

Power to Save!?: The Role of the Spirit of the Lord in the Book of Judges

Lee Roy Martin*

Church of God Theological Seminary, 900 Walker ST NE, Cleveland, TN 37311, USA
lmartin@cogts.edu

Abstract

This study of the role of the Spirit of Yahweh in the book of Judges utilizes a literary-theological approach as a way of hearing the stories of the four judges who are empowered by the Spirit. It is argued here that the Spirit of Yahweh in Judges functions primarily as the dynamic presence of Yahweh that compels and empowers the judges to effectuate Yahweh's salvation of his covenant people, and that each of the stories presents a unique perspective on the role of the Spirit.

Keywords

the book of Judges, judges, Holy Spirit, Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Spirit empowerment, charisma, leadership, salvation

A. Introduction

The Spirit of Yahweh (רוּחַ יְהוָה) appears seven times in the book of Judges,¹ and these seven texts have enjoyed more than a little attention, having been included in a number of studies on the Holy Spirit.² The studies, however, are

* Lee Roy Martin (DTh, University of South Africa) is Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at the Church of God Theological Seminary, Cleveland, TN, USA.

¹ Judg. 3.10 records the first canonical appearance of the phrase רוּחַ יְהוָה. The other six appearances in Judg. are 6.34; 11.29; 13.25; 14.06; 14.19; and 15.14.

² E.g., Dale Moody, *Spirit of the Living God: The Biblical Concepts Interpreted in Context* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 14-15; George T. Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), pp. 17-18; Stanley M. Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Pub. House, 1976), pp. 33-42; John Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible: All the Major Passages About the Spirit: A Commentary* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1990), pp. 53-55; Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (trans. John F. Hoffmeyer; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 50-74; and Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), pp. 112-18.

brief and have not given sufficient attention to the place of the Spirit of Yahweh within the overall narrative of Judges. My goal is to bring a fresh perspective to bear upon the Spirit in Judges by utilizing a literary-theological approach that appreciates the references to the Spirit as a part of the larger narrative context.

I argue that the Spirit of Yahweh in Judges functions primarily as the dynamic presence of Yahweh that compels and empowers the judges to effectuate Yahweh's salvation of his covenant people. Other scholars have proposed similar interpretations,³ but have omitted consideration of important features of the narrative. I argue further that each of the stories of the judges presents a unique perspective on the role of the Spirit. Samson, for example, is a paradoxical character who is repeatedly empowered by the Spirit to perform feats that have no apparent relation to the salvation of Israel. Even though he is the most powerful judge in Judges, he is unable to save Israel from the Philistines.

B. The Prologue of Judges

The book of Judges begins with a prologue (1.1-3.6) that sets the stage for the stories of the judges (3.7-16.31). The first part of the prologue (1.1-2.5) recounts the warfare that continues between the Israelites and the Canaanites following the death of Joshua. The tribes of Israel undertake the task of securing their individual territories by driving out the remaining Canaanites, but many of the tribes are unsuccessful. Yahweh censures the Israelites, declaring that their failure is a result of their violation of the covenant (2.1-5) and that, consequently, Yahweh will allow the Canaanites to continue as 'adversaries' and 'their gods will be a snare' (2.3).⁴

The second part of the prologue (2.6-3.6) offers a programmatic summary of the book of Judges that previews the book in terms of a recurring cyclical pattern. The cycle begins when the Israelites forget Yahweh and engage in idolatry. The behavior of the Israelites provokes Yahweh to anger and he

³ See John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 541, who writes that the Spirit comes on a leader and 'he or she is inspired to undertake extraordinary ventures for the sake of the people's freedom and well-being'. Cf. Welker, *God the Spirit*, who describes the Spirit's work in 'early' (p. 51) texts under the heading: 'In deliverance out of collective distress and sin: Restoration of solidarity and of the community's capacity for action—Spirit and process of emergence' (p. 52). Unfortunately, Welker's synthetic theological approach does not treat the Judges texts separately from similar texts in 1 Samuel.

⁴ Cf. ch. 5 of Lee Roy Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God: A Pentecostal Hearing of the Book of Judges* (JPTS, 32; Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, forthcoming). Biblical citations are the translations of the author unless noted otherwise.

disciplines them by handing them over to an oppressive enemy. The Israelites then cry out to Yahweh for deliverance, and Yahweh is moved with compassion because of their suffering. Finally, Yahweh raises up a judge who saves the Israelites from their enemy, and the land enjoys a time of peace. Although each appearance of the cycle incorporates a unique combination of elements,⁵ the cycle can be reduced to two basic movements. First, the Israelites rebel and God punishes them. Second, the Israelites cry to God and he saves them.⁶ The uniting of these two movements into one recurring cycle registers the theological tension between the justice of God and the mercy of God (cf. Exod. 34.6-7).⁷ Finally, the prologue predicts that the idolatry of the Israelites will grow more egregious with each repetition of the cycle and that the relationship between Israel and Yahweh will deteriorate (2.17, 19).

C. Othniel: Paradigmatic Deliverer

Once the prologue has established the pattern for the book, the stories of the judges get under way, beginning with a short, concise narrative that features Othniel as the first of the judges. A mere five verses, the story reads:

The Israelites did evil in the sight of Yahweh; they forgot Yahweh their God, and they worshiped the Baals and the Asherahs. And the anger of Yahweh burned

⁵ The variations are charted in detail by Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (VTSup, 63; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 22-25. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies; Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), p. 231, lists the elements of the cycle as 'rebellion, affliction, conversion, peace'. Instead of the impersonal taxonomy of Wellhausen (and other scholars), I would prefer to use the more relational language of the biblical text, which presents the cycle in the form of concrete verbal clauses: Israel did evil; Yahweh sold them; Israel cried out; Yahweh raised up a judge; etc.

⁶ Cf. Walter Beyerlin, 'Gattung und Herkunft des Rahmens im Richterbuch', in Ernst Würthwein and Otto Kaiser (eds.), *Tradition und Situation: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie. Artur Weiser zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), pp.1-29; and Walter Brueggemann, 'Social Criticism and Social Vision in the Deuteronomic Formula of the Judges', in J. Jeremias and L. Peritt (eds.), *Die Botschaft und die Boten: Festschrift für Hans Walter Wolff zum 70. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), pp. 101-114.

⁷ Most interpreters, unwilling to retain the theological tension, have chosen to describe the cycle as one of justice, in which the deliverance of the Israelites is conditioned upon their repentance, or one of mercy, in which the anger of God is eclipsed by his compassion. I contend, however, that an important theological claim of Judges is that the tension between God's justice and his mercy is never dissolved. See ch. 7 of Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*. Welker claims that these deliverances are 'experiences of the forgiveness of sins' (*God the Spirit*, p. 65), and they may be, but forgiveness language is entirely absent from Judges.

against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. The Israelites cried out to Yahweh, and Yahweh raised up a savior for the Israelites, and he saved them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of Yahweh came upon him, and he judged Israel, and he went out to war, and Yahweh gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. And the land had rest forty years. And Othniel son of Kenaz died (Judg. 3.7-11).

The completeness of the elements in the cyclical pattern, the brevity of the story, and the flawless performance of Othniel suggest that he is the paradigmatic deliverer in the book of Judges.⁸

As predicted in the prologue, the Othniel story begins with the idolatry of the Israelites and Yahweh's judgment of their sin. 'On the basis of sin', writes Welker, 'Israel loses its internal unity, its coherence. Inasmuch as Israel forgets God and turns to the idols of peoples of other lands, it loses its internal coherence. It loses the power to defend itself against outside aggression and oppression'.⁹ Then, after the Israelites serve Cushan-rishathaim for eight years, they cry out to Yahweh. The Hebrew word עבד, used here to describe the servitude of the Israelites, is the same word that represents their bondage in Egypt (Exod. 1.13-14), and the word זעק expresses their cries in both situations (Exod. 2.23). In Judges, just as in Exodus, the Israelites cry out in the midst of their suffering and Yahweh responds with compassion, raising up a savior who saves them (ישע). The Spirit of Yahweh (רוח יהוה) comes upon Othniel and he judges Israel, and he goes to war, and he accomplishes salvation. Yahweh, the God who saves them from the servitude of Egypt, now hears their cries and saves them from the servitude of Cushan-rishathaim.¹⁰ The Spirit of Yahweh, therefore, strengthens Othniel for the task of breaking the community-threatening power of oppression.¹¹ With the coming of the

⁸ See Lawson Grant Stone, 'From Tribal Confederation to Monarchic State: The Editorial Perspective of the Book of Judges', (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1988), pp. 260-89, who argues for the paradigmatic role of Othniel. Cf. Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (trans. Jonathan Chipman; Biblical Interpretation, 38; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), pp. 160-66; and Rea, *Holy Spirit*, p. 54.

⁹ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 63.

¹⁰ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), who shows the significance of the exodus tradition and how it is carried forward (pp. 173-81).

¹¹ Although the Spirit enables the judges to lead Israel into battle, Welker argues that the Spirit is not not a 'spirit of war' (*God the Spirit*, p. 52-58).

Spirit, a ‘process of emergence sets in, a process that in an unforeseen manner constitutes a new beginning, new relations, a new reality’.¹²

The text seems to assume that the hearer¹³ will know the meaning of the phrase רִיחַ יְהוָה. It is well established that the Hebrew רִיחַ has a broad semantic range that includes ‘wind’, ‘breath’, ‘air’, ‘disposition’, ‘vigor’, and ‘spirit’.¹⁴ In some cases, it is difficult to choose which of these meanings of רִיחַ best fits the context;¹⁵ but in most cases, an examination of biblical patterns of usage clarifies the meaning. Although there is some value in establishing of an original core meaning such as ‘air in motion’ or the like,¹⁶ such a broad definition is of little use in determining the meaning of רִיחַ in a specific text. The context and collocations of רִיחַ must take precedence over any diachronic or etymological reconstructions when determining the meaning of רִיחַ in each context.¹⁷

The meaning of רִיחַ as ‘wind’, while not bearing directly upon the book of Judges, is part of the conceptual fabric of the book’s theology of salvation. Israel’s primal salvation narrative is the exodus, which is effected by Yahweh’s direct intervention, an intervention that sometimes comes through the agency of the mysterious and powerful רִיחַ. Yahweh uses an east wind (רִיחַ) to bring the locust plague against the Egyptians and a west wind (רִיחַ) to drive them into the sea (Exod. 10.13, 19). It is the east wind (רִיחַ) that Yahweh uses to divide the waters, allowing the Israelites to pass over on dry ground (Exod. 14.21). Dale Moody contends that ‘the primacy of the exodus in Israel’s faith promoted

¹² Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 64-65.

