

PRE-CRITICAL EXEGