

Deconstructing the Downward Spiral: Anthology as Coherence in the Book of the

Judges

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Abstract

Many conceive of the shape of the book of Judges as a downward spiral with each leader getting worse and worse, culminating in the horrific events of Judges 19-21. Proponents of this reading suggest that the judges can be evaluated by how closely they imitate their predecessors and the so-called 'judges cycle' in Judg 2:11-19. This article provides a historical survey to show that this interpretation originates during the literary turn in biblical studies and argued for a coherent literary reading in contrast to the source-critical approaches of the 20th century. Since then, however, it has become a cliché. Using eight tests, I argue that this reading is not substantiated through close textual analysis, and therefore Judges is better understood as a *creatively curated anthology of stories set in a particular moral-literary world*. The book demonstrates an ideological cohesion between the narratives but resists descriptions of linear progression along a particular theme (e.g., moral deterioration). Each of the main narratives (3:7-21:28) can be read on its own terms without the meaning being overdetermined by position or structure. Instead, Judges finds its narrative and ideological coherence through its anthology because each story is set within the same moral universe/narrative world.

Introduction

Judges is often understood as a series of cyclical narratives arranged to depict Israel's deteriorating morality. Though the book exhibits signs of multi-staged editorial activity, numerous studies have been devoted to reading the book's final form as a coherent text.¹

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The rough consensus is that the narratives in the central part of the book (chs. 3-16) are not only cyclical but indicate a “downward spiral” or a pattern of decay as Israel descends deeper into depravity. With each generation and each new deliverer, the narratives get worse and worse before culminating in the horrific events of Judg 19-21.

Operating under this basic assumption, scholars have further interpreted the book according to two closely linked ideas. The first is that Othniel (Judg 3:7-11) is the paradigmatic judge who can serve as a positive foil for the later judges. Mary Conway writes “Othniel, the ideal judge, sets the standard for evaluating the subsequent judges (controlled and empowered by God’s spirit and free from explicit sin).”² The characters assumed to be relatively positive in the book are both in close narrative proximity to Othniel and emulate his actions to varying degrees. The second is that prologue outlines the judges cycle (apostasy, punishment, crying out, deliverance; cf. Judg 2:11-19), and this functions as an interpretive key to unlocking the book’s evaluation of its characters.

¹ Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, JSOTSS 46 (Sheffield Academic, 1987); Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (University of Chicago, 1988); J. Cheryl Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *CBQ* 52.3 (1990): 410–31; Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6 of *NAC* (B&H, 1999); Gregory T. K Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges* (Brill, 2006); Mary L. Conway, *Judging the Judges: A Narrative Appraisal Analysis*, Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic (Eisenbrauns, 2020).

² *Judging the Judges*, 90.

Conway notes that, “admittedly, the pattern is followed with less and less completeness in each subsequent cycle, but it nevertheless sets the implied author’s standard or norm for these narratives and thus establishes one method by which they can be contrasted with one another.”³ The prologue then establishes the structure by which any deviation from it indicates the implied author’s judgement of the individual character. Taken together, these two ideas configure the rhetorical shape of *Judges* as a downward spiral—a progressive deterioration from both Othniel’s paradigmatic example and the narrator’s pattern in the prologue. Summarizing one of the first scholars to suggest this, Barry Webb writes, “the pattern of 3.7-16.31 is not merely repetitive or cyclic, but is a downward spiral—a progressive exploration of a theme for which the groundwork has been laid in 1.1-3.6.”⁴

My argument is that neither of these two ideas are supported by close textual analysis, and therefore, the shape of *Judges* should be described as something other than a “downward spiral.” While the designation may be rhetorically useful, it is a structural way of reading superimposed upon the text that obscures more nuanced readings of the book.⁵ I will begin by sketching a brief historical account of this reading to show how it

³ *Judging the Judges*, 79; cf. Block, *Judges*, 132, 145–49; Wong, *Judges*, 185–90.

⁴ J. P. U. Lilley, “A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 18.1 (1967): 94–102 in Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 29–30.

⁵ The discussion here is focused on the canonical or final form of *Judges*. There may have been, as Jobling argued, an earlier “Extended Book of Judges” (Judges 2:11-

arose during the search for coherence. Next, I will apply eight tests to argue that a pattern of decline cannot be established by the narratives of *Judges*. Finally, I will argue that the book is better understood as a *creatively curated anthology*. The narratives stand on their own, and yet, they cohere with one another because they participate in same moral and literary world. Their meaning is not determined by a superimposed structure or their position in the book.

A Brief Sketch of the “Downward Spiral”

The cyclical nature of *Judges* has long been noted, but issues of historicity and chronology have dominated the book’s interpretive enterprise. Source criticism flourished in the late 19th to mid 20th century, with scholars like Moore, Burney, and Simpson finding Pentateuchal sources (J and E) continuing through the book with some editorial insertions from the so-called Deuteronomistic school.⁶ With Noth’s *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, *Judges* was caught up into the larger Deuteronomistic History.⁷ Though this hypothesis would be challenged and significantly modified in the years to come, Noth

1 Samuel 12) which included the Eli and Samuel narratives (*1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Liturgical, 1998), 43–76.

⁶ George Foot Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, ICC (T & T Clark, 1895); Charles Fox Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes* (London, 1920); Cuthbert Simpson, *Composition of the Book of Judges* (Oxford: Alden, 1958).

⁷ Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (M. Niemeyer, 1943).

articulated a relative amount of coherence to the book, if only at an earlier stage of its development.⁸

During the literary turn in the mid 20th century, scholars sought to interpret the Bible as literature and pay close attention to its narrative and poetic artistry. Interests turned to reading *Judges* as a work in its own right rather than a depository of earlier traditions. J.P.U. Lilley's 1967 article marks one of the first critical attempts to understand *Judges* as a coherent narrative.⁹ Lilley counters earlier claims that restricted the book's artistry to those narratives that perfunctorily matched the introduction and saw any deviance as an indication of sources. Lilley argues, "The theme develops; mere repetition is artistically avoided; incidentals are systematically woven in . . . the author is working with data which he feels free to adapt and handle to a certain extent, but not to force into a regular pattern regardless of historic actualities."¹⁰ Lilley is one of the first to suggest that a major feature of the book's literary structure is "the progressive rather than merely cyclic treatment of the material concerning the judges themselves."¹¹ Writing only a year later, Arthur Cundall suggests that "A progressive deterioration is revealed, each successive cycle being characterized by a greater descent into apostasy and corruption, and by a more

⁸ For a summary of the Deuteronomistic history and its development see Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (T & T Clark, 2007).

⁹ Lilley, "Literary Appreciation."

¹⁰ Lilley, "Literary Appreciation," 99.

¹¹ Lilley, "Literary Appreciation," 101.

superficial repentance, than the one preceding.”¹² These were followed by other literary-sensitive readings that found comparable levels of coherence.¹³

While the “downward spiral” had appeared in a few publications, the phrase appears unknown to mainstream biblical scholarship. The first instance of it in relation to *Judges* is found in a 1966 review article in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* by Millard Lind.¹⁴ In his review of Westermann, Lind proposes that the movement of history according to the Deuteronomistic historian was “not merely on a declining plane, but as a downward spiral (cf. Judges 2:6 ff).”¹⁵ Lindsey’s 1984 commentary makes the most of this phrase in a helpful illustration:

¹² Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth* (IVP, 1968), 70.

¹³ Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, “The Book of Judges,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*. 2, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw, *The Bible in Literature Courses* (Abingdon, 1974); Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges*, A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History pt. 1 (Seabury Press, 1980); D. W. Gooding, “The Composition of the Book of Judges,” *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 16 (1982): 70*-79*.

¹⁴ Review of Claus Westermann, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (John Knox, 1963).

¹⁵ “Review of Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics,” *MQR* 40 (1966): 227–37, here 236.

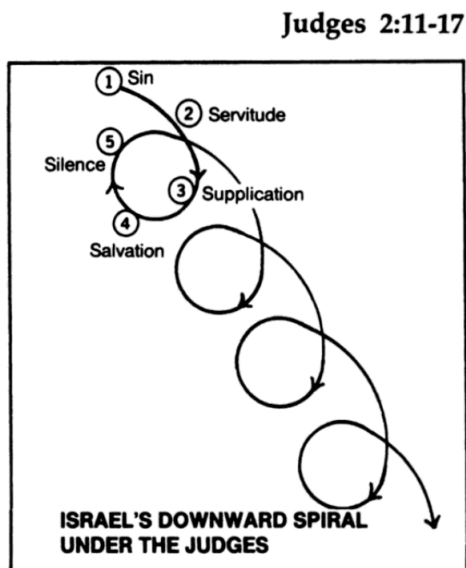


Figure 1: Early Depiction of the Downward Spiral¹⁶

The phrase appears in a few other publications in the 1980's, but to the best of my knowledge, none of these are cited in any subsequent work.¹⁷

The origins of the phrase within mainstream *Judges* scholarship can be traced to Barry Webb's 1987 *Integrated Reading*, the first full-length literary treatment of *Judges*. Building upon the earlier literary approaches Webb argued for a general cohesion between the narratives within the main body of the text (3:7-16:31) and the integrated relationship between the prologue (1:1-3:6) and the ending (17-21). The central narratives express a redactional unity via the Deuteronomistic framework, and the variations "reflect the changing state of Israel as seen in the succession of episodes. The change is one of

¹⁶ F. Duane Lindsey, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Dallas TS:1984)

¹⁷ Robert G. Flood, *30-Minute Panorama of the Bible* (Moody, 1984), 18; David R. Reid, *Devotions for Growing Christians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1986), 214.

progressive deterioration in Israel's condition, in relation to YHWH, in relation to its enemies, and in relation to its own internal stability.”¹⁸ In his literature review, Webb introduces the downward spiral phrase by connecting it to Lilley’s article, even though such language is absent there. Commenting on Judg 2:18-19, Webb will adopt this language as his own: “Israel is depicted as spiralling downwards into worse and worse apostasy.”¹⁹ Webb’s doctoral supervisor, David Gunn, borrows the phrase in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*.²⁰ Soon after, the phrase becomes popular, appearing in several works.²¹

¹⁸ Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 175–76. I have devocalized the name of Israel’s deity here and anywhere else it occurs.

¹⁹ Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 112.

²⁰ David M. Gunn, “Joshua and Judges,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Harvard University, 1990), 102–21, here 112.

²¹ Lawson G. Stone, “From Tribal Confederation to Monarchic State: The Editorial Perspective of the Book of Judges” (Yale University, 1988), 255, 464–77; Dana Nolan Fewell, “Judges,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Ann Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (WJK, 1992), 73–83, here 73; Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 1994), 125; Dennis Olson, “The Book of Judges,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon, 1998), 721–888, here 725–26; Terry L. Brensinger, *Judges*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald, 1999), 19; Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Baker Academic, 2004); Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Liturgical, 2000), 40.

Other scholars such as Exum, Block, and Wong further popularized Israel's downward spiral.²² Though each understands *Judges* differently, they argue that a progressive deterioration is a fundamental aspect of the book that contributes to its overarching design and purpose. Helpfully, these scholars identified thematic and lexical links between the individual narratives and the distinct parts of the book that had been previously assigned to different traditions. The downward spiral became the animating feature of these later arguments, but in some places this structure of decline played a heavy hand in the interpretation of individual narratives and how they relate to the book. Specific examples will be addressed later.

Stone's Ph.D. dissertation does not use the exact phrase (he prefers 'graduated deterioration').

²² Other scholars such as Yairah Amit, Lillian Klein, and Robert O'Connell also argued for complex, integrated readings of the book, but they did not view the book as a downward spiral, see Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Brill, 1999); Lillian R Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Almond, 1989); Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSupp v. 63 (Brill, 1996). Klein did however argue that the use of irony was progressive in the book. Roger Ryan is a rare opponent of the downward spiral, but his critique rests on the assumption that the judges are heroic and relatively positive—an assumption not many would follow. *Judges, Readings* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 171–74, 180–81.

When looking at the recent publications on *Judges*, both academic and those written for non-specialist audiences, one would hardly guess that Israel's downward spiral is a recent phenomenon. The move from a cyclical structure to one emblematic of a progressive deterioration was a byproduct of the search for coherence in the book. Since the flurry of publications at the turn of the 21st century, this reading has become a staple feature. Numerous publications feature charts and figures depicting the spiral, including Boda and Conway's recent commentary:

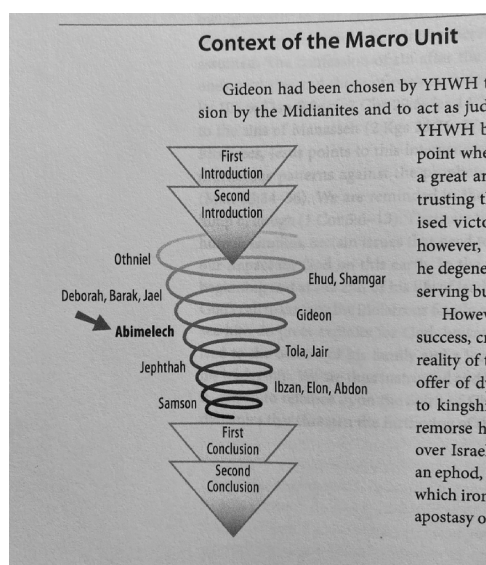


Figure 2: The Downward Spiral in a recent commentary²³

²³ Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, *Judges*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Zondervan, 2022), 414. Another popular illustration can be found in the video on *Judges* from Tim Mackie and Jon Collins at the Bible Project (2016).

Others incorporate the phrase into section headings and view the structure as partially determinant of the meaning of the narrative. This shift is perhaps best illustrated by Barry Webb's 2012 NICOT commentary. While his previous monograph only briefly referenced a "downward spiral," the phrase appears more central to his more recent interpretation. In the past two decades, the phrase has become a convenient way to describe the content and structure of the book, especially in general introductions, study Bibles, and other works aimed at non-specialist readers.²⁴ The phrase is often used as a shorthand for the

²⁴ J. Alan Groves, "Judges," in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Baker Academic, 2008), 92–101, here 97; *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008); Michael A. Harbin, *The Promise and the Blessing: A Historical Survey of the Old and New Testaments* (Zondervan Academic, 2010), 197; David Janzen, *The Social Meanings of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: A Study of Four Writings* (De Gruyter, 2012), 139; Jerome F. D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture*, Interpretation (WJK, 2013), 127; Oliver D. Crisp and Ian Stackhouse, *Text Message: The Centrality of Scripture in Preaching* (Pickwick Publications, 2014), 44; Earl D. Radmacher, ed., *NKJV Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 2014), 374; Mark Galli, ed., *NIV Understand the Faith Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2015), 238; Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2016); Abraham Kuruville, *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Wipf & Stock, 2017); Laura A. Smit and Stephen E. Fowl, *Judges & Ruth (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)* (Brazos, 2018); Deryn Guest, *YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges: An Object-Relations Analysis*, SOTS Monographs (CUP, 2019), 91; Isabelle M. Hamley,

book's rhetoric/ideology without being substantiated with much evidence. In other words, the phrase has become a cliché.