¹³ I prefer the term ‘hearer’ over ‘reader’, because ‘hearing’ expresses more precisely the goal of a Pentecostal approach to Scripture. See ch. 3 of Lee Roy Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*.

¹⁴ Francis Brown *et al.*, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (trans. Edward Robinson; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), pp. 924-25; Ludwig Köhler, *HALOT* (2 vols.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, Study edn, 2001), II, pp. 1198-2000.

¹⁵ Furthermore, in some texts the meanings may interchange and merge into dynamic word play. E.g., Ezek. 37 and Isa. 40-42. On the nuances of רִיחַ in the latter text, see John Goldingay, ‘The Breath of Yahweh Scorching, Confounding, Anointing: The Message of Isaiah 40-42’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997), pp. 3-34.

¹⁶ Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. A. S. Todd; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 140; cf. J. Barton Payne, ‘רוּחַ’, in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (eds.), *TWOT* (2 vols.; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), II, p. 836. See also Walter C. Wright, ‘The Use of Pneuma in the Pauline Corpus with Special Attention to the Relationship between Pneuma and the Risen Christ’, (Ph.D. Diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1977), pp. 10-16, who argues that the original meaning of רִיחַ is probably ‘breath’; and Harold D. Hunter, *Spirit-baptism: A Pentecostal Alternative* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 23, who prefers ‘wind’ as the most fundamental meaning.

¹⁷ Cf. Alphonsus Benson, ‘The Spirit of God in the Didactic Books of the Old Testament’, (S.T.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, 1949), p. 71.

ruach as the metaphor for God's direct action in nature and history'.¹⁸ This powerful רוח appears in the exodus story as the invading presence of God, of which Michael Green writes, 'the Beyond has come into our midst, and we can neither organize nor domesticate him'.¹⁹

More directly related to the book of Judges is the meaning of רוח as 'Spirit'. The intended audience of Judges would be aware of the Hebrew traditions regarding רוח as the Spirit of Yahweh and would import those traditions to this text. Furthermore, a hearer of the biblical narrative from Genesis to Judges would have some awareness of the nature and functions of the Spirit in relation to humanity, to the community and to leadership. For example, a hearer of the Torah would know that the abiding presence of Yahweh's Spirit sustains human life (Gen. 6.3); the Spirit gives Joseph the ability to interpret dreams (Gen. 42.38), thus saving Israel (Gen. 50.20); the Spirit enables artisans to construct the priestly garments (Exod. 28.3) and the tabernacle (Exod. 31.3; 35.31);²⁰ Yahweh's Spirit is upon Moses and is given to seventy elders who prophesy and who then serve as assistants to Moses (Num. 11.17-29); the Spirit of God inspires the prophecy of Balaam (Num. 24.2); Joshua is chosen to be Moses' successor because the Spirit is 'in' him (Num. 27.18); and when Moses lays his hands upon Joshua he is 'filled' with the Spirit (Deut. 34.9).²¹ These texts seem to suggest that in the Torah the Spirit of God relates to humans as the *untamable gift of the energizing presence of Yahweh*.²²

Not only do these texts from the Torah clarify the nature and function of the Spirit of Yahweh, but they also prepare the hearer of Judges for the appearance of the Spirit in the story of Othniel. The coming of the Spirit upon Othniel is the only element of the cyclical pattern that is not explicitly named in the prologue; therefore, the hearer might be surprised by this first biblical

¹⁸ Moody, *Spirit of the Living God*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁹ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (I Believe, 1; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 19-20.

²⁰ In the texts that I cite here, the Spirit of wisdom is clearly a gift of divine empowerment.

²¹ Apparently, Joshua is chosen partly because the Spirit is already in him, yet the Spirit comes into him in even greater measure when Moses lays his hands upon him.

²² Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), who concludes that the Spirit functions in the Old Testament as the 'empowering presence' of God (p. 8). While the trinitarian nature of the Spirit is not a concern of these texts, it has been noted that Yahweh is the only ancient Near Eastern deity who has a spirit. Other gods may control the *ruach* (wind), but they have no *ruach* (spirit). Lloyd R. Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Tokyo: Seibunsha, 1972), p. 1. Cf. Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, p. 5. Cf. Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, p. 541 who contents that the *ruach* of Yahweh indicates that he is present 'in part, but not in whole'.

appearance of the phrase רִיחַ יְהוָה.²³ Reflection upon the Spirit in Israel's Torah, however, places Othniel within the trajectory of earlier leaders. That is, in light of the Spirit's empowerment of previous leaders (Joseph, Moses, the seventy, and Joshua), the hearer of Judges might assume that Spirit empowerment is a necessary qualifier for leadership in Israel and that the 'personal encounter is not for its own sake—it is for the sake of the community'.²⁴ Thus, the importance of Othniel's reception of the Spirit becomes clearer as the 'mark of God's chosen' leader,²⁵ and the Spirit's authorization of Othniel positions him in the company of the past heroes of Israel.

The commissioning of leaders by Yahweh often includes the promise that his presence will be with the leader. It might be argued that the phrase רִיחַ יְהוָה is a way of speaking about this personal *presence* of Yahweh. Therefore, we hear Yahweh say to Moses, 'I will be with you' (Exod. 3.), and later we hear that Yahweh's Spirit is upon Moses (Num. 11). In the same fashion, we hear the narrator of Judges say that Yahweh will be 'with' the judges that he raises up (Judg. 2.18.), and later we hear that the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon Othniel (3.10).²⁶ Further into Judges, we hear Yahweh say to Gideon, 'I will be with you', then we hear that the Spirit of Yahweh 'clothed' Gideon (6.34). The coming of the Spirit, therefore, corresponds to the promise that God will be 'with' his chosen leader²⁷ and is a manifestation of the presence of Yahweh.²⁸

As the presence of Yahweh, the Spirit that comes upon Gideon and the other judges is designated as the Spirit of 'Yahweh' (יהוה) rather than the Spirit of 'God' (אֱלֹהִים). This consistent use of 'Yahweh' over 'God' adds a personal quality to the narrative, since Yahweh is the distinctive personal name of Israel's covenant God.²⁹ The book of Judges prefers the name 'Yahweh', which

²³ The phrase רִיחַ יְהוָה occurs 27 times in the Hebrew Bible. Although the phrase is not found in the canon prior to Judges, there are two texts in which the Spirit is suffixed by a possessive pronoun whose antecedent is Yahweh. Yahweh speaks of 'my Spirit' (Gen. 6.3), and Moses remarks, 'would that all of the people of Yahweh were prophets and that Yahweh would put his Spirit upon them' (Num. 11.29).

²⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 571. Cf. Welker, *God the Spirit*, who insists, 'in no instance is the descent of the Spirit merely a private affair' (p. 75); and Benson, 'Spirit of God', p. 72.

²⁵ Herbert Wolf, 'Judges', in F. E. Gaebelin (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), III, p. 398.

²⁶ See Amit, *Judges: Art of Editing*, p. 161, who apparently recognizes the correlation between 2.18 and 3.10, since she places the two verses opposite each other in a chart.

²⁷ Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSup, 46; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 127.

²⁸ Cf. Moody, *Spirit of the Living God*, p. 12.

²⁹ Cf. Stanley M. Horton, 'The Holy Spirit in the Book of Judges', *Par 3* (1969), pp. 9-14 (14).

appears 175 times, over the broader name ‘God’, which is used only 15 times;³⁰ and up to this point in Judges, the name ‘Yahweh’ is used in every reference to the God of Israel except in the speech of Adoni-bezek (1.7). Therefore, it is Yahweh who swears to give the land to the Israelites (2.1); it is Yahweh who brings them up out of Egypt (2.1); it is Yahweh who promises to keep covenant forever (2.1); it is Yahweh who directs the tribes in the conquest (1.1-2); it is Yahweh who gives the Canaanites and Perizzites into the hand of Israel (1.4); it is Yahweh who gives victories to Judah and Joseph (1.19-22); it is Yahweh who sends his angel (2.1); it is Yahweh to whom the Israelites make sacrifice (2.5); it is Yahweh who is angered by Israel’s idolatry (2.14); and it is Yahweh who promises to raise up judges (2.16). Consequently, it is the Spirit of Yahweh which comes upon Othniel in order to assure the realization of Yahweh’s commitments.³¹

I would argue that the personal name ‘Yahweh’ claims priority in Judges because it is Yahweh who is the creator of Israel as an alternative egalitarian community that stands over against the oppressive regimes of Egypt and Canaan.³² The Spirit of Yahweh, therefore, comes upon Othniel in resistance to Cushan-rishathaim, who represents the Canaanite system of tyrannical city-states. Yahweh is the God who stands outside every human system of power, control, and oppression and who critiques those systems and who, as divine warrior, delivers his people from the domination of those evil systems.³³ Yahweh is Israel’s king, her suzerain, who guarantees freedom from the human structures of authority that seek to dominate and enslave. The Spirit of Yahweh, therefore, is the Spirit of the Mosaic covenant, the Spirit that is ‘at work giving new order and new orientation’,³⁴ the Spirit of a new kind of God who is not beholden to human centers of power. The Spirit of Yahweh is the Spirit of the God who is free to bestow his saving power upon whomsoever he will, who is faithful to his covenant people,

³⁰ The number 15 does not include the 10 places where the phrase יהוה אלהים occurs, because in those cases the more general name (אלהים) is subordinate to the personal name (יהוה).

³¹ The phrase *ruach Yahweh* demonstrates that ‘it is Yahweh himself who came to the rescue by raising up the judge/deliverer’. Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 134.

