

Yahweh Conflicted: Unresolved Theological Tension in the Cycle of Judges

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the theological implications of the well-known cyclical pattern of the book of Judges. Previous approaches (historical critical, sociological, and narrative) have located the cycle within the compositional history of Judges; they have identified the ideological agendas inherent within the elements of the cycle; and they have examined the role of the cycle within the overall structure of the book. Building upon these earlier results, I argue here that the cycle of Judges registers a deep theological tension within the character of Yahweh himself, an irreconcilable conflict between his anger and his compassion. I propose further that the breakdown of the cycle in the latter part of Judges is a manifestation of Yahweh's frustration and his unwillingness to make a final choice between justice and mercy for Israel. I conclude that the tension between Yahweh's anger and his compassion belongs to his disposition as a relational being; therefore, it is a tension that must not be mitigated in our theology.

A INTRODUCTION

The cyclical framework of the book of Judges has been analysed from a number of perspectives. For the most part, these different perspectives have supplemented one another and have led to a continuing refinement of the scholarly consensus regarding the cycle of Judges. Martin Noth argued that the framework was a secondary deuteronomistic addition to the original stories of the judges,² and Walter Beyerlin further divided the added material into two redactional layers. Beyerlin argued as well that the cycle could be reduced to two separate components—sin/punishment and cry/deliverance.³ Walter Bruegge-

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² Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1943), 3-4.

³ Walter Beyerlin, “Gattung und Herkunft des Rahmens im Richterbuch,” in *Tradition und Situation: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie. Artur Weiser zum 70 Geburtstag* (ed. Ernst Würthwein and Otto Kaiser; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 1-29.

mann, building on Beyerlin, identified the streams of theological tradition that produced the two components and the social interests that were served by them.⁴ Frederick Greenspahn focused on the theology of the framework, and although he went too far by seeking to unify the cycle into a single movement of oppression and deliverance, he argued convincingly that Yahweh's acts of deliverance were based upon the theology of the exodus and the covenant rather than on a theology of repentance.⁵ Taking Robert Polzin's literary study⁶ as a point of departure, J. Cheryl Exum explored the role of the cycle within the narrative of Judges. She noted especially the correspondence between the breakdown of the cycle in the latter part of the book and the increasingly ambiguous role of Yahweh in the narrative.⁷

The combined work of the aforementioned scholars serves as the foundation upon which I intend to build further as I probe the theological content of the cyclical pattern in Judges. I argue here that the cycle in its two primary movements (sin/punishment and cry/salvation) registers a deep theological tension within the character of Yahweh himself, an irreconcilable conflict between his anger and his compassion. I propose further that the breakdown of the cycle in the latter part of Judges is a result of Yahweh's exasperation and his unwillingness to make a final choice between justice and mercy for Israel. I conclude that the tension between Yahweh's anger and his compassion belongs to his disposition as a relational being; therefore, it is a tension that must not be mitigated in our theology.

B THE CYCLE OF JUDGES

The prologue of Judges offers a programmatic summary of the book of Judges that previews the recurring cyclical pattern. The pattern consists of the following elements: (1) the Israelites do what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, forsaking Yahweh and serving other gods (2:11); (2) Yahweh becomes very angry with Israel (2:14); (3) he gives the Israelites over to the power of the en-

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Social Criticism and Social Vision in the Deuteronomic Formula of the Judges," in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981), 73-90.

⁵ Frederick E. Greenspahn, "The Theology of the Framework of Judges," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 385-96. On the significance of the exodus motif throughout the entire book of Judges, see Lee Roy Martin, "'Where Are the Wonders?': The Exodus Motif in the Book of Judges," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 2 (2010), forthcoming.

⁶ Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 146-204.

⁷ J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 410-31.

emy who oppresses them (2:14-15); (4) The Lord raises up judges, but the Israelites do not obey the judges (2:16-17); (5) The Lord has compassion on the Israelites on account of their suffering, and he delivers them through the leadership of the judge (2:18);⁸ (6) After the judge dies, the cycle repeats, with each generation growing worse than the one that precedes it (2:19).

