Judges Resources

# Deborah

How is God’s purpose achieved in the world? How is oppression (sometimes) brought under control and justice (sometimes) done? How do men and women play a part in the achieving of such ends? And how are they affected by their involvement in these affairs? The story of Deborah and Ya’el, and of Barak, Sisera, Jabin, and his mother, with its portrayal of motherhood and machismo, suggests perspectives on these questions.

In Israel’s world as in ours a significant role was fulfilled by officially-recognized leaders of church and state with their institutional positions, by kings such as David, Solomon, and Josiah. When there were no kings in Israel (and, indeed, sometimes when there were), the role was played by people who had no institutional position, people who were the ancient equivalents to Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, and Bob Geldof. They are usually referred to as “judges,” though administering the legal system is not prominent in the stories told about them. In the Bible’s way of speaking, being a “judge” is a matter of seeing that God’s “just and gentle government” of the world becomes a reality. That involves bringing people the gift of freedom, so that judging people is not so different from bringing them salvation and they can as easily be called “saviours” as “judges.”

By definitionthe judges were people who had no place in an institutional or constitutional structure. Neither were they people who would have had such a place if there had been such a structure, as is apparent when one considers who they were. The first was Othniel, who brought about a famous victory over an Aramaean king with a name long enough to mirror the threat he signified to Israel; and Othniel was merely Caleb’s younger brother. A theme of these stories is announced: we know very well already from Genesis that younger brothers are despised by human reckoning but/and favoured by God. The second judge is a man called Ehud, who indulged in an assassination worthy of a place in a late‑night horror movie. He had to do his stabbing with his left hand, because he was disabled (not merely left‑handed, as the translations say: literally, he was “bound as to his right hand’). He was not the sort of person who could have been a king (for kings such as Saul and David are emphatically handsome blue‑eyed boys) or a priest (for priests had to be physically without blemish, like the sacrifices they offered). The third judge was an obscure man called Shamgar son of Anat, who killed six hundred Philistines with an ox goad. “He too delivered Israel,” the story comments; but his name marks him as Canaanite (and Anat is the name of a Canaanite goddess) who presumably acted on his own people’s behalf and benefited Israel only accidentally.

Later in judges we will read of the liberating, judging activity of a further line of unlikely heroes, unlikely in their case not because of their position in society but because of their personal and moral qualities. There will be the disbelieving, fearful, sign‑seeking, vengeful Gideon, who ends up leading Israel into the idolatry from which the judges were supposed to deliver people. There will be his son Abimelech, who was so stupid he wanted to be king (a post no one in their senses ever covets). There will be the outcast Jephthah, who was willing to kill his daughter rather than reconsider his relationship with Yahweh. There will be Samson with his fateful addiction to sex and violence.

## Deborah: judge, prophet, leader, poet

Amidst such a line, Deborah has the right to hold her head rather high, even if it will not be surprising if she too turns out to have her blind spots. Let it not be said that a woman cannot hold her head high as a leader. The encouragement her portrait offers scarcely prepares us for the horror of the way a woman is treated in the last story of the Book of Judges, though the violence even of her story perhaps does.

The stories of younger brother Othniel, handicapped Ehud, and Canaanite Shamgar have put question marks by eldest‑ism, able‑ism, and racism; Deborah’s story will undermine sexism. They have all been marginal people, such as everyone knows God does not use ‑ the young, the disabled, and the foreign. Now there appears a woman. Everyone knows women have no place in the structure of responsibility and power. Their job is to follow the men’s lead.

When Deborah is introduced, the story places great emphasis on her being a woman. She is “Deborah” (a woman’s name, of course), “a prophetess” (Hebrew has a feminine noun for that like English), and “woman” or “wife” of Lappidot. Even this word *lappidot*, meaning torches, flames, or flashes, is a feminine word, a strange usage if it is the name of a man. Perhaps “woman of flashes” is a description of Deborah herself, not the name of her husband. This would then fit with the fact that her husband is not otherwise mentioned ‑ a married woman tends to be described as “the wife of so­and‑so” more often than Deborah is described as “woman of *lappidot*.” She is not even identified by her father. She operates as an independent person: she is just “Deborah.”

Many of the names in this story do seem to be significant. Deborah’s own name means “bee.” That other characterization as “woman of torches” hints at her being a woman of fire, a woman who flames and flashes, as indeed she is. She is a woman with the gift of prophecy, with a sting in her tail and a flash in her eye. With the help of Yahweh her story will subvert the patriarchal presuppositions of Israel’s social order (or ours). She is a woman who takes the lead, and in national life; there is no hint that a women’s role is confined to the home. The story we are about to consider begins with the Israelites as thralls and chattels and ends with them once again free to control their own destiny; the change comes about because of the initiative of a woman.

She is almost the first person to be called a prophet in Israel’s story. Abraham was once called a prophet because he was a person whose prayer God heard (Gen 20:7). Miriam was called a prophet because she was someone who led Israelite women in praise (Exod. 15:20). Bee is the first named prophet who brings a word from God that shapes history in the way the word of God will do in the Books of Kings. She will not be the last woman in the prophetic line; it continues in the persons of figures such as Isaiah’s wife and Huldah. It is perhaps also as a prophet that she leads the singing preserved in Judges 5, like Miriam after the Israelites’ escape from the Red Sea. To judge from Joel. 2:28‑32, Acts 2, and 1 Corinthians 14, she stands as a promise regarding the way God can use a woman, a promise open to being newly fulfilled once the Holy Spirit is at work in the church of Jesus.

Bee was also active as a judge in Israel. In general, judgment in the sense of deciding legal cases was the business of the senior men in the community, who would gather in the square inside the city gate to decide on legal matters. But on some occasions of contention people might have recourse to a person who was known to have special insight and who would be asked to decide between their conflicting claims. In a famous story two mothers went to Solomon to get him to resolve a dispute over who was the true mother of a child, and he has the God‑given wisdom to be able to do so in a way which makes absolutely clear which of them is the pretender (1 Ki. 3). Bee was that kind of wise woman. Her wisdom, too, came from God. She sat under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, available for consultation in that connection. That in itself hints at God’s involvement. This was no ordinary palm tree. Palm trees do not grow on the ridge of the mountains of Ephraim a thousand metres above sea level, and the word the story uses is not the ordinary word for a palm tree but one which is also used for a pole or column, a religious object which reminded people of the presence of God, like the pillar Jacob set up at Bethel. Bee sat there in the presence of God and sought God’s wisdom for people. So as well as being Israel’s first proper prophet, this woman is Israel’s first proper judge (in the sense of someone who sorts out disputes). Her woman’s insight is given by God, given back to God, and used by God.