³² Cf. George E. Mendenhall, ‘Hebrew Conquest of Palestine’, *BA* 25 (1962), pp. 66-87 (73-86).

³³ Cf. Bruce C. Birch *et al.*, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 113-14. See also, Georges Auzou, *La Force de L’esprit, Étude du “Livre des Juges”* (Paris: Éditions de l’Orante, 1966), p. 75, who insists that the power of the Spirit is always for the liberation of the land. Auzou writes, ‘Il est manifeste, d’autre part, que ce don d’une énergie supérieure est en relation avec la libération du territoire sauf dans le texte de 14, 6, il s’agit toujours d’ennemis à vaincre, à exterminer ou à expulser’.

³⁴ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 51.

who passionately embraces those who suffer, and who suffers with them.³⁵ Consequently, the Spirit functions in the Othniel cycle to authorize and enable Othniel as a warrior judge who accomplishes Yahweh's salvation of Israel (3.9).

This first judge is a person who knows the struggle against the Canaanites and who is known as a victor (Judg. 1.11-15); in fact, he is the only victor in the first chapter of Judges who is mentioned by name. Othniel, the nephew of Caleb, defeats the town of Kiriath-sepher and achieves notoriety as a local leader.³⁶ However, once Yahweh determines to save Israel from Cushan-rishathaim, he chooses Othniel as the first of the judges, and Othniel is propelled beyond the level of clan leader to the status of national savior. Although historical evidence indicates that the judges ruled as tribal chieftains over small regions, the narrative of Judges portrays them as national leaders.³⁷ Therefore, in the account of Othniel's rule, his tribal affiliation is not mentioned, but he is identified as one who 'judged Israel' (3.10).³⁸ The narrative, by repeatedly utilizing the terms 'Israel' (יִשְׂרָאֵל) and 'sons of Israel' (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), frames the story in terms of national participation and significance. The first judge, therefore, is a person who is recognized as a local leader but who is subsequently authorized and empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh to enter a larger arena of influence. In this regard, Othniel stands in continuity with the seventy elders, who before the Spirit 'rested' (נוּחַ) upon them (Num. 11.25) were known (יָדַע) to be leaders (Num. 11.16) and with Joshua, who before the Spirit 'filled' (מָלֵא) him (Deut. 34.9) had the Spirit 'in' (ב) him (Num. 27.18) and served as Moses' assistant.

The text declares that 'the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Othniel', and the Hebrew phrase 'came upon him' (וַתְּהִי עִלָּיו) is suggestive of several points: 1. As mentioned above, it is the Spirit who is the active subject of the verb, and Othniel is a recipient of the action; 2. The Spirit is not a part of Othniel either physically or psychologically, but comes to him from outside; 3. The Spirit's action registers Yahweh's movement from perceived absence to perceived presence;³⁹ and 4. The phrase 'came upon' is a vivid figure of speech that signifies a theological concept in phenomenological terms.

³⁵ Samuel Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology* (JPTS, 14; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), highlights the biblical witness to God's redeeming compassion (pp. 72-77) and maintains that the Spirit-filled church will imitate the compassion of God in formation of redemptive community (pp. 103-112).

³⁶ I find no evidence for Welker's contention that the Spirit uses leaders who do 'not really fit into any community' (*God the Spirit*, p. 51).

³⁷ Cf. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, p. 234.

³⁸ For a more thorough discussion of the nationalistic agenda of Judges, see ch. 5 of Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*.

³⁹ Cf. Horton, 'The Holy Spirit in the Book of Judges', p. 14, who writes that the Spirit is not 'a mere influence coming from a God who is far away'.

The theological concept is that the Spirit of Yahweh empowers, energizes, and equips Othniel for the task of saving the Israelites. It has been asserted almost universally that the work of the Spirit in Judges is temporary and external rather than lasting and inward.⁴⁰ Although the text is nearly silent regarding the exact nature of the Spirit's work in the Old Testament, the judges show evidence of courage, wisdom, and faith, traits which are produced by the coming of the Spirit and which might easily be understood as manifesting an inward work. I am not arguing that an inward transforming work of the Spirit is a primary concern of the texts in Judges; I insist only that the possibility of an inward work of the Spirit should not be discounted before the evidence is examined. The external language of 'coming upon' presents no difficulty, since even the New Testament also uses terminology that seems to represent an outward presence of the Spirit when the theological interpretation requires an inward transformation. Jesus promises his disciples that after he goes away, he will send another paraclete, who will remain 'with' (μετα) them forever (John 14.16). In the book of Acts, in a time when theologians expect the Spirit to be 'inside' the Christian, we read that the Spirit 'fell upon' (ἐπεπεσεν ... ἐπι) the believers at Cornelius' house (Acts 10.44). I would contend that, in both the Old and New Testaments, the Spirit originates from without the believer but produces effects within the believer.⁴¹ Gideon, who appears later in Judges, experiences the transformative effect of the coming of the Spirit. J. Paul Tanner argues that the Gideon narrative is structured to highlight Gideon's fear and to show the change that transpired in Gideon as God crafted the circumstances in such a way that Gideon moves from fear to faith.⁴² Earlier in the canon, the spirit is 'upon' Moses, but his journey of faith bears the marks of genuine spiritual formation under the continuing influence of the Holy Spirit. The narratives of Joseph and Joshua record a similar depth of spiritual growth.

In regard to the duration of the Spirit's presence with the judges, it should be noted that episodic charismatic endowments can be found as well in the

⁴⁰ It should not be surprising that scholars differ in their interpretations of the Old Testament data regarding the Spirit, given the persistent diversity of interpretations of the more abundant New Testament data.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the inward work of the Spirit in the Old Testament, particularly in the life of David, see Leonard P. Maré, 'Some Remarks on the Spirit of God in the Life of David', *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 88 (2006), pp. 30-41 (35-40). See also, Gary Fredricks, 'Rethinking the Role of the Holy Spirit in the Lives of Old Testament Believers', *Trinity Journal* 9, no. 1 (1988), pp. 81-104; and E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary on the Book of Judges* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 95.

⁴² J. Paul Tanner, 'The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992), pp. 146-61 (160).

New Testament book of Acts. The ability of the Apostles to perform signs and wonders is not continuous and neither is it within their control (Acts 5.3-11; 13.9-11; 16.16-18). These temporary endowments, however, do not negate the ongoing, inward working of the Spirit in the same persons. Similarly, the judges experienced temporary charismatic endowments, but the text gives some indication that the Spirit continued to be with them. Yahweh, for example, is said to be 'with' the judge, and Yahweh saves Israel 'all the days of the judge' (2.18). Once the judges were chosen by Yahweh and endowed with the Spirit, those judges continued to serve for a number of years (8.28; 10.2, 3; 12.7, 9, 11, 14; 15.20; 16.31). Furthermore, it is said of Samson that 'Yahweh departed from upon him' (16.20), a statement that might suggest the Spirit's ongoing presence until that point in time.⁴³

Even though the nature of the Spirit's work may continue to be disputed, the emphasis of the text seems clear enough—Yahweh chooses to impart his energizing presence to Othniel, making him a human participant in Yahweh's salvific plan.⁴⁴ On the one hand, Yahweh is free to work independently of human agents, sometimes arranging events, routing the enemy, and employing natural forces to bring about Israel's salvation. In fact, he sometimes works *against* Israel in this fashion, giving the unfaithful Israelites into the power of their enemies, and in the process, he 'strengthens' the enemy (Judg. 3.12). His strengthening of the enemy, however, is impersonal and from a distance, since at no time do we hear that the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon one of the enemy leaders.⁴⁵ On the other hand, when Yahweh decides to move on behalf of Israel, he recruits a human partner who serves in an active role of leadership, a human partner who 'succeeds in restoring loyalty, solidarity, and the capacity for communal action among the people'.⁴⁶ The story of Othniel, therefore, witnesses to the 'important role of human agency in partnership with the redeeming activity of God'.⁴⁷

These human agents, raised up by Yahweh, are not members of a hereditary line of leaders; their authority derives from the charismatic endowment of the

⁴³ In a similar fashion, I would argue that the Spirit was present with Moses throughout his time of leadership (Num. 11.17-29) and the Spirit continued to be upon Joshua as well (Deut. 34.9; Num. 27.18). Later in the canon, the Spirit was with Saul until 'Yahweh departed from him' (1 Sam. 16.14). Cf. the prayer that is attributed to David, 'take not thy Holy Spirit from me' (Ps. 51.11).

⁴⁴ Cf. Horton, *Holy Spirit*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ The Spirit, however, comes upon a non-Israelite, Balaam, for the purposes of saving Israel. Cf. the naming of Cyrus as the Lord's 'anointed' (Isa. 45.1).

⁴⁶ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 53; cf. p. 56.

⁴⁷ Birch *et al.*, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 122.

Spirit.⁴⁸ Moreover, there is no indication in the text that Othniel seeks the position of judge or that he in any way controls the working of the Spirit. It is Yahweh who takes the initiative to choose Othniel and who functions as the active subject in the phrase, ‘Yahweh raised up a savior’ (3.9). Then it is the Spirit of Yahweh who is subject in the phrase, ‘the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him’ (3.10). The Spirit of Yahweh is not under human control and cannot be domesticated for human purposes. Only after Yahweh takes action in choosing Othniel and the Spirit of Yahweh takes action in coming upon him does Othniel take action to judge Israel and go to war. Othniel is moved by the Spirit to participate with Yahweh in the divine liberating mission. Yahweh, therefore, is moved by the cries of Israel, and Othniel is moved by the coming of the Spirit.

D. Gideon: Timorous Warrior

Only four of the judges are said to be empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh, yet it might be inferred from the paradigmatic nature of the Othniel story that the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon all of the judges. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible’s apparent valuing of Spirit empowerment as enablement for leadership could point to the same conclusion—that every judge is empowered by the Spirit. However, since the biblical text does not directly ascribe the Spirit of Yahweh to Ehud or Deborah, I will not attend to their stories, except to say that the expected cyclical pattern of sin, punishment, cry, and deliverance provides the narrative framework for the stories.

