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**Reading and Listening  
Meeting One God in Many Texts**

*Festschrift* for Eric Peels  
on the occasion of his 25th jubilee  
as professor of Old Testament Studies

Edited by

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## PREFACE

Twenty-five years ago, on January 13, 1993, dr. Hendrik George Laurens (Eric) Peels, born in 1956, inaugurated as professor of Old Testament Studies at the Theological University of Apeldoorn (TUA). Already in 1986, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, being the founder and stakeholder of the TUA, appointed Eric Peels an assistant professor. After having finished his Ph.D. *cum laude* in 1992,<sup>1</sup> under the guidance of prof. dr. B.J. Oosterhoff and prof. dr. A.S. van der Woude, he was appointed a professor of Old Testament Studies, thus becoming the successor of his most formative teacher Oosterhoff.

The inaugural lecture of Eric Peels was on the prophecy of Nahum and discussed its theology in its most literal sense, its talk about God.<sup>2</sup> According to the opening sentence of the book of Nahum, YHWH is a jealous and avenging God. Many readers of the Bible are confused by statements like this and are inclined to consider them jarring notes among the impressive chorus of divergent Old Testament voices. For that reason, Eric Peels accepted the challenge to focus his research on the ‘shadow sides’ of the Old Testament revelation of God.<sup>3</sup>

Many colleagues as well as ministers and Christian laity, not only of his own denomination, have benefited of the books, articles and lectures that Eric has published, and are grateful for his teachings. Eric also lectured at several universities in South-Africa, South-Korea and Japan. He contributed to the international conferences of the *Society of Biblical Literature* (SBL), the *European Association of Biblical Studies* (EABS), and the *International Organisation for the Study of the Old Testament* (IOSOT) and participated in the *Oudtestamentische Werkgezelschap* in the Netherlands and Belgium (OTW), being its president from 2005-2008. Enjoying the fruits of all these activities Eric, together with his cordial and attentive wife Janine, maintains a close relationship with a lot of colleagues and friends in many countries. For all these reasons, we would like to honour our highly respected friend and colleague by offering him this *Festschrift* at the occasion of his 25th jubilee.

We are grateful that this *Festschrift* is published in the Supplement Series of *Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities* (ACEBT), and that the Editorial Board of this series welcomed our initiative and offered its cooperation. We thank all contributors for their willingness to participate in this project. It would not have been difficult to double the extent of this *Festschrift*, for Eric Peels has more colleagues and friends than those who were invited or able to participate. Therefore, a *Tabula Gratulatorum* is included. This *Festschrift* also includes a bibliography of all publications of Eric Peels which could be traced. We thank Sander Kok for meticulously compiling this bibliography as well as the index of biblical texts.

Congratulating Eric Peels with his 25th jubilee as professor of Old Testament Studies and wishing him God’s blessing, we offer him this *Festschrift*. It was a pleasure to work on it. For now, it is our hope that it will also be a pleasure to read the twenty-eight contributions to this volume, which all have been written as a token of gratitude and lasting friendship.

Apeldoorn, January 19, 2018

Jaap Dekker  
Gert Kwakkel

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<sup>1</sup> H.G.L. Peels, *De wraak van God. De betekenis van de wortel NQM en de functie van de NQM-teksten in het kader van de oudtestamentische Godsopenbaring*, Zoetermeer 1992 (ET: *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* [OTS, 31], Leiden 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *Voed het oud vertrouwen weder. De Godsopenbaring bij Nahum* (ApSt, 28), Kampen 1993 (Revive the initial faith: the revelation of God in Nahum’s prophecy).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. his *Wie is als Gij? Schaduwkanten van het oudtestamentische Godsbeeld*, Zoetermeer <sup>2</sup>2007 (ET: *Shadow Sides: God in the Old Testament*, Carlisle 2003).

