

SESSION TWENTY – SIX

THE GIDEON NARRATIVE AS THE FOCAL POINT OF JUDGES

Judges 3:7—16:31

NOTE: The following is an article by the same name that was originally published by *BibSac* in 1992 [See J. Paul Tanner, "The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:594 (Apr-Jun 1992): 146-61]. The material presented here is the same as in the original article, with only slight formatting changes to conform to the style of these notes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the grandeur of Hebrew poetry has long been recognized, far less attention has been paid to the literary composition of Hebrew narrative. However, the last three decades have seen a dramatic shift of attention to structural and stylistic aspects of Hebrew narrative. Studies have demonstrated that ancient Hebrew narratives were composed with care, using sophisticated literary techniques.¹ One interesting facet of this narrative artistry is the imposition of structure by means of textual patterning, that is, the control of words and motifs so as to form symmetrically arranged patterns in the text.²

This article introduces the rhetorical study of structure in Hebrew narrative, which may be termed "textual patterning." This is then applied to the Book of Judges and in particular to the Gideon narrative of Judges 6–8, since this unit serves as the pivot point for the book. The article also seeks to illustrate the significance of this research by suggesting how textual patterning in the Gideon narrative contributes to the theological message of the book.

II. TEXTUAL PATTERNING IN HEBREW NARRATIVE

Against the background of the traditional critical approaches to the Hebrew Scriptures, the past three decades have witnessed the emergence of a need for a synchronic approach to the text. Attention to the canonical form of the text has led to the discovery of repeated instances in which the Hebrew text has been structurally shaped and patterned. The results of such approaches have provided some balance to the extremes of historical critical methods and have also demonstrated that structural patterning of the text can be an important clue to the theological emphasis of the narrative.

¹ A few of the more notable treatments of narrative artistry are Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOT Supplement Series 70 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983); Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford, 1966); and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

² For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see this writer's "Textual Patterning in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Case Study in Judges 6–8" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1990), hereafter referred to as "Textual Patterning."

In the synchronic approach to Hebrew narrative some scholars have employed the method known as “structuralism.”³ This approach, which arose out of the field of secular literary criticism, must be distinguished from the approach taken here, because “structuralism” does not focus on the formal surface aspects that define the structure of the text. Furthermore it does not have as its goal the interpretation of the text, thereby limiting its usefulness for most biblical scholars. Overall, structuralism suffers from the vanity of trying to impose an abstract Western literary method on ancient texts rather than deriving a method inductively.

The discipline of rhetorical criticism, on the other hand, is concerned with observing the formal surface structure of narrative texts. Although rhetorical criticism is not limited to this concern, it at least includes it. As envisioned by James Muilenburg, the pioneering scholar of this discipline, rhetorical criticism is concerned with a multitude of stylistic matters and particularly with the unique features of a given narrative composition (failure to attend to unique features being a deficiency that Muilenburg saw in “form criticism”).⁴ Rhetorical criticism points out a host of literary features, including repetition of words (and phrases and motifs), inclusions, chiasms, literary structure, strategic placement of particles, the use of parallelism, wordplays, and paronomasia. Hence rhetorical criticism is a synchronic approach concerned with matters of style, structure, and texture. “Textual patterning” is a term used here to refer to the patterned structural composition of the biblical text.

A number of common types of textual patterns have been observed by scholars: alternation, ring composition, inclusio, chiasmus, parallel, introversion, and concentric.⁵ Such patterns have several values. First, they are helpful in confirming the bounds of a literary unit. Second, the introversion and concentric patterns can highlight important points of the literary unit or mark the turning point in the plot development. Not only can inclusions give emphasis by way of repetition, but their use to frame or bound a unit can be particularly helpful in recognizing textual patterns within the unit.

Textual patterning may be simple or complex. For instance, the paralleling elements may simply be verbal repetitions (of a word or a phrase), but often the paralleling elements can be ascertained only by abstracting the plot development.⁶ Yet even the latter may have word or phrase repetitions as well. In addition to this variation of the way in which parallels are formed, complex and multiple structures

³ A bibliography relevant for work in structuralism can be found in David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible I*, 2d ed., JSOT Supplement Series 7 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 98–101. For a good treatment of structuralism, see J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975). For an analysis and critique of structuralism and its application to the Bible, see D. C. Greenwood, *Structuralism and the Biblical Text* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985); T. J. Keegen, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 40–72; and J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 104–39, 185–94. For helpful comments from an evangelical perspective, see Carl E. Armerding, *The Old Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) and Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

⁴ James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (March 1969): 1–18. Allen P. Ross has written a helpful introduction from an evangelical perspective: “Literary Analysis of the Text,” *Exegesis and Exposition* 1 (Fall 1986): 5–17.

