

THE JUDGES

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The judges occupy a unique place in the history of Israel moulding the people into a nation and setting the scene for the monarchy. If a more leisurely exploration of the topic were available then it might be seen that beginning with Moses and ending with Samuel the role of the judge ultimately subverts its own authority finally disappearing from the life of the nation. The Deuteronomic Code was established as an expression of the revelation of the absent Divine rather than the mediation of the judge between Yahweh and the people of Israel. A literary approach to the narratives of the judges reveals an underlying unity brought to wholeness through the shaping, paradoxes and tensions which emerge between the divine and the human. This paper limits itself, with the exception of Samson however, to those who are called judges in the book of the same name. In so doing it can be said that they are far from the types expressed in the characters of Moses and Joshua.

The death of Joshua leaves the Israelites without a recognised leader and the question in Judges 1:1 "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?" begs to be answered. Although the immediate answer is that "Judah is to go" the question is not merely a device to establish a sense of the dramatic but rather the Book of Judges' *raison d'être*. The sustainable answer is to be found in the men and the woman who are imbued with the spirit of the Lord to lead their people.

The Book of Judges highlights that the Israelites have not been successful in erasing the native inhabitants of the Promised Land, as has been the promise of Yahweh, for they have not been true to their side of the Deuteronomic Covenant (Josh.2:20). While the Book of Joshua, despite the conflicting plots, concludes that the covenant, for the most part, has been kept (Josh.24:25) the Book of Judges recognises that the covenant has been kept only when there is a divinely appointed leader present. Left alone the people of Israel have no capacity to obey the covenant either by choice or divine grace (Judg.2:6-19). The judges are not always leaders in the sense of being

government officials or theocratic elders but rather they are military leaders who attack the enemy and save the Israelites in response to their cries to God for help. In some doing the judges become living icons of divine power and not just arbiters of justice. Their presence gives a human face to Yahweh, reminding the people that they are His chosen race.

The narrative shows that the people of Israel have now settled in the Promised Land but the question remains as to whether they will keep or lose their inheritance. It is not because of Israel's righteousness that it occupies Canaan but because of the wickedness of the native inhabitants (Deut.9) but as the Israelites prostitute themselves to the gods of the land they are weakened in their capacity to defend themselves from marauders. Out of compassion Yahweh then turns away his anger and raises up judges to defend them (Judg.2:11-19). To some measure this picture of apostasy, invasion, defeat, oppression and deliverance is a microcosm of Israel's whole history within the larger story of the Old Testament. Yet Gabriel Josipovici would caution against seeing the Book of Judges as just a series of cycles and suggests that the rhythm of the narrative which has been developing since the stories of the Patriarchs is under such strain in the Book of Judges that it almost collapses. Always there is the undercurrent of apostasy and there is no indication in Judges that Israel gives up its foreign gods just because a judge appears. The first time that occurs is just before Jephthar arrives on the scene. The narrative will not pick up the rhythm again until the appearance of David and then it will finally collapse and disintegrate under the Kings of Israel and Judah.¹ The reason for the collapse is that the pattern of living and dying at the completion of life's tasks is foreshortened. In the Book of Judges the deaths for the most part are unnatural, many being "left handed deaths" and not followed by the comfort of burial. The charting of a victorious future in the Promised Land, by Moses and Joshua, seems in some measure to have aborted.

Abraham Malamut says that the appearance of the deliverer-judge occurred only after many years oppression by an alien people.² When a judge does appear it is with charisma for he or she, with one exception, has been possessed with the Spirit of the Lord. The exception is the figure of Abimelech who is named by Malamut as an "anti-judge" or "anti-deliverer".³ The judges do not appear in some kind of social vacuum, however, for although at that time everyone did what he saw fit (Judg.17:6 & 21:25) there is no suggestion in the text that the priesthood had vanished or that the tribal elders no longer

functioned. What the text does imply is that traditional authority had started to crumble or had already crumbled. To that point in time the tribal amphictyony remained a confederation without a standing army or central government bureaucracy which would occur with the establishment of the kings.

