

# The Unlikely Heroes of Judges

## A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Collegiate Biblical Studies

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**I**magine a class that deals entirely with the Old Testament Book of Judges: a quarter-long, four-hour, upper-division, interdisciplinary class on just this one book. Of all the books of the Bible to be chosen for intensive study, why this one of ancient brutality, bravado, and at times beastly behavior? What does this book have to offer students facing the 21st century? What does it have to offer the church? And how does one plumb its depths in a way that keeps students engaged for a whole term?

As two intrepid teachers, immersed to varying degrees in the wide-ranging disciplines of biblical studies, literary criticism, archaeology, anthropology, and theology, we set out to answer these questions. We developed a class designed to bring a broad spectrum of approaches to the study of one biblical book. Our purpose was to explore a small segment of the Bible from several angles and through various lenses. This, we hoped, would enrich students' appreciation not only for Judges, but also for the rest of the Bible.

### **But Really, Why a Course on Judges?**

The Book of Judges appears an unlikely choice at best and downright problematic at worst. Why study it? Because it is part of God's Word, put there for a purpose, however odd or perplexing. It is part of the sacred canon of Scripture and, for that reason alone, deserves our careful study. But in addition, the Book of Judges is ideal for an interdisciplinary approach to Bible study for several other significant reasons.

First, as a work of literature, the book contains some of the greatest Hebrew stories in the Bible. These narratives move with the flair of inspired tribal storytellers and the literary finesse of biblical writers. Here we have the stories of Ehud, the left-handed judge; of Deborah, the woman of flame; of Gideon, the reluctant warrior; of Jephthah, the rash father; and of Samson, the riddle-telling strongman. This collection of great stories offers insights about the ways God works through human agencies.

Second, as a work of history, the book reflects a time period of tremendous turmoil in Palestine—1200 to 1000 B.C.E. by most estimates. This period birthed the tribal entities

BY DOUGLAS R. CLARK AND BEVERLY BEEM

A Philistine temple at Tel Qasile,\* perhaps like the one the Bible tells us Samson destroyed.

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MT. Tabor, where the army of Deborah and Barak mounted ~~their~~ attack on Sisera's army.

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The remains of Jericho (City of Palms) and its oasis, where Ehud met with King Eglon of Moab.

*\*Ancient mounds are called "Tel" in Hebrew, "Tell" in traditional Arabic, and "Tall" in more recent Arabic transliterations.*

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and then state governments of Israel, as well as groups on the other side of the Jordan River like the Ammonites and the Moabites. Other peoples, like the Hittites, Egyptians, Canaanites, Midianites and Philistines, also play roles on this stage, some making quick exits, others waiting in the wings. The period we call Iron I, the

time of early Israel, is significant in biblical history. It is also one of the most vigorously discussed among historians, making its study even more intriguing.

Third, as the family history of Israelite tribal groups surviving in a sometimes harsh and hostile environment, the book establishes the root stories for ancient Israel. These heroic accounts of deliverance from oppression help define Israel and its relationship with God.

Fourth, as an ancient text, the book connects well with the boom in archaeological research on this time period. The central hill country of Israel and Jordan, the setting for much of the Book of Judges, exploded with the establishment of hundreds of small agricultural settlements, some of which we cautiously identify with earliest Israel and Ammon. So archaeology becomes an important contributor to the discussion.

Fifth, the period of the judges provides a remarkable laboratory for investigating the values of these early biblical characters. Anthropologists and sociologists have contributed significantly to our understanding of what life was like in those days—for example: What it meant to be a woman in a man's world. What it meant to survive off the land. What it was like to raise a family

when typically only half the children survived until their teens.

Sixth, we confront in this book some of the most profound theological challenges in the Bible—the problem of war; the challenge of embracing a God whose spirit dashes, destroys, and devastates; the dilemma of “going and doing likewise” with some of these unlikely judges as examples.

Finally, as unusual as it may seem, we find in this book some of the richest devotional insights available anywhere. If God can entrust responsibility to the unlikeliest of the unlikely, to these less-than-perfect specimens of humanity—the left-handed Ehud; the female Deborah; the reticent Gideon; the rash Jephthah; the strongman Samson—imagine what He can do with you and me. These stories offer many devotional possibilities and invite reflection and response.

