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Moral Formation and the Book of Judges

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Scripture and Ethics

Scholars have long appreciated the value of the Book of Judges as a source of information concerning the pre-monarchical history of Israel.¹ However, few have explored it from a theological and ethical perspective. Judges is one of the most neglected books of the Bible, which is a pity because it is a work rich in ethical insight. It is not prescriptively ethical in the sense that it presents explicit norms and rules of conduct. However, it deals with an equally important matter: the community of faith as the context for moral formation.

My claim is that Judges can be ethically illuminating for Christians in the twenty-first century. But the terms of that claim must be carefully circumscribed. It is made in full recognition of the problematic relationship between the moral categories of ancient Israel and those of our own time. Cyril Rodd has argued this point most forcefully in his book *Glimpses of a Strange Land*.² Rodd's thesis is that the moral universe of ancient Israel is a 'strange land' and that the entire approach of the Old Testament to ethical questions is completely foreign to our own post-Enlightenment perspective. The Bible, for example, is able notoriously to lend support to practices which we would view as morally abhorrent such as genocide, holy war, slavery and the oppression of women, all of which occur in Judges as in many

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- 1 Robert C. Boling, *Judges* (Anchor Bible 6A) (Garden City, N.J., 1975); C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (London, 1918); John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (New Century Bible Commentary) (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1986); James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges* (Cambridge, 1975); George Foot Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (New York, 1895); J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges*, John Bowen, trans. (Philadelphia, 1981).
 - 2 Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh, 2001).

other books. The best we can hope for, Rodd argues, is to catch 'glimpses' of what ancient Israel meant by right and wrong and 'the Old Testament can only provide help with modern ethical problems if its strangeness is taken fully into account.'³

Rodd is certainly correct and his work is a strong challenge to those who would read the Old Testament anachronistically as if the mental and moral framework of ancient Israel were the same as our own. But the question posed in this paper is not one strictly of history ('What did the inhabitants of ancient Israel mean by morality?') but one of biblical hermeneutics and ethical reflection on Scripture ('How can the biblical narrative be read and assimilated in our time?') Granted, these questions are not unrelated. Contemporary judgments must be rooted in history. However, the community of faith is required to hear the text not merely as an historical artefact, but as a living story, containing within itself traditions of interpretation and transmitted to us via various interpretative traditions. Hearing the text as the Word of God within the community of faith is an activity of a different order from analyzing it as an historical source. As James Sanders points out, the text must be read *theologically*.⁴ This involves asking what the text can reasonably tell us of God and God's ways, not laboring under the illusion that there is a direct unmediated line of connection between the moral world of 1000 BC and today. This should come as no surprise, however, because the same process is involved in an informed reading of any text from long ago. We do not need, for example, to pretend that there are not profound differences between our world and that of Elizabethan England to read Shakespeare with profit. The original context of the text guides but does not exhaust its meaning.

And so we turn to the intriguing and enigmatic text of Judges to give us what it can reasonably give us, not so much specific ethical norms as a deeper awareness of the fundamentally communal character of Scripture. The biblical canon is reflective, in a primary sense, of a community's encounter with God in history. However, Scripture is also constitutive of that community and regulative of its ongoing identity. George Lindbeck talks of the 'grammar of religion.' A religion is a living faith analogous to a language that not only expresses ideas and beliefs held by its adherents, but furnishes the rules by which such a community of belief is defined.⁵ Communities of faith

3 Ibid, 300.

4 James Sanders, 'Hermeneutics,' *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville, Tennessee, 1976), 404.

5 See G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia, 1984).

shaped the biblical canon; but they continue to *be shaped* by it as well. The Bible is Holy Scripture and not simply a collection of interesting texts because it is able to '[transmit] and [order] authoritative tradition. . . for a generation which had not participated in the original events of revelation.'⁶ A scriptural hermeneutic presupposes the power of the texts to transmit a living tradition. Without such a hermeneutic, the Bible will tend to be approached only as a repository of historical data yielding inert knowledge of the past and placed under the authority of some prior interpretive commitment, such as historicist, Marxist or feminist ideology. Scripture is Scripture because it has the authoritative weight of revelation within the community out of which it has emerged. It is in this communal sense that Scripture informs the church's ethical task.⁷

