The Savage Poetry Of *Judges*

The oldest parts of the Bible—the focus of the second quarter's Sabbath school lesson—are poetry about violence.

by Beverly G. Beem, Douglas R. Clark, and Jerry A. Gladson

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.

But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab.

Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes. Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab.

Now Eglon was a very fat man. When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king."

So the king said, "Silence!" and all his attendants went out from his presence.

Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber, and said, "I have a message from God for you." So he rose from his seat.

Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof chamber on him, and locked them.

After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, "He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber." So they waited until they were embarrassed.

When he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor.

Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed

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beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah. When he arrived he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head.

He said to them, "Follow after me; for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand."

So they went down after him, and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and allowed no one to cross over. At that time they killed about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; no one escaped.

So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest eighty years.

—Judges 3:12-30 (NRSV)

EHUD, THE LEFT-HANDED SON OF THE RIGHT hand, takes his homemade dagger and slays Eglon, the fatted calf of Moab. The Israelite audience would have recognized the pun and laughed. The murder is committed in the king's own palace. The murderer escapes while his courtiers wait outside the locked door trying to figure out why the king is taking so long to open the door. Lingering over the royal chamber pot, they surmise. The Israelite hearers would have recognized the irony and laughed. The 20th-century reader, too, sees in this ancient story a first-rate cloak-and-dagger murder mystery. While we, too, can laugh at the twists and turns of this tale of intrigue and derring-do, we recognize the craft of a master storyteller.

In a study of biblical narrative technique, Erich Auerbach compares Hebrew story-telling style with that of Homer. Homeric style, he says, puts everything in the foreground, com-

The Story of Hebrew Storytelling

Judges is a unique anthology of narratives and poetry set in the period of earliest Israel. Since narrative literature constitutes a good deal of the material in the Old Testament, including most of the stories found in the book of Judges, a note or two about stories in general might prove helpful, especially stories in the Hebrew Bible. Whereas legal texts intend to give structure to life, wisdom amasses observations about life and tries to make sense of it, psalms celebrate or lament life, narrative literature attempts to recreate and convey the essence of life. In the process, hearers and later readers engage the stories and are engaged by them. Creative literary features both edify and entertain.

In recent years, closer literary readings of the Bible have moved biblical studies into a new era. During the past few decades, vigorous proposals have forced traditional scholarship to reconsider its philosophical, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings.

Fundamental to the new literary analysis is a recognition of the Bible as literature. Some are more stringent than others in drawing a line between literary and historical or theological aspects of the Bible. All those who approach the Bible as literature focus on literary structures, forms, features, agendas. To start elsewhere is to treat these narratives as though they were something other than literary.

For Ryken and Longman, this means two things: the form of the story itself conveys meaning, and biblical stories are self-consciously artistic.

> This implies that we cannot grasp the truth of story or poem, for example, without first interacting with the story qualities or poetic images. . . . The literary critic's preoccupation with the forms of biblical literature is more than an aesthetic delight in craftsmanship, though it is not less than that. It is also part of a concern to understand the truth of the text at a deeper level than a propositional summary extracted from the text (p. 17f).

The very notion of the literary nature of the text has stimulated creative rethinking and reformulation of priorities in the study of biblical literature. Within the milieu of literary approaches to the Bible, a *narrative analysis* includes several related categories or subcategories: *rhetorical criticism*, with its concern for surface structure; *aesthetic criticism*, with its focus upon artistic features; *structuralism*, which examines deep linguistics structures and symbols; and *deconstruction*, which places meaning entirely on the side of the reader.

pletely describing time, place, character, motives, and backgrounds of the story. Biblical style, on the other hand, depicts nothing except what is needed for the action. All else is left in obscurity. Details so abundant in Homeric stories are here left to the imagination. So, in biblical narrative when the storyteller bothers to record a particular detail of setting or character or description, chances are it is a significant one to an understanding of the story. Our task as readers is to find out what this significance is.

Reading the Book of Judges

This book includes some of the most exciting stories in the Bible. Deborah and Barak, Jael and Sisera, Jephthah and his daughter, Samson and Delilah. It is hard to imagine a finer anthology of the narrative art. But what makes them a book? What unifies them and connects them? Of all the stories floating around the campfires of ancient Israel, why would the final editor select these to preserve for all time?

