David J. H. Beldman

*The Completion of Judges: Strategies of Ending in Judges 17–21*

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In a revision of his PhD dissertation, Beldman makes the case that the traditional interpretation of the progressive deterioration of Israelite society during the judges period needs to be revised. He attempts to do this through a careful examination of the role of the final section of the book of Judges through the lens of literary theory and in particular the strategies attached to “endings.” Choosing to deal with Judges as an integrated literary whole rather than employing redaction or source criticism to identify its component parts, he considers the most important task to be the determination of the rhetorical purpose at work in chapters 17–21.

Beldman lays the foundation for his study by first surveying the history of interpretation of Judges and focusing on those modern studies that place an emphasis on literary analysis. While this is admittedly a selective review, he does manage to provide a good cross-section of studies and a variety of viewpoints. Noting that most apply a synchronic, chronologically linear approach to the text, he points out that they nearly all divide Judges into three sections and see chapters 17–21 as the “completion of the downward spiral … that brings completion to the plot and themes” (50). The major anomaly, however, is the seemingly artificial injection of the topics of kingship and cult in these final chapters and whether they relate in some way to the agenda of the editor, either reflecting the tensions
between north and south after the division of the kingdoms or simply a dichotomy between pro-David and anti-Saul rhetoric.

Beldman then turns to what he considers to be a neglected area for biblical scholars, the study of the concept of endings. His journey through modern literary theorists includes the work of Frank Kermode, Barbara H. Smith, and Marianna Torgovnick. The most space, however, is given to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “threefold mimesis” (61–64). According to this narrative structural process, actions are configured into a coherent plot and reconfigured by the audience, who in reading the text are allowed to “indwell for a time in the world that the narratives project” (63). Beldman uses this model to describe the emplotment of the book of Judges and to point out that when, in the middle section of the book, not all elements of the cyclical pattern appear with each judge, it is a reflection of rhetorical purpose and a way to demonstrate the increasingly “problematic behavior” of the judges who follow Othniel (67). Furthermore, the break in the pattern in the final chapters has its own rhetorical purpose, signaling “that a change in understanding the past is necessary” (76).

Beldman then turns to an examination of three strategies of ending: (1) the strategy of completion; (2) the strategy of circularity; and (3) the strategy of entrapment. Each of these strategies helps to draw out major themes (leadership), links (phrases, events) between sections, or surprises ( kingship and cult in the final section) that are designed to elicit introspection by the audience. This section is very helpful in its careful detailing of literary aspects of the text. In particular, the expansion of the number of literary links between the beginning and ending sections of Judges (84–94) makes a good case for tying these two sections together in the compositional process.

As Beldman pulls together his arguments based on the literary foundation he has laid, he focuses on the major theme of leadership that other scholars have discussed, but instead of seeing it as a signal that Israel must establish a monarchy he points to the refrain “no king in Israel” as a warning that Israel’s troubles are due to their rejection of Yahweh as king. His point is that the final chapters in Judges, rather than being an appendage or the denouement of a downward spiral demonstrating the moral and spiritual degradation of Israel, are in fact part of the strategy of entrapment designed to show that Israel’s troubles are based on “their failure to submit to the kingship of Yahweh” (122).

For this interpretation to work, a temporal reordering of the book is necessary. Thus instead of being the culmination of the narrative of Judges, chapters 17–21 actually date to the earlier period of the settlement, shortly after the death of Joshua (131). That assumption is then based on the appearance of two named characters, Jonathan (grandson of Moses) and Phinehas (grandson of Aaron) in Judg 18:30 and 20:28 as
temporal cues. Their presence employs the deliberate strategy of circularity that draws the readers back to the beginning of the narrative/period and makes the point that the book does not follow a linear progression. Instead, it dispels for the audience the “dynamic of forgetting” that is a part of the cycle in the middle section of the book (137). By opening up a new possibility for the audience, they can reassess the situation in the Judges period and see that Israel has been caught up from the very beginning in a cycle of futility. The lawlessness and anarchy that characterize chapters 17–21 are actually the immediate reaction to Joshua’s death and the demise of his generation and the precursor to rather than the end point of the progression toward decline (142–43).

Whether one accepts Beldman’s thesis for the rhetorical purpose of the ending chapters of the book of Judges, he has certainly raised an interesting possibility that deserves attention. I would have preferred that he give more attention to the transition from section one in the narrative to the initiation of the judges cycle, since it is quite a step from the civil war in chapters 20–21 to the appointment of Othniel as the first judge. If the narrative purpose for the final chapters is indeed to demonstrate how quickly and how early Israel fell after rejecting Yahweh’s kingship, why then do they accept a Yahweh-appointed judge?

Of more concern is the lack of sufficient attention to the possible time period associated with the editing of the Judges materials. There are brief accounts in the chapter surveying other works, with oblique references to the editing process during either the divided monarchy or the exilic period. However, Beldman does not focus on this thread, and that is troublesome given his interpretation of endings. It seems important to say why the book is structured as he suggests, not just its literary strategy but also its theological and political focus. The book of Judges is more than entertainment or a set of cautionary narratives designed to point to the importance of choosing Yahweh over a human king. While these elements do exist, it would have been helpful if the author had chosen to make an argument for which community/audience and which time period was being addressed by the editors.

Even with this caveat, the volume is a useful contribution to the literary examination of the book of Judges. It deserves attention, and its conclusions need to be discussed in future works on this material. Beldman is quite correct to say that biblical scholars need to expand their horizons to include literary theory as another interpretative tool.