

Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges

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The Book of Judges is dominated by conflicts. A lasting peace, almost reached at the end of Joshua, is again far away. Throughout the book there are three different kinds of conflict:

- *conquering the land*: the Book of Judges starts with a short description of the conquering of the promised land in 1:1-2:5, forming a transition from the book of Joshua to the book of Judges. The land is not yet completely conquered, due to the fault of the people. And instead of Israel, other nations are granted peace and rest (Judg 2:23, 3:1). The motif of conquering the land is resumed once more in chap. 17-18.
- *fight for liberation and freedom*: adding to the threat from foreign people, enemies from outside conquer, occupy and oppress Israel. In this situation saviours arise and fight for freedom. Stories about these freedom fighters dominate most of the Book of Judges sketching a period of history that encompasses several attempts at achieving rest without actually succeeding in accomplishing it on a continuing basis.
- *civil war*: not only foreigners form an ongoing threat, but rivalry among Israelite tribes leads to further fights between the tribes (cf. Judg 8:1-21, 12:1-6, 20:21).

The period of the judges is depicted as a desperate time calling for exceptional leaders. The stories in the Book of Judges, however, do not offer a solution, rather they depict a process of trial and error. The book ends with an even stronger desire for exceptional leaders.

The stories of the central figures, the judges, offer a diverse portrayal. There is no image of an ideal judge, but several individual characters sharing only one activity: they fight for their people. The judges are presented as heroes, although not without flaws, but they do not achieve sustained success. Asked for an explanation for this situation, the Book of Judges provides a recurring statement: it is the apostasy of the people that causes all the misery.

Most of the stories in Judg 3-16 are linked by a framework presenting them as episodes of Israel's failure to observe YHWH's covenant, of punishment and rescue. A varying number of recurring elements uphold the schema. In this respect, the framework is more than a loose bond between the stories.¹ The recurring elements suggest a pattern. Furthermore, these verses add a new perspective to the entire text. The stories become polyphonic as more than one voice might be heard in the same voice. In the course of the narrations the framework forms a prominent voice within the stories of individual judges that starts a dialogue with all the other voices. In this discourse neither the framework nor the individual stories remain unaffected, rather they have a mutual impact upon each other.

The elements of the framework most notably occur at the beginning and the end of the individual stories. What makes the framework of Judges special (compared to other biblical frameworks, e.g. in the Books of Kings) is the preface in Judg 2:11-19. These verses present a distinct perspective on the period of the judges.² As a preface, it could be read as an introduction to the framework as well as the stories, providing an insight into the correlation between the activities of the people, their failure to observe God's covenant and an evaluation and reaction by God.

In this paper I will look closely at the narrative function of the introduction and the framework, give examples of how the framework interacts with the introduction as well as the stories and evokes an ongoing discourse on the judges and their reigns.

¹The existence of such a framework and its elements – most times classified as a deuteronomic schema – has been described numerous times, nevertheless its narrative and rhetoric function has been widely neglected.

²Cf. Jonker, *Exclusivity and variety*, 85.

Looking at the stories in Judges through the lens of the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, the dialogue between different voices becomes obvious. The voice of the introduction with its strong valuation is the first voice to be clearly noticed. Before the stories start, this voice offers an authoritative evaluation of the period of the judges. After the judgmental anticipation, this voice is continued in the framework. However, in this process, it loses its explanatory status and starts to engage in a dialogue with the voice(s) of the individual stories, even joining other voices in a double-voiced discourse. The unfolding of the book of Judges can be described as a dialogue³ between the voice of the introduction and the voice of the individual stories. The development of the quarrelling voices reaches its climax in the story of Samson, where the interpretation of the introduction, as well as the schema upheld by the framework, dissolve into a carnivalesque presentation of events.

Preface and Framework

Continuing the stories of the conquering of the promised land in the Book of Joshua, Judg 1 summarises the military problems encountered by the Israelites and, subsequently, Judg 2 offers a religious perspective⁴ on this situation.⁵ Before the stories of the judges unfold, 2:8-10 refers back to the death of Joshua and the people of his generation contrasting them to the Israel of the present, who do not know YHWH anymore. What has been achieved is lost, the community, whose first task it is to bear God, his deeds, laws and promises in remembrance – as Deuteronomy formulates it – has failed to do so. The retrospect challenges the continuity of the people and their relationship to YHWH. The question as to whether Israel will remain loyal to YHWH, or whether anybody will be able to guide Israel, is raised quite urgently.

Judg 2:11-19 presents a short description of the era of the Judges evaluated in a strongly negative tenor. The sequence of events corresponds, approximately, to the structure of the individual stories. Some elements of this preface are repeated to frame these stories, connecting the preface and its perspective to the stories of the judges.

The preface (Judg 2:11-19)

These verses are arranged in a simple concentric structure:

- Evaluation (v 11-13)
 - God's point of view
 - Apostasy of the people, worshipping other deities and abandoning YHWH
- God's reaction (v 14-15))
 - Grants no peace, not stability
 - Other nations serve as God's tools
- God's reaction (v 16-18)
 - Judges raised as God's tools
 - God changes - not the people
- Evaluation (v 19)
 - Perspective of the narrating voice
 - The people behave worse

³According to Bakhtin "an idea only lives insofar it enters into dialogical relations with other ideas and with the idea of others and therefore the central theme, the idea of a novel unfolds in a variety of independent, different voices." Bakhtin, *Probleme der Poetik Dostoevskijs*, 301.

⁴Especially the direct speech of YHWH's messenger (2:1-3) and YHWH (2:20-21) emphasise the interrelation between promise of the land, covenant and loyalty to YHWH in the view of foreign nations and their deities.