The first of the judges to be raised up by the Lord is Othniel. As the son-in-law of Caleb son of Jephunneh he first appears in Joshua 15 where he is encouraged by his wife to ask for land as part of the reward for capturing Kiriath Sepher. The story is repeated in Judges 1, with the small addition of Othniel being the son of Caleb's younger brother. The securing of Caleb's daughter, Acsah, as his wife was the main reward for Othniel's military foray and success. His wife, with an eye on her husband's financial security and advancement, asks her father for land supplied with spring water. Despite the patriarchal society this incident suggests that women are not altogether without some power. This idea will be taken up more forcibly in the narrative of Deborah.

Othniel has no say in the establishment of his role. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and so he is identified as Israel's judge who then goes to war for his people. Unlike Moses who argued with Yahweh about his tasks and Joshua who grows into his role there is a sense of immediacy and brevity about God's action in giving His Spirit to Othniel. Nevertheless, Othniel is not a man without previous military experience, as his capture of Kiriath Sepher has shown, and so he is already a known identity within the community. What his anointing does indicate is that he is now a recognised leader within Israel. Rather than the capture of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram being a one off incident in a running dispute over territory, Othniel's action gives peace in the land for forty years. It is significant that the enemy does not challenge Israel again during Othniel's lifetime. The power of the Spirit of the Lord would appear to be apparent to Israel's enemies as well as to Israel itself. Yet the peace which Othniel's judgeship brings with it does not extend beyond his death. Polzin states that "God raises up judges who bring temporary relief but not repentance";⁴ however the problem is not just a lack of repentance but an inability by Israel to maintain the covenant without a divinely sanctioned leader. The people of Israel need deliverance from both the external enemy and themselves.

To some measure the relationship between the judge and Israel prefigures that of the monarch and his people. However, the metonymic figure of the king as the representative of his people

bringing with it either wellbeing or catastrophe is only partly accurate in the premonarchic times of the judges. The nation of Israel suffers because of its own folly and never because of the actions of the judges who only ever become its deliverers through the grace of God. Certainly Judges 2:10 makes it plain that a whole generation grew up, after the death of Joshua, not knowing the Lord or his delivering power. It required the Lord to raise up judges to save the people from the outside enemy and their apostasy (Judg.2:16-19). The judges stand in place of Yahweh and rather than be seen as representing the people they are metaphors for the divine being. In essence the judges belong to Yahweh, acting on His behalf, while the king belongs to his people.

Following the death of Othniel Israel again falls away from the covenant and is delivered into the power of Eglon, king of Moab. After eighteen years of subjugation Israel is given Ehud the son of Gera from the tribe of Benjamin as deliverer. That Ehud is noted as being a left-handed man is textually more important than just identifying his ability to deceive either the royal guards or the king himself. David Jobling shows that the stories of Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, and Jephthah are "respectively, and pointedly, left handed, female, youngest son, and illegitimate" indicating a second level of liberation, that of subordinate groups within Israel being released and lifted from obscurity.⁵ Yet left-handedness brings with it the sense of deceit and so the gift which Ehud offers to Eglon is shown not to be a true gift but one which is as double edged as the sword he uses to kill the king. The play on ideas continues for Ehud and Israel who both know that the Word of God is itself two edged bringing compassion and destruction according to the measure of obedience to it. The text reveals, then, the paradoxes of theodicy with the issue of divine retributive justice and mercy running as a thread throughout the whole of Scripture constantly subverting the salvation history of Israel.

The mocking irony of the narrative is its most striking feature and Ehud's treatment of Eglon is given in some detail. Eglon's bulk is held up to ridicule and as Barry Webb writes "His obesity symbolizes both his greed and his gullibility".⁶ That Moab falls with its king is very much in keeping with the concept mentioned previously that the king and the land are one.

