

HISTORY AND PROPHECY IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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In introductory courses to the Old Testament modern teachers usually find it helpful to confront the student with the old Jewish tradition which reckons the book of Judges together with Joshua, Samuel and Kings to the part of the canon called the Former Prophets. This can be regarded as a useful contribution to the discussion about the right view upon this and other books which are in the Christian tradition called the historical books and interpreted as giving an accurate historical picture of the situations they describe. The name 'Former Prophets' would indicate that what we find written in these books is, as formulated by L.C. Allen in a standard introduction, 'not history as modern historians might write it. Rather it is history from a prophetic point of view'.¹ Allen gives three reasons why the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are called prophetic: '(1) There is a focus on prophetic messengers, especially Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha and their role in history. (2) There is an anti-establishment perspective, like that of the preexilic prophets in the Latter Prophets. Failure and shortcomings in the leadership of Israelite society are continually exposed. (3) Events are analyzed in the light of the prophetic truth that YHWH is sovereign in history, both foretelling and fulfilling his prophetic word.' In this contribution I want to evaluate the arguments for this commonly accepted characterization of the book of Judges. To this I shall add a discussion of the different ways in which scholars nevertheless try to reconstruct the historical facts behind the stories told about the judges, because, as Allen hastens to add: 'To make such a statement, however, is not to denigrate the historical value of the biblical books'.

¹ W.S. LaSor et al., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form and Background of the Old Testament* (second edition), Grand Rapids 1996, 133.

1. THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM 'FORMER PROPHETS'

The categorization of these books as prophetic is already known from the introduction to Jesus Sirach, which speaks of 'the Law, the Prophets, and the other books'. We also find it in Josephus' book *Contra Apion* 1:40: 'but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books.' In 2 Maccabees 2:13 it is told 'how Nehemiah founded a library and made a collection of those about the kings and the prophets and those of David and the letters of the kings on the subject of offerings'. It is interesting that what is usually indicated as the Prophets is described here as the books 'about the kings and the prophets'. This hints at the subdivision into Former and Latter Prophets. It should be noted, however, that this subdivision was made much later. It is not known in Talmudic times. When the rabbis referred to 'former prophets' they meant the prophets who lived in the period before the destruction of the first temple. With the 'latter prophets' they meant the postexilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.² The name Former Prophets as a designation of the books of Joshua to Kings appears to be coined by the Soncino family in their edition of these books with the commentary of Rabbi David Kimchi.³ According to Sarna and Sperling the subdivision between Former and Latter Prophets was made 'for convenience only', in order 'to differentiate between the narrative, historical works (...) and the (largely poetic) literary creations of the prophetic authors'.⁴ So perhaps we should be more careful and make not too much of the qualification as prophetic.

The most important reason for this name is that according to old Jewish canonical tradition their authors were prophets, as is stated in Talmud Baba Bathra 14b–15a: 'Who wrote the Scripture?—Moses wrote his own book which bears his name and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and (the last) eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses,

² Cf. N.M. Sarna, D.M. Sperling, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (second edition), vol. 3, Jerusalem 2007, 576.

³ Cf. M. Avioz, 'On the Origin of the Term *Nevi'im Rishonim*' (Hebrew), *JISJ* 8 (2009), 1–7.

⁴ Sarna, Sperling, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 3, 576.

Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote the book which bears his name, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes ...’

In this connection it should be noted that also Joshua, the author of ‘the book which bears his name’, is regarded as a prophet in old Jewish tradition. Jesus Sirach 46:1 says that he succeeded Moses in his profession as a prophet.