⁵The two parts of the exposition complement one another. Cf. Amit, *The book of Judges*, 158-160.

The focus lies on the evaluation of the period of the judges. God's point of view is used as an authoritative perspective to sum up the era. It thus emphasises that there is no doubt left: this is the rating of the ultimate authority.

- (11) The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of YHWH and worshipped the Baals,
 (12) and they abandoned YHWH, 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 YHWH to anger.
 (13) They abandoned YHWH, and worshipped Baal and the Astartes.

After the evaluation, the narrating voice subsequently unfolds the evil and emphasises two aspects: following other gods (11b,12b-c, 13b) and abandoning their own God (12a.d, 13a). This shows a process of a growing distance from God and, in v 12d, it is further called *k'is*. The act mentioned is classified as an explicit provocation. Simultaneously, it is already hinted at, that whatever happens next will happen in accordance with the covenant between the people and God.

God's reaction, his anger as well as the distress he causes, is shown in vs 14a-15. Although God delivers them to their enemies the part they are allowed to play is strictly assigned to them by God; they are his tools. The main conflict unfolds between God and his people.⁶

Judg 2:14-15 is formulated as a contrasting text to Jos 21:44-45 further emphasising the relationship between YHWH and his people.⁷ The peaceful situation at the end of Joshua's reign is reversed. What has already be stated in 2:8-10, namely that the continuity has been interrupted and that Israel's existence in the land is no longer secure, is once more hinted at by this inverted image of the situation.

Judg 2:14-15

So the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel
 and he handed
 them over to raiders (*ššit*) who plundered them.
 He sold them to their enemies (*yb*) all around

whom they were no longer able to resist.
 Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand
 of YHWH was against them for the worse
 as YHWH had sad
 and as YHWH had sworn (*šb'*) to them.
 They were in great distress.

Jos 21:44-45

YHWH gave them rest on every side,
 just as he had sworn (*šb'*) to their forefathers.
 not one of their enemies (*yb*) resisted them,

Not one of all YHWH's good promises to the
 house of Israel failed, every one was fulfilled.

Although Jos 21 is interlinked as a contrasting text, Judg 2:14-15 still contains traces of the original concept of peace and security. The strict rejection is formulated as a double-voiced discourse, referring simultaneously to two different intentions. In this way the contrast between the present and the past, as well as a feeling of loss, is emphasised.

At first glance vs 16 and 18, quite abruptly, show a totally different (re)action by God.

- (16) Then YHWH raised up judges,
 who saved them out of the hands of those who plundered them.
 (18) Whenever YHWH raised up a judge for them, YHWH was with the judge,

⁶Cf. Deut 6:14, 8:19, 11:16,28, 13:7f, 28,14, 30,17f, Jos 23,16f.

⁷Cf. Becker, Richterzeit, 77.

and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge, for YHWH would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them.

Just as God raised enemies, he now raises judges. The specific role of a judge is only hinted at,⁸ the only mission explicitly mentioned is delivering Israel from its enemies. The personality of the judges does not come into focus, nor does their faith or their loyalty to YHWH, or their individual contributions. The focus lies yet again on God. God raises the judge, he is with him and thus it is God who saves.⁹ Furthermore, the cause for this change in God's behaviour lies only within God himself; he acts because he is moved by pity.¹⁰ The people on the other hand did not alter their way of life (v 17). Even the judges could not make a difference. As this summary of the situation is mentioned before God's motivation is presented, it further emphasises that the people did nothing to provoke, let alone deserve, this reaction. The logic unfolded is not based on reward and punishment but rather on punishment and grace.¹¹ While the people struggle to get away from their deity (*znh*) God reacts to the distress of his people. In conclusion, v 19 summarises the subsequent behaviour of the people. After the death of a judge, the situation becomes even worse.

(19) But whenever the judge died, they turned back¹² and were more corrupt than their fathers,¹³ following other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practises or their stubborn ways.

The introduction, vs 11-19, puts forward a quite pessimistic opinion. There is no way out, and no last chance. It makes no difference what voice of the double-voiced dialogue one follows. Neither the schema of punishment or reward, as it is evoked with the references to covenant texts,¹⁴ nor the schema of punishment and grace, which emphasises God's compassion,¹⁵ changes the situation. The people fail to uphold their side of the covenant and even the repeated and undeservedly merciful intervention of God has no impact. The final sentence on the period of the judges is passed even before the stories of the individual judges are presented.

As an introduction to stories of unique heroes the emphasis on the people is striking. The attitude of the judges is of no importance. It is only the people and their behaviour the introduction is interested in. According to the introduction, the significance of the heroes is reduced to showing them as God's tool for bringing temporary relief; they make no more permanent impact. The introduction's evaluation emphasises that there will be no "happy ending".

Although the introduction is presented in terms of a concluding evaluation, it does not necessarily summarise the intention of the individual stories of the judges. Rather it presents one voice that starts a discourse with the narratives; changing the stories and being changed itself. The introduction functions to offer one perspective, however, it is not guaranteed that this perspective will prevail in a dialogue with the individual stories.

⁸There is a hint to an educational task in 17a, but this is not unfolded.

⁹The subject in 18c could be either the judge or YHWH. Thus on the level of syntax it could not be decided of God saves or the judge.

¹⁰For the meaning of the verb *nhm* cf. Willi-Plein, *Ijobs Widerruf*.

¹¹Cf. Greenspahn, *The Theology of the Framework*, 386.

¹²does not indicate a turning around or turning off the the right way, rather it points to an iteration and intensification. Cf. Soggin, *Art. 886*. This is further emphasised by a comparative *m-)* bwt - more than their fathers.