⁵ See further, Tanner, “Textual Patterning,” 74–85. Also see H. Van Dyke Parunak, “Oral Typesetting: Some Uses of Biblical Structure,” *Biblica* 62 (1981): 153–68.

⁶ This has been demonstrated, for example, by John H. Stek, “The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4,” in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 53–86.

may also be present. This may include asymmetrical patterns where there is a disruption of the symmetry for the purpose of causing something to stand out for emphasis.

Although cases of textual patterning are well attested in Hebrew Scripture, the challenge is to recognize and determine their presence in the text.⁷ The primary key may lie in the way in which “bounds” are established for textual patterns.⁸ Fundamental to this is an understanding of the literary unit known as an “episode.”⁹ Episodes can usually be identified by the transitional techniques used between them. These transitional techniques may include temporal clauses (especially with וַיְהִי), circumstantial clauses, הִנֵּה clauses, repetition (of key words, phrases, or motifs), or shift of scene (often accompanied by transition verbs of motion such as בָּא, הֵלֵךְ, עָלָה, יָרַד, and יָצָא, or even a verb of apprehension such as רָאָה). Understandably the presence of such devices in the text does not automatically signal a verse as being episode initial or episode terminal; the point is simply that transitions from one episode to another often occur in conjunction with these factors. Being aware of their presence in the text helps the interpreter develop a sensitivity to the transition from one episode to another, and the ability to recognize these episodes is fundamental to discerning textual patterns.

Previous studies highlighting textual patterns have borne witness to the fact that there are often *shared traits* between different textual patterns (i.e., patterns that are found in different narratives). Hence there are universals, and this reality makes possible the formulation of a method for searching them out. The following steps are suggested for such a procedure.

1. Recognize the overall structural features of the book or major unit in which a narrative resides.
2. Determine episode boundaries. Transition techniques (possible clues to episode bounds) must be identified and evaluated. Particularly important is the presence of *inclusio* or framing.
3. Look for textual patterning *within* an individual episode (the microlevel). Of particular importance here is the paralleling of terms, phrases, or motifs.
4. Look for parallels and connections *between* episodes to see if there is a pattern at the macrolevel.
5. Examine the patterns for the significance. Whether textual patterning is present at the microlevel or macrolevel, careful evaluation must be made of the findings to understand how and why patterns are being utilized by the author.

⁷ Several articles have been written on this topic, but a few of the more helpful works are J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Structural and Stylistic Analysis* (Assen-Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975); Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler, eds., *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 1 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974); and Allen P. Ross, “The Dispersion of the Nations in Genesis 11:1–9,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 119–38.

⁸ See Tanner, “Textual Patterning,” 91–116, for an extensive technical discussion and substantiation of episode bounding and transition techniques.

⁹ An episode is an incident within the overall story that is complete in itself. An episode may be composed of one or more paragraphs and may join with other episodes to form a larger section. See J. Cheryl Exum, “Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19 (1981): 12.

III. THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The Book of Judges may be viewed as having a two-part introduction (1:1–2:5 and 2:6–3:6) and a two-part epilogue (17:1–18:31 and 19:1–21:25). Parallel ideas and motifs link the first introduction (1:1–2:5) with the second epilogue (19:1–21:25), and in like manner the second introduction (2:6–3:6) with the first epilogue (17:1–18:31).

The main body of the book (3:7–16:31) evidences structural arrangement by recurring words and phrases that have been labelled *stereotyped formulae*. Most notable of these is the phrase, “And the sons of Israel again did evil in the eyes of the lord,” which heads up nearly every narrative block within the main body. These stereotyped formulae suggest that a narrator skillfully wove the accounts together for the purpose of making a theological point.

Within the main body of the book, seven major narrative blocks can be noted. Moreover, there are certain parallel features between these narratives so that the entire book reflects a carefully worked symmetrical pattern.¹⁰ Furthermore this pattern has as its focal point the Gideon narrative in 6:1–8:32.¹¹

- A Introduction, Part I (1:1–2:5)
 - B Introduction, Part II (2:6–3:6)
 - C Othniel Narrative (3:7-11)
 - D Ehud Narrative (3:12–31)
 - E Deborah-Barak Narrative (4:1–5:31)
 - F Gideon Narrative (6:1–8:32)
 - E’ Abimelech Narrative (8:33–10:5)
 - D’ Jephthah Narrative (10:6–12:15)
 - C’ Samson Narrative (13:1–16:31)
 - B’ Epilogue, Part I (17:1–18:31)
 - A’ Epilogue, Part II (19:1–21:25)

This arrangement suggests that the Gideon narrative has a unique contribution to make to the theological development of the book. As the nation went from one cycle of discipline to the next,