However, to ground ethics in Scripture does not make right living easy or straightforward because the Bible is not merely a book of rules. People of faith are still troubled by moral decision-making. As James Gustafson points out, ethical issues arise precisely because the answer to the question 'What ought I to do?' is not always obvious.⁸ This ambiguity is especially pronounced in the twentieth century. Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed the devilish character of decision-making in 1943. In the surreal context of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer questioned how it is possible to decide and to act with integrity when none of the accepted ways of measuring right from wrong hold any long. Bonhoeffer wondered 'whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet — people to whom every available alternative seemed equally intolerable, repugnant and futileThe great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts.'⁹ Reason, conscience, duty, freedom — all the tried and true foundations of practical morality had become utterly weightless and insubstantial in the crisis of totalitarianism.¹⁰ In our own situation, rife with apparently insoluble moral

6 Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979), 60.

7 Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis, 1976), 127ff.

8 James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago, 1981) 1:87.

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition (New York, 1971), 3-4.

10 The philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that totalitarianism reduces the human person 'to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other.' The concept of the person as a free moral agent is obliterated. Human beings become purely reactive creatures and ethics comes to an end. *Totalitarianism* (Part Three of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [San Diego, New York, 1968]), 135.

dilemmas, we might well ask with Bonhoeffer, 'Who stands fast?'¹¹

Stanley Hauerwas has argued that, even though every age has been tormented by moral choice, ethics is especially vexing in our time because we have lost precisely this sense that it is a communal enterprise.¹² Kant and his successors sought to define ethics strictly in terms of decisions made by autonomous moral agents. But Christian ethics has never been individualistic. Ethics is more a process of formation, as Bonhoeffer himself understood,¹³ and Christian formation takes place primarily within the community. Over the last twenty-five years, several Christian ethicists such as James Gustafson, James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas have attempted to reassert the proper communal basis for ethics. Ethics involves more than simply judging between alternatives, what one writer has described as 'quandary ethics'.¹⁴ Moral living consists of more than episodes of decision. It is the cultivation of practices and virtues that can only be formed within the context of a coherent life story.¹⁵ An ethical vision more faithful to Scripture and Christian tradition attempts to develop an 'ethics of character' in which internalized values and qualities become the precondition for making responsible choices. Ethics becomes more a matter of who one is than what one does. While it includes the act of choosing between alternatives, it is not confined to those acts of decision.¹⁶

Judges as Scripture

Turning to the Book of Judges, whatever else it may be (historical source, monarchist propaganda), for Christians today it is Scripture. As such, it has both a community-forming and community-regulating function. It narrates the history of Israel prior to the institution of the monarchy in such a way that the significance of those events is not exhausted by changes in historical circumstance but continues to shape those who read it with the eyes of faith. Its meaning for today is not defined primarily by the methods of historical criticism

11 *Letters and Papers*, 4.

12 *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1983).

13 See 'Ethics as Formation' in *Ethics*, Eberhard Bethge, ed., (New York, 1955), 64-119.

14 Edmond Pincoffs, quoted in James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1974), 19ff.

15 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville, 1986), 171.

16 See McClendon, 'In Search of an Ethics of Character' in *Biography as Theology*, pp. 13-38; James M. Gustafson, *Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia, 1971); Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, Texas, 1975); William H. Willimon, *The Service of God: Christian Work and Worship* (Nashville, 1983).

(although these perform a useful function) but by a careful and prayerful listening to the voice of God in and through the texts.

The main ethical thrust of Judges could be summarized as follows: The very capacity to make moral judgments itself arises from the desire to obey God. The community of faith is the context in which this capacity of obedience is learned and practiced. Conversely, when the covenant relationship between God and God's people is neglected, the faculty of moral judgment atrophies. It not only becomes impossible to *do* right, it becomes impossible to *know* what is right. Judgment is not a function of autonomous practical reason but of a living relationship with God.

Judges may be read as Torah in narrative form — halakah (law) as haggadah (story). An appreciation of this dimension of Judges requires a literary as well as a historical-critical reading. The main device propelling the narrative is irony. This is the thesis of Lillian Klein in her study *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*.¹⁷ Klein departs from the standard critical view that Judges is a clumsily edited mishmash of conflicting sources.¹⁸ She interprets the book as a collection of disparate narratives skilfully integrated into a structured whole by the use of irony. I will draw significantly on Klein's treatment in what follows.