## AN UNCOMMON BOOK OF PRAYER

## The Theology of the Book of Judges

Klaas Spronk

In studies on the theology of the Old Testament, the Book of Judges does not play a prominent part. This is primarily due to the fact that it is seen as part of the Deuteronomistic History with its clear message about YHWH's blessings and curses in relation to Israel's obedience to the Torah.<sup>1</sup> Although Noth's theory assuming only one author is challenged and often replaced by multi-layered reconstructions, the Book of Judges is usually still seen within some kind of deuteronomistic framework. A good example of this can be found in the recent handbook by Jörg Jeremias. He agrees with many of his colleagues that we are probably dealing with different deuteronomistic authors, coinciding with separate blocks. The Book of Judges takes a special place: 'besonders das Richterbuch und die Bücher Sam bis Kön differieren konzeptionell in mehrfacher Hinsicht'.<sup>2</sup> In its present form it would have been the work of deuteronomistic authors after the exile, but they shared the theological views of their pre-exilic predecessors. The main difference was that the emphasis was no longer on the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem, but on the first commandment: to venerate YHWH alone.<sup>3</sup>

Not everyone agrees that the theology of the Book of Judges is deuteronomistic. Frederick Greenspahn maintains that 'careful scrutiny of the biblical text itself suggests that such a view is simplistic'.<sup>4</sup> In his opinion, the theology of the author who collected and edited the older stories of Israel's heroes is not based on the well-known deuteronomistic reward-and-punishment scheme, but on a scheme of punishment and grace, as can be found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Robert Miller goes one step further. In his view the deuteronomistic theological viewpoints are intentionally challenged in the Book of Judges in its final form. Instead the book is 'permeated by a contrary theology on a covenant of divine commitment'.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I want to take another look at the way YHWH is described in the Book of Judges. Based on my earlier studies on this fascinating book,<sup>6</sup> I assume that it is possible that the Book of Judges offers a specific perspective on YHWH and his relationship to the people of

<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., R.B. Dillard, 'Theology of the Book of Judges', in: W.A. Elwell (ed.), *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (1996)

[<http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/judges-theology-of.html>].

<sup>2</sup> J. Jeremias, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Grundrisse zum Alten Testament, ATD, Ergänzungsreihe 6), Göttingen 2015, 224.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremias, *Theologie*, 230.

<sup>4</sup> F. Greenspahn, 'The Theology of the Framework of Judges', *VT* 36 (1986), 386.

<sup>5</sup> R.D. Miller, 'Deuteronomistic Theology in the Book of Judges?', *OTE* 15 (2002), 414.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Spronk, 'The Book of Judges as a Late Construct', in: L. Jonker (ed.), *Historiography and Identity: (Re)formulation in Second Temple Historiographic Literature* (LHB/OTS, 534), New York 2010, 15-28; 'Comparing the Book of Judges to Greek Literature', in: M.C.A. Korpel, L.L. Grabbe (eds), *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond*, Fs. B.E.J.H. Becking (LHB/OTS, 616), London 2015, 261-271; 'De ethiek van het boek Rechters', in: P. Tomson, J. de Lange (eds), *'So Good, So Beautiful': Studies into Psalms, Ethics, Aesthetics, and Hermeneutics*, Fs. D. Erbele-Küster, Gorinchem 2015, 53-63.

