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Remembering and forgetting in the book of Judges

by Klaas Spronk

A messenger of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. He said: 'I made you go up from Egypt and I brought you to the land that I swore to your fathers. And I said: I will not break my covenant with you forever. 2 And you, you should not cut a covenant with those who dwell in this land. Their altars you should demolish. But you did not listen to my voice. What have you done? 3 So now I say: I will not drive them out from before your face and they will be a whip on your sides to you and their gods will be a snare to you.' 4 It happened, when the messenger of the Lord had spoken these words to all Israelites, that the people lifted up their voice and wept. 5 They called the name of that place Bochim and they sacrificed there to the Lord.

6 Joshua sent the people off and the Israelites went, a man to his inheritance, to take possession of the land. 7 The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who had prolonged the days after Joshua, who had seen every great deed of the Lord that he had done for Israel. 8 Joshua, son of Nun, servant of the Lord, died, a hundred and ten years old. 9 They buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath Heres on mount Ephraim, north of mount Gaash. 10 Also that entire generation was gathered to its fathers. Another generation came up after them, that did not know the Lord and the deed he had done for Israel.

Judges 2:1-10 (own translation)

'Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it'. These words of Winston Churchill (paraphrasing the warning by the philosopher George Santayana in 1905: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it') will probably be quoted more often in this Festschrift around the theme of commemorating or forgetting. Nevertheless, they are worth mentioning here again, not as a cliché, but as a fitting representation of the message of the book of Judges. Another often used cliché with regard to the book of Judges is 'l'histoire se répète'. Although this summarizes much of the contents of the book very well on account of its iterative structure, it misses the point of these repetitions. Nevertheless, it is useful to start these considerations with a study of the repetitions in Judges.

The first chapter of the book of Judges can be considered to be a variant report of the conquest of the Promised Land as has already been described in the book of Joshua. In a historical-critical approach to the text, it is often assumed that we are dealing with an older version of the story than the more elaborate and positive description in the previous book. The many references to failed attempts by individual tribes to take possession of the land allotted to them in this book would also be more in line with the historical facts. One should not fail to note however, that the differences in the way the taking of the land was described in the book of Joshua, are not so big at all. Most of the first chapter of the book of Judges consists of quotations taken from different places in the book of Joshua. The main difference is that the tribe of Judah is given a prominent place in Judges. It is mentioned in 1:2 as the tribe chosen by the Lord to be the first to take the land. Here and also in the final chapters of the book, the tribe of Benjamin is presented as the negative counterpart of Judah. In this way the book of Judges foreshadows the later relationship between the first kings of Israel, with the Benjaminite king Saul and the Judean king David as his opponent.

Also Judges 2 clearly takes up elements from the book of Joshua. Verses 6-9 almost verbatim repeat Joshua 24:29-31. This description of the death and burial of Joshua is followed by the remark that those who saw Joshua's great deeds have served the Lord. Verses 1-5, describing a

gathering in Bochim, have a clear parallel in the book of Joshua as well. Many scholars have attempted to explain the double reference of the death of Joshua as due to a complex history of redactional activity, resulting in an incoherent structure of partly contradictory layers. In its present form, however, the first chapters of the book of Judges make sense as a way of relating both books by partly repeating the previous book. The story in Judges 2:1-5 has a clear parallel in Joshua 24, namely in the story of the gathering of the Israelites as told in verses 1-28, which also precede the report of his death. In both stories the Israelites are reminded of the good things done by the Lord for the Israelites and of the covenant between the Lord and Israel. Whereas the Israelites had made a solemn vow to keep the covenant in Joshua 24, they are now confronted with the fact that they have broken this promise. Joshua had warned them of the consequences. A basic difference between the two stories is that this second time it is the messenger of the Lord who has to remind the people of their responsibility. Apparently, a good human leader is lacking. Also the response of the people is different. Whereas the Israelites intended to keep the covenant according to Joshua 24, in the story in Judges 2 the only thing they do is weep at Bochim (Bochim means 'weepers'). This sets the tone for the rest of the book: there will be an ongoing lack of reliable leaders and in the end the Israelites can only weep at the outcome of the ensuing civil war (Judges 21:2-3).

After the recapitulation of the book of Joshua in Judges 1:1-2:9 the idea of a history that repeats itself is presented more explicitly in a general introduction. It describes how every new generation makes the same mistake of forgetting the good things the Lord did for his people in the past. Every time again the Lord reacts as announced by punishing them through the hands of foreign enemies. Every time again they are given a new chance when they repent and the Lord sends a deliverer, but every time the new generation makes the same mistake again. This goes on and on. It is suggested in the final chapters that it will end with the coming of a king, through the repetition of the remark that there was no king in those days when all these dreadful things happened.