¹³) bwt could refer to all the generations before, especially the fathers God brought out of Egypt (cf. 2:1.12, 2:10.17.10.22) but also to the last generation (6:13).

¹⁴Judg 2:11-3:6 repeatedly refers to texts of covenant; e.g. Jos 23-24, Deut 4-11, 31:14-29. Cf. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 77.

¹⁵Cf. Greenspahn, *The Theology of the Framework*, 393.

Frame

Closely connected to the introduction, is a set of motifs and phrases forming a frame for most of the individual stories. The most obvious of the repeated elements are:¹⁶

The Israelites do evil in the eyes of JHWH
 They are delivered into the hands of the enemies
 They cry for help
 God arises a judge
 God supports the judge
 The enemies are delivered into the hands of Israel
 Rest and peace for the land
 Death and burial of a judge

These repetitions connect the individual stories and form the impression of a continuous era. The repeated information, which mostly concerns the beginning and the end of every story, joins the individual stories and forms the impression of a continuous era.¹⁷ Furthermore these repetitions remind the readers repeatedly of the judgement presented in Judg 2:11-19. However, the negative evaluation only becomes obvious when reading from the introduction to the framework. Only because of the double-voiced dialogue, that brings in the critical voice of the introduction, the verses of the framework refer to the judges' futile efforts, and the remaining apostasy. The framing parts of the stories alone do not suggest such a devastating conclusion.

The minor judges

The so-called minor judges¹⁸ form a first step between a framework and a story. Although the texts do not unfold complete stories they fill an outline with individual persons. The beginning and ending of these texts uses a strict formulaic language,¹⁹ further evoking the image of a continuous series. The succession of minor judges increases the number of judges and thus strengthens the impression of an ongoing era for all Israel.²⁰ Besides their function to judge or to save Israel, the minor judges have very little in common with the stories of the major judges or the introduction. Most striking these short texts lack explicit evaluations.²¹ The interpretation of Judg 2:11-19 is not reflected in these texts. In the middle of highly evaluated stories the minor judges take up a neutral position. While telling their story the narrative voice seems not to be engaged in any dialogue.

¹⁶How many elements are considered constitutive for the schema varies. The most elaborate list is set up by O'Connell with 20 elements (cf. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 72-80); Becker e.g. only counts 11 constitutive elements, cf. Becker, *Richterzeit und Königtum*, 83.

¹⁷In contrast to the individual stories the framework offers a pan-Israelite perspective. Furthermore, it builds up a "repeated cycle so as to incorporate all the incidents it embraces as part of a larger whole". Greenspahn, *The Theology of the Framework*, 387.

¹⁸Tola, Jair (Judg 10:1-5), Ibzan, Elon, Abdon (Judg 12:8-15).

¹⁹There are two different introductions: "After (*name*) arose..." (Judg 10:1.3) "After him (*name*) judged Israel" (Judg 12:8.11.13) but only one ending: the summary of the years the judge reigned is followed by a notice of his death and burial.

²⁰"The theory that the author / redactor aimed at presenting twelve judges in order to represent all the tribes of Israel seems indeed to be a viable explanation for the inclusion of the six minor judges." Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 241.

²¹The only implicit evaluation is the reference to marriages with foreigners in Judg 12:9.

The major judges – an ongoing double-voiced dialogue

The narratives of the so-called major judges expand the stories and present the events unfolding around one central figure. Subsequently, the judge's decisions, actions and words become a dominant element of the story. Whereas the judge of the introduction has not been evaluated, because he was shown as God's (neutral) tool, the individual stories portray the judges as individual people with virtues and flaws.

These individual portrayals are set into the recurring framework and in this way they are also linked to the introduction in Judg 2:11-19. This juxtaposition implies on the one hand "that each hero account is to some extent a manifestation of the same religious-historical phenomenon"²² on the other hand it also emphasises the differences, which are sometimes subtle, sometimes very obvious and contradictory, and it thus starts a dialogue between the different voices.

One of the most obvious differences is the number of framework elements included in the individual stories. Although the recurring schema is quite simple, the individual stories do not repeat all the elements. The only exception is the story of Otniel (Judg 3:7-11). This story stands right in the middle between the minor and major judges. It is the first and only narrative, which explicitly uses every part of the schema. Although every stage of the schema is filled with individual actors – Otniel the judge, the king of Mesopotamia as enemy –, the events are not portrayed in detail nor is there a build up of suspense within the story.

In all the other stories one or more of the elements in the framework is/are missing. Furthermore, the elements of the framework are transformed and unfolded as a part of the narrative within the story.

Once the readers are familiar with the recurring elements, other parts of the story come to be perceived in reference to the framework as well. Instead of rather distant comments on the overall situation, individual elements of the story might point to the framework. In this way the framework is interweaved with the story and becomes individualised. The lack of a complete repetition of all the elements as well as the absorption of single elements into the stories promotes a double-voiced dialogue. Instead of two competing voices side by side, these voices are polyphonic, they overlap and are presented simultaneously.²³

Evil in the eyes of YHWH

Seven times²⁴ a narrative is introduced with the evaluation "and the sons of Israel did evil in the eyes of YHWH".²⁵ The repeated mention of the evil-doing of the people ensures that this evaluation forms the background for all the stories of the major judges. Whatever trouble the people is in, it is their own fault.²⁶ The stories themselves, however, do not necessarily refer to the wrongdoings or support this view at all.

