God at risk: Divine vulnerability in Judges 10:6-16

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ABSTRACT

God is often portrayed by theologians as impassable, unemotional. Biblical statements of his emotions have been identified as anthropopathisms, figures of speech that do not represent the true nature of God. In the same way that anthropomorphisms represent God’s character and actions in a symbolic way (e.g., his eyes represent his omniscience), anthropopathisms represent his will and his decrees. Thus, the impassable God does not really become angry because anger is a mere human emotion. The anger of God is no more than an ancient metaphor for God’s impassionate sense of justice. The God of Judges, however, is presented in the narrative as a passionate character.

A INTRODUCTION

Then Yahweh said to the Israelites, ‘Was it not from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the Ammonites and from the Philistines – and when the Sidonians and Amalek and Maon oppressed you, you cried unto me, and I saved you from their power? But you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore, I will not save you again. Go and call upon the gods that you have chosen. They will save you in the time of your distress’ (Jdg 10: 11-13).

Judges 10:6-16 is quite a shocking dialogue between God and Israel. Suddenly and without warning, God refuses to rescue his people. In spite of their confession and their repentance, God declares that his patience has been exhausted. He had saved them time after time, but He will not save them again. The cycle of Israel’s rebellion had been repeated four times earlier in the book of Judges. It would not be repeated quite the same again. The unique perplexity of this passage and its sudden appearance in Judges should cause it to be the object of much scrutiny, but it has not received significant attention by Bible scholars.

The book of Judges has seen an increase in scholarly attention in recent years. According to Craig (2003:221-259) over 200 journal articles on Judges were written

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2 Author’s translation.
in the past fifteen years, compared to only 184 that were produced in the preceding forty years (1950-1990). However, in spite of the dramatic increase in Judges research, only one publication devotes any substantial consideration to the role of God within the narrative of Judges, and only one publication speaks to Judges 10:6-16. Bowman’s (1995:17-44) introduction to narrative criticism includes a twelve page analysis of God’s role in Judges, and Shiveka’s (2002:77-86) journal article is a detailed study that offers a new translation of one word (םmodelName) in Judges 10:16. Furthermore, the commentaries contribute little to our understanding of the character of God, and they barely mention chapter 10. Schneider (2000:160) for example, devotes less than one page to chapter 10, and she does no more than summarize the text. She provides no commentary and no discussion of the significance of chapter 10 or its place in the flow of narrative. Soggin (1981:201-203) devotes about one and a half pages to chapter 10, but most of his comments are simply paraphrases of the text. His primary concern is source criticism; thus, he entitles this section of his commentary ‘Prologue: Deuteronomistic Introduction’.4

In this study I will offer a brief overview of the book of Judges and the cycle of rebellion. I will then outline the striking features of chapter 10 and discuss the passage’s strategic role within the overall structure of Judges. Next, I will discuss the apparent conflict between the anger of God and the compassion of God that is central to the importance of chapter 10. Finally, I will suggest that an underlying theology of chapter 10 (and all of Judges) is that God has chosen to enter into a genuine relationship with his people (Fretheim 1984:35), and that a genuine relationship causes God himself to be vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and personal injury. As soon as the Lord chose to enter into the covenant, he submitted himself to a position of personal risk.

B OVERVIEW OF JUDGES

The book of Judges consists of three major sections: (1) an introduction (1:1-3:5); (2) the stories of the judges (3:6-16:31); and (3) a conclusion (17:1-21:25; Gooding 1982:70-79). The introduction offers both a theological reflection on the cause of the events that are found in Judges, as well as a short summary of those events. The second section of the book sets forth the stories of the major judges along with brief accounts of the minor judges. The conclusion consists of two complex narratives that do not relate directly to any of the judges, but are set within the historical time period that belongs to the judges.

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3 For the survey of research between 1950 and 1990 see Rüdiger (1991:221-259).  
The first section of Judges (1:1-3:5) may be further divided into two parts, in the nature of a dual introduction. The first introduction (1:1-2:5) summarizes the completion of the conquest after the death of Joshua. Chapter 1 begins with accounts of tribal victories but concludes with quite a long list of failures. The angel of the Lord appears in chapter 2 and rebukes Israel for failing to expel the inhabitants of the land as God had commanded them. Their failure to complete fully the conquest is interpreted by the angel as a violation of their covenant with Yahweh. According to the angel, the Israelites’ root problem was their refusal to hear and obey God’s word: ‘You have not heard/obeyed (םָשַׁר) my command’ (2:2; Schult 1997: 1375-1380). The charge is repeated three more times in Judges: ‘They would not hear/obey the judges’ (2:17a); ‘They have not heard/obeyed my voice’ (2:20); ‘You have not heard/obeyed my voice’ (6:10). The Israelites were disobedient to the clear commands of God and would suffer because of their stubbornness.

A second introduction begins with Judges 2:6, which recounts the death of Joshua and Israel’s subsequent apostasy. This second introduction focuses on the idolatry that resulted from cohabitation with the Canaanites, and Canaanite religion is described as a constant test for Israel. The introduction concludes with a preview of the cycle of rebellion that will be repeated throughout Judges. The pattern consists of the following elements: (1) Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, forsaking Yahweh and serving other gods (2:11); (2) God became very angry with Israel (2:14); (3) God gave Israel over to the power of the enemy who oppressed them (2:14-15); (4) The Lord raised up judges, but Israel would not hear/obey the judges (2:16-17); (5) The Lord would have compassion on Israel on account of their suffering, and he would deliver them through the leadership of the judge (2:18); (6) After the judge died, the Israelites would relapse into idolatry, with each generation growing worse than the one that preceded it (2:19). The reader is informed from the outset that Israel’s spiritual state would spiral downward throughout Judges. Israel’s failure, therefore, is presented from two distinct perspectives. First, they failed to drive out the Canaanites; and second, they committed idolatry. These two sins are distinct, yet they issue from one basic source, which is Israel’s refusal to hear/obey the voice of God (Martin 1975:135).

