

## THE RHETORICAL PURPOSE OF JUDGES (Judges Introduction in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*)

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In recent years there have been two major contenders for the dominant theme of the book of Judges, the first being kingship (esp. Amit, Brettler, Patton, O'Connell, Schneider, Sweeney, Auld, Midden, Matthews) and the second, assimilation (esp. Guest, Block, Wong), a phenomenon borne out in my analysis of the literary structure of the book above. One needs to question, however, whether it is necessary to choose between these two themes.

Clearly, assimilation is articulated in the first introduction to the book (1:1-2:5) as the tribes progressively fail in their attempts to conquer their tribal territories. The stories of the Judges rehearsed in the core of the book reveal that the people and ultimately the leaders of Israel are sucked into the religious and social vortex of the Canaanites, ultimately compromising their covenantal relationship with Yahweh and one another. The refrains in chs. 17-21 note that "everyone did as he saw fit," a phrase drawn from Deuteronomy 12:8, which addresses the issue of assimilation to Canaanite religious practices. The behavior of Micah, the Danites, the Benjamites, and all Israel throughout chs. 17-21 is indistinguishable from that of the Canaanites who were in the land.

While the theme of assimilation is undeniably important to the book of Judges, so also is the theme of leadership. This theme is apparent from the outset of the book, especially when comparing it to the beginning of the book of Joshua.

Joshua 1 reveals a clear transition plan for leadership in Israel, one in which the mantle was transferred from Moses to Joshua. This same concern for transition in leadership reappears at the beginning of Judges, which again notes the death of the leader (Joshua) and then depicts an inquiry of Yahweh that explicitly asks about leadership in the new era. Past study has typically highlighted not only the dominant role played by the judge-deliverers in this book, but also the progressive decline in their success and character, ending with their disappearance after the successively worse disappointments of Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and especially Samson.

Scholars have highlighted both promonarchical and antimonarchical streams within Judges. The former (promonarchical) is usually linked to those places in the book that glorify the actions of the entire tribe of Judah or individuals within it, often in contrast to those of other tribes to the north, or that allude to places or actions associated with David or Saul. The latter (antimonarchical) stream is usually linked to the presentation of Canaanite kingship at various points in the book and especially to the Abimelech traditions at the center of the book. Serious questions have been asked about the legitimacy of the evidence for each of these monarchical streams. Some have questioned the promonarchical approach by noting that Davidic connections are not always positive, such as the



Judahite failure in 1:19, the Judahite capitulation to the Philistines in ch. 15, the Bethlehemite Levite's apostasy in chs. 17-18, the Bethlehemite concubine's marital unfaithfulness in ch. 19, and the Judahite failure in the initial battle against Benjamin in ch. 20. Others have questioned the antimonarchical approach by highlighting idealization of Judahite efforts (Judahite conquest, Othniel) and noting that Jotham's fable suggests that Gideon's refusal of kingship actually opened the way for the rise of the murderous Abimelech.

It appears that one cannot completely eliminate the tension between these two approaches to the issue of leadership in the book of Judges. Buber explained this tension diachronically, linking the antimonarchical stream to an earlier stage in the development of the book. Interestingly, similar tension has been discerned in the book of Samuel, an observation that has also prompted a diachronic solution to this tension; that is, there was a development in the Deuteronomistic tradition. But its presence in an adjacent book in which scholars have discerned Deuteronomistic themes may also indicate that this tension may be a feature typical of the Deuteronomistic historiographic tradition in general. The book of Deuteronomy does envision a role for the royal house within Israel's leadership after the death of Moses. The way this vision is expressed in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 suggests that human kingship will arise due to human rather than divine mandate ("Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us" 17:14). Yahweh, however, clearly provides legislation for dealing with this political arrangement—legislation that demands covenantal obedience from the royal house.

In the same way the book of Judges sends a mixed message about kingship. On the one side it makes clear in Gideon's refusal (8:22-27) that Yahweh is to be king in Israel. But the depiction of the failure of both Abimelech's reign as well as the leadership of the Judges and the resulting anarchic tribal conditions is designed to lead the reader to the realization that royal rule is necessary in Israel. This rule, however, is carefully circumscribed. While Yahweh remains king, a royal figure is needed who will ensure that people do not simply do as they see fit; that is, the king must be someone who will ensure that Israel worships Yahweh alone at the central shrine (see commentary on 17:6). Allusions in the book suggest that this kingship is linked to the tribe of Judah rather than to Saulide Benjamin or the northern tribes. But kingship is no *carte blanche* offered to the Davidides, in whose closet there are many skeletons and whose potential for failure is subtly admitted in Judges. This admission reminds the reader that kingship is no panacea for leadership in Israel, even as it affirms the rise of royal Judahite rule through the Davidic dynasty.

The dual refrain of chs. 17-21 ("in those days Israel had no king" and "everyone did as he saw fit" brings together the two dominant themes highlighted in past scholarship. The first phrase points to kingship, with all its promise and peril, while the second to assimilation, the protection from which was to be the primary responsibility of the royal house through maintenance of the central shrine in Jerusalem. In this way Judges sets up the book of Samuel, where two models of kingship will be depicted: the first kingship according to Israel's desire and the second kingship according to Yahweh's desire.