

Ch. 7 – Judges

Anarchy unmasked – the failure of charismatic leadership

“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6, 21:25; see 18:1, 19:1).

During the three centuries following the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34) and Joshua (Joshua 24, ca. 1200 B.C.) and before the establishment of the monarchy (Saul, David, Solomon..., ca. 1025-586 B.C.), the problem arose of the leadership, government and defense of the twelve tribes of Israel. The situation was similar to that of the Christian churches after the death of Jesus and his disciples (Peter, Paul..., ca. 64 A.C.) and before the establishment of the monarchical bishops, ca. 200 A.C. (→ **1 Timothy, Titus**). Throughout the long history of the Bible we can see how every system of human government, sooner or later, was unmasked and failed:

Judges: **anarchy** unmasked – the failure of charismatic leadership

Hierarchies unmasked:

(1) Samuel-Kings: failure of the **monarchy**

(2) Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah: failure of the **priestly theocracy**; see the Messianic kingdom

See in the NT: the twelve apostate apostles (male Jews); → the faithful women.

One purpose of the Deuteronomistic History (DH 1 and 2; → below and **Joshua**) is to demonstrate how God rejected Saul (of the tribe of Benjamin) and chose David (of the tribe of Judah) and his descendants to reign. Therefore, at the very beginning of the book the Israelites ask:

“Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?”

Yahweh said, “Judah shall go up” (1:1-2; → 20:18, 26).

And thus the book ends with the tragic account of the civil war that almost annihilated the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 19–21; see 20:18,26). However, the DH maintains a strong dialectic between pro and anti monarchical texts and arguments (anarchists; see 1 Samuel 8). Furthermore, the framework of the stories (see 2:11-23) underscores a cyclical history – or better, a spiral (descending, especially at the end) – in which four elements recur:

- Apostasy: Israel is unfaithful to Yahweh and falls into *idolatry* (2:11);
- As a result, they provoke Yahweh's *anger* (2:12-13);
- Yahweh delivers them into the hands of *oppressive enemies*; see impoverishment, 2:14-15; and
- Israel calls out and Yahweh anoints with God's Spirit a *caudillo-liberator*; see blessing, 2:16.

The individual accounts concerning the twelve “judges” (liberators-caudillos) are placed in a later double framework (DH 1 and 2):

Ch. 1, DH 2 (6th century B.C., exilic-apologetic: 586 B.C., era of “your fault–for your idolatry“)
 | 2:1–3:6 DH 1 (7th century, Josiah-evangelistic: repent!)
 | | 3:6–16:31 **Accounts of the 12 “Judges”-liberators/caudillos 1200–1025 b.C.**
 | 17–18 DH 1 (7th century, Josiah-evangelistic: repent!)
 Chs. 19–21 DH 2 (6th century B.C., exilic-apologetic: 586, era of “your fault –for your idolatry”)

Outline

(*O* = *outcries* (*za’aq*), total of 6 times; *Sp* = Spirit, total of 7 times, 4 Samson)

- I. Double introduction, 1:1–3:6
 - 1:1–2:5 Later introduction (sixth century)
 - 2:6–3:6 Original introduction (seventh century)

- II. History of the twelve liberators-caudillos (“Judges”: six **major** and six *minor*); 3:7–16:31
 1. **Othniel**, 3:7-11 (oppression: Mesopotamian, 3:8); ***O* 3:9; *Sp* 3:10**
 2. **Ehud**, 3:12-30 (oppression: Eglon, king of Moab, 3:14); ***O* 3:15**
 3. **Shamgar**, 3:31 (“liberated” Israel from the Philistines; implicit oppression)
 4. **Deborah** (with Barak), 4:1–5:31 (oppression: Canaanite, ***O* 4:3**)
 5. **Gideon** (cf. his son Abimelech) ***O* 6:6-7; *Sp* 6:34**
 Gideon, 6:1–8:35 (oppression: Midianite, 6:1)
 Abimelech, 9:1-57 (tyrant, violent oppressor, 9:22)
 6. **Tola**, 10:1-2 (“liberated” Israel; implicit oppression without specifying the enemy)
 7. **Jair**, 10:3-5 (without oppression or liberation; “judged”)
 8. **Jephthah**, 10:6–12:7 (oppressors: Philistines and Ammonites); ***O refused* 10:10, 14; *Sp* 11:29**
 9. **Ibzan**, 12:8-10 (without oppression or liberation; “judged”)
 10. **Elon**, 12:11-12 (without oppression or liberation; “judged”)
 11. **Abdon**, 12:13-15 (without oppression or liberation; “judged”)
 12. **Samson**, 13:1–16:31 oppression: Philistines, 13:1); ***Sp* 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14 (cf. 15:19)!**

- III. Two appendices and conclusion, 17:1–21:25

The Shrines of Micah and Dan, 17:1–18:31
 Micah, his mother and the young Levite: a private shrine, 17:1-13
 Migration of the Danites and the founding of their shrine, 18:1-31

The Levite with his concubine and the war against Benjamin, 19:1–21:25
 Rape and murder of the concubine, 19:1-30
 The Israelites vow to revenge Gibeah's crime, 20:1-48
 The virgins of Jabesh-Gilead given to the Benjaminites, 21:1-14
 Kidnapping (*gazal*, “to rob”, 21:23) of the young women of Shiloh, 21:15-24

Conclusion, 17:6; → // 21:25

1. Idolatrous, Oppressed and Impoverished Israel. Both in the original introduction (2:10-19, seventh century B.C.) and in the account of the first “judge”-liberator, Othniel (3:7-11), who served as a model and paradigm for the following liberators, we perceive that Judges stresses a series of oppression and liberation cycles (cf. the Exodus paradigm in Deut. 26:5-9):¹

- Israel commits “evil”, idolatry (3:7; 2:10-13; see 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1);
- Therefore, Yahweh's anger is provoked against Yahweh's people (3:8a; 2:12-13, 20);
- Yahweh permits Yahweh's people to be enslaved by oppressors (3:8b; 2:14-15, 18; 10:7);
- Israel cries out (*za'aq*) in grief, asking for relief (3:9a);
- Yahweh raises up a caudillo-liberator (3:9b; 2:18);
- The Spirit of Yahweh empowers the liberator to win the war (3:10; 11:29);
- The people (“the land”) enjoy peace-blessing for 40 years (3:11; 2:18-19).

