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*Mary L. Conway*



## Monarchy in Judges: Positive or Negative?

MARY L. CONWAY

*Mary L. Conway is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.*

**Abstract:** There has been much discussion in the scholarly literature as to whether Judges is pro-monarchic or anti-monarchic. Gideon’s rejection of kingship and the disastrous rule of Abimelech have been used in evidence to assert that human kingship is not YHWH’s preferred mode of governance. On the other hand, variations on the refrain “There was no king in Israel; each person did what was right in their own eyes” in the final chapters would appear to support the establishment of dynastic kingship. Reducing the issue of monarchy to an “either/or” situation, however, is to underestimate the message about kingship, and indeed leadership, that the book of Judges presents.

**Key Words:** Judges, Monarchy, Kingship, Leadership, Anarchy.

### Introduction

Before the call of Abraham and the formation of the nation of Israel, leadership was primarily a clan or family matter. The head of a family, often a large extended family, would take the lead in justice and decision making. These leaders were normally male, and the fathers of subgroups would be recognized as elders in the clan. Noah and Abraham are examples of this type of leadership. The surrounding nations did have monarchs, but in fact, many of the early “kings” mentioned in the Old Testament (see Gen 10:6–32; 14:1–16; 20:1–18, etc.) were not monarchs in the sense of the leaders of great powers, such as the Assyrian empire builders and the Egyptian pharaohs, but local tribal leaders.

Even after Abraham left his country to found the people of God, later known as Israel, leadership was largely a family matter, passed down from patriarch to patriarch—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph—and aided by elders from clans and בֵּית אָבוֹת (fathers’ households). Israel was not an “empire” in the sense of others in the ancient Near East (ANE), such as the Akkadians, Assyrians, Hittites, and Egyptians,<sup>1</sup> with infrastructure and the concept of divine kingship, but rather a nomadic tribal

1. See the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago’s interesting Ancient Near Eastern Cross-Cultural Time Line at <https://oi.uchicago.edu/timeline>.

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community with leaders who were not monarchs.<sup>2</sup> In the Old Testament, the kingship of YHWH is implied, and later, overtly stated (e.g., Exod 15:18; 1 Sam 12:12; Ps 10:16). It was not until the end of Israel's captivity in Egypt that centralized charismatic leadership arose under Moses, and then Joshua. Even so, these leaders were not "kings" and there was no "monarchy." Israelite leaders were YHWH's "servants" or "vice-regents," never kings themselves.<sup>3</sup>

It is not until the time of the Judges that monarchy becomes a significant issue; in fact, it forms a major theme of a book that deals extensively with the issue of Israelite leadership.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of failing leadership, the issue reaches a crisis during the tenures of Gideon and Abimelech, and is resolved—at least temporarily—in the implications of the refrain: "There was no king in Israel..." (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

## Monarchy in Judges

### The Decline of Centralized Leadership

Moses and Joshua are portrayed as great leaders over all Israel. In spite of the appearance given by the sequential narratives of the book of Judges, these שֹׁפְטִים are not leaders of Israel as a whole but of individual tribes or coalitions of tribes.<sup>5</sup> A significant change occurs during the tenure of Caleb. The first verse of Judges, "Now it came about after the death of Joshua..."; וַיָּהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, echoes the first verse of the book of Joshua, "Now it came about after the death of Moses..."; וַיָּהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת מֹשֶׁה. Later, in 2 Sam 1:1 the motif appears again, this time in the context of David's ascension to the throne as monarch of a united Israel: "After the death of Saul..."; וַיָּהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שָׂאוּל. Unlike the appointment of Moses, Joshua, and David, however, no specific new leader is appointed to succeed Joshua. When the Israelites exited *en masse* from Egypt and travelled together through

2. For a helpful overview see K. M. Heim, "Kings and Kingship," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 610–23.

3. Regarding Moses, see Exod 14:31; Num 12:7; Deut 34:5; Josh 1:1, 15; 8:21, 23; 18:7; 1 Chron 6:49; 2 Chron 1:3; 24:6; Neh. 1:7; 10:29. This is also true of Joshua (Josh 24:9; Judg 2:8), Caleb (Num 12:24). The term is even used of King David, indicating that his kingship is subordinate to YHWH's (2 Sam 7:5–8; 1 Kings 8:66; 11:36; 2 Kings 19:34; 2 Chron 17:4).

4. Some of the material in this article is based on Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, *Judges*, ed. Daniel I. Block, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Forthcoming). See this resource for more detail.

5. According to Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, WBC 8 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), lxxxiii, "The Israel of the traditional narratives does not appear as a united group of twelve tribes. Rather, each judge works in a specific territory and calls to battle those tribes or clans in the immediate vicinity." See also Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 33.

the wilderness, it made sense for God to provide a charismatic leader who could inspire and encourage this collection of former slaves. Moses, with his compelling personality and his inside knowledge of the court of Egypt, made a logical choice. When the Israelites first arrived in Canaan, and needed to establish their presence in and right to the land, a strong military general such as Joshua was the best choice.<sup>6</sup> YHWH provides the type of leader the people need in their situation, and one might expect him to do so at the beginning of Judges, when Israel is about to settle down in a new territory.<sup>7</sup>

At Judges 1:1, the Israelites inquire of YHWH, “Who should go up for us to the Canaanites at first in order to make war against them?”<sup>8</sup> YHWH responds: “Judah should go up. Take note, I hereby give the land into its power” (v. 2). The logical candidate for leadership from the tribe of Judah is Caleb.<sup>9</sup> He is one of the two scouts—the other was Joshua himself—who trusted YHWH to venture into the Promised Land when all the others made fearful excuses because of the Anakim, a tribe of large, dangerous people (see Deut 1:28; 2:10, 21; 9:2) who intimidated them (Num 13:25–33). Once again, here during the conquest, Caleb shows that he has no fear of the Anakim, as the killing of their three leaders, Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai indicates (Judg 1:10).