The 'art of irony is the art of saying something without really saying it.'¹⁹ Recognizing the presence of irony makes for a much more interesting reading of Judges. It cannot be fully understood if it is always read simply at face value. For example, the formulaic statement 'in those days Israel had no king' is often taken to be a polemical slogan supporting Israel's desire for a monarchy. The narrative shows, however, that the author/redactor intended this ironically. Of course Israel had a King. His name was Yahweh and their predicament was a consequence of their ignoring of this fact. Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out that 'irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood.'²⁰ This is certainly true of Judges which tells a tragicomic tale of a people's descent into moral confusion and their growing impotence to do anything about it because they walked in their own way rather than in God's.

An Ironic Interpretation of Israel's History

Judges opens with a foreshadowing of a dominant theme of the

17 Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield, 1988).

18 See, for instance, Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, 348.

19 D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London, 1969), 5.

20 *The Irony of American History* (New York, 1952), 2.

Deuteronomic history: Israel's dangerous coexistence with Canaanite peoples and their gods.²¹ The Canaanites, aside from their historical significance, have a kind of symbolic or mythic status in the Hebrew Bible. They represent the ever-present temptations of syncretism and idolatry. The Canaanite way is portrayed as a 'formula for death', physically, militarily, socially, but above all, spiritually.²² Chapter 1 contrasts the ignominious fate of the idolatrous boaster Adoni-Bezek at the hands of the mighty men of Judah (1:7) with the blessedness of Othniel and Achsah. These two are the ideal types of faithful Israel, the courageous warrior and the confident and fruitful bride (1:13-15).²³ Othniel and Achsah dwell in obedient *shalom*, perpetuating the tradition of Caleb.

But chapter 1 also introduces the ominous counter-example of the Canaanites. They bring military oppression (1:19) but, even worse, spiritual and moral compromise. The Canaanites possessed technologically superior weaponry, but more dangerous was that fact that they were a potential 'snare' to Israel (2:3). The theme of Judges is the progressive backsliding of God's people into the death-dealing habits of their neighbors who in turn became a source of torment to Israel. The book repeats a dreary refrain: The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh; God punished them by sending a tyrant to rule over them; they cried out for relief; God heard their cries and, in the absence of a central ruler, raised up charismatic leaders called judges to deliver them. The judges brought peace; but as surely as the sun rises the cycle of apostasy began again. Judges portrays this cycle not as the mere eternal recurrence of the same but as an actual downward spiral. Repentance never restored their relationship with God to its original integrity. The effect of their willful alienation from God was cumulative. Each successive period of decline turned out to be more disastrous than the one before until Israel reached the level of total moral anarchy and became no better than the Canaanites they were sent to conquer.

Klein suggests that Othniel was not only the first of the judges but

21 I use the term 'Deuteronomic history' simply to assent to the generally accepted theory that the Hebrew Bible from the Book of Deuteronomy to Second Kings shows signs of being the work of a single redactor or school of redactors; and that it expresses a unitary theological vision. Detailed critical issues such as whether chapters 20 and 21 actually originated with 'the Deuteronomist' or come from a separate tradition are outside the scope of this essay or the author's competence. (See Robert C. Boling, *Judges* [Anchor Bible 6A. Garden City, N.J., 1975], 278).

22 E. John Hamlin, *Judges: At Risk in the Promised Land* (International Theological Commentary) (Grand Rapids, 1990), 15.

23 Klein, 27.

24 *Ibid.*, 34.

the ideal judge (3:7-11).²⁴ He was the nephew of Caleb and carried on the 'different spirit' of faithfulness exemplified by his uncle (Numbers 14:24). Two factors marked Othniel's leadership. He was filled with the Spirit of the Lord (3:10); and he made war *successfully* against the Arameans (3:11). These two characteristics were not coincidental. Battles are won when they are fought in response to God's command. Subsequent leaders departed further and further from the example. Some possessed the Spirit but did not take up God's cause (Samson). Some acted decisively but did so without the authority of the Spirit (Ehud). Every judge after Othniel represented a corruption of the ideal.

The judge Ehud, for example, appears to be a strong deliverer. He uses treachery to murder the Moabite king Eglon (3:15ff.). However, God's Spirit is conspicuously absent from Ehud's actions. He acts boldly but *autonomously*, foreshadowing the verdict of the author/redactor of Judges that everyone in Israel did as he or she saw fit.