#### **How, Then, to Teach an Interdisciplinary Course on Judges?**

In team teaching, professors from different disciplines collaborate to show how their specialties illuminate a text. How, for instance, does archaeology assist in the literary reading of a narrative and, conversely, how does a literary approach help

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us understand the times in which the story occurs? How can all these disciplines work together to illuminate the theological purpose of the book? And how do we resolve issues of faith and learning, of science and religion, which inevitably arise in connection with our study of the Bible? Indeed, what better place for these foundational collegiate experiences to take place—asking questions, thinking clearly, finding faith—than in the close encounter between students and Scripture?

Through this approach, students learn to see scholarship as a collaborative endeavor. Often, what we learn about a subject depends on the questions we ask. Each discipline asks its own questions and develops its own tools for answering them. Some questions can be answered only by drawing on the expertise of specialists in fields other than our own. As students explore the purpose and limits of each discipline, they discover something about the nature of scholarship.

Both of us draw from our current research—Doug Clark in biblical studies and the archaeology and anthropology of Iron Age Palestine, and Bev Beem in biblical narrative and literary analysis. We attempt to model the excitement of research and collaboration and to draw our students into the endeavor. We also make available to class members a file cabinet full of resource materials collected over the past several years. Students who participate in a shared task are more likely to take it seriously and feel more responsible for their work than if they passively receive information from their teachers.

The study of each judge typically begins with telling the story, looking at its contexts, seeing how it fits with previous stories, detecting repetitions and patterns in themes and images, and examining the customs and cultural features in the accounts. We look at the stage on which the story is played out, the props used, and the relationship of action, character, and theme. With each new judge, we also introduce the story's geographical setting by means of slides. By looking at the setting and landscape as well as the archaeological remains, we learn about the lives of ancient people.

We prepared for this visual dimension by traveling to Israel and Jordan with the biblical text open before us. There we

studied and photographed the places connected with each of these hero stories. We traced the footsteps of Samson in the Shephelah; of Deborah around Megiddo, Mt. Tabor, and the Wadi Kishon; of Jephthah through Transjordan to the Wadi Mujib, known in the Bible as the Arnon. As one student said, "Reading descriptions can only do so much, but seeing the pictures and hearing from someone who was there is great."

Approaching these stories creatively can be something of a challenge to students, many of whom have heard them repeatedly in Sabbath school and Bible classes. Students may start the class wondering how we can spend a whole term on these old stories. Our challenge is to move beyond the familiar to help them see the strangeness and complexities of the narratives. Using the disciplines listed below to view the Book of Judges helps us address this challenge in ways that are responsible to the Bible and to faith-building.

#### **Biblical Studies**

As with all biblical texts, we seek the most helpful ways of reading and appropriately interpreting them. The main textbook for the class is the Book of Judges, which is always before us. Supplementary readings simply help inform the conversation. The three big questions in biblical

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studies, or exegesis, help us in this endeavor: (1) What did these words mean to the people who first heard them? (2) What do they mean to us today? (3) How are we moved, shaped, changed, and molded by them, or—in other words—how does God use them to make a difference in our lives? As one member of the class put it, "Realizing that Judges was intended for a specific audience makes its messages more accessible for me."

Biblical study seeks an understanding of these sacred texts in the various contexts in which and through which they have come to us. Looking at historical background and events, the time frame, and the peoples mentioned, the literary setting

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**The 1996 crew of excavators at Tall al-'Umayri,\* Jordan, who completed the clearing of the four-room house from the time of the judges. (See page 11.)**

into which the story was placed—this all leads us to ask penetrating questions about the text and provides the most responsible means for interpreting and applying biblical passages and narratives.

### Literary Approaches

We ask students to do repeated close readings, which reveal much that they had not noticed before, especially as they gain a greater awareness of life in ancient times. Hebrew narrative style is sparse, providing

few details and little background. Whatever detail the narrator chose to include must be seen as significant to the story. Why is it important that Ehud is left-handed? Why does the narrator tell us that the Levite and his concubine bypassed Jebus and Ramah to lodge in Gibeah? Details that seem superfluous take on significance as students reread and analyze the story. As one student said, “The readings that pick apart the texts offer up a startling depth to the stories in Judges. Five verses suddenly turn into a complex story with a commentary on the religious state of Israel thrown in.”