In spite of Caleb’s reputation, however, the conquest does not go well. It consists of a few victories that soon become intermingled with setbacks, and eventually devolves into the repeated motif, “but they did *not* dispossess...” (vv. 21, 27–33). The destruction of the three leaders is a victory; however, the actual cities of Hebron (v. 10) and Debir (v. 11) are not “struck down.” It would seem that “going out against” (לָקַח הַלָּחֶם) a city does not ensure that the city is defeated, and it appears that Judah’s conquests are, as Frolov states, “losing momentum” at this point.<sup>10</sup> Note that at the

6. For a brief summary of theories as to whether the entry into Canaan was more of a conquest or a settlement, see Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 210–25.

7. Note, however, that there is a temporal overlap between the first chapters of Judges and the book of Joshua.

8. All Bible translations in this article are those of Boda and Conway, *Judges*, unless otherwise indicated.

9. Tribal membership in the ANE was not exclusively based on biological descent but could also be attained by political or economic affiliation, settlement within a group, or shared religious conviction. Although Caleb is described as being from the tribe of Judah (Num 13:6; 34:19) he is also designated a “Kenizzite” (Num 32:12; Josh 14:6, 14; see also 1 Chr 4:13–15). Members of a different ethnic groups were sometimes integrated into Judah over time. See K. Lawson Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 66 n. 17. See also J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 103; Mark J. Fretz and Raphael I. Panitz, “Caleb (Person),” *ABD*, 1:809–10; and J. Kenneth Kuntz, “Kenaz (Person),” *ABD*, 4:17.

10. Serge Frolov, *Judges*, FOTL 6B (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 48. Note that Hebron is not given to Caleb as part of his allotment until v. 20; the reference to “dispossessing” (שָׁרַף) the three sons of Anak in this later verse may mean the actual taking of their land, although they were “struck down” earlier.

start of their ventures, in v. 1, the people “inquired of YHWH” (שאל בַּיהוָה). Now, however, when the going gets tough and clear victory eludes Israel, no such inquiry takes place. It is interesting that previously, after their failure to conquer Ai, Joshua—the *other* spy—challenged and questioned God to find the reason behind Israel’s defeat in Joshua 7. After dealing with Achan’s sin, the Israelites went on to success. Caleb, however, makes no such inquiry. The loss of momentum, and his consequent desperation after the loss of the territory of Hebron and Debir, causes Caleb to offer his daughter in marriage in v. 12 as motivation to any warrior who can successfully *strike down* (נכה) and *capture* (לכד) Debir (Kiriath-sepher).<sup>11</sup>

Some scholars have described the brief vignette featuring Caleb and Achsah as a “charming domestic scene,”<sup>12</sup> but its message is far less positive. When Achsah is disappointed with her father’s gift of land, she goes to inquire of him and confidently asks for land with water (v. 14–15), trusting in the goodness and concern of her father to supply her needs. The incident is clearly intended symbolically as reproof: whereas Achsah went and inquired of her father when she was disappointed in his provision of land because she had a trusting relationship with him, Caleb failed to go and inquire of YHWH when he was disappointed in his provision of land, in spite of his earlier demonstration of trust in the God of Israel.<sup>13</sup> The situation calls to mind Joshua 17:14–18, in which Ephraim and Manasseh hesitated to attack the Canaanites because they also had iron chariots. Then, their leader Joshua—again, the *other* spy—assured the Israelites that they were powerful and had the ability to conquer the valley. It would appear that Caleb has no such confidence; he acts on his own initiative without consulting YHWH. It is significant that Caleb disappears from the narrative at v. 20 and is never heard of again. In fact, Israel faces more and more defeats in battle and fails to drive out the Canaanites, who persist in living among them (1:27–36). This is largely due to their apostasy, for another generation arose who “did the evil thing in the eyes of YHWH, and they served the Baals, and they abandoned YHWH the God of their ancestors” (2:11–12), and YHWH “gave them into the power of plunderers...then he sold them into the power of their surrounding enemies” (v. 14).

## **Tribal Leadership**

With the initial stages of the occupation of the land accomplished, but with centralized leadership proving ineffectual, the tribes disperse to their own allotments to attempt

11. Trent C. Butler, *Joshua*, WBC 7 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 186, calls the event in this parallel passage “the somewhat foolhardy challenge of Caleb (v 16) promising his daughter to whatever brave soul would conquer the city.” In fact, in his Joshua commentary, Butler views the entire Caleb-Achsah-Othniel pericope as somewhat farcical. If Judah was beginning to experience difficulty in battle, however, perhaps it was not so foolhardy from a military perspective.