Searching for the Spiral in *Judges*

Concerned for coherence, scholars saw in *Judges* not an amalgamation of sources and sagas, but a complex literary design that mirrored Israel's spiritual and moral condition. The popularity of this idea is at least partially due to the prologue's description of the judges cycle: "But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They

Unspeakable Things Unspoken: An Irigarayan Reading of Otherness and Victimization in Judges 19-21 (Pickwick, 2019), 94; Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament: A Concise Introduction* (Routledge, 2019); Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *The End of the Beginning: Joshua and Judges, A People and a Land* (Eerdmans, 2019); Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology* (Kregel Academic, 2020), 149; Andrew E. Arterbury, W. H. Jr Bellinger, and Derek S. Dodson, *Engaging the Christian Scriptures: An Introduction to the Bible* (Baker Books, 2021); J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Living God's Word: Discovering Our Place in the Great Story of Scripture* (Zondervan Academic, 2021), 52; A. Rebecca Basdeo Hill, "Dismembering Israel: The Downward Spiral of the Abuse of Women in the Book of Judges," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 31.2 (2022): 198–214; Dominick S. Hernández, *Engaging the Old Testament: How to Read Biblical Narrative, Poetry, and Prophecy Well* (Baker Academic, 2023), 114. This list is neither comprehensive nor a critique of these authors. I only wish to indicate how widespread this idea has become recently.

refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (Judg 2:19 NIV). It appears then, at least in the narrator’s description, that there is a progressive deterioration in the so-called judges period. However, proponents of this reading go further than this. They argue that the downward spiral is evidenced within the central section of the book (3:7-16:31). The structure and/or content of each narrative progressively deteriorates as part of the overarching design of the book.²⁵

The focus of this section is evaluating this argument through a series of eight tests. The first two tests assess the central claims by focusing on the structural and linguistic similarity of the later narratives to Othniel (Test #1) and the prologue (Test #2). The next two tests evaluate the downward spiral on the deteriorating quality of the narratives’ content. Test #3 explores the moral trajectory of the narratives (i.e., do the actions get worse as the book progresses?), while Test #4 examines the activity of the deity. Tests #5-7 focus on less significant aspects of the book that are often, but not always, used as evidence of deterioration. Finally, Test #8 explores a neglected aspect of the book (relative chronology and narrative time) which I will argue represents a major weakness of the argument. Not every test holds equal weight, and not every test can account for the entire book. Some of the proposed tests only pertain to the major judges; others include details only mentioned in certain parts of the book. Thus, the argument for the downward spiral is neither confirmed or disproven by one test or another, but on the accumulation of the evidence.

²⁵ Cf. Wong, *Judges*, 249.

Test #1 — Is the Othniel Cycle “paradigmatic” for the rest of the book?

Many have suggested that the ambiguous narratives within *Judges* can be evaluated based on Othniel’s paradigmatic cycle.²⁶ A greater similarity indicates a more positive evaluation. Due to the cycle’s brevity, it can be difficult to compare Othniel with longer narratives like Gideon or Samson. Therefore, scholars have labelled the discrete parts of the cycle in various ways, often making no distinction between the cycle described in Judg 2:11-19 and that of 3:7-11.²⁷ Block, for example, has suggested a seven-fold formula but explains that these features will not be found in every narrative. The lack of the cycle’s features is taken as concrete proof of the downward spiral:

[The Othniel cycle], which is described with the greatest economy of words, is the most complete. Thereafter the structure gradually disintegrates, so that by the time the reader reaches the Samson account, the skeletal elements are barely visible. This too must be regarded as intentional. The progressive disintegration of the literary form reflects what is happening in Israel as a whole.²⁸

²⁶ Boda and Conway, *Judges*, 188–92; Brensinger, *Judges*, 51; Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, Old Testament Readings (Routledge, 2002), 4–5; Klein, *Triumph of Irony*, 34; Olson, “Judges,” 766–68; Schneider, *Judges*, 35; Stone, “From Tribal Confederation,” 287–89; Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 127.

²⁷ For extended discussion on the framework and its elements see O’Connell, *Rhetoric*, 19–57; Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, “Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges,” *JBL* 128.4 (2009): 687–702; F.E. Greenspan, “The Theology of the Framework of Judges,” *VT* 36 (1986): 385–96.

²⁸ Block, *Judges*, 148–49 Cf., Exum, “Centre Cannot Hold,” 412; J. Clinton McCann, *Judges* (WJK, 2002), 10; Wong, *Judges*, 181–85.

Thus, according to Block and others, if Othniel is meant to be paradigmatic and the book also displays a downward spiral, then readers should expect each judge's cycle to imitate Othniel's less and less.

I have identified 11 categories in Othniel's cycle by which to score the other major judges.²⁹ It is not necessary that the same elements be missing in each subsequent narrative, though that would make for a more compelling argument. It is only required that each narrative deviates from Othniel's cycle more than the preceding narratives.

1. DTR intro (And Israel again did evil...[E.g. Judg 3:7])³⁰
2. YHWH is Angry
3. Verb (מכר "to sell")
4. Into the Hand
5. Israel cries out (צעק or זעק)
6. YHWH raises up
7. Title of "Savior" (מושיע)
8. Spirit of YHWH
9. "And He judged Israel" (וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל)
10. "Land was quiet" (וַתִּשְׁקֵט הָאָרֶץ)
11. Death of Judge

²⁹ Many of these are similar to the 11 categories proposed by Wolfgang Richter cited in Uwe Becker, *Richterzeit und Königtum: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Richterbuch*, vol. 192 of *BZAW* (De Gruyter, 1990), 83. One may find even more categories (e.g., "forgetting the Lord", "serving Baals and Asherahs", or the time of oppression).

³⁰ All translations unless otherwise stated are my own.

| Judge | DTR intro | YHWH Angry | Verb | Into the Hand | Israel cries out | YHWH raises up | Title | Spirit of YHWH | "He judged Israel" | Land was quiet | Death of Judge | Similarity scores |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|---------------------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Othniel (3:7-11) | X | X | Sold (מכר) | X | X | X | Saviour (מושיע) | X | X | X | X | /11 |
| | 3:7a | 3:8a | 3:8b | 3:8b | 3:9a | 3:9b | 3:9b | 3:10a | 3:10b | 3:11a | 3:11b | |
| Ehud (3:12-30) | X | — | Strengthened against (חזק + על) | — | X | X | Saviour (מושיע) | — | — | X | — | 5.5 |
| | 3:12a | | 3:12b | | 3:15a | 3:15b | 3:15b | | | 3:30b | (in 4:1) | |
| Deborah & Barak (4-5) | X | — | Sold (מכר) | X | X | — | Prophetess (נביאה) | — | X | X | — | 6.5 |
| | 4:1 | | 4:2a | 4:2a | 4:3a | | 4:4a | | 4:4b | 5:31 | | |
| Gideon (6:1-8:32) | X | — | Gave (נתן) | X | X | ? | — | X | — | X | X | ≈7 |
| | 6:1 | | 6:1b | 6:1b | 6:6b | | | 6:34 | | 8:28 | 8:32 | |
| Jephthah (10:6-12:7) | X | X | Sold (מכר) | X | X | — | Chief & Ruler (לראש וליקצין) | X | X | — | X | 8.5 |
| | 10:6 | 10:7 | 10:7 | 10:7 | 10:10 | | 11:11 | 11:29 | 12:7 | | 12:7 | |
| Samson (13-16) | X | — | Gave (נתן) | X | — | ? | — | X | X | — | X | ≈6 |
| | 13:1 | | 13:1 | 13:1 | | | | 13:25; 14:6; 14:19; 15:14 | 15:20 / 16:31 | | 16:30-31 | |

The green X indicates that there is a similarity between the narratives while the red — means that the category is missing from the narrative. The Blue and Yellow boxes demonstrate lexical similarity—blue being identical and yellow being different but synonymous. Only a half-point was awarded for the yellow boxes. Some differences appear stylistic, (e.g., YHWH *sells* Israel into the enemy's hands in Othniel's cycle, but he *gives* them into their hands in Gideon's), nevertheless these variations may indicate a progressive deterioration. So, while the test might appear pedantic, it is simply following the logic of the argument. Interestingly, every major narrative contains at least one of these slight differences. The scores of Gideon and Samson are approximate because while the text doesn't explicitly say that the Lord raised them up, Gideon's call narrative in 6:11-24, 36-40 and Samson's annunciation and birth narrative in Ch. 13 indicate that they are chosen by God. Readers may wish to award an extra half-point to their scores.