Israel. I am happy to present this study as a token of respect and friendship to Eric Peels, with whom I share an interest in difficult texts like the Book of Judges, which are full of violence in the name of YHWH but nevertheless can be a source of inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the modern history of research of the Book of Judges, scholars often sharply distinguish between the diachronic and synchronic approach, usually with little respect for one another. Walter Groß, who in his commentary offers very detailed analyses of the growth of the text, disqualifies the ‘ahistoristische holistische reine Endtextauslegung’ as ‘unsachgemäß’. ‘Weil sie den Text in seinen Widersprüchen und damit in seinen widerständigen Formulierungen nicht wirklich wahrzunehmen fähig ist, läuft sie Gefahr, vorschnelle Synthesen zu suchen und zu diesem Zweck z.B. Brüche in der Personenführung psychologisierend oder moralisierend auszuwerten und so dem Text Aussagen und Wertungen zuzuschreiben, die seinen ursprünglichen Autoren, wohl auch seinen ursprünglichen Lesern völlig fern lagen.’<sup>8</sup> Assuming that Groß is right and that one has to reckon with a number of different voices in different contexts, it is necessary to think about the consequences for the study of the theology of the book: are there different and perhaps even contradictory views on YHWH? Gerhard von Rad notes a difference in the character of the texts. The original stories stemming from the early ages of Israel ‘führen uns kultur- und geistesgeschichtlich in eine archaische Welt und haben eine Urwüchsigkeit und Frische an sich, wie sie nur Überlieferungen aus der Frühzeit eines Volkes eigen sein kann’.<sup>9</sup> This would have been replaced later by much more thoughtful theological reflections. According to the old stories, YHWH acted unpredictably (‘durchaus unberechenbar’), whereas the Deuteronomist presents his actions as more systematic (‘göttliche Gesetzmäßigkeit’).<sup>10</sup> John Yoder finds in the original stories of the judges a concept of God close to that of Canaanite Baal and El. Israel’s concept of God developed over time, but in his opinion the older texts still have an important function, namely, preventing the reader from controlling God or ignoring the inevitable ‘religious and moral struggles of God’s earthly children’.<sup>11</sup>

When looking at the consequences of the diachronic approach, one may note that it appears to be difficult to escape the risk that Groß associated with the synchronic approach: modern ideas and systemization may become too dominant, especially in reconstructing some kind of development of religious conceptions. The descriptions by Von Rad and Yoder primarily say something about their own ideas of the ‘primitive’ religion of Israel and are hardly based on the texts themselves. It cannot be denied that the Book of Judges shows clear traces of editing. The differences in character and length of the stories point to different sources used by the writer or writers. In his commentary, Groß sometimes identifies more than ten layers beneath the

<sup>7</sup> Our views are well summarized in H.G.L. Peels, ‘De God van het Oude Testament: heilig is Hij’, *ThRef* 57 (2014), 422-431, and K. Spronk, ‘The Transformative Power of Old Testament Texts about Violence’, in: L. van Liere, K. Spronk (eds), *Images of Enmity and Hope: The Transformative Power of Religions in Conflicts*, Münster 2013, 15-27.

<sup>8</sup> W. Groß, *Richter* (HThKAT), Freiburg 2009, 78.

<sup>9</sup> G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Bd 1, München 1960, 341.

<sup>10</sup> Von Rad, *Theologie* 1, 343.

<sup>11</sup> J.C. Yoder, *Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor*, Minneapolis 2015, 218.

Masoretic text. He also offers many suggestions about the possible date of these layers, but has to admit that this dating is based on a reconstruction of the history of Israel, which is in itself also based on much debated historical-critical analyses of Old Testament texts. So there is much uncertainty about the identity of the original authors and their audience.

The following description of the image of YHWH in the Book of Judges, therefore, will not be based on a reconstruction of the growth of the text, distinguishing between source material and editorial texts. It may be assumed that the final text presents a coherent picture of YHWH and his relationship to the tribes of Israel. However, one has to leave open the possibility that there are elements which do not fit in and that this may be due to the fact that they belong to earlier or later traditions.

### THE PLACE OF YHWH WITHIN THE BOOK

Starting by first simply listing all the passages where the god of Israel is mentioned, it can be noticed that the name YHWH is mentioned 175 times and that he is referred to as אלהים 40 times. Most occurrences of the name are found in chapter 6 (27x). Besides, it occurs frequently in chapters 2 (23x), 3 (15x), 11 (14x), 13 (18x), and 20 (10x), whereas it is missing from chapter 9 and occurs only once in chapters 12, 18, and 19. The number 175 (in 618 verses) shows that the Book of Judges is no less ‘theological’ than the neighbouring books, such as Joshua (with 224 occurrences in 658 verses) and 1 Samuel (320 in 810 verses). The distribution over the chapters coincides with what is usually regarded as the climax of the book, namely Gideon as the ideal judge as described in chapters 6 and 7, directly followed by the anti-climax in the person of Abimelech in chapter 9. The low number of occurrences may be due to the fact that we are dealing with a theologically problematic situation in chapter 12 (the conflict with Ephraim) and certainly also in chapters 18 and 19, but one would expect the same for chapters 20 and 21 (in the final chapter YHWH is mentioned 7 times). A closer look at the texts with explicit references to YHWH may give some answers.

