

## The Book of Judges on Kingship and the Greek *peri basileias* literature

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The theme of kingship is explicitly mentioned in the final chapters of the book of Judges in the repeated remark that ‘there was no king in Israel in these days’ (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It is clearly suggested that the terrible things that are reported in these chapters – strange cultic practices by Danites, rape and murder in Gibeah, civil war leading to the near extinction of one of the tribes of Israel – are all due to the absence of a king. In this way the ancient author prepares the way for kingship in Israel. Also the earlier chapters of the book of Judges can be read as an introduction to the stories of the kings. The judges are pictured as ‘proto-kings’. This term was coined by Mark Brettler, who in a number of publications points to the pro-Davidic character of the book. Although he does not deny that there are clear traces of the use of older sources and of maybe more than one redaction, he emphasizes that the book, in its present form, is a unit with one clear message: ‘Given what we know about ancient Israel, Judges is not a book of history in the sense of a work interested in the real past, nor is it work of literature in the sense of belles lettres. Instead, it is a highly political work, which echoes the following sentiment, found elsewhere in the Bible (1 Kgs 1:31): “May my lord King David live forever!”’.<sup>1</sup>

The common view is that the first judges, especially Othniel from the tribe of Judah, are presented as good leaders and the next judges are more and more disappointing. This progression paved the way for the wish of a good king. So indirectly the view on kingship is positive.

It is good to realize that this conclusion is based on the assumption that most judges are pictured as failures. Is that correct? Susan Niditch argues against this: “nowhere in Judges is it implied that kingship is an absolute ideal, necessary to replace the failed model of polity offered by the judges. Indeed, scholars misread who see the judges as abject failures, each one worse than the previous. .... The judges, however, are not failures at all: each judge models a variety of epic hero who achieves magnificent larger than-life victories. Unusual birth, unexpected election, the tactic of trickery, the exhibition of valor and nerve, and the experience of pathos are typical of the character motif.”<sup>2</sup> In her opinion these stories – including the stories in the final chapters of the book – are no more than references to a distant past and offer ‘a complex and ambivalent view of kingship that acknowledges its role in Israelite polity without endorsing it or propagandizing in favor of the monarchy’.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that Niditch wants to redress the balance. This can be welcomed as a kind of necessary measure safeguarding the biblical text from judging it according to modern moral values. She certainly has a point that it is probably too simple to discard some of these stories as no more than examples of (to speak with Von Rad) ‘vertane Gotteskraft’.<sup>4</sup> For instance, even in the story of Jephthah sacrificing his daughter the modern reader waits in vain for criticism by the biblical writer. On the other hand, Niditch may go too far when she denies a direct relation between the refrain at the end of the book of Judges about the absence of a king and the following stories about the kings.

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<sup>1</sup> Brettler 2002, 115–6.

<sup>2</sup> Niditch, in: Ahn – Cook (eds.) 2009, 59-70, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Niditch 2009, 70.

<sup>4</sup> von Rad 1962, 364.

## 10.1 Gideon and Abimelech

What most scholars will agree upon, is that leadership is an important theme of the book of Judges. This was recently convincingly shown again by Eli Assis in his monograph on the stories of Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah.<sup>5</sup> The basic criterion for good leadership appears to be whether the one who has become a leader still can see the other as the brother. Who only acts for himself is not fit to be a ruler. In this regard Abimelech turns out to be the worst possible leader. In the case of Gideon things are more complicated. There is inconsistency both in his relations with YHWH and with his people. According to Assis the story is deliberately ambiguous. After his military success Gideon has proven to be according to the Israelites worthy of founding a dynasty: 'Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian' (8:22). First, Gideon reacts modest and pious: 'I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; YHWH shall rule over you' (8:23). But this is immediately followed by his very dubious request to give him precious materials in order to make an ephod, which he erected in Ophrah, in the same place where Gideon started his career as a judge in destroying the altar of his father for Baal. In this way he leads his people astray, including his own family: 'And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house' (8:27). One can also question his sincerity in refusing hereditary rulership. Gideon said no, using the same argument as Samuel in 1 Sam. 8: God is king, but in the next chapter we hear of a son of Gideon called Abimelech, which can be translated 'my father is king'.