Ehud, unlike Othniel, does not act unilaterally. He is sent to Eglon by the Israelites. Although the gaps in the text lead to speculation as to how far the strategies of deceit are planned in advance there is the strong possibility that the tribal leaders actively sought out a person who would act for them. While Yahweh gives them a deliverer the text

avoids saying directly that Ehud was possessed by the Spirit of God. Certainly the text's very recognition of Ehud indicates that his actions are approved by God but the details of Eglon's execution and Ehud's subsequent escape from the palace suggest that he has made his own opportunities. Even Ehud's ironic message from God is not sufficient evidence to suggest that he is imbued with divine spirit at that point.⁷ The story shows a concern for the use of the intellect to achieve the hoped for goals and brings into focus that free will is an element which must be accepted in any divine mission. It is not until Ehud blows the trumpet in the hills of Ephraim that God is given the credit for any action. Ehud recognises that Yahweh has given his blessing to the events in Moab and now with a rallying cry wants the impetus generated by the recent events to be carried through. Just as the people supported the initial strategy of tribute they are part of the second strategy aimed at destroying the Moabite army by bottlenecking them at the Jordan fords. There is, however, ambiguity in the passive voice of Judges 3:30, "That day Moab was made subject to Israel". It is unclear whether God, Ehud or Israel itself subdued the enemy or whether the success comes, in part or whole, from all three parties. This ambiguity is, to some extent, symptomatic of the whole story for it is possible to interpret, as does Amit, the scenario as God-directed.

Ehud's role as a judge does not quite fit the pattern that was carved out by Othniel. Certainly he is a deliverer but the point in his activities where he is seen to have been given the divine mantle of the judge comes well down in the order of events. The very specific function that Ehud performs narrows judgement to acts of bloodshed and violence causing tensions in the concept of nature of justice. The text in its effort to portray the so called minor judges as the true servants of Yahweh unwittingly present them as already having lost the exemplary standing of the founding fathers of the nation, Moses and Joshua.

After Ehud comes Shamgar son of Anath but he is a fleeting figure. His activity reminds the reader that the Philistines who inhabit the western coast of the Promised Land are as much a threat to complete conquest by the Israelites as are the Canaanites. The mention of the Philistines foreshadows their rising importance as enemies and contenders for the land by the time of Samson. There is an element of heroic legend in the reporting that Shamgar struck down six hundred Philistines with an ox-goad, a weapon that suggests a method of less subtlety and intellectual prowess than used by his predecessor (Judg.

3:31). The use of superlatives is a common device in legend, myth and folktale and is also used a number of times in the Samson narratives suggesting the distance which the narrator stands from the source material. Unlike Ehud Shamgar is shown to be very much the lone warrior who acts independently of his society.

With the reporting of Shamgar's victory over the Philistines the narrative turns to the only woman judge in the book, Deborah. Once again the movement of action returns to the conflict with the Canaanites. The narrative sequence opens with the formulaic statement "... the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (Judg.4:1), and this time it is Jabin of Hazor who oppresses the Israelites. As with the story of Ehud and Eglon there is real drama in this story but characterisation is given greater depth in the narrative than with the earlier story. If the song of Deborah is included, which contains the pathetic picture of Sisera's mother waiting for him, then six characters at least have major parts in the drama. The narrative is slow to unfold bringing with it a mounting tension resolved only as the main and sub plots come together on the word "dead" as Jael produces the body of Sisera (Judg. 4:22).