Deborah (Judg 4) is shown as a prophetess and a judge, who is able to take the right actions at the right time. V 5 also mentions that Deborah is a practising judge, and that people seek her judgement (v 5). She is shown favourably as a capable leader. This description does not support the general notion of evil in v 1 and this tension cannot easily be harmonised. The

²²O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 27.

²³"It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions". Bakhtin, *Discourse and the Novel*, 324.

²⁴Judg 2:11, 3:7, 12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1.

²⁵There are two alternate formulations: "And the sons of Israel did evil in the eyes of YHWH" (Judg 2:11, 3:7, 6:1) and "And the sons of Israel continued (*yshp*) to do evil in the eyes of YHWH" (Judg 3:12, 4:1, 10:6, 13:1). The second formulation emphasises the continuity.

²⁶Only Judg 3:7 and 10:6 further specify the evil as apostasy.

narrating voice offers two different portraits of one situation. The phrase of the framework (v 1) stimulates a re-lecture and raises critical questions: is Deborah able to bring justice, does she grant the people what they seek when they go to her? Or even further: is she a good judge? Is she a judge who judges according to God's standards? Can she make a difference? Thus the phrase of the framework urges the readers to reconsider the information in vs 4-5 or, vice versa, the evaluation of v 1.

The outline of the Israelites' wrongdoing in the introduction to the Jephthah story bears the closest resemblance to Judg 2:11-13. Before the next story unfolds, the wrongdoing of the Israelites is emphasised and the severe charge is repeated once more. Following the story of Abimelech and the short mention of the judges Tola and Jair, this elaborate introduction ensures that the next stories will again be perceived from the schema's point of view. Judg 10:6 even offers the most extensive list of foreign deities the Israelites worshipped.²⁷ The great emphasis on the evil doing in the Jephthah story is not restricted to an introductory verse, rather it leads to an elaborate introduction that expands the short statements of the framework into a narrative scene (10:6-16).

Twice the element of the evaluation is even personified. Judg 2:1-5 and Judg 6:8-10 a messenger and a prophet are introduced solely to rebuke Israel. In this way the evaluation is emphasised even more. It is not only the message of the narrating voice, but God's own message delivered by a special, personal carrier.²⁸ Furthermore, the general evaluation is supplemented with a retrospect on the covenant and a notice that the people were not meeting its demands. While in Judg 2:4 the people respond to the message (they weep), Judg 6 records no reaction. Thus the speech has a merely evaluative and interpretative nature. The prophet's speech in Judg 6:8-10 forms an inclusion with the general introduction of the "evil in YHWH's eyes" (6:1). The reference to the evil doing of the people is thus even more emphasised. In the introduction in Judg 6:1-10 the speech of the prophet functions as the immediate answer to the people's cry for help (v 7), however, a very discouraging answer. The emphasis on the covenant and the logic of retribution represses the concept of God's mercy. The prophet's speech appears as a monologic speech, which challenges the different voices within the narrative voice. Nevertheless, after the perspective of retribution is highlighted in the beginning, the Gideon narrative will yet again tell a different story.

Delivered into the hands of the enemies

In most of the stories, God's reaction immediately follows the evil doing. While the introduction focuses on God's action (2:14-15) the individual stories emphasise the threat. God gives (*ntn* 6:1, 13:1), or sells (*mkr* Judg 3:8, 4:2, 10:7) Israel to its enemies. The distress caused by the enemies is one of the most common elements within all stories. It is the immediate reason for a judge taking action. Even so, this element is also varied. When the enemies come to power, Judg 3:12 states that God strengthened the enemies (*h'zq*), 4:3 mentions that the enemies oppress Israel (*lh's*), 10:9 (cf. 2:15) summarises the situation as great distress (*srr m' d*). Judg 3:8, 10:7 (cf. 2:14) further

²⁷ At the beginning of the Jephthah story this element of the introduction not only emphasises the evil deeds but it also forms an allusion to the theme of the other nations in the land who are an ongoing test for Israel (2:3, 2:20 - 3:6). With exception the Baalim and Ashtarot the other deities are not named, but referred to as "the Gods of other nations" (Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, Philistines). Thus their otherness is established through the other people who worship them. When Israel also turns to these deities it becomes obvious that Israel is unable to cope with the challenge of the foreign nations in the land.

²⁸ The speech refers back to Ex 34:12-13 and the prohibition to bond with foreign nations. Cf. Rake, *Juda wird aufsteigen*, 71.

says that the anger of God is inflamed.²⁹ This emotional reaction is used as cause for his action and points out that the punishment is not caused by an automatic deed-consequence-nexus.³⁰

The superiority of the enemies and the wrath of God form the initial problem the narratives to solve. The stories portray the oppression from the perspective of the affected Israelites rather than from God's perspective. What looked like a punishment that the people deserved in the introduction, is described as a hardship the Israelites suffer. Consequently, most of the stories further emphasise the force and the superiority of the enemies.

Urgent descriptions of the threat are shown in the stories of Gideon (6:2-6) and Jephthah (10:8-9,17). Judg 6 describes in detail how the Midianites and Amalekites oppress Israel. In order to intensify the image of danger, the size of the enemy is compared to a plague of locusts thus emphasising their unavoidable and devastating presence.³¹ Judg 10:8-9 also talks about the enemies spreading out. First the enemies threaten the land and people east of the Jordan, but then they cross the river and their threat expands to other clans of Israel as well. Similarly to the depiction in Judg 6, the inexorable spreading of the enemies is highlighted. The Deborah story uses another image, "900 chariots of iron" (4:3), to express the military superiority of Sisera and his army.