### THE MEANINGFUL BEGINNING

YHWH is already mentioned in 1:1. The Israelites ask YHWH: ‘Who shall go up first to fight the Canaanites?’<sup>12</sup> YHWH answers promptly: ‘Judah shall go up first.’ This question is repeated in 20:18, 23 and 27, but there the enemy is the tribe of the Benjaminites. Nevertheless, YHWH’s answer remains the same and, just as in the first chapter, it is followed by successful actions. According to 1:4, YHWH delivers the Canaanites and Perizzites into the hand of Judah and in 1:19 it is explicitly stated that YHWH is with Judah. Also in the battles against the Benjaminites, the other tribes are eventually successful, when YHWH gives the Benjaminites into their hands (20:28). In 20:35 we even read that it is YHWH himself who defeats Benjamin.

One can compare this to the beginning of the Book of Joshua. Both Joshua and Judges open with a reference to the death of the previous leader: ‘It happened after the death of Moses / Joshua’. In Joshua 1:1 it is YHWH who takes the initiative by addressing Joshua, commanding him to take the place of Moses and to hold onto the Torah. By keeping to everything written in

<sup>12</sup> The translations are mine.

the Books of Moses, he will be able to make the right choices and act according to the will of YHWH. It is remarkable that in the Book of Judges this command and even a reference to the Torah are missing. The consequence of the lack of the Torah as a medium between YHWH and his people is that in the Book of Judges, contact between YHWH and the Israelites is more direct. There are many direct dialogues between God and man. The way YHWH is addressed in the beginning and end, using the phrase שאל באלהים, has a close parallel in a number of stories about Saul and David and their relation to YHWH.<sup>13</sup> These stories illustrate the rise to power of David as the result of his successful attempts to obtain divine advice, for instance in 1 Sam 22:10,13 and 2 Sam 2:1 (David asks YHWH: 'Shall I go up?'). On the other hand, they also illustrate the downfall of Saul, when after the death of Samuel he is no longer able to make contact with YHWH (1 Sam 28:6,16). This indicates that what we have here at the beginning of the Book of Judges is the first and probably also the most important criterion for good leadership.

Elsewhere it is stated that the Israelites cry out (זעק, 3:9,15; 6:6,7; 10:10; צעק, 4:3; 10:12) to YHWH in their distress, caused by the enemies sent by YHWH. This is reminiscent of the Israelites suffering from persecution by Pharaoh in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> In both cases YHWH reacts according to his mercy and because he remembers his covenant with Israel. On the part of the Israelites, one could ask whether this outcry to YHWH is only based on their agony or whether some repentance or conversion is also involved. According to the summary of what happened in the period of the judges in 1 Sam 12:9-10, the outcry was a confession of sin: 'They cried out to YHWH and said: "We have sinned; we have forsaken YHWH and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths. But now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve you".' This is not explicitly stated, however, in combination with the verb זעק / צעק in the Book of Judges. The only exception is 10:10, but precisely there YHWH questions Israel's sincerity and suggests that they had better cry out to the other gods they chose to serve (10:14). After this conversation the verb זעק / צעק is not used any more in the Book of Judges. Apparently the people realized that when used on its own the verb could give rise to misunderstanding: when one wants to address YHWH in the right manner, more than a simple outcry is needed.