David Pleins concludes that in the Hebrew Scriptures

rarely, and then only in the poetic inserts, does the historical literature make use of the many Hebrew words for 'poor' and 'poverty' that are common in the rest of the Hebrew Bible.... *The poor...are not the object of the ethical wrestlings of the historical sections of the Hebrew Bible.* This fact alone is astonishing and ought to at least force us to pause before we all too quickly apply this material...to modern projects aimed at liberating the poor.²

However, Judges 6:1-6 explicitly points out that the oppression impoverishes Israel:

The Israelites did what was evil [idolatry] in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. The hand of Midian prevailed (*ta'az*) over Israel; and because of Midian the Israelites provided for themselves *hiding places in the mountains, caves* and strongholds. For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them. They would encamp against them and *destroy the produce of the land*, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and *leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts*; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in. Thus Israel was greatly *impoverished (dalal)* because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out (*za'aq*) to Yahweh for help.

As in the case of → **Second Isaiah**, in books such as Judges words that refer to the poor as a class are not common because *all the people* suffered oppression and impoverishment and then experienced liberation from the caudillos-liberators.³ Judges presents a theology of power: a critique of the power of the oppressors and Yahweh's option through the Spirit in favor of oppressed and impoverished people. Furthermore, certain texts anticipate Samuel's classic denunciation of the abuses of power common in monarchies (1 Samuel 8), and the fact that two texts indicate that two women not only “seduced” Samson but in a certain way oppressed him (*tsuq*, 14:17, the first wife; 16:16, Delilah) suggests that sexual attraction can represent a stronger power than physical force or military power (also see → Song of Songs 8:6).⁴

Vocabulary for oppression (and poverty) in Judges

DH 2 Second introduction (exilic, sixth century B.C.) 1:1–2:5

1:34 The Amorites *restricted* (*lakhats*) those of the tribe of Dan to the mountains.

1:35 The tribe of Joseph subjected the Amorites to *forced labor* (*mas*).

DH 1 First introduction (pre-exilic, seventh century), 2:6–3:6

2:14,16 Invaders...*plundered-oppressed* (*shasah/s*) Israel.⁵

2:15 The Israelites...became very *anguished* (*tsarar I*).

2:18 Enemies...oppressed (*lakhats*) and afflicted (*dakhaq*) Israel.

Twelve “Judges”-liberators

1. Othniel: The Israelites “served” [as slaves] (*abad*, 3:8) the Mesopotamian power.

2. Ehud: The Israelites were “under the control of [like slaves]” (*abad*) the king of Moab (3:14); see 3:30, Moab was “under the control of” (*kana'*) Israel.

3. *Shamgar*: *Oppression is implicit in the liberation that he achieved* (3:31).

4. Deborah (with Barak): Jabin, a Canaanite king, had 900 chariots of iron and oppressed (*lakhats*) the Israelites cruelly (*khazqah*) for 20 years (4:3).

5. Gideon: Tyranny (*ta'az*, 6:2) of the Midianites; see poverty, *dallal*, 6:6.

Yahweh had liberated Israel from Egypt and from other oppressors (*lakhats*, 6:9).

Abimelech: Yahweh punished Abimelech for the “violence” (*khamas*, 9:24) of having shed the innocent blood of his 70 brothers (see *gazal*, to steal, 9:25).

6. *Tola*: *Oppression is implicit in the liberation he achieved* (10:1-2).

7. ***Jair*: *No mention of liberation or oppression!* (10:3-5).

8. Jephthah: The Philistines and the Ammonites “crushed (*ratsats*) and oppressed (*ra'ats*) Israel (10:8)Israel *suffered* great *oppression* (*tarar I*, 10:9) ...and cried (*tsa'aq*, v. 10)Yahweh responded: ‘Haven't you been oppressed (*lakhats*, v. 12) by [Egypt + six other nations] in the time of your oppression (*tsarah I*, v. 14)...?’” Jephthah's legitimate brothers drove the bastard Jephthah out (*garash*, 11:2, 7; to deny him his inheritance) but they went to him when they were oppressed (*tsar I*, 11:7).

9. ***Ibzan*: *No mention of liberation or oppression!* (12:8-10).

10. ***Elon*: *No mention of liberation or oppression!* (12:11).

11. ***Abdon*: *No mention of liberation or oppression!* (12:13-15).

12. Samson: Yahweh “gave” (*natan*, 13:1) Israel into the hands of the Philistines....

Samson's wife “pressured” (*tsuq*, 14:17) him to explain his riddle.... The lords of the Philistines and Delilah were able to “dominate” (*anah*, 16:5-6, 19) Samson....

Delilah pressured (*tsuq*, 16:16) him to reveal his secret.

DH 1 17–18 First appendices: The sanctuaries of Micah and Dan, 17:1–18:31

DH 2 19–21 Second appendix: The crime of Gibeah, the war against Benjamin, 19:1–21:25

Rape and murder of the concubine, 19:1-30;

“rape, humiliate” (*anah*, 19:24; 20:5); “to know” (sexually) = “rape” (*yada'*, 19:25); “to abuse” (*alal*, sexual violence, 19:25, 26).

