

Introduction

Subject and Context

The book of Judges depicts the period between the conquest of the land in Joshua and the institution of Israel's monarchy in Samuel. The book's protagonists—Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson—are referred to as “judges.” A narrative is devoted to each of these judges, and while the story of Othniel is brief with only a few details, some narratives are much longer, like those of Gideon and Samson. The story of Abimelech's reign follows the Gideon narrative, and the book also includes lists of leaders (with the exception of Shamgar and Tola) who are not involved in the people's salvation (3:31; 10:1–5; 12:8–15).

This era is referred to as “the days of the judges” in the Bible itself, although not in the book of Judges. The book of Ruth opens, “It came to pass in the days when judges ruled” (1:1); the author of Kings refers to the time before the monarchy as the time when judges ruled: “No such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, even during all the days of the kings of Israel and of the kings of Judah” (2 Kgs 23:22); and there are other references in 2 Sam 7:11 and 1 Chr 17:6, 10.

The word “judge” has two primary meanings in the Bible: one who sits in judgment (as in, for example, Deut 16:18), and leader (as described in, for example, 1 Sam 8; 20; 2 Kgs 15:2; Ps 2:10). With the exception of Deborah (Judg 4:4–5), throughout the book of Judges the word is used in the sense of “leader.”¹ In other Northwest Semitic languages, similar words bare similar meaning. The Akkadian word *šapātu* and *tpt* in Ugaritic refer to leadership.² In Mari the root *špt* occurs with its subject king or official.³

Before the judges, the most established form of national leadership was the rule of the elders (Josh 24:31; Judg 2:7). The role of elder presumably

1. Ishida, “Leaders,” 514–30.

2. CAD 17.1:450–51; Fensham, “Ugaritic Root *tpt*.” See Smith and Bloch-Smith, *Judges* 1, 4–6.

3. Niehr, *Herrschen und Richten*, 25–41; Niehr, “שפט, שפט.”

continued even after the judges began to appear, although their status may not have remained as authoritative. It is the elders of Gilead who appoint Jephthah as leader during the Ammonite oppression (11:5). The elders serve as the people's leaders, but when they are not able to deal with Israel's problems they turn to Jephthah to fight against the Ammonites. Similarly, when Samuel appoints his sons as judges, the elders ask him to anoint a king. The elders seem to be the default ruling body, especially in times of peace,⁴ while judges only arise under certain historical circumstances. Neither system ensures governmental continuity or stability. Yet it is the charismatic, ad hoc judges who undermine the elders' status and create the circumstances that lead to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel.⁵ The days when judges ruled marks the transition from the leadership of the elders to the foundation of the monarchy. This transition is neither swift nor smooth. The book of Judges depicts the failure of the elders' traditional rule, and their eclipse by the charismatic, intense, flawed judges, whose erratic leadership breaks up the ground for the deeper, more stable foundations of monarchy.

The book of Judges bridges Joshua and Samuel, opening with the phrase "After the death of Joshua." After the death of Joshua and the elders of his generation comes the turning point in the people's relationship with God, for it is then that they begin to worship other gods. This new, idol-worshipping generation marks the beginning of the era of the judges. The last catastrophic chapters of Judges ring with the refrain, "In those days, there was no king in Israel; people did as they pleased." It is these chapters that tell of the story of Micah's idol, the tribe of Dan's migration north, and the concubine at Gibeah, and which so vividly paint the era of the judges as the treacherous time of anarchy that underscores Israel's need for institutionalized leadership. In this way, the book of Judges serves as a bridge—unstable and perilous—between the book of Joshua and the book of Samuel, between the era of conquest and settlement and the era of kings.

History and Ideology

The book of Judges describes the events of this period, but it is not a historical account in the modern sense of the word. The events described in the book

4. See ch. 9, below. Reviv, "Types of Leadership," 204–21. On the elders and their relationship to the judges, see Reviv, *Elders*, 33–47. See also Weisman, "Charismatic Leaders," 407. On the elders in the Bible, see McKenzie, "Elders," 522–40. On leadership of a democratic nature in Judges, see Wolf, "Primitive Democracy," 98–108.

