

THE LITERARY SHAPE OF JUDGES (Judges Introduction in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*)

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Analysis of the book of Judges has consistently highlighted the double introduction to the book, the first beginning with the death of Joshua (1:1-2:5) and the second with the final moments of Joshua's life (2:6-3:6). A close look at these two introductions does suggest that on a thematic level the first one (1:1-2:5) relates more closely to the concluding chapters of the book (chs. 17-21) and the second one (2:6-3:6) to the inner core of stories about the judges/deliverers (3:7-16:31). The cyclical pattern found in this inner core separates six major judges from six minor judges and Abimelech, thus suggesting the use of a variety of source materials.

These kinds of observations, while possibly granting insight into the development of the book (see above), may also provide foundational insights into the rhetorical shape of the book in its present form. Recent rhetorical work (esp. Webb, Klein, Amit, O'Connell, Wong) has revealed that the first introduction foreshadows developments not only in the final chapters of the book (chs. 17-21), but also in the central core of the book (2:6-16:31). This first introduction also plays a role in transitioning the reader from the book of Joshua by drawing on proleptic material from that book.

In the light of these observations, it is important to note that Judges in its present form, which is the dominant object of the present study, is structured into three basic parts. The first is the introduction to the book as a whole, an introduction that focuses on tribal identity rather than charismatic leadership (1:1-2:5). The second is the complex of stories of the judges/deliverers that constitute the inner core of the book (3:7-16:31), which is introduced by the material in 2:6-3:6. This complex of stories is arranged into thirteen sections. Six of these sections constitute elongated accounts of major judge-deliverer figures structured according to a cyclical narrative pattern (Othniel: 3:7-11; Ehud: 3:12-30; Deborah-Barak: 4:1-5:31; Gideon: 6:1-8:32; Jephthah: 10:6-12:7; Samson: 13:1-16:31). These six longer accounts are matched by six short accounts, which do not employ the cyclical but do appear in pattern groups of increasing size: first one judge (Shamgar: 3:31), then two (Tola: 10:1-2; Jair: 10:3-5), and finally three (Ibzan: 12:8-10; Elon: 12:11-12; Abdon: 12:13-15) judges. Lastly, one account presents the anomalous royal figure of Abimelech (8:33-9:57), whose story mimics the cyclical pattern established in the accounts of the judge-deliverers.

The book ends with an epilogue (chs. 17-21) arranged into two distinct yet interconnected subsections (chs. 17-18 and 19-21), which bring closure to the book as a whole. The social context of these final stories, with their focus on tribe rather than on charismatic figure, echoes that of the first introduction of the book. But in this case the challenges faced by Israel are no longer from the nations who possessed



(1:1-2:5) or surrounded (2:6-16:31) Canaan, but from their own compatriots who act like these nations. The book closes, therefore, not with a return to its opening state, but with a digression to a worse state, even as the narrator looks for a new type of leader who will guide the nation into purity of worship.

One can discern rhetorical movement as the book unfolds. There appears to be a general geographic movement from south to north, both in the first introduction of the prologue in 1:1-31 and in the overall flow of the accounts of the judge-deliverers in the central core accounts of 3:7-16:31. More important, however, are signs of regression throughout the book. Both prologues trace a progressive decline. The first traces this decline in the decreasing ability of first the southern and then especially the northern tribes to occupy their tribal territories allotted in the book of Joshua (ch. 1), ending with a judgment on the nation that leaves the Canaanite nations in possession of the land (2:1-5). The second prologue traces this decline through a cyclical pattern that becomes increasingly worse (2:6-19), ending again with a judgment on the nation accomplished by God's leaving Canaanite nations behind (2:20-3:6).

While the central core of the book of Judges (3:7-16:31) is dominated by the repeated cyclical pattern established in the second introduction of 2:6-19, it is important to notice that this cyclical pattern follows a downward spiral as the situation worsens, the people become less active in seeking Yahweh, and the behavior of the judge-deliverer becomes increasingly erratic, especially from Gideon on. Exum notes "the increasingly problematic character of the human protagonists, and ... the increasingly ambiguous role of the deity," while Wong sees this progressive deterioration in five areas: (1) the judges' decreasing faith in Yahweh; (2) the increasing prominence of the judges' self-interest as motivation behind their actions; (3) decreasing participation of the tribes in successive military campaigns; (4) the judges' increasing harshness in dealing with internal dissent; (5) Yahweh's increasing frustration with his people as the cyclical pattern breaks down. Ultimately, leadership is eliminated from the account after Samson's demise, thus highlighting the ultimate failure of the charismatic judge-deliverer phase of Israel's history and prompting the need for the monarchy in an Israel that has assimilated to the Canaanites (chs. 17-21).