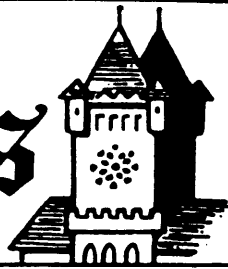


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## INTERPRETING THE HISTORICAL BOOKS OF SCRIPTURE

by James B. Jordan

*(This essay is part of the Introduction to my forthcoming study on the Book of Judges. The principles I discuss here in connection with Judges can be applied to any of the historical sections of Scripture.)*

One of the best ways to communicate truth in such a way as to grip the hearts and minds of the hearer is by means of story telling. The Bible is full of stories, designed for just this purpose. The whole theology of story telling could use a treatment in itself. In this book, however, it is my intention to illustrate such a theology, rather than to write it systematically.

God is Himself the Great Story Teller. Being God, He can sovereignly superintend all events so as to bring His stories to life. His stories really happened. The fact that they are told as stories does not subtract one whit from their real historical character. Still, what gives them their thrilling power is not that we know that they really happened in a certain year and at a certain place, but because they speak to us today.

Why do good stories speak to us today? Because, as students of literature would say, they embody universal characteristics, and deal with universal problems, hopes, fears, symbols, and so forth. This is exactly correct. Universal truths are not the same as abstract generalities, however. It is precisely in the specific events themselves that the most universal aspects of the stories are seen.

### Images of God in Judges

There are in Biblical theology certain great universals. They derive from the fact that man is the image, the very symbol of God. Thus, throughout the Bible marches *The Seed*. He is the one born of *The Woman* who will crush the head of *The Serpent*. We shall meet him several times in the book of Judges. Indeed, the crushing of the head of the enemy is one of the most obvious themes in the book:

Ehud kills Eglon, political head.

Jael crushes Sisera's head with a tentpeg.

Gideon destroys the four political heads Zebah, Zalmunna, Oreb, and Zeeb.

Abimelech's head is crushed by a rock, again by a woman.

Samson destroys all five heads of the Philistine cities, by crushing them with rocks.

There is also *The Anointed One*, also known by his Hebrew name *Messiah*. He is the one who has had oil poured upon his head, making him a special priest or king over God's people. Or, apart from oil he has been given a special anointing of the Holy Spirit. He represents God's people, for better or for worse. We shall meet him in Judges as well, because each of the judges was anointed by the Spirit.

As mentioned above, there is *The Mother*, and we meet her in the persons of Deborah and her evil twin, the mother

of Sisera, as well as in the mother of Samson. There is also *The Bride*, and we shall meet her in the wife of the Levite who is raped to death by the men of Gibeah. And since there is *The Bride*, we also see *The Groom*. We see him offering salvation to those outside the kingdom, in the person of the young Samson; and we find him faithlessly leaving *The Bride* to die, in the person of the Levite. And of course, if there is the mother and the bride, there must also be *The Whore*, and what better candidate than Delilah to fill that symbolic role?

Less familiar to us, perhaps, is *The Youth*. He is the young man who is offered the temptation to seize power prematurely, which was the sin of Adam and of Ham.<sup>1</sup> We meet him in the person of Gideon. Another character we meet frequently in Genesis, but only once in Judges, is *The Younger Brother*. When the older brother apostatizes, and is judged, the younger brother takes his place. We meet him in Judges in the person of Jotham, because the death of his older brothers was a sign to Israel that the old world order is under judgment.

And we have not exhausted the list. But are all these mere symbols, mere allegorical figures? Not at all. If you or I had written these stories, and had tried to make everything come out just so, we would have had to engage in a little judicious fiction (and there is nothing wrong with that, as Jesus' parables illustrate). But that is not what we have here. These were real flesh and blood people, who really lived. Their lives were so ordered by God, however, that everything did come out just so; and the history of their lives was written by the author in such a way as to bring out the universal meanings, without the need to distort a single fact.

### Keys to Interpretation

Who was this author of Judges? Christians confess that God wrote this book, ultimately, as He wrote all of the Bible. I think the most likely candidate for human authorship is Samuel. As we shall see, one of the major themes in Judges is that there was no human king in Israel. The people were supposed to recognize the Lord as their king. When they did not, chaos ensued. It is Samuel who made the great speech against the tyranny of human kings in 1 Samuel 8, and it is very easy to believe that he might have been moved by God to prepare Judges as a tract for the times.

