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Introduction and Overview

The Judges as Political Patrons

When a messenger of Yhwh first encountered Gideon, the messenger greeted him saying, "Yhwh is with you, valiant mighty man" (*gibbôr heḥāyil* – גבור החיל) (Judg. 6:12).[1] With these words, the messenger identified Gideon as a member of an elite class wielding extensive military, political, and economic power. The messenger did not address Gideon as a religious leader or identify him as a magistrate. Had the messenger been a modern political scientist, not a peripatetic prophet, he might have called Gideon a patrimonial leader or patron. Other terms that come to mind for the contemporary reader are strongman, big man, boss, or even warlord. Gideon was but one of many commanding figures, most of them warriors or heads of prominent houses, who exercised authority in ancient Syria-Palestine. In part, the power of these individuals was based on their

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1. The term גבור (*gibbôr*) means "man of valor" while the term חיל (*ḥayil*) can be translated as "strong man" or "prosperous man." Unless otherwise noted, throughout this book, all translations from Judges are my own. All other biblical references are taken from the RSV.

ability to mobilize followers, followers who were not just fighters or producers, but who were people with unusual temporal or supernatural knowledge. The power of the great men and women of valor also rested on their reputation for reliability, their claim to honor, and their great wealth. These individuals are the focus of the Hebrew Bible's book of Judges.

Although the heroes in the book of Judges were first and foremost political figures, to my knowledge they have never been the object of sustained study by a political scientist. Past scholarship on premonarchic Israel has been dominated by biblical scholars, historians, sociologists, and literary specialists.[2] In looking at politics in the centuries before the monarchy, they have chronicled the competition among the Israelites, Canaanites, and Philistines. They have looked at the process of tribal unification that ended in national solidarity. They have studied the consolidation of political authority as Israel transitioned from a decentralized polity to a centralized monarchy. While these scholars have done much to illuminate the Early Iron Age, the time period described in the book of Judges, their focus has not been primarily on the inner workings and intellectual foundation of political dealings in that era.[3]

An exception is Niels Peter Lemche, who argues that ancient Israel was governed by the rules and values of patron–client politics. Loyalty and deference were the glue holding the structure together. Patrons offered protection for people seeking justice and security

2. For two discussions of methodology emphasizing historians, anthropologists, archeologists, sociologists, and literature experts, see Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), and Anthony J. Frendo, *Pre-Exilic Israel, the Hebrew Bible, and Archeology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011). Conspicuously absent in both books is any reference to political scientists. Political theorist Michael Walzer does look at Judges, but relatively superficially. Walzer, who is more concerned about the theme of covenant, regards Judges as a transitional book. See Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

3. The Early Iron Age spanned the two centuries from 1200 to 1000 BCE.

while clients gave tribute and obedient support to the rulers. Even relationships enforced by threat and military power were cloaked in the language of family, friendship, and devotion. Frequently, political arrangements were sealed by vows of loyalty spoken in formal ceremonial settings.[4] While Lemche offers a valuable heuristic overview of patronage, he does not provide a detailed description of the internal dynamics of the patron-client relationship, nor does he attempt an in-depth analysis of political culture, the set of underlying values that shape all political behavior.

The goal of my book is to take on that task. The study will investigate the political resources available to powerful men and women in premonarchic Israel, consider the political strategies they employed, and describe the political culture that guided their actions. The analysis of early Israelite political strategies, political resources, and political culture is based on the fact that the men and women depicted in the book of Judges were deeply engaged in—even preoccupied with—temporal political power. In spite of this reality, except for the work of Max Weber, virtually all scholarly studies of premonarchic Israel regard the characters in Judges as religious figures, thus people preoccupied with the relationship between the world of humans and the world of the supernatural. However, the heroes portrayed in Judges did not think of themselves as religious functionaries or as dispensers of legal rulings. Of course, like everyone else in the ancient Near East, they took religion into account. But they regarded religion as a tool to be used for political advantage, not as a set of guidelines for encouraging ethical behavior or for promoting social justice.[5] Some of them did settle disputes and

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4. Niels Peter Lemche, "Kings and Clients: On Loyalty between the Ruler and the Ruled in Ancient Israel," *Semeia* 66 (1994): 119–32. Lemche, whose main interest is in the time of the monarchy, begins his article by comparing ancient patrons to Mafia godfathers who demanded absolute loyalty in return for powerful protection. Lemche laments the fact that biblical scholarship has focused on family instead of larger community governance.

enforce common law. But those actions were just part of their work as heads of great houses and as patrons of larger communities. The main interest of the men and women of valor was not in religious faithfulness nor in the details of law; rather, their concern was maximizing political power. Their quest for power is richly documented in the praise names, oral histories, legends, and fictional tales contained in the book of Judges. These accounts reflect the strong men's and women's ideas about patronage politics, their strategies for political survival, and the challenges they faced in the pursuit of power.

The lives of the men and women of valor in Judges have been hidden by distance in time, cultural dissimilarity, and the fragility of the chain of transmission between original actions and eventual written descriptions. In fact, historical minimalists, rightly skeptical of an overly literalistic reading of the Hebrew Bible, despair of finding any useful data in the accounts claiming to illuminate the time of the judges.[6] But, the real cause of their obscurity may have more to

5. At least not ethics and justice as understood by later Hebrew thinkers. At this point, it may be useful to offer working definitions of politics and religion. Politics deals with the use of power, the power to exercise control through the use of force and violence and the power to determine the distribution of economic and social resources. Politics is also about community decision making, whether decisions made by an autocrat or by the people as a whole. Religion focuses on the relationship between the world of humans and the domain of the supernatural. That relationship can be one in which people try to submit to divine will through ethical behavior or it can be one in which people attempt to manipulate the connection for their social, economic, or political advantage.

6. Although a majority of scholars believe that the stories contained in the main body of the book (Judg. 3:7–15:20) reflect very old oral histories, folktales, and legends about battles and governance, a number of researchers suggest that the entire book may be a much later literary invention. P. Deryn Guest, who points out that there is no independent confirmation for any of the material in Judges, argues that a later "creative writer … deliberately contrived (a) literary work … intentionally designed to fill a 'gap' period between the conquest and the … monarchy." Noting that all scholars acknowledge the strong hand of a later editor, Guest posits that it is but a small step between editing and creating "*de novo*." Guest, "Can Judges Survive without Sources? Challenging the Consensus," *JSOT* 78 (1998): 58–59. Although less radical than Guest, Marc Brettler argues that the stories in Judges were selected and refashioned to address concerns of the monarchic period or later. According to Brettler, the stories in Judges were created as foreshadowings of a centuries' long conflict between the house of Saul and the house of David. Brettler, "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics," *Journal of*

do with our perspectives as moderns and postmoderns. Of course it is difficult to reconstruct the life and thought of people so far away in time and place, but that is a challenge familiar, even welcome, to any scholar trying to enter into distant worlds. The real reason why premonarchic leaders are so little known today is that their true nature and identity are embarrassments to those of us living in the shadow of the Enlightenment. We do not know who they are because we cannot accept them for who they truly were. We are offended by their crude religious rituals, their unscientific trust in the power of magic and divination, their easy recourse to brutality, their glorification of treachery and duplicity, and their shocking abuse of women. And, as Lemche notes, the patron-client values undergirding their political activities have been marginalized, even criminalized, in our times.[7]

Because the figures in Judges are unacceptable companions for people espousing contemporary Western values, they have been ignored or, worse yet, recreated in a way that is less jarring for

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Biblical Literature 108, no. 3 (1989): 395–418. Other representative skeptics about the historicity of Judges are G. W. Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Paleolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest,* JSOTSup 146 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); and Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society,* The Biblical Seminar 5 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988). Minimalists have also challenged the historical reliability of the far more abundantly documented period of the early kings. See D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*, JSOTSup 6 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978); and Gary N. Knoppers, "The Vanishing Solomon: The Disappearance of the United Monarchy from Recent Histories of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 1 (1997): 19–44. In his book analyzing strategies for reconstructing the past (*Pre-Exilic Israel*), Anthony J. Frendo gives more weight to the historical value of biblical texts, even those lacking independent confirmation. Frendo argues that texts are no more unreliable than the artifacts or icons uncovered by archeologists. All three—texts, artifacts, and icons—offer a window onto the past and all three reflect political or theological biases. For a succinct and balanced review of the dispute about historicity, see Ziony Zevit, "Three Debates about Bible and Archeology," *Biblica* 83, no. 1 (2002): 1–27.

7. Lemche, "Kings and Clients," 122. Ironically, theologically conservative interpreters of Judges, people who regard many of the "judges" as champions of faith, have much in common with the far more liberal minimalists. Neither accepts the original tales as reliable. While the minimalists regard the heroic stories as later literary creations, theologically conservative exegetes filter the tales through the eyes of the much later post-seventh-century Deuteronomistic writers who recast the accounts in ways that would not have been recognized by the original storytellers.

modern sensibilities.[8] Few readers who are church- or synagogue-goers have ever heard a sermon about Ehud, the hero who assassinated his sovereign Eglon, perhaps while the latter was sitting on his commode. Even if they did hear such a talk, almost certainly it omitted the claim that feces spewed forth from the gaping sword wound in Eglon's enormous belly or the possibility that Ehud escaped to the exterior of the palace by squeezing through the hole in Eglon's toilet seat.[9] It is equally doubtful that many moderns have listened to a religious exposition extolling the virtues of casting lots to render legal judgments and determine guilt or innocence, or that they have been made aware that indispensable features of the ephod, a special garment worn by early spiritual leaders, were the two pockets holding the Urim and Thummim, stones used by a diviner to discover God's will.[10] In addition, moderns would be surprised to learn that, instead of condemning Jephthah for sacrificing his only daughter, the book of Judges presents him as a principled hero. Also, people living today would find it difficult to accept the fact that the Ephraimite householder described in Judges 19 was willing to trade the honor of his virgin daughters for the safety of his stranger-guest and that his act was described as a culturally acceptable strategy.

