

Preface 19

Ecclesiastes 12:12

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James B. Jordan's JUDGES: GOD'S WAR AGAINST HUMANISM

by David Chilton

James B. Jordan is, to my mind, the very best Bible teacher on the planet. I have been waiting anxiously for this superb commentary to be published, ever since I saw an early draft more than seven years ago. I believe that Christian leaders in both ministry and academia will find it to be one of the finest commentaries available. It is true, of course, that few readers even of serious Christian literature take the trouble to read Bible commentaries; these are usually seen as belonging to the domain of theological specialists, rather than of laymen. While that may be true of many commentaries (I can even remember a seminary professor urging a group of future pastors not to bother reading them!), this volume is definitely an outstanding exception to that rule. It is well-written and avoids technical language; it gets to the point; it is consistently both edifying in its straightforward wisdom and astonishing in its depth of insight. I recommend it highly.

Since I cannot hope to cover everything Jordan says here, I must content myself with a discussion of a couple of major themes in the book. These will then be followed by a brief summary of the message (and high points) of Judges as a whole.

I. Principles of Interpretation

Jordan once observed that most conservative evangelicals unintentionally pursue a "liberal" approach toward Scripture in their sermons and commentaries. Liberals have held for years that the Bible is not revelation itself; rather, they maintain, it is a [flawed] record of revelation. While conservative evangelicals profess to believe that the Bible itself is revelation (and as such is inspired, authoritative, and inerrant), their expository methods deny this. In practice, conservatives themselves often treat the Bible as only a "record" of revelation. Evangelical commentaries tend not to deal with the actual text of the Bible, treating only of the events related in the text and paying scant attention to the wording of God's revelation. (Ironically, since liberals don't believe the events really happened, they sometimes tend to pay closer attention to the text itself. That's all they've got left.)

For example, a conservative exposition of Judges might wax eloquent on the histories of Deborah, Jephthah, and Samson (complete with devotional musings on certain spiritual applications thereof); but it might also tend to ignore the form in which God saw fit to reveal these truths. There would probably be little, if any, comment on the literary architecture of the book, in terms of either its overall structure or its component parts.

The Bible: God's Storybook

One of Jordan's greatest strengths as a Bible teacher is that he is constantly asking: *Why* is the story told in this particular way? *Why* is this particular word or phrase repeated several times? (How many times?) What does this story have in common with other stories? How is it different? *Why* does the text draw our attention to seemingly unimportant details? How do the minor incidents fit into the argument of the book as a whole? What literary devices (metaphor, satire, drama, comedy, allegory, poetry, etc.) does the author use? *Why* does the book sometimes depart from a strict chronological account (e.g., placing some stories "out of order")? How are these stories related to the larger Story that the Bible tells? What does this story tell us about Jesus Christ? What does this story have to do with our salvation? *Why* did God bother to give us this particular information?

What all this implies is that to be a good Bible teacher one must be a storyteller, since the Bible is written as a story—as *the* Story, in fact. In his inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary in 1894, Geerhardus Vos spoke of the advantages of the Biblical Theology approach to the study of Scripture; among these, he said, is "the new life and freshness which it gives to the old truth, showing it in all its historic vividness and reality with the dew of the morning of revelation upon its opening leaves. It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history, the parallel to which in dramatic interest and simple eloquence is nowhere to be found. It is this that makes the Scriptures speak and appeal to and touch the hearts and lead the minds of men captive to the truth everywhere. No one will be able to handle the Word of God more effectually than he to whom the treasure-chambers of its historic meaning have been opened up" (Richard B. Gaffin, ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 23).

One of the most important discoveries that can be made by any Bible teacher is an understanding of the basic imagery laid down in the early chapters of Genesis—light and darkness, water and land, sky and clouds, mountains and gardens, beasts and dragons, gold and jewels, trees and thorns, cherubs and flaming swords—all of which form a grand and glorious Story, the *true* "fairy tale," one which can be grasped and delighted in even by very young children. (For a good introduction to the literary motifs of Scripture, see Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*; Zondervan, 1984.)

How to Read the Bible

Jordan takes this a step further with his observation that "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 a prophetic warning to the people. If we read Judges merely as a set of exciting stories, we miss this" (p. xi; cf. p. 54).