Deborah like Ehud does not act alone for she is the catalyst for the actions of others. The real stories are not those of the two human principals, Deborah and Jabin, but their subordinates, Barak and Sisera, with the story of Jael being an important sub plot. The reader is not told why a woman is judge, given that Deborah has "no standing in the agnatic-patriarchal order",⁸ but Jobling's comments on the recognition of subordinate groups gives a partial explanation for the role in which she is found. As with Ehud, Deborah moves away from the expected stereotype of the judge manifesting herself in a 'left-handed' way. The writer of Judges could well have given different emphases to the characters altering the reader's perspective as to their importance, so Deborah's role, therefore, cannot be seen as an unintentional authorial slip. The violence which accompanies and surrounds the 'left-handed' judges is reflected in the breaks and gaps within the text. The rhythm of the earlier texts dealing with Moses and Joshua jerks sharply. Even the song of Deborah and Barak (Judg.5) is macabre in its theme and shifts rapidly and sharply from scene to scene.

Deborah is already a judge when she calls Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh north of Jabin's fortress in Hazor. Her action is not the result of a sudden infusion by the Spirit of God but rather a considered response to the situation. Deborah realises that Barak in

coming from an area near Jabin will know the local geographical terrain and can use this knowledge to trap Sisera's chariots, routing his army. It is Deborah's intention to take the final responsibility for the defeat of Sisera but Barak lacks the confidence to play his part alone. Despite Deborah's assurance that the Lord will be with Barak he is not willing to act without Deborah's presence and for his lack of faith he will not have the honour of the victory. There is irony in Deborah's reply to Barak when she says that the honour will go to a woman (Judg. 4:9). The reader, presumably Barak and maybe even Deborah, herself, must assume that the woman will be Deborah but given Deborah's rebuke to Barak it is not expected that the narrative will develop in a direct line. The reader, however, is kept in suspense as to the resolution until almost the end of the sub plot when it finishes with the graphic horror of Jael driving the tent peg through Sisera's head. The events which began with a woman's directions end with a woman's actions. Both Barak and Sisera have their honour taken away and given to two women.

Deborah, despite being portrayed initially in a quiescent role, for she holds court and the Israelites come to her to have disputes settled, acts with authority when the community of Israel cries for help. Because she is a judge it must be assumed that the Spirit of the Lord rests upon her in her magisterial deliberations but her full power of discernment is not acquired until all Israel is in need. The use of tactical skill, intellectual astuteness and delegation of authority, rather than brute force, mark Deborah's role as a judge although it is Jael, a woman, who is not even a true Israelite, who is the real hero of the story. The prominence given to Deborah over Jael the real hero has to be seen in terms of the role of judge. It is the value placed on the Spirit of the Lord resting on an individual which is of most importance to the author of the book.

In the song of chapter 5 Deborah is identified as "a mother in Israel" (Judg.5:7) who protects her people. The other characters must be seen in relation to her divine authority rather than for any action they undertake as individuals. The song both recapitulates the events just completed and points to implications of those events. There is ambiguity in the final lines "So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength". Not only is the external enemy cursed but the suggestion that it might be Israel itself who is the enemy cannot be dismissed. Deborah in being anointed as a judge does not relinquish the prophetic powers, by which she is first identified, and so her song which is partly

prophetic suggests a possible vision of that which might befall Israel. As the narrative continues to unfold it becomes clear that the prophecy will be fulfilled for there is a foreshadowing of the tragedies which come from the lack of tribal unity. The cracks of disunity are never far below the surface and soon appear as Gideon son of Joash the Abiezrite, the next judge, must diplomatically assuage the political sensitivities of the Ephraimites during his war against the Midianites.

