

Power and Knowledge

The Control of Knowledge

As prominent warriors, community leaders, and heads of houses, the men of valor in Judges managed subordinates, manipulated superiors, and dealt with enemies. As was true in other patronage systems, success depended on their ability to exercise force and distribute wealth. However, they also relied on other political resources. Knowledge mongers as well as pursuers of military power and material riches, the heroes in Judges valued information as much as physical strength, adeptness with patronage, or the ability to administer a great house. In exploring the question of how the mighty men of valor gained and held power, this chapter argues that the champions described in the book of Judges regarded knowledge as an indispensable tool for achieving that end. Some of that knowledge was dispensed by them personally; some was generated by others in their employ or under their control. Some of the knowledge was consumed by the men of valor themselves; some was

reallocated as a form of patronage or even sold in order to generate income.

The knowledge pursued by men and women in Judges is what moderns label as indigenous knowledge.¹ Indigenous knowledge deals with both the temporal and supernatural worlds, worlds not sharply differentiated in pre-scientific societies. In the book of Judges, strongmen sought temporal knowledge about land rights, strategies for battle, the location of secret entrances in city walls, potential political conspiracies, and diplomatic history. They also collected information about who had wealth, who could be taxed, and who could be trusted. But even more important for people in the book of Judges was an understanding of the supernatural world. As anthropologist Harry G. West notes, people who acknowledge a supernatural realm seek to comprehend, gain access to, manipulate, and benefit from that world. Such insight, entrée, and control complement and enhance knowledge and actions in the temporal domain.² In the book of Judges, large oak trees, hills, temples, altars, sacred pillars, and sculpted stones provided physical points of access to the world of the supernatural. While ordinary individuals might have dealings with the paranormal, ritual experts were regarded as the most effective intermediaries between the worlds of the seen and the unseen. Seized in ecstasy, clothed in unique garments, and coiffed unconventionally, these spiritual specialists offered sacrifices and manipulated specialized implements of divination when serving as vessels of supernatural guidance.

1. The following UNESCO statement offers a good definition of indigenous knowledge: "Indigenous Knowledge (IK) can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment. This definition encompasses all forms of knowledge—technologies, know-how skills, practices and beliefs—that enable the community to achieve stable livelihoods in their environment. A number of terms are used interchangeably to refer to the concept of IK, including Traditional Knowledge (TK), Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK), Local Knowledge (LK) and Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS)" (www.unep.org/ik/).
2. Harry G. West, *Ethnographic Sorcery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

In describing how leaders in premonarchic Israel used knowledge to build their fortunes, this chapter will borrow from the insights of cultural anthropologist Jane Guyer.³ Looking at strongmen depicted in African legend, Guyer argues that political power is partially dependent on a leader's ability to mobilize knowledge. In assessing the importance of knowledge in traditional Africa, Guyer challenges the assumption that power is primarily linked to the control of people—wives, children, pawns, clients, and slaves—merely as producers and reproducers. According to Guyer, successful leaders assemble subordinates and associates for their intellectual attributes and specialized knowledge as much as for their strength to labor as farmers or porters, their physical prowess as fighters, their ability to bear children, or their membership in key kin groups. Thus Guyer calls on scholars to move beyond a static structuralist preoccupation with lineage or a materialistic Marxist emphasis on the control of surplus wealth. Although written to illuminate precolonial Africa, Guyer's essay opens up promising lines of inquiry for any preindustrial society. Her approach invites us to recognize the multifaceted character of indigenous knowledge and to consider the dynamic struggle to gain access to—monopolize, if possible—widely dispersed specialists whose intellect contributes to the political, economic, and social strength of a powerful town, prominent region, or influential leader.