2. THE PROPHETS IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

One of the arguments mentioned by Allen for the prophetic character of the Former Prophets is that these books ‘focus on prophetic messengers’. This may hold true for Samuel and Kings, but hardly for Joshua and Judges. In the book of Judges we only find two explicit references to prophets and both can be regarded as marginal. The first is in Judges 4:4–5 describing Deborah as ‘a prophetess (אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה), wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.’ This is a remarkable combination of information about her person, family status, living place and function. Her title ‘prophetess’ stands by itself. It has no connection with what follows. The emphasis is on her work as a judge: that is what the Israelites expect her to do. The title prophetess seems to have been given to her later, as has been noted by a number of commentators. A reason for this could have been the place where she resided (‘under the palm of Deborah’). This can be associated with graves and therefore with the forbidden way to contact the supernatural by necromancy.⁵ Auld has shown that the title נְבִיאָה was often added to the stories of the kings in a later stage.⁶ This appears to have been done in Judges 4 as well. It makes the relation between Deborah and Barak look like the relation between Samuel and Saul, Nathan and David, Elijah and Ahab.

The second occurrence of the word נְבִיאָה is in Judges 6:7–10, a part of the introduction to the story of Gideon. In the previous six verses it is told that YHWH gave the Israelites into the hand of Midian. It concludes

⁵ Cf. K. Spronk, ‘Deborah: a Prophetess: the Meaning and Background of Judges 4:4–5’, in: J.C. de Moor (ed.), *The Elusive Prophet* (OTS 45), Leiden 2001, 232–242.

⁶ A.G. Auld, ‘Prophets and Prophecy in Jeremiah and Kings’, *ZAW* 96 (1984), 66–82.

in verse 6 with the remark that 'Israel was totally humiliated before Midian'. Then the Israelites cried out to YHWH. According to the repeated framework in the book of Judges one would expect that this reference to Israel crying out to YHWH is immediately followed by describing YHWH taking action and raising up a deliverer, as in 3:9 (Othniel) and 3:15 (Ehud). But before we read in this situation of Gideon being raised up, a prophet enters the stage: 'When the Israelites cried to YHWH because of Midian, YHWH sent a prophet (אִישׁ נְבִיא) to the Israelites.' This prophet reminds the Israelites of YHWH helping them out of Egypt and giving them their land. He had asked them 'not to fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living', but they had not obeyed this command. Then, in verse 11, a messenger of YHWH comes, finds Gideon and starts persuading him to become the next deliverer of Israel.

These verses 6:7–10 are usually interpreted as a later added intermezzo.⁷ It separates the cry for help from YHWH's reaction. Also the first words in verse 7, repeating the reference to Israel's crying for help in verse 6, can be interpreted as an indication that different pieces of text are glued together. In the Septuagint this repetition of the last words of verse 6 in verse 7 is missing. In the Judges scroll from Qumran cave 4 precisely these four verses appear to be missing completely.⁸ This brings some scholars to the conclusion that we have here a rare case where redaction criticism is supported by textcritical evidence. The Qumran text would have preserved an early text form. One should be careful, however, with making too much from this fragment. Very little is known of the scroll as a whole.

When one takes a closer look at the text and its context it can be noted that leaving the verses 7–10 out does not result in a more logical text. Leaving out verses 7–10 would mean that the reference to Israel crying out was originally followed by the action of the messenger of YHWH. This is not what one would expect on the basis of a comparison with the stories about Othniel and Ehud, where Israel's crying out is directly followed by a description of the raising of a deliverer. Moreover, in his reaction to the messenger Gideon reacts to the words of the prophet, when he says: 'Where are all the wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, "Did not YHWH bring us up out of Egypt"'. But now YHWH has abandoned

⁷ Cf. A. Scherer, *Überlieferungen von Religion und Krieg: Exegetische und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Richter 3–8 und verwandten Texten* (WMANT 105), Neukirchen-Vluyn 2005, 197: 'spätsekundär-deuterokanonisch'.

