

“REIGN OVER US!”:
THE THEME OF KINGSHIP IN JUDGES 8-9

by

Sara L. Locke, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Christian Studies

McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
2009

Master of Arts in Christian Studies
Hamilton, Ontario

McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE

TITLE: "Reign Over Us!": The Theme of Kingship in Judges 8-9

AUTHOR: Sara L. Locke

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Mark J. Boda

NUMBER OF PAGES: viii + 172



McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE

Upon the recommendation of an oral examining committee, this thesis by

SARA L. LOCKE

is hereby accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN CHRISTIAN STUDIES

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark R. ...", written over a horizontal line.

Primary Supervisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cynthia A. Watfall", written over a horizontal line.

Secondary Supervisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. ...", written over a horizontal line.

Academic Dean

Date: March 16, 2009

ABSTRACT

“Reign Over Us!”: The Theme of Kingship in Judges 8-9

Sara L. Locke
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
Master of Arts in Christian Studies, 2009

The negative portrayal of kingship in Judg 8-9 contributes greatly to the discussion concerning the legitimacy of human kingship for Israel in the book of Judges. Through the implementation of various literary techniques the narrator of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative presents an anti-monarchic ideology. This is emphasized by the actions of Gideon (Judg 8), Abimelech (Judg 9:1-6, 22-57) and Israel (Judg 9:7-21) and is highlighted by the disastrous outcome of events in each of these sections. Further, Judg 8-9 offers a depiction of the Canaanization of Israel with a particular focus on their adoption of the Canaanite systems of worship and monarchy. When the anti-monarchic tone of this narrative is read against the refrain found throughout Judg 17-21 (“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”), there is a clear tension which leaves the reader with an ambiguous message concerning human kingship. The negative attention given to human kingship in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative directs focus toward Israel’s inability to remain faithful to Yahweh, their king, suggesting that this, rather than the legitimacy of human kingship, is the primary concern of the narrator in Judg 8-9.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

For my very first Bible teachers
my Mom and Dad

Thank you for being so wonderful. Your support and encouragement mean more to me than you can ever know. Thank you for your unconditional love. Thank you for demonstrating what it means to have strength and perseverance in living out God's calling in life.

For Dr. Mark J. Boda

Thank you for being such a wonderful mentor. You challenge me to be a better scholar, you encourage me to find my own voice, and you inspire me to be a better Christian. Thank you for your support and remarkable level of dedication.

For Dr. Keith Bodner

Thank you for awakening in me a love and passion for the Hebrew Scriptures. Thank you for introducing me to the beauty, complexity and significance of Old Testament narrative. Thank you for your continued encouragement.

With thanks to:

Mary Conway for posing challenging questions and offering helpful advice.

Dr. Wendy Porter for offering a listening ear and consistent encouragement.

Beth Stovell and *Colin Toffelmire* for humouring my excessive enthusiasm for the Book of Judges and for stimulating conversation in the T.A. office.

A multitude of friends who offered encouragement, support and plenty of excuses for much needed breaks from writing.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW	1
1.1 Introductory Comments	1
1.2 Defining the Issue	1
i. Pro-Monarchic Views	3
ii. Anti-Monarchic Views	8
iii. Dealing With the Tension	10
1.3 Thesis Statement	15
 CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY	 16
2.1 A Very Brief History of Narrative Criticism	16
2.2 What is Narrative Criticism?	18
2.3 Literary Features	20
i. Point of View	20
ii. Narrative Structure	26
Setting	26
Narrative Types	29
Plot	31
iii. Narration and Dialogue	34
iv. Ambiguity in Old Testament Narrative	36
v. Characterization	38
vi. Wordplay	42
Word Choice	42
Word Order	43
vii. Repetition	43
2.4 Ideological Point of View	45
2.5 Procedure	45
 CHAPTER 3: JUDGES 6:1-8:32 - GIDEON'S REFUSAL OF KINGSHIP	 49
3.1 Introductory Comments	49
3.2 The Judge Cycle	49
3.3 Plot	51
3.4 Characterization	66
i. Gideon/Jerubbaal	67
ii. Young Boys (נער)	83
iii. Zebah and Zalmunna	86
3.5 Leitmotif: The Men of Israel	87
3.6 The Significance of the Offer of Kingship	89
3.7 Conclusion	92

CHAPTER 4: JUDGES 8:33-9:6, 22-57 – THE REIGN AND FALL OF ABIMELECH	95
4.1 Introductory Comments	95
4.2 Plot	97
4.3 Setting	101
4.4 Characterization	103
i. Abimelech	103
ii. Baals of Shechem	109
iii. Gaal, Son of Ebed	111
iv. God (Elohim)/Yahweh	114
v. Unnamed Woman of Thebez	118
vi. Summary of Characterization	119
4.5 Wordplay and Word Choice	119
i. The Significance of Leadership	119
Baal (בעל)	120
Princely Rule (שרר)	122
To Reign or Rule (משל and מלך)	123
ii. Summary of Wordplay	124
4.6 Conclusion	124
CHAPTER 5: JUDGES 9:7-21 – JOTHAM’S FABLE	126
5.1 Introduction	126
5.2 The Literary Genre of the Fable	127
i. The Literary-Rhetorical Function of Parables	128
ii. Interpreting a Parable	131
iii. The Audience of a Parable	133
5.3 Procedure for Interpreting the Fable	133
5.4 Characterization	135
5.5 Setting	139
5.6 Who is Jotham’s Audience?	140
5.7 The Fable	142
i. Plot, Characterization, Pattern and Other Stylistic Features	142
ii. The Fable and Jotham’s Application	151
iii. The Fable and Reality	157
5.8 The Main Point of the Fable	161
5.9 Conclusion	163
CONCLUSION	165
BIBLIOGRAPHY	168

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	<i>Anchor Bible</i>
BDB	<i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i> Brown, Driver and Briggs.
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DH	Deuteronomistic History
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for Study of the Old Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NAC	<i>New American Commentary</i>
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
NIBC	<i>New International Biblical Commentary</i>
NIV	New International Version
OT	Old Testament
OTL	<i>Old Testament Library</i>
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Introductory Comments

The theme of kingship in the Old Testament is particularly significant since it offers insight into Israel's relationship with Yahweh. The OT presents conflicting views on human kingship offering both positive and negative stories of Israelite kings. The present study is concerned, in particular, with the presentation of kingship in the book of Judges. There is great debate among scholars concerning whether the message of Judges is pro-monarchic or anti-monarchic. This debate is encouraged by the very obvious tensions in the book of Judges surrounding this theme. There appear to be conflicting messages concerning kingship and therefore the reader is presented with a text that is ambiguous in this regard.

Defining the Issue

At the beginning of the book of Judges the judges are presented in a relatively positive light. Othniel is a good judge but as the judge cycle¹ continues the judges become increasingly worse until the end of Judges where Israel experiences the disastrous results of their own disobedience combined with very poor leadership as provided by the judges. Judges 17-21 then offers a description of some examples of the moral and spiritual corruption of Israel as demonstrated through extreme violence and inter-tribal conflict leading to the near demise of the tribe of Benjamin. It has been

¹ Judges 3-16 is a record of the time in Israel in which judges ruled. The story of each judge follows a particular pattern. The cycle is as follows: 1. Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh. 2. Yahweh delivers them into the hand of their enemies whom they serve until they can no longer bear it. 3. Israel cries out to Yahweh. 4. Yahweh has compassion on them and raises up a judge-deliverer to rescue them. 5. Israel has a time of peace until the death of the judge. For a more detailed discussion on the judge cycle see Chapter 3 of this study.

suggested that this downward spiral throughout the time of the judges may be an indication that the office of judge as a form of leadership for Israel is not effective and that some other form of government must be implemented. This pro-monarchic idea, combined with the refrain of Judg 17-21 (“In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes”) suggests that perhaps the purpose of the book of Judges is to provide a positive view of the monarchy, particularly in light of the monarchy that emerges in the book of Samuel. However, Block suggests that while this statement may simply refer to Israel’s lack of a human king, it may instead be explaining Israel’s rejection of Yahweh as their king. In this case, the narrator may be suggesting that at this very low point in Israel’s history they have no king, neither human nor divine.² Boling agrees on this issue, stating that it is Israel’s lack of acknowledgement of Yahweh’s kingship in Israel that is being lamented in the refrain throughout Judg 17-21.³

The real tension surrounding the theme of kingship does not become evident until Judges 8-9, the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. In 8:22, after Gideon has rescued Israel from the hand of Midian, the Israelites ask Gideon to rule over them. The invitation appears to be an offer of hereditary kingship since they proceed to offer the position to Gideon’s sons and grandsons. Gideon refuses the offer, declaring, “Indeed I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you. Yahweh will rule over you” (8:23). This statement seems to make a significant judgment on human kingship, implying that human and divine rule are mutually exclusive. Then, after the death of Gideon, his son Abimelech has himself made king after killing 69 of his brothers. His youngest brother, Jotham, narrowly escaped the mass fratricide. Not only does Abimelech offer a horrid

² Block, *Judges*, 59.

³ Boling, *Judges*, 258.

example of human kingship, but his brother, Jotham, declares a speech in the form of a fable which is clearly anti-monarchic (9:7-10). These anti-monarchic components of the book of Judges, combined with the previously discussed pro-monarchic ideas form the basis for the debate among scholars concerning the message of kingship in the book of Judges. In an attempt to bring some clarity to the issue, this study will proceed by explaining, discussing and comparing various recent views on kingship in Judges.

Pro-Monarchic Views

O'Connell, as one who argues for a positive view of the monarchy in the book of Judges, suggests that the reader of Judges is not prepared for the monarchic theme within Judges and therefore may be surprised when he or she comes to the refrain of Judg 17-21⁴ where it is suddenly evident that the book has been compiled with the purpose of demonstrating the inadequate pre-monarchic leadership of Israel. O'Connell further suggests that after reading this refrain it is crucial to re-evaluate the previous accounts of the judges in order to discover whether or not the author of Judges had been implicitly preparing for this "monarchical idealization."⁵ It is from this re-evaluation of the book of Judges in light of the refrain of chapters 17-21 that one becomes more aware of the shift to the north and the deterioration of the position of judge over Israel during that time. Amit shares this view as she says that, "the editor organized the period as a sequence of events that suggests disappointment with the existing leadership, leading to the gradual recognition of the need for a king." She points out that, "The book opens with a description of a reality in which no mention is made of any institutions of leadership, and

⁴ "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes," Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25.

⁵ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 270. See also Auld, *Joshua, Judges*.

concludes with a declaration of the necessity for a king.”⁶ Amit argues that the pro-monarchic theme is emphasized through the people’s need for continuous leadership. She says that this idea was first expressed in Israel’s offer of continuous rule to Gideon (8:22) and then confirmed in their support of Abimelech until his death (9:55). Because of the lack of rebellion when there is record of one judge immediately after another, it appears that this is the means by which Israel is able to maintain its loyalty to Yahweh. “The reader learns that there is a connection between observing the covenant and consecutive leadership.”⁷

While Amit does not agree that kingship is an ideal for Israel, she admits that the book of Judges offers a description of the inability of the judges to deal with the problems of Israel during that time, and therefore there was no solution other than anointing a king.⁸ She discusses the editorial guidelines, noting that a central goal was to “shape the awareness that a change of government was inevitable.”⁹ Since kingship is not an ideal, but rather a last resort for Israel the text offers the example of poor leadership through the incident of Abimelech, “forcing the reader to reflect on the negative components of monarchy.”¹⁰

Schneider agrees, pointing out that because of the downward spiral in leadership Israel is experiencing with the judges their situation deteriorates to a place where,

⁶ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 59-60.

⁷ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 82. This is intriguing since it operates on the assumption that continuous rule is preferable to the interrupted rule of the judges. However, Jobling points out that the continuous system disregards divine initiative. He says that, “in the framework of the judge-cycles any tendency towards hereditary leadership has negative results; every son of a judge who achieves a leadership role (Abimelech; Hophni and Phinehas; Joel and Abijah) exercises it badly”; Jobling, *Sense*, 53.

⁸ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 60.

⁹ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 60. It is Amit’s argument that since Israel is so clearly unable to remain faithful to Yahweh without this kind of leadership, a primary draw of the monarchy is its feature of continuous reign. The reader is then influenced by this and is convinced that, “there is an advantage to ongoing leadership: that is, royal rule, which is characterized by fixity, centrality, and the assumption of responsibility”; Amit, 60-61.

¹⁰ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 60-61.

although perhaps not ideal, “kingship was the only answer to Israel’s predicament.”¹¹ It is her suggestion that the composition of Judges is meant to make the reader believe that in Israel’s particular circumstance there was no other solution to their problem than the establishment of a human monarchy. She says that their “moral compass is lost through lack of leadership,” thus implying that “the depravity in which Israel finds itself is not a result of Israel’s own lack of faithfulness but rather to the type of leadership which has been provided for them.”¹² While these scholars admit that a human king is not ideal for Israel, it is still suggested that the book of Judges is pro-monarchic in the sense that it is the best, and perhaps only, solution for Israel during that time. It is suggested that continuous rule is the only way to remedy a situation of everyone doing what is right in their own eyes.¹³

Some scholars suggest that in light of the events of 1 Samuel and David’s kingship, Judg 17-21 is a Deuteronomistic formula which clearly demonstrates a negative understanding of the pre-monarchic period in order to inspire in the reader great expectation of the monarchy that is to come.¹⁴ This would be further emphasized by the state in which Israel finds itself as the book of Judges comes to an end. Also suggesting that the author is looking back from the time of the monarchy, Goldsworthy concludes that the monarchy must be viewed as a necessary means of providing order and stability to Israel as a nation.¹⁵

¹¹ Schneider, *Judges*, xii.

¹² Schneider, *Judges*, xii.

¹³ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 117.

¹⁴ Dietrich, “History and Law,” 317. However, Brettler (*Book of Judges*, 91) suggests that the refrain of Judg 17-21 “really says: ‘In those days there was no king in Israel, (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) and Saul wouldn’t be much better, either.’”

¹⁵ Goldsworthy, *Gospel & Kingdom*, 70.

Scholarly discussion on the theme of kingship in the book of Judges extends beyond whether the book is pro- or anti-monarchic. Some extend this discussion to a more specific kind of kingship so that if Judges is condemning kingship, it only condemns the model that is adopted by Abimelech. For example, Oeste argues that while there is an anti-monarchic tone, particularly in Judg 8-9, this is not indicative of an overall negative view of kingship. Instead, the message of the book is one emphasizing the value of centralized leadership and condemning a system of local leadership.¹⁶ This argument is based on the fact that Abimelech was made king by the Shechemites and there is some indication that his rule was only localized.

One camp of scholars, who argue that Judges is pro-monarchic, points particularly to a pro-Judah concept that seems to appear throughout Judges. These scholars, such as O'Connell, argue that the purpose of Judges is to glorify the tribe of Judah above the other tribes.¹⁷ He points out that if the reader looks at Judges from a monarchic perspective two main issues stand out. The first issue is the record of the positive portrayal of Judah, pointing to its divine election by Yahweh (Judg 1:1-2; 20:18). The second issue is the priority given to Judah in the order of the tribes and especially the record of Othniel as the only truly competent judge among all of the judges of Israel.¹⁸

From this, O'Connell concludes that the book of Judges was "composed to endorse

¹⁶ Oeste, "Illegitimacy," 302. Others who suggest that Abimelech's reign did not include all of Israel are Soggin, *Judges*, 180-181; Boling, *Judges*, 183; Lindars, "Gideon," 318.

¹⁷ Weinfeld says that Judah is especially made to look good when compared with Benjamin who was unable to drive out the foreigners who lived in Jerusalem (Judg 1:21); Weinfeld, "Judges 1:1-2:5," 289-290. Weinfeld goes on to speak of this as an injustice as he points out that, "the editor knew that the Jebusites lived in Jerusalem at the time, but he blames the Benjaminites for that (v. 21). Judah is therefore credited with the conquest of Jerusalem, while a Benjaminite is faulted for failing to expel the Jebusites. This stands in explicit contradiction to Josh. 1:63 where the *Judahites* were the ones who were not able to drive out the Jebusites of Jerusalem"; Weinfeld, "Judges 1:1-2:5," 392. See also Matthews who says that the stories of the judges, "present a polemical view of this period of Israelite history, with the general intention of promoting the political importance of the tribe of Judah (see Judg 1:2; although contrast Judg 15:9-13)"; Matthews, *Judges*, 8.

¹⁸ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 270.

implicitly a divinely elected Judahite as the ideal king of Israel.”¹⁹ Pressler agrees as she refers to the account of Judg 17-21 as “political propaganda in favor of David’s dynasty.”²⁰ Similarly, Sweeney says that Judges draws attention to the promotion of the tribe of Judah, pointing toward a Davidic dynasty by highlighting the inadequacies of the judges from the northern tribes. To Sweeney it is obvious that there is a clear polemic against Ephraim and Bethel in Judges which serves the interests of the tribe of Judah and, subsequently, the house of David within the Deuteronomistic History. It is his suggestion that the book of Judges portrays Judah idealistically so that it will come forward as the best source of leadership for Israel.²¹ Similarly, Boda points out that in the book of Judges, “Judahite Davidic dynastic leadership is favored over Benjaminite Saulide and Northern royal leadership.”²² However, he also acknowledges the tension, pointing out that, “the presentation provides enough ambiguity in the depiction of the Judahite Davidic solution to prepare the reader for the ultimate demise of even this royal solution.”²³ Thus, while recognizing a pro-monarchic theme, he also acknowledges the tension caused by the conflicting views as well as the looming knowledge that no matter

¹⁹ O’Connell, *Rhetoric*, 270. O’Connell says that, “Since Othniel is the only deliverer from the tribe of Judah, his positive representation may be construed as a symbolic endorsement of leadership from the tribe of Judah. Thus, if on the basis of both priority of mention and characterization the Judges compiler/redactor were intent on characterizing one tribe as preeminently qualified to put forth a leader for Israel – a leader who, according to the monarchical idealization of Judg. 17:6 and 21:25, should be king – then that tribe would be Judah”; 292. See also Peterson who says that the central message of Judges is “the need for kingship and loyalty to Yahweh” and that by the end of Judges there is no doubt from which tribe this king is meant to come. Peterson, “Polemic for Davidic Kingship?”, 8. Looking forward to Samuel and Kings he suggests that “The positive qualities of a given judge almost without fail resemble qualities found in David. On the other hand, the negative aspects of the same judge most often find parallels in the character flaws of Saul especially after his sin in 1 Sam 13 and 15:1–3”; Peterson, “Polemic for Davidic Kingship?”, 9.

²⁰ Pressler, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, 238.

²¹ Sweeney, “Davidic Polemics,” 518.

²² Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 23.

²³ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 23.

how well the monarchy is set up by the narrator it will still eventually come to an end.

O'Connell sums up his view by stating that:

The rhetorical purpose of the book of Judges is ostensibly to enjoin its readers to endorse a divinely appointed Judahite king who, in contrast to foreign kings or non-Judahite deliverers in Israel, upholds such deuteronomic ideals as the need to expel foreigners from the land and the need to maintain intertribal loyalty to YHWH's cult and his regulations concerning social justice.²⁴

According to this view, in light of the refrain of Judg 17-21 it is difficult to avoid the implication that a monarchy from the tribe of Judah is being enforced while one from the tribe of Benjamin is being denounced.²⁵ While these pro-monarchic views appear to be relatively straightforward, the issue becomes less clear when considering also an anti-monarchic reading of the text.

Anti-Monarchic Views

Since there appear to be both pro- and anti-monarchic components to the book of Judges, one ought to also consider the camp of scholars who understand the message of the book of Judges to be anti-monarchic. Niditch argues that the book of Judges provides a "self-critical portrait of the monarchy."²⁶ She suggests that the judges are portrayed as "clever, brave, inspired, charismatic, and flawed. They are heroic, engaging figures, and none of them is a king."²⁷ It is her suggestion that the leadership of the judges is not as bad as some may suggest. While their methods are often unconventional, these judges were able to rescue Israel from oppression and bring peace to the land throughout their lifetime. This system, when contrasted with Israel's first attempt at a monarchy

²⁴ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 343.

²⁵ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 310.

²⁶ Niditch, *Judges*, 114.

²⁷ Niditch, *Judges*, 114.

(Abimelech) does not present a positive perception of what human kingship would be like for Israel.

Similarly, Assis suggests that, “A reading of the Gideon and Abimelech accounts convinces the reader that the monarchic model is not the desired leadership form both with respect to the principle emerging from Gideon’s words and as regards the problematic reality of the monarchy as it appears in the Abimelech account.”²⁸ Such scholars recognize the problematic nature of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative within the broader context of the book of Judges. Buber recognizes the conflicting views but very strongly states that

The Jotham fable, the strongest anti-monarchical poem of world literature, is the counterpart of the Gideon passage... The kingship, so teaches the poem... is not a productive calling. It is vain, but also bewildering and seditious, that men rule over men. Everyone is to pursue his own proper business, and the manifold fruitfulness will constitute a community over which, in order that it endure, no one needs rule.²⁹

It is difficult to defend Judges as a pro-monarchic book when taking seriously the Gideon-Abimelech account.³⁰ While fewer scholars hold an anti-monarchic

²⁸ Assis, *Self-Interest*, 244.

²⁹ Buber, *Kingship*, 75.

³⁰ What is interesting about the pro-monarchic reading of Judges is that when reading ahead to the time when Israel has a monarchy, one understands that Israel will continue in unfaithfulness to Yahweh even once the monarchy has been established. Although there are times when kings in Israel are good leaders who are able to direct them toward worshipping Yahweh, this is not really any more consistent than it is during the period of the judges. If one claims that the inconsistent rule during the time of the judges is the reason for Israel’s problems then this problem ought to be remedied with the continuous rule that comes with the establishment of the monarchy. This, however, proves to be quite untrue. McCann points out that, “On the surface, chapters 17-21 – and indeed the progressive deterioration that occurs throughout the book of Judges – seems to be a none-too-subtle setup for the Davidic monarchy. In fact, it is likely that the book of Judges was shaped with this purpose in mind... the Deuteronomistic Historians generally supported the monarchy; and a preexilic edition of the Deuteronomistic History may well have been aimed at using ‘the period of the judges’ to make a case for the legitimacy of the monarchy. If so, however, it is necessary to recall the likelihood that an exilic or postexilic ‘edition’ of the Deuteronomistic History was produced. From the perspective of the exile, it appeared that the monarchy, like the office of judge, had failed. The message contained in this failure is that no institution – not even the Davidic monarchy – is exempt for the consequences of idolatry and unfaithfulness. The historical fact of the failure and disappearance of the

understanding, their arguments are valid and arise as a result of the ambiguity concerning kingship in the book of Judges.

Dealing With the Tension

Because of the ambiguity reflected in the conflicting pro- and anti-monarchic views some scholars understand the book of Judges to be neither pro- nor anti-monarchic. Block, for example, suggests that although there may be political nuances in the book of Judges, a political agenda would not have been the main focus of the narrative. He expresses doubt that the writer of Judges would have been more concerned with the political structure of Israel than he is with the spiritual state.³¹

On a similar note, Webb, having recognized the extensive discussion on an issue that appears to be irresolvable, says that Judges is not simply pro- nor anti-monarchic and that the discussion of the book has been dominated too much by this theme.³² While Webb's frustration is, in many respects, understandable, his conclusion is not. Kingship is so broadly discussed because it is such a prominent issue in the book of Judges. For Block this becomes a significant theological issue as he points out that, "Israel's future could not be secured simply by changing the political constitution in accordance with prevailing and apparently effective patterns. Only radical repentance would reverse the fate of the nation."³³ Similarly, while Wong has a more anti-monarchic reading of Judges

Davidic monarchy is crucial for the interpretation of the book of Judges. It means, for instance, that the book of Judges cannot simply be read as Davidic propaganda, even though it may have served as such at one time in its history"; McCann, *Judges*, 10-11.

³¹ Block says that, "Even if the books of Samuel and Kings that follow display a pro-Davidic stance, 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 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"; Block, *Judges*, 37.

³² Webb, *Book of Judges*, 202.

³³ Block, *Judges*, 335.

he agrees with Block that, “the problem that plagued the period, and therefore, its possible solution, is not primarily a political one, but a spiritual one.”³⁴ He, like Block, suggests that the refrain of Judg 17-21 is a reference to the kingship of Yahweh. “Understood in the context of the book as a whole, what the refrain seems to be pinpointing as the central problem is Israel’s refusal to recognize YHWH’s ultimate kingly authority. The implied solution, therefore, is that the nation must return to YHWH and begin honouring His kingly authority before the deterioration can be halted and reversed.”³⁵ Because Wong argues that the refrain of Judg 17-21 refers to Yahweh as Israel’s king, he says that the tension is eliminated and there are no longer conflicting views of kingship within Judges to reconcile.³⁶ He says that, “While the argument for an alleged anti-monarchical sentiment in the central section comes from a number of different episodes, the alleged pro-monarchical sentiment in the epilogue seems to be based primarily on a plain reading of the refrain that repeatedly punctuates the narratives in that section.”³⁷ This is interesting since Wong deals only with the refrain of Judges 17-21 but not with any other pro-monarchic ideas that are present in the book of Judges. He has clearly made an attempt to reconcile the tension but has left some issues unaddressed.

Jobling discusses this ambiguity beyond the book of Judges and into the DH as a whole. He says that since the DH does not present a clear view of the legitimacy of human monarchy, perhaps this is a result of the fact that the author did not have a clear

³⁴ Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 252.

³⁵ Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 252.

³⁶ For Wong, this affects the understanding of the entire book of Judges. He says that, “If the evaluative refrain in the epilogue explicitly identifies Israel’s problem in the period as one relating to the non-honouring of YHWH by His people, then in a more subtle way, the shaping of the narratives in the epilogue to highlight similar behaviours between leader and people hints at the need for godly leaders who can set proper examples so as to lead the nation back to a YHWH-honouring path. And this seems to be the central message towards which Judges as a whole and each of its constituent parts consciously point”; Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 254.

³⁷ Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 191.

understanding of it. He says that “the deuteronomic treatment of monarchy is a classic example of talking around a contradiction.”³⁸ Since the discussion on monarchy is so complex, Jobling suggests, perhaps the reader ought not to make a statement about the intentionality of the message presented on this issue. The author lets this contradiction remain because “it was a contradiction that Israel should go on living *within*.”³⁹

Gerbrandt does not declare that Judges is either pro- or anti-monarchic but instead says that the particular circumstances that are described, particularly in Judg 8-9, present the wrong approach to establishing human kingship. A major issue is that Israel fails to recognize that Yahweh is its deliverer. Gerbrandt points out that “kingship is wrong whenever it usurps Yahweh’s role in this area.”⁴⁰ While he recognizes this negative component of kingship he goes on to point out that Israel’s cyclical rebellion, which is typified by the Abimelech story helps to reinforce the message that is repeated in Judg 17-21.⁴¹ While many scholars understand the Abimelech narrative as portraying kingship in a negative light, in order to make sense of it in the context of the rest of the book, Gerbrandt suggests the exact opposite. Instead the Abimelech story helps to pave the way for “the rise of kingship, that institution which was expected to lead Israel in covenant obedience and loyalty to Yahweh.”⁴²

Soggin does not take a clear stand on the issue at hand. He simply points out the issue of ambiguity suggesting that the Gideon-Abimelech narrative offers “a deliberate rejection of the institution of the monarchy as such, and not just of some of its worse aspects.” He continues by pointing out that, “There is a very different attitude here from

³⁸ Jobling, *Sense*, 46.

³⁹ Jobling, *Sense*, 46.

⁴⁰ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 129.

⁴¹ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 134.

⁴² Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 134.

that which we find, for example, in chs. 17-21, where the origin of all the ills which the people have to suffer is seen in the absence of the monarchy.”⁴³ This simple description of events is the result of a passage that is deeply ambiguous and for some, does not seem to warrant choosing a side. Some components of the book of Judges are pro-monarchic while others are anti-monarchic. Some of the previously mentioned scholars make an attempt to deal with this tension.

Jobling speculates that the lack of clarity on this issue is due to the fact that the editors did not have an opinion on whether the monarchy would be a positive or a negative for Israel.⁴⁴ He says that since the author does not have an opinion, he offers all angles of both judgeship and monarchy, pointing out both the positive and the negative aspects of each.⁴⁵ Expressing a view similar to that of Amit, Gerbrandt offers another solution to this tension. He says that the Deuteronomist was not opposed to kingship as an institution but was still aware of its weaknesses.⁴⁶ Therefore, both the positive and the negative components of kingship can be displayed without any concern of contradiction. Assis deals with the tension by suggesting that, “The Book of Judges, which contains texts reflecting reservations about the monarchy, and contrasting texts praising the monarchy, reflects a reasonable picture of a pre-monarchic period and the difficult transition between the forms of government.”⁴⁷

Clearly, attempts have been made to reconcile the tension that accompanies the theme of kingship in the book of Judges. Some of the views as outlined above argue that the tension in Judges is a result of multi-layered redaction. Some suggest that Judg 17-21

⁴³ Soggin, *Judges*, 177.

⁴⁴ Jobling, *Sense*, 46.

⁴⁵ Jobling, *Sense*, 87.

⁴⁶ Gerbrandt, *Kingdom*, 146.

⁴⁷ Assis, *Self-Interest*, 242.

is an appendix to Judges, particularly since it carries pro-monarchic connotations which are contradictory to the primarily anti-monarchic tone that is evident in the rest of the book of Judges.⁴⁸ As Jobling points out, “such treatments cannot avoid the problem of why the final form of the text brings together such apparently opposed points of view.”⁴⁹ This ongoing scholarly debate is an indication that the topic ought to be awarded further attention. It is from this point that this study will move forward in an attempt to bring some resolution to the issue.

It is evident from the discussion above that Judg 8-9 has a significant role in causing tension in the theme of kingship in the book of Judges. In order to proceed with this study most effectively it is important to note that Judg 8-9 is part of a larger literary unit, the Gideon-Abimelech narrative (Judg 6-9).⁵⁰ Therefore, this study will focus on Judg 6-9, highlighting the author’s evaluation of kingship within this unit. The study will implement the tools of narrative criticism in order to assist in identifying the author’s evaluation of the theme of kingship in this literary unit.

⁴⁸ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 136.

⁴⁹ Jobling, *Sense*, 45.

⁵⁰ Some argue that this ought to be broken into two separate sections. This issue will be addressed in more detail at a later point in this study.

Thesis Statement

The narrator of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative presents an anti-monarchic ideology which is emphasized by the actions of Gideon (Judg 8), Abimelech (Judg 9:1-6, 22-57) and Israel (Judg 9:7-21) and is highlighted by the disastrous outcome of events in each of these sections. This is further emphasized by a focus upon Israel's adoption of various Canaanite practices including their systems of worship and monarchy. This anti-monarchic section is in tension with the remainder of the book of Judges which has significant pro-monarchic elements. The negative attention given to human kingship in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative draws attention to Israel's inability to remain faithful to Yahweh, their king, suggesting that this, rather than the legitimacy of human kingship, is the primary concern of the narrator in Judg 8-9.

Chapter 2 METHODOLOGY

There is much opportunity for contribution to the scholarly debate on the theme of kingship in the book of Judges. Since the Gideon-Abimelech narrative appears to cause the most significant amount of tension on this issue, this is where this study will focus its attention. In order to examine the theme of kingship most effectively narrative criticism will be implemented in a careful examination of Judg 6-9.

A Very Brief History of Narrative Criticism

It has not been until recent scholarship that any amount of attention has been given to literary critical methods for studying biblical Hebrew narrative. Prior to the emergence of literary criticism the focus in biblical studies was mainly on a historical-, source- or text-critical approach with emphasis on the development of traditions and texts.¹ The historical methods have approached the narratives with interest in the changes that the narratives have undergone over a period of time. They have also been “a means of uncovering the historic-cultural reality, such as the setting/function in life (*Sitz im Leben*) or the changing views, institutions and religious customs.”² While historical approaches are of great importance for understanding the way that the text came into being, literary approaches are equally important for understanding the text in its present form.³ Thus as Bowman points out,

¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 9.

² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 10.

³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 10. See also Bowman who suggests that, “The division of the text into its component sources and the historical reconstruction of previous versions assist us in discovering issues important to earlier communities and in understanding the process by which the present form of the text was created. They do not, however, help us understand the final form of the story. The final form is as important as earlier versions, since it is the text that has been preserved for us and is the one most accessible to us”; Bowman, “Narrative Criticism,” 18.

The basic presuppositions of narrative criticism are that (1) the final, present form of the text functions as a coherent narrative; (2) this narrative has a literary integrity apart from circumstances relating to the compositional process, the historical reality behind the story, or the interpretive agenda of the reader; and (3) an analysis of the literary features of this narrative will reveal an interpretive focus.⁴

This is the reason for the rise of literary approaches in biblical studies.

Since various other approaches to scripture tend to fragment the text, rather than considering a narrative unit as a whole, there is a need to study narrative units in their entirety. This can be accomplished not by understanding how the text came to be but instead by extracting meaning and purpose from the text in its final form. House suggests that “an over emphasis on historical detail costs readers a proper understanding of plot, theme, and character. Pre-textual matters subsumed textual issues.”⁵ The rise of literary criticism, and subsequently narrative and rhetorical criticism, came about not because historical methodologies were ineffective but because “new ways to illuminate the Bible were desired.”⁶ Because of this desire and the work of a few key pioneers, literary criticism (including narrative and rhetorical critical methods) became more seriously considered as a legitimate methodology for biblical studies.

In 1969 James Muilenburg, in an article entitled “Form Criticism and Beyond,” described the benefits of a rhetorical critical approach in which the reader’s attention is shifted from historical matters and onto the text itself. With this approach passages would, “no longer serve simply as avenues back into history.”⁷ Between 1981 and 1989 literary criticism had developed enough to become a major influence in Old Testament studies. Through the work of such scholars as Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*,

⁴ Bowman, “Narrative Criticism,” 17.

⁵ House, “Rise and Current Status,” 3.

⁶ House, “Rise and Current Status,” 3.

⁷ House, “Rise and Current Status,” 8.

1981), Northrop Frye (*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, 1982), Adele Berlin (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 1983), Meir Sternberg (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 1985), Peter Miscall (*1 Samuel: A Literary Reading*, 1986), and Robert Polzin (*Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 1980 and *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 1989) among others, literary approaches began to flourish making the world of biblical literature more accessible to experienced biblical scholars as well as less experienced students.⁸

What is Narrative Criticism?

Narrative Criticism is a branch of literary criticism that takes into account the final form of the biblical text and considers narrative units in their entirety. This methodology aims to identify various patterns and trends within the narrative, embracing contradictions and inconsistencies in order to gain a greater understanding of the narrative unit as a whole. A narrative critical approach focuses on the narrative text, exploring various literary features in order to determine the purpose and message of the text. These literary features include, but are not limited to, setting, plot, point of view, narration and dialogue, characterization and other narrative techniques including word-play, repetition, metaphor, word-choice, and word-order.

In defence of literary criticism as a legitimate and valuable methodology Alter points out that “attention to such features leads not to a more ‘imaginative’ reading of biblical narrative but to a more precise one; and since all these features are linked to discernible details in the Hebrew text, the literary approach is actually a good deal *less* conjectural than historical scholarship.”⁹ While the contributions of historical criticism

⁸ House, “Rise and Current Status,” 17.