The second major section of Judges (3:6-16:31) forms the greater part of the book and consists of a series of salvation narratives whose main characters are called judges. These narratives follow the basic pattern or cycle that is detailed above. The narratives, however, are more explicit with regard to several elements, and utilize a variety of expressions when naming the elements of the pattern. For example, the narratives include Israel’s cries to God for help (3:9; 3:15; 4:3; 6:7; 10:10). Also, the first four narratives conclude with the words ‘and the land had rest’ (3:11; 3:30; 5:31; 8:28). Furthermore, in the case of Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, it is said

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5 In addition to the four accusations, the question of Israel’s obedience is mentioned two other times: 2:17b and 3:4. The theme of hearing/obeying is also found four times in the concluding chapters of the book: 18:25; 19:25; 20:3; and 20:13.
that the ‘Spirit of Yahweh’ came upon them (3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6; 14:19; 15:14). Thus, the pattern is generally the same, but each narrative includes unique details and variations on the theme.

The major judges (those who appear in the longer narratives) are Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. Gideon’s son Abimelech also receives significant attention as a usurper of power in chapter 9. The minor judges are Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. The judges seem to be ordered in such a way that their personal characteristics and response to God mirror the downward spiral of Israel as a whole. The first judge, Othniel, is a war hero who has no faults. The second judge, Ehud, has a minor handicap; he is left-handed (described in the Hebrew text as ‘infirm in his right hand’). The third judge, Deborah, is a woman, a fact that would present many hindrances in the society of that time. Next came Gideon who was hesitant and even fearful. References to fearfulness occur seven times in chapters 6 through 8. Furthermore, the Gideon cycle ends with idolatry, with the Israelites worshiping Gideon’s ephod. After Gideon died, his son Abimelech seizes power and proclaims himself to be king. Jephthah, the next judge, is an outcast, the son of a prostitute who makes a rash vow that results in the unlawful sacrifice of his daughter. Samson is the final judge, and although he is called by God and set apart as a Nazirite from birth, he pursues prostitutes, gives free reign to his anger, fails to deliver Israel, and is the only judge who was captured by the enemy.

The third major section of Judges (17:1-21:25) consists of two narrative appendices that seem to parallel the two introductions. In chapters 17 and 18 the Danites steal a household idol from a man named Micah, and they establish an idolatrous worship centre in Dan. Chapters 19 through 21 describe in gory detail the rape, murder, and dismemberment of a Levite’s concubine. Because the Benjaminites where unwilling to punish the criminals, the other Israelites engage them in battle and nearly eradicate the tribe of Benjamin. The first of the concluding narratives is concerned with idolatry, and the second results in civil war. Judges, therefore, begins with the Israelites’ fighting against their enemies and concludes with their fighting each other. These two concluding narratives suggest that Israel had fallen to a state of chaos, violence, immorality, idolatry, and depravity.

Chapters 17 through 21 might be perceived as superfluous because their narratives do not include any judges. The primary focus of the book of Judges, however, is not the judges themselves; rather, the primary focus is on the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The narratives of the judges form the matrix in which that relationship is explored. Neither the introduction nor the conclusion of Judges is superfluous. On the contrary, they confirm to the reader essential elements of the plot that bring unity and coherence to the larger narrative.

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6 Not everyone, of course, believes that Jephthah really sacrificed his daughter. The issue, however, is not directly germane to this paper.
C FEATURES OF CHAPTER 10

At the end of the lengthy Gideon/Abimelech episode (chaps 6-9), Abimelech is killed by a nameless woman, who drops a millstone7 on his head as he and his army are attacking the tower of Thebez. The narrator adds a moral to the end of the story: ‘God repaid the evil of Abimelech ... and God returned all the evil of the Shechemites upon their own heads’ (9:56-57).

Following the death of Abimelech, two of the minor judges are mentioned very briefly. The text says, ‘After Abimelech, there arose to save Israel, Tola, son of Puah’ (10:1). Tola judged Israel twenty-three years, but no details of his exploits are recorded. ‘There arose after him, Jair the Gileadite, and he judged Israel twenty-two years’ (10:3). His activities are not chronicled either.

After accounts of the two minor judges, a familiar refrain appears for the sixth time within the Book of Judges: The Israelites ‘did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh’ (10:6).8 Every previous judge cycle has begun with this indictment, and the reader would likely expect that another standard cycle has commenced. In this fifth cycle, however, the idolatry of the Israelites seems to have increased: ‘they served the Baals and the Ashtartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus, they forsook Yahweh and did not serve him’ (10:6). Among the four previous cycles, only the first one had specifically named Israel’s idols; they had worshipped the Baals and Asherahs (3:7; Schneider 2000:160). Therefore, when compared to the earlier cycles, the appearance of such an array of foreign gods in chapter 10 raises the intensity level of this episode and makes Israel appear quite guilty (cf Webb 1986:44; Block 1999:344). The intensity is heightened further by the addition of a summarizing accusation: ‘Thus they forsook Yahweh and did not serve him.’