Judges, like all the so-called "history books" of the Old Testament, is really a prophecy. Judges is numbered among what are called the "Former Prophets." These books were called prophecies because the histories they recorded were regarded as exemplary. The histories showed God's principles in action, and thus formed prophetic warnings to the

1. See James B. Jordan, "Rebellion, Tyranny, and Dominion in the Book of Genesis," in North, ed., *Tactics of Christian Resistance*. Christianity & Civilization No. 3 (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1983).

people. If we read Judges merely as a set of exciting stories, we miss this.

To get at the prophetic meaning, we need to know four "secrets" of interpreting Biblical narratives. First, we have to take seriously the universals, as mentioned above. The first enemy who invades Israel in the book of Judges is Cushman-of-Double-Wickedness from Aram-of-Double-River. This is Mesopotamia. What is the prophecy? If the people do not live righteously, the enemy will come from Mesopotamia. And so it was. First Assyria conquered Northern Israel, and later Babylon conquered Southern Israel, so that even the idea of a two-fold destruction came to pass.

Along these lines, we must confess with Genesis 1:26 that man, both individually and corporately (at various levels), is the very image of God. This means that human life inevitably and incessantly images the life of God, either properly (righteously) or improperly (sinfully). What this fact means is that there is a profound symbolic dimension to everything in human life. For instance, the interaction of people with one another shows the interaction among the Three Persons of God, either rightly or wrongly. Now, this is more particularly true of the stories recounted in the Bible, since they are designed as prophecy. In more pointed ways they show us how to image God, or how not to.

The symbolism or typology of Scripture is more or less *vague*. There is nothing wrong with vagueness. We have to have some vague words in our language as well as some more specific words. For instance, to tell someone that a room is "large" is vague compared to telling him that the dimensions of the room are 12x 120x 120 feet—yet "large" conveys information better than the specifics would. Similarly, to say that the sun rose today around 6:00 A.M. is perfectly clear, yet it is relatively more vague than to say that the horizon of the earth lowered to reveal the sun at precisely 5:58:45 A. M., Eastern Daylight Time, as viewed from Athens, Georgia.

Some of the parables of Jesus are very specific, so specific as to be virtual allegories (such as the Parable of the Wedding Feast, Matthew 22:1-13), while others are more vague or general. This is also true of the stories of the Old Testament. Some events are clearly and pointedly symbolic and topological, while some are only vaguely and generally so.

We have to explain this in order to distance ourselves from the "interpretive minimalism" that has come to characterize evangelical commentaries on Scripture in recent years. We do not need some specific New Testament verse to "prove" that a given Old Testament story has symbolic dimensions. Rather, such symbolic dimensions are presupposed in the very fact that man is the image of God. Thus, we ought not be afraid to hazard a guess at the wider prophetic meanings of Scripture narratives, as we consider how they image the ways of God.

Such a "maximalist" approach as this puts us more in line with the kind of interpretation used by the Church Fathers. It seems dangerous, because it is not readily evident what kinds of checks and balances are to be employed in such an approach. Do the five loaves and two fishes represent the five books of Moses and the Old and New Testaments? Almost certainly not. What, however, is our check on such an interpretation? We have to say that the check and balance on interpretation is the whole rest of Scripture and of theology. As time goes along, and we learn more and more, our interpretations will become refined. If we do not plunge in and try now, however, that day of refinement will never come.

Let me take an example now. In Judges 1:11-15 we have the story of Othniel and Achsah. The characters here are the Enemy (giants), the Father (Caleb), the Son (Othniel), the Daughter (Achsah), and two other factors: springs of water and a donkey. The Son destroys the Enemy in order to win the Bride from the Father. Can we see a vague image of the gospel here? Certainly; it fairly leaps off the page. After the

marriage, we find the Bride asking the Father for springs of water. Can we see in this a *vague* image of the Church asking for and receiving the Spirit? Also, we see the Bride riding on an ass, an unclean beast. Given the fact that unclean animals signify the unconverted nations (Acts 10, 11), and that the false Bride of Revelation is seen riding on the back of the Beast (Rev. 17:3), can we see in this a *vague* picture of the Church riding on and dominating the heathen world? I think so.