In developing her argument, Guyer points out that knowledge, especially among preindustrial groups, is embodied in people. Such knowledge includes information about the behavior of animals, formulas to ensure fertility (of crops, animals, and humans), techniques to interpret dreams or visions, methods to settle disputes or identify wrongdoers, magical potions to harm enemies or help

3. Jane I. Guyer, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995): 91–120.

friends, strategies to win a battle, schemes to multiply wealth, ways to attract the favor of a lover, medicines for healing, and rituals to gain the favor of the gods. Although shrines, bits of writing, oracles and sayings, grave sites, sacred trees, and household idols may serve as mnemonic repositories of information, all of these tools require a living keeper or specialist who makes the knowledge accessible to the larger population.

Guyer emphasizes the fact that indigenous knowledge is idiosyncratic and particular. The sheer volume and range of information make it impossible for any single individual to master or remember it all. Furthermore, the living nature of knowledge makes it resistant to capture by one person or group. Subject to innovation, purchase or sale, borrowing, adaptation, experimentation, rejection, and obsolescence, this knowledge is never static. It continually adjusts in response to economic shifts, immigration, travel and trade, natural disasters, environmental modifications, political changes, and individual creativity.

According to Guyer, a successful big man or woman is one who can gather—Guyer uses the word “compose”—a diverse company of experts, whose knowledge enables the big person to preserve and multiply power. This knowledge can be leveraged by the big person to produce numerous offspring and to ward off disease and death. It can also be used to accumulate wealth, increase military prowess, and enhance one’s reputation as a settler of disputes. However, given the personalized and multifaceted nature of information, the mobilization, control, and centralization of expert knowledge is a formidable task. Because indigenous knowledge cannot be captured by a static kin structure or a single religious institution, “compositional” success is tenuous. Not only may experts be ethnically and geographically distant, they may be outspoken, defiant, confrontational, and costly. Therefore, leaders must give

constant attention to protecting their investment in the people, whose knowledge, not just labor, can be a key component of political power and wealth.

Guyer notes that in Africa the dynamic, innovative, and compositional nature of indigenous knowledge was nearly destroyed by colonialism which sought to restrict non-Western information and wisdom. Colonial authorities either deprecated or outlawed the use of traditional knowledge in all domains of life. As a result, long-held notions about education, the military, criminal justice, natural science, agriculture, politics, religion, the family, and medicine were cast aside by colonial officials. Under colonialism, the institutions supporting the exercise of indigenous knowledge were dismantled and many traditional experts who embodied the knowledge were exiled or killed. In addition, most of the remaining experts either became discouraged or lost their clients and patrons, who turned to “modern” sources of “truth.”

Guyer’s model, developed for Africa, can be used to explain the nature of politics in premonarchic Israel. Applying the model to the book of Judges reveals the central importance of knowledge for the exercise of power. Repeatedly in Judges we see prominent individuals attempting to capture and use knowledge in ways that increased their wealth, followers, territory, or stature. Occasionally, we see groups and individuals fail because rivals achieved superiority in the competition for information.

The Composition of Knowledge in Judges

The book of Judges invites the following questions: How did the mighty men of valor gain ascendancy? How did they maintain their hold on power? And what were the threats to their power? These questions cannot be resolved by reference to simple sociological, economic, or theological formulas. Jane Guyer’s thesis invites us to

consider the possibility that the strongmen depicted in the book of Judges were successful in part because they were able to “compose” knowledge. If the men of valor owed some of their success to the mobilization of information, we should find echoes of that fact in the vivid myths, legends, and histories of the book of Judges. However, when investigating the topic, we need to be aware that over the centuries, like the colonial authorities in Africa described by Guyer, political and religious partisans of a Yhwhist monarchy worked energetically to extinguish both the practice and memory of competing indigenous knowledge. This effort came to a peak during and after the reign of King Josiah in the late seventh century.⁴ As seen in Deuteronomy, the judicial ideal for Josiah’s time, non-Yhwhistic prophets or interpreters of dreams were to be put to death, even if they spoke the truth and even if their predictions came true (Deut. 13:1–5).

