Lecture 10: The Book of Judges

History-telling in the Bible

The book of Judges ostensibly picks up where the book of Joshua left off: with the people in the land, having gained a foothold, only now they are bereft of Joshua’s leadership.

As Nelson accurately reports, the structural unity of the book, in the form we have it, is set by the paired question and answer found in the initial episode and again towards the end of the book. The first appearance of this pair sets the scene for completing the battles to wrest the land from its inhabitants: “1 The Israelites inquired of the LORD, “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?” 2 The LORD said, “Judah shall go up. I hereby give the land into his hand.” Here Judah takes the lead among the tribes in attacking the Canaanites.

Then, at the start of the final episode in the book we find this question & answer pair again, only this time as the people set out to avenge a crime committed in one tribe (Benjamin) by attacking that tribe as a whole: “8 The Israelites proceeded to go up to Bethel, where they inquired of God, “Which of us shall go up first to battle against the Benjaminites?” And the LORD answered, “Judah shall go up first.” As Nelson says, what is, in the first instance, a directive that gives guidance to Israel in their battles against external foes becomes, in the last instance, a directive for internecine warfare. Taken together, this establishes a trajectory of deterioration in Israel’s life during the time of the Judges.

However, we need to remember that this trajectory is created by two units distinct from the intervening chapters, which have their own agendas. On the one hand, the final 5 chapters of Joshua, 17-21, stand out from the rest by (among other things) the lament, appearing four times in them, that “In those days there was no king in Israel.” Moreover, that lament, in both its first and last appearances, is accompanied by the derogatory statement, “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” These chapters stress the chaos that reigned prior to the rise of the monarchy. For these chapters, a king is a stabilizing force, a theme not sounded in chapters 2-20.

Moreover, as Nelson tells you, these concluding chapters show no interest in figures like the “Judges” of the preceding chapters and are not concerned with threats from outside foes. What’s more, absent from these chapters is the pattern of apostasy, oppression, deliverance, followed by an interval of peace, that dominates the majority of the book. The different concerns of these chapters make them seem of a different cloth than the previous chapters. On the other hand, a number of scholars have argued recently that these are simply a transition to the story of the establishment of the monarchy in 1 Samuel. I’ll return to this contention later.
At the other end, beginning in the first chapter and extending through the first five verses of chapter 2, is a narrative that is more jarring in the context of this book. This, of course, is the chapter I drew on last time to show a very different pattern for Israel’s capture of its land than is suggested by Joshua 1-11.

But what makes this chapter especially problematic, as Nelson notes, is its opening clause, “After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of the LORD, ‘Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites…’” And that statement is problematic due to the new report of Joshua’s death in 2.6-8: “When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land. The people worshiped the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred ten years. So they buried him within the bounds of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.”

As Nelson says, this creates the peculiar circumstance of Joshua dying twice. And yet, the problem is even more acute, inasmuch as Joshua’s death was already reported at the end of Joshua, in chapter 24: “So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances. After these things Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred ten years old. They buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the LORD did for Israel.”

Notice the striking similarities between that report and the one in Judges 2: 1) both begin with Joshua dismissing the people to return to their inheritances; 2) both report that the people served the LORD all of Joshua’s days, as well as throughout the days of the elders who served under Joshua; 3) finally, they both narrate Joshua’s death and burial in the same way. So why is this story repeated in Joshua 2 in nearly identical form, and when, after all, did Joshua die?

To answer that, we need to return briefly to the book of Joshua. You’ll recall that the consensus among scholars is that chapters 1-12 (or at least 1-11) and chapter 23 are original components of the Deuteronomistic History, with chapters 13-22 a later insertion. You’ll also recall that chapter 23 constitutes Joshua’s valedictory address, concluding the era of his leadership as Israel began to appropriate the land promised them. As you might recall, the narrator introduces Joshua’s address this way: “A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies all around, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, their elders and heads, their judges and officers, and said to them, “I am now old and well advanced in years….”

In the speech that follows, Joshua reminds the people of the principle by which
they have succeeded to this point and by which they will finish the job of driving the natives from the land: steadfast observance of the Law of Moses. And he concludes his speech with a stern warning to the people of what will happen if they stray from this principle: “And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know …that not one thing has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you.… But just as all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the bad things, until he has destroyed you from this good land that the LORD your God has given you. If you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you.”

Given the Deuteronomist’s convictions about Israel’s life under the Torah as expounded by Deuteronomy and played out in Joshua 1-11, that is a fitting farewell speech for Joshua to deliver just before his death. And that makes it surprising to find a second farewell speech in chapter 24.

The report of this speech begins with a new assembly of the people at Joshua’s behest: “Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.” Even more striking than this new assembly for a speech by Joshua, are his words: “And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.”

What Joshua provides in this second speech is a review of Israel’s history, from the days of Abraham to their present life in the land. Then Joshua challenges the people to serve the LORD rather than the gods of the nations, in response to which the people affirm their resolve to do so. Curiously, Joshua rebuffs their claim: “But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.”

This sort of challenge to the people’s avowal of their intention is out of character for the Joshua who appears in the remainder of the book, even in chapter 23, where
he exhorts them to obedience, while noting their excellent record to this point.

It turns out that the scene depicted here is of Joshua certifying a covenant with the people before his death, as becomes explicit in the verses that follow: “25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. 26 Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. 27 Joshua said to all the people, “See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.”

Most striking is the report that “Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God,” since throughout the book of Joshua his modus operandi has been showing a deferential reliance on the Law book written by Moses, which would include the record of the covenant Moses concluded with the people. To have Joshua mediating a covenant and making statutes and ordinances for them, which he writes in “the book of the law of God” gives him a status equal to that of Moses.

In fact, Joshua is replicating the final actions of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy: mediating a final agreement between the people and God to follow the LORD’s commands, and writing the words in the book of the Law.

More than that, however, the report of his death we read earlier explicitly accords him a status equal to Moses: “29 After these things Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred ten years old.”

Previously Joshua has been called merely “the assistant of Moses,” while the title, “the servant of the LORD,” has been reserved for Moses. Now Joshua is also accorded the honorary title, “servant of the LORD.” Here again, chapter 24 gives him a status equal to Moses.

Equally striking, however, is the way the narrative continues after reporting Joshua’s burial and noting that Israel maintained fidelity to the LORD throughout the life of Joshua and the lives of the elders who served under him: “32 The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. 33 Eleazar son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of his son Phinehas, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim.”

The report about the burial of the bones of Joseph at Shechem ties up a loose end not yet cared for. At the end of Genesis, Joseph, on his death bed, makes his sons promise to bring his bones into their land when they depart, and Exodus 13.19 reports that Moses did so. And yet nowhere does anyone inter his bones. Joshua 24:32 reports that burial.

More important, v. 33 reports the death of Eleazar, son of Aaron, even as
Numbers and Deuteronomy have Aaron and Moses dying close together, to close an era. Most strikingly, Eleazar is mentioned only 7 other times in the book, all of them in chapters 13-22, itself a secondary section of the book.

When you perceive how familiar this twenty-fourth chapter is with the narrative of the Torah; and when you notice the correspondences it draws between Joshua’s final actions and those of Moses; and when you observe the paired deaths of the chief priest and the “servant of the LORD” in these narratives (analogous to the paired deaths of Aaron and Moses), it impels the conclusion that someone has fashioned Joshua 24 as the end to the era of Joshua, parallel to the conclusion of the era of Moses. But why would someone do this?

As we’ll see, what is known as the Torah began life as a narrative about the escape from Egypt and the people's journey through the wilderness, including their sojourn at Sinai. To that was prefixed the work we know as Genesis. At the same time, what we know as the book of Exodus was extended via legal codes inserted into Exodus that also created the bulk of Leviticus and the first chapters of Numbers, yielding a tetratuch (four books).