¹⁰ Credit goes to D. W. Gooding, “The Composition of the Book of Judges,” *Eretz Israel* 16 (1982): 70–79, for the identification of this overall scheme (though this writer disagrees with the structure Gooding suggests for the Gideon narrative). For elaboration of the paralleling themes and motifs, see Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, JSOT Supplement Series 46 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

¹¹ For a different concept of the structure of Judges, see Dale Sumner DeWitt, “The Jephthah Traditions: A Rhetorical and Literary Study in the Deuteronomistic History” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1987). DeWitt locates the center of the book with the Jephthah narrative, partly by reason of the lists of “minor judges” that frame the Jephthah narrative. For a discussion and refutation of this position, see this writer’s “Textual Patterning,” 222–28.

there was a continual deterioration. Also there was a shift in the “quality” of the judges themselves as the book advances. The Gideon narrative seems to mark a notable turning point.

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF THE GIDEON NARRATIVE

An examination of the Gideon narrative reveals 20 episodes. They yield no significant evidence of inner-episodal textual patterning, but there is ample evidence of inter-episodal textual patterning, that is, patterning based on relationships between the episodes.¹² The episodes tend to group together in clusters in which two or three episodes share a bonding between them on the basis of a common motif, a repeated phrase, an inclusio, or some other grammatical or syntactical feature that tends to set them off from other episodes. This technique of *episode bonding* is found throughout the narrative, resulting in eight episode clusters. Furthermore, when these clusters are examined from an even broader perspective, a pairing of episode clusters can be discerned. The result is that for the four episodes in 6:11–32, an alternation pattern of the type A B A' B' is found. For the six episodes in 6:33–7:18, a concentric pattern of the type A B C C' B' A' is found. For the six episodes in 7:19–8:21, an alternation pattern of the type A B C A' B' C' is noted.

The result is an overall division of the Gideon narrative into five primary sections. Furthermore, though these sections are derived on the basis of textual patterning, they accord perfectly with the contents of the narrative. The first section (6:1–10) provides the introduction and setting before Gideon's debut, the second section (6:11–32) gives the commissioning of Gideon as deliverer of Israel, the third section (6:33–7:18) presents the preparation for the battle, the fourth section (7:19–8:21) recounts the defeat of the Midianite army, and the fifth section (8:22–32) records the conclusion to Gideon's life after the victory over Midian. Yet thematic parallels exist between the first and fifth sections and between the second and fourth sections, thus giving the whole narrative a symmetrical pattern:¹³

- A 6:1-10
- B 6:11-32
- C 6:33–7:18
- B' 7:19–8:21
- A' 8:22-32

Sections A and A' have thematic connections with one another, and both have a simple A B pattern. Sections B and B' have thematic connections, and both have an alternation pattern. The remaining section C has a unique structure of its own with a concentric arrangement. Thus the overall structural pattern for the Gideon narrative highlights the middle section, 6:33–7:18.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STRUCTURAL PATTERN OF JUDGES

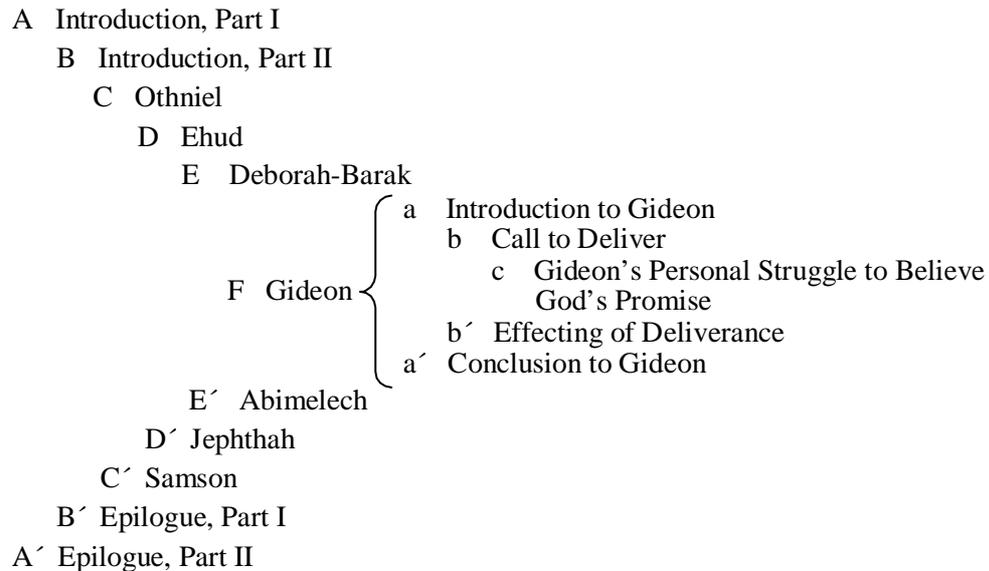
A. The Organizing Principle of Symmetry

Examining the Book of Judges through the structural approach of textual patterning leads to two observations. The first is that the book as a whole is structured in a symmetrical inversion

¹² See Tanner, “Textual Patterning,” 147–99, for a detailed analysis of Judges 6–8.