8. One example of a fanciful recreation can be seen in the work of Martin Noth. Based on no evidence whatsoever from Syria-Palestine, but only on parallels from ancient Greece, he posited the existence of a well-organized twelve-tribe league which he named the amphictyony. Arguing from silence, Noth claimed that the absence of any explicit reference to the amphictyony demonstrated that the organization was so deeply engrained in Hebrew political and religious life that biblical writers saw no need to describe its structure or function. Going further, Noth argued that the so-called "minor judges" of Judges 10 and 12 were elected guardians and proclaimers of "divine law." The fact that divine law is never mentioned in Judges undermines such a claim. See Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1958), 85–102.

9. See Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60; and Baruch Halpern, "The Assassination of Eglon: The First Locked-Room Murder Mystery," *Bible Review* 4, no. 6 (1988): 33–44.

10. The term *ephod* can also refer to a statue used for divination.

Generally, these and other uncomfortable details are disregarded by modern Christians and Jews.

When they are not simply ignored, oftentimes the narratives in Judges are rewritten to fit our more refined values. Instead of a brutal warlord celebrated by the praise name Hacker, Gideon is portrayed as an individual of commendable monotheistic zeal.[11] Samson is recalled as a champion, albeit a tad imprudent, endowed with great strength from Yhwh, not as a man lauded for his sexual appetite, his eagerness to exact revenge, and his propensity to take foolish risks. Jael is portrayed as a woman faithful to Yhwh, not as a seductress who symbolically rapes the lover-prey she puts to death. Jephthah becomes a miscalculating and heartless father, not an admirable promise keeper.

Lest it be assumed that only pious Jewish and Christian exegetes have inflicted intellectual violence on the men and women in Judges (perhaps a just reward for their unhesitating resort to bloodshed), more secular thinkers also have damaged them, either by dismissal or transformation. For example, the protagonists in Judges can become mere illustrations supporting prevailing literary theories. As a result, their stories are subject to dissection or revision. In an effort to force Ehud into the desired literary persona, that of a physically handicapped man who turns a shortcoming (his reputed left-handedness) into an advantage (the ability to draw a sword from an unexpected hiding place), commentators downplay the obvious reading that as a "left-handed Benjaminite" he was a member of an elite ambidextrous fighting force trained to wield a weapon equally well with either hand.[12] Modern deconstructionists, building on the notion of literary malleability and the opinion that text is about

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11. The root word underlying Gideon's name (גדע) signifies "hacking, hewing, or cutting off." In the Hebrew Bible, the object of the hacking can be as varied as an arm, a staff, trees, a beard, bars of iron, or the horns of an altar.

12. For a discussion of ambidextrous Benjaminite warriors, see chapter 3, "Power and Trust."

contestation, draw scholarship even further from the proposition that the narratives in Judges can generate useful data about ancient times.[13] Although often yielding brilliant insight into underlying messages or concealed meanings, deconstructionists sometimes force the text of Judges in directions its original narrators or editors would not have understood or supported.[14] Ironically, although many modern scholars have little faith that at the narrative level ancient texts can describe the premonarchic period with any reliability, those same analysts have boundless confidence in their own ability to wrest hidden meanings from subtle turns of phrases, variations in the declension of nouns and verbs, the choice and placement of words in sentences, or even the absence of information in an account.

Modern social scientists who have studied Judges tend to downplay the importance of individual heroes, the main focus of the book. Beginning with Max Weber in 1923, twentieth-century researchers approached the book of Judges using the tools of history, economics, and anthropology. Some scholars described premonarchic Israel as a segmentary lineage system in which kin groups competed to

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13. Mark Smith says that these approaches, which deemphasize the study of language and cultural context, result in a "sustained disassociation of the study of biblical literature from Israelite history" (*Early History of God*, xxv–xxvi).

14. One of the best postmodern literary expositions of Judges is that of Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Bal focuses on the hidden, even suppressed, accounts of violence against women and the efforts to reshape the kin system from matrilineal to patrilineal. However, Bal is less concerned about analyzing the explicit message of the stories in Judges. Other works are less successful. In his extraordinarily detailed work, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), Robert O'Connell argues that the author/editor of Judges was preoccupied with establishing the preeminence of the southern tribe of Judah and that the writer wanted to show the theme of social and religious disintegration that would be solved only by the appointment of a king. As J. Cheryl Exum has pointed out, O'Connell's argument is intricate to the point of artificiality. Exum, review of Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60 (1999): 537–38. Taking deconstructionism to its logical extreme and also trying to salvage historical meaning from distant texts, Jacobus Marais argues that the material in the book of Judges is a compilation of opinions placed in juxtaposition. Thus Marais turns the editor of Judges into a twentieth-century perspectivalist. According to Marais, any attempt to retrieve the actual past, beyond uncovering an ancient literary debate about the past, is futile. See his *Representation in Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998).

monopolize land, labor, and leadership. Others examined the political forms in Israel as they evolved from charismatic and tribal to institutional and monarchical. Scholars with a Marxist bent combed the text of Judges and other "historical" books to uncover evidence of an egalitarian Israelite peasant revolution against oppressive Canaanite city-states.[15] While these approaches take seriously the actual structures, trends, and events of history, they tend to focus on macro-level realities. In doing so, they risk reducing the men and women of valor to lineage metonyms or ciphers for economic and class conflict. Except perhaps for Weber, none give much attention to the way that individual political leaders may have operated, much less thought, in the late second millennium BCE.

Biblical Sources about the Men and Women of Valor

An analysis of politics in the era before the monarchy should consider how the political leaders of the time were regarded in the Bible. This analysis logically begins with an overview of the sources that claim to describe that period in time. Three of the sources are contained in the book of Judges itself. In describing these three literary traditions, I rely heavily on the work of Susan Niditch, who summarizes and simplifies the contributions of previous scholarship. Without becoming overly entangled in the minutiae of source and text criticism, Niditch provides an appropriately comprehensive big picture.[16]

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15. Relying on anthropologists such as Ronald Cohen, Colin Renfrew, and Elman Service, James W. Flanagan sees Israel's early history as the story of a transition from segmentary tribe to chiefdom to kingship. See James W. Flanagan, *David's Social Drama: A Hologram of Israel's Early Iron Age* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1988); and Flanagan, "Chiefs in Israel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 20 (1981): 47–73. The best-known Marxist approach is that of Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979). Susan Niditch seems to dismiss Gottwald's claim as not being applicable to the book of Judges. See Susan Niditch, *Judges* (Louisville: Westminster, 2008), 58.

The earliest and most extensive accounts of the men and women of valor, accounts contained in the main body of the book of Judges (3:15–16:31), are tales of individual warrior heroes living in what later became the northern kingdom of Israel. Niditch labels these as "epic-bardic" stories.[17] First popularized within specific regions of Palestine, the stories likely circulated as separate accounts. This epic-bardic material includes historical recollections and legends, folktales, poems or victory songs, a fable, and taunts. While some of the stories may be grounded in historical reality, other tales are more fanciful, reminiscent of Homeric recitations. In any event, most scholars regard the accounts of people such as Deborah, Gideon, Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson as among the oldest stories in the Bible. These bardic narratives maintain much of their early robust and unvarnished character. Even when they cannot be trusted to provide an accurate record of actual individuals and events, because of their age they open a unique and reliable literary window onto the political perceptions, values, and activities of Israel prior to the emergence of the monarchy. In these accounts the main characters are remembered as extraordinary political leaders who operated in turbulent times. The stories concentrate on raw power, the stuff of politics. The attempt to monopolize force and violence, the distribution of resources, and the process of decision making, all central to any discussion of politics, preoccupied the leaders described in the epic-bardic accounts in Judges. Eventually, the bardic tales were assembled into a single narrative that now makes up Judges 3 through 16.[18]

16. In discussing how the book of Judges was compiled over a period of many centuries, Niditch does not stray far from the work of Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 29–38.

17. Niditch, *Judges,* 9–10. As Niditch notes, the brief account of Othniel in Judg. 3:7–11 and the introduction to the story of Ehud in Judg. 3:12–14 are Deuteronomistic insertions and should not be attributed to the epic-bardic storyteller (ibid., 56–57).

18. Judges 3–16 also features other material. For example, Judg. 10:1–5 and 12:7–15 contain a list of so-called minor judges, men said to have led Israel. The brief accounts of their lives include the number of years they supposedly "judged," where they lived, where they were buried, and

Although the stories were stitched together centuries after their initial creation, it is impossible to conceal the fact that they were originally unrelated. While a later editor's annotations suggest that the men and women in Judges ruled consecutively and that they controlled all of Israel for several hundred years, the stories have neither geographical unity nor chronological continuity. Even taking into account the fictional tale of Samson, there are only six major figures in the bardic collection. None of these leaders claimed sovereignty over more than their own region and none had any official connection with any other leader.[19] Almost certainly, there would have been scores of such localized accounts about heroic men and women living in premonarchic Israel. Therefore the narratives in Judges should be read as somewhat random serendipitous glimpses into the political thought and life of the time.[20]

Any attempt to explain why the six stories in Judges survived is highly speculative.[21] However, 2 Samuel provides independent

perhaps a mention of their wealth and a reference to the sons and daughters of their house. For a discussion of these men see Alan J. Hauser, "The 'Minor Judges': A Re-Evaluation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975): 190–200. Hauser persuasively challenges Martin Noth's contention that the "minor judges" were legal officials administering justice while the "major judges" were military leaders. Hauser contends that the names of the "minor judges" represent a separate list of military leaders. Because the list also included Jephthah, the Deuteronomistic editor inserted the material into the epic-bardic series of stories. In addition, the story of Samson and Delilah (Judges 16) appears to have been added somewhat later. The evidence for this is that the Deuteronomistic editor offered two conclusions to the Samson account, one at the end of chapter 15, another at the end of chapter 16.