The attachment of Deuteronomy to this complex by transferring from the end of Numbers the report of Moses’ death and combining it into what is now Deuteronomy 34 produced the Pentateuch, a collection of five books. And yet, there is something unsatisfying about this narrative, since the promises of land makes the reader anticipate a story that reports the acquisition of that land. And so some scholars, around the middle of the 20th century, proposed that we think in terms of a hexateuch as the basic unit: the six books from Genesis through Joshua. The implication of Joshua 24 is that they were not the first to think of this possibility. The author of this chapter was, in effect creating just that, by forging what amounted to two parallel eras: the era of Moses and deliverance from Egypt, and the era of Joshua and conquest of the land. And in doing so, he separated the book of Joshua from its natural sequel in the book of Judges, making Joshua the end of the story begun in Genesis.

That attempt did not succeed, however, and a Pentateuch became the standard for the Torah. But ultimately, what was produced has come to be recognized as a full-blown history of Israel that some scholars call “the primary history,” extending from Genesis through 2 Kings.

It is not a history produced by a single historiographer, obviously – or even a group of historians working in concert. It is a conflation of contributions by authors having their individual perspectives and their own axes to grind. Most striking, as we’ll see, is the difference in perspective between the authors of the Deuteronomistic History and parts of the Pentateuch.

To return to the double narration of Joshua’s death, in Joshua 24 and Judges 2, most likely the Deuteronomistic narrative flowed from the conclusion of Joshua’s
speech in Joshua 23 to the report of his death and burial in Judges 2.6, reading something like this: “14 And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know ...that not one thing has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you... 15 But just as all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the bad things... 16 If you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you. (Judges) 2

When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land. 7 The people worshiped the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. 8 Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred ten years. 9 So they buried him within the bounds of his inheritance in Timnath-heres....”

What, then, are we to make of the peculiar narrative at the start of Judges that reports events after Joshua’s death? Why does that stand before the report of his death in chapter 2?

A number of possibilities have been suggested, such as that chapter 1 has been supplied as a new introduction to the book of Judges, once Joshua had been incorporated into a hexateuch, with the report of Joshua’s death in Joshua 24. Others have suggested that chapter 1 was simply a tradition about Israel’s early life familiar to an editor who preserved it, so that it would not be lost.

It seems more likely, however, that the editor who prefixed this chapter to the book did so to make a point, which he puts forward in the speech he attributes to the angel of the LORD in 2.1-5: “1 Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you. 2 For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! 3 So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you.” 4 When the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people lifted up their voices and wept. 5 So they named that place Bochim [= “weeping people”], and there they sacrificed to the LORD.”

This recalls Joshua’s final warning to the people of what would happen if they associated with the natives of the land: “13 Know assuredly that the LORD your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land that the LORD your God has given you.” – This threat is
realized following Joshua’s death, according to 2:1-5.

In fact, notice that the angel of Judges 2:1-5 charges the people with breaking their covenant with the LORD by disobeying his command about associating with the inhabitants of the land, and he speaks of their action as something quite evident: “See what you have done!” And yet, the only actions that have taken place since Joshua’s death, according to the summary of chapter 1, are military campaigns, the first half of which (or more) see the people victorious. It’s the second half of the report that paints a more dismal picture: “27 Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land. 28 When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not in fact drive them out. 29 And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; but the Canaanites lived among them in Gezer. 30 Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites lived among them, and became subject to forced labor. 31 Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Ahlab, or of Achzib, or of Helbah, or of Aphik, or of Rehob; 32 but the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out. 33 Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, but lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land.”

It seems likely that these reports, like the first half of the chapter, derive from a list of various tribes’ military engagements and their outcomes that have been collated into this account. The author of 2.1-5 has keyed in on the statements about not driving out the Canaanites so that the Canaanites “lived among them” or, even worse, that the people lived among the Canaanites. For that reason he has the angel of the LORD charge the people with having broken the LORD’s command. For the author who penned these words as a commentary on the first chapter, living side-by-side with the Canaanites was tantamount to making a covenant with them.