The fourth appearance of the cyclical framework identifies Gideon as the second of the judges to be explicitly empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh. The Midianites, the oppressors in the Gideon story, are more destructive than Israel’s previous subjugators (Judg. 6.1-6). The Midianites have so terrified Gideon that he fearfully threshes his grain in his wine press so that he will not be discovered and plundered (6.11). There at the wine press, the angel of Yahweh confronts Gideon with a surprising declaration—‘Yahweh is with you, mighty warrior’ (6.12). The truth of the angel’s statement is denied by Gideon, who gives voice to his frustration by recounting Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and then lamenting, ‘but now Yahweh has forsaken us and given us into the hands of the Midianites’ (6.13).

Unlike Othniel, Gideon has no previous experience as a warrior or as a leader, and the hearer of the story might wonder why Gideon is chosen as a judge. Although the text does not specify the reason for Yahweh’s recruitment

⁴⁸ Rea, *Holy Spirit*, p. 49.

of Gideon, I would point to two suggestive elements in the text. First, Gideon displays knowledge of Israel's salvation from the bondage of Egypt, and he questions why Yahweh's saving power has not been exercised to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. Gideon's reference to the 'wonders' (נִפְלְאוֹת) of the past could indicate that his family ('ancestors', v. 13) had sung the Song of Moses, which speaks of the 'wonders' of Yahweh's salvation (Exod. 15.11; see also Josh. 3.5). At the least, Gideon is clearly aware of the traditions of the exodus, and he has yearned for divine deliverance in his own time. Second, it is revealed later in the story that Gideon's own father is guilty of syncretism and harbors an altar to Baal (6.25). Gideon, therefore, is an appropriate choice for the role of judge, since he is intimately aware of the idolatry of the Israelites, and he has contemplated the traditions of Yahweh's saving power. The angel of Yahweh proceeds to commission Gideon himself as Yahweh's instrument of salvation (שֵׁשׁ). Thus Gideon, who charges God with failing to save Israel, is himself charged with the task of salvation, and Yahweh promises to 'be with' him (6.16).

Gideon's first encounter with God exhibits numerous similarities to the call narrative of Moses⁴⁹ and casts Gideon as a new Moses,⁵⁰ invested with divine authority, who will deliver the Israelites from oppression. A comparison of the stories reveals the following points of contact, most of which involve the call narrative: 1. Gideon is working for his father while hiding from the Midianites (Judg. 6.11), and Moses is in hiding while working for his father-in-law, a Midianite (Exod. 3.1); 2. The angel of Yahweh acts as initial agent of encounter (Judg. 6.11; Exod. 3.2); 3. The deliverance from Egypt is central to both encounters (Judg. 6.13; Exod. 3.10); 4. The speaker changes from the angel to Yahweh (Judg. 6.14; Exod. 3.4); 5. Both are called to save Israel (Judg. 6.14; Exod. 3.10); 6. Both are sent (שָׁלַח) by Yahweh (Judg. 6.14; Exod. 3.10); 7. Both offer objections to the call (Judg. 6.15; Exod. 3.11); 8. Both are given signs (Judg. 6.17; Exod. 4.2-8); 9. Yahweh says to both, 'I will be with you' (Judg. 6.16; Exod. 3.12); 10. Yahweh produces miraculous fire (Judg. 6.21; Exod. 3.2); 11. A staff is used to produce a miraculous sign (Judg. 6.21; Exod. 4.2-3); 12. The initial acts of both Gideon and Moses create controversy (Judg. 6.25-32; Exod. 5.21); 13. Both narratives involve the collection of gold to make an idol (Judg. 8.24-27;

⁴⁹ Mark S. Smith, 'Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion', *CBQ* 64, no. 4 (2002), pp. 631-51 (634-38).

⁵⁰ Barnabas Lindars, 'Gideon and Kingship', *JTS* 16 (1965), pp. 315-26 (317). Lindars summarizes the conclusions of Walter Beyerlin, 'Geschichte und Heilsgeschichtliche Traditionsbildung im Alten Testament: Ein Beitrag zur Traditionsgeschichte von Richter 6-8', *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 1-25.

Exod. 32.2-4);⁵¹ 14. Gideon names his firstborn 'Jether', the name of the father-in-law of Moses (Judg. 8.20; Exod. 4.18);⁵² 15. The stories of both Gideon and Moses include episodes of failure near the end (Judg. 8.27; Num. 20.11-12). The references to the exodus and the similarities between Gideon and Moses combine to place the 'Gideon saga in the framework of the Yahweh covenant'.⁵³

Since Gideon seems destined to imitate Moses' salvation of Israel, the hearer is not surprised when the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon Gideon. Gideon's first act of obedience, however, is performed before the Spirit enters the narrative (6.25-32). The Spirit of Yahweh comes upon Gideon only after we learn of the impending attack of the enemy. The Midianites assemble their army, cross the Jordan River and encamp in the Valley of Jezreel. Then, 'the Spirit of Yahweh clothed Gideon, and he sounded the *shofar*' (6.34).⁵⁴ The effect of the Spirit is immediate, as Gideon assembles the Abiezrites and the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they go up to engage the Midianites in battle (6.35). The Spirit of Yahweh, working through Gideon, creates a 'renewal of the people's unanimity and capacity for action, a renewal of the people's power of resistance in the midst of universal despair'.⁵⁵ Gideon's first work had been a private project, achieved under the cover of darkness, but after the Spirit comes upon him, he positions himself as a public leader who emerges from the shadows into the light of day. Before the Spirit strengthens Gideon, he stands by in silence while his father defends his actions (6.28-32); but after the Spirit comes upon him, Gideon speaks for himself.

Although interpreters agree that the Spirit empowers Gideon in some fashion, they do not agree on the correct translation of לבשה, the Hebrew verb that is used to describe the coming of the Spirit of Yahweh upon Gideon.⁵⁶ The most common use of the *qal* verb לבש is 'put on',⁵⁷ which would produce the

⁵¹ A. Graeme Auld, 'Gideon: Hacking at the Heart of the Old Testament', *VT* 39 (1989), pp. 257-67 (257).

⁵² Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Bible and Literature, 14; Sheffield: Almond, 1988), p. 62.

⁵³ Lindars, 'Gideon and Kingship', p. 317.

⁵⁴ The grammar indicates a compound sentence with the first clause providing circumstance to the second clause. Consequently, the coming of the Spirit and Gideon's sounding of the trumpet are united into a single event. Oddly enough, this grammar places the Spirit's action in the background while the blowing of the trumpet is in the foreground. See Alviero Niccacci, *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose* (trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson; JSOTSup, 86; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 64-66.

⁵⁵ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 53.

⁵⁶ The verb is *qal* perf. 3rd fem. sing. The fem. gender agrees with *ruach* (Spirit).

⁵⁷ Köhler, *HALOT*, I, p. 519; William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, corrected 10th edn, 1988), p. 173. Cf. Brown *et al.*, *BDB*, p. 527, who calls the Spirit's action an 'incarnation'.

translation, ‘The Spirit of Yahweh put on Gideon’. In this translation, therefore, Gideon is the garment that clothes the Spirit, and the Spirit is on the inside of Gideon. Most Bible versions, however, translate the verb לבש as ‘clothe’, or something similar, a translation that designates the Spirit as the clothing that covers Gideon. Some of these translations render לבש in a more literal sense, for example: ‘came upon’ (KJV, NASB, NIV), ‘covered’ (CJB), ‘enveloped’ (CSB, NAB, TNK), ‘clothed around’ (NJB), ‘clothed’ (ESV), and ἐνεδυσεν (‘clothed’, Codex Alexandrinus), and *induit* (‘clothed’, Vulgate). Other versions, however, choose to translate לבש according to its effect upon Gideon, for example: ‘took possession of’ (RSV, NRSV), ‘took control of’ (NET), and ἐνεδυναμωσεν (‘strengthened’, Codex Vaticanus). The narrative seems to indicate, however, that terminology of possession and control is probably too strong, since there is no indication in the text that Gideon loses control of his own volition.

Notwithstanding the more common sense of לבש as ‘put on’, I contend (in agreement with most translations) that in this case there are good reasons to translate לבש as ‘clothe’. First, other terminology would serve better if the writer wishes to locate the Spirit ‘inside’ Gideon. Other texts, for example, state that the Spirit ‘enters’ Ezekiel (Ezek. 2.2); the Spirit ‘fills’ Joshua, the artisans, and Micah (Deut. 34.9; Exod. 28.3; 31.3; 35.31; Mic. 3.8); and the Spirit is ‘in’ Joseph, Joshua, and Daniel (Gen. 41.38; Num. 27.18; Dan. 4.8, 9, 18; 5.11). Second, the meaning and significance of the ‘clothing’ metaphor is appropriate only if it is the Spirit who is the clothing. The functions of clothing are to give protection, beautification, identification, or covering; and if Gideon is the clothing of the Spirit, it would imply that Gideon provides the Spirit with these benefits. Third, although the argument is correct that a less ambiguous construction, ‘Gideon was clothed (*pual*) by the Spirit’,⁵⁸ could have been used, such a construction would make Gideon, rather than רינה, the subject of the verb.⁵⁹ It is important that Spirit is the subject (as in every case in Judges), since it is the Spirit, not Gideon, that initiates the encounter and confers power. Fourth, the *qal* passive form of לבש means ‘clothed’, not ‘was put on’, suggesting that the active form (which we have here) can mean ‘clothe’ rather

⁵⁸ Cf. 1 Ki. 22.10, where the *pual* ptc., ‘clothed with garments’, is found. Also, the *qal* passive ptc. is found in a number of texts. The expected passive form of לבש, the *nifal*, does not occur in the Hebrew Bible.