The repetitions of the cycle in Judges 3-16 follow the basic pattern that is detailed in the prologue.⁹ These narratives, however, utilise a variety of expressions when manifesting the elements of the pattern, and sometimes they include additional elements in the cycle. For example, in five of the cycles, the suffering of the Israelites results in their crying out to God for his help (3:9; 3:15; 4:3; 6:7; 10:10); and the first four narratives conclude with the words “and the land had rest” (3:11; 3:30; 5:31; 8:28). Also, in the case of Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, it is said that the “Spirit of Yahweh” came upon them (3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6; 14:19; 15:14). Thus, the pattern is generally the same, but each narrative includes unique details and variations on the scheme.¹⁰

Although each appearance of the cycle incorporates a unique combination of elements, the cycle can be reduced to two basic movements. The first movement of the cycle is the Israelites' sin and subsequent punishment and the second movement is the Israelites' cry and subsequent deliverance. Each of the two movements is rooted in the covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh, and each movement is generated by Yahweh's passionate response to Israel's actions.

1 Part One of the Cycle (Sin/Punishment)

The first movement in the cycle is consistent throughout Judges: “[T]he Israelites did that which was evil *עֲבָדָה* in the sight of Yahweh” (Judg 2:11; 3:7,

⁸ In light of 2:20-23, which describes the role of the remaining Canaanites to be that of a test for the Israelites, any deliverance can only be partial unless the Israelites genuinely repent. I understand 2:20-23 as a different formulation of 2:1-5. Although the nations *in the land* serve to test the Israelites' covenant faithfulness, it is nations from *outside the land* who serve as Yahweh's instruments to punish the Israelites when they prove unfaithful.

⁹ Serge Frolov argues that the final cycle of Judges continues into 1 Samuel (“Rethinking Judges,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 [2009], 24-41), but his conclusions do not affect my proposal here.

¹⁰ The variations in the elements of the cycle are charted in detail by Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (VTSup 63. Leiden: Brill, 1996), 22-25. O'Connell lists a total of 20 elements, 12 of which he considers “essential” (26). Regarding the Spirit of Yahweh in Judges, see Lee Roy Martin, “Power to Save!?: The Role of the Spirit of the Lord in the Book of Judges,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16.2 (2008), 21-50.

12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). The nature of Israel's sin is defined further as idolatry. It is said that the Israelites "served the Baalim. And they forsook Yahweh, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and they worshiped them, and they vexed Yahweh" (2:11b-12); they "lusted (הָנַזֵּן) after other gods and worshiped them" (2:17); they "forgot Yahweh their God, and served the Baalim and the Asheroth" (3:7b); they worshiped the gods of the Amorites (6:10); and they "served the Baalim, and the Ashtaroth, and the gods of Aram, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook Yahweh, and did not serve him" (10:6b).

Greenspahn argues that the sin of idolatry, which is prominent in the prologue, is absent in the cyclical framework of chapters 3-16. He insists that "the evil" referred to in the stories of the judges is undefined and does not include idolatry.¹¹ Although my proposal does not require a specific identification of "the evil", I would question Greenspahn's conclusion for two reasons. First, the practice of idolatry is included in the fabric of the Gideon story both at its beginning and at its end. Gideon's first act was to destroy the altar of Baal (6:25-32), and his final act was to construct a golden ephod that became an object of illicit worship (8:27). Moreover, it is stated that "as soon as Gideon died, the Israelites returned and lusted (הָנַזֵּן) after the Baals, making Baal-berith their god" (8:33). Besides the Gideon narrative, there are indications of idolatry in the Ehud story's use of הָנַזֵּלים (3:19, 26), which both the NIV and the NASB translate as "the idols". Furthermore, the Song of Deborah may be calling attention to idolatry when it speaks of "new gods" being chosen (5:8),¹² and Samson's pursuit of foreign women may represent Israel's pursuit of foreign gods.¹³ Second, it seems likely that the intended reader of Judges would

¹¹ Greenspahn, "Framework of Judges," 394-95. Following Beyerlin ("Gattung und Herkunft," 4-5), Greenspahn argues that the idolatry texts (2:11-13; 3:7; 10:6, 10-14) are deuteronomistic but the framework of chapters 3-16 is not ("Framework of Judges," 391). Cf. Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges* (JSOTSup 385. New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 16-27. In her recent commentary, Susan Niditch sees both the framework and the idolatry texts as originating from "Deuteronomically oriented writers" (*Judges: A Commentary* [OTL. Louisville: Westminster Press, 2008], 49) and holds them together as the "voice of the theologian" (10-11). Gregory Wong proposes an even greater unity, arguing that the prologue is paradigmatic for the entire book of Judges (*Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* [VTSup 111. Leiden: Brill, 2006], 181-90).

¹² The translation of Judges 5:8 is disputed, though every version that I consulted (LXX, NASB, NIV, JPS, NJB, NRSV) supports the rendering, "They chose new gods." For an opposing view, see Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (New American Commentary 6. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 226-27.