So, what was the author able to accomplish by prefixing these verses to the beginning of the book? Notice that the report of Joshua’s death that originally opened the book concluded as follows: “10 Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; 12 and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. 13 They abandoned the LORD, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. 14 So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers
who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. 15 Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them to bring misfortune, as the Lord had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress.”

So how do the reports of the people associating with the Canaanites and then the angel’s proclamation that the people have broken the Lord’s command accomplish anything beyond this original introduction that has only generations after Joshua going astray?

We need to notice what follows on the heels of chapter 2’s judgment that the Lord handed the people over to their enemies: “16 Then the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. 17 Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord; they did not follow their example. 18 Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. 19 But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. 20 So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel; and he said, “Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their ancestors, and have not obeyed my voice, 21 I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died.”

As you know, this serves as the programmatic statement for the stories of the judges, the military champions or deliverers whose stories are told in the central chapters of the book. The pattern, as these verses state, is that the people do evil in the eyes of the Lord (i.e. they commit apostasy), the Lord imposes an oppressor, the people cry out, in response to which the Lord sends a deliverer to rid them of their oppressor, during whose life the land enjoys peace, but then the people again do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord. That establishes a pattern of undulation, with each crest marking fidelity instigated by the Lord’s deliverance through a hero, and each dip representing the people’s return to evil in the wake of the deliverer’s death.

What chapter 1-2:5 does that would be missing without it is to establish the dips as the baseline for Israel’s character. Without this section the book of Judges would be about a people who vacillated between fidelity to the Lord and faithlessness, based on how they were faring. While that would certainly establish the principle claim of Deuteronomy that fidelity brings reward, while doing evil brings punishment, what 1.1-2:5 contributes, is that by the time that cycle began,
Israel was so enmeshed in associations with the Canaanite natives that they were perpetually vulnerable to worship of gods other than the LORD. Accordingly, the “dips” in Israel’s cycle are not occasional fluctuations in Israel’s fidelity that had to be corrected, but symptoms of the major problem with Israel diagnosed in the statements of chapter 1 that speak of the people living side-by-side with the Canaanites. They had fallen helplessly prey to the evil of which they had been warned.

What, then, about the stories in the mid-section, the ones about the occasional champions the LORD sent to deliver the people from their oppressors? Where did they come from and how has the author used them?

One of the features of Judges that links it to Joshua and Deuteronomy is its emphasis on all Israel. Each of the so-called “judges” is said to rule over all Israel. For example, here is the story of the judge named Othniel: “

7 The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs. Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

8 But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother.

9 The spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the LORD gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

10 So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.”

Note the representation of this event as encompassing all Israel: “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” and then the text speaks of the LORD’s anger against Israel, so that “the Israelites” served a foreign ruler until “the Israelites cried out to the LORD,” who raised up a deliverer for “the Israelites,” and that deliverer judged Israel. This passage creates the image of a deliverer with some sort of rule over all the tribes of Israel. And nothing in the story itself competes with that; it seems to be all Israel.

However, other stories betray a different perspective, such as the story following hard on the account of Othniel. That story begins with the stylized report, “

12 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD.” Notice that this event also concerns, ostensibly, “the Israelites” as a whole. That perspective continues in the next couple of verses, which report Eglon’s attack: “

13 In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.” By the way, the “city of palms” is another designation for Jericho.
It’s noteworthy that what is described as an oppression of Israel by a daunting coalition results in the capture of just one city, on Israel’s far eastern border. Moreover, the long-term effect of this capture is said to be that “the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.” And yet, according to v. 13, he had captured only one city.

The man raised up as a deliverer is described as follows: “15 But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab.” The fact that he was a Benjaminite is significant, for Benjamin is the tribe that settled in a small region that included Jericho.

Now, when Ehud went to deliver tribute to Eglon, he managed a subterfuge that gained him a private audience with the King, at which time he assassinated him with a concealed dagger. He made his getaway, ran back to his land and, according to v. 27, “27 When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head.” Needless to say, they routed the army of Moab and delivered Israel from its control.