⁵⁹ See Nahum M. Waldman, ‘The Imagery of Clothing, Covering and Overpowering’, *JANES* 19 (1989), pp. 161–70, who argues that the wording of Judg. 6.34 may be a result of syntactical restructuring or grammatical transformation that results in the meaning ‘clothe’ for לבש (pp. 166–69). Waldman presents copious examples from the ANE and Rabbinical sources.

than ‘put on’.⁶⁰ Finally, the ambiguity of the Judg. 6.34 is mitigated by Job 29.14 where, like here, the object of clothing serves as the subject of the verb. The verse reads, ‘I put on righteousness, and it clothed me (לִבַּשׁ); my just cause was like a robe and turban’. Job’s statement that righteousness ‘clothed’ him is parallel to the final part of the verse, in which his ‘just cause’ (מִשְׁפָּט) is like a robe and turban, both of which are objects of clothing. When the article of clothing serves as the subject, the verb does not mean ‘put on’, rather it means ‘clothe’ or ‘cover’.⁶¹ I agree, therefore, with Klein, who concludes that Gideon is ‘surrounded by the spirit of Yahweh, as with a mantle; he “wears” the divine spirit’.⁶²

If, as I have argued, the Spirit clothes Gideon, what is the significance of the imagery of clothing? The basic functions of clothing are to conceal (Gen. 3.21), to protect (Hag. 1.6), to adorn (2 Sam. 1.24), and to categorize the wearer within a social situation (Gen. 38.19). Gamberoni, who agrees that לִבַּשׁ in Judg. 6.34 means ‘clothed’, classifies the functions of clothing into the following categories: 1. ‘without clothing, the individual would be helpless’; 2. clothing identifies social structures and a person’s place in society; and 3. ‘clothing can express close personal ties’.⁶³ Citing parallels in other ancient Near Eastern literature, Waldman insists that the imagery of clothing suggests that ‘an additional force is added to the wearer’ and that ‘these qualities, worn by the bearers, add something to their basic natures. They are more than they might have been and are enhanced because of the wrapping of extra power’.⁶⁴ The Spirit of Yahweh, as the clothing of Gideon, protects him, empowers him, and identifies him as Yahweh’s chosen judge who will lead the Israelites to freedom.⁶⁵

Although the gift of the Spirit authorizes Gideon as a judge and empowers him for leadership, it does not immediately eliminate all of Gideon’s weaknesses.

⁶⁰ 1 Sam. 17:5; Prov. 31:21; Ezek. 9:2, 11; 10:2, 6; 23:6, 12; 38:4; Dan. 10:5; 12:6; Zech. 3:3.

⁶¹ Köhler, *HALOT*, I, p. 519. Cf. J. Gamberoni, ‘לִבַּשׁ’, in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *TDOT* (trans. David E. Green; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), VII, p. 463; and Waldman, ‘Imagery of Clothing’, pp. 166–67. Waldman cites a parallel to Judg. 6.34, in which a G-form of *labasu* in Nuzi is used in the sense of ‘clothe’ (p. 165).

⁶² Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, p. 55.

⁶³ Gamberoni, ‘לִבַּשׁ’, p. 461.

⁶⁴ Waldman, ‘Imagery of Clothing’, p. 163. Waldman cites primarily Sumerian and Akkadian literature, but he points to the same imagery in Syriac texts, Mandaic liturgies, and Aramaic incantation texts. However, according to Waldman, the Gideon text is unique in that other texts in the ANE name ‘demons, illness, fear, etc., as the subjects, but there is no mention of a god covering a person’ (p. 166). Neve’s contention that *labash* registers a ‘violent’ action is unsubstantiated; see *Spirit of God*, pp. 19–20.

⁶⁵ Cf. John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (New Century Bible; Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, rev. edn, 1977), p. 233, who argues that the clothing of the Spirit signifies Gideon’s authority.

Gideon continues to be hesitant and even fearful, as we learn from the further references to the theme of fear (6.27; 7.3, 10; 8.20) and from his repeated requests for assurance from Yahweh.⁶⁶ Gideon finally attains faith when he hears the voice of Yahweh speaking through an enemy soldier (Judg. 7.9-11), and he executes a miraculous rout of the Midianites.⁶⁷

The subject of clothing is revisited near the end of the Gideon story when he chooses to commemorate his victories by constructing a golden ephod, which later becomes the object of idolatry (8.27, 33) and a 'snare' to Gideon and his family (8.27, cf. 2.3). The hearer may reflect upon the significance of Gideon's ephod of gold in light of the earlier text where Gideon is clothed by the Spirit. Gideon, it seems, is exchanging one type of clothing for another. The clothing of the Spirit of Yahweh draws attention to the mission of Yahweh, the power of Yahweh, and to the type of leadership that aspires to the salvation of the community and to the prosperity of the community. Moreover, the clothing of the Spirit is an endorsement of charismatic authority. The ephod, however, is a priestly garment, a sign of institutional authority. Gideon's clothing of gold draws attention to the status and wealth that comes to him as a result of his victories and to the kind of leadership that aspires to personal acclaim and personal prosperity. In spite of the fact that Gideon refuses the offer of kingship, he adopts a lifestyle that is consistent with that of a monarch, multiplying to himself wives and wealth. The early Gideon is a timid man who is enveloped and overwhelmed by the Spirit of 'wonders', but the later Gideon is a confident man (8.1-21) who is enveloped and overwhelmed by a spirit of prestige.⁶⁸

E. Jephthah: Injudicious Judge

The continuing idolatry of the Israelites signals the beginning of the fifth appearance of the cyclical framework, and Yahweh responds by giving them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. The Israelites cry out to Yahweh for his aid, but in light of the idolatry surrounding Gideon's ephod,

⁶⁶ It is argued by Webb, *Judges: An Integrated Reading*, p. 150, that Gideon's fear is prominent in the story.

⁶⁷ See the discussion of Gideon in Lee Roy Martin, 'Tongues of Angels, Words of Prophets: Means of Divine Communication in the Book of Judges', in Steven J. Land, John Christopher Thomas, and Rickie D. Moore (eds.), *Passover, Pentecost & Parousia: Studies in Celebration of the Life and Ministry of R. Hollis Gause* (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, forthcoming).

⁶⁸ Cf. Jacobus Marais, *Representation in Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Biblical Interpretation, 36; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), p. 114, who writes that Gideon, 'having tasted power, turns on God and becomes his own god'.

the illegitimate rulership of Abimelech (ch. 9),⁶⁹ and two more implied cycles of sin and deliverance (10.1-5), Yahweh speaks directly to the Israelites and angrily declares that he is finished with them. He reminds the Israelites of the numerous times that he has saved them, yet they have continued to forsake him and serve foreign gods. He furiously rebukes them and announces that he will save them no more (10.13).

In the face of Yahweh's refusal to save the Israelites, the elders of Gilead, by their own initiative, seek out a commander to lead them in battle against the Ammonites, and Jephthah is chosen. He is 'the son of a prostitute and a mighty warrior' (11.1), who had been driven out of his father's house and has become an outlaw (11.3). Jephthah, the only judge who is not raised up by Yahweh, agrees to lead the Israelites in battle in exchange for the promise of permanent power.

Having been received back into the community, Jephthah attempts diplomatic negotiation with the king of Ammon (11.12). In his communications with the foreign king, Jephthah credits Yahweh as the one who brought the Israelites out of the bondage of Egypt and gave the land to the Israelites (11.23). Moreover, Yahweh is the one to whom Jephthah looks for victory (11.9, 24, 27). Jephthah declares that he will not surrender the land in which he now enjoys a new position of status and a reborn sense of belonging. Having suffered previously the loss of land and the pain of exile, he is not willing to relinquish that which has been restored to him. Jephthah 'seeks to avoid military confrontation if possible, and he defers decisive powers to Yahweh',⁷⁰ but his fervent defense of Israel's claim upon the land and his submission of the case to Yahweh as judge (11.27) are not sufficient to convince the Ammonite king to reconsider his attack.

With the Ammonite and Israelite armies assembled for battle (10.17), Yahweh, who had threatened not to help Israel any more (10.13), shows himself once again to be the God of surprising grace and sends his empowering Spirit upon Jephthah (11.29). Although Yahweh does not participate in the selection of Jephthah as a judge, he nevertheless chooses to put his Spirit upon Jephthah. Could it be that Jephthah's recounting of the exodus and his concern for the land awakens Yahweh to action and moves him to put his Spirit upon Jephthah?⁷¹ In any case, the fact that the LORD would put his Spirit upon a

⁶⁹ Instead of receiving the Spirit of Yahweh (רוח יהוה), Abimelech is undermined by 'an evil spirit' (רוח רעה) that is sent by Yahweh to bring enmity between Abimelech and the people of Shechem (Judg. 9.23).

⁷⁰ Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, p. 89.

⁷¹ This possibility is entertained by Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam; Colledgeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 173.

leader that had not been divinely chosen demonstrates that his concern for the safety of the community overrides any other considerations.

When the elders of Gilead choose Jephthah, he leads with a negotiated authority, which is centered in his proven abilities as a warrior; but when the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon him, Jephthah leads with a charismatic authority, which is centered in the proven abilities of Yahweh as Israel's warrior God. When Jephthah is chosen to lead the Gileadites, he makes an offer of peace to the Ammonites. His experience as a warrior would make him fully aware of the pain and death that comes with warfare, and he wisely pursues a peaceful resolution of the conflict. However, when it becomes clear that Jephthah's human attempts at peace have failed and the Ammonite king is intent on going to war against Israel, the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon Jephthah and moves him to attack the enemy and save Israel.⁷² Jephthah's actions bear some resemblance to Moses' initial encounters with Pharaoh, in which Moses offers to negotiate the Israelites' peaceful migration out of Egypt. However, when Pharaoh will not allow the Israelites to depart in peace, Yahweh intervenes in a dramatic act of salvation. Similarly, the coming of the Spirit upon Jephthah leaves 'no doubt that Jephthah's victory against the Ammonites was considered to be Yahweh's saving act on behalf of Israel'.⁷³

Even though Jephthah departs from the usual pattern for the judges, in that he is not raised up by Yahweh, his Spirit empowerment narrative corresponds in several ways to the narratives of earlier judges. First, the wording of the announcement, 'the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah', utilizes the same Hebrew phrase (וַתְּהִי עָלָיו) that had signaled earlier the Spirit's coming upon Othniel. Second, in the stories of both Gideon and Jephthah, the Spirit is given at a crucial juncture in the narrative when decisive action is required.⁷⁴ The Spirit clothes Gideon and he assembles the army; the Spirit comes upon Jephthah and he apparently adds to the already assembled army⁷⁵ and launches the attack. The Spirit descends in 'situations of danger in which no escape could be seen ... situations of danger in which no hope remained'.⁷⁶ Third, as in the case of Gideon, the coming of the Spirit upon Jephthah does not nullify

⁷² Cf. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, p. 254. See Dennis Olson, 'Judges', *The New Interpreter's Bible: Numbers-Samuel* (12 vols.; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), II, who remarks that 'everything up to this point has involved human initiative' (p. 831).