¹³ For documentation, see Tanner, “Textual Patterning,” 188–99.

pattern with its focal point being the Gideon narrative in chapters 6–8. The second is that the Gideon narrative itself is also structured in a symmetrical inversion pattern, with its focal point being 6:33–7:18. Significantly the same type of structuring technique that characterizes the book as a whole characterizes the Gideon narrative itself. Associations between sections based on thematic parallels constitute the organizing principle for the symmetrical arrangements. The patterns underlying these two observations can be superimposed as follows:



B. Gideon as the Turning Point in Judges

In relation to the book as a whole, Gideon receives attention as the focal point because he represents a significant shift in the “quality” of the judges that served Israel. A progressive deterioration begins with Othniel and continues through Samson.¹⁴ Othniel was almost an idealized judge, and Samson was a debauched self-centered individual. God used each judge, whether strong or weak, to accomplish His sovereign will and effect deliverance for the theocratic nation.¹⁵ Gideon, on the other hand, stands somewhere between these two extremes and represents the primary turning point from the “better” judges to the “weaker” ones.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jobling has also noticed that judgeship initially appears positive but then becomes more and more negative. “The section begins with the judge-system in place and working (Othniel). Then, and with increasing pervasiveness, problems with the system are permitted to appear; rule by the judges fails to conform to expectations” (*The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible II*, 60). Jobling then lists four evidences of this negative trend. J. Cheryl Exum also observes that all the judges except Othniel make for unlikely heroes and that some of these leaders exhibit highly questionable behavior (“The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 [July 1990]: 412). Cf. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading*, 157–58, 170–71.

¹⁵ Abimelech is obviously an exception in that he did not deliver the Israelites from a foreign power. Yet as a leader, he demonstrates the dangers of dynastic kingship when power is placed in the hands of an ungodly individual.

¹⁶ Exum has made a similar observation: “Although no neatly progressive pattern emerges, a turning-point occurs with Gideon. Gideon and the important figures after him reveal disturbing weaknesses, if not serious faults” (“The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” 412). In chapter 7 of

The Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah-Barak narratives. Othniel, the first judge, delivered Israel from Cushan-rishathaim of Mesopotamia. This is recorded in a concise, straightforward manner (3:7–11). The text neither mentions nor hints at flaws in his character, and the passage seems to illustrate perfectly the divine principle for dealing with the theocratic nation that had been delineated in the second introduction in 2:11–23. Furthermore Othniel came on the scene already a hero figure, because he had been previously introduced in 1:11–15 as a relative of the valiant Caleb who captured Debir (also known as Kiriath-sepher). Of possible significance is the fact that Othniel arose from the tribe of Judah. The second judge, Ehud, was left-handed and a man of the tribe of Benjamin and is seen in a positive light. Barak was a valiant warrior and led Israel to a mighty triumph over the forces of Jabin, king of Canaan, but his record is slightly tainted by his hesitation to follow the divine orders given through Deborah, a mistake for which he was deprived of the honor of capturing the enemy commander in battle (4:8–9).

The Gideon Narrative. With Gideon, the accounts of the judges become more complex. Whereas the Othniel account is very brief, the next two (Ehud and Deborah-Barak) are progressively longer. In comparison, the Gideon narrative is significantly longer, and this remains the governing principle for the rest of Judges.¹⁷ The Gideon narrative also reflects greater complexity in that there is more elaboration on him as a person and more negative notes in the account. At the same time, the Gideon narrative marks a shift in the deteriorating condition of the nation in its relationship to Yahweh, in that He dealt more firmly with the nation. Though the familiar refrain “the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” is given in 6:1, the Gideon narrative is not simply one more cycle of apostasy on par with the previous ones. The nation’s apostasy had reached a lower point, and this is underscored by the additional fact that the Lord sent an unnamed prophet to rebuke them (6:7–10) *before* Gideon was raised up as a “judge” to handle the Midianite crisis.

This apostasy is also singled out by the shift in character of the one God used as a *deliverer*. Gideon was not the noble example Othniel had been. Certainly Gideon was good news for Israel in that he effected the needed deliverance from Midian (and did act valiantly and nobly at several points in the story), but he struggled to believe God and was flawed in character, as seen in the following incidents.

He cynically expressed disappointment with God’s present treatment of the nation (6:13).

He was reluctant to accept God’s call to him to be a deliverer (6:15).

He needed a confirming sign that the call was really from God (6:17).