19. The only exception might be Abimelech who claimed Gideon as his father. However, Abimelech's base of operation was many kilometers away from Gideon's town of Ophrah. Furthermore, although Gideon was a strong champion of Yhwh, the word "Yhwh" never appears in the Abimelech narrative. The only deities mentioned are El and Baal. The most that can be drawn from this evidence is that Abimelech perhaps was aware of Gideon and that he may have attempted to strengthen himself by claiming a fictive tie to the renowned warrior.

20. While six stories may not seem much for a period lasting several hundred years, in comparison to what is known about other people and places from that time, these are extraordinarily rich sources.

21. In a personal communication, Scott Starbuck suggests that the tales might have been gathered together during the time Israelite monarchs were seeking to consolidate their rule. In addition to using military power, forced labor, and patronage to expand their authority, kings might have tried to win the support of regional big men from the north by honoring heroic figures

evidence that some of the epic-bardic tales were well-known and valued during the first years of the monarchy.[22] The story of King David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 specifically mentions both Jerubbaal (Gideon) and his putative son Abimelech (11:21).[23] According to 2 Samuel, scheming to conceal his love affair with Bathsheba, David instructed his commander Joab to position Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, in the front line of battle. Following David's orders, Joab withdrew, isolating Uriah, who was killed (2 Sam. 11:14–17). Later, Joab commented on the dangers of approaching the wall of a city under siege. Joab specifically recalled that Abimelech, the son of Jerubbaal, had been killed because he recklessly got too close to the wall of a town under attack and that a mere woman standing on the wall threw an upper millstone that took his life (2 Sam. 11:19–21; cf. Judg. 9:50–54). This detailed reference in 2 Samuel indicates that tales from Judges were circulated in the tenth century and may have been used to instruct warriors about prudent conduct in battle.

Sometime, perhaps in the late 600s or early 500s BCE, an editor or editors took the epic-bardic stories and added a Yhwhistic religious commentary, which Niditch labels the "Voice of the Theologian." This commentary reflected the ideals of the Deuteronomic school of thought that flowered during the time of King Josiah (ca. 640–609 BCE).[24] According to 2 Kings 22, the book of the law (Deuteronomy)

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of the tribal era. The epic-bardic accounts eventually may have been committed to writing on individual clay tablets that were stored in the royal archives at Israel's capital, Samaria. The tales then could have made their way to Judah after the fall of Israel in 722/21 BCE.

22. In 2 Samuel we have evidence of an explicit and very early independent reference to two of the most important epic-bardic tales in Judges. The story in 2 Samuel 11 predates both the Deuteronomistic writer's theological editorials and the humanist redactor's literary additions by hundreds of years. The parallel version in 1 Chronicles 19 omits the salacious and iniquitous details about David's dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah, details that cast the iconic King David in a negative light.

23. In 2 Sam. 11:21, Jerubbaal is called Jerubbesheth (with "besheth" connoting "shame"). This may be a later gloss intended to dishonor the deity Baal.

was discovered by the high priest in ca. 622 BCE. The finding then led to a religious revival spearheaded by Josiah. Several generations after Josiah, an editor(s)—whom moderns refer to as the Deuteronomistic Historian—compiled the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings as commentaries on how well Israel adhered to the laws of Deuteronomy.

As Norman Gottwald says, although doing very little to remold the original epic-bardic material in Judges, the Deuteronomistic Historian added annotations that serve as formulaic "clamps" around the individual stories and around the collection as a whole.[25] True to the Deuteronomic ideal, the clamps focus on covenantal faithfulness and unfaithfulness. This pattern is first introduced in Judg. 2:1–5, which tells the story of a messenger of Yhwh, who reminded the people that Yhwh graciously delivered the people of Israel from Egypt and brought them into a new land. Through the messenger, the Deuteronomistic text further recalls that Yhwh made an eternal covenant with Israel and that, in return, Israel was ordered never to cut a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. However, according to the editor(s), the people of Israel were not faithful. They did not pull down the altars of the original evil inhabitants, nor did they listen to the voice of Yhwh. As a result, Yhwh did not drive out the indigenous tribes who, along with their gods, continued to be a trap for Israel. At this point, reports the Deuteronomistic Historian, the

24. The term "Deuteronomic" refers to the content and ideals of the book of Deuteronomy. "Deuteronomistic" refers to subsequent interpretations and applications of Deuteronomy. The later editor might have been one individual or a group of people representing a Deuteronomistic school of thought. There also is no way of knowing if the editor assembled separate stories or if they had been previously joined into a single narrative. During the exile, followers of the Deuteronomistic school made further amendments and additions. For a summary of the scholarly debate about the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic writer(s) see Roy Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy: The Character of Samuel and the Deuteronomistic Evaluation of Prophecy* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), 17–19. See also Niditch, *Judges*, 11.

25. Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 150. These annotations are especially evident in the stories of Othniel (3:7-9 and 3:11), Ehud (3:12, 3:15a, and 3:30), Deborah and Barak (4:1–3a and 5:31b), Gideon (6:1 and 8:28), Jephthah (10:6–7 and 12:7), and Samson (13:1, 15:20, and 16:31b).

sons of Israel cried out and wept. This prologue to the subsequent collection of heroic stories summarizes the key Deuteronomic themes of Yhwh's blessings, Yhwh's covenant with Israel, Israel's apostasy, the hardship of punishment, Israel's grief and repentance, and Yhwh sending a deliverer.

The Deuteronomistic collector(s)/editor(s) added these thematic clamps to each and every story of the political champions in the book of Judges. Because they were attached so artificially and in such a standardized manner, they are easily detected even by the casual reader. However, as can be seen in the last lines of chapter 2 and the first lines of chapter 3, the Deuteronomistic editor(s) had difficulty applying the rubric of blessing, covenant, apostasy, punishment, repentance, cry for help, and salvation (blessing) to stories originally composed with a completely unrelated message. The result was occasional inconsistency. While at the end of chapter 2 the editorial additions attribute the lack of success in expelling Israel's enemies from the land to Israel's unfaithfulness, in chapter 3 the writer offers a different explanation. The second hypothesis is that Yhwh allowed Israel's foes to remain because he did not want Israel to forget the art of war (Judg. 3:1–2).[26]

Although the Deuteronomistic writings claim to reflect the principles of Deuteronomy, there are obvious deep contradictions between the two.[27] In Deuteronomy the role of the monarch is dramatically limited; in the later writings of the Deuteronomistic Historian the powers of the sovereign are exalted. Restrictions on

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26. Elsewhere, the Deuteronomistic Historian offers yet a third explanation for the presence of other peoples in the land. In Deut. 7:22 the historian opines that Yhwh did not allow the Israelites to eliminate the previous inhabitants quickly and completely because he feared a newly empty land would be overrun by wild animals.

27. See Bernard Levinson, "The Reconceptualization of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History's Transformation of Torah," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 4 (2001): 511–34; and Gary N. Knoppers, "Rethinking the Relationship between Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2001): 393–415.

royal authority are most explicit in Deut 17:14–20, known as the law of the king. This passage enjoins the king from building a large military (having many horses), from selling people into foreign bondage in exchange for horses, from multiplying the number of his wives, and from acquiring great personal wealth (stores of gold and silver).[28] Deuteronomy 17:14–20 also states that the king must be one of the people (not a person of foreign origin), and not seek to be elevated above his "brethren." Furthermore, by commanding the king to copy, read, and keep the law, the text subordinates the ruler to covenant directives and to the Levitical priests who safeguard the Torah. Later, Deuteronomy 20 places even warfare under the control of the priests. Bernard Levinson, who regards Deuteronomy as an idealistic, even utopian composition that was never implemented, also points out that Deuteronomy removes the king from the judicial system and takes away the king's right to forgive debts and restore land to original owners.[29] In short, Deuteronomy denies the king power over the military, the judiciary, and the cultus, restricts his ability to acquire wealth in wives and money, undercuts his freedom to express noblesse oblige (by cancelling debt and redistributing land), and prohibits him from claiming superior status over the people. The result is that all the tools of power—military, financial, judicial, cultic, patronage, and honorific—are neutralized.

As Levinson notes, the Deuteronomistic Historian, while claiming allegiance to Deuteronomy, subverts the book's central message by celebrating kingly powers. In contrast to Deuteronomy, the books of Samuel and Kings, both compiled by the Deuteronomistic Historian, portray Israelite monarchs as dominant political, military, cultic, and judicial leaders. Kings are praised for their wealth, virility, and majesty. Furthermore, the historian argues that Israel's fortunes are

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28. Having multiple wives was not only a measure of wealth, but also an important diplomatic tool.
29. Levinson, "Reconceptualization of Kingship," 529–31.

wholly dependent on the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of the royal leader. Thus Josiah is portrayed as the pivotal figure in implementing the tenets of the newly discovered Deuteronomic law while the high priest is described as a somewhat secondary actor.[30]

Assuming Levinson is correct, it is easy to understand why the Deuteronomistic Historian did not rewrite the heroic tales in Judges. The charismatic men of valor foreshadowed the qualities that the Deuteronomistic Historian admired in a monarch. Audacious fighters, unrestrained by laws and bureaucrats, not subordinated to priests or the Torah, and distinguished as men of scrupulousness, wealth, and power, the protagonists in Judges represented qualities the Deuteronomistic writer valued in successful leaders. The Deuteronomistic Historian's only obvious modification to the tales about ancient men and women of valor was contained in the theological clamps that introduced the theme of covenant fidelity or infidelity. But, consistent with other Deuteronomistic writings, even this modification enhanced the standing of individual leaders, whose actions were said to have determined the fate of the entire nation. For the Deuteronomistic writer(s), the heroes in Judges were welcome political and religious liberators sent by Yhwh to rescue a beleaguered people.