The reign of Deborah confirms Yahweh's predilection for choosing unusual leaders, not only a woman but also a younger son (Othniel) or a left-handed warrior (Ehud). Deborah was a prophetess in whom the Spirit of God was alive and active (4:4ff.). However, an ominous sub-theme in the Deborah narrative is provided by Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who boldly kills Sisera, but, like Ehud, acts autonomously without Yahweh's instigation.²⁵ Laudable as her actions might appear, Jael adds to the growing list of those who take matters into their own hands.

Gideon is a major player in the drama of Judges. He possesses all the marks of a truly gifted leader. He is the recipient of divine grace, being from the least important clan of Manasseh, yet elected to deliver Israel (4:15). Like Moses, Gideon is privileged to hear an unmediated word from Yahweh (4:14). Unlike Moses, however, Gideon puts God to the test by demanding a tangible sign of God's reliability not once but twice (6:36-40). Midian's defeat is orchestrated by Yahweh deliberately 'in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her' (7:2 NIV). Yet boasting is precisely what Gideon does. 'For the Lord and for Gideon' he commands his men to shout when they attack (7:19).²⁶ This *hubris*, subtly inserted into the narrative, comes to dominate the plot of Judges. Gideon, the conqueror of tyrants, shows himself to be a tyrant in his treatment of the town of Succoth (8:5-17). His egocentricity

25 *Ibid.*, 41-42.

26 *Ibid.*, 57, 59.

impairs his sense of judgment. Even the great Gideon is guilty of placing his own ambition ahead of the humble worship of Yahweh.

For all his self-centredness, Gideon is wise enough to decline the invitation to become Israel's king. 'Yahweh will rule over you', he says (8:23). But immediately, Gideon empties his own words of credibility by fashioning a golden ephod as a personal object of worship. This may have seemed like an innocuous enough transgression at the time but, we are told, the ephod became 'a snare' to both Gideon and his family (8:27).

These episodes of relatively minor negligence set the stage for one of the truly grotesque events in Judges. Abimelech was Gideon's son by his Shechemite concubine (8:31). Egotism and idolatry were a subtext in the Gideon narrative but they erupt with full force in the tale of Abimelech. Abimelech's first notable act is his personal murdering of 70 of his brothers. The author/redactor clearly intends this atrocity to be seen as human sacrifice which may have been typical of the Canaanites, but was utterly abominable to Israel (9:5).²⁷ He convinces the Shechemites to crown him king and inaugurates a reign of gratuitous violence in which king and subjects begin to devour one another. The Abimelech narrative contradicts the thesis that Judges is primarily a monarchist tract because, as chapter 9 makes clear, the mere fact of having a king is no guarantee that righteousness will reign. Kings can turn out to behave like Abimelech. Justice and peace arise from faithfulness to Yahweh, not from political organization.

After Abimelech's antics, Yahweh's patience wears thin. When the Philistines and the Ammonites attack, God resists the people's plea for help. 'Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen', the Lord says. 'Let them save you when you are in trouble' (10:14). However, God's mercy proves stronger than the people's sin or his own anger. Yahweh relents once more and along comes Jephthah, another deliverer who is long on enthusiasm but short on judgment. Jephthah's character is marked by impulsiveness and lack of prudence. These tragic flaws produce the most poignant tale in the book. Jephthah makes a rash vow that he will sacrifice whatever emerges from his house first if the Lord helps him to defeat the Ammonites (11: 30-31). God grants him success, but shows that one ought to think before speaking. Out of the house comes Jephthah's only daughter, singing and dancing. Jephthah follows through with his promise, regarding his ill-conceived word as of more value than the life of his daughter. Jephthah's offering verges on the abhorrent practice of human sacrifice. His moral compass is so skewed that he truly believes that Yahweh would

27 Hamlin identifies human sacrifice as one of the markers of 'the Canaanite way of death' (*Judges*, 15).

prefer he keep a foolish oath even at the cost of an innocent girl's life. Jephthah graphically demonstrates his estrangement from the true Spirit of God.