⁹ Alter, *Art*, 21.

are important for rooting the text in a spatial, temporal, and cultural context, narrative criticism allows for a focus on the text itself. The initial response to an inconsistency or tension within the text is not to dismiss it as a textual error but to embrace it in order to determine what meaning and significance it may contribute to the narrative. While other approaches would consider the book of Judges primarily as a compilation of stories contributed at various times by various authors, followed by a complicated process of redaction, the narrative critical approach considers the text as it is – a literary unit replete with narrative art. These literary features, when studied closely, offer deep insight into the meaning and purpose of the text. Thus, when alleged inconsistencies arise within the text, rather than explaining them away by discussing a redactional process, the narrative critical approach works with these inconsistencies in order to discover what purpose they serve in the final form of the text.

Working under the umbrella of narrative criticism it is helpful to also consider the rhetoric of the text, that is, the means by which the narrator persuades the reader. While rhetorical criticism has, at times, been treated as a separate methodology, it is here acknowledged that this component is, in many ways, inherent within narrative criticism. Rhetorical criticism is, “viewed as a pragmatic approach to literature that focuses on the means through which a work achieves a particular effect on its reader.”¹⁰ It is evident in biblical Hebrew narrative that at times the author uses the literary techniques as outlined above in order to persuade the reader to adopt his own values. For this reason, in this study, point of view, characterization, plot, setting, wordplay and other literary features and devices will be considered in terms of their function in communicating the ideologies of the author or narrator. The rhetorical aspect of narrative criticism moves a step beyond

¹⁰ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 14.

identifying patterns and literary features within the narrative in order to explain what they are meant to communicate. This is a crucial step for interpreting the narrative.

Literary Features

Point of view

In seeking to understand biblical literature it is important to consider the roles of the author/editors as well as the narrator and audience (those which are original as well as those which are presented to the reader through the narrative).

Author/Editor

In a discussion of Biblical narrative it is not sufficient to refer to the original author of the narrative. It is important to recognize that there is a real human being who, at some point in human history, composed the narrative. This is the “real, historical, ‘empirical author.’”¹¹ However, it is difficult for the reader to acquire information about the *real author* and even if one could access this information, it is not within the parameters of narrative criticism to consider this information unless it can be inferred directly from the immediate narrative that is being considered.

With this in mind, when using a narrative critical approach, another type of authorial voice must be recognized. If one cannot refer to the *real author* then it is necessary to determine the ‘I’ whose voice is heard intermittently throughout biblical narrative. Vanhoozer refers to this voice as the *dramatized author* (this study will refer to this voice as the narrator) and it is important to avoid confusing this voice with that of the *real author*.¹² Vanhoozer suggests that somewhere between these two authorial roles there is another important figure: the *implied author*.

¹¹ Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 68.

¹² Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 68.

The mention of an *implied author* is common within narrative criticism. Since the *real author* can most often not be determined through the narrative, any mention of the author is not a reference to the *real author*, but rather to the implied author. The purpose of considering the *implied author* is to make a decision about the perspective from which the narrative may be interpreted. Wayne Booth describes the implied author as “the author’s second self.”¹³ He suggests that even where there is no dramatized narrator there is still a depiction of an author who is “distinct from the ‘real man’ – whatever we may take him to be – who creates a superior version of himself.”¹⁴ Randolph Tate describes the role of implied author by suggesting that in “the process of writing, the *real author* becomes an *implied author*. The self who writes is somehow different from the self who thinks. For all practical purposes the *implied author* is the one whom the reader constructs from the text itself.”¹⁵ The *implied author*, then, is the authorial figure who can be considered in narrative criticism. The point of view of the *implied author* can be determined apart from considering anything that is extrinsic to the narrative.

Vanhoozer suggests that, “Enquiries about the empirical author may shed some light on how the text came to be, but not on what the text means.”¹⁶ This may be a difficult statement to defend since understanding the identity of the *real author* would shed light on the setting in which the narrative was written. This may not change the meaning of the text but it could deeply impact the reader’s understanding of the purpose of the text and the message that is being conveyed. While avoiding a discussion of the *real author* is a convenient way of skirting the issue of authorial identity and intent, this

¹³ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 151.

¹⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 151.

¹⁵ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 103.

¹⁶ Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 69.

issue highlights a major limitation of narrative criticism. Since narrative criticism does not consider anything outside of the text, its very nature often does not allow for contextualization of the narrative. To understand a biblical narrative it is necessary to have at least a basic concept of when and where it was written. This temporal, geographical and cultural context will make a significant impact on the way that the narrative can be understood.

On the other hand, the benefit of considering the implied author is that the literary critic can then speak of authorial intention “without violating the basic principle that narratives should be interpreted on their own terms.”¹⁷ Making reference to the implied author allows the narrative critic to focus on the text itself and the information that it provides in regard to temporal and spatial setting, rather than on determining this information from extra-textual evidence. A benefit of this is that the reader can more readily determine what is most important to the author, as is demonstrated through the narrative. A basic understanding of historical background is, without a doubt, beneficial to anyone who desires to understand biblical narrative, however, within narrative criticism the focus is on the information that is provided in the immediate text.

Regardless of its limitations, narrative criticism does maintain its synchronic approach, with the understanding that through this approach the text and information provided therein, rather than the background historical information, becomes the primary interpretive key.¹⁸ Throughout the remainder of this study any mention of the author will be in reference to the *implied author* rather than the *real author*.

¹⁷ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 5.

¹⁸ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 5.

Audience

It is important to also consider the role of the reader of a narrative. In that regard, narrative critics discuss the role of an *implied reader*. Tate describes the *implied reader* as “the reader or audience presupposed by the narrative, the reader (or type of reader) who the author has in mind during the process of composition.”¹⁹ When considering this, the narrative critic can ask questions about the assumptions made by the author concerning the background and knowledge of the reader. These answers should be found within the text itself, yet still an understanding of the cultural and historical world in which the author lives can be very helpful.²⁰

While the actual response of the original historical audience is impossible to predict, what the literary critic has some clues to is “an anticipated response from the implied reader.”²¹ The intricate art of OT narrative leads one to assume that the implied reader is not a first-time reader. The complexity of the narrative suggests that the reader can come to fully appreciate the narrative only after multiple readings of the text.²²

Narrator

The role of the narrator has already been mentioned briefly in the previous discussion of authorial roles. Here, the narrator will be considered more thoroughly. It is important to remember when reading biblical Hebrew narrative that the voice of the narrator is not identical with the voice of the author. The narrator is, instead, a rhetorical device created by the author through which the narrative is conveyed.²³ Generally speaking, the voice of the narrator should be regarded as trustworthy. The narrator “does

¹⁹ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 103.

²⁰ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 103.

²¹ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 20.

²² Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 20.

²³ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 27.

not make mistakes, give false or unintentionally misleading information, or deliberately deceive us.”²⁴ Throughout biblical narrative, the narrator is conveyed not only as trustworthy but also as omniscient.²⁵ Bowman points out that “Biblical narrators are usually third-person, omniscient narrators who reliably and accurately relate their stories, though not without an interpretive perspective.”²⁶ When the narrator speaks, the reader believes them not only because they speak the truth but because they have a thorough knowledge of the events and the outcome of the story. They have access to privileged information and at times they choose to reveal that information to the reader while at other times they do not. There are instances in biblical narrative where the narrator divulges information to the reader concerning the outcome of an event while the characters in the story do not have access to that information.

The narrator is very important since it is through this voice that the reader is introduced to the stories and presented, whether implicitly or explicitly, with the ideologies of the narrative. This is the voice that guides the reader in making judgments and evaluation of the setting, characters and events of the stories.²⁷ The authoritative voice of the narrator, along with the idea that “God’s evaluative point of view can be determined and must be accepted as normative” creates a very powerful tool of persuasion.²⁸ Since the reader will most often side with those who share God’s point of view, or even that of the narrator, the author has the ability to govern the interpretation of the reader.

²⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 53.

²⁵ An exception to this rule, of course, may be in the case of a first-person rather than third-person narrator (for example in Ezra-Nehemiah).

²⁶ Bowman, “Narrative Criticism,” 21.

²⁷ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 24.

²⁸ Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 25.

It is also important to note that the story is presented by the narrator from various angles. Berlin points out that the narrator is the “camera eye” through which the reader sees the story and the angle is determined by what that narrator is choosing to reveal from their extensive and omniscient understanding of the story. The story may be viewed from a distance with a broad depiction of the entire scene or it may be zoomed in for a careful examination of a particular event or character within the narrative. The perspective may be through the eyes of one character throughout an entire story or it may switch from character to character in order to demonstrate a variety of viewpoints.²⁹ In doing this the narrator has the advantage of emphasizing the parts of the narrative that most clearly communicate their ideology. The narrator can play all of the angles to their own advantage in order to make a clear point.

While the multi-perspectival quality of biblical Hebrew narrative offers a depiction of various angles of the narrative, the story is still presented to the reader through the filter of the narrator. Those perspectives that are described in the narrative are specifically chosen by the author in order to convey a message through the text. This is interesting since it is also the case that, “this shift from one point of view to another may result not only in different perspectives, but also in disparate ones.”³⁰ In such a circumstance it is the task of the narrative critic to determine the message that is being conveyed through the larger unit which includes much irony, ambiguity and tension.

²⁹ Berlin, *Poetics*, 44.

³⁰ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 117.

Narrative Structure: Setting, Narrative Types and Plot

Setting

The setting of biblical Hebrew narrative has numerous functions. Some of these include, “making the story vivid to our imagination, reinforcing character and action, building an atmosphere, strengthening the structural unity of a story, and conveying symbolic meanings.”³¹ For these reasons narrative setting is very important for understanding the purpose and message of biblical narrative.

The temporal and physical (spatial) setting of a narrative can be important for its interpretation. As has already been determined, the synchronic approach of narrative criticism relies solely on what may be determined from the text itself. At times, components of each of the following types of settings can be determined in biblical narrative. It is important to pay attention to the physical and temporal setting of the narrative. The reader must take note of the physical environment in which the events take place and the characters interact. In addition one must consider the time of day, year or era in which the event occurs.³² Any description of the setting that has been included in the narrative should be considered important to the purpose of the text. The narrator does not include insignificant details in the text.

Physical Setting

The physical setting of a narrative is important for various reasons. Particularly for interpretation it is important to understand that the physical setting is often riddled with symbolism. Ryken points out that, “at the very least, settings often have a positive or

³¹ Ryken, *Words*, 62.

³² Ryken, *Words*, 54.

negative moral or emotional meaning.”³³ When approaching biblical Hebrew narrative the reader ought to ask what the relationship is between the physical setting and the characters and events of the story. Often the physical environment of a narrative can provide clues to the reader concerning the events of the narrative. It may even provide, “an atmosphere in which the action seems inevitable.”³⁴ The physical setting is very tightly intertwined with the events and characters of the story since the setting is revealed primarily through the actions and movement of the characters within the story. For example, often “the characters go on journeys, during the course of which the names of the places from which they set out and to which they are going or which they pass on the way are mentioned.”³⁵ Thus, because of the movement of the characters, the setting is revealed. The physical settings, including specific geographical locations (i.e. a city or a body of water), and less specific locations (i.e. in a house, beneath a tree, beside a rock, or on top of a mountain) are very important to the plot of the narrative.³⁶

Bar-Efrat points out that, “biblical narrative has no desire to linger and enjoy the view.”³⁷ Since narrative is most often concerned with a rapid description of events, physical descriptions are often not detailed, but the information which is provided ought to be considered crucial for understanding and interpreting the story. Since the focus in biblical narrative is on forging ahead and moving quickly through the narrative it has been suggested that the temporal setting is much more important and physical setting plays a secondary role.³⁸ While this idea has some merit, one should not play down the

³³ Ryken, *Words*, 55.

³⁴ Ryken, *Words*, 58-59.

³⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 185.

³⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 187.

³⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 196.

³⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 196.

significance of the spatial setting since whatever information is offered is important for the purpose of the narrative.

Temporal Setting

There are two components of time that must be considered in biblical narrative. The reader ought to consider both the time that passes within the narrative (narrated or internal time) and the time that passes as the story is being told or read (narration or external time).³⁹

External Time

Since narrative is revealed to the reader over a period of time the author may use this as an advantage. This provides an opportunity for the author to take advantage of the ability to heighten tension and deepen interest in the plot. It is through the unfolding of external time that the author is able to use language, and its structural units to their advantage. "The author chooses the words, builds the sentences and constructs the paragraphs, paying careful attention to their size so as to create a dynamic rhythm, which is also a function of time."⁴⁰ The amount of external time that is devoted to a particular narrative or portion of narrative is a direct reflection of the significance of that narrative.

Internal Time

In biblical Hebrew narrative internal time does not move forward at a consistent pace. Gaps, delays, moving forward and backward in time, and other devices are used by the author in order to depict the events of the story in the way most conducive to expressing the message and purpose. Another indicator of the speed at which time is moving is the use of temporal markers. These may refer to a specific point in time (i.e.

³⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 143.

⁴⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 142.

“On that day,” “In the morning,” “During the night,” etc.) or to the amount of time that has passed (i.e. “the land had peace for forty years”).⁴¹ The latter of these two is an

indication to the reader that narrated time is passing more quickly than narration time.

“Narrated time is not uniform or regular and its directions and speed often change.”⁴²

This expression of time is depicted with specific purpose and makes a contribution to the meaning and message of the narrative as a whole. This effect is often accomplished through the use of various narrative types.

Narrative Types

Through the use of various narrative types the author offers an indication of the significance of the events of the narrative.⁴³ These can be used to speed up or slow down both the narrated and narration time. The purpose of this would be to draw emphasis to a portion of the narrative that is deemed to be of particular importance to the narrator.

These types include direct, descriptive, dramatic and declarative narrative.⁴⁴

Direct Narrative

Direct narrative is simply a report of the unfolding of events in the voice of the narrator. This does not include any evaluative commentary but a simple outline of events. In this narrative type the story moves forward at a fairly quick and steady pace. A scenic account (whose events are described in detail usually through dialogue) cannot be used to convey a story that extends over a large amount of time. Thus, in order to connect these scenic accounts the narrator offers summary. Summary is a necessary means of narration

⁴¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 144.

⁴² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 142.

⁴³ Boda, “Narrative Analysis”; Ryken, *Words*, 43.

⁴⁴ Boda, “Narrative Analysis.”

for filling in areas that are important for understanding the plot but do not need to be emphasized in and of themselves.

Descriptive Narrative

It is common for the author to alternate between slow and quick movement within a narrative or even to make time stand still. Full stops in the narrative occur when the narrator pauses the action in order to offer a description of a character or place. These descriptions offer a picture of the narrative and “while we are looking at that picture time stops within the narrative.”⁴⁵ There is a direct correlation between the amount of time devoted to describing a character or event and its significance.⁴⁶ The reader should take note of these descriptions as there is a purposeful slowing of the narrative in order to draw attention to the significance of that which is being described. Bar-Efrat points out that taking note of the difference between these two kinds of accounts is crucial because, “If we note the variations in narrated time in relation to narration time, ranging from scenic representation to summary account, we will discover the narrative’s focal points and the relative importance of its various subjects.”⁴⁷ This includes not only descriptive but also dramatic narrative.

Dramatic Narrative

Dramatic narrative refers to the instances within a narrative when the narrator slows the movement by recording, word-for-word, the dialogue of characters within the story. Narrated time and narration time become almost identical to each other during dialogue.⁴⁸ Dialogue slows down the speed of the narrative and encourages the reader to

⁴⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 146.

⁴⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 142-143.

⁴⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 151.

⁴⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 150.

carefully consider the events as they are unfolding. When the narrator does not slow down in order to explain the details of an event or conversation this may be an indicator that those events are of less significance than those which are recorded mostly through dialogue. Bowman suggests that, “The use of direct discourse interrupts what would otherwise have been a continuous narrative thread, thereby placing an organizational emphasis on the information contained in the speech.”⁴⁹ Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the amount of time devoted to a particular event if the reader is to understand what is being emphasized within the narrative. At times dialogue is repetitive, accounting word-for-word the same speech multiple times. This slows the narrative even further and very careful attention should be given to such dialogue.

Plot

Plot refers to the pattern of events that occur within a narrative. In biblical narrative it is important to remember that since the narration is not extensive but rather brief and concise, every detail that is offered by the author and presented by the narrator is important. Not only is the content of the narrative important but so also is the order and style in which it is presented.

The plot of a story is not only important because it presents us with the actions and events within a story but because it is structured in a particular way in order to present to the reader the main purpose and priorities of the author. Ryken describes plot as “the organizing principle or backbone of a story. Without it, stories become a formless mass.”⁵⁰ Since narrative without plot would be incomprehensible Brooks describes plot

⁴⁹ Bowman, “Narrative Criticism,” 22.

⁵⁰ Ryken, *Words*, 71.

as “the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements – incidents, episodes, actions – of a narrative.”⁵¹

Plot is the component of narrative that drives the reader to keep reading in order to discover the outcome of events. It is not only an organizational tool but is intentional and goal-oriented, always causing the story to move forward.⁵² Not only is the plot designed to push the story line forward and keep the reader’s attention but it is also “a purposeful structure” in which the author has the ability to organize the elements of the story in whichever way will be most beneficial for emphasizing the author’s ideals.⁵³ In this sense, the plot is very intentionally structured. The author carefully selects which details to include and those ideas which do not fit into the author’s carefully crafted development of the rhetoric of the plot are omitted.⁵⁴ This concept gives plot a place in the rhetorical purpose of the narrative. This is also accomplished as the plot influences the emotional flow of the narrative, tracking the main tension within the narrative as well as the release of that tension. This emotional component holds the attention of the reader through to the end of the narrative.

A significant component of the plot of a narrative is its unity. To understand the unity of the narrative the reader must first determine the boundaries of a given episode and then determine the “inner dynamics that constitute the unity of the action.”⁵⁵ It is often the case that the conflict is the unifying agent of the story. When considering unity within narrative one ought to consider not only the unity of a particular episode but also the unifying components that connect these episodes with the wider narrative. “The

⁵¹ Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 5.

⁵² Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 12.

⁵³ Amit, *Reading*, 46-47.

⁵⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93.

⁵⁵ Ryken, *Words*, 65.

individual narrative usually acquires additional significance when it serves as a constituent element of the wider whole.”⁵⁶ Another way of detecting unity between narratives is consistency of a principal character. While these narratives may still be divided because they deal with different events in the life of this character, the unity can still be maintained since the main aspects of the character’s personality are reflected in each narrative.⁵⁷

In most cases the structure of a plot is based around one or more conflicts. This conflict may be “physical conflict, character conflict, inner psychological conflict, or moral/spiritual conflict.”⁵⁸ The most simple plot outline includes the following:

- 1) Preliminary incidents which include any introductory comments or necessary background information for the narrative.
- 2) An occasioning incident that instigates the tension in the plot.
- 3) Complications which build the tension beyond the occasioning incident, often generating more conflict.
- 4) A point where the conflict as generated from the initial tension is most intense.
- 5) The climax which may or may not overlap with #4 above.
- 6) The point of unravelling which includes an event that begins to immediately release the tension caused by the occasioning incident.
- 7) The resolution which may include a number of events which lead to the ultimate point of resolution.
- 8) The point of resolution in which the tension of the occasioning incident has been fully resolved.
- 9) The outcome which includes any final comments or evaluation by the narrator.⁵⁹

These elements in the plot help the reader to trace, not only the significance of the events of the narrative but also its emotional flow. To summarize, from the initial situation that is

⁵⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 94.

⁵⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 135.

⁵⁸ Ryken, *Words*, 62.

⁵⁹ Boda, “Narrative Analysis.”

presented by the narrator, the plot develops through a chain of events to the central conflict. From that point there is a major factor of change, through which the conflict begins to be resolved. The event that initiates this resolution is of great importance for understanding the text. After this event there is usually a rapid return to a sense of tranquility.⁶⁰ Thus, the plot works first toward presenting the conflict and then toward resolving it.

At times, there may also be an “illusory conclusion.” This occurs when the narrative does not end with the rapid decline but instead encounters another conflict, rises to another pinnacle and only then descends to its real conclusion.⁶¹ The conclusion of a narrative is evident, not only as the story is brought back to a place of serenity but it is also often clearly marked by an event in the story such as someone on a journey returning home, or even by the death of the protagonist.⁶² Events such as these offer a sense of closure to the reader and it becomes clear that the episode has come to an end.

Narration and Dialogue

In biblical narrative the story unfolds as the author reveals the events through the voice of the narrator. The importance of the omniscient narrator has been discussed above. The narrator communicates through both narration (offering description, summary and even commentary in their own voice) and dialogue (explaining word-for-word the conversations that are occurring among the characters in the story).⁶³ While the voice of

⁶⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 121.

⁶¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 124.

⁶² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 130.

⁶³ See discussion on narrative types above.

the narrator is always more trustworthy than the voices of the characters in the story,⁶⁴ both are important for understanding the purpose and message of the narrative.

Alter points out that:

A proper narrative event occurs when the narrative tempo slows down enough for us to discriminate a particular scene; to have the illusion of the scene's "presence" as it unfolds; to be able to imagine the interaction of personages or sometimes personages and groups, together with the freight of motivations, ulterior aims, character traits, political, social, or religious constraints, moral and theological meanings, borne by their speech, gestures, and acts.⁶⁵

It is in the careful consideration of both the dialogue and narration of these events that the reader is able to determine the purpose of the narrative unit. In examining biblical narrative it is important to remember that since biblical writers have limited what is recorded in a narrative every detail is important.⁶⁶ Everything is included for a purpose so it is necessary that the reader pays close attention. As discussed above, one reason for varying the type of narration used is to speed up or slow down the movement of narrated time. These various narration methods (direct, dramatic, descriptive and declarative) are used quite intentionally in order to communicate the purpose and priorities of the narrative.

Direct narration is that which describes the events as they occur in a narrative. This does not include any comment or description but is simply an account of the actions and events. It is not uncommon for direct narration to confirm something that has already been said in the speech of a character in the story.⁶⁷ Since the voice of the narrator is more reliable than the voice of a character in the story this repetition may simply serve

⁶⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 53.

⁶⁵ Alter, *Art*, 63.

⁶⁶ Alter, *Art*, 80.

⁶⁷ Alter, *Art*, 65.

the purpose of confirming the information or it may place emphasis on the event, suggesting to the reader that it is especially important to take note of this.

At other times the voice of the narrator may contradict something that has been said by a character in the story.⁶⁸ This kind of tension leads to ambiguity within the narrative, particularly when attempting to determine the purpose and message of the author. The issue of ambiguity will be discussed below in greater detail. Here, it is simply acknowledged that this kind of inconsistency is not uncommon between voices in the narrative and the reader ought to pay close attention to any tension of this sort.

Dialogue is very frequent in biblical Hebrew narrative. It functions to slow down the narrative and also to give the reader a new perspective through which to view the action. Not only so, but dialogue also provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the motivations of the characters. A close examination of dialogue within a narrative is very important since the characteristics that the reader is able to derive from the dialogue become apparent mostly through contrast or differentiation from the norm.⁶⁹

Ambiguity in Old Testament Narrative

Throughout the OT there are instances where there seem to be contradictions and ambiguity within the text. Sternberg discusses such inconsistencies stating that where

⁶⁸ For example. In 1 Sam 15: 11, 29, 35 the verb נחם (to repent, be sorry) appears four times with conflicting ideas concerning whether or not Yahweh is capable of being the subject of this verb. In v. 11 the voice of Yahweh admits that he is sorry (נחם) that he made Saul king. Then, in v. 29 Samuel says, “the Glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind (נחם); for He is not a human that He should change his mind (נחם).” In v. 35 the voice of the narrator reminds the reader that Yahweh regretted (נחם) that he made Saul king over Israel. In such a situation it is clear that the voice of Yahweh and the narrator hold more influence than the voice of any other character. Still, the tension caused by this ambiguity causes the reader to pay particular attention to this action. Even Yahweh, whom one may not expect would change his mind, did so regarding the kingship of Saul. At the very least this tension in the text demands from the reader some extra attention.

⁶⁹ Alter, *Art*, 72.

there are two or more mutually exclusive hypotheses “each reading may serve to balance and ironize the other.”⁷⁰ He says that,

A simultaneous reading of a text from two unresolvable perspectives, with its constant movement between the rivals, not only enriches every doubled construct, actional or psychological. It inevitably makes for heightened perceptibility. It sharpens our awareness of the work’s verbal art, foregrounds the modes of expression, and brings out the more subtle features of the represented events... The ambiguity calls attention to the literary texture as such.⁷¹

Ambiguity within OT narrative is often intentional and is used by the narrator as a tool by which to engage the reader, encouraging them to consider all of the options before coming to a decision about the meaning of the text. Vanhoozer agrees that at times, an author may say something different than what they intend to communicate in order to create this ambiguity.⁷²

While such ambiguities cause the source critic to dwell on errors of transmission, a narrative critic embraces such inconsistency in order to appreciate the rhetorical value of the ambiguity.⁷³ In this study every attempt will be made to consider this kind of ambiguity as an intentional device of rhetoric, yet where there is convincing evidence that source criticism will be helpful in producing a more accurate interpretation, such information will be considered. The goal of the study is not to force an interpretation of the text into a box called narrative criticism, but instead to use the elements of narrative criticism that are most helpful for the interpretation of the text.

While ambiguity must be considered for its literary and rhetorical value there is danger of reading more into this than is warranted. Since ambiguity has no particular aesthetic value it must only be considered as intentional when one can discern a specific

⁷⁰ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 228.

⁷¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 228.

⁷² Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 156.

⁷³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 227.

function. Vanhoozer suggests that while ambiguity may be intentional, it may also at times be accidental if “the author, through negligence or incompetence, performs a clumsy communicative act.”⁷⁴ Since ambiguity is not always intentional, it must be combined with other literary features within the narrative in order to be considered, “a distinctive principle of literature.”⁷⁵

Characterization

Characterization is a key component of narrative art in the OT. Through the description, speech and actions of the characters the reader is given a fresh perspective and new vantage point by which to view the story. Bowman points out four ways in which characterization occurs: 1) Through characters’ actions and interactions; 2) Through characters’ speech; 3) Through the speech of other characters concerning that character; 4) Through the narrator’s comments or evaluation of a character.⁷⁶

Characterization can be used to establish ideals and, depending on how a character is depicted, the reader will know whether or not they can be trusted. Characters are usually placed in one of two categories: *flat* or *round*. A round character has a broad range of traits and there is more revealed about them than seems necessary for the plot. These characters “have the capacity to grow, to develop, to change their minds, to surprise the reader as well as the other characters in the story.”⁷⁷ A flat character has a limited range of traits. These may be superficial and only necessary to keep the story moving or, in contrast, they may be quite important to the storyline while still having very little

⁷⁴ Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 156.

⁷⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 227-228.

⁷⁶ Bowman, “Narrative Criticism,” 30.

⁷⁷ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 75.

revealed about them.⁷⁸ Berlin adds a third class of characters that she refers to as *agent* characters. These characters are not particularly important and the reader is not provided any information about them. Instead, “they are necessary for the plot, or serve to contrast with or provoke responses from the characters.”⁷⁹ These characters act almost as a part of the setting and are important in the same sense that any other piece of the setting is important.

Characterization occurs through direct description of appearance, report of actions, report of inner thoughts and direct speech.⁸⁰ Direct description of a character in narration is relatively infrequent so when such a description is offered the reader can be assured that the description is important for the plot.⁸¹ The reader is not enlightened as to the appearance of a character in order to provide an image of what the character may look like. Such physical descriptions are meant to make the reader aware of the character’s social class, specific situations, and any really outstanding traits.⁸² These physical traits may also be described in order to give some insight into what is to come later in the story. For example, the description of a character as beautiful, “usually communicates their sexual desirability in stories of courtship, seduction, or rape.”⁸³

The importance of dialogue has been discussed previously. Here it is only important to note that the reader can learn much about a character through direct speech. It is not only what a character says but also the way that they speak that provides insight

⁷⁸ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 75.

⁷⁹ Berlin, *Narrative Art*, 32.

⁸⁰ Alter, *Art*, 117.

⁸¹ Berlin, *Poetics*, 34.

⁸² Berlin, *Poetics*, 36.

⁸³ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 57.

into the character. The reader must carefully consider any deviation from what would be expected. Dialogue is often used to show contrast between characters.⁸⁴

It should also be noted that biblical characters, even main characters, are not fixed, that is, they have the ability to change. These changes are evidenced in the characters speech and actions and are especially apparent when a character speaks or acts contrary to what the reader is expecting.⁸⁵ It is possible for either negative or positive change to occur in a character throughout their involvement in a narrative. At times in the narrative it is important to compare and contrast the characters. If two characters within a narrative display particularly similar or contrasting qualities this may be to emphasize either the extreme positive or extreme negative qualities of each character. This is also the case with similar characters which may be purposely placed side by side in a narrative for foreshadowing or other purposes.

Naming

In OT narrative the names of characters play a key role. Names can give the reader insight into physical appearance and personality (i.e. Jacob and Esau) and they can also offer deeper insight into the narrative and events which are to come. Sternberg suggests that the naming of a character reveals more about the one naming than the character who is receiving the name.⁸⁶ In order to fully grasp the depth of meaning of names perhaps both ought to be considered. The OT is also replete with name changes. These name changes are most often declared by Yahweh himself and indicate a specific important event or turning point in a character's life (i.e. Abraham and Sarah). When

⁸⁴ Berlin, *Poetics*, 40.

⁸⁵ Berlin, *Poetics*, 40.

⁸⁶ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 331.

studying OT narrative the reader ought to give careful attention to the names of characters and especially any name changes within the narrative.

The importance of naming is not restricted to the character's given name but also in the epithets provided. An epithet provides insight not only into the character in question but also to the plot as it unfolds. "It shapes the sequence of our expectations (as a foreshadowing device) because it is bound to shape the sequence of events (as a developmental factor)."⁸⁷ As mentioned previously, if a woman is described as beautiful then she will undoubtedly become the object of either love or lust. Similarly, if a man is described as being especially strong, wise or gifted then the reader can confidently know that his skills will come into play at some point in the narrative. Consider the Ehud narrative (Judg 3:15-30) and the importance of the epithet at the introduction of the character of Ehud. Ehud is described as a man bound in his right hand (3:15). Such an unusual description is an indicator that this will come into play at a later point in the story. The reader eventually learns that it is because of this characteristic that Ehud is able to get his sword past the guards and have the opportunity to be alone with Eglon, king of Moab, in order to kill him. Naming and epithets are quite significant in OT narrative and ought to be considered closely.

Just as the reader should pay careful attention to the naming of a character there is also significance in the absence of such naming. Anonymity of character is quite common in OT narrative. Anonymous characters include, "wise women, messengers and other personified voices..., collective figures like gangs or courtiers."⁸⁸ Despite the seeming

⁸⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 338.

⁸⁸ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 330.

lack of importance that one would expect to correlate with anonymity of character, some anonymous characters play very important roles in OT narrative.

Wordplay

Throughout OT narrative various types of wordplay are evident. Alter suggests that when considering wordplay one ought to be aware of two ideas: “the repeated use of narrative analogy, through which one part of the text provides oblique commentary on another” and “the richly expressive function of syntax.”⁸⁹ This study will focus primarily on the wordplay that is evident through word choice, word order and repetition. Any variation from what might be expected in the narrative will also be considered. An example of this kind of variation from the norm is a sudden chain of verbs attached to one subject. Alter attributes this to a depiction of rapidity of action.⁹⁰

Word Choice

In biblical Hebrew, as in other languages, a number of different meanings may be attributed to any one word. Thus, it is important to consider not only the dominant meaning of a word but also its secondary meanings so as to come to the best possible meaning in its particular context. There are countless ways for the narrator to communicate any given idea. The words through which the story is communicated have been chosen carefully by the author. There are times when the author chooses to use a word that is, perhaps, unexpected by the reader. These instances should always be given some extra consideration. At times the word choice leads to ambiguity and other times it offers a clear meaning along with evident overtones from alternate meanings. It is often the case that secondary meanings along with their connotations are as important as the

⁸⁹ Alter, *Art*, 21.

⁹⁰ Alter, *Art*, 80.

primary meaning.⁹¹ The reader should consider word choice especially in circumstances when it seems as though the most obvious word has not been utilized.

Word Order

Within biblical Hebrew it is conventional for a phrase to have a verb, subject, object (VSO) word order. Any deviation from this pattern should cause the reader to question the purpose for that particular word order. Often this is an indication that the author is attempting to emphasize the importance of a specific concept or event in the story.⁹² It is important for the reader to pay careful attention to such details as word order in order to gain the optimal understanding and insight from the text.

Repetition

Repetition is a very common device used within OT narrative. There are different levels of repetition which have varying purposes. While the duplication of a word can be used to express strong emotion, the repetition of key words in a narrative may be used to establish a relationship between the stages of the narrative. In doing this, the meaning and message of the narrative is revealed without interrupting the narrative flow.⁹³ This kind of repetition may also occur with slight variations or change in its meaning. This does not nullify the significance of the repetition. At times it is not a single word but rather an entire phrase that is repeated. This may be verbatim or contain slight changes. Both the repetition and changes are important in order to understand what the author is communicating.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 206.

⁹² Although the reader also ought to keep in mind the theory of such scholars as Heller who point out that a reversal in word order may indicate an off-line comment or paragraph marker; Heller; *Narrative Structure*, 54.

⁹³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 213.

⁹⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 214.

Alter offers a scale of repetitive structuring beginning with the smallest, most unitary and moving toward the largest, most composite. These include *Leitwort* (considering the semantic range of the root), *motif* (considering a recurring image, action or object), *theme* (considering a recurring moral or other value), *sequence of actions* (considering the repetition of an action with some increment or intensification), and *type-scenes* (considering an episode containing a fixed sequence of motifs).⁹⁵ Each of these types of repetition are quite commonly found within biblical Hebrew narrative and are useful for gaining insight into the priorities of the author and the purpose of the narrative. Some of the many functions of repetition within OT narrative include creating atmosphere, constructing a main theme or developing character, emphasizing a specific moment, and building suspense. Repetition can also offer humour through exaggeration as well as helping the reader to understand the rhetoric of the narrative.⁹⁶

Along with repetition the reader must consider variation. At times repetition is present within the narrative for the purpose of drawing attention to the deviation from that pattern. This kind of deviation is often found within what is known as a *three and four* pattern. In such a case the same set of events or dialogue would be repeated three times with the same result. Then on the fourth cycle an element of the cycle, often the response to the very same action, changes.⁹⁷ A consideration of repetition and contrast through variation can provide much insight into the purpose and meaning of the biblical Hebrew narrative.

⁹⁵ Alter, *Art*, 95-96.

⁹⁶ Gunn and Fewell, 148.

⁹⁷ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 109.

Ideological Point of View

Infrequently the narrator of a biblical tale offers an explicit evaluation of the events of the story. Such an explicit assessment is helpful but this is not the only means by which the narrator can communicate an ideology. Boda points out that this ideological point of view may become evident through a “normative spokesperson in the story,” through the outcome of the story, or through the selection and arrangement of detail.⁹⁸ Each of the literary features described above can contribute to the ideological point of view. This is how the reader is able to discern the message that the narrator means to communicate.