The cycle returns to normal with verse 7: ‘The anger of Yahweh was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites ....’ These enemies crushed and oppressed Israel for eighteen years, and ‘Israel was greatly distressed’ (10:7-9). There is nothing unusual about this element of the cycle, unless it is the uniqueness of registering two enemies and the use of two quite intensive words for oppression (שָׁנַח, shatter and כּשֶׁר, crush) that are not used elsewhere in Judges to describe Israel’s fate (Block 1999:345). Previous cycles, however, have demonstrated considerable variety of expression and some intensity when disclosing the nature of the enemies’ oppressions. For example, Jabin had ‘squeezed (כֹּל) the Israelites with force (הָעָמַד) for twenty years’ (4:3). The most detailed account of oppression is found in the Gideon cycle, where five verses at the

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7 Recent archaeological discoveries show that individual households used small millstones weighing 8 to 10 pounds. See Herr & Boyd (2002:34-37, 62).

8 This refrain appeared once in the introduction (2:11), then it serves as the beginning of every major judge cycle (3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1).
beginning of the story are devoted to the Midianites’ actions, and other aspects of their activities are mentioned throughout the narrative.

Next, as usual, ‘The Israelites cried unto Yahweh’ (10:10). Their cry, however, is followed by quite an unusual addition: the content of their cry is recorded. On this occasion, they not only cry out for help, but they blurt out a confession: ‘We have sinned against you, in that we have forsaken our God and we have served the Baals’ (10:10). Never before in Judges had the content of their cry been supplied to the reader, and never before had Israel confessed any sin. It would appear that Israel is expressing genuine repentance towards God.

At this point, the reader would likely expect the appearance of the next element of the standard judge cycle, God’s raising up a judge to bring salvation to Israel (3:9; 3:15; 4:4; and 6:11). God, however, does not respond as expected. He declares,

>Was it not from Egypt and from the Amorites and from the Ammonites and from the Philistines – and when the Sidonians and Amalek and Maon oppressed you, you cried unto me, and I saved you from their power? But you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore, I will not save you again. Go and call upon the gods that you have chosen. They will save you in the time of your distress (10:11-14).

The Lord reminds Israel of his faithfulness, mercy, and salvation in the past. He points back all the way to Egypt and then lists six more enemies from which he had saved them. This is the only time in Judges that the Lord responds verbally to Israel’s cries. In previous rebukes of Israel, God had employed an angel (2:1), and prophets (4:4 and 6:8). The immediacy of the dialogue is accentuated by the lack of a mediating angel or prophet. The tone of the rebuff is quite sarcastic, ‘Go cry to the gods you have chosen (cf Webb 1986:45).’ The Lord seems to be completely unresponsive to Israel’s cries and unconcerned about their suffering. Pressler reads this rebuff as ‘the passionate, pained response of a lover whose love is betrayed one too many times’ (Pressler 2002:198). God’s response is unprecedented and completely unexpected. The basic plan of the book appears to have been established in chapter 3, but this divine intransigence was not included as part of the standard cycle.

As in previous cycles, the narrator informs the reader that God is very angry at the Israelites, but in chapter 10, the anger of God is given further expression in his speech. He refuses to aid Israel again, and he sarcastically recommends they seek the help of the foreign gods. Additional evidence for the passionate tone of God’s speech may be found in the Hebrew grammar of verses 11 and 12. Verse 11 is an incomplete sentence that contains no verb. The Hebrew text reads:

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9 The same Hebrew word (נָצוּ) is used for ‘cry’ in 3:9; 3:15; 6:6,7; 10:10 and 10:14. In 4:3 the word is נָצוּ, which is a variant spelling of the same root. (Cf Brown et al 1979:858).

10 List of nations in Jdg 10:11-12 and previous deliverance: Amorites (Nm 21; Jos 24:8); Ammonites (Jdg 3:13); Philistines (Jdg 3:31); Sidonians (Jos 13:6; Jdg 3:3); Amalekites (Jdg 6:3, 33; 7:12); Maon (Jos 15:55; The LXX has Midianites-Jdg 6).
The verse might be translated literally, ‘And Yahweh said unto the sons of Israel, “Was it not from Egypt and from the Ammonite and from the sons of Ammon and from the Philistines ...?”’ Verse 12 follows with, “And the Sidonians and Amalek and Maon oppressed you, and you cried unto me, and I saved you from their hand.”’ Verse 12, therefore, is a complete sentence and makes sense as it stands, but verse 11 is incomplete, and cannot be attached grammatically to verse 12. The critical apparatus of the BHS suggests that verse 11 is corrupt and recommends the addition of the verb חָשָׁפַה as an emendation, even though there is no manuscript support for such a move (Kittel et al 1987:421). Translations have smoothed out the verse by supplying the missing verb; for example, the King James Version reads: ‘And the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Did not I deliver you from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, from the children of Ammon, and from the Philistines?’11 Commentators insist on emending verse 11, either by adding a verb, by removing the preposition יִשְׁרָאֵל, or by doing both. Boling declares that ‘the verses have clearly suffered in transmission’ (Boling 1975:192; Moore 1895:281-82; Soggin 1981:202; Block 1999:346; O’Connell 1996:467-468).12 Gesenius (Kautzsch-Cowley 1910:505-506) allows for the legitimate existence of rhetorical anacoluthon, but he sees no reason for its use in Judges 10. Therefore, he also calls for emendation.13

Soggin (1981:202) argues that the corruption of verse 11 is made obvious by the abnormal attaching of the preposition יִשְׁרָאֵל directly to the names of the nations (‘from Egypt’, etc), when the usual terminology for salvation in Judges is ‘saved from the hand of’ (2:16, 18; 6:9, 14; 8:22; 9:17; 10:12; 13:5). In regard to Judges, Soggin is correct; but יִשְׁרָאֵל can be used with יָשָׁנָה, as it is in 2 Samuel 22:4 (יִשְׁרָאֵל יָשָׁנָה, ‘I will be saved from my enemies’). Furthermore, when Judges speaks of Egypt, the preposition יִשְׁרָאֵל is often attached to יָשָׁנָה (2:1; 6:8; 6:13; 11:13; and 11:16). It seems, therefore, that the use of the preposition יִשְׁרָאֵל may be conditioned by the placing of Egypt first in the list.