In spite of any politically or theologically induced amnesia intended to suppress the memory of heterodox ideas, the book of Judges is replete with references to indigenous knowledge and the ways powerful people used that knowledge. Many of those references are associated with oracular inquiry. In the second millennium, some of the most sophisticated intellectual activity took place at sites for divination. There, experts drew on tradition, experience, ritual, and the voice of the supernatural to offer advice and render decisions about vital issues facing their clients. Significantly, the first sentence in Judges contains the term “inquire” (*šā’al* – שׂאל), an unmistakable reference to an oracular query.⁵ That sentence, written by the humanist editor, is an appropriate introduction for the entire book.

4. For a discussion of this competition, see Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1987).

5. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 20. Soggin notes that when *šā’al* (שׂאל) is associated with any deity, the reference is always to oracular activity.

Although in Judg. 1:1 the humanist writer refers to a military decision (determining which group should go first into war) and legitimizes only a single source for knowledge (Yhwh), the example is faithful to the spirit of a culture where the quest for knowledge was a preoccupation. Many other passages in Judges recall specific sites or physical objects associated with the process of gaining and divulging knowledge. Shrines, idols, altars, high places, distinctive garments for divination (ephod), charms, implements for casting lots (Urim and Thummim), sacrificial ceremonies to inquire of or thank a god, *'āšerîm* (sacred pillars representing the consort of Baal), temples (for example, the house of Baal of the covenant at Shechem), and especially sacred oak trees (where divining took place), all indicate that people in premonarchic Israel had myriad places and instruments to seek divine guidance and disseminate information.⁶

The explicitly emphasized popularity of divining sites operated by Deborah (Judg. 4:4–6), Gideon (Judg. 8:23–27), Micah (Judges 17), and the tribe of Dan (Judges 18) suggests that people from all walks of life frequented those places. From multiple stories and references in other books in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is clear that people received guidance in many areas of life. At the household level, they sought assistance in matters of marital fidelity, curing illness, and bearing and protecting children. When caring for animals and crops, they looked for advice about appropriate times for planting and harvesting and about ways of insuring the health and fertility of their flocks and herds. At other times, they wanted help in locating lost animals, resolving civil disputes, guaranteeing safety when traveling, and prospering in business.

6. Roy Heller discusses the various strategies for obtaining supernatural knowledge. He distinguishes between divination, in which a human being takes the initiative to acquire paranormal information, and prophecy, in which the human agent is a vehicle for a divinely instigated message. See Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy: The Character of Samuel and the Deuteronomistic Evaluation of Prophecy* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), 3–4.

While the sites and tools for seeking knowledge promised the backing of divine authority, words or signs from the ancestors or gods (including Yhwh) had to be mediated by human interpreters.⁷ Although the mediums, shrine owners, or people who cast lots or used other divination techniques claimed to act only as unobstructed channels from the gods or ancestors, the human intermediary actually controlled the message. In the case of dispute resolution, a successful and respected intermediary would have drawn from a deep well of experience, intuition, understanding of social structures, knowledge of character, and memory of common law when rendering a decision. When offering advice about illness, a medium would have relied on a long practice of diagnosis and prescription.

An example from contemporary Africa illustrates how divining may have worked in ancient Israel. John Gay, an anthropologist with decades of experience living in Africa, relates the following story about a Liberian friend who suspected that the manager of her farm had stolen money. Although the manager denied wrongdoing, he agreed to a trial by ordeal. Gay writes,

I was present as a witness. The ordeal man heated a cutlass red hot and announced that if applied to the leg of an innocent person no harm would be done, but that the guilty person would be burned. . . . He rubbed a liquid on the legs of the two parties [the accused and the accuser] and then on his own leg, seemingly the same liquid in all three cases. He applied the fiery red cutlass to his own leg first, and nothing happened. He reheated it and applied it to my friend's leg, and still nothing happened. I watched closely and could see that, in fact, her skin was depressed where the cutlass touched it. In short, he was not faking the physical contact of hot iron with flesh. He then turned to the accused person, applied the reheated iron, and at once the flesh sizzled and smoked. Guilt was established.⁸

7. First Samuel 28 describes in great detail how King Saul sought out a medium through whom he could consult the dead ancestor/seer Samuel.