She is “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7). The Book of Proverbs shows how parents in Israel shared with each other the responsibility and authority to provide for their children and to teach them the ways of godly wisdom. The story tells us of no family of her own that Bee had, but as a metaphorical mother she exercised a parent’s responsibility and authority over Israel. As someone who combined the role of judge, prophet, leader, and poet, there is no doubt that she is the greatest figure in the book. It is certainly striking that the only person in scripture who combines all these roles is a woman, but then it is often the case in modern Western culture, too, that women have to learn to live with a more bewildering and demanding combination of roles than men do!

The situation in which Deborah initiates the action is the one which recurs through the Book of Judges. Israel had turned its back on Yahweh, who had responded by casting it off for a while and allowing it to come under the control of “King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor.” The second phrase helps to make sense of the first. The Canaanites were the indigenous population of Palestine, in possession of the land before the Israelites. They were not one political entity, however, but a series of independent city‑states, and in this sense there was no such thing as a king of Canaan as a whole. But Hazor was much the biggest Canaanite city, and we know that its king was viewed as *the* king in Canaan by the far-away power in Iraq.

The city of Hazor stands in a commanding position 15 kilometres north of Lake Galilee, controlling the high­ways north to Lebanon, northeast to Syria and Iraq, south to Palestine and Egypt, west to the Mediterranean. It is an imposing site, a kilometre square, not much by modem standards, but gigantic by those of ancient Palestine; no other city comes near it. The story of Joshua conquering this huge city (without a miracle) in Joshua 11 is a far more astounding one than the story of his conquering little Jericho. But Israelite possession of it evidently did not last, for it is again a centre of Canaanite authority, ruled by a different Jabin (presumably) from the Jabin of Joshua’s day. His name may also be significant, in an ironic way. It means “discerning.”

Jabin’s army commander is a man called Sisera. His name is significant for a different reason. It is not an Israelite or Canaamte one; the best guess is that it is Philistine. The Philistines immigrated into Canaan just after the Israelites from the opposite direction, from the Greek islands. It was they who gave the country the name “Palestine”;we do not know the location of Sisera’s city, though it is significant that its name was “Haroshet of the Gentiles.” The Canaanites, Philistines, and Israelites lived in uneasy coexistence in the country, sometimes two of them in alliance against the third. We have noted the hint that the Israelites could at least recognize Canaanite Shamgar as someone with whom they shared the Philistines as a common enemy. More often, perhaps, it was the Canaanites and Philistines who were in alliance, and this is one of those moments. These two peoples have combined forces and they hold the Israelites in a pincer.

Some awareness of Palestinian geography helps to clarify one way in which they did that. To oversimplify, the main part of the country (west of the Jordan) divides into four blocks. The northernmost is the mountains of Galilee. The southernmost two blocks comprise the mountain ridge north and south of Jerusalem, which among the Israelites was allocated to the tribe of Ephraim and the tribe of Judah. Between these mountain areas is a sizable plain.

Either side of the plain and controlling communications in both directions lie Hazor and a number of other cities such as Bet Shean, Taanach, and Megiddo, which were in Philistine or Canaanite hands. The Israelites live in the mountains either side of this plain and have difficulty reaching each other because of these powers in between, like Palestinians trying to get between different parts of Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza today. Caravans cease and travellers have to avoid the main roads and travel by sidetracks that will bring their own hazards (Jdg. 5:6).

The fact that the Israelites lived in the mountains reflects the fact that they were the technologically less sophisticated people of their day (again, like contemporary Palestinians in the West Bank). Jabin and Sisera had a vast fleet of iron-reinforced chariots, but the iron age has not dawned on the Israelites, who lack even sword or spear (5:8). As ever, the technologically more sophisticated nation can use its expertise to control the destiny of the less sophisticated.

Only when they saw the trouble they were in through turning away from Yahweh did the Israelites turn back and cry for help from Yahweh. Their “crying for help” deserves noting. It is one of a number of ways in which a story such as this one reminds us of the Israelites’ rescue from Egypt and their receiving their new home in Canaan. During their oppression in Egypt and during the generation they spent as nomads in Sinai they had often “cried out for help” to Yahweh, and received it. Their experience of oppression in Canaan, deprived of true enjoyment of the homeland promised them there, is like a continuation of that earlier experience. After all, the name of the villain, Jabin, is the same. The technological problem is the same; it was the Canaanites’ possession of superior equipment that had hindered the Israelites’ making a more com­plete job of occupying the land in Joshua’s day (Jos. 17:16, Jdg. 1:19). The Israelites therefore respond to the crisis in the appropriate way. Their experience in Egypt and in Sinai proved that Yahweh was the kind of God who hears the cry of the oppressed, even when their oppression is their own fault. They know they have to live with the exodus‑Sinai God as exodus‑Sinai people. They set their hope on the exodus‑Sinai God’s honouring that.

## Barak the reluctant general

Apart from cry out to Yahweh, as far as the story tells us, the Israelites do nothing. Until Bee makes them. She sends for a man called Barak ben Abinoam, Barak son of Abinoam (adding a man’s father’s name or a woman’s husband’s name being the equivalent of adding their surname in English). Barak belonged to the tribe of Naphtali and lived in a town in northern Galilee called Kedesh, well beyond Hazor. Bee herself lived near the southern end of the area of the tribe of Ephraim. They come almost from two extremes of the area of the tribes most affected by the constraints imposed by Jabin and Sisera. The tribes Barak summons are the major Galilean tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali; the other tribes who also take part are from the mountains on the south side of the plain, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Machir (Manasseh), along with Issachar, who shared the plain itself (in theory) with Zebulun. Other tribes a little further away are chided for not taking part; those of the far south are not mentioned (see Jdg. 5:14‑18).

Something else links but distances Deborah and Barak. Barak’s name is again significant. Bee was the woman of “flashes”; “Barak” itself means “lightning.” They are very similar people, but very different.

So Bee summons Lightning. “Yahweh the God of Israel commands you, "Go, take up position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Qishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand".” Mount Tabor and the River Qishon stand on the northern and the southern sides of that plain which the Canaanites and the Philistines control; the main road which the Israelites cannot use runs past these places on its way from Damascus and the east to the sea coast and Egypt.

The pattern of Israel’s original victories over the Jabins of Joshua’s day is being repeated: once again Israel is being challenged to take on the Canaanites against all the odds. God gives Lightning a command and a promise. If he will do what God says, he will see God act. The Israelites will not really have to fight; all they will have to do is provoke Sisera to action and then receive the victory Yahweh simply gives them. Yet they do have to muster, march, and provoke. What God does could not come about without God acting; but it could not come about without the human army acting, too. Victory involves people and commanders offering themselves willingly and marching down from the mountains to the plain prepared to do battle, yet even their self‑offering is a reason for praise of God (Jdg. 5:2,9), presumably because even it reflects God’s providence or inspiration.