Though he obeyed the Lord by tearing down the Baal altar, he did it by night because he feared the men of his village (6:27).

The fleece incident reveals his lack of faith, because it was nothing more than an attempt to gain confirmation for what he already knew to be God’s will (6:36–37).

his dissertation, L. G. Stone has demonstrated how “compared with the Othniel account, the judges following him form a clear three-step decline from triumphant judges (3:12–5:31) through a transitional figure, Gideon (6:1–8:28), to the ‘tragic’ judges (10:6–16:31)” (see abstract of “From Tribal Confederation to Monarchic State: The Editorial Perspective of the Book of Judges” [PhD diss., Yale University, 1988]).

¹⁷ The Abimelech account is somewhat of an exception to this trend, though the principle is still true if it is recognized that Abimelech is an extension in one sense of the Gideon narrative.

He took extreme measures of vengeance against his fellow Israelites at Succoth and Penuel (8:16–17).¹⁸

His making of the ephod resulted in the nation “playing the harlot” after it, that is, using it in an idolatrous way (8:27).

Though he declined the kingship, his actions show that he really coveted this honor for himself (8:23–31).¹⁹

He sought to establish a harem for himself as well as to take a Shechemite concubine (8:30–31).

To all this could be added that his father was a community leader in the Baal cult (6:25–27). Clearly a shadow of suspicion hangs over Gideon, and the judges who followed him were unquestionably worse.

The Abimelech narrative. The Abimelech narrative obviously differs from the others in the series, and its purpose is not to portray him as a “judge” but rather to “play through” a crucial issue raised in the Gideon narrative. The Gideon narrative introduced the issue of dynastic kingship (8:22–23),²⁰ and the Abimelech narrative shows the potential for evil that such a political arrangement could have in the hands of an incompetent and decadent individual.²¹

¹⁸ Webb, pointing out the internal fighting that took place under Gideon and Abimelech, wrote, “Gideon is the first judge to turn the sword against his compatriots” (*The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading*, 158). The problem of internal strife, first observed with Gideon, persisted with Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson. Though not necessarily placed chronologically, the epilogue to Judges reveals the intensity and magnitude of the internal problem.

¹⁹ Block states, “In spite of his pious comment, ‘I will not rule over you’ (8:23), all of these actions suggest the opposite. He behaves like an oriental king, a status memorialized in the name of his son, Abimelech (‘my father is king’)” (Daniel I. Block, “The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration*, ed. Avraham Gileadi [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 50). For further discussion on the monarchy element, see Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible II*, 58–87; Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), 123–24; and Dale DeWitt, “The Jephthah Traditions,” 285–309.

²⁰ The monarchy theme is another valuable contribution the Gideon narrative makes to the overall theology of Deuteronomy through 1 Samuel. The Book of Judges not only fills the gap between the Moses-Joshua era and the implementation of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8–12, but Judges is already anticipating, as it were, the coming of the monarchy. Jobling states, “Kingship in Israel makes its definitive appearance in 1 Sam 8.... But, in relation to that section, Judg 6–9 cannot fail to hold particular interest. Standing as part of the account of the judge-period, which account, I have argued, provides the theological context for the rise of monarchy, the Gideon-Abimelech chapters record a previous time when Israel took up its deuteronomic option to seek a king. We have here, then, a proleptic treatment of the theme of monarchy” (*The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible II*, 66–67). “If the whole narrative of the judge-period prepares us generally to read 1 Sam 8–12, Judg 6–9 does so much more specifically. The rise of monarchy has happened before! Judg 6–9 adjusts our reading of 1 Sam 8–12, as it were, in advance. Being under no constraint to portray kingship positively, it can explore thoroughly its dubious aspects” (*ibid.*, 85). If Judges as a whole prepares the reader for the monarchy development in 1 Samuel, it is most interesting that the issue would be raised precisely in the Gideon narrative, which, as seen in the structure of the book, is the central portion.

²¹ Jobling has noted this as well in Judges 6–9: “The section treats many aspects of monarchy, with particular stress on its potential evils. It assumes kingship to be hereditary, and says or implies much about heredity, its ‘rules’ and its problems. Through what is said both about Gideon and about Abimelech, the characteristic misdeeds of kings are rehearsed” (*ibid.*, 84).

