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SUPPLEMENT SERIES 2

Unless some one guide me...
***Festschrift* for Karel A. Deurloo**

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A STORY TO WEEP ABOUT

Some Remarks on Judges 2:1-5 and its Context

Klaas Spronk

In one of his many popular – but never superficial! – exegetical studies, Karel Deurloo makes a number of striking remarks on the meaning of Judges 2:1-5, the story of the Messenger of YHWH rebuking the sons of Israel at Bochim: the history of Israel which is about to be unfolded shall not serve any kind of national pride. The starting point is at Bochim, translated ‘the weepers’, indicating that the book of Judges shall be a book of penance. The transfer of God’s messenger from Gilgal to Bochim denotes the difference of this book as compared to the book of Joshua describing the triumph starting in Gilgal.¹ In this short study I hope to demonstrate that indeed the book of Judges introduces the history of Israel as a story to weep about. I dedicate it to Karel Deurloo who pointed so many students the way to the joy of studying the ancient Hebrew scriptures as an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

Judges 2:1-5 has received much attention in recent research, particularly for two reasons. In the first place it plays an important part in the much debated transition from the book of Joshua to the book of Judges; it precedes the reporting of the death and burial of Joshua, which repeats Joshua 24:28-30.² In the second place the story of the messenger of YHWH reminds the reader of other texts about this kind of heavenly intervention, especially the one reported in Exodus 23:20-22.³ There are also clear parallels with other texts

¹ K. Deurloo, in: H. Blok, and others, *Geen koning in die dagen: Over het boek Richteren als profetische geschiedschrijving*, Baarn 1982, 23.

² See on this subject E. Blum, ‘Der kompositionelle Knoten am Übergang von Josua zu Richter. Ein entflechtungsvorschlag’, in: M. Vervenne, J. Lust (eds.), *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature* (FS C.H.W. Brekelmans; BEThL 133), Leuven 1997, 181-212, with a summary of previous research.

³ Cf. H.-D. Neef, ‘“Ich selber bin in ihm” (Ex 23,21): Exegetische Beobachtungen zur Rede vom “Engel der Herrn” in Ex 23,20-22; 32,34; 33,2; Jdc 2,1-5; 5,23’, *BZ* 38-39 (1994-1995), 54-75.

about Israel's relation to the other nations, especially Exodus 34.⁴ Intensive literary critical research did not lead until now to clear and generally accepted results. It appears to be difficult to come to a convincing relative dating of the texts involved. Some scholars regard Judges 2:1-5 as an old local tradition, whereas other attribute it to a late, deuteronomistic redactor.

In accordance with a tendency in recent research, for instance according to the approach of the Amsterdam School of exegesis, one can also try to look for a plausible line of thought in the Hebrew text as it is handed down to us.⁵ It would be unwise, however, to ignore the benefits of historical-critical research. In the case of the book of Judges this means that it appears to be fruitful to read this book a part of the overall history of Israel from its beginning until the end, in the Babylonian exile. Nor should it be denied that there are sometimes clear traces that older traditions having been incorporated into the story.

Let's now first take a closer look at the text itself. Judges 2:1-5 can be separated from its context simply by looking at the change of subject. Judges 1 ends with a description of the Amorites living in the territory of the house of Joseph.⁶ Judges 2:6 takes up Joshua 24:28, repeating that Joshua sent the people away to take possession of the land. In addition to what we read in Joshua 24 it is told now that the sons of Israel actually go. Judges 2:1-5 perfectly fits in the tension called up by these two texts concerning the relation with the other nations.⁷ It is a commentary on the faults made by the

⁴ Cf. J. Halbe, *Das Privilegrecht Jahwes: Ex 34,10-26. Gestalt und Wesen, Herkunft und Wirken in vordeuteronomistischer Zeit*, Göttingen 1975, with a detailed analysis of Jdg. 2:1-5 on p. 346-391. See also U. Becker, *Richterzeit und Königtum: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Richterbuch* (BZAW 192), Berlin 1990, 51-55.

⁵ See with regard to the book of Judges next to the study by Deurloo and others mentioned in n.1 now also among others B.G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOT, SS 46), Sheffield 1987, and Y. Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (BIS 38), Leiden 1999.

⁶ It is remarkable that the first word of Jdg. 2:1, ויעלה, closely resembles the last word of 1:36, ומעלה. Is this coincidental or can it be regarded as an indication that 2:1-5 reacts upon the facts described in the previous chapter? One could say that the description of the territory of a foreign nation within the boundaries of the land promised to Israel is connected in this way to the now following remembrance of this promise.

