

A LITERARY APPRECIATION OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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The Book of Judges represents a critical phase of Israelite history. It appears critical in the prophetic view of decline and fall from a Mosaic ideal, and equally so in the thesis of Martin Noth that the nation as such was created in this period.¹ It was no less evidently formative for the traditions of Israel, and hence for the material on which the prophetic writings were based. The interest of the period is thus matched by the variety and interest of our sources of information, and their importance for the general history of Israelite literature.

In Judges, the old-fashioned documentary analysis meets its Waterloo; following the fundamental disagreement of the chief English commentators, Moore and Burney, it has reached the sterile controversy between Simpson and Eissfeldt,² which seems to have lost all touch with reality. Such a methodology has been completely abandoned by the Uppsala school, concentrating on the form and meaning of the traditions,³ and to a lesser extent by Noth, who is also interested in the growth of tradition rather than the dissection of supposedly composite documents.⁴ To the old dichotomy of J and E, originally related to the Divided Monarchy and supposed to run right through the Law and the earlier part of the Former Prophets, Noth opposes the concept of a 'deuteronomic history' (using older source-material) which would pass through stages of enlargement and later addition of detail. Whatever sources may have been used, documentary or other, the composition is no longer seen as a scrap-book of excerpts.

¹ M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, A. & C. Black, London (1960²) 5f.

² Cf. C. A. Simpson, *Composition of the Book of Judges*, Blackwell, Oxford (1957) 1ff.

³ Cf. J. Bright, *Early Israel in Recent History Writing*, SCM Press, London (1956); E. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition*, SCM Press, London (1954), particularly chapter 4 for a systematic contrast of 'traditio-historical' with 'literary-critical' method.

⁴ M. Noth, *Das Buch Josua*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen (1953²) Einleitung.

The thesis of our present study is that a fresh appraisal of Judges as a literary work, starting from the assumptions of authorship rather than of redaction, could lead to a more satisfying interpretation of the book than is to be found in the standard commentaries, and could help to resolve some of the major problems which have been raised. Our first hypothesis is that a person, properly called the 'author', cast the book in its present mould, having conceived in his own mind the general idea and plan. This is the essence of literary talent. If we found Judges an annalistic composition devoid of the marks of great literature, we might consider the postulate of an author debatable; but if we find (as from casual acquaintance we might expect to find) evidence of literary initiative and ability, then such a postulate becomes necessary, and may be proved in so far as further investigation reveals coherence and purpose in the work.

The assumption of 'authorship' does not rule out the possibility of additions and later editing, still less does it deny the possibility of identifying sources; it simply takes as a principle that one should begin by looking for the maximum rather than the minimum unity of plan. If the first theory will not stand examination, one is driven to formulate a more complex theory, but with the knowledge at any rate that the simpler possibilities have been considered.

The question of purpose is bound up with that of authorship; a demonstrable unity or lack of unity of purpose will be a powerful argument for or against unity of composition, since literary purpose is naturally attributable to an individual writer, more especially if the writing has any literary merit. Purpose may be discovered by noting certain remarks, by observing the writer's selectivity, by discerning patterns in his work. However, an author may conceivably have more than one purpose, not all equally in view in any one paragraph or section. A student might then extract the material contributing to each theme, and produce an apparent literary analysis which is really based on nothing more than the assignment of a separate hypothetical writer to each purpose. To illustrate from Judges, having observed that the second part of the introduction (*i.e.* 2:6—3:6) expounds a theme of recurrent rebellion and disaster, the old methodology extracts those parts of the book which do

not contribute directly to this cyclic pattern (*e.g.* 1:1—2:5, chapters 17–21, the minor judges). This quasi-literary analysis, once established, is likely to inhibit any wider estimate of the theme of the book. Since the part is easier to see than the whole, such an approach has an inherent bias towards fragmentation.

Thus the evaluation of purpose, albeit important, is difficult, open to subjective views, and rarely of itself conclusive. Our attention must be directed first to such matters as language, style, and arrangement of material, which can be more objectively considered. This survey will deal in turn with the introduction, the main part of the book, and the closing chapters; in this last section, the question of purpose comes inevitably to the fore.