⁸ Cf. E. Ulrich et al., *Qumran Cave 4, IX* (DJD XIV), Oxford 1995, 161–164.

us and put us into the hand of Midian' (6:13). When we look at other stories about the judges we can note that there is a tendency in the book of Judges to deviate from the scheme presented at the beginning. In the story of Deborah and Barak the reference to Israel crying out to YHWH is not followed by the raising up of a deliverer. Deborah, the judge who is going to help Israel, is already functioning. In the story of Jephthah we see the same pattern as in the story of Gideon. When Israel cries out to YHWH because of the oppression by the Ammonites YHWH does not immediately send Jephthah but first speaks (directly, without a reference to a prophet or a messenger) to the Israelites in the same way as the prophet in chapter 6, referring to his help in the past (10:11–12). And before Jephthah can start his work as a deliverer some problems have to be resolved between him and his family and the people. So there are good reasons to see 6:7–10 as part of the overall 'systematic and tendentious shaping of the editing of the cycle'⁹ and not as a late insertion.

Judges 6:7–10 has its closest parallel in the words spoken by Samuel addressing the people after he had anointed Saul as their king: 'He said to the Israelites: "This is what YHWH, the God of Israel says: 'I have brought Israel up out of Egypt and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and the kingdoms that oppressed you.'"' (1 Sam. 10:18). According to Scherer the text of Judges 6 is secondary, dependent upon 1 Samuel 10.¹⁰ He also points to the relation between Judges 6:7–10 and the story of the messenger of YHWH at Bochim (2:1–5), in which the people of Israel are also reminded of the exodus out of Egypt.

3. THE PROPHETIC CHARACTER OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

All these texts, which are not part of the stories about the deliverers and judges themselves but seem to be meant to introduce or supplement them, have been discussed extensively by scholars investigating the origin and possible redaction(s) of the book of Judges. There is a growing consensus concerning the book of Judges that its present form is best explained as a late interpolation between the books of Joshua and Samuel.¹¹ Old stories were put in a framework making them fit in

⁹ Y. Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (BIS 38), Leiden 1999, 251.

¹⁰ Cf. Scherer, *Überlieferungen von Religion und Krieg*, 194–195.

¹¹ Cf. T. Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History. A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction*, London 2005, 137; K. Spronk, 'From Joshua to Samuel: Some

between the stories of the origin of Israel and the history of the monarchy. It is not necessary to assume all kinds of redactional layers or to give it a place in some kind of deuteronomistic theory. It is possible to assume one single, coherent redactional operation. The way in which the beginning of the book is related to Joshua looks like the way the last chapters are related to the books of Samuel, for instance, by the reference to similar place names. Very interesting in this regard is the special role of the messenger of YHWH in the book of Judges. In 2:1–5 the messenger of YHWH comes to the people of Israel to remind them of the covenant with their God which they have broken. This takes up Joshua 24, where it was Joshua who spoke about the covenant and the obligations for the people. The role of Joshua is taken over in Judges 2 by the messenger of YHWH. Something similar can be observed in the parallel passages about the birth of Samson in Judges 13 and the birth of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1. The main difference between these stories is that the promise in 1 Samuel 1 is given by the priest Eli, whereas in Judges 13 it was given by a messenger of YHWH. Similarly, in Judges 2 compared to Joshua 24 there is a kind of upgrade with regard to the mediator between YHWH and man.

One may note a pattern here in which also the aforementioned added references to the prophet(ess) fit. It makes Deborah look like Samuel and it also relates the story of Gideon to the story of the first king anointed by Samuel. It puts emphasis on the right relation with YHWH. This way of telling the old stories of Israel's heroes appears to be typical of the book of Judges. One could call it the prophetic character of the book. In fact, already the first verse of the book strikes this prophetic tone. After the death of Joshua the Israelites ask of YHWH: 'Who shall go up against the Canaanites first?' The expression used here (שאל ביהוה) is found only in the stories of the judges, Saul, and David. In the books of Samuel it can be called a 'Leitmotiv'.¹² It is decisive in the career of Saul. His downfall and also the rise of David are connected with the right and successful way to get advice from YHWH. It is hardly a coincidence that this expression is used here in Judges 1:1, where it is related to Judah, the tribe of David. It is also hardly a coincidence that it returns in the final part of the book

Remarks on the Origin of the Book of Judges', in: J. van Ruiten, J.C. de Vos (eds), *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology. Studies in Honour of Ed Noort* (VTS 124), Leiden 2009, 137–149.