As readers move from the story of Achsah in the first chapter to the story of the concubine in the final episode, they are following the disintegration of a nation. Judges begins in victory as Israel enters the promised land and settles it; it ends in dissolution, as family preys on family, tribe attacks tribe. There is no order, no law, no social structure, no sign of God. The final verse is a haunting refrain that explains the reason for this chaos: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

How did it happen? How could a book that begins with such hopefulness end with such despair? Part of the answer is embedded in the narrative framework. In the second chapter, the narrator charts the pattern holding these narratives together. It's a six-stage process. Israel forgets God and goes after other gods. God responds by abandoning them to their enemies. Israel languishes in oppression. The tribes then cry to God, not necessarily in repentance, but in suffering. God hears their cries and raises up a judge to deliver Israel. Then Israel has rest and serves God all the days of the judge. But when the judge dies, the cycle begins all over again.

The book is actually about the leadership of Israel. It begins after the death of Joshua. But Israel is not leaderless. It asks direction of God, and God is there to give it. "Who shall go up?" asks Israel in chapter 1. God answers, "Judah shall go up." Who is the leader of Israel? God is. And we see in the parade of judges, across the stage, leaders raised up by God to deliver Israel. They are charismatic leaders. Chosen by God. Empowered by

Attention to the literary features of the biblical text brings with it reassessments of author, text, and reader. One thus excavates these ancient narratives to uncover points of view—for example, an author, a narrator, and an implied narrator. In similar fashion, one searches for a narratee, implied narratee, and real reader among the diverse strata of a story. In addition, characterization, plot, rhetorical features, all call for analysis.

With Ryken and Longman, we sense that, "Underlying the range of current critical approaches . . . is a shared conviction that literature is the result of conscious composition, careful patterning, and an awareness of literary conventions prevalent at the time of writing and subsequently" (p. 18). The Hebrew language lends itself to creative, energetic, and engaging storytelling—verbal roots of most vocabulary, ensuring action; an economy of words, allowing the imagination much more space in which to create scenes and providing a foundation for double-meanings; character and plot development; an extremely wide range of rhetorical devices, fostering humor, irony, paronomasia, etc. Reading the Bible as literature leads modern readers into meaningful, enjoyable, and redemptive experiences with biblical narrative.

God. But as the cycle works itself through over and over again, the presence of God becomes less apparent. Finally, he says in the story of Jephthah, "'I will deliver you no more'" (chap. 10:13). Even then, he delivers Israel one more time. But his presence is less apparent in the last part of the book. Where is he when the Levite is carving up the body of his concubine and calling Israel to war? A new form of leadership is needed. The system of judges that began with the glory of Deborah and Ehud ends with the ambiguity of Jephthah and Samson. The final editor remembers the glories of the old days, even as he calls for the stability that a king would bring.

The narrator chooses the medium of story to explore the nature of leadership in Israel. In the framework passages, surrounding the stories the narrator comments on their significance. But these passages are only transitional. The heart of the book lies in the stories. To understand them, the reader must watch the choice of detail, notice recurring themes and images, and keep track of variations in the plot.

When God raises leaders in Israel, he chooses the unlikeliest heroes. Instead of the mighty generals one might expect from God, he chooses a left-handed assassin, a woman judging Israel under a palm tree, the youngest of the smallest tribe, and the bastard son living on the outskirts of the community. Unlikely heroes, indeed. But the deliverer of Israel is God, and he works through whomever he will.

These unlikely heroes fight with the unlikeliest weapons. Ehud strikes down a king with an unexpected, shortened sword, hidden under his cloak. Jael fells a general with a tent-peg. Shamgar kills 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. Gideon fights with pitchers and lanterns. A certain woman topples Abimelech with a millstone. These are all instruments of peace, common household tools, turned to purposes of war.

Stories of war are ordinarily men's stories. The appearance of a woman would not be expected. But in these stories, women play significant roles. Achsah receives a great dowry of the dry Negev and asks for wells, the prerogatives of chiefs, and thus ensures the prosperity of her family. Deborah, the woman of flame, conveys the words of God to the resistant Barak. The victory will be in the hands of a woman, she tells him. Surprisingly enough, the woman is not Deborah, but Jael who offers milk in a lordly dish. Abimelech destroys the fields of Shechem and burns 1,000 people taking refuge in a tower. When he attempts to do the same thing at Thebez, "a certain woman" drops a millstone on his head and delivers her city. And Abimelech calls his armor-bearer to run him through lest people say that he was killed by a woman. The narrator says, "When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they all went home" (chap. 9:55, NRSV).

