

## THE MEANING OF THE MINOR JUDGES: UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE'S SHORTEST STORIES

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**Abstract:** *The notices about the so-called “minor judges” (Judg 3:31; 10:1–5; 12:8–15) are strategically arranged in the literary structure of the book of Judges. They are “minor” only in the sense that they are shorter than the other stories, but their selective thematic emphases (especially on foreign deliverers, royal aspirations, outside marriages, “canaanization,” the number twelve, etc.) indicate that they are included with editorial purpose. The minor judges therefore have major importance for understanding the theological message of the book.*

**Key words:** *book of Judges, canaanization, donkeys, foreigners, marriage with outsiders, minor judges, royal aspirations, seventy, twelve*

The book of Judges is a somewhat neglected book in Christian pulpits and Bible curricula today. If the stories of Judges are known or taught, usually only the so-called “major” judges attract interest while the remaining narratives (especially from chapters 1–2, 17–21) suffer from neglect. But the so-called “minor” judges are perhaps the most neglected parts of the book, no doubt because of their positioning (between the major cycles), brevity, and their presumed unimportance which may derive from the unfortunate label “minor.”

But it is my contention that the three passages (3:31; 10:1–5; 12:8–15)<sup>1</sup> describing the minor judges contribute a great deal to the theological meaning of the book of Judges because they reinforce the progressive patterns and themes of the whole book, provide thematic transitions between cycles, and bring the total number of leaders to twelve in order to indict all Israel. The essential themes that emerge from a study of the minor judges may be summarized as follows: (1) foreigners may serve as deliverers; (2) judges are acting like kings by asserting status, building dynasties, and making alliances; (3) judges are arranging marriages with outsiders (probably non-Israelites); (4) the twelve leaders in chapters 3–16 are a representation of the tribes and actions of all Israel; and (5) the “canaanization” of

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<sup>1</sup> Although some scholars have excluded Shamgar and have included Jephthah in the list of minor judges (e.g. R. D. Nelson, “Ideology, Geography, and the List of Minor Judges,” *JSOT* 31 [2007]: 347–64; R. Smend, *Yahweh War and Tribal Confederation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1970] 43, 48, 51–53, 71), the narrator’s consistent use of the preposition אֶתְּרִי (or אֶתְּרִי) does not allow for this. All six of the minor judges are introduced with this term (3:31; 10:1, 3; 12:8, 11, 13), while Jephthah is introduced differently (see 11:1). See D. W. Gooding, “The Composition of the Book of Judges,” *Eretz-Israel* 16 (1982): 79\* n. 23; B. G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987), 123–25; K. L. Younger, *Judges, Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 43.

Israel intensifies as its leaders are multiplied. While these five themes are emphasized throughout the entire book of Judges, they are acutely stressed in Judg 3:31, 10:1–5, and 12:8–15.

### I. LITERARY PLACEMENT OF THE MINOR JUDGES

The accounts of the six minor judges punctuate Judges 3–16 at three strategic points. From a formal perspective, these three notices may be described as intentional literary “interruptions”<sup>2</sup> because they are so terse and non-cyclical. But from a pedagogical (or didactic) perspective, the three notices can be also described as complementary and essential to the theological strategy of the book.

First, the Shamgar notice relates to the two previous cycles (Othniel and Ehud) because all three accounts document deliverance for Israel (3:9, 15, 31; employing the root *יָשַׁע*). Shamgar also relates to the following cycle (Deborah and Barak) due to the socio-historical parallel that existed in the days of both Shamgar and Jael, when “caravans ceased and wayfarers went by roundabout paths” (5:6; NJPS).<sup>3</sup> And like the Ehud and Deborah accounts, the Shamgar notice features the use of makeshift weapons (3:31; cf. 3:16; 4:21; 5:26).

The second cluster of minor judge notices (Tola and Jair) relates to the preceding Gideon-Abimelech stories because of the emphasis on royal prerogatives like having many sons to insure dynastic succession (10:4; cf. 8:30–31). The identification of Jair as a “Gileadite” (10:3) relates to the following Jephthah story which shares the same geographical setting (cf. 10:8, 17–18; 11:1–11, 29, 40; 12:4–7).