The same is true of the last and most famous judge, Samson. Samson, although a Nazirite, touches and eats that which is unclean (13:4; 15:15).²⁸ Even worse, Samson has a fatal weakness for foreign women. He is a strong man who is the weakest judge of all because he cannot master his own passions.²⁹ He plays the part of champion of Israel and scourge of the uncircumcised, but his egocentricity and lust make him more like the Philistines than unlike them. Samson falls prey to his own nature and dies alongside the pagans he set out to destroy.

Israel in Moral Free-Fall

Following Samson is the section of Judges often referred to as an 'epilogue' suggesting that it stands apart from the main narrative, almost as an afterthought.³⁰ In fact, though, chapters 17 to 21 are the climax of the theme which gives Judges its dramatic and theological unity: that those who break communion with Yahweh lose the ability to tell right from wrong. These chapters describe the final descent into moral anarchy. One commentator entitles these chapters 'The Years of Lawlessness.'³¹ Structurally, this section is framed by the refrain 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit' (17:6; 21:25; also 19:1). It is a misreading of the intention of the book to interpret this in narrowly political terms. The refrain is, again, deeply ironic. Lawlessness has little to do with the lack of a strong centralized political and military administration and everything to do with spiritual malaise.³² The irony is, of course, that Israel *did* have a king. That king's name was Yahweh. Over time, by the habitual neglect of the covenant relationship with the living God, Israel lost its redemptive memory of the one under whose sovereignty they existed. I would contend that Judges is a tale of progressively more acute spiritual vertigo. By this point in the narrative, not only did Israel not do what was right, they *could* not do what was right. Their own apostasy created a moral and spiritual paralysis. They no longer even had the means of discerning the will of God. They wandered aimless and lost.

28 Klein, 129.

29 Ibid., 118.

30 In fact, this supposed 'afterthought' makes up almost one quarter of the book and is by far the longest continuous narrative in Judges.

31 Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 181.

32 I say this in disagreement with Martin: 'the absence of a central monarchical system is used to explain the generally anarchic state of the country' (199).

Chapters 17 to 21 consist of a triptych of apparently disparate but thematically related episodes. Chapter 17 tells of an Ephraimite named Micah who steals 1100 shekels of silver from his mother. He owns up to his theft and, surprisingly, she blesses him, thereby giving tacit approval to what he has done. Micah uses the stolen money to purchase a carved image. He then hires a peripatetic Levite to be his personal priest, and ascribes all his good fortune to Yahweh (17:13). These seem like victimless crimes. But Micah has violated the eighth commandment (stealing), the third (trivializing God's name) and most especially the first and second (making a carved image and bowing down in worship to it). The underlying theme of Judges is that sin is cumulative and communal in its effects. Small sins create the climate in which great ones can flourish; and individual actions have far-reaching effects. Micah's apparently small transgressions set the stage narratively for much more deadly sins.

In chapter 18, the scene shifts to the tribe of Dan.³³ The Danites had no territory of their own. Theirs had been allotted in the western hills and coastal plain; but the hostility of enemies prevented them from taking possession of what was theirs.³⁴ Their ongoing landlessness, however, is more than just a value-neutral statement of fact. The Deuteronomic perspective is that land is a sign of Yahweh's favor. Israel will possess and thrive in the land if they cleave to their covenant with their God.³⁵ A tribe perennially deprived of its share of the land must be in a state of disharmony with God's will.

What the Danites cannot acquire by grace they seize by force through an act of conquest that is the exact antithesis of the holy wars of Joshua and Judges 1. In a parody of Numbers 13, the Danites send out spies to scout the countryside (18:2). The spies sent by Moses into Canaan returned with tales of a bountiful land but terrifying enemies (Numbers 13:27-29). Conquest of that land demanded the utmost courage and trust in God. The Israelites suffered a failure of nerve and their cowardice resulted in forty years of wandering in the wilderness. By contrast, the Danite spies happened on the town of Laish and returned with a report of a peaceful and unsuspecting people (18:7). Their cowardice topped that of their ancestors in the wilderness. They set upon Laish and butchered its innocent inhabitants, razing it to the ground, with no motive other than greed.

Making war was always the prerogative of Yahweh. Conquests were

33 The instability of location in Judges, shifting without apparent reason from one place to another, in itself reinforces the point that moral sickness had attacked the length and breadth of the land.