Why summon Lightning in particular? I have this fantasy that this was exactly the question he asked. “Why me?” Certainly his response is all of a piece with the way people like Moses, Gideon and Jeremiah responded when God summoned them. The last thing Lightning wants to do is take on a Canaanite army with 900 chariots which distinctly tip the balance of forces the Canaanites’ way. Lightning does not wish to be cast into the macho role of the great military hero, especially when he can weigh up the odds. “Why me? Why wasn’t I fishing in the River Jordan when Bee’s message arrived? Why wasn’t the phone off the hook?’

So his fax back to Bee was, “I’ll only go if you come with me. You’re the one who’s thirsting for a battle, itching to indulge your reckless enthusiasm, at a moment when a bit of rational thought points in a quite different direction. I’m quite willing to keep my head down and wait till the Canaanites go away. I would really rather settle for a quiet life. But if I am to go, you must come too.” Barak wants to hide behind the skirts of the woman through whom God speaks; he is unsure whether God will be there if God’s representative is not. God wants him to stand on his own, humanly speaking ‑ to stand on his own with God, in this sense to be a man. Lightning has God’s skirt to hide behind; he does not need a woman’s, even a woman who is the most remarkable leader/judge/prophet/poet he will ever see.

For of course it was not merely the message of a stinging, flashing woman. It was the message of Yahweh, who was capable of being somewhat macho from time to time, and who proposed to be the military strategist in the planned confrontation between Lightning and Sisera. “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go,” Lightning had said. Moses had once said something along those lines, but he had been talking to God, the God who had of course promised to be with him (Exod. 3:12; 33:1‑3,12‑16). It is Yahweh who is summoning Lightning. At least, Bee claims it is, though it must be said that we are not told that she was right. We are not told that Yahweh had spoken to Bee; this might be a macho woman’s manipulating a peaceable man with her theology. If so, however, God strings along with Bee rather than siding with peaceable Lightning. Lightning wants to avoid becoming involved, but Bee will not let him, and God plays it Bee’s way.

‘I will certainly go with you, she says. But she also has another word from Yahweh about the matter. His response was surely not peaceable but feeble. “The path you are treading will not lead to your honour, because Yahweh is going to sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.” If Lightning insists on taking Bee with him as his lucky charm, it will be the lucky charm that gets the credit. At first sight that is all she seems to be saying. The reality will be more complicatedly humiliating.

When Barak musters troops at Mount Tabor, Sisera is drawn by the bait. He and his forces with their 900 chariots gather on the other side of the plain. Bee urges Lightning to attack, promising that Yahweh has gone on in advance of Lightning and has, in effect, already given Sisera into his power. If we are to take Bee’s later poem literally, the way Yahweh does that is through a tumultuous storm which comes at just the right moment to even out the odds between the two armies (see Jdg. 5:19‑22).

There is a piece of theological poetic justice about this. The Philistine gods were gods who manifested themselves in weather phenomena. Dagon, for instance, who will explicitly appear in the Samson story and in the account of the covenant chest’s adventures in 1 Samuel 5, was a god of lightning, which adds a further piquancy to that being the meaning of Lappidot and Barak. The implication is, the real God of lightning is Yahweh, who now manifests that by acting through such natural elements and enabling agents such as flashing Bee and Lightning himself to represent on earth the energy to which Dagon and his representatives can only pretend. The Canaanite goddess Anat was also associated with the stars and rain (which was believed to come from the stars); further, she was a warrior goddess. Yahweh of course was neither male nor female, but/and had characteristics which other peoples would ascribe to their gods or goddesses, certainly including control of stars and rain. Here the power which the Canaanites attributed to their warrior god­dess is attributed to Yahweh and to Yahweh’s warrior prophetess.

Sisera had mustered his forces by the Qishon Wadi. A wadi is a river which flows only when it has rained, especially in the desert where it will be just a dry cleft for most of the year. But when there is a storm (maybe a distance away in the mountains), for a few hours it can become a raging torrent. The Qishon does flow all year round as a harmless brook, but the storm evidently turned it into a flood. One of its effects was perhaps to make the Canaanite chariots undriveable. One way or another the result was not merely to even out the odds between the two armies but to put them in favour of the one which was not used to relying on such technology. The Canaanite chariot forces panicked and took unsuc­cessful flight for home; Lightning (who was evidently learning to overcome any reluctance to play the macho hero) led his forces in slaughtering them.

## Ya’el, and the downfall of Sisera and of Barak

The Canaanite commander showed himself made of wiser stuff than his troops (or so it seemed at first). The survivor is the person who can keep cool in a crisis and take rational action. Sisera abandons his chariot, which no doubt made him conspicuous as well as being no use when it rained, and disappears on foot in the direction of Lightning’s own town, which was perhaps the last direction they would look for him. Near Kedesh, however, was an industrial estate called Elon‑bezaanannim which belonged to a tribe called the Qenites. Their name links them with Cain (Qain, as we might transliterate it), whose family “made all kinds of bronze and iron” (Gen 4:22). More recently they had become allies by marriage with the Israelites, through Moses’s marriage to a Qenite. But a group such as the Qenites, like the modern Bedouin or Druze, survive by reading the political runes correctly and being on good terms with whoever is the power of the day, and still more recently they have become allies of Jabin. Given their expertise, they would be natural chariot suppliers and maintenance engineers. These technological experts have been the key to Sisera’s success but are now in more than one sense the key to his downfall.

Among them is a woman called Ya’el, who in personality has some parallels to Bee and about whose position there are some ambiguities parallel to the ones which attach to Bee. She is “wife of Heber the Qenite,” according to the translations. So where is Heber when Sisera arrives? Perhaps the answer is that he had gone off with Sisera to run the chariot pit‑stop services for his army, and is now on the run or dead like everyone else. But “heber” is most often an ordinary word meaning “company,” and Ya’el may simply be being described as “the woman who belongs to the Qenite group.” Whether or not she is a married woman, she resembles Bee in that she acts as an independent person.

When Sisera arrives at her home, expecting he is on friendly territory if these Qenites were his boss’s chariot engineers (or at least were allies of Jabin), he has fled on foot the best part of fifty miles. Ya’el comes out to meet him and offers him an extraordinarily urbane and smooth welcome, in the circumstances. It is reminiscent of the welcome Abraham offered the three men on their way to Sodom, but that is not all. There is a wicked ambiguity about it. When an apparently unattached, certainly unaccompanied woman takes the initiative and invites a man into her bedroom, in any other context it would be the act of a seductress like the one who appears in Proverbs 7. She, like Ya’el, might well be expected to offer a man refreshment and comfort, invite him to lie down and relax, reassure him that everything will be all right and that she will tell no one of his visit ‑ and then be the death of him, Proverbs says.