Civil war (against Benjamin), 20:1-48; “rape, humiliate” (*anah*, 20:5).

The virgins of Jabesh given to the Benjaminites, 21:1-14;

Abduction (*gazal*, “to steal”, 21:23) of the girls of Shiloh. 21:15-24.

While the individual accounts of the major judges point out that an Israelite tribe suffered under an enemy oppressor, the Deuteronomistic framework insists that, in final analysis, the fault is not that of the oppressor but that of Israel for having practiced idolatry. In this point the DH differs from the paradigm of the Exodus, where the Israelite slaves did not worship idols and the blame falls to the oppressor, Egypt. The brief accounts concerning the six minor judges do not include vocabulary for oppression. In the cases of two of them it may be a question of implicit oppression because it states that they “liberated” Israel, but in the other four cases “to judge” appears to simply mean “to govern”, since the texts do not refer to enemies, nor to liberation, and the facts included appear irrelevant to the cycle of these last two experiences.

As in the Exodus paradigm (2:23), in Judges the oppressed commonly “cry out” (*za’aq*) in their grief and Yahweh hears their crying as a prayer and responds with liberating deeds. Thus, in Judges, four accounts refer explicitly to the outcries of the people (Othniel, 3:9; Ehud, 3:15; Gideon, 6:6, 11; cf. the Israelites, 10:10,14, whose outcry God ignored).

Another basic element in the paradigm of the liberators-judges is that, as a response to the oppression and outcries of grief of the people, the *Spirit of Yahweh* (God the liberator) comes to equip the human liberator. In the cases of four of these judges, the Spirit of Yahweh equips the judge for his mission (Othniel, 3:10; Gideon, 6:34; Jephthah, 11:29; Samson, 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). Commentators commonly affirm that the Spirit of Yahweh in Judges is “impersonal”.⁶ However, just as it would be anachronistic to interpret such texts as a reference to the Third Person of the Trinity, neither should we create a dichotomy between “personal/ impersonal”, since “the Spirit of Yahweh” in Judges always is that of a personal God. The surprising thing in Judges is the fact that Samson (who appears to be more like the actors Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone than Jesus) is the liberator most often shown as the beneficiary of the divine Spirit (four of the seven references)! Another surprise is the immediate consequences of the equipping with the Spirit of Yahweh: Othniel (3:29) and Gideon (6:34) advance against the enemy, but Jephthah made the tragic vow that results in his daughter's sacrifice (11:29-31).

In Samson's case, the increased physical strength was accompanied by sexual desires that motivated him to look for a Philistine wife (13:25; see 14:1-2); later he killed a lion with his bare hands (14:6) and 30 Philistines (14:19), then a thousand Philistines (15:15; cf. the reference to Samson's human spirit in 15:19) – and, finally, he took his own life in a “kamikaze” style (cf. today's Palestinians against Israel!). He killed more Philistines in his death than he had killed in his entire life (16:30). Given the sexual adventures and the lack of discernment characteristic of Samson, we could question if the Spirit of Yahweh was a “Holy” Spirit or simply one of power. God also sent an “evil spirit” between Abimelech and the people of Shechem (9:23; cf. 8:3). Regardless, the concept of God's Spirit appears to be more developed in Isaiah, where it is characterized by justice (32:14-15) and wisdom (11:1-9), in addition to power (31:3).

The concern for the poor in the DH is shown in the references to the Levites, unemployed by Josiah's reforms (640-609 BC, the centralization of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem; → Deut. 14:22-29; Ezeq. 40–48; Nehemiah; 1–2 Chronicles) and dispersed in the land in Judges (the Levite and Micah, ch. 17–18; the Levite and his concubine, 19–21).⁷

2. Women

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah... who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises.... (Hebrews 11:32-33).

Until the modern period, Judges was an ignored book. In ideologically patriarchal commentaries if there was enough “time” to focus on contributions by women that appeared there, the tendency was to criticize them for having usurped the masculine roles – *negative* examples of the deplorable conditions before the establishment of the monarchy and “the good order”. With the emergence of feminist studies, the situation changed: the abundant contributions of *positive* women in Judges were focused on and tolerance of the *violence* they suffered was denounced, both in the texts and in commentaries (especially see the outstanding pioneering work of the lesbian biblicist, Phyllis Trible.⁸

The long tradition of prejudicial patriarchal interpretations is evident even in the New Testament, since the book of Judges exalts the contribution of Deborah, while the author of → **Hebrews** passes over her to honor Barak, who Judges had profiled as weak. Furthermore, Hebrews pours salt on the wound: as examples of faith it honors Samson, whose marriage, divorce and relations with a prostitute did not reveal many “family values”, and Jephthah, whose hurried and cruel vow resulted in the sacrifice of his own daughter. Outside of Judges, the women in the Hebrew Bible appear primarily as mothers, but in Judges they are emphasized for a variety of other roles, including military (see Proverbs 31; → **Proverbs**). With the exception of Delilah (16:4-22/31), almost all the women in Judges make a positive contribution to the welfare of Israel.

2.1 Achsah, positive woman and “gender bender” (Judges 1:12-16; Joshua 15:16-17; 1 Chron. 2:49; cf. the daughters Zelophehad, Num. 27:1-11; 36:1-12; → **Numbers**). [“Gender benders are people who side-step gender and do not conform their lives to the expectations or norms of a patriarchal society for their specific gender.] According to the MT (Hebrew) of Judges 1:14, Achsah convinced her husband Othniel to ask for the land of Caleb, but the translations and commentaries often have preferred to follow the LXX, thinking that the MT is not as consistent with the context (see 1:14 note “a” in NIV; HCSB note 1:14). We are to understand, then, that Othniel convinced Achsah to ask Caleb, her father, for a piece of land, and she, like the daughters of Zelophehad, takes the initiative: she convinces Caleb to accede to her wish. Achsah and Othniel represent the only “respectable” couple among the judges (see the parents of Samson, Judges 13), but obviously their marriage was not the result of a covenant between them, since she was given to Othniel by her father, as a prize of war (→ **Malachi**).

