Judges and Ruth

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1. Introduction

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*T*he stories compiled in the Book of Judges are filled with dynamic and at times enigmatic characters. They sometimes jump off the pages, like the tales of Gideon or Samson, surprising the reader with actions or words that are completely unexpected. There are also occasions when the reader is left wondering where the rest of the story has gone or why only certain details have been included in the narrative. For, although some of these tales contain fairly well-developed plots and fleshed-out characters, some are quite sketchy and beg to be completed or to have rough edges smoothed out (see the tales of Othniel and Ehud). In fact, some characters are barely there (only a couple of verses – like Shamgar), and the information provided about them is so enigmatic that the purpose for including them is unclear. But that is the way it is with the Book of Judges. It is filled with irony, both earthy and dark comedy, very human situations, great danger, and a continual plea for stability that always seems to elude the people of the Israelite tribes.

It is quite likely that much of the received text of the Book of Judges was drawn from oral tradition – especially "hero" stories – based on the cultural memories of each of the tribes or regions of ancient Israel. Some of it is fragmentary, and that may be a reflection of an incomplete survival of traditions or an editor's decision-making process, which drew the stories into a set literary or theological framework and eliminated those features that were not part of this agenda. Much of it is entertaining, but there are episodes that are incredibly violent, and some characters perform acts in the name of national liberty that modern readers would consider scandalous or frightening (see Ehud's murder of Eglon or Jael's driving a tent peg through Sisera's brow). There are also some remarkable gaps in what might be expected of a people who have made a covenant with Yahweh (see Exod 24). For instance, the Ark of the Covenant, so prominent in the stories about Moses and Joshua (e.g., Exod 25:10–22; Num 10:33–36; Josh 3:3–6; 6:8–16),

is missing from most of the Book of Judges (see only 20:27). In addition, there is no mention of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17) except in the speech of an unnamed prophet in the Gideon narrative (Judg 6:10), and very little compliance with any of these statutes.

The Book of Judges does not mention a central shrine where Israelite worship took place (see the use of Shiloh in 1 Sam 1:3). In most cases the acts of worship take place at village "high places" that may be dedicated to Baal and Asherah (Judg 6:25–26) or used to honor various gods, including Yahweh (Judg 13:15–16). There also is no mention of a high priest like Aaron or one of his descendants (see Exod 29) – only solitary Levites who are answerable to no higher authority and seem unconcerned with anything other than personal employment or personal welfare (Judg 17:7; 19:1).

Even more evident is the lack of cooperation between the various tribes. This can of course be explained to a certain extent by the absence of political unity during this period and the disorganized nature of isolated settlements scattered throughout the hill country. However, the text makes a real point of noting those instances in which some tribes actually refuse a call to arms (Judg 5:13–18), and those in which tribes (especially Ephraim) engage in intimidation and spark open warfare with other tribes (Judg 12:1–7). Crowning this anarchic situation is the general civil war between Benjamin and all of the other tribes over the rape of the Levite's concubine (Judg 19–21). Although it may be a true reflection of frontier literature, it seems more likely that the editors constructed the narrative in such a way that it becomes an intentional caricature of events and thus an argument for law and order. The Judges material therefore is supposed to be rough, uncouth, and in places very exciting and comical.

The settlement period prior to the establishment of the Israelite monarchy forms the background to the Book of Judges (ca. 1100–1000 BCE). Unlike the more idealized accounts of the conquest of Canaan in the Book of Joshua (e.g., Josh 11:16–12), the episodes in Judges provide a somewhat more realistic portrayal of life in the Central Hill Country and in the Transjordanian area of Gilead before the monarchy (see Judg 1:19–36). There is more attention to the military failures of the Israelites as well as to the aspects of everyday life of individuals and families (see Deborah judging cases in 4:5, Gideon's ploy to save his grain in 6:11, and the distrait woman in 9:53 who fled with her grindstone and then cast it down on Abimelech's head).

As noted in Josh 13:2–3, the Philistines control the area of the Shephelah, a fertile plateau region extending from the southern coastal plain inland to the Judean Hill Country. The five major cities of these people were founded by a

portion of the Sea People invaders sometime after 1200 BCE, and their superior organization and technology gave them the edge needed to enforce their hegemony over much of the rest of Canaan (1 Sam 13:19–21). In what could be considered a face-saving piece of political rhetoric, Pharaoh Rameses III describes how he defeated contingents of Sea Peoples and other tribes while allowing some to settle in Canaan (*ANET*, 262): "I slew the Denyen in their islands, while the Tjeker and the Philistines [Peleset] were made ashes. The Sherden and the Weshesh of the Sea were made nonexistent. . . . I settled them in strongholds, bound in my name." It seems that the Egyptians lost control over Canaan and that new peoples including the Philistines and the Israelites were able to settle and carve out portions of the land for themselves.