Cry for help

Five times the people cry (*š' q*) to God for help in acute distress.³² Compared to the introduction in Judg 2, this element is highlighted in the individual narratives. Judg 2:18 only mentions a groaning (*n' qh*), but no cry for help. Contrary to the introductory schema the people remember their God and hope for help. An immediate reaction by God, however, is only reported in 3:9,15, the stories of Othiel and Ehud, whereas, in all the other narratives there is growing suspense as to whether God will act or not.³³

Judg 10:6-16 emphasises the uncertainty. Following the detailed description of the enemy's spread the cry for help (*v* 10) slows the speed of the narrative and (re)focuses it on the people. The cry itself is presented by the narrating voice, but the confession of guilt is given in direct speech (10b-d and verse 15). It is the only confession and – compared to the introduction – casts a different, even a positive light on the people. God's answer starts with a review of his history with his people, highlighting their fault and finally asking them to turn to the other deities they are following instead of him. A rejection could not be formulated more harshly. God retreats. Nevertheless, the people make one more effort. They react to God's denial with a combination of confession, submission to God's will and a repeated cry for help. 16a-b shows the corresponding actions of the Israelites. God's reaction, however, is only unveiled to the readers: "and his *npš* became short (*qsr II*) because of Israel's labour".³⁴ This refers to Judg 2:18 and emphasises once more that God reacts to Israel's need. Although 10:16 does not yet tell that God changes his mind the similarity to the introduction makes it very likely that God will change his mind and rescue his people. Nevertheless, only the readers know about this change,

²⁹This emphasis is connected to those texts that speak of a abandoning and forgetting God.

³⁰Cf. Becker, *Richterzeit*, 75.

³¹Cf. Ex 10:12; 1 Kings 8:37 the locusts are one of the possible great plagues; Joel 1:4 highlights the destruction locusts cause; Prov 30:27 points yet to another possible allusion. The locusts are shown as well organised insects: "the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank". While the Israelites hide in dens and caves their enemies are numerous and appear well organised.

³²Judg 3:9,15, 4:3, 6:6,7, 10:10.

³³In the stories of Deborah (4:3) the cry for help is not answered, in the stories of Gideon (6:6) and Jephthah (10:10-14) the answer is a refusal. The communication between God and the people is severely disturbed and the concept "of a continuously sinful Israel and a consistently benevolent God" (Greenspahn, *The Theology of the Framework*, 396) is not proclaimed but only hoped for.

³⁴C.f. Num 21:4, Judg 16:16, Sach 11:8.

while the narrated figures still are clueless. Thus suspense is created. How will the people react if the threat intensifies? Or will God make his change obvious and appoint a judge again? For Judg 10, the schema fulfils an important function for the plot. God's reaction to the distress of his people forms the inciting moment of the plot. Following this introduction, the narrative in 11:1-11 appears to come from a different angle. The question as to whether the men of Gilead would succeed in recruiting Jephthah is now juxtaposed with the uncertainty as to whether Jephthah is God's chosen judge, too, or just that of the elders. And this question pervades the story, shifting the image to that of a successful, but tragic hero, who, perhaps, never had been chosen.

A judge

While the introductory schema does not provide any details on the judges or their actions, this aspect is central to the individual stories. Even the few elements mentioned in the schema – God raises a judge (3:9.16), he then saves (*yš'*) Israel (3:9) – are rarely mentioned verbatim. Quite similarly, the label “judge” is not explained,³⁵ nor do the heroes of the stories perform legal tasks or give advice to the people. Deborah is the only exception, she is shown to be a practising judge (4:5). The description of how the judges save Israel unfolds individually within every story. A variety of individual characters and heroes are presented.

The narrative describing Gideon's appointment (6:12-24) focuses on the most important task he will have to fulfil, that is to save³⁶ his people. Gideon, however, expresses serious doubts about this assignment. The questions: who is able to save Israel? is God still willing to save Israel? or will Gideon be able to act as a saviour? are the focus of the elaborate dialogues between God (or his messenger) and Gideon (6:12-16; 36-40; 7:2-11). The preface showed the judges as God's tools, most of the heroes/judges save Israel with the help of God, but, it is only in the Gideon narrative that the relationship between the judge saving the people and God saving them, is discussed. The question, however, is not answered for once and for all. God shows his superior ability to save, but, nevertheless, the people are also convinced that Gideon saved them out of the hand of Midian and, as a consequence, they offer him the kingship (8:22).³⁷ The interpretation of Gideon as a character strongly relies on the interpretation of 2:16. Either Gideon is a hero who needs to be encouraged at the beginning but emerges as a self-assured hero, or Gideon is a tool of God that became overbearing and overconfident. For the first time the Gideon story raises a competing alternative: God saves or Israel saves itself (7:2).³⁸

God's support

Judg 2:18 notes that God is with each respective judge. Although this formulation is repeated verbatim only once (6:16), another phrase also refers to it: the *rwḥ yḥwh* that empowers Gideon, Jephthah and Samson.³⁹ The information that the *rwḥ yḥwh* comes over a judge is formulated as a commentary for the readers. Whether the narrated figures realise this is happening is never expressed. In most cases the actors show no awareness of God's spirit. The comments by the narrating voice enable the readers to realise the connections of the plot. Mostly, this phrase appears just before we are told of one of the hero's' great actions. Thus the phrase ensures

³⁵The verbs *yš'* and *špt* both refer to the function of a leader, overlapping in their meaning.

³⁶The verb *yš'* occurs eight times.

³⁷Cf. Exum, *The Centre Cannot Hold*, 419.

³⁸Most occurrences of the verb *p'r* point to YHWH who shows his glory acting in Israel (cf. especially Isa 10:15, also Isa 44:23, 49:3, 60:21, 61:3).