11 The following translations offer similar solutions: JPS, NASB, RSV, NIV, NRSV, NAB, NJB, NKJV, and TNK. I was unable to find any translation that allows v 11 to stand without a verb. Some translations (including the Vulgate and Luther) join vv 11 and 12 into one sentence, choosing to remove the preposition יִשְׁרָאֵל from v 11. Both A and B versions of the LXX remove the anacoluthon, but they do so in different ways.

12 Other commentators do not mention the anacoluthon, but in their translations they emend v 11 (e.g. Martin 1975:135; Pressler 2002:197; Schneider 2000:160; Webb 1986:43; Wilcock 1992:108).

13 Gesenius’ examples of anacoluthon are Gn 23:13; 31:52; Ezk 34:10;Nm 14:21ff; 32:20ff; Dt 17:2ff; 24:1ff; and 29:21ff. Other grammars do not mention anacoluthon; nor do they discuss Jdg 10:11-12 (cf Joüon & Muraoka 1991; Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze 1999; Waltke and O’Connor 1990).
In spite of the universal calls for emendation, there is good reason to accept the text as it stands. In fact, any clarifying emendation would detract significantly from the mood of the text, which is expressed in the explosive tone of the anacoluthon. The extraordinary form of expression matches the extraordinary content of the expression. God is frustrated with Israel, and his frustration is evident in his strained response. The broken grammar manifests the passionate outburst of an offended God. Verse 11 is the fractional speech of a furious God. To remove the tension from Judges 10:11-12 would be equivalent to removing the Song of Deborah from chapter 5 because we have the prose account of the same events in chapter 4. Just as poetry creates a mood, so does direct speech; and the speech of chapter 10 creates a dense mood of complex emotion, which must not be easily dismissed.

After the Lord threatened to abandon Israel to their own devices, they repeated their confession and supplemented it with the reiteration of their plea for help, saying ‘We have sinned; do, yourself, to us whatever is good in your sight, only please deliver us this day’ (10:15). The redundant use of the pronoun you (anza) with the imperative do (hav) shows that Israel wants to be delivered (hav) from the enemy and placed under the discipline of God himself. Apparently, they preferred a punishment that proceeded directly from God (disease, crop failure, natural disasters, etc) rather than one that came through the mediation of an enemy people.14 Although the Lord did not respond to their plea for deliverance, ‘They put aside their foreign gods from among them and they served Yahweh’ (10:16). They proceeded to discard their idols and to serve (hav) the Lord, actions which function in the narrative as a counterpart or inclusio to the beginning of the episode in verse 6, which states, ‘they forsook the Lord and did not serve (hav) him.’ In verse 6 they do not serve Yahweh, but in verse 16 they do serve Yahweh.

The putting away of their idols and their serving of Yahweh would appear to be the consequence of genuine repentance. It would be natural for the reader to expect God’s mercy and forgiveness to accompany Israel’s repentance. Yet, Yahweh does not answer, showing that ‘deliverance does not mechanically follow confession’ (Pressler 2002:197). Furthermore, he does not speak again until chapter 13 when the angel of Yahweh announces the coming birth of Samson. Although Yahweh does not speak, the narrator furnishes a glimpse into the heart of God with these concluding words: ‘And his soul was grieved by the misery of Israel’ (10:16b). The Lord does not answer, and he does not save Israel, but he is moved to grief by the misery of Israel. ‘Israel’s suffering is God’s grief’ (Heschel 1962:151). At the beginning of this narrative, he was angry at Israel because of their unfaithfulness; but now he is suffering along with them. The reader is left with quite an ambiguous situation. God has not answered; he has not saved; but he is sympathetic to Israel’s plight.

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14 Cf David, who also chose discipline from the hand of God rather than from the hand of the enemy (2 Sm 24:14).
The above survey of Judges 10 discloses several striking features: (1) Verses 6 through 16 offer details of the longest dialogue between God and Israel within the book of Judges (Harris, Brown & Moore 2000:221); (2) The dialogue is unmediated. That is, the text does not report the presence of an angel, prophet/ess, or any other messenger; (3) It records the longest list of idols in Judges; (4) It is the only time in Judges that Israel is said to have repented and laid aside their idols; (5) It is the only time in Judges that Yahweh refuses to come to the aid of his people when they call upon him; (6) The passage brings into focus the conflict between Yahweh’s anger and his compassion, a conflict that is occasioned by the rebellion of his covenant people. In light of the covenant, he is well within his rights to abandon Israel (cf Dt and Jdg 2-3; Wilcock 1992:105) yet he cannot bear to see Israel suffer.