The third cluster of minor judge notices (Ibzan, Elon, Abdon) relates to the preceding accounts by revisiting the royal theme of many sons (12:9, 14; cf. 10:4)—note especially how the mention of Abdon’s seventy (grand)sons echoes the earlier reference to Gideon’s seventy sons and many wives (8:30–31). This theme also provides a stark contrast with the childless major judge Jephthah (11:34), who is sandwiched between two minor judges who have major-sized families (Jair and Ibzan: 10:4; 12:9).<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the third cluster of minor judges anticipates the Samson story by introducing the theme of foreign marriages (12:9; cf. 14:1–3, 10–11; see below).

In the macro-structure of the book of Judges, the first minor judge is placed among the “first triad” of stories (3:7–5:31) which share a relatively positive portrayal of Israel’s leaders. The second and third lists of minor judges are positioned among the “second triad” of stories (9:1–16:31) which share a relatively negative

<sup>2</sup> E. T. Mullen, “The ‘Minor Judges’: Some Literary and Historical Considerations,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 193 n. 22. The generic label “notice” is employed by S. Frolov, *Judges* (FOTL 6B; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 110, 112, 113, 178, 188, 211, 347, 348, 350, 364, 365.

<sup>3</sup> The “contextually significant” placement of 3:31 before 5:6 is also noted by G. T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges* (VTSup 111; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 238.

<sup>4</sup> See J. C. Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 421; Mullen, “Minor Judges,” 199 n. 36, 201; M. J. Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 1: Jephthah,” *BSac* 162.647 (2005): 282–83, 286–90, 297; Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges*, 238.

portrayal of Israel's leaders.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the three minor judge passages show a moral/spiritual progression from the ambiguous Shamgar (3:31) to the royal aspirations of Jair (10:4) and to the foreign alliances of Ibzan (12:9) and the intensified royal aspirations of Abdon (12:14). Thus, Shamgar is relatively better than Tola and Jair, who are relatively better than Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.<sup>6</sup> This progression is also evident in the relative verbal proportions of the three passages: 3:31 is the shortest (24 words) with one leader, 10:1–5 is larger (87 words) with two leaders, and 12:8–15 is the largest (117 words) with three leaders.<sup>7</sup> The principle of increasing immorality indicated by increasing verbiage is an editorial strategy that is also evident in the sequence of major judges.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the trifold sequence of minor judges displays a geographical pattern that moves from south to north: 3:31 has a southern orientation (dealing with the Philistine threat), 10:1–5 has a Transjordanian orientation (at least for Jair the Gileadite), and 12:8–15 has a northern orientation (dealing with Zebulun and Ephraim/Manasseh). The same geographic pattern is also apparent in the (major) parallel panels of the book: Othniel//Samson have a southern orientation, Ehud//Jephthah have a Transjordanian orientation, and Deborah//Abimelech have a northern orientation.<sup>9</sup>

## II. CONTEXTUAL EXPOSITION OF THE MINOR JUDGES

1. *The first notice: Shamgar (3:31)*. The name Shamgar is probably non-Israelite as it derives from the non-Semitic Hurrian language.<sup>10</sup> No tribal or territorial identification is recorded for Shamgar, as it was for the other foreign judge Othniel (a Kenizzite assimilated with the tribe of Judah; 1:13; 3:9, 11). Shamgar's foreign status may also be indicated by his pairing with the foreigner Jael (a Kenite): "In the

<sup>5</sup> The entire book of Judges is structured as a ring composition with the parallel panels ("triads") framing the centrally positioned Gideon narrative. See K. C. Way, *Judges and Ruth* (Teach the Text Commentary; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 2–6, 108; and idem, "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. B. T. Arnold, N. L. Erickson, and J. H. Walton; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 247–60.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, D. T. Olson suggests that the first notice is "positive," the second is "transitional," and the third is "negative" ("The Book of Judges," *NIB* 2:820, 839–40).

<sup>7</sup> Word counts are computed in BibleWorks software (based on the Hebrew text: search version WTM).

<sup>8</sup> See Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 36–37; cf. A. Globe, "Enemies Round About: Disintegrative Structure in the Book of Judges," in *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text* (ed. V. L. Tollers and J. Maier; Bucknell Review 33.2; Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 235.

<sup>9</sup> See Way, *Judges and Ruth*, 3, 109; idem, "Literary Structure," 251–52; cf. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges*, 246.