Thus the settlement period, as portrayed in the Book of Judges, presents a time of political opportunism, internecine warfare between various tribes and peoples, temporary chiefdoms ruled or led by warlords, and a generally lawless, anarchic era. What has come down to us in written form is a compilation of episodes by an editor or a group of editors, referred to as the Deuteronomistic Historian, that originally circulated in the monarchic period in oral form. The Deuteronomistic History is the term commonly employed to refer to the material in the Book of Deuteronomy as well as Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings in the Hebrew Bible. Many scholars concur that this body of literature is the product of an editing process that utilized oral tradition, court histories, and other literary materials, and thereby shaped the emphasis and presentation of the biblical text to create a distinct theological perspective. The primary aim of the Deuteronomistic History is to emphasize the importance of obedience to the covenant and the dire consequences of failure to adhere to the law and to God's pronouncements. A common structure and vocabulary is identified by scholars, and it is generally dated to the latter portion of the sixth century BCE.[1]

The disparate stories in the Book of Judges by these late editors describe the difficulties of life as the Israelites begin to settle in Canaan and the attempt to meet the challenge of creating a group identity. From the very beginning the editors try to create a coherent sense of the history of this long-ago period in a plausible manner while at the same time speaking more directly to a

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[1] See Steven L. McKenzie, "Deuteronomistic History." Pages 160–68 of vol. 2 in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David N. Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992, for a more complete discussion of the origins and history of scholarly opinion on the Deuteronomistic History.

much later audience living in the Babylonian exile and, like the people of the Judges period, lacking a king or political control over events that affect their lives.[2]

The narrative in Judges begins with the announcement of Joshua's death, and the people are immediately thrown into the uncertainties attendant with a lack of strong leadership. As a result one of the main themes in the book is the search or desire for "legitimate leadership,"[3] articulated in the final chapters in the recurrent phrase, "in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 18:1; 21:25). Given the likelihood that much of this material was edited no earlier than the late seventh century BCE by the Deuteronomistic Historian, the agenda of the editors may have been to legitimize Josiah's administration (640–609 BCE) in Judah. Another possibility, based on statements in 1 Samuel 12, would be their effort to demonstrate that the true king of the Israelites is Yahweh and that without divine direction the people fall into political and social chaos.[4]

LITERARY ANALYSIS

The most distinctive literary feature of the Book of Judges is that the various and unrelated stories have been compiled and systematically arranged and edited into a coherent whole.[5] A three-part division provides (1) an introductory and explanatory narrative (1:1–3:6), (2) a collection of tales about the judges (3:7–16:31), and (3) four episodes that accentuate the anarchic character of the time period (17:1–21:25). Such an easily defined structure indicates conscious editing and a specific theological emphasis on the part of one[6] or possibly two[7] late monarchic or postexilic groups. This is not to say that the stories can be put aside as totally secondary to the theological

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[2]   Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988b: 138–39.

[3]   E. Theodore Mullen Jr., "The 'Minor Judges': Some Literary and Historical Considerations," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 194.

[4]   Marc Z. Brettler, "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics," *JBL* 108 (1989): 395–418; William J. Dumbrell, " 'In Those Days There Was No King in Israel; Every Man Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes': The Purpose of the Book of Judges Reconsidered," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 31–32.

[5]   See the chart in Marvin A. Sweeney, "Davidic Polemic in the Book of Judges," *VT* 47 (1997): 529.

[6]   Hans D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung.* ATANT 66. Zurich, Switz.: Theologischer Verlag, 1980; John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983.