The classical exposition of this division, *e.g.* by C. A. Burney,⁵ is more or less as follows:

- a. 1:1—2:5 is neither compatible with Joshua, nor a likely sequel to that book; it is 'out of place in its present connection'.
- b. 2:6—3:6 provides 'the true sequel to Joshua 24', setting out the narrator's philosophy of the subsequent history.
- c. The 'work of the editor' (so called because he used older narrative material and set it in a framework) 'extends no further than the history of Samson. . . . The final narratives . . . do not serve to illustrate this editor's scheme as laid down in his general introduction.'

I. THE INTRODUCTORY SECTIONS

The traditional subdivision of 1:1—3:6 requires further examination. Burney regards 1:1—2:5 as 'explaining the unsettled condition of affairs by the addition of details not incorporated by the main editor'.⁶ This view, however, depends on his prior assertion that the passage is incompatible with Joshua and 'out of place'; apart from that, there is no reason why the passage should not be by the same hand as the rest of the introduction, for precisely the purpose which Burney suggests.

I submit that Burney does not establish his point, on four counts. Firstly, the alleged incompatibility rests only on 1:1a;

⁵ *The Book of Judges*, Rivingtons, London (1930⁸) xxxivff.

⁶ *Ibid.* 2.

in the remaining points of contact between Judges 1 and Joshua, it may be shown that while Judges 1 is certainly not written as a sequel to Joshua, there are strong indications of common source-material, and the differences are essentially due to the different use of this material. The same applies to 2:6ff.; the term 'sequel' (to Joshua), applied to 2:6—3:6, is misleading, and 'true sequel' (Burney) even more so.

Secondly, Burney's interpretation does not dispose of the crux phrase 1:1a. On his own understanding of the work of the P (priestly) writer, he makes an antithesis between P and J over the question whether Joshua really completed a conquest;⁷ yet here is another priestly writer (classified R^P by Burney, in accordance with the then prevailing symbology) explicitly accepting what is considered to have been the J (or 'saga') point of view. If 1:1a is excluded from this 'R^P introduction', the difficulty of its relationship to the rest of the introduction disappears; if it is included, contradiction is already inherent in the traditional analysis without considering the rest of the introduction; and certainly the phrase never stood immediately before 2:6!

Thirdly, the emphasis of this passage is not quite correctly given by Burney. The charge against the Israelites is not in the first place that they failed to expel the Canaanites from their towns, but that they failed to stamp out the Canaanite religion in the territory which they did occupy; and this, says the historian, was the root reason for their widespread failure to exploit the invasion (2:2—3). This is entirely in line with the emphasis in the rest of chapter 2.

Fourthly, there are elements in the pattern of the central framework which arise in 2:1—5 and suggest that this also is part of the introduction to the narratives. These are: the reminder of the Exodus, and the phrase 'you did not obey my call', cf. 6:8—10; 10:11. Furthermore, this passage provides the first of a series of confrontations between the Lord and his people, which are definitely part of the author's scheme.

II. THE PATTERN OF THE CENTRAL PART OF JUDGES

The characteristic phrases which the episodes have in common all repeat from the introduction, except the chronological and

⁷ *Ibid.* 1.

local details; but the pattern is not merely repetitive. 'Again' in the phrase 'they did evil' is dropped in 6:1; the phrases 'they forsook the Lord', 'they served foreign gods', 'the wrath . . . burned', are present in the Othniel and Jephthah narratives, but omitted intermediately. 'He gave' alternates with 'he sold', while the introduction has both. The note of controversy with the Lord, foreshadowed in the Bochim tradition, is found in the Gideon and Jephthah episodes, but there is a marked progression each time. The phrase 'the Lord raised up' fades out as an explicit statement, though of course it is always implied in the story; it fits in direct sequence after 'they called on the Lord', but does not come after the controversy passages. In the case of Deborah, the presentation is varied in this respect.