What’s significant here, though, is that his call to arms seems to have involved the central hill country of Ephraim, which means that he drew on a small contingent to defeat the Moabites, in spite of the implication of the language that “the Israelites” carried out this action. Of course, that corresponds to the fact that the only city affected, according to the report, was Jericho.

So in the end, these events involve a rather restricted region, rather than all the tribes who became Israel. And that is the case in nearly every other story of these “judges.”

The prime exception to that is the story of Deborah as narrated in chapter 5. This poem speaks of a coalition of tribes that banded together against Canaanites led by forces from Hazor in the north, although the battle is said to have taken place a little further to the south, at Taanach. The poem is very specific about which tribes declined involvement, namely Reuben, Ahser, Gilead and Dan. The poem is also silent about other tribes, such as Manasseh and Judah. As a result, the tribes it specifies as involved in the battle are those shaded in red on this map. Even allowing that other tribal units near the area of the battle would have joined in, we are far from an “all Israel” event in this story.

As a result, it seems likely that the “all Israel perspective” implied in these stories has been imposed on them, just as we found the “all Israel” perspective in the early chapters of Joshua an artifice to bring it into line with the “all Israel” perspective of Deuteronomy.

In fact, study of these stories of the “judges” has led to the conclusion that they are a collection of independent tribal stories about local military champions that
have been forged into a running narrative unified by three literary devices. The first of those is the stylized framework surrounding these stories that makes of them a cycle of the people committing evil in the eyes of the L ORD, prompting him to send an oppressor, upon which the people cry out for help, and in response to which the L ORD sends a deliverer who frees them from the oppressor. The land then knows peace for a period, during the remainder of the deliverer’s life, after which the people again do evil in the L ORD’s eyes and the cycle is repeated.

It is crucial to note, by the way, that the language used in these links is peculiar to them; it is not found in the stories themselves, indicating that this structure has been created by the redactor who organized the stories into this cycle. What’s more, the cycle he has created exhibits precisely the situation Deuteronomy says the people would face if they did what was evil in the eyes of the L ORD. Equally, if they did what was right, they would know peace.

The second device used to forge these stories into this cycle was the imposition of an “all Israel.” By making these stories of all Israel’s sin, repentance and deliverance, the writer has been able to align them with the concern of Deuteronomy for the unity of Israel in obedience or disobedience.

The third device giving these stories unity is the provision of a chronological framework. As Nelson tells you, some of the time references seem to be original to the stories, while others have more the character of “round numbers” (e.g. “40 years”) that have been supplied to give the narrative a sense of the passing of time.

Again, these stories in the heart of the book enable the writer to bring home repeatedly the principles of punishment and reward based on the response of the people to the L ORD’s commands. They also enable him to bridge the gap temporally between the people’s arrival in the land and the institution of the monarchy.

That leaves us with the concluding chapters, 17-21, which turn from the activity of these local champions to highlight two stories of abuse and treachery. The first, in chapters 17-18, concerns the fate of a young Levite hired by an individual to serve as priest for a shrine he owned. The origins of that shrine are shrouded in evil, according to the opening sentences of the story: “1 There was a man in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. 2 He said to his mother, “The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse and even spoke it in my hearing, that silver is in my possession; I took it; but now I will return it to you.” And his mother said, “May my son be blessed by the L ORD!”

3 Then he returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother; and his mother said, “I consecrate the silver to the L ORD from my hand for my son, to make an idol of cast metal.” 4 So when he returned the money to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver, and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into an idol of cast metal; and it was in the house of Micah. 5 This man Micah had a shrine,
and he made an ephod and teraphim [devices used for soothsaying], and installed one of his sons, who became his priest.”

These events, involving the forging of an idol of cast metal and the making of an ephod and teraphim, are not reported with approval, as is made clear by the narrator’s aside to the reader: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” That’s a note of disapproval. And as I mentioned earlier, the statement about the absence of a king appears three more times in these chapters.