Procedure

This study will carefully examine Judg 8-9 in order to discern the narrator’s perspective on kingship. This will be accomplished by identifying and discussing the basic literary devices as described above. Throughout the analysis there will be a close consideration of the theme of kingship as it recurs within the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. The findings of this careful examination of the text will be compared with the findings of various scholars on the tension surrounding the theme of kingship.

A literary analysis of Judg 8-9 will focus on the following components of the narrative in order to identify the various narrative techniques and rhetorical strategies that have been implemented in this text.

a. Setting and Narrative Types

While a careful description of the role of setting in narrative analysis has been offered above, this study will be limited to the discussion of only key locations as they pertain to the message and purpose of the narrative. The internal and external speed at which the

⁹⁸ Boda, “Narrative Analysis.”

narrative moves will be considered paying particular attention to the use of various narrative types. The use of these narrative types will be considered as they offer an indication of significant themes and events throughout.

b. Plot

This study will offer a thorough analysis of the plot of Judges 8-9 identifying the main points of the plot including the preliminary incidents, occasioning incident, complications and conflict generated, point of most intense conflict, climax, point where the conflict begins to unravel, resolution, point of resolution, outcome, and conclusion. Where possible this structure will be applied to the narrative, taking special note of the occasioning incident as well as the point at which the conflict begins to unravel since these are often indicative of a main theme within the narrative. Where the narrative plot is more complicated than this basic structure special attention will be given in order to identify any points that do correspond to the basic plot structure as well as the effect of the deviance from the basic structure.

c. Point of View

This study will consider the person-voice that is used in each section of the narrative. It will ask who is speaking. It will consider how broad or focused the narrative is and whether the narrative is being offered by the reliable narrator or a less reliable character within the story. Finally, it will consider the effect that these elements have on the purpose and meaning of the text.

d. Narration and Dialogue

This study will consider the arrangement of the narrative material. It will consider what has been included, what has not been included and why this is so. Special

consideration will be given to any points in the narrative where the narrator deviates from the forward movement of the plot in order to provide a piece of expository information. It will consider the purpose of details that do not appear to be crucial to the narrative.⁹⁹ Any discrepancy between the speech of two characters will be carefully examined as well as any repetition between narration and dialogue. The study will be aware of any significant first or last words of a character. The length of dialogue or direct speech will also be noted as this may signal a need for special attentiveness.

e. Characterization

This study will pay particular attention to characterization within Judg 6-9. Special consideration will be given to Gideon, Abimelech, Jotham, Yahweh, and the Israelites, as the key players in the narrative. Other significant characters will also be examined particularly in regard to their interaction with the previously mentioned characters. These characters will be compared and contrasted where appropriate keeping in mind that the author may use parallel characters in order to give the reader insight into the outcome of the story. Consideration will be given to the function of the characters in the rhetoric of the narrative. Since names play such a key role in Judg 6-9 these, along with any epithets offered will be identified and examined. Characterization through actions and speech will be considered along with explicit evaluation offered by the narrator.

f. Wordplay

This study will identify various occurrences of wordplay throughout the narrative. The various levels of repetition will be considered from syntactical details to broader thematic repetition. Divergence from the expected repetition will also be identified.

⁹⁹ Alter, *Art*, 185.

Where word choice and word order are outstanding from what is expected these will be identified and evaluated.

A narrative critical examination of the book of Judges, particularly chapters 8 and 9, will reveal the purpose of the theme of kingship in this narrative. As the tension surrounding this theme is encountered and wrestled through, the purpose of the discussion of kingship in Judges will become increasingly more clear. It is important for the reader to pay careful attention to the prevalent theme of kingship in Judg 8-9 because it will help to determine what the text is communicating ideologically concerning the theme of kingship. The importance of this study extends beyond these two chapters since the theme of kingship connects them to the book of Judges as a whole, to the entire Deuteronomistic History and arguably to the entire Old Testament. Since the theme of kingship is recurrent throughout the OT a more accurate understanding of what is being communicated in the narrative of the book of Judges may offer insight to the theme of kingship as found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

This chapter has offered a thorough description of each of the major elements of narrative criticism. However it should be noted that this study will not offer an equal amount of attention to each of these elements. Instead, the majority of focus will be placed on plot and characterization with discussion of various other literary elements where most applicable to the study. The literary elements as outlined above will not be addressed in that particular order. Instead, as the study works through the three sections of Judg 8-9 the literary features which are most relevant to the various sections will be considered.

Chapter 3

GIDEON'S REFUSAL TO REIGN

JUDGES 6:1-8:32

Introductory Comments

The Gideon narrative is considered by some scholars to be the focal point of the book of Judges.¹ Its length, placement and variation from the other judge cycles call the reader's attention and indicate that the content of this episode is crucial for understanding the book of Judges as a whole. The Gideon-Abimelech narrative has much to say about the theme of kingship and its role in the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. This chapter will focus on the Gideon episode by considering various literary features as presented by the author, with a focus on plot and characterization, in order to discern the primary purpose and message of this narrative. In doing so, particular attention will be given to the theme of kingship as well as Israel's tendency to be easily influenced by its surrounding nations.

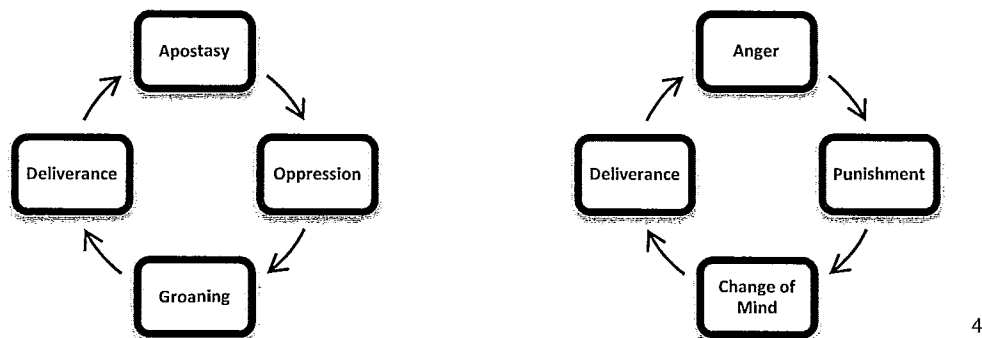
The Judge Cycle

In order to understand the individual events of the book of Judges one must have an understanding of the cyclical nature of the presentation of the events in the book. The components of the cycle are debated among scholars. McCann offers a four-part cycle as follows: 1. Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh; 2. God's anger brings judgment; 3. God raises a judge-deliverer; 4. The judge dies.² Matthews' description of the cycle varies slightly from this. He offers five elements of the cycle as follows: 1. Israel disobeys; 2. God allows oppression; 3. Israel repents; 4. God raises a judge-deliverer;

¹ Exum, "Centre Cannot Hold," 418; McCann, *Judges*, 61-62; Assis, *Self Interest*, 127-129; Tanner, "Focal Point," 152-156.

² McCann *Judges*, 9-10.

5. The judge ends the oppression.³ Block offers two different cycles – one for Israel and one for Yahweh:



What is evident from these examples is that, regardless of the way the cycles are broken down, there is still an obvious cycle including the unfaithfulness of Israel which is responded to by punishment from Yahweh. The oppression leads to a point where Israel can no longer bear it and therefore they cry out to Yahweh who has compassion on them and raises up a judge-deliverer. After the death of the judge this cycle begins again. This cycle is presented to the reader first in Judg 2:11-19 and repeats through the accounts of Othniel (Judg 3:9-14), Ehud (Judg 3:15-30), Deborah (Judg 4-5), Gideon (Judg 6:1-8:32) and even Abimelech (Judg 8:33-9:57). With the Gideon narrative the cycle begins to change and some have pointed out that from that point on the structure begins to fall apart.⁵ This is quite evident in the Jephthah and Samson narratives in which there is basically no longer any semblance of the cycle remaining. It is interesting to note how the elements of this cycle fit into the plots of the various judge episodes and the points at which there is divergence. This study will proceed by exploring the plot of the Gideon narrative and its role in communicating the purpose, message and ideology of the author.

³ Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 8.

⁴ Block, *Judges*, 135.

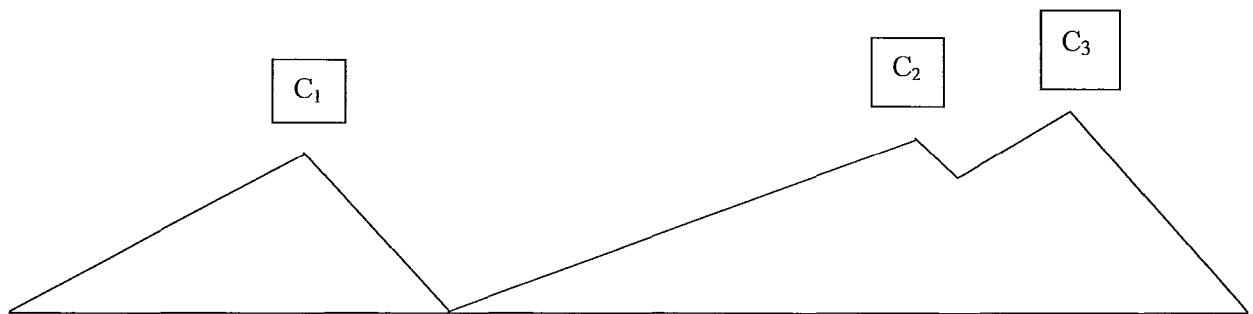
⁵ Tanner, "Gideon as the Focal Point," 152-156.

Plot

It is important to consider the unfolding of the plot of the book of Judges in order to understand its meaning. Webb points out that the book of Judges should be described as

history-as-plot rather than as history-as-chronicle. That is, if the subject matter is ‘what happened in the life of Israel between the death of Joshua and the birth of Samuel’, this is presented not as a mere succession of events, but rather as *plot* in which events are causally related to one another. Hence the narrative meaning of the text (its meaning as *story*) is taken to consist in the interaction of persons and events within the unfolding plot.⁶

The Gideon narrative does not follow a simple plot outline. Webb suggests that a diagram of the plot would appear as follows:



He suggests that the tension mounts beginning with the call of Gideon in 6:11-24, and reaches a climax in chapter 7 with the successful attack on the camp of Midian (C₁). The tension is then released but the story is unexpectedly resumed in 8:4, at the point when Gideon and his men cross the Jordan. At this point “a whole new narrative development begins to emerge.”⁷ From this point in 8:4 new tensions build and this section apparently reaches a climax when the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, are captured (C₂).

⁶ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 146.

⁷ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 146.

However, Webb proceeds to explain that the true climax of this section of the Gideon narrative follows this in 8:22 when the Israelites request that Gideon rule over them (C₃).⁸

O'Connell offers a much more complicated explanation of the plot as he divides the Gideon-Abimelech narrative into three different plot lines, each with their own tension and resolution.⁹ For O'Connell plot A is concerned with Yahweh rescuing Israel from Midian, plot B with Yahweh's judgment of Gideon and his tribe because of their cultic practices, and plot C with Yahweh's judgment of Gideon and his house for social injustice.¹⁰ He points out two dramatic climaxes in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. The first is when Gideon kills the two kings of Midian (8:21) and the second climax is the point at which the nameless woman of Thebez drops an upper-millstone on Abimelech's head (9:53).¹¹ These attempts do not seem to fully capture those points which cause and release the tension in the story. Perhaps it will be most helpful to consider two plot lines in the Gideon narrative. The first of these describes the tension between Israel and Midian while the second describes the tension between Israel and Yahweh.¹²

Plot Line 1

On the most basic level, a plot dealing with the tension between Israel and Midian, including occasioning incident, complication, climax, point of unravelling and resolution, can be identified and outlined as follows:

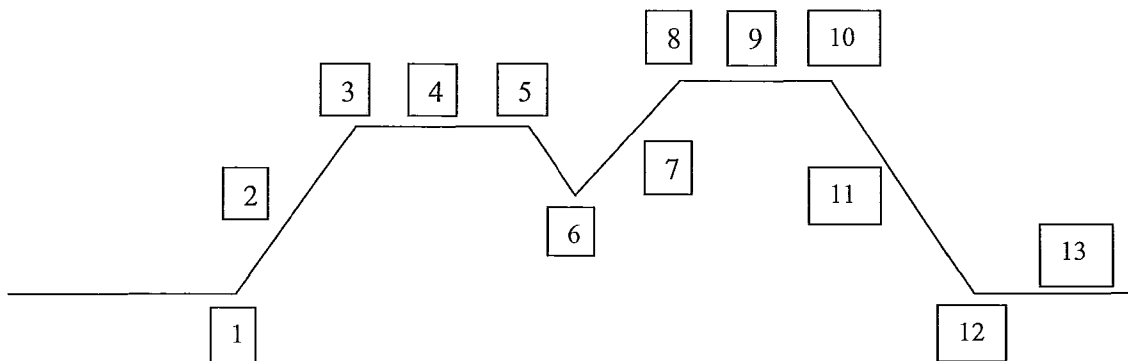
⁸ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 146. Webb emphasizes that the plot both begins (6:11) and ends (8:32) in Ophrah with crossing the point of resolution of the first section. He also suggests that the events of these two sections have quite a few similarities; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 147.

⁹ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 140-146.

¹⁰ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 139.

¹¹ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 156-157. For more on this climax in chapter 9 see this study's chapter on Abimelech's reign and fall.

¹² While Webb does not outline the plot of the Gideon narrative in this way, he does identify these two tensions within the narrative; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 153.



One element that makes the Gideon narrative stand out from the preceding judge cycles is the way that the narrator has lengthened each element of the plot. Block states that “the expansive style of the Gideon narrative is evident from the outset.”¹³ The following will consider the content and purpose of each of these expanded components within the plot of the Israel vs. Midian tension of the Gideon narrative.

1. *Occasioning incident* – Judges 6:1.

The point at which the tension begins to build is when Israel is given into the hand of Midian. This comes about as Yahweh’s response of judgment to Israel’s disobedience and unfaithfulness. This description mirrors similar events in the previous judge cycles (3:8, 12; 4:2; 10:7; 13:1).

2. *Complications* – Judges 6:2-5.

In these verses the tension mounts as the oppression of Israel at the hand of Midian is described in much more detail than in the previous judge cycles.¹⁴ Verses 2-5 are dedicated to describing the devastation that Israel is experiencing under the hand of Midian. Webb points out that “the pitiful decline in their lifestyle is conveyed by piling

¹³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 251.

¹⁴ McCann says that “as in chapter 4, the details of the new oppression are elaborated upon, but even more extensively this time (6:2-6)”; McCann, *Judges*, 63. See also Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145.

detail upon detail.”¹⁵ This detailed description serves to exaggerate the tension, communicating a sense of urgency to the reader. It may also be a preliminary indication that Israel’s situation is quickly deteriorating.¹⁶ It is this oppression at the hand of Midian that drives the remainder of the narrative forward. Everything that happens, from this point forward, moves toward resolving this point of conflict for Israel.

3. *Conflict Most Intense* – Judges 6:6.

At a point when Israel can no longer bear the immense oppression from Midian, they cry out to Yahweh, as in the previous judge cycles. The problem of oppression that is introduced in 6:1 has intensified and has reached its worst point. The Israelites can no longer tolerate their suffering and their response is described “in the briefest of terms: they cried out to God.”¹⁷ Even this portion of the narrative has been expanded by the narrator. After mentioning Israel’s cry in 6:6, the narrator then repeats the same events in reverse-order in the very next verse.¹⁸ “(6) Then Israel was brought very low before Midian and the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh. (7) And it was when Israel cried out to Yahweh because of Midian...” Just as their oppression was extended and exaggerated, so is the description of their cry for help. Israel can no longer bear their oppression so they do the only thing they know how to do – they call out to Yahweh.

4. *Climax* – Judges 6:7-10.

Yahweh’s immediate response to the Israelites serves as the climax of this narrative. While in the previous judges cycles Yahweh immediately responds to the cry

¹⁵ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145. Webb also points out that “the iterative verb-forms in vv. 3-5 capture stylistically the wave after wave of pillage and destruction.” Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145.

¹⁶ McCann, *Judges*, 63.

¹⁷ Block, *Judges*, 253. Webb points out that calling out to Yahweh is “an activity with ancient precedent in Israelite tradition: their fathers had cried to Yahweh in their desperate circumstances in Egypt and had been sent a savior in the form of Moses (Exod. 2.23-3.12)”; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145.

¹⁸ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145.

of Israel by raising up a deliverer (2:16; 3:9, 15; 4:4), this is slightly varied in the Gideon episode. Instead of a deliverer, Yahweh sends a prophet. While this is similar, in some ways, to the Deborah narrative,¹⁹ it ought to be observed that the prophet has not been sent to help deliver Israel, but instead to scold them. Webb points out that the role of this unnamed prophet “contrasts sharply” with that of Deborah.²⁰ Block suggests that this reminds the reader not only of the theological implications of Israel’s actions but “it also highlights the undeserved nature of Yahweh’s intervention on her behalf.”²¹ Since these events vary slightly from the previous cycles, the reader is not certain that Yahweh will intervene by raising up a deliverer.²² The tension caused by the uncertainty emphasizes this point at the climax of the narrative. Block says that “the narrator’s purpose in inserting this prophetic scolding at this point is to set the stage for the call of Gideon. If God raises up a deliverer for Israel, it is an entirely gracious act.”²³ Thus, while the narrator has the attention of the reader, Israel’s major weaknesses are addressed through the voice of Yahweh. The speech of this unnamed prophet makes clear to the reader that if Yahweh is to once again come to the rescue of Israel, it is totally undeserved.

5. Conflict Begins to Unravel – Judges 6:11-16.

The point in this story when the tension begins to unravel is when Yahweh calls Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites. It is important to note that while Yahweh was the one who delivered Israel into the hands of Midian, he is also the one who sets in motion the actions to bring them deliverance. Gideon responds to the call by pointing out

¹⁹ Block points out that “the unnamed prophet appears in this narrative at precisely the same point as Deborah had been introduced in 4:4, namely, immediately after the notice that Israel had cried out to Yahweh.” Block, *Judges*, 254. See also Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145.

²⁰ Webb, 145. See also McCann, *Judges*, 63.

²¹ Block, *Judges*, 254.

²² Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145; Block, *Judges*, 256.

²³ Block, *Judges*, 256.

his weaknesses and expressing much doubt. This is reminiscent of other call narratives in the Old Testament. O'Connell points out that the call of Gideon has the elements of the divine commissioning type-scene such as that of Moses in Exod 3:1-4:17.²⁴ It is also reminiscent of the call of prophets such as Isaiah (Isa 6) and Jeremiah (Jer 1).²⁵ When Moses is called to rescue the Israelites from Egypt he responds with similar questions and requests. The similarities between these stories immediately calls to mind the success that Moses had in delivering Israel from Egypt.²⁶ Yet still one ought not to forget too quickly that Israel in their disobedience did not immediately experience the land that was promised to them. If the reader draws a connection between Moses and Gideon then it should not be expected that even after Israel is freed from the oppression of Midian they will remember to worship Yahweh alone. Perhaps, instead, they will rebel as they did in Exod 32 when they crafted for themselves a golden calf in order that they might worship it. Here, as the scene is lengthened, stretching out the major points in the plot and

²⁴ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 148. O'Connell also points out that it also has elements of the divine recognition type-scene since he shows hospitality to an angel of Yahweh as in Gen 18:1-8; O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 149.

²⁵ Matthews, *Judges*, 83. Block says that, "Such narratives typically consist of (1) a confrontation with God and/or his messenger; (2) an introductory address of the person being called; (3) the divine commission; (4) the raising of objections by the person called; (5) divine words of reassurance; and (6) a sign authenticating the call experience"; Block, *Judges*, 257.

²⁶ Block says that "the narrator intentionally presents Gideon as sort of a second Moses." Block, *Judges*, 257. There are a number of remarkable parallels between the call of Moses (Exod. 3-4) and the call of Gideon. 1) Both men question whether or not they are capable. Gideon says, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house" (Judg 6:15). Moses says, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?... Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod 3:11; 4:10). 2) Both are reassured that Yahweh is with them (Judg. 6:12; Exod 3:12). 3) Both are reminded that Yahweh has sent them (Judg 6:14; Exod 3:13). 4) Both ask for multiple signs (Judg 6:20-21, 36-40; 7:10-14; Exod 4:1-9). If these similarities were not sufficient to bring the story of Moses and the Israelites to the mind of the reader there are two additional reminders. In 6:8 when the prophet visits Israel he reminds them: "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'It was I who brought you up from Egypt and brought you out from the house of slavery. I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians...'" (Judg 6:8-9). Then, Gideon, himself brings this up in his inquiry: "And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?'" (Judg 6:13). Ironically, while it is Moses who chastises the Israelites for crafting and worshipping an idol (Exod 32:30), near the end of the Gideon account it is he, himself, who will request materials from the Israelites in order to craft an ephod that becomes the object of Israel's worship (Judg 8:27). See Webb, *Book of Judges*, 148.

drawing more attention to it, the author is offering clues as to how the story might turn out. This account of the call of Gideon is “without parallel in the preceding episodes and serves to establish a distinct perspective on the protagonist at the outset of the narrative.”²⁷

At this point in the story the tension begins to release as the reader is made aware that Yahweh has not abandoned Israel despite their lack of faithfulness to him. While the prophet’s address left the reader unsure of the fate of Israel, this is more than compensated for by the direct correlation between Moses, who had so successfully delivered Israel, and Gideon who has this task before him. The call of Gideon paves the way for the tension between Israel and Midian to be resolved.

6. Illusory Conclusion – Judges 6:16.

At this point in the narrative as Gideon receives reassurance from Yahweh that he is with him and that he will defeat Midian, the tension of the occasioning incident begins to release. However, what is present here is an element of plot which Bar-Efrat refers to as an “illusory conclusion.”²⁸ This occurs when the narrative does not end with a rapid decline but instead encounters another conflict. After receiving this encouragement and reassurance from Yahweh the reader is prepared for Gideon to go immediately to battle against Midian. However, instead of taking action immediately Gideon begins to ask for a multitude of signs.

7. Complications – Judges 6:17-7:12.

This new series of complications begins with Gideon’s request of Yahweh, “Please, if I have found favour in your eyes then give to me a sign that it is you speaking

²⁷ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 148. Matthews agrees saying that “no other judge has similar tale”; Matthews, *Judges*, 83.

²⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 124.

to me.” From this point on Gideon goes through a complicated process of trials and testing and it appears as though he may not actually make it to battle. Perhaps no portion of the Gideon narrative is quite as extended as Gideon’s request for signs. After receiving signs and assurance during his immediate calling, Gideon remains unconvinced. Block points out that, “Despite being clear about the will of God, being empowered by the Spirit of God, and being confirmed as a divinely chosen leader by the overwhelming response of his countrymen to his own summons to battle, he uses every means available to try to get out of the mission to which he has been called.”²⁹ In this portion of the narrative not only does Gideon continuously ask for signs, for proof that Yahweh is sending him, but also Yahweh is intent on proving to Gideon and all of Israel that when they go out to battle they cannot possibly win without Yahweh. Thus, he diminishes Gideon’s army to a mere 300 men. Throughout this section the tension continues to increase.

8. Conflict Most Intense – Judges 7:12.

The conflict reaches its most intense point as the narrator describes the multitude of Midianites and Amalekites who Gideon and his small army will have to defeat.

9. Climax – Judges 7:13-14.

The climax of the narrative is the dream that Gideon overhears at the Midianite camp. There is, in the interpretation of the dream, a realization that Gideon will succeed in overtaking the Midianites and Amalekites. This is of particular importance since at this

²⁹ Block, *Judges*, 273.

climactic point the reader is reminded, once again, that it is God who will bring victory for Gideon.³⁰

10. Point of Unravelling – Judges 7:15.

The tension of this plot finally begins to release in 7:15 as Gideon realizes the certainty of the victory. At this point, Gideon bows down to worship Yahweh, returns to the camp and declares to his army, “Arise for Yahweh has given the camp of Midian into your hand.” Finally Gideon has accepted his call to deliver Israel from Midian and the narrator describes him as being ready to take action. From this point the tension will continue to unravel through to the end of the Gideon narrative.

11. Resolution – Judges 7:16-8:20.

While the resolution of the tension is now on its way, it does not arrive quickly. After Gideon gains the confidence to obey Yahweh’s calling the resolution of the plot proceeds to unfold in two stages.³¹ First, after Gideon’s army had been reduced so as to make it clear that their victory could occur only as a result of Yahweh going out before them, they went to battle against Midian (Judg 7:16). Their surprise attack against the camp of Midian is successful but, as clearly pointed out by the narrator, only by the power of Yahweh. Block points out that in 7:22a the narrator reminds the reader that “this battle does indeed belong to Yahweh”³² as he describes how Yahweh set the sword of each man against his colleague. Yahweh has taken action in this story in order to make sure that Gideon and his army are successful in delivering Israel. At this point, Gideon

³⁰ It is interesting to note that the repetition of Yahweh giving Midian into the hand of Gideon occurs through the voice of Yahweh (7:2, 7, 9); Midianite dream interpreter (7:14); and Gideon (7:15). The narrator has gone to great lengths to emphasize that it is Yahweh who has delivered Israel from the Midianites.

³¹ These two stages of resolution are the points outlined in Webb’s plot diagram above as the two major climaxes of the story of Gideon. Webb, *Book of Judges*, 147.

³² Block, *Judges*, 283.

calls for help and in response the Ephraimites pursue and overtake Oreb and Zeeb, leaders of Midian (7:25).

The next stage of resolution is Gideon's pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna (8:4-20). Along the way, Gideon requests from Succoth and Penuel some sustenance for his army. Block says that "by citing these two examples the narrator demonstrates that the reaction of Succoth was not an isolated event but reflective of the general Transjordanian disposition toward Gideon."³³ Without assistance from Succoth and Penuel Gideon and his troops proceed to pursue Zebah and Zalmunna, successfully overtaking them (8:12). Further extending the narrative, before Gideon goes ahead with the murder of these kings he first visits Succoth and Penuel to discipline them as he sees fit (8:13-17). After this diversion has been dealt with Gideon returns to the task at hand and the narrative is redirected toward Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian.

12. *Point of Resolution – Judges 8:21.*

The drawn out description of the previous events all lead to the final point of resolution – the death of Zebah and Zalmunna. Finally, after a detailed description of the call of Gideon (6:11-12), the testing (6:13-22, 36-40), tearing down the altar of Baal (6:23-35), reduction of Gideon's army (7:1-8), successful attack of the Midianite camp (7:9-24), defeat of Oreb and Zeeb (7:25), request and punishment of Penuel and Succoth (8:5-9, 14-17) Gideon is able to kill Zebah and Zalmunna, bringing completion to the defeat of Midian and resolution to the initial tension of the plot of the Gideon narrative. While other judge cycles provide a description of the defeat of foreign kings this one has a significant variance. Judges 3:10 reports that when Othniel went out to war, Yahweh gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Aram into his hand and his hand was strengthened

³³ Block, *Judges*, 290.

against Cushan-rishathaim. Similarly, 4:23 reports that God subdued Jabin, king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. While Yahweh has commissioned Gideon for this task at this point in the narrative there is shockingly little mention of Yahweh's involvement in the defeat of Zebah and Zalmunna.

The description of Gideon pursuing and killing these kings is particularly important in the Gideon account since he who personally defeats two foreign kings will be offered the position of king over Israel for this very reason. This interaction with the kings of Midian is of utmost importance for the events that will follow. Boda points out that "it is interesting that it is these Midianite kings who first broach the subject of kingship, flattering Gideon through their comparison with his brothers by alluding to royal status."³⁴ It is the kind of kingship represented by Zebah and Zalmunna that will influence Israel's understanding and implementation of kingship in the coming scenes.³⁵ It is of particular importance for this narrative that at this key point in the narrative, the point of resolution, the idea of kingship emerges – especially the kingship of Gideon.

13. *Outcome – Judges 8:28-32.*

Here at the end of the Gideon cycle, just as in the previous judge cycles (3:11, 30; 4:23-24, 5:31b), the defeat of the enemy leads to a time of peace (8:28). Therefore, it is evident that the occasioning incident (being given into the hand of Midian) which was brought on as an act of judgment for Israel's disobedience, has been completely resolved. However, in laying out the elements of this basic plot line some very significant events have been ignored. For this reason, this study will now identify a second plot line that

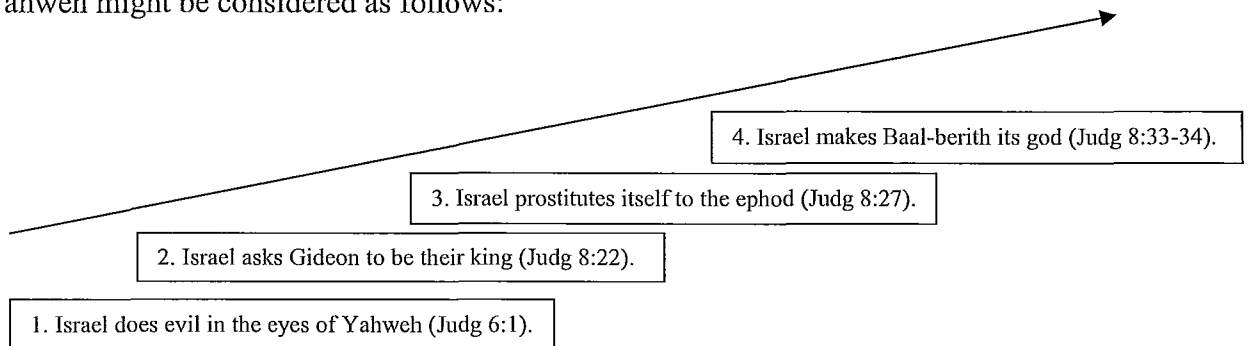
³⁴ Boda, "Judges," draft p. 20.

³⁵ Boda, "Judges," draft, p. 20.

runs throughout the Gideon narrative simultaneously with the basic plot as described above.

Plot Line 2

It is important to note that the plot of the Gideon narrative is much more complicated than that which is outlined above. While the text makes it clear that Israel experienced forty years of peace in the time of Gideon the reader cannot ignore the fact that the time of peace described was not a time of faithfulness to Yahweh (as indicated in 8:27). While the tension of Israel vs. Midian has been resolved the tension of Israel vs. Yahweh might be considered as follows:



This tension begins much earlier than the Gideon narrative and it has been increasing even throughout the previous judge cycles. Thus, when Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh, as recorded in 6:1 this is just a further complication of an ongoing tension between Israel and Yahweh. Various incidents in the Gideon narrative contribute to the intensification of this tension.

1. Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh – Judges 6:1.

This increase in tension between Israel and Yahweh is what moves Yahweh to give them into the hand of Midian, giving rise to the conflict as previously discussed.

This discussion will demonstrate that this tension between Israel and Yahweh is never resolved within this narrative. Webb points out that these words of 6:1a

stand in abrupt contrast to the high praises of Yahweh that have been sung in the previous chapter and confront us in a particularly striking way with the fickleness of the Israelites, who cannot for long resist the allurements of other gods no matter how much Yahweh exerts himself on their behalf... The problem of apostasy is explored much more fully in this episode than in previous ones.³⁶

Yahweh's immediate response of sending a prophet (the point indicated as the climax in plot 1 as discussed above) is an indication to the reader that this tension has been building.³⁷ While in the previous cycles Yahweh has acted immediately by raising up a judge-deliverer (3:9, 15; 4:4), here he sends a prophet to scold Israel reminding the reader of Yahweh's role as their deliverer, as well as Israel's disobedience.³⁸ Tension continues to increase as there is no indication of a response by Israel. What is most impacting about this situation is that Yahweh then proceeds from this point to raise up a deliverer. Thus, the tension between Yahweh and Israel does not affect Yahweh's compassion and grace toward them.

2. Israel asks Gideon to be their king – Judges 8:22.

Upon Gideon's defeat of the Midianite kings, Israel immediately requests that he would become their king. The motivation behind Israel's offer is what makes it most dangerous. "The men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule over us. Indeed you, also your sons, also your grandsons for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian'" (Judg 8:22).

Webb points out that, "The key word, *שׁוּב* (to save), has occurred six times previously in the narrative, all in the first movement (6.14, 15, 36, 37; 7.2, 7). In every case the same

³⁶ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 144.

³⁷ Webb suggests that "the appeal to Yahweh is part of the pattern established in the preceding episodes" but here "Yahweh's frustration begins to show for the first time"; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 144.

³⁸ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 145.

point is made either directly or implicitly: it is Yahweh, not Gideon or the Israelites themselves who saves Israel.”³⁹ This repetition brings greater impact to the contrast between this truth and the Israelites’ inability to recognize it.⁴⁰ Block says that “their offer is symptomatic of a nationwide problem.”⁴¹ Boda points out that “the one who was king in the ancient world was the one who led the nation successfully in battle.”⁴² Since Israel does not recognize Yahweh as their deliverer then they also do not recognize him as their king. Gideon responds negatively to the offer stating that he will not rule over them, nor his sons, nor his grandsons, but that Yahweh would rule over them (8:23). Gideon’s response seems to declare that human and divine rule are mutually exclusive. This further increases the tension between Israel and Yahweh, not only because they were, in a sense, attempting to replace him as their king, but also because the model for kingship they envisioned was a reflection of Canaanite influence.

3. *Israel prostitutes itself to the ephod – Judges 8:27.*

After Gideon refuses the offer of kingship in Judg 8:23 he proceeds to craft an ephod.⁴³ Webb suggests that this is “a logical sequel to his assertion that Yahweh shall rule Israel. If Yahweh is to rule he must be inquired of, and it is apparently with the

³⁹ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 152. See also Block, *Judges*, 298.

⁴⁰ Webb says that, “If the rationale of the offer is that he who saves is entitled to rule, that entitlement belongs to Yahweh, not Gideon”; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 152.

⁴¹ Block, *Judges*, 297.

⁴² Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 21.

⁴³ Block says that, “Elsewhere in the Old Testament ‘ephod’ denotes the priest’s special breast piece. Because this object was ‘placed’ in Gideon’s city and became an object of pagan worship, this meaning seems unlikely here. The solution may be suggested by the Akkadian cognate *epattu*, which, in several old Assyrian texts apparently refers to the costly garments worn by high officials and/or draped over images of the gods. The present usage suggests a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole. Accordingly, the word ‘ephod’ here represents not only the garment that clothed a sacred image but also the image over which the garment was draped and which became the object of worship for the Israelites. The narrator does not reveal the nature of the image, but it seems most likely that he has reconstructed the shrine to Baal he earlier had torn down at Yahweh’s command (6:25-32)”; Block, *Judges*, 300. Gray points out that, “In congruity with the root meaning of **ephod**, we read it as the covering for the symbol of the divine presence... and as such it may have represented the dedication of spoils in the sanctuary of Yahweh (the Lord is Peace), established at **Ophrah** by Gideon (6:24)”; Gray, *Judges*, 299.

intention of facilitating such inquiry that Gideon makes an ephod and puts it in Ophrah where Yahweh had appeared to him and an altar to Yahweh now stood.”⁴⁴ Matthews does not view Gideon’s crafting of the ephod as being entirely innocent. He says that, “It may be that the failure of the judges to retain their loyalties to God or to focus their energies entirely to serving God’s plan for the people is simply a reflection of the covenantal failures of the people as a whole during this period.”⁴⁵ Whether or not Gideon had noble intentions in crafting the ephod, Israel still made it an object of worship.⁴⁶ It is ironic that the one who tore down idols at the beginning of his career (6:25-32), is now crafting one at the end of his career.⁴⁷ The tragedy in this is that not only has Israel failed to recognize that Yahweh is the one who goes before them into battle, but also they have forgotten that he is the only one to be worshipped.