The Jephthah narrative. With Jephthah the narration seems to return to the topic of the judge proper, but again the characterization of him as a worthy judge is questionable. Block states,

The narrator's characterization of Jephthah as a "valiant warrior" (*gibbôr hayil*, 11:1) hardly commends him spiritually for the role of savior in Israel. Indeed, he was a most unlikely candidate for leadership, being the ostracized son of a harlot and a leader of a band of brigands in the mountains of Gilead (11:1–3). Although his bargaining with the Ammonites reflects political astuteness and an awareness of YHWH's actions in Israel's history (11:12–28), his negotiations with the leaders of Gilead are motivated by opportunistic ambition (11:9–11). His rash vow, preceding his battle with the Ammonites, sounds like the type of bargain foreigners would make with their gods (11:30–31).²²

Besides Jephthah's character being suspect, once again the deterioration of the nation is underscored by a divine rebuke as a preface to Jephthah's introduction in the narrative (10:10–16). This is parallel to the Gideon account, which indicates that the nation's apostasy is not simply cyclical. However, the situation had worsened beyond that of the Gideon narrative, because now the Lord went a step further: "You have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress" (10:13–14).

In light of the values of Torah, Jephthah was not a fitting judge for the nation, and yet that seems to be just the point. With each round of apostasy, the nation seemed to plunge deeper, God's response was more serious, and the "judge" for the nation was less and less qualified for the role. There is a correspondence between the nation's unfaithfulness to Yahweh and His Torah, and the "quality" of the judge who was raised up to deliver them.

The Samson narrative. The judgeship of Samson seems to epitomize this trend. He married a Philistine woman, had an affair with a Philistine harlot, and loved another Philistine woman, Delilah. All this was in contrast to his Nazirite calling. Though he did inflict casualties on the Philistines, he did not deliver the nation from the foreign power, and in fact the theocratic nation never followed him into battle. The more godly Samuel (through intercessory prayer and leading the nation through repentance) would have the privilege of seeing the Philistines subdued at the battle of Mizpah (1 Sam 7). Commenting on Samson's qualification as judge, Block remarks, "Like most of the other judges, Samson was an unlikely candidate for leadership in Israel. The narrator seems to stress that what accomplishments were achieved were all to YHWH's credit, produced in spite of, rather than because of, the man."²³

Webb contends that Judges 3:7–16:31 represents one complex narrative movement with a climactic realization of major themes in the Samson narrative. "These themes are brought to a unique focus in the story of Samson whose personal history recapitulates that of Israel as a whole in the judges era, especially in his *nazir* (separate) status, his going after foreign women, and his calling upon Yahweh."²⁴

Thus the judgeship narratives in the main body of the book reflect a definite deterioration, and the Gideon narrative functions as the turning point of the series. Two facts highlight this observation: (a) a structured arrangement of the text (a symmetrical inversion pattern) with

²² Block, "The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule," 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴ Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading*, 179.

Gideon as the focal point, and (b) the fact that with Gideon the narratives become substantially longer and more complex in comparison with the first three judge narratives.

C. The Focal Point of the Gideon Narrative

All the judges except Abimelech countered a foreign threat, but only in the case of Gideon is there an extensive personal interaction between the judge and the Lord. This observation suggests that the narrative provides more than simply a victory account for future generations of Israel's defeat of Midian. While it is true that Samson offered up a few quick prayers, only in the case of Gideon is there a focus on the judge's faith and his coming to grips with the Lord's call on his life. "No character in the book receives more divine assurance than Gideon and no one displays more doubt. Gideon is, significantly, the only judge to whom God speaks directly, though this privilege does not allay his faintheartedness."²⁵

The significance of this observation is even reflected in the structure of the Gideon narrative. The matter of Gideon being the judge (i.e., deliverer) from the Midianites is not the focal element of the narrative. Certainly he was used for that purpose, but the focus of the narrative comes in 6:33–7:18, in which the theme of deliverance is momentarily suspended to allow for another development. The primary matter in the Gideon narrative is not the deliverance itself, but rather something more personal, namely, Gideon's struggle to believe God's promise.

D. Gideon's Struggle to Believe God's Promise

Judges 6:33–7:18 is arranged in the following concentric pattern:

- A The Spirit-endowed Gideon *mobilized* four tribes against the Midianites, though *lacking confidence* in God's promise (6:33–35).
- B Gideon sought a *sign* from God with the fleece to *confirm the promise* that the Lord would give Midian into his hand (6:36–40).
- C With the *fearful* Israelites having departed, God directed Gideon to *go down* to the water for the further reduction of his force (7:1–8).
- C' With *fear* still in Gideon himself, God directed Gideon to *go down* to the enemy camp to overhear the enemy (7:9–11).
- B' God provided a *sign* to Gideon with the dream of the Midianite to *confirm the promise* that the Lord would give Midian into his hand (7:12–14).
- A' The worshipping Gideon *mobilized* his force of 300 for a surprise attack against the Midianites, *fully confident* in God's promise (7:15–18).

The reduction of Gideon's army is a familiar story often told from the perspective of emphasizing God's ability to deliver whether by many or by few. While this is true, such an explanation falls short of doing justice in this context. The context is dealing with a struggle within Gideon himself.