Abimelech and the minor judges were omitted from this table because they scored less than three.

The scores reveal that there is not a clear downward trajectory. Ehud's cycle scored the lowest in similarity, even though he is the closest in proximity to Othniel. Jephthah, on the other hand, scored the highest. Furthermore, there is no apparent pattern to the missing elements.

Test #2 — How similar are the other cycles to Judges 2:11-19?

The second test compares each narrative to the cycle described in Judg 2:11-19 and is scored using 10 categories.

1. DTR intro (And Israel again did evil...[E.g. Judg 3:7])
2. They abandoned YHWH (וַיַּעַזְבוּ אֶת־יְהוָה)
3. YHWH is angry
4. Verb (מכר "to sell" and נתן "to give")
5. Into the Hand
6. YHWH raises up
7. Title: Judge (שֹׁפֵטִים)
8. Judge saved them (וַיִּזְשִׁיעֵם)
9. YHWH was with them
10. YHWH saved them

| Judge | DTR intro | They abandoned (עזבו) YHWH | YHWH Angry | Verb | Into the Hand | YHWH raises up | Title | Judge saved them | YHWH was with them | YHWH saved (שׁוּב) them | Score |
|----------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|--|--|----------------------|
| Prologue (Judg. 2:11-23) | X | X | X | Gave & Sold (נתן & מכר) | X | X | Judges (שֹׁפְטִים) | They saved them (ישׁא) | X | He saved them from the hand of their enemies | Max score: 10 |
| | 2:11 | 2:12-14 | 2:14; 2:19 | 2:14 | 2:14 | 2:16a | 2:16a | 2:16b | 2:18b | 2:18c | |
| Othniel (3:7-11) | X | The forgot (שכח) YHWH their God | X | Sold (מכר) | X | X | Saviour (מוֹשִׁיעַ) | X | "And the Spirit of YHWH was upon him" | YHWH gave (נתן) into his hand . . . | 8 |
| | 3:7a | 3:7bc | 3:8a | 3:8b | 3:8b | 3:9b | 3:9b | 3:9b | 3:10a | 3:10b | |
| Ehud (3:12-30) | X | — | — | Strengthened against (חזק + על) | — | X | Saviour (מוֹשִׁיעַ) | X | — | — | 4 |
| | 3:12a | 3:12c | | 3:12b | | 3:15b | 3:15b | | | | |
| Deborah & Barak (4-5) | X | — | — | Sold (מכר) | X | — | Prophetess (נְבִיאָה) | X | Does not YHWH go out (אָצַף) before you? | God humbled (כנע) . . . | 5.5 |
| | 4:1 | | | 4:2a | 4:2a | | 4:4a | | 4:14 | 4:23 | |
| Gideon (6:1-8:32) | X | — | — | Gave (נתן) | X | ? | — | X | Spirit of YHWH clothed (לְבָשָׁה) Gideon | — | ≈5 |
| | 6:1 | | | 6:1b | 6:1b | | | 6:37 | 6:34 | | |
| Jephthah (10:6-12:7) | X | X | X | Sold (מכר) | X | — | Chief & Ruler (לְרֹאשׁ יִלְקָצִיז) | X | Spirit of YHWH was upon Jephthah | YHWH gave (נתן) them into his hand | 7.5 |
| | 10:6 | 10:6, 10 | 10:7 | 10:7 | 10:7 | | 11:11 | | 11:29 | 11:32b | |
| Samson (13-16) | X | — | — | Gave (נתן) | X | ? | Nazirite (נָזִיר) | X | ≈ | — | ≈5.5 |
| | 13:1 | | | 13:1 | 13:1 | | 13:5 | 13:5 | 13:25; 14:6; 14:19; 15:14 | | |

The green X's, red —'s, and the blue/yellow boxes are scored the same as the previous test. Some categories are very specific like the title of Judge. YHWH raises up a *judge* who saved them in the prologue, but elsewhere in the book, the characters are called saviour, prophet, Nazirite, or ruler. Another specific category is the "forsaking of YHWH". Similar wording is used in Othniel's cycle (3:7—"they forgot YHWH") and in Abimelech's narrative (8:34—"they did not remember"). The only narrative that uses identical phrasing is Judg 10:6-7, which likely indicates a shared author. The "YHWH was with them" category is also specific and one which no narrative fulfilled. As the activity of the Spirit is highly ambiguous in these narratives, these instances should not be collapsed into the same category. Even so, a half-point is awarded if the Spirit appears in the narrative.

Other categories like “Judge saved them” are broad. The characters are awarded a point if they saved Israel in any way, which would exclude Abimelech and some of the minor judges.

The final category, “YHWH saved them” functions as a summary statement that indicates that Israel’s God is credited with the victory by the narrator. Variations of this phrase are found in three of the cycles. For Othniel (3:10) and Jephthah (11:32), YHWH gives (נתן) the enemy into their hand. For Deborah and Barak, the narrator summarizes, “So on that day God humbled (כנע) Jabin, king of Canaan (כנען) before the Israelites” (4:23). There is close similarity between this summary and the prologue in that Israel’s God is credited. The differences are slight, and the apparent wordplay is likely stylistic rather than stemming from a different hand. These are awarded a half-point. The crucial difference in the Ehud (3:30) and Gideon (8:28) narratives is the agent of victory. The narrator credits *Israel* with the victory in 3:30, and Midian is described as humbled (וַיִּכְנַע) before the Israelites (8:28). Samson’s narrative lacks such a summary.

If we were to rearrange the book in a downward spiral based on the similarity scores of tests #1 and #2, here is what it would look like:

| Canonical Order | Downward Spiral acc. to Test #1 | Downward Spiral acc. to Test #2 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Othniel | Othniel | Othniel (8) |
| Ehud | Jephthah (8.5) | Jephthah (7.5) |
| Shamgar | Gideon (≈ 7) | Deborah/Barak (Tied-5.5) |
| Deborah/Barak | Deborah/Barak (6.5) | Samson (Tied-≈ 5.5) |
| Gideon | Samson (≈ 6) | Gideon (≈ 5) |
| Abimelech | Ehud (5.5) | Ehud (4) |
| Tola | Minor Judges + Abimelech (>2) | Minor Judges + Abimelech (>2) |
| Jair | | |
| Jephthah | | |
| Izban | | |

| | | |
|--------|--|--|
| Elon | | |
| Abdon | | |
| Samson | | |

Surprisingly, Jephthah scores the highest in similarity for both tests.³¹ Equally surprising is that Ehud scores the lowest of the major judges in both tests. If the downward spiral is dependent on a deterioration of *form* as well as content as many have suggested, then these tests strongly rule against this reading.

Test #3 — Do the actions of the Judges get worse as the book progresses?

| Judge/narrative | Ethical Transgression |
|------------------------|--|
| Ehud | Regicide, idolatry? |
| Deborah/Barak | Weakness, breaking gender norms? |
| Gideon | Testing God?, cultic infractions, war crimes |
| Abimelech | Fratricide, war crimes |
| Jephthah | Child sacrifice, genocide |
| Samson | Exogamy, environmental damage |

A third test of a downward trajectory is more subjective. With confidence, we can evaluate the activities of Judges 19-21, particularly the egregious gender-based violence, to represent the *worst* events in the book. If *Judges* is configured as a downward spiral to illustrate Israel's moral deterioration, then one should be able to trace a moral trajectory wherein the ethical transgressions of Israel noticeably increase in severity. It should not be an explosion of violence, but one expected by the reader. If the events of Judges 19-

³¹ O'Connell makes a similar observation and critiques Exum's argument that the cycle "increasingly breaks down as the accounts progress" (*Rhetoric*, 178).