¹³ So Edward L. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," *Prooftexts* 1/3 (1981), 237-60.

understand the phrase “that which is evil in the eyes of Yahweh” as a reference to idolatry, given the canonical precedent. The book of Deuteronomy names “the evil” as idolatry (4:23-26; 9:18-21; 17:2-3; 31:29), which will provoke Yahweh’s “anger” (4:25; 9:18; 31:20, 29), and which will result in severe divine punishment (4:26).

Whether or not “the evil” is to be identified as idolatry, it is clear that Israel is repeatedly indicted for some form of grave disobedience to which Yahweh reacts.¹⁴ Without exception, Yahweh’s response to the sin of the Israelites is to deliver them over to their enemies for punishment (Judg 2:14; 3:8; 3:12; 4:2; 6:1, 13; 10:7; 13:1). We are told that Yahweh’s disciplinary actions are motivated by his anger toward Israel — “His anger burned against Israel” (2:14, 20; 3:8, 10:7). Yahweh’s anger is revealed further in the tone and content of his speeches to Israel. In his first speech (2:1-5) he angrily rebukes Israel for her unfaithfulness, and he then exclaims, “What is this that you have done?” (2:2), a rhetorical question that is loaded with passion. His second speech (6:7-10) briskly employs a series of five verbs to recount his gracious actions on behalf of Israel — “I brought you out ... I freed you ... I rescued you ... I drove out ... I gave you.” He concludes with a sixth verb that serves as a fervent rebuke, “I said to you, ‘You shall not worship the gods of the Amorites, but you have not obeyed my voice.’” Yahweh’s third speech (10:10-16) is extraordinarily harsh throughout. Yahweh reminds Israel that he had saved them from seven enemies, yet Israel continues to sin. He is so angry that he speaks with broken grammar: “Was it not from Egypt and from the Ammonite and from the sons of Ammon and from the Philistines . . . ? And the Sidonians and Amalek and Maon oppressed you, and you cried unto me, and I

¹⁴ A number of interpreters argue that the sin of the Israelites is unbroken and grows worse throughout Judges. Greenspahn writes, “the term *wayyosipu*, which precedes all but the first assertion that Israel did evil, should not be translated ‘they again ...’ but ‘they continued ...,’ for the Bible makes no claim that their transgression ever stopped” (“Framework of Judges,” 394). Cf. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 177. Two factors suggest that the case for unbroken sin is not so clear as Polzin and Greenspahn infer. First, the Hebrew *וְיֹאכְלֶה*, “they added”, i.e. “again”, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible means “continued”. The term always refers to a series of repeated actions, not the continuity of one action. Second, there are other indications in the text that Israel’s sin was not entirely continuous. For example, the prologue declares that after the judges died the Israelites would return (*וְיָבֹרְכֶה*) to their idolatry and do worse than the previous generation (Judg 2:19). Also, if the Israelites continued to sin during the lifetime of the judges, the statement that they did evil “after Ehud died” (Judg 4:1 NRSV) would not make sense. Moreover, we are told that “as soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed (*וְיָבֹרְכֶה*) and prostituted themselves with the Baals” (Judg 8:33 NRSV). I would not argue that “the evil” was completely eradicated, only that its severity was diminished for a time in the wake of Yahweh’s saving actions.

saved you from their hand" (10:11-12).¹⁵ He then declares furiously and sarcastically, "I will not save you again; cry to the gods you have chosen; they will deliver you" (10:13-14). The anger of Yahweh is his passionate response to personal affront, to covenant infidelity, to relational dysfunction created by Israel.¹⁶ Thus, the first movement of the cycle (sin/punishment) is initiated by Israel's disobedience, which inflames Yahweh's intense anger, and he acts decisively to punish Israel.

2 Part Two of the Cycle (Cry/Salvation)

The second movement of the cycle begins when the oppressed Israelites cry out to Yahweh (3:9, 14; 4:3; 6:6, 7; 10:10).¹⁷ Interpreters have often assumed that the cries of Israel are cries of repentance. Wellhausen, for example, characterised Israel's cry as evidence of "*Bekehrung*" ("conversion"),¹⁸ and Burney declared that one of the lessons of Judges is that "true repentance is followed by a renewal of the Divine favour".¹⁹ George F. Moore, however, observed correctly that Israel repents only on one occasion (10:10-16).²⁰ Recent interpreters have confirmed Moore's observation,²¹ but the occasional writer continues to use the terminology of repentance.²² Michael Welker goes so far as to claim

¹⁵ On the anacoluthon in 10:11 see Lee Roy Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God: A Pentecostal Hearing of the Book of Judges* (JPTSup 32. Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2008), 204-206.