The stories of the judges are the stories of people working more or less closely with God, with one another, and with their families. They are people living in a particular time and place and involved in the ordinary activities of daily life. The stories take place in palaces, in homes, in tents, in fields. Battles are won by unlikely people wielding unlikelier weapons. Israel is settling the land promised to them by God. But it is a sad story. The cycle of apostasy and deliverance works itself out, over and over again, until the formula breaks. Something new is needed. The charismatic leadership God used in this settlement period is giving way to a new form of leadership. But the time has not yet come. The book ends with Israel in chaos, ready for a new form of leadership to move them into the next stage of history. The stories of unlikely heroes will give way to stories of kings and prophets.

The Contours of Hebrew Poetry

To appreciate the poetical character of many of the books of the Old Testament, especially the Deborah account in Judges 5, it is necessary to have some awareness of Hebrew poetry. It is based on a line and its parts. Usually, the line consists of two balanced parts, known as *cola*, marked off with the equivalent of our semicolon. When two lines are joined, is called a *bicolon*; when three, a *tricolon*, and so on:[1]

"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain" (Isaiah 40:4).[2]

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever" (Psalm 111:10).

Further enhancing the poetical form is a balancing of lines, most frequently in the style of a couplet. Two whole lines appear side by side. This is known technically as the *parallelismus membrorum*, or *parallelism of members*:

"The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever"
(Isaiah 40:7, 8).

Such balancing is likely intended as a seconding, a restating or echoing in some form of the initial line. In the example above, line B restates and extends what is meant by the "breath of God"—namely, the prophetic word of God contrasted with the transitory existence of the people.

Such balancing of lines enjoys many variations. In one form, known as *synonymous parallelism*, the second line restates or echoes the first:

"Lord, when you went forth from Seir,
when you marched from the region of Edom . . ."
(Judges 5:4).

In a contrasting couplet, known as an *antithetic parallelism*, the second line contrasts with the first:

"So perish all your enemies, O Lord!
But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might" (Judges 5:31).

The succeeding lines may not only echo or restate, but advance the thought of the first line. This is *synthetic parallelism*. Although the distinction between it and synonymous parallelism may at times be blurred, the synthetic variety often extends beyond two lines:

"The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!"
(Judges 5:21).

The *chiasm*, or *inverted parallelism*, is more complicated, because its basic pattern resembles the Greek letter *chi* χ:

(A) "Most blessed of women be Jael,
(B) the wife of Heber the Kenite,
(A)´ of tent-dwelling women most blessed"
(Judges 5:24).

(A) "Have mercy on me, O God,
(B) according to your steadfast love;
(B´) according to your abundant mercies
(A´) blot out my transgressions and cleanse me from my sin"
(Psalm 51:1, Hebrews).

Line A is parallel to A´ at the end of the couplet, while B is parallel to its adjoining member B´. The whole couplet is thus inverted in the shape of χ. Larger units or even entire books also use chiastic structure.[3]

Parallelism may be translated into any language. Hebrew poetry also makes use of internal phonetic patterns, such as alliteration and assonance. But the general feature of parallelism, once grasped, is of inestimable value in understanding Hebrew poetry. One line helps interpret another. Like other speakers and writers in the ancient world, all the prophets and poets of Israel use parallelism.

As with English poetry, Hebrew poetry apparently has some sort of meter. Since Hebrew was originally written without vowels, precluding a precise knowledge of its pronunciation and accentuation, we may never fully clarify the Hebrew metric system (or even if a systematic one existed).[4] Some insist on counting only the accents, others consider just the syllables,[5] but we really do not know. The lack of certainty in the area of meter, however, does not limit our enjoyment of the beauty of Hebrew poetry.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Aloysius Fitzgerald, "Hebrew Poetry," *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 201-208.

2. This quotation, and those that follow, from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

3. Kenneth Strand finds a chiastic structure governing the entirety of Revelation, a book whose structure has long puzzled scholars (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, With Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis* [Rev. ed.; Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1976]). An appendix in his study offers a chiastic arrangement of Zechariah (p. 85).

4. Robert Alter goes so far as to assert that because there is so little evidence for the counting of stresses in a line of Hebrew poetry, "the term *meter* should probably be abandoned for biblical verse" (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], p. 9).

5. F. M. Cross, "Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Verse: The Prosody of Lamentations 1:1-22," *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, D. N. Freedman, C. L. Meyers, and M. O'Connor, eds. (ASOR Special Vol. ser. 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983); D. N. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980).