For the most part, the Deuteronomistic writer looks favorably upon the so-called judges. However, consciously or unconsciously, the editorial remarks question the effectiveness of the militant big men and women in Judges. While not directly criticizing the judges as individuals, the Deuteronomistic Historian repeatedly asserts that the Israelite people were constantly attacked by powerful and predatory neighbors, both near and distant. Midianites from the south, Moabites from the east, Canaanites from the lowlands, and Philistines from the coast plundered, demanded tribute, took slaves,

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30. Ibid., 532–34.

and humiliated the Israelite people. Even though the Deuteronomistic Historian observes that the judge–deliverers regularly rose up to provide relief, the writer explicitly notes that peace did not outlast the lifetime of an individual leader. Thus the editor characterizes the period of the judges as a time of political turmoil. Like modern political scientists, who prefer stable centralized states over short-lived patron-client polities, the Deuteronomistic Historian doubts the long-term value of individual heroic leaders.

In part as a result of the Deuteronomistic Historian's editorial comments, the men and women in Judges were transformed into institutionalized officeholders. While the epic-bardic storyteller had used the words "mighty" and "valor" to describe the early leaders, the Deuteronomistic editor(s) introduced the terms "judge" (*šōp̄ēṭ* – שפט) and "deliverer" (*môšîaʿ* – מושיע).[31] By choosing the more bureaucratic and institutional word שפט, the Deuteronomistic interpreter has tempted modern readers to regard the men and women of valor as official functionaries at the head of established territories rather than as individual champions managing precarious patron-client polities. Because of the way the Psalms, prophetic literature, and the New Testament interpreted Judges, even the term מושיע has assumed a more regal connotation.

Building on the Deuteronomistic editor's annotated collection of heroic stories, another writer compiled the final layer of the book of Judges. The time and purpose of this addition are in more dispute than is the case for the epic-bardic accounts or the Deuteronomistic writer's amendments. Sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, an author whom Susan Niditch labels the "Voice of the Humanist" added chapters 1 and 17–21.[32] Perhaps living in exile in Babylon, the

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31. In describing Othniel, the Deuteronomistic text of Judg. 3:9–10 provides the first reference to these terms. The Hebrew word שפט, commonly rendered "to judge," is more accurately translated as "to govern" or "to rule." The epic-bardic storyteller never uses the word "judge" when describing a human being.

humanist provided chapter 1 as a prologue bridging the time between Joshua and the heroes in Judges. Drawing heavily from the book of Joshua, the humanist lists the ten tribes of Israel, indicates whom they fought and where they settled, and identifies the indigenous peoples who remained in the land. Unlike the Deuteronomistic writer, the humanist offers no theological explanation for any of the victories or defeats. Although the humanist asserts that the sons of Israel cast lots to determine which tribe should go first to fight the Canaanites, that Yhwh gave the Canaanites into the hand of Israel, and that Yhwh was with Israel, there is no mention of covenant, apostasy, punishment, repentance, or divine compassion. The humanist says nothing more than any other ancient social or political commentator would have said or thought. Even non-Israelites would have attributed success or failure to divine involvement and every non-Israelite would have consulted a divinity before going to battle. Most strikingly, and unlike the bardic storyteller, the humanist gives little attention to any individual hero. The one exception is the story of Caleb, Othniel, and Achsah in Judg. 1:12–15, an account borrowed word for word from Josh. 15:16–19.

The humanist's most distinctive contribution comes in chapters 17–21, chapters that conclude the book's final version. These chapters continue the nontheological and nonheroic tenor of chapter 1. To some extent, the humanist betrays an agnostic attitude toward the heroes of the past.[33] They are distant figures whose remoteness allows the humanist literary space to add stories making a plea for tribal

32. Niditch, *Judges*, 11–13. The following discussion of Judges 1 and 17–21 relies heavily on Niditch. Of the three dominant traditions in Judges, the humanist voice represented in chapters 1 and 17–21 is the most difficult to identify and date. Judges 18:30 refers to the fall of the northern kingdom, which took place in 722 BCE. Therefore, the humanist wrote no earlier than that date and perhaps a century or more later. Fortunately, the precise identity of the humanist is not critical for the main findings of my book.

33. Many commentators have pointed out the bias against Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and Dan in chapters 17–21. For example, see Gregory Mobley, "Judges," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1:516.

unity and for generosity toward Levite religious functionaries.[34] Only one important person, Micah, who is definitely not a man of respected valor, a judge, or a rescuing champion, is mentioned by name. All the other protagonists are unnamed, presented as symbols of honorable or dishonorable behavior. Like chapter 1, the final section of Judges is preoccupied with the unity of the nation of Israel, a concern notably lacking in the bardic tales. Furthermore, in contrast to the sometimes disjointed and repetitive bardic stories, the humanist's accounts are carefully crafted, unified narratives suggesting literary sophistication. Perhaps composed as historical fiction, they point to the political and social concerns of educated Israelites who were living long after the time of the original men and women of valor and even after the time of the monarchy.[35] The humanist writer is keenly aware of the transitory nature of power and of the lurking danger of intertribal conflict. For the humanist, premonarchic times were distant, an age when there was no king. According to Niditch, the reoccurring phrase, "In those days there was no king in Israel; a man did what was right in his own eyes," is not so much a negative statement about an ancient era as it is a statement of regret that in the humanist's time Israel no longer had either a king or a nation.[36]

34. After the fall of the northern kingdom, many unemployed Levites sought refuge in the south. In the tale of the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19), the storyteller condemns inhospitality toward wandering Levites. However, that message is compromised by the story of Micah (Judges 18), which portrays displaced Levites as mercenary and untrustworthy.

35. In this respect, the humanist is writing roughly in the same time period and genre as the author of the book of Ruth. See Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Dallas: Word, 1996). Bush notes that Ruth is written in a Hebrew style representative of the postmonarchic period. In his commentary, Victor Matthews says Ruth is a "tightly written, composite tale dating to the beginning of the postexilic period" (*Judges and Ruth*, 209). Agreeing with this perspective, Niditch writes that the worldview of the humanist is "congruent with those of some Persian or early Hellenistic period biblical writers" (*Judges*, 12). Ezra, Nehemiah, Jonah, and 3 Isaiah also may be relatively contemporaneous.

36. Niditch, *Judges*, 13.

Although the humanist's record may not be a reliable source for reconstructing premonarchic Israel, these writings prove there was a continuing interest in that time and that many of the key values evident in the epic accounts of the bardic storyteller persisted hundreds of years after the lives of the early leaders.[37] The reliance on divination, the importance of hospitality, the centrality of contractual reliability, the significance of honor, and the value of women as economic and political commodities all continued even after the monarchy had come and gone.

Other Hebrew Bible material offers insights about Israelite attitudes toward the big men and women, who lived in the thirteenth through the eleventh centuries BCE. Written during the period of the monarchy, Psalm 83 refers to threats from Israel's neighbors and also from the Neo-Assyrian Empire.[38] At a time when the very existence of Israel seemed in doubt, the writer calls on Yhwh to deliver Israel by destroying her foes as he had done during the time of the men and women of valor. Specifically recalling the battles of Gideon, Barak, and Deborah, the lyricist begs Yhwh to turn Israel's enemies into dust, burn them with fire, fill them with shame, terrify them, and cause them to perish in disgrace like the Canaanite and Midianite enemies many years earlier. Thus the victories and acts of vengeance described in the book of Judges are recalled with admiration and longing.[39]

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37. Niditch says it is impossible to determine if the humanist relied on much older stories or if the accounts were written as historical fiction (ibid., 11–12).
38. Revived by Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE), the Neo-Assyrian Empire was a model of military and bureaucratic efficiency. Instead of merely taking plunder and tribute, Tiglath-pileser permanently annexed vast territories. The Assyrian king was known for executing or deporting conquered peoples and also incorporating them into his vast army. For Tiglath-pileser's relation to eighth-century Israel see John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 253–54.
39. Like the references to Gideon and Abimelech in the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), Psalm 83 provides an independent verification that the heroes in Judges 3–16 were well-known during the time of the monarchy.

Psalm 106, likely composed during the exile, offers a negative perspective on the time described in Judges. Written at a low point in the political life of the Israelite people, the song attempts to explain the defeat and destruction of the nation. Using theological language, the psalmist attributes the many problems of the past to a lack of religious faithfulness. Describing a cycle of apostasy and deliverance, Psalm 106 refers to the evils of serving idols and of engaging in human sacrifice, specifically the sacrifice of sons and daughters. Such practices, asserts the writer, polluted the land with blood. As will be noted below, the use of idols and other tools of divination and devotion was a common practice for political leaders during the time prior to the monarchy. Furthermore, a willingness to sacrifice one's child in order to uphold an oath to Yhwh was regarded as a sign of extraordinary courage and strength on the part of a big man. By the time of the exile, these values had changed, at least among some.

The Christian New Testament includes two references to Judges. In Acts 13:20 Paul mentions the characters in Judges, identifying them as judges (κριτὰς), a word from the legal realm, and describing then as given by God.[40] The Letter to the Hebrews contains a more extensive citation. Lauding the great heroes of faith, men and women like Moses, Abraham, Sarah, and Rahab who had been obedient to God, the writer of Hebrews goes on to list the central figures in Judges—Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah—as well as Samuel and David. These individuals are credited with having "conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, [and] quenched raging fire." They are said to have "escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb. 11:32–34.[41] The comments

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40. The word κριτής (sing.) refers to an official rendering a legal decision or one having the ability to discern. A related word is the term κριτήριον, meaning "law court." The English words "critic" and "criterion" are derived from the two Greek words.

by Paul and the author of Hebrews are evidence that more than one thousand years after their stories had originally been told, the premonarchic heroes in Judges were extolled by the first-century CE Jewish and Christian communities as leaders given by God and as examples of faithful obedience.