¹⁶ I am not suggesting that anger is an "attribute" of God in the theological sense, rather it is Yahweh's passionate response to human sin.

¹⁷ As we will discuss below, the cycle begins to break down in chapter 10, and the Israelites do not cry out to Yahweh in the Samson cycle.

¹⁸ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1883), 240. For Wellhausen, the four stages of the cycle were "*Abfall Drangsal Bekehrung Ruhe*" (240-41).

¹⁹ C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges, with Introduction and Notes* (London: Rivingtons, 1918), cxxi.

²⁰ George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (ICC. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), xv-xvi, footnote.

²¹ E.g., Brueggemann, "Social Criticism," 83; Greenspahn, "Framework of Judges," 394-95; Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 155; Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold," 421; Wong, *Compositional Strategy of Judges*, 181, n. 11.

²² E.g., Serge Frolov, *The Turn of the Cycle: 1 Samuel 1-8 in Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 47, 48; O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 40-42; Robert B. Hughes, J. Carl Laney, and Robert B. Hughes, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (The Tyndale Reference Library. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 99; Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 136; Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), 135; Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The*

that in Judges the Israelites experience “the forgiveness of sins”,²³ but forgiveness language is entirely absent from Judges.

Rather than being a cry of repentance, Israel’s cry in Judges (קַעֲקָעָת) is reminiscent of the exodus (Exod 2:23), where the cry is “a plea to be delivered from oppression”²⁴ Just as in the case of the exodus, the cry in Judges is sometimes no more than a groan (רָקָעַ; Judg 2:18; Exod 2:24).²⁵ Israel’s suffering under the Egyptian regime is paradigmatic for its later suffering at the hands of the tyrannical Canaanite rulers. “The framework,” writes Greenspahn, “thus perceives the period of the judges as continuing the process initiated by the exodus in which Israel’s suffering is dealt with by divine salvation.”²⁶

These desperate cries of Israel awaken Yahweh to action, and he raises up a judge who saves Israel from their oppressor. The terminology employed in the calling of the judge may vary, and the description of the leader as a “judge” or as a “saviour” may also vary. Nevertheless, in every cycle save one, Yahweh recruits a person who works on behalf of Israel to bring justice and safety. The one exception is the Jephthah cycle, in which Yahweh refuses to save Israel (10:13) and Jephthah is chosen by the elders of Gilead. Even then, however, Yahweh partially relents and puts his spirit upon Jephthah, who is subsequently empowered to defeat the invading Ammonites.

Therefore, the second movement (cry/salvation) is initiated by the actions of Israel, who “cry” to Yahweh. Yahweh then responds decisively to change Israel’s circumstances. Just as in the first movement, Yahweh’s actions are grounded in his passions. We noted in the first movement that before Yahweh acted he was provoked to anger. In the second movement Yahweh is moved to compassion. Over and over it is Israel’s suffering, not their repentance, that motivates Yahweh to save; therefore, every act of deliverance regis-

Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts (New York: Free Press, 2001), 120; Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 53.

²³ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (trans. John F. Hoffmeyer. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 65.

²⁴ Brueggemann, “Social Criticism,” 83.

²⁵ Philippe Guillaume contends that the Israelite’s “groaning” in the prologue reflects an activity different from their “crying” in the framework (*Waiting for Josiah*, 21). To my mind, the parallels in Exodus 2:23-24 and the semantic similarity of the two Hebrew terms suggest that “groan” and “cry” describe the same activity spoken of in two different ways. Cf. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 40; and Wong, *Compositional Strategy of Judges*, 181, n. 13.

²⁶ Greenspahn, “Framework of Judges,” 395. It should be noted, however, that Israel’s suffering in Judges is characterised as a punishment from Yahweh while the suffering in Egypt is not.

ters Yahweh's compassion. Moreover, the text explicitly confirms the empathy of Yahweh as the motivating force behind his actions when it declares that Yahweh "saved them from the hand of their enemies ... because Yahweh was sorry (מָרַא) on account of those who tyrannised and oppressed them" (2:18b). The verb מָרַא is used frequently in the Hebrew Bible to signify God's change of mind or actions. It can be translated "repent", "regret" or "be sorry".²⁷ The use of מָרַא indicates that God's sympathy for the suffering of the Israelites is the major factor in his decision to save them. A similar but even deeper compassion is expressed in the words of 10:16, "he was wearied by the suffering of Israel".²⁸

It seems clear, therefore, that the second movement of the cycle (cry/salvation) is initiated by the groans or cries of oppressed Israel. These cries arouse Yahweh's empathy, and he acts decisively to save Israel.