<sup>10</sup> See R. S. Hess, "Israelite Identity and Personal Names from the Book of Judges," *HS* 44 (2003): 29; idem, "Judges 1–5 and its Translation," in *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects* (ed. S. E. Porter and R. S. Hess; JSNTSS 173; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 148–49; idem, "The Name Game," *BAR* 30.6 (Nov./Dec. 2004): 40; B. Lindars, *Judges 1–5* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 157; N. Shupak, "New Light on Shamgar ben 'Anath," *Bib* 70 (1989): 523.

days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael” (5:6).<sup>11</sup> Since the first deliverers of the major and minor sequences (i.e. Othniel and Shamgar, respectively) are both ethnic foreigners, the narrator may be indicating that there is a “dearth of native leadership in Israel.”<sup>12</sup> That is, YHWH’s employment of outside deliverers may suggest that there were no worthy candidates found inside ethnic Israel.

The title “son of Anath” may identify Shamgar as a member of a special warrior class and/or as a disciple of the goddess Anath (cf. 5:6).<sup>13</sup> The phrase is also attested on inscribed bronze arrowheads from the Iron I period (including one from southern Palestine—El Khadr near Bethlehem).<sup>14</sup> Anath is the adolescent sister of Baal who is closely associated with warfare and hunting in Ugaritic texts.<sup>15</sup> While it is a little disturbing that the only divine name mentioned in the Shamgar account is Anath, Shamgar is nonetheless noted by the narrator as an agent of (YHWH’s) deliverance for Israel. Perhaps Shamgar functioned as a foreign mercenary (either for Israel or for Egypt),<sup>16</sup> or perhaps he delivered Israel unknowingly while fighting his own battles (cf. Samson).

The term used for “goad/prod” (גִּלְמָה) only occurs here in the Hebrew Bible, and it is rendered by the LXX as “ploughshare” (Rahlfs B: ἀροτροπους). It was most likely made of hard wood with a metal tip.<sup>17</sup> Unconventional weapons are noted frequently in the book of Judges (Ehud’s custom dagger, Jael’s tent peg, a woman’s upper millstone, and Samson’s donkey jawbone), most likely to emphasize that YHWH’s victories are not dependent on state-of-the-art weaponry or technology (cf. Joshua 6; 1 Sam 13:19–14:23; 17:45–47; etc.).<sup>18</sup>

Also, based on the mention of Philistines elsewhere in the book (cf. 10:11; 13–16), it is evident that Shamgar’s historical defeat of the Philistines was only a

<sup>11</sup> See J. D. Schloen, “Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah,” *CBO* 55 (1993): 22 n. 37.

<sup>12</sup> D. I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 175; cf. Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 130–31. For a more thorough analysis on the theme of foreign rescuers in the book of Judges see K. C. Way, “The Righteous Gentiles of the Judges Period,” in *Kingdom Ethics in Theory and Practice* (ed. R. Langer; La Mirada, CA: Biola University, 2011), 236–50.

<sup>13</sup> See Hess, “Israelite Identity,” 26, 28; idem, “Judges 1–5,” 148; idem, “Name Game,” 41 n. 2; Shupak, “New Light on Shamgar ben ‘Anath,” 523–24.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. see *COS* 2.84:221; cf. Hess, “Israelite Identity,” 26, 28; idem, “Name Game,” 41 n. 2.

<sup>15</sup> For additional references see P. L. Day, “Anat,” *DDD*, 36–43; I. Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qadeshbet, and Asherah c. 1500–1000 BCE* (OBO 204; Fribourg: Fribourg Academic Press, 2008), esp. 92–93. For an insightful discussion on the role of Anath in the “heroic culture” of early Israel see G. Mobley, *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2005), 19–38.

<sup>16</sup> See Shupak, “New Light on Shamgar ben ‘Anath,” 523–24.

<sup>17</sup> See D. I. Block, “Judges” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (ed. J. H. Walton; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 2:133; see also the photo of an Egyptian model featuring cattle-drivers holding goads (p. 132). In addition, cattle prods are pictured on Sennacherib’s Lachish reliefs (see D. Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* [Publications of the Institute of Archaeology 6; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1982], 77, 84–87, 108, 110, 111). For additional reference on ox goads see P. J. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 16; Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 158; Sir 38:25.