21 are the bottom rung of a ladder, what is represented by the other rungs and are they spaced evenly apart?

The suggested transgressions listed in the table are, of course, contested. Some readers might understand the narratives quite differently and others might not find them to exhibit any transgression (e.g., Ehud). Other examples (i.e., Deborah and Barak) do not represent my own understanding, but simply a popular one. Differently than the previous tests, I've chosen to include Abimelech even though he is not considered a judge.

Ehud is treated relatively positively, even if he does assassinate a king while posing as a prophet/oracle. There may be some small whispers of idolatry with the twin references to idols (הַפְּסִילִים) at Gilgal (Judg 3:19, 26), but the characterization and motivations of Ehud remain ambiguous. In Judges 4, Barak's request that Deborah accompany him into battle is understood by many to indicate weakness, or "unmanliness". Later in the story, Jael breaks hospitality norms and kills Sisera. The degree to which this is better or worse than Ehud is hard to define.

Gideon's narrative is fraught with ethical ambiguity. Do his repeated tests of YHWH constitute faith or doubt? Is his punishment of the men of Succoth and Peniel justified or meant to be understood as petty revenge—something we might consider today as a war crime? Gideon is unambiguously indicted by the narrator for establishing an illicit cult that leads Israel astray (Judg 8:27-28). Abimelech's murder of his 70 brothers is likewise strongly condemned by the narrator (Judg 9:56). Even though there appears to be religious syncretism in Shechem (Judg 9:4-6), only the violence of Abimelech and the city's leaders are explicitly critiqued. If viewed as a downward spiral, is this meant to

indicate that such violence is *worse* than idolatry? Though numerous interpretive issues persist, Jephthah's narrative is perhaps less ethically ambiguous, as child sacrifice is emphatically condemned by the Deuteronomist.³² Additionally, the civil war with Ephraim results in genocide (Judg 12). It certainly seems that things are spiraling downward.

Samson, however, poses a significant difficulty for this reading. Block suggests that "in Samson the crises facing the nation reaches its climax and their spiritual condition its nadir. This man embodies/personifies all that is wrong in Israel."³³ Samson may be many things—brash, foolish, violent—but he doesn't seem any worse than some other characters within *Judges*. In contrast to Gideon, Samson doesn't appear idolatrous. In fact, he is one of only a handful of characters in *Judges* who pray to YHWH.³⁴ Unlike Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah, he does not intentionally harm his own people, even

³² E.g., Deut 12:29-31; 18:10; 2 Kgs 3:27; 16:3.

³³ Block, *Judges*, 392.

³⁴ Wong argues that Samson's lack of faith is a "form of deterioration from Gideon and Jephthah" (*Judges*, 165). Yet, this reading does not consider Samson's prayer in the temple (Judg 16:28) and relies on a negative construal of ambiguous details. Samson's request for water is made to be conclusive evidence of his lack of faith, which is worse than Gideon's and Jephthah's because it came after the victory. In comparing Jephthah's faith with Gideon's, Wong suggests that though Gideon doubted God more frequently, Jephthah doubted him more severely (163-164). Jephthah is worse because he risked his daughter's life, but Gideon only risked some wool. However, Wong's judgment would seemingly vindicate Samson because he only risked his thirst.

when he is betrayed by the men of Judah.³⁵ Samson's major crime is one of passion—that he loves foreign women (at least in one way of understanding the narrative). Exogamy is generally condemned in the Hebrew Bible, especially when it leads to idolatry (e.g., Phineas in Num 25). But this is not always the case as evidenced by multiple narratives: Tamar (Gen 38), Moses' Cushite Wife (Num 12:1), Rahab (Josh 6), and Ruth. While Samson's romantic relationships are understood as problematic, one would be hard-pressed to defend his actions as *worse* than Jephthah's genocide, Abimelech's fratricide, or even Gideon's idolatry. In the case of the latter two, the narrator explicitly condemns these actions. In stark contrast, at least one of Samson's love interests, the woman from Timnah, is explicitly said to be from YHWH (Judg 14:4). The evaluation of Samson and his deeds is something that is left open by the narrative. His narrative is morally ambiguous in ways others are not.

Some scholars have suggested additional ways to determine a downward trajectory such as the treatment of women or tribal unity.³⁶ Likewise, these rely on selective interpretations which may not be accepted by everyone. The treatment of women, for example, does not follow a clear downward trajectory, even if the events of 19-21 are egregious. The portrayal of Achsah (Judg 1:12-15) is regarded as relatively positive, especially within a patriarchal setting, but what makes her more positive than

³⁵ His actions do have serious consequences for others as seen in the retaliatory violence of the Philistines (15:4-12), but this is different than the direct violence of Gideon, Abimelech, or Jephthah.

³⁶ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*; Hill, "Dismembering Israel"; Wong, *Judges*, 176–80.

Deborah, Jael, or Samson’s mother? Mixed with the positive depictions of Deborah and Jael is the cruel mockery of Sisera’s Mother (Judg 5:28-30).³⁷ Later narratives also exhibit depictions of women that are better than earlier ones. Samson’s mother is characterized as a pious woman who understands the ways of God more than her husband. Does her faith serve as a foil to Gideon’s? Samson’s treatment of women is no worse than Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter.

These tests are too subjective to be conclusive. The many ambiguities within *Judges* frustrate clear ethical judgements, and readers will likely not agree on which action is worse than another. Instead, this test highlights the reader’s participation in meaning-making. While it is possible that the book is shaped with a downwards trajectory, it is the reader who does much to reconstruct it and interpret the narratives accordingly. If there is a downward spiral, then readers must understand Samson’s actions as worse than Jephthah’s, and Deborah/Barak’s actions as worse than Ehud.

Test #4 — Does the activity of Israel’s God indicate a pattern of decay?

| Judge/narrative | Number of Verbs with the Deity as Subject | Total Word Count of Narrative | Word Frequency per 100 words |
|------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Othniel | 5.5 | 108 | 5 |
| Ehud | 2 | 417 | 0.47 |
| Deborah/Barak | 6 | 1,023 | 0.58 |

³⁷ The reader’s feelings for her are likely mitigated by the fantasies of rape-by-conquest that are used to comfort the anxious mother, cf. Amy C. Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence: Reading Biblical Narratives as an Ethical Project* (WJK, 2021), 43–64.

| | | | |
|-----------|---------|-------|-------------|
| Gideon | 24 [10] | 2,371 | 1.01 [0.42] |
| Abimelech | 2 | 1,272 | 0.15 |
| Jephthah | 5 | 1,396 | 0.35 |
| Samson | 19 [12] | 2,291 | 0.82 [0.52] |

A fourth test is to look at the activity of Israel's God. Here, the data can be interpreted in more than one way. The more the deity acts in a narrative can either negatively indicate a greater need for his presence or positively indicate that Israel is relying on their God. These alternative interpretations can be seen in the commentators: Way explains that "the downward spiral is seen in the theme of God's presence, which is unmistakably prominent in the early accounts (chs. 1–7) and ominously ambiguous or absent in the later accounts (chs. 8–21)."³⁸ In contrast, Block writes, "Ironically, as we witness the deterioration in the nation's condition, we also witness an increase in the divine involvement in the individual's lives."³⁹ But are either of these true?

