

JUDGES

INTRODUCTION

The book of Judges continues the history of Israel after their entry into the Promised Land. Their conquest was not fully completed, and their continued interaction with the remaining Canaanite inhabitants created political and religious friction. The stories are exciting, well-told tales of intrigue, suspense, seduction, violence, revenge, and triumph. Through them all, the hand of the God of Israel moves – sometimes obviously and sometimes furtively – to teach his people their need for him.

TITLE

The title for Judges is taken from the Hebrew word שָׁפֵט (*šāphaṭ*)¹, the term for a ruler incorporating all the functions of government – executive as well as judicial. These rulers not only made decisions regarding law, but also enforced those decisions. The judges themselves seem to serve a dual role within the book: military leaders (Gideon, Jephthah, Samson) and civil administrators responsible for maintaining justice (Deborah, Tolah, Jair). The NIV often translates the verbal form of the word as “led,” a word that comprehensively summarizes their function. Their authority was limited regionally, and their leadership often relied on the good will of Israelite tribes to cooperate.

AUTHOR AND COMPOSITION

The Book of Judges nowhere mentions its author. In the late nineteenth century, Wellhausen’s theory of various sources com-

¹The cognates of the term held similar meaning throughout the ancient Near East. *Encyclopedia Judaica* notes that *šāphaṭ* is an Akkadian cognate of *šapītu*, indicating a “district governor” or “high administrative official.”

prising the Pentateuch was also extended to Judges, understanding the text as an intermingled product of different writers.² This idea later gave way to Martin Noth's theory that Joshua through Second Kings was composed during the time of Israel's exile using earlier sources.³ This position considers Judges to be part of the Deuteronomistic History, the history of Joshua through 2 Kings written during the age of exile in the 6th century B.C. The "Deuteronomist" is not considered to be a single person but a Deuteronomistic school, a sophisticated group of scribes writing over decades or centuries.⁴

More recent studies argue that Judges represents the highly unified product of a single mind.⁵ While the author of Judges no doubt makes use of various sources from which to construct an account, the intricacy with which the book is constructed suggests a single guiding hand responsible for producing the material. Both oral traditions and written texts were passed down through the generations until the author collected, compiled, and presented them in written form.⁶ Ancient rabbis held that Judges was written by Samuel,⁷ a position still defended by many today.⁸ Other suggestions for a specific author have not achieved consensus.⁹

²C.F. Burney (*The Book of Judges, with Introduction and Notes, and Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings, with an Introduction and Appendix* [New York: KTAV Pub. House, 1970], pp. xli-l), attributes Judges to the Elohist writer.

³Mark A. O'Brien, "Judges and the Deuteronomistic History," in *The History of Israel's Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. by Steven L. McKenzie and Matt Patrick Graham (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), p. 239.

⁴O'Brien, "Judges and the Deuteronomistic History," p. 257.

⁵See Gregory T.K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). Wong examines the interconnectedness of multiple elements within the text, suggesting a much more unified text in composition than previously allowed by scholars.

⁶The Bible itself refers to sources used that are no longer available (Num 21:14; Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18). The author's use of sources does not undermine the idea of inspiration. Individual sources are merely one of many components utilized by the Holy Spirit to produce the text.

⁷*Bava Batra, Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 14b.

⁸See C.J. Goslinga's *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 198-223, for a discussion on the unity and authorship of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. Goslinga rightly notes that the discussion of authorship is relevant only if the book is part of a unity, i.e., written by a single author.

⁹Adrien J. Bledstein's "Is Judges a Woman's Satire on Men Who Play

DATE AND CHRONOLOGY

INTERNAL EVIDENCE

The date of Judges' composition, like the authorship, is uncertain. The text, however, contains numerous useful internal clues related to the date of its composition. These chronological markers prove more useful to a position maintaining that the book was composed by a single author at a given point in time. If the text is considered to be merely a collection of individual sources, a marker may be helpful for dating a particular source, but is of little use in dating the entire book.

The first chronological marker is the phrase, "to this day." The phrase occurs seven times in the Hebrew text of Judges (1:21,26; 6:24; 10:4; 15:19; 18:12; 19:30),¹⁰ and assists in narrowing down the latter limit of the date range for the composition of the text. "To this day" is used to describe a past event with effects still lingering at the time of writing. Judges 1:21, for instance, mentions that because the tribe of Benjamin failed to drive the Jebusites from the city of Jerusalem, the two groups coexisted in Jerusalem "until this day." Jerusalem will later be conquered by David (2 Sam 5:6-9),¹¹ which places the date of the Judges prior to the second king of Israel.