At the outset, we look at the stories as narratives, observing how plot, character, setting, and theme work together to create a story with significance to its first listeners in ancient Israel and to its readers today. One student noted, “Learning storytelling techniques has helped me to gain a better understanding of OT stories.” Close examination often reveals patterns that occur throughout the narratives, such as unlikely heroes using unusual weapons like oxgoads, millstones, and tent-pegs in cunning warfare against far-stronger enemies. Once we identify patterns, we can recognize variations and note their signifi-

cance in the overall theme of the book.

One pattern that emerges in the book is the importance of women, something of a surprise in a collection of war stories from a man's world. But women are important players in most of the hero stories, and the way they are treated becomes a mirror for Israel's relationship with God. The stories of Achsah, early in Judges, and the concubine, at the end, provide a framework. Achsah, the forthright daughter of Caleb who asks for springs of water as part of her dowry to ensure the prosperity of her family, contrasts dramatically with the silent concubine whose torn body is used to call the tribes of Israel to civil war.

Why are these stories included? What ties them together? Why are they placed in this particular order? These are the questions of literary analysis. The deuteronomists, inspired editors who collected the stories together into a historical framework, give us a clue to the meaning by establishing the following pattern: Israel departs from God; God abandons them to their enemies; Israel is oppressed; Israel then cries to God in their distress; God raises up a deliverer and rescues Israel; Israel worships God all the days of the

judge. Then the cycle begins again. As we watch the pattern play itself out with repetitions and variations, we see the progression of a nation from the world of Caleb and Achsah to the world of the Levite and his concubine, a downward spiral that signals the beginning of a new phase in Israel's history.

We also become aware of an important thread running through the entire book, which has to do with leadership. In contrast to Samuel's reticence to accept a king over early Israel, the Book of Judges exposes what happens when there is no king in the land. At the beginning of the book, God is the head over these tribal groups. As long as they follow Him, they prosper. Departure from God's will leads to disaster and destruction. Periodically, God raises up human instruments to rescue them from oppressors, ensuring periods of peace and growth. These charismatic leaders, inspired by God for the occasion, seemingly had no natural qualifications for the position. On the positive side, earliest Israel enjoyed moments of redemption and success through these unlikely heroes. But, as the book progresses, these leaders began to exhibit the flaws associated with kingship. Gideon disclaims the role of king, while leading his clans into the worship of a graven image. His son, Abimelech, whose name means "My Father Is King," embodies the nightmare version of a king. The book is ultimately a study of the qualities of leadership, which should be of keen interest to people concerned about religious institutions today.

The ending of Judges is not a happy one. Israel is in utter chaos. The last word is, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25, NRSV). But these words foreshadow Israel's new destiny as a nation. The time of the judges is over. The biblical storytellers now turn their attention to Samuel, Saul, and David.

### **Archaeological and Historical Considerations**

Archaeology ensures a future for the past. It is the systematic excavation, documentation, interpretation, and preservation of ancient artifacts and architecture that provides us with an open window into past human activities. For decades, archaeology has been linked closely with history

and facts about places, people, chronology, events, as well as the underlying causes for things we document. It has thus provided an important source of background information.

Although some demand from archaeology more than it can produce, hoping to prove the Bible true with sensational discoveries or splashy interpretations, it is only one tool among many that helps us understand the Bible better. It illustrates and illuminates the stories we read by giving tangible form to threshing floors and wine-presses, to bedouin tents and domestic houses, to altars and public buildings, to roadways and villages. Archaeology illuminates four-room houses, like the one found at Tall al-'Umayri in Jordan, which provides insights into Jephthah's house, out of which his only daughter emerged at the wrong time. Archaeology helps us identify the sites where the judges' life stories and conflicts unfolded. One significant advantage of incorporating the study of archaeology into the study of ancient history, according to one student, is that it helps "adjust my thinking to see events as the participants must have seen them."

Archaeology also creates tensions for the thoughtful student. The period of the judges is one of the most hotly debated in all of biblical archaeology, as its results

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sometimes match the biblical record, sometimes disagree, and sometimes add a new dimension. Thus, we must grapple with issues of faith and learning, of science and religion, in order to maintain our belief in the God of the Bible and engage in honest appraisal of the archaeological record.