Jordan's "Introduction" offers four suggestions for interpreting Biblical stories in order to understand their prophetic meaning. Because this is one of the best brief discussions of Biblical hermeneutics available, I am reviewing it at length here:

1. *Take the Biblical "universals" seriously.* By *universals* Jordan means the various images and symbols given in the Bible: the Seed, the Woman, the Serpent, the Bride, the Groom, the Harlot, and so on. It is important to note, however, that in their various historic outworkings these universals are always more or less vague; "snapshots of truth," Jordan calls them. Thus, while most Bible stories are not intended as strict, point-by-point allegories, it is not necessary on the other hand to come up with a "proof-text" that gives us specific warrant for interpreting some particular story in terms of a wider, prophetic meaning. As Jordan says, "such symbolic dimensions are presupposed in the very fact that man is the image of God." For example, we call God "Father," not because He is like earthly fathers but because earthly fathers are images of Him. He is the Original Father, as He is the Original of everything else (see Eph. 3:15; cf. Matt. 7:9-11; 23:9). All creation images Him, and this inescapably means that *all creation is primarily symbolic*. All creatures reflect the glory of God, and are images of some aspect or other of His nature. The *primary* value of anything is that it is a symbol of God. All other values and relationships are secondary. (For an extended discussion of the primacy of symbolism, see Jordan's essay, "Symbolism: A Manifesto," in *The Geneva Papers*, No. 28 [May 1984], available for a donation to Geneva Ministries, P.O. Box 8376, Tyler, TX 75711).

Our first assumption in approaching Bible stories, therefore, must be that they were written down in order to reveal something about God—not just to tell us exciting herosagas. Jordan calls this "interpretive maximalism," an approach that harmonizes with the interpretive method used by the Church Fathers, as opposed to the "minimalism" that has characterized fundamentalist-evangelical commentaries since the rise of rationalism. One of the ways in which Jordan illustrates this is by showing that it is impossible to construct a strict chronology for the Book of Judges: The numbers given for the years covered by the book (as well as the numbers of wives, sons, and so on) "in addition to being historically accurate, have theological significance" (p. 55).

2. *Pay attention to the interaction between God and man.* We must be sensitive to the "liturgical structures" of the Bible—the repeated pattern in which we see God's Word of command or promise, followed by man's response to God's Word, and then God's evaluation of that response. "This threefold pattern underlies every narrative in Scripture," Jordan says; much of his commentary is simply an extended illustration of this fact, and most chapters begin with a liturgical outline of the Scripture passage under discussion.

3. *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." Jordan shows how the history of the Old Covenant develops in terms of three large-scale repetitions of this story (from the creation until the Flood; from the re-creation

of the world under Noah until the Exile; finally, from the re-creation of the world under Daniel and Ezra until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70). "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." A crucial factor in our understanding of any part of the Bible will be our grasp of this covenant-historical framework and how the section under study fits into the pattern. (Judges is part of a smaller repetition of the pattern within the second cycle, and represents the Fall and Decline leading up to the capture of the Ark of the Covenant; see pp. 237-40 for Jordan's discussion of this theme).

4. *Pay close attention to the details in the text.* "The writings in the Bible are carefully constructed literary masterpieces. Failure to keep that in mind leads to sloppy interpretation. . . . 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 called to specific numbers, there is a reason. In other words, a 'host of 7000 men' is not interpretively the same thing as a 'large host of men.' Details are important."

A good example of this is Jordan's discussion of Judges 9:53: "But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull." (Note: The text does not simply say that "Abimelech got killed." The details are there for a reason.) It is important, for symbolic reasons, that a woman crushed the tyrant's head (see, e.g., Gen. 3:15; cf. Jud. 5:24-27); that he was destroyed by a stone (cf. Deut. 13:10; Jud. 9:5; 1 Sam. 17:49; Dan. 2:34; Matt. 21:44); and that it was a millstone, an implement of work to overcome tyranny (cf. Zech. 1:18-21). *Details are important!*

"Maximalism" and "Speculation"