⁷ Cf. D.I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (The New American Commentary 6), Nashville 1999, 109, who calls these verses 'a hinge' between Jdg. 1 and 2:6-23. Cf. also Webb, *The Book*, 102: 'Compositionally this unit belongs with what precedes it; thematically it provides the transition from what precedes to what follows'.

Israelites in this matter and an indication of the manner in which the people of Israel now go on: not self-assured and proud, but stamped as a failure. The following stories shall confirm this again and again.

Judges 2:1-5 has in itself a nice concentric structure.⁸ The beginning mentioning (the messenger of) YHWH and Bochim (vs. 1a) corresponds with the place being called Bochim and the reference to (the offering to) YHWH at the end (vs. 5). Note also the chiasm: the order YHWH - Bochim in verse 1a is reversed in verse 5. After the introduction we first hear of the messenger speaking in the third person (וַיֹּאמֶר, vs. 1b), which has its counterpart in verse 4a (כִּדְבָר). In these verses he speaks first of the 'fathers' (vs. 1b) and then of the 'sons (of Israel)' (vs. 4b). The address in the first person at the end of verse 1 (וָאֵמַר) has its parallel in verse 3 (וְגַם אִמְרָתִי). These two discourses are built up chiastically. After וַיֹּאמֶר the messenger first speaks of the relation between YHWH and Israel ('I shall never break my covenant with you'). This is followed by a remark on the relation between Israel and the nations ('you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars', vs. 2a). After וְגַם אִמְרָתִי we first hear of the relation between YHWH and the nations ('I will not drive them out before you'). This is followed by a remark on the relation between the nations and Israel ('They will be traps⁹ to you and their gods will be a snare to you'). The sayings introduced by וַיֹּאמֶר and וְגַם אִמְרָתִי are both more or less literal quotations, mostly taken from Exodus 23:20-33. It is not clear whether verse 3 has to be read as an announcement of judgement ('Therefore, I said, I will not drive them out')¹⁰ or as merely another reference to an earlier saying of YHWH.¹¹ There can be no doubt about the central place of the words framed by these quotations: 'You did not listen to my voice. What have you done?' (vs. 2b). This indicates that the problems regarding the nations originate in the distorted relation of Israel and YHWH.

⁸ This seems to have been overlooked by most commentators. Only A. Marx, 'Forme et fonction de Juges 2,1-5', *RHPPhR* 59 (1979), 341-350, pays some attention to this matter. See esp. p. 342-343 on the structure of the sayings of the messenger.

⁹ The word לִצְדִּים is much debated. Cf. A. Spreafico, 'Giud 2,3: *ldym*', *Bib* 65 (1984), 390-392. I follow a suggestion by Dillmann relating it to Akkadian *addu*; cf. B. Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, Edinburgh 1995, 79; and Block, *Judges*, 116.

¹⁰ Cf. among others M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford 1985, 202.

¹¹ Cf. among others A. van der Kooij, '“And I also Said”: A New Interpretation of Judges II 3', *VT* 45 (1995), 294-306.

As is noted by a number of commentators¹² the expression *מה-זאת עשיתם* reminds of the words spoken by YHWH to Eve according to Genesis 3:13: *מה-זאת עשית*. In both cases it is used absolutely, that is, without addition as, for instance, in Geneses 29:25 and Exodus 14:5. This parallel with the beginning of the book of Genesis may be more than a coincidence, because it is enforced by the fact that the preceding words (*לא-שמעתם בקלי*) have a parallel in Genesis 3:17 (*כי שמעת לקול אשתך*). What is more important, is that both texts appear to have the function within the wider context of giving a reason for the impending irrevocable downfall of the people because of the disturbed relation with YHWH.¹³ In the first chapters of the book of Genesis it is told how this affects the different human relations. First the man turns himself against the woman (Gen. 3:12), then the man stands up against his brother (Gen. 4) and the child against his father (Gen. 9:22) and the father against his child (Gen. 9:25), and finally the nations turn against each other (Gen. 11:1-9). After this introduction we hear of the new beginning YHWH makes with Abram (Gen. 12). A similar pattern is found in the book of Judges as an introduction to the new beginning made with Saul and especially with David.¹⁴

In line with the opening scene in Judges 2:1-5 we could call the book of Judges a story to weep about. The verb *בכה* even appears to function as a catch word in this respect. Looking at the places where it is used we see a sequence of all kinds of human relations comparable to the one of Genesis 3-11 described above. In Judges 2:4 Israel weeps because of the disturbed relation with YHWH. In 11:37 the daughter of Jephthah weeps because she has to die as a virgin due to her father's rash vow. In 14:16 it is Samson's wife weeping, as one of the examples of Samson's problematic relation to

¹² Cf. among others G.F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (ICC), Edinburg 1895, 59; and Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 78.