⁷³ Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 207.

⁷⁴ The narrative concerning Othniel is so brief that it includes no details regarding the timing of the Spirit's coming upon him.

⁷⁵ Cf. Olson, 'Judges', p. 831.

⁷⁶ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 52.

his personal volition nor eliminate all of his doubts. Even after Gideon receives the Spirit, he seeks a reassuring sign from God; and after Jephthah receives the Spirit, he makes an unwise vow that he hopes will guarantee his victory.⁷⁷ Fourth, both Gideon and Jephthah display knowledge of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and they manifest a degree of passion regarding Israel's claim to the land. Fifth, after their battles are decided, both Gideon and Jephthah engage in destructive behavior—Gideon builds his golden ephod, and Jephthah sacrifices his daughter.⁷⁸ The giving of the Spirit, therefore, does not guarantee that the recipient will pursue righteousness and act always in accordance with God's purposes. God grants even a Spirit-empowered leader the freedom to pursue ruinous behavior that can lead to disastrous consequences. Sixth, both Gideon and Jephthah face intertribal conflict with the Ephraimites. Gideon is able to defuse the tensions peacefully (8.1-3), but Jephthah fights against the Ephraimites and soundly defeats them (12.1-6).

The stories of Gideon and Jephthah seem to demonstrate that the power that flows from the Spirit to initiate and complete Yahweh's salvific mission can produce in the recipient a confidence that continues to manifest itself even after the initial mission has been accomplished. This confidence may then serve the recipient's own desires and purposes, which may be opposed to the purposes of God. Gideon's newfound boldness is registered in his cruel treatment of the people of Succoth and Penuel (8.4-17), and Jephthah's self-assertiveness is evident in his relentless pursuit of the Ephraimites (12.5-6). 'God's Spirit', remarks Dennis Olson, 'does, indeed, give special powers to leaders, but that power may be abused by unfaithful or misguided leaders'.⁷⁹

It has been argued that since Jephthah's rash vow is subsequent to his reception of the Spirit, the Spirit bears some responsibility for Jephthah's unwise act,⁸⁰ and the same has been said of Gideon's test with the fleece. Such a view, however, requires a degree of Spirit possession that overwhelms the recipient's

⁷⁷ Commenting on Gideon's and Jephthah's lack of assurance, Welker writes, 'those upon whom the Spirit comes are and remain imperfect, finite, mortal human beings' (*God the Spirit*, pp. 58-59).

⁷⁸ I realize that not all interpreters accept that Jephthah actually offered up his daughter, but text states that Jephthah 'did to her his vow that he had vowed' (11.39). Cf. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 215-18. In any case, the question of Jephthah's folly is a matter of degree only, since the vow itself was injudicious. The Jephthah story may be within the view of Ps. 106.34-45, especially v. 37, 'they sacrificed their sons and their daughters'.

⁷⁹ Olson, 'Judges', p. 768.

⁸⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges', *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 410-31 (413, 422).

personal volition, a degree of control that is nowhere indicated in the text.⁸¹ The text associates the coming of the Spirit with specific immediately subsequent actions. In the case of Othniel, the series of clauses reads: ‘the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him, and he judged Israel, and he went out to war’ (3.10). Once the Spirit comes upon him, he continues as the subject of the verbs until it is said that ‘Yahweh gave’ the enemy into his hand. In the case of Gideon, as I noted earlier, the coming of the Spirit is connected syntactically with the subsequent clause, in which Gideon sounds the alarm to assemble the army. In the case of Jephthah, the text reads: ‘The Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and he passed on to Mizpah of Gilead and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed over to the Ammonites’ (11.29). The next verse, in which Jephthah makes his vow, stands outside the series of events that are directly attributed to the influence of the Spirit. The disjunction at the end of the series is indicated by two grammatical elements: 1. The final verb in the series of four verbs of verse 29 is not a *wayyiqtol*, but is an *x-qatal*, which breaks the series; and 2. The subsequent clause, which registers the vow, restates the named subject: ‘And Jephthah vowed a vow to Yahweh’ (11.30). The renaming of the subject, when no other subject has intervened in the series of clauses, suggests the beginning of a new series of events. After the episode of the vow, the narrative resumes at the place where it left off in verse 29, with the subject named once more as the signal of a new series of events: ‘So Jephthah passed over to the Ammonites to fight against them’ (11.32). I contend, therefore, that the undesirable acts of Gideon and Jephthah are not *provoked* by the Spirit but neither are they *prevented* by the Spirit.⁸²

In the story of Jephthah, the narrative continues to display the tension between Yahweh’s anger and his compassion. The tension is evident in that, although the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon Jephthah and brings victory, the land is not granted a time of rest, as it is in earlier appearances of the cycle. The land cannot rest because Yahweh defeats only the Ammonites, and he does not remove the threat of the Philistines, who are listed as another enemy in this cycle (10.7). Furthermore, Yahweh does not prevent the sacrifice of Jephthah’s

⁸¹ Cf. Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, p. 543, who denies that the Spirit of Yahweh is implicated in the Jephthah’s making of the vow. See also, Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (VTSup, 111; Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 159–63. Wong points to the inconsistency of Exum’s argument, in that she wants to attribute Jephthah’s vow to the influence of the Spirit, but she does not want to attribute Gideon’s quest for a sign to the same influence.

⁸² Cf. Webb, *Judges: An Integrated Reading*, p. 62, who agrees that the vow interrupts the story of Jephthah.

daughter; he does not prevent the intertribal battles that follow Jephthah's victory; neither does he speak at any time during the narrative. Apparently, after Yahweh's declaration that he will not save Israel again (10.13), he is determined to intervene as little as possible, yet he is not prepared to allow Israel's complete destruction.⁸³ Moreover, by their continual idolatry, the Israelites become their own worst enemy, and although the Spirit of Yahweh saves the Israelites from the Ammonites, the Spirit of Yahweh does not save the Israelites from themselves.

F. Samson: 'Troubled' by the Spirit

For the final time in the book of Judges, the Israelites forsake Yahweh, who hands them over to an oppressive enemy, the Philistines (13.1).⁸⁴ The cyclical framework that begins to deteriorate with the Jephthah cycle breaks down completely in the Samson cycle. Although they are given over into the power of the Philistines, the Israelites surprisingly do not cry out for God's help, and they are not saved from the Philistines.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted the numerous similarities between the judges while acknowledging the uniqueness of each, and Samson's story stands out in numerous ways.⁸⁵ Samson is the only judge whom Yahweh prepares from before birth to fill the role of judge. The angel of Yahweh predicts his birth and he is dedicated as a nazirite to God (Judg. 13.3-5). The narrative of Samson's birth classifies him as a person of destiny and creates in the hearer a sense of eager anticipation. Yahweh's unexpected breaking of his silence

⁸³ For an insightful study of the increasingly ambiguous role of Yahweh in Judges, see Exum, 'The Centre Cannot Hold', pp. 410-31. Exum sees the lack of narrator comment in the final narratives as a failure to expound the theology of Judges, and she observes Yahweh's lack of participation in the stories of Jephthah and Samson. However, she does not make the connection to Yahweh's earlier statement that he will save Israel no more (10.13), and she does not appreciate the importance of the prologue nor recognize the role of the speeches of God within Judges (On the speeches of God, see Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*). In contrast to Exum, P. Deryn Guest, 'Can Judges Survive Without Sources? Challenging the Consensus', *JSOT*, no. 78 (1998), pp. 43-61, denies the need for narrator comment in the final stories of Judges, believing the prologue alone to be sufficient theological explanation of the Judges period.

⁸⁴ Actually, the Philistines appear as oppressors in Judg. 10.7 along with the Ammonites. Jephthah saves Israel from the Ammonites but he does not attack the Philistines.

⁸⁵ For a detailed exposition of Samson's uniqueness, see Edward L. Greenstein, 'The Riddle of Samson', *Prf* 1/3 (1981), pp. 237-60 (239-47). In spite of this uniqueness, see Webb, *Judges: An Integrated Reading*, pp. 164-67, who shows numerous comparisons between the Gideon and Samson narratives.

(after having threatened never to save Israel again) indicates that he may be returning to full engagement with his people, and Samson's miraculous birth might forecast divine blessings upon his life. The calling of Samson to be a nazirite adds to the sense of his purpose and devotion, and the annunciation narrative includes elements that bring to mind the call of Gideon, who was successful in saving the Israelites from their oppressor. Except for the puzzling declaration that Samson will 'begin' to save Israel, everything in chapter 13 indicates that Samson is poised to be the greatest judge of them all.⁸⁶

Samson's early life is described concisely: 'The woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the boy grew, and Yahweh blessed him. And the Spirit of Yahweh began to trouble him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol' (13.24-25). Samson's potential for greatness is affirmed by the statements, 'the boy grew, and Yahweh blessed him', but the effect of the Spirit upon Samson is stated somewhat ambiguously in the subsequent phrase, 'the Spirit of Yahweh began to trouble him' (פָּעַם). This is the only appearance of the verb פָּעַם in the *gal* stem, and lexicons define it as 'impel, push',⁸⁷ or 'to stir, trouble'.⁸⁸ It seems likely that this first reference to the Spirit in Samson's life is a foreshadowing of what lies ahead in chapters 14-16, where it is the Spirit, rather than Samson's status as a nazirite or his miraculous birth, that generates his power.⁸⁹

Then again, the verb פָּעַם may foreshadow the Samson story also in a more ominous way, given that in every other appearance in the Hebrew Bible it means 'to be troubled'. The Psalmist writes, 'I am troubled and cannot speak' (Ps. 77.5); Pharaoh's 'spirit was troubled' (Gen. 41.8); and King Nebuchadnezzar says, 'I dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled' (Dan. 2.3, also 2.1). Apparently, the stirring of the Spirit could be interpreted as a disconcerting or troubling event in the life of the young Samson. Is it possible that he is not altogether enthusiastic about or comfortable with the Spirit's activity in his life? We might infer from Samson's experience that the coming of the Spirit is not always and altogether a blissful encounter and that we should beware of 'superficial enthusiasm about the Spirit'.⁹⁰ Could the *troubling* effect of the Spirit's work in Samson be a clue to his later enigmatic behavior, or could it

⁸⁶ Cf. J. Cheryl Exum, 'Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13', *JBL* 99 (1980), pp. 43-59 (49).