God?" in *The Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), for instance, suggests Judges is written by a woman satirist with the intention of condemning violent men. Bledstein goes further in suggesting the Deuteronomist was Huldah from 2 Kings 22, who redacted Judges and is also responsible for the portrayals of Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah. Unfortunately, Bledstein incorrectly imposes modern feminist motivations on the ancient writer. If gender is a concern to the author of Judges at all, it is secondary to the author's intended theological purpose.

¹⁰The Jebusites cohabitated with the Benjamites in Jerusalem (1:21); the traitor of Bethel built a city he named Luz in the land of the Hittites (1:26); Gideon's altar still stood in Ophrah (6:24); the regional villages controlled by Jair's sons were still named Havvoth Jair (10:4); the spring from which Samson drank was still present at Lehi (15:19); the area west of Kiriath Jearim where the Danite army camped was still designated as such (18:12); and Danite idolatry continued "all the time the house of God was in Shiloh" (18:31). All of these instances likely describe premonarchal events, and are seemingly fresh in the memory of the author.

¹¹Jebusites are still present in Jerusalem after the conquest of the city. David purchases the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite in order to

A second chronological marker is the phrase, “In those days.” The saying occurs seven times (17:6; 18:1(2×); 19:1; 20:27,28; 21:25) and helps pinpoint the early limits of the composition date. “In those days” is used to describe a past condition that no longer applies at the time of writing. Four of the uses of “in those days” are linked to a time before Israel had a king. Judges then was written after the beginning of the monarchy, no earlier than the reign of Saul. Israel’s lack of a king is also connected to anarchy and chaos in the land, suggesting that Judges was written during a time of comparative stability before the division of the kingdom.¹² The early reigns of Saul and David — as well as the reign of Solomon — provided such seasons of stability. “In those days” is also used to indicate a previous time when the Ark of the Covenant was located in Bethel and the grandson of the High Priest Aaron was priest (20:27-28). These markers indicate an initial composition date for Judges as early as David’s early reign from Hebron (2 Sam 2:11).¹³

A third enigmatic marker is the reference in Judges 18:30 to “the time of captivity in the land.” While the majority of chronological markers suggest a date for Judges during the early united kingdom, this phrase is often understood to refer to the Assyrian exile in the eighth century B.C. That identification is used as one basis for assuming Judges (or at least chapters 17–21) has a later composition date. There is, however, no reason to assume that the “captivity” referred to does not represent a historical context known to the original audience but lost to modern readers. The Ark of the Covenant, for instance, was captured in 1 Samuel 4, and could also fit the context of a “time of captivity.” Judges 18:31 refers to a parallel marker — a time when “the house of God was in Shiloh.” This second reference predates Solomon’s temple, probably referring to the early Israelite cultic center established around the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Unless the phrase “time of captivity in the land” is an editorial addi-

offer a sacrifice in 2 Sam 24:18-25. After David’s victory and occupation of the city, however, the Jebusites became subservient to the Hebrews as David’s power and influence increased. Had the writer of Judges known about David’s conquest of Jerusalem, it surely would have been the chronological marker used.

¹²Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, p. 219.

¹³Robert H. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 332-338.

tion added by a later scribe for clarification, the phrase does not refer to the Assyrian exile. Ultimately, the reference is unspecific enough to warrant interpretation based on the other multiple chronological markers present throughout the text.¹⁴

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Adding up the years of the various oppressions and times of peace recorded throughout the book returns a span of more than 400 years. Based on 1 Kings 6:1, there were 480 years between the Exodus and Solomon's fourth year. Attempts have been made to reconcile the chronology of the Judges accounts, but these are misguided. Treating Judges as a straightforward chronology creates difficulties, not the least of which is limiting the events of Joshua, Samuel and Saul to only sixty years.¹⁵ A better solution is to consider the individual accounts of judges as occurring independently of the others. The judges were regional leaders, and many of their experiences likely overlapped, occurring at the same time.¹⁶ Second, many numbers in Judges likely represent rounded and symbolic numbers. The use of forty years (3:11; 5:31; 8:28; 13:1), for instance, probably represents a full generation rather than a specific duration.¹⁷

TEXT

The text of Judges is well preserved, with few corruptions in the Hebrew Masoretic Text. The two main traditions of the Septuagint (LXX), however, are in less agreement regarding the text and contain many points of divergence.¹⁸ Though Judges is not directly quoted in the New Testament, Hebrews 11:32 lists Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah as examples of faith. Paul also refers to the judges in

¹⁴Ibid., p. 336.