### THE MESSENGER OF YHWH

Characteristic of the encounter between YHWH and Israel according to the Book of Judges is that when YHWH takes the initiative to start a conversation he does so via the מלאך יהוה. This happens three times: in 2:1-5; 6:11-24; and 13:2-23, which is more than in any other book in the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> The first appearance of the messenger of YHWH in 2:1-5 reminds us of Exod 23:20-23, where the messenger is sent by YHWH to lead the people and to keep it to the commandments.<sup>16</sup> The reaction of the people to the reproach and threats by the messenger is

one of shock. They start weeping and also take measures to restore the relationship with YHWH by making sacrifices.

The second account<sup>17</sup> of a meeting with a messenger of YHWH is in the beginning of the story of Gideon. In comparison with 2:1-5, it can be noted that it takes much more time for Gideon to be convinced by the messenger. The repeated reference to YHWH leading his people out of Egypt does not impress him, because he does not see those miracles happening in his own situation (6:13). This reaction seems to provoke YHWH not to hide any longer behind the messenger: 'Then YHWH turned to him and said: "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?"' (6:14). From now on the conversation is between Gideon and YHWH himself. This is only interrupted by the scene describing the offering and the messenger of YHWH going up in the flame.

The third encounter is between the messenger of YHWH and the wife of Manoah (13:3). Here, there is much more debate about the identity of the מלאך יהוה. In the report to her husband, she speaks of 'a man of God looking like a messenger of God' (13:6). 'Man of God' is a common indication of a prophet (cf. 1 Sam 2:27; 9:6). So the first suggestion here is that we are dealing with a human being. This is taken over by Manoah when he asks YHWH to send this 'man of God' again (13:8). It is remarkable and probably not a coincidence that Manoah never uses the name of YHWH. When he addresses him in his prayer, he says אדוני, 'my Lord'. In the story the attention to the use of the name is underlined by the fact that, quite surprisingly, the narrator now also speaks of אלהים: 'God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again' (13:9). When, finally, Manoah understands that he met the messenger of YHWH when he did the wondrous thing (מפלא, 13:19, relating it to Gideon asking for miracles in his conversation with the messenger, in 6:13) of going up in the flame, he again uses the word אלהים: 'We shall surely die, because we have seen God' (13:22). It is the same reaction as Gideon's, except that Gideon uses the name of YHWH (6:22). The wife of Manoah knows better. This is emphasized by her using the name of YHWH in her reassuring answer. Again, there is a difference with the story of Gideon, where it is YHWH himself who takes away Gideon's fear.

There is much debate about the precise relationship between YHWH and the messenger of YHWH.<sup>18</sup> Within the Book of Judges, the three closely related stories about the messenger of YHWH indicate YHWH's initiative to get into contact with his people. They show that despite Israel's sin and its reluctance towards YHWH, this contact is still possible and can become very close. The differences between the stories of the encounter in chapters 6 and 13 show that this close relationship, as established between YHWH and Gideon, is not self-evident and can break down again.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. H.-F. Fuhs, 'שאל *šā'al*', in: *ThWAT* VII, Stuttgart 1993, 921, who calls it a 'Leitmotiv'.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Greenspahn, 'The Theology of the Framework of Judges', 393.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. E. Eynikel, 'The Angel in Samson's Birth Narrative Judg 13', in: F.V. Reiterer, T. Nicklas *et al.* (eds), *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature, Yearbook 2007), Berlin 2007, 118, who points to the fact that the מלאך יהוה is found 19x in the Book of Judges out of 58x in the Hebrew Bible and that מלאך אלהים is used next to it 2x in Judg 6:20; 13:6 out of 13x in total.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. H. Ausloos, 'The "Angel of YHWH" in Exod. xxiii 20-33 and Judg. ii 1-5. A Clue to the "Deuteronom(ist)ic" Puzzle?', *VT* 58 (2008), 1-12.