To calculate this activity, I have analyzed the number of verbs that have Israel's deity as their subject (this includes YHWH, Elohim, the Spirit of the YHWH, and the divine messenger). I have chosen only to count the verbs that occur in the narration of events and not direct speech (e.g., Ehud in 3:28 or Jephthah in 11:21-27). The 5.5 verbs in Othniel's cycle accounts for the ambiguity of $\alpha\mu\psi\iota\iota\iota$. It could be that the Lord raises up

³⁸ "The Literary Structure of Judges Revisited: Judges as a Ring Composition," in *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus*, ed. Bill T. Arnold, Nancy L. Erickson, and John H. Walton (Eisenbrauns, 2014), 258.

³⁹ Block, *Judges*, 149.

Othniel “and he (i.e., YHWH) saves them”, or that Othniel is the one saving the people. Gideon’s and Samson’s narratives have the most, but many of them include a series of wayyiqtol and hendiadys like “he appeared...and he said” (Judg 13:3) or the repeated wayyiqtol in dialogues: “and he said.” The numbers in brackets are a more conservative number that indicate distinct actions. Even if accounting for word frequency, this test does not indicate a downward spiral. Israel’s God is not *more* active in one half of the book or the other, and neither does YHWH’s activity follow any set pattern.

Test #5 — Does the length of oppression increase consistently throughout Judges?

| Judge/Account | Length of Oppression |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Othniel | 8 years (3:8) |
| Ehud | 18 years (3:14) |
| Deborah/Barak | 20 years (4:3) |
| Gideon | 7 years (6:1) |
| Jephthah | 18 years (10:8) |
| Samson | 40 years (13:1) |

Another way some have argued for a downward trend in the book is by focusing on the length of Israel’s oppression. As Olson has argued, if the length of oppression increases consistently, then this gestures toward a downward spiral.⁴⁰ From this chart, there appears to be an increase in length of oppression from Othniel to Deborah, but then it suddenly dips down in Gideon’s narrative, one year less than Othniel, before shooting

⁴⁰ Olson, “Judges,” 763.

back up. The minor judges and Abimelech do not mention the length of oppression. Interestingly, the first three major judges seem to mirror the other three in length of oppression, but with Samson doubling the amount during Deborah's cycle. This may indicate something about the compositional/redactional history, but it would be premature to suggest anything on this information alone. Test #5 does not reveal a downward spiral.

Test #6 — Does the length of peace decrease consistently throughout Judges?

| Judge/Account | Length of Peace |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Othniel | 40 years (3:11) |
| Ehud | 80 years (3:30) |
| Deborah | 40 years (5:31) |
| Gideon | 40 years (8:28) |

Others have suggested that the downward spiral is evidenced by a decreasing length of peace following the activity of the judges.⁴¹ The length of peace is listed in typical round numbers which signify a generational length of time. There is no upward or downward trajectory; numbers are repeated and then abruptly stop after Gideon. It appears there is not enough data to confirm the downward spiral as the theme only occurs in half of the book.

Test #7 — Does the length of judgeship follow any discernible pattern?

⁴¹ Block, *Judges*, 384–85; McCann, *Judges*, 43; Wong, *Judges*, 251.

| Judge/Account | Length of Judgeship |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Tola | 23 years |
| Jair | 22 years |
| Jephthah | 6 years |
| Izban | 7 years |
| Elon | 10 years |
| Abdon | 8 years |
| Samson | 20 years |

While not explicitly argued for by scholars, the seventh test nicely complements the suggestions of Tests #5-6 by examining the length of judgeship. Here again, the data is limited but does not indicate a downward spiral. The numbers vary and there is no obvious pattern. One might notice that all the missing judges (save for Shamgar) were present in Test #6. This might indicate different sources, or different emphases of narration; one writer focused on the legacy of the Judge while the other focused on the length of their career. Even so, tests #6-7 are insufficient to prove the hypothesis because neither encapsulate the entire book.

Test #8 — Do the Relative Chronology and Narrative Time of Judges support the Downward Spiral?

The final test examines the book's narrative time and the rhetorical effect of its narrative chronology. If there is a downward spiral, the wider narrative ought to progress in a single, linear direction. If not, advocates ought to make a compelling case for the dis-chronology. Establishing the narrative chronology is different from the many attempts to reconstruct a historical chronology of the judges period, efforts which have been impeded by the sparse

details of the book.⁴² Narrative chronology is the time-setting established by plot and narration (i.e., within the world of the text). Othniel, for example, is situated within the first generation after the death of Joshua (Judg 1:13). Regardless of when (or if) the events of Judg 3:7-11 took place historically they occur within the story-world and its narrative chronology. The other accounts suggest a consecutive succession of judges, even though historically some judges likely overlapped.

Narrative chronology differs also from the reader's experience of the story's plot, which Ricoeur refers to as the "fictive experience of time."⁴³ There is often a disconnect between the "narrated time" and the time it takes readers to experience the narrative.⁴⁴ This disconnect is due to the limitations of the medium and mechanics of reading. Simultaneous actions or different perspectives are often narrated sequentially, as seen in the humorous depiction of nervous servants waiting outside the doors whilst Ehud escapes from Eglon's palace (Judg 3:24-26). The reader's experience of these scenes differs from their narrative representation. In other instances, past actions appear as "flashbacks" to provide important information for the reader. The narrator explains that "Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites" (Judg 4:11) and that "there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite" (Judg 4:17). These

⁴² Moore, *Judges*, xxxvii–xlili; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges* (SCM, 1981), 6–12.

⁴³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (University of Chicago, 1984), 2:77.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:61–81. For a summary of Ricoeur's work as it relates to *Judges*, see David J. H Beldman, *The Completion of Judges* (Eisenbrauns, 2017), 58–77.

interruptions to the plot's momentum do not disrupt its narrative chronology. Instead, they serve to clarify key aspects within the story, namely why Sisera flees to Jael's tent.

In Judges 17-21, the reader's experience of time is disrupted by the narrative chronology. Although these final stories come at the end of the reader's experience of the book, they are dischronologized—set at the beginning of the book's narrative chronology. The stories of Micah and the Danite migration (Judg 17-18) appear to follow consecutively from Samson's narrative, indicated by the repeated place names of Zorah, Eshtaol, and the Camp of Dan (Judg 13:2, 25; 16:31; 18:2, 8, 11). But, after the Danites move north and raze Laish (Judg 18:27-31), the reader encounters something unexpected: "Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time the land went into captivity" (Judg 18:30). The previously unnamed Levite introduced in Judg 17:7 now presides over the new cult at Dan and is shockingly revealed to be the grandson of Moses.⁴⁵

This revelation accomplishes two things. First, it reveals that Israel's idolatry has thoroughly corrupted even the most venerable of institutions and families. Secondly, it introduces a new narrative chronology for the reader. These events are set within the first generation after Joshua's death, revealing that the corruption of Israel's priesthood

⁴⁵ For discussion about the suspended Nun in the Masoretic tradition, see Natalio Fernández Marcos, ed., *Judges*, vol. 7 of *BHQ* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 104*-105*; Steve Weitzman, "Reopening the Case of the Suspiciously Suspended Nun in Judges 18:30," *CBQ* 61.3 (1999): 448–60.

occurred not at the end of the judges period, but at its inception.⁴⁶ The events of Judges 19-21 likewise occur within the first generation, as indicated by the presence of Phinehas acting as high priest (Judg 20:28).⁴⁷ Thus, the stories that appear to be the “rock-bottom” of Israel’s downward spiral, are some of the *earliest* accounts within the book.⁴⁸ This new narrative chronology also disrupts the reader’s previous linear understanding of the book. As Samson’s narrative logically occurs before the migration of the Danites, he is one of the first judges.⁴⁹ Other narratives may also gain new significance. Ehud’s left-handedness might more sinisterly connect him to the Men of Gibeah and the Left-handed fighters (Judg 20:16) who may have survived the civil war. The new relative chronology

⁴⁶ Cf. Beldman, *The Completion of Judges*, 137.