What does this say about the ideas of the writer about kingship? The answer to this question depends on the author's assumed historical context. Is this the time of Josiah, the exemplary good king? Is this the time of the exile, when it had become clear that the kings of Judah had failed? These are the dates usually mentioned by scholars who assume that the book of Judges is part of the Deuteronomistic History. Assis thinks of the pre-monarchic period, but it can also be defended, as is recently done by Kristin Swanson, that the book of Judges is a parody on leadership in the Persian period.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion there are good reasons for the suggestion mentioned above that the book of Judges was deliberately written (for a large part on the basis of older stories) with an eye on the books of Samuel and Kings and can be seen as a kind of introduction, produced (like most introductions) after the texts it introduces. As I have demonstrated elsewhere<sup>7</sup> the book of Judges is connected in a similar way at the end to the books of Samuel as it is connected to the book of Joshua in the beginning: part of the text of the older book (Samuel and Joshua) is taken up and put in the new framework. In the beginning of the book of Judges this connection is meant to show that the tribe of Judah is now going to take the place of Joshua. At the end of the book expectations are raised about who is going to take over the task of Judah, who was leading the other tribes in the battle against the Benjaminites.

A relatively late date for the book of Judges is also advocated by David Carr in his book on the formation of the Hebrew bible: "the book of Judges, despite containing a possible early kernel of stories, seems to represent a relatively late portion of the history now extending from Deuteronomy-2 Kings, perhaps formed in part as a bridge between Deuteronomy-Joshua and Samuel-Kings".<sup>8</sup> Carr suggests a dating of this final formation of the book of Judges "late in the Hellenistic, perhaps even in the Hasmonean, period". A factor that may have encouraged the incorporation of stories about judges between Joshua and Samuel "is the evident focus on judge deliverer figures seen in demonstrably Hasmonean period texts (e.g. Judith and 1 Maccabees)".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Assis 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Swanson, in: Berquist – Hunt (eds.) 2012, 92-106.

<sup>7</sup> Spronk, in: Jonker (ed.) 2010, 15-28.

<sup>8</sup> Carr 2011, 245.

<sup>9</sup> Carr 2011, 285; cf. also p. 345.

With regard to the theme of kingship in the book of Judges, there are good reasons to focus on the stories of Gideon and Abimelech. Because of their length and central position they take a prominent place within the book.<sup>10</sup> The least one can say about the view on kingship in these stories is that it introduces the idea of hereditary leadership and that the first who claims to have inherited the leadership of his father proves to be unworthy as a leader. It is not unlikely that the stories of Gideon and Abimelech were written with specific kings in mind. Graeme Auld points in this connection to the close correspondence between Gideon, who is also known as Jerubbaal, and king Jeroboam: The names Jerubbaal and Jeroboam are closely related, their activities are connected with the same places (Shechem and Penuel), and they are both blamed for initiating forbidden cultic innovations.<sup>11</sup> To this can be added that with both Gideon/Jerubbaal and Jeroboam there is a contrast between the positive start, being appointed in the name of YHWH, and the ending in apostasy. Also Gideon's attitude towards kingship as described in Judges 8:22-27 can be seen within this framework. In his words he looks like Samuel, in his deeds he foreshadows all the kings 'who went in the ways of Jeroboam'.

Abimelech seems to have a counterpart among the kings of Israel as well, namely in Jehu. They both start their reign, after being accepted as the new leader by the citizens of Shechem and Samaria respectively, with killing seventy possible rivals: Abimelech kills his seventy brothers (Jdg 9:5), Jehu orders to behead the seventy sons of Ahab (2 Kgs 10:6-7). The fact that the brothers of Abimelech are killed 'on one stone' also suggests decapitation. Jehu is praised – next to being condemned for committing the same sins as Jeroboam – for having punished the house of Ahab for its evil deeds (2 Kgs 10:30). In fact, he can be seen as the royal counterpart of the prophets, having a great number of Baal priests slaughtered like Elijah (2 Kgs 10:18-28; cf. 1 Kgs 18:40). With Elisha he shares the number of forty-two opponents being killed on one occasion (2 Kgs 10:14; cf. 2 Kgs 2:24). Abimelech does not receive any praise in the book of Judges. More than the other leaders of Israel he is explicitly criticized. This is done in the fable of Jotham (Jdg 9:7-20), eloquently raising the question whether it is always the best person who becomes king. Also the end of Abimelech is telling: like the defeated foreign general Siserah he is killed by a woman using a household item as a weapon (9:53; cf. 4:22). When this association between Abimelech and Jehu is correct, it seems to indicate that the book of Judges is more critical with regard to kingship than the book of Kings. The example of Abimelech shows the great risks involved when a man is granted great military power by heritage and thus how appropriate it would have been for Gideon to really decline the offer by the Israelites.

## 10.2 Greek parallels

It has been recognized by many scholars that there are many parallels between the stories of the judges with Greek texts.<sup>12</sup> The following list may illustrate this.