<sup>18</sup> See Mobley, *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel*, 56–59.

localized, temporary fix. After all, the Philistines continue to threaten Israel until the time of king David (cf. 2 Sam 8:1; 1 Chr 18:1).<sup>19</sup>

2. *The second cluster of notices: Tola and Jair (10:1–5).* The name Tola' (10:1) denotes “crimson” or “worm,”<sup>20</sup> although the latter sense would make for an unlikely birth name. His tribal history in Issachar is also documented in Gen 46:13; Num 26:23–24; and 1 Chron 7:1–2. He was most likely buried in the family tomb<sup>21</sup> in Shamir (technically located in Manasseh's allotment)—a region which is later attributed to Shemer and purchased by Omri to become Samaria, the royal capital of the northern kingdom (cf. 1 Kgs 16:24).<sup>22</sup>

It is important to notice that Tola's administrative/theological function is described in 10:1–2 as both “delivering/rescuing” (שׁע in *Hiphil*) and “judging/governing” (שׁפט in *Qal*). In fact, the narrator also employs these verbal roots interchangeably in the prologue (2:16, 18) and in the stories of Othniel (3:9–10) and Samson (13:5; 15:20; 16:31).<sup>23</sup> Therefore it is prudent in the book of Judges not to make a functional distinction between מוֹשִׁיעַ and שׁפֵּט. A judge is a rescuer, and a rescuer is an agent of justice. A judge metes out God's justice (cf. Heb 11:33, “administered justice”) as the means of God's deliverance.

The narrator also employs a noun clause for Tola in 10:1, emphatically breaking the sequence of *waw*-consecutive imperfects: “Now he was dwelling in Shamir” (והוא־ישב בשמיר). The participle שׁב may indicate more than mere “dwelling,” however. In this context it may refer to a royal enterprise,<sup>24</sup> and one might translate the verb more precisely as “sitting” or “presiding.”<sup>25</sup>

The name Ja'ir (10:3–5) means “may [DN] enlighten/shine.”<sup>26</sup> His tribal history in Gilead is also documented in Num 32:41; Deut 3:14; 1 Kgs 4:13; 1 Chr 2:21–23. His burial place at Qamon (קמוֹן; Rahlfs A: Παμμω; Rahlfs B: Παμων) is

<sup>19</sup> For general reference on the Philistines see C. S. Ehrlich, “Philistines,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (ed. B. T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 782–92; Way, *Judges and Ruth*, 131.

<sup>20</sup> See Hess, “Israelite Identity,” 33; Nelson, “Ideology,” 357–58.

<sup>21</sup> See L. E. Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” *BAOR* 260 (1985): 23.

<sup>22</sup> See Nelson, “Ideology,” 358–59; L. E. Stager, “Shemer's Estate,” *BAOR* 277/278 (1990): 103–4.

<sup>23</sup> See J. M. Sasson, “Coherence and Fragments: Reflections on the *SKL* and the *Book of Judges*,” in *Opening the Tablet Box: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Benjamin R. Foster* (ed. S. C. Melville and A. L. Slotzky; CHANE 42; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 364 n. 6, 367; see also Frolov, *Judges*, 353; Mullen, “Minor Judges,” 192–93. For additional discussion on the term *šōpēt* see T. L. J. Mafico, *Yahweh's Emergence as “Judge” Among the Gods: A Study of the Hebrew Root Špt* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> I must thank Mark S. Smith who suggested this nuance to me after hearing an earlier version of this paper at the SBL annual meeting in San Diego, CA (24 November 2014).

<sup>25</sup> These glosses are proposed by B. G. Webb (*The Book of Judges* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 298). The same nuance and syntax is employed for Eglon and Sisera respectively in Judg 3:20 and 4:2 (“was based in,” NIV). The idiom also occurs in Ugaritic and Akkadian (ytb b- and asabu ina) for royal enthronement (see M. S. Smith, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* [AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016], 75, 77, 168), and in KTU 1.108:2–3 the idiom is used in parallelism with the verb tpt (=Heb. שׁפט; see D. Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* [WAW 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002], 194), just like in Judg 10:1–2.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. HALOT 381; Hess, “Israelite Identity,” 36.

unidentified.<sup>27</sup> The term used for donkey (רַעַי) in 10:4 and 12:14 is not a “foal,” “colt,” or young animal (as translated by LXX, N/KJV, HCSB, etc.) but is rather a male equid, most likely a jackass.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the term for donkey (רַעַי) in 10:4 sounds similar to both the name of the judge (רַעַיָּה) and the common term for city (רַעַיָּה).<sup>29</sup> The NJPS translation cleverly preserves part of this Hebrew word play in English: Jair “had thirty sons, who rode on thirty *burros* and owned thirty *boroughs*” (emphasis added; cf. the similar use of πῶλος [“young animal”] and πόλις [“city”] in LXX). The remark about Ja’ir’s thirty sons/donkeys/cities characterizes his family as wealthy and powerful,<sup>30</sup> and the rhetorical impact would be analogous to noting that a modern person drives a Mercedes-Benz.