¹² H.-F. Fuhs, *TWAT*, 7, Stuttgart 1993, 921; for the use of this verb in the Book of Jeremiah see B. Becking, "Means of Revelation in the Book of Jeremiah", in: H.M. Barstad, R.G. Kratz (eds), *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (BZAW 388), Berlin, New York 2009, 33–47.

telling dreadful stories about a situation when there is no king to keep the peace between the tribes. In 20:18 YHWH is asked again: 'Who shall go up first?', this time against the Benjaminites. Again it is Judah who is called up by YHWH. It is precisely what happens with David according to 2 Samuel 2:1. David asks YHWH: 'Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?'. YHWH assures him that it is safe for him to go up to Hebron.

The (prophetic) message of the book of Judges appears to be given at the outset, clear and simple: before acting you should ask YHWH and wait for his answer. The right example is given at the beginning and repeated at the end. It concerns Judah and this points forward to the greatest son of Judah, David. Others can follow this example, like the Danites (cf. 18:5–6). Things will go well with the help of a prophetess like Deborah, but in many cases things go wrong. Most of the time this has to do with bad communication or even a lack of communication with YHWH. An example of bad communication with YHWH is the story of Jephthah who does not ask the divine advice but starts negotiating with YHWH. The example of no communication is the story of Samson. He only remembers his god when he is on the brink of death.

4. LOOKING FOR A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It would be wrong to set prophecy against history. In the Old Testament prophets are nearly always directly involved in political matters. Prophetic texts are best understood when they can be related to a specific historical situation. One of good things of the historical critical exegesis is that it teaches us that it can be helpful to differentiate between the historical situation of the story and the historical situation of the story teller. Some interpreters assume or state that this is not necessary with regard to the book of Judges and come with evidence that we are dealing with eyewitness accounts. Usually this is motivated by the conviction that as a sacred text the Old Testament must be a valid historical source. This was also suggested, for instance, by Allen in the quotation given in the introduction to this article. A good example of this approach was given recently by Bryant G. Wood. He is so convinced that he accuses scholars who not agree of being unscientific: 'As one schooled in the scientific method, it disturbs me that, in addition to the say-so of esteemed authority figures, many times opinions are driven by preconceived notions, received knowledge (...), arguments from silence (...) or majority opinion. In an objective, scientific inquiry, conclusions must

be based on evidence, and evidence alone. Take the matter of the historical accuracy of the Hebrew Bible. Most scholars are of the opinion that biblical history prior to the monarchy is myth and fable.¹³ Unfortunately, the way he tries to prove his case appears to be more aggressive than convincing. For instance, he bases the historical reliability of Judges 3 on a rather superficial interpretation of the results of an old excavation: 'Judges 3 tells of Eglon, king of Moab, establishing a residency at Jericho and exacting tribute from the Israelite tribes for 18 years in the late 14th century. When John Garstang excavated Jericho in the 1930s he found a large palatial-like structure which he identified as Eglon's palace. An abundance of imported pottery and an inscribed clay tablet attest to a well-to-do occupant involved in administrative activities. Yet, there was no town to rule over. It was occupied only a short time in the late 14th century and then abandoned.'¹⁴ He adds that the plan of the building excavated by Garstang matches a reconstruction by Baruch Halpern of Eglon's palace 'remarkably well'. This 'evidence' is not so hard as suggested by Wood and it certainly does not speak for itself. First, we have to assume that 'the city of palms' mentioned in Judges 3:13 as taken by the Moabite king Eglon was the same as the city of Jericho. Then we have to assume that Eglon made this into his residence and that Ehud went there to meet him. From the story in Judges 3 we do not get the impression that Eglon's residence was very special. So it comes as no surprise that one of the buildings of ancient Jericho looks like it, having also an upper room, a porch and a back door. This could have been the place where all this happened, but it is not likely and it certainly does not prove that Judges 3 gives a reliable account of something that happened there. What is 'speaking' here is Wood's conviction about the character of the Bible.