C THEOLOGICAL TENSION MANIFESTED IN THE CYCLE

Walter Brueggemann argues that the two basic movements of the cycle arise from different social contexts and express competing and conflicting theological traditions.²⁹ According to Brueggemann, the first part of the cycle (sin/punishment) is a "highly theologized version of retribution" based upon the "correspondence of deed and consequence", and it justifies a dependable, orderly social structure.³⁰ The sin/punishment scheme can be used to maintain discipline within the ranks of a movement such as that of the Mosaic community, or it can function to legitimate an existing establishment of ruling elite. In either case it serves to maintain an established order.

In contrast, the second part of the cycle (cry/salvation) stands in opposition to entrenched powers, structures, and institutions, and "speaks of Yahweh as a source of political power who will liberate from another, lesser political power that oppresses".³¹ This second part of the formula reflects the radical

²⁷ Ludwig Köhler, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), I:688; Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1958), 608; H. J. Stoebe, "מָרַא," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), II:738; David J. A. Cline, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), V:663.

²⁸ By the time we reach chapter 10, the cycle is disintegrating and Yahweh refuses to save Israel, thus the compassion described in 10:16 does not extend so far as to include the change of mind that is expressed by מָרַא in 2:18b. For my argument (contra Polzin and others) that Judges 10:16 registers Yahweh's suffering compassion, see Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*, 207-13.

²⁹ Brueggemann, "Social Criticism," 73-90.

³⁰ Brueggemann, "Social Criticism," 79.

³¹ Brueggemann, "Social Criticism," 84.

graciousness of Yahweh as enacted in the exodus. Yahweh acts as deliverer to intervene and overthrow tyranny and oppression. The Israelites who were saved from the brutality of Pharaoh soon found themselves in need of deliverance from the pitiless Canaanite rulers who had ensnared and subjugated them.

Greenspahn agrees that the second part of the cycle is analogous to the theology of the exodus, reflecting “a theology of election and grace, that is to say God's free and unconditioned commitment to Israel, a commitment which is not ultimately bound to Israel's own actions”³² The Israelites are reminded in Judges 2:1-5 that Yahweh saved them from the slavery of Egypt not because they deserved salvation, but because he chose them to be his people. Yahweh's responsiveness is attributed to his commitment to his covenant with Israel and to his other previously uttered words (2:1-5, 20; 6:7-10; 10:10-16). “God's response is occasioned not by Israel's religious fidelity, but rather by her need, just as it was at the time of the exodus. This is far removed from a concept of reward and punishment, reflecting instead a theology of election and grace, that is to say God's free and unconditioned commitment to Israel, a commitment which is not ultimately bound to Israel's own actions.”³³

The first movement, therefore, is based upon a dependable and predictable theology of justice, while the second movement is based upon a more open and surprising theology of mercy. The two-part nature of the cycle gives rise to the different interpretations of the cycle, which usually focus either on the causality that is found in part one of the cycle or on the grace that is evident within part two of the cycle. I find it significant that although the two parts of the cycle reflect two different theological approaches to the covenant relationship, the book of Judges holds them together within the one recurring cycle. Under the covenant, Yahweh consistently punishes evil deeds (he will “by no means clear the guilty” [Exod 34:7]), but he also responds with compassion toward those who suffer (he is “merciful and gracious” [Exod 34:6]).³⁴ The

³² Greenspahn, “Framework of Judges,” 394-95. Interpreters continue to misconstrue the Judges framework as a single movement. Cf., e.g., K. L. Noll, who sees the cycle as one of “apostasy and repentance” (“Deuteronomistic History or Deuteronomic Debate? [A Thought Experiment],” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 [2007]: 340).

³³ Greenspahn, “Framework of Judges,” 394-95. The cycle of Judges “minimizes the necessity of repentance” as a prerequisite to deliverance (Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History: Part Two: 1 Samuel* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989], 74).

