

# ○ REVIEW OF ROGER RYAN, *JUDGES. READINGS: A NEW BIBLICAL COMMENTARY*

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This commentary continues Ryan's research on the book of Judges that began with his 2005 doctoral thesis at Oxford. In that work and in this commentary he offers 'positive readings of the characters of judge-deliverers (chs. 3–16) against the consensus of scholars who generally understand them to be negative role models and anti-heroes' (p. vii). He invites his readers

... into the dangerous ancient world of biblical Israel inhabited by heroes, heroines, hissable villains, a chorus of naughty Israelites, countless silent victims and Yahweh the God of Israel who does whatever it takes to win his people back from the gods of Canaan to covenant loyalty (p. xi).

'Hissable villains' and 'naughty Israelites' anticipate Ryan's penchant for treating the Judges narratives in a near soap opera style, a style that contrasts with his claims that Judges treats its readers as mature adults and that his commentary allows the biblical text to breathe (see p. xii *passim*). There is little of a traditional commentary here. His comments on text critical issues and Hebrew vocabulary and syntax are confined to those that clearly support his particular analysis. He doesn't offer his outline of Judges until the close of the commentary (pp. 205–07).

In an Introduction Ryan lays out his approach and assumptions of date and purpose (pp. xiii–xiv). Since Judges is a collection of stories he prefers the title 'storyteller' to that of 'author.' The stories portray apostate Israel abandoning Yahweh and the covenant with him (see Joshua 24); they opt for 'peaceful co-existence' with the land's inhabitants and for worship of their gods. Co-existence is Ryan's common charge against the Israelites in Judges and is ample justification for Yahweh's punishment of them. The storyteller wrote his book in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, for an exilic audience; Ryan has a limited picture of this audience, its setting and its concerns. The storyteller instills shame in those who are in exile because of their past apostasy against Yahweh. He warns them to reestablish and to retain their loyalty to Yahweh and to not lose their own identity by assimilating with the inhabitants of the land. Finally the storyteller encourages them with the

assurance that Yahweh will use all means to retain their loyalty to him. Sending oppressors and then judge-deliverers are the main divine tactic in Judges. The tripartite overview – shame, loyalty, reassurance – is repeated at points throughout Ryan’s book.

From the Introduction Ryan turns immediately to the book of Judges. He retells the stories in a way that emphasises our sympathy for Yahweh trying to keep his people’s trust and faith, our judgment of the Israelites for their continual rejection of that trust and our admiration for the daring faith and resolve of the judge-deliverers. [Ryan easily equates the exilic audience with ‘us,’ modern readers, shifting back-and-forth between ‘they’ and ‘we.’] Yahweh sends the latter to rescue the Israelites from the oppressors that he sent to punish them in the first place. Ryan notes the injustice of taking over a land with no possibility of compromise with the people already there but he never engages the issue for its political or theological implications. He opts for reading Judges from the viewpoint of its exilic author and from the viewpoint of Yahweh. Violence and slaughter were business as usual in the ancient world and in the bible and we can’t judge it by our standards.

Ryan has a lively style in his retellings of the tales of Judges with many interesting comments and insights but the retellings are always in the service of casting the judge-deliverers as heroes and as exemplary characters. Despite the formulaic account of Othniel’s defeat of Cushan-rishathaim (‘double wickedness’), Ryan lauds the storyteller’s ability to portray the calibre of this war hero. Ehud is courageous, clever and able. His tale is an ‘intriguing detective story,’ a ‘perfect murder,’ playing upon the possibility that the Moabites never do learn how their king died (p. 19). Throughout his book Ryan gives little or no consideration to the issues of ambiguity, irony and questionable characters, including Yahweh, that mark the varied interpretations of Judges of the last generation.

Shamgar should not be overlooked even if he is allotted only one verse (3:31). He improvises with an ox goad as a weapon to slaughter 600 Philistines and thus displays his impressive heroism. Indeed the calibre and heroism of the judges stresses Yahweh’s commitment to always be with his people. Ryan glides over Yahweh’s initial sale of the Israelites as fitting punishment for their apostasy and co-existence with the land’s inhabitants.