In fact, it stands again at the start of chapter 18, which narrates the tribe of Dan journeying north to find territory for itself, taking along a young Levite that Micah had subsequently hired to serve as the priest at his shrine. The members of the tribe of Dan also took along the cast idol and the ephod and teraphim and established their own shrine when they reached their new territory in the far north. These are the kinds of lawless things that happened before there was a king.

The second narrative, in chapters 19-21 concerns, as you know, the rape and murder of a man’s concubine and the resultant attack on the men and tribe of the city in which that rape occurred, inasmuch as no one in the city or tribe would avenge the crime. That sordid tale is introduced as follows: “In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.”

After all the Israelites rallied ’round the Levite and annihilated the Benjaminites (save for a group of 600 men who fled), they discovered that one city had not joined in the massacre, and so they dispatched a contingent to kill all that city’s inhabitants, except for 400 virgins they found there, whom they brought back and made available to the 600 survivors of Benjamin to regenerate their tribe.

At the conclusion of that story – indeed, the conclusion of the book – we find this editorial comment, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Whereas the middle section of the book seeks to display the principle of reward and punishment corresponding to obedience or faithlessness, and the first chapter means to set disobedience as Israel’s baseline, the final 5 chapters blame societal discord on the absence of a king, thus advancing a positive assessment of the monarchy as having the power to curb discord and errant behavior among the people.

As you’ll recall, scholars have often regarded these concluding chapters as a late addition to the book, since they do not feature the kinds of champions of the people against their oppressors that we find in the body of the book and since they lack the thematic litany of the people doing what's wrong in the eyes of the LORD, the imposition of an oppressor, the people's cry of distress, the provision of a deliverer, and a subsequent period of peace. However, a number of scholars have raised reasonable questions about whether those differences are sufficient to argue that
these chapters were added by someone other than the deuteronomistic historian.

On the one hand, the pattern of disobedience, consequent punishment, and then deliverance seems intended to display the flip side of the coin from Joshua: when the people do what's evil in the eyes of the LORD, they wind up inheriting the kinds of curses Deut 28 threatens. However, there is no reason to demand that the author speak with merely a single voice about the "lessons" of this period.

That is to say, it is reasonable to suppose that in chapters 17-21 he turns from portraying this period as one of the people's lack of faithfulness, resulting in political and military failures, to characterize it as a time of societal discord that points to the need for some sort of unifying leadership. After all, Joshua's era was successful in part because Israel was under the leadership of an individual who harnessed their baser impulses and directed them towards compliance with the LORD's commands. Nothing demonstrates the negative effects of the lack of a central leader than Judges 17-21. And the author does not retreat from making the point: this is the sort of disorder that results when there is no king to provide moral structure for society.

But if that is the purpose of these chapters, why should we expect the author to tell it with the devices he used in the previous chapters, including the repeated framework of apostasy, oppressor, appeal for help, deliverer, and peace?

Moreover, let's notice that the phrase that appears in the first and the last references to the absence of a king: "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Notice the similarity in diction to one of the refrains throughout the heart of judges: "The Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD." The fact that the phrase in 17:6 and 21:25 speak of "in their own eyes" rather than "in the eyes of the Lord" is no real obstacle to noting this similarity, since the issue of 17-21 is the lack of social cohesion and morality in the absence of a unifying guide. The diction has been massaged in the light of that approach.

Consequently, a strong case can be made that chapters 17-21 are part of the Deuteronomistic historian's portrayal of the age leading up to the monarchy. In which case we must consider him a supporter of the monarchy.

However, as we've seen, this positive view of the monarchy meets with a less enthusiastic endorsement in 1 Samuel 8-12. So how do we explain that a work that has such a positive view of kingship at the end of Judges so quickly embraces a negative evaluation of it in 1 Samuel? Next time we’ll turn to that era of Samuel and the monarchy's founding.