[7]   Andrew D. H. Mayes, *The Story of Israel between Settlement and Exile: A Redactional Study of the Deuteronomistic History.* London: SCM, 1983: 58–80; Mark A. O'Brien,

agenda of the Deuteronomistic Historian. They existed first, and from them come the real character and tone of the book, however they may have been packaged by later redactors.[8]

The Book of Judges begins with a general introduction, which provides a transition from the orderly period of Joshua's leadership to the chaotic conditions that necessitate the "raising" of judges. These first two chapters explain why the Israelite tribes were not able to complete their conquest of the Canaanites and other inhabitants of the Promised Land. One example appears in Judg 1:19, where it states that Yahweh, the divine warrior, gave the Israelite tribe of Judah a victory in the hill country, but the Israelites were not able to defeat the people of the plain because they had "iron chariots." This is an unusual admission of failure considering the victories over chariot armies described in Josh 11:6–9 and Judg 4:13–16. It provides, however, a more balanced appraisal of the Israelites' ability to conquer occupied territory than does the idealized narrative in the first twelve chapters of the Book of Joshua. It also emphasizes the differences in material culture between the Israelites and the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan.

The explanatory material contains as well two competitive statements concerning the retention of some of these enemy peoples in Canaan.[9] The more theological of the two declares that Yahweh has decided to allow them to survive (i.e., God would not drive them out) in order "to test Israel, whether or not they would take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their ancestors did" (Judg 2:22). Curiously, in the other explanation God chooses to use these people "to teach those [Israelites] who had no experience of [war]" warfare's methods (Judg 3:2). Rationalizations such as these, the latter of which is placed in parentheses by the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translators to show it was not part of the original story, represent later commentary on the narrative material. It is unlikely that the Israelites during the Judges period would appreciate the value of having Canaanites as test subjects or military drill instructors, especially while they were being oppressed by them. However, the Deuteronomistic Historian views these events from hindsight and can therefore present them in a manner to illustrate the point that the people had brought their punishment on themselves and that only Yahweh could remove their oppressors.[10]

The Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis: A Reassessment. OBO 92. Göttingen, Ger.: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989: 82–98.
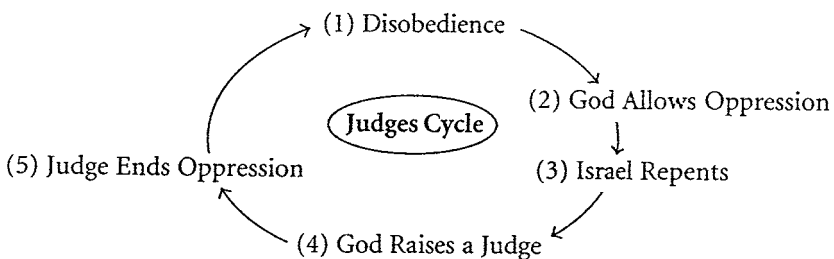
8 B. Halpern, *The First Historians* (1988b): 124–30.
9 Marc Z. Brettler, *The Book of Judges.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002: 79.
10 Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges.* VTSup 63. Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1996: 76–79.

The stories in the middle portion of the book (3:7–16:31) are progressively chaotic. Othniel (3:7–11), the first judge, is a paragon of virtue who is raised by God to serve the people and is filled with the spirit of the Lord. He responds to the needs of the people, provides them with a military victory, and then provides them with forty years of rest without claiming the title of king or imposing any strictures on them. From there on, however, it is a swift decline in moral standards and authoritative leadership. From Ehud's role as a bloody-handed assassin, to Gideon's uncertainties in his own abilities, to Samson's lustful romp through the Philistine cities, the world in the stories in chapters 3–16 borders on being totally anarchic. However, the biblical editors made a very conscious effort to tie these episodes into an apparently chronological narrative. In addition, the stories present a polemical view of this period of Israelite history, with the general intention of promoting the political importance of the tribe of Judah (see Judg 1:2; although contrast Judg 15:9–13). In particular, they enhance the importance of later stability of the Davidic dynasty versus the failures of Saul and the Benjaminites.[11] The stories are not arranged chronologically, however, and they share only the disorder of the times. The cycle or framework that is used to tie the stories together gives a sense of literary and theological unity.

The framework used by the biblical editors is quite simple, following a consistent pattern of events (Judg 2:11–19). It emphasizes, in its repeated usage, that the Israelites, despite having a judge raised to assist them, always resume the pattern of disobedience that caused God's displeasure in the first place:[12]

(1) Disobedience

(2) God Allows Oppression

Judges Cycle

(5) Judge Ends Oppression

(3) Israel Repents

(4) God Raises a Judge

[11] M. A. Sweeney, "Davidic Polemic" (1997): 517; Andrew D. H. Mayes, "Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17–21," *BibInt* 9 (2001): 252–53.
[12] Michael K. Wilson, "'As You Like It': The Idolatry of Micah and the Danites (Judges 17–18)," *RTR* 54 (1995): 75.