³⁹The *rwḥ yḥwh* is introduced with different verbs: *hyḥ* Judg 3:10, 11:29; *hll* 13:25; *lbš* 6:34; *šlh* 14:6.19, 15:14 (cf. also 1 Sam 10.6.10, 11.6, 16:13, 18:10).

the readers are aware that it is God acting.⁴⁰ The acting and initiating role of the judges is re-interpreted with a reference to God.

The *rwḥ yḥwḥ* plays a crucial role, particularly in the stories of Jephthah and Samson. In the Jephthah story the mention of the *rwḥ yḥwḥ* in 11:29 is the first firm evidence to the readers that God has again changed his mind and is with Jephthah, although he did not raise him. This comment, by the narrating voice, thus brings the Jephthah story back into the schema. Only one verse along, however, this notice adds another allusion, as Jephthah takes his famous vow trying to ensure the help of God (v 30-31). Bearing in mind that the *rwḥ yḥwḥ* is already with him, the vow marks Jephthah out as sceptical, or even ignorant. The comment undermines the positive portrayal of Jephthah and it further shows the sacrifice of his daughter, not as a tragic implication, but as a consequence of his own doubt in God.

In the story of Samson this phrase helps to convert the wild man into a biblical hero.⁴¹ He is no longer an aggressive, lone fighter, rather he fights God's war.

Delivered into the hands of Israel

While the introduction only mentions that a judge "saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them" (v 16), the stories go one step further. Several times it is mentioned that God delivered the enemies into the hands of Israel,⁴² or that the enemies are subdued.⁴³ The victory over the enemies is an important part of the stories. The note that God delivered the enemies into the hands of the Israelites highlights the power and the strength they could gain with God's help.

This phrase occurs not only within the framework, but it is also included in the central sections of the narratives. In direct speech, it is used as encouragement and confirmation of God's help. In this sense, it is used in an oracle (the land is given 1:2), a vow (11:30), a speech by God (7:7), in the speech of a prophetess (4:7.14), in a premonition in a dream (7:14-15) and in a plea (15:18). In a discussion with other people, it is used to show confidence (8:7), but also to formulate a retrospective interpretation of events (8:3). The hope and certainty that God will deliver the enemies into the hands of the Israelites is a central part of their strength and their view of their own greatness.

In the Gideon story the motif of delivering the enemies into the hand of Israel is unfolded at great length.⁴⁴ In the beginning of the story, Gideon has to be persuaded that God will deliver the enemies into his hands. Thus the motif is used in contrast to the security and strength it expresses in the other stories. It is this contrast that highlights Gideon's insecurity and doubts about his mission and portrays him as a dithering hero.

Death and burial

At the end of the stories there are several concluding elements. Death and burial mark the end of a judge's reign. Regularly this element closes the story of a minor judge, it also occurs in Judg 8:32 and 16:31. However, even before the period of the judges, this element appears in the story of Joshua in Judg 2:8-10. In this text the death of Joshua raises the question of consistency in the guidance of the people. Thus with every repetition and with every death of a judge this question is alluded to and raised anew.

⁴⁰Only 3:10 connects the the *rwḥ yḥwḥ* directly to Otniel's task as judge in general.

⁴¹Cf. Mobley, The wild man.

⁴²Judg 3:10, 11:21.32.

⁴³Judg 3:30, 8:28, 11:33, subdued by God Judg 4:23.

⁴⁴7:7.9.14.15.

The motif of “rest” is closely connected to the concluding elements. Four times it is said, that the land enjoyed a period of rest during the reign of a judge.⁴⁵ Compared to the framework, the positive evaluation of the period of a judge is striking. Quite contrarily, the introduction emphasises the insignificance of a judge-neither during his reign nor afterwards do the people act any better. The contrast results from a change in perspective. While the stories of the individual judges pay attention to the well being of the people, the introduction exclusively focuses on their relationship to God.

Stories and framework

Just as the framework shapes the individual stories of the judges, the stories also challenge the framework. The evaluation at the beginning of the stories is not a rigid and everlasting schema, rather it crumbles under the accumulating doubts and conflicting stories. Either the saviours YHWH appoints challenges the principle of God’s tool (Gideon), or the leaders YHWH imposes on his people are unwanted (Samson), or God does not appoint a leader at all (Jephthah). The focus of the stories rapidly shifts from the people and their liberation to the leaders and the individual problems and episodes in their reigns.

While the authoritative voice of the framework is challenged and disappears in a lively dialogue with the voices of other stories, no alternative dominant voice arises. The firm voice introduced in Judg 2:11-19 fades away.

Dissolving the Schema - Samson

The increasing involvement of the judges and the individualisation of the narrated events hit their peak in the Samson story.⁴⁶ The national dimension of this leader and saviour is only alluded to, whereas his personal skirmishes fill most of the narrative. The story of Samson not only individualises the elements of the framework, but also exaggerates and ridicules them. The curious portrayal of a “wild man” as an Israelite judge shows traces of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival.

The various stories of Samson show a multifaceted hero. He is introduced as a promised child, who grows up to become a man of superhuman strength. In several conflicts, he is superior to the Philistines and he can only be overwhelmed by treachery. Such heroes are common in folk stories. Samson’s place within the book of Judges, however, alters these stories. Now the hero fights with the help of God and his struggles are related to the fate of his people. However, this combination brings out serious inconsistencies distorting the story into a carnivalesque series of events.