There is something else this points to. Ya’el’s name, like others in this story, may be more than just a name. It means “goat.” As well as its advice to avoid other women, elsewhere Proverbs gives a husband some positive hints about how to safeguard his marriage. He is to rejoice in his wife as a lovely deer, a graceful goat (Prov; 5:19). In English comparing your wife to a goat would be an insult, and translations therefore use terms such as “hind” or “doe.” So it will give more the right impression if we call Ya’el “Doe.” The term offers one or two more hints about Ya’el and her place in this story. It implies that she is an attractive woman; that is significant in the way the story unfolds. But further, “goat” is also a title for another goddess, so in addition Ya’el reminds us of Shamgar ben Anat and his implicitly Canaanite faith.

Ya’el perhaps knows the predicament she is in. Whether she is an independent Quenite woman with all the personal insecurityof that position at a moment like this (women in general, but independent women in particular, are often in personal peril in wartime), or the wife of a Qenite engineer whom the Israelites would have reason to view as a traitor, she belongs to a group who have backed the losing side. At this point (like Rahab in Jericho, as well as like Bee) she at least behaves like an independent woman, takes her destiny into her own hands, and acts in a way that brings Israel’s victory to its completion in the death of Israel’s enemy commander. Because she was a woman she won Sisera’s confidence. He relaxed, and it cost him his life.

For like Lightning, Sisera no longer wants to be involved; he, too, has now had enough of playing the macho hero. He was physically exhausted, but when he lets himself fall very deeply asleep it is as if he also wants to contract out of life for a while, though probably not for as long as he ends up doing. Perhaps he knew that a nomadic group like the Qenites were committed to the practice of hospitality: in the desert a mutual commitment to hospitality can mean the difference between life and death. He thought he knew he could trust Ya’el. But perhaps Ya’el knew what this nomadic commitment to hospitality could mean for a woman (see the unsavoury stories in Gen 19 and Jdg. 19) and is at this point, too, ready for a little role reversal.

She gets together her woman’s weapons ‑ gentleness and considerateness, cooking and hospitality, courage and unscrupulousness, a tent peg and a hammer (it was apparently a woman’s job to erect the tent), and drives the tent peg through Sisera’s skull as he sleeps. He must have been deeply asleep indeed; she must have used very violent force in an act which matches or even exceeds the grotesqueness of Ehud’s (Jdg. 3:20‑22). Ya’el the Qenite joins Shamgar the Canaanite (see 5:6) in the roll of honour of those who may have acted for themselves but who consciously or unconsciously also acted to free Israel. She is a deliverer, too.

Sisera’s convulsions are barely over when Lightning arrives at the encampment, just too late if he now wants to play the hero and realize his destiny of being another Othniel (3:9‑10). Ya’el had had no such hesitations. She struts out boldly to tell Lightning where he can find the object of his search, and conducts him to the tent to behold the great general pathetically impaled. “The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory,” Bee had said, “for Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” It is doubly true, and more literally true than either of them had guessed. Even if there is no suggestion that she consciously acts for Yahweh’s sake, God’s work is apparently done through her, and her achievement is to be long celebrated (5:24). Sisera and Lightning have both fallen to a deceptive lone foreign assassin. Sisera’s last words were, “If anyone asks if there is a man here, say "No" .” They were ironic words, with regard to himself and Lightning, who arrives just in time to view the body. Lightning reminds us of Inspector Morse’s assistant (or Sherlock Holmes’s), only there as foil to the great man (in this case the great woman), or even reminds us of Ehud’s pathetic minders (3:24‑25). Sisera’s death is not Barak’s victory but his defeat and humiliation.

## Sisera’s mother and her homely violence

“May Ya’el’s achievement be long celebrated,” says Bee. “So may all your enemies perish, Yahweh” (Jdg. 5:31). Thus, like Sisera, impaled on a tent peg and convulsed? Bee remains macho and bloodthirsty to the end. Alongside the blessing on Ya’el, member of a clan which would have been pulled both ways by this battle because of its association both with Israel and with Jabin, is the terrible curse on Meroz (5:23), apparently a Canaanite village which also had an association with Israel but supported Sisera at the crucial moment.

Did God answer those prayers, and approve them? The text is silent about that, as it was silent about whether the actual battle came about by Bee’s initiative or by Yahweh’s. Ya’el is in scripture (so the prayer for her to be long celebrated is granted) but her story is not read (so it is not). It is not merely that the church has tended to prefer men’s stories in scripture, though that is so. It is that the violence of stories such as Bee’s and Ya’el’s, or Ehud’s and Shamgar’s, makes us feel uncomfortable. It faces us with the fact of violence within ourselves, which we prefer to avoid. But it also seems in tension with the sense expressed elsewhere in scripture that the solution to violence issues from letting it be done to oneself, not doing it. Lightning is the sad figure in this story, but also an authentic one.

Perhaps the point is subconsciously made by the little vignette with which Bee’s song closes. She imagines the scene back in Sisera’s home town, in his villa. It is a garrison town and they are a military family. They know what it is like to psych themselves up for war, to send the men off to battle not sure how many will return or with what horrendous injuries. When they are away, everyone is jumpy and the tension builds as the time passes. No one relaxes.

As a senior military commander Sisera would have a house in a commanding position in Haroset, a position designed to catch the breeze in summer but also thus offering a vantage point over the area around. His mother paces the floor as the time goes on and they ought to be receiving some news. She peers through the wooden lattice which bridges the stone window openings, again designed to get maximum benefit from the breeze without losing privacy, and itself indicating that this is a rather fancy villa in Upper Haroset. Her son seems a long time, he and his men .... She and her household staff keep their spirits up by discussing the good reasons that may have delayed the men, but their words do not convince us, and perhaps did not convince them. Her villa is her prison as well as her home; she dare not move away from the telephone lest the call comes. As the iron chariots had stuck in the marsh and become worse than useless to their men, so the summer villa has become a prison on the way to being a backwater to its women.

Lightning has no escape from his man’s role, and she has no escape from her woman’s role, though like him, in the end she has entered into it enthusiastically. Behind every powerful man is a mother . . . . It involves her in something of a betrayal of her own sex. Why is there no sound of a returning chariot? It must be because they have won such a stupendous battle against those pathetic, primitive Israelites that they are working overtime dividing up the plunder. Like someone looking forward to the return of her son from a business trip abroad, she wonders what he will bring her as a souvenir: some nice native embroidery? But she thinks not just of the materials but of the people and imagines his forces embarrassed by choice among the young Israelite girls. Rape and pillage is what war is about, and she is quite happy about that as long as the Canaanites are winning. Her musings are ironic, of course, and so is the description of her staff, her “very wise” ladies‑in‑waiting. They are not wise enough to recognize that the power balance has changed or to guess that womanhood has been Sisera’s downfall rather than vice versa. The kind of motherhood that Bee embodies and that Ya’el embodies in active ways is also the kind that Sisera’s mother embodies in a more passive way, a violent motherhood that will now grieve at what other mothers have done to her son. The returning army will bring her not embroidery but sackcloth.