34 Joshua 19:37; Judges 1:34.

35 See, e.g. Deuteronomy 5:33.

'devoted' to Yahweh which meant that they were destroyed utterly, not out of blood lust, but so that people would not be tempted to use the plunder for personal gain (cf. 1 Samuel 15). Victory was to the glory of God, not to the enrichment of Israel. The Danites' barbarism bears a superficial resemblance to the conquest of Canaan but with a crucial difference: it was undertaken on their own initiative, neither guided nor blessed by God. It is hardly surprising that, when the Danites rebuilt Laish, they made it a place of idols (18:30-31).

The third scene in the triptych concerns another homeless Levite, a free-lancer unattached to the official levitical cities, who 'came from nowhere in time and in space.'³⁶ This man is the metaphorical embodiment of Israel who have become alienated from the identity-giving narrative in which the capacity for right living is nourished. This episode is thick with irony. The Levite pursues his promiscuous concubine to her father's house. He and the father-in-law spend three days drinking and dining together (19:4). Against his better judgment, the Levite allows his father-in-law to detain him until close to nightfall on the day when he must set out for home. It is an apparently innocent indiscretion with serious consequences.

This rootless wanderer, however, has no powers of judgment. Living in estrangement from God, he is incapable of doing the right thing or of intuiting the impact his actions. Arriving at the town of Gibeah, the Levite and his concubine are taken in by an elderly man (19:16-21). As chapter 18 paralleled Numbers 13, so this narrative mirrors the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, but again, with several significant differences. As with Lot's guests, the men of the town surround the house, demanding that the Levite be sent out so they can rape him (cf. Genesis 19:5). The owner, unwilling to violate the laws of hospitality offers them first his own virgin daughter and then the Levite's concubine (cf. Genesis 19:8). Gibeah, like Sodom, is a place so far sunk in unbelief that the faculty of moral judgment has all but disintegrated.

Genesis 19 is sometimes interpreted as if it were somehow legitimating Lot's offer of his daughters in exchange for the guest. Misogyny, the argument runs, is so ingrained in the culture of the Bible that the rape of young women is regarded as more acceptable than the rape of men, or even the violation of hospitality.³⁷ While plausible

³⁶ Klein, 161.

³⁷ See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narrative* (Philadelphia, 1984), 68ff. Also Koala Jones-Warsaw, 'Towards a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21' in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (Sheffield, 1993) 172-186 for an interpretation according to the category of victimization.

on one level, it seems to me that this reading misses the profound point of both texts. Both alternatives — virgin daughters or male guests — are equally loathsome. In the Sodomite context, Lot cannot discern the right thing to do. One alternative is as terrible as another. Lot is trapped in a dilemma.

The same holds true in Gibeah. It is even worse than Sodom, however because while the angel of Yahweh was present with Lot, God is terribly absent in Gibeah. There is no divine intervention. Even in Sodom, God's angel struck the wicked with blindness and the innocent were spared. Here there is no such reprieve. The concubine is tossed to the wolves by the Levite, presumably to protect himself (19:25.)

Word of the Gibeites' outrageous conduct spreads. The Levite dramatizes his outrage by chopping the dead woman in pieces and sending her to the corners of the land as a call to arms. All Israel gathers to take revenge on the tribe of Benjamin for the sins of Gibeah. The whole thing is hypocritical, however. It was the Levite who was ultimately responsible for her fate.

Israel assembles for war. But all is not as it should be. Significantly and ironically, the Levite tells the people to 'speak up and give *your* verdict', not to seek Yahweh's verdict (20:7). In 20:13 the call to purge Israel of evil sounds hollow since Judges has demonstrated the extent to which evil has pervaded the whole land. Israel inquires of Yahweh in words paralleling 1: 1-2, 'Who shall go up first?' Yahweh's response is identical: 'Judah shall go', with one striking difference. Whereas victory was promised in the campaign against the Canaanites, no such promise is given here. Later on God does say that he will give the Benjamites into their hands (20:28) but the annihilation of brother by brother is more of a defeat than a triumph. This is not holy conquest but fratricidal slaughter. It is the people of God devouring one another. Yahweh's permission is itself an ironic judgment on people whose own waywardness has led to moral, political and social anarchy. Benjamite slays Israelite and Israelite slays Benjamite in an inconclusive bloodbath. No one can even remember the issue that provoked the conflict.