12. See, for example, Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 94.

13. See the chapter “The First Introduction” in Boda and Conway, *Judges, for more detail*.

to establish themselves on their land. From this point on there is no centralized leadership in Israel, but local judges are raised up to lead the various tribes (Judg 2:16). With the people scattered over the land and the need to deal with local issues of cultic worship, civil administration, and military defense, this form of leadership is most suitable. Othniel, the nephew—or possibly brother—of Caleb,<sup>14</sup> is the first judge mentioned and proves to be a very successful leader, empowered by the Spirit of YHWH; he serves as the standard by which all subsequent judges are evaluated. He is from the tribe of Judah. The next judge, Ehud, however, is from the tribe of Benjamin, and then Deborah the Ephraimite and Barak from Naphtali—the first judge to show signs of hesitation and weakness—share the leadership of Israel. It is likely that each of these judges ruled over and defended only a portion of the Israelite territory; in fact, the Song of Deborah laments the fact that a number of tribes failed to get involved in driving off the enemy (5:17). Gideon begins as a leader in Manasseh, but later musters Naphtali, Asher, and Ephraim (7:23–24). It is during the tenure of Gideon, subsequent to Barak’s inadequate leadership,<sup>15</sup> that the issue of “kingship” first arises.

## **Monarchy: Corrupted and Abdicated**

### *The Nature of Israelite Kingship*

It is important to consider exactly what “kingship” or “monarchy” entails in Judges. Israel was originally an association of tribes, built initially on kinship relations. However, as Cazelles notes, “Kin-based social organizations [in the ANE] were no longer fully effective for meeting the increasingly complex demands of urban and political development. Leadership passed on to certain officials responsible for military, economic, and civil administration.”<sup>16</sup> The titles of these leaders varied, and some could be considered “kings” even if the Hebrew term מלך, “king,” is not used. In Judges, the terms מלך, commonly translated “to reign”—as well as the cognate, מְלִיכָה, “king”—and מָשַׁל, commonly rendered “to rule,” are both used in varying contexts. Too much weight must not be attached to the different lexis, however, since the two words have an overlapping semantic range and are sometimes used synonymously.<sup>17</sup> The issue in Judges is not simply the role of “king,” but the role of “a king like the nations.”

14. See Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 124 n. 32.

15. See the chapter on Deborah and Barak in Boda and Conway, *Judges*, for a detailed argument for the inadequacy of Barak’s leadership.

16. Henri Cazelles, “Sacral Kingship,” *ABD* 5:863.

17. See note 21 below.

As early as Deuteronomy 17:15–20, Moses foresaw the eventual necessity of kingship, and outlined the characteristics of a king “whom YHWH your God chooses” (v. 15). The king

- must be an Israelite
- must not multiply horses *for himself* (לוֹ)
- must not return the people to Egypt
- must not multiply wives *for himself* (לוֹ) lest *his heart* (לְקַבּוֹ) turn away
- must not accumulate silver or gold *for himself* (לוֹ)
- must write the law *for himself* (לוֹ) and read it daily
- must fear YHWH
- must submit to and carefully observe the law
- must not exalt *his heart* (לְקַבּוֹ) over his people
- must not turn aside from the commandment

It is interesting how often “for himself” (לוֹ) and “his heart” (לְקַבּוֹ) appear in this passage. There seems to be a major emphasis on the king keeping his heart/mind focused on YHWH and his law and away from himself and his own interests, status, and power. Above all he is not to be arrogant, but must fear YHWH his God. It is also very interesting that the result of following these guidelines is a suggestion of dynastic monarchy: “so that he may lengthen days over his kingdom—he and his sons—in the midst of Israel” (v. 20).<sup>18</sup> A king like the nations would be someone with an inflated ego, who accumulated wealth and power for himself, and who did not honor YHWH and submit to his law, whereas a king that YHWH chooses, or “a man after [YHWH’s] own heart,” as 1 Samuel 13:14 puts it,<sup>19</sup> would be someone who was humble, who acted as a vice-regent under YHWH, and who served God’s purposes rather than his own. It was, after all, YHWH’s original intention in creation that humanity, both male and female, should “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over/rule over/take charge of (רָדָה)<sup>20</sup> the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28).

18. See Tomoo Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 142 (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1977), 41.

19. See Jer 3:15; 2 Sam 7:21; Ps 20:5[4]. This term refers to YHWH’s choice of David rather than David’s character, therefore saying more about YHWH’s heart than David’s. For various points of view on the meaning of this term see Benjamin J. M. Johnson, “The Heart of YHWH’s Chosen One in 1 Samuel,” *JBL* 131, no. 3 (2012); Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Heart of YHWH and His Chosen One in 1 Samuel 13:14,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 4 (2014); P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 229.

20. See David J. A. Clines, David M. Stec, and Jacqueline C. R. De Roo, eds., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 8 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2011), 7:419.

### ***Gideon: Kingship Abdicated***

Gideon begins as an unlikely candidate for kingship; he is hesitant and insecure (6:15), afraid of the Midianites (6:11) and even his own household (6:27). He is not so much humble as weak and afraid. YHWH spends considerable time carefully and patiently building up his confidence and trust. Gideon takes baby steps at first, destroying his own family altar to Baal (6:28), but finally develops the courage to lead a tiny army against the enemy, trusting in YHWH's help (7:15). Gideon's taste of victory has an unexpected result, however. When he is chasing Zeba and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian, the reader is told: "Then Gideon entered into the Jordan. (Now he was passing over, and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing.) And he said to the men of Succoth, 'Give loaves of bread to the army which is following me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian'" (8:4–5). Note the change from "he was passing over, and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted (pl.) yet pursuing (pl.)" to "for they are exhausted (pl.) and I am pursuing (sg.)." This, followed by a long litany of masculine singular references to Gideon alone, the violent confrontations with the people of Succoth and Penuel, and the slaughter of the two kings as personal revenge for the death of his brothers, shows that Gideon has morphed into an arrogant, self-confident, self-serving tyrant, not a humble servant of YHWH. Gideon has become "a king like the nations," and the people cry out, "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson, because you have saved us from the power of Midian" (8:22). In their view, YHWH has not saved them; Gideon has. It may appear that Gideon is merely offered leadership, rather than kingship, since the verb used in v. 22 is from the root "rule" (משל) rather than "reign" (מלך);<sup>21</sup> however, the two have overlapping semantic ranges. Also, the suggestion that his son rule after him implies a dynastic kingship.<sup>22</sup> It would seem that the situation in Israel has begun to deteriorate. Some local judges are strong and faithful, but some are weak. YHWH may well have been intending to establish Gideon as a centralized monarch in order to restore order and cultic faithfulness; however, it is not to be.