Deborah, Barak and Jael comprise ‘a raw story of violence and brutality, gore and woe’ (p. 31) that Ryan introduces with characteristic simplification. ‘Yahweh acts like a market trader who offers Israelites for sale when he has good cause to be angry with his people’ (p. 26). Since this is a mostly positive story, Ryan’s version is not far from the biblical text but, on the other hand, he adds only a few interesting sidelights to it. He presents his own translation of the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 without critical notes. The violence and gloating of the song are placed in the context of liberation from years of oppression.

Reading the next judges, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson, in a positive manner requires considerable recasting and slighting of the biblical text on his part. It is clear with these judges that Ryan wants to present totally positive pictures in which all that each judge says and does reflects a dedicated and faithful leader, if not a hero. The judges, after all, are to be clear role models for the storyteller’s exilic audience.

Gideon’s repeated requests for a divine sign reflect his caution and his slaughter of the inhabitants of Succoth and Penuel is justified on the grounds that they did not fulfil their obligation of hospitality in a time of war. Ryan says nothing about the extremely negative portrayal of kingship in the episode of Gideon’s son Abimelech who becomes king of Shechem. The latter is

mainly a story of rage and retribution in which we the readers 'beam with delight' at Abimelech's demise (p. 67).

'Can anything positive be said about Jephthah the Gileadite?' Ryan recognises that most interpreters see Jephthah as weak and murderous stressing the sacrifice of his daughter. In a tortured reading Ryan justifies Jephthah's need for a vow in the first place and argues that it is his daughter's own choice, without a stated motive, to offer herself as a human sacrifice. The slaughter of 42,000 Ephraimites is justified in terms similar to those used with Gideon: 'those who deliver Israel from invaders and oppressors are to be provisioned, supported and honoured, not abandoned, abused and threatened' (p. 94).

Ryan recasts Samson's birth story from Manoah's viewpoint (pp. 96–100); this may be interesting reading but again it simplifies the text, particularly by slighting the story's concern with his wife, not Manoah. Samson is 'Yahweh's strong servant, who shines with strength like the rays of the sun, a noble, powerful and distinguished hero' (p. 101) who intentionally seeks to provoke the Philistines into battles that they will lose. Ryan needs to override the biblical text to provide a positive reading of this hero and his male-centered retellings, evident in his treatment of Jephthah's daughter and Manoah's wife, assert themselves with this judge and his involvements with women. When his Philistine wife nags him to reveal the answer to his riddle, Ryan comments, 'Will Yahweh's strong judge-deliverer ... be able to resist his tearful nagging wife? Of course he gives in to her, *the poor man* is unable to do otherwise' (p. 108; my italics).

Ryan places the closing stories in chapters 17–21 in the time after the partial conquests of Judges's opening chapters and seems perplexed by them particularly by the near total absence of Yahweh. He does his best to read them in some positive mode. The refrain 'there was no king in Israel' probably refers to Yahweh's kingship and not to the human monarchy of Samuel and Kings and the Israelites doing 'what was right in their own eyes' means that they make their own decisions in these troubled times, not that they willfully abandon God.

Ryan closes with a lengthy Afterword (pp. 169–212) that is repetitive of itself and of much of the rest of the book in the explanation and defence of his readings. He briefly summarises a large number of contemporary studies of Judges that propose a wide variety of interpretations that Ryan rejects in his commentary as being too negative and questioning. He summarises their conclusions without discussion of or engagement with their methods and arguments.

It is laudable for Ryan to lay out explicitly his goals, his desire for positive readings, but not when he then sidesteps the issue of 'method' or 'approach.' He produces his positive readings by retelling, in a self-fulfilling mode, the Judges narratives as positive and by simply ignoring and suppressing those many textual features that don't fit his readings. He then states or implies that this is to accept the text on its own terms. Nor does he engage with the many other interpreters and interpretations that he rejects despite the fact that they have much to offer for a positive take on Judges. Other studies reveal 'flawed' characters with obvious 'moral and religious failings.' For Ryan this amounts to a total condemnation of the characters and of the book of Judges as a whole (p. 200) and therefore no further discussion of the studies or of their complex interpretations is needed.