1. The people of Israel sin by violating the covenant (doing "evil in the sight of the Lord," turning away from Yahweh, and worshipping other gods [3:7]).

2. A disappointed Yahweh becomes angry and allows the Israelites to be oppressed by their neighbors. This is an excellent example of a theodicy, an explanation for why God allows bad things to happen to the chosen people. It is not unique to the Israelites. In the ninth century BCE "Stele of Mesha," King Mesha of Moab, explains why his people have been oppressed by the Israelites, saying, "Omri, the King of Israel controlled Moab for many years because Chemosh, our chief god, was angry at his people."[13]

3. The Israelites repent and call upon Yahweh to deliver them from their oppressors. This step in the framework provides the Israelites with proof that repentance on their part is necessary to regain God's favor toward them. It does not justify their previous actions and is not a quid pro quo requiring Yahweh to help them, but it is the only way they can return to compliance with the terms of the covenantal agreement.

4. Yahweh responds by raising up a judge to deal with the crisis. In several cases this includes an infusion of God's spirit into the judges impelling them to action and giving them greater authority. In most cases the task of the judge takes the form of military activity within a defined area, although it is not always organized warfare.

5. A period of peace and order (usually in increments of twenty, forty, or eighty years), coinciding with the career of the judge, is almost immediately followed by a return to the sin that had precipitated the original crisis, and the cycle resumes. This resumption of their "failed" condition is the catalyst for moving on to the next episode.

The basic features of this structure begin to break down in Judg 9 with the violent story of Abimelech and his attempt to seize the kingship that his father Gideon had rejected. From that point on, none of the judges will be entirely successful, and none will be described as having brought peace to the land. Jephthah is raised to his position as judge by members of his own tribe, and although he is successful in defeating the Ammonites, he does not remove all of the oppressing nations, and he violates a basic tenet of Israelite religious practice when he sacrifices his daughter after attempting

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[13] Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997: 158.

to blackmail God into giving him a military victory (Judg 11:29–40). Samson, the last major judge, never leads his people in battle but instead engages in a private war that centers more on a series of women in his life, and he dies in the suicidal action of pulling a Philistine temple down on a huge crowd (Judg 16:28–31).

The final five chapters (Judg 17–21) are distinct because they do not contain any mention of a judge. They are filled with the same sorts of anarchic events occurring in other portions of the book – lawlessness, civil war, and idolatry – but no judge arises to meet the problems. Instead there is a tale of a rogue Levite who assists an idolater by officiating in a shrine in Micah's home and then performs the same duties for the migrating tribe of Dan after it confiscates the idols and creates a shrine in the new capital. Topping off the theme of reckless behavior is a fantastic tale of brutal rape and civil war involving all of the tribes. While it is tempting to say that these stories were appended to the end of the book because of their similarity to other Judges material, it is more likely that they were added to provide a final literary transition for the opening of the monarchy period that begins in 1 Sam. The theme that "in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 21:25) is best exemplified in these final chapters.

This concluding section also provides a crowning argument for the establishment of the monarchy and lays the foundation for the anointing of Saul and David as the first national leaders of Israel. In addition, the Deuteronomistic Historian may have hoped to underscore the importance of a "righteous" king like Josiah, who cleansed the Jerusalem temple, destroyed the false altars in Bethel, and restored the Passover celebration (2 Kings 22:3–23:27). In this way a direct contrast is made to polemicize Josiah's sons Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, who came to the throne with the political assistance of foreign powers and eventually brought the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon upon Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:36–24:20).[14]

OUTLINE OF THE JUDGES

Othniel   Raised by God to defeat Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim, resulting in 40 years of rest (3:7–11)

Ehud   Assassinates Eglon of Moab, resulting in 80 years of rest (3:12–30)

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[14]   E. Aydeet Mueller, *The Micah Story: A Morality Tale in the Book of Judges.* New York: Peter Lang, 2001: 15.