¹⁵A. Cohen, *Joshua and Judges: Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1970), p. 153.

¹⁶Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, pp. 223-234.

¹⁷Burney, *Judges*, p. liv.

¹⁸See Walter Ray Bodine, *The Greek Text of Judges: Recensional Developments* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980).

a sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:19-20). Other less certain parallels between Judges and the New Testament have also been suggested, such as Thomas Brodie's suggestion that Luke's Gospel makes heavy use of patterns and themes from Judges.¹⁹

CANONICITY

In the Hebrew Bible, Judges is grouped with the Former Prophets along with Joshua and Samuel-Kings. The book fills in the gap between the Conquest and the monarchy. While the presence of violence and the inability of God's people to succeed have historically unnerved interpreters, the book's strong theology and crucial role in the history of Israel have ensured its place in the canon.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE ISRAELITE CONTEXT

By the beginning of Judges, the Hebrew culture has been heavily influenced by three events. First, the identity of Israel was shaped by the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus positioned Yahweh as the sole deity of the Hebrews. In Egypt, the people had been subjected to Egyptian control. In the ancient world, the nation with the most power was understood to have the most powerful deities. If Egypt controlled the Hebrews, then there was no question that the Egyptian deities were more powerful than the god of the Hebrews. But God is not limited by human perceptions or theology. Through the ten plagues and the ministry of Moses, God makes it clear to both Egyptians and Hebrews that he is the most powerful by systematically dismantling Egyptian theology. Egyptian deities were shown to have not *lesser* power than Yahweh, but *no* power. Establishing the power of their deity was crucial for developing the identity of the Hebrews.

Beyond God's expression of his power through the Exodus, the

¹⁹Thomas L. Brodie, *The Birthing of the New Testament: The Intertextual Development of the New Testament Writings* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2004), pp. 86-92, 447-519.

Israelite identity was shaped by the Sinai covenant. God's demonstration of his power verified his right to author the covenant he gave to the Israelites. The covenant created a new religious identity for Israel. Much of the Law created a distinction between Israel and her neighbors, and that distinction would be crucial for maintaining an independent identity while surrounded by polytheistic nations.

The third factor shaping the identity of early Israel is the incomplete nature of the Conquest. As the reader of Joshua knows, the people failed to conquer fully the land God promised to them. The reality of possessing only a partially captured land creates two difficulties for the Israelite identity. The first is syncretism — the blending of the different religious cultures that plagued Israel until the Assyrian and Babylonian Exiles. “Whenever two groups of peoples come into contact there is an inevitable tendency to syncretism, the gods become identified, or, in the case of a conquered country, their gods find an inferior place in the pantheon of their conquerors. This process is not conscious or deliberate, but it is nevertheless real.”²⁰ The Israelite identity was contaminated by exposure to the various available religious alternatives. The resulting syncretized culture effectively diluted Yahweh to a powerful god among many, which in turn diluted Israel's uniqueness among the surrounding cultures. Further, from the Israelite perspective, Yahweh had not fully delivered a conquered land, so it was natural for the Israelites to diversify their theological portfolio and look to many of the other available deities for favor. Judges 10:10-16 reveals the syncretism from Yahweh's perspective. When the Ammonites oppress the people, they complain to God. God's response in verse 14 abandons the people to their own paradigm. God has no desire to be the most powerful god among many; he wants to be the Only God.

Judges corrects the misconception that Yahweh has not conquered the land. God is not the one at fault for the continued presence of the various groups in Canaan; the text of Judges places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the people: five times in the first chapter the failure to drive out the occupants of the land is attributed to a particular tribe's inability to rout the occupants because of an enemy's technological abilities (1:19) or a nation's tenacity (1:27). The failure to

²⁰Arthur Ernest Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), p. 40.

take over the land completely is rooted in human causes. Even in 2:20-21 the people's disobedience, not God's lack of power, is the cause of failure. The blame for any failures during the conquest is laid at the feet of the Israelites, not at the feet of Yahweh.