D THE ROLE OF CHAPTER 10 WITHIN JUDGES

After chapter 10, the whole texture of the narrative changes. The land never again has rest. Never again is deliverance (יהוה) or salvation (יהוה) attributed to God. For the most part, in the remainder of the book, God is silent, speaking only in two episodes. Furthermore, God’s relative silence is accompanied by his relative inactivity. For the reasons stated above, the dialogue between God and Israel in 10:6-16 is the major turning point in the book, and its parallels to chapter 3 demonstrate that it serves as a ‘theological introduction’ to chapters 11 through 21 (Boling 1975:193).

The Lord’s shocking reply is just the beginning of several divergences from the standard judge cycle. The stories of the final two judges (Jephthah and Samson) depart significantly from the pattern of the first four episodes. For example, Jephthah was the only judge who was not chosen by Yahweh (Block 1999:337). The reason for Yahweh’s silence during the process of Jephthah’s unique appointment is found in Judges 10:6-16 – Yahweh declared his withdrawal from Israel. In the Samson cycle, it is made clear that Israel sinned again, but it is not said that God is angry; it is not recorded that the people cry out for salvation; it is not reported that God saved Israel; and it is not said that the land had rest.

It has been argued that chapter 10 is not the turning point in Judges but rather that the Abimelech episode signals the new direction in the narrative (Harris, Brown & Moore 2000:218; Gooding 1982:70-79; Block 1999:335). Without a doubt, Abimelech is a central character in the narrative, and his role is both vital and complex. The movement from Gideon (who refuses to be king) to Abimelech (who makes

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15 The final judge, Samson, is different from all other judges in at least three ways. First, he is chosen from before his birth and is destined to be a judge and a Nazirite all the days of his life. Second, he never raises an army to engage the enemy, the Philistines. Third, he fails to save Israel.

16 Since this paper does not focus on Abimelech, his role in the overall narrative of Judges will not be detailed here. For more on Abimelech, see Boogaart (1985:45-56), Fokkelman (1992:33-45) and Janzen (1987:33-37). Most other articles on Abimelech are historical critical studies.
himself king) is a powerful introduction to the theme of monarchy, a theme that is revisited later in the book. The argument for Abimelech as the turning point in the book, however, appears to be based upon questionable assumptions. First, the argument assumes that speech of God (as found in chap 10) is less significant than the actions of other characters. Second, it assumes that the various source materials in Judges can be ranked in levels of importance based upon their relative age. According to this view, chapter 10, being a Deuteronomic source, occupies the third and latest strata, and is, therefore, virtually disposable. Third, the argument for Abimelech’s priority is partially based upon historical criticism’s penchant for pursuing the perceived political agenda of the documents. That is, since the Abimelech story relates to the monarchical theme (a political agenda), it must carry more weight than chapter 10, which pursues a religious agenda. Fourth, the argument for Abimelech as the turning point underestimates the narrative value of the minor judges who are chronicled in 10:1-5. The accounts of Tola and Jair function in the narrative as a temporal buffer between the story of Abimelech in chapter 9 and the speech of God that begins in 10:6. More than an entire generation (45 years) passes from the time of Abimelech’s illegitimate rule to the time when God refuses to save Israel.

1 The passions of God

When the reader of Judges reaches 10:6 and hears the words, ‘The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh’, and ‘the anger of Yahweh grew hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hand’ of the enemy, and ‘the Israelites cried out to Yahweh’, s/he would expect to see the repetition of the whole judge cycle for the fifth time. The expectations of the reader are shattered, however, by the unfolding of a unique scenario: Yahweh refuses to help Israel. ‘I saved you time and again,’ the Lord says, ‘but I will save you no more.’ The reader naturally expects the next event to be Yahweh’s raising up of a saviour, but no such action ensues. Instead of naming a judge/saviour, the Lord responds to Israel’s cries with a stinging rebuke, reminding them of all the times he has saved them in the past. Yahweh declares that this time he will not save them. His mercy has been used up. All hope is not lost, however, for in verse 16, he groans with compassion, ‘he could not bear to see Israel suffer.’

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17 Brown offers the following point: ‘The length and detail of this divine speech is significant; for in Hb. narrative convention, important points are often communicated in the form of direct speech, and how much more in the form of divine speech’ (cf Harris, Brown & Moore 2000:221).
18 Cf, e.g: ‘The story of Abimelech is one of the oldest in the book of Judges, and in various ways one of the most instructive,’ (Moore 1895:238).
19 Historical critics tend to read the biblical documents as political propaganda packaged in the guise of religion, while I would view them the opposite way – they are religious documents with political implications. It should be noted that the theme of kingship is not accepted unanimously as the major theme of Abimelech’s story (see Webb 1986:34-43). Webb argues that retribution is the controlling theme.
This episode highlights the two poles that represent God’s passions. At one end is
the anger of God, and at the other end is the compassion of God. The judge cycle of
chapter 10 begins with the statement of God’s anger, ‘The anger of Yahweh was hot
against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of
the Ammonites’ (10:7). His anger is apparently justified, given the depths of idolatry
into which the Israelites had fallen. By this time, the reader of Judges would be
familiar with the cycle that included Israel’s idolatry and Yahweh’s angry response.
The theme of God’s anger was introduced in chapter 2, and the cause of that anger
was attributed to the actions of the Israelites who worshipped other gods and in doing
so ‘provoked/vexed Yahweh’ (2:12). The idolatry of Israel is further described as a
breach of the covenant and as disobedience (Pressler 2002:197). The Lord said, ‘This
people have transgressed my covenant ... and have not heard/obeyed my voice’ (2:20).
God had been faithful to the covenant (2:1), but Israel was unfaithful and disobedient.