⁸⁷ Holladay, *Lexicon*, p. 295.

⁸⁸ Köhler, *HALOT*, II, p. 952.

⁸⁹ Marc Z. Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (Old Testament Readings; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 43.

⁹⁰ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 61. The prophets would agree; cf. Isa. 6.5-7; 49.4; Jer. 4.19; 12.1-3; Ezek. 3.14-15; Hos. 1.2-9; and Jon. 1.1-3; 4.1-2.

be a portent of Samson's tragic end, since it is the Spirit that 'sets in motion a process that does not end until Samson's tortured body is brought up from Gaza to be buried'?⁹¹

Ambiguities notwithstanding, we know that Samson is anointed as the chosen judge of Israel, and his strength flows from the Spirit of Yahweh. The Spirit rests upon Samson and we expect him, like earlier judges, to assemble the army of Israel and engage the enemy, but no such action ensues. The hearer's hopeful expectations regarding Samson go entirely unfulfilled, while Samson pursues his own agenda. Time after time, the Spirit comes upon Samson, but still Samson does not gather the Israelites for battle, and he does not eliminate the Philistine threat. The Spirit enables Samson to tear apart an attacking lion (14.6), to kill thirty Philistines in Ashkelon and take their clothing (14.19) and to break free of his bonds and kill one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey (15.14).

Each time the Spirit comes upon Samson in chapters 14 and 15, the Hebrew term is צלח, which means to 'succeed'⁹² or 'attain',⁹³ but in some contexts seems to mean 'rush'.⁹⁴ For example, 'one thousand men rushed (צלח) to the Jordan ahead of the king' (2 Sam. 19.18); 'seek the Lord and live, lest he rush upon the house of Jacob like fire' (Amos 5.6). Although the Hebrew word may elude precise definition, its usage suggests a forcefulness that exceeds any of the other terms used in Judges to describe the coming of the Spirit. The same terminology describes the experience of Saul when he is engulfed in an ecstatic experience (1 Sam. 10.10). We learn from its use in relation to David, however, that the word does not necessarily include the idea of complete control. When David is anointed by Samuel, the Spirit rushes (צלח) upon him 'from that day forward' (1 Sam. 16.13), and nowhere in the text do we find the suggestion that the Spirit took control of David's body or his will. Consequently, I would argue that Samson is quite overwhelmed every time the Spirit comes upon him but nothing in the text suggests that the Spirit negates Samson's power of volition.⁹⁵ In fact, Samson's every act before the Lord departs from him (Judg. 16.20) appears to be driven by his own passions and his own will.

⁹¹ Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land*, p. 143. For פָּעַם as a *Leitwort* in the Samson saga (15.3; 16.18, 20, 28), see O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, pp. 44-45.

⁹² Köhler, *HALOT*, II, p. 1026.

⁹³ J. Hausmann, 'צלח', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *TDOT* (trans. David E. Green; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), XII, p. 383.

⁹⁴ Brown *et al.*, *BDB*, p. 852. Cf. C. J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1986), p. 422; and Rea, *Holy Spirit*, p. 55.

⁹⁵ Cf. Horton, *Holy Spirit*, pp. 40-41.

Samson's willfulness and self-centeredness are evident throughout the narratives of chapters 14-16, beginning with his insistence on marrying a Philistine woman despite the objections of his parents (14.1-3). His unruly behavior persists as he breaks his nazirite vows by touching the corpse of a dead lion (14.8-9), and as he visits a prostitute in Gaza (16.1). Because of his roguish conduct, Samson is often used as support for the view that persons in the Old Testament can be empowered by the Spirit but 'not purified', in contrast to the New Testament where it is assumed that purity and power are joined together.⁹⁶ In response to the discussions surrounding purity and power, I would offer the following observations.⁹⁷ First, the God of Judges is free to distribute power to whomsoever he will, and at times he even empowers unbelievers (e.g., the Canaanites rulers). Second, the charismatic endowment of the Spirit in Judges is not always a sign of spiritual maturity or holy character. Fredricks argues that the same holds true in the New Testament age and in the present age:

To assume that NT believers live on a higher plane of spirituality is to overlook the sins of division, immorality, and drunkenness in the church at Corinth, the legalism at Galatia, the idleness at Thessalonica as well as the numerous sins present in the Spirit-indwelled church today.⁹⁸

Third, we must beware of constructing a purity and power dichotomy that distorts the message of the book of Judges. Judges is a book that from beginning to end registers Yahweh's exclusive claim upon the people of God. In Judges, sin is not excused, disobedience is not treated lightly, and idolatry does not go unpunished. Yahweh is so angered by the repeated rebellion of the Israelites that upon their single expression of repentance he refuses to forgive them. Fourth, the perspective on sin and idolatry in Judges is more communal than what we find in contemporary theology. The sanctifying work of the Spirit in the life of the individual is not a dominant concern of Judges, rather, the sanctification of the community in covenant takes precedence over the sanctification of the individual. This communal aspect of holiness deserves

⁹⁶ Hunter, *Spirit-baptism*, p. 25. On this issue, the New Testament is not as clear as we might assume, and the presence of sin in the lives of believers is a topic that continues to be disputed among Christian theologians. Cf. ch. 1 in Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*.

⁹⁷ Regarding the questionable spiritual value of the judges; see Lee Roy Martin, 'Judging the Judges: Searching for Value in these Problematic Characters', The 37th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Durham, NC (2008).

⁹⁸ Fredricks, 'Holy Spirit in the OT', p. 87. We might add to the list of Fredricks the strife between Paul and Barnabus (Acts 15.39), the bigotry and hypocrisy of Peter (Gal. 2.11-14), and the sins of the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2.1-3.22). Cf. Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God*, ch. 1.

more attention, especially in this electronic age when humans, in spite of being better connected than ever before, bear little communal responsibility or accountability.⁹⁹ Fifth, while it is commonly assumed that the work of the Spirit in Judges is not soteriological (in the theological sense), is it possible that our definition of ‘soteriology’ fails to appreciate the Old Testament witness to God’s saving acts?¹⁰⁰ After all, the judges are called ‘saviors’, and their actions are called ‘salvation’. The Israelites are saved from both the physical/political bondage to Canaanite oppressors and from the spiritual bondage to Baal and Asherah, the gods of Canaan. At the end of the Samson saga, Yahweh strengthens Samson so that he might win both a physical and spiritual victory by destroying the temple of the Philistine god Dagon. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, salvation in Judges is cast in the tradition of the exodus, a tradition that is adopted in both the Old Testament and the New Testament as the paradigmatic salvation story.

In Judges the Spirit of Yahweh is given for the purpose of effecting the salvation of Israel, but even with his charismatic endowment Samson ‘appears never to have had any concern for the interests of Israel’.¹⁰¹ Thus, the most obvious discrepancy in the Samson story is his failure to fight for the salvation of Israel, a failure that accounts for the question mark in my title: ‘Power to Save!?’ Does Samson, like the previous judges, receive the Spirit as power to save, or does the Spirit in the Samson story fulfill a different role? On the surface, it appears that the Spirit of Yahweh does no more than pull ‘Samson out of his scrapes’,¹⁰² but the Samson story is a complex narrative that operates from beginning to end around the themes of secret knowledge and riddles. It is not surprising, therefore, that the hearers of the story have questions.¹⁰³ The actions of the Spirit of Yahweh are clear enough; the Spirit saves Samson from a lion (14.6), moves Samson to kill thirty Philistines and take their clothing (14.19), and saves Samson from being captured while at the same time giving

⁹⁹ For a powerful call to communal holiness, see J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1: Paul’s View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

¹⁰⁰ Liberation theologues have heard this OT witness, but the Western theological community has not always welcomed recent global theological insights. On the contribution of Pentecostalism to a broader concept of salvation, see Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (trans. R. A. Wilson; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1st U.S. edn, 1972), pp. 204-17, 246-57, and Richard Schaul, ‘La Iglesia, Crisis y Nuevas Perspectivas’, *Vida y Pensamiento* 15 (1995), pp. 8-48.

¹⁰¹ Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 181. Cf. Montague, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 18.

¹⁰² Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, p. 125.

¹⁰³ Crenshaw, *Samson*, pp. 66-69. Cf. Greenstein, ‘Riddle of Samson’, pp. 246-47; and Exum, ‘Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga’, pp. 3-29 (4-19).

him the strength to kill one thousand Philistines (15.14-15). The ultimate goal of Samson's Spirit inspired acts, however, is not easily discerned, because the Israelites do not seem to benefit from Samson's individualistic enterprise. Unlike the earlier judges, Samson never assembles the Israelites for battle against the enemy.