5. Reviv, "Types of Leadership," 204–21; Weisman, "Charismatic Leadership," 14.

are largely local rather than national and take place in certain regions,⁶ and it is evident—even in the book itself—that not everything that transpires in this era is depicted.⁷ In the introduction to the Jephthah narrative, God describes Israel's backsliding after he has saved them time and again from various oppressors (10:11–12). This survey includes Ma'on and Sidon, oppressors who do not feature in Judges; nor is the story of Israel's salvation from Ammon mentioned before this introduction (v. 11). This implies that the book does not include all the events of this period and that this list reflects a historical reality that did not make its way into the text. Similarly, 1 Sam 12:11 refers to a judge named "Bedan," and while he is often identified as Samson, it may be a reference to a judge whose story is not included in the book of Judges.⁸ This invites the conclusion that Judges is a selection of narratives. While it does describe historical events, by no means is its purpose to serve as a comprehensive historical record; rather, it aims to portray the evolving relationship between God and Israel. It is for this ideological objective that the narratives were selected, shaped, and arranged in a sophisticated structure.

The Book's Main Components and Structure

The book comprises three clear parts:

- 1:1–3:6: Prologues describing the people's sins
- 3:7–16:31: The judge narratives
- 17:1–21:5: Epilogues describing the people's sins

The first part of the book consists of two separate prologues: the first from 1:1 to 2:10, and the second from 2:11 to 3:6. The former describes Israel's failure to complete the conquest at the beginning of the time of the judges, for which

6. An accepted, reasonable theory in research is that the judges were local leaders. This does not, however, negate any national themes in the book. In the Song of Deborah, which is perceived as one of the earliest texts in the book, the people are perceived as a united entity. See, for example, Moore, *Judges*, 134. On the national nature of the book, and the idea that judges ruled locally, see Kaufmann, *Sefer Shoftim*, 18–20.

7. Malamat (*History of Biblical Israel*, 153–54) points out that the judges narratives are not repetitive. Each episode has a different enemy, the regions differ, and no two judges come from the same tribe. From this he concludes that the book presents different models of oppressors and judges. He believes that Judges is a selective collection that brings a variety of war narratives from the premonarchic era.

8. The Babylonian Talmud (Rosh Hashana 25a) writes that this refers to Samson. So do the Aramaic Targum, Rashi, Kara, and Kimhi. The Septuagint has Barak. In contrast, see Zakovitch, "בדן=יפתח," 123–25.

God's messenger reproaches them (2:1–5); the latter describes the people's sin of idolatry (2:11–3:6). Various passages in the Pentateuch warn that failing to drive out the Canaanites will result in idolatry, and these warnings are realized at the beginning of Judges. The second prologue also describes the cycle of sin-punishment-salvation that will constitute the main part of the book. The people stray from God, are punished with enslavement to a foreign nation, are rescued by a savior sent by God, and remain devoted to God for the rest of the savior's life. With the judge's death, the people relapse once more, beginning the cycle anew (2:11–19).

The second and main part of the book, 3:7–16:31, comprises the judge narratives. Six narratives follow the paradigmatic model: the stories of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. Each of these narratives portrays the hero and their rescue of Israel.⁹ Besides these six, there are two lists of minor judges who are mentioned without an accompanying story of salvation, as well as a brief mention of Shamgar son of Anath, whose story does not fit the model of sin-punishment-salvation. Another full-length narrative is that of Abimelech son of Gideon (ch. 9), who fights the people in order to rule over them, rather than saving them.

The third part of the book (chs. 17–21) does not follow this model of sin-punishment-redemption; rather, it consists of two narratives. The first is the story of Micah's idol, which the tribe of Dan then steals as they migrate to the north (18); the second is the gruesome story of the concubine at Gibeah (19), which then degenerates into the story of Israel's war against Benjamin for defending the perpetrators (20). Following this civil war, Benjamin is almost completely annihilated, until the tribes find a creative solution to enable its regeneration (21). This final section of the book paves the way for the monarchy by repeating, four times, different formulations of the phrase "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Together, these three parts form a unified whole. While many scholars have argued for various stages of redaction,¹⁰ today more and more scholars perceive