Apparently, the Lord’s anger intensified as the list of foreign gods grew longer
and as Israel persisted in apostasy. In chapter 10, the Lord reminds Israel of his
repeated salvation from enemy after enemy, while Israel continued to relapse into
idolatry. It seems that Israel’s chronic unfaithfulness and ingratitude provoked God to
the point that he was forced to employ drastic measures in his dealings with his people
(Moore 1895:278). If he did not vigorously confront Israel, the covenant would be in
danger of irreparable mutilation. Since the Lord had declared earlier that he would
never break his covenant (2:1), his refusal to save the Israelites must be interpreted as
an emergency measure, calculated to discipline them severely. ‘A personal relation-
ship binds Him to Israel. ... The divine commandments are not mere recommendations
for man, but express divine concern, which, when, realized or repudiated, is of
personal importance to him’ (Heschel 1962:24).

Compassion stands at the other end of the spectrum of God’s passions, but
chapter 10 shows little evidence of that compassion. It is only the second part of
verse 16 that offers a small ray of hope, a glimmer of light, an indication that God’s
compassion had not failed. It declares that the Lord ‘was grieved at the misery of
Israel’. Apparently, Israel’s suffering affected God in such a way that his compassion
was aroused. Their misery caused him sorrow. This closing verse in the exchange
between the Lord and Israel reveals a small opening in the door of hope that God had
slammed shut.

The equivocal nature of God’s response to Israel in 10:6-16 perhaps produces
mixed expectations in the reader. Will Yahweh again come to Israel’s aid and deliver
them as he did in the past? Or, will he resolutely refuse to respond to what may be
once again a temporary and shallow rededication of a rebellious and recalcitrant
people? This uncertainty regarding God’s attitude is denied, however, by Avi Shiveka,
who argues that verse 16 does not include any movement towards compassion on
God’s part. Shiveka makes this assertion by insisting that in this case the word הָ֫עֶשֶׁת
does not mean ‘misery’ as it has been translated; rather, but that it means ‘deceit’. If
הָ֫עֶשֶׁת means ‘deceit’, then the latter part of the verse would read, ‘and he was grieved
by the deceit of Israel.’ Therefore, Shiveka (2002:77-86) argues that the deceit of
Israel would be their attempt to persuade God that they were repentant when in fact they were not. Their deceit would be their feigned repentance, their pretense, their hypocrisy (Shiveka 2002:77-86).

Shiveka’s concern for verse 16 is to be commended, when so many scholars have ignored the implications of God’s passions. Furthermore, he appreciates the significance of chapter 10 for the interpretation of the second half of Judges. Shiveka is correct when he argues that chapter 10 presents a God who is angry with his people, frustrated by their continual backsliding, and disappointed in all their previous claims to repentance. He is also correct in his proposal that God’s reticence to comfort and aid Israel will have repercussions in the Jephthah story. He is not correct, however, in his translation of כפיאה as ‘deceit’. Shiveka’s argument rests upon two grounds. First, he suggests that the translation ‘he was grieved by the deceit of Israel’ is more consistent with the context of chapter 10. With this translation, Yahweh’s persistent refusal to aid Israel continues to the very end of the passage. Second, he points to texts where כפיאה is paired with words that mean ‘deceit’, and he argues that since the words are paired together, they must be synonyms.

Shiveka’s linguistic argument is unconvincing, however, because the pairing of words by no means requires that the paired words be synonyms (Bernhardt 1974:142). The usage of כפיאה does not vary in the Hebrew Bible, and the lexica consistently define כפיאה as a noun meaning ‘toil’, ‘trouble’, ‘misery’, ‘labour’, and they never define it as ‘deceit’.20

Although the meaning of כפיאה is consistent, there are two distinct ways that it can be used. It can signify either the ‘toil’ or ‘misery’ that one suffers, or it may signify the ‘toil’ or ‘misery’ that one causes others to suffer. Many nouns that express a verbal quality are capable of similar dual usage, but the basic meaning of those terms remains the same. Whenever כפיאה is paired with ‘deceit’, the causative force of the noun comes into play. In those cases, the words ‘misery’ and ‘deceit’ are complementary, but they are not synonymous. Both words fit into the same semantic field and designate coexistent forms of oppression.21 For example in Job 15:35, ‘They conceive misery (חמס), and give birth to trouble (חמין) (Knierim 1997:60; also Clines 1993:141) and their womb prepares deceit (זרמה).’22 In addition, כפיאה can be followed by a functional genitive; and, as is the case with other verbal nouns, that genitive may

20 Brown et al (1979:765); Köhler (2001:845); Köhler & Baumgartner (1958:715); Van Gemeren (1997:435); Schwertner (1997:924); Holladay (1988:276); Even-Shoshan (1983:897). A few representative verses are Job 3:20, ‘Why is light given to him that is in misery (חמס), and life to the bitter in soul’; Job 11:16, ‘Because you shall forget your trouble (חמל), and remember it as waters that pass away’; and Pr 31:7, ‘Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery (חמל) no more.’


22 Another example is Ps 10:7, ‘His mouth is full of cursing (מלא), deceit (זרמה), and fraud (מר): under his tongue is misery (חמס) and trouble (זרם).’
be an objective genitive or it may be a subjective genitive. That is, the phrase ‘the misery of Israel’ can denote the misery suffered by Israel or it can mean the misery that Israel causes. In Judges chapter 10, Israel is obviously the object of suffering, not the cause of suffering (Webb 1986:46-48).