Sometimes archaeological evidence does speak for itself, namely with the discovery of written texts. Of course, texts need to be translated and interpreted and they often leave room for discussion. Nowadays we also have to reckon with forgeries by creative criminals trying to take advantage of the eagerness for material from the biblical period. This eagerness can also lead to too much creativity with biblical scholars. An astonishing example of this is the interpretation by William H. Shea of an ostrakon found in Ashkelon.¹⁵ This ostrakon was presented first in

¹³ B.G. Wood, "Let the Evidence Speak", *BAR* 33.2 (2007), 26.

¹⁴ Wood, "Let the Evidence Speak", 26–27.

¹⁵ W.H. Shea, 'Samson and Delilah in a Philistine Text from Ashkelon', *DavarLogos* 2.1 (2003), 73–86.

1996 by Frank Moore Cross.¹⁶ He interpreted it as an administrative text, which he translated as: '... from the (cereal) crop which you (...) they shall pay to (...) (cereal) crop of Sapan ...'. Shea comes with a completely different reading. He assumes a remarkable mix of letters and pictograms and translates: 'To Hanno of Gaza: The head of the Hebrew Samson, (who belonged) to Delilah, I placed in the hand of Agga, the son of Achish of Ashkelon king.' According to Shea we are dealing with a letter from the king of Ashkelon, Agga, to Hanno, king of Gaza, about the movement of the head of Samson. There can be no doubt about the identity of the decapitated person: this is the Samson of Judges 13–16. In the letter we are informed of something not told in Judges 16. Samson was beheaded, just like Goliath by David.

It is difficult to take this seriously. One suspects that this is a hoax, a joke, or a test of the scholarly world. It cannot be excluded, however, that Shea is serious here. He may have been inspired by the inscription of Khirbet el-Qôm with regard to the use of pictograms, because this inscription is related to the picture of a hand. Shea took part in the discussion about the translation and meaning of the inscription, to which he contributed with a number of daring, so far mostly not accepted suggestions.¹⁷ Whatever may have been his intentions, Erasmus Gaß took him seriously and did him the honour of completely tearing down this house of cards, returning to a translation closely resembling the one by Cross: 'From the (cereal) crop which you have let down one shall lift up for (...) son of Sapan.'¹⁸

This leaves the question: is it possible that we shall be confronted one day with a (more convincing) piece of evidence like this, with positive proof of the existence of Samson and Delilah as historical persons or of any of the other persons named in the book of Judges? According to most handbooks it should not be excluded. Although it is usually admitted that the text is relatively late, the possibility is left open that the stories refer to actual historical facts and situations. This is based on archaeological and sociological evidence. A recent example of this is given by Sperling: 'For all its theological tendentiousness, the picture presented by Judges of conditions in pre-monarchic Israel finds a good deal of archaeological support. In addition, despite the imposition of their own concerns by

¹⁶ F.M. Cross, 'A Philistine Ostrakon from Ashkelon', *BAR* 22.1 (1996), 64–65.

¹⁷ W.H. Shea, 'The Khirbet el-Qom Tomb Inscription again', *VT* 40 (1990), 110–116.

¹⁸ E. Gaß, 'Samson and Delilah in a Newly Found Inscription?', *JNSL* 32 (2006), 103–114.

later writers, Judges has preserved literary fragments of great antiquity and affords insights into the social and religious conditions of the period between the conquest and the monarchy'.¹⁹ He finds this 'archaeological support' in an article by Bloch-Smith and Alpert Nakhai, in which they state: 'Given the rather late and tendentious nature of the biblical text, it is somewhat unexpected to discover that archaeological evidence presents a similar, though not identical, picture of the events of the period. (...) Excavated sacred sites of the Iron I are generally consistent with those descriptions preserved in the Book of Judges'.²⁰ Something similar can be observed with Ackerman when she states that 'the multiple women characters in Judges are depicted as fulfilling the exact sorts of economic, social, political, and religious roles within their communities that Meyers' examination of the archaeological, sociological, and ethnographic data available for the Iron I period predicts'.²¹