- The remarkable detail that they cut off the thumbs and big toes of king Adonibesek, just as he had done before with his captives (Jdg 1:6-7) reminds of a detail from the story of the war between Athens and the people of the isle of Aegina in the fifth century BCE. It is told that the Athenians cut off the right thumbs of the Aeginean prisoners, so that they were not able to use lances any more or work as rowers on their boats.
- When the translation of the second verse of the song of Deborah as referring to letting one's hair hang loose before starting the battle is correct, then this can be associated with the much repeated phrase in Homer's Iliad speaking of the 'long haired' (*komoontes*) Greek warriors.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Way 2014, 254.

<sup>11</sup> Auld, in: Lemaire – Saebø (eds.) 2000, 353-367; 354; cf. also Auld 1989, 257-267.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Spronk 2010, 24-27; and Klaas Spronk, 'Comparing the Book of Judges to Greek Literature' (in a forthcoming Festschrift).

- The catalogue in 5:14-18 of all tribes who participated in the battle against the Canaanites reminds of the description in the second book of the Iliad of the warriors joining the war against Troj.
- The enigmatic reference to the tribe of Dan 'abiding with the ships' (5:17) has a parallel in what one repeatedly reads in the Iliad about Achilles staying with his ships, refusing to join the Greeks in battle.
- The number of soldiers of Gideon's small army, 300 men, is the same as the famous group of soldiers from Sparta lead by Leonides attempting to stop the invading Persians in Thermopylae.
- Jotham's fable reminds of the many fables credited to the ancient Greek story teller Aesop, in which also figure speaking trees.
- The story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (11:29-40) can be compared to the similar history of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigeneia.
- Samson looks very much like Hercules, who is also brought down not by brutal force but by a woman he loves.
- The remarkable story about the Danite migration reminds of what was told about the foundation of Massalia (present day Marseille) by the people of the Greek city of Phocaea.

The least one can conclude on the basis of this and other parallels that it is possible to read the book of Judges against a Hellenistic background with all kinds of direct and indirect references to Greek literature. Now the question comes up whether there may be also a link with regard to the views on leadership in general and kingship in particular.

### 10.3 The *peri basileuas* literature

The evaluation of kingship or the justification of monarchic rule appears to be an important theme in Greek philosophy, especially in the so called *peri basileias* literature.<sup>13</sup> . It probably started in the fifth century BCE with scribes like the famous poet Pindar, with sayings like: 'under every regime the straight-talking man excels: in a tyranny, when the boisterous people rule, or when the wise watch over the city' (*Pythian* 2.86–8). He influenced historians like Herodot and Thucydides and also Plato with his ideas about educating and advising the perfect king. In *The Republic* Plato discusses various kinds of government and the reasons why things get wrong under tyranny. It led to the extensive writings on this subject in the next centuries. There is an intriguing passage by Plutarchus:

'Demetrius of Phalerum recommended to Ptolemy the king to buy and read the books dealing with the office of king and ruler. "For," as he said, " those things which the kings' friends are not bold enough to recommend to them are written in the books".' (*Moralia* 189D)

Unfortunately we do not know which books he meant. As a matter of fact we do not have much literature on kings and kingship from the Hellenistic period. This does not mean that there was none. Aristotle refers to his book on kingship, but unfortunately this was lost. The same goes for quite a number of books titled 'On kingship' or the like, including one by Epicurus. There are passages left from one relatively late version, namely a book by the Epicurean scholar Philodemus, from the first century AD. It is called 'On the Good King according to Homer'. This gives an interesting indication of the usage to use the older literature, just as what was suggested above about the book of Judges as a way to comment on the later kings of Judah and Israel.

In general kingship was welcomed as a good way of governing. Here Homer is quoted many times, as it is stated in the Iliad: "The rule of many is not good, let there be one ruler, one king" (2.204f). Of course, this could only be good under the condition that the king is a good and wise man and follows the good examples as can be found in the ancient legends, like Theseus and Herakles, or from history, like Cyrus

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hornblower, in: Lewis (ed.) 2006, 151-163; Murray, in: Rajak a. o. (eds.) 2007, 13-28.

who is remembered as a ‘father to his people’.<sup>14</sup> To safeguard the quality, with love for his people in first place, an important role was seen for the philosopher. One of his basic tasks would be ‘to provide a bulwark against the invasion of the irrational into government’.<sup>15</sup>