9. See Ishida, "Leaders," 514–30; Rosenberg, "Šof^ctim," 77–86; McKenzie, "Judge of Israel," 118–21.

10. Scholars are divided regarding the work's dating, formation, and genre. After the Documentary Hypothesis approach was rejected in regard to the book of Judges, the prevalent opinion became Noth's (*Deuteronomistic History*, 15–44), which viewed it as part of a unified Deuteronomistic work. He holds that it was composed in mid-sixth century BCE. Cross (*Canaanite Myth*, 287–89) believes that the work redacted in two stages: one from Isaiah's time, as part of his reform and renewal of David's line, and the second in the postexilic period. Against Noth, Greenspahn ("Theology," 385–96) shows that the frame narratives are not always consistent, and that their theology is not Deuteronomistic. Boling (*Judges*, 36) is convinced that the narrative framework is pre-Deuteronomistic and belongs to the premonarchic period. Brueggemann ("Social Criticism,"

the book as a cohesive, unified work.¹¹ I will now present a very brief analysis of the book's different sections; more comprehensive discussions and references to research will be presented below in context.

The first prologue (1:1–2:10) includes a description of the people's failure to complete the conquest of the land; the angel's reproach, which is related to the period of conquest and settlement that begins in Joshua's time; and some material that also appears in the book of Joshua. The second introduction (2:11–3:6) presents a paradigmatic model of the judge narratives that will comprise the main part of the book: the cycle of sin, punishment, and salvation. The two introductions form a logical sequence: the first looks back to Joshua's time, while the second describes the period that follows the first—the era of the judges. The content of the two introductions also forms a logical sequence: in several places, the Pentateuch warns that if the Canaanites are not driven out, they will influence the Israelites and lead them to idolatry (Exod 34:11–16; Deut 7:1–5; 20:15–18). The first unit describes Israel's sin of allowing the nations to remain in the land, and the second unit describes how Israel succumbs to idolatry. Moreover, neither introduction is complete without the other; Israel's repeated idolatry is explained as the result of the nations' presence, while their sin of leaving the nations is not complete until the reader learns of the consequences of the nations' influence over Israel.

The book's central section (3:7–16:31) presents the narratives of six judges who rescue Israel after their sin and punishment. The six narratives do not merely follow the exact same model; there is development between each one, and their order is significant. Just as the first unit begins with a glowing report of Judah's successful conquest and concludes with Dan's utter failure, the first

110–14) believes that there are four stages of redaction, all pre-Deuteronomistic. Guest ("Without Sources," 42–61) thinks the work is solidly unified and that one cannot differentiate between the Deuteronomist's word and the book's sources; see also Van Seters, *In Search of History*, 342–47. As for the judges narratives themselves, the accepted stance in research today is that they are the stories of ancient local tribes, gathered and compiled by a pre-Deuteronomistic redactor, while a separate collection included anecdotes of the minor judges; the collections were then combined by the Deuteronomistic redactor, who added a beginning and end to each narrative in order to generate a chronological collection. As the book's framework is Deuteronomistic, the judges were presented as national leaders who followed one another, with intervals between their periods of leadership. Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 72. Guillaume (*Josiah*, 5–74) holds that the main part of the book (chs. 3–9) was composed in the seventh century BCE, while the rest of the work is later. Mayes ("Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology," 241–58) is convinced that chs. 17–21 were intended as precursors to the Saul and David narratives—anti-Saul and pro-David. For a summary of the book's redaction, see O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 345–68; Block, *Judges*, 44–59; Webb, *Judges* (2012), 20–32. On the debate about the Deuteronomist in the book of Judges, see Spronk, *Judges*, 14–16.

11. For example, Gros Louis, "Book of Judges," 141–62; Lilley, "Literary Appreciation," 94–102; Webb, *Judges* (1987), 207–11; Exum, "Center," 410–31; Schneider, *Judges*, xii–xiii; O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, in many places, such as the summary on 343–44; Webb, *Judges* (2012), 32–35; Block, *Judges*, 50–63; Assis, *Self-Interest*, 127–30; Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 140–93.

judge narrative tells the story of Othniel son of Kenaz from the tribe of Judah, who successfully rescues the people, while the last judge, Samson, is from the tribe of Dan, and the salvation he brings is extremely limited.¹² The story of Abimelech and the list of the minor judges do not follow the paradigmatic model, but they contribute to the book's ideological development.