The second problem created by a partial conquest is the external pressure created by the remaining people groups. Because the possession of land was crucial to survival in the ancient world, it was vigorously defended. No one was too interested in sharing territory. The Israelites are the new kids on the block, and these interlopers are not viewed favorably by the surrounding nations. The result is the constant military pressure applied against Israel seen in the book of Judges.

THE BROADER CONTEXT OF CANAAN AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Little extrabiblical data from the time of Judges exists. This period coincided with the collapse of power centers during the late Bronze Age and the inability on the part of any regional entity to control Canaan. The Egyptians no longer maintained control over the area, the Hittites had been defeated by an obscure people group known as the Mushkaya, and Babylon and Assyria were too disorganized to exert power over Canaan. "We have arrived at an age in which no external great power was strong enough or free enough to interfere in the affairs of Cana'an."²¹

The situation in Canaan reflected this reality. Only tiny local powers controlled any significant area, and it is these groups that will cause problems for the nation of Israel. Groups such as the Midianites and Ammonites were nomadic peoples and periodically applied pressure to Israel. The Philistines, on the other hand, were better organized, more deeply rooted, and better established than the groups surrounding them. They had the additional advantage of possessing a technological monopoly over all types of metalworking, including valuable iron.²² Mathews compares the social context to twelfth-century England. The climate was political anarchy, and the

²¹Burney, *Judges*, p. xcvi.

²²Victor Harold Mathews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 17.

majority of population centers were villages sized from 75-100, limited by the amount of resources in the area.²³ Such conditions allowed for the frequent rise of small rulers who organized groups around the acquisition and defense of available resources.

HISTORICITY

Much of the debate of the historicity of Judges relates not to the method of composition, but to the date. An earlier dating of the book (ca. 10th century B.C.) commonly accompanies a belief in its historical validity. Those preferring a later date of composition tend to assume a lower level of historical accuracy, instead opting for a perspective that considers the text to be heavily redacted over time.²⁴ Generally, the later the assumed date of composition, the more the text is assumed to have been edited. Further, those preferring later dates also assume the changes made to the text are connected to particular theological or political agendas that further obscure the view of whatever history might be underlying the text. Philippe Guillaume concludes, "The period of the Judges is therefore a literary construct that should not be used as evidence for the reconstitution of the factual history of Israel before statehood. The term should be definitively banned from serious Histories of Israel."²⁵

As with all of Scripture, one's fundamental assumptions determine beliefs about historicity. The stories of Samson's phenomenal strength or Gideon's defeating an army of 120,000 with a paltry squad of 300 are considered simply unbelievable by some. But to those allowing for a God who interacts in human events, the events described in Judges present no historical difficulties.

PURPOSE

Many different purposes have been suggested as the reason for writing Judges. The most common position is that Judges was writ-

²³Ibid., pp. 12-13.

²⁴Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995) performs just such a meticulous analysis of the text, determining the presence of omissions, glosses, and redactions in the text.

²⁵Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 252.

ten as propaganda in support of the monarchy. The identity of the king depends on the date of the book. If Judges was written early in the monarchy, its elevation of the tribe of Judah and the undermining of Benjamin would suggest that the book was compiled in support of the early Davidic monarchy.²⁶ Others suggest the book was composed during Josiah's reign and therefore functioned as a polemic for Josiah's rule.²⁷

Judges' purpose, however, is first and foremost theological in nature. The book of Judges intends to do more than merely support David or Josiah as the legitimate monarch of the Hebrews; it promotes Israel as a people struggling in faithfulness to their God. The leadership vacuum that Judges observes is secondary to the negative commentary provided on Israel's abandonment of commitment to Yahweh. "The theocratic rule of YHWH is [the author's] uppermost concern, rather than providing an apologia for any earthly monarch, however apparently beneficial or successful."²⁸ This perspective better fits the literary composition techniques used by Judges' author. Many commentators point out Judges' author's use of the cyclical pattern of sin, oppression, repentance, and deliverance as a literary device within the book.²⁹ This repeated pattern of decline effectively maps the degeneration of a society that abandons Yahweh.³⁰

²⁶Mark Zvi Brettler's *The Book of Judges* is typical in asserting that Judges represents a political polemic supporting the Davidic kingship (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003). See also J. Clinton McCann's *Judges* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002) and Robert H. O'Connell's *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*.

²⁷E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary on the Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 4.

