Every-person” of Israel, the relatively powerless majority. They can serve in that representational role because the general social subordination of women was widely recognizable, and indeed increased as Israel moved from the relatively decentralized social structure of the tribal period into the more stratified social organization of the monarchy.

In the brilliant introductory essay to her study of female characters in the Bible, Tikva Frymer-Kensky observes that despite such subordination, the Hebrew Bible differs from other ancient literature in making no attempt to justify the low social standing of women by portraying them as the “other,” different from and inferior to men. And indeed, she suggests, the Israelites as a nation came

to see themselves in the same way the Bible represents women, as relatively powerless yet not inferior:

Israel was always small and vulnerable in comparison to the empires surrounding it. As time went on, this vulnerability gave way to defeat, and Israel was conquered by more powerful nations. The Bible's view of women became central to Israel's thinking, for it provided a paradigm for understanding powerlessness and subordination without recourse to prejudicial ideas. Israel was subject to the power and authority of others on an international level just as women were subordinate within Israelite society, and the Bible's own image of women enabled its thinkers to accept this powerlessness without translating it into a sense of inferiority or worthlessness. In this way, the Bible's image of women was an essential element in its self-image and its understanding of Israel's destiny.¹²

Accordingly, Frymer-Kensky maintains, stories such as this one were preserved and retold, not to make statements about women in particular,¹³ but to make statements about the whole house of Israel: "Her torn body is a symbol of the torn shreds of the social fabric: what has been done to her has already been done to the bonds of trust between Israelites."¹⁴ The early prophetic tradition remembers "the days of Gibeah" (Hos 9:9; 10:9) as emblematic of Israel's corruption. It is appropriate, then, that immediately after the hacking up of the body, the narrator momentarily drops the stance of the uninvolved narrator of past events and considers what this story might mean for future generations:

And it shall be that everyone who sees will say, "Nothing like this has happened or been seen from the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day." Attend to her [or: to it], take counsel, and speak out! (Judg 19:30)

Precisely where the quoted speech ends here is a translator's judgment call, as the Hebrew does not mark it; the essential point is not changed if the quote continues through the series of imperatives. In either case, the narrative is opening up toward future generations, imaginatively engaging those who will hear this story and "see" these events in time to come, insisting that this will move them to reflection and forthright speech.¹⁵ This is one of the few moments within the Former Prophets when the narrative voice becomes overtly prophetic.¹⁶ This series of plural imperatives, addressed to an unspecified but presumably wide audience of potential "seers," is a call for public responsibility. That charge might be viewed as the direct opposite of the grotesque permission that the householder in

Gibeah gives to the mob outside his door: “Here are my young daughter and his concubine. I’ll put them out, and you rape them and do to them whatever is good in your eyes” (19:24). In the aftermath of that horrific deed, when bodies have been abused and the social body has been dismembered, the only way to recover decency is for people to name honestly what has happened and claim it as their common responsibility.

But Israel does not recover decency, as Judges tells it. Instead of leading to deep communal reflection, the dismemberment sets off the chain reaction of violence with which the book lurches to its conclusion, and much of the rest of that chain involves sexual coercion or violence against women. Israelite outrage against Gibeah, a city of the tribe of Benjamin, leads to a war of revenge. This is the great civil war of biblical tradition, with appalling carnage on both sides: 50,000 Benjaminites die, but also 40,000 in the opposing army. Moreover, it is far from clear that YHWH is fighting on the side of the avengers, the anti-Benjaminite coalition. They are cut down in two great waves, even though they have twice sought oracular direction for the battle, and both times YHWH has encouraged them to go up and fight (20:17–25). Although on the third sally, the war finally turns in their favor, the question remains: Did YHWH deliberately mislead them with what appeared to be assurances of an easy victory?

No explanation is given, but the evidence here lines up with one interesting feature in the whole book. There are many instances, beginning with Gideon, of Israelites asking for signs or special communications from YHWH. Yet at the same time, there is a steady deterioration of the fortunes and character of Israel. There is a tragic irony operating here: people can act religious and believe themselves to be religious, and God may respond to that up to a point, but finally, “it is by their fruits you shall know them” (Matt 7:16). The outcome of this war is the bitter fruit of more violence. The tribe of Benjamin is threatened with extermination as a result of war and the solemn oath not to give them daughters in marriage that the other tribes have sworn. In a perverse demonstration of “generosity” (Judg 21:22), the other tribes rescue Benjamin, first by taking 400 virgins from Jabesh-Gilead and killing everyone else, and then by authorizing the kidnap of an additional 200 young women from Shiloh. The whole body politic is sick; “from head to foot, no part of it is healthy” (Isa 1:6).

The book of Judges has no resolution; it ends with unmitigated horror. Perhaps for that reason, the biblical canon includes a second story set “in the time when the judges were judging” (Ruth 1:1). Ruth is the rare moment in the Bible where women are major characters, shapers of history. This is history as it begins in local community, unfolding from the bottom up. In the Christian ordering of the Old Testament, the hopeful story of Ruth and Naomi immediately follows the mounting tragedy of Judges.

Notes

1. *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church (1979), 820; emphasis added. The prayer was written by the Rev. George Lyman Locke in 1882 as one of the proposed revisions for the American Episcopal Prayer Book; it first appeared in the published Prayer Book in 1928. See Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 560.
2. The phrase “text of terror” originated with Phyllis Trible, who treats at length Judg 11 and Judg 19 in her *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 64–116.
3. Trible highlights the atrocities committed against female characters, but she does not acknowledge the narrator’s own negative judgment on those events. See, for example, her comment on Judg 19: “If the storyteller advocates neither pornography nor sensationalism, he also cares little about the woman’s fate. . . . Truly, to speak for this woman is to interpret against the narrator, plot, other characters, and the biblical tradition because they have shown her neither compassion nor attention”; see Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 76, 86. Trible makes a distinction between the editor and the narrator; the editor, in her judgment, concludes “not only this story but the entire book of Judges with an indictment” and thus “prepares his readers to look favorably upon kingship” (84). Jacqueline E. Lapsley sees a more positive role for the narrator in shaping readers’ critical perspective on the violence in Judg 19–21; see her *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 35–67.
4. Num 21:4; Judg 16:16; Job 21:4.
5. On the roles of women in household and community, and the complementarity between women and men, see Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 103–70.
6. Robert S. Kawashima comments on the “general sense of opacity typical of oral-traditional tales,” in contrast to literary prose compositions; see his *Biblical Narrative and the Death of the Rhapsode* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 18–21.
7. The English translation of phrases from Gouri’s poem is my own. For Hebrew and English versions of the poem, see David C. Jacobson, *Does David Still Play Before You? Israeli Poetry and the Bible* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 99–100.
8. The violent upstart Abimelech was in power for three years (Judg 9:22).
9. Uriel Simon, “Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15, no. 46 (1990): 11–19.
10. Marc Brettler, “The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 3 (1989): 412–13.

11. Brettler argues that the author of Judges is a learned person addressing an audience that is expected to hear this story within a larger literary context; see “Book of Judges,” 412.
12. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), xvi–xvii.
13. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, xvii.
14. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 128.
15. The future-tense verbs in the translation I offer distinguish it from the otherwise similar translations in the NJPS *Tanakh* and Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, 50. There is a more drastic difference from the NRSV, which, following the Greek version of the story, continues with past-tense narration and makes the quoted speech the instruction that the Levite man sends to the Israelites along with the body parts.
16. See 1 Kgs 22:28 for another instance where narrative in the Former Prophets becomes overtly prophetic speech (cf. Mic 1:2).