The call to Gideon to rescue the Israelites from the invading hordes of Midianites finds its parallel in the earlier call to Moses. However, unlike Moses' response to the Lord of "Here I am" Gideon's reply is more of that of the country yokel. There is no awe or even astonishment at the appearance of the angel of the Lord and Gideon launches forth, in a rather unsophisticated even gauche manner, with questions about why the Lord has abandoned Israel. Whether Gideon is serious or not about the way he addresses the angel of the Lord is not clear but given the Lord's greeting to Gideon stating that he is a mighty warrior (Judg.6:12) the incident borders on farce. Gideon disbelieves that it is really the Lord who is addressing him and the dialogue continues with Gideon portraying himself as an eiron, wanting to feed the Lord and asking Him not to leave until the meal is prepared. However, underlying the banter is the more serious theme of worthiness and like Moses Gideon pleads that he is not able to carry out the task which is presented to him. The abruptness of the disappearance of both the meal and the angel of the Lord shakes Gideon out of his complacency and verbal jousting forcing him to face the reality of the situation in words echoing those of Moses in Exodus 3. The rhythm of the text further falters with the introduction of the comic incongruity of the scene and forces a sharp focus on the plausibility of Israel's worthiness in keeping the office of judge. The gap between the divine and the human which had narrowed under the leadership of Moses and Joshua has suddenly widened. This is a gap which remains difficult to bridge through to the judgeship of Samuel. Even with his special relationship with Yahweh the flaws in Samuel's character lead to the eventual demise of the institution of judge.

The oddity of the whole scene between Gideon and the angel of the Lord marks a turning point in the Book of Judges. From the beginning of chapter 6 there arises an ambiguity as to the loyalties of the judges to Yahweh. Gideon's decision to make an ephod (Judg.8:27) is a sign of the process of self aggrandisement that continues to separate the judges and the people from the Lord. Polzin sees that the vacillation between the use of the divine names "Yahweh" and "Elohim" is

indicative, in the story of Gideon, of the vacillation in allegiance.⁹ Gideon's own name change to Jerub-Baal adds to the ideological confusion which is being established for the latter name places emphasis, albeit negative, on his relationship with Baal rather than Yahweh.

Although the people of Israel worship alien gods Yahweh does not forget His people. When they cry to Him for deliverance a prophet is sent to remind the people of their past deliverances by Yahweh (Judg. 6:7-10). Gideon must have heard this message and have been sufficiently moved by it to act upon the Lord's command and destroy the gods in his father's house. For Gideon not to be lynched by the town mob because of his actions, but saved by his father's persuasive words, indicates that Gideon is not as lowly in community standing as he had previously intimated to the angel of the Lord (Judg. 6:15). Certainly as a man with at least ten servants he has some personal wealth as well as social standing.

At this point in the narrative the implication is that the lines are drawn between those who follow Yahweh and those who continue to follow the foreign gods. Gideon in being given the new name of Jerub-Baal is publicly identified as a follower of Yahweh or at least not a follower of Baal. The new name also highlights the impotence of Baal for the god does not respond to the destruction done to his altar. Only after the public recognition of Gideon does the Spirit of the Lord come upon him. With divine authority and some diplomatic strategy he now draws together the militia of northern Israel, beginning with his own clansmen, into the holy war against the Midianites and other eastern peoples who have crossed the Jordan.

Just in case he is mistaken in identifying the god whom he should be following he asks Yahweh to authenticate His reality and power through the signs of the dew on the fleece and ground. Like Moses Gideon has a sense of inadequacy for the task ahead and must be reassured. With the assurance that he is correct in his assumptions and capacity to overcome the enemy, plans now take shape for the military action against the Midianites. These plans must first be shaped by Yahweh and so the thirty-two thousand men are ultimately sifted to three hundred by the strange act of how the men drink the water. It is these three hundred whom God assures Gideon will succeed in the coming battle. The rest are on standby in the tent lines in case some backup is needed. This is the second time God gives indication of His support. Still Gideon is not fully convinced and for a third time God directs Gideon to a sign of His power through the Midianite soldier's

dream (Judg. 7:13-14).

It is with another 'left-handed' action that the tension of the narrative breaks. Gideon acts under cover of darkness with the clever manoeuvre of a noisy tactical surprise. The ruse works with his elite response group shouting allegiance to the Lord and Gideon. To achieve a complete routing and victory Gideon sends for the Ephraimites to cut the Midianites' retreat at the Jordan. Buoyed with success Gideon might expect immediate recognition from all Israel as its deliverer but the Ephraimites are angry that they were not called into battle right from the beginning. Using his diplomatic skill once more Gideon is able to placate them giving him space to continue his pursuit of the Midianites across the Jordan. Nevertheless the incident indicates the fragility of tribal unity and cooperation which will be broken in the time of Jephthar when a real internecine struggle will occur.