The motif of “thirty sons (and thirty donkeys),” occurring in the descriptions of Jair (10:4), Ibzan (12:9) and Abdon (12:14), bears striking resemblance to a Hittite epic text known as the Tale of Zalpa in which a queen is said to have borne thirty sons and thirty daughters, and the sons are said to be driving donkeys.<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that the donkeys in the Zalpa epic are closely associated with royalty. Although M. Tsevat suggests that the biblical account in this case borrowed from the Hittite version,<sup>32</sup> it is more likely that the motif of “thirty sons (and thirty donkeys)” in both texts indicates a “type scene”<sup>33</sup> that signifies prestige, power, wealth, or kingship in the ancient Near Eastern world. One might even suggest that such details are included in the biblical narrative to indicate that these minor judges had royal aspirations as they were strutting around on their donkeys. Elsewhere in the Bible, the donkey is often associated with royalty (cf. Gen 49:10–11; 1 Sam 25:20, 23, 42; 2 Sam 16:1–2; 19:26 [MT 19:27]; Zech 9:9) or at least with people of high social standing (cf. Num 22:21–34; Judg 5:10; 1 Sam 9–10; 1 Kgs 13:13–29). In Ugaritic epic texts, the donkey is also employed by riders of high status, including deities and noblemen.<sup>34</sup> Finally, it is known that equids are frequently interred with

<sup>27</sup> Possibly located at Qamm (see C. G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 126, 289).

<sup>28</sup> See K. C. Way, “Donkey Domain: Zechariah 9:9 and Lexical Semantics,” *JBL* 129 (2010): 106, 110–11, 113; idem, *Donkeys in the Biblical World: Ceremony and Symbol* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 166–70.

<sup>29</sup> One does not mean to imply that the **ס** and **שׁ** sound the same but that the final two consonants of all three words sound the same.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. B. Beem, “The Minor Judges: A Literary Reading of Some Very Short Stories,” in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective* (ed. K. L. Younger Jr., et al.; Scripture in Context 4; Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 11; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 152, 158; Nelson, “Ideology,” 355; Way, *Donkeys*, 55, 74, 172.

<sup>31</sup> See COS 1.71:181; H. A. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed; WAW 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 81–82; cf. Beem, “The Minor Judges,” 155–56; M. Tsevat, “Two Old Testament Stories and Their Hittite Analogues,” *JAOs* 103.1 (1983): 322–26.

<sup>32</sup> See Tsevat, “Two Old Testament Stories,” 326.

<sup>33</sup> For the classic definition of “type scene” see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47–62, 181–182, 188; cf. Way, *Donkeys in the Biblical World*, 74.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. see the Ba’lu Myth, the ‘Aqhatu Legend, and the Rapi’uma Texts (COS 1.86:258–259; 1.103:352; M. S. Smith and W. T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 2: *Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3–1.4* [VTSup 114; Leiden: Brill, 2009], 485–87, 490–93, 495–97, 502–14; Way, *Donkeys*, 49–55). Note, however, that in the Ba’lu Myth, Smith and Pitard erroneously identify the

elite, or even royal, human graves in Bronze-Iron Age burials all over the Near East and Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

3. *The third cluster of notices: Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8–15).* The name 'Ibzan (12:8–10) is related to a root meaning "quick."<sup>36</sup> 'Ibzan's hometown is probably the northern Bethlehem located in Zebulun's allotment (*Beit Labm*; cf. Josh 19:15), rather than the better-known Bethlehem located in Judah (cf. 17:7–9; 19:1–2, 18).<sup>37</sup>

The most important information provided about 'Ibzan is his illicit marriage arrangements for all sixty of his children. First of all, his large number of children (compare the children of Gideon, Jair, and Abdon), which is only possible with a sizable harem, suggests that he is concerned about dynastic succession. Second, he demonstrates economic power and secures political alliances by strategically marrying his sons and daughters to outsiders. The text specifically states in 12:9 that 'Ibzan sent his thirty daughters "to the outside" (הַחוּצָה) for husbands, while he brought thirty daughters to his sons "from the outside" (מִן־הַחוּץ). Since marrying non-Israelite "daughters" is proscribed as an entrée to idolatry in the Torah (Exod 34:15–16; Deut 7:3–4; cf. Josh 23:12) and is also a major theme in the book of Judges (see especially 3:5–6; 14:1–3; cf. 1:12–13; 21:1, 7, 18), it is best to understand the term "outside" as referring not merely to the "clan" (cf. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV, NJPS) or to the "tribe" (cf. HCSB),<sup>38</sup> neither of which would be remarkable, but to "the people of Israel."<sup>39</sup> The notation about 'Ibzan's arrangements in 12:9 strikingly documents the latest example of the dark days of the judges: the slide toward apostasy that goes along with marrying non-Israelites (or more accurately, marrying non-Yahwists).<sup>40</sup>