Following the war comes bitter remorse. 'What have we done?' Israel cries. In a final act of senseless killing they wipe out the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead who, by refusing to join the war, show that they alone in all Israel had maintained their sanity. Only the virgins of Jabesh Gilead are spared to provide wives for the Benjamite men who survived, in order that one tribe might not be 'cut off from Israel' (21:6). When these were not enough, they kidnapped more (21:20ff.) The futility of the entire campaign against Benjamin is its most enduring legacy. 'If Israel had not eradicated Benjamin, it has

eradicated its own sense of ethical judgment. . . .³⁸ Judges tells the story of the horror of life without God. 'Victory' over Benjamin simply accentuates the political, social, moral and spiritual defeat of the people.

Contemporary Resonances with the Book of Judges

I am proposing an ethical reading of Judges. As Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, ethics is profoundly communal in nature. It can never be abstracted from the contingencies of time and space in which character is formed and decisions are made.³⁹ This means being attentive to the *distance* between our context and that of Judges as well as their proximity. We cannot draw straightforward lines of connection or simple moral maxims from Judges as if the challenges we face were no different from those of ancient Israel.

At the same time, the very concept of scriptural authority means that there is genuine continuity between past and present. The story of Judges is, in a sense, our story because we, too, are confronted by the self-revealing God of Israel. What Judges does *as Scripture*, is to invite us to reflect on what happens to the community of faith when it becomes estranged from God. The capacity to form wise and sound judgments is so impaired that such a community can no longer even tell if it is doing the right thing. Its moral perceptions become blurred and distorted.

Three aspects of our situation resonate with the narrative of the Book of Judges. First, morality in our time has become largely a private matter. Alasdair McIntyre, in his influential book *After Virtue*, has argued that a loss of the capacity for coherent moral discourse is a characteristic of modernity.⁴⁰ The very language that has shaped the moral tradition of western civilization beginning with Aristotle has been largely forgotten. Only fragments of that language survive in forms that have become disconnected from their original significance. Morality, insofar as it exists at all, is seen as strictly a matter of personal preference.⁴¹ Even within the church, moral judgment has become radically individualized to the point that church pronouncements on moral issues invite the accusation of 'judgmentalism'. The Christian community often is no longer able to act credibly as a moral guide or arbiter. Since the end of the Middle Ages the power of the church to dictate morality has been in decline. What is differ-

38 Klein, 184.

39 *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, 1ff.

40 *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1984).

41 *Ibid.*, 12; Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 3.

ent about the modern and post-modern eras is the positive conviction that the church *ought not* to interfere in the personal preferences of anyone, even its own constituency. The story of Judges in which 'everyone does as he or she sees fit' challenges us to engage in self-criticism on this score.

A second resonance has to do with the dominating influence of alien ideologies that claim hegemony over the authority of Scripture. The most alien of all twentieth century ideologies was the Nazi cult of blood and soil. In 1934, a gathering of Lutheran and Reformed theologians met at Barmen to take their stand against the German Christian movement which placed the cross of Christ underneath the swastika. 'We reject the false doctrine', the Barmen Declaration declared, 'as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure, or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.'⁴²

One does not need to look only at vicious and extreme ideologies like Nazism, however, to see the displacement of the Word of God. Many contemporary ideologies make comfortable alliances with Christianity and even offer helpful critiques; but when pushed to their logical conclusions they reveal a fundamental incompatibility with the biblical message. One such alien ideology is the cult of the self in which God is offered primarily as a means of meeting people's inner needs. A therapeutic view in which people 'hunger not for personal salvation. . . but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security'⁴³ has taken hold even in many Christian communities. Believers join unbelievers in a quest for their 'inner child' or a perpetual cycle of recovery from various psychic and emotional traumas. Narcissistic spiritualities have displaced the traditional Christian understanding of the Gospel as a dying to self for the sake of God and neighbor. Such an understanding of human life can become profoundly isolating and anti-communal,⁴⁴ preoccupied as it is with fleeting emotional sensations. The 'feel-good' gospel offered by many contemporary churches is intensely popular but antithetical to the biblical vision of responsible human existence in God's world.

A second example can be found within certain streams of feminist theology. Many feminists regard the biblical text as inherently patriarchal, written and employed to sustain the oppression of women.