4. *Israel makes Baal-berith its god and they do not remember Yahweh – Judges 8:33-34.*

It has already been observed that Israel’s idea of kingship is a reflection of their surrounding Canaanite influence. Then, here in 8:33 the reader becomes more aware of this Canaanization of Israel. Block points out that “in making El/Baal-Berith their god Israel went beyond mere harlotry with the local Baals. They have displaced Yahweh, their own covenant God, with this ‘Baal of the Covenant,’ and reversed the order of

⁴⁴ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 152-153; Amit, *Art of Editing*, 98.

⁴⁵ Matthews, *Judges*, 98. Niditch, on the other hand, skirts this issue, defending Gideon, pointing out that, “After the brief comment concerning the ephod (v. 27), the positive message and tone about Gideon’s success as a leader quickly resumes”; Niditch, *Judges*, 106.

⁴⁶ McCann states that, “Gideon’s leadership has resulted in idolatry, the very thing that Gideon had begun his career by combating when he tore down the altar of Baal”; McCann, *Judges*, 70. See also Block who points out that, “For the first time idolatry is officially sponsored by a leader of the nation. Israel need not wait for an officially anointed king to steepen the slope of their spiritual declension. Gideon, as representative and leader of the people, will do what is right in his own eyes and invite the people to follow him”; Block, *Judges*, 301.

⁴⁷ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 21.

divine human relations.”⁴⁸ Boda comments that, “Forgetting all that Yahweh has done for them, they worship a god named Baal-Berith in 8:33; 9:4 and El-Berith in 9:46, meaning Baal (lord) of the Covenant and God of the Covenant respectively, names which suggest that they have transferred the covenant made with Yahweh to the Canaanite pantheon of Baal and El.”⁴⁹ Here, as this tension rises there is a progressive move towards the explicit Canaanization of the Israelites. First they attempted to set up a monarchy that resembles that of the Canaanites and then they attempted to set for themselves a Canaanite god.

Plot Conclusions

What is most striking about tracking this separate tension in the plot is that even though the tension between Israel and Yahweh is never resolved here, still, as outlined in plot 1, Yahweh sends a deliverer to rescue them in their time of distress. Strategically, the author first identifies Israel’s desire to replace Yahweh as their warrior-king. Then, in the next section the author identifies Israel’s desire to replace Yahweh as an object of worship. And finally, Israel makes Baal-berith their God, completely “forgetting” (or merely disregarding) all that Yahweh has done for Israel in rescuing them from their enemies. This demonstrates a progressive move away from Yahweh and toward Canaanite practices. Plot 1 emphasizes the faithfulness of Yahweh and this is exaggerated by plot 2 which draws attention to the infidelity of Israel. This juxtaposition emphasizes Yahweh’s devotion to and compassion for Israel.

Characterization

The author of the book of Judges has offered much in the way of characterization. This provides helpful insight into the purpose and message of Judges through the

⁴⁸ Block, *Judges*, 306.

⁴⁹ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 23.

description, actions and dialogue of various characters. There is much offered by way of characterization for Gideon, the protagonist of this narrative. Other characters (such as Gideon's army and the young men described throughout) who do not appear to play a main role in the narrative also prove to be helpful in providing insight into the character of Gideon and the events of the narrative.

Gideon/Jerubbaal

Throughout Old Testament narrative the names of characters often offer insight into an element of the character's personality, position, relationship to other characters, or future actions. This is particularly true in the book of Judges and more specifically in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. The reader's attention is especially drawn to this in the characterization of Gideon. Gideon means "hacker"⁵⁰ or "to cut down."⁵¹ This name plays a role early in Gideon's career as Yahweh calls him to tear down the Baal and Asherah of his father (6:27). This simple connection is an indication to the reader that the characters' names will continue to play a significant role as the narrative unfolds.

Interestingly, it is in living up to his first name that Gideon received his second name.

After he tore down the Baal and Asherah the men of Ophrah were furious and wanted to kill him. In Gideon's defence, his father pointed out that if Baal is god then he could contend for himself and immediately changed Gideon's name to Jerubbaal meaning, "let Baal contend" (6:30-31).⁵² There is some scholarly debate surrounding the meaning of

⁵⁰ Block notes that this is "a function he will soon be called upon to fulfill as he destroys the altar of Baal on his father's property (vv. 25-27)"; Block, *Judges*, 257-258.

⁵¹ McCann states that the name "is derived from a verb that is used elsewhere to describe the activity of hacking down idolatrous images or shrines (see 'hew[ed] down' in Deut. 7:5; 12:3; 2 Chr. 14:3; 31:1; and 'broke down' in 2 Chr. 34:4, 7). Although the Hebrew verb is not used in this sense within the story of Gideon or anywhere else in the book of Judges, it apparently lies behind the name 'Gideon' in order to recall and celebrate Gideon's destruction of the altar of Baal (6:25-32)"; McCann, *Judges*, 61.

⁵² Block points out that, "the ambiguity of the name is heightened by a comparison of the immediate event with the long-range character of Gideon's rule. Gideon's action here appears to have exposed the

this name and the purpose it plays in the narrative. Matthews suggests this new name is ironic “since Gideon publicly ‘contended’ not with Baal but with Yahweh’s angel.”⁵³ He also points out that Gideon’s new name is a constant reminder that Baal is powerless to defend himself even against the timid and fearful Gideon.⁵⁴

Polzin explains that Gideon/Jerubbaal’s double name suggests a ‘split characterization.’ The name Gideon is used for the portions of the narrative that shed a more positive light on Gideon, while ‘Jerubbaal’ appears in the more negative points in his life. He says that the ‘baal’ component in the latter would enforce that idea.⁵⁵ Polzin also argues that the split characterization is a reflection of his divided loyalties. This is not surprising since Israel’s divided loyalties are clear throughout the entire book of Judges.⁵⁶ This divided loyalty in Gideon is a reflection of that which is an issue for all of Israel. Regarding this double name Soggin points out that “dual names are particularly characteristic of *kings*.”⁵⁷ As the Gideon narrative unfolds, this idea will become increasingly more important.

It is curious that even after Gideon’s name change in 6:29 he is only referred to as Jerubbaal four times while he is referred to as Gideon twenty-eight times. Thus the reader ought to question the purpose of the name change. It is not until chapter 9 that the name Jerubbaal occurs consistently. Referring to Gideon’s new name Bludorn says, “With the

impotence of Baal irrefutably. But this account should be read in light of 8:27, according to which Gideon himself revives and expands the influence of the Baal cult at Ophrah, and 8:33, which seems to have the Israelites entering into some sort of covenant with Baal. Did Baal contend for himself? Apparently yes. In the end he is vindicated. He has risen again in Israel, which makes the coming deliverance that Yahweh provides all the more remarkable. Despite the nation’s fundamental Canaanization, God still acts on their behalf”; Block, *Judges*, 271. For a detailed description of the name, “Jerubbaal,” see Bludorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 101-104.

⁵³ Matthews, *Judges*, 87. See also Klein, *Triumph*, 54-55.

⁵⁴ Matthews, *Judges*, 87.

⁵⁵ Polzin, *Moses*, 169.

⁵⁶ Polzin, *Moses*, 169.

⁵⁷ Matthews, *Judges*, 83; Soggin, *Judges*, 14.

contrast between its rendering ‘Baal is great’ and paronomastic meaning ‘Baal-fighter’, this name describes the contrast between Baal as god and Gideon or YHWH as Baal-fighter.”⁵⁸ The frequent presence of the name Jerubbaal in Judg 9 is especially fitting since the word ‘*baal*’ occurs very frequently in many different ways. This, in contrast with the complete absence of the divine name is a reflection of Israel’s focus of worship. Yahweh’s absence is starkly contrasted with a frequent reminder of the presence of Baal.⁵⁹

Gideon, the hero of Judg 6-8 is an important and complex character. Amit suggests that, “The characterization of Gideon shows two distinct personalities, with the difference based on God’s perceived presence or distance.”⁶⁰ Consider the following three phases of the Gideon account, the ways in which Gideon’s character is transformed and how, through this characterization, the ideology and message of the author are communicated.

Gideon: The Youngest Son of the Weakest Tribe

It is often the case that a character’s first words can provide insight into their future actions.⁶¹ Gideon’s first words in 6:13 immediately demonstrate doubt. He questions the messenger of Yahweh saying, “Excuse me lord, but if Yahweh is there with us then why has all this found us? And where are all the wonders which our fathers recounted to us saying, ‘Did not Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?’ But now Yahweh has forsaken us and he has given us into the hand of Midian.”⁶² What this tells the reader is

⁵⁸ Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 202.

⁵⁹ Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 201. For more on this see chapter four of this study.

⁶⁰ Amit, *Reading*, 86.

⁶¹ Alter, *Art*, 117.

⁶² Block describes Gideon’s interaction with the angel of Yahweh as “cheeky and sarcastic”; Block, *Judges*, 260.

not only that Gideon is a man of doubt and fear but also that he was unaware of the fact that it was Israel's idolatry and unfaithfulness that brought them to their current unbearable circumstances. While he has heard stories about the wonders performed by Yahweh and his acts of deliverance the reader assumes that Gideon has never witnessed the work of Yahweh with his own eyes. It should also be noted that while Gideon's words present him as a coward, the angel of Yahweh addresses him as a 'mighty warrior' (6:12). These conflicting descriptions demand the reader's attention and offer an indication that perhaps there is more complexity to the character of Gideon than the reader is immediately presented with. Also, because this description of Gideon as a "mighty warrior" is ultimately from Yahweh, himself, the reader ought to consider it a reliable description. While this title does not seem to be appropriate for Gideon, at this point in the narrative the reader ought to read in anticipation of how this will become a reality later in the career of Gideon.

The next time Gideon speaks (6:15) it is again with a question. He says, "Excuse me lord, but how will I save Israel? Behold my tribe is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the smallest in my father's house." Just as Gideon's first words, these are laced with doubt and fear. Gideon's description of himself as the youngest of the weakest tribe (6:15) is reminiscent of the motif of the youngest son as portrayed throughout the OT.⁶³ This is also appropriate here in the book of Judges since in the previous judge cycles Yahweh has chosen unlikely deliverers.⁶⁴ This is also interesting since Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, will hold great significance in the narrative which follows.

⁶³ As is the case with Abel, Jacob, Joseph, David, etc. See Fox, "Stalking," 46-47.

⁶⁴ Ehud, the left-handed man (Judg 3:15-30), Deborah, a woman (Judg 4-5), and now Gideon, the youngest from the weakest tribe.

Following this, Gideon asks for a series of signs in order that he can be sure that he is truly being called by Yahweh. Following the first sign (6:21) Gideon realized that he had been conversing with the angel of Yahweh and his response was one of fear. This is certain since Yahweh then commands him, “do not fear” (8:23). Yet despite this command and the clear sign that Yahweh had given Gideon to reassure him that the mission he was on is commissioned by Yahweh, he still acts in fear. “Then Gideon took ten men from his servants and did just as Yahweh had spoken to him. But it was because he was too afraid of his father and the men of the city to do it in the day, he did it in the night” (6:27). Gideon’s actions continue to be ruled by fear.⁶⁵ This character trait will also be identified in Gideon’s son, Jether, later in the narrative. Gideon’s fear and doubt are again made clear in his hesitancy to obey Yahweh even after he had revealed himself to Gideon through signs and through protecting him after he carried out Yahweh’s first command. Before he is willing to go out against the Midianites he insists on two more signs from Yahweh (6:36-40). Clearly throughout this first phase in the depiction of Gideon’s life he is presented as one who is ruled by fear and doubt.

However, Berlin points out that, “The Bible’s main characters, and also many secondary characters, are not static. Changes in their character are shown by changes in their reactions. Thus the later words and deeds of a character may contrast with his earlier words and deeds.”⁶⁶ While fear and hesitation dominated the beginning of the story of Gideon, this begins to change in chapter 7 and as the narrative progresses the reader will notice significant changes in the character of Gideon in both his words and deeds. Block

⁶⁵ Amit, *Reading*, 86.

⁶⁶ Berlin, *Poetics*, 40.

points out that in chapters 6-7 Gideon undergoes a transformation from a timid man to a “fearless agent of God, willing to take on the enemy against all odds.”⁶⁷

Gideon: Mighty Warrior

Throughout the first half of chapter 7 Gideon does not speak at all. He simply carries out the commands that Yahweh asks of him. His next words are significantly different from the character that the reader has become acquainted with in chapter 6. Here, his words are filled with confidence as he declares to the Israelite camp, “Arise for Yahweh has given the camp of Midian into your hand” (7:15). This confidence grows as Gideon begins to act as a leader for Israel, commanding them to do as he does and also claiming a portion of the victory for himself (7:17-18).⁶⁸

The narrative of Judg 8 is well focused on Gideon, following his actions and conversations closely, as though the narrator were standing beside Gideon in the midst of the action watching his every move and hearing his every word. This detailed account of Gideon’s actions is an indication to the reader that the author considers his actions to be of particular importance. Amit points out that this second part of the Gideon episode shows a radical change in Gideon’s personality. “Suddenly he is a charismatic leader who uses diplomatic tactics in dealing with the men of Ephraim” (8:2).⁶⁹

There are a few discrepancies between narration and dialogue near the beginning of Judg 8 which may provide insight into Gideon’s character. In v. 4 the voice of the narrator describes the action by explaining that Gideon *as well as* the men who were with

⁶⁷ Block, *Judges*, 287.

⁶⁸ “When I and all who are with me blast on the trumpet you also blast on the trumpets, surrounding all the camp, and say, ‘For Yahweh and for Gideon’” (7:18).

⁶⁹ Amit, *Reading*, 86. See also Block who says that Gideon’s response in vv. 2-3 “shows him at his diplomatic best”; Block, *Judges*, 285.

him were “weary and pursuing” (הוּ וּשְׁלֹשׁ-מֵאוֹת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֹתוֹ עֵיפִים וְרֹדְפִים).⁷⁰ In the very next verse as Gideon pleads with the men of Succoth for some sustenance for his army he explains to them that his army is weary and *he* is pursuing (וְעֵיפִים הֵם וְאֹנְכִי רֹדֵף; 8:5). This contrast offers interesting insight into the character of Gideon. While the narrator has offered the plain facts which were that all the men involved were weary from their pursuit, Gideon attempts to describe the situation in a way that is much more pompous. He does not admit his own weakness but rather focuses on his great pursuit as though he were doing it without assistance. When the text offers this kind of tension between the words of the narrator and those of a character the reader ought to consider the narrator the most reliable.

It is interesting to note that this entire exchange between Gideon and the leaders of Succoth is recorded. Immediately following, the narrator summarizes a similar interaction between Gideon and the men of Penuel without offering a record of the dialogue (8:8). This draws attention away from this scene and onto what will come next. While the majority of the dialogue has been summarized by the narrator, Gideon’s response to them is recorded. This again slows down the narrative and draws attention to

⁷⁰ The 300 men who accompany Gideon and are mentioned in 8:4 are significant mostly because of the repeated reference to them previously in the Gideon narrative. The narrator repeatedly reminds the reader of the size of Gideon’s army. This is important since in chapter 7 Gideon was prepared to fight against the Midianites with an army of thirty-two thousand men but Yahweh reduced his army to 300 in order to prove that their victory was not accomplished by human strength but by the power of God. The size of Gideon’s army is mentioned six times in chapter 7 (vv. 6, 7, 8a, 8b, 16, 22) in order to draw attention to this very small army. To emphasize this further the narrator describes the Midianite camp as “a multitude of locusts and their camels were without number, as abundant as the sand on the seashore” (7:12). When the 300 men with Gideon are mentioned in 8:4 the reader can be assured that their weariness is especially legitimate since they had just taken on the Midianite army, killing 120,000 of them. The strength and perseverance with which Yahweh provided Gideon’s 300 men is especially astounding since the reader is to understand that the 300 men with whom Gideon began the battle are still with him as they are in pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna.

what it is that Gideon is saying. He assures him that when he returns he will tear down the tower (8:9). It is clear that the narrator has used this transition from summary to dialogue in order to draw attention to the content of Gideon's short speech.

The achievements of Gideon are made evident through a series of third masculine singular verbs. *Gideon* went up to Karkor and smote (3ms) the camp (v. 11). When Zebah and Zalmunna fled he pursued (3ms) them and he captured (3ms) them (v. 12). Also Gideon routed (with semantic connotations of terrifying⁷¹) the whole army (v. 12). It is interesting with this last action that the typical word order changes, fronting the object and therefore placing emphasis upon it: וְכָל-הַמִּחָנָה הִחָרִיד. ⁷² This word order places emphasis on the fact that it was the *whole army* on which Gideon was having this effect.⁷³ At this point in the story, through the direct description of events being offered by the narrator, the reader is being persuaded that Gideon has become a man of strength and influence.

As the narrative proceeds, this same pattern of 3ms verbs, describing the actions of Gideon continues. Gideon returned (3ms) from battle (v. 12), he captured (3ms) a boy (v. 13), he came (3ms) to the men of Succoth (v. 15), he took (3ms) the elders of the city and he disciplined (3ms) them. He tore down (3ms) the tower of Penuel and he killed (3ms) the men of the city. Gideon's actions against Succoth and Penuel in 8:14-17 are a reflection of the change that has occurred in his character. Block says that here

⁷¹ BDB, 353.

⁷² Arnold and Choi, *Syntax*, 169.

⁷³ This is particularly interesting in light of what is to come with Abimelech in chapter 9. Here, while the reader is aware that Gideon has an army of 300 with him, the actions are attributed to one man. The same may be said of Abimelech who the reader is told has hired 70 worthless and reckless men but then whose actions are described as one man killing his 69 brothers upon one stone.

“Gideon/Jerubbaal ‘contends’ and ‘hacks’ his own people.”⁷⁴ He also points out that, “Gideon’s behaviour could be justified if Penuel were a Canaanite city, but these were fellow Israelites! His character has been transformed again – he acted like a general out of control, no longer bound by rules of civility, let alone national loyalty.”⁷⁵ Thus the development of Gideon’s character is apparent once again. He who started out as fearful and timid, gained confidence to carry out the battle for which Yahweh called and equipped him. Then, with a taste of power and success, Gideon begins to lose control and act out of his own selfish ambition rather than in obedience to Yahweh.

In v. 20 after questioning Zebah and Zalmunna Gideon commands his son, who is only a boy, to kill them. Gideon is then challenged by Zebah and Zalmunna who, most likely, are attempting to avoid the shame of being slaughtered by a boy. Their challenge to him to rise up and kill them himself “for as the man, so is his strength” is most ironic considering the series of events, leading up to this point, that demonstrate the strength of Gideon. The challenge is also most appropriate since, in chapter 6 when Gideon is being called he is addressed as a “warrior of strength” (6:12) by the angel of Yahweh and he is commanded by Yahweh to “go in this your strength” (6:14). It is ironic that these kings of Midian, having been captured by Gideon, are giving him instruction through these two imperatives, “Arise! Kill!” Gideon then carries out their commands.

The character traits that Gideon demonstrates in this section of the narrative do not present him in a positive light. There seems to have been a move away from following the commands of Yahweh to now acting out of his own will. McCann points out that, especially in regard to Gideon’s treatment of the men of Penuel, “there is

⁷⁴ Block, *Judges*, 287. See also Klein, *Triumph*, 62.

⁷⁵ Block, *Judges*, 293.

absolutely no indication that this behaviour is divinely directed. Rather, it has every appearance of selfishly motivated personal revenge.”⁷⁶ His own personal vendetta also becomes apparent as he is about to kill Zebah and Zalmunna and the reader becomes aware that they have killed his brothers.⁷⁷ McCann describes Gideon’s actions from 8:4-21 as “arrogant, ruthlessly self-serving, and brutally vindictive... It appears that Gideon has not moved from fear to faith, but rather from fear to self-assertion.”⁷⁸ Gideon’s negative characterization in this portion of the narrative does not leave the reader with high expectations for the remainder of his time as judge. Thus, Gideon’s seemingly noble response to Israel’s offer of kingship (8:22-23) as discussed below catches the reader off guard.

Gideon: Almost a King

It is interesting that at this point in the narrative, when Gideon’s character has transitioned from a fearful, yet obedient, warrior of Yahweh to a self-serving and violent reprobate Israel asks him to become their king (8:22). Gideon’s response to the offer of kingship is equally as intriguing as the offer itself. While the transformation that the reader has seen in Gideon up to this point does not appear to be completely positive, this point in the narrative offers a glimpse of real strength and wisdom in Gideon. In v. 23 Gideon immediately responds to the Israelites’ offer to rule over them by saying, “Indeed

⁷⁶ McCann, *Judges*, 69.

⁷⁷ Yet still McCann points out that Gideon’s killing of Zebah and Zalmunna is more acceptable since he had a responsibility to annihilate the enemy; McCann, *Judges*, 69. Also, Gideon’s determination to avenge his brothers is admirable especially when compared with Abimelech who will, himself, kill his seventy brothers in order to enable himself to be made king (9:5).

⁷⁸ McCann, *Judges*, 69.

I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you. Yahweh will rule over you”
(8:23).⁷⁹

Whether or not Israel’s offer of rule was infused with the knowledge that the offer being made was illegitimate, Gideon’s response makes it clear. This statement, in and of itself, carries clear anti-monarchic connotations, implying that for Israel divine and human kingship are mutually exclusive. He replies using the same verb (משל) that was used by the men of Israel in their offer, perhaps with the purpose of emphasizing the fact that no matter what they choose to call it, that kind of rule belongs to Yahweh, the one who went before them in battle and delivered Midian into their hands. Block points out that, “Choosing his words carefully and casting his answer as a solemn triple assertion, [Gideon] categorically rejected the opportunity to be the founder of the first dynasty in Israel. His rationale is theologically correct and appears to be perfectly noble.”⁸⁰

However, Gideon has already been acting suspiciously like a king even before this offer.

Block points out that

Since Gideon launched his pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna in 8:4, his behavior has followed the typical pattern of oriental kings: (1) he treated his subjects/countrymen ruthlessly (vv. 5-9, 13-17); (2) his actions were driven by a personal agenda rather than theological or national ideals; (3) he reacted to the death of his brothers as if they were royal assassinations requiring blood vengeance; (4) he made ridiculous demands on his people (v. 20); (5) he claimed for himself the symbols of royalty taken from the enemy.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Amit suggests that, “This passage helps the reader to organize all the details that have been given thus far under one general heading: the kingdom of God”; Amit, *Art of Editing*, 98. Amit ultimately argues that because of the problems that accompany this time with Yahweh as king, this is not the best type of rule for Israel. Thus, while human monarchy is not ideal and will not work out for Israel as one would hope, it is still a better option than the type of rule that is demonstrated in the pre-monarchic period. The problem with this view is that it does not acknowledge the fact that there is an even better option for Israel. If they would really acknowledge Yahweh as their king and not worship the gods of the surrounding nations then they would have the opportunity to experience the reign of Yahweh as it was intended. The pre-monarchic period was not a demonstration of the Kingdom of Yahweh because the people were completely lacking loyalty to their King.

⁸⁰ Block, *Judges*, 298.

⁸¹ Block, *Judges*, 299.

The problem, then, with Gideon's verbal response is that it does not coincide with his preceding or subsequent actions. While he verbally refuses the offer, he continues to act in a kingly way.

Some of the suspiciously kingly actions performed by Gideon following his verbal refusal of the offer of the kingship are as follows.⁸² Gideon's first recorded act following his refusal of the offer is to ask for a portion of the plunder that the Israelites had acquired (8:24). The description of these events is drawn out by the narrator as he provides the dialogue of the request and response and then proceeds to describe their actions (8:24-25). Additionally, there is a detailed description of the amount of plunder that is offered to Gideon (8:26).⁸³ Clearly, the author is intentionally drawing attention to this request since no detailed description of this sort has occurred previously in this chapter. The description is important not only because the request for a portion of the plunder is contradictory to the rejection of kingship which precedes it but also because of what will eventually become of these treasures.⁸⁴ O'Connell points out the irony in Gideon rebuilding an object of worship in Ophrah, the same city in which he tore down idols as a prerequisite to delivering Israel.⁸⁵

Then, in 8:30 the narrator offers a description of Gideon's actions after his verbal refusal of the kingship. The narrator explains that Gideon has seventy sons because he

⁸² Scholars typically agree on the nature of Gideon's post-refusal actions. See Matthews, *Judges*, 97; Block, *Judges*, 299.

⁸³ Block says that "the amount of gold Gideon received takes on the character of a royal treasure. Seventeen hundred shekels of gold amounts to 43 pounds. This is indeed a treasure fit for a king!"; Block, *Judges*, 299-300.

⁸⁴ See discussion above on Gideon's ephod.

⁸⁵ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 154.

has many wives as well as a concubine.⁸⁶ While acquiring many wives was forbidden in the kingship laws laid out in Deut 17, it would have been typical for the foreign kings to behave in this manner.⁸⁷ Gideon, therefore, acting as a king according to the example that had been demonstrated to him by the surrounding nations, acquires many wives and has many sons. Finally, were Gideon's previous actions not suspicious enough, he names his son "Abimelech" (אַבִּימֶלֶךְ) meaning "my father is king."⁸⁸

The tension between Gideon's verbal response and his actions contributes to the ambiguity surrounding the theme of kingship in the book of Judges. Gideon says that he cannot be their king but then he proceeds to act like a king so the reader is left with the question of which one of these responses is appropriate. If it is not appropriate for Gideon to act as king then his character is seriously being called into question in this section. Oestle points out that the contrast between Gideon's verbal response and the narrator's description of his actions is especially interesting when one considers the different voices by which the story is being told. He notes that the narrator never explicitly affirms Gideon's negative response to the offer but proceeds to explain (in his own voice – that

⁸⁶ O'Connell suggests that the fact that Gideon has a concubine stems from his Baalist sympathies. "His sexual relations with a Canaanite and his example of ruthlessness foreshadow... the fratricidal rivalry among his would-be heirs (8:30, 35; 9:1-22)"; O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 153.

⁸⁷ Block, *Judges*, 303.

⁸⁸ See Block, *Judges*, 303-304 for possible interpretations of this name. Webb says that Abimelech's name is "an ironic comment on the contradiction between Gideon's public pronouncements and private practice. It is also a portent; for, as the ensuing narrative clearly indicates, Gideon did become a dynast, in fact if not in name, and the succession was decided in the bloody intrigues which attended Abimelech's rise to power, as one who had far fewer scruples about the acquisition and exercise of power than his father had had"; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 154. Matthews suggests that "Perhaps this is Gideon's way of signalling that he accepted his leadership role and expected it to be passed on to his heir. To be more consistent with regard to his character, however, Gideon more likely chose this name as an indicator that Yahweh, 'the God-father,' is the patron of this child"; Matthews, *Judges*, 99. Wong points out that "in the majority of cases in Hebrew Scripture, the naming of a son is by the mother and not the father... In light of all this, it is significant that Judg. 8:31 clearly states that it was Gideon who gave Abimelech his name even though the mother, Gideon's concubine, is also mentioned within the verse. Can it be then, that the narrator is specifically using this incident to hint at Gideon's personal ambition?"; Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 170-171.

is, the most reliable voice in the narrative) that Gideon proceeded to live his life as though he were king over Israel.⁸⁹ This is an interesting perspective. However, it is also possible that the narrator makes sure to quote Gideon's verbal response and then contrast that with his actions in order to make a statement either about Gideon's character, or about the office of human kingship, in general.⁹⁰

While Gideon's verbal response to the offer of kingship is appropriate and admirable, his subsequent actions are not. This is especially true since Gideon takes the plunder and crafts it into an ephod, leading Israel astray and back into idolatry (8:27). While it seems clear that this is not an admirable act, Amit defends Gideon in this circumstance, stating that,

Gideon's words are accompanied by a concrete, practical step: the making of an ephod from the spoils of war. The booty ephod made following the declaration 'the Lord will rule over you' symbolized the factor of deliverance. Thus, the people's demand for fixed rule was answered by Gideon by creating a concrete and constantly available symbol of God's deliverance and providential presence, that is, His rule.⁹¹

While this is an interesting perspective, the reader must take seriously the fact that Gideon begins to stray from the pattern of the other judges. There are no judges prior to this who act in such a way that Israel is led astray. Gideon's kingly act of asking for a portion of their plunder ultimately leads Israel back into acts of idolatry. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that at the beginning of the Gideon narrative, in Judg 6, one of his first significant acts is tearing down the Baal and Asherah belonging to

⁸⁹ Oeste, "Legitimacy," 173.

⁹⁰ On this issue, Oeste comes to the conclusion that, "The narrative has counter-balanced Gideon's rejection of kingship with his regal pretensions, so that it is not at all clear that the narrative wishes to completely eschew all forms of human kingship"; Oeste, "Legitimacy," 92.

⁹¹ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 97. See also discussion of Gideon's ephod above.

his father. Now, rather than tearing down an illegitimate object of worship he is crafting one, going astray and taking the Israelites along with him.

After considering the development of the character of Gideon in Judg 6-8 the reader is not left with a great impression. Gideon is, at first, a coward yet as he becomes more brave and confident he also becomes violent and prone to accepting praise for accomplishments that are not his own. Nevertheless, Gideon was called by Yahweh and he obeyed Yahweh in order to deliver Israel from the Midianites. At the end of Gideon's life the reader is left with uncertainty as to whether or not Gideon was a good leader for Israel. While the narrative reports so many negative actions in the final verse of the chapter the narrator offers an overall evaluation of Gideon stating that Israel did not "show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal Gideon according to all the good that he did for Israel" (8:35). If the narrator is considered to be reliable then the reader has to reconcile this commentary on the life of Gideon with his actions as they have been recorded. Not only so, but the only time that the character of Gideon is discussed in Judg 9 is during Jotham's speech. Jotham describes Gideon as one who fought for Israel, risking his life in order to deliver them from Midian (9:17). This second positive evaluation of Gideon enforces the idea that Gideon was, at the very least, an important figure for Israel.

The ambiguity concerning Gideon's character should not be a surprise to the reader since the Gideon-Abimelech narrative is fraught with ambiguity. What is the author attempting to communicate through this ambiguity? While the narrator's description of Gideon's actions invokes negative images, perhaps, rather than considering this an evaluation of Gideon's character, the reader ought to consider it a reflection of what happens as a human rises in power, especially toward the office of kingship. Then,

the evaluative comments concerning the good that Gideon did for Israel are a reflection of just that.⁹² With a close examination of Gideon's actions, there is one act that stands out as exceptional and in alignment with the ideology of the narrator. While Gideon does act *like* a king, he clearly, verbally admits that Yahweh is their king (8:23). After this refusal he proceeds to act like a king because he recognizes that the people are in need of leadership – a leadership to which Yahweh had actually called Gideon. While he clearly makes mistakes and, at times, demonstrates poor judgment, there are a couple of areas in which he actually did well. First, he obeyed (albeit hesitantly) when Yahweh called him to deliver Israel. Also, under Yahweh he led the Israelites to victory against Midian, and in a very tempting situation in which he was offered the position of the very first Israelite king he spoke up, declaring to the Israelites that Yahweh was their king. As Gideon fulfilled his calling as judge-deliverer for Israel Yahweh used him to defeat Midian and deliver Israel. As in the other judge cycles Israel experienced forty years of peace. This is, most certainly, the good that the narrator refers to in the evaluative statement at the end of Judg 8.

Because of this, it appears that the author's concern is not to make a judgment about Gideon but instead to make a judgment about the role that Israel had requested him to fill. Since the negative actions of Gideon seem to be a reflection of the way a

⁹² Some scholars are sceptical about the narrator's comment on the good that Gideon had done for Israel. McCann, for example treats the comment as a sort of sarcastic, ironic statement; McCann, *Judges*, 71. Block states that here "the narrator tries to salvage something of Gideon. After all, he was called by God, and he was indeed the deliverer of Israel"; Block, *Judges*, 306. Others, however, recognize that the narrator is explicitly referring to some good that Gideon has done. Niditch points out that this verse "emphasizes the contrast between Gideon's good works and the people's lack of loyalty, setting the scene for the story of Abimelech"; Niditch, *Judges*, 106. Bluedorn comments that, "with this evaluation of Gideon's accomplishment the narrator draws a rather positive picture of Gideon despite these negative records... Hence it seems once more that the narrator deliberately refers to Gideon as a man of good deeds and perhaps even as a good leader at the outset of the Abimelech narrative to establish a contrast to Abimelech's bad leadership and his and the Baalists' evil deeds as recorded in that narrative"; Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 201.

Canaanite king may act, it is possible that the judgment being made is not only about Gideon but, perhaps even more, about his specifically kingly actions. This, in turn, is a greater judgment on Israel whose request of Gideon is a reflection of their conformity to surrounding nations. Since Gideon's "kingly" actions led Israel into idolatry even before his death this may be an indication to the reader that when one openly enters into the position of king (particularly in the style with which Israel is familiar with) this will not have a positive outcome for Israel. Thus, the sense of judgment against Gideon that the reader develops throughout this narrative ought to be directed not toward Gideon, but toward the rise in power, especially toward this style of kingship, in which Gideon participated. In this, the narrator's final evaluation of the Gideon episode, the narrator is redirecting the reader's attention in order to focus on the primary issue at hand which is Israel's inability to maintain loyalty to Yahweh, the one who "delivers them from the hand of all their surrounding enemies" (8:34). The mention of Yahweh as an agent of deliverance for Israel at this point reminds the reader of the request to Gideon, "Rule over us. Indeed you, your sons and your grandsons for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian" (8:22). The narrator here emphasizes the connection between winning battles for Israel and being king over Israel, suggesting that kingship as Israel knows it is not, and never will be, an appropriate form of government for Israel.

Young Boys (נער) as Agents

Throughout the Gideon-Abimelech narrative there is mention of various "young boys" (נער) who, while they do not have significant roles in and of themselves, contribute greatly to the characterization of the major characters. Also, their mention most often appears to accompany a theme of fear. The first instance of this is in 7:10-11 as Yahweh

attempts to convince Gideon to have the courage to go fight against the Midianites. “But if you are afraid to go down, you go down, and Purah your youth [נַעַר], to the camp.”

Since Gideon was afraid Yahweh suggested that he go, along with his youth, in order to gain confidence in the mission.⁹³

The next time a נַעַר appears is in 8:14 when Gideon captures a youth from the men of Succoth. It is interesting and ironic that in both of these situations Gideon depends on a youth to help him get what he needs. Also, this second instance of נַעַר, in 8:14 accompanies a significant act of violence. It is ironic that Gideon requires the assistance of a young boy in order to carry out his treacherous acts of violence against Succoth. While Gideon is apparently beginning to leave the fear that was so apparent early in his career behind him it is evidenced here in a very discrete way as he takes advantage of one much younger and weaker than him.