³⁴ The theological connections to Yahweh's self-revelation in Exodus 34 may not be accidental. In his commandments that immediately follow his disclosure to Moses, Yahweh uttered several phrases that can be linked directly to the book of Judges: “I make a covenant” (Exod 34:10; cf. Judg 2:1); “lest it be for a snare” (Exod 34:12; cf. Judg 2:3); “I am driving out . . .” (Exod 34:11; cf. Judg 6:9); “beware lest you make a

uniting of these two movements into one recurring cycle manifests Yahweh's inner conflict, the theological tension between his justice and his mercy (i.e., between his anger and his compassion). As Pressler writes when reflecting on Judges 2, "divine judgment and divine mercy are held in tension in the very heart of God".³⁵

D YAHWEH'S INNER CONFLICT AND THE BREAKDOWN OF THE CYCLE

Yahweh's inner conflict is first displayed in his reprimand of Israel in Judges 2:1-5. In this speech to Israel, he reaffirms his commitment to his gracious covenant relationship with Israel, but he is angered by Israel's disregard for that relationship. Thus Yahweh's professed commitment not to break the covenant forever (2:1) coupled with Israel's violation of the covenant (2:2) accounts for the dialectical forces that generate the cyclical motion of the rest of the book. Yahweh's sense of justice requires him to discipline Israel, but his compassion will not allow him to abandon his people.

1 The Breakdown of the Cycle

Yahweh's response to Israel alternates between anger and compassion as the cycle continues with the Othniel and Ehud narratives. In the Deborah narrative the completion of the cycle is threatened when Barak hesitates, and Yahweh chooses to withhold the glory from Barak (4:6-8). A more serious threat to the cyclical pattern comes in the Gideon cycle when Gideon requires repeated signs and assurances from Yahweh; but, in the end, the cycle runs its course with the components intact.

The tension between justice and mercy intensifies throughout Judges 3-9 on account of Israel's repeated offences, and the cycle begins to break down in Judges 10:6-16. At this point Yahweh becomes so frustrated that he refuses to allow the cycle to continue.³⁶ Here at the beginning of the Jephthah cycle when the Israelites cry out for help, Yahweh recounts the numerous times that he has delivered them, and he declares angrily, "I will not save you again" (10:13). As

covenant with the inhabitants of the land" (Exod 34:12; cf. Judg 2:2); "you shall destroy their altars" (Exod 34:13; cf. Judg 2:2); "you shall worship no other god" (Exod 34:14; cf. Judg 6:10); "lusting after their gods" (Exod 34:15; cf. Judg 2:17); and "[do not] take their daughters to marry your sons" (Exod 34:16; cf. Judg 3:6).

³⁵ Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 135.

³⁶ J. P. U. Lilly recognises the pattern of deterioration ("A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 [1967]: 98-102), and Wong argues that deterioration is the major theme of the book of Judges (*Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges*, 181-90), but neither Lilly nor Wong links the deterioration to the inner conflict of Yahweh.

a consequence of Yahweh's withdrawal, the Jephthah cycle lacks two important components that are found in all the previous cycles. First, Yahweh does not choose a judge. Because of his disengagement from the Israelites, Yahweh refuses to participate in the choosing of a deliverer. Consequently, Jephthah is chosen not by Yahweh but by the elders of Gilead. Second, at the end of the Jephthah narrative it is not said that the land had rest (perhaps because Jephthah defeated only one of the two oppressors named in 10:6).

The cyclical pattern is again incomplete in the Samson cycle, the only cycle in which the Israelites do not cry out to Yahweh for his help.³⁷ In fact they seem content to live under the domination of the Philistines rather than to join Samson in his fight against Philistine oppression (Judg 15:11). In addition to the missing cry for help, the Samson cycle fails to include both salvation from the enemy and rest for the land. Samson's failure to effect salvation is important enough to the story that it is mentioned in his birth narrative when the angel of Yahweh says not that Samson will deliver Israel but that he will only "begin" to deliver Israel (13:5). The cyclical pattern, therefore, is complete in the Othniel and Ehud narratives, is threatened in the Deborah and Gideon narratives, and finally collapses in the Jephthah and Samson cycles. The human participants in the narratives, as important as their roles are, are not responsible ultimately for the collapse of the cyclical framework. The cycle collapses in chapter 10 because of Yahweh's refusal to be manipulated further by Israel's unfaithful behaviour pattern.

In the epilogue to Judges, Yahweh disappears almost entirely. Throughout the Micah story, the characters invoke the name of Yahweh (17:2, 3, 13), but Yahweh himself is silent. Micah's illicit activities prompt the first occurrence of the refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Since the covenant assumes that Yahweh is Israel's great king, and since Gideon, in his refusal of the monarchy, declares Yahweh to be Israel's only ruler (8:22-23), the refrain that there is no king in Israel may mean not only that Israel has no human king but also that God has withdrawn from manifesting his sovereign authority. The story of Micah and his idol merges into the story of the Danites and their search for a land to inhabit. They settle in Laish and use Micah's idol and priest to establish there a cultic centre (18:27-30). The Danites give credit to God for their victory; but, as before, Yahweh himself neither speaks nor acts in the narrative.