Although they are all exhausted Gideon, with great sense of character and purpose, keeps his fighting band in full pursuit of the enemy. However, there is no diplomatic gentleness in his words when the cities of Succoth and Peniel refuse his men food. He promises that the men of the cities will be taught a painful lesson on his triumphant return. Again using his tactical capacity he falls upon his enemy and completely routs them as well as capturing their kings.

Gideon's bitterness against those from whom he has expected help is expended by whipping the elders of Succoth with thorns and briers and killing the men of Peniel but not before taunting them with their own words when they asked why they should help him (Judg 8:15-17). And now what was a holy war becomes one of personal vengeance as he executes the Midianite kings in revenge for killing his brothers.

Webb suggests that the introduction of Gideon's son at this point highlights the difference between the early diffident Gideon and the man of strength that he has become.¹⁰ Certainly Gideon acts like a king and the Israelites want him to rule over them. For the first time the issue of kingship in Israel is touched on and it foreshadows the request to Samuel by the people to be given a king like the nations around them (1 Sam. 8:5). The concept of the judge as the bearer of the presence of the Absolute is breaking down. It is a king moulded in Israel's own image which is craved for and not a judge who represents the absent Yahweh. The people want their idols, they seek a metonymy not a metaphor. The time, then, is not yet appropriate for Gideon and he refuses to establish a dynasty saying that the only ruler is the Lord. Nevertheless he is pictured as a potentate with his sons, wives and substantial wealth.

The ambiguity of loyalty to Yahweh comes full circle after Gideon's military victory. In building a gold ephod, which is harmless in itself, a new god is established and as the narrator says "All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family" (Judg. 8:27). The ambiguity is compounded immediately after this statement for the names of Gideon and Jerrub-Baal oscillate freely in the concluding parts of the narrative. The slide by Israel towards complete apostasy has begun even before Gideon has died and comes to fruition immediately after his death. Each time the Israelites forget the Lord the role of the judge becomes a more mocking expression of the Mosaic blueprint. It is with bitter irony that the office of judge reaches its nadir in Abimelech.

Although Gideon does not proceed to establish a monarchical dynasty his illegitimate son, Abimelech, is quite happy to take advantage of his father's name as well as his mother's connections with the aristocracy of Schechem. Even his name, meaning "my father is Lord or king", offers a significant, if ironic, clue to his predisposition for status. His forthright questions about governorship and family loyalty leave no doubt as to his intentions to assume the mantle of authority. Abimelech is no judge in the sense in which it has been established since the time of Othniel. He is an opportunist who grabs leadership through fast talking and the elimination of any possible opposition by executing his half brothers. His leadership is without the blessing of Yahweh and lacks the charisma of the true judge. He is unlike his namesake, Abimelech king of Gerar, in the time of Abraham who in repenting of his actions in taking Abraham's wife Sarah as a possible concubine, is healed of his impotency (Gen. 20: 17).

Abimelech's motives for leadership are those of personal greed and power. There is no indication that his actions will serve anyone but himself which is the antithesis of the Israelite judges down to the time of Gideon. He consolidates his rule over the important city of Shechem and the surrounding area of Beth Millo by encouraging its citizens to crown him king and there rules the city state much like the Canaanite kings have done for generations. Israel, then, has fallen so far from the worship of Yahweh that it cannot be differentiated from the native peoples of the land.