²⁸David Jackman, *Judges, Ruth* (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 24. Daniel Block presents a similar perspective in *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), pp. 57-59.

²⁹David Jobling, "Structuralist Criticism: The Text's World of Meaning," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. by Gale Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 96. See also Lillian Klein's *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989). For those taking a structural approach to Judges, the Othniel narrative functions as the paradigm for the cycles within the book. Some works, such as Tammi Schneider's *Judges* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), modify the approach and present the cycles as progressively degenerative.

³⁰Wong (*Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges*) argues that the key to the purpose of Judges is reflected best in the prologue and epilogue. He

Judges reminds readers that Yahweh is merciful and faithful to his covenant in spite of disobedience.

LITERARY STYLE AND CHARACTER

Judges is a carefully written book and has many features that surely would have delighted ancient readers. At its most basic, Judges is simply a collection of engaging stories. But looking just beneath the surface of the text reveals a treasure of storytelling features. By capturing the attention and imagination of the reader, Judges powerfully provides an encounter with the God of Israel. The book of Judges is best read as a story with God at the center. Judges is not merely a skillfully told story. The author constructs the narrative skillfully in order to motivate the reader to interact with the God of Israel.

GEOGRAPHY

Geography plays a central role in Judges. The movements of the tribes, the locations of the inhabitants of the area, rivers, battlefields, and the terrain all factor into the author's construction of this era of Israel's history. Geography determines the area that may be controlled by iron chariots, hampers the escape of retreating troops, and indirectly leads to the idolatry of a wandering tribe. The events recorded in Judges occur in real locations, and the author repeatedly provides places not only as frames of reference for the reader, but as factors in shaping the outcome of events.

THE HERO THEME

Everyone loves a good underdog-becomes-the-hero story, and Judges delivers. The individual judges stand against big odds and still succeed. The Old Testament is full of the motif of hero — Joshua, Samson, David and his mighty men, and Elijah all come through for God in the nick of time. The structure of the hero stories in the book of Judges parallels that of hero stories told in simi-

argues that the purpose is to catalogue Israel's "progressive deterioration" during this period of history. The solution to the Israelite's problem, then, becomes spiritual in nature.

lar cultures for millennia. Yet behind Old Testament hero stories lurks God's powerful hand. Yahweh is the ultimate hero of Judges.

THE TRICKSTER THEME

Judges is filled with characters who deceive in order to achieve the desired results. Rather than being considered dishonest, such characters should be understood to use trickery to gain leverage from a weaker position. Ehud, Jael, Samson, and Delilah all employ trickery to gain an advantage. Trickery in a narrative allows the reader knowledge that the characters lack until the deceit comes to fruition.

THE RETRIBUTION THEME

The powerful theological theme of retribution threads its way through Judges. The book fuels the Hebrew paradigm that retribution for evil must be meted out to the guilty. Abimelech, the tribe of Benjamin, Adoni-Bezek, and Sisera are all divinely repaid for their evil. Judges reminds the reader that the God of Israel has constructed a universe where injustice does not go unanswered.

WORDPLAY

The Hebrew of Judges makes heavy use of wordplay and puns. The names of characters, bitter remarks, repeated phrases, crass humor, and subtle allusions all contribute to the humor and demonstrate the skill of the author. Such elements make the stories all the more engaging to the reader.

ECHO NARRATIVE

Another literary aspect of Judges is its repeated reference to previous events in Israel's history, particularly events occurring in Genesis. Daniel Block uses the term "echo narrative" to describe how a passage connects to a previous event.³¹ Jephthah's daughter and the

³¹Daniel Block, "Echo Narrative Technique in Hebrew Literature: A Study in Judges 19," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 325-341. The more common and current aca-

Levite's concubine elicit echoes of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. The Levite's arrival in Gibeah and the intervention of the host bring to mind Lot's predicament with the angels in Sodom in Genesis 19. The prediction of Samson's birth brings to mind the promised birth of Isaac.³² Judges' author relies on the broader history of Israel to provide a sense of continuity and scope to the book's readers.

AMBIGUITY

Judges' author is a master of ambiguity. While many commentators wrestle over the absence of detail in the text, it is more likely that the author deliberately intends to be vague and playful. Jael and Sisera are seen in a tent. Did they or didn't they? A concubine is murdered, but is it by a mob or by a Levite with a knife? Micah steals silver from his mother, oddly the same amount paid by one of the Philistine lords to Delilah. The author repeatedly leaves a haze over the details that forces the reader to second guess what has just been read. Millennia later, the literary product still forces the reader to wrestle with both meaning and imagination.