We cannot know what Gideon was thinking when his men made this appeal, but his attitude and behavior change immediately. It is likely that the men's demand

21. The root משל is in the same semantic range as מלך although it is a more general term, and can be translated to "rule" or "have authority." It is used of YHWH's kingly rule, as in Judg 8:23 (see also Ps 22:29; 66:7; 1 Chr 29:12; 2 Chr 20:6; etc.) and human kings such as Solomon, Sihon, and Og (Josh 12:2, 5; 1 Kgs 5:1). See the worthwhile analysis in Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, BIS (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), 92–96, who compares the two terms and also compares short term, emergency, military leadership of judges under YHWH to the long term, hereditary leadership of kings under YHWH. She concludes that by the end of Judges "the monarchy is not understood as an ideal solution, but as a pragmatic one" (p. 96).

22. As some have noted, the life of Gideon after his victory over Midian certainly resembles that of a king with a harem (Judg 8:29–30), regardless of his refusal. See, for example, Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 302; Butler, *Judges*, 222; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading*, JSOTSup 46 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 154; Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, 210.



shocks Gideon into an “epiphany” or “anagnorisis” of self-awareness;<sup>23</sup> he suddenly, and justifiably, realizes how arrogant and self-centered he has become in his unrelenting pursuit of power and is appalled at his own behavior. He recognizes that he has exceeded the limits of the authority that YHWH has given him and distorted it to accomplish his own personal agenda. Thus, in an excess of remorse, and instead of backtracking to an appropriate exercise of power, he completely abdicates his position: “I assuredly will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; YHWH will rule over you” (v. 23). Gideon goes too far, moving from one extreme to the other. His arrogant, violent pursuit of individual power and personal revenge—kingship like that of the nations—is unacceptable, but so is a false humility that results in his rejection of any sort of rule, even a position of leadership which God has clearly called him to accept—Israelite kingship under YHWH. All of YHWH’s patient effort in developing a leader who will act as his vice-regent in Israel is frustrated as Gideon reverts back to his previous persona, characterized by impotence, timidity, and a sense of inadequacy.

Many have argued that Gideon’s refusal of kingship and acknowledgement of YHWH’s direct rule is a humble and faithful act,<sup>24</sup> but Gideon in fact throws the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. After the incipient weakness shown by Barak, YHWH desperately needs a faithful and competent leader to guide Israel forward, someone to serve as his vice-regent, perhaps even to establish a dynastic monarchy as David will do later. There is actually no overt condemnation of monarchy as such in the Gideon narrative, only the rejection of self-serving, violent, and power-hungry kingship: “a king like the nations.” As Provan remarks, there must be guidelines “if human kingship is not to interfere with divine kingship but express it...[Israel needed] the right sort of kingship: [David] fights God’s battles and not his own.”<sup>25</sup> There is no further evidence of effective leadership by Gideon, however, who seems preoccupied with personal and family interests (8:29–31). He leaves YHWH to rule more or less directly, in spite of the fact that the creation mandate indicates that God planned to rule through faithful and obedient humanity (Gen 1:27–28). The leadership vacuum created by Gideon, who seems to revert to the role of priest—a

23. Anagnorisis is a kind of “aha moment,” also known as “discovery” or “recognition.” Aristotle says, “‘Recognition’, as indeed the word implies, [is] a change from not-knowing to knowing” (Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, trans. George Whalley [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997], 124).

24. For differing opinions on the significance of Gideon’s response, see Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 299; Lawson G. Stone, “Judges,” in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, ed. Philip Wesley Comfort, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 3* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012), 299–300; Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 152; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 263; Robert H. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1996), 168–69.

25. I am indebted to a lecture on Daniel by Iain Provan for initiating this line of thought. Iain W. Provan, *Daniel: Living with Beastly Empires*. “3502g.Mp3: Daniel 7 (Cont) Daniel 8.” (Vancouver: Regent College <http://www.regentaudio.com>, 2004), Audio lecture, see especially 31:00–32:30.

role for which he is definitely not qualified (8:24–27)—is seized by an opportunist: Gideon’s own son.

### ***Abimelech: Kingship Corrupted***

Gideon has been raised up by YHWH to act as his vice-regent, but after his first failure he throws in the towel and recedes into the background, reverting to the weakness and insecurity he demonstrated at the start of the narrative. The narrator does note “all the good that he had done to Israel” (8:35), and indeed he does defeat the Midianite oppressors and temporarily restore Yahwistic worship to Israel, but, ironically, he leads them back into apostasy again (8:27).