In addition to the texts and the lexica, the translations are consistent in rendering יָרֵעָה as ‘misery’, ‘suffering’, ‘trouble’. Among the ancient versions, the Septuagint translates יָרֵעָה with κόπος, (‘a striking, beating ... toil, trouble’; Liddell et al 1940:978). Targum Jonathan uses יָרֵעָה and expands the verse by adding פָּנָים (pain, sorrow); the Vulgate uses ‘miseria’ (misery). The following translations use some form of the word ‘misery’: Geneva Bible, Authorized King James Version, New King James Version, New International Version, New American Standard Version, New American Bible, Revised Standard Version, New Living Translation, the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH. The New Revised Standard Version reads ‘suffer’; the New Jerusalem Bible says ‘suffering’, and the New English Bible employs ‘plight’. The following non-English versions all utilize terms that are synonymous with ‘misery’ and ‘suffering’: Luther Bibel, geplagt; Elberfelder Bibel, Elend; Reina-Valera, aflicción; Bible in Français Courant, accablement; La Sacra Bibbia Nuova Riveduta, afflizione; Leidse Vertaling, lijden; Netherlands Bible Society Version, ellende; and the Ou Vertaling in Afrikaans, moeite. Thus, it seems clear that Bible translators have consistently understood יָרֵעָה as a form of suffering.

Shiveka’s other argument, which is based on contextual considerations, on the surface seems reasonable; it makes sense that God’s frustration with Israel might continue until the end of the passage. The weight of linguistic evidence against Shiveka, however, requires another view of the context. Is it possible that wider contextual factors may contribute to the meaning of the text? Since chapter 10 functions as an introduction to the second half of Judges, it may be instructive to explore possible parallels in the introduction to the first half of the book. The pattern for the judge cycle in 2:11-19 does, in fact, show evidence of such a parallel. (Pressler 2002:198). God’s anger is revealed in 2:14, and his compassion is expressed in 2:18. God becomes angry because of Israel’s idolatry and he saves them because he is moved with compassion. The Lord ‘saved them from the hand of their enemies ... because the Lord was sorry (খুশী) on account of those who tyrannized and oppressed them’ (2:18b). The verb יָרֵעָה is used frequently in the Hebrew Bible to signify God’s change of mind or actions. It can be translated ‘repent’, ‘regret’, or ‘be sorry’ (Köhler 2001:688; Köhler & Baumgartner 1958:608; Stoebe 1997:738; Clines 1993:663). Regardless of the precise meaning that is assigned to יָרֵעָה, one thing is clear; God’s sympathy for the suffering of Israel was a major factor in his decision to save them. The same sympathy is expressed in the words of 10:16, ‘his soul was grieved by the misery of Israel.’

2 The vulnerability of God

Chapter 10 of Judges brings into focus the apparent conflict between Yahweh’s anger
and his compassion, a conflict that derives from the covenant relationship between God and his people. The angel of the Lord had said in chapter 2:

I brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you to the land that I had sworn to your ancestors. And I said, ‘I will not break my covenant with you forever. And you, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.’ But you have not heard/obeyed my voice ... (2:1-2).

In light of the Lord’s initial rebuke of Israel, one could suggest that the underlying theology of Judges is based upon the covenant relationship between God and Israel (Harris, Brown & Moore 1979:132). God has chosen to enter into a genuine relationship with his people, and that relationship causes God himself to be vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and personal injury. As soon as the Lord chose to enter into the covenant, he submitted himself to a position of personal risk (Moltmann 1993:271-275). The covenant relationship ‘reveals a divine vulnerability, as God takes on all the risks that authentic relatedness entails. Because of what happens to that relationship with those whom God loves, God suffers’ (Fretheim 1984:78, 36-37, 76-77; also Boling 1975:193).

Yahweh’s negative response to Israel’s cries in chapter 10 marks a clear departure from the expected cycle and begs for an explanation. Apparently, God’s change of response shows that he is not mechanical in his response to sin and/or repentance; rather, his response is truly relational (for a theological argument for the relationality of God, cf Pinnock 2000:3-26). In chapter 10, the cry of the Israelites is more sincere than ever; they repent, confessing twice, ‘we have sinned.’ They demonstrate their authentic repentance by casting aside their idols and serving Yahweh. Yet in spite of their apparent change of heart and action, the Lord refuses to come to their aid.

The interaction between Yahweh and Israel in chapter 10 of Judges suggests that by entering into a covenant relationship with Israel, the God of Judges has put himself at risk or made himself vulnerable in at least three ways. First, the God of Judges is vulnerable to repeated rejection – God is faithful, but Israel is not faithful. God has kept his covenant obligations, but Israel has broken the covenant over and over. God has repeatedly rescued Israel, but their gratitude has been short-lived. Israel’s relationship to God is one of freedom, based upon intergenerational covenant renewal. That freedom may be illustrated in the challenge of Joshua, who said to Israel, ‘Choose today whom you will serve’ (Jos 24:15). In the Book of Judges, the Israelites chose over and over again to serve the gods of the Canaanites; and when they served the gods of the Canaanites, they were forced to serve the Canaanites as well. Freedom does have its limits.

Second, the God of Judges is vulnerable to attempted manipulation. The Israelites’ recurring cycle of rebellion and their repentance in chapter 10 may epitomize their attempts to use God, to abuse their relationship with God. Over and over they had committed what was evil in the sight of God, but God had forgiven them each time. It is only natural that they would anticipate forgiveness once again, if they repented.
Their repeated rebellion may indicate to the reader that the Israelites were attempting to manipulate God to their own ends, presuming upon his mercy, and taking advantage of his compassion (Block 1999:347). Further, the reader may sense that their efforts to manipulate and exploit God were successful for a time. But in chapter 10 it becomes clear that the Lord is refusing to allow that manipulation to continue.