Jotham, the only surviving brother of Abimelech, shows up Abimelech's real character as a tyrant by the heavily ironic fable of the trees and thorns. There is no direct appeal to God by Jotham for help but a wistful hope that Yahweh might yet again come to Israel's aid. That He does not come is the first indication that He is fast losing

patience with a people who abuse His compassion. For three years the people of Israel are quite happy to accept the murderer whom they have crowned king, and Jotham in danger of losing his life, flees north to sanctuary at Beer to disappear from the narrative.

God is not to be avoided, however, and so He sends an evil spirit to separate the people of Schechem from Abimelech (Judg. 9:23-24). They set up brigands to attack Abimelech, rob travellers and wreck any good order that Abimelech had established. As discipline starts to break down a potential rival to Abimelech is seen in Gaal son of Ebed who moves into the city and brings the citizens over to his side. With the help of his deputy, Zebul, Abimelech defeats Gaal and destroys Schechem. A false sense of power leads Abimelech to attempt to consolidate his hold on the strategic town of Thebez but in a moment of dramatic irony the narrative tells that Abimelech is mortally wounded by a millstone dropped on his head. He believes that it is a woman who has caused his destruction and it is left to the narrator to show that it is God who is the real destroyer of the ungodly, which includes both Abimelech and the people of Schechem. That a stone is the instrument of destruction, a similar instrument to that used in the death of Abimelech's half brothers, gives a final ironic twist to the narrative. Abimelech is only a parody of the real judge and the judgements which he makes are mendacious acts based on his own misconceptions of his role and his distance from Yahweh.

Abimelech's governorship has been an attempt by Israel to institutionalise the role of judge but the time is not ripe for transmuted the Israelite order and Israel still clings to the idea that Yahweh is king even if it is treacherously disloyal to him.¹¹

Given Israel's disarray caused by Abimelech, Tola son of Puah rises to save Israel and through his leadership gives Israel a time of stability. No destabilising events occur during his life which suggests that the land was at peace. The peace continues through the judgeship of Jair the Gileadite who given the size of his family and stable of donkeys must have been a man of some social stature. Jair's wealth indicates that the role of judge brought with it perquisites appropriate to the position. Alternatively, the judges come from a social class which is well established financially. That Jair is from Gilead is a satisfying narrative point to lead into the events surrounding Jephthah, himself a Gileadite.

Israel's constant worship of the gods of Canaan has led both to its subjection at the hands of their enemies and the potential for the disintegration of tribal unity. During Jephthah's time the shaky

foundations of Israel's unity finally crack and Jephthar as judge has to deal with both the external and internal enemy. The tragedy which has befallen Israel is compounded with the story of Jephthar's vow and the subsequent burnt sacrifice of his only child. The telling of this sad event becomes central to the narrative sequence indicating that though Jephthar is acknowledged as a judge in Israel he is a reflection of the level of moral discreditability to which Israel has fallen.

After setting the new scene of oppression the narrative goes on to say that Yahweh is on the point of disowning His people. When they cry to Him for help against the Ammonites He angrily rebukes them reminding them that as they have forsaken Him and served other gods then those gods can get them out of trouble (Judg.10:13-14). With the reality of being discarded by Yahweh the Israelites realise that they have gone too far in their perfidy and so for the first time since Joshua they put away the foreign gods and demand that God save them immediately. In answering the cry Yahweh raises up Jephthar to be their judge-deliverer.

Jephthar is the fourth judge whom Jobling identifies as being from a subordinate or left-handed group within Israel, for he is the son of a prostitute. Like Abimelech his heritage is a doubtful one and must be a reminder to Israel that just as they have prostituted themselves to foreign gods so it is ironical they must humble themselves before the son of a prostitute if they are to be delivered. Yahweh has His revenge on the people for stripping Him of the honour that is due to Him. Yet Jephthar, in himself, is a worthy man and the narrator calls him a mighty warrior (Judg. 11:1).