The name 'Elon (12:11–12) probably means "ram," as animal names were commonly employed for personal names in the biblical world (in Judges compare Caleb, 'Eglon, Ja'el, 'Oreb, Ze'eb, Ga'al).<sup>41</sup> Although it is unidentified, the name of 'Elon's burial place in 12:12 (אֵילִים; Rahlfs A: Αἰλιμ) may be a wordplay on the personal name 'Elon since both words are spelled with the same consonants in

animal as a horse rather than a donkey (see pp. 503–6). Interestingly, in the 'Aqhatu Legend, the donkey rider Dani'lu also functions as a judge at the city gate (see Way, *Donkeys*, 52 n. 130).

<sup>35</sup> See K. C. Way, "Assessing Sacred Asses: Bronze Age Donkey Burials in the Near East," *Levant* 42 (2010): 210–213, 219–25; idem, *Donkeys*, 151–52.

<sup>36</sup> Hess, "Israelite Identity," 33; cf. *HALOT* 9.

<sup>37</sup> See A. F. Rainey and R. S. Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 139, 141, 184, 231.

<sup>38</sup> N. K. Gottwald opts for a tribal interpretation of the term "outside" (*The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979], 305–8), failing to relate it to the theme of illicit marriages as set forth in Judg 3:5–6.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. T. J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 188. For the relationship between the Hebrew terms for clan, tribe, and people, see Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 26–27.

<sup>40</sup> It is important at this juncture to clarify that a major issue in the book of Judges is Israel's Yahwistic identity, not just Israel's ethnic identity. That is why faithful (i.e. Yahwistic) foreigners like Othniel and Jael are depicted so positively in the book (cf. Rahab, Caleb, and Ruth).

<sup>41</sup> Hess, "Israelite Identity," 35; cf. *HALOT* 40–41. For other dignified animal names see Hess, "Israelite Identity," 37; Way, *Donkeys*, 175.

Hebrew. His tribal history in Zebulun is also documented in Gen 46:14; Num 26:26.

The name ‘Abdon (12:13–15), which is based on the common root meaning “serve,” is also attested on an unprovenanced arrowhead from the Iron I period.<sup>42</sup> Just as his numerous progeny and donkeys are indicative of royal behavior (see above), the number seventy in 12:14 may carry the same connotation. The number seventy frequently occurs as a figure of speech in royal contexts in both the Hebrew Bible (cf. Judg 1:7; 8:30; 9:2, 5, 18, 24, 56; 2 Kgs 10:1, 6–7) and ancient Near Eastern texts.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it may be more than coincidental that the total number for the years of service by the minor judges (i.e. 23+22+7+10+8 in the Masoretic Text) comes to no more or less than seventy.<sup>44</sup>

Abdon’s hometown/burial place at Pirathon (12:13, 15) is identified with *Far’ata*.<sup>45</sup> Since this site is technically in Manasseh’s allotment, the phrase “the land of Ephraim” (v. 15) seems to be used loosely here.<sup>46</sup> While the enigmatic location “hill country of the Amalekite” (v. 15) is presently unidentified, the reference might point to an earlier period when the Ephraimites and Amalekites had a close relationship (cf. 5:14).<sup>47</sup> However, informed readers may also recall that the memory of the Amalekites should have been blotted out by this time (see Deut 25:19). One suggests that the narrator concludes this third and final notice about the minor judges by mentioning the Amalekites in order to achieve the same rhetorical effect as the one produced by the mention of Amorites in Judg 1:36 and the mention of Canaan in Judg 21:12. In all three of these passages, the shocking conclusion may cause the reader to ask “Whose land is this, anyway?”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this is a device by which the narrator demonstrates the scandalous “canaanization” (or, in this case, “amalekization”) of the land of Israel and the inversion of the conquest (undoing what was accomplished in the book of Joshua).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Hess, “Israelite Identity,” 37–39; see also R. S. Hess, “Arrowheads from Iron Age I: Personal Names and Authenticity,” in *Ugarit at Seventy-Five* (ed. K. L. Younger Jr.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 125.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. see the Ba’lu Myth and the Panamuwa Inscription (*COF* 1.86:262 and 2.37:158, respectively) as well as the partially reconstructed lacunae of the Zakkur Stele and the Tel Dan Stele (*COF* 2.35:155 and 2.39:161 respectively). For additional discussion on the significance of the number seventy, see J. C. de Moor, “Seventy,” in “*Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf*: Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient: Festschrift für Oswald Loretz (ed. M. Dietrich and I. Kottsieper; AOAT 250; Münster: Ugarit, 1998), 199–203; F. C. Fensham, “The Numeral Seventy in the Old Testament and the Family of Jerubbaal, Ahab, Panammuwa and Athirat,” *PEQ* 109 (1977): 113–15.