When responsible leadership abdicates, tyranny results.<sup>26</sup> Jotham’s fable (9:7–15) vividly illustrates this truth. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine—all of them productive plants providing the staples necessary for life—refuse the leadership role. They focus on their own strengths and cannot see the larger picture: the need for coordinated leadership. It is left to the bramble, a thorny, useless plant, to take on the ruling role by default. According to Butler, “The precise identification of the plant indicated by Hebrew תְּבַרְבֵּרִים is not known. Ps 58:9 (Heb. 10) identifies its use as fuel burned up under cooking pots. Otherwise, it is useless except to stick and prick.”<sup>27</sup> Jotham’s thornbush is an apt metaphor for the reign of Abimelech.

Note that Abimelech offers to “rule,” מָשַׁל, over Shechem, whereas Jotham states that the Shechemites have “made him king,” מָלַךְ; however, recall that the two words are overlapping in meaning. It is not so much the title that matters as the form of leadership. Abimelech is certainly a “king like the nations” (see 1 Sam 8:5–22) rather than a “king whom YHWH chooses.” Space precludes a detailed analysis of Abimelech’s reign;<sup>28</sup> suffice it to say that his tenure is characterized by self-serving violence and apostasy. The leadership vacuum that Gideon created is filled by a self-serving, Baal worshipping, secondary son of a Shechemite woman. For once, external enemies are not a threat to Israel; an insidious internal enemy rises to power and threatens to destroy Israel from within. However, after three short years Abimelech is destroyed by his own machinations. As responsible leadership in Israel continues to deteriorate, the need for strong, faithful, centralized leadership increases.

26. As Stone aptly puts it: “Far from being a critique of kingship, the Abimelech story stands as an affirmation that when legitimate human rule is usurped, divine rule asserts itself in defense of human rule—and (dare I say) dynastic, human rule at that” (Stone, “Judges,” 323).

27. Butler, *Judges*, 241. Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 6D (2014), 383, notes that תְּבַרְבֵּרִים is “a term among many in the Hebrew Bible that refer to a variety of plants with prickles or spines.”

28. See the Abimelech chapter in Boda and Conway, *Judges for more detail*.

## Degeneration of Leadership in Israel

### *The Non-Cyclic Judges*

The non-cyclic judges form two peaceful clusters that punctuate the apostasy and turmoil of the rules of Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson.<sup>29</sup> The prosperity and peace of these interludes contrasts powerfully with the turmoil of the surrounding narratives, but their brevity serves to accentuate the extent of the cultic and military chaos in the long narratives that surround them. As Beem notes, “The minor judge narratives depict a peaceful world in which Israel can grow and thrive.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Jephthah*

The tenure of Jephthah is the result of a desperate search for effective leadership. Gideon was specifically raised up by YHWH (6:14) to deliver his people in a time of crisis. His son, Abimelech, ruthlessly set about raising himself up to the position of king over Israel (9:1–6). The non-cyclic judges, Tola and Jair, simply “arise” (אָרָסוּ, 10:1, 3); whether they raise themselves up, or are raised up by YHWH, or are raised up by the common will of the people is unknown, since no agent is given. Jephthah, however, is sought for and appointed by the elders of the people themselves when YHWH refuses to come to their aid after they are threatened by the king of Ammon (10:18). The apostasy of the people has become so extreme that YHWH’s patience has run out (10:11–14, 16);<sup>31</sup> they now worship a veritable grocery list of false gods: “Then the people of Israel continued to do the evil thing in the eyes of YHWH, and they served the Baals and the Ashtaroth and the gods of Aram and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab and the gods of the people of Ammon and the gods of the Philistines, and they abandoned YHWH and they did not serve him” (10:6). Jephthah’s reputation as a courageous fighter makes him a likely candidate for leadership from the elders’ perspective (11:1).

29. Although these narratives are extremely brief, and most of the elements that characterize the cycles of the “major” or “cyclic” judges—Sin, Discipline, Cry, Divine Word, Deliverance, Peace, and Death—are absent, they constitute a meaningful part of the structure of Judges. Many now prefer to call them “non-cyclic judges” rather than “minor judges.” See Amit, *The Art of Editing*, 84; Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, 43; Alan J. Hauser, “Minor Judges: A Re-Evaluation,” *JBL* 94, no. 2 (1975) and E. Theodore Mullen, “The ‘Minor Judges’: Some Literary and Historical Considerations,” *CBQ* 44, no. 2 (1982).

30. Beverly G. Beem, “The Minor Judges: A Literary Reading of Some Very Short Stories,” in *Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspectives* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 150.

31. The clause וַתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁוֹ בְּעַמְלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (10:16) is difficult and controversial. Woodenly, it may be rendered, “And/but his soul was short with the misery/trouble of Israel.” Some translations interpret the Hebrew to indicate YHWH’s compassion for Israel (e.g., NRSV: “and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer”; similarly NASB, TNIV, JPS); while others interpret it as demonstrating YHWH’s annoyance with his people (e.g., ESV: “and he became impatient over the misery of Israel”; similarly HCSB); a similar division can be noted among commentators. See the Jephthah chapter in Boda and Conway, *Judges for a detailed analysis*.