Issues concerning oppression and deliverance have been resolved for a while. Questions about community relationships and family happiness remain. Even Jabin is to some degree a victim. It was God who had sold Israel to him in the first place, using him to achieve the divine purpose, and now has overpowered Jabin. Perhaps Jabin now wants to avoid being involved, like Lightning and Sisera; there must have been some reason why he avoided fighting, as Lightning wanted to, and left the task to Sisera who had more taste for such activity. But for a leader in a position like his there is no escape until the Israelites have destroyed him (Jdg. 4:23‑24). Like his commander he will find the only escape is death.

Bee’s story and Bee’s song concern some political, military, and historical questions, and some personal questions about what it means to be a man or a woman. The story began (4:1‑3) the way we might expect a story about Israel’s adventures in the judges period to begin, but as it unfolds it changes the agenda and subverts our expectations of such a story. It comes to be about Israelite power and Canaanite oppression, but also about women’s power and patriarchal oppression. It is typical of scripture that it interweaves these concerns: historical issues are determined through people coming to terms with who they themselves are, and people discover who they themselves are through their involvement in historical events. The crucial events are as much the ones that take place in the privacy of Ya’el’s home as the ones that take place on the battlefield where the business remains unfinished.

Bee’s story and Bee’s song affirm the significance of Israel’s activity in history, Yahweh’s activity with Israel which makes their victories possible, and women’s activity in a men’s world. But it does that in an ambiguous and ironic way.

How is God’s purpose realized in the world? Through kings like Jabin who are involved in the fulfillment of God’s purpose all unbeknown to themselves, in ways they enjoy and in ways they wish they could escape. Through the people of God crying out to God in the midst of their suffering (even when it is deserved). Through a woman of insight who becomes a woman of violence. Through a reluctant soldier who learns the lesson from her very well. Through a woman on her own who uses her female wiles to become a traitor and an assassin. It embraces three assertive women, three women with violent intent; Deborah and Ya’el succeed because Yahweh is with them, Sisera’s mother is disappointed because Yahweh is not with her. It embraces three men trying to avoid violence and failing, three male victims, Jabin because Yahweh’s purpose runs a different way, Barak because Deborah has other ideas, Sisera because he relaxes in the company of Ya’el. They all play a part in Yahweh’s purpose, and in the introduction of 40 years’ peace in the land, for the sake of which it might almost seem worthwhile to be a victim.

# Jephthah and His Daughter

Summarized from J. Cheryl Exum*, Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge UP, 1992).

Jephthah’s story appalls us. He is “unwittingly responsible for a situation that calls for him to take the life of his own child. A vow made in ambiguous circumstances and in ignorance of its outcome forces his hand…. There is no apparent reason for the disaster that befalls Jephthah, nothing of the divine displeasure that drives Saul to despair and madness…. Strangely, we are not told how the act affects him; nor for that matter do we learn of God’s reaction…. Wherein, then, does the tragedy of Jephthah lie?” It lies “in events themselves, in a certain ambiguity that surrounds all that transpires, and finally in the divine silence, the refusal of the deity to take a position *vis-à-vis* these events.

The story opens in Judges 10 at a point of crisis and begins by following the familiar pattern of the book. Verses 11-14, however, introduce a new element, the divine refusal to intervene: “Therefore I will not continue to deliver you.” The people implore divine assistance at any price…. This is the only place in Judges where the people actually repent. And yet Yhwh… does not react by providing a deliverer….

The introduction to Jephthah in Judg. 11:1 alerts us from the beginning to an ambivalent quality about him…. He combines the desirable with the unacceptable…. If Jephthah’s origins are questionable, so is his rise to power…. Jephthah is first sought out by the elders, and only later affected by the spirit of Yhwh.

The pinnacle of his career, his moment of greatest glory, contains the seeds of his tragedy. Jephtah vows a sacrifice to Yahweh, and victory demands its scandalous performance. What provokes it? See 11:29. By implication he makes his vow under the influence of Yahweh. The problem is the last two words of it. The irony, the tragic irony, rests in the exact correspondence between the ill-chosen terms of Jephtah’s vow and the subsequent events. We do not know what provokes Jephtah to set these particular terms or what determines this particular outcome, what accounts forthe chilling coincidence between the vow and the daughter’s appearance. The fact is that their connection cannot be explained; it has no cause, at least not one we can name, and that is the source of its terror.

 The description of Jephtah’s daughter, “only she—alone—he did not have, except for her, son or daughter’, reminds us of another sacrificial victim, “your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac”. But there, a ram was sacrificed instead of the child. Here, the words emphasize the daughter’s singularity and Jephtah’s isolation. Jephtah, the outcast, the marginal figure, who tends to act independently even when representing others, faces his tragic moment alone. His isolation is the more striking when we perceive the contrast with his daughter, who has companions with whom to share her grief. Only 11:35 furnishes any insight into Jephtah’s emotional state and portrays an inner conflict. Jephtah becomes a tragic figure insofar as he realizes he has no alternative, that he is caught in a situation both of his own making and paradoxically an accident of fate. He did not intend to sacrifice his daughter. The experience of being trapped in an intolerable situation for which one is unintentionally yet still somehow responsible gives rise to tragic awareness. Saul knows he has lost the kingship yet he multiplies his efforts to hold onto it. Jephtah does not grapple to find a way out of a situation for which there is no way out. There is no wrestling against his fate.

The source of the tragic in the story of Jephtah is not divine enmity, as in Saul’s case, but divine silence. The account of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac shows one possible direction our narrative could have taken. But in Judges 11, God neither requires nor rejects human sacrifice. Jephtah, like his daughter, is a victim of forces beyond his control. Nor is the daughter innocent; she did not resist. She speaks on behalf of the sacrificial system and patriarchal authority, absolving it of responsibility. And the women of Israel cooperated in this elevation of the willing victim to honored status.

# Samson

Samson is one of the great examples of faith in the New Testament, someone the Bible expects us to learn from. So what sort of man was this hero of faith?

The Israelites had again done wrong in the eyes of Yahweh, who had given them into the power of the Philistines. At a political level it is a period of considerable violence in Israel’s national relationships. Arguably international relations are thus in their “normal” state; strife is more that normal state than is peace. On a gloomy day it can seem that to seek peace is always to work against the grain, that nations are inherently violent ‑ they always have been and they always will be. The individuals who make up nations are likewise innately violent (especially the men, for gender questions do seem to come into play here) ‑individual and national violence feed each other. The story of Samson in Judges 14‑17 is part of the story of violent relationships between the Israelites and the Philistines; Samson was to be the man to give the Philistines something to think about. It is also the story of his personal violence.

## Old Testament James Bond, yet tragic hero

Samson was indeed someone God used. He was a man with a calling. Yet he was a tragic hero. But none of that is where the story starts. The first fact that becomes clear in his story is that Samson was the Old Testament James Bond. He fancied a Philistine girl, and went to win her. On the way a lion attacked him and he tore the lion apart the way you kill a goat (which would be more than enough for most of us), with his bare hands. “But he did not tell his father or mother what he had done,” the story says. Well, you wouldn’t, would you? When he got to Timnah, the Philistines swindled him out of 30 lengths of linen and 30 suits (£3000?). So he went on to the next Philistine town, killed 30 men, and paid his debt with their clothes.