Patron-Client Politics

As Max Weber noted in *Ancient Judaism*, the men and women described in the book of Judges were not judges who rendered judicial decisions. Rather, they were charismatic patrimonial political leaders similar to the big men and women in other premodern societies.[42] Weber was correct to contend that much of the energy responsible for Israel's political evolution came from the dynamic leadership of these figures. Drawing on the status of their lineage, the attraction of their strength and boldness, and the lure of their liberality, the "judges" built constituencies of support and moved Israel along the continuum from tribe to kingdom. Through bravery, cunning, deceit, threat, cruelty, magical powers, oracular insights, dispute resolution, claims of supernatural endorsement, the shrewd management of tribute and spoils, and a reputation for honor and reliability, the mighty men of valor exercised control over the Israelite people and their elders. In so doing, they laid the foundation for the tenth-century monarchy and they profoundly shaped the development of the Yhwhist religion.[43]

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41. It may be significant that Abimelech, the one protagonist in the epic-bardic tales never identified as a partisan of Yhwh, is not included in the list.
42. Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1952), 11–12. For a more recent parallel to Weber, see James W. Flanagan, "Chiefs in Israel." While Flanagan's study deals with Saul, David, and Solomon, he looks at the role of powerful leaders in moving Israel toward statehood.
43. As will be noted in the final chapter, I believe the strategies and characteristics exhibited by the early leaders had a powerful impact on the subsequent development of government (the monarchs were exceptionally successful mighty men), ethnic and national awareness (the activities of the early heroes provided a shared collection of stories about heroes, battles, and

Building on Weber and relying on textual and archeological evidence, J. David Schloen argues that the metaphor of a patriarchal household shaped all relationships in the second-millennium ancient Near East.[44] The mores of a patriarchal family provided structure and served as a template for behavior at each level of society. Patrimonial relationships, based on loyalty, deference, and mutual responsibility, guided social, political, legal, economic, and religious intercourse. From the most humble families to magnificent royal courts, the simple domestic concept of parental control and concern bound together family heads and their dependents, owners and slaves, cities and subordinate rural areas, and kings and subjects. According to Schloen, a "decentralized hierarchy of households nested one into another" and incorporated every person, community, and region.[45] At the apex of society, the leader was regarded as a father, his officials assumed the role of subordinate kin, and his subjects thought of themselves as dependents within a family.[46]

While the relationships in the patrimonial household and in the larger political sphere were based on clearly defined social and legal expectations, in theory the relationships were also sustained by deep personal loyalty and love. Discussing the concept of covenant in the Hebrew Bible and in the ancient Near East, Bill Arnold emphasizes both the objective dimensions of conduct and the subjective dimensions of emotion characterizing the relationships between

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enemies that could be used to create a unified story of the past), and religious beliefs, especially concepts about Yhwh (memories of the men and women of valor influenced later ideas about covenant faithfulness, divine power, divine discretion, and divine deliverance).

44. J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002). Although Schloen focuses on Ugarit, his study deals with many surrounding societies, including premonarchic Israel.

45. Schloen, *House of the Father*, 65. See also 283–87.

46. Applying Weber's concept of a traditional patrimonial household model to Syria-Palestine, Schloen notes that officials did not have specialized roles. A subordinate would serve in multiple capacities such as military leader, police official, tax collector, judicial officer, agricultural manager, and head of a house. These duties would be carried out simultaneously. Furthermore, there was no distinction between public and private spheres (ibid., 284–85).

covenant partners. Without rejecting the conclusions of earlier scholars, who accentuated the objective contractual legal expectations for proper covenant conduct, Arnold points out that covenants in the Hebrew Bible also stressed the subjective qualities of affection and personal loyalty. This emotional component of covenants can be seen in the initial love between David and Saul, the enduring love between David and Jonathan, and the imagery of conjugal love in the writings of Hosea and Jeremiah.[47]

Although Schloen and Arnold suggest that in its idealized form the patrimonial social unit was bound together by "love and justice," in reality a patrimonial community, whether that of a small intergenerational family, a prominent house, or an extensive polity, relied on multiple strategies to ensure loyalty and continuity.[48] The redistribution of material goods and the use or threat of coercion would have been some of the instruments of control employed by fathers, town elders, and powerful patrons such as those described in the book of Judges. However, a leader's honor, reputation for consistency, ability to render wise legal judgments, and capacity to access the realm of the supernatural were equally important tools to gain and maintain legitimacy. The strength and persistence of any social unit, from family to kingdom, depended on the leader's ability to exercise these tools effectively and efficiently. In looking at political power, Max Weber distinguished between charismatic

47. Bill T. Arnold, "The Love-Fear Antinomy in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011): 551–69. Arnold builds on and revises a seminal essay by William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77–87. See also Susan Ackerman, "The Personal is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love (ʾāhēb, ʾahăbâ) in the Hebrew Bible," *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 437–58; Moshe Weinfeld, "The Common Heritage of Covenantal Traditions in the Ancient World," in *I Trattati nel Mondo Antico: Forma, Ideologia, Funzione*, Saggi di storia antica 2, ed. Luciano Canfora, Mario Liverani, and Carlo Zaccagnini (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1990), 175–91; and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003): 350–69.
48. Schloen, *House of the Father*, 13. Schloen's analysis may place undue emphasis on the integrated, harmonious nature of the patrimonial relationships.

and traditional patrimonial political systems. Although both operated according to many of the same principles, leaders in traditional systems generally expected to transfer their authority to the next generation without serious challenge. Charismatic authority, more dependent on an individual leader's personal qualities, was much more fragile. However, all patrimonial political systems, whether charismatic or traditional, relied on clients' loyalty for their survival and were at constant risk of collapse or decay if not properly managed.

Premonarchic Israel

Because of antiquity, because of cultural diversity, because archeological records are sparse, and because of differing methodological and theological approaches, the history of Early Iron Age Israel is a subject of great debate.[49] In the following overview, I try to summarize commonly held views about premonarchic times without getting overly entangled in the deep weeds of academic disputes. Some readers familiar with the literature will disagree with my portrayal of the scholarly consensus and all readers should be aware that virtually every statement I make has been contested by more than one reputable researcher. Readers also should keep in mind Anthony Frendo's warning that even generally accepted interpretations should not be confused with fact.[50]

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49. For more detail about premonarchic Israel see the following: William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Frank S. Frick, *The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Models and Theories*, Social World of Biblical Antiquity 4 (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1985); Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*; Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90–131; and Jonathan M. Golden, *Ancient Canaan and Israel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a discussion of religion in the Early Iron Age, see Smith, *Early History of God*, and Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

Before the time described in the book of Judges, the Egyptian empire exerted feudal control over the city-states located in Syria-Palestine.[51] The Amarna tablets, correspondence to the Egyptian capital from Canaanite vassals in the mid–1300s BCE, reveal that Egypt relied on local rulers to extract taxes, corvée, slaves, and plunder from the region.[52] In addition to imposing indirect rule over the area, Egypt maintained a military presence in the land in order to provide a buffer zone against powerful states to the north and east. The Amarna records indicate a good deal of social and political discord in the region as unruly vassals competed among themselves and as they faced unrest from a group of renegades labeled Apiru.[53] With the waning of Egyptian influence in the late fourteenth century, insecurity may have increased as the heads of city-states fought against each other, as some peasants and bonded workers resorted to banditry, and as Apiru mercenaries left the employ of the city-states to became freelance brigands.

In spite of political changes, the economy of the region displayed much continuity over a number of centuries. Wheat and barley were the main dietary staples; olives provided cooking oil; grapes were processed into wine; and sheep, goats, and poultry were used for their meat, milk, eggs, feathers, hides, and wool. Although these crops and animals could be found throughout the area, lighter rainfall

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50. Frendo, *Pre-Exilic Israel,* 102.

51. Although feudalism is similar to patrimonial systems, scholars generally note that feudalism depends more on formal contracts while patrimonialism primarily relies on familial sentiments.

52. For translations of the Amarna correspondence, see William L. Moran, ed. and trans., *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). See also James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 483–90.

53. Most scholars see a connection between the words "Apiru" and "Hebrew." The Apiru appear as mercenaries, renegade peasants, hostile outside interlopers, and as rival city-state rulers. Norman Gottwald suggests that the Apiru label could be used to denigrate any individual or group challenging the status quo. Thus powerful vassals accused each other of being Apiru. In any case, the frequent references to Apiru demonstrate a degree of political and social instability in the time period preceding the rise of the judges (Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh,* 401–9).

in the wooded hill country and in the south resulted in lower concentrations of people in those regions than on the coastal plains and interior valleys. In the more fertile and more densely populated areas, Canaanite rulers maintained economic control by organizing dependent workers on large estates, by conscripting peasants for corvée, and by taxing independent farmers living in the villages surrounding the walled cities. Over time, through the use of terraces and cisterns and by clearing away trees, free farmers and escaped serfs were able to settle more of the hill country where they established small, unwalled communities. Except for the absence of a defensive wall and public structures such as a temple or administrative building, such settlements did not differ greatly from the somewhat larger fortified towns. Some of the walled cities and rural settlements served as places of refuge where an individual could take temporary shelter from an angry pursuer seeking revenge.

From the south and east of the hill country, pastoralists moved in and out to take advantage of changing rainfall patterns related to the seasons. During the dry and fallow period between April and September, herders grazed their animals in the agricultural areas where the dung and other animal products would have been welcomed by the sedentary farmers. At this time, the various groups exchanged trade items, folk stories, recollections about genealogies, political commentaries, and religious concepts and rituals. Other transitory peoples brought additional economic, ethnic, and cultural variety. Midianite caravans moving through the area were the sources of ideas and exotic trade goods. Related to the Midianites, the Kenites, a landless group of metalworkers from the south, were regarded with some suspicion and also were welcomed because of their esoteric and essential knowledge. Described in the Bible as descendants of Cain, they traveled widely making and repairing tools and trinkets. Messengers of Yhwh, itinerant religious specialists, also

played an important role during the premonarchic period because of their value to political big men who managed shrines or who needed divine power and oracular advice.[54]

Scholars generally agree that the Israelite people, who came to regard themselves as a separate ethnic group, and the indigenous Canaanites actually emerged from the same stock. Speaking the same language, cultivating the same crops, eating the same foods, building the same type of houses, worshiping the same gods (El, Baal, and Asherah), and celebrating the same agricultural festivals, the Canaanites and Israelites living in Syria–Palestine originally were members of a single cultural complex.[55] Frank Moore Cross notes that the language and images of theophany in early Israel borrowed heavily from the theophany of Baal.[56] Another example of cultural sharing in early Israel is that Hebrew poetry was both linguistically and literarily dependent on Canaanite precedents. Cross points out that the poetic meter of the earliest Hebrew poetry, for example the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, is typical of Ugaritic (Canaanite) epic style.[57] In his study of the Psalms, Mitchell Dahood shows how Hebrew songwriters appropriated Ugaritic odes to the gods as the basis for hymns praising both Yhwh and Israelite monarchs.[58]

54. In contrast to the messengers of Yhwh, the Levites (with claims of ties to Moses and Aaron) are not mentioned in the bardic tales. The later humanist writer, however, makes Levites central figures.