#### 10.4 The eternal recurrence in Greek philosophy, Judges and Qohelet

All this does not result in direct parallels with the book of Judges. One may note, however, a comparable way of thinking about what is the best form of leadership and about what makes a good leader. It is interesting to note that this can also be connected with the idea of the eternal recurrence of things. In the book of Judges we find this in chapter 2:11-22 describing the ever returning sequence of apostasy by the Israelites, punishment by YHWH, repenting by the Israelites, and deliverance by a judge sent by YHWH. This reminds of what was said, for instance, by the Stoic philosopher Zeno (334-262 BCE) about the eternal recurrence of things. For the Stoics “there was one ‘history’ which was repeated an infinite number of times”.<sup>16</sup> In the second century BCE Polybius used it in his *Histories* in the form of the idea of historical recurrence. In this he was much influenced, as he indicates himself, by Plato. We can speak of a common Greek conception. Polybius describes how the blessing of democracy is lost by the generation who forgot how it replaced the bad situation of oppression by oligarchs:

While those who had experienced oligarchic excess remained alive, they were content with the existing regime and were fully committed to equality of speech and the right of every citizen to speak his mind. But by the time a new crop of young men had been born and democracy was in its third generation, the principles of equal and free speech were too familiar to seem particularly important, and some people began to want to get ahead of everyone else. It was especially the rich who succumbed to this temptation and longed for power. But then, finding that their own resources and merits were not enough to enable them to get what they wanted, they squandered their fortunes on bribing and corrupting the general populace in all sorts of ways. Once this inane hunger for glory had made the common people greedy for such largesse and willing to accept it, democracy in its turn was overthrown, and replaced by violence and government by main force. For once people had grown accustomed to eating off others’ tables and expected their daily needs to be met, then, when they found someone to champion their cause—a man of vision and daring, who had been excluded from political office by his poverty— they instituted government by force: they banded together and set about murdering, banishing, and redistributing land, until they were reduced to a bestial state and once more gained a monarchic master. This is the cycle of constitutions, the natural way in which systems of government develop, metamorphose, and start all over again. (*Histories*, VI.9)<sup>17</sup>

Was the writer of the book of Judges influenced by this way of thinking, when he took up the older stories of Israel and put them in a new framework? It certainly seems possible, but was it also probable? A positive argument can be derived from the remarkable correspondence in a number of points with the book of Qohelet. To begin with, Qohelet is one of the few other books in the Hebrew bible in which we find a similar idea of the ever returning patterns in life, as it is expressed very clearly in the first chapter:

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<sup>14</sup> Murray 2007, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Murray 2007, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Trompf 1979, p. 12; cf. also Trompf, in: Emerton (ed.) 1979, 213-229, 220ff.

<sup>17</sup> Translation: Robin Waterfield, *Polybius, The Histories*, Oxford 2010, 376f.

‘One generation passes away, and another generation comes; But the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, And turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, And comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; To the place from which the rivers come, There they return again’ (Qoh 1:4-7).

This can be related to another parallel between Qohelet, the book of Judges and a theme in Greek thinking: the story of the rash vow of Jephthah which cost him his daughter in Judges 11 and the similar Greek story about Agamemnon and Iphigeneia. They can be seen as stories illustrating the advice of Qohelet 5:4-5 “When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed. Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.”

### **10.5 Consequences for the view on kingship**

Can we add now to these parallels between Judges, Greek literature and Qohelet the view on kingship? In Qohelet 9:14-18 we find a short story about leadership. It tells of a small town which was besieged by a great king. It was delivered by a wise man, but no one remembered him, because he was poor. From this one should learn to listen to the words of the wise, spoken quietly, rather than to ‘the shout of a ruler of fools’. One can find some Platonic ideas in this text. It is not the status which is decisive, but the quality. Strength without wisdom is of little use. The best leadership is based on wisdom. A number of the stories in the book of Judges can be read as illustration of these insights. Its protagonists have to learn that the victory is not simply won by the number of soldiers or the strength of the hero.

When comparing these texts it should be taken into account that the writer of the book of Judges was not free to invent stories. We have to assume that he saw it as his primary task to edit existing stories, putting them in the new framework, connecting Joshua with the books of Samuel. He will not have intended to weave all kinds of contemporary fancy Greek elements into his work. It is more likely that they were incorporated more or less automatically as they were part of his education, which certainly also included the many works *peri basileias*.

This hypothesis has consequences for the way we can define the view on kingship according to the book of Judges. With Plutarchus we could say that this is a good book for rulers, because it dares to say the truth about leaders who do not do their job well. But that does not mean that it is in general negative towards kingship. Like Plato and Aristotle the book of Judges teaches us to be critical towards any kind of government.