These are *vague* images, snapshots of truth as it were. It would be stretching matters to try to make this story into a prophetic type in the full sense, but at the same time we ought not to blind ourselves to the possibility that a more general picture of the kingdom of God is presented here. Without any doubt, the story of Othniel and Achsah is designed to picture for us the winning of the kingdom, and the blessings that come to the righteous after the kingdom is won. In a general way, this is parallel to the work of Christ in winning the kingdom, and the blessings that come to the Church afterwards. Given this *genera*/truth, we are invited to inspect the passage more closely to see more specific parallels, as I did above.

One does not burn at the stake for interpretations such as this. At the same time, we would not be doing our duty to the text if we did not at least give some reflection to them. In this commentary, I shall be interpreting the text "maximally." The reader must consider the ideas I throw out, and if he finds that some are not really well supported, or not credible, that is fine. The important thing is to engage in the interpretive discussion, and strive for a fuller understanding of the prophecies before us.

The second "secret" is to keep an eye on the interaction between God and man. We ask three questions:

1. What is God's Word of promise and command?
2. What is man's response (rebellion or faithfulness)?
3. What is God's Word of evaluation (judgment or blessing)?

Every Biblical narrative contains all three elements, at least by implication. Sometimes the Word of promise/command is not expressed, because it is contained in the Law, which is the background for all the later books of the Bible. Every promise is a command, for the faithful man knows that he needs to pursue the blessing in the promise; and every command is a promise, for God will always bless those who submit to His commands. We then come to man's response. Men are either faithful or rebellious—sometimes a mixture of the two. Then, third, we come to God's evaluation or judgment, which entails either curse or blessing.

This threefold action underlies every narrative in Scripture. Adam was given a command/promise. He rebelled. God came to judge him. Humanity as a whole is given a command/promise from God. Human history as a whole is the response of humanity. The Last Judgment is the final evaluation made by God. Abram was given a command: move to Canaan. Abram obeyed. After he arrived in Canaan, God met him and blessed him—and gave him his next orders, which Abram obeyed, and God blessed him and then gave him his next orders, which he obeyed, etc., etc.

The third "secret" is to take note of the larger covenant-historical context of the book. The Bible presents one basic story over and over again, with variations each time, designed for our instruction. This is the story of creation, fall, decline, judgment, and re-creation. This pattern happens in three very large historical sweeps during the Old Covenant. The first occurrence is the creation of the world, the fall of Adam, the decline recorded in Genesis 6, the judgment of the Flood, and the recreation in Noah.

The second occurrence of this pattern in its large form begins with the re-creation of the world after the Flood. This re-creation takes the same form as the first creation: First the wider world is made (Gen. 1; Gen. 10, the nations), and then the sanctuary is set up (Gen. 2, Eden; Gen. 12, call of

Abram). The creation section continues until Israel is fully settled in the land, when David finally conquers all of it. Then comes the fall, with Solomon, and a progressive decline until the Exile, when the new Adams and Eves are once again cast out of God's sanctuary. The re-creation comes with Daniel and Ezra.

The third occurrence of this pattern begins with the re-creation of the world under Daniel, and the re-establishment of the sanctuary by Ezra. The big fall comes when God's people crucify the Lord of Glory. The decline continues until A.D. 70, and issues in the destruction of the sanctuary. The final, third recreation is, thus, the Church, which is permanent.

I have identified these three large occurrences of the pattern by using the rule of the sanctuary. In spite of all the ups and downs in Israel's history, they were not cast out of the land until Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem. Thus, from Abraham to Nebuchadnezzar is one large history. Accordingly, the first three "days" of history have at their centers three sanctuaries: Eden, the first Tabernacle/Temple, and the second (Ezra's) Temple. Christ's death in the third cycle (on the third "day") broke this cycle forever. In spite of her ups and downs, the history of the Church will be one of progressive re-creation and culmination.

Now, within the second great occurrence of this pattern (from Abraham to the Exile), there are three smaller manifestations of the pattern:

**Basic pattern No. 2a:**

Creation: Abraham to Exodus

Fall and Decline: Wilderness

Judgment: Death of that generation

Re-creation: Death of Aaron, as high priest, enabling people to leave wilderness "city of refuge" and once again take possession of their lands (Num. 20:29 and 21:1ff.)