Some have asked: How does a "maximalist" evade the accusation that he is merely being speculative, interpreting the text according to his personal prejudice or the whim of the moment? Of course, the charge that an interpreter is being "speculative" can be, as often as not, little more than a smokescreen to disguise the accuser's ignorance of what the interpreter is talking about. The appropriate question, therefore, is whether or not the interpreter is proceeding in his investigations along Biblical lines of thought. Does this mean that he must stick to the so-called "plain sense" of the text? It might be answered that one man's "plain sense" is another man's "speculation." A hyper-literalist would object to any level of symbolism at all. (For example, one popular preacher teaches, on the basis of the "plain sense" of Revelation 12, that there is a real, live, fire-breathing, seven-headed dragon flying around in outer space!) The more usual, run-of-the-mill literalist rejects all symbolism not explicitly explained as such in Scripture. But neither of these positions is countenanced by the Bible. God has given us principles of interpreting His Word, and He expects us to use them. Our goal in Bible teaching is, to put it plainly, *Bible teaching*, according to the Bible's own standards of exegesis—whether or not those fit everyone's notions of "plainness."

There are at least two things that can keep an interpreter on a Biblical track, avoiding the pitfalls of willy-nilly speculation. First, he must be faithful to the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. Reading the Bible with theological eyes, in terms of systematic and historical theology, is an effective check on unbridled speculation. Second, the interpreter must keep in mind that the symbols in the Bible are not isolated; rather, they are part of a *system* of symbolism given in the Bible, an architecture of images in which all the parts fit together. If we honestly and carefully read the Bible theologically and with respect to the Bible's own literary structure, we will not go very far astray. (For more on Biblical interpretation, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old*

and New Testaments [Eerdmans, 1948]; Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* [Baker Book House, 1980].)

II. Baalism, Then and Now

We today tend to think of idolatry in general, and Baalism in particular, as far removed from our lives. We can't imagine what it must be like to be so primitive, so *gauche*, as to bow down and worship gods of wood and stone. Modern men may not be Christians, but at least they aren't so rude as to be idolaters. Jordan argues, however, that Baalism is very close indeed to the worldview of modern, sophisticated paganism (humanism): "In essence it was the ascription of power to Nature: The universe has within it the force of life. The world as we know it is the result of the union of the ultimate male and female principles of the universe, which may be called Baal and Ashtaroth (or Astartes). . . . Canaanite philosophers believed, of course, that these ultimate forces were impersonal, and that their union was not sexual; but the common people preferred to think of the matter mythically. The sun god copulated with the original mud of the world, and the animals and man resulted. How does such a myth differ from a more sophisticated expression of the same principle, such as can be found in any 20th century high school textbook? Once, we are told, there was a vast primordial sea. Then one day, sparked by sunlight, an organic molecule appeared, which evolved to become our present world. A 'male' principle, sunlight, inseminates a 'female' principle, the primordial sea, and life is born. . . ."

"Thus, the heart of ancient Baalism was secular humanism. Secular humanism says that the universe is self-creating, so that Nature is ultimate (this being the 'secular' aspect). Secular humanism also teaches that man is the lord of Nature, and that man must rule over (stimulate) Nature (this being the 'humanism' aspect)" (pp. 35ff.).

Worship: Christian and Pagan, Ancient and Modern

Surely Jordan is exaggerating. After all, modern humanists don't literally bow down to some idol of Nature; to call humanists "idolaters" and "Nature-worshippers" is merely a bit of metaphorical excess, is it not? Jordan answers: "Let the reader, however, consider whether he as a Christian ever literally bows down to his God. How many Protestant churches that have kneelers has the reader ever been in? Do Protestants show their respect for the King of kings by at least standing for prayer, or do they pray sitting down, a posture nowhere encountered in Scripture for prayer? If modern Christians have no more respect for their God than to address Him sitting down, why should we expect the modern Baalists to bow down to Nature? Ancient man bowed before his god, whether it was Nature (Baalism) or the Creator (YHWH). Modern man does not bow before his god, whether Nature (Humanism) or the Creator (Christ).