2.2 Deborah, positive woman and “gender bender” (Judges 5:1-31, her song // 4:1-24). Although *all* translations indicate that Deborah was the “*wife* of Lappidoth” (Judges 4:4), Tikva Frimer-Kensky points out that it is better to understand the Hebrew as “*woman*” (not “*wife*”) of a place (Lappidoth), or “*woman of torches*”⁹ – or even of another woman named Lapidoth (“*Torches*”, since the ending is feminine plural). Nothing in the Bible suggests that Deborah was married, and her appearance with Barak continually at her side would be very indecent in the patriarchal context of the book if she had a husband with the feminine name Lappidoth. She is described as a “*mother in Israel*” (5:7), obviously in the metaphorical sense as the mother of the nation, not as a housewife with biological children. Deborah, the only woman judge, was one of

the “major” judges and the only one who was also called a “prophet/prophetess”. She played a decisive role in the defeat of the Canaanites and is the only one who is named in two different stories (Judges 5 and 4). The poetic version (Judges 5) is chronologically prior to the prose and one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible. (Cf. women's leadership in the oldest Pauline texts with the inferior status imposed in the → deutero-pauline and pastoral letters.) The other judges (males) began to judge *after* achieving a military triumph, but at the beginning of the story, before the battle, Deborah is seated under “the palm of Deborah” administering justice (4:5).¹⁰ The Canaanites, with 900 chariots of iron, had an enormous technological advantage, but

The stars fought from heaven,
from their courses they fought against Sisera (5:20).

Yahweh, then, sent a storm and the Canaanite chariots were washed away in the torrent Kishon (5:21), which permitted the triumph of the Israelite infantry under the command of Barak.

2.3 Jael (“wild goat”), positive woman and “gender bender” (5:6, 24-27 // 4:9, 17-22). She assassinated Sisera, the Canaanite general, thus fulfilling Deborah's prophecy (4:9). To be killed by a woman was considered shameful (see Judges 9:54). Traditionally male commentators have disapproved Jael's act as a betrayal and have explained that the version in Judges 5 includes elements of poetic exaggeration (5:6, 27). However, the poetic version is much older (seventh century BC and Tikva Frymer-Kensky points out that Deborah's song shows no discomfort with women warriors. In the original version Sisera is not asleep, but is standing up when Jael kills him (5:27). The stealthy heroine of the later version reflects the fears and prejudices of the monarchy, where the militant leadership of women like Deborah and Jael was only a memory.¹¹

2.4 Anonymous woman of Thebez, positive woman and “gender bender”, kills Abimelech (9:40-55; 2 Samuel 11:21). Like Jael, who managed to kill the Canaanite general Sisera, another woman, although anonymous, used a millstone (an instrument that women knew well) as a weapon of war and fatally wounded Gideon's son, who wanted to make himself king. The tyrant was able to avoid the bad reputation of being a man killed by a woman (9:54), but centuries later King David made it clear that the history of the woman's act could not be forgotten (although her name has been erased, 2 Samuel 11:21).

2.5 Anonymous virgin, Jephthah's daughter, positive woman (11:34-40; 10:6–12:7; Jephthah's vow, 11:29-40). As Karla Bohmbach points out, the narrative concerning Jephthah's virgin daughter is one of the most enigmatic in the entire Bible.¹² Why would Jephthah make such a vow? Is it by inspiration of the Spirit of Yahweh (11:29-31)? Did Jephthah not know that the custom was that the women were the first to come out of the house to greet the men who came back victoriously from war (Ex. 15:19-21; 1 Sam. 18:6-7)? Or did he think an animal would come out first before his daughter or wife? Why does Jephthah's wife never appear, neither to greet him nor to protect her daughter? Did the daughter know about her father's vow and come out first on purpose? Did Jephthah really kill his daughter, or did he just consecrate her to the service of a sanctuary (1 Samuel 1)? Why did the daughter lament only her virginity and not also the loss of her life? If it were a case of human sacrifice, why did Yahweh not intervene as Yahweh did in the case of Isaac (Genesis 22)? Why did the community not intervene in defense of the daughter (see the case of Jonathan, 1 Samuel 14:45)? How does the

narrative function in the book – to disqualify Jephthah as a judge and demonstrate the urgency of instituting a monarchy? The text raises many such questions without answering them!

2.6 Delilah (“coquettish”, from the Aramaic verb “to flirt”; 16:4-22/31). She is the only woman in the Samson narratives mentioned by name. She does not appear to have been a Philistine (she refers to the Philistines as “they”, 16:9, 12, 14, 20), but she seduces like the “strange woman” of → **Proverbs** (cf. the militant women, above, 2.2-2.4). Because of the relationship with the preceding text (16:1-3) it is common to assume that Delilah (woman of “the night” [*lailah*, Hebrew]) was a prostitute, although the text is not explicit, saying only that Samson “fell in love” with her (16:4), but not vice versa.¹³