The first three judges are positive figures, and their characters are flawless: Othniel (3:7–11), Ehud (3:12–30), and Deborah (4). Very little is told about Othniel, but what is mentioned is entirely positive. Othniel saves the people from the Arameans even though his own tribe is not affected by their oppression (as he lives in Judah's territory in the south). Ehud acts alone, putting his life at great risk. Neither character seeks personal benefit in any way after they save Israel. When Ehud rallies the people for battle, he declares that it is God who will bring them victory. Deborah also states repeatedly that God is responsible for the people's victory against the Canaanites. Deborah, the protagonist, is a prophet, and she does not act for personal reasons. One of the central themes in the Song of Deborah is the various tribes' willingness to volunteer for the people's sake, as opposed to some who will not. The first three judges are presented as positive characters, and the only problem in these narratives is the people's relapse into sin following the death of each judge.

In contrast, the final three characters are problematic: Abimelech (9), Jephthah (10:1–12:7), and Samson (13–16). What these three have in common is their focus on their own personal benefit, to varying degrees, which has various implications and consequences. Abimelech kills his brothers in order to rule and instigates a bloody civil war in order to retain power. Jephthah only agrees to accept the role of military commander if he is appointed the head of Gilead, and he leads a cruel vendetta against Ephraim for failing to show him proper respect. Samson fights against the Philistines for personal reasons, and he neither attempts to save Israel from their oppression nor actually saves them—on the contrary, the Israelites suffer from his violence against their oppressors. When the tribe of Judah complains about his incitement, he explains his own personal motives: “As they did to me, so I have done to them” (15:11).

The Gideon narrative, right at the center of the book, is the most complex. Gideon's faith in God is not complete at the beginning, and although he does reach a place of true belief, he eventually leads the people to sin with his graven image. His attitude toward the people is also complex: he is concerned about

12. Malamat (*History of Biblical Israel*, 153–54) attempts to explain the order of the judges narratives based on a geographic pattern from south to north. Zakovitch (“Associative Arrangement,” 164–83) believes that Judges is arranged according to associative connections between juxtaposed narratives. Williams (“Structure,” 20–85) is convinced that there are twelve judges in all, and they represent the seasons. Others are convinced that the narratives show the religious deterioration between each judge. See, for example, Block, *Judges*, 145; see also 132.

the people's distress and prevents conflict with the tribe of Ephraim, yet he is also clearly concerned about his own name and status and treats those who question him with fierce cruelty.

This results in a symmetric structure: the first three judges are positive characters with a positive relationship with God, the last three are problematic characters concerned with their own interests, and at the center is the Gideon narrative, whose first half, like the first three judges, centers on Gideon's faith in God, while the second half, like the final three, focuses on his own instability and thus anticipates the deterioration portrayed in the rest of the book.¹³

The book's prologue and epilogue also fit in with this structure. The first chapters of the book present a two-stage religious problem, wherein the first stage—failing to take possession of the land (1:1–2:10)—leads to the second stage—idolatry (2:11–3:4). These two problems are related to the first three narratives, which each begin with the people's relapse into idolatry after the judge's death. The book's epilogue emphasizes the lack of organized leadership, as a continuation of the last three judge narratives and their problematic leadership.

The book's epilogues are parallel to its prologues. The story of Micah's idol (17) is a story of idolatry, parallel to the worship of Baal and Asherah in the second prologue. The civil war (20–21) is parallel to Israel's failure to conquer the land in the first prologue.¹⁴ This results in the following structure:

- A: Prologue: The people's religious offenses:
 - 1. Failure to engage in war against the Canaanites (1:1–2:5)
 - 2. Idolatry (2:6–3:6)
- B: Positive leadership followed by religious instability after the judge's death (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah)
- C: Gideon: From religious instability to unstable leadership
- B': Negative leadership resulting in religious instability (Abimelech, Jephthah, Samson)
- A': Epilogue: Problems resulting from lack of leadership:
 - 1. Idolatry (17–18)
 - 2. Civil war (19–21)

Besides the overall structure, there are many connections between the various narratives, which contributes to the work's cohesion. The Deborah

13. On symmetrical order in the book, see Gooding, "Composition," 70–79; Tanner, "Gideon," 146–61; Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 105–20. On the structure of the book, see Spronk, *Judges*, 5–7.

14. On the symmetry of the two prologues and two epilogues, see Olson, "Judges," 863; Webb, *Judges* (2012), 32; Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 47–77.

narrative is closely connected to the Ehud narrative through various motifs and the narrative structure; it is an attempt to overcome the difficulty that followed Ehud's death, when the people resorted to idolatry. Connections between the various narratives are present in every level of the plot. The links between the Abimelech narrative and the Gideon narrative are obvious, and the two can be read as a narrative sequence. Beyond the fact that Abimelech is Gideon's son, which Abimelech uses to justify his self-appointment, there are similarities and inversions between the two characters. There are also parallels between Jephthah's egocentrism and Abimelech's, and there are contrasts between Jephthah's conflict with Ephraim and Gideon's tension with the same tribe.