"Similarly, for ancient man, the heart of religious exercise was adoration, worship, prostration, sacrament (a fellowship meal with the god). This was true of Israel before the Lord, and of the Canaanites before Baal. And this is the Biblical view of worship: Preaching/proclamation is the Word from God, which leads to a response of adoration, prostration, sacrament. The modern Christian, however, sees the heart of worship as entertainment (from a choir and an entertaining preacher) or as philosophical meditation (from a scholarly preacher). The sermon, instead of leading into worship, has become itself the climax of worship. And, just as the modern Christian view of worship is not much more than studying doctrine, so the modern humanist worships his god in the same way. We don't see humanists bowing down to their gods, but we do see them studying them, lecturing about them, writing books about them. And we don't see Christians bowing down to the Lord either, but we do see them studying Him, preaching about Him, and writing books about Him.

"Thus, there is indeed a big difference between ancient religions and modern man. Ancient man *primarily* worshipped his gods, while modern man *primarily* studies his" (pp. 34f.).

"No Such Thing as Nature"

"The details of the Baal cult are not of much importance to us now. It is the underlying philosophy of Baalism which is regnant in American education and life today, and which is taught in the science departments of almost all Christian colleges today, and not just in science departments either. Scripture teaches that God sustains life directly, not indirectly. There is no such thing as Nature. God has not given any inherent power of development to the universe as such. God created the universe and all life by immediate actions, not by mediate processes. When God withdraws His Breath (which is the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life), death follows immediately (Gen. 7:22). The idea that God wound up the universe and then let it run its course, so that there is such a thing as Nature which has an intrinsic power, is Deism, not Christianity. Theistic evolution is Deism, not Christianity. To the extent to which the processes of Nature replace the acts of God in any system, to that extent the system has become Baalistic" (pp. 37f.).

"Because of the influence of neo-Baalism (secular humanism) in our modern culture, we tend to think that God, when He made the world, installed certain 'natural laws' or processes that work automatically and impersonally. This is a Deistic, not a Christian, view of the world. What we call natural or physical law is actually a rough approximate generalization about the ordinary activity of God in governing His creation. Matter, space, and time are created by God, and are ruled directly and actively by Him. His rule is called 'law.' God almost always causes things to be done the same way, according to covenant regularities (the Christian equivalent of natural laws), which covenant regularities were established in Genesis 8:22. Science and technology are possible because God does not change the rules, so man can confidently explore the world and learn to work it. Such confidence, though, is always a form of faith, faith either in Nature (Baal) and natural law, or faith in God and in the trustworthiness of His commitment to maintain covenant regularities" (p. 102).

Miracles and "the Laws of Nature"

"The religion of the Bible is a religion-philosophy that ascribes all events to personal actions on the part of personal, accountable agents (God, angels, and men), as we have seen. The eternally active Triune God brings all things to pass through His eternal activity, not through the establishment of impersonal processes. Baalism, on the other hand, is a religion-philosophy that ascribes all events to impersonal processes on the part of impersonal forces, which may be mythologized as gods and goddesses" (p. 128).

"What are miracles? The Deistic view of miracle sees it as a disruption of the processes of nature that God established at the creation. A proper Christian view of miracle sees it as God's acting in a way different from the way He usually acts. God does not 'set aside the physical laws' in miracles, for there are no such laws or processes to set aside. The importance of miracles in Scripture is that they pointedly demonstrate that God is the eternally active God, and that the universe is not a self-sustaining process. Miracles refute Baalism, whether Pantheistic (the universe as self-originating) or Deistic (God created it, and left it to itself)" (p. 129).

"Our modern philosophy of process makes us hesitant about taking matters of our daily life to God in prayer. It is as easy for God to keep my car running as it is for Him to let it run down. When we see that God is active in everything, our

dependence on Him should greatly increase. While we should not look for miracles in the sense of signs (the Bible is our sign, telling us how to live), we should be looking all the time to the eternally active God to bring things to pass. There is much that we should be asking for, except that our Baalistic philosophy of process causes us to think that it is no use asking for it. We should take everything to God in prayer.