8. John Gay, *Africa: A Dream Deferred* (Northridge, CA: New World African Press, 2004), 46.

Gay continues by offering his own explanation of what had happened. He assumes that the “ordeal man” used subterfuge to make sure that only one participant was burned. But the real trick was deciding which party should be singled out for blame. In Gay’s view, either the ordeal doctor had been paid to demonstrate guilt or he had determined—Gay suspected by psychological clues—that the man was culpable. It is also possible that blame was assigned according to social standing. In that case, the task of the ordeal doctor would have been to determine which of the litigants was of higher rank.

Gay’s experience in modern Liberia suggests that while sleight of hand and adroit manipulation of physical implements are important, a diviner’s experience and interpretive ability are the key ingredients in any trial by ordeal. The same would be true for other types of divination. Except in the most straightforward cases—for example, casting lots in cases parallel to those in which moderns would flip a coin or draw straws—the real voice in divination is that of the human in charge. While it takes training and insider understanding to conduct the physical steps of divination, the essential skill is far more complex and much more intellectual or psychological. This skill draws on an extensive store of indigenous knowledge.

In rendering their decisions, ancient Israel’s diviners would have drawn on multiple facets of indigenous knowledge. Some of that knowledge concerned the techniques and implements that were the physical or formulaic manifestation of the process such as the specialized attire or coif that enhanced credibility and the verbal inflections and formulas associated with specific divination problems. Other components of knowledge were more subtle and cerebral. These included the capacity to read a person’s character (intent, motivation, level of anxiety, and truthfulness), an understanding of practical solutions or strategies (for battle, for healing an illness, for overcoming infertility, for locating a lost animal, and for resolving

a civil dispute), an ability to accurately assess social standing, and a knack for instilling confidence in the petitioner(s). All were crucial for successful divination. All required natural talent and all reflected specialized knowledge built upon careful training, extensive practice, and sound judgment. In short, good practitioners were highly qualified indigenous-knowledge professionals. Only several generations removed from the time depicted in Judges, the example of the child Samuel wearing a small linen ephod—the ritual garment with pockets for the Urim and Thummim, key implements of divination—and working under the supervision of the master diviner Eli suggests that preparation for professional life might begin as soon as a person could walk and talk (1 Sam. 2:18–20; 3:1).

Like their modern counterparts, not all ancient knowledge workers were honest. The Hebrew Bible contains multiple accusations about fraud and favoritism in the process of divination—for example, charges of malfeasance against both Eli’s sons and Samuel’s sons. A statement attributed to the seer Samuel indicates that integrity was a common concern for seers and diviners. In an address to the people of Israel, Samuel offered to submit to trial by ordeal should anyone accuse him of taking a bribe or judging unfairly (1 Sam. 12:3–5). When considering the matter of indigenous knowledge, the fact that fraud is mentioned is proof that people in Israel were well aware of the human element in the process of divination.⁹

9. Fraud on the part of diviners and prophets was a very real concern for ancient Near Eastern consumers of supernatural knowledge. See J. J. M. Roberts, “Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature,” in *Congress Volume, Jerusalem 1986* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 211–20. Roy Heller discusses the suspicion and uncertainty people had toward both diviners and prophets. Because divination was subject to error, even when practiced in good faith, diviners sometimes sought multiple readings to confirm their findings. Mediated through human words or actions, prophecy was considered to be more subjective. Therefore, prophets were even more suspect than diviners, who were regarded a bit more like objective spiritual technicians (*Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 6–11). Deuteronomy 18:20–22 is another Hebrew Bible passage warning against false prophets.