2.7 The Levite's anonymous “concubine” (*pilegish*), negative or positive woman? (19:1-30 [20:1–21:25]), one of the most horrendous texts in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴ All translations refer to this woman as the Levite's “concubine”, but a “concubine” usually refers to a sexual companion of a man who also has a wife, which does not appear to be the case here (see Abraham, Sara and Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21; → **Genesis**). Furthermore, the text speaks of the Levite as the *husband* of the *pilegish* (19:3; 20:4) and the *son-in-law* of the father (19:5), while the father is called the *father-in-law* of the Levite (19:4, 7, 9). When the text affirms that the *pilegish* “prostituted herself” (*zanah*, 19:2; NIV, “was unfaithful”; see HCSB notes b and 19:2) and returned to the house of her father, the translation is again doubtful. If she literally had sexual relations with a lover, why did she not go to his house instead of returning to her father's house? And why would the Levite search for her “to speak tenderly to her” without taking revenge if she in fact had betrayed him (19:3, NRSV)? For this reason modern translations often reject the Hebrew “prostituted herself” and accept the reading of some Greek manuscripts that she “became angry” with the Levite (NRSV). On the other hand, why did the Levite wait four months before looking for her? Was he waiting to see if she was pregnant by another man?¹⁵

The narrative of the rape (*'anah*, 19:25) of the *pilegish* is quite similar to the attempt by the men of Sodom to rape the two visiting angels in Lot's house (see Gen. 19:1-8 and **3. Sexual Minorities**, below; → **Genesis**). Although the Judges text is not explicit, it is common to suppose that the Levite sought to protect himself by throwing the woman out of the house to be raped by the Benjaminites (Judges 19:25). They did not kill her, since she was able to return to the house after the rapes, but we cannot know when she died.

The narrative raises a question about the teaching of Judges concerning women, since Deborah, Jael and the anonymous woman who killed Abimelech are examples of strong women who fulfill functions normally reserved for men in patriarchal societies, while the virgin daughter of Jephthah and the Levite's *pilegish* suffer horrendous acts of violence. Does the book of Judges include these narratives to entertain male readers (a type of yellow journalism or pornography?; see Ezekiel 16, 23; → **Ezequiel**), or simply to demonstrate the urgency of inaugurating the monarchy? Regardless, the pioneer exegete Phyllis Trible (lesbian feminist) correctly labeled this narrative as a “Terror Text”.¹⁶ In its note concerning Judges 19 (“The Crime of Gibeah”) concerning the rape attack that killed the Levite's concubine *La Biblia de Nuestro Pueblo* (BNP, by L. A. Schökel), a Spanish translation of the Bible, points out:

Many people have wanted to find a condemnation of 'homosexuality' both in the story of Sodom [Genesis 19] and in this story [Judges 19]. We should avoid anachronisms when

interpreting the Bible. The word 'homosexual' appeared recently in the nineteenth century. In these two narratives the true crime is inhospitality, violence and phallic aggression against foreigners. In both narratives the phallus serves as a weapon of aggression that establishes the relationship of domination and submission, practices frequently used in wars.

This note even corrects the homophobic note concerning Sodom in the same Spanish translation (although not the notes on Leviticus 18 and 20 and the New Testament texts)! The NJB translates correctly the text of → **Jude** 7, and the note interprets the text well, but without refuting the homophobic translations and notes of other texts. But the BNP note on Judges 19 for the first time in Spanish begins the struggle to educate and warn against homophobic prejudices in our Bible translations. (Good notes are increasingly common in English translations, as well as German and French. *Note*: I'm very grateful to Esther Baruja and Kathryn Griess, formerly IFES staff in Paraguay and Chile, respectively, for calling my attention to this important note in the BNP.)

2.8 Mothers, prostitutes and maidens/virgins. Of the other women in Judges, the following merit special attention:

- Samson's anonymous mother (13:2-25; 14:2-9, 16; 16:17). Although the text names the father Manoah, the angel of Yahweh appears first to the anonymous and sterile mother, who is the principle figure of this section¹⁷ (→ Maria, Luke, Matthew);
- Abimelech's mother, an anonymous prostitute (11:1-2);
- Micah's prosperous mother who had some control of the home's possessions (17:1-4);
- The mothers of Jabesh-gilead (21:10-14); in the destruction of the women and children, only the virgins were kept alive as wives for the tribe of Benjamin;
- The maidens/virgins of Shiloh (21:21-23) who were abducted, robbed (*gazal*; 21:23) by the Benjaminites and, in effect, raped.

In the patriarchal ideology of the Ancient East, commonly reflected in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the essence of masculinity was to be a warrior¹⁸ (→ **Revelation**). Therefore, that Deborah commanded Barak and directed the war against the Canaanites, that Jael killed General Sisera and that a woman (anonymous) managed to kill the tyrant Abimelech are highly significant acts, since Judges, more than any other book in the Bible, presents in a positive light Israelite women who went beyond the limits and norms of the patriarchy and thus made a fundamental contribution to the fulfillment of the will of God. Furthermore, the book demonstrates the fundamental error of those who insist that the Bible sustains a rigid gender concept and always condemns all who trespass the limits.¹⁹ As **John Calvin** recognized, the case of Deborah is especially dangerous, since it subverts such ideologies.

3. Sexual minorities (SM) vs. Family Values. Of the twelve liberators-caudillos (“judges”, six **major** and six *minor*), all except one appear to be sexual minorities.

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| | 1. Othniel , 3:7-11 | Achsah, wife (1:11-15) |
| SM | 2. Ehud , 3:12-30 | Single? |
| SM | 3. <i>Shamgar</i> , 3:31 | Single? |
| SM | 4. Deborah , 4:1–5:31 | Prophetess, woman from/wife of? Lappidoth (4:4) |
| SM | 5. Gideon , 6:1–8:35 | Polygamist, 70 children + concubine; → Abimelech |

- SM 6. *Tola*, 10:1-2 Single
 SM 7. *Jair*, 10:3-5 Polygamist, 30 children
 SM 8. **Jephthah**, 10:6–12:7 Bastard, mother = prostitute (11:1); virgin daughter (11:37-38) sacrificed in fulfillment of Jephthah's vow
 SM 9. *Ibzan*, 12:8-10 Polygamist, 30 daughters and 30 sons
 SM 10. *Elon*, 12:11-12 Single
 SM 11. *Abdon*, 12:13-15 Polygamist, 40 children and 30 grandchildren
 SM 12. **Samson**, 13:1–16:31 Married, separated + prostitute + Delilah

In addition, Judges mentions two other sexual minorities: Micah (17:1-13) and the Levite of Ephraim with his concubine (19:1-10).