⁴⁷ Phinehas’s activities may not be emblematic of proper cultic worship, but a corruptive compliment of Judg 17-18. See Brandon Hurlbert, “Taking the Absurdity Seriously: Questioning the Complicity of YHWH in Judges 20-21,” in *Violent Biblical Texts*, ed. Helen Paynter and Trevor Lawrence (Routledge, 2022).

⁴⁸ Several premodern readers have reordered the book to align with the relative chronology. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 5.136-178; *Seder O’lam Rabbah* 12.2; Theodoret of Cyrus, *The Questions on the Octateuch*, ed. Robert C. Hill, LEC v. 1, 2 (Catholic University of America, 2007), 357–61.

⁴⁹ Following Klein, Conway and Boda suggest that Samson and his family may represent a remnant of the tribe of Dan who did not migrate north. This would mean that the narrative could occur towards the end of the judges period (747).

problematizes a linear progression of the book and critically undercuts the key assumption on which the downward spiral rests.

This dis-chronology, however, is often ignored or has little effect on the interpretation.⁵⁰ If acknowledged, it is strangely marshalled in support of the downward spiral. Brensinger writes, “If the central events here [Judg 19-21] do occur early in the period, then the writer has once again positioned materials on the basis of theology rather than chronology. More important than the precise sequence of events is the unmistakable qualitative decline that so characterizes the times.”⁵¹ Such proposals are plausible, considering the book’s ideological and literary editing. However, it is not immediately clear why the dis-chronology can be safely ignored while the cyclical framework and the deteriorating structure (which are entirely absent from Judg 17-21) continue to hold explanatory power of the book’s rhetoric. Is there perhaps a more compelling reason for the dis-chronology of the book?

⁵⁰ E.g., Block, *Judges*, 512, 562; McCann, *Judges*, 124–25; Olson, “Judges,” 871, 885; Schneider, *Judges*, 242–43, 275; Kenneth C. Way, *Judges and Ruth* (Baker, 2016), 154, 156; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2012), 448–49, 486.

⁵¹ Brensinger, *Judges*, 201; Cf., Boda and Conway, *Judges*, 747. Wong admits as much in a footnote, *Judges*, 234 fn 19.

Here is a clear example of how the assumed structure of the book imposes upon, and indeed, snuffs out the rhetorical force of the narrative.⁵² The dis-chronology radically disrupts linear progression, and thus, as David Beldman has suggested, the progressive deterioration of Israel's actions can only be the reader's *impression* of the book as they read one story after another.⁵³ As I have argued in tests #1-7, however, this impression is not substantiated by the text. Even if the downward spiral could be found in the central part of *Judges*, the reader's fictive experience of time is disrupted by the new information of the book's ending. Beldman writes, "As an analepsis, drawing the reader back to an earlier time, [the events of Chs. 17-21] prompt a retrospective reevaluation of the whole period represented in the book."⁵⁴ The rhetorical force of the analepsis is to provide a moral logic for the other narratives and explain Israel's repetitive apostasy. One suggestion offered by the final narratives is that Israel's repeated failures are the result of the corruption of Israel's priesthood, which began almost immediately after Joshua's death. The apparent remedy to the situation is found in the refrain, "and in those days

⁵² This echoes the criticism of Mieke Bal: "The book is taken as a whole, its topic is determined, and the individual stories are subordinated to it" (*Death & Dissymmetry*, 12). While Bal does suggest a worsening condition of Israel in the book, her goal is to demonstrate that a "counter-coherence is a possible, and in many ways a preferable, way of reading" by focusing on gender, sex, violence (20).

⁵³ Beldman, *The Completion of Judges*, 137, 141–42.

⁵⁴ Beldman, *The Completion of Judges*, 72.

there was no king in Israel” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). Ironically, the downward spiral collapses under the weight of its own logic when the book is read as a coherent narrative.

Summary of the Tests

After subjecting *Judges* to numerous tests, there does not appear to be a downward spiral in either form or content. Tests #1-2 revealed that the reader cannot trace a progressive deterioration from Othniel to Samson based on structural elements or use Judges 2 to evaluate the later characters based on similarity. Every cycle deviates from the prologue (even Othniel’s), but these differences do not seem to follow a clear or meaningful pattern. Test #3 traced the moral trajectory of the book, but its subjectivity weighed against the reading. Readers will naturally disagree on which actions are worse than others, but there was no clear, downward progression of evil, even when considering the treatment of women. Test #4 examined the activity of the deity by analyzing the number of verbs with Israel’s God as their subject. Even when accounting for word frequency, Israel’s God is not *more* active in one half of the book or the other, nor does YHWH’s activity follow any set pattern. While there were different ways of reading the data in Tests #5-7, there was no clear pattern that would support a downward spiral in the book. In Test #8, I argued that the closing chapters of the book introduce a relative narrative chronology which disrupts a linear progression and a core assumption of the downward spiral. Following Beldman’s proposal, I suggested that the rhetorical force of this dis-chronology is better explained as a “retrospective analysis” of Israel’s failures which are the result of a corrupted priesthood.

Anthology and Coherence

If there is no downward spiral, how then shall we read *Judges*? Considering the complex composition of the work, the distinctness of each narrative, and the literary artistry which achieves in its final form a certain level of coherence, I suggest that the book is better read as a *creatively curated anthology of stories set in a particular moral-literary world*. The book demonstrates an ideological cohesion between the narratives but resists descriptions of linear progression along a particular theme (e.g., moral deterioration). While each of the main narratives (3:7-21:28) can be read on its own terms (which is how many naturally approach the book), readers may sense a deeper coherence between them because each story is set within the same moral universe/narrative world, or what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as *chronotope*. This term describes a combining of geographical space and historicized and/or imagined time which imbues the narrative world with “generic significance.”⁵⁵ Setting is thus the negotiation between space and time. The Western genre, for example, is not described simply by its geographical setting but in its appropriation of the ethos of an imagined time. The result is that narrative settings take on additional meaning that may prove important for interpretation.

A heuristic analogy is found in contemporary media like Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* (2011–), or the older *Twilight Zone* by Rod Serling (1959-1964).⁵⁶ As anthologies,

⁵⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas, 1981), 84–85.

⁵⁶ Another example can be found in the Coen brother’s Western anthology film, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018).

the narratives and characters are self-contained and episodic. The individual stories are significant in themselves, and each narrative requires its own sensitivities to understand its message. Yet, they are all set within the same narrative universe that is best described as a near-future dystopia or a world in parallel to ours. The episodes share a similar ideological goal in their critique of contemporary culture and its undue reliance on technology. Within some episodes of *Black Mirror*, there are echoes and homages to other episodes. Often referred to as “easter eggs,” these deliberate references do not advance the plot or serve as an interpretive cipher to the story. Within this anthology, the “easter eggs” only provide a deeper coherence to the episodes by locating them within the same narrative universe. Despite this deeper coherence, it would be a mistake to assume a neat linear or thematic progression of the series. The episodes are not arranged to tell a coherent narrative from start to finish. The anthology is not designed to provoke the audience to rank which episode is the worst—though they may decide to do so. Instead, the episodes are curated to give a broader portrait of a world gone mad with each episode contributing to this overarching ideological critique of the present.