These themes of fear and violence are both present in 8:20 where Gideon’s son, Jether, is twice described as a נַעַר. Here, it appears that Gideon is attempting to pass on his new-found confidence to his firstborn son Jether as he commands him to kill Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian. However, while Jether has taken on an attribute of his father it is not strength and confidence with an ability to demonstrate those violently, but instead it is the fear that was so much a part of Gideon’s life in Judg 6.

⁹³ Block says that, “נַעַר normally means ‘young man,’ but in military contexts such as this it refers to Gideon’s personal attendant, perhaps his armor/shield bearer”; Block, *Judges*, 278 n. 601. While this may be the case, the recurrence of the word throughout the Gideon-Abimelech narrative is an indication that the narrator intended that the reader notice the theme. At the very least it has connotations of youthfulness, in which case it is interesting that Gideon’s fear is so emphasized here that he does not go down to the camp alone but brings his נַעַר with him.

Jether is crippled by fear because he is still a youth (נער).⁹⁴ Block points out that Jether is portrayed as “an alter ego of Gideon’s former (preferred) self, the lad had not yet grown up and developed a stomach for violence.”⁹⁵ The contrast between Jether’s response to the request and Gideon’s subsequent brutal slaughter of the kings is surely meant to draw the reader’s attention back to the time in Gideon’s life when his response may have been similar to that of his son.⁹⁶

The final mention of a נער in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative is at the very end of Judg 9. In 9:54 after a woman dropped an upper-millstone on Abimelech’s head, as he is about to die he asks his armour bearer (נער) to draw his sword and kill him. Abimelech feared that he would be known as one killed by a woman. The youth here immediately obeys Abimelech and is not crippled with the fear that is so evident in Jether. Being a youth did not prevent him from drawing his sword in order to kill.

While none of these youths are described with great detail and as characters they are not particularly developed, they play an important role in revealing information about other characters in the narrative, particularly Gideon and Abimelech. The recurrence of this word and these characters also functions to bring consistency and continuity to the Gideon-Abimelech narrative unit.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Schneider comments on the importance of Gideon’s son in this situation. It is significant that he cannot carry out the kind of tasks that would be crucial for kings to be able to carry out; Schneider, *Judges*, 126.

⁹⁵ Block, *Judges*, 295.

⁹⁶ “The father’s earlier diffidence is now mirrored in the son, who hesitates when he is told to kill the prisoners, ‘because he was afraid’ (20b); Webb, *Book of Judges*, 152. See also Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 20.

⁹⁷ It is particularly interesting that Jether was afraid to kill Zebah and Zalmunna. Perhaps this was because he was simply afraid to kill or perhaps it was because they were kings. Abimelech’s armour-bearer, on the other hand does not hesitate to kill Abimelech, a *supposed* king. Perhaps the narrator is making a statement on the illegitimacy of Abimelech’s reign. He did not invoke the same sort of fear or respect. O’Connell points out that a similar response is given by Saul’s armour bearer in 1 Sam 31:4a as he refuses “because he is afraid to slay Saul, the Israelite king”; O’Connell, *Rhetoric*, 290-291.

Zebah and Zalmunna

Zebah and Zalmunna may be classified as flat characters in these chapters. However, while their role is minimal and they have little to say they play a very important role. Interestingly, in this narrative where the names of characters play such an important role Zebah means “sacrifice” and Zalmunna means “image/idol.” In chapter 8 then, Gideon (“hacker”) is in pursuit of Zebah (“sacrifice”) and Zalmunna (“idol”), kings of Midian, in order to kill them. If for no other reason, the presence of these kings is important, simply because they are kings in a narrative where leadership (and particularly kingship) is very important. Webb points out that the one who has killed the kings has now “achieved a kingly status in the eyes of his followers.”⁹⁸ It is according to the example of such kings that Gideon will begin to act as a king (8:24-33) and Abimelech will completely and openly take on the title (Judg 9).

Also, while Zebah and Zalmunna do not have extensive speaking roles in this narrative, what they do say is very important. The first words spoken by these kings in this narrative is in response to Gideon’s question regarding the identity of the men who they killed in Tabor. Their response was, “They were like you, each one resembling the son of the king” (8:18). Block points out that this response is “highly significant because it introduces the motif of kingship for the first time in the book.”⁹⁹ Schneider provides a few possible explanations for the Midianite kings’ response to Gideon. First, she says that they could possibly have been mocking Gideon since their death was imminent. Second, she says that they could have been attempting to flatter him in order to escape from their impending doom. Third, she says that they could simply have been telling the truth and

⁹⁸ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 152.

⁹⁹ Block, *Judges*, 294.

that possibly these men had some physical indication of royalty such as regal dress or posture.¹⁰⁰ It is possible that these Midianite kings were attempting to invoke compassion in Gideon by flattering him. However, what is significant for this narrative is that the first words of these kings are in reference to Gideon and his possession of kingly qualities. This prepares the reader for the continuing rise of the issue of human kingship for Israel in these next couple of chapters.

Leitmotif: The Men of Israel

The people of Israel are the only characters who are consistently present throughout the book of Judges. They are the reason that judges are necessary and they are the ones who propel the cyclical downward spiral. Throughout the narrative they are referred to most often either as the “sons of Israel” or simply “Israel.” These titles seem to be interchangeable with no specific use for either. However, there is some consistency in that in each judge cycle they are always referred to as the sons of Israel when they do evil in the eyes of Yahweh as well as when they cry out to Yahweh. This consistency makes the repetition of the previously discussed judge cycle much more uniform and clear. When the Israelites are referred to by means of anything other than these two titles the reader ought to pay close attention. Consider, for example the title “men of Israel.” This does not occur in Judges at all until the Gideon-Abimelech narrative and even then occurs only four times in chapters 7-9. Of particular importance for this study is the fact that this is the title by which the Israelites are named in 8:22 when they offer Gideon the

¹⁰⁰ Schneider also suggests that they could literally have been the sons of kings, Canaanites – the sons of his mother rather than his father. In this case Schneider says that the text could be suggesting that Joash had married a Canaanite princess which would explain the Baals and Asherah described earlier in Gideon’s story. She says that, “Gideon may have looked, not like the son of a king, but the son of a queen”; Schneider, *Judges*, 124. However, this is an odd interpretation given the fact that Zebah and Zalmunna specifically say “sons of the king.”

position of king over Israel. Block says that they are deliberately labeled as “the men of Israel” in order to make this “look like a pan-Israelite assembly offering rule over the entire nation.”¹⁰¹ From 8:22 through chapter 9 it is not always clear to what level the entirety of Israel is involved in the events. It is sometimes suggested that the Gideon-Abimelech narrative argues only against localized leadership since the “*baals* of Shechem”¹⁰² set Abimelech over them.¹⁰³ However, 8:22 clearly states that the *men of Israel* asked Gideon to be their king. The narrator is presenting this, not as localized, but as centralized leadership. If a judgment is indeed being made concerning this type of leadership, it is a judgment regarding a decision made by Israel as a whole.

It is also important that the next time the men of Israel are named as such is at the very end of the story of Abimelech. Judges 9:55 says that, “When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead they went, each man, to his own place.” The term “men of Israel” here serves two purposes. First, it neatly connects the account of Abimelech’s reign with the offer of kingship to Gideon. Secondly, it reminds the reader that the problems that arise in the story of Abimelech are not only within the confines of smaller groups of Israelites. When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech, their king, was dead they no longer had anyone to follow and, therefore, they returned to their homes. The author is not communicating a problem for a small portion of Israel, but a problem for the whole of Israel. Block says that “seeing their leader slain, Abimelech’s men abandoned the siege of the tower and returned to their homes... It seems that with Abimelech’s decisive victory over the Canaanite city of Shechem he had won the allegiance of many

¹⁰¹ Block, *Judges*, 296.

¹⁰² Hebrew reads בְּעָלֵי שֶׁכֶם. This phrase is translated elsewhere as “leaders of Shechem” (NASB) or “citizens of Shechem” (NIV) but throughout this study will be translated as “Baals of Shechem.” This issue will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁰³ For a more thorough discussion on this issue see Chapter 4 of this study.

Israelites. But with the death of their leader not only had this military adventure ended, but the Israelite experiment in Canaanite kingship also had fittingly aborted.”¹⁰⁴ By the conclusion of the Abimelech narrative the reader has been offered a sense of what monarchic rule could be like for Israel and it is not a positive perception.

The Significance of the Offer of Kingship

The events of Judg 8:22 are crucial for the remainder of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative and are central to the theme, purpose and message of the book of Judges. It is here that the men of Israel make a request of Gideon: “Rule over us, you and your son and your son’s son for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” Here, where the narrator could have said, “then the men of Israel asked Gideon to rule over them,” instead the dramatic narrative is recorded. This request carries great weight and ought to be awarded significant attention. The various words referring to leadership that appear in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative are particularly important in 8:22. When the men of Israel ask Gideon to become their king their request is *מִשַּׁל-בָּנוּ*. The verb, *משל* “to rule,” appears four times in only two verses. While it is true that this word is sometimes used to describe kingly reign the root only appears twenty-five times¹⁰⁵ in total in the historical writings.¹⁰⁶ This number is especially low when compared with the 2165 occurrences of the root *מלך* in the historical writings. Thus, the reader ought to consider why, in this particular instance, the author chooses to use *משל*.¹⁰⁷ It is possible that these words were

¹⁰⁴ Block, *Judges*, 334.

¹⁰⁵ Included in those twenty-five occurrences are the instances when the root carries the meaning “proverb.” Thus, its use as an indication of kingly reign is even less frequent.

¹⁰⁶ Biblical books including Joshua-Esther.

¹⁰⁷ Block suggests that the root *מלך* is “studiously avoided in the offer, presumably because this represents an illegitimate attempt to establish the monarchy”; Block, *Judges*, 297.

chosen in order to mask the fact that it was actually kingship, not just any sort of rule that they were offering to him. If this is the case, that mask fell off as their offer was extended to Gideon's descendents (גִּדְוֹן בֶּן-גִּדְוֹן). Perhaps by using this less common word to indicate kingly reign the author is attempting to communicate that the Israelites, themselves, were aware that this offer was inappropriate.

The position being offered to Gideon was one of hereditary kingship. That is, there was an expectation that after Gideon's death his son would rule, and then his grandson (8:22). Since Israel had never before had a human king, the only model of kingship available to them was that which came from the surrounding nations. Unfortunately, Israel was forgetting the law that Yahweh had set for them for such a time, since he was aware that their request for a king was inevitable (Deut 17).

According to the deuteronomic law on kingship¹⁰⁸ Israel was supposed to set over themselves only a king of Yahweh's choosing.¹⁰⁹ While Yahweh had chosen Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites he had not chosen him to become their king. At this point, the motivation of the men of Israel becomes very important. The reason that they

¹⁰⁷“Indeed set over you a king who Yahweh your God chooses. From among your brothers set over you a king. Do not place over you a foreigner who is not your brother. Indeed he will not multiply to himself horses and he will not cause the people to return to Egypt in order to multiply horses. Yahweh said to you, ‘You will not again return in this way’. And he will not multiply for himself wives and he will not turn his heart. Now silver and gold he will not multiply for himself exceedingly. And it will be when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom then he will write for himself a copy of this law upon a scroll before the priests, the Levites. And it will be with him and he will read it all the days of his life in order that he will learn to fear Yahweh his God, to obey all the words of this law and these statutes to do. To not exalt his heart from his brother and to not turn from the command the right and the left in order that the days will be long of his kingdom, he and his sons in the midst of Israel.” (Deut. 17:15-20)

¹⁰⁹ Block states that, “this offer flies in the face of the Mosaic charter for kingship in Deut 17:14-20 in several important respects. On the one hand, there is no hint here that Gideon had been divinely chosen to be king or that the Israelites were concerned about this issue in the least. On the other hand, at this, the first experiment in kingship in Israel, there is immediate talk of hereditary civil rule. One may assume therefore that, as in 1 Sam 8 (vv. 5, 19-20), Israel's paradigm for kingship was derived from the surrounding nations”; Block, *Judges*, 297.

include in their offer of kingship is that Gideon has delivered them from the hand of Midian. However, five times in Judg 7 the author makes it clear that it was Yahweh who delivered Israel from the Midianites.¹¹⁰ Not only so, but Yahweh had also reduced Gideon's army to only 300 men so that human credit could not be awarded for the miraculous victory.¹¹¹ The clear problem here is not an issue of whether or not Israel should have a human king but rather that they fail to recognize Yahweh as their king, and here particularly as the one who leads them in battle.¹¹² This same issue arises in 1 Sam 8 when the Israelites demand a human king. When they are reasoning with Samuel they say, "A king will be over us. And indeed we will be like all the nations. And our king will judge us, and he will go out before us, and he will fight our battles" (1 Sam 8:19b-20). Just as their request in 1 Samuel 8 is with improper motivation, so is their request in Judg 8. The recurring theme is their lack of ability to recognize the faithfulness of Yahweh.

Up to this point in the book of Judges alone, Yahweh has already delivered them from their enemies five times despite their unfaithfulness. Each time Yahweh is the one who puts the plan in motion, and who goes out to rescue them from their enemies, but Israel is unable to recognize this characteristic of their God. Therefore, in Judg 8 when the Israelites recognize that Gideon went out into battle and delivered them from Midian they immediately want to appoint him as their king. Whether or not it was appropriate, or in Israel's best interest, for them to have a king is irrelevant here. What is most important is that Israel had forgotten Yahweh, their king who goes out before them in battle. In 1 Sam 8 Yahweh says of Israel, "it is not you they have rejected but it is me they have

¹¹⁰ See Judg 7:2, 7, 9, 14, 15.

¹¹¹ Judges 7:2

¹¹² Block, *Judges*, 298. He also suggests that Gideon prepared the way for this in 7:18, 20 when he shouted "a sword for Yahweh and for Gideon"; Block, *Judges*, 298.

rejected from being king over them” (1 Sam 8:7). While Yahweh does not speak up in Judg 8, when one reads Yahweh’s response in 1 Sam 8 it becomes clear that this is a trend in Israelite history. Also, an explicit statement from Yahweh on the issue is not necessary since the events of the chapter, along with the narrator’s evaluation serves this purpose in the Gideon narrative. Here the Israelites have missed the point that Yahweh is their king and that it is he alone who delivers them from their enemies and Gideon has missed the point that it is his job not to revel in the glory of a victory, but rather to redirect that glory toward Yahweh.

Conclusion

The events of Judg 8 do not lead the reader to believe that human kingship would be in Israel’s best interest. As the complicated plot unfolds it is interesting that as outlined in plot 1 above, the climax of the episode is when Yahweh sends a prophet to address the Israelites to scold them for their lack of faithfulness to him. The climax that occurs after the illusory conclusion draws even more attention to the fact that it is Yahweh who wins the battle against Midian. This makes Israel’s offer of kingship to Gideon even more ludicrous. What makes the narrative remarkable is the fact that while one expects that along with the resolution of the conflict between Israel and Midian would come some resolution to the tension between Israel and Yahweh, this does not occur. In fact, even after the Midianite kings have been defeated Israel continues in this same unfaithfulness for which they are being scolded during the climax of the narrative. What is of particular interest is the way that the issue of kingship is outlined as a prominent contributing factor to the increasing tension between Israel and Yahweh, thus drawing negative attention to the idea of human monarchy.

The ideological point of view of the narrative is presented in the Gideon episode through the selection and arrangement of details, a normative spokesperson (the prophet of 6:8-10) and the outcome of events.¹¹³ Each of these components of the narrative suggest that the narrator is presenting an anti-monarchic ideology. This anti-monarchic theme is contributed to through the characterization of Gideon. Gideon, who at the beginning of his career obeys the instructions of Yahweh and is successful in accomplishing the mission for which he has been called, begins to change quite negatively as he rises in power. The transition of his character into a violent man, capable of killing some from among his own people and then leading Israel to idolatry makes a statement about the kind of leadership that he has assumed. Gideon's verbal refusal of the title of king does not nullify the fact that he did, indeed, act as a king following the Canaanite model of kingship that had been demonstrated to Israel. This, combined with Gideon's statement of 8:23 that assumes human and divine kingship to be mutually exclusive, draws negative attention to human kingship. Through the voice of the prophet in 6:8-10 the narrator draws attention to Israel's inability to recognize Yahweh as their deliverer. It is this same weakness that leads Israel to ask Gideon to be their king. These major features, combined with some smaller nuances introduced by the narrator, portray an anti-monarchic position and emphasize Israel's inability to remain faithful to Yahweh.

The message of this episode seems to contradict the pro-monarchic views that seem fairly clear elsewhere in the book of Judges.¹¹⁴ If the narrator is attempting to set the scene for a successful monarchy, his purpose has not succeeded in this story. If the anti-monarchic tone of this story is read against the refrain of Judg 17-21 ("In those days

¹¹³ Boda, "Narrative Analysis."

¹¹⁴ See Chapter 1 of this study.

there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”), there is a clear tension which leaves the reader with an ambiguous message concerning kingship.

The narrator’s evaluation in 8:34-35 provides an ideal preface to Judg 9. The Israelites did not remember Yahweh and they did not act in kindness toward Gideon, who had been offered kingship and declined for theological reasons. Now then, the reader might assume that Israel will continue to work toward setting for themselves a human king, in the style of the surrounding nations.

Chapter 4

THE REIGN AND FALL OF ABIMELECH JUDGES 8:32-9:6, 22-57

Introductory Comments

Scholars hold conflicting views on whether or not Judg 9 has an anti-monarchic theme. There is some ambiguity concerning the breadth of Abimelech's reign. Some argue that Judg 9 makes a statement not about human kingship in general, but rather about the problem of localized leadership. Such scholars make reference to the fact that Abimelech was made king by the Shechemites and reigned over Shechem. Oeste, for example, states that "the story of Abimelech and the Shechemites, while negative, serves to dissuade its implied audience from supporting local leadership, and through this negative analogy, argues for the values of a centralized polity."¹ Still other scholars suggest that while, historically, Abimelech's reign was probably over a small region, when it comes to literary purpose the narrative has a message concerning kingship over all of Israel. Block states that the story is focused on Shechem, one small part of the country, and that "apart from the editorial observation in v. 22, the only place Israel is named (v. 55), the reference is awkward."² He also points out that "Israel" is not necessarily a reference to all of Israel but may just refer to a certain region. Still, on a literary level, he points out that the smaller region may be recognized as a representation of the country as a whole.³ Similarly, Boda comments that "while it is possible that this does refer to all the Israelite tribes, it is more likely that Abimelech ruled over the more

¹ Oeste, "Legitimacy," 302.

² Block, *Judges*, 309.

³ Block, *Judges*, 322.

limited region surrounding Shechem which was, indeed, 'Israel.'"⁴ However, he also points out that on a literary level there are implications for the whole of Israel.⁵

Dumbrell suggests that "the total effect of Judges 9 is to present kingship to us as a humanistic alternative to the great series of divine initiatives which maintained Israel's position through the activity of the successive hero figures."⁶ Not all, however, would agree that this is the main concern of Judg 9. Gerbrandt, for example says that, "nowhere is there any hint that Abimelech's sin was that he became king. Nor is it suggested that Shechem's crime was that they made Abimelech king. Rather, it is explicitly stated that Abimelech's crime was killing his brothers (9:24, 56), and that Shechem's crime was helping him to kill his brothers (9:24)."⁷ He then continues by explaining that the message of the chapter is that, "when kingship is based on crime and the abuse of force, especially against one's brothers then the inevitable outcome of such a kingship will be destruction."⁸ Block agrees as he says that it is "retribution, not kingship as an institution" that drives the narrative. The crime is the treachery that has been committed against Gideon.⁹ Since there is so much scholarly discussion on this topic, techniques of narrative criticism will be applied to the text in order to evaluate the message concerning kingship as presented by the narrator.

⁴ Boda, "Judges," draft p. 28.

⁵ Boda, "Judges," draft p. 28.

⁶ Dumbrell, "In Those Days," 29.

⁷ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 132.

⁸ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 132.

⁹ Block, *Judges*, 336.

Also on this see Boogaart who says that, "The story of Abimelech and Shechem is without question about retribution. The narrator summarizes what has transpired with these words, which are structured chiastically:

A And God caused to return

B the evil of Abimelech—which he did to his father in killing his seventy brothers—

B and the evil of the men of Shechem

A God caused to return upon their heads... (9.56-57). Boogaart, "Stone for Stone," 49.

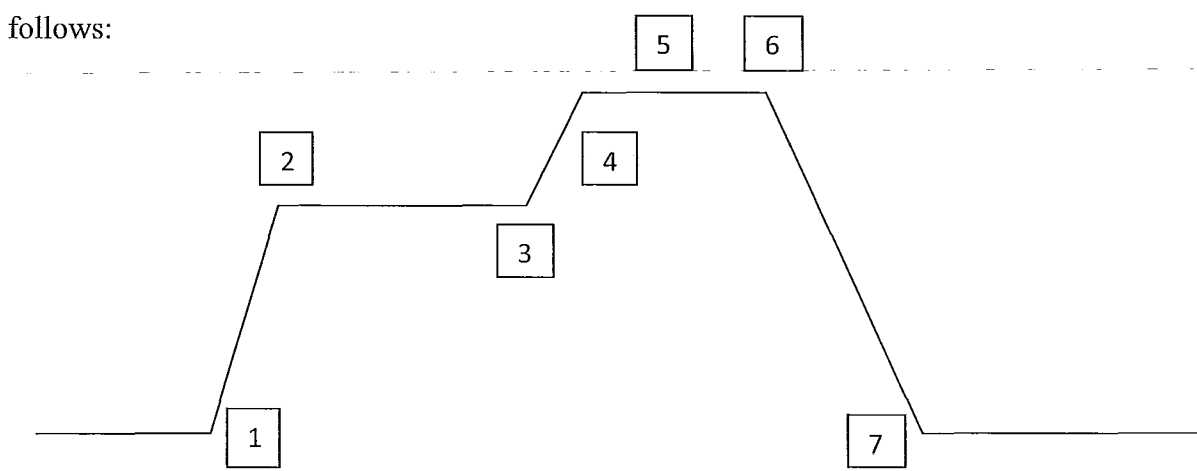
This chapter will focus on the literary features of the reign and fall of Abimelech focusing on plot and characterization while also considering setting, narrative types and wordplay. An evaluation of these features will demonstrate the anti-monarchic tone of Judg 9 which contributes to the narrative's overall theme of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh, their king.

Plot

As with the plot of the Gideon episode, the Abimelech episode is complex. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a plot line running throughout this narrative in which the tension between Israel and Yahweh consistently increases and is not resolved. The end of Judg 8 presents the beginning of the plot of the Abimelech episode. This tension between Israel and Yahweh is increased in 8:33, after the death of Gideon when the Israelites make Baal-berith their god. Although they already practiced idolatry before the death of Gideon, it is here that the idolatry is specifically pointed out with particular reference to Baal-berith (8:33-34). This incident can be considered parallel with the infidelity of Israel described in the other judge cycles (2:11-12; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). While the language differs, the content is the same. The people of Israel turn away from God and they instead worship the gods of the surrounding nations. This tension between Israel and Yahweh progressively increases throughout the book of Judges.

Because the plot of the Abimelech narrative cannot be easily mapped and because the cycle does not include the exact language of the previous cycles, scholars offer various interpretations and explanations. For example, Jobling considers the Abimelech narrative (8:33-9:57) as a *gap*, that is, the period in between the regular judge cycles. He says that these gaps often include the record of minor judges but here the gap is extended

and irregular.¹⁰ However, there seems to be a better explanation of the way that the Abimelech episode fits into the broader Judges narrative. While each element is not identical and the language used is different from the previous cycles there is an evident tension that finds resolution as in the previous cycles. Boda points out that this is the case, “with Israel’s Apostasy traced in 8:33-35, Divine Discipline in 9:1-6, followed by the rescue of 9:22-57.” And, “while one does not find the element of Israel’s Cry, the prophetic element which often follows such a cry (4:4-7; 6:7-10) may be discerned in Jotham’s declaration of 9:7-21.”¹¹ Because of Israel’s unfaithfulness to Yahweh (8:33-35) he delivers them into the hand of their enemies. In the judge cycles leading up to the Abimelech episode, upon mention of Israel’s disobedience Yahweh gives them into the hand of their enemies (2:14; 3:8, 12; 4:2; 6:1). The Abimelech episode stands out in the sense that, at this point in the cycle the reader has come to expect oppression, followed by the raising up of a leader. Consider, then, that perhaps the reign of Abimelech is Yahweh’s judgment of Israel for this disobedience.¹² The plot line, then, would appear as follows:



¹⁰ Jobling, *Sense*, 48.

¹¹ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 22-23. For more on this, see chapter on Jotham’s Fable.

¹² Bluedorn points out that, “the narrator closes the Gideon narrative with the comment that Israel’s idolatry has consequences; these consequences are expected to be addressed in the Abimelech narrative.” He also states that, “The record of Israel’s idolatry corresponds to the records of Israel’s idolatry at the beginning of the previous narratives, so that it already sets the stage for the following narrative,” that is a time of judgment for Israel. Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 182.

The occasioning incident (1), that which creates tension in the plot, is when Abimelech kills his brothers and the *baals* of Shechem make him king (9:5-6). The conflict reaches, what the reader initially understands as the climax (2) during Jotham's speech from Mount Gerizim (9:7-21). However, the tension increases again in 9:23 when God sends an evil spirit, creating conflict between Abimelech and Shechem. This unexpected complication increases the tension even further (3). The tension continues to mount as there is battle back and forth between Abimelech and Shechem leading to the destruction of the Shechemites (4). The actual climax of the story is reached when Abimelech camps against Thebez (9:50) (5). At this point in the narrative the people of Thebez have hidden themselves away in a tower. Since this is the circumstance under which Shechem has been defeated only verses earlier the reader comes to expect Thebez to encounter this same devastation. O'Connell refers to this moment as "the second dramatic climax of the Gideon/Abimelech account" and says that it interrupts the pattern that has been repeated in Abimelech's three previous attacks against Shechem.¹³

However, in an unsuspected turn of events an unnamed woman drops an upper-millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull (6). O'Connell says that this moment "breaks the tension that has been mounting throughout the increasingly gruesome series of Abimelech's rampages (9:26-41, 42-49, 46-49, 50-52)."¹⁴ If, then, the tension in the plot is caused by Abimelech being made king then the tension begins to release at the point when the upper-millstone is dropped on his head. This means that the unnamed woman fulfills the role that the judge-deliverers filled in the previous cycles. Boda

¹³ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 156.

¹⁴ O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 157. O'Connell suggests that this moment is not only the climax of the Abimelech account but that it is, in fact, the climax of the entire Gideon/Abimelech narrative; O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 161.

rightfully points out that, “This nameless woman is the only human who approximates the role played elsewhere by the judge-deliverers.”¹⁵ The point of resolution in the Abimelech episode comes in 9:54 with the death of Abimelech and record of God repaying the wickedness that he and Shechem had shown to the house of Jerubbaal (7). However, while this tension of an immediate threat toward Israel has been eliminated, the tension between Israel and Yahweh which increased in 8:33 when they made Baal-berith their god remains unresolved.

While the Abimelech narrative includes the main elements of the judge cycles that come before it, there are some major differences that are worth pointing out.¹⁶ This is especially noteworthy since at this point in the book of Judges the cycle has begun to deteriorate and the judge-deliverers will no longer experience the same kind of straightforward success. One key difference in the Abimelech account is that the conflict described does not involve oppression from outside of Israel but is, instead, internal conflict.¹⁷ Also, this is the first episode in the book of Judges where Yahweh is not explicitly present. This idea, combined with the internal conflict, are indications to the reader that with the Gideon-Abimelech narrative things are beginning to go downhill drastically for Israel. Matthews points out that from this point on, “none of the judges

¹⁵ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 31. See also Amit who agrees that the Abimelech episode ought to be interpreted as a stage of punishment but suggests that it is not the nameless woman of Thebez who fulfills the role of the deliverer but instead Tola, who appears in 10:1. Amit, *Art of Editing*, 109.

¹⁶ O’Connell suggests that, “While it is true that the Abimelech story extends beyond the confines of the cycle-motif that frames the story of Gideon, the traces of the cycle-motif that frame the Abimelech story are sufficient to show that the latter was designed to be read as a necessary prolongation of the Gideon account – necessary so as to resolve complications introduced by Gideon’s misdeeds. Further, it is the escalation of evils begun by the one who delivered Israel from Midian that foments a cultic and social chaos in the land so extensive that YHWH himself must restore order by retributive justice (9:23-24, 56-57)”; O’Connell, *Rhetoric*, 170.

¹⁷ Concerning Abimelech as Israel’s punishment for their infidelity perhaps the reader ought to consider the strong theme of retributive justice. It is possibly the case that if Israel’s sin was failing to recognize Yahweh as their king and offering the position to a human (Gideon) then here their punishment includes a direct and obvious response in the form of a human king who will not serve their best interest but instead propel them in this downward spiral bringing conflict not externally but internally.

will be entirely successful, and none will be described as having brought peace to the land.”¹⁸ Block points out that the structure of the book along with the timing of this episode offer a hint to the reader that the Canaanite influence over Israel is set and it will only become worse from this point.¹⁹ There is general consensus among scholars that this moment in the Judges narrative propels the downward spiral that leads Israel into the depth of moral and spiritual corruption.²⁰

Setting

There are a few issues of setting that are worth noting in Judg 9. In 8:31 the narrator explains that Gideon has a concubine in Shechem. Since this woman is the mother of Abimelech the reader should take note that mention of her physical location is important. This becomes true in 9:1 as Abimelech goes to Shechem to address his uncles in order to persuade them to assist in his royal pursuit. The specific mention of Shechem gives the reader the understanding that in this location Abimelech has an advantage because of his familial roots. More interestingly, in regard to the theme of kingship Shechem becomes noteworthy. Boda points out that it is “a key site at the schism of the Davidic Kingdom, hosting the coronation of Solomon’s son Rehoboam (1 Ki 12:1) and, after the northern tribes revolted against Rehoboam, becoming Jeroboam’s first capital of his northern kingdom of Israel.”²¹ This is important in a narrative where the author draws the attention of the reader to the theme of kingship.

While there are not an abundance of physical setting markers described in the narrative, those that are mentioned are of specific importance. Since 9:6 has been

¹⁸ Matthews, *Judges*, 9.

¹⁹ Block, *Judges*, 335.

²⁰ McCann, *Judges*, 61; Tanner, “Focal Point,” 152; Matthews, *Judges*, 79; Jobling, *Sense*, 58; Assis, *Self-Interest*, 127; Exum, “Centre Cannot Hold,” 418.

²¹ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 23.

described above as the occasioning incident in the plot, the fact that a location is offered is significant. At this juncture in the narrative Abimelech is being made king. This occurs at the oak of the pillar which, as the narrator once again reminds the reader, is in Shechem. Block says that “the nature and significance of this tree is unclear, but the association with the ‘pillar,’ a propped up stone representing Baal in Canaanite cult installations, suggests a sacred tree in the sanctuary area. The location heightens the religious significance of the event.”²² Boda agrees that this is “most likely a sacred site at Shechem.”²³ The inclusion of this information in the narrative is an indication to the reader that the narrator is emphasizing not only the political implications of this action but also the religious implications. The coronation of Abimelech, who has not been chosen by Yahweh, at this sacred site most likely associated with Canaanite religion, is a reminder to the reader of Israel’s move away from Yahweh and toward the worship of the gods of surrounding nations.

Another important physical landmark is the soothsayer’s tree mentioned in 9:37. Boda describes this as a “key sacred landmark outside the city” which further develops the “motif of sacred trees that have played both positive and negative roles within the book of Judges.”²⁴ Most importantly, here it is “a reminder of the kind of pagan activity that gave rise to the divine discipline of Israel.”²⁵ Also, O’Connell points out that that reference to this tree lends “poetic justice to the attack by alluding to the cultic tree beside which Abimelech was installed as king (9:6) and by drawing from the tree motif of

²² Block, *Judges*, 313.

²³ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 25.

²⁴ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 37.

²⁵ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 37. See also Amit, *Art of Editing*, 101.

Jotham, whose imagery foreshadows doom.”²⁶ These primary references to physical setting in Judg 9 all hold religious or political significance and draw negative attention to the issue of kingship while reminding the reader of Israel’s constant struggle with idolatry.

Characterization

The characters in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative are an important means through which the author communicates the message of the narrative. This may be observed through the words and actions of the characters, description and evaluation by the narrator, including naming and epithets. It is clear that especially in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative the names attributed to characters are of great significance.

Abimelech

The characterization of Abimelech begins at the first mention of his name. In 8:32 the narrator reports that Gideon had a concubine in Shechem and she bore for him a son. The first thing that the reader learns about Abimelech is that he is the son of a Shechemite concubine. From the outset this suggests that Abimelech may have a lower status than his seventy brothers. Amit points out that, “Abimelech, the son of a concubine, suffered an inferior status in Gideon’s family hierarchy.”²⁷ The narrative clearly distinguishes Abimelech from the other sons who “came out from his loins” (8:30). Boda points out that it is this “lower status” that “leads to his departure from Ophrah and arrival at Shechem to use his matrilineal links to gain advantage over his seventy brothers.”²⁸

²⁶ O’Connell, *Rhetoric*, 160.

²⁷ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 103.

²⁸ Boda, “Judges,” draft p.24.

The second piece of information that the reader receives about Abimelech is his name, אֲבִימֶלֶךְ, which means “my father is king.” The irony surrounding this name is immediately evident. Niditch comments that

its pattern is typical of a Northwest Semitic ruler’s name, meaning ‘My father is king,’ and implies descent for the ruler from a divine king of kings or proper inheritance of a previous human king’s mantle. In this case, Abimelech is neither. He does not serve with divine blessing, and his father chose not to be king, believing God to be the only true king.²⁹

However Gideon, after having refused the position of king over Israel in 8:23, proceeds to name his son “my father is king.” While Abimelech is clearly not a man of upstanding character his pursuit of the crown is, perhaps, not completely unwarranted. In a narrative where the theme of leadership is so prominent, what is the reader to expect from a character whose name means “my father is king”? Block points out that “By naming one of Gideon/Jerubbaal’s seventy sons and by commenting on his irregular parentage in 8:31, the narrator has created a sense of anticipation. This expectation is met in 9:1-6 as he describes in detail Abimelech’s conduct after the death of his father.”³⁰ At the first mention of Abimelech’s name in 8:31 the reader is given a hint that the issue of human kingship has not died with Gideon.

Whether or not Gideon accepted the position of king, his family still had a royal function. Boda points out that the name Abimelech along with “the narrator’s explicit reference to him as ‘the son of Jerub-Baal,’ highlights the royal function of this family.”³¹ He is referred to twice as the “son of Jerubbaal.” This is interesting since the meaning of his name would be something along the line of “my father is king, son of let Baal

²⁹ Niditch, *Judges*, 115.

³⁰ Block, *Judges*, 310.