42 Hubert G. Locke, ed., *The Church Confronts the Nazis: Barmen Then and Now* (New York and Toronto, 1984), 22.

43 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1978), 7.

44 *Ibid.*

Only by applying the principles of a feminist critique can Scripture be redeemed from patriarchy.⁴⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, among others, has argued that only those biblical texts which promote 'the full humanity of women' can be regarded as 'Word of God.'⁴⁶ The biblical narrative is automatically subjected to a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' which isolates from the canon those texts compatible with feminist consciousness and rejects the rest. Certainly feminism has presented a much-needed and legitimate challenge to patriarchal Christian culture and history. However, insofar as feminist hermeneutics gives primary authority to women's experience and relegates the biblical narrative to a subordinate position, it is an alien ideology.

Other examples of alien ideologies might be Enlightenment rationalism, exemplified in certain types approaches to historical criticism that subordinate the authority of biblical texts to the canons of criticism themselves.⁴⁷ Faith is not derived from the biblical narrative itself, but from speculative reconstructions of the events and persons based on a particular understanding of history. Still a further example might be the equation of Christianity and modern American consumer culture.⁴⁸

The time of the Judges was marked by the insidious influence of the Canaanite 'way of death'. As Israel dallied with seductive creeds and practices, her moral intuition deteriorated to the point where she could no longer tell what was of God and what was not of God. Judges deals not so much with the content of obedience but with the conditions that make obedience possible or even intelligible. Such a situation can be found in the Christian churches today and it is to that situation of captivity that Judges still speaks.

A third similarity between the community of faith in Judges and today is our tendency to make impersonal, institutional responses to deeply personal moral and spiritual issues. The response of the tribal confederacy to political and social instability was only worked out well after the time of the Judges when Samuel was commanded by God to find and anoint a king. However, a profound ambivalence towards a

45 Feminist theological literature is enormous. See, for example, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, 1984).

46 *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, 1983), 19.

47 See Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology' in James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense, trans. *Religions in History* (Minneapolis, 1991), 11-32.

48 See William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas, n.d.).

monarchic form of rule persists within the Hebrew Bible. That is because Israel's motive for demanding kings was not so that they would be more faithful but so they could be like their neighbors (1 Samuel 8:5). The institution of monarchy, although in a positive sense the source and bearer of messianic hope, also established an affluent, complacent, alienating 'royal consciousness' which attempted to domesticate the free sovereignty of God.⁴⁹ In an analogous manner, the Christian community today tends to respond to the critical decline in interest in the church with managerial solutions and control tactics. What technique can we perfect, what 'hook' can we apply to attract the lost, especially the young, back to the fold? Denominations tinker with task-forces, congregations rearrange roles, pastors enroll in 'cutting-edge' seminars, individuals run out to buy the latest how-to book. The reality narrated with such force in Judges is that, whatever Israel's predicament was, it was not a crisis of political organization as it seemed to be on the surface of things. Israel, to repeat, already had a king. That king's name was Yahweh Sabaoth. The choice to walk within the bounds of Yahweh's covenant was essentially the same whether people were ruled by a Moses-like prophet, a charismatic judge or a hereditary monarch. Institutional responses are always secondary to the orientation of the heart towards God, and active participation in the story of salvation.

Community is the context in which attentiveness to God is taught, learned, nurtured and internalized. The Christian community's role, now as much as ever, is to strengthen the commitments which reinforce openness to the activity of God in history. That role is carried out by teaching and celebrating the narratives of God's dealings with God's people, and by being counterculturally attentive to the practices of worship, prayer, fellowship and charity which, while appearing to be socially trivial, are the foundation of Christian character and virtue.

Christians at the dawn of the third millennium are not the first generation to have experienced an impairment of the moral sense. Judges makes clear that it is an age-old problem. Holding on to the divine gift of moral discernment comes through prayer, repentance, immersion in God's Word and a daily hungering after the Holy Spirit.

Abstract

The article recognises the place of Judges as Scripture and explores its value for ethics by invoking the concept of irony. The book shows

49 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, 1978), 28ff.

the horror of life without God. It invites us to reflect on our situation when we become estranged from God. Suggestions are made regarding the private nature of morality, the imposing of alien ideologies on Scripture, and the danger of making impersonal, institutional responses to personal moral and spiritual issues.

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