

THEME AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Judges

Daniel I. Block

Impressed by the refrain "There was no king in Israel," which appears four times in the last five chapters (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), scholars have often interpreted the Book of Judges as an apologetic for the monarchy in Israel. The chaos reflected in the narratives demonstrates the need for a centralized royal constitution. Support for this view may be derived also from the circumstances precipitating the request for a king by the elders of Israel in 1 Samuel 8. The fundamental anti-Ephraimite stance of the book is irrefutable, but M. Brettler's treatment of it as "a political allegory fostering the Davidic monarchy" not only minimizes the significance of several textual units that are critical of the monarchy but also disregards the critical stance toward Judah reflected in the book. Furthermore, it hardly accounts for the overall tenor of the book. This is a prophetic book, not a political tractate. It represents a call to return to the God of the covenant, whom the people have abandoned in favor of the virile and exciting fertility gods of the land. The theme of the book is the Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of settlement. The author's goal in exposing this problem is to wake up his own generation. This is an appeal to the covenant people to abandon all forms of paganism and return to Yahweh. In so doing the narrator also offers his readers a profound commentary on the grace of God. Left to their own devices the Israelites would surely have destroyed themselves. Only by the repeated gracious intervention of God do they emerge from the dark pre-monarchic period as a separate people and nation. In this book God deals with his people only partially in accordance with the formula: obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings the curse. Israel's victories over her enemies say much less about the nation than about their God, who intervenes repeatedly presumably because his long-range goal of using Israel as a light to the nations depends upon the nation's survival of this dark period of her history.

The author's agenda is evident not only in the individual units but in the broad structure of the book as a whole. The Prologue (1:1-3:6) explains the underlying causes of the Canaanization of Israel: the tribes' failure to fulfill the divine mandate in eliminating the native population (Deut 7:1-5). The major part, the "Book of Deliverers" (3:7-16:31), describes the consequences of Israel's Canaanization and Yahweh's response. The collection of "hero-stories" has its own specific prologue (3:1-6) in which the reader is reminded of the problematic historical and spiritual background for the following hero-stories. The sequence of six cycles of "apostasy-punishment-cry of pain-deliverance" not only expresses the persistence of the issue; it demonstrates the increasing intensity of the nation's depravity. The arrangement of the "hero-stories" reflects this process so that in the end we are left with "antiheroes" rather than truly great men of God. In the Epilogue (17:1- 21:25), which really is the climax of the presentation, the Danite and Benjamite tribes demonstrate the extent and intensity of the problem in the nation's religious and social dysfunction.



The deliberateness with which the author pursues his course is reflected in the integration and arrangement of elements of the respective parts. These features will be noted in the commentary. For the moment we draw attention only to the correspondence between the order in which the tribes are named in the Prologue (1:1-36) and the order in which their representatives appear (mostly as deliverers) in the Book of Deliverers: Judah (Othniel), Benjamin (Ehud), Ephraim (Deborah), Manasseh (Gideon), Gilead, (Jephthah), Dan (Samson). Preexistent materials are obviously being adapted and arranged for theological purposes.

Some may object that the fourfold occurrence of the refrain "In those days Israel had no king" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) the narrator looks to the institution of kingship as the prescription for the chaos of the premonarchic period. However, this is an unlikely interpretation of the refrain for several reasons. First, elsewhere the narrator expresses a decidedly negative disposition toward those who assume the role of kingship. Second, rather than lifting up the kings as an ideal above the confusion of this period, the addition of "everyone did as he saw fit" in 17:6 and 21:25 reduces the population to the moral and spiritual level of Israel's kings in later years. Rebellion against God is democratized. In the mind of the author, during this period Israel did not need a king to lead them into sin; they could all do so on their own. Third, the statement "Israel had no king" is quite ambiguous. A superficial reading suggests that the narrator has an earthly human king in mind. At another level, however, he may be hereby declaring Israel's rejection of the theocracy. Contrary to Gideon's empty confession in 8:23, no one, not even God, rules in Israel.