Shamgar	Kills 600 Philistines with an ox goad, thereby "delivering" Israel (3:31)
Deborah	A prophetess and local judge who incites Barak to raise an army among the tribes to defeat Jabin and Sisera (4–5)
Gideon	Invested with God's spirit to deliver Israel from Midian in a series of military campaigns, resulting in 40 years of rest (6–8)
Abimelech	Gideon's son, but not a judge, who kills 70 brothers, becomes a warlord with help of the city of Shechem, and is killed in battle after 3 years (9)
Tola	Minor judge of Issachar who served for 23 years (10:1–2)
Jair	Minor judge of Gilead with 30 sons who served for 22 years (10:3–5)
Jephthah	Bandit chief invited by elders of Gilead to deliver them from Ammonites, who also fights a civil war with Ephraim and sacrifices his daughter to fulfill a vow (10:6–12:7)
Ibzan	Minor judge of Bethlehem with 30 sons and 30 daughters who served 7 years (12:8–10)
Elon	Minor judge of Zebulun who served 10 years (12:11–12)
Abdon	Minor judge of Pirathon in Ephraim with 40 sons and 30 grandsons who served for 8 years (12:13–15)
Samson	Nazirite with superhuman strength whose personal adventures involve a series of Philistine women, slaughter of thousands of Philistines, and a tragic end. He judged Israel for 20 years (13–16) [15]

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

To understand the Judges material it is necessary to try to comprehend the intention of the authors of these stories and the later editors who compiled them into an extended narrative. Every nation has its "wild" period, a time that some would like to forget but that was very important in the development of the people into a nation. Tribal Israel was at best a loose confederation of tribal territories made up primarily of an agriculturally based village

[15]   This outline is a revised version of that found in J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986: 88.

culture.[16] The tribes cooperated occasionally, but as the "song of Deborah" (Judg 5:12–18) and the feud between Jephthah and the Ephraimites (Judg 12:1–6) demonstrate, that cooperation was never universal or long-lasting. Rules of law and allegiance to a covenant that bound the people into a single political unit came later in Israelite history. It might well have been impossible for that union to take place without the chaos of the Judges period to serve as the example of what they had escaped and into which they never wished to sink again. In this way a case is made, however propagandistic, for law and order and the establishment of a government to ensure stability. These stories also function as a reminder, especially to the people of the postexilic era who also had no king, that chaos – cultural and political – is to be equated with a failure to obey the covenant.

In approaching the Book of Judges, it may be most useful to imagine a period in history when lawlessness and disregard for tradition were rampant, such as in twelfth-century England, when the heirs of Henry I (Matilda and Stephen) and their followers ravaged the country and legal constraints were abandoned, or during the colonial period in Canada, when French trappers were known for their trailbreaking exploits and a desire to stay as far away from civilization as possible. A similar period of North American frontier life occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century CE, when the man with the most firepower and the ability to trick, cajole, or threaten his way through every situation was heralded as a hero or at least an antihero. Names like Billy the Kid, Jessie James, and Wild Bill Hickok come to mind, and their excesses and flaunting of the law have become just as legendary as some of the figures described in Judges. They are bigger than life, and the exaggerations about their lives and accomplishments set the tone for an era rather than chronicle its history.

This period of Israelite history was a time of new settlements and of the struggle to survive both social and physical environments. As yet no evidence has been uncovered that proves a discernible ethnic difference between the Canaanites and those people who would eventually become the Israelites.[17] In fact, many of the "Israelite" villages were probably made up of Canaanites who had fled their former homes to escape the warfare, famine, and disease plaguing Syria-Palestine between 1200 and 1000 BCE. New population groups

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[16]   Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993: 96–97.
[17]   Kurt L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction*. London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001: 140–45.

that entered the area during this time of chaos then may have joined them.[18] It is during this period, when the incursions of the Sea Peoples dissolved Egyptian control over the area, that new social groups were founded on a common need to pool their labor to produce crops and to establish new settlements in quieter regions of the country. The struggle to survive within a kin-based, egalitarian village community forged a sense of cooperation and care for each other, which is also reflected in the covenantal obligations imposed on them by the law and by their God (see especially the statutes designed to protect widows, orphans, and strangers in Deut 24:17–21).[19]

The culture that does develop in the hill country is initially based on former Canaanite models, but it will eventually take on a distinctive character.[20] These pioneers will have to be tougher and more resourceful to survive in the more marginal environment they have been forced to settle. Most of the sites identified by archaeologists are located in previously uninhabited areas of the hill country of Judah, an indication that the better sites were taken by the Philistines. Thus the pragmatism of village life, directed by elders and emphasizing the ideals of hard work and shared responsibility, had to become the norm. In addition, the ideals of an egalitarian society marked by the virtues of trust, honor, and a hatred of slavery contribute to the creation of a distinct people that will become Israelite. The Israelite credo expressing this attitude is found repeatedly in the legal statutes of the Deuteronomic Law Code (Deut 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22): "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt."