The final chapters of Judges recount the unspeakable atrocities that are inflicted upon a Levite's secondary wife (19:25-30), who is raped, murdered and dismembered, and upon the women of Jabesh-gilead and Shiloh, who are kidnapped and forced to become wives to the Benjaminite remnant (21:12, 20-23). It is quite disturbing to the hearer of Judges that Yahweh does nothing to

³⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 337.

prevent the savagery of the Levite, the men of Gibeah, or the Benjamites. Apparently, Yahweh is intentionally uninvolved, allowing the Israelites to “do what is right” in their own eyes (17:6; 21:25). However, when the Israelites decide to punish the Gibeonite offenders by engaging in battle with Benjamin, who is one of their own tribes, they turn to Yahweh for his direction. In an episode that recalls Judges 1:1-2, the Israelites inquire of Yahweh, “Who shall go up first to fight the Benjamites?”, and Yahweh replies, “Judah is first” (20:18). Unlike his response in Judges 1:2, Yahweh’s answer here is incomplete, since he does not include in his response the words “go up” (הַלְעֵי), and he does not promise victory. By answering the inquiry, but not answering completely, Yahweh allows the Israelites to go into battle without his complete authorisation. The Israelites are defeated, and after weeping before Yahweh they inquire of him again, and Yahweh replies in the affirmative (20:22), but again he does not promise victory. They fight for a second day, and again the Israelites are defeated. After a third inquiry, Yahweh not only instructs them to continue the battle, but he insures the Israelites of victory (20:28). The Benjamites are decimated, and the other tribes mourn the aftermath of the civil war (21:1-7).

Yahweh’s role in the narrative is ambiguous, in that, even though he responds to the inquiries of the Israelites, he causes the war to be prolonged. Perhaps Yahweh’s drawing out of the Israelite conflict is a reflection of his own prolonged inner conflict. Could it be possible that Yahweh is turning the tables on Israel and forcing them to experience the same kind of conflicted situation which he is suffering? Like Yahweh, the Israelites are forced to choose between justice and mercy. They must decide just how severely to punish the Benjamites and how to prevent the complete extermination of the tribe of Benjamin. Israel’s choices are not easy ones, but they mirror the vexing choices that present themselves to Yahweh—justice or mercy.

2 Yahweh’s Inner Conflict

A number of scholars have recognised the breakdown of the cycle, and Exum has noted the “increasingly ambiguous role of the deity”.³⁸ I contend that the breakdown of the cycle is a result of Yahweh’s inner conflict, which is registered in his speech of 10:7-16. In chapter 10, Yahweh is furious and does not save the Israelites, but he is wearied by their suffering. “Israel’s suffering is God’s grief.”³⁹ Yahweh’s resistance to saving Israel again (10:13), coupled with his suffering compassion (10:16), signals a major shift toward ambiguity in God’s role. Although Exum attributes to Yahweh partial responsibility for the collapse of the cyclical pattern, she does not give sufficient weight to Yah-

³⁸ Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold,” 411.

³⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), II:151.

weh's speech in Judges 10:7-16, and she does not recognise, as I suggest here, that Yahweh's inner struggle is the source of his ambiguous actions in Judges 17-21. In chapter 10, Yahweh refuses to respond to Israel's cries. He refuses to act. Israel's ingratitude and continued forsaking of Yahweh have exhausted his patience so that he no longer responds to their cry for help. Yahweh's inner conflict is registered in his two apparently incompatible declarations: (1) "I will never break my covenant" (2:1); and (2) "I will not save you again" (10:13). Yahweh's refusal to save Israel stands in tension with his earlier declarations of faithfulness and his earlier acts of salvation. Although he does not bring complete salvation again, neither does he allow Israel to be completely destroyed by their enemies (chs. 11-16). Yahweh is unwilling to make a final choice between justice and mercy for Israel, but his withdrawal means that he leaves the Israelites to their own devices. His refusal to aid Israel explains why he does not intervene to save Jephthah's daughter, why his role in the Samson cycle is so ambiguous, and why he allows the civil war that almost destroys the Benjamites.

Yahweh's resistance to manipulation in chapter 10 suggests that his compassionate deliverance is not a mechanical, automatic response. I suggest, therefore, that the breakdown of the cycle in the latter part of Judges is a result of Yahweh's frustration and his unwillingness to make a final choice between justice and mercy for Israel. I contend further that an important theological claim of Judges is that the tension between God's justice and his mercy is never dissolved.