<sup>44</sup> See Globe, “Enemies Round About,” 243; Sasson, “Coherence and Fragments,” 367, 368–69. The total of seventy, excluding Jephthah’s tenure (6 years), may serve as another indication that Jephthah is formally excluded from the minor judges (see n. 1). On this point, see R. Baker, “Double Trouble: Counting the Cost of Jephthah,” *JBL* 137 (2018): 31.

<sup>45</sup> Rainey and Notley, *Sacred Bridge*, 136, 139, 141, 149, 214.

<sup>46</sup> See Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 390; Nelson, “Ideology,” 360.

<sup>47</sup> See Schloen, “Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*,” 27.

<sup>48</sup> Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 72–73, 278.

<sup>49</sup> The term “canaanization” is from Daniel Block (*Judges, Ruth*, 58, 73, 75, 143–144, 250, 473, etc.). The idea that Judges shows a reversal of the conquest is elaborated by Trent Butler (*Judges* [WBC 8; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009], lvii–lxiv). M. J. Boda also suggests that this mention of Amalekites is



## III. THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MINOR JUDGES

Since these passages are both purposefully reported and strategically arranged (see “Literary Placement” above) in the book of Judges, it is evident that the term “minor” (apparently coined by Albrecht Alt)<sup>50</sup> can be a misnomer. These accounts are “minor” only in the sense that they are shorter than the other stories and they lack explicit cyclical features. However, their selective thematic emphases (especially on kingdom building, foreign alliances, and canaanization) reveal that they are included with editorial purpose. The minor judges therefore have major importance for understanding the theological message of the book.

The cyclical pattern of apostasy-oppression-deliverance<sup>51</sup> which is expounded in Judg 2:11–19 and illustrated so well in Judg 3:7–30 (the Othniel and Ehud stories) is barely recognizable in the first notice of minor judges (3:31). Although Shamgar’s foreign ethnicity and his disturbing religious affiliations may indirectly indict Israel, apostasy is not explicitly described, and a Philistine oppression may be only implied (cf. Judg 10:11). Nevertheless, the narrator regards Shamgar as an agent of deliverance.

Deliverance is also mentioned in connection with Tola (10:1), but the implicit oppressor’s identity is unstated. Perhaps some modicum of deliverance is implicitly present for all the remaining minor judges, but the text does not address this matter (similar ambiguity about deliverance is also arguably present in both the Jephthah and Samson accounts; cf. 10:13–14; 13:5). All the minor judges after Shamgar are said to govern/judge Israel (employing the verb **שָׁפַט**, just like the major judges) but exactly how they brought justice is unclear.

What is clear is that the cyclical rubric of 2:11–19 is progressively breaking down in the book (especially in the second half, after the Gideon account) and that YHWH’s involvement in each leader’s tenure is increasingly ambiguous or even absent.<sup>52</sup> The minor judges are not explicitly raised up by YHWH (Tola and Jair simply “arose” [*Qal* rather than the usual *Hiphil* form]; 10:1, 3),<sup>53</sup> and the land os-

“a reminder of the incompleteness of the conquest” (“Judges,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* [eds. T. Longman and D. E. Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 2:1202).

<sup>50</sup> See A. Alt’s *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 130–31, 320.