It should be noted that the data Sperling and Ackerman are referring to are no more than circumstantial evidence. No direct connection can be made with any of the persons or events described in the book of Judges. The positive view with regard to the historical reliability of the book of Judges taken beforehand by scholars like Sperling and Ackerman can be regarded as the legacy of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth and their theory about the settlement in Canaan. Alt and Noth have made it plausible that the book of Judges, especially the first chapter, gives a more reliable picture of the history of ancient Israel than the book of Joshua. Noth also created a fitting historical background for the stories of the individual judges with his theory of the Amphictyony, as a kind of irregular tribal league. Since the time of Alt and Noth much has changed in the scholarly opinions about the period before the kings and the books describing that period. The theory of the Amphictyony has been abandoned. Noth's theory of the Deuteronomistic History and the place which the book of Judges takes in it, is—to say the least—questioned. As a consequence one should be more reluctant with regard to the value of the book of Judges as a source for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel.

In his recent commentary on the book of Judges Trent Butler presents this topic as if it is likely that the book of Judges gives a good historical

¹⁹ S.D. Sperling, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (second edition, 2007), 11, 566.

²⁰ E. Bloch-Smith, B. Alpert Nakhai, 'A Landscape Comes to Life: The Iron I Period', *NEA* 62 (1999), 62–127, 118–119.

²¹ S. Ackerman, 'Digging Up Deborah: Recent Hebrew Bible Scholarship on Gender and the Contribution of Archaeology', *NEA* 66 (2003), 172–197, 176, referring to C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Oxford 1988.

picture of the period it describes between the lives of Joshua and David: 'The concept of outsiders coming in and David ruling from Jerusalem requires some type of interim period. Why not accept the biblical contours of this interim period as that of local heroes performing in ironic ways to become both revered in tribal memory and pictured as the ultimate cause of Israel's moral and political downfall? Does not the very human picture of the heroes provide some kind of authentication?'²² One can, however, also ask: why not accept this book as made up to fill in the intermediate period between Joshua and Saul? Why not accept that this was done on the basis of the books that had to be connected? The literary analysis of the book of Judges seems to point in this way. It may have been written or produced in the first place to connect Joshua and Samuel, not to document the pre-monarchic period, with heroes who are not pictured as 'very human' but as prefiguration of the following kings.²³

5. EVALUATION OF SOME RECENT STUDIES ON JUDGES AND HISTORY

A number of recently published studies show different ways of relating the stories from the book of Judges to the history of ancient Israel. They also show how difficult it is to come to convincing results.

In discussing Judges 19–21, the stories about the rape of the concubine and the following battles between the tribe of Benjamin and the other tribes, Douglas Lawrie states that one cannot simply distinguish here between fact and fiction.²⁴ In his view this story is so bizarre that it is not plausible that it was invented by an author as an introduction to the stories of the kings. He also has his questions about the motives of scholars like Julius Wellhausen. He may have been too focused on demolishing any confidence in the narrative as an accurate historical account because of his struggle against the orthodox view on the Bible as a reliable source of historic information. According to Lawrie it is possible to assume some historical truth behind these stories. Benjamin could have become, because of its geographical position, a nasty stumbling

²² T. Butler, *Judges* (WBC 8), Nashville 2009, lxxi.

²³ Cf. M.Z. Brettler, 'The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics', *JBL* 108 (1989), 395–418. He speaks of judges as 'protokings' (p. 407).

²⁴ D.G. Lawrie, 'Figuring in and Figuring it out: The Historical Imagination at Work in and on Judges 19–21', *Scriptura* 96 (2007), 425–440.

block on the road between North and South. History also shows that it is possible that a relatively small incident, like the murder of one woman, can bring about a major war. He points in this connection to the incident of the murder of one man that lead to the First World War. Very important in the view of Lawrie is the rhetorical factor. It is clear that these chapters are part of an attempt to show that the Israelites are better off with David of Jerusalem than with Saul of Gibeah. But to convince the hearer the rhetorician should be able to point to things that really happened and are remembered as such by his audience.