It seems he was not really satisfied with this revenge. Eventually he went and caught 300 foxes, tied torches to their tails, and turned the foxes loose in the Philistine cornfields and orchards. The Philistines, in their turn, killed Samson’s wife and her father, though Samson got his own back on them in the end. “He smote them, hip and thigh, with great slaughter.” This time the Philistines invaded Judah, looking for him. Samson’s own people persuaded him to surrender himself, and the Philistines tied him up, but he broke their ropes as if these were sticky tape. He looked around and spotted a dead donkey, grabbed the donkey’s jaw and went flailing at the Philistines, killing another thousand of them. The interwovenness of personal and national violence, and the place of God in all this, is noted in the observation that his parents have to be forgiven their opposition to Samson’s marriage plans because they did not realize that these were giving Yahweh opportunity to intervene in politics and take some action to free Israel from Philistine oppression for a while (Jdg. 14:4).

The way the story has opened has revealed Samson’s other obvious characteristic as well as his violent streak, his eye for girls. Mieke Bal has noted how the interwovenness of sex and violence is characteristic of the Book of Judges as a whole, and it is the combination of sex and violence that invites us to view Samson as an Old Testament James Bond, though it must be noted that in due course even James Bond cleaned up his act somewhat in the light of Aids. Samson is pre‑Aids, more a child of the 1960s. Samson first got into trouble because he fancied a Philistine girl, and later he was nearly caught in Gaza when he was spending a night with a girl there. But then there was Delilah, who was not just pretty or sexy: he fell for Delilah.

That brings us up short. James Bond does not fall in love. This is the point at which we move from Samson the Old Testament James Bond to Samson the tragic hero. Women and violence are the two themes that link Samson and James Bond, but the links are superficial. James Bond is always the successful ladies’ man. If a heart is broken, it will not be his. He rides off into the sunset with a sequence of attractive girls.

For all the similarities, Samson is not quite the same. There are four women in Samson’s story. There is the girl he married, the girl he picked up, and the girl he fell in love with, who occupy Judges 14, 15, and 16. But before we come to them, we read in chapter 13 about a very different woman, the one who bore him. She was like a number of other women in the Old Testament such as Sarah and Hannah. For years she had not been able to have children. They had tried and tried and hoped and prayed, and it had never happened. Then God promised she would have a son, and they called him Samson. It is a suggestive name: it means “Sunshine.” As far as his mother was concerned, the sun shone out of his eyes. You can almost see her glowing pride as he grows to be bigger and stronger than anyone else in the area. That was the first woman in Samson’s life. The picture of her and her husband contrasts sadly with the story of the woman he married because he fancied her and the woman he spent the night with because he felt like it.

Then there was the woman he fell in love with. Here is when Samson becomes a human being, when he softens and becomes vulnerable ‑ though I suspect there would be a feminist/psychoanalytical critique of this so‑called falling in love. If he does grow as a person, it is the means of his downfall. The tragedy was that it was a tale of unrequited love. Delilah was able to be the woman who found out the secret of Samson’s strength and to tell the Philistines, for 30 pieces of silver. “And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with bronze fetters. And he ground at the mill in the prison.” Delilah is a woman like Ya’el but working for the other side, using her womanliness in that connection as Samson is using his manliness, but also using her intelligence as he is not, because men so easily throw sense to the winds when diverted by what they think is love. In Judges Yahweh’s spirit may convey power but it does not necessarily convey insight.

## Man with a calling, man God used

What exactly was it that was tragic about Samson? He was a disappointment to his family, he made a mess of his relationships, his manliness and strength were pathetically overcome and made fun of by the Philistines, but what was tragic about Samson was the contrast between what he was and what he was supposed to be before God. Samson was a man with a calling. He was supposed to be God’s agent in liberating Israel from the Philistines. What happens, however, is that at the beginning of the story he marries a Philistine, and at the end of the story he dies with the Philistines.

There were other aspects to his calling. To mark him out as Yahweh’s servant, he was supposed to be a Nazirite, someone especially devoted to God. A Nazirite was different in three ways from other people. He abstained from alcohol; it was perhaps a symbol of being filled with another Spirit. He avoided eating certain things, keeping a special version of the kosher laws that all Israelites observed. The point was not that there was anything wrong with these foods; they were not a threat to health. Abstaining from them simply marked the Nazirite out. His third distinctive mark was that he kept his hair long. That was another sign of his consecration, and thus another sign of the strength which came from the God he was consecrated to.

Those were Samson’s vows. He breaks each one of them. First we see him at the same kind of wedding feast as everyone else, where (no doubt) the wine flowed freely. Then he eats some honey produced by bees who had made their nest in the carcase of that lion he killed, which means that the honey would be unclean. Finally there was his hair. “How can you say you love me,” said Delilah, “when you keep your secrets from me? What is the secret of your strength?” She nagged him day after day until she wore him down and he told her. “It’s the fact that scissors have never been near my head, not since I was born, because I have been set apart as a Nazirite since birth. If my hair were cut off, my strength would go. I would be as weak as anyone else.” When Delilah saw that he had now told her the truth, she sent word to the Philistine SAS. “Come back one more time. He has told me.” They came with the eleven hundred shekels they had promised her. She lulled him to sleep on her lap. Perhaps he was tired of fighting, like Sisera, and subconsciously wanted out ‑ in which case he reminds one of the tragic violent heroes of films such as *Once Upon A Time In America* who find they can never get out. As he slept like a baby on its mother’s lap, Delilah called a man to cut off his seven plaits of hair, whereupon his strength left him. Then she shouted out, “Samson, the Philistines are on top of you.” He woke up with a yawn and said to himself, “Well, I shall soon see them off again,” not realizing that Yahweh had left him. It was the contrast between the man he was and the man he was supposed to be that constituted his tragedy.

This might have been the end of the story, but it is not, and that is one good reason why the story appears in the Bible. We do not, of course, need the Bible to tell us James Bond stories. We have Ian Fleming to do that. But part of the reason why this kind of story is there is that inside most of us there is a little James Bond (or a little Delilah). That is partly why so many people like those films. They are fantasies.

The Bible’s James Bond, however, lives in the real world, where sex and violence rebound on us. It makes us live in the actual world, not in a celluloid one. Then precisely because many of the instincts of Samson or Delilah are inside us, something of the tragedy of their stories also appears in our lives. We misuse our opportunities, mess up our relationships, and hurt people. We know that we fall short of God’s vision and of the commitments we make to God.