**Basic pattern No. 2b:**

Creation: Joshua and the conquest

Fall: Judges chapter 1

Decline: book of Judges

Judgment: capture of the Ark at the time of Samson, Samuel, and Ruth (I develop this in detail in chapter 12 of this book)

Re-creation: the return of the Ark

**Basic pattern No. 2c:**

Creation: Samuel and David

Fall: Solomon, who breaks all the laws for kings (compare Deuteronomy 17:16f. with 1 Kings 10:14ff., 26ff.; 11:1ff.)

Decline: the two monarchies

Judgment the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile

Re-creation: Ezra, Nehemiah

Throughout the Bible, there are smaller manifestations of this pattern as well. Our concern in this third "secret" of interpretation is to note the position of the book of Judges in the overall sweep of redemptive history. Judges records the fall, decline, and judgment of Israel, and also (in Samson and in the last chapter) the beginnings of re-creation. This is an important structure for understanding the book.

The fourth "secret" of interpretation is to pay close attention to the specific details in the text. God does not waste words. God has absolute superintendence of events, and every detail recorded in the text is to be pondered for significance. Judges 9:53, for instance, does not say, "Someone threw a stone and it hit Abimelech so that he was dying." Rather, it says, "A certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull." Every detail is important, as we shall see in chapter 8 of this study: that it was a woman, that it was a stone, that it was a millstone, that it hit and crushed his head.

Similarly, numbers are usually important as symbols in the text. Ancient writers always used numbers symbolically,

and it strains credulity to think that the writers of the Bible did not do so. People today don't think of numbers symbolically, but in the history of the world, modern man is a great exception on this point. To be sure, the numbers are also literally true, but since God superintends all events, we are certainly invited to consider the deeper significance of the number patterns in the text.

The writings in the Bible are carefully constructed literary masterpieces. Failure to keep that fact in mind leads to sloppy interpretation. (Undoubtedly there is a fair share of sloppy work in this present commentary, but let us agree at the outset that we shall at least try to be as careful as possible.) If something is repeated in the text, it is repeated for a reason. If someone's name is given, or omitted (as with Samson's mother), there is a reason. If attention is tailored to specific numbers, there is a reason. In other words, a "host of 7000 men" is not interpretively the same as a "large host of men." Details are important.

By keeping these four "secrets" in mind, we can have a God-centered approach to the message of Judges. Primarily, after all, these are not moral tales of what men did rightly or wrongly. Primarily they are stories about how God deals with man, in judgment and redemption. The interplay between God and man is the heart of history.

So, as we retell these stories, we shall be looking at their prophetic meaning. What did they mean to the people of that time? What lessons were they supposed to draw from the text? And what lessons are we to draw, as well?

### Overviews of Judges

Let us now turn to an overview of the book, in terms of its larger structure. There are several interlaced structuring devices in Judges.

First of all, the stories recounted in Judges come in five sets of pairs. My guess is that this arrangement is designed to exemplify the Biblical doctrine that any matter is established only "at the mouth of two or three witnesses" (Dt. 19:15). This type of pairing or doubling is quite common in the Bible, and probably for this reason. God is Three and One, and He always gives two or three testimonies to Himself.

The following is an outline and overview of Judges, in terms of these pairs.

#### I. Two Introductions:

- A. From Conquest to Compromise (1:1-2:5)
- B. Principles of Chastisement (2:6-3:6)

#### II. Two Exemplary Judges:

- A. Othniel (3:7-11)
- B. Ehud (3:12-30)

#### III. Two Unlikely Judges:

- A. Deborah, a woman (4:1-5:31)
- B. Gideon, a youth (6:1-9:57)
  - 1. Gideon's triumphs (6:1-8:28)
  - 2. Gideon's fall and the beginning of the polemic against kingship (8:29-9:57)

(Notice that Psalm 83:9-12 and Isaiah 9:1-4 put the Deborah and Gideon stories together.)

#### IV. Two Compromised Judges:

- A. Jephthah, the half-breed (10:1-12:15)
  - 1. Jephthah's sin of desiring the crown (11:1-40)
  - 2. Jephthah's righteous acts (12:1-7)
- B. Samson, the Nazirite (13:1-16:31)
  - 1. Samson's birth (13)
  - 2. Samson's evangelistic work (14-15)
  - 3. Samson's fall (16)

(Notice that the story of Jephthah is bracketed with notices about minor judges (10:1-5; 12:8-15), which illustrate the temptation to kingship. Notice also that the Jephthah and Samson stories are inversions of one of another: Jephthah's righteous acts come after his fall, while Samson's fall comes after his righteous acts.)