The first episode of this section (6:33–35) seems to open on a valiant note, for in these verses the Spirit of God is said to "clothe" (לְבַשׁ) Gideon and use him for rallying the Israelite tribes

²⁵ Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," 416.

for battle. Nevertheless caution must be taken not to read too much into this event. Block is on target in his explanation:

Whereas in the case of Gideon the Spirit is said to have “clothed”...the man (6:34), this should not be interpreted too differently from every other instance in which the Spirit is described as having come/rushed upon its object. This expression, reminiscent of Num 24:3 (in which case Balaam, the Mesopotamian prophet, experiences the same phenomenon), does not presuppose any particular level of spirituality on the part of the recipient. To the contrary, this divine intrusion into human experience seems to graphically describe YHWH’s arresting of men ill-disposed toward resolving Israel’s problems and his equipping of them for the saving task.²⁶

In this case the ministry of the Spirit reflects God’s sovereign will to set things in motion for the deliverance He planned, not Gideon’s condition of faith or spirituality. Certainly Gideon was acting in obedience when he blew the shofar and summoned the Israelite tribes to battle, but the following episode (6:36–40) with his request about the fleece clearly reveals his shortcomings.

Rather than being a paradigm for the discernment of God’s will, Gideon’s request for a fleece is an expression of doubt and lack of faith: “Then Gideon said to God, ‘If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor’” (6:36–37). By his own admission Gideon already knew God’s will and promise, for this had been carefully articulated to him by the Angel of the Lord (6:14–16); the problem was his own ability to take God at His word.

God’s promise and Gideon’s problem of faith are crucial matters in tension within 6:33–7:18, an observation confirmed even by the structural components. For instance five of the six episodes pick up the promise theme in the leitmotif of the Lord giving (נָתַן) Midian into the hand of Israel (6:36; 7:2,7,9,14–15). In addition to this, the repetition of “fear” (יָרָא) in the two innermost episodes of the structure (7:3,10) singles this out for attention.²⁷ The reduction of Gideon’s force on the basis of “fear” has its backdrop in Deuteronomy 20:8: “Then the officers shall speak further to the people, and they shall say, ‘Who is the man that is afraid (הַיָּרֵאָה) and fainthearted (הַלֵּבָבִי)? Let him depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers’ hearts melt like his heart.’” The irony of the unit in Judges is that one of the tests for eliminating unnecessary Israelite warriors (viz., fear, see Judg 7:3) is the very problem that

²⁶ Block, “The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule,” 52.

²⁷ The fear motif is stressed not only by the repetition of יָרָא but by the unique use of a related word חָרַד. In 7:3, God’s instructions for removing the men of fear are found in the words גִּי־יִרְאָה וְחָרַד יָשָׁב. The adjective חָרַד basically means “trembling” from fear, though Bauman contends that the semantic focus is on panic terror (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “חָרַד,” by A. Bauman, 5 [1986]: 167). Most translations render this as “whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return,” though Boling treats the expression as a hendiadys: “Whoever is downright afraid” (Robert G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], p. 144). In either case the connection with the place-name חָרַד עֵין of 7:1 can hardly be missed. As a proper name, חָרַד appears as a hapax legomenon. Whatever the lexical connection with verse 3 (Boling translates חָרַד עֵין as “Harod’s Spring” [ibid., 142]), the narrator seems to intend a play on words, that is, the very name of the place is a reminder of the “fearful trembling” that turned men back from battle. G. R. Driver notes the play on the name, but rejects the notion that חָרַד עֵין is so-called because of Gideon’s proclamation that whoever was fearful should leave (“Hebrew Homonyms,” *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 16 [1967]: 54–56). Driver claims that three or four distinct roots lie behind the Hebrew חָרַד.

beset the leader himself. The connection with 7:10, in which the Lord spoke to Gideon, is striking: “But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp.” The issue then was whether Gideon himself could overcome his own fear to believe that the Lord would give Midian into the hand of Israel. In this case the structure has proved useful, playing handmaid to the narrator’s chief concerns: ridding Gideon of his fear and lack of faith and convincing him that God would do exactly as He had promised.

Gideon’s request with the fleece reflected war in his heart: he was fearful and lacked faith. Interestingly the reduction of Gideon’s army in the structure of the text falls precisely between his unfounded request for a fleece and God’s exposure of his fear. Therefore the reduction of the army was not so much intended to glorify God (by demonstrating His ability to deliver with only 300) as it was to put Gideon in a position where his fear would be exposed. The very thing Gideon had hoped to achieve by the fleece demonstration—some kind of self-assurance that things would turn out well—was the very “carpet” that God pulled out from beneath him. Gideon sought to gain some security by his self-conceived sign with the fleece, and though God acquiesced to that request, He immediately countered by putting Gideon in an even more vulnerable position. If Gideon struggled to trust God with 32,000 Israelites against a Midianite force of 135,000 (see 8:10), how would he react when he had only a force of 300? In this light the words of God in 7:10 take on great significance.