Life in these small villages (75–100 inhabitants) therefore would have been dependent on the available natural resources, such as arable land, grazing area, and water sources. It would have been driven by the forces of nature that may or may not have provided sufficient rain in season, and the people's concerns would be to protect themselves and their crops and animals from killing winds and plagues of locust (see Deut 28:38–39). The people worked extremely hard in their fields, and when they made sacrifices they did so in thanks to Yahweh and also, apparently, to the Canaanite gods (Judg 6:25–30) in the expectation of continued good fortune and sustained fertility. Their villages were mapped out not in grids but according to the households of

[18] Volkmar Fritz, "Israelites and Canaanites: You Can Tell Them Apart," *BAR* 28 (4, 2002): 30–31.
[19] Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996: 225–34.
[20] Victor H. Matthews, *A Brief History of Ancient Israel*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 2002: 30–32.

each villager. Cottage industry was a part of the responsibilities of each family, but there may have been some families able to specialize as potters, tanners, or dye makers, with their shops attached to their houses. These "specialists" offered simple wares while also working their own farming plots or vineyards.

Village law and assembly of the people would have been conducted on the centrally located threshing floor (Judg 6:37; Ruth 3:3–6). Here, where grain was processed and distributed, disputes were settled and the needs of the poor were ascertained and addressed. In this way the village cared for its own and managed its harvest to the benefit and survival of the entire community. This shared system works best on a small scale. Later it will be tapped and exploited by the monarchy (1 Sam 8:14–15), and eventually the community's resources will be drained by taxes, and the sense of egalitarianism will be weakened. Once the monarchy is established, a structured, multilevel social system will replace the simpler village culture.

The material culture of the hill country settlements during the settlement period could therefore be described as environmentally focused. Survival required risk-taking strategies and a mixed economy that did not concentrate on a single crop or resource.[21] Often just enough grain was produced to maintain the population and perhaps provide a small surplus that could be used for trade or stored against the inevitable bad years. Population growth could provide a larger work force, but it would also drain, at least temporarily, the food supply. In other words, life was a gamble, and for the Israelites to master their new environment and eventually to expand beyond the hill country they would have to do two things: (1) increase their population and (2) borrow many of the useful aspects of the material culture of the Canaanite cities of the plains. It was this latter requirement, however, that was the principal danger.

When one culture borrows from another (a process known as syncretism) the temptation is to become "just like" that other culture and to allow the distinctive aspects of the borrowing culture to be submerged or lost. The biblical writers continually argue against syncretism, especially with regard to the worship of foreign gods. But, the stories in the Book of Judges clearly suggest that many of the Israelites were true neither to Yahweh nor to the covenant made at Sinai. These people strongly resembled their neighbors, working and worshiping in much the same way and drawing what they could from the land. The struggle for survival, however, also provided them with

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[21]   David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan*. Sheffield, Eng.: Almond Press, 1985: 267–69.

an incentive to seek out God's help and draw on the covenant to define both their relationship with Yahweh and with each other. Although the judges, for the most part, are not good role models, they do act in the name of Yahweh and are empowered with the spirit of God. Thus their stories add to the cultural foundation of ancient Israel and serve as one of the developmental steps leading to the establishment of the monarchy and a more unified people.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Because this period is not well documented except in the Bible, most of what we can learn about life during the early Iron Age is based on archaeological remains.[22] The pattern of new settlements in the hill country (at present over 300 excavated or surveyed) suggests a migration of the population to this previously underpopulated region during the period between 1200 and 1000 BCE.[23] In their examination of these village sites, archaeologists try to identify patterns of culture based on pottery types, architectural styles, and technologies.[24] Very often a new people entering an area will bring in a distinctive culture, evidenced by its possessions, such as pottery, jewelry, and weapons, and even its burial styles.

Although it would be helpful if there were startling differences between Israelite and Canaanite material cultures, that does not seem to be the case. New housing styles, such as the four-room house, do indicate a change, but this may be due to the environment of the hill country, where most new settlements had a mixed agricultural and pastoral economy.[25] These standardized structures contained a central courtyard that was flanked by a room on either side and a broad room at one end. This arrangement, with access to each of the rooms by way of the courtyard, provided shared living and storage space for the extended family that dwelt there as well as shelter for the animals. A sense of unity may have been created by this

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[22] Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 25–28.