The Samson story challenges us to look in the eye what it is that God wants to do with us and to look in the eye the kind of special commitments God asks of us, and to see how we are getting on with them. It presents us with a man who made a mess of his life, his relationships, and his calling. But it then tells us that this is not quite the end of the story, because even in that situation it is still possible to be the person God uses. This does not undo the tragedy, as the end of the story shows, but it takes a little of the edge off it.

The Philistines had captured Samson, gouged out his eyes, and taken him to Gaza. John Milton wrote a poem about Samson, whose blindness he shared. Many painters have painted Samson in his blindness, too. It is this aspect of Samson that has caught their imagination, perhaps because to them sight is so all‑important; they recall the sculptor in the play *Whose Life Is It Anyway*, who wishes to commit suicide when paralysis makes him unable to continue the creative activity which defines him as a human being. Milton also wrote a poem in which he overtly reflected on his own blindness.

 God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
and post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.

In a terrible sense that will also be true of Samson. Perhaps Yahweh was using Samson’s love for Delilah just as had been the case with his attraction for the Philistine woman with whom the story began.

The Philistines had chained him up and set him to grinding corn in the prison. There the hair that had been cut off began to grow again. Then the time came for a festival in honour of their god, Dagon, and they assembled to worship him for delivering their troubler, Samson, into their hands (a woman never gets the credit, even if she does do the work). They fetched Samson from the prison and stood him in the middle of the temple to perform for their entertainment. Samson had to be led by a boy, of course, because he could not see. He asked the boy to put him where he could feel the pillars in the temple. It is helpful to know something about Philistine architecture: temples had two pillars in the middle to support the roof, as is illustrated in examples that have been excavated in Palestine in recent years. Samson began to press with the strength of each arm on the two pillars; and Samson prayed. Samson is praying! “Yahweh, remember me. Give me strength just once more, Yahweh. Give me one chance to get revenge on the Philistines, at least for blinding me. I will be happy to die with them!” He pushed with all his might, and the temple collapsed on the Philistine rulers and people and on Samson himself. He killed many more when he died than while he lived. The story ends with his family going to get his body, and burying him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father.

It is the end of the story, but Samson is mentioned that once more in scripture, in Hebrews 11. “What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson….” Even Samson is in the list of the heroes of faith; even Samson is among the cloud of witnesses. If there is room for Samson, there is room for you and me.

# Responses to Questions

What were the sanctuaries? There was no temple. Is there the wilderness sanctuary? What was the worship system?

*\*\*The wilderness sanctuary is at Shiloh in 18:31, but that’s too far away for people to go to regularly. It wouldn’t be surprising if there were local sanctuaries in towns—what are later referred to as the high places. Judges 17—18 refers to Micah having a family sanctuary, and it wouldn’t be surprising if much worship was based on the family (the big extended family, that is), as it would have been in the time of Israel’s ancestors. Compare Deuteronomy’s emphasis on the family as the worship and teaching unit.*

They didn’t know the Lord (2:10) but they knew enough to cry out?

*\*\*Whenever you get the word “know” in the OT, it’s worth asking whether it implies “acknowledge,” and that’s the point here.*

Was there a time in Israel’s history when Israel believed pagan gods were real?

Does the Jephtah story imply that Kemosh is a legitimate god and that human sacrifice is okay?

*\*\*It might imply that Jephtah thinks that he is, as it probably implies that human sacrifice is okay; we know from the Prophets that lots of Israelites though that way. But his story stands under the sign of Judges 21:25. Officially, Israel always knew that pagan gods were real; they just knew that they weren’t God in the same sense as Yahweh, the only God with a big G.*

Can violence be used for good? When?

*\*\*In Judges a common use of violence is to punish wrongdoing—sometimes on God’s initiative, sometimes without God’s initiative. If punishing wrongdoing counts as “good,” that would be an example. Some such violence is designed to discipline and not just punish—in other words, to draw people back from wrong ways and push them into right ways. That might count as good. My father once or twice spanked me—I think that did me good, and it fits with the description of God’s fatherly action in Hebrews 12, and I may once or twice have done the same to my sons. If I were in the police I would probably have to use violence, which fits with Romans 13.But I don’t think any of the violence in Judges is presented to us as setting an example. That’s not what the book is for.*

Why is the spirit of Yahweh always associated with physical power and destruction?

*\*\*That’s a neat question! Maybe the meaning of the word* ruah *points to the answer.* Ruah *means wind and breath and spirit. Its reference to the wind points to its being something tumultuous and powerful, not gentle. Wind blows trees over. Hence in Acts 2 spirit is associated with fire; also Matt 3:11-12. The coming of God’s spirit is overwhelming. The common Christian concept of the spiritual as inward and gentle doesn’t have much basis in scripture.*

Why did God go along with Israel’s idea to kill so many people, including people not directly involved in the conflict—women, children, animals?

*\*\*I guess for the same reason as God went along with (say) the Crusades? God doesn’t intervene very much to stop people doing the wrong thing or to tweak what they do.*

How does Judges fit into Abraham being the father of a nation called to bless the world?

*\*\*I don’t think Abraham was called to bless the world, was he? He was promised that God would bless him in such a way that other people would seek (and find) the same blessing.But anyway, in Judges God’s plan isn’t working out: again, the stories stand under the sign of Judges 21:25.*

God delivers Israel to other nations, then destroys them. Does God care only about Israel?

*\*\*There’s little indication in Judges that God cares about other peoples. It’s the setting of Judges in the wider OT story that indicates that wider care.*

When Yahweh’s spirit comes on someone, do they always do something Yahweh wants done?

*\*\*It’s Christian experience that when the Holy Spirit comes on someone, their consequent words and actions may mix up something of themselves with what is of God, and you could say the same about Yahweh’s spirit in Judges. The reference to the spirit is a reference to supernatural power.*

Why does God use people who are so flawed?

Is there rhyme or reason why God chooses these people?

Is it common for heroes to be depicted in such negative light?

Why does God stay with people despite bad personal judgments?

*\*\*God doesn’t typically operate on an immediate punishment for wrongdoing basis, does he? It’s common in the OT (and the NT) to portray heroes as having great weaknesses—David is a fine example of this point.* *I guess it contrasts with one strand of Western spirituality, which makes us like to have heroes to be inspired by. Theologically, it points to the fact that the hero in Israel is God. If you have God as hero, you can risk the human heroes being jerks. It would link with that fact that it’s impossible to see rhyme or reason, though not all God’s choices are random (see the stories of the choice of Saul and David).*

What does the NT think of Judges?

*\*\*Notwithstanding the previous question the NT likes a number of Judges’ heroes (Heb 11)!*

What does the word “judge” mean? How is Samson a judge?

*\*\*I agree, “judge” is a misleading translation of the word shopet. Some translations have “leader,” which is better.*

When Ehud kills Eglon, is it murder or war?

*\*\*It’s assassination.*

What is the significance of the fact that the story doesn’t condemn Jephtah?