While much of the knowledge noted in the book of Judges was related to divination, other types of knowledge or skill were more secular in nature. Specialized legal, historical, and geographical knowledge figure prominently in the narrative. For example, when the elders of Gilead hired the warrior/brigand Jephthah as their political leader and military commander, they invested him by means of a standard ritualized contract (Judg. 11:10). We must assume that unmentioned characters in the story were expert in the wording, conditions, and ceremonies involved in cementing an agreement between powerful and high-profile parties. Later, when attempting to negotiate with his rival, the king of the Ammonites, Jephthah sent messengers who displayed a detailed command of historical events and territorial borders. We may presume that the diplomatic history and geography recounted by these diplomats were expertly shaped to favor Jephthah's cause (Judg. 11:12–28). As with the covenant binding Jephthah and the elders of Gilead, the recitation of history and the references to previous agreements required specialized knowledge of legal procedures and agreements from the past. Both cases featured contending parties who sought to frame information in a way that best served their interests. The account of the strongman Abimelech also illustrates the complexity of political contracts. After prolonged negotiations, the citizens of Shechem entered into an agreement with Abimelech. Ratified at Shechem's sacred oak (Judg. 9:6), the contract gave Abimelech an exclusive right to collect duties on trade caravans passing through the region (Judg. 9:25).¹⁰

As might be expected from a book celebrating a warrior elite, much of the secular knowledge in the book of Judges is military in

10. Based on possible parallels with a covenant between David and the elders of Hebron, Abimelech's oath may have also contained the promise that he would rule with justice. For a discussion of David's covenant, see Scott Starbuck, *Court Oracles in the Psalms: The So-Called Royal Psalms in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 192–95. I discuss this more fully in chapter 3.

nature. A brief account embedded in the book's editorial framework describes how the people of Israel recruited spies to secure insider information needed to defeat a walled city (Judg. 1:22–26). Judges also recalls how the big man Abimelech relied on intelligence collected by his deputy Zebul to identify the protagonists of a gathering rebellion (Judg. 9:30–31). When planning on how to counter a revolt at Shechem, Abimelech again turned to Zebul who suggested a strategy by which a small company of warriors would draw out the adversary by attacking and then falling back. Abimelech followed Zebul's advice. His staged retreat tricked the enemy into a reckless pursuit that ended with an ambush by forces Abimelech had hidden on both sides of the escape route (Judg. 9:32–45).¹¹

The accounts in Judges indicate that supernatural and temporal knowledge were not regarded as sharply separate categories. The story of the strongman Barak emphasized the link between divination and military operations. Barak (a praise name meaning “Lightning”) traveled a long distance seeking the advice of the prophetess-judge Deborah, who conducted her divination business under a sacred tree. Not only did Deborah tell Barak how to recruit his warriors, what battle strategy he should employ, and the times and places to attack, she also assured Barak that Yhwh himself had guaranteed success. This encouragement was either tempered or intensified by Deborah's taunt that a woman, not Barak himself, would earn credit for the triumph (Judg. 4:6–14). In another case, described centuries later by the humanist writer, fighters confronting the tribe of Benjamin “inquired of Yhwh” (the technical reference to divination) and were given specific counsel about when and where to do battle. Instructed to use an entrapment strategy similar to the one that led to Abimelech's success, the people of Israel then defeated the tribe of

11. Many African tales describe successful military campaigns that rely on this type of strategy. The famous Zulu leader Shaka used the method which has been called the “bull's horn” formation.

Benjamin. According to the story, even though the command to join the battle did not result in success initially, the oracular encouragement gave the attackers the resolve to continue the battle. The eventual outcome was a total rout of the Benjaminites (Judg. 20:18–46).

At the individual level, ancient Israelites thought information provided by a divine messenger or seer could enable a warrior to achieve great physical strength. Samson gained his powers by following a formula given to his mother by a messenger of Yhwh (Judg. 13:3).¹² Similar in nature to the fanciful story of Paul Bunyan, Samson's tale is a legendary construction intended to extol the qualities of a youthful warrior (*na'ar* – נער).¹³ At a time when prowess in battle resulted in booty, honor, and women, one can only assume that aspiring warriors (or their kin) not only would have told and retold the story of Samson, but would have sought out rituals or medicines promising extraordinary strength. The story of Samson also suggests that knowledge pertaining to superhuman power was a closely guarded secret. The legend of Samson has parallels in modern-day Africa where diviners offer esoteric medicine in the form of charms, potions, codes of conduct, or dress that give strength and provide protection.¹⁴ Such magic is thought to make an