## V. Two Appendices

- A. The Levites fail to guard the worship of Israel (17-18) (See 3:7—idolatry)
- B. The Levites fail to guard the morality of Israel (19-21) (See 3:6—whoredom)

Such is the simplest way to outline the book. There is a second way to do it, which brings out the two-witness aspect even more fully. Beginning with Ehud, at least, each section introduces a theme that is taken up by the next section, as follows:

**Ehud and Deborah:** in both stories we have deliverance from the enemy by an assassinating hand. In both stories the head of the serpent is crushed by the Messianic hero or heroine, and then the armies of God follow after with a mopping up operation. (Cf. 3:27 and 4:14). Ehud recaptured the "City of Paim Trees," and Deborah sat as judge under a paim tree.

**Deborah and Gideon:** in both stories we have deliverance by subordinates when leaders default. In both stories, when the wicked are defeated, the sun rises (5:31; 8:13).

**Gideon and Jephthah:** Here we have two stories showing a desire to establish a false kingship; and both Abimelech and Jephthah were halfbreeds. A humanistic kingship grows out of a halfbreed faith.

**Jephthah and Samson:** in both stories, character flaws prevent effective leadership and social progress. In both stories we have rebellion against and betrayal of God's anointed leader.

**Samson and Appendix 1:** These two stories are linked by having the same setting, and by the betrayal either of the Lord Himself or of the Lord's Anointed for 1100 pieces of silver.

**Appendices 1 & 2:** in both of these the underlying problem is the default on the part of the Levite-guardians of Israel.

A third overall structure in Judges is seen in the middle section of the book. There is a progressive rebellion against God, seen in a progressive refusal to follow His Anointed:

**Ehud:** No problem following the Anointed.

**Deborah:** Barak must be persuaded to follow the Lord's command.

**Gideon:** Most of the tribes follow him, but Ephraim shows rebellion.

**Jephthah:** Ephraim rebels outright and is punished.

**Samson:** Judah is no better than Ephraim, and delivers the Messiah over to the enemy. In fact, as the royal tribe, Judah possesses higher privileges, and so her sin is greater than Ephraim's.

Fourth, there is a general parallel between the first section of Judges, and the outline of the rest of the book. As we shall see, the first introduction to Judges shows Israel beginning well, but progressively compromising until God judges them, and then grants them healing through sacrifice. Similarly, the rest of the book of Judges shows the same pattern: beginning well (Othniel, Ehud), progressive decline (as noted above), final judgment (the second appendix), followed by redemption and new life (the last chapter of the book). As we shall see when we get to it, the second appendix picks upon language and themes from the first introduction, so that these two sections bracket the book of Judges.

### Theology of Judges

In terms of its "theology proper," the book of Judges presents God almost exclusively in two aspects. The first is as the LORD. God told Moses in Exodus 6:3, "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them." This does not mean that the patriarchs did not use the name YHWH or LORD, but that God had not made clear to them its meaning. God appeared to the patriarchs as God Almighty, the God Who creates covenants and makes promises. At the exodus, God appeared to Israel as the LORD, the God Who continues ("establishes") His covenant and who keeps His promises. Exodus 6:6-8 gives a detailed exposition of the meaning of the name LORD: The LORD is the one who brings His people out of bondage (v. 6), who marries them (v. 7), and who gives them the land promised to them (v. 8).

The name LORD, then, has to do with God's faithfulness in the face of man's faithlessness. It has to do with the land God promised, and the conquest of that land. It has to do with God's marriage to Israel. It has to do with bondage and deliverance. These are all major themes in Judges, and this is why "LORD" is the name for God used here. Thus, the book of Judges as a whole is a large-scale exposition of the meaning of the name LORD.

The other term used to refer to God in Judges is "Angel of the LORD." According to Exodus 24:20ff., the Angel is the one who goes before the people, as Captain of the LORDS host, to lead them into the land. The Angel of the LORD, thus, appeared to Joshua at the beginning of the conquest (Joshua 5:13ff.). In Judges, God manifests Himself as Angel when He judges the people at Gilgal for their faithlessness in the conquest (Jud. 2:1-4), when He appears to Gideon to summon him to war for the land (Jud. 6:11-22), and when He appears to the wife of Manoah to announce the birth of Samson the deliverer (Jud. 13:3-21).

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