³¹ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 24.

contend.” With a constant reference in Abimelech’s name, not only to the word *king* but also to his *father*, the reader cannot forget the heavy connotations of Canaanization that Jerubbaal carries even in his name. This is especially interesting since, with the exception of 8:29 and 35, even after Gideon’s name change he is consistently referred to as Gideon throughout chapter 8. It is not until chapter 9 that the name Jerubbaal continuously reemerges, lest the reader forget the god who is being worshipped by Israel in this time. It is also interesting that in v. 28 the epithet, “son of Jerubbaal” is used *negatively* against Abimelech. While the narrator makes Jerubbaal seem like such an honourable figure throughout chapter 9, here in 9:28 Gaal, son of Ebed is using the title against him.

Block points out that Abimelech is a strategic, effective politician with an “insatiable lust for power.”³² The narrator consistently characterizes Abimelech in a negative light. Early in chapter 9, after Abimelech has persuaded his Shechemite relatives to assist in his royal pursuit, the narrative explains that the *baals* of Shechem retrieved money from the temple of Baal-berith in order to help him. Boda points out that, “the fact that the money comes from a temple dedicated to a god which has led Israel astray (8:33-35) accentuates the evil of Abimelech’s action and the culpability of the Shechemites in what follows.”³³ This evidence of the Canaanization of Israel will recur throughout chapter 9 but is brought to light here, early on, through the description of the process of Abimelech’s rise to power. Amit also points out that there is an important connection between the mention of the worship of Baal-berith (8:33) and Abimelech’s funding from the temple of Baal-berith in 9:4. Through this connection the narrator is reminding the

³² Block, *Judges*, 310-311, 314.

³³ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 25.

reader that this is the god whom Israel worshipped during this time.³⁴ This is significant since it is the idolatry of Israel that leads to Abimelech's ability to rise to power, which is the main tension in the Abimelech narrative.

Amit points out the numerous negative actions of Abimelech that are presented by the narrator, contributing to his negative characterization. As previously mentioned, he uses silver from the temple of Baal-berith to hire worthless, reckless men. Following this he murders his brothers and is then able to have himself made king. Amit points out that the cruelty of the murder is expressed in the contrast between the seventy brothers, seventy reckless men, and the one stone.³⁵ Abimelech is also negatively characterized through Jotham's speech atop Mount Gerizim (9:7-20).³⁶ It is interesting that while Abimelech is presented as such an unworthy character he is able to preserve the loyalty of Israel until his death. Judges 9:55 reports that only after Abimelech died did the Israelites return to their homes. Concerning this, Amit states that, "by stressing Abimelech's charisma and military talents, the author maintains a balance between his negative characterization, serving the negative critique of the monarchy, and the reliable one, which explains why, notwithstanding his negative acts, the men of Israel were loyal to him."³⁷ The narrative seems to use this negative characterization of Abimelech to present to the reader the negative components of human monarchic rule.³⁸

Abimelech and Gideon

It is interesting to consider the difference between Abimelech and his father, Gideon. There are a few particular items that stand out. In each of these comparisons

³⁴ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 101.

³⁵ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 103-104.

³⁶ See chapter on Jotham's Fable.

³⁷ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 112.

³⁸ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 99.

Gideon appears to the reader to be much more noble and worthy of respect than his son Abimelech. First, consider Gideon's anger when he found out that Zebah and Zalmunna had killed his brothers. In 8:19 it is made clear that a prime motivation for killing these Midianite kings was that they killed his brothers. This is especially interesting when compared with Abimelech who in 9:5 killed 69 of his brothers in order to get what he wanted.³⁹ His motive was completely selfish. Also, significantly for this narrative, Gideon was called by Yahweh to go to battle against Midian in order to deliver Israel from oppression. Abimelech had no such calling and, in fact, Yahweh is not mentioned at all during his rule. Gideon was empowered by Yahweh to win a great victory while Abimelech, who, in his own strength was able to kill some of his enemies, was eventually killed after having his skull crushed by a woman. It is also interesting that in chapter 8, Gideon is described as defeating many enemies and doing great things all on his own without any mention of his army (which we know had only 300 people anyway). Abimelech, on the other hand, when fighting against his enemies, is always mentioned along with "the people who were with him" (הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-אִתּוֹ). This phrase appears four times in four verses (vv. 32, 33, 34, 35) and then again twice in v. 48. While Gideon's ventures (particularly in chasing after the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna) were

³⁹ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 104. Amit further contrasts Gideon and Abimelech in the following four ways: 1. While Gideon rejected kingship, Abimelech offered to anoint himself. 2. While Gideon smashed the altar of Baal and gathered the spoils of war in order to craft an ephod "for God," Abimelech took silver from the house of Baal-berith in order to make himself king. 3. Gideon carefully selected his army while Abimelech hired "worthless and reckless" men. 4. Gideon avenged the blood of his brothers while Abimelech killed his own brothers. Amit, *Art of Editing*, 104. This perspective, which so glorified Gideon, carefully covers his mistakes (i.e. Creating the ephod) and gives him credit where credit is not due (i.e. in sifting out his army. It is clear that Yahweh completed this process for him). There is no need to try to explain the ambiguity of this situation. Gideon's conflicting words and actions do not need to be explained away. He may simply be understood as a man who recognized who Yahweh was and tried to live honourably, yet at times caved under the pressure and unintentionally led Israel astray. See also Boda, "Judges," draft p. 24.

described in a string of 3ms verbs with very little mention of assistance, here the narrator makes it clear that if Abimelech is to win these battles he needs plenty of assistance. This may also be a reflection of the fact that Abimelech's ventures were not sanctioned by Yahweh and he was therefore acting in his own strength (since his god, *baal-berith* did not have the ability to grant such strength). In this way, the reader is reminded that Yahweh is not with Abimelech, his reign has not been sanctioned by Yahweh and it will not be blessed by Yahweh. This might also lead the reader to suspect that Abimelech's reign will not be a successful one.

The comparison between father and son is especially important here when considering the issue of kingship. Amit, who has an overly sympathetic view of Gideon, says that, "Abimelech's attitude to rule is entirely different from that of Gideon, the comparison between the two enriches the thematic discussion, creating a confrontation between Gideon, representative of the kingdom of God, and a human king – Abimelech."⁴⁰ Such an understanding of the narrative may be awarding Gideon a little too much credit, especially in light of the fact that he crafted an ephod, which, whether well-intentioned or not, became an idol for all Israel and caused problems even for Gideon and his household.⁴¹ However, while Gideon's actions following his refusal of the position of kingship are not ideal, and while it is true that he was not a perfect leader for Israel, he did make one very important decision. Immediately when the men of Israel ask Gideon to reign over them, when they offer him this hereditary kingship, he declares, "Indeed I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. Yahweh will rule over you" (8:23). Regardless of Gideon's shortcomings, he knew the truth about the

⁴⁰ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 95.

⁴¹ For more on Gideon's crafting of the ephod see chapter on Gideon.

identity of the true ruler of Israel. He made an attempt to redirect Israel's worship to Yahweh and while, admittedly, he faltered in many ways, it seems that his intentions were noble. At the very least he attempted to remind Israel that their true leader is Yahweh. Abimelech, in contrast, committed heinous crimes in order to place himself in this position of power. If the author is intentionally contrasting this father and son, perhaps there is also a statement being made in this concerning the legitimacy of human kingship for Israel. Amit points out that:

The fact of the father-son relations between Gideon and Abimelech creates the expectation that the son will continue in his father's path. However, examination of the sequel indicates the opposed path of the two figures, and the basis for spoiling the expectations of the men of Israel for continuity of rule. The kingdom of Abimelech sowed destruction and ruin and did not provide its supporters either security or peace. Moreover, the contrasting analogy between father and son strengthens the negative impression of the behavior of the son.⁴²

Thus, even when compared with Gideon, the negative idea that the reader receives concerning Abimelech is overwhelming. This first example of a king in Israel is devastatingly negative.

Baals of Shechem

The *baals* of Shechem are very important characters in this narrative for a number of reasons. First, it is interesting that they immediately honour Abimelech's request to make him king. Since he is their relative, they are quickly persuaded to place him in this prestigious office. The *baals* of Shechem, as a representation of all of Israel, desperately desire to have a strong human leader. This is evidenced in 8:22, occurs again here in 9:6, and will resurface in 1 Sam 8.

⁴² Amit, *Art of Editing*, 102.

It is also significant to note that the *baals* of Shechem were connected to the temple of Baal-berith. This is evident since they were able to retrieve seventy pieces of silver from the temple treasury in order to assist Abimelech in hiring reckless men to aid in murdering his seventy brothers (9:4-5).⁴³ In light of Israel's problem with being led astray by the influence of surrounding nations, these references to the Canaanization of Israel are significant and a consistent reminder of Israel's struggle to remember Yahweh.

Their need for a leader is further noticed since after God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem (9:23), when they are no longer following him, they immediately desire a new leader. Gaal, son of Ebed steps in to provide leadership (9:26). This need for leadership sheds some light on their unhesitating willingness to set Abimelech as king at the beginning of chapter 9. While the reader does not learn much about the *baals* of Shechem from the narrative they have a very clear and important role. Their most significant act was, as representative of all Israel, making Abimelech king.

It is interesting that the reasoning for the *baals* of Shechem in making Abimelech king is that he is their relative. At the beginning of chapter 9 he has a good relationship with them. They treated him as family, helping him to kill his brothers and setting him as their king. After God sends an evil spirit between them the *baals* of Shechem deal treacherously with Abimelech. Prior to this they had worked together as a team. Verse 24 states that Abimelech killed his brothers and that the *baals* of Shechem strengthened his hand to carry out the task. It is fitting that the narrator mentions this teamwork at the point in the narrative in which this relationship is about to fall apart. Verse 24 mentions

⁴³ Block, *Judges*, 310-311.

the way that they worked together and that is immediately followed by a description of the *baals* of Shechem setting an ambush against him.

Not only does the narrator offer an evaluation through the speech and actions of the *baals* of Shechem but also through the voice of another character. Jotham offers an evaluation, directly to the *baals* of Shechem pointing out their two great sins. First he scolds them for killing the sons of Jerubbaal and then for making Abimelech king.

Gaal, Son of Ebed

Thus far the naming of characters in this story has proven to be quite important. Consider then, Gaal, son of Ebed. In a narrative where names hold great significance the reader ought to be aware of a character called, “loathsome son of slave.”⁴⁴ Ironically, when Gaal addresses the *baals* of Shechem this man, who is consistently referred to as son of Ebed (עֶבֶד), asks “Who is Abimelech and who are Shechem that we should serve them?” (מִי־אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ וּמִי־שָׁכֶם כִּי נַעֲבֹדָנּוּ).⁴⁵ Not only is there an interesting play on words here but it is interesting to consider what the response of the *baals* of Shechem could have been. In 9:6 these people made Abimelech their king. So to answer the question, “Who is Abimelech that we should serve him?": He is their king. The way that the *baals* of Shechem acted toward Abimelech makes a statement about how seriously they took this idea of kingship.

⁴⁴ Boda points out that this is “hardly an honourable name in the ancient world”; Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 29.

⁴⁵ Matthews recognizes irony here but suggests that the irony is in Gaal’s reference to Abimelech and Zebul as “servants”; Matthews, *Judges*, 110. Since Gaal never actually labels them as such, this is not what is ironic but simply that the one whose repeated epithet carries with it the idea of being a servant or slave is rising up against the idea of serving Abimelech or Zebul.

Multiple scholars have also pointed out the parallel between Abimelech and Gaal in this address to the people of Shechem. Boda says that, “In his speech, Gaal mentions his ancestor Hamor, the Hivite ruler of Shechem (Ge 33:19; 34:2) and uses logic strikingly similar to that originally employed by Abimelech to entice Shechem to follow him rather than his brothers (Jdg 9:1-3).”⁴⁶ If Abimelech’s reign is to be considered a time of judgment for Israel for their disobedience to Yahweh, then it is interesting that a similar character, having been “compelled by the hidden hand of God,”⁴⁷ is sent to increase that tension even further.

Also, in describing the celebration inspired by Gaal, the author presents a series of actions (9:26-27) that are attributed to the *baals* of Shechem. “Then they went out to the field. Then they gathered their grapes. Then they trampled them. Then they rejoiced. Then they came to the house of their god. Then they ate. Then they drank. Then they cursed Abimelech.” Here, the narrator has drawn out the description by describing each step in the process of their celebration. A couple of important issues ought to be noted here. The fact that “their god” is unnamed in this verse is interesting in light of the fact that the title *baal* is rampant throughout chapter 9. It seems as though the author mentioned *baal* every chance that he could and in every possible circumstance, yet here, while one assumes that the god being referred to is *baal-berith*, the author leaves it unnamed. Instead the word *Elohim* is used, perhaps to draw attention to the fact that Abimelech has led Israel in the worship of *baal-berith*. They have made him their god and Yahweh is no longer being acknowledged by them in any way. It is ironic that the

⁴⁶ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 29. See also Block, (*Judges*, 325) and Webb, (*Book of Judges*, 154-155) who say that Abimelech’s actions in 9:1-2 are “answered by Gaal’s arrival in Shechem to incite its leaders to conspire with him against Abimelech (9:26-27).”

⁴⁷ Block, *Judges*, 325.

house of their god, from where the *baals* of Shechem once retrieved seventy pieces of silver in order to hire reckless fellows to kill the seventy brothers of Abimelech, is now the place where these same men hold a celebration in order to curse Abimelech. All of their other actions lead up to this point, which is the climax of their celebration.⁴⁸ Boda points out that this celebration (v. 27) “serves to highlight Gaal’s popularity among the people, as well as the enduring pagan character of the Shechemites.”⁴⁹

What is clear about Gaal is that he was immediately able to take leadership of the *baals* of Shechem and motivate them to rise up against Abimelech. Concerning Gaal, it is interesting that the portion of the story where he is present does not drive the narrative forward. The whole section, vv. 26-41, serves almost as an aside. Prior to this, God sent a spirit to cause dissent between Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem (9:23). Then it seemed as though the *baals* of Shechem had a plan to act against him as the narrator explains that they set an ambush on the tops of the mountains (9:25). Then, v. 25 says that, “It was told to Abimelech.”

It is at this point that Gaal shows up. He earns the trust of the *baals* of Shechem and they have a celebration. He speaks to them, convincing them that they are under no obligation to serve Abimelech and that Abimelech should be removed from power (9:29). Zebul, Abimelech’s deputy, hears of this and sets up Gaal to fight against Abimelech yet there is no mention of any real defeat. Abimelech wins the battle but there is no mention of anyone dying, only that “many fell wounded up to the opening of the gate” (9:40). Gaal and his relatives were driven out from Shechem but then in v. 42 the narrative seems to pick up where it left off in v. 25. Verse 9:42 says, “And it was the next day, that

⁴⁸ Block, *Judges*, 326.

⁴⁹ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 29.

the people went out to the field *and it was told to Abimelech*.” Here, by repeating the phrase found in 9:25 the narrator is drawing the reader back to the time before Gaal came onto the scene. Following this, Abimelech battles against the *baals* of Shechem just as one would have expected before Gaal came. If it is true that the story of Gaal does not move the narrative forward, then what is its purpose?

Boogaart points out the following similarities between Gaal and Abimelech in regard to their encounter with the Shechemites:

1. A man comes to Shechem (9.1a; 9.26a)
2. The man is accompanied by his brothers/kinsmen (9.1b-3a; 9.26a)
3. The man conspires against the absent ruler of Shechem with a speech delivered at a gathering (9.2-3a; 9.28-29)
4. The speech emphasizes that the ties of the conspirator to Shechem are closer than those of the ruler (9.2b; 9.28)
5. The Shechemites put their trust in the conspirator (9.3b; 9.26b)
6. The conspirator encounters the ruler (9.5; 9.30-42)⁵⁰

The significance of this similar structure, Boogaart says, is that “after the decisive intervention of God, the original evil of conspiracy returns to haunt Abimelech and the men of Shechem.”⁵¹ The similarities in the structure of these two anecdotes cause the reader to ask whether their outcome will also be the same. Just as Gaal was defeated and not given the chance to prolong his leadership (9:41), so Abimelech’s leadership would come to a premature end, although his in a more dramatic way than Gaal’s.

God (Elohim)/Yahweh

Judges 9 is different from the narratives that surround it in that there is no mention, whatsoever of Yahweh. While, at times, it is clear that he is present and intervening in order to accomplish his purposes (9:7, 23, 56, 57), his name is never

⁵⁰ Boogaart, “Stone for Stone,” 50-51.

⁵¹ Boogaart, “Stone for Stone,” 51.

mentioned. Block suggests that the silence of Yahweh is not only a result of the failure of Israel to recognize him as their God and King, but also a result of the fact that Yahweh is letting them act as they please. Yahweh is not mentioned because he is not acting. Block says that “although ultimately Yahweh was behind the demise of Abimelech and Shechem, to a large extent he lets Israel destroy herself. There is no place here for divine soteriological intervention.”⁵² Polzin, however, suggests that the shift from mention of Yahweh to *Elohim* is a result of Israel’s switching between gods as objects of worship. He says that this is a result of their inability to determine the identity of the God who delivered them from the Midianites.⁵³

God (*Elohim*) however, is mentioned at a few key points in the narrative. It is interesting that as Jotham stands atop Mount Gerizim in order to address the Shechemites he calls on the authority of God when speaking to them (9:7). In this way, he acts as a sort of prophetic voice, claiming authority and connection with God as he speaks. Thus, while God is not personally addressing the situation it seems as though Jotham may be speaking on his behalf.⁵⁴ In 9:23 God sends an evil spirit to destroy the relationship between Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem.⁵⁵ This is that point in the narrative at which everything begins to unravel for Abimelech. In other judge cycles when there is mention of a spirit (רוּחַ) it is almost always in reference to the Spirit of Yahweh coming upon a judge-deliverer to strengthen them for the task that is ahead. Here, in chapter 9, this is not the case. Yahweh is not mentioned at all and the spirit that is being sent by God

⁵² Block, *Judges*, 309.

⁵³ Polzin, *Moses*, 170.

⁵⁴ See more on this in Chapter 5 of this study.

⁵⁵ See Block, *Judges*, 323-325.

is a negative one – not meant to strengthen as in the other instances of רוּחַ in Judges.⁵⁶

This offers an important contrast, perhaps emphasizing the absence of Yahweh and his disapproval of the leadership (especially kingship acquired in this way) of Abimelech.

Concerning this, McCann points out that “the narrator – unlike Abimelech himself – will not leave God out of the picture; so he or she explains that unrest arose between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem.”⁵⁷

The role of God here is very important especially if one considers only the information provided in the narrative. Other than the fact that Abimelech acquired his power by such an immoral and dreadful method, there is no negative account prior to v. 23 of Abimelech’s acts as king. There is no record of any action that would cause the *baals* of Shechem to turn against Abimelech in this way. Instead, the reader is presented with the simple fact that Abimelech’s rule did not have divine approval. Thus, in order to bring Abimelech’s rule to an end God (*Elohim*) sent an ‘evil’ spirit.⁵⁸ Despite the complete absence of Yahweh in this passage, and only a few mentions of God (*Elohim*), the reader cannot ignore the fact that God is still at work. He knows that this kind of kingship is not appropriate for his people and so he acts in order to put an end to it. God’s action here is a pivotal point in the narrative. It is, at this point in the narrative, the working of God that leads to the fall of Abimelech.

⁵⁶ Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14. See also Webb, *Book of Judges*, 158-159; Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 28. Matthews says that this “may be a literary vehicle that allows the editor to make clear that there is a divine touch involved in these events (compare the ‘lying spirit’ sent to Ahab in 1 Kings 22:19-23 and the ‘evil spirit from the Lord’ sent to torment Saul in 1 Sam 16:14)”; Matthews, *Judges*, 109; Webb suggests that this “is a reminder that God has a different principle of operation he can invoke at his discretion, and if it can be invoked against Abimelech and the men of Shechem, why not against Israel in general, and if against unfaithfulness in the one sphere, why not against unfaithfulness in the other?”; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 159.

⁵⁷ McCann, *Judges*, 73.

⁵⁸ Block notes that all three occurrences of the word *Elohim* in Judg 9 are theological commentary by the narrator concerning the events. Block, *Judges*, 309. This is “reflective of the pervasively Canaanite tone of this chapter”; Block, *Judges*, 322.

Another key point in the narrative at which God (*Elohim*) is mentioned is in 9:56. Here the narrator offers theological comment and evaluation concerning the events. Judges 9:56 reminds the reader that the action of God has led to this point. God's involvement in the story, at the very least in sending a spirit to cause dissent between Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem, has ultimately led to retribution for the wicked deeds performed by Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem. Despite the infrequent appearance of God in chapter 9, he still intervenes at the appropriate times, first bringing an evil spirit and ultimately causing the death of Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem. It is interesting that even during a time when Israel completely lacks faithfulness to Yahweh, he still acts in order to bring about what is best for them. Webb points out that

After 8.34-35 in which the Israelites reject Yahweh and make Baal-berith their god only אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) is used (9.7, 23, 56, 57). In the stories of the judges god, יהוה (*Yahweh*), has operated on a different principle, namely, punishment tempered by compassion, with compassion (expressed as rescue) having the final say in each episode. The significance of a story of such thorough and exact retribution appearing at this point in the book must be sought in the context of the serious and rapid deterioration in Israel's relationship with Yahweh to which the Gideon episode has drawn our attention, and of the connection made in 8.34-35 between the unfaithfulness of the Israelites towards Yahweh and their unfaithfulness towards Gideon's household.⁵⁹

The language used in chap. 9, referring only to God rather than Yahweh, and even then only in three instances, is an indication of the change that has occurred in Israel. Yahweh is no longer a focus and is no longer the object of worship in Israel. They have once again abandoned him and have focused their worship upon *Baal-berith*. Without a single mention of the divine name, yet twenty-five occurrences of the word *baal*, there can be no doubt that the narrator is concerned to bring attention to the fact that *Baal-berith* is now Israel's god. It is especially interesting that there is such a strong focus on this

⁵⁹ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 158.

during a time when Israel has set for themselves a human king. This may or may not be an evaluation of the office of human kingship, however, combined with the other anti-monarchic elements of Judg 9 it is fairly convincing. The Israelites have set a king over them, they are worshipping *Baal-berith* and as a result there is a disturbingly overwhelming absence of Yahweh.

Unnamed Woman of Thebez

As mentioned in the discussion of the plot of the Abimelech episode, there is a very important unnamed woman in 9:53. This woman acts in the same role as the judge-deliverers of the previous cycles, initiating the event that leads to the unravelling of the tension. Women play key roles throughout the book of Judges so it is no surprise that a woman is the hero of this particular narrative. Boda points out that, “In this ancient patriarchal context this reference is intended to shame Abimelech.”⁶⁰ This shame would be similar to that of Sisera who died at the hand of a woman in 4:21. O’Connell points out that

It is probably more than coincidence that the assault on Abimelech by a woman finds analogy in the account of Jael’s slaying of Sisera: both agents are women, both women appear late in the account, both deal a man his deathblow to the head and both thereby evidence YHWH’s control of circumstances to bring about military victory (over Sisera or Abimelech) and poetic justice (vis-à-vis Barak or Abimelech).⁶¹

As a result of the downward spiral throughout the book of Judges, this unnamed woman will be the last in the book of Judges to act as a hero. After this point the women of Judges become the abused and mistreated, rather than heroes.

⁶⁰ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 31.

⁶¹ O’Connell, *Rhetoric*, 162. See also McCann, *Judges*, 75; Matthews, *Judges*, 111; Yee, *Method*, 113.

Summary of Characterization

A careful consideration of the characterization of Abimelech, the *baals* of Shechem, Gaal, God and the unnamed woman of Thebez reveals to the reader that the narrator is intentionally drawing negative attention to the theme of kingship. This occurs particularly through the character of Abimelech and his interaction with other characters in the narrative. It is also evident through the lack of explicit mention of Yahweh, indicating that where this kind of kingship exists, Yahweh has been forgotten. The characterization of the *baals* of Shechem offers a reminder of the Canaanization of Israel that has been occurring which is a major contributing factor to their adoption of this method of kingship. Overall, this characterization highlights the anti-monarchic theme in the Gideon Abimelech narrative.

Wordplay and Word Choice

The Significance of Leadership

Throughout the Gideon-Abimelech narrative there is obvious repetition of certain words that are, most likely, used intentionally in order to help present the agenda of the narrative. The fact that the book of Judges is dominated by a theme of leadership is apparent in the repetition of various words which indicate some office or act of leadership. The frequent recurrence of this diversity of words within the chapter will prove to be a reminder that regardless of the kind of leadership that Israel has, their situation is hopeless until they begin to acknowledge Yahweh as their king. Judges 8 and 9 contain a variety of leadership words including שרר, משל, מלך, בעל. Here, each of these words, their frequency, meaning and significance in the context of Judg 8-9 will be discussed.

Baal (בעל)

The word בעל can be translated as “owner,” “lord,” “husband,” “ruler,” and on rare occasions, “citizen.” It is, of course, also the name of the god of the Canaanites, Philistines and other nations under which Israel had been oppressed. This word is prominent throughout the Abimelech narrative. The end of chapter 8 sets the tone for the reader in mentioning that, “As soon as Gideon died the sons of Israel turned and they prostituted themselves after the baals and they set for themselves Baal-berith as a god.” Baal-berith proves to be important in the career of Abimelech because it is from the temple of Baal-berith that the *baals* of Shechem retrieve the silver with which Abimelech is able to hire help to murder his brothers. From this point and through Judg 9 *baal* appears to be everywhere. This issue of the presence of *baal* in Judg 9 ought to be carefully considered. It appears as though the author uses this word as frequently as possible, even in unlikely and unnecessary circumstances throughout the narrative.

It has already been mentioned that the name *Jerubbaal* occurs eight times in this chapter. While this is the name given to Gideon by his father in chapter 6, he is only referred to as such twice in chapter 8.⁶² Then in chapter 9, after Gideon is dead his new name, *Jerubbaal*, continues to appear. Boda points out that, “This constant emphasis on the connection between Gideon and Baal reminds the reader of the Canaanite context and tone of this story.”⁶³ Block agrees as he comments that, “In the use of names, *Jerubbaal* is used throughout for Gideon, and *Yahweh* is referred to only by the generic *Elohim*. These features reflect the author’s unambiguous stance toward the nation and the characters:

⁶² Once when he is being given the name (8:29) and then at the very end of the chapter (8:35) where he, at the same time referred to as Gideon.

⁶³ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 25. See also Amit, *Art of Eding*, 102.

Israel has been totally Canaanized; Baal has contended for himself and prevailed.”⁶⁴

Abimelech is referred to as the “son of Jerubbaal,”⁶⁵ his brothers are referred to as the “sons of Jerubbaal,”⁶⁶ and then in the same verse the youngest brother, Jotham is referred to as the “son of Jerubbaal.”⁶⁷ While it is not uncommon in OT narrative to identify a character by naming their father it stands out in Judg 9 because the name Jerubbaal is used while throughout chapter 8 it appears only twice (8:29, 35). This seems to be an intentional use of *baal* in an instance where it is not necessary.

Then, as has also been briefly mentioned, the people who make Abimelech king are referred to as the *baals* of Shechem. While *baal* can be translated simply as leader, throughout this study they have been referred to as the *baals* of Shechem because this is such an important title in the context of this narrative. Already there has been a focus on *baal* through the unnecessary reference to Gideon as Jerubbaal throughout the chapter. Further attention is given to *Baal* through the naming of these people. The NIV translates *baal* here as “citizen.” In the entire OT, outside of Judg 9, the word *baal* is only used that way 5 times (of Jericho in Josh 24:1, of the high places of Arnon in Num 21:28, of Gibeah in Judg 20:5, of Keilah in 1 Sam 23:11, 12, of Jabesh in 2 Sam 21:12). However, in Judg 9 the phrase appears 13 times in addition to two instances of the “*baals* of the tower of Shechem” (9:46, 47). It is also curious that, even after the death of the *baals* of Shechem the author is not finished with the title. He refers to the leaders of Thebez as the *baals* of the city (9:51). Considering its infrequent use in this manner throughout the rest of the OT, its frequency here in Judg 9 must be considered intentional. In this way, the

⁶⁴ Block, *Judges*, 308.

⁶⁵ Judges 9:1, 28.

⁶⁶ Judges 9:5, 24.

⁶⁷ Judges 9:5, 57.

author has once again drawn the reader's attention to the true problem in Israel. Block says that, while up to this point in the book of Judges:

ba'alim has always referred to 'the baals,' or local manifestations of the Canaanite deity, here *ba'ale sekem* bears a non theological sense. But the choice of this word seems deliberate, keeping alive in the reader's mind the fundamental problem of Baalism on the one hand and providing a link with 'Baal-Berith' (v. 4) and 'Jerubbaal' on the other.⁶⁸

As a nation, Israel continues to turn away from Yahweh and worship other gods. *Baal* is ever-present in the text while Yahweh does not appear at all.⁶⁹

Princely Rule (שָׂרָר)

Another recurring leadership word that appears in Judg 8–9 is שָׂרָר. This verb means “to be or act as prince” and the noun which is derived from it (שָׂרָר) means “chief,” “ruler,” “prince,” “captain,” etc. What is important to note is that this word *does not* mean “king.” This word appears in 8:3 in reference to Oreb and Zeeb, the *leaders* of Midian. These *leaders* (שָׂרָר) clearly hold different titles from the *kings* (מֶלֶךְ) of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna. This reminds the reader that there is a notable difference between the meaning of these two words. The word is also used in the description of the *leaders* (שָׂרָר) of Succoth who Gideon encounters in 8:6. What is most interesting is that in 9:22 the narrator states that, “Abimelech ruled (שָׂרָר) over Israel for three years.” This is

⁶⁸ Block, *Judges*, 311.

⁶⁹ Bluedorn's study argues that the Gideon-Abimelech narrative is meant to demonstrate the power of Yahweh, while proving that Baal is powerless, and actually non-existent. He says that, “Since the narrator has already demonstrated that YHWH is god and Baal is not existent, the Abimelech narrative demonstrates the other side of the coin, namely that Baal is not god and Baalism is a self-destructive religion that only leads to disaster and mutual destruction among the Baalists”; Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 262.

especially interesting since in 9:6 the *baals* of Shechem had caused Abimelech (אַבִּימֶלֶךְ) to reign (וַיִּמְלִיכוּ) as king (לְמֶלֶךְ), clearly repeating the root מֶלֶךְ. Block notes that “although the lords of Shechem have anointed him as *melek*, ‘king,’ the narrator refuses to dignify him with the title.”⁷⁰ The only other time this word (שָׂרַר) appears in chap. 9 is in reference to Zebul, one who worked as an official under Abimelech’s reign (9:30).

To Reign or Rule (מֶלֶךְ and מָשַׁל)

The word מָשַׁל means “to rule, reign” and can be used interchangeably with מֶלֶךְ, “to reign.”⁷¹ The former is used by the Israelites and Gideon in 8:22-23 in both the offer and refusal of kingship. This same word is used by Abimelech in 9:2 as he offers the *baals* of Shechem an ultimatum – that either seventy men or one man would rule (מָשַׁל) over them. Considering their subsequent actions it is clear that Abimelech is referring to a kingly rule. Thus, this study is not concerned with when and where each of these words are used, only that they are both words indicating kingly leadership which contribute to this theme in chapter 9.

Just as the name Jerubbaal carries with it connotations of the Canaanization of Israel and their tendency to act in idolatrous ways throughout Judg 9, so the name Abimelech carries the theme of kingly leadership throughout the chapter. The name alone occurs 38 times, which is not uncommon considering he is the protagonist of this particular story. However, its presence throughout does keep the reader’s attention

⁷⁰ Block, *Judges*, 322.

⁷¹ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 94.

focused on issues of leadership – particularly royal leadership – throughout the chapter.⁷² This kingly language is also prominent in Jotham’s fable.⁷³ The frequent presence of each of these words consistently remind the reader of one of the primary themes of Judg 9 (and ultimately of the book of Judges as a whole).

Summary of Wordplay

Through the details of specific word choice and repetition the narrator consistently brings to attention the theme of kingship. Just as with characterization, wordplay in Judg 9 emphasizes the problem of the Canaanization of Israel and its role in kingship. The narrator’s choice of words continuously emphasizes the leadership theme, drawing attention to the problem with the leadership of Abimelech and implicitly making a negative statement about kingship, in general.

Conclusion

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 states that a king appointed over Israel must be chosen by Yahweh, must not exalt himself above others, and must consider his first priority as the reading and observance of the Torah. In contrast to this, Abimelech “seizes power on his own initiative, slaughters his brothers, and utterly disregards Yahweh and Yahweh’s Torah.”⁷⁴ This first example of royal rule in Israel’s history does not shed a positive light on the issue. Dietrich suggests that the reign of Abimelech is an example of the idea that “only the least worthy and most brutal subjects are inclined to become kings.”⁷⁵ Thus, the Abimelech narrative does not cause the reader to look forward with great anticipation or expectation to the shift to a monarchic system.

⁷² See 8:31; 9:1, 3, 4, 6, 16, 18, 19, 20 (x2), 21, 22, 23 (x2), 24, 25, 27, 28, 29 (x2), 31, 34, 35, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 45, 47, 48 (x2), 49, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56.

⁷³ See chapter on Jotham’s Fable.

⁷⁴ Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 185.

⁷⁵ Dietrich, “History and Law,” 318.

The ideological point of view of the narrative is presented in the Abimelech episode through the selection and arrangement of details, but even more strongly through the outcome of events. Throughout this chapter, what has become evident is that by the use of various literary devices the author is drawing attention to the negative aspects of human kingship, the poor decisions of the Shechemites, and the disaster that comes as a result of Israel's lack of faithfulness to Yahweh. Through plot, setting, characterization and word-play, the author has highlighted all of the most negative aspects of kingship in the book of Judges. The anti-monarchic tone of this single episode, while not necessarily a reflection of the message of the entire book of Judges, is very strong in chapter 9. Set within the context of the book of Judges this anti-monarchic theme counter-balances portions of the rest of the book of Judges which appear to be pro-monarchic.

Israel's unfaithfulness and ability to be so easily swayed by the surrounding nations is what brings the tension to the plot. References to physical setting are based on places with religious significance, pointing to Israel's tendency to worship the baals. The characterization of various characters including Abimelech, the *baals* of Shechem and God emphasize the negative aspects of human kingship as well as the heavy Canaanization of Israel that has taken place. Finally, through word choice and wordplay the author has drawn attention to the theme of leadership, especially emphasizing the inappropriateness of the particular leadership under which Israel is living during this time. It is evident that through the use of these various literary devices the narrator offers a negative depiction of human kingship.

Chapter 5

JOTHAM'S FABLE

JUDGES 9:6-21

Introduction

Judges 9:8-15, commonly known as Jotham's fable, plays an important role in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. Since this literary genre is relatively uncommon in the OT it captures the attention of the reader and suggests that its content may be of particular importance. This chapter will consider various theories on the rhetorical function and message of the fable of Judg 9, particularly focusing on its message concerning kingship. With a close examination of the fable, its deliverer, characters, audience and moral, its role in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative will become much more clear. Since the fable is a different genre from its surrounding narrative it requires a different evaluative approach.