12. The messenger or envoy (*mal'āk* – מלאך) who met Samson's mother in the field is called an "angel" in many translations, including the Septuagint, but both the woman and her husband Manoah regarded the individual as a human being. Although heavenly beings commonly appear in legends and myths, it is equally logical to assume the storyteller was thinking of a traveling diviner. Mieke Bal goes so far as to suggest that the storyteller regarded the exotic figure as Samson's biological father. *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104–5. As Mark S. Smith notes, ancient storytellers, who saw the world as populated with divine beings, would not have been concerned about a clear distinction between humans and gods. "Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 631–51.

13. While נער can refer to any male youth, it can also carry the meaning of a young man on the path to becoming a warrior. In that case, it would be the equivalent to the English word "squire."

14. Readers also will see parallels with the superstitious rituals used by modern athletes.

individual immune from harm (even bullets) and invisible to enemy forces. However, as with Samson, the complicated formula for obtaining such power must be followed with absolute precision. Any lapse, however momentary or inadvertent, results in the withdrawal of the magical properties. Consequently, it is easy for a diviner to deflect blame in case of failure. As was true in the story of Samson, in Africa such medicine is the property of specialists.

The Individualistic and Idiosyncratic Nature of Knowledge

Like intellectual property in Guyer's traditional Africa, much indigenous knowledge in premonarchic Israel was highly fragmented and personalized. Held in the minds of individuals rather than in libraries, centralized political institutions, or a dominant religious organization, it was varied and idiosyncratic.¹⁵ Although much indigenous knowledge was closely linked to religious specialists, the fact that Yhwhism did not command an intellectual consensus until after 600 BCE enabled many forms of knowledge to flourish. As Morton Smith writes, "Although the cult of Yahweh is the principal concern of the Old Testament, it may not have been the principal religious concern of the Israelites."¹⁶ Smith notes that long after the period described in the book of Judges, the ancient Hebrews intermarried with their Canaanite neighbors, named their children after non-Yhwhist deities, frequented Canaanite fertility shrines, honored El and Baal, and constructed high places and sacred pillars symbolizing the Canaanite fertility goddess, Athirat (or Asherah). They also relied on household idols, crafted figurines of naked female deities, used snakes as cultic objects, and made personal seals

15. This statement is not meant to deny that stories—for example, tales of the men and women of valor themselves—might have been written down on clay tablets and eventually stored in a royal archive.

16. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*, 14.

indicating reverence for the sun. Furthermore, in times of great stress they practiced human sacrifice.¹⁷

Except for reformist interludes, until the time of the exile, even Jerusalem was characterized by a climate of religious toleration, if not interreligious cooperation.¹⁸ In a gesture that was not unusual, in the year 842 BCE King Ahaziah of Judah consulted the god Baal-zebub of Ekron to obtain a prognosis regarding the illness that eventually took his life (2 Kgs. 1:2–17). Later, King Manasseh (687–642 BCE) constructed high places for Baal and Asherah, worshiped the host of heaven, relied on soothsaying and augury, dealt with mediums and wizards, and sacrificed his own son.¹⁹ According to a detailed account by Ezekiel, formerly a temple priest, even the Jerusalem temple was the site of semisecret non-Yhwhist rituals as late as 600 BCE.²⁰ Smith contends that those cults could not have continued without the tacit, if not active, support of temple officials.²¹

17. *Ibid.*, 2–23.