The two prologues function as a chronological and logical sequence. The first—which summarizes the era of Joshua—leads to the second, which summarizes the era of the judges. Because the Israelites do not drive out the Canaanites from the land, they are soon influenced by their religious practices. There are also structural connections between them, as I will discuss below.

The two epilogues are also closely related. They share a deep structure: a family problem evolves into a tribal and then national crisis. Both feature a Levite protagonist (17:7; 19:1), and scenes of both take place in the Ephraim hills. Both involve hosting: Micah convinces the young Levite to stay with him (17:10–11), while the father of the Levite's concubine attempts to convince the Levite to stay with him (19:4–10). Both narratives devolve into anarchy and thus illustrate the need for organized government.

The epilogues are also linked to the judge narratives through a network of motifs. Both the Samson narrative and the saga of Micah's idol involve the tribe of Dan. Micah steals 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother (17:3), and the same sum is promised to Delilah for Samson's capture (16:5). Zorah, Eshtaol, and "the camp of Dan" feature in both narratives (13:25; 18:2, 11–12).

The book's prologue is also connected to its epilogue. Chapters 1 and 18 both tell of the conquest of the land, and both beginning and end describe war. The Israelites twice inquire who should attack first, and twice God responds that Judah should (1:1; 20:18). The people weep twice (2:4; 21:2). Once again, the two epilogues are parallel to the two prologues, the book is arranged in a clear structure, and its components are interconnected; the work is thus unified and cohesive and imparts a general message, as I will now discuss.

The Meaning of the Book

The book of Judges opens with the people's sin after Joshua's time and describes their recurring lapse into idolatry over the course of the period.

Throughout the book the people sin, and God punishes and brings salvation before the people sin once more; the book also concludes with their grave sin. This vicious cycle begins when the people do not continue Joshua's conquest and are influenced by the Canaanites as a result. They relapse into sin after the death of each judge, sins that grow worse and more violent with the lack of central, stable leadership. This moral deterioration is repeatedly linked with unstable leadership. In the book of Judges, the subject of leadership and failing to follow in God's ways are intertwined. This connection is already anticipated when religious deterioration is linked to the death of Joshua (2:8–10):

Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred ten years. . . . The whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

The people begin to sin after all those who witnessed the wonders of Joshua's time have passed away. These verses show how human leadership and devotion to God are intertwined; I will elaborate on this connection in context below. Here, I will briefly note that the people perceived their leaders as mediators with God and representatives of God's presence. With the death of Joshua and the elders, the people no longer felt that God's presence was among them, and this led them to seek out the more tangible presence of idolatry. With the arrival of each judge, the people reconnected with God, but this connection dissipated following the judge's death. This cycle repeats itself in the stories of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon, but after Gideon's death, the people relapse into sin with no respite.

This cycle is laid out at the beginning of the book (2:11–23): sin, punishment, and salvation. The presentation of a schematic model within a biblical book is unusual, and it reveals to the reader from the onset that this form of leadership will not endure or solve any religious, political, or military problems. Even before the first episode, the reader realizes that he or she must check not only how every judge brings salvation but how each figure fails to bring lasting stability—which invites the need for a new model of leadership that is not discussed in the book's prologue.

Though the first three judges themselves are exemplary figures, the people nonetheless relapse into idolatry after their death, and the reader, already alerted by the paradigmatic model, is able to conclude that this model of leadership does not result in stability. A significant change takes place in the fourth narrative, the story of Gideon, which lies at the book's center. At the end of this story the people ask Gideon to rule over them as king—this seems a promising solution, given that the reader already knows that the “judge” model of

leadership will not endure. However, Gideon immediately rejects this solution with a powerful theological message that criticizes the institution of monarchy.

The Abimelech narrative, the continuation of Gideon's, further reinforces this message by illustrating the grave disasters that result from an inappropriate attitude toward monarchy. Abimelech craves power and achieves it through bloodthirsty cruelty. After this narrative sequence, the reader is convinced that monarchy is not a desirable model of leadership, neither on the level of principle raised by Gideon—"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (8:23)—nor on the practical level, as seen from Abimelech's "reign," which is entirely egocentric and achieved through massacre. The Abimelech narrative raises a practical objection to monarchy.