### **Anthropological Concerns**

Although it is a recent addition to the tools of biblical archaeology, anthropology has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the world of the judges. Anthropology concerns itself not so much with places or events as with human life and culture. It looks at religious practices, family structures, economics, social values, and life cycles. How, for instance, does a family subsist in a fairly dry, often hostile

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**Women harvesting grain, reminiscent of the story of Ruth.**

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environment? How do they put food on the table and keep house? How do they sort out gender roles? How and what do they worship, given the smorgasbord of competing deities promising protection against drought, dysentery, and military devastation? These issues help tremendously in our efforts to understand and appreciate the individuals and groups who occupied the land of the judges.

Some of the stories reflect cultural phenomena which, to our mostly Western, individualistic ways of thinking about life, appear foreign. Shame and honor play a significant role in these accounts. Family members must live and behave in ways that honor the patriarchal structures of tribal society. Jephthah has made his vow, and his daughter has no choice but to submit to its fulfillment. The highest of hinterland values, protective hospitality, shapes the outcome of more than one of these stories, including the accounts of the fleeing general searching for sanctuary in the tent of Jael and the traveling Levite and his concubine seeking refuge in Gibeah.

### **Theological Issues**

Judges presents us with a seemingly unending list of theological questions. Christian readers of the book have already encountered the God of the New Testament as revealed in the person of Jesus. Whatever one thinks about the God sitting for a portrait in Judges, this is not Jesus! We do not have here the transparently gentle and gracious God who moves about the countryside mending broken limbs and fixing blind eyes. Here we have a God whose spirit leads Samson to tear apart

lions and steal from bees, to set foxes and fields ablaze, to murder 30 Ashkelonites in order to settle the demands of a riddle gone bad. Here we have a God who apparently delights in ruse and deception, as most of the successful judges use craft and trickery to accomplish God's will. In recognizing these issues, one class member pondered, "What has been problematic for me is understanding why God is often so silent in these stories and what theological implications this action suggests."

Accordingly, our class has had to grapple with profound theological issues. And, in the quest to understand this God and the standards God wants us to live by, we have discovered penetratingly deep theological truths. Not for the faint of heart, the theology of this book reminds us that God is God, that He is a warrior who intervened on behalf of His people in early tribal Israel. The God of Judges is serious about evil, but even more serious about saving and rescuing people who are sometimes more in the way than on it. As one student said, "I saw how God can't be boxed into my own beliefs," and that "this study has helped me to see God as bigger than what I will ever totally understand." In fact, the very ambiguity of Judges' presentation of God is theologically significant, since it calls listeners/readers back again and again to the text to see if they might have missed something, and whether they might need to rethink this God who claims sovereignty and seeks to rescue them from troubles of their own making.

### **Devotional Dimensions**

At first glance, it may seem virtually impossible to find uplifting spiritual value in the Book of Judges. However, we constantly search for this dimension—and find plenty to discuss in the process. We begin each class with a devotional tied to the story for that day, in an effort to focus our attention on issues that extend beyond academic concerns, such as spiritual formation, the devotional life, and religious reflection and action. One student expressed it like this: "I've enjoyed the morning devotions to get us all turned upward in our search of Judges." We avoid using patently cheap devotional ideas, attempting rather to let the texts and stories speak to us at a devotional level.

What does it mean, we ask, for God to employ the likes of a left-handed dagger-carrier, a woman in a man's world, the reticent Gideon for whom several indications of divine providence are not enough, an illegitimate Gileadite whose rash vow costs the life of his only daughter, or a womanizing, wine-drinking Nazirite whose vows should have kept him on the straight-and-narrow but didn't? If God can use these people—the unlikely of the unlikely—might there be a place for each of us in a divine plan to which we sense God is calling us? And, of course, the story of Ruth, which we include in our class syllabus, portrays good people going about treating other people as God would—a fitting conclusion to our study.

After all, every one of us feels left-handed on occasion. We all know what it means to face our own Midianites without enough firepower. We have each experienced the debilitating terror of looking across our own valleys to the encamped Canaanites. The Philistines have been upon us, badgering us with riddles of their own. Learning to read devotionally means learning to listen to the Spirit of God speaking to us through the text in these battles with the Philistines and in our attempts to find God's will. ☸

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