Against this view it can be argued that it is not impossible to explain Judges 19 as fiction with a specific function. In the story everything is centered around the places Jebus/Jerusalem and Gibeah, cities that are related to David and Saul respectively. Gibeah is the place where hospitality is violated. The story telling this is not invented, but adapted from Genesis 19, the story of the people of Sodom showing no respect for the guests of Lot. The stories of the battles between the tribes show no details which make one think of a specific historic event. The same holds true for the story about the robbing of the girls of Shilo, because we are dealing here with a theme that is well known in many cultures.

More promising with regard to the question about the historical background is the attempt by Mario Liverani in his book about the history of Israel. He is able to relate these final chapters in the book of Judges to the situation in the Persian province of Yehud after the return from the Babylonian exile: 'The scenario of a diversified territory, dangerous to cross, of relationships that represented a balance between maximum security and maximum interaction, of regular meetings and dispersions, is set in a "founding" pre-monarchic past. It is, however, clear that both author and reader have also—and chiefly—the post-exile situation in mind, with the returnees spread throughout the whole territory, partly governed by them and partly in the hands of foreign, and clearly hostile, people, as well as partly controlled by groups that they were related to but who were not very trustworthy. It is no coincidence that the historical scene, restricted to the area between Bethlehem and the Benjaminites centres, coincides precisely with the territory that the Babylonian returnees occupied on their arrival.'²⁵

However, we face the same problem as when trying to relate the stories in the book of Judges to the period before the monarchy: it is possible to

²⁵ M. Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, London 2005, 307.

read them against this background, but it is no more than likely. Both attempts say more about the convictions of the interpreter than about the interpreted text.

When it comes to hard facts we are on more solid ground with the approach by Erasmus Gaß.²⁶ His search for the historical background of the stories of Samson and the Philistines is at first sight even less promising than that of Lawrie and Liverani with regard to Judges 19–21. The name of the hero and his lover, Samson and Delilah, seem to be invented: ‘he of the sun’ against ‘she of the night’. The battles against the Philistines seem to meant as a kind of prelude to the stories of David: what has begun successfully but eventually remained unfinished is taken up by David who brings it to an end. The numbers used in the story point to an artificially constructed climax: first 30 men are killed by Samson (14:19), then he captures and tortures 300 foxes (15:40), and finally he ends his life taking 3000 enemies with him (16:27).

The interesting thing is that Gaß brings in external evidence which is not beforehand influenced by the wish to prove any kind of dating. He has studied the archaeological evidence concerning the places mentioned in the story: when were they occupied and known to the possible hearers of the story? Next to this he surveyed the remains of the Philistine culture. A problem, however, with this approach is that the Philistines and the places mentioned in the story do not have to be a physical reality to the hearers. They can also be part of a common memory, laid down in well known stories. The best chance to get a possible clue to a historic situation is with facts and names that do not seem to have a specific function within the story and its wider framework. In the case of the story of Samson the Philistines do not meet this criterion, but the placenames Zora and Estaol do. So the archaeological information that the site of Şar‘a, usually identified with Zora, was primarily inhabited in the period between 700 and 586 BCE may be relevant. It can be regarded as an indication of the time in which this story may have been told or invented.²⁷

²⁶ E. Gaß, ‘Simson und die Philister: Historische und archäologische Rückfragen’, *RB* 114 (2007), 372–402. Gaß also contributed much in this regard to the commentary by W. Groß, *Richter* (HThKAT), Freiburg 2009.

²⁷ Cf. Groß, *Richter*, 742–743.

6. CONCLUSION

After this short study into the prophetic character of the book of the Judges and the small survey of the mostly unsuccessful search for points of reference to any known historical situation, it can be concluded that it does not seem wise to expect physical evidence for any of the stories of the book of Judges as historical fact somewhere between the 13th to the 11th century BCE, in which these stories are said to have taken place. It is more more likely to find evidence of the historic situation of the story tellers. The thorough literary analysis, on which this search for history should be based, shows that the writer who is responsible for the book of Judges in its present form can be called a prophet.