Every time the Israelites are blamed for forgetting their god, but what about the deliverers and judges sent by the Lord? Should they not have instructed their people better? We are only informed by the author of their actions against the enemy. We do not know what happened after their victory, in the many years of rest following it. The so called 'minor judges' did not have to fight enemies at all. They only had to 'judge' Israel (10:1-5; 12:8-15). It is not clear what this meant, but apparently their work did not result in the better behaviour of their people. Also after each judge, the Israelites fell back into 'doing what is evil in the eyes of the Lord'. None of these leaders, therefore, can be regarded as a good successor for Joshua, who had clearly instructed his people by reminding them of the good deeds by the Lord in the past, the covenant made with the Lord, the consequences for the people of breaking that covenant.

None of the Israelite leaders figuring in the book of Judges is explicitly condemned, with the exception of Abimelek (9:56). He is the example of a bad leader. When it comes to his father, Gideon or Jerubbaal, things are complicated. On the one hand, Gideon's reaction to the offer of establishing a dynasty is praiseworthy. He does not accept it stating that the Lord is the true leader of Israel (8:22-23). On the other hand, his subsequent actions are clearly not in line with his words. He makes the place of his birth a cultic centre, leading his people to idolatry, and he names his son Abimelek, 'my father is king' – he is not referring to the Lord. In the story of his calling in chapter 6 the element of remembering the deeds of the Lord plays a prominent role. Gideon is called to save his people from the Midianites by a messenger of the Lord. Gideon hesitates. He has his doubts about the intervention by the Lord: 'if the Lord is with us, why has all this visited us? Where are all the wonders which our fathers recounted to us, saying: "Was it not from Egypt that the Lord brought us up?" And now the Lord has forsaken us and he has given us into the hand of Midian' (6:13). So Gideon had not forgotten the deeds of the Lord. In the story this is emphasized by the fact that before the appearance of the messenger of the Lord a prophet had reminded the Israelites of the works of the Lord and of the covenant, in the same way as had been done by the messenger of the Lord in Bochim (6:7-10). For Gideon it is not only a matter of remembering, but also a matter of taking it to heart. He was clearly not convinced, not by the prophet and also not by the messenger of the Lord. It would take a number of extra miracles before he would give in.

Gideon gets most of the attention in the book of Judges and can also be regarded as the most successful leader in the period between the conquest and the kingdom. Nevertheless, he is not the leader who walks in the footsteps of Joshua. According to the first verse of the book of Judges this leader should come from the tribe of Judah. Anyone familiar with the history of Israel will realize that this points to David. However, in the period before David seized the throne there is an even better candidate, namely Samuel. He is from the tribe of Ephraim, which caused trouble in opposing both Gideon and Jephthah, but he does fit very well into the profile of the perfect leader for Israel. He successfully combines the functions of military leader, judge, and prophet. In this way he surpasses Gideon. Samuel does what Gideon and the other leaders in the period of the judges failed to do: he reminds the people of the good deeds of the Lord in the past. At the end of his career Samuel delivers a long speech in which he tells again the story of the exodus and of the period of the judges and urges them to obey the Lord (1 Samuel 12). It is precisely in this way that Samuel is demonstrably the successor of Moses and Joshua, who spoke in the same way to the people at the end of their life. When it comes to the future kings of Israel the same can be said only of Solomon, who reminded his people of their history with the Lord and of the covenant (1 Kings 8).

Returning to the book of Judges and looking at it again from the perspective of ideal leadership, it can be noted that there are two people who look like Samuel. The first is Samson. Their birth stories in Judges 13 and 1 Samuel 1 show many similarities and both are devoted to the service of the Lord. They are very different, however, in the way they fulfil their task. Samson does not show any leadership quality at all and only refers to the Lord when the dire straits in which he winds up force him to. Another, and at first sight unexpected, parallel is found in Deborah. She is the only one in the Hebrew Bible who is, like Samuel, both judge and prophet. Like Samuel she lives in Rama (4:5). And like Samuel she reminds her people of the glorious past of the Lord, when she describes him in her song as the mighty one coming from Sinai (5:4-5).

In the history of interpretation of the book of Judges there is much discussion about the question of whether the book regards kingship positively or negatively. The better question, however, is: what does the book of Judges teach us about good leadership? It turns out that one of the most important qualities of a good leader is that he or she does not forget the past and learns from it. The book of Judges also shows that such leaders are rare. Therefore, praise the prophets (and professors) who help us to remember the past and take the appropriate lessons from it.