18. For a summary of reform movements, see *ibid.*, 24–29.

19. 2 Kgs. 21:1–9. For more details about the multiplicity of religious ideas and practices in Israel, see chapter 2, “Religious Parties among the Israelites before 587,” in Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*, 11–42. See also Jean-Michel de Tarragon, “Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Canaan and Ancient Israel,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner, 1995), 3:2071–81; and Bill T. Arnold, “Necromancy and Cleromancy in 1 and 2 Samuel,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 199–213. Both de Tarragon and Arnold describe a wide variety of practices enabling people to gain access to special knowledge. Some of the evidence for such practices comes from the many detailed and specific condemnations in the Hebrew Bible; other evidence comes from nonjudgmental or favorable depictions. Casting lots, interpreting dreams, and seeking out prophecies were all regarded as acceptable, even by later editors (1 Sam. 28:6 and Num. 27:21). Although by the time Deuteronomy was compiled (ca. 640–600 BCE) astrology, soothsaying, sacrificing a child, consulting necromancers or wizards, going to a charmer or sorcerer, and augury had been condemned by people associated with the god Yhwh, the long list in Deut. 18:9–14 of such strategies for accessing knowledge suggests that they were still being practiced. For a discussion of human sacrifice, see J. Andrew Dearman, “The Tophet in Jerusalem: Archeology and Cultural Profile,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22, no. 1 (1996): 59–71.

20. Ezekiel 18. As well as being a priest, Ezekiel was a prophet prone to ecstasy and he was famous for his dramatizations of calamitous events (he mimicked the siege of Jerusalem, the tragedy of military defeat, and the plight of going into exile). Deported to Babylon in 597, Ezekiel remained there for another 15 years.

21. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*, 20.

The fact that partisans, both in the northern and southern kingdoms, occasionally engaged in missions to cleanse the land of religious competitors is proof more of syncretism than of orthodoxy. In the very first century of the monarchy's existence, Judah's king Asa (913–873 BCE) tried to ban ritual copulation, destroy ancestral idols, and take action against his mother because of her devotion to Asherah. Asa's efforts are evidence of the vitality of non-Yhwhist institutions of knowledge about fertility and fate. Not long after, in the north, during the reign of Ahab of Israel (869–850 BCE), the competition between the prophets of Baal and of Yhwh turned violent as leaders on both sides attacked and killed large numbers of their rivals. First, Queen Jezebel murdered the prophets of Yhwh and then Elijah slew the prophets of Baal. As described in 1 Kings 18 and 19, this was a competition among purveyors of indigenous knowledge—specifically, experts in the control of rainfall and lightning. Elijah's successful purge of Baal prophets came after a lengthy drought, a calamity that would have seriously undermined the partisans of Baal, a god renowned for his power to guarantee moisture and fertility.²²

The massacre of failed workers in magic has parallels to the waves of violent retaliation against diviners in African societies. After periods of stress—drought, disease, famine, invasion, or defeat—people have turned against spiritual leaders formerly revered for their knowledge about the weather, health, and defense. This may explain Gideon's deed of defiance in destroying his father's shrine. Such acts of revenge do not signal a rejection of the underlying philosophical principles of indigenous wisdom, only of the men and

22. For Baal's importance to agricultural people depending on rain, see Fred E. Woods, *Water and Storm Polemics Against Baalism in Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 13–14. Woods notes that one of Baal's praise names was "rider of the clouds" (*ibid.*, 14).

women claiming to dispense the knowledge and of the ultimate origin of their information.

The book of Judges offers little information about the specific content of indigenous knowledge dispensed at the provincial level, but the book is full of references to the demand for such knowledge. While very wealthy, powerful, or desperate individuals may have traveled long distances to seek guidance, most people would have no choice but to rely on resident professionals working at hometown ancestor shrines, divining sites, and fertility temples. Because much of the demand was for locally relevant indigenous knowledge, experts offering advice about disease, conflict resolution, marital relations, fertility, personal safety, travel, commerce, and wealth would have been local as well. Such particularity would have resulted in variety, creativity, and some degree of specialization.