Taking his clue from the mischievous Samson (Judges 15:4-5), Martin Luther described his two principal enemies (the Vatican and the Anabaptists) as two female foxes that appeared to fight each other but actually were tied tail to tail, since both exalted a human word (from the Pope or from the sect's prophets) above the Word of God in the Scriptures. Similarly, traditional commentaries and modern feminist studies, usually so opposite, have something in common: they look with disapproval on all the arrangements and **adventures in Judges that did not support traditional family values**. However, it is very difficult to imagine that the authors of the individual narratives and of the two Deuteronomistic writings shared this perspective. Of the twelve “judges”, Othniel (the first, 3:7-11; 1:11-15) is the only one who is presented with a wife (Achsah, an admirable Israelite woman), while Samson (the last, 13–16) is the one who enjoyed the most sexual adventures. However, after Samson, Judges narrates, without any sign of disapproval, the abduction of the young women of Shiloh to provide wives for the Benjaminites (21:15-24). Of the ten male liberators-judges after Othniel, we have four polygamists (Gideon, with his concubine; Jair; Ibzan; Abdon); four bachelors (homosexuals?, Ehud, Shamgar, Tola and Elon); Jephthah, who abandoned his wife; and Samson, “sleeping with the enemy” (his Philistine? wife), later with a prostitute and, finally, fatally seduced by Delilah.

Although everyone affirms that **Deborah** was the “wife” of Lappidoth (4:4), the Hebrew word (*ishah*) can well mean “woman”, not wife, and Lappidoth (feminine plural, a name without parallels) may indicate another woman or a place and not a husband. Such a conclusion fits better with the strong personality of Deborah and with the fact that she continually appears in the text with Barak at her side and not “Lappidoth”. We might easily suppose that she was a lesbian, since she seems a great deal like another military heroine, Joan of Arc, burned at the stake by the English for insisting on wearing male clothing (→ Deut. 22:5).

The scarcity of any biblical support for modern family values is due to the fact that in the Hebrew Bible the patriarchal “house” is *larger* than the modern nuclear family, while New Testament leaders (Jesus, Paul, etc.) prefer something *narrower*: unmarried itinerant teachers rather than married couples with children (→ Romans 16). Like the prophets and prophetesses, the caudillos-liberators of Judges appear to be people of the Spirit, sexual minorities like the shamans, almost without exception. In addition to its lack of exemplary marriages, Judges describes various **friendships between males that appear to have a homoerotic flavor**.

- The Levite of Judges 19 is always with a slave, waits four months before looking for his concubine in her father's house and once there appears to be more interested in the father than in his partner.

- In Judges 17, Micah has children (17:5), but a wife-mother never appears (dead, divorced?; see 18:24), and his most intimate relationships appear to be with his mother and later with a young male Levite.

Tammy Schneider refutes the theory that the history in Judges is purely cyclical (idolatry-oppression-liberation) and seeks to demonstrate rather that **the theology of the history of Judges** expresses a degenerative spiral.²⁰ For her the first judge, Othniel, with his wife Achsah, represent the highest ideal and everything that comes later represents a degeneration toward anarchy and violence. However, we may ask, according to Judges:

- Is Deborah (Judges 4–5) inferior to Achsah (1:11-14) and to Othniel (3:7-11)?
- Is Gideon (Judges 6–8) inferior to the four previous judges, when the book narrates his exceptional faith with such detail?
- And what about Samson, who more than any of the other judges experienced the anointing of the Spirit of Yahweh, who was the most successful in the struggle against Israel's enemies (the Philistines) and to whom Judges dedicates more space (four chapters) than to any other liberator (Judges 13–16)?

Modern women may scorn **Samson** for being a “womanizer”, but it is quite doubtful that the authors of the narratives and the Deuteronomistic editors who incorporated them into their framework shared this disdain. Instead of disqualifying Samson, we can learn how God anoints with God's Spirit “unworthy” human beings and does not allow certain sexual weaknesses disqualify them for God's service (see Cyrus, → Isaiah 45). We should not be surprised that the Spirit of Yahweh, who gave Samson so much physical energy, also had its manifestation in the erotic/affectionate sphere – although we should recognize the lack of wisdom and justice in the sexual life of the last liberator.

Without doubt the final narratives (the rape of the Levite's concubine and the resulting civil war, Judges 19–21) illustrate the urgency of a new order (the monarchy), but such recognition does not justify the conclusion that the book describes a continual degeneration. Best recognize that the individual judges' *narratives* support no rigid philosophy/ theology of the history – neither purely cyclical nor degenerative. The individual stories are squeezed into the Deuteronomistic framework with its insistence on idolatry as almost the only sin, but this framework squeeze cannot eliminate the strong manifestations of individuality and strength that reflect the diversity of God's ways in history and God's delight in carrying out the divine project through quite diverse human beings always ready to surprise us. A wise hermeneutic in the interpretation of Judges must always maintain a strong dialectic between the framework's Deuteronomistic theology and the individuality inherent in each narrative.