Third, the God of Judges is vulnerable to internal conflict. In chapter 10 of Judges, God is angry; he is so angry that he refuses to save his covenant people from oppression. An angry God is a terrible presence, but even more terrible would be an absent God. As Moltmann (1993:272) stated, ‘The opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference. Indifference towards justice and injustice would be a retreat on the part of God from the covenant. But his wrath is an expression of his abiding interest.’ Yes, God is angry; he is so angry that he speaks with broken grammar (10:11). He is so angry that he becomes sarcastic: ‘Go and cry out to the gods that you have chosen. They will save you’ (10:14). On the one hand, he is so angry that when Israel repents for the second time, he remains silent. On the other hand, he is moved with intense compassion; he is grieved by their suffering; he suffers with them. The words of verse 16 indicate a draining, depleting, diminishing, exhausting compassion. According to Scherman (2000:182), ‘The verse likens God to a sensitive human being, who cannot bear to see the suffering of a beloved friend. Even though the friend has wronged him and does not deserve mercy, the person feels compelled to try and relieve the friend’s agony’. He asks, ‘What hidden bond exists between the word of wrath and the word of compassion, between “consuming fire” and “everlasting love”? ’ (Heschel 1962:23). The Lord appears to be torn in two directions (Pressler 2002:198). According to Fiddes (1988:23-24), this inner conflict is ‘the torment of God’s desire for his people, a longing which is suffused by a sense of failure and disappointment. “Struggle” within God’ is an expression of his pain. He will not be manipulated and exploited, but he cannot bear to remain idle while his people suffer. It is a tension that remains unresolved in Judges.

**E CONCLUSION**

God is often portrayed by theologians as impassable, unemotional. Biblical statements of his emotions have been identified as anthropopathisms, figures of speech that do not represent the true nature of God (Fretheim 1984:6). In the same way that anthropomorphisms represent God’s character and actions in a symbolic way (e.g., his eyes represent his omniscience), anthropopathisms represent his will and his decrees. Thus, the impassable God does not really become angry because anger is a mere human emotion. The anger of God is no more than an ancient metaphor for God’s

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23 God’s words here express an ‘angry tone’; Webb (1986:45).
24 Similar words are used to describe Samson’s exhaustion from Delilah’s constant inquiries.
impassionate sense of justice. The God of Judges, however, is presented in the narrative as a passionate character.

Although the character of God in Judges is only one of many sources for theological inquiry, I would suggest that the voice of this text should not be silenced. The question of God’s passibility/impassibility has serious implications for theology, Christology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and pastoral theology. If God is impassible, then he did not suffer in Christ; and the incarnation is emptied of its significance. According to Moltmann, ‘To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness’ (Moltmann 1993:274; Fiddes 1988:145). If God is impassible then human affections must be a result of the fall, and salvation must include deliverance from the affections. Humanity, however, was created in the image of God; and, like God, humanity has the capacity for relating, loving, hating, hurting, grieving, hoping, and caring. These capacities are not the result of the fall, for when the human was first created, it was God’s own judgement that ‘it is not good for the human to be alone’ (Gn 2:18). As a perfect human, created in God’s image, the human needed companionship, relationship; therefore, God created a companion.

If God himself is impassionate and incapable of genuine relationships, then where is our model for the church, for community? Where is our model for intimacy? Why should the church concern itself with relationships, family, and care? Community and intimacy are difficult enough as it is, but with an impassible God they become impossible. ‘An apathetic God makes apathetic believers’ (Fiddes 1988:48). Steven Land (1993) has pointed forward theologically by insisting on the value of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. His important work shows that orthodoxy is dead without right relationship (Jas 2:19, ‘even the demons believe’); orthopraxy is empty without right motives (cf 1 Cor 13); and orthopathy is attained not through renouncing pathos (à la Augustine [cf Fiddes 1988:17; Heschel 1962:83], but through embracing the pathos of God. The possibility of embracing God’s pathos is explored by Solivan (1998:38), who declares that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus ‘serves as a tangible paradigm of correspondence between God’s orthopathos and the possibility of our own.’


26 Divine impassibility was one of Marcion’s foundational tenets, and he carried the doctrine to its logical conclusion in his docetic Christology.

27 The term ‘human’ is used here because gender was irrelevant before Eve’s creation.

28 ‘God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God – that is the basis for a real hope which both embraces and overcomes the world, and the ground for a love which is stronger than death and can sustain death. It is the ground for living with the terror of history and the end of history, and nevertheless remaining in love and meeting what comes in openness for God’s future. It is the ground for living and bearing guilt and sorrow for the future of man in God’ (Moltmann 1993:78).
Finally, the doctrine of passibility/impassibility has serious consequences for pastoral theology. What kind of God should be preached and imitated, the impassionate God or the compassionate God who grieves over the suffering of Israel (Fretheim 1984:24)?

It is true that the affections of God are not equivalent to the affections of humans (Fretheim 1984:8; Heschel 1962:55). Human affections, although not sinful, are influenced by sin. Unlike humans, God’s emotions and actions are always appropriate to the situation. Unlike humans, God does not internalise his anger. God is healthy and whole while humans are often unhealthy and dysfunctional. (Moltmann 1993:271).

Finally, I agree that a tension exists between the immutability of God and the passibility of God; but surely it is a tension that can be accommodated within a theological tradition that affirms the tension-filled mysteries of the trinity and the incarnation.

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