E. The Resolution of Gideon’s Fear

What Gideon sought to gain by the sign of the fleece was brought to nil. So he had to go back to the choice to believe God’s promise simply because God had spoken. To help him see that, God devised a sign for him. In the fifth episode (7:12–14), God confirmed His will through a Midianite’s dream, which Gideon overheard being retold and interpreted by the Midianite. The statement “God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand” repeats the promise God had been making all along to Gideon, but now God allowed him to hear it from the lips of a Midianite soldier. The irony is stunning: hearing the promise directly from the Lord did not convince Gideon, but hearing it from the Midianite soldier did.

The final episode of this section (7:15–18) shows that overhearing the dream brought about the desired effect in Gideon. “And it came about when Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, that he bowed in worship” (v. 15). From that point on Gideon was a different man—a man of faith and courage. In the final segment of verse 15, Gideon roused his small band to action with the words, “Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands.” The promise of deliverance now poured forth from his own lips with complete confidence in God. Gideon had moved from fear to faith, and that is precisely the point of the section 6:33–7:18.

F. The Relationship of Structure to Theology

The textual patterning of the Gideon narrative is carefully composed to highlight not the deliverance from Midian but the change that transpired in Gideon’s heart, and it is precisely there that the greatest theological lesson in these chapters is found. The fear in Gideon’s heart held him back from being able to trust the promise God had given about his delivering Israel from the Midianites. To overcome this deficiency in Gideon’s life, God uniquely worked to expose the problem of fear in his life and to bring him to a point of worship and faith. Then and only then was Gideon ready to lead Israel in battle. Within this central section of the narrative, the six episodes are carefully composed in a concentric arrangement (A B C C’ B’ A’) as though the very structure reflects the *reversal* going on within Gideon. Furthermore all the struggles in the book result from a lack of faith. This struggle is most fully spelled out in the

Gideon narrative, which accords with this event (his religious struggle) being put in the very center of the book.

Though Gideon's life eventually became a disappointment (like those of most other judges and kings in Israel's history), the focal element of the Gideon narrative from the perspective of the structure provides a paradigm of what God was looking for in a leader for the nation: God desired a leader who would simply worship Him and take Him at His word. For Gideon, this lesson did not come easily. The narrator, savoring the theological impact that the historical recounting of Gideon's story provided for his readers, suspended the deliverance account momentarily to allow the camera (as it were) to slow the tempo and focus in on Gideon as a leader. The concentric patterning of the text with the "fear motif" centrally placed²⁸ highlights God's careful tooling of Gideon the man to demonstrate His desire for the leader of His covenant people. In doing so, the narrator leaves the reader with a penetrating message: God must bring His servant to a moment when, with all human confidence stripped away, he sits silently in humble adoration of his God as the One who is totally sufficient against all odds to accomplish His divine will. Then and only then is he ready to move forward to taste God's victory, though that victory is no more secure or certain than before.

VI. CONCLUSION

The judges of Israel (as valuable as they were in delivering Israel at times) proved to be an insufficient means by which Israel would overcome her foreign aggressors. The problem of course was not the inability of the Lord to safeguard His people, but their continual and even worsening tendency to turn from Him. Though God raised up the deliverers needed for the moment, He sovereignly controlled the "quality" of the judges provided. It is no wonder then that the main body of the Book of Judges does not present a uniform cycle of sin-discipline-repentance-deliverance. Overall, the cycles reflect a progressive degeneration, so that by the time Samson comes on the scene the reader is left questioning the value of a judge altogether. That is precisely the impression the narrator wished to present, and that is what makes the epilogue to the book so appropriate. By the time the reader reaches the end of the Samson narrative, he ought to realize that another "judge" would not be the answer to the nation's problem. The narrator, in anticipation of what was coming in 1 Samuel with the crowning of a king, was overtly using the twofold epilogue of Judges 17–21 to further this transition from a theocracy (utilizing judges) to a monarchy. As stated four times in Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The judges were a disappointment (and ultimately Gideon himself was also). But at the very center of the judge cycles is the theological truth of what God seeks in His leaders: He desires those who worship Him and take Him at His word, and thus are committed to doing all His will. As the kings took their place over the nation, the same expectation would fall on them as well. How fitting that this enduring lesson would be strategically placed (through textual patterning) at the very heart of the Book of Judges, not simply in the Gideon narrative but at the focal point of that narrative as well.

²⁸ Elements C and C' of the concentric pattern for 6:33–7:18 contain the repetition of נָרָא ("fear") whereby Gideon's own problem is artfully exposed.