The distinguishing feature of the notices on the minor judges is not the paucity of information in itself—we know very little about Othniel, who receives the full formulaic treatment—but that they do not arise to counter invasion. The phrasing of their notices (one, a pair, then three), the pattern (of which elements are already in the longer episodes), and the subtle variation of it, are all evidence of artistic handling. Why are they in the book? The stock answer, that they were brought in later to make the number up to twelve, implies selection from a wider range. If such further traditions did exist, it is all the more curious that Shamgar ben Anath (who may not have been a full-blooded Israelite) should have been brought into the number in preference to other tribal heroes; but if we have all the judges that were known to the author or editor, there is no point in imputing a motive of 'making up the number'.

The introduction to Jephthah (10:6, 7) virtually serves for Samson also, for we find only minimal repetition at 13:1, and this is not preceded by any note to the effect that 'Ammon was subdued'. Here we have the last stage in the gradual departure from stereotyped formulae; and while this argues first of all for deliberate movement in his presentation on the part of the author, it also suggests strongly that he is giving precedence to historic actuality and is not bound by a pattern of his own making. Indeed we can hardly fail to notice that the situation is steadily deteriorating throughout. From Abimelech's time on, the land does not recover its peace; deliverance is less complete; Jephthah fails where Gideon succeeded in avoiding civil war.

If the Samson episode is regarded as part of the central theme—and this is implied by 10:7–9—then at the very end there is lacking something which is normally regarded as basic to this theme; for Samson is a judge in Israel, but he does not effect any real liberation from the foreign enemy.

Our conclusion is that the theory which limits the main structure of the book to the exposition of a 'pragmatic principle' of repeated defection of the people resulting in disaster, followed by repentance resulting in salvation, is an inadequate interpretation (and, incidentally, is based on too limited a view of the introduction). The theme develops; mere repetition is artistically avoided; incidentals are systematically woven in. Further, there is reason to believe that the author is working with data which he feels free to adapt and handle to a certain extent, but not to force into a regular pattern regardless of historic actualities. Perhaps this will sufficiently account, too, for the inclusion of the non-standard episode concerning Abimelech as an integral part of the narrative.

III. THE CLOSING CHAPTERS

Burney's view is typical of the literary-critical school: 'in the main of the same literary character as the other old narratives, (they) do not serve to illustrate this editor's scheme as laid down in the general introduction, and altogether lack traces of his hand as seen in the stereotyped introductions and conclusions of the stories of the Judges'.⁸

But if the usual reading of 'the editor's scheme' is inadequate to account for the way he handles his material in the stories of the judges, and if we must therefore revise and deepen our appreciation of his purpose, it becomes conceivable that his scheme extended to the use of these further stories to drive his point home. Conversely, they may themselves contribute to the understanding of the author's purpose, since we need not regard his work as concluded by the obituary notice on Samson (16:31).

One should also ask how the work would appear without the closing stories. Any such assessment is bound to be rather subjective, in the absence of any formal or explicit literary connection between Judges and Samuel; but one feels that

⁸ *Ibid.* xxxvii.

without chapters 17–21 the end of the book would display neither the literary skill nor the sense of history which characterize its earlier portions. There would be neither climax nor summing up, nor any pointing forward. Indeed, the material concerning Samson has detracted from the main theme (even on the limited view) rather than illustrated it, and something is required to return the emphasis to the failure of Israel *vis-à-vis* their Lord. We should have to say that ‘some later editor’ had seen what was lacking and had most ably selected and presented two episodes from the national traditions, which displayed the state of the nation and the religious and moral failure underlying their political misfortunes. Then it would be easier to credit this man with the conception of the book as a whole, than to postulate as pre-existent a strangely incomplete work by a writer of similar calibre.

