

THE MEANING OF THE MINOR JUDGES

Judges

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The book of Judges is a somewhat neglected book in Christian pulpits and Bible curricula today. If the stories of Judges are known or taught, usually only the so-called “major” judges attract interest while the remaining narratives – especially from chapters 1-2, 17-21 – suffer from neglect. But the so-called “minor” judges are perhaps the most neglected parts of the book, no doubt because of their positioning (between the major cycles), brevity and their presumed unimportance which may derive from the unfortunate label “minor.”

But it is my contention that the three passages (3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15) describing the minor judges contribute a great deal to the theological meaning of the book of Judges because they reinforce the progressive patterns and themes of the whole book, provide thematic transitions between cycles and bring the total number of leaders to twelve in order to indict all Israel. The essential themes that emerge from a study of the minor judges may be summarized as follows: (1) foreigners may serve as deliverers; (2) judges are acting like kings by asserting status, building dynasties and making alliances; (3) judges are arranging marriages with outsiders (probably non-Israelites); (4) the twelve leaders in chapters 3-16 are a representation of the tribes and actions of all Israel; and (5) the “canaanization” of Israel intensifies as its leaders are multiplied. While these five themes are emphasized throughout the entire book of Judges, they are acutely stressed in Judges 3:31, 10:1-5, and 12:8-15.

After treating the “literary placement” and the “contextual exposition” of the three passages, I offer the following remarks about the “theological significance of the Minor Judges.”

Since these passages are both purposefully reported and strategically arranged...in the book of Judges, it is evident that the term “minor” (apparently coined by Albrecht Alt) can be a misnomer. These accounts are “minor” only in the sense that they are shorter than the other stories and they lack explicit cyclical features. However, their selective thematic emphases – especially on kingdom building, foreign alliances and canaanization – reveal that they are included with editorial purpose. The minor judges therefore have major importance for understanding the theological message of the book.

The cyclical pattern of apostasy-oppression-deliverance which is expounded in Judg. 2:11-19 and illustrated so well in Judg 3:7-30 (the Othniel and Ehud stories) is barely recognizable in the first notice of minor judges (3:31). Although Shamgar’s foreign ethnicity and his disturbing religious affiliations may indirectly indict Israel, apostasy is not explicitly described and a Philistine oppression may be only implied (cf. Judg 10:11). Nevertheless, the narrator regards Shamgar as an agent of deliverance.

Deliverance is also mentioned in connection with Tola (10:1) but the implicit oppressor’s identity is unstated. Perhaps some modicum of deliverance is implicitly present for all the remaining minor judges, but the text does not address this



matter (similar ambiguity about deliverance is also arguably present in both the Jephthah and Samson accounts; cf. 10:13-14; 13:5). All of the minor judges after Shamgar are said to govern/judge Israel (employing the verb *šafat*, just like the major judges) but exactly how they brought justice is unclear.

What is clear is that the cyclical rubric of 2:11-19 is progressively breaking down in the book – especially in the second half, after the Gideon account – and that YHWH’s involvement in each leader’s tenure is increasingly ambiguous or even absent. The minor judges are not explicitly raised up by YHWH (Tola and Jair simply “arose” [Qal rather than the usual Hiphil form]; 10:1, 3), and the land ostensibly never enjoys any rest after the Gideon account. One might go as far as to say that as YHWH’s sovereign role decreases in these narrations, the role of the human leader increases as each one pursues his own self-interested agenda. The implicit trajectory of increasing human sovereignty at the expense of YHWH’s kingship (which is supposedly normative, according to 8:23; 11:27) comes to maturity—actually, degeneracy!—in the epilogue where there is no king in Israel and each does what is right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25).

A remaining theological issue that deserves attention is the likelihood that the narrator selected these six minor judges in order to bring the total number of deliverers/judges in the book to twelve. The number twelve is easily computed by excluding Abimelech from the roster since he “ruled” (*šrr*, 9:22) illegitimately as an internal oppressor and is never called a “judge” or a “deliverer” by the narrator (8:33-9:57). The literary quota of twelve is likely intended as an indictment against all Israel so that no Israelite tribe is exempted from the growing trend of covenant rebellion (or “canaanization”) which characterizes the period. Apostasy was a corporate offense, and every Israelite man and woman holds a stake in the responsibility.

Based on the foregoing discussion it should be evident that the theological motifs which emerge from the study of the minor judges are also important emphases in the so-called “major” judges and in the book of Judges as a whole. The minor judges are essentially reinforcing, clarifying and complementing (but certainly not complimenting) the major judges. Thus the differences between the major and minor judges are evidently not about theological function; the differences are rather defined only by proportions of verbiage and the specific details of narration. Hopefully when readers consider these three brief notices they will not be deflected by the unfortunate moniker “minor,” but they can instead appreciate the many theological contributions these short stories make to the message of the book of Judges, and then they can more effectively integrate them into Christian ministry today.