<sup>17</sup> The מלאך יהוה is also mentioned in 5:23, but this is not within a story of an encounter between YHWH and man. As will be explained below, this verse also points to an interesting aspect in the relations between YHWH and man.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A.S. van der Woude, 'De *Mal'ak Jahweh*: een Godsbood', *NedTT* 18 (1963), 1-13; S.L. White, 'Angel of the Lord: Messenger or Euphemism?', *TynBul* 50 (1999), 299-305; M.-J. Paul, 'The Identity of the Angel of the LORD', *Hiphil* 4 [http://www.seej.net/hiphil] (2007); R.A. López, 'Identifying the "Angel of the Lord" in the Book of Judges', *BBR* 20 (2010), 1-18. It is telling that the editor of the *ThWAT*, H.-J. Fabry, felt it necessary to add a special paragraph on this subject (on p. 901) to the article on מלאך in Band IV, Stuttgart 1984, 887-904, by D.N. Freedman and B.F. Willoughby.



## YHWH AND THE LEADERS OF ISRAEL

According to the narrator, there can be no doubt that it is YHWH who acts and steers the course of history. It is clearly stated in chapter 2 that YHWH, who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, now gives his people into the hand of enemies and also raises the judges to deliver them from these enemies. Even the old nations that remained in the land are said to have been left there by YHWH (3:1). In all the following stories this determining role of YHWH is indicated, both directly and indirectly via his spirit. In a number of cases it is emphasized, for instance, when it is stated in the story of Samson wishing to marry a Philistine woman: 'it was of YHWH that he was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines' (14:4). Towards the end of the book, especially in chapter 19, the number of references to YHWH pulling the strings is declining or even completely missing. However, there is one in the final chapter, in a statement about the fate of the tribe of Benjamin: 'YHWH had made a gap in the tribes of Israel' (21:15).

In many cases the narrator also gives information about the way the different characters react to this role of YHWH and how they relate to YHWH's actions. Ehud says to Eglon that he has 'a word of God' for him (3:20), indicating that YHWH is behind the following deadly action. When he calls the Israelites to follow him, he declares that YHWH has given their enemy into their hands (3:28). There can also be no doubt that Deborah acknowledges YHWH's decisive role. She passes this on to Barak (4:6) and when he does not show enough confidence she announces that YHWH will use a woman instead (4:9). In the introduction of the song in the next chapter she emphasizes that they owe their victory to YHWH. It is even stated—with the words of the messenger of YHWH—that the tribes were asked to help YHWH in his battle (5:23). It is usually the other way around: YHWH assisting his people.<sup>19</sup> It indicates that here YHWH has taken the initiative.

Of central importance in the story of Gideon is the moment when YHWH directly addresses Gideon saying: 'Go in your strength, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?' (6:14). It is a combination of YHWH sending and Gideon acting with the strength he received. When Gideon is still hesitating, he rightly appeals to YHWH as the one who has to save his people: 'If you will save Israel by my hand as you have said' (6:36). The underlying important theological insight is that YHWH is the real saviour. The rest of the story clearly illustrates that it is not by human power, but by divine intervention that the Midianites are defeated. After this victory, however, the question comes up once again: was this the hand of YHWH or do we have to credit Gideon with special qualities? First the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunnah suggest that Gideon is more than average. They suggest that he looks like the son of a king (8:18) and speak of his manly strength (8:21; note the parallel with 6:14). Then the Israelites ask him to rule over them and found a dynasty (8:22). Gideon resists the temptation, stating that the real ruler is YHWH (8:23). This is fully in line with the basic message of the Book of Judges, but the moment this theological insight is clear it is adumbrated by human arrogance. Gideon makes himself important by placing a cultic device in his birthplace Ophrah (8:27) and calls one of his sons Abimelech, which can be translated as 'my father is king' (8:31). When it comes to the relationship with YHWH, this Abimelech is the opposite of his father.<sup>20</sup> He has no relations with YHWH at all. Abimelech does not seek the advice of YHWH

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology: Genesis-Kings* (LHB/OTS, 454), New York 2006, 130, who speaks of an 'unusual angle on divine and human power'.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. E. Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives* (Judg 6-12) (VT.S, 106), Leiden 2005, 171. Cf. also Groß, *Richter*,

once and from the side of YHWH every intervention is aimed against Abimelech. In 9:23 it is stated that God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem and as a conclusion we read that God had avenged the evil done by Abimelech. The author may have avoided using the name of YHWH to emphasize the distance between YHWH and the man who trusted in his own strength alone.