Besides providing a more satisfying conclusion, these chapters provide the forward link and thus reveal more of the author’s purpose and circumstances. The point that ‘in those days there was no king in Israel’ is made four times. The first time, as soon as the stage has been set and interest captured for the first episode, the explanation of its import is added ‘and so every man did as he thought fit’; and this is repeated at the last time, as the historian’s final comment. In both stories the phrases are integral with the narrative as it stands, particularly so in the second. It is a reasonable conclusion that the stories are told here at least partly to justify the introduction of the monarchy, though it is equally certain that they were previously handed down independently in different settings. It is also a reasonable, though not a necessary, inference that the stories were put in their present setting at a time when the monarchy had arrived, and was still effective as providing good government and sound religious leadership. This does not necessarily ‘place’ the author of Judges; what we have argued is that our author incorporated these stories in this form, whether or not he was responsible for their ‘monarchist’ setting, as suiting his literary arrangement and in keeping with his viewpoint and intention as a historian.

IV. CONCLUSION

The hypothesis with which we began this study, and which we find tenable as a result of it, is that the Book of Judges is substantially a single piece of historical writing, presenting a phase of the history covered by the Former Prophets. We find that the author first describes the opening situation, and sums up the period in the terms which are to him most relevant; then he arranges his narrative material, primarily but not exclusively with reference to his leading theme; and finally with two dramatic examples he illustrates the condition of the nation without a central government. The traditional stories and the miscellaneous information woven into this pattern are of diverse origin, but the pattern itself is no mean creation.

The two features of the literary structure of the book which contribute most to this reassessment are, first, the general coherence of the introduction, the so-called two sections being found complementary and not different in standpoint from each other; and, second, the progressive rather than merely cyclic treatment of the material concerning the judges themselves. If now we find that the book does not naturally end with the notice of Samson's death, it may further be said that the last chapters play a part as important for the historical status of the book as for its literary merit.

The introduction says that the Israelites failed to complete the conquest of Palestine, and that this failure was attributable to their breach of faith with their God, which became evident with the passing of Joshua's generation, and deepened continually despite all their experiences of divine discipline and mercy. The main part of the book elaborates this theme, recording the deterioration of Israel's position until the enemies are no longer repulsed, there is scarcely any more will to resist, and civil war has added its special horrors to the tale of depression. We have now to ask, in view of the author's competence as a writer and apparent maturity as a historian, what may have been the purpose or occasion of his telling this story in this way.

As far as we are aware, the only answer hitherto given to this question relates to the central portion of the book, because the regnant redaction-hypothesis accounts for most details and peripherals as arising from the interests of the supposed editors. The view that the author of the central portion was concerned to

show how the events of his time witnessed to his theology is fair up to a point, but we have found it inadequate and incomplete.

The recording of principal traditions about the great men of the time was certainly within the aims of the writer, but this does not explain the theological motif, the selectivity, the development. The problem has sometimes been treated by attributing the theological element to the Deuteronomist, or an editor, and the chronicle or saga motive to his sources (usually defined as J); this would rule the saga motive out of account altogether as reason for the book in its present form. Although the breaking of the covenant is present as a motif (2:1ff., and implicitly in 6:8ff.; 8:23; 10:15), it is not dominant, and does not of itself provide the dramatic interest to call forth and sustain historical writing of this calibre. One would expect such writing, as distinct from a mere chronicle of events, to be occasioned by a high drama of human experience, or explain a situation which by its importance and abnormality demands an explanation.

We have seen that the general theme of the book is one of increasing failure and depression; this implies that there was originally, in the author's view, an ideal and even a measure of attainment. We may also observe that the story has a sequel, and would certainly never have been written if the light of Israel had been extinguished under the Philistine-Ammonite bushel.

It may well be relevant here that the book is, as it were, titled with the phrase 'after Joshua's death', which belongs neither to what is commonly called the 'second introduction' nor, strictly speaking, to the 'first'. Certainly it closes on the carefully repeated note that this is what life in Israel was like before the monarchy. It is in this unlooked-for transition from the measure of success achieved by the Invasion to the near-eclipse of the nation in Samuel's day—both, data of history attested in principle by archaeological evidence—that we find a situation which requires explaining, and a subject worthy of an historian.