While the fable constitutes a genre different from narrative it is important also to note that it has been very intentionally set within the narrative. Block says that, "These verses are intentionally integrated with the surrounding narrative by the introductory comment in v. 7 and an epilogic statement in v. 21."¹ The careful integration of the fable into the narrative emphasizes the importance of discerning the role and purpose of the fable within the surrounding story. The question of why the author chooses to use this particular genre at this point in the story and what that ought to communicate to the reader is explored in this chapter.

¹ Block, *Judges*, 315.

The Literary Genre of the Fable

Since the fable is clearly a different genre from its surrounding narrative it ought to be interpreted in light of other such material within the OT. In order to do so one must identify the literary category to which the fable belongs. Tatu points out that the term fable refers to “a literary text in which the characters are non-humans equipped with human abilities, feelings, habits, and the moral before the finish spells out the meaning of the plot.”² Block describes Jotham’s fable as “the finest example in Scripture of a fable,” which he proceeds to define as “a short narrative in poetry or prose that teaches a moral lesson and involves creatures, plants, and/or inanimate objects speaking or behaving like human characters.”³ While fables are very infrequent in the OT, the broader category under which they fall, *meshalim*, are more frequent. Niditch describes the *mashal* as, “a form of oblique and artful communication (a saying, an icon, a narrative, a symbolic action, or another form) that sets up an analogy between the communication and the real-life settings of the listeners.”⁴ Stein points out that the term *mashal* covers a breadth of meaning including the following categories: proverb (i.e. Ezek 16:44); taunt (i.e. Deut 28:37); riddle (i.e. Ps 78:2); parable (i.e. 2 Sam 12:1-7); allegory (i.e. Ezek 17:2-21).⁵ Snodgrass comments on this breadth of meaning and suggests that the dominant theme that ties these together is the idea of comparison. He then concludes, very broadly, that “a *mashal* is any saying meant to stimulate thought and provide insight.”⁶ Stein has not included fables in his list as outlined above, yet many scholars simply understand fables

² Tatu, “Crux,” 108.

³ Block, *Judges*, 316.

⁴ Niditch, *Judges*, 116.

⁵ Stein, “Genre,” 41. Stein does not include Jotham’s fable in his list of OT parables. Instead it is listed under “Additional Dimensions of the Term ‘*Mashal*’ alone with “figurative discourses” and “odes or poems.” See also Stein, “Parables,” 31.

⁶ Snodgrass, “Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 39.

as parables.⁷ Considering Jotham's fable in particular, Stein says that although it is not specifically referred to as a *mashal* or parable, it should still be considered as such.⁸ With this understanding the terms fable and parable may be used interchangeably throughout this study and the function and interpretation of parables in general will be applied to the fable, in particular.

The Literary-Rhetorical Function of Parables

The appearance of a parable is particularly striking in OT narrative. Snodgrass lists twelve OT parables: 2 Sam 12:1-14; Isa 5:1-7; 2 Sam 14:1-20; 1 Kgs 20:35-42; Judg 9:7-15; 2 Kgs 14:9-10; Ezek 16:1-54; 17:2-24; 19:2-9; 19:10-14; 23:1-49; 24:3-14. He points out that each of these parables is accompanied by explanations and that, "the accounts are not general stories, but context-specific. They were told to mirror specific realities. They are stories with intent."⁹ Each of these parables function within their surrounding narrative for a particular purpose.

Sternberg suggests that the rhetorical function of the parable is quite important in biblical narrative because it provides the narrator "with a 'natural' justification for recasting the facts of his case – however well-known to the addressee – into the terms that will best serve his purpose."¹⁰ Thus, even if the main point of the narrative has already been addressed through the words and actions of characters or through overt

⁷ See Beavis "Parable and Fable"; Stein, "Genre"; Evans "Parables"; Amit, *Reading*; Westermann, *Parables of Jesus*.

⁸ Stein, "Genre," 31. Interestingly, Stern points out that, "Only in Rabbinic literature does the word *mashal* become a formal generic title for parables and fables... The conventional translation of *mashal* as 'parable' ultimately derives, it seems, from the Septuagint, which first renders *mashal* as *parabolē*"; Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 9-10.

⁹ Snodgrass, "Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 40.

¹⁰ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 428.

evaluation by the narrator, the parable gives occasion for reiteration of the point.¹¹ With this in mind, the role of Jotham's fable within the Gideon-Abimelech narrative is immensely important. The parable gives the opportunity for the narrator "to present the new version to his audience in an objective guise and to invest the moral with general validity."¹² In OT narrative, parables are used to teach a lesson while keeping the messenger of the lesson out of harm's way.

Of particular importance for this fable is that parables are frequently "an indirect means by which a person of lower status confronts one with power over him or her (e.g. 2 Sam 12:1-15; 14:1-20)."¹³ While Jotham did not necessarily have a lower status than the Shechemites, he still speaks as one who is fairly powerless, especially considering the fact that his audience had just aided Abimelech in killing 69 of his brothers. Block says that "precisely because he has no power politically, he chooses a powerful rhetorical device."¹⁴ Jotham was not in a socially advantageous situation so his address to the Shechemites had to be delivered in a delicate manner. The form of the fable allows him to be slightly removed from the problem that is at hand.

Stein suggests that parables have two main functions: "They enhance communication and they assist persuasion... They perform the latter by disarming their hearers and by piercing through defenses and resistance. They can do this because the

¹¹ Schöpfli refers to the fable as 'metaphorical narrative' and says that it has rhetorical value because it makes people listen, attracts their attention, and appeals to their emotions. At the same time it is clear to the hearers or readers that the narrative is something fictitious because its protagonists are animals or plants. So they recognize that they have to translate these metaphors into everyday language. This makes them think about the narrative while they are listening to it, as they have to find out its meaning. The speaker then explains the story to them, offering an interpretation and application. As a rule, the metaphorical narrative implies some criticism regarding the persons the speaker of the story addresses. As it includes a reproach for some fault and the consequences of the latter, metaphorical narratives and their interpretations are a variation of doom prophecy. Like prophecies of doom they are analytic and predictive or warning in character; Schöpfli, "Jotham's Speech," 18-19.

¹² Sternberg, *Poetics*, 428.

¹³ Niditch, *Judges*, 116.

¹⁴ Block, *Judges*, 315.

analogy in a parable is different from the sensitive reality with which it is dealing.”¹⁵

Using Nathan’s parable as an example he explains that by veiling the actual issue at hand Nathan was able to confront David even in regard to the sensitive issue of his adultery and murder. What makes Jotham’s fable different from this is that the audience did not respond to the parable with changed hearts. As a result, even the veiling of the message that occurred through the use of the fable was not able to protect Jotham and he was forced to flee and hide (9:21).

Snodgrass argues that, “The immediate aim of a parable is to be compellingly interesting, and in being interesting it diverts attention and disarms. A parable’s ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, *and* move to action.”¹⁶ In the case of Jotham’s fable it is clear that despite his efforts, those being addressed are not being impacted deeply enough to motivate them to correct their mistakes. Thus, it would seem that the parable serves very little immediate purpose. While in other OT parables the audience of the parable is moved to action, this is not the case with Jotham’s fable and the Shechemites. Sternberg, however, suggests that in this case “[Jotham’s] failure is the narrator’s success.”¹⁷ He claims that the Shechemites’ disregard for the parable and subsequent lack of action helps to push the storyline forward to the enactment of the very moral of the parable which had been ignored. This comes to fruition in the destruction of the people of Shechem as well as Abimelech, their ruler.¹⁸

¹⁵ Stein, “Genre,” 38.

¹⁶ Snodgrass, “Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 8.

¹⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 429.

¹⁸ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 429.

Interpreting a Parable

In order to proceed with an interpretation of this portion of Judg 9 it is essential to understand how a parable ought to be interpreted. There is some debate among scholars concerning this issue. Throughout the history of interpretation it was common to treat parables as a series of allegories. However, Jülicher (1910) challenged this method and suggested that rather than finding allegorical connections for each element within a parable one ought to look instead for one main point or dominant theme that arises out of the parable.¹⁹ Among those who have adopted this view of interpreting the parables is Westermann, who suggests that one ought to distinguish between allegorical interpretation, in which the meaning is determined from the individual features, from parables, in which the meaning is determined from the story as a whole.²⁰ Stein agrees, saying, “In interpreting a parable... one should not search for various meanings, but for *the* meaning. Details in a parable simply provide local color and interest. They do not possess meaning in themselves, but only contribute to *the* meaning of the text.”²¹

Similarly, Blomberg points out that, “Modern scholarship has rightly rejected allegorical interpretation in favor of an approach which sees each parable as making only one main point.”²² His concern is that it is apparent that the elaborate allegorization of parables appears to be rather arbitrary. In such cases, it would be more effective to attempt to identify one overarching theme of the parable.²³ However, he later points out that some allegory is clearly evident in parables and cannot be ignored. He says that “the primary details which disclose an allegorical level of meaning are the narratives’ principal

¹⁹ Westermann, *Parables of Jesus*, 12.

²⁰ Westermann, *Parables of Jesus*, 13.

²¹ Stein, “Genre,” 31.

²² Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 16.

²³ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 16.

characters, and the meanings ascribed to them must be ones which the stories' original audiences could have been expected to grasp in their historical setting."²⁴ He makes clear that even though some allegory may be present in the parables this *does not* mean that each detail of the story is an allegory. "The main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation, and the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these characters."²⁵ Thus, while characters in the parable are often aligned with characters in the surrounding narrative the majority of the attention ought still to be awarded to the one main point of the parable. On a similar note, Stern says that, "Even if a mashal's narrative personifies abstract concepts, entities, and relationship – God, the Community of Israel, the covenant – those features of the mashal, be they called allegorical or symbolic or referential, exist only for the sake of enabling its audience to grasp for themselves the ulterior message that the mashal bears."²⁶ So, in the task of interpreting a parable it is not that one ought to disregard any significant details in the parable, but rather that one should not be concerned with aligning every detail of the parable with a counterpart in the surrounding narrative.²⁷

The Audience of the Parable

As mentioned previously, a primary purpose of a parable is to communicate a truth in order to convict and move the audience to take action. The immediate intention

²⁴ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 68. Hultgren says that, "The interpreter should recognize allegorical elements wherever they exist and respect them. Moreover, more than one symbol can appear in a given parable. But in the final analysis the interpreter should not work under the assumption that there are hidden meanings within the text that can be brought out by allegorizing." Referring to the parables of Jesus he states that, "it is necessary to observe that some parables are allegorical through and through"; Hultgren, *Parables*, 14.

²⁵ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 166.

²⁶ Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 11-12.

²⁷ In regard to Jotham's fable, Blumhorn suggests that "We do not need to pay attention to every detail of the fable, since the application applies the fable as a whole rather than individual parts of it"; Blumhorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 217-218.

of a biblical parable is to “influence the person addressed.”²⁸ Therefore, in order to understand what a parable is communicating the interpreter must first understand who, in particular, the parable is addressing. It is often the case that the parable is successful in provoking a response from the one addressed. Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12) provides an excellent example of this. Outraged by Nathan’s story of the poor man’s lamb and unaware that he, himself, was the guilty party, David calls judgment upon himself. Through the parable Nathan successfully opens David’s eyes to the gravity of the crimes that he has committed. The parable is meant to convince David that he is guilty of a terrible crime and this goal is achieved.²⁹ Since the primary goal of the parable is to move the audience to action the parable automatically calls attention to the inappropriate actions of those being addressed. While peripheral issues may be addressed and significant details ought to be noticed, the main theme of the parable is that which applies directly to the immediate audience of the parable.

Procedure for Interpreting the Fable

In order to understand what the author is communicating through Jotham’s fable and its place in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative it is important to first implement various appropriate methods of narrative criticism. These include a close consideration of plot, setting, characterization, word choice, repetition, literary pattern and divergence from pattern. Since the parable form is different from regular narrative, some of these literary conventions will be approached slightly differently. For example, while some attention must be given to the creatures in order to identify any qualities that will connect them with the narrative, characterization (other than that of Jotham) will not be as concerned

²⁸ Westermann, *Parables of Jesus*, 21.

²⁹ Other instances where the hearer of the parable pronounces judgment on himself are 2 Sam 14:1-20; 1 Kgs 20:35-43; Isa 5:1-7. Evans, “Parables,” 65-66.

with these attributes as it is concerned with the connection between fable and the narrative circumstances surrounding the fable. Then, the parable ought to be considered in light of the application provided by Jotham. This may provide insight into any connections that ought to be made between the characters in the fable and the characters in the surrounding narrative. The main theme and purpose of the parable may be identified in light of both its content and its audience. After considering the fable and its application one may consider how the fable has been incorporated into its surrounding narrative and in turn and its broader purpose in the narrative.

In order to provide an adequate interpretation of this fable this study will proceed as follows:

- 1) Consider the characterization of Jotham.
- 2) Consider the setting in which the fable is being delivered including physical location, the circumstance in which it is being delivered and the immediate audience to whom Jotham is speaking.
- 3) Proceed with analysis of the fable moving through the fable, verse-by-verse, dealing with issues of setting, characterization, pattern and divergence from pattern, wordplay, word choice, as well as any other relevant literary features of the fable. This study will not focus on the plot of the fable since the place of the fable within the plot of the Abimelech narrative is of greater significance.
- 4) Compare the events of the fable with Jotham's application of it paying particular attention to areas of divergence.
- 5) Compare the fable and Jotham's application with the events in the surrounding narrative paying particular attention to those connections between the two which

are clearly parallel. This will assist in gaining an understanding of the meaning of the fable. This will be done without the intention of aligning every detail in the fable with a narrative counterpart. Where appropriate these comparisons will also be made throughout the analysis of the fable (see #3 above).

- 6) Identify the main theme of the fable by considering the components of the analysis as outlined above.
- 7) Identify the role and purpose of the fable as set within its narrative context considering points of contention or similarity particularly in thematic material.

Characterization

Jotham is a crucial character in the narrative of Judg 9. As mentioned in this study's chapter on Abimelech's Reign and Fall, Jotham appears at the climax of the narrative. In a narrative where the key players demonstrate questionable character, Jotham stands out as an admirable hero. Block points out that even "Jotham's name is an expression of true Yahwistic faith: 'the LORD is perfect/honest.'"³⁰ The narrator's presentation of Jotham continues to be quite positive and Webb points out that "he has been adopted by the narrator as his own *alter ego*, the character in the story who gives voice to the narrator's own interpretation of the situation."³¹ By presenting Jotham in this way, the narrator prepares the reader to trust the words and actions of Jotham and to consider him a reliable source of information regarding the events of the past as well as the future.

³⁰ Block, *Judges*, 315. He also notes (n. 772) that "יֹתָם is an abbreviated sentence name from יְהוָה + תָּמָם, bearing assonantal links with אֱמֶת, 'truth, integrity.'"

³¹ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 157.

The characterization of Jotham is interesting in that he is not only a man of many words but also a man of many actions. From the very introduction of Jotham he stands out to the reader since, out of all of his brothers, he was the only one who was able to escape the ruthless violence of his brother. This is peculiar in light of the emphasis that has been placed on mentioning the seventy brothers and the seventy pieces of silver that were used to hire (presumably seventy) worthless and reckless men in order to carry out the job. Since Jotham was able to escape, perhaps Abimelech's hired help was even more worthless than he bargained for. None of Abimelech's other brothers are mentioned by name and none have any recorded action, but somehow Jotham was able to hide himself. Block points out that "the narrator had mentioned this small detail only in passing and had immediately resumed the main plot line concerning Abimelech, as if the usurper would have it all his way. But the early reference to Jotham has created an expectation for a complication in the plot."³²

Since there is a theme throughout OT narratives of the youngest son rising to a place of prominence it is interesting that Jotham, the youngest, was able to escape.³³ At this point in the narrative, the reader wonders whether or not Jotham, himself, will succeed his father instead of Abimelech. Perhaps this was motivation enough for Jotham to step out and speak against the *baals* of Shechem who made Abimelech their king. It is difficult to ignore the fact that if Jotham is able to convince the *baals* of Shechem to turn against Abimelech then Jotham would be the only remaining son of Gideon and would be the rightful heir. In light of this trend in OT narrative this could not go unmentioned.

³² Block, *Judges*, 315.

³³ See discussion of youngest son motif in Chapter 3 of this study.

Whatever Jotham's motivation was, he mustered up the confidence to stand before the *baals* of Shechem and challenge their decision to make Abimelech king. In 9:7 Jotham's actions are described through a string of verbs which lend a sense of haste, emphasis, and perhaps urgency to the message that Jotham is about to share: "Then he stood at the top of Mount Gerizim. Then he lifted his voice. Then he called out. Then he said..." These four actions all lead to the one final result which is offering a challenge to the *baals* of Shechem in the form of a fable. The redundancy of these verbs is emphatic and slows the narrative in order to draw the attention of the reader to this very important parable that Jotham is about to deliver. Then, following the address to the *baals* of Shechem, Jotham is described in v. 21 as performing another string of actions: "Then Jotham fled (נוס). Then he fled (ברח). Then he went to Beer. Then he dwelt there..."

This description offers the same sort of redundancy as the previous description of Jotham's actions. The reader is left with the impression that just as there was urgency in Jotham's address to the *baals* of Shechem, so was there urgency and haste in his escape.³⁴

Having narrowly escaped the mass fratricide, Jotham was not willing to stick around in order to find out what might happen to him. In this, the narrator points out an element of fearfulness in Jotham's character. This is reminiscent of Gideon early in his career, especially as in Judg 6:27 when he tore down the Baal altar in the night because he was too afraid to do it in the day. It also draws the reader's attention back to Gideon's first born son, Jether who was afraid to kill the kings of Midian (8:20). Yet even through Jotham's fear there was an element of great courage. Despite his disadvantageous

³⁴ Block points out that "Since he is the only survivor of a family murdered by his half-brother, he cannot enter Shechem to make his point. Therefore he must speak from the mountain outside the city, and he must flee for his life as soon as he is through with his speech"; Block, *Judges*, 315.

situation he still took his place atop Mount Gerizim in order to challenge the *baals* of Shechem for their unwise decision of making Abimelech king. Since the theme of Jotham's fable has such a strong emphasis on kingship it is crucial to note the attention that the author has drawn to this section by emphasizing the urgency of the actions of Jotham both immediately preceding and following his speech.

In Jotham's opening words to the Shechemites he makes reference to God, as though he has the authority to speak on his behalf. He commands them to listen to him so that God will listen to them (9:7).³⁵ Scholars have various speculations concerning the narrator's depiction of Jotham at this point in the narrative. What is the purpose of Jotham's reference to God? Block suggests that "unlike Abimelech who is driven entirely by self-interest, Jotham seems to have the best interests of the Shechemites at heart, holding out the possibility that they may receive a hearing with God."³⁶ On the other hand, Boda suggests that "while it is possible that this is an invitation for them to seek God penitentially, it is more likely that it is a way of gaining attention by posing as a prophet who has special access to the heavenly realms."³⁷ If it is the case that Jotham is simply using God as leverage to put forth his own agenda, then the reader is inclined to take the message of the fable less seriously.

However, some scholars suggest that Jotham's appeal to God is an indication that he fulfills an actual prophetic role similar to that of the prophet who appears to the Israelites early in the Gideon narrative. Block says that, "In function and content Jotham's speech parallels that of the prophet in 6:7-10. In the former the prophet had

³⁵ This is not a simple conditional clause (i.e. "if... then") but rather it is a consequential clause. Waltke and O'Connor say that after a volitional form the *waw* copulative has a consequential force. Therefore rather than "if... then," it is "command... consequence"; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 563.

³⁶ Block, *Judges*, 316.

³⁷ Boda, "Judges," draft p. 26.

brought a lawsuit against the people of Israel in the name of Yahweh. Here Jotham brings a lawsuit against the lords of Shechem in the name of his father Jerubbaal. Covenant language flavors both.”³⁸ Perhaps by having Jotham claim divine association the author is attributing authority to his voice. In doing so the reader becomes more willing to accept the authority of the message of the parable. This also emphasizes the importance of the content of the message of Jotham’s fable, particularly because God is mentioned so infrequently throughout chapter 9. It seems that Jotham’s fable holds at least some merit since the prediction that he makes concerning Abimelech and the Shechemites does come to pass.

Setting: Mount Gerizim

The setting in which Jotham delivers his speech to the *baals* of Shechem is important for a couple of reasons. First of all, it is important to note that vv. 6-7 indicate that he delivers this address immediately following the inauguration of Abimelech, while they were still gathered. Since Jotham has already only narrowly escaped his own death at the hands of these men, the location from which he delivers this speech is crucial. The narrator points out that Jotham went to the *top* of Mt. Gerizim. There, out of harm’s reach, Jotham proceeds to deliver a challenging address to the Shechemites. The fact that Jotham was still in danger is emphasized also in the narrative following his speech as he flees because of his brother, Abimelech (9:21).

³⁸ Block, *Judges*, 315. Also see Schöpfung who suggests that, “Within Judges 9 the metaphorical narrative reinforces Jotham’s function as a prophetic figure whose warning becomes true. Although the epithet “prophet” is not attached to Jotham... he is like one of the series of prophets confronting kings later on in the history of Israel as it is given in Samuel and Kings; Schöpfung, “Jotham’s Speech,” 19.

Jotham's location on top of Mt. Gerizim is also important within the context of the broader narrative since it has been the site of previous significant events for Israel.

Matthews points out that:

The account in Deut 27:11-28 identifies Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal as cultic centers from which the Levites pronounce blessings and curses based on obedience or disobedience to the covenant. Jotham's parable and curse therefore occur on a significant site and thereby obtain greater authority in the condemnation of Abimelech and the lords of Shechem.³⁹

In the context of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative this is of particular importance. Since covenant loyalty is so closely related to this location, Jotham's address from that point is even more striking. From the outset, there is an indication that the issue being addressed in the fable, as well as in the wider Gideon-Abimelech narrative, is that Yahweh's covenant people continuously fail to remain faithful to him.

Who is Jotham's Audience?

In order to understand the meaning of a parable one must identify the initial audience to which the parable was addressed. As outlined above, a parable typically calls to attention a specific wrongdoing of its immediate audience. Jotham's initial words from the top of Mount Gerizim make his intended audience clear. He says in 9:7, "Listen to me, *baals* of Shechem." There is no hint that the parable was directed toward Abimelech, instead it is clearly addressed to the *baals* of Shechem. Block agrees as he says that, "Jotham does not attack Abimelech directly; this address is for the citizens of the city."⁴⁰ Therefore, the primary moral or message of this fable is a judgment against the *baals* of Shechem.

³⁹ Matthews, *Judges*, 105. See also Brown, *Judges*, 208.

⁴⁰ Block, *Judges*, 316.

This becomes clear throughout the fable. If the reader is to equate Abimelech with the bramble, it does not seem that his actions are being called into question. As will be addressed later, by labeling Abimelech as the bramble the narrator does make a judgment about the character of Abimelech. However, since this parable is clearly addressed to the Shechemites, this belittling of Abimelech further emphasizes the poor judgment of the Shechemites in agreeing to make him their king. Also, when considering Jotham's post-fable address (9:16-20) it is interesting to note that in 9:18 he condemns the Shechemites for the murder of the seventy sons of Jerubbaal. Since the murder of the seventy sons of Jerubbaal has been attributed to Abimelech on two other occasions in this narrative (9:5, 24), perhaps it is the case that in this instance the narrator is purposely drawing attention to the misdeeds of the Shechemites (as representative of all Israel).

While it is obvious that Abimelech acted treacherously throughout chapter 9, it is also clear that those treacherous acts are not the focus of Jotham's fable. Jotham's concern is that the Shechemites understand the gravity of their actions in making Abimelech king. While the narrator, the authoritative voice of the narrative, places the guilt of this crime mostly upon Abimelech (9:5, 56), it is also made clear that Shechem played a crucial role and they are not innocent in the matter. The Israelites are not merely victims of corrupt leadership. They are the ones who have empowered Abimelech to act in his treacherous ways. This fact is confirmed in the narrator's evaluation in 9:24 which attributes the murder of the seventy sons of Jerubbaal to Abimelech, yet also condemns the "*baals* of Shechem who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers."

It is clear that the fable is directed toward the *baals* of Shechem, who, in the Gideon-Abimelech narrative are representatives of Israel, as a whole. The function of this

within the Gideon-Abimelech narrative is to draw the attention away from the protagonists, who up to this point, have been receiving a considerable amount of attention, and redirect that attention toward the Israelites. Since Gideon and Abimelech have been the focus of attention it is easy to overlook the role of the Israelites in the devastation that has come to them. The Israelites are the consistently present characters throughout the book of Judges. It is because of their infidelity that they are repeatedly given over to their enemies. During the previous judge cycles where the judges are seen in a much more positive light this negative attention is still clearly placed upon the Israelites. However, since the faults of Gideon and Abimelech have been so clearly highlighted in Judg 6-9 the reader may begin to lose sight of the fact that Israel is in this dire state because of their own lack of faithfulness to Yahweh. Also, just as kingship has been presented negatively where the focus is on Gideon (Judg 6-8) and Abimelech (Judg 9:1-6, 22-57) so it will be demonstrated that kingship is presented negatively in Judg 9:7-21 where the focus is on the Israelites. Israel's unfaithfulness is the cause of the downward spiral that has been propelled further by the Gideon-Abimelech narrative.

**The Fable:
Plot, Characterization, Pattern and Other Stylistic Features**

The Trees

There is little debate over the community of trees who are in search of a king. It seems quite clear that the trees who are seeking a king are representative of the Shechemites (and all of Israel). It is evident that Israel desperately desires a human king to reign over them. If this had not already been made clear enough through their offer of kingship to Gideon in 8:22, then surely it is clarified as Abimelech is installed as king over them in 9:6. This desperation is demonstrated in a number of ways throughout the

fable. From the outset of the story this is evident in the emphatic first words: “The trees indeed went (הָלֹךְ הָלְכוּ)...” (9:8).⁴¹ This gives the reader a clear impression that the trees are on a mission and are determined to find a ruler for themselves.

The trees approach three different, very fruitful trees in search of a ruler. First, they make the offer to the olive tree: “Reign over us!” (9:8). After the olive tree refuses the offer the same offer is made to the fig tree and the vine, each of which respond in a very similar manner to the first. Each of these trees describes the way in which they are productive by carrying out the task that has already been assigned to them. The olive tree produces valuable oil (9:9), the fig tree produces sweet fruit (9:11) and the vine produces valuable wine (9:13). Their refusals suggest that to become king would be to give up a productive and valuable role for one of much less worth. Niditch points out that, “the various examples of vegetation insist that they are too important and worthwhile to be king.”⁴²

Since throughout Judg 9 the reader is consistently reminded of the Canaanite influence over Israel, it is significant to note that in the response of both the olive tree and the vine there is a reference to “gods and humans.” Boda points out that this suggests “a view of the heavenly court more akin to the Canaanite pantheon than to Israelite orthodoxy, not surprising in light of the conditions of the time in the wake of Gideon’s activities.”⁴³ This reference to Canaanite influence is quite consistent throughout Judg 9 and reminds the reader that the Israelites have, once again, caved under the influence of

⁴¹ This is made clear by the emphatic use of the infinitive absolute plus the finite verb of the same root.

⁴² Niditch, *Judges*, 116.

⁴³ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 27.

the surrounding nations. They no longer worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, but instead worship the gods of the Canaanites.

What is yet to be determined concerning the refusal of each of these trees is whether or not they were right to refuse the offer.⁴⁴ If what they were doing was productive and they did not believe that “swaying” (נוּגַעַ) over the trees would be productive, then perhaps they made the right decision. Block suggests that, “Unlike Abimelech, whose seizure of the throne was driven by sheer self-interest, each of these trees acknowledged its value to society as a whole and expressed its refusal to abandon what all would recognize as true public service.”⁴⁵ Since royal language is not avoided in the fable the response of each of the trees is most interesting. While the request to each of the productive trees was, “Reign over us!” (מִלְכֵּי עָלֵינוּ), the response that they provided seemed to perceive the title as holding much less significance. Each of them did not want to leave their useful jobs in order to “sway” over the trees (לְנוּגַעַ עַל-הָעֵצִים).⁴⁶ The use of this language appears to be intentional and may be considered as an anti-monarchic statement causing the reader to believe that each of these trees made a wise decision in rejecting the offer of kingship.

However, some will argue that if one of these competent and noble trees had accepted this offer, then the community of trees would not have to resort to approaching the bramble with this request. Some scholars equate these trees with the character of

⁴⁴ Schöpflin understands the trees as a strong symbol of God’s blessing and asks whether or not it would be going too far “to say that when the trees characteristic of God’s blessing refuse to become king, this is an implicit statement that it is an institution contrary to YHWH’S will”; Schöpflin, “Jotham’s Speech,” 15.

⁴⁵ Block, *Judges*, 318.

⁴⁶ Boda points out that “it appears that these plants know what their functions are and thus reject kingship.” Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 26.

Gideon who did turn down the offer of kingship in 8:23. In equating the two, these scholars suggest that the fable offers a judgment of Gideon, who perhaps could have prevented a less worthy ruler from coming to power. Boda, for example, says that, “Jotham’s fable brings to mind not only Shechem’s anointing of Abimelech as king, but also Gideon’s refusal of kingship, suggesting that when good leaders refuse the royal throne, they leave the nation vulnerable to inappropriate royal leadership.”⁴⁷ Maly agrees as he says that “the meaning of the fable... was clearly not directed against kingship itself, but against those who refused, for insufficient reasons, the burden of leadership.”⁴⁸

Dumbrell strongly opposes this as he states that, “It is not that the kingship must be endorsed and that if the best men do not take it up the charlatans will, but that the office of kingship is an unprofitable one, which is not only unproductive, but incapable of offering any real protection to the community.”⁴⁹ Also, since it has already been established that the parable is directed toward the Shechemites (and Israel as a whole), the primary concern is to call attention to the negative actions of the Shechemites. The responses given by the stronger, useful trees offer an indication to the reader that even they are not a good choice for the position of king over the community of trees. The fable is not addressed to Gideon and could not possibly be calling him to action. Thus, while these noble trees who refuse the offer may be representative of Gideon it seems unlikely that the fable is suggesting that Gideon should have accepted the offer. If the fable is meant to help the immediate audience understand a truth and call them to take action, then the change must take place through the actions of the Shechemites who have strengthened Abimelech to rise to this place of power. Beyond its immediate context,

⁴⁷ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 23.

⁴⁸ Maly, “The Jotham Fable,” 303.

⁴⁹ Dumbrell, “In Those Days,” 29.

then, it may be a warning to Israel that appointing their own king will be a fruitless effort and that it is only as they allow Yahweh to have that place, making decisions about their rulers, that they will experience effective and productive leadership. Jotham's target audience are the people of Shechem and the primary judgment and warning is against them for making Abimelech king.

For the following reasons it seems unlikely that through Jotham's fable the narrator is suggesting that Gideon should have accepted the offer of kingship: 1) The deuteronomic law concerning kingship instructs Israel, "You will indeed set over you a king whom Yahweh, your God chooses" (Deut 17:15). While Yahweh did call Gideon to deliver Israel from Midian, there is no record in the narrative that Yahweh called him to reign as king over Israel.⁵⁰ 2) Gideon's refusal of the position of king was necessary in light of the motivation of the Israelites in their offer.⁵¹ They invited him to reign over them on the grounds that he has delivered them from the Midianites. However, the narrator makes it very clear throughout Judg 7-8 that victory over Midian ought to be completely attributed to the work of Yahweh (6:14, 15, 36, 37; 7:2, 7).⁵² Israel does not

⁵⁰ Although, interestingly, Jobling suggests that the fable is a judgment of Gideon, not for his refusal of the throne but for his acceptance of it. He says that, "The fable is strongly anti-monarchical, but it concerns the first beginning of monarchy (the Gideon, not the Abimelech, situation). The rest of the speech complains, not that the people have chosen a king, but that they have chosen the *wrong* king, stressing in particular Abimelech's illegitimacy (v. 18). Once monarchy is in place by the people's initiative (Gideon), it cannot – even from an anti-monarchical point of view – simply be ended by the people's initiative. Yet the people have a responsibility in regard to *which* of the king's sons assumes the throne!"; Jobling, *Sense*, 81.

⁵¹ Boda suggests that, "while Gideon's refusal was appropriate in light of the Israelite desire to install a royal figure for militaristic reasons, his refusal left the nation vulnerable to the abusive royal rule of Abimelech. Appropriate human kingship which recognizes Yahweh's authority may have a role, if only to deter royal courts fashioned after the surrounding nations"; Boda, "Judges," draft p. 27.

⁵² "In every case the same point is made either directly or implicitly: it is Yahweh, not Gideon or the Israelites themselves, who saves Israel"; Webb, *Book of Judges*, 152.

understand that it is Yahweh who continuously goes before them into battle, and therefore they ask Gideon to be their king (8:22).⁵³

Amit also points out the comparison to be made between the noble trees and Gideon. She notes three similar elements between the two: the offer of kingship, the refusal of kingship, and the acceptance of kingship by a much less worthy candidate.⁵⁴ Amit says that, “Gideon did not understand the extent to which the men of Israel were interested in a flesh and blood king, just as the useful trees did not understand how firm was the decision of the other trees to anoint a king.”⁵⁵ However, Gideon’s decision to reject the offer of kingship must be considered the right decision even despite the Israelites’ subsequent actions. Just as the trees in the fable were aware that the role they carried was more useful than agreeing to “sway” over the trees, so Gideon knew that he was fulfilling the role to which Yahweh had called him at the beginning of Judg 6. He had been called to be a judge-deliverer, but not a king over Israel. To take on any role above and beyond that to which Yahweh had called him would be worthless and pointless, a mere “swaying” over the trees. While Gideon’s actions following his refusal of kingship are not ideal, the refusal is still presented by the narrator as an honorable decision.⁵⁶

The Bramble

Up to this point in the trees’ search for a king they have been completely unsuccessful. Three times they have made an offer and three times the offer has been

⁵³ In 1 Sam 8 this is the same reason that Israel offers when demanding a human king. At that time Yahweh clearly speaks out that this is a blatant rejection of his leadership. This is no different in the offer to Gideon in Judg 8, suggesting that Gideon was right to refuse the offer.

⁵⁴ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 108.

⁵⁵ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 109.

⁵⁶ Schöpfli suggests that, “The three “noble” trees, that refuse to accept the position... are a rhetorical means to make Abimelech appear even worse”; Schöpfli, “Jotham’s Speech,” 16.

refused. This repetition of request and refusal leads the reader to believe that perhaps there is no hope for the mission of these trees. Amit identifies this as a three-and-four pattern.⁵⁷ In such a pattern the same actions are carried out three times in a row with the same result each time. However, on the fourth attempt the outcome is different as is evident in Jotham's fable. After experiencing rejection three times in a row the community of trees gather again, determined to set over themselves a king. Amit suggests that this repetition, "serves to illuminate the obsession with monarchy" and "alludes to the dissatisfaction with the rule of God."⁵⁸ Their determination (or perhaps desperation) is also indicated by the slight variation in the fourth request. While previously the story says that the trees (הָעֵצִים) spoke to the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine, here there is a slight variation which says that *all* the trees (כָּל-הָעֵצִים) spoke to the bramble. This time, the response from the royal candidate is different. The bramble does not refuse the offer but instead he accepts it, offering a challenge to the community of trees. The three-and-four device is often used to draw attention to the component of the story where there is a variation from the previously repeated pattern. Amit points out that, "The break in the thrice-repeated rhetorical structure, when the kingship is offered to the bramble, jars the reader but also focuses attention on this most important element in the now-dislocated sequence. The transparent metaphor of the bramble equated with Abimelech then stands out as the blatant risk taken by the elders of Shechem."⁵⁹

There is a general consensus among biblical scholars that the bramble in the fable parallels the character of Abimelech. It is interesting that the fable itself does not

⁵⁷ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 109.