A similar movement from a positive development in the relations between YHWH and the Israelite leader towards alienation can be found in the story of Jephthah.<sup>21</sup> In both the negotiations with the elders of Israel and with the king of Ammon, Jephthah pays due respect to YHWH. When Jephthah is made 'head and commander' over Israel, he also 'speaks his words before YHWH' (11:11). When he tries to persuade the king of Ammon to give up his claims to the contested region, he calls upon YHWH as judge (11:27). It is important to note that YHWH is explicitly called *יְהוָה* here. The only other place where this noun is used in the Book of Judges is in the general introduction in 2:16-19.<sup>22</sup> Jephthah shares with the king of Ammon and with the reader his clear theological insight: the real judge is YHWH. Together with the observations by Gideon of YHWH as the real saviour (6:36) and real ruler (8:23), this can be regarded as the core theological message of the book. Good relations with YHWH are confirmed when Jephthah receives the spirit of YHWH. Then, however, things go wrong, starting with his rash vow, which costs him his only child, and ending with the slaughter of forty-two thousand Ephraimites (12:6). YHWH is still mentioned in these chapters, but he does not have an active role. The terrible things that happen are not ascribed to his doing.

The stories of Samson can be read as a lesson not to trust in one's own strength. Again one may note the contrast between the positive introduction and problems that arise as soon as the central human character has received the spirit of YHWH. The difference with the story about Jephthah is that in the end contact with YHWH is restored when Samson prays to YHWH. In fact his father Manoah gave a good example when he prayed for the return of the messenger (13:8). Samson learned to pray to YHWH at moments when he had become weak: when he was very thirsty (15:18) and when he had lost his strength and eyesight (16:28). In this way the story makes clear that man is dependent on YHWH and also that YHWH is open to human supplication and uses imperfect men like Manoah and Samson to achieve his plans.<sup>23</sup>

In the final chapters of the book, people still talk about YHWH but hardly to him. The mother of Micah blesses her son in the name of YHWH and dedicates the money, which he had returned to her, to YHWH (17:2-3). Micah assumes that YHWH will be good to him (17:13). There is no reaction, however, from YHWH, or any indication of his approval. The same can be said of the blessing and the promise given to the Danites (18:6,10). No active role is ascribed to YHWH. In chapter 19 describing the gruesome death of the woman from Bethlehem, he is not mentioned at all. In the aftermath of this story, when the tribe of Benjamin is punished for the crime at

93: 'So endet das Richterbuch mit historisch-theologischen Wertungen die denen im Zentrum bei Gideon und Abimelech diametral zuwiderlaufen.'

<sup>21</sup> Cf. K. Spronk, 'Judging Jephthah: The Contribution of Syntactical Analysis to the Interpretation of Judges 11:29-40', in: W.Th. van Peursen, J.W. Dyk (eds), *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation*, Fs. E. Talstra (SSN, 57), Leiden 2011, 299-315. In his insightful essay on Judges 11:29-40, 'Geschiedenis in antitypisch perspectief', *Wapenveld* 51/6 (2001), 12-16, Eric Peels suggests to read this story within the broader framework of the salvation history. See also the contribution of Koert van Bekkum to this *Festschrift*: "'Let YHWH, the Judge, Decide': Historical, Literary and Theological Aspects of the Jephthah Narrative'.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J.C. Exum, 'The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga', *VT* 33 (1983), 30-45.

Gibeah, YHWH does act again. This happens when the Israelites ask his advice in the same manner as at the beginning of the book (20:18,23,27). YHWH answers and also acts on behalf of those who prayed to him: ‘YHWH defeated Benjamin for Israel’ (20:35).