Ehud (3:12-30), the liberator-leader who freed Israel from the oppression of Eglon, the fat Moabite king, was both unmarried and left-handed. Although → **Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes** manifests a certain scorn against left-handed persons (10:2) and many biblical texts reflect the common prejudices of the majority, which gives special honor to the right hand (see Jesus seated “at the right hand of God” in → Psalm 110; Mat. 22:44; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:13; and in the Apostle's Creed), the subversive role that Deborah and other women played in Judges subverts patriarchal prejudices. Similarly, Ehud fulfills his function in the face of the common prejudices against

left-handed persons – prejudices embodied in the vocabulary and in the common expressions in almost any language: see “right”, whose omnipresence in English subtly supports traditional oppressive ideologies, both secular and religious. In 1963 (five years before the foundation of Metropolitan Community Churches, MCC, in 1968 and six years before Stonewall, 1969) the Quakers of England declared that “*to be homosexual is to be sexually left-handed*” – a prophetic perception, since it indicated that a homosexual orientation is simply a normal human variant and not a perversion, a degeneration, a vice or an illness. As the second of the twelve liberators-leaders, Ehud by no means represents a degeneration, compared with the first judge Othniel. On the contrary, the text highlights, with detailed description, his astute military strategy to triumph against more powerful enemies-oppressors. The Hebrew text literally says Ehud was “restricted” with reference to his right hand but, as a “disabled” person, he learned to utilize this limitation and to develop the capacity of his left hand to a surprising and effective degree.²¹ According to prescientific concepts, everyone prefers the right hand and relationships with the opposite sex, and to be left-handed or homosexual is an indication of a problem. Ironically, Judges informs us that Ehud, the left-handed one, was of the tribe of Benjamin (3:15, literally, “son of the right hand”), and at the end of the book we are told that 700 of the best warriors of this tribe were left-handed (20:15-16). By no means should we conclude that Ehud, the left-handed person, represented a degeneration compared with Othniel.²²

The individual narratives celebrate the *freedom* of Israel after the Exodus and before the monarchy and the *diversity* of liberators-leaders that Yahweh used to liberate them from their oppressors. Later the individual narratives were placed in the framework of the Deuteronomistic history that focused on *idolatry* as a common cause of oppression and were arranged in a cyclical framework according to which the freedom and diversity of the people and their leaders came to represent *anarchical* situations that made the introduction of the monarchy necessary.

In addition to the first judge, Othniel (3:7-11) with his wife Achsah (1:11-15), the only respectable couple in Judges are **Manoah and his anonymous wife** (13:2-24), the pious parents of the scandalous last judge, Samson. However, at the beginning the wife is a kind of sexual minority since she is “sterile”, according to the prescientific concepts of infertility (13:2-3). Although the author of the account dignified Manoah by preserving his name, the angel of Yahweh preferred to dignify the wife and first appeared twice to her and only later to the husband (cf. the angel who appeared to Mary and Joseph in Matthew 1).

In the cases of six judges the text includes no detailed narrative and, consequently, for centuries the commentaries designated them as “*minor*” judges. All are sexual minorities:

- three single men: Shamgar, liberator from the Philistines, 3:31; Tola, liberator from an anonymous oppressor, 10:1-2; Elon, “governed” without oppression or liberation, 12:11-12.
- three practiced polygamy and had an abundance of sons and daughters: Jair, 30 sons, 10:3-5; Ibzan, 30 sons and 30 daughters, 12:8-10; Abdon, 40 sons and 30 grandsons, 12:13-15.

Commentators commonly criticize the minor judges for not having changed anything²³ but they largely governed during years of peace and prosperity. Commentators easily forget what Thomas Jefferson (the U.S.'s third president) concluded, that in many circumstances “that government is best which governs least” (cf. what followers of Ronald Reagan like to affirm,

that “government is not the *solution* to problems but the *cause* of them”). Of course, such populist political slogans are simplistic, since occasions and situations abound when it is necessary to strengthen the state – above all when an enemy threatens the peace and freedom of a people or when injustice, oppression and violence need to be confronted (Psalm 72). However, the six judges who appear in the Bible without long narratives of military actions can represent one ideal for the function of the state: do the minimum, respecting the freedom of the people to prosper in peace. In this way the six “minor” judges refute the macho norm that the essence of being a man is to be a warrior and point toward the prophets Micah (Micah 4:1-4) and Isaiah (Is. 2:1-5; 11:1-9) and their teaching that God's historic plan ends with a universal peace founded on liberty and justice.

The brief texts which describe the six “minor” judges (3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15) also make clear that in Hebrew a “judge” (*shofet*) that “judged” (*shafat*) could indicate simply a “leader” who “led/governed” (10:3-4; 12:8-14, NIV), without starting any wars of liberation. However, for the cycles of oppression, in the majority of cases in Judges it is more precise to translate with the terms “liberator/deliverer” and “deliver”, as does the NRSV and the KJV (see 3:9, 31; contrary to NIV, which uses “deliverer” and “saved”). Although all systems of government in biblical history failed (anarchy, charismatic leaders, hereditary monarchy, priestly theocracy, male apostles), in addition to noting the weaknesses and failures of each system we should also observe the positive elements that contributed to the development of more adequate modern systems (e.g., constitutional monarchies, representative democracies, etc.). The inclusion of the six “minor judges” also assured the representation of a larger number of the twelve tribes, thus suggesting a better division of power (consider the senators of small modern states), instead of a concentration of power in just one tribe (such as Judah).