¹³ Cf. Marx, 'Forme', 349-350.

¹⁴ Cf. Deurloo, *Geen koning*, 15-16; P. van Midden, *Broederschap & Koningschap: Een onderzoek naar de betekenis van Gideon en Abimelek in het boek Richteren*, Maastricht 1998, 246-276. Cf. also the remark by R.H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (VTS 73), Leiden 1996, 343: 'the rhetorical purpose of the book of Judges is ostensibly to enjoin its readers to endorse a divinely appointed Judahite king who, in contrast to foreign kings or non-Judahite deliverers in Israel, upholds such deuteronomistic ideals as the need to expel foreigners from the land'.

women. Finally, weeping is typical of the sad stories about the tribes fighting against each other (20:23, 26; 21:2).¹⁵

We can even go one step further and assume a relation with Josiah's weeping according to 2 Kings 22:19. Josiah is confronted here, just as the people of Israel in Judges 2, with a quotation of YHWH's words concerning the covenant and the law. Just as the people of Israel, Josiah realizes that the covenant is broken because the people had not acted according to the commandments and, like the Israelites, he starts weeping. Thereupon Josiah acts as the Israelites should have done right at the beginning: he puts away all idolatry and returns to the right worship of YHWH.

After this survey of the wider context in which Judges 2:1-5 appears to take a central place, we now return to the location of the encounter with the messenger of YHWH. It is called Bochim in the verses 1 and 5 and this name is explained in verses 4-5 by referring to the weeping of the people. In verse 1 it has the article and could be translated therefore literally: 'from Gilgal to the weepers'.¹⁶ This is not likely, however, because it is not clear to whom this refers and for what reasons they are indicated in this way. The definite article seems to have been influenced by the preceding reference to Gilgal which also has the article.¹⁷ As was remarked above, the transfer from the one place to the other probably has a symbolic meaning here. Gilgal stands for the beginning of the operation under Joshua, Bochim is exemplary for what is going to happen after Joshua's death.

Most commentators will agree with Deurloo¹⁸ that Bochim is 'a literary location' and that the real place meant here is Bethel, as is indicated in the Septuagint and supported by the parallel in Judges 20-21, where the weeping also takes place in Bethel. This town was already associated with weeping in Genesis 35:8 mentioning the 'oak of weeping' (אלון בכור), the

¹⁵ The relation between Jdg. 2:1-5 and Jdg. 20-21 is noted by many commentators; cf., for instance, Van Midden, *Broederschap*, 252, and Amit, *The Art*, 354. See on 'weeping' as a key word in the book of Judges and on the relation of Jdg. 11:37 and 2:5 also G. Minnaard, 'Eine Geschichte zum Weinen – Jephthas Tochter: Exegese von Ri. 11,29-40 im Zusammenhang des Richterbuches', *Texte & Kontexte* 43 (1989), 2-29; esp. 25.

¹⁶ Cf. R.G. Boling, *Judges* (AB), Garden City 1975, 53, who also translates Gilgal: 'from The Circle to The Weepers'; cf. also J.E. Tollington, 'The Book of Judges: The Result of Post-Exilic Exegesis?', *OTS* 40 (1998), 186-196, esp. 190 and n. 20.

¹⁷ Cf. Webb, *The Book*, 240, n. 83; Y. Amit, *Hidden Polemics in Biblical Narrative* (BIS 25), Leiden 2000, 123.

¹⁸ Deurloo, *Geen koning*, 21.

burial place of Deborah, the nurse of Rebekkah, located 'below Bethel'.¹⁹ After what was remarked above about בכה as a key word in the book of Judges, one can imagine why Bethel would have received this surname, Bochim. It is not clear, however, why a reference to Bethel itself – as in the Septuagint (cf. also Jdg. 1:23, 26) – is left out. According to Amit we are dealing here with an example of hidden polemic.²⁰ Bethel is a cause of weeping because for the first readers of this story Bethel was primarily the place where Jeroboam had placed his altar (1 Kgs. 13). Within the context of the first chapter of the book of Judges this negative view of Bethel could not be expressed directly. Here it still has a positive connotation: as the place of the contact between YHWH and Jacob (Gen. 28) and the city conquered by the house of Joseph (Jdg. 1:22-26).