It starts in Judg 13 with the only birth-narrative in the book of Judges. Samson is not only appointed by YHWH as a judge, he is elected before his birth. With this narrative pattern Samson is aligned with other exceptional people and situations (cf. Abraham/Sarah/Isaac, Hannah/Samuel). These links also point to the differences between the stories and point out some elements of irony. The first suspicion is raised by the circumstances of Samson’s parents. Although Samson’s mother is declared barren, this has not yet become problem for her or her husband. God’s messenger is the first to announce the problem. Thus the promised child does not relieve distress, but is a real surprise. The full significance of the child is further only an-

⁴⁵So Judg 2:11. 30, 5:31, 8:28, cf. Jos 4:23. The motif of rest also refers to Joshua and alludes to this time of peace. Thus the time of the judges and the time of Joshua are connected. Cf. Rake, *Juda wird aufsteigen*, 134.

⁴⁶It has widely been noted that the framework is incomplete in the Samson story pointing to the end of the repeated stories. Cf. e.g. Greenspahn, *The Theology of the Framework*, 389; Exum, *The centre cannot hold*, 412.

nounced to the unnamed mother (13:5), while Manoach, the father, is excluded and left without any function.⁴⁷

The way the child is announced already exhibits a humorous side, but it is also full of suspense.⁴⁸ More than any other judge, Samson is singled out⁴⁹ and his birth story rouses great expectations. However, these expectations are disappointed in Judg 14-15 as the sacred element (the Nazirite) is mixed with the profane image of a wild man. Samson does not become an exemplary saviour or judge, instead the image of a judge is turned upside down. Samson is elected, but he fights mostly for personal issues. Several crude skirmishes between Samson and the Philistines are described in rapid succession. These episodes focus on Samson's enormous strength as well as his wits, unfolding a sometimes cruel, but nevertheless humorous and turbulent story.

According to God's messenger, the mission of Samson is to begin to rescue Israel from the Philistines. Samson's first confrontation with the Philistines starts with a personal bond (14:1-19). When Samson informs his parents that he wants to marry a Philistine woman (v 1-4) different perspectives appear in the narrative. The parents take on the perspective of the people, in their view the Philistines are foreigners and opponents, disdainfully called "uncircumcised", whom Israelites should avoid (v 3). In Samson's point of view this woman is the right one, she is (*yšr*) in his eyes (v 3).⁵⁰ Yet another perspective is introduced by the narrating voice. From God's point of view, this encounter serves as a purposeful occasion for a confrontation. This interpretation turns the usual distance between Israel and the Philistines upside down. The conflict is transported from a national-political level to a family one.⁵¹ This becomes even more obvious as all three perspectives exist side by side. Following the marriage,⁵² most of Samson's fights develop from personal troubles.

Samson is blessed with an exorbitant self-assessment. He acts as if he is invulnerable (16:20) and everything is at his disposal. Samson's self-perception also becomes apparent if he is harried or injured. His vengeance (14:9; 15:15) as his vindication (15:7; 16:28) is beyond any measure. Samson repays any personal harm on a national level. Only in 15:9-13 all Israel comes into focus. V 9 starts out with a typical situation of harassment. However, instead of urging Samson to fight for his own people, the Judahites seek an individual solution and try to hand Samson over to the enemies. Obviously, the Judahites do not regard him as a freedom fighter, but rather as a hero they distrust and want to get rid off. The great victory Samson gains is again shown as his personal triumph (15:14-16). Samson does not become a saviour of his people. Conversely, the Philistines regard Samson as their enemy, representative of his people. All their efforts are concentrated on defeating Samson. This also seems like a reversal of the usual narrative events where the judges exemplary lead their people to victory. In the Samson story the judge is exemplary vanquished. Like Samson, neither the people of Israel, nor the enemies fit into the usual picture. Although a superiority of the Philistines is shown, it is not emphasised as an acute problem for the people.

⁴⁷This trait is unfolded in some detail. E.g. the answer to Manoach's prayer brings the messenger back to the woman, but not to Manoach (13:8-11), the messenger does not answer Manoach's questions concerning the mission of the promised son but focusses only on Manoach's wife (13:12-14); Manoach does not recognise the God's messenger (13:17.21) and once he recognises him he is scarred (13:22).

⁴⁸E.g. the child's Nazirite status that is only revealed to his mother (13:5). The connection between election, birth and death, mentioned first by the mother (13:7), is a first hint of the promised child's fate.

⁴⁹Cf. Exum, *The Centre Cannot Hold*, 423.

⁵⁰This utterance already refers to the last part of the book of Judges, where it is repeatedly stated that "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25).

⁵¹Cf. Bakhtin, *Probleme der Poetik Dostoevskijs*, 138.

⁵²Focusing on women, the basic opposition between Israelites and Philistines is brought down to earth, to the level of the body, thus revailing another element of carnival. Cf. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 19-20.

Nevertheless, the narrating voice repeats several times that God is with Samson. Like many other elements of the framework, YHWH's involvement is picked up by the story. The narrative voice includes commentaries pointing out that the *rwḥ yḥwḥ* is involved in Samson's skirmishes and supports him (13:25, 14:6.19, 15:14),⁵³ thus informing the readers that YHWH is acting behind the events.⁵⁴ While YHWH's acting is not apparent to the narrated figures (13:16; 14:4; 16:20) for the readers it becomes obvious "that no threat is too great for Samson when the spirit takes possession of him."⁵⁵ God also answers Samson's prayers (15:18-19, 16:28-30). These individual prayers are the only references to the element of a "cry for help".