An important task of local diviners would have been to adjudicate charges of infidelity. Mieke Bal's *Death and Dissymmetry* is a reminder of the enormous level of gender tension described, directly and indirectly, in Judges. In Bal's view, gender-based violence was a result of the efforts of husbands, fathers, and lineages to assert control over females. At a time when women—daughters, wives, and concubines—were a major source of wealth and when a man's stature was measured by his progeny, female fidelity was an abiding economic, social, and legal concern. Therefore, ancient Israel's reservoir of indigenous knowledge offered remedies to deal with accusations of female unfaithfulness. Numbers 5:11–31 outlines one of the very early magical-judicial procedures used by experts to determine paternity. After committing a curse to writing, the ordeal's administrator washed off the words with water, which had been sprinkled with dust taken from the floor of a shrine. The woman accused of betraying her husband was then required to drink this “water of bitterness.” In the case of guilt, she would later miscarry.

As Michel de Tarragon observes, the course of action blended magic, ritual, and the judicial.²³ Presumably, the water of bitterness ordeal was commonly used at the divining sites mentioned in Judges.

The desire for information in Israel would have stimulated the multiplication of people willing to pose as purveyors of knowledge. Looking at specifics in Judges, we note that many experts described in the book were tied to a local shrine in a particular geographic region. For example, Deborah offered oracular advice from her sacred oak near Bethel (House of El). Gideon, a diviner par excellence, was based at Ophrah, the site of a divining oak, perhaps in the Jezreel Valley. Elon, whose name means “Oak,” may not have been remembered as an individual at all, but as a line of diviners working at a place of oracular inquiry located midway between the Sea of Chinnereth (later known as the Sea of Galilee) and the Mediterranean Sea (Judg. 12:11).²⁴ While local shrines would have been associated with resident spirits or ancestors, even powerful gods such as Yhwh and El were thought by some to have only parochial powers, thus exercising jurisdiction over restricted locales and phenomena. Excavations at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in the northeast Sinai Desert have uncovered early eighth-century Hebrew inscriptions to “Yahweh of Teman (Edom)” and to “Yahweh of Shomron (Samaria).”²⁵ During the time of King Ahab, advisors to the king of Syria assured their monarch that he would easily prevail against Israel because Yhwh was a god of the hills, not a god of the valleys (1 Kgs. 20:23, 28). Ahab’s victory proved those information experts wrong. In the Song of Deborah, there is an explicit boast about Yhwh’s ability to provide

23. De Tarragon, “Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination,” 2078.

24. While Elon may have been a personal name or title, I believe it is more likely that the word referred to a divination site. From my own work in Africa I know that place names or impersonal titles often find their way into lists of rulers or diviners.

25. See Ze’ev Meshel, “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” in *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Archeology in the Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3:311–12. These inscriptions also refer to Yhwh’s Asherah (wife).

assistance beyond the mountainous desert region where he was thought to reside (Judg. 5:4–5, 19–21). When Gideon began his career, he sided with Yhwh, but performed a series of tests to determine whether Yhwh or Baal had the greater control over sources of water (dew, rain, and the torrents of the deep). If particular gods had more power over specific natural realities or over certain regions of the land, then it follows that their spokespeople would be regarded as having greater expertise in those domains.

Some forms of knowledge were associated with specific ethnic groups or economic enterprises. The Kenites, a tribe of metalworking specialists who traveled throughout Israel, were native to the desert region south of the Dead Sea. Midianite and Kenite caravan leaders, who may have passed through the hill country in an effort to circumvent Canaanite tax collectors, were the guardians of commercial expertise. In turn, these merchants/smugglers relied on local guides, suppliers, and guards who offered their specialized knowledge for sale.²⁶ Similar to the Kenites, the Levites, another desert people, itinerated around the land offering divination services to whoever would pay. Perhaps capitalizing on claims of an exotic origin, one of the leading Levitical families declared descent from Phinehas, an Egyptian name meaning “African” or “black man.”²⁷

The Mobilization and Monopolization of Knowledge by the Mighty Men

The personalized, idiosyncratic, and dispersed nature of knowledge—both secular and supernatural—meant that it was not easily controlled. Consequently, a big man, house, town, or

26. See J. David Schloen, “Caravans, Kenites and *Casus Belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1993): 18–38.

27. The reference to Phinehas may indicate that indigenous knowledge from sub-Saharan Africa had found its way to Palestine.