The Gileadite elders are fully prepared to give Jephthah the supreme position of “governor” (שׂר) of all the inhabitants of Gilead” (10:18); however, they begin their negotiations by merely offering him the status of קצין, a high-ranking military position, or “general” (11:6). Thus, when Jephthah—still smarting from their previous harsh treatment of him (11:1–3)—proves reluctant and tries to negotiate a better deal, they pull out their trump card—which has been up their sleeve all along—and make the irresistible offer of governorship. Jephthah accepts, not realizing that he is being manipulated by the elders. Although Jephthah is not termed a “king,” his power over Gilead, a Transjordanian territory consisting of parts of the tribes of Gad and Asher, is considerable. He conducts negotiations with the king of Ammon as an equal. Although appointed by the elders, he does later seem to be endorsed by YHWH when he sends his Spirit on the judge (11:29). Jephthah demonstrates some control over Ephraim as well, summoning them to battle; however, the deterioration of unity in Israel is evidenced by the bitter dispute between Jephthah and that tribe that results in the decimation the Ephraimites (12:1–6).<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, although Jephthah’s knowledge of Israelite history is considerable, his knowledge of—and trust in—YHWH is minimal. He doubts that God will give him success and tribes to negotiate with YHWH himself by offering his daughter in sacrifice if he wins the battle.<sup>33</sup> He tries to manipulate YHWH as pagan kings might try to manipulate their gods, and as the king of Moab actually does in 2 Kings 3:26–27 to ensure success in battle. Jephthah is hardly a leader whom YHWH chooses, but a resentful, self-serving, manipulative, syncretistic tribal warrior who first leads Israel into internecine warfare. He merely demonstrates the weaknesses of tribal leadership and the need for responsible, centralized rule. His tenure ends ignominiously with 42,000 Ephraimites, fellow Israelites, dead at the fords of the Jordan (12:6).

## **Samson**

The final judge in the book of Judges is hardly a leader at all.<sup>34</sup> Although Samson is often presented in Sunday school lessons and popular media as a “hero,” and the text

32. This contrasts effectively with the way that Gideon dealt with the Ephraimites in 8:1–3.

33. Note that Jephthah does actually sacrifice his daughter; however, the Spirit does not influence or motivate Jephthah’s vow, as some commentators fear. The discourse of the Hebrew makes clear that the main narrative breaks at v. 29 with a *QATAL terminal marker and the lexis עבר* (passed over) and קְנֵי עַמּוֹן (people of Ammon). The making of the vow is a separate paragraph, a digression that may have taken place at another place or time. The narrative is then taken up again in 11:27 with the repeated lexis עבר (passed over) and קְנֵי עַמּוֹן (people of Ammon), the technique of “resumptive repetition.” What the coming of the Spirit motivates is the battle plan. See E. J. Revell, “The Battle with Benjamin (Judges 20:29–48) and Hebrew Narrative Techniques,” *VT* 35, no. 4 (1985): 427. See also Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Presentation of Synchronicity and Simultaneity in Biblical Narratives,” in *Studies in Hebrew Narrative Art Throughout the Ages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), 9–26.

34. Note that although Samson is placed last for literary reasons, there are indications that he actually ruled much earlier in the settlement period. Also, note that Eli (1 Sam 4:18) and Samuel (1 Sam 7:6, 15) were later judges in Israel.

twice states that he judged Israel for 20 years (15:20; 16:31), he never demonstrates any evidence of leadership, and, as the messenger states at the very beginning, Samson would only “begin to save Israel from the power of the Philistines” (13:5). His two recorded prayers (15:18; 16:28) are examples of arrogant self-interest. Samson spends his time womanizing or gaining revenge for personal insults and injuries. In fact, he is handed over to the Philistines by the tribe of Judah when his antics provoke threats of a violent response from their enemies. His fellow Israelites view the so-called judge as merely a troublemaker, and have, as a result, sunk into complacency and passive acceptance of their lot (15:9–13).

What the reader is told, but what Samson’s parents do not know, is that YHWH is “seeking an opportunity from the Philistines” (14:4). He is actually *using* Samson’s weaknesses and flaws to provoke the Israelites into conflict with the enemy, that is, to shake them out of their syncretistic complacency. The Samson narrative demonstrates just how much Israelite leadership has deteriorated. Samson’s first dubious exploit was his pursuit of a Philistine woman in Timnah (14:1–4). The narrator informs the reader that “this” was from YHWH, even though Samson broke the Deuteronomic law, because YHWH was actively provoking a situation against the Philistines (v. 14). Exactly what “this” refers to is debatable. It could be Samson’s attraction to the Philistine woman, his marriage to her, or the entire situation. It could even be that it was YHWH’s will for Samson to break the law of Moses. This is not to imply that YHWH causes anyone to sin, but that he can set up a situation in which, based on his knowledge of the subject’s character, he can anticipate that that person *will* sin, and plans to use the results of that sin to achieve his purposes.<sup>35</sup> Olson takes the issue a step further, however:

Remarkably, God steers Samson to disobey God’s own covenant prohibitions against intermarriage in order to help Israel act against the Philistine oppressors. Yet we remain shy in exercising such freedom and want to absolve God by suggesting the language does not require divine causation but only divine permission or allowance.<sup>36</sup>

Klein is more cautious in her analysis: “YHWH’s *seeking* does not imply that YHWH incited Samson’s desire for the Timnite woman. Rather, it suggests that Samson’s irregular actions nevertheless accord with YHWH’s will.”<sup>37</sup> The situation of Israel

35. See Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study*, VTSup 111 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), 101.

36. Dennis T. Olson, “The Book of Judges,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 2*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 849.