[23] William G. Dever, "Excavating the Hebrew Bible, or Burying It Again?" *BASOR* 322 (2001): 71; idem, "Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up? Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I," *BASOR* 297 (1995): 72; Israel Finkelstein, "The Emergence of the Monarchy in Israel: The Environmental and Socio-Economic Aspects," *JSOT* 44 (1989): 53–59.

[24] See the discussion in Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel.* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 2001: 9–19.

[25] L. E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family" (1985): 17; Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust, "Ideology in Stone: Understanding the Four-Room House," *BAR* 28 (4, 2002): 36.

architectural design, communicating a sense of inward or familial strength and egalitarian ethos that could successfully struggle against the chaos of the outside world.[26]

Identification of pottery types and styles is one of the most universally accepted means of determining entrance of new cultures into an area. This method, however, is of little help during the settlement period in identifying uniquely Israelite ceramics. Other than the Aegean-style Philistine one-handled cooking jugs and craters decorated with birds, the ceramics of this portion of the early Iron Age remain the same as the older Canaanite forms. They used two-handled cooking pots, collared-rim storage jars, and a variety of undecorated bowls and jugs.[27]

Other innovations produced in these villages, such as the terracing of hillsides for farming and the plastering of cisterns to prevent seepage of water into the porous limestone, seem to be a matter more of the natural developments of life in the hill country than of inventions that radically changed their world. Still these simple methods of shaping their environment and preserving precious natural resources add to the sense of communal life.[28] People in small villages without walls or a means of defense saw their struggle with nature rather than with their neighbors. Certainly, they could be harassed by raiders (Judg 6:2–6) and claimed as part of a larger political unit for taxation purposes (Judg 3:12–13), but their real strength was to be found in their sense of community. They formed nonstratified, close-knit, kinship-based villages and were dependent on each other and on living from harvest to harvest.

What has come out of the ground in the last two decades of archaeological investigation is a fuller understanding of the Philistine presence in Canaan. Sites like Gezer and Tell Miqne-Ekron reveal well-established urban cultures. They maintained large-scale industry, especially in the rendering of olive oil, and established trade contacts from Egypt to Phoenicia. Their purported widespread use of iron technology, however, appears to be exaggerated. They possessed a knowledge of iron, but bronze continued to be the principal metal used for weapons, farm implements, and industrial tools. The statement in 1 Sam 13:19 that there was "no smith to be found throughout all the land of Israel" and that the Israelites were forced to rely upon the

[26] S. Bunimovitz and A. Faust, "Ideology in Stone," *BAR* 28 (2002): 40–41.
[27] P. J. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (2001): 139.
[28] William G. Dever, "The Identity of Early Israel: A Rejoinder to Keith W. Whitelam," *JSOT* 72 (1996): 15–16.

Philistines to sharpen their farm implements suggests not a monopoly on iron technology but on metal working in general.[29] Intensive specialization of labor would have been less likely in the Israelite villages where most efforts had to be directed to farming. They would most likely have produced their own common ware pottery, tanned their own hides, and woven their own cloth for clothing, but a blacksmith is a dedicated profession, not one that can be done part-time.

One can trace the place names mentioned in the biblical text. The Philistine cities of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gaza, and Gezer, as well as the Canaanite and Phoenician cities of Megiddo, Acco, Sidon, Beth-shemesh, Jebus (Jerusalem), and Hazor have all been located, and it can be ascertained that they existed and were inhabited during the early Iron Age. It is more difficult to authenticate the social and religious practices of this period. Some cultic sites (temples, shrines, etc.) have been excavated, images discovered, and sacrifices described in documents written in later eras (such as the Stele of Mesha of the late ninth century BCE). These kinds of archaeological data, however, must be examined with caution. Mute artifacts obviously have their limitations, and drawing conclusions or parallels based on similar but later social customs may be misleading. As is the case with other poorly documented periods of biblical history, the age of Judges must, for now, remain more tentative than concrete. What remains is an examination of the received text of the Book of Judges, which is an artifact that, like pottery or architecture, can be analyzed in an attempt to reconstruct the society of ancient Israel.

[29] Paula McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel.* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox, 1999: 74–75.