⁵⁸ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 109.

⁵⁹ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 107.

condemn the actions of the bramble. While bramble, in its very nature, is relatively useless and worthless, the bramble in the fable is not attributed with any other negative attributes. Instead, the bramble is the voice within the parable that issues a warning and curse to those offering to make him their king. This does not mean that the bramble is a good choice for a king, but is instead an indication that the attention of the narrator is not on the actions of Abimelech but on those of the Shechemites. The desperation of the trees is so severe that they are blinded to the fact that the bramble would not be an appropriate ruler for them at all. It is clear that Abimelech's actions throughout chapter 9 are reprehensible, yet still that is not the primary focus of this fable.

The response of the bramble is surprising. Tatu states that the bramble's "answer to the invitation the trees presented him to stand for the office is in sharp contrast with the rest, for three reasons: it is much amplified, it is affirmative and conditional, being accompanied by a curse for those who would later on refuse its sovereignty."⁶⁰ The bramble answers that if their offer is genuine then they are invited to come and take refuge in its shade. It seems as though the bramble would not have much to offer in the way of shelter. Block points out that, "The image of trees 'seeking cover' beneath a bramble is absurd, not only for reasons of size, but also because buckthorn offer neither shade nor cover; they have thorns!"⁶¹ Perhaps this ironic invitation is meant to be a wake-up call for the Shechemites. Not only does it seem unlikely that a community of trees could take refuge in the shade of a thorny bramble, but also doing so could put them in danger. The Shechemites were to deduce from this that what they had done in setting Abimelech as their king was equally ridiculous. Just as the bramble would not be able to

⁶⁰ Tatu, "Crux," 110.

⁶¹ Block, *Judges*, 318.

provide the shelter that he was offering, so Abimelech would not be able to provide the kind of leadership that would be helpful for Israel.

Even if the bramble is able to provide shelter for the community of trees it is important to note the danger that may accompany such a situation. In the curse offered by the bramble there is a threat of fire coming forth from the bramble to consume even the mightiest of trees. The only other time this word (טִפְאָה) appears in the OT, the bramble is fuel for a fire.⁶² Amit states that, “the ironic fashioning of the bramble as the one under whose shade they come to take shelter, but whom it would be better for them to fear because of its fire, is a characterization of the unsuccessful attempt to set up a monarchy without divine approval.”⁶³ The community of trees were setting themselves up for disaster, as were the Shechemites.

The bramble’s invitation to take refuge is quickly followed by a warning that if they are not sincere in this offer fire would come out from him, powerful enough to consume the cedars of Lebanon (9:15). Block states that this threat to produce fire himself which would consume the cedars of Lebanon is a reflection of the bramble’s “excessively high self-esteem.” He is stating that, “He will not be king over just any trees; the most majestic trees on earth are subject to him.”⁶⁴ Concerning this Boda states that, “the thorn tree’s promise of refuge is sincere, but its threat against the cedars is

⁶² See Ps 58:9. In this context the word “fire” does not even appear but is assumed, suggesting that this is so obviously an effective fuel that the fire itself need not be mentioned. While this particular word in Jotham’s fable, (טִפְאָה) meaning bramble, occurs only once outside of Judg 9 it is interesting to note that words which share its semantic range generally occur in reference to destruction, pain and/or devastation. See קִינָה, צָוֶה, שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה, שָׂרָה. Many of these are also used in reference to fire but all are used to describe devastation. It is also interesting to note that the word תִּהְיוּ, usually rendered as “bramble” or “brier,” is used in 1 Sam 13:6 to describe a place of refuge.

⁶³ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 109.

⁶⁴ Block, *Judges*, 319.

ridiculous, revealing the foolish desperation of the other trees and the lack of sincerity of the thorn tree.”⁶⁵ However, the threat may not be as foolish as it first appears.

The bramble’s ability to consume the cedars of Lebanon is not reliant on its strength. As mentioned above, bramble is known for its usefulness as fuel for a fire. The bramble does not need strength or great stature in order to consume the mightiest of trees. It only needs its ability to burn and the fire can take care of the destruction. Perhaps then, this is a warning that a less than worthy ruler has the ability to cause an abundance of damage to his subjects. Even more interesting, and fitting within the context of this narrative, is that in order to destroy the community of trees with fire the bramble must burn up, itself. The destruction that the bramble will cause will fall upon itself, as well as those around it.

The Fable and Jotham’s Application

As is the case with other OT parables, Jotham’s fable is followed by an application of the speech for his immediate audience. Webb suggests that, “The main thrust of the speech lies not in the fable itself (vv. 8-15) but in his application of it to the

⁶⁵ Boda, “Judges,” draft p. 27. Brown, on the other hand says concerning this threat that, “the point is clear: Something as insignificant and worthless as a thornbush (Abimelech) had the power to destroy something so grand and noble as the cedars of Lebanon (Shechemites)”; Brown, *Judges*, 208. The point, however, may not be as clear as Brown states. It has already been established that the community of trees are representative of the Shechemites. They have not been previously referred to as “cedars of Lebanon,” nor have they acted with the strength of character that one might expect from a tree as noble and strong as the cedars of Lebanon. It is more likely that the bramble is issuing a warning that the retribution that will come is a serious matter, powerful enough to destroy even the strongest of the tree community. Another understanding of this threat is offered by Tatu who states that, “According to the literary tradition of Mesopotamian ‘contest literature’ a fable would net the non-human characters (in most cases an opposite pair) to duel verbally over their abilities. This tradition is closely followed in The Lebanese Thisde and the Cedar. Therefore, qualities such as shade and combustion to which direct reference is expressed in Jotham’s fable should be considered as real for the fourth plant candidate. Although the majority of authorities interpret the biblical term (תִּצְטַח) as ‘thorn bush,’ it makes more sense both in Gen 50.11-12 and in Jdg 9.14-15 to perceive it as a thorny tree, most likely impressive in stature”; Tatu, “Crux,” 123. However, it seems more likely in the context of this fable that the bramble ought to be considered as relatively useless apart from its ability to burn.

present situation (vv. 16-21).”⁶⁶ This very important application offered by Jotham helps to clarify the connection between the fable and Jotham’s immediate situation. The following chart outlines a comparison of the bramble’s response (9:15) with Jotham’s response (9:16, 19-20).

9:15 The Bramble’s Response	9:16 Jotham’s Interrupted Response	9:19-20 Jotham’s Resumed Response
If in truth	So now if in truth and integrity	So now if truth and integrity
	You have done this	
You are anointing me as king over you	And made Abimelech king	
	And if good you have done with Jerubbaal and with his house	You have done with Jerubbaal and with his house this day
	And if the dealing of his hand you have done to him	
Come. Take refuge in my shade.		Rejoice with Abimelech and let Abimelech indeed rejoice with you.
But if not fire will come out from		But if not fire will come out from
The bramble		Abimelech
And it will consume		And it will consume
The cedars of Lebanon		The <i>baals</i> of Shechem and the house of Millo
		And fire will come out from the <i>baals</i> of Shechem and from the house of Millo and it will consume Abimelech.

It is apparent here that Jotham’s explanation is meant to align, at least in part, with the warning that the bramble offers in v. 15. When these verses are considered section-by-section it is clear that Jotham is concerned with the integrity of the actions of the Shechemites. It is curious that he presents this conditional statement since it is clear that he is aware that they have, indeed, not acted with integrity. It is also interesting that Jotham has added to the fable’s requirement of “truth” (אֱמֶת) alone and adds that they must have acted in “integrity” (תְּמִים).

⁶⁶ Webb, *Book of Judges*, 155.

The issue then moves on from *how* they acted to *what* they did. According to this chart the primary concern is their motivation and method in making Abimelech king. The bramble questions the motivation for this act in the fable and Jotham reiterates it in the explanation. The question is whether or not they acted with truth and integrity in making Abimelech king. Beyond that, Jotham's concern is the way that this affected Jerubbaal and his house. Twice he questions whether or not the *baals* of Shechem have acted in truth and integrity on this matter.⁶⁷ Both the bramble and Jotham offer a reward for suitable behaviour in this regard. For the community of trees the reward is taking refuge in the shade of the bramble and for the Shechemites the reward is rejoicing with Abimelech.

In examining this section vv. 17-18 have not been considered since they are not parallel with the above verses. They do, however, play a very important role in Jotham's explanation of the fable. These verses contain the tangent that interrupted Jotham's application of the fable, which up to this point, was following the fable quite closely. Here, Jotham reminds the *baals* of Shechem that his father fought on their behalf, risking his life in order to deliver them from the hand of Midian. He then proceeds to condemn them for rising against the house of Jerubbaal, killing his seventy sons and making Abimelech, the son of Jerubbaal's concubine, king. The content of this tangent makes it clear that the *baals* of Shechem have not treated Jerubbaal and his house as they deserved. Jotham clearly states that they have committed these specific wrongs against his family. It is interesting then, that the line preceding this tangent (v. 16) as well as the

⁶⁷ This issue may have been of special importance to Jotham since it is his family who was killed in order for Abimelech to rise to this position. If Jotham can convince the *baals* of Shechem to realize their wrongdoing against the house of Jerubbaal then maybe his life would be spared and possibly the *baals* of Shechem would realize who was the proper legitimate heir to Gideon's position of leadership.

line following it (v. 19) suggest that it is even possible that they treated the house of Jerubbaal with the respect they deserve. Verse 16 says, “And if you have done good to Jerubbaal and his house and if you have treated him fairly...” and v. 19 resumes with, “If in truth and integrity you have dealt with Jerubbaal and with his house this day...” While the repetition of a line is commonly used in the resumption of a speech that has been left behind due to the tangential habit of the speaker, this repetition is especially interesting since it is clearly not the case that the *baals* of Shechem will fall into this category.⁶⁸ The repetition draws the reader’s attention and its ironic content reminds the reader that the fable is condemning the actions of the *baals* of Shechem (as representatives of all Israel) for the wrong they have done against the house of Jerubbaal, including making Abimelech king.

If the addressees of the fable so clearly do not fit into the category of those who have dealt with truth and integrity toward the house of Jerubbaal, then what is the purpose of describing the reward for such appropriate behaviour? Jotham says, “If in truth and integrity you have dealt with Jerubbaal and his house and if you have treated him as he deserves then rejoice with Abimelech and let him also rejoice with you” (9:19). Perhaps since the author so closely aligns Jotham’s application with the fable, here he inserts this line with complete confidence that this will never happen. In fact, one might say that the chances of Abimelech and the *baals* of Shechem rejoicing in one another are

⁶⁸ However, Niditch notes here that, “The Israelite author may be suggesting that monarchy is a necessary evil and that many kings are useless, but the political arrangement, flawed as it is, has a chance to work only when both parties enter into the agreement in good faith. Jotham’s application of the *māšāl* continues this line of thought and directs a stinging critique at Abimelech’s coup and his kingship”; Niditch, *Judges*, 116.

about the same as the chance of the community of trees being able to take refuge in the shade of the bramble (9:15).

Since the *baals* of Shechem did not treat the house of Jerubbaal as they should have, the curse that is to follow in v. 20 is of utmost importance and ought to be considered seriously by the reader. The threat now against the *baals* of Shechem and the house of Millo is that fire will come out from Abimelech and consume them. This section of Jotham's explanation most closely mirrors the text of the fable: "But if not, fire will come out from the bramble/Abimelech and it will consume the cedars of Lebanon/the *baals* of Shechem and the house of Millo." Perhaps the almost verbatim repetition of this line is meant to draw attention to it. This is especially interesting in light of the outcome of the Abimelech story in which fire does come from Abimelech to kill the *baals* of Shechem. It is also interesting that the house of Millo is included here since they are only recorded as being present at the coronation of Abimelech (9:6), but were not present throughout the remainder of the narrative.⁶⁹ Mention of the house of Millo reminds the reader of their last appearance, the inauguration of Abimelech, and draws the attention back to the improper action of those who assisted in making Abimelech king. Perhaps this ought to be viewed as a direct condemnation of that act.

Finally, in Jotham's explanation he adds that not only would those who set Abimelech as king be killed, but also Abimelech himself. This is interesting since in the parable there is no explicit reference to the bramble being destroyed. However, as mentioned previously the destruction of the bramble is, at the very least, implied since its means of causing destruction requires that the bramble itself would be consumed.

⁶⁹ Perhaps Amit has lost sight of this as she notes that, "The situation of anointing a king, which is the central theme of the parable, is hardly referred to in the moral. This is the main reason for the inconsistency between the parable and the reality which it is meant to represent"; Amit, *Art of Editing*, 105.

Through the fable Jotham is communicating that Shechem's eagerness to set a king over themselves led them to act in poor judgment, setting over themselves a king who is so inadequate for the position that he would eventually bring destruction not only to Shechem but also to himself.⁷⁰

Thus, the fable and its application draw attention to the misdeeds of the Shechemites in making Abimelech their king. Bluedorn identifies the primary theme of the fable and application as the Shechemites' lack of loyalty to Yahweh their God in conspiring with Abimelech against the house of Jerubbaal and making Abimelech king.⁷¹ This poor judgment is highlighted by the narrator's negative characterization of Abimelech in representing him as useless, destructive bramble. While the main emphasis in the fable is on the Shechemites, the narrator is sure to point out in the application of the fable that Shechem's unworthy ruler would also be punished for his offences. The narrative that follows (9:22-57) will focus on Abimelech's rule and fall, consistently pointing out his errors and unworthiness for the position of king. Jotham's fable, however, keeps as its primary focus the Shechemites who, in their desperation, were foolish enough to choose such an unworthy candidate. Thus, just as the narrator sheds a negative light on kingship with a focus on Gideon and Abimelech, here the same is accomplished with a focus on the Israelites. Their decision to make Abimelech king would lead to disaster, as predicted in this fable.

⁷⁰ This image of fire offers a picture of mutual destruction. Fire will come out from the bramble and as the great trees are being consumed fire will also come out from them. On this Brown offers a simple explanation stating that, "In essence, he said that they deserved nothing better than each other and would eventually destroy each other by fire. Justice would demand their mutual destruction because they had together destroyed his father's family"; Brown, *Judges*, 208.

⁷¹ Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism*, 223.

The Fable and Reality

It is clear that the events of Jotham's fable do not perfectly coincide with the events of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative. Because of this there are a number of issues that are points of contention among scholars. Amit outlines six ways in which scholars deal with the tensions in the parable: 1) Some say that the proclamation of the parable is an actual historical situation; 2) Some suggest that Jotham never existed but is simply a symbol; 3) Some suggest that the inconsistencies can be explained by Jotham using an already existing parable; 4) Some suggest that the use of the parable genre does not require that all of the details correspond; 5) Some suggest that the inconsistency expresses the anti-monarchic approach; and finally 6) Some suggest that the meaning of the fable is about rejection of a certain type of king and/or manner of anointing.⁷² Amit then explains that "the incompatibility between the story of Jotham and the details of the reality which have appeared thus far, prove to the reader that the parable of Jotham is not an allegory and is not to be judged according to the criteria of this literary style. Jotham's fable is thus incorporated within the dynamic of the event as a dramatic element within the plot and not as an independent genre."⁷³ While Jotham's fable should not be described as an "allegory" it is still clear that it has allegorical elements. The author has clearly aligned elements within the story with characters and situations from the immediate context of the surrounding narrative. Thus, it is still important to recognize the fable as a genre different from its surrounding narrative and not simply as dramatic dialogue within the narrative. The inconsistencies between the fable and the situation in the context of its surrounding narrative are acceptable since the present study suggests

⁷² Amit, *Art of Editing*, 105-106.

⁷³ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 107-108.

that parables do not require an alignment of every detail between fable and narrative context.

As has already been discussed, there are a few parallels which seem clear. It is very likely that the community of trees who are seeking a king refer to the *baals* of Shechem (and ultimately all of Israel) and that the bramble refers to Abimelech. There are other similarities and ways in which the stories coincide, but it is not possible to align all of the details. Block points out seven main points of contention between the two yet ultimately states that, “when rhetoricians employ illustrative stories, they do not generally insist that every element of the story be consistent with every element of the rest of the speech.”⁷⁴ Still, some of these discrepancies ought to be identified and discussed.

One point of contention is that in the fable the trees approach the candidates for a king while in the narrative Abimelech actively seeks the position of king.⁷⁵ This tension can be explained by the fact that the fable was not directed toward Abimelech and is not focused on his actions but is instead focused on the actions of the *baals* of Shechem.

Amit points out that:

The lack of consistency between parable and reality only strengthens the message of the parable. The description according to which the trees address the bramble of their own free will, and the bramble ironically offers them to take shelter in his shade, while threatening fire if they attempt to abandon this doubtful shelter, does not resemble in its details the story of the anointing of Abimelech. But it does bring out even more the readiness of the men of Israel to place over themselves any king whatsoever.⁷⁶

It is clear from the request of the Israelites in 8:22 that they are in search of a king. Since the parable does appear within the context of a story in which Israel has already made an

⁷⁴ Block, *Judges*, 317.

⁷⁵ Block, *Judges*, 316.

⁷⁶ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 110-111.

attempt to set a king over themselves (Gideon) the author has already provided a clue as to the general attitude and motivation of the people of Israel on this issue.

Another point of contention identified by Block is that in the fable the community of trees approaches three candidates, settling on the fourth, while the narrative mentions only one candidate, Abimelech.⁷⁷ As outlined above, the parable is concerned with communicating a general message about how misguided the Israelites are in their pursuit of a human king. The number of candidates who are approached prior to the bramble is irrelevant. The point is that they are so desperate for a king that they will settle for anyone.

The next inconsistency pointed out by Block is that the fable critiques kingship in general while the narrative critiques Abimelech's kingship, in particular.⁷⁸ This point can be contested.⁷⁹ It is not so clear cut that Judg 9 only condemns the kingship of Abimelech. What is sure is that both the fable and the surrounding narrative present a negative perception of kingship. This ought to be considered a commonality rather than a point of contention. Finally, Block points out as an inconsistency that the narrative (9:57) interprets Jotham's words as a curse while this language is not used in the fable, itself.⁸⁰

Again, this ought not to be considered an inconsistency. While the particular word, "curse," does not appear in the fable or its application what Jotham is delivering to the Shechemites is very clearly just that.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Block, *Judges*, 316.

⁷⁸ Block, *Judges*, 316.

⁷⁹ See Chapter 4 of this study for an anti-monarchic reading of the whole of Judg 9.

⁸⁰ Block, *Judges*, 317.

⁸¹ Block points out three other points of contention which are diachronic concerns and are not of particular interest to this study but still offer some insight in regard to inconsistencies between fable and surrounding narrative. The first of these is that the fable is poetry while the surrounding narrative is prose. One might speculate that the fable is the result of later redactional work yet this study is interested in its role in the

The present study holds the view that it is not necessary for all of the details of a parable to line up with the events of the surrounding narrative in order for it to effectively communicate its message. Consider, for example, Nathan's parable of 2 Sam 12. This parable is addressed specifically to David in order to rebuke him for the great sin that he had committed against Uriah. In the parable, a rich man who had many flocks and herds took the one and only, treasured lamb of a poor man in order to slaughter it to feed his guests. While the moral of this parable is clear, the details are not all perfectly aligned with the details of the narrative. Indeed David is to be understood as the rich man, and Uriah as the poor man. However if the lamb is to represent Bathsheba, then these details are certainly not consistent with the narrative. This is especially true since the rich man did not take the poor man's lamb in order to satisfy his own desires but simply to feed his guests. Despite the fact that the details of this parable do not precisely mirror the details of the surrounding narrative, the moral of the story is clear. David understands the moral and so does the reader of the text. Nathan simply pointed out to David that while he had many riches and could acquire for himself anything that he wanted, he greatly wronged Uriah by taking from him not only his wife, but also his very life.

Similarly, the details of Jotham's fable do not need to align exactly with the details of the surrounding narrative. The message directed toward the *baals* of Shechem is clear. Their desperation for a human king has led them to make bad choices in choosing a king. They have not set a king who was chosen by Yahweh and they have failed to recognize that he is their king and ultimate ruler.

narrative as it is. He also points out that the fable is "overtly political in character" while the narrative is "theologically neutral"; Block, *Judges*, 316.

The Main Point of the Fable

Having considered all of these issues, the reader is left with the problem of identifying the purpose and message of the fable. The fable communicates a couple of very strong points. It is undeniable that the fable carries an anti-monarchic theme. While it may be argued that the fable condemns human kingship in general, it is certain that, at the very least, it condemns the kind of kingship that Israel witnessed under the rule of Abimelech. Niditch suggests that the fable does both. She says it “is a comment on the unworthiness of monarchs in general and of Abimelech in particular.”⁸²

It ought to be noted from the fable and the rejection of kingship by the three valuable trees that kingship, outside of its proper context, is useless. It is better for the trees to do that which they were created to do, than to leave their productive work to go and sway over the trees. This has been demonstrated by the specific language that has been chosen as well as repetition of action that demonstrates Israel’s desperation for a human king. Block points out that, “Whereas in the ancient Near East kingship was viewed as positive, desirable, necessary, and coveted by all, Jotham perceives it as fundamentally negative. It is self-destructive and destructive of the very ones it is intended to protect.”⁸³ Just as Jotham predicted in his fable and its application, great harm came to those who set Abimelech as their king. While ideally a king would protect his subjects the Abimelech narrative offers a description of a king who, after being betrayed, proceeds to destroy those over whom he had ruled and in doing so, also destroys himself.

⁸² Niditch, *Judges*, 115.

⁸³ Block, *Judges*, 321.

Dumbrell points out that while the fable focuses on the specific kingship of Abimelech, it is still a statement on the legitimacy of kingship in general since “Abimelech’s is that form of Canaanite city-state kingship with which Israel at that time would have been most familiar (cf. 1 Sam. 8).”⁸⁴ He also states that kingship “is only aimed at by those who are unworthy of the office, by political adventurers and social misfits such as Abimelech.”⁸⁵ Buber makes a very strong statement concerning Jotham’s fable as he suggests that:

The Jotham fable, the strongest anti-monarchical poem of world literature, is the counterpart of the Gideon passage... The kingship, so teaches the poem... is not a productive calling. It is vain, but also bewildering and seditious, that men rule over men. Everyone is to pursue his own proper business, and the manifold fruitfulness will constitute a community over which, in order that it endure, no one needs rule.⁸⁶

The reason such a strong statement as this can be made is because the fable, no matter from what angle you view it, still carries an anti-monarchic tone. From the refusal of the noble trees to Jotham’s accurate prediction of the outcome of Abimelech’s reign, there is no element of this fable that leaves the reader with the understanding that human kingship is Israel’s best option. Gerbrandt agrees as he says that, “If the fable originally arose within Israel, either in pre-kingship times or during the early years of the monarchy, as is likely, then it is difficult to read it in any other way than as a denigration of kingship.”⁸⁷ He sees in the fable such an anti-monarchic tone that he says the fable, “most probably arose in early Israel as an expression of those who saw kingship as an institution with no positive function.”⁸⁸ The fable explains that kingship, the way that Israel has learned it

⁸⁴ Dumbrell, “In Those Days,” 29.

⁸⁵ Dumbrell, “In Those Days,” 29.

⁸⁶ Buber, *Kingship*, 75.

⁸⁷ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 130.

⁸⁸ Gerbrandt, *Kingship*, 130.

from the Canaanites, would not, in any way be beneficial to Israel.⁸⁹ Concerning this, Dumbrell suggests that “the office of kingship is an unprofitable one, which is not only unproductive, but incapable of offering any real protection to the community.”⁹⁰

While most of these scholars suggest that the fable condemns kingship as a whole there are also those who would argue that it condemns, more specifically, the kingship of Abimelech. Amit, for example, says that the parable “attacks the manner in which Abimelech rose to power, or, in more general terms, the reality in which negative elements are liable to come to the throne. Rule itself, which is in God’s hands, is not a subject of criticism.”⁹¹

Conclusion

Jotham’s fable, set in the context of its surrounding narrative, portrays human kingship in a very negative light. Israel’s initial offer of kingship to Gideon (8:22), on the grounds that he had rescued them from Midian, sets the reader up for the account of Abimelech and his disastrous rule. Jotham’s fable further emphasizes the bad judgment of the Israelites by explicitly condemning their action of anointing a king over them. The description in the fable of a repeated offer of kingship, the repeated refusal by those who understood the importance of the role that they already had, and the eventual offer of the position to one who would bring destruction calls attention toward Israel’s grave error.

The ideological point of view of the narrator is presented in Jotham’s fable primarily through the selection and arrangement of details and a normative spokesperson (Jotham). In this sense, Jotham fills the same role as the prophet in the Gideon narrative. The carefully presented fable, its interpretation and its placement within this narrative

⁸⁹ Dumbrell, “In Those Days,” 28

⁹⁰ Dumbrell, “In Those Days,” 28.

⁹¹ Amit, *Art of Editing*, 106-107.

presents a very negative view of kingship. Thus, the author of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative has provided a negative view of kingship as presented through Gideon's involvement (Judg 8), Abimelech's involvement (Judg 9:1-6, 22-57) and Israel's involvement (Judg 9:7-21).

CONCLUSION

Having acknowledged the ongoing scholarly debate about the theme of kingship in the book of Judges, the purpose of this study has been to bring some clarification to the issue by discerning the narrator's perspective on kingship. Through the implementation of a narrative critical methodology one is able to determine the ideological point of view of the narrator in Judg 8-9. While the narrator does not offer an explicit statement about kingship in these chapters, the narrator has implemented various other methods of communicating an ideology concerning kingship.

In the Gideon episode the ideological point of view is presented through the selection and arrangement of details, a normative spokesperson (the prophet of 6:8-10), and the outcome of events. Each of these components suggests that the narrator is presenting an anti-monarchic ideology. This is accomplished in the Gideon episode through the characterization of Gideon and the change in his character after taking on leadership beyond what Yahweh had called him to. Gideon's verbal refusal of kingship does not detract from the fact that he did act as a king, modeling himself after the Canaanite kings. These issues in combination with Gideon's statement in 8:23 which declares human and divine kingship as mutually exclusive draws negative attention to human kingship. Through the voice of the prophet in 6:8-10 the narrator points out Israel's inability to recognize Yahweh as their deliverer. It is this same weakness that leads them to ask Gideon to rule over them, as king.

In the Abimelech episode the author communicates an anti-monarchic perspective by implementing various literary devices in order to highlight the poor decisions of the Israelites and the disaster that comes as a result of Israel's lack of faithfulness to Yahweh.

The most prominent means of communicating this ideology in the Abimelech episode is through the disastrous outcome of events. Also, the characterization of Abimelech, the *baals* of Shechem and God emphasize the negative characteristics of human kingship. Israel's unfaithfulness and ability to be so easily swayed by the surrounding nations is what causes tension in the plot. References to physical setting are based on places with religious significance, pointing to Israel's tendency to worship the baals. These features all highlight the heavy Canaanization of Israel that has taken place. Finally, through word choice and wordplay the author has drawn attention to the theme of leadership, especially emphasizing the inappropriateness of the particular leadership under which Israel is living during this time.

Jotham's fable is a particularly interesting portion of the book of Judges. Its parabolic form immediately demands the attention of the reader and suggests that its content is important. Israel's initial offer of kingship to Gideon (8:22), on the grounds that he had rescued them from Midian, sets the reader up for the account of Abimelech and his disastrous rule. Jotham's fable further emphasizes the poor judgment of the Israelites by explicitly condemning their action of anointing a king over them. The description in the fable of the repeated offer of kingship, the repeated refusal by those who understood the importance of the role that they already had, and the eventual offer of the position to one who would bring destruction calls attention toward Israel's grave error. The ideological point of view of the narrator is presented in Jotham's fable primarily through the selection and arrangement of details and a normative spokesperson (Jotham).

Thus, the narrator of the Gideon-Abimelech narrative has provided a negative view of kingship as presented through the inappropriate actions of Gideon (Judg 8), Abimelech (Judg 9:1-6, 22-57) and Israel (Judg 9:7-21). If the author is attempting to set the scene for a successful monarchy, that purpose has not succeeded in this story. When the anti-monarchic tone of this narrative is read against the refrain found throughout Judg 17-21 ("In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes"), there is a clear tension which leaves the reader with an ambiguous message concerning kingship.

It has become apparent throughout this study that a major contributing factor to Israel's downfall is their inability to recognize Yahweh as their king and as the only proper object of worship. This idea has been intensified with continual reference to the Canaanization of Israel throughout Judg 8-9. The negative portrayal of kingship in Judg 8-9 contributes greatly to the ambiguity concerning the legitimacy of human kingship for Israel in the book of Judges. This ambiguity is intentional and suggests that the narrator's primary concern in the book of Judges as a whole is not to promote or condemn the office of kingship, but rather to emphasize Israel's lack of faithfulness to Yahweh, their king.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.
- Amit, Yairah. *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*. Biblical Interpretation Series 38. Translated by Jonathan Chipman. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- . *Hidden Polemics in Biblical Narrative*. Biblical Interpretation Series 25. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- . *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Arnold, Bill T. and John H. Choi. *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Assis, Elie. *Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the A Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives (Judg 6-12)*. Supplements to VT 106. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Auld, Graeme. *The Daily Study Bible: Joshua, Judges and Ruth*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.
- Bar-Efrat, Shimeon. *Narrative Art in the Bible*. London: T & T Clark International, 2004.
- Berlin, Adele. *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*. Bible and Literature Series 9. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983.
- Beavis, Mary Ann. "Parable and Fable." *CBQ* 52 (1990) 473-98.
- Block, Daniel I. *Judges, Ruth*. NAC. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999.
- . "Will the Real Gideon Please Stand Up? Narrative Style and Intention in Judges 6-9." *JETS* 40 (1997) 353-66.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990.
- Bluedorn, Wolfgang. *Yahweh Versus Baalism: A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative*. JSOT Supplement Series 329. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001.
- Boda, M. J. "Judges." In *Expositors Bible Commentary*, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming.
- . "Narrative Analysis." Intermediate Hebrew 1, McMaster Divinity College, Fall Semester 2007.

- Boling, Robert G. *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. AB. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975.
- Boogaart, T. A. "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem." *JSOT* 32 (1985) 45-56.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Bowman, Richard G. "Narrative Criticism of Judges: Human Purpose in Conflict with Divine Presence." In *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, edited by Gale A. Yee, 17-44. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Brettler, M. Z. "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics." *JBL* 108 (1989) 395-418.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1984.
- Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Corrected ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952.
- Brown, Cheryl A. "Judges." In *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*. NIBC 5, 121-289. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000.
- Buber, Martin. *The Kingship of God*. 3rd ed. Translated by R. Scheimann. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1967.
- Dietrich, W. "History and Law: Deuteronomistic Historiography and Deuteronomic Law Exemplified in the Passage from the Period of the Judges to the Monarchical Period." In *Israel Constructs Its History: Deuteronomist Historiography in Recent Research*, JSOT Supplements 306, edited by A. D. Pury, T. Römer, & J. D. Macchi, 315-42. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000.
- Dumbrell, W. J. "'In Those Days There Was No King in Israel, Every Man Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes': The Purpose of the Book of Judges Reconsidered." *JSOT* 25 (1983) 23-33.
- Evans, Craig A. "Parables in Early Judaism." In *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, 51-75. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Exum, J. Cheryl. "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges." *CBQ* 52 (1990) 410-29.

- Fox, Everett. "Stalking the Younger Brother," *JSOT* 60 (1993) 45-68.
- Gerbrandt, G. E. *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History*. Atlanta: Scholars, 1986.
- Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Gospel and Kingdom*. Exeter: Paternoster, 1981.
- Gray, John. *New Century Bible Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986.
- Gunn, David M. *Judges*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Gunn, D. M., and Danna Nolan Fewell. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford Bible Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Heller, Roy L. *Narrative Structure and Discourse Constellations: An Analysis of Clause Function in Biblical Hebrew Prose*. Harvard Semitic Studies 55. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004.
- House, Paul R. "The Rise and Current Status of Literary Criticism of the Old Testament." In *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, edited by Paul R. House, 3-22. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992.
- Hultgren, Arland J. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Jobling, David. *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible II*. JSOT Supplement Series 39. Sheffield: JSOT, 1986.
- Klein, Lillian R. *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988.
- Lindars, Barnabas. "Gideon and Kingship." *JTS* 16 (1965): 315-26.
- Maly, Eugene. "The Jotham Fable—Anti-monarchical?" *CBQ* 22 (1960) 299-305.
- Matthews, Victor H. *Judges and Ruth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Mayes, A. D. H. "Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17–21." *BI* 9 (2001) 241–58.
- McCann, J. Clinton. *Judges*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002.
- Niditch, Susan. *Judges : A Commentary*. 1st ed. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

- O'Connell, R. H. *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*. Supplements to VT 63. Leiden: E J Brill, 1996.
- Oeste, Gordon Kenneth. "Legitimacy, Illegitimacy and the Right to Rule: Windows on Abimelech's Rise and Demise in Judges 9." Ph.D diss., Wycliffe College, 2007.
- Polzin, Robert. *Moses and the Deuteronomist*. A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History 1. New York: Seabury, 1980.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *What is Narrative Criticism?* Guides to Biblical Scholarship, New Testament Series. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.
- Pressler, C. *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002.
- Ryken, Leland. *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.
- Ryken, Leland, and Tremper Longman III. *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.
- Schöpfli, Karin. "Jotham's Speech and Fable as Prophetic Comment on Abimelech's Story: The Genesis of Judges 9." *SJOT* 18 (2004) 3-22.
- Snodgrass, Klyne R. "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus." In *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, 3-29. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Soggin, J. Albert. *Judges: A Commentary*. Translated by J. Bowden. OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981.
- Stein, Robert H. "Genre of the Parables." In *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, 30-50. Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Stern, David. *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Indiana Literary Biblical Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Sweeney, M. A. "Davidic Polemics in the Book of Judges." *VT* 47 (1997) 517-29.
- Tanner, J. Paul. "The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point in Judges." *BS* 149 (1992) 146-61.

- Tate, W. Randolph. *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*. 3rd ed. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008.
- Tatu, Silviu. "Jotham's Fable and the *Crux Interpretum* in Judges IX." *VT* 56 (2006) 105-124.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.
- Waltke, Bruce K., and M. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989.
- Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*. JSOT Supplement Series 46. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987.
- Weinfeld, M. "Judges 1.1-2.5: The Conquest under the Leadership of the House of Judah." In *Understanding Poets and Prophets*, edited by A. Graeme Auld, 388-400. Sheffield: JSOT, 1993.
- Westermann, Claus. *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.
- Wong, Gregory T. *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive Rhetorical Study*. Supplements to VT 111. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Yee, Gale A. *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.