On the one hand, Samson's failure to save Israel might be due to his own disobedience, since the work of the Spirit 'is not effective apart from human participation'.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps he is simply unwilling to gather his people together into a unified force. On the other hand, the absence of salvation might be blamed upon the Israelite people, who do not ask to be saved from the Philistines but who seem content to live under the domination of the enemy. The pattern in the book of Judges is that Yahweh saves the Israelites subsequent to their cry unto him, and without their cry for help, Yahweh is not obligated to save.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the Israelites' impertinence goes beyond their passive failure to cry out to Yahweh. They actively oppose the work of Samson when they insist that he forego any further attacks upon the Philistines, who, the Israelites say, 'rule over us' (Judg. 15.9-13).¹⁰⁶

While both Samson and the Israelites bear some responsibility for their continued bondage to the Philistines, it must be acknowledged that Yahweh himself plays a significant role in the story. I have shown that after Yahweh refuses to save Israel again (10.13), he restricts his direct involvement with his people, but his actions in the Samson saga seem to suggest that he may desire to save them once again. Yahweh raises up Samson, promises that he will 'begin to save' the Israelites, blesses him, and endows him with the Spirit. Yahweh is involved both overtly (through the Spirit) and covertly (manipulating events in the background).¹⁰⁷ Although neither the Israelites nor Samson show any interest in

¹⁰⁴ J. Clinton McCann, *Judges* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), p. 65-66.

¹⁰⁵ It should be noted that Yahweh answers the cries that emerge in the Samson narrative. Manoah's prayer is answered (13.8), and so are those of Samson (15.18; 16.28). Wong, *Compositional Strategy of Judges*, pp. 163-64, observes that Samson's fear that he will die of thirst, parallels the doubts of Gideon and Jephthah, which they expressed after the Spirit had come upon them. The cries of Samson, argues Exum, are the goal of the narrative. J. Cheryl Exum, 'Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga', *JSOT*, no. 19 (1981), pp. 3-29 (22-24); and 'The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga', *VT* 33 (1983), pp. 30-45 (p. 45). Exum adds, 'The absence of Israel's cry at the beginning of the Samson story perhaps finds compensation in Samson's cry to Yhwh in 16:28-30'; 'The Centre Cannot Hold', p. 425.

¹⁰⁶ 'The words of the Israelites hark back to Gideon's declaration, 'Yahweh will rule over you' (8.23). Cf. also the initial complaint against Moses' efforts of salvation (Exod. 5.15-23).

¹⁰⁷ Exum, 'The Centre Cannot Hold', p. 424, remarks that 'everything is determined by God without the knowledge (or consent?) of those involved'.

fighting the Philistines, Yahweh seeks ‘an occasion against’ them (14.4). Still, Israel is not saved, and they are not saved because the Spirit never urges Samson to assemble an army to resist the Philistines.¹⁰⁸ The Spirit comes upon Othniel, Gideon, and Jephthah, prompting them to assemble the troops for battle; but the Spirit never prompts Samson to raise an army. Apparently, Yahweh’s intention is not to save the Israelites, but only to ‘begin’ to save them (13.5).¹⁰⁹

The aim of partial salvation is acceptable to Yahweh because the Philistines have not yet created unbearable conditions for the Israelites. Although the Philistines oppress Israel, the text does not portray them as an immediate threat to the survival of Israel. Therefore, since Yahweh has determined to limit his involvement with Israel, he does not compel Samson to engage in full-scale war. From the moment that Yahweh refuses to save the Israelites again (10.13), he saves them only from the most imminent danger. Never again in Judges are the Israelites freed completely from oppression.

Yahweh’s intention to initiate salvation but not to complete it helps to explain the role of the Spirit in the life of Samson.¹¹⁰ Although the Spirit does not save all of Israel, the Spirit saves Samson three times. Whenever Samson finds himself in a life-threatening situation, the Spirit of Yahweh comes upon him, enabling him to escape.¹¹¹ Twice he is engaging the enemy in battle, and without the aid of the Spirit, he certainly would be defeated. Upon close examination, therefore, we can discern the element of salvation within the work of the Spirit in the life of Samson. When the Spirit comes upon Samson it is to save him from imminent danger. On one occasion the Spirit of Yahweh is responsible both for placing Samson in danger and then for saving Samson from that danger. The Spirit moves Samson to go down to Ashkelon, attack thirty Philistines and steal their clothing (14.19). Without the Spirit, Samson would not have been able to defeat the thirty men and escape from the Philistine city of Ashkelon. The Ashkelon episode is part of the wedding narrative and grows out of the earlier text that states Yahweh’s desire to fight against the Philistines (14.4). Yahweh does not intend to deliver Israel, but

¹⁰⁸ Cf. McCann, *Judges*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁹ *Contra* Crenshaw, *Samson*, pp. 133–34, who writes, ‘Eager to deliver Israel from the Philistines, he raises up Samson’.

¹¹⁰ That the story of Samson represents the story of Israel is argued convincingly by Greenstein, ‘Riddle of Samson’, pp. 247–55; but Greenstein’s assertion (p. 253) that ‘Samson does not fight for Israel because Samson is Israel’ holds up only at the figurative level. It is not convincing at the narrative level, which still requires an explanation for the inaction of the judge Samson.

¹¹¹ *Contra* Welker, *God the Spirit*, who denies that Samson’s exploits are salvation stories (p. 66–71).

neither will he permit the Philistines to grow comfortable. Perhaps in the Samson story Yahweh is not so much *for* Israel as he is *against* the Philistines. The conclusion to Yahweh's battle against the Philistines comes when 'Samson tears down not just a local shrine, but the very temple of Dagon ... the *climax* towards which the whole narrative moves'.¹¹²

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine all the nuances of the Samson saga; and my interpretation, though carefully considered, is provisional and open to modification.¹¹³ The difficulty in defining the role of the Spirit of Yahweh in the Samson story derives from the enigmatic nature of the entire story. It has been argued that the Samson narrative is replete with intentional ambiguity,¹¹⁴ and it 'epitomizes the paradoxical mode of representation'¹¹⁵ in Judges and other Old Testament texts by defying all efforts to find a unifying ideology/theology that will explain all of the questions. Moreover, Polzin contends that no 'systematic model of divine mercy and justice' can bring coherence to the Samson cycle.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, I perceive a kind of clarity in the incoherence and a certainty in the ambiguity. The Samson saga's narrative clarity/incoherence and certainty/ambiguity find their source and explication in the dynamic relational disposition of Yahweh, who is both angry and compassionate (Judg. 2.14, 18), who both sentences and saves (Judg. 3.8, 10), who both wounds and heals (Judg. 15.18-19), who rejects but then relents (Judg. 16.20, 30), and who is free and yet bound to Israel by his own eternal covenant (Judg. 2.1).

¹¹² Webb, *Judges: An Integrated Reading*, p. 167. Cf. Greenstein, 'Riddle of Samson', p. 252.

¹¹³ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 67, argues that 'Samson is chosen as a troublemaker who shall make clear the evil and deviousness of the Philistines, and at the same time show that the strong and clever Israelite can be superior to them'. I commend the efforts of Welker, who, like the rest of us, is scrambling to find a tenable explanation for the Spirit's continued presence in the life of Samson. Welker, however, seems to base his interpretation of Samson as an 'integrative figure' not upon the narrative itself but upon the socio-political situation that stands behind the narrative. At several points Welker's comments are at odds with the biblical narrative. For example, he claims that in the Samson story the Spirit gives 'steadfastness in affliction' (p. 65), but steadfastness is not to be found in Samson or in the Israelites. Welker states further that the Spirit, through Samson, forges in the people of Israel an 'identity of resistance' (p. 68), causing them to 'unite with him in solidarity' (p. 72) and to gather 'behind Samson' (p. 74); but the people never resist the Philistines or unite behind Samson. Welker speaks of the 'power in [Samson] hair' (p. 70), when in fact his hair is only a symbol of his power. He identifies Samson as a facilitator of Israel's moral 'formation of identity' (p. 73); but at the end of the story, Israel is more de-formed than ever before. He claims that the Philistines are 'an affliction that cannot be removed' (p. 69), but in the world of the text it has been demonstrated through the earlier judges that deliverance is always possible. Finally, I would encourage Welker to consider the views of prominent scholars such as R. Boling, J. Crenshaw, L. Klein, J. C. Exum, E. Greenstein, and S. Niditch, none of whom are cited by him.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, p. 185.

¹¹⁵ Marais, *Representation in Old Testament Narrative Texts*, p. 132.

¹¹⁶ Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, p. 189.

G. Conclusion

In Judges the Israelites violate their covenant with Yahweh by pursuing other gods, thereby provoking the wrath of Yahweh, who gives his people over to an enemy power. Once in bondage to oppressive forces, they ‘cannot evade the superior power, and their powers of resistance are inadequate. The force that is oppressing or threatening the people, the attacking enemy, is simply stronger’.¹¹⁷ The Israelites, therefore, require a deliverer who is empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh and who will restore hope, build unanimity, and lead them to salvation. Even after their dramatic deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites continue to be tempted and seduced by outside forces, and once the people of God have yielded to those forces, the seducing powers control and threaten to destroy the community. It is Yahweh’s saving power, exercised in the giving of his Spirit to the judges, that rescues the community of faith from complete ruin.

My study has shown that the Spirit of Yahweh in Judges functions to authorize and equip God’s chosen leaders and to effect salvation, even if, as in the case of Samson, it is only the inception of salvation. Clearly, the Spirit proceeds from Yahweh, represents the interests of Yahweh, and serves to highlight the role of Yahweh as savior and creator of new beginnings. Along with Yahweh’s participation in the narrative through his actions and his speeches (chs. 2, 6, and 10), the giving of his Spirit assures that he, and not the Israelites, the judges, or the Canaanites is, in control of the progress and direction of the narrative. The workings of the Spirit parallel the other activities of God as he responds to the spiraling decline of Israel’s devotion to the covenant. Yahweh’s eventual refusal to completely save Israel registers the escalating tension within the passions of Yahweh himself, as he is compelled to distance himself from an increasingly idolatrous Israel.

The series of Spirit endowed judges concludes with Jephthah and Samson whose lives and behavior mirror the collapse of Israel.¹¹⁸ Despite their charismatic endowments, these judges are unable to control the wandering passions of Israel; in fact, they can not even control themselves. At the end of Judges we are confronted with human frailty, and we are forced to cry out only to God for salvation, because, in the words of James Crenshaw, ‘he alone can deliver Israel once and for all time, for he does not sleep on Delilah’s knee’.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 52.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Exum, ‘The Centre Cannot Hold’, pp. 410-31, who traces the pattern of decay through the book.

¹¹⁹ Crenshaw, *Samson*, p. 135.