Samson against the Philistines: An Israelite suicide, “kamikaze” style. Few persons in the Bible have provoked such opposite evaluations as Samson, the last judge-liberator. His name means “little sun”, but he achieved his ultimate triumph against the Philistines as a blind man. For Tammy Schneider, Samson was a philanderer and the worst judge;²⁴ according to Robert Boling he was a tragic figure because he lacked a civic commitment;²⁵ James Crenshaw concludes that the Samson narratives, with his secret betrayed and his mother's vow ignored, focus on the common problem in Israel of the sexual attraction of foreign women.²⁶ With Alberto Soggin we can discern a dialectic in the texts, where the scandalous narratives of sexual adventures and the exploits of a warrior were linked in a narrative that stressed a prenatal divine vocation and the anointing of the Spirit of Yahweh.²⁷

Although recently negative evaluations dominate, it was not always that way. In the ancient Jewish tradition (Josephus) Samson was a religious hero with tragic elements (his sexual weakness). For the author of Hebrews, in the New Testament, he was a memorable example of faith (Heb. 11:32-33, cited above under **2. Women**). John Milton, the great blind poet, in *Samson Agonistes* (1671) made Samson a thinker, a defender of divine justice and a hero in facing temptation. Long before him, patristic authors developed innumerable typological parallels between “the saint” Samson and Jesus, for example:

- the birth of each was miraculous, announced by an angel;
- both received the power of the Spirit (Samson four times; other judges only once);

- both defeated a lion (Satan, in the case of Jesus, 1 Peter 5:8);
- both were betrayed and subjected to the enemy because of a bribe;
- both were bound by the enemy;
- the Spirit abandoned both in the hour of the crucial struggle;
- in the final encounter with the enemy each fought alone;
- both achieved his greatest triumph through death;
- both broke gates (the gates of hell in the case of Jesus);
- both were chosen by God and liberated Israel.

The fact that Samson is the judge who received the greatest anointing of the Spirit of Yahweh (four times; cf. one time in the case of three other judges) proves to be especially problematic for many readers today; he is the one who has the most sexual adventures, but they were only useful as occasions to kill more Philistines. Modern commentators treat the issue in very different ways. Tammy Schneider condemns Samson without mercy as the worst of the judges and overlooks the four texts that refer to his anointing by the Spirit of Yahweh²⁸ (cf. Is. 11:1-9; 32:1-5). She points out how Samson made decisions in accordance with what he considered desirable according to his own eyes (14:1-3 – the fundamental error of the period; 17:6; 21:25). She finishes by describing how Samson, “the little sun”, lives in perpetual darkness (blindness), thanks to Delilah, the “night-woman”.²⁹ Robert Boling emphasizes a dichotomy between the “impersonal spirit” that equipped Samson with muscular power and the more personal Spirit who in other books inspires the prophets with wisdom and justice.³⁰

Without doubt Samson seems to lack an “integration between his spirituality and his sexuality” and, to the God who chose him, and continually equipped him with God's Spirit, he appears to have forgotten the sixth and seventh of the Ten Commandments (do not kill and do not commit adultery). However, Samson's sexual adventures were those of marriage, separation/divorce, visiting a prostitute and falling in love with Delilah (premarital sex?) – activities tolerated in the Hebrew Bible – but the hero never committed adultery. Ralph Blair would insist that men who continually look for new sexual companions (“promiscuity”) are really looking for the intimacy of love (consider Samson's compulsion to reveal his secrets).³¹ We could also point out how many times in the Bible, and in church history, God chooses and powerfully uses sexual minorities, in spite of and by way of their weaknesses, special temptations and sexual failures.³² Furthermore, in spite of all the condemnation of Samson for his sexual downfalls (cf. the condemnations of Sodom), it is notable that no modern commentator denounces Samson for his “heterosexuality”. They demonstrate the capacity to discern between a sexual orientation (given by God – consider Psalm 139:13) and sins that harm the neighbor and result from abuse, not from appropriate use and expression of one's sexual orientation.

Rape and murder of a concubine provoke a civil war, Judges 19–21. The parallels between the Judges 19 narrative concerning the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine and the narrative in → Genesis 19 about the intent of the men of Sodom to rape the two visiting angels has provoked much study. Above all, biblicists have pointed out that, if the rape and assassination of *a woman* in Judges does not provide a basis for condemning “heterosexuality”, how can so many continue to condemn “homosexuality” based on the Sodom narrative where rape (not a consensual act) is also dealt with and where the targets of violence are not men but angels? (→ **Jude 7**, “other flesh”; see above under **2. Women.**)

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¹ Hanks 1982:17; J. Barton Payne 1982/91:764-769

² David Pleins, 2000:95-96.

³ Hanks 1983:11, 129, 128.

⁴ Hanks 1983: 128, n. 24.

⁵ Schökel 780.

⁶ Boling; Schneider

⁷ David Pleins 2001:103-104, 136; David Hubbard 1982/91:1195-1202; Lisbeth Freid 2000:803-804.

⁸ Phylis Trible 1984.

⁹ Tikva Frimer-Kensky 2001:66).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 98.

¹² Karla Bohmbach 2000:243-244

¹³ Cheryl Exum 2001:68-69.

¹⁴ Ken Stone 2001:248-250.

¹⁵ Tammi Schneider 2000:252-253.

¹⁶ Phyllis Trible, 1984.

¹⁷ Cheryl Exum 2000:245-246

¹⁸ Stephen Moore 2001:173-199

¹⁹ Robert Gagnon 2001

²⁰ Tammy Schneider 2000:287-90.

²¹ Ibid., 47-49.

²² Pace Schneider.

²³ Ibid., 158.

²⁴ Tammy Schneider 2000:193.

²⁵ Robert Boling 1992:1112.

²⁶ James Crenshaw 1992:953.

²⁷ Alberto Soggin 1981:258.

²⁸ Tammy Schneider, 2000:193-227.

²⁹ Ibid., 224.

³⁰ Robert Boling, 1992:1112.

³¹ Ralph Blair, 1980, 1981.

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