After the possibility of monarchy is ruled out for the time being, the reader must seek out another model of leadership. But there are no new models to be found, and the story of Jephthah reverts to two familiar alternatives: the patriarchic institute of elders and the charismatic judge, which are both deemed ineffective in the long preface to the Jephthah narrative (10:6–16). In this preface, God declares unwillingness to send another judge because the people do not remain loyal to God over time (10:11–14), while the elders prove helpless against the enemy.

In the Jephthah narrative, God allows Israel another chance and accepts Jephthah as the *de facto* leader, but he proves unsuitable and brings disaster upon the people. After the reader is exposed to harsh criticism of the monarchy, he or she learns that there is no going back to the models of leadership that have served the people since Joshua's time.

The Samson narrative, as I will discuss below, clearly anticipates the story of Samuel and the period of monarchy that will soon follow. The narratives of Micah's idol, Dan's migration, and the concubine at Gibeah and all its gruesome consequences all demonstrate the anarchy and bloodshed that stems from the lack of organized leadership and refer once again to the need for monarchy in order to prevent such anarchy.

Thus these narratives are divided into stories that negate monarchy (Gideon and Abimelech) and stories that anticipate that monarchy will solve the problems born of unstable leadership. The issue of monarchy is raised explicitly in the Gideon narrative; once again with Abimelech, who actually reigns; and with Jephthah, who agrees to lead the battle only after he is appointed as the head of the people. All three of these leaders end up cruelly slaughtering their own people out of desire to retain their personal power (8:14–17; 9:4, 40, 43–45, 49–52; 12:4–6). These narratives thus present the great harm that monarchy is liable to inflict upon the people. Yet the concluding chapters present a state of anarchy that is much worse. The people's corrupt crimes against God and society point to a need for a stable government. The book of Judges thus presents

arguments for and against the institution of monarchy: on the one hand, earthly kingship opposes heavenly kingship, and strong leaders act in their own interests, while on the other, the lack of stable human government leads to religious, moral, and social corruption. Soon, in the book of Samuel, it emerges that the people are eager to make the transition to a system of monarchy; what function, then, do the judge narratives serve within this significant process?

The transition from the book of Joshua, where the people are ruled by a single leader, to the book of Samuel, when they return to government by a single leader—this time a king—is navigated via the book of Judges. The Israelites do not immediately adopt this system when they enter the land, but when they do—in order to emulate the nations around them, and in order to solve their political problems—it is because the judge narratives have proven that there is no good alternative to monarchy. When the Israelites finally undertake the establishment of a royal system, they do so with full awareness of its disadvantages. There is initially preference to reject such a system, presumably because of the principle expressed by Gideon, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you”—ideally, there would be no permanent human leadership in order to highlight God’s rule. Once it is clear, however, that the lack of stable human leadership consistently results in the violation of God’s ways, it is established that there is no choice but to turn to earthly kingship.

Ultimately, the judge narratives convey that there is no ideal form of leadership, and that each system has its advantages and disadvantages. The form of leadership is not nearly as important as the character and qualities of the leader. There is no mandatory form of government in Israel; what matters above all is God’s sovereignty over the world. The need for kingship arises because a series of judges does not bring stability, and this instability is mirrored by the people’s unstable commitment to God and God’s ways. The right king may lead to the desired stability. Before the institution of monarchy is established in Israel, the book of Judges expresses that God is the only true king of Israel, and that the only leaders fit to rule over Israel are those who place their loyalty to God above all else.

Date

The most salient historical anchor of these narratives is the antimonarchic perspective provided in Gideon’s speech (8:23).¹⁵ The three narratives of Gideon,

15. Scholars are divided regarding the period of this ideology. Wellhausen (*Die Composition*, 239, 254–56) thinks that the antimonarchic ideology dates to the postexilic period, when there

