



Deryn Guest

YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges: An Object-Relations Analysis

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Scholars familiar with previous publications on the book of Judges by Deryn Guest, senior lecturer in hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham, will understand that the content of this erudite monograph is more critical and more exciting than the title suggests. Guest is known from her *When Deborah Met Jael: Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies* (2005) and her recent “Judging YHWH in the Book of Judges,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative* (2016). The latter title fits the contents of the present book better. Guest criticizes the way mainstream biblical commentators uncritically go along with the positive picture of YHWH, on the one hand, and the very negative picture of Israel, on the other hand, given by the scribe of the book of Judges. They should have unmasked the underlying reasons that motivated the scribe. The ancient scribe may not have been aware of them, but with the help of analytic tools of modern psychology they can and should be disclosed.

This psychological approach to the text is not new. Guest builds on the work of others, including Mieke Bal and Stuart Lasine, but deems it necessary to base it more thoroughly on relevant theory. In her opinion, especially object-relations theory proves to be quite helpful to reveal the subconsciously applied strategies of the narrator. It is a theory about the way human beings relate to each other, with special attention to the relation between parents and children, to attachment and impingement.

In the introduction, Guest presents herself as someone who does not give in—as in her opinion is done by most theologians—to the temptation to “grant YHWH a privileged special character status that is beyond human comprehension” (5) and thus exonerating YHWH from any responsibility for all the gruesome violence described in the book of Judges. Instead, she takes the position of a therapist who will listen as carefully as possible to the story of the client but also keeping a critical distance. She thus seeks “to provide a psychologically informed critical assessment of the way in which YHWH is projected as an ideal, loving-but-correcting, enduringly loyal parent to his hopelessly wayward, ignorant, children of Israel” (13).

Guest devotes (in chapter 1) much attention to the description and evaluation of the object-relationship theory developed by Donald Woods Winnicott and its five key concepts: the capacity to be alone, the true and false self, the holding environment, the good-enough mother, and the restitutive gesture. They are illustrated by many examples of problematic relations between children and their consequences for the development of the children into adults. She then applies this theory to the stories in the book of Judges to get a better view on the flawed relationship between YHWH and Israel, with YHWH taking the role of the father and, more often, the mother. It shows that YHWH’s parenting style leads to an unhealthy environment for Israel as his or her child.

In the next chapter, Guest discusses recent attempts to interpret the cyclical framework in the book of Judges from the perspective of trauma therapy, as is done especially by David Janzen in *The Violent Gift: Trauma Subversion of the Deuteronomistic History’s Narrative* (2012). Guest agrees that the repeated story of being delivered into the hands of enemies can be regarded as “a traumatic stutter” but concludes that, in the end, trauma therapy proves not to be the best interpretative lens. Counterarguments are, in her view, the many elements of humor, the literary artistry, and the polyphony in the book of Judges, which do not cohere with the suggested traumatic background. Guest also derives an important argument from the dating of the book of Judges. She criticizes, following the lead of Philip Davies and others, the common attempt to date it as part of the Deuteronomistic History composed, using older material, in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. A date in the late Persian period or early Hellenistic period is more likely. This more peaceful period also fits better the text, which “is more of a wisdom text than a piece of historiography” (88).

In the third chapter, Guest focuses within the framework of the object-relations theory on attachment theory as it is developed by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby. After a general presentation, she applies it to the exegesis of Judg 2:11–23 (the overview of the repeating conflict between YHWH and Israel); 10:6–16 (the discussion between YHWH and Israel, with YHWH threatening to stop helping); and 1 Sam 12:7–25 (Samuel giving an overview of the relation between YHWH and Israel). These three texts are chosen because, according

to Guest, they are key passages in the story in which the scribe plays out “fantasies of abandonment and rescue in a one-sided, conflicted relationship” (91). The inclusion of the text of 1 Samuel is defended as a related illustration of the attachment issues between YHWH and Israel. It reminds me of the way Sergei Frolov (not mentioned by Guest), in his commentary in the series *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (2013), suggests that we read the book of Judges together with the first part of the book of Samuel (he sees an important break after 1 Sam 8).

The three texts are presented in Guest’s translation with a number of sometimes-detailed discussions of problematic texts. For instance, an interesting new theory is presented about the enigmatic reference to Bedan in 1 Sam 12:11 as a “deliberate ploy” (121). Following attachment theory, the texts are analyzed from the perspectives of attachment and abandonment, attachment and affect, attachment and game play, further illustrating the problematic relationship between YHWH and Israel as dominated by attachment issues.

In the fourth chapter, this is explained as a masochistic defense mechanism, as a way of repressing the bad aspects of YHWH’s character to keep him a good god. Guest urges modern readers of the book of Judges to step outside the scribe’s rhetoric and look beyond the way YHWH and Israel are presented. What lies behind the text is suppressed aggression against a god who does not act like a good mother.

In the concluding chapter, Guest expresses the hope that her work will promote future studies relating psychological theory and biblical hermeneutics. Time and again she notes that she is reading against the grain. With her study, Guest wants to break the “taboo on critical studies of YHWH” (175), which she notes, for instance, in the guidelines of series such as the *New International Commentary of the Old Testament*.

Guest is certainly right when she invites modern commentators to acknowledge the fact that, in the course of time, the image of God changes and that we are dealing in the book of Judges with the specific view of its scribe. Our modern image of YHWH would have been unacceptable to the ancient author, in spite of agreement that the relation between YHWH and his people was seriously disturbed. Whether it is possible to learn more about the hidden motives of the ancient author or not remains uncertain. Much depends upon the assumed historic background, the assumed audience, and the assumed basic themes. Inevitably, many things remain hypothetical here. Other choices are also possible and sometimes more plausible. When looking at the texts from the perspective of leadership, one gets a very different picture of the relationship with YHWH. One could also question the choice of the three texts as exemplary. Including the text from the books of Samuel emphasizes the aspect of the problematic relation. A more interesting choice would have been the encounter between Gideon and (the messenger of) YHWH in Judg 6 with an angry

reaction by Gideon, indicating that the element of anger against YHWH is not completely missing, as suggested by Guest.

This well-edited book (with a combined index on authors and subjects) is published as the first in a new monograph series of the Society for Old Testament Studies. The new series is presented as seeking “to showcase the best of modern biblical studies.” The monograph by Deryn Guest certainly meets this ambition.