The refrain of the last five chapters is that ‘there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (17:6; 21:25). This is often explained as a defence of kingship, paving the way for the first kings of Israel.<sup>24</sup> It is probably more to the point, however, to put the emphasis on the second part of the sentence: everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The Book of Judges has shown time and again the importance of asking the advice of YHWH to do what is right in his eyes. What is needed is good leadership: someone—be it a king or not—who is fully convinced that the best way to start one’s action is by asking YHWH what to do. In the Book of Judges only few leaders realize this ideal or they do so only temporarily. In this way their stories can be seen as a prefiguration of the future kings.

### CONCLUSION

The first verse of the Book of Judges sets its theological tone: to reach a goal one should first ask YHWH. The stories of Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson show that this insight is gained gradually and can also be forgotten. At their brightest moments the ancient heroes of Israel realize that it is YHWH who is the saviour, ruler and judge par excellence. As an introduction to the following stories about the kings, the Book of Judges makes it clear that the best king is a king who knows when and how to pray to YHWH.

<sup>24</sup> This is questioned by G.T.K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (VT.S, 111), Leiden 2006, 191-223, who wants to take מֶלֶךְ as referring to YHWH rather than to a human king. This is not convincing, because he has to go a long way to prove his case, by piling up circumstantial evidence, such as a farfetched comparison with 2 Chr 15:3.

## ‘LET YHWH, THE JUDGE, DECIDE’

Reflections on the Historical, Literary and Theological Aspects  
of the Jephthah Narrative

Koert van Bekkum

### INTRODUCTION

The Jephthah narrative in the Book of Judges (Judg 10:6-12:7) is a remarkable story. Jephthah presents himself as a strong leader, becomes a judge, and seems to be dedicated to YHWH, the God of Israel. At the same time, he bears the traits of a tragic hero, losing his single child because of a foolish vow and breaking the unity of Israel in a civil war.

The first time Eric Peels paid attention to the account was in his monograph on the vengeance of God, because of the attestation of the root נקם in the response of Jephthah’s daughter to her father’s complaint (Judg 11:36). In one of the so-called ‘theses’ added to his original dissertation, Peels made an intriguing remark on the rabbinic interpretation of the passage: ‘For the understanding of Judg 11:29-40, it is not without significance that the figurative interpretation of Jephthah’s sacrifice is of Jewish origin (R. Joseph Kimchi) and dates to the second half of the 12th century CE, the period in which the blood accusation against the Jews was heard for the first time in history’ (thesis IX).<sup>1</sup> This comment reveals that Peels is not only concerned with philological and exegetical issues concerning the image of God in the Old Testament, but also addresses potential theological tensions that arise from a comparison between the religion-historical and literary meaning of the texts and their reception history. A similarly comprehensive approach can be observed in a later article for a non-scholarly readership on the meaning of Jephthah’s vow in a Christian perspective, in which Peels characterizes Jephthah as an ‘antitype’ of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades the narrative, and in particular the passage regarding Jephthah’s vow, has been subject to intense study from different angles: (social-)literary analysis,<sup>3</sup> feminist

<sup>1</sup> H.G.L. Peels, *De wraak van God. De betekenis van de wortel NQM en de functie van de NQM-teksten in het kader van de oudtestamentische Godsopenbaring*, Zoetermeer 1993, 197-199; ET: *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the context of Divine Revelation of the Old Testament* (OTS, 31), Leiden 1995, 251-253.

<sup>2</sup> H.G.L. Peels, ‘Geschiedenis in antitypisch perspectief’, *Wapenveld* 51 (2001), 12-16. In addition, one of Peels’ PhD-candidates wrote a thesis on Ammon and Moab also discussing the Jephthah narrative: Th. Scheiber, *Lots Enkel. Israels Verhltnis zu Moab und Ammon im Alten Testament*, Norderstedt 2007, 116-127.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. B.G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTS, 46), Sheffield 1987, 42-78; T.J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam), Collegeville 2000, 160-186; G. Oeste, ‘Butchered Brothers and Betrayed Families: Degenerating Kinship Structures in the Book of Judges’, *JSOT* 35 (2011), 295-316.