INVERSION

A favorite literary tool of Judges' author is the use of inversion. The reader continually encounters the unexpected as the author changes the outcome to the opposite of what the reader naturally expects.³³ These inversions may be as simple as repeated small twists encountered along the way. In keeping with the Hebrew mind-set of trust expressed in Psalm 44:6-7, even the weapons used in Judges represent a surprise for the reader. God delivers through an ox goad, a tent peg, a jawbone, pitchers and torches, and even bare hands.

Often, the inversions are more significant. Moral inversion powerfully overturns the reader's expectation of finding righteousness and faith in the lives of Israelite readers. A Levite, expected to lead

demic term is "intertextuality," relating to one text's reference to another for an author's literary agenda.

³²These examples will be explored more fully in the commentary section.

³³Klein's *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, for instance, explores a complex structure in Judges that highlights the irony of the text.

in the pure worship of Yahweh, contracts out his religious services to the highest bidder. Samson, who should be the holiest man in the book, denigrates every aspect of his Nazirite covenant. The supposedly safe Jewish city of Gibeah becomes a nightmare for a band of travelers. Just as Joshua inverts moral expectations and toys with the definitions of “Israelite” and “Canaanite,”³⁴ Judges upends the moral expectations of the reader.

The most significant kind of inversion used by Judges’ author is gender inversion.³⁵ The narrative repeatedly inverts the expected gender roles of both sexes, in effect inverting the patriarchal paradigm the reader expects to encounter. Powerful male warriors (Sisera, Abimelech, Samson) are conquered by seemingly helpless women. Men are sidelined as women are elevated (Deborah, Manoah’s wife). The typical roles expected for both sexes are constantly overturned in the text. Where the readers expect the man to be victorious, they see the woman standing and the man vanquished at her feet. Where a man is humiliated, a woman is honored. Women succeed physically, socially, financially, and spiritually in connection with men who fail. When a woman suffers in the book of Judges, she always does so at the hands of a man. Men, however, suffer at the hands of both men and women. The author is not exhibiting a sexist attitude. Rather, the author has a clear understanding of the gender models of the era in which he writes and deliberately inverts those models for literary effect.

³⁴Rahab may be considered an immoral prostitute from a pagan people who becomes a faithful follower of Yahweh, while the Hebrew warrior Achan rebels and is killed for his rejection of Yahweh, becoming, in effect, Canaanite. See Mark Ziese, *Joshua* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2008).

³⁵Several biblical commentators have noted literary inversion specifically linked to gender. Mary Shields suggests that the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4 is exalted at Elisha’s expense (“Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman: Role and Power Reversals in 2 Kings 4,” *JSOT* 58 [June 1993]: 59-69). Robert Alter also points out that the Song of Deborah “plays almost teasingly with the expected roles of man and woman” (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* [London: T & T Clark, 1985], p. 46). See also Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “The Role of Women in the Rhetorical Strategy of the Book of Judges,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

A WORD ON GENDER

Judges, with its portrayal of both positive and negative images of women, provides fruitful soil for Bible study focused on gender. Achsah, Deborah, Jael, Manoah's wife, and Delilah are all women who succeed powerfully in Judges, often at the expense of men. But Judges is also replete with victimized women: Jephthah's daughter, Samson's wife, the Levite's concubine, and the daughters of Shiloh. While Judges reflects a patriarchal society, contrary to the opinion of much of feminist scholarship, patriarchy is not in and of itself abusive. At the same time, because Judges observes horrible wounds delivered by people in positions of power, it still has implications for both women and men in the modern audience. A victim of sexual assault hears the text of Judges in ways others cannot imagine, so it is imperative that those who handle the book interpret it not only accurately, but also sensitively.

STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE

Judges may be divided into four main sections. The book is composed of two prologues (1:1–2:5 and 2:6–3:6), a central section telling the story of the judges (3:7–16:31), and a concluding section comprised of two separate narratives (17–18 and 19–21). Many modern commentators follow Lillian Klein's understanding of the structure of the central section of Judges as reflecting the "Othniel paradigm": that the first judge is the standard to which all other judges are compared.³⁶

³⁶*The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges.*