37. Klein’s interpretation is worth quoting in full: “Samson’s desire for the Timnite woman is not justified by *Yahweh*, it is attributed to *Yahweh* by the reliable narrator: ‘He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines’ (14:4). The narrator is reliable—within human limitations of knowledge. Significantly, he does not present *Yahweh* as a divinity of magical or unlimited powers, for *Yahweh* seeks to stir man to enact the divine will. In the covenant relationship binding both man and

does call for drastic action, however. The Philistines are ruling over Israel (v. 4c) and Israel is sinking further and further into lethargic acceptance of their lot.

The narrator reports that “the spirit of YHWH began to “trouble” Samson (וַתְּהַל רִיחַ יְהוָה לְפַעְמוֹ) in Mahaneh-Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol (v. 25a–b). Previously in Judges, the Spirit was said to “clothe” or “come upon” a leader.<sup>38</sup> The rare verb פעם is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qal stem, but it is generally agreed that it means to “trouble,” “disturb,” “stir,”<sup>39</sup> or “agitate,” “inspire.”<sup>40</sup> Samson is the weakest leader in Judges, and therefore YHWH himself must step in and take control, acting as the deliverer himself. Perhaps this is why Samson is designated a Nazirite. Numbers 6:1–21 gives the laws pertaining to Nazirites. Either men or women could take a vow to dedicate themselves to YHWH for a period of time; the specific purpose of this act of dedication is not given, but it was likely in gratitude for answered prayer or blessings bestowed,<sup>41</sup> or as preparation for holy war.<sup>42</sup> Here, however, Samson does not dedicate himself; he is consecrated for special use by YHWH himself.

A true king in Israel, one that God chooses, should be a faithful vice-regent under YHWH. Samson is definitely chosen by God, but not as a king. He is so weak that he can only serve as a puppet, a passive tool; he will merely be the agent of a delivering God. The one thing that Samson does accomplish—or at least that YHWH accomplishes through him—is the destruction of the temple of Dagon (16:25–30), who was considered to be Baal’s father and the patron deity of many areas of Mesopotamia. In the ANE, the success or failure of an army, or a leader, was dependent on the power of the god the people worshipped. The defeat of Samson would appear to the Philistines as a defeat for Israel’s deity, and a triumph for their own god, Dagon. This is not the first time in Judges that the narrator has brought the

*God, Yahweh does not effect his will by divine fiat, and man’s free will is stressed. Yahweh’s seeking does not imply that Yahweh incited Samson’s desire for the Timnite woman. Rather, it suggests that Samson’s irregular actions nevertheless accord with Yahweh’s will.... Sometimes, as in the Samson narrative, man accomplishes Yahweh’s will unwittingly, and the divine purpose is realized as a consequence of man’s unethical actions.... Yahweh’s will is fulfilled despite—even through—human inadequacies” (emphasis original). Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, Bible and Literature Series 14 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 116–17.*

38. 3:10: וַתְּהַל רִיחַ יְהוָה עָלָיו וַתְּהַל רִיחַ יְהוָה; 6:34: וַיִּרְיַח יְהוָה לְבָשָׁה אֶת־גִּדְעוֹן; 11:29: וַתְּהַל עַל־יַפְתָּח רִיחַ יְהוָה.

39. HALOT, 952. It does, however, appear in the passive Niphal in Gen 41:8, where Pharaoh is troubled by his dream; Ps 77:5; Dan 2:3, where it means “disturbed” or “troubled.” It also appears in a similar context in Dan 2:1 in the Hithpael.

40. DCH, 6:731.

41. Mark J. Boda, “Judges,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 2: Numbers to Ruth*, ed. David E. Garland and Tremper Longman (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 1207. See Lev 7:16–17; Pss 22:25; 50:14; 56:12; 61:5, 8; 66:13; 76:11; 116:14, 18; cf. Gen 28:20; 31:13; Judg 11:30; Jonah 2:9. See also Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man: The Story of Samson (Judges 13–16)*, Bible in History (Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 44; Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 143. Other examples of Nazirite consecration are found in 1 Sam 1; 1 Macc 3:49–51; Acts 18:18; 21:23–24.

42. See Stone, “Judges,” 374, who references Deut 29:6. This is a possible explanation for Judg 5:2: וַתְּהַל רִיחַ יְהוָה עָלָיו, “When hair hung loosely in Israel...”

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divine contest into focus; in the Ehud pericope it is implied by the *double entendre* inherent in “God/gods” (אֱלֹהִים), in the Gideon narrative the dispute is between Y<sup>HWH</sup> and Baal, and in the Jephthah episode between Y<sup>HWH</sup> and Chemosh.<sup>43</sup> The central issue here in the climax of the Samson narrative is whether Y<sup>HWH</sup> or Dagon is the true god, and Y<sup>HWH</sup> ultimately proves the victor.