Abimelech, and Jephthah focus on these leaders' human flaws, presenting what must be considered when choosing a leader, and the dangers of these choices. In all three narratives, the people have an element of choice regarding their leader: Gideon is initially elected by God and he saves the people from their oppressors, but the people then turn to him and ask him to become their king; Abimelech is elected to reign by the people of Shechem (and Jotham's main criticism is against this terrible choice); Jephthah is elected as leader by the elders of Gilead. These narratives convey what kind of factors the people must take into account when choosing a leader.¹⁶ Even after Gideon rejects the concept of monarchy and all its problems, the stories of Jephthah and Samson emphasize that the leadership model of judges cannot endure, and the book's conclusion presents kingship as the only solution to the anarchy of this era. The book of Judges thus seems to be part of the fierce polemics about the advantages and disadvantages of monarchy during a time when this question was on the agenda. And indeed, this work has taught us much about Israelite society, its forms of leadership, and the nature of the relationships between the tribes. The book of Judges describes a shaky, instable era of constant change and political flux in Israel and reflects the premonarchic ideologies about government during this time.¹⁷ Such drastic political change

was no longer a monarchy. The promonarchic position (represented, for example, in 1 Sam 9:16) is from David and Solomon's time, when "every man sat beneath his vine and fig tree." Many scholars disagree that the antimonarchic stance is postexilic, since in biblical texts from the Second Temple period there is no evidence of this position. On the contrary, yearning for the days of the Davidic dynasty is classically associated with this period (Crüsemann, *Der Widerstand*, 1:684–87). Some believe that the antimonarchic views expressed in Judges are from the monarchic period. Budde (*Das Buch der Richter*, 66–67) holds that the antimonarchic views date to the destruction of Samaria, in line with the views of Hosea (e.g., Hos 8:4; 13:9–11). It is doubtful whether Hosea opposed monarchy; see, for example, Mays, *Hosea*, 117; Moore, *Judges*, 229–30; Burney, *Judges*, 183–84, 235. Richter (*Die Bearbeitungen des "Retterbuchs"*, 319–43) believes that the book of saviors, from chs. 3–9, attempts to present an antimonarchic stance, dating to Jehu's time. Crüsemann (*Der Widerstand*, 42–54) believes that the criticism presented by Gideon could not have been composed before there was actually kingship in Israel, and that this stance dates to the time of Solomon. According to Buber (*Kingship of God*, 59–65), Gideon's words reflect the premonarchic period and that they express the very notion of monarchy, based on the idea that earthly rule is an offense to heavenly rule. Many follow this opinion: Noth, *History of Israel*, 164–65; Bright, *History*, 173, 175; Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 263–65; Weinfeld, "Zion," 87–88; Malamat, *History of Biblical Israel*, 122; Weisman, "Charismatic Leaders," 410; Boling, *Judges*, 35. Noth (*History of Israel*, 165) believes that Gideon's response reflects the Israelite tribes' view before the institution of monarchy, and that this opposition was the reason why Israel's monarchy was established so late compared to the nations around them.

16. On the connection between Judges and the monarchy, see Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 332–33.

17. Presumably, if the book were later, there would be signs of this in the text. Had it been composed during David or Solomon's time, for example, the conquest of Jerusalem would have presumably occupied a more central place in the text. But Jerusalem serves no function at all in the book; it is only mentioned twice, with no importance in either mention or any hint of its

has a profound effect on the lives of the people and will certainly not take place without fierce polemics.

These narratives' focus on the pros and cons of the monarchy aptly reflects a reality in which there is no king, when the question of the form of government that should be established is at stake—right before the monarchy is established. The Gideon narrative's focus on the correct criteria for choosing a leader implies that the people have a choice in the matter; this would not be the case during a time when there is already a royal dynasty that passes the kingship from father to son, when the people would have very limited ability to intervene in the process of electing the leader.

The book of Judges, which contains both pro- and antimonarchic views,¹⁸ reflects the period that preceded the establishment of Israel's monarchy. It echoes the difficult period of transition between forms of government and offers a glimpse into the complex polemics of making a major historical change that cannot easily be reversed. Within these polemics, the book of Judges presents kingship as a necessary step after all other possible forms of leadership have been tested and ruled out, thus characterizing earthly kingship as a necessary establishment that does not challenge heavenly rule. Through this theological perspective, the book provides the appropriate criteria for electing a worthy leader.

future significance (1:8, 22). It is also briefly mentioned in the story of the concubine at Gibeah (19:10–12). This claim is especially important given the scholarly claim that the book of Judges is a pro-Davidic polemic against Benjamin. See Brettler, "Book of Judges," 399–418; Sweeney, "Polemics," 517–29.

18. Buber, *Kingship of God*, 66–84.