E YAHWEH'S RELATIONAL NATURE

In Judges, both the anger and the compassion of Yahweh are grounded in his covenant relationship to Israel. He repeatedly hands the Israelites over to their oppressors because they have violated the covenant. Again and again he saves them from their enemies because they cry out in agony to him. In Judges 3-9 Yahweh's responses to Israel appear to be quite predictable, but in chapter 10, when for the first time Israel confesses and puts away its idols, Yahweh does not save, thus demonstrating that his actions are not at all mechanical. Instead, he shows that he relates genuinely to Israel as a covenant partner.⁴⁰ Yahweh is so frustrated with his people that he will not respond even to their repentance. It is Yahweh's nature to respond both with promise and with judgment, with anger and with compassion, but those manifestations of his passions are not predetermined; they are not guaranteed.

I conclude, therefore, that the tension between Yahweh's anger and his compassion belongs to his disposition as a relational being; therefore, it is a

⁴⁰ On the relationality of Yahweh in Judges 10, see Lee Roy Martin, "God At Risk: Divine Vulnerability in Judges 10:6-16," *Old Testament Essays* 1/3 (2005): 722-40.

tension that must not be mitigated in our theology. On the one hand, Western theology has emphasised justice, repentance, and obedience to God's commands. On the other hand, liberationist approaches have stressed God's compassion in the face of human suffering. Oppressed peoples, therefore, do not think of their need for God first in terms of forgiveness but in terms of deliverance from oppressive human structures.⁴¹ Early in their history, religious movements tend to emphasise a more dynamic and open view of God. He is the God who intervenes to create a new order and a new way of being.⁴² Entrenched religious institutions, however, stress a more stable and closed theology of God. He is the God who stands behind the present order and who authorises the present structures. It is not necessary, however, to choose between the God of justice and the God of mercy, between the God who gives stability to the world and the God who intervenes. The two theologies of God are both present within the one cycle of Judges. Gerhard von Rad writes:

[E]very generation was confronted by Jahweh's whole historical revelation both in judgment and in salvation. It was not the case that one generation was subjected only to his wrath while the next was solely subjected to his will to save. It was rather that each generation experienced the whole Jahweh.⁴³

The book of Judges does not allow us to choose between these two Gods—the God of justice and the God of mercy. In Judges the two are one and the same.

F CONCLUSION

The narrative of Judges displays a deep tension within the character of Yahweh, a tension between his anger and his compassion. By the end of the book, we might expect that either his anger or his compassion will gain the upper hand and win out over the other, but in fact, what proves to be Yahweh's strongest character trait is his ability to postpone decisive action. For him to completely abandon Israel is unthinkable in light of his earlier declaration: "I will not break my covenant with you forever" (Judg 2:2); but to prosper Israel in its disobedience is an equally unbearable affront to his sense of justice. Yahweh, therefore, chooses neither to forsake Israel nor to bless Israel. Yah-

⁴¹ Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, "Salvation in the Bible vs Salvation in the Church," *Word & World* 13 (1993), 363-72; Samuel Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology* (JPTSup, 14. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); and Richard Shaull and Waldo A. Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations, Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁴² Cf. Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (trans. R. A. Wilson. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1972), 353-496.

⁴³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1962), I:332.

weh is able to bear the tension indefinitely, to continue in ambiguity, to suffer in silence. He does not enjoy the tension, but he endures.

Yahweh's first speech (2:1-5) registers the source of the conflict between Yahweh and the Israelites, which grounds and generates the two-fold cyclical pattern. The tension between his justice and his mercy intensifies throughout chapters 3-9, and chapter 10 marks the turning point of the narrative and the collapse of the cyclical pattern. I have shown how the tension between Yahweh's anger and his compassion continues unresolved from the third speech through the ensuing narratives to the end of the book. I have demonstrated that the inner tension between Yahweh's anger and his compassion is the cause of the ambiguity regarding Yahweh's role in the second half of Judges. While this ambiguity has been acknowledged in recent scholarship, I have shown that the source of the ambiguity rests in the tension expressed in Yahweh's conflicted passions.⁴⁴ Thus the tension between Yahweh's anger and compassion is a tension that generates the cycle in the first place, a tension that causes the eventual breakdown of the cycle, and a tension that is not resolved at the end of the book of Judges. Amazingly, the book of Judges refuses to soften Yahweh's inner struggle as he responds to the changing situation of the Israelites.

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⁴⁴ I am not going so far as to suggest that the theme or focus of Judges is the passions of Yahweh, nor that the primary message of the book is the conflict in Yahweh's passions. The themes of Judges are numerous and complex; see Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*, 91-95.

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