<sup>51</sup> I prefer a minimalist analysis of the cyclical pattern that recognizes only three basic components: (1) Israel does evil by serving foreign gods (2:11–13); (2) YHWH responds by giving Israel over to foreign oppressors (2:14–15); and then by (3) graciously delivering Israel by raising up a “judge” (2:16–18), which is often YHWH’s compassionate response to Israel’s “groaning” (2:18). Finally, after the judge died, Israel would not change its stubborn ways and would go deeper into apostasy than before (2:19), and the cycle would repeat itself. Note that repentance is not one of the components of this cycle (see F. E. Greenspahn, “The Theology of the Framework of Judges,” *VT* 36 [1986]: 386, 391, 394–96; J. Hoyt, “Reassessing Repentance in Judges,” *BSac* 169 [2012]: 143–58; Mullen, “Minor Judges,” 191).

<sup>52</sup> See J. C. Exum, “Centre Cannot Hold,” 411–12, 421, 431; Schneider, *Judges*, 155.

<sup>53</sup> Nelson remarks that the use of **קָוַם** in the *Qal* stem here may imply that “their emergence is to be understood as a result of human developments rather than direct divine activity” (Nelson, “Ideology,” 350); cf. Exum, “Centre Cannot Hold,” 421. J. M. Sasson similarly translates the verb “stepped up” (*Judges 1–12* [AYB 6D; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014], 115, 406) and notes that it gives Tola and Jair each “control of his own actions, mildly implying a power grab” (p. 409).

tensibly never enjoys any rest after the Gideon account. One might go as far as to say that as YHWH's sovereign role decreases in these narrations, the role of the human leader increases as each one pursues his own self-interested agenda. The implicit trajectory of increasing human sovereignty at the expense of YHWH's kingship (which is supposedly normative, according to 8:23; 11:27) comes to maturity—actually, degeneracy!—in the epilogue where there is no king in Israel and each does what is right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25).

A remaining theological issue that deserves attention is the likelihood that the narrator selected these six minor judges in order to bring the total number of deliverers/judges in the book to twelve.<sup>54</sup> The number twelve is easily computed by excluding Abimelech from the roster since he “ruled” (שָׁרַר, 9:22) illegitimately as an internal oppressor and is never called a “judge” or a “deliverer” by the narrator (8:33–9:57). The literary quota of twelve is likely intended as an indictment against all Israel so that no Israelite tribe is exempted from the growing trend of covenant rebellion (or “canaanization”) which characterizes the period.<sup>55</sup> Apostasy was a corporate offense, and every Israelite man and woman holds a stake in the responsibility.<sup>56</sup>

Based on the foregoing discussion it should be evident that the theological motifs which emerge from the study of the minor judges are also important emphases in the so-called “major” judges and in the book of Judges as a whole. The minor judges are essentially reinforcing, clarifying, and complementing (but certainly not complimenting) the major judges. Thus the differences between the major and minor judges are evidently not about theological function; the differences are rather defined only by proportions of verbiage and the specific details of narration.<sup>57</sup> Hopefully, when readers consider these three brief notices, they will not be deflected by the unfortunate moniker “minor,” but they can instead appreciate the many theological contributions these short stories make to the message of the book

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges*, 241. The twelve judges/deliverers in literary order are as follows: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. While the total of twelve undoubtedly signifies the tribes of Israel, the narrator does not make all the tribal connections explicit. For example, is Shamgar somehow assimilated with an Israelite tribe? Is there more than one judge from Zebulun? Are there any judges from Reuben, Simeon or Levi? etc. Rather than forcing these connections (like the dubious speculations of J. G. Williams, “The Structure of Judges 2.6–16:31,” *JOT* 49 [1991]: 77–85), the narrator seems content with a general geographical distribution: accounts regarding the south (Othniel, Shamgar, Samson), accounts regarding the north (Deborah/Barak, Gideon, Tola, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon), and accounts regarding the east (Ehud, Jair, Jephthah).

<sup>55</sup> In a similar way, the twelve pieces of the concubine's corpse are sent to the tribes of Israel to elicit a corporate response (19:29–20:7).

<sup>56</sup> Brenner observes that the narrator, consciously or not, presents twelve major female figures over and against the twelve male judges (see A. Brenner, “Women Frame the Book of Judges—How and Why?” in *Joshua and Judges* [ed. A. Brenner and G. A. Yee; Texts @ Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013], 132).

<sup>57</sup> Similarly, A. J. Hauser concludes: “The categories ‘major judge’ and ‘minor judge’ serve no useful function other than to indicate the length and style of the literary traditions” (“The ‘Minor Judges’: A Reevaluation,” *JBL* 94 [1975]: 200).

of Judges, and then they can more effectively integrate them into Christian ministry today.