## Descent into Anarchy

Israel set out from Egypt under the strong charismatic leadership of Moses, continued by Joshua. After their arrival in Canaan, local leadership by tribal judges was—or should have been—a more effective mode of governance; however, the increasing weakness and apostasy of individual leaders led to a steady deterioration in the integrity of Israel. Gideon, raised up and prepared by Y<sup>HWH</sup>, had the potential to drive out the oppressors and clear the land of Baal worship, and perhaps become the first dynastic “king” in Israel, but his success and power went to his head and turned him into a egocentric tyrant. Realizing his error, he abandoned his responsibility and rejected the role of vice-regent under Y<sup>HWH</sup>; in so doing he left Israel vulnerable to the despotism of Abimelech, the self-made king, and led the people back into apostasy. That cultic aberrance manifested itself again in Jephthah, who used human sacrifice to try and manipulate God, and unlike Gideon, who had the skill to reconcile the diverse tribes (8:1–4), turned brother against brother in internecine strife. By the tenure of Samson, leadership has become totally ineffectual and Y<sup>HWH</sup> himself must intervene to bring a measure of deliverance to Israel.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the double conclusion (Judg 17–21) is punctuated by variations on the lament, “There was no king in Israel; each person did what was right in their own eyes (17:6) “אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה.”<sup>44</sup> In a contemporary pluralistic context it might seem commendable to do what one believes is the right thing; however, in the historical and the literary context this is a negative judgment on Israel. The Israelites were in a covenant relationship with Y<sup>HWH</sup>. In Deuteronomy 12:8 Moses states: “You shall not do at all what we are doing here today, every one doing *whatever is right in their own eyes*.”<sup>45</sup> Throughout Judges, the accusation has been that Israel “did the evil thing *in the eyes of Y<sup>HWH</sup>*.” It is Y<sup>HWH</sup>’s will that is the standard, not humanity’s. The focus in Deuteronomy 12 is the need for centralized worship. As covenant partners, Israel was obligated to obey the covenant stipulations and serve Y<sup>HWH</sup>, and Y<sup>HWH</sup> only. Relying on their own assessment of what was right and of what constituted appropriate worship consistently led them into apostasy. As Olson notes, by the end of Judges the reader witnesses their “near disintegration as

43. See Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 167–68.

44. See also 18:1; 19:1; 21:25.

45. See Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 195.

a covenant community of God.”<sup>46</sup> Israel had completely lost their way. In the first conclusion (Judg 17–18), the emphasis is on cultic disobedience. Illegitimate shrines are set up, unqualified people serve as priests, tribes steal from each other, and the worship of YHWH is corrupted into using him as a “tame god” who will ensure their prosperity. The second conclusion (Judg 19–21) focuses on moral and military chaos, a world where women are gang raped and abducted, whole tribes are slaughtered, and Israel’s greatest enemy is itself. The people make token inquiries of YHWH, but ultimately go their own way. “There was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes” is the final statement in Judges.

The leadership of judges may have been good and effective when it was instituted—witness Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah—but it no longer serves the purpose. Centralized leadership, and centralized worship, was desperately needed. YHWH was seeking אִישׁ כְּלִבּוֹ, “a man according to his own heart” (1 Sam 13:14), מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, “a king whom YHWH your God chooses” (Deut 17:15). David had many failings, but, unlike most of the kings that followed him—for human kingship is not a perfect institution—he never turned away from YHWH to apostasy, and repented when he committed sin. DeRouchie comments, “The negative elements of David’s life were probably retained to emphasize the need for one greater than David—a divine royal son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7, 12; cf. Luke 1:32), “chosen” of God (Isa 42:1; cf. Luke 9:35; 23:35; 1 Pet 2:4), whose faithfulness would be complete (Isa 55:3; cf. 1 Pet 2:22–24) and whose kingship would never end (2 Sam 7:16; cf. Luke 1:33).”<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Is the text of Judges pro-monarchic or anti-monarchic? Ultimately, that is the wrong question. It is better to ask, What type of leadership does YHWH require in a given situation? Or, What kind of king does YHWH require? There is no “one size fits all” leadership role in Scripture. At various times God has chosen to appoint various types of leaders: family heads, tribal elders, charismatic leaders, local judges, prophets, and kings, among others. Even the lexis overlaps. A tribal leader may be a “king” in his own small realm. The important thing is that these leaders must be “servants of YHWH,” faithful vice-regents of YHWH in their own domain, who fight YHWH’s battles, not their own. It is worth bearing in mind that throughout the books of Kings, monarchy also deteriorates as a leadership mode. The ultimate kingship belongs to YHWH.

Is there a message here for contemporary society? Is there an ideal “Christian” form of government or political party?<sup>48</sup> Israel was a theocracy; most contemporary

46. Olson, “The Book of Judges,” 863.

47. DeRouchie, “The Heart of YHWH and His Chosen One in 1 Samuel 13:14,” 487.

48. See Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 37: “It is doubtful the compiler of the Judges material was concerned chiefly with political structures. And even if the book provides a great deal of information



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societies are secular or pluralistic. There is no such thing as Christendom any more, and Christianity cannot—and should not—be imposed “top-down” on a society by Christians running for government and trying to *force* their faith on everyone by changing the laws. The church is in exile.<sup>49</sup> This is not the place for a discussion of political theory, but contemporary Christians would do well to listen to the advice of Jeremiah when Israel was taken into exile and was no longer able to establish its own government:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:4–7 NRSV)

We must humbly live the Christian life and generously seek the common good in the midst of a difficult situation, acting as lights in the darkness, as people such as Ruth and Boaz did during the dark time of the Judges when leadership deteriorated and syncretism was rampant. Ultimately, in the new heaven and the new earth, humanity will assume their rightful role as vice-regents of YHWH, caretakers of his good creation.<sup>50</sup> Until then, Christians must live as faithful servants of God, doing what good they can and reflecting YHWH’s love into the world.

on the political situation in Israel during the period of settlement, it is unwise hermeneutically to use the book primarily for the reconstruction of political structures. Writing from a deuteronomic/prophetic perspective, the narrator was much more concerned about Israel’s spiritual state.”

49. See Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope after Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

50. See J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).