55. At least until 900 BCE, it is impossible to distinguish between Canaanites and Israelites based on archeological and linguistic evidence. Mark Smith notes that "Iron I Israel was largely Canaanite in culture.… Israel inherited local cultural traditions from the Late Bronze Age and its culture was largely continuous with the Canaanite culture of the coast and valleys during the Iron I period" (*Early History of God*, 27–28). As many scholars have noted, the name "Isra-el" honors El, the head of the Canaanite heavenly court. The people were not known as "Isra-ya." The implication is that the people embraced the worship of Yhwh sometime after they had solidified at least the rudiments of an ethnic identity. Anthony Frendo is more cautious when describing Israel's Canaanite roots. However, even he says that the vast majority of Israelites were of Canaanite origin. Frendo suggests that Hebrews from the south introduced the stories of the patriarchs and exodus. Coming into the hill country of Palestine they were then grafted into a much larger Canaanite group already known as Israel (*Pre-Exilic Israel*, 13).

56. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 150.

57. Ibid., 115–16.

Because the process of cultural differentiation separating the Israelites from their neighbors was so gradual and took place over many generations, the people experiencing the change would have been unaware of the transition. Once the separation had reached the point where the existence of distinct and rival cultures was obvious, storytellers explained the differences through the medium of clichés about conflict and change. The martial clichés recorded in the book of Joshua attributed the dissimilarities and the tensions between the early Israelites and their neighbors to a series of battles, the Exodus cliché referred to an escape and epic journey, and clichés in Genesis and elsewhere suggested that cultural distinctions reflected long-ago sibling strife. While the travels, conquests, and family quarrels would be described by moderns as wanderings and struggles of the imagination, the concreteness of the symbolic images provided ancient people with a satisfactory explanation for how Israelite culture both replaced and remained in tension with the surrounding societies.[59]

58. Mitchell Dahood, SJ, *Psalms III: 101–150*, Anchor Bible 17A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), xxii. Dahood sees a close relationship between Ugaritic texts from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE and early biblical poetry of the thirteenth and twelfth centuries. He says that the relationship is even more striking when looking at the psalms written mainly from the eleventh to sixth centuries BCE. In his three-volume commentary, Dahood argues that in many cases Hebrew poets simply replaced the name of a Canaanite deity or ruler with the name of Yhwh or a Hebrew king. While many scholars believe Dahood overemphasized the degree to which Ugaritic texts and language shaped Hebrew psalmody, a significant level of influence is undeniable. A modern parallel would be the way Friedrich Schiller's Romantic poem "Ode to Joy," which celebrated Greek mythology, was recycled by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony (perhaps as a Masonic tribute), reused by Christians as the hymn "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," appropriated by Nazi Germany, borrowed as the preindependence anthem of white-ruled Rhodesia, and made the "Anthem of Europe" by the European Union.

59. The use of clichés of war, travel, or family conflict to explain ethnic separation is a very common strategy among preindustrial peoples, who assume that dramatic events in the distant past must have been responsible for the differences they observe in the present. The image of battle suggests a more disruptive separation while tales of migration and sibling conflict acknowledge connection as well as distance. The now outdated debate as to whether the Israelites entered the land as disruptive conquerors or as peaceful migrant settlers actually grew out of the fact that the Israelites had competing perspectives about the past, rival interpretations expressed through contending clichés. While clichés should not be understood as literal descriptions of the past, there is room for common ground between scholars who interpret

The earliest known reference identifying the Israelites as a distinct group is from the Merneptah Stele, dated about 1207 BCE. The stele, which gives an account of Pharaoh Merneptah's victories in North Africa and Palestine, notes that in the course of battles in Canaan "the peoples of the tribes of Israel have been laid waste." The stele goes on to boast that all of Canaan had been pacified and had submitted to the power of the pharaoh.[60] Just how the Israelites mentioned in the stele came to be regarded as a separate ethnic grouping and how that grouping later grew into a community large and strong enough to establish a monarchy is subject to great debate. Ethnic identities are fluid. They can grow out of a people's recognition that they share a geographical region, a language, subsistence patterns, an outside threat, a central ruler, and a related set of social and religious beliefs, or that they trade and intermarry. In considering Israel in the light of traditional societies all over the world, it would be remarkable in the extreme if the people living in the Canaanite hill country had not claimed some type of ethnic identity. Just how that identity emerged may remain shrouded in the same mystery that obscures the origins of ethnic consciousness elsewhere in the world. While many traditional people regard their emergence as an act of divine intervention, the true miracle would be to find a people without an ethnic awareness.

The Israelites were surrounded by other Semitic peoples. The Edomites—living south of the Dead Sea and described as descendants

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a story such as the exodus narrative as a pious fiction and those who believe there was an actual migration. Today, even more conservative scholars, who regard the story of the exodus as true, generally acknowledge that the account was introduced by a very small percentage of the people, who eventually became known as Israelites. The larger Israelite group then appropriated the saga as a cliché explaining their own social, economic, political, and religious situation. The stories in the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Joshua are similar to tales in African oral traditions about how ethnic groups came into existence. For a discussion of African clichés see Joseph C. Miller, *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, UK: Dawson, 1980), 24–31.

60. See Frank Frick, *A Journey through the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 201–3; and Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 378.

of Esau—were regarded as a closely related, albeit somewhat hostile, people. Moab and Ammon were located east of the Jordan River. Along the Mediterranean coast to the north, the Phoenicians with their cities and ships were a more powerful and cosmopolitan people, whose roots also were Canaanite. Toward the end of the period described in Judges, non-Semitic seafaring peoples with ties to Cyprus and Greece settled on the southern and central coastal plains. Remembered as the Philistines, they posed a grave threat to the Israelite people. Nevertheless, some of these Sea Peoples were incorporated into Israel and became known as the tribe of Dan.

In the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, hill country Israelites and their neighbors clustered in extended multigenerational households, known as the father's house (*bêt ʾāb* – אב בת). The place of work and residence for Israelite families was a pillared, two-story building.[61] The low-ceiling ground floor was used for storage, food processing and crafts, and keeping animals. The upper floor, sometimes laid out around an open courtyard, provided dwelling space for human occupants.[62] Larger families, numbering ten people or more per household, included older parents, married sons and their children, unmarried daughters, servants, and poor kin. Although it was the ideal form, this multigenerational patrilineal family would often break down when its patriarch died and when older brothers established their own nuclear households. At any given time, only about one third of the households conformed to the ideal joint-family model while about two-thirds of the households included no more than five people.[63]

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61. The pillared house had two rows of interior posts which supported an upper floor. Schloen and Stager believe the Israelite pillared house was a modification of a Canaanite structure which featured two solid interior walls instead of pillars (Schloen, *House of the Father*, 137).

62. Most houses contained less than seventy square meters (about five hundred square feet) of space (ibid., 147).

63. The information in this paragraph relies heavily on Schloen who summarizes and analyzes data generated by the most respected twentieth-century archeologists. Schloen says that the

Economically self-sufficient, families lived together in small village communities which generated a bit of surplus that they distributed to less fortunate relatives, sold to merchants, or offered as tribute to patrimonial political leaders who ruled much larger houses. Geographically proximate households regarded themselves as members of clans that generally numbered between one hundred and one hundred fifty people.[64] Guided by elders, Israelite clans were responsible for dispute resolution, legal decisions, land allocation, and defense against bandits and animal predators. Presumably the larger clan community gathered to celebrate marriages, conduct funerals, and observe festivals marking the harvests. These communities were characterized by some social disparity. Early legal codes indicate that slavery and pawnship were common and that wealthy men acquired more than their share of women.

The heroes described in Judges were heads of houses and clans. Their power was based on their ability to mobilize political support and material resources from members of those groups. Furthermore, the strategies they used to manage households were replicated in the methods they employed to rule more extensive domains. However, setting aside later extrapolations that reflect the perspective of people during the monarchy, there is no convincing evidence of any kind of central political or religious institutions unifying tribes, let alone an entire nation. Religious activity would have centered on household gods linked to family ancestors and to the cults of El (a benign father who reigned over a somewhat unruly heavenly court), of El's son

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evidence points to a pattern that was relatively stable for centuries and that changed dramatically only with the social disruption brought by the end of the monarchy (ibid., 135–83).

64. According to Schloen, 70 percent of Israelite settlements occupied less than one third of a hectare of land, about the amount needed to build housing for 100 to 150 people. About 20 percent of the settlements were between one third and one hectare while only about 10 percent of the communities covered more than one hectare. Villages typically numbered between 100 and 150 people, in other words one clan, and contained about 20 households (ibid., 154–55).

