Katharine E. Southwood

Marriage by Capture in the Book of Judges: An Anthropological Approach

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In this book, the first in a new monograph series of SOTS (the British Society for Old Testament Study), Southwood presents a thorough and well-documented investigation of Judg 21, making careful use of anthropological studies of marriage by capture while paying close attention to the biblical narrative as well as recent scholarly debate. Following a brief preface the book contains five chapters, conclusion, bibliography, and indices of authors and themes.

The first chapter, “Methods, Considerations and Recent Approaches to Judges 21,” reviews various approaches, including questions related to monarchy, the role of women, Greek and Roman mythology and law, redaction (the Deuteronomistic History), and dating, before discussing the advantages and disadvantages of applying social anthropology to Judg 21. Although the question of sources remains unresolved, Southwood notes clear links between Judg 17–21 and the beginning of the book and also the possibility that a division exists between 17–18 and 19–21. She concludes that the refrain about every man doing what he held to be right was probably a secondary addition. With respect to dating, she finds indications that Judg 19–21 derives from the postexilic (Persian) period persuasive.
Chapter 2 comprises a discussion of marriage by capture in its various guises undertaken from an anthropological perspective. Discussion includes the problem of consent (which is problematic, since some cases involve preplanning with the bride or her parents), a careful exploration of the differences between individual capture and raiding for brides, and consideration of the variety and inconsistency among emic interpretations of such marriages. Marriage by capture is often found in systems involving arranged marriage, bride price, patriarchal organization, and the social unacceptability of illegitimate birth or sexual activity prior to marriage. Within such systems it is often regarded as a peripheral form of marriage. Virginity, which reflects on male honor and female modesty, is highly prized in such systems; where virginity is taken or even doubted, with the consequence that the value of the bride price is thoroughly debased, it is generally considered best that the young women so taken should marry their captors.

In the third chapter, which is concerned with virginity, marriage, and rape in the Hebrew Bible, the author pays close attention to the relevant laws with respect to sexual behavior, noting, inter alia, the cultural expectation of a woman’s virginity prior to marriage (which was linked to marriageability and bride price), that “the term ‘rape’ is not lexicalised in Hebrew,” and a discussion of the term הנע that probes its consequences within the honor/shame system, so that it holds connotations of the humiliation that follows rape. Here the narratives of Dinah (Gen 34), Tamar (2 Sam 13), and the battle with the Moabites (Num 31) are discussed, followed by consideration of the laws pertaining to marriage with captives taken in war, which Southwood carefully distinguishes from the model of marriage by capture explored in the previous chapter.

While her discussion of issues represented in Judges and other biblical texts explored is much to the point and its value should not be discounted, more importantly these first three chapters carefully lay the foundation for Southwood’s proposal in the fourth chapter that the narrative of Judg 21 contains two examples of marriage by capture that may be understood in terms informed by an anthropological perspective. The first episode (21:10–12), she contends, despite significant differences that are identified, resembles the banlike action taken in Num 31. Additionally, she finds striking similarities between this first episode and “the problems concerning ethnically endogamous marriages in Ezra 9–10” (186–87). The raid undertaken in the second episode (21:19–21) has “more in common with raiding for wives than with other forms of marriage by capture” (187). Southwood refutes interpretations that suggest that the dancing of the young women may have been provocative, arguing that it is unlikely that they expected to be taken as they were, in a manner that presumably occasioned dishonor and loss of a bride price for the families from which they were taken. Even so, it is likely that the outcome would have been considered an alternative form of establishing marriages.
The final chapter presents the argument that Judg 21 constitutes a Persian-period critique of superficial unity in which the question is confronted whether the idea of an ethnically unified group or the ideal of a group that maintained particular values and cultural codes of conduct is more important. Southwood discerns in both Judg 21 and Ezra 9–10 a concern with the ethnic other in the midst—for Judges the Benjamites, for Ezra the people of the land—that is, in both cases, those who were not taken into exile and who may not have possessed precisely the same values as the returnees. She states that early audiences were presented with a dilemma: “Either boundaries are to be extended and group core values are to be diminished to include those ignoring such values, or boundaries are to be contracted and certain parts of ‘Israel’ who do not fit the behavioral criteria of the writers of these texts are to be excluded” (201, emphasis original).

Following a paragraph that distinguishes the functions of Judg 19–20 (the Benjaminites depicted as ethnic other) and 21 (foregrounding the issue of ethnic unity and identity), which sounds a warning against compromise, the brief concluding chapter draws out for the reader the main points of the book.

The use of anthropological research for the interpretation of ancient texts involves certain difficulties, since our knowledge of the ancient situation is restricted to what is contained in texts that were not composed with such research in mind, and it certainly was not the purpose of those who composed them to provide answers to questions raised by anthropological research. Nevertheless, insights gained from such research, when carefully undertaken, may illuminate our understanding of the texts and the nature of the practices to which they attest. Clearly aware of this sort of difficulty as well as heuristic potential, Southwood demonstrates good practice in her carefully constructed argument. The relevant social anthropology appears to be well researched, and the conclusions derived from it are carefully related to the biblical materials. Among her conclusions—even if the present reviewer admits to finding them congenial—perhaps the correlation she observes between Judges and Ezra and the dating she assigns to the text will prove to be the most strenuously debated. Yet her book is well argued and well documented; as an example of good practice in the integration of anthropological research into biblical studies, it provides the interested reader with much to ponder.

The last two years have seen the publication of three quite different books focusing on the closing chapters of Judges: Cynthia Edenburg’s Dismembering the Whole: Composition and Purpose of Judges 19–21 (2016), David J. H. Beldman’s The Completion of Judges: Strategies of Ending in Judges 17–21 (2017), and Southwood’s book. Each of these books brings a different perspective and expertise to bear upon the ending of Judges; when read together, they suggest that there is much still to be said about these chapters. There is a measure of complementarity between Southwood and Edenburg, whose earlier articles
are cited by Southwood, with respect to dating and some redactional issues, especially the “no king in Israel” phrase. Indeed, there may be merit in reading Edenburg and Southwood together. Whereas Edenburg applies a broad methodological spectrum to her interpretation of the text and its origins, Southwood brings anthropological studies into the discussion of the Judg 21 narrative and more generally of Israelite marriage. Her conclusions concerning the historical context and purpose of the narrative, if they find general approval, will also add to our understanding of the postexilic/Persian period. Her book, like Edenburg’s, should find a lasting place in discussion of the book of Judges.