Jephthar's skill is not only in the military field but also in the diplomatic. First he negotiates his position with the leaders of Gilead making them swear by the Lord that the leadership of Gilead will be his after he defeats the Ammonites. If they want deliverance they have no choice but to agree and so just as Yahweh has extracted a pledge from the Gileadites so does Jephthar. Next Jephthar attempts to negotiate, albeit unsuccessfully, with the Ammonite king by arguing that the Ammonite claim to the Gilead lands is based on a false interpretation of history.

With the negative response from the Ammonite king the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jephthar and he advances against the king. There is an expectation that there will be immediate conflict between the armies and followed by victory but the rhythm of the narrative falters dramatically as Jephthar makes his vow to offer as a burnt sacrifice the first thing that greets him on his triumphant return home. The shock

realisation that it is his daughter who greets him with joy heightens the dramatic tension of the narrative sharply. Nevertheless Jephthar's vow is not offered impulsively but as a calculated bribe to Yahweh and his use of words to gain advantage merely shifts into a different mode. That his daughter will be the victim of Jephthar's vow cannot have been dismissed by him as an unlikely possibility even though he takes the risk that it will be to the contrary. Jephthar in making the vow is seeking reassurance from Yahweh in much the same way as he did with the elders of Gilead. The irony is that as the Spirit of the Lord has already come upon him his fears are unnecessary although only the reader knows this is so.¹²

The sacrifice of Jephthar's daughter echoes the story of Abraham and Isaac. There is no scapegoat given by the Lord in the Book of Judges' story and the tragedy is that, unlike Abraham, there will be no dynasty established in Jephthar's name. Yet the tragedy is not that of Jephthar but rather his daughter, whose death is lamented by her friends in a similar fashion to that of the Chorus in Greek tragedy. Jephthar lives to defeat his enemy which is both his tragedy and victory.

Although Jephthar might be theologically correct in keeping his vow there is something morally repugnant in his carrying through the vow particularly as it occurs two months after his daughter is identified for sacrifice. His religious righteousness flaws his character and sets up a paradox as to the appropriate actions of a judge. Unlike the judge-deliverers who have gone before him Jephthar is a reflection of flawed Israel, for although he gains victory over the Ammonites he must sacrifice his people as he did his daughter. The Ephraimites cannot be won by sweet words and forty-two thousand are slaughtered because of their inability to say a word correctly (Judg.12:6). The tribal unity is shattered and torn apart by a difference of dialect and political jealousy and the peace which comes with Jephthar's judgeship is bought with the lives of those who should have been under his protection. There is now a truly unbridgeable gap between divine and human justice, between the Archetype and the human antitype. The desire of the text to show harmony between Yahweh and His earthly representative is subverted by the reality that the judge functions only within his own moral framework.

By way of conclusion it can be seen that the synoptic portrayal of the lives of Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, the judges who come after Jephthar, bring the rhythm of the narrative almost to a halt. As with Tola and Jair before them they are seen to be men of substance but

are reactive in their roles. At best the comments about them serve like a slow intermezzo between the lives of more vigorous and exciting personalities.

This paper has not done full justice to the role of the Hebrew judges but what I hope we have seen is that from a literary point of view they are part of a deliberate narrative structure. Although the character of each judge is colourful in itself there is an overall slide in moral purpose from the highpoints of the lives of Moses and Joshua. The slide is continued with Samson and Samuel until they give way to the monarchy.

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3. Ibid. p.163.
4. Polzin p.151.
5. D. Jobling, "Right-Brained Story of Left-Handed Man: An Antiphon to Yairah Amit", Signs and Wonders (ed) J.C. Exum (The Society of Biblical Literature, 1989, p.128).
6. B. Webb, The Book of The Judges (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), p.129.
7. Yairah Amit would argue that the gaps in the text are sufficient to show Yahweh's direct input into the whole event. See Exum, p.97.
8. Cross and others, p.161.
9. Polzin, pp.170-171.
10. Webb, p.151.
11. Malamat, p.164.
12. Webb, p.64.