Baal (a powerful and tumultuous god of war, fertility, and rain), and of Asherah (El's consort). Although the awareness and worship of the god Yhwh were also part of the religious landscape, oracles, necromancy, divining, sacrifices, images of metal or wood, blessings and curses, and oath-taking played important roles in the religious life of the hill country peoples who regarded themselves as Israelites. Among the elite, human sacrifice was practiced in times of dire crisis or at occasions expressing extraordinary gratitude to a deity.[65]

By the end of the period described in the book of Judges, Israel was not the same. Canaanite control over the hill country was being vigorously contested; small, isolated settlements and towns were increasingly united under aggressive big men who began imagining themselves as possible hereditary kings controlling extensive lands; and the worship of Yhwh as a powerful and jealous deity had become commonplace. What was responsible for these developments? Without denying the importance of gradual underlying social and economic forces, the following study will examine the role of the men and women of valor who were at the heart of the political and religious process that created the nation of Israel. Their stories are recounted in the book of Judges, which strongly asserts that these men and women, along with the religious specialists known as messengers of Yhwh, were the key actors during the premonarchic period.[66]

The Protagonists: Mighty Men and Women of Valor

As noted at the start of this chapter, the male protagonists in Judges were not actually judges, but mighty men of valor (גבור החיל).[67]

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65. See Smith, *Early History of God,* 171–81. The topic of human sacrifice will be discussed in detail in chapter 5.
66. See the discussion about the messengers of Yhwh at the end of this chapter.
67. Only Deborah is actually said to have judged (שפטה). As will be seen in later chapters, her role was that of a seer, not a warrior/ruler.

Various forms of the roots גבר and חיל appear frequently in the Hebrew Bible. As a noun, חיל (*ḥyl*) can refer to a fortification, thus evoking a sense of unyielding defensive strength. In the Hebrew Scriptures the word is used to describe the ramparts of Thebes, Jerusalem, and Zion.[68] As a verb or adjective חיל suggests an enduring firm and strong action or quality.[69] Building on these meanings, חיל most often carries a military connotation, referring to an army, a warrior, or the strength of a horse. Second Samuel 11:16 indicates that the fiercest place on the battleground was occupied by valiant men. The armies of Assyria, the fighting men of Pharaoh, the soldiers of Jericho, and the warriors of Joshua are all described by the word חיל.[70] Although the primary meaning of the term suggests the resolute strength of a warrior, the word can be used to describe ability, efficiency, or trustworthiness in nonmilitary affairs. Moses selected able men (men of חיל) to assist him in governing while the pharaoh recruited able men from among the Hebrews to care for his cattle.[71] In addition, חיל is also associated with the security of wealth.[72]

Words based on the root גבר (*gbr*) also point to strength, but strength exercised more aggressively than defensively. As a verb, the word can mean the capacity to force, compel, or prevail over enemies. As an adjective, the word suggests boldness, pride, audaciousness, and might. A horse, a crocodile, a warrior, or the body

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68. Nah. 3:8; Pss. 48:13; 122:7.

69. Job 20:21 refers to a prosperity that does not endure (is not strong) and Ps. 10:5 refers to the ways of the wicked, which are persistent. In Psalm 33:17 the adjectival form notes the strength of a horse.

70. There are dozens of passages where חיל is used to describe an army, generally foot soldiers in contrast to chariots or horsemen. A few of the passages are Exod. 14:9, 17, 28; Josh. 6:2; 10:7; Isa. 36:2.

71. Exod. 18:21 and 25; Gen. 47:6.

72. Some of the passages using the word to refer to wealth are Gen. 34:29; Num. 31:9; Deut. 8:17, 18; Isa. 8:4; 10:14; 30:6; Mic. 4:13; Jer. 15:13; Job 31:25; and Ps. 18:32, 39. Zechariah 14:14 explicitly lists gold, silver, and garments as examples of חיל.

of a man can all be described by the adjective גבורה. In Genesis, the Nephilim, superhuman children of gods and mortals, are called גברים. Similarly, Nimrod a fabled character in the mythical age of prodigious heroes, is described as the first גבור (mighty person) and as a גבור ציד (*gibbôr ṣayid*, mighty hunter).[73] Goliath, another figure of extraordinary might, is also identified as a גבור.[74] The name of the angel Gabriel (גבריאל), leader of God's heavenly army, is a combination of the word *gibbôr* and El. Although גבור can refer to a mighty army, a mighty king, mighty descendants, an angel, or a mighty deity, the word is used most often to describe a mighty warrior. Frequently, the words גבור and חיל are combined into a title, a title often translated as "man of valor." "Strong warrior," "firm warrior," or "valiant warrior" would also be appropriate renditions.

A survey of the many references to גבור החיל in the Hebrew Scriptures indicates that the men of valor were renowned as warriors, expert in the use of the shield and sword. First Chronicles 12:8 describes the men of valor as being swift as gazelles and having faces like lions. The reference to their physical appearance suggests long, flowing hair that was the mark of Israelite warriors.[75] Apparently, men of valor fought on foot, for they are commonly distinguished from men riding horses or driving chariots.[76] While highly regarded for their military might, a man of valor displayed other qualities. The young David, a man of valor, was skillful at playing music, prudent in speech, and handsome. In addition, it was said that he experienced divine approval because Yhwh was with him.[77] A man of

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73. Gen. 6:4; 10:8–9.
74. 1 Sam. 17:51.
75. See Judg. 5:2. The Song of Deborah celebrates the flowing hair of self-sacrificing warriors (see Niditch, *Judges*, 70). Also, Samson the Nazirite famously had long locks, as did David's warrior son Absalom.
76. Exod. 14:9, 17, 28; 2 Kgs. 6:14–15.
77. 1 Sam. 16:18.

valor might also be industrious; Solomon, who admired the diligence of Jeroboam, a man of valor, placed him in charge of forced labor.

Although many men enjoyed the status of גבור חיל, the highest ranking among this group were individuals with considerable wealth and responsibility. When the king of Assyria demanded one thousand talents of silver from Menahem, the king of Israel, Menahem turned to his men of valor in order to raise the funds. Other references to the men of valor indicate that many were heads of houses, individuals whose names were well-known, and fathers of many offspring. From the Hebrew Bible we also see that men of valor were highly regarded for their exemplary character. The assistants Moses chose from among the men of valor were trustworthy people who respected Yhwh and hated bribery.[78] When Saul and his sons were killed, it was men of valor who risked their own lives to retrieve the bodies and give them a proper burial.[79] These brave and reliable men stand in sharp contrast to בני בליעל (*běnê běliyaʿal*, sons of emptiness), disloyal men who were untrustworthy and worthless.[80]

Gideon was the first to be addressed as a man of valor in Judges, but he was not alone among Israel's mighty men of his time. An incident that took place later in Gideon's life indicates that he saw himself as but one of many such mighty men.[81] Preparing to execute two of his enemies he reminded them that they had killed a number of his own men at Tabor.[82] The dead men at Tabor were then described

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78. Exod. 18:21, 25.

79. 1 Sam. 31:12.

80. 1 Sam. 10:26. The בני בליעל were the men who refused to recognize Saul. The word בלי can refer to the lack of water, lack of clothes (nakedness), or lack of knowledge.

81. These mighty men are somewhat of an embarrassment to biblical scholars who regard early Israel as an egalitarian society organized around respectable religious principles. Boling claims the mighty men were very rare (*Judges*, 111), and in his massive sociological study Gottwald hardly mentions them. Gottwald asserts that they became common only under the more hierarchical and oppressive monarchy (*Tribes of Yahweh*, 507).

82. The battle of Tabor receives no other mention in the story of Gideon. Failing to describe defeats was not uncommon.

as being just like Gideon, resembling the sons of a king—thus as Gideon's martial compatriots and social equals (his brothers, the sons of his mother).[83] In addition to Gideon, Jephthah, another prominent warrior big man in Judges, is specifically identified as a גבור (*gibbôr*) (Judg. 11:1). Although not labeled as *gibbôrîm*, the other big men described in the book of Judges certainly fall into that category. The left-handed warrior Ehud, Gideon's putative son Abimelech, and the great commander Barak have all the marks of the *gibbôrîm*. Judges 20:44 and 46 note that the tribe of Benjamin had numerous *gibbôrîm*, and the tribe of Dan is credited with five such individuals in Judg. 18:2. In addition, Samson's story should be thought of as describing the warrior qualities of a youthful man of valor.

Israel's ideal mighty man was David, who spent much of his life as a warrior mercenary. Prior to becoming a king, his career resembled that of the heroes in Judges. Assembling a group of subordinate mighty men, David was able to gain control of an entire kingdom. More than thirty of the mighty men serving under David are named in 2 Sam. 23:8–39. They are ranked according to their levels of responsibility and they are described as strong, valiant, and loyal individuals. Single-handedly killing large numbers of opposing warriors, fighting so doggedly that their swords stuck fast to their hands, slaying lions with their bare hands, and recklessly penetrating enemy lines just to fetch a drink of water for their thirsty commander are some of the deeds attributed to David's *gibbôrîm*.

As can be seen from descriptions of David's mighty men and from references elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, leaders over subordinate mighty men rewarded their companies of fighters with promotions and booty and also with gifts of land, slaves, and women. In addition, the honor earned in battle would have been regarded as an important

83. Judg. 8:18–20.

prize. The very existence of the stories making up the book of Judges is evidence of how the power and valor of great warrior leaders were recalled and recounted. Holding together a group of competitive, impulsive, proud, courageous, demanding, and strong young followers—men enthralled by tales such as the legend of Samson—would have been a challenging task. A leader who demonstrated his success in that context would have been a logical candidate for more extensive responsibilities. It is, therefore, not surprising that Gideon harbored thoughts of becoming a king and that his putative son Abimelech attempted to put such aspirations into action.[84]

No female in Judges is explicitly labeled as a woman of valor (ʾēšet ḥayil – אשת חיל), but many merit that title. Except for the stories of Ehud and Gideon, each epic-bardic saga features females who play important, even primary, roles. Achsah, Deborah, Jael, Sisera's mother, Delilah, and the woman who delivered the fatal blow to Abimelech are all strong women whose determination and/or warriorly qualities are recorded in the premonarchic tales contained in Judges. Their stories challenge any notion that all women were thought of as passive actors whose lives, ideas, and actions were completely controlled and constantly overshadowed by men.

Compiled more than five hundred years after the period depicted in Judges, Proverbs is the only book in the Hebrew Bible actually to use the term mighty woman (אשת חיל). Unfortunately, the phrase is diminished in translation. The RSV renders אשת חיל as "good wife" while the much earlier King James uses the words "virtuous woman." However, in Prov. 31:10–31, the אשת חיל is much more than a sexually pure and compliant spouse. The account in Proverbs 31 lists

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84. Judg. 8:22–23. Even though the text explicitly states that the people, not Gideon, asked that he and his descendants rule as kings, Gideon may have initiated the request. Modern-day authoritarian leaders, who seek to extend their mandate, often justify their actions by claiming they are only acceding to popular demand, a demand they themselves create.

the economic and managerial marks of valor essential for the success of a great house, whether in premonarchic times or in the more cosmopolitan and urbanized postmonarchic era. The woman of valor in Proverbs 31 is an entrepreneur, household manager, landowner, vintner, philanthropist, and craftsperson. She is also described as strong, dignified, optimistic, confident, industrious, and kind. The passage in Proverbs concludes by saying that the woman of valor is honored by public praise and blessing in the city gates, lauded not for superficial charm and beauty, but for measurable accomplishments. Although Proverbs does not comment on the military attributes of valor, the leadership qualities in Proverbs are those that would have been attributed to illustrious men and women during the time of Judges.

The Messenger of Yhwh

While not nearly so prominent as the men and women of valor, another group of people in the book of Judges deserves mention. Appearing in the tales of Gideon and Samson, these enigmatic figures are known by the title messenger of Yhwh (מלאך יהוה – *malʾak yhwh*) There are compelling similarities between the promises, admonitions, and actions of the messengers of Yhwh in Judges who appeared to Gideon and Samson's parents and in the account of Moses in Exodus 3. In each case, a mysterious and exotic individual appeared and disappeared suddenly and without explanation. In each case, the messenger promised power to an individual charged with fighting against an oppressor (the Midianites, the Philistines, or Pharaoh) and bringing deliverance. In each case, the power was explicitly linked to the deity Yhwh. In each case, the listener expressed doubt, reluctance, and even fear. In each case, the messenger was validated by a supernatural event (the miracle of

Gideon's fleece, the infertile woman becoming pregnant with Samson, and Moses's staff turning into a snake) and inexplicable pyrotechnics (a burning bush which was not destroyed, all-consuming flames for sacrifices ignited mysteriously). And, in each case, the recipient of the message went on to great deeds of triumph.

The commonalities in these stories suggest a pattern which has both a sociopolitical and a literary dimension. From a sociopolitical point of view, the messengers of Yhwh in Exodus and Judges appear to have been peripatetic agitators who dealt with strong, but marginalized, individuals, motivating and mobilizing them to strike out against political and ethnic enemies of the Hebrew people.[85] Seeming to appear out of nowhere, the messengers validated their words with spectacular demonstrations of magic, often involving fire. Given the similarity of their admonitions and modi operandi, it would appear that these agitators were part of a loosely organized company of revolutionary-minded individuals. From a literary perspective, it is likely that there was a shared tradition and a collection of somewhat standardized stories. The stories, perhaps created and preserved by the messengers themselves, might have become templates to guide their behavior and to gild their reputation. As the stories were told, the lines between reality, legend, and myth, as well as those between the human and divine worlds, would have blurred.[86]

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85. Much of the scholarly discussion regarding the messenger of Yhwh has been driven by theological concerns about whether the messenger was a being separate from the deity. Thus the question deals with whether the messenger is to be regarded as Yhwh himself appearing in a theophany, as an angelic envoy, or a human agent claiming to act for the deity. See Rene A. Lopez, "Identifying the 'Angel of the Lord' in the Book of Judges: A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 1 (2010): 1–18. Lopez correctly argues that the term messenger of Yhwh can refer to all three manifestations and that the Hebrew Bible describes multiple human messengers. Based on this conclusion, it then becomes possible to ask about the social structures in which the human messengers operated and the temporal functions they served.

Written hundreds of years after the epic-bardic stories were first committed to memory, the Deuteronomistic account in Judges begins with a tale of a messenger of Yhwh. In Judg. 2:1–5, the messenger condemns Israel for accommodating to Canaanite culture.[87] In this scene, the messenger spoke not just to one individual, but to all the sons of Israel gathered at Gilgal. Reminding the people of Yhwh's deliverance from Egypt, the messenger chastised the people for breaking the covenant they had once cut with their deity. According to the messenger, their sin was tolerating pagan altars and being lured by the gods of the local Canaanites. Weeping with remorse, the people offered a sacrifice to Yhwh and named the place Bochim (Weepers). Although less personal and more covenantal, the proclamation at Gilgal was consistent with the words of the messenger of Yhwh to Gideon and to Samson's parents.

The striking parallels between the Hebrew Bible's messenger of Yhwh and traditional diviners who instigated a revolt against German colonialism in early twentieth-century Tanganyika may help us understand the situation in ancient Israel more fully. Like the Midianites, the Philistines, or the pharaoh, the Germans greatly disrupted economic, social, and political life. Obligating Africans to build roads, grow cash crops, and earn money to pay a head tax, the Germans placed enormous pressure on the subsistence economy. Combined with a severe drought in 1905, the result was a serious food shortage. Like the messenger of Yhwh, who convinced Moses to challenge Egypt and Gideon to defy Baal, traditional African diviners loyal to the snake god Hongo promised supernatural power

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86. In the case of Moses, one must ask if the story was projected back in time and attached to a heroic figure of the past or if groups associated with the Moses tradition introduced the actual practices and the literary genre into the land.

87. The literary technique used by the Deuteronomistic writer is similar to that used by the bardic-epic storyteller who inserted Jotham's fable into the story of Abimelech (Judg. 9:7–21). In each case the writer placed his or her words in the mouth of a third person.

(*maji* or magical water) that would protect Africans against German bullets. Although the leading spirit medium, Kinjikitile Ngwale, was executed in 1905, other itinerant mediums mobilized chiefs and warriors to continue what became known as the Maji Maji revolt. But unlike Gideon and Samson, who were given power enabling them to dishonor Baal and Dagon, Kinjikitile Ngwale did not succeed. His magic water did not turn bullets into water and Maji Maji did not lift the weight of oppression. The Germans remained in control and the two-year revolt (1905–7) took the lives of several hundred thousand Africans, who were killed in battle or died of famine. However, the uprising is remembered as one of the greatest threats to the European presence in East Africa.[88]

Methodology and Organization

The goal of this book is to describe the political values of premonarchic times. If, as the majority of scholars believe, the epic-bardic tales of Judges were created no later than the early monarchy, those narratives are rich sources for learning about how early Israelites *thought* leaders behaved, what they did to gain and hold power, and how a political system operated.[89] The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Abimelech may not reveal much about the life of any actual individual, but they record what people hoped for and feared politically, how they conducted themselves in the public sphere, and the strategies they considered effective in governance.

The primary methodological tools and language in this book are those of social science, not theology. Borrowing anthropological, sociological, and politico-scientific theories about wealth, power,

88. See John Iliffe, "The Organization of the Maji Maji Rebellion," *Journal of African History* 8 (1967): 495–512; Thaddeus Sunseri, "Reinterpreting a Colonial Rebellion: Forestry and Social Control in German East Africa, 1874–1915," *Environmental History* 8, no. 3 (2003): 430–51.

89. As noted before, there is independent documentation from 2 Samuel that Israelite warriors were well aware of the heroes in Judges.

honor, and indigenous knowledge, this study applies those concepts to early Israelite society. As just seen, chapter 1 of the book summarizes commonly accepted understandings about late second-millennium Syro-Palestinian society and about how the book of Judges was built upon a collection of oral histories, legends, and folktales that were edited and supplemented by later writers. This chapter identifies the main characters in Judges not as religious or legal officials, but as men and women of valor operating within turbulent patron-client systems. The remaining chapters of the book examine how those men and women gained and consolidated power in patronage systems. The central argument is that they sought ways to rule that neither depleted their material resources nor required the constant exercise of force. Patrons who must frequently provide material rewards to clients or who must continually impose their will through violence risk exhausting their treasure and multiplying resentment to the point where it cannot be contained. The most successful valiant men and women in Judges found less expensive and less dangerous ways to maintain their power.

Building on the ideas of Jane Guyer, chapter 2 explains how the patron leaders used their control of indigenous knowledge, both temporal and supernatural, to enhance their authority. While studies of patron-client systems always emphasize the importance of mobilizing people for their ability to fight, work, or bear children, Judges offers many examples of leaders who collected people with intellectual expertise. Chapter 3 investigates the importance of having a reputation for constancy or reliability in order to hold power. Joel Migdal has noted that patron-client leaders are weakened because they are forced to delegate power and redistribute wealth in order to win and keep the loyalty of their subordinates. The book of Judges proposes an alternative strategy. Judges suggests that a leader who is renowned as utterly unswerving and absolutely faithful to contractual

agreements can attract allies and neutralize enemies. But, as Hannah Arendt, Donald Shriver, and Miroslav Volf recognize, for society to survive, the rigidity of constancy must be tempered by clemency and compassion. Both the bardic stories of Jephthah and the humanist's tales of intertribal wars ponder that reality. Chapter 4 draws on the classic writings of Julian Pitt-Rivers, J. G. Peristiany, and Frank Stewart to consider how "big men and women" in Judges used honor as a way to exercise authority. Like the quality of reliability, honor can enhance power without drastically depleting resources or creating additional enemies. Even chapter 5, which looks at the use of wealth, suggests that effective individuals operating in a patronage system are able to manage material resources in a way that ensures more income than outflow. In an economic system relying on plunder, tribute, and gifting, men of valor in Judges added to their power and wealth by offering lavish and spectacular sacrificial gifts to Yhwh. Karl Polanyi's work on precapitalist economies, Macur Olson's descriptions of roving and stationary bandits, and Marcel Mauss's and Natalie Davis's writings on gifting were all instrumental in the development of chapter 5. Finally, building on Walter Brueggemann's thoughts about the dynamic and ongoing conversation between God and humans, chapter 6 concludes the book with a brief reflection on the enduring significance of the book of Judges. In all the chapters of this book, I owe a great debt to Susan Niditch. Her commentary on Judges and her study of war in the Hebrew Bible are models of careful scholarship and sensible interpretation.