*\*\*The same as the fact that it doesn’t condemn other people, nor does it commend the good guys. It leaves people to work out how to evaluate the characters. And it’s not very interested in doing so, because the real point lies in the story and in what God is doing.*

What are we to think about vows/promises to God (not least about our children)? Should we make them? Can you get out of foolish vows? What would have happened to Jephtah if he had not fulfilled his vow?

*\*\*There are examples of such vows/promises in Scripture that are okay—e.g., the Hannah story in 1 Samuel 1—2. Saul makes a stupid vow and people help him get out of it (1 Sam 14). I assume Jephtah could have talked to Yahweh about it and negotiated something. Any “proper” Israelite would know that sacrificing a human being was wrong.*

Is Samson a terrorist?

*\*\*I guess from the Philistine perspective, yes; from Yahweh’s and Israel’s angle, he is a freedom fighteror a special forces operative.*

What’s the teaching of the Samson story?

*See (c) above*.

Judges 14:4: Samson’s action was from Yahweh, because he was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines. So Yahweh was getting Samson to break a rule in the Torah?

*\*\*I don’t think his action involved breaking a rule in the Torah (there’s no ban on marrying a Philistine) but I don’t think it would be impossible for speak in these terms about doing something against the Torah. The implication isn’t that Samson is doing something he didn’t want to do. Compare Genesis 50:20.*

Why did God leave Samson after Delilah cut his hair? It seems silly.

*\*\*For a Nazirite (see (c)), his hair was a sign of his dedication to God.*

Was prostitution acceptable?

Why did God allow disobedience about matters of sexual morality but punish the society about serving other gods?

*\*\*Did God allow it? Doesn’t it look as if people paid a price for it? But you’re right that the issue the book gives more explicit attention to is people’s faithfulness to Yahweh. It’s the same with David. Maybe God thinks that unfaithfulness to Yahweh is going to mean the end of his project to redeem the world through Israel? Maybe that unfaithfulness is the sin against the Holy Spirit, the only sin that can’t be forgiven because it implies turning away from the means of forgiveness. The OT doesn’t forbid prostitution (or polygamy) but I don’t see the Samson story as thinking it is okay, any more than adultery.*

Does God still send people into the world to do one thing (like Samson, or John the Baptizer)?

*\*\*Maybe. One thing is quite a lot. But we need to remember that while in Scripture we have only the one thing, we don’t know what else they did. It reminds me of the oddity that we only have one or two prophecies from prophets such as Haggai. I expect God gave him many other prophecies for the people, but the ones in “his” book were especially important because they related to building the temple.*

The story of the Levite’s concubine is disheartening. What is its message? How can women take heart from it?

*\*\*I would have thought that the disheartening aspect of the story is that it is not untypical of what happens in the world, and of what happens in our world. One of the great things about Judges and the OT generally is that it portrays life as it actually is. It is not escapist. But it then sets a story of this kind on the context of God working out a purpose for the word’s redemption.*

In what way are these stories prophetic?

*\*\*They give you God’s angle on what is going on; they show you God’s word at work; they have power to change us.*

In what way should they impact us?

*\*\*Make us stop teaching simply that God is love and nothing else? Encourage us that God uses such flawed people?*

Does God know whether Israel is going to obey or disobey?

Why didn’t God send a king sooner, skipping the judges phase?

What was God’s plan throughout Judges? Was it all to set up the institution of kingship?

*\*\*I don’t see any indication that God had a plan. The OT story very often describes God in reaction to situations rather than working out a plan. (It would be a weird plan!) So God is seeing how things go and then doing something about it. Of course you could assume he knew ahead of time and knew what he was going to do. But that idea is hard to fit with the way the OT describes God as surprised and disappointed by Israel’s unfaithfulness (e.g., Isaiah 7; Jeremiah 3).Why didn’t God send Jesus sooner, skipping the OT phase?*

How do we teach and preach these stories?

*\*\*By retelling them with some reflection interwoven, so as to let people find themselves in them. See (a) and (c) above*.

How do we fit the morality and actions of these stories with the Sermon on the Mount?

*\*\*In what sense do we need to do so? They aren’t stories about how to be moral. They are stories about immorality among the people of God and what God does about it. They illustrate people like Jephtah and Samson dong things the Sermon on the Mount prohibits and the OT shows to be wrong and unwise, and God interacting with them and working through them.*

Does anything good happen in Judges? Is it all about sin and waywardness?

*\*\*I think some of the things in the Deborah and Gideon stories are neat!*

Did the stories happen as they say or have they been changed to make a theological point?

*\*\*I don’t think we have the criteria for answering that question. I assume that as with other OT stories they are “based on fact.”*

How were women perceived in the time?

*\*\*See the stories of Deborah, Jephtah’s daughter, Samson’s mother, Delilah, the Levite’s wife, the Shiloh women (also Ruth and Hannah).*

When the Israelites “cried out” to Yahweh (3:9, 15; 4:2; 6:6, 7; 10:10, 12, was it genuine repentance?

*\*\*In itself, crying out doesn’t imply repentance at all. It’s a cry of pain. And it’s the pain that Yahweh responds to in 2:18. But when the text refers to crying out to Yahweh, the emphasis is on the fact that it is Yahweh that they are crying out, rather than the other gods they had turned away to. In this sense it was genuine repentance (the Hebrew word for repent literally means “turn [back]”). But it didn’t last!*

What/who is “the angel of the Lord”?

*\*\*The word for “angel” is a word for a king’s representative who speaks and acts on the king’s behalf (it’s the same word for human representatives in e.g., 6:35; 7:24; 11:12-19).I think “aide” is a better translation for both the supernatural and the human figure. When the king’s aide comes, it’s the same in effect as if the king comes—he can act and speak on the king’s behalf. It’s the same with Yahweh’s aide. He’s a supernatural figure, but he looks like a human being, so it may be a while before you realize who it is (cf. Heb 13:2).*

What’s the conception of salvation in Judges?

*\*\*When translations talk about God “saving” Israel, you need to understand it is light of the way the NT talks about being saved in passages such as Matt 8:25; 14:30. It’s God rescuing you from danger or oppression. When the OT wants to talk about a personal relationship with God, it uses different terms.*

Why does God keep saving Israel when they keep falling into worshiping other gods?

*\*\*Yes, why is God gracious and merciful with us?*

What is the character of God here?

*\*\*God is capable of acting sovereignly and powerfully in political events; applies that capacity to fulfill his purpose for his people; gets angry and chastises them when they are unfaithful, but then relents and delivers them; is prepared to use human violence in this connection; works against human expectations in using foreigners, younger brothers, women, wimps, sex-addicts, and fighters*.

Can we really say that Jesus is the same essence as the God of Judges?

*\*\*This morning I happen to be reading John 15, where Jesus and his Father seem quite like the God of Judges, don’t they? See John15:1-2, 6.*