"There are things in our lives that we have gotten used to, and we think 'Well, that's just the way things are.' In reality, however, these things we have gotten used to are the way God is doing things, and God can do things differently if He wants to. There would probably be a great deal less chronic sickness among us if we would stop treating sickness as a process and start treating it as the action of God, correctable by Him. 2 Chronicles 16:12 condemns Asa for looking solely to the physicians rather than to God for healing. James 5:14-15 tells us the primary thing we should do in the case of sickness (without despising the ministries of Luke the physician).

"Baalism is rampant in America today, in the classroom, in science, in social science (how to manipulate people by manipulating processes), on the right (cycles of civilization), on the left (irresistible forces of dialectical materialism), etc. We as Christians must keep reminding ourselves that God is a Person, our relationship to Him is personal, He is personally interested in every atom of the universe, He governs all things by His personal actions, we are surrounded by angels, we can ask and He will answer" (pp. 130f.).

III. The Message of the Book of Judges

The story of Judges is largely a tale of Israel's compromises with Baalism and her consequent judgments at the hands of the Canaanites, who originally had been defeated by Joshua in the definitive conquest of the land. Israel's subsequent history should have been simply a series of mopping-up operations, applying and extending the victory that had already been achieved. But, instead of exercising dominion over the land, Israel's repeated rebellion against the Covenant resulted in a devastating cycle of slavery-repentance-deliverance-apostasy-slavery. The basic principles are stated in Judges 2:13-19:

13. So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.

14. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.

15. Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.

16. Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.

17. And yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers.

18. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for

the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. 19. But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways.

A major factor in Israel's apostasy, and a theme that runs throughout Judges, is the failure of the Levites. They were supposed to be the priest-guardians of Israel, and their failure properly to guard the Bride (by observing God's commandments) resulted in disaster for the nation. According to Scripture, the husband has three "priestly" tasks to perform for his wife: He is required to guard her, to give her food, and to instruct her. As Jordan points out, the priest images the divine Husband to the Bride (this, incidentally, is why the woman is forbidden to exercise priestly functions, since she is an image of the Bride; cf. Jordan's discussion of this point on pp. 77-81). "What we find in Judges, especially in the appendix [Judges 17-21], is the failure of the Levites to act as proper husbands to Israel. They failed to teach and thus failed to guard. As a result, they left the Bride of the Lord exposed to danger. . . . The Spiritual harlotry of Israel, the Bride, was due in large part to the failure of the Levites, representing the Groom, to guard her by means of sound instruction. The true Husband (the Lord) was not visible, and was soon forgotten, with the result that the lonely Bride went sinfully searching for an adulterous substitute. Wicked as her actions were, the primary blame lay on the Levites" (p. 32).

Jordan fleshes out this theme throughout the rest of his book, which contains some of the most exciting and informative studies in Scripture you will ever read. There is the story of Ehud, the godly southpaw who assassinated a tyrant; of Shamgar, the Canaanite convert who became the "Surprise Judge," a sort of "Zorro, B.C."; of Deborah, Israel's "Mother," who sat at the gate of heaven and composed songs of praise and satire; of the great Battle of Megiddo (the first "Armageddon," for all you prophecy buffs); of Jael, a real knockout who could whip up a mean dish of yogurt; of Gideon, nicknamed the "Baal Fighter"; of Abimelech, Israel's first king; of Jephthah, who did *not* literally offer his daughter up as a sacrifice, contrary to what you may have heard (this section alone is worth the price of the book); of Samson, whose reputation is at last rehabilitated from a very long-standing bad press; of Micah, the priest who made gods; of Jonathan, Moses' apostate grandson; and of the sodomite thugs who attacked, raped, and murdered the Bride. (Some parts of this commentary might get at least a PG-13 rating, but it is always both sensitively worded and faithful to the message of Scripture.)

Many other themes are dealt with in this wonderful book, from the effects of sin on our digestive cycle to the Biblical principles of psychological warfare, from the governmental structure of the Hebrew republic (and the influence of the Book of Judges on Christian political thought) to the amusing and delightful strategem which some young maidens used to catch their husbands (then, as now, it was customary to maintain the official fiction that the boys were catching the girls, but everyone knew better). There are fascinating discussions of the relationship of faith and culture, the function of the Nazirite in the Old Covenant, the purpose of oppression, the evils of pluralism, and much more. You will love this book, and so will your pastor. Buy him a copy, too.

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