The motif of the hero longing for women, but being unable to recognise an obvious conspiracy against him (Judg 16:6-21) further adds to the (humorous) counter-image of a judge. Not even the heroic end of the story changes this image. Before a heroic element is unveiled Samson becomes a laughingstock (*šḥq*) in the eyes of the Philistines. As they gather for a feast they enjoy laughing at their worst enemy. Although the narrating voice views this event as a great success, because Samson killed more Philistines than ever before (16:30), the hero himself dies in the collapse of the temple. Furthermore the perspective offered by the narrating voice is not unique, Samson's point of view is shown as well. In his perspective, the destruction of Dagon's temple and killing all the people is just revenge for one of his eyes (16:28). Once more an element of irony overlays the picture.

Samson's portrayal shows traits of Bakhtin's concept of a carnival king with the typical process of exaltation and degradation. Born as a promised child and endowed with enormous strength his fall is foreseeable from the beginning. His invincibility and success cumulates in his relation with Delila and leads to his total humiliation in Gaza. Yet his death simultaneously is a moment of triumph and celebration and the beginning of Israel's liberation.⁵⁶

Neither the enemies, the threat they pose, nor the hero and his fights are portrayed with the earnestness of the other stories. The exaggeration includes an anti-authoritarian force that undermines the image of the introduction. The chosen leader develops an individuality that has not been mentioned or foreseen in the introduction. In Samson's encounter with Delilah, the actions of this hero display yet another aspect. The image shifts from the hero fighting his enemies with God's help, to a conflict between the hero and his God. The question of individual loyalty is raised when Samson unveils his secret (16:17).

With the last of the judges, the role of "God's tool for his people", the schema designed for a judge, collapses. Simultaneously, the whole concept becomes dubious.⁵⁷ When seen as carnivalesque, the portrayal of the collapse of the schema becomes less threatening. Even though the problems demonstrated here are severe and challenge the basic schema of interpretation without leading to a new valid interpretation, the humorous element of the collapse offers room for new interpretations.⁵⁸

⁵³A hint that the influence of the *rwḥ yḥwḥ* is not unproblematic is given in 13:25 "And the *rwḥ yḥwḥ* began to stir (*p(m)*) him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol." Most occurrences of *p(m)* refer to unease, especially uneasiness caused by dreams (Gen 41:8; Dan 2:1,3; Ps 77:5). As Samson's uneasiness is not emphasised, it seems to be aimless though limited to a small region.

⁵⁴Cf. Exum, *Promise and Fulfillment*, 37ff.

⁵⁵Exum, *Theological dimension*, 38.

⁵⁶Cf. Bakhtin, *Probleme der Poetik Dostoevskijs*, 138-140.

⁵⁷Exum interprets the dissolving of the well established narrative elements as a sign that the "cyclical pattern of punishment and deliverance has exhausted itself." Exum, *The Centre Cannot Hold*, 413.

⁵⁸One of those attempts is the longing for a king in Judg 17-21.

Summary

The narratives of the individual judges portray heroes who rescue their tribe/people from the oppression of fierce enemies. These heroes are far from being flawless, but, nevertheless, they are shown in a positive light. Chosen by God, or supported by him, they are able to save their people and sometimes, we are told, they even provide rest and peace for the land. A framework connects these stories and, together with the stories of the minor judges, it helps to construct the image of an era. The repeated description of oppression and rescue characterises this era as a troubled one, but, nonetheless, also as an age of great leaders, who are supported by God.

Reading the stories with a Bakhtinian model of polyphonic and carnevalesque texts opens a new view on these narratives.

The introduction in Judg 2:11-19 introduces a clear, authoritative voice that serves as a guideline for a relecture of the hero stories. It disempowers the judges and reduces the great heroes to God's tools. There is no need for individual heroes. Their great victories and battles are just minor events within God's reaction to the people. Whatever they do - there is no change. Only a change in the behaviour of the community could accomplish that. The best the judges can manage is to make evident God's mercy for his people.⁵⁹

This voice continues throughout the narrations of the judges. But the narrating voice is not restricted to this voice, it rather is constantly engaged in a dialogue between different concepts and portraits of the Judges and their era. At a first glance this discourse seems to confine itself to the clearly separated verses of introduction and framework on the one hand and the individual stories on the other hand. But it soon becomes apparent that the dialogue continues in the individual narrative. More and more the narrating voice does not only present two perspectives but is engaged in a double voiced dialogue. The perspective of the introduction adds a grain of doubt to the reading of every hero story and, with the repeated elements, it makes sure this doubt lingers. Focusing on the influence of the single stories on the introduction and the schema of the framework, the changes are at least as radical. In story after story, one or more of the seemingly established elements is challenged and set aside. In the end, the discourse between the various voices dissolves into a carnevalesque portrayal of one of the greatest and surely strongest heroes. This indicates an ambivalent disposition towards the role of the judges and their importance. In a somewhat disquieting way a familiar schema is unravelled and challenged. No alternative (or monologic) interpretation is offered in its place, but the quarreling dialogue between the voices remains.⁶⁰ The dialogic discourse in the Book of Judges remains unfinalisable.⁶¹

Even more, the strict and pessimistic portrayal of the era of judges presented in Judg 2:11-19 is turned upside down. In the carnevalesque portrayal of Samson it becomes possible to make fun of otherwise troubling views on Israel's history and the relation to its deity. Once the authoritative attempt has crumbled the carnival spirit "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world (...) and to enter a completely new order of things."⁶²

⁵⁹This is a function they first of all fulfil for the readers.

⁶⁰All voices offer a specific point of view on the world, they represent a form of conceptualizing the world in word, specific world view, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values." Bakhtin, *Discourse and the Novel*, 291f.

⁶¹According to Bakhtin dialogic truth is only to be found at the point of intersection of several unmerged voices. Cf. *Probleme der Poetik*, 301.

⁶²Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 34.

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