When it is true that Bochim points to Bethel and the adultery practised there, one could also consider the possibility that the association with weeping has something to do with the character of this condemned cult. According to Hvidberg our text contains traces of cultic weeping as part of the cult of the dying and rising god of fertility Baal.²¹ His theory found little support among Old Testament scholars,²² but it can be of help in finding an indication of the historical background of the actions described in Judges 2:4-5. Halbe thinks of a pre-exilic sanctuary, next to the one in Gilgal, where the Israelites assembled in times of distress to lament and to do penance.²³ The same idea can be found with Veijola, but he dates this in the sixth century BCE.²⁴ They do not give an explanation of the fact that the name of this place of apparently unquestionable worship is not clearly

¹⁹ Amit, *Hidden Polemics*, 125-126, points in this connection to other texts in which Gilgal and Bethel are mentioned together: Am. 4:4; 5:5; Hos. 4:15. Marx, 'Forme', 347-348, proposes a relation with Siloh, because of its location near Gibeon (the story of the Gibeonites in Josh. 9 is an illustration of making a covenant with the people of the land; cf. Jdg. 2:2). He also notes that according to the principle of the *atbash* (a cryptographic device according to which the first letter of the alphabet is replaced by the last, the second by the penultimate etc.) the first two consonants of בכים point to שלה.

²⁰ Amit, *Hidden Polemic*, 119-128; cf. also his 'Bochim, Bethel, and the Hidden Polemic (Judg 2,1-5)', in: G. Galil, M. Weinfeld (eds.), *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography Presented to Zecharia Kallai* (VTS 81), Leiden 2000, 121-131.

²¹ F.F. Hvidberg, *Weeping and Laughter in the Old Testament: A Study of Canaanite-Israelite Religion*, Leiden 1962, 105-107.

²² Cf., for instance, V. Hamp, *TWAT*, I, 642-643.

²³ Halbe, *Das Privilegrecht*, 383-384.

²⁴ T. Veijola, *Verheissung in der Krise: Studien zur Literatur und Theologie der Exilszeit anhand des 89. Psalms*, Helsinki 1982, 185.

given. Therefore, Amit may be right in assuming a hidden polemic against cultic practices in Bethel. This would be in line with the actions undertaken by King Josiah, who was already mentioned above as one of the 'weepers' in the history of Israel. According to 2 Kings 23:15-16 he cleansed the cultic places of Bethel. In this connection we also hear of the graves in that area being emptied. The bones of the dead are burned on the altar, thus desecrating it. The presence of graves close to the sanctuary can also be seen as an indication that these graves had a function in the idolatry and point to a cult of the dead and to necromancy (cf. also vs. 24). I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that the place where the prophetess Deborah resided, 'under the palm of Deborah' (Jdg. 4:4-5) – which is probably the same place as Bochim or is at least to be located in the same area – originally was also associated with the cult of the dead.²⁵ This means that Hvidberg's theory was not so far off the mark after all, but instead of relating this text to the cult of Baal it seems better to think of the cult of the dead.

A good illustration of this kind of cultic weeping can be found now in the Ugaritic text KTU 1.161.²⁶ In this text the spirits of the dead kings of the dynasty are called up to bless the king and queen of Ugarit. After the summoning of all departed kings, we hear of a lamentation in which even the royal furniture participates:

O throne of Niqmaddu, weep!²⁷
 Let his footstool shed tears in front of it.
 Let the royal table weep,
 let it swallow its tears,
 tears and tears, tears!

Then the sun god is asked to bring up the dead kings from the netherworld. After that sacrifices are brought, seven times. So also the end of this Ugaritic text reminds one of Judges 2:4-5, because here, too, the weeping is followed by the bringing of sacrifices.

This possible historical background indicates that the reference to Israel's weeping in Judges 2:4 should not only be interpreted as an act of

²⁵ K. Spronk, 'Deborah, a Prophetess: The Meaning and Background of Judges 4:4-5', *OTS* (forthcoming).

²⁶ See for recent translations M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, *TUAT*, II/3, 331-333, and B.A. Levine and others, in: W.W. Hallo (ed.), *The Context of Scripture*, I, Leiden 1997, 357-358.

²⁷ In Ugaritic the verb *bky* (cognate to Hebrew בכה) is used.

repentance. It also points to making the right choice, like King Josiah, for the right god and the right cult. As long as the Israelites do not realize this and act accordingly, their history will remain a story to weep about.