Judges can be approached by readers in a similar way. As a creatively curated *anthology*, the narratives can be read as stand-alone episodes.⁵⁷ One does not *need* to

⁵⁷ Cf. Serge Frolov, *Judges*, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* v. 6B (Eerdmans, 2013), 90. Frolov has described the genre/form of the book as “serial storytelling,” and draws analogies with *A Thousand and One Nights*, Agatha Christie’s *Poirot* and *Twilight Zone*. He writes, “In Judg 3:7–1 Sam 7:17, all cycles have roughly

compare the actions of Samson with those of Ehud for either story to make sense. This classification takes seriously the complex compositional history of the individual narratives and the long process of editing, redacting, and compiling which likely occurred over several centuries by a variety of interpretive communities, each with their own ideological motivations.⁵⁸ Yet, this is not to say that *Judges* is merely a random selection of stories, or that the narratives are unrelated to one another and haphazardly stitched together. Within *Judges* scholarship, “anthology” appears as a negative term that emphasizes the fragmented and episodic quality to the narratives.⁵⁹ In describing the anthology as *creatively curated*, I am suggesting that the narratives are connected at an editorial or canonical level due to their recontextualization into a larger literary work defined by a shared narrative world. There is a level of coherence to the book, but as I have argued, this cannot be explained by the downward spiral as the text does not provide

the same basic structure, defined by the recurrent formulae, and implicitly feature YHWH and Israel as the main characters.” This description is perhaps too broad to be useful.

⁵⁸ There are many ways of accounting for the book’s composition and its redactional strata—all of which are conjectural and speculative (some more than others). The composite nature of the text is more than likely even if we cannot be certain of its precise history.

⁵⁹ Cf., Webb, *Integrated Reading*, 124; Gunn, “Joshua and Judges,” 103; Amit, *Judges*, 144; Greger Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives: A Critical Examination of Some Synchronic Studies of the Book of Judges*, Örebro Studies in Literary History and Criticism 1 (Örebro University, 2001), 113.

enough support. Instead, the points of continuity between the narratives exist because *each episode is made to occur in the same moral and literary universe*. The chronotope of *Judges* is loosely defined by the prologue (Judg 1:1-3:6) and the refrain (Judg 17:6; 21:25): Israel's life in the land is threatened by foreign gods, foreign nations, and even fellow Israelites. Who will take charge and lead them back to YHWH? Thus, the prologue, along with Othniel's cycle, *introduces a state of affairs rather than a paradigm for comparative analysis*. Almost like a theme song or opening title sequence, the cyclical frame in the central part of the book (Judg 3:7-16:31) serves as a generic indicator of the chronotope.⁶⁰ It signals to the reader that in some form or another, danger and dystopia are ahead—you are now entering the Twilight Zone.⁶¹

While an anthology provides deeper coherence to the narratives, each episode offers its own perspective on a variety of issues. Readers need not collapse those perspectives into a singular ideology or monologic discourse.⁶² The echoes or associative

⁶⁰ The narrator's introduction in Ruth 1:1 ("In the days when the Judges judged") similarly locates the narrative in this chronotope. For the canonical reader, the story is freighted with generic assumptions derived from one's understanding of *Judges*. Cf., Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 99.

⁶¹ Or perhaps the Wild West.

⁶² Drawing on Bakhtin's proposal of polyphony carnivalesque texts, Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher has helpfully argued that the prologue of *Judges* functions as one voice in dialogue with the other parts of the book ("Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges").

word links many have sensed throughout *Judges* can be understood as “easter eggs.”⁶³ The repetition of characters and places like the Ephraimites/Ephraim (Judg 3:27; 5:14; 7:24-8:3; 12:1-6; 17:1; 19:1, 16) or of words like “thrust/blow” (√עקת cf. Judg 3:21, 27; 4:21; 6:34, 7:18-22; 16:14) creates a connection between disparate portions of the book. They do not, however, suggest that the reader must situate in a spiral. While I am modestly proposing that the book can be read as an anthology and that such a reading is illuminating because it makes the best sense of the textual data, there may also be historical warrant for it. As there are numerous examples of collections of stories and poetry from the ancient world and within Jewish literature, such a proposal is historically *plausible* even if it is beyond our ability to conclusively prove that an ancient audience interpreted *Judges* in this way.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Allow me to conclude with two examples that demonstrate the value of reading *Judges* as a creatively curated anthology. First, the location of the individual narratives within the book no longer over-determines their interpretation. As I suggested with Test #3, it is

⁶³ Joel Kaminsky (“Reflections on Associative Word Links in Judges,” *JSOT* 36.4 (2012): 411–34.) has argued that the word associations connect the narratives in a way that draws attention to their literary distinctness.

⁶⁴ For an extensive discussion on archival practices in the ancient world and its relation to the Hebrew Bible, see Laura Carlson Hasler, *Archival Historiography in Jewish Antiquity* (OUP, 2020); Cf. David Stern, ed., *The Anthology in Jewish Literature* (OUP, 2004).

difficult to articulate why some characters are worse than others. Often, evaluations are based on the book's assumed structure. Reading as a creatively curated anthology, the narratives are open to a wider range of interpretations that are arguably more attentive to their literary details. Within the downward spiral, Ehud's relatively positive treatment is based on his proximity to Othniel, even though Tests #1-2 showed that Ehud is the *least* similar to Othniel and the prologue. His actions of assassinating a king while offering a word of God may be recast in a more negative light. Due to the downward spiral, readers feel they must find some fault within the story of Deborah and Barak—often relying on misogynistic interpretations for their discovery. Instead, readers can explore the intertwining stories of Deborah, Barak, Sisera, and Jael as they navigate the complexity and dangers of life in the land. Similarly, Samson is treated as the worst of the judges, even though his penchant for foreign women is arguably one of the least problematic actions in the book. Reading *Judges* in this way, however, does not necessitate revisionist readings of every narrative. Many will continue to find fault with the judges in ways similar to those who advocate for a downward spiral. Yet, these interpretations will be *strengthened* by this approach because the evaluations will be based on real textual evidence rather than on structural conjecture.

Second, reading *Judges* as an anthology allows readers to better appreciate the book's complex compositional history and, to borrow Robert Alter's phrase, its composite artistry. The search for coherence that resulted in the downward spiral was a reaction to the critical insights of the 19th and early 20th century. The narratives were either torn asunder, divided by verse into sources and early traditions that competed endlessly with one another, or the differences were smoothed over in favor of a coherent final form.

There are clear signs of editorial activity within individual narratives and in how they “fit” within the larger shape of the book. Yet, as evidenced by the persistence of literary readings, there is a deeper coherence between these narratives and their underlying traditions that indicate they were not haphazardly arranged. Like our modern-day anthologies, every narrative does not need to be written by the same person or even adopt the same ideology. There does not need to be a singular, overarching theme for the book to be considered coherent, for an anthology has the potential to be dialogic. Coherence is rather achieved by its participation in the series and its chronotope.

This approach might help explain the so-called minor judges (Judg 3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15), whose inclusion presents issues for the downward spiral (e.g., they lack the cyclical details of the prologue and interrupt the downward moral trajectory). Within an anthology, they can be understood as evidence of an earlier source whose presence marks a supplementary but peripheral role. So, while Shamgar’s inclusion disrupts the apparent structure, it prepares the reader for the central message of Deborah and Barak’s story and song: that ethnic identity is no guarantor of wickedness or righteousness; Israel’s identity is founded upon responsiveness to YHWH. Likewise, the two lists that bookend Jephthah’s story do not need to be reconciled to an overarching superstructure (they cannot be) nor dismissed only as the residue of earlier sources. The focus on

progeny and security in Jair (Judg 10:3-5), Ibzan (Judg 12:8-10) and Abdon (Judg 12:13-15) may serve as an implicit evaluation for Jephthah who lacks both.⁶⁵

Freeing the book from the downward spiral and approaching *Judges* as an anthology allows the narrative to be read in a renewed way. In so doing, readers can better appreciate the narratives, respecting their complex compositional history *and* their literary artistry. By understanding *Judges* as a creatively curated anthology readers can find coherence and treat the book as a unified whole without taming the wildness of its stories that have captured imaginations through the centuries.

⁶⁵ Surprisingly, this is roughly the conclusion of many proponents of the downward spiral, even though the inclusion of the minor judges disrupts their structural assumptions. Cf., Block, *Judges*, 336–40, 388–91; Wong, *Judges*, 236–49.



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