

Preface

I began this study of Judges because of my long-standing interest in patron-client politics and because the material in Judges is an attractive and underused source of comparative data on that topic. I was also drawn to Judges because, as a person of faith, I am haunted by the fact that while the heroes in the book thought and acted in ways moderns would consider deeply immoral, they are often presented by religious people as spiritual champions. Finally, as a pacifist and former director of the Whitworth University peace studies program, I am challenged by people who sometimes justify the use of force by referencing the Hebrew Bible, especially stories in Judges.

Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor is a book about political culture and political behavior. In the Hebrew Bible, the male protagonists in Judges were identified as “men of valor” or “mighty men.” Ambitious, and at times ruthless, they would be labeled chiefs, strongmen, patrimonial leaders, or even warlords in today’s world. Although the sixth-century BCE Deuteronomistic editor portrayed them as moral champions and called them judges, the original bardic storytellers and the men of valor themselves were preoccupied with the problem of gaining and maintaining political power.

My study considers the variety of strategies the men and women of valor used to gain and consolidate power. Certainly the use of violence, the redistribution of patronage, and the control of the labor and reproductive capacity of subordinates were among their key political tools. However, the central argument of my book is that these individuals relied on other political resources that carried less risk of depleting their wealth or requiring constant exercise of force. The main body of my book devotes a chapter to each of the following strategies used by the men of valor in their pursuit of power: 1) mobilizing and dispensing indigenous knowledge, 2) cultivating a reputation for being uncommonly reliable, 3) presenting themselves as honorable (consequential), and 4) positioning themselves as skillful mediators between the realms of earth and heaven. Each chapter builds on important theories from political science, anthropology, sociology, and economics. Throughout the book, I deal with the political implications of the tension between Yhwh and Baal and the way powerful strongmen in Judges used their association with Yhwh to advance their political, economic, or military agenda. I also give attention to the messengers of Yhwh, most likely I will argue itinerant politico-religious agitators, who mobilized ambitious political leaders by promoting Yhwh as a deity with unparalleled temporal and supernatural power.

In writing this book, I have been influenced by my understanding of African society, especially African political culture. My first encounter with Africa was as a volunteer teaching secondary school in the Congo, a country ruled by the ruthless patrimonial strongman Mobutu Sese Seko. Later, when conducting field research in Congo, I encountered many benevolent traditional chiefs who exercised their patrimonial duties in a way that promoted the well-being of their communities. Over the course of my five decades of involvement in Africa I have had many opportunities to study the continent's peoples

and political systems. Besides writing about politics in Congo, Liberia, Dahomey, and Buganda, my on-the-ground experiences include lecturing in universities in Liberia, Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania, leading student study groups to Liberia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, and serving as a consultant or election monitor in several West African countries. Throughout my career, I have been impressed by the pervasiveness and perseverance of patron-client politics in Africa as well as in other parts of the world distant in both time and place. I have been especially mindful of the similarities between the political strategies and values of traditional Africa and those of ancient Israel.

Drawing on my understanding of Africa, my book on Judges references religious, social, and political practices from the African continent. I do this for two reasons. First, the people in northeast Africa are part of a larger Semitic cultural and linguistic world which includes not only Egypt, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa, but also Syria-Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula. Through Egypt and the Red Sea corridor, trade goods, people, and ideas flowed between Syria-Palestine and sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, some practices and values were shared. Consequently, an understanding of Africa can contribute to a better understanding of ancient Israel. The rich potential of this avenue of investigation has never been adequately explored. Second, even when there is no connection between an idea or action in Africa and Syria-Palestine, the fact that a farmer, pastoralist, diviner, storyteller, merchant, or strongman in pre-industrial Africa engaged in a certain activity demonstrates that it would be possible for humans elsewhere to follow a similar pattern. This observation does not constitute proof, but it does support the formulation of plausible hypotheses. While the strategies of a diviner in Liberia cannot be used as evidence of how a seer in early Israel might have conducted business, the practices in Liberia prove that

such an approach *can* be employed. While myths and legends of people in Central Africa have no direct bearing on the tales in Judges, the fact that African stories contain clichés based on fantasy but are filled with political and social meaning should alert one to the possibility that stories in Judges might use the same literary tool.

Because my book on Judges has four primary audiences—political scientists, historians, Hebrew Bible specialists, and general readers—I tried to balance the need to provide sufficient background information with the realization that some of that material will be regarded as common knowledge by others. People unfamiliar with the content of the book of Judges are advised to take the time to read through this short book in the Hebrew Bible before considering my own analysis. While any modern rendering will do, my recommendation would be to read Susan Niditch's literal translation, which captures the feel of the original Hebrew text.¹

1. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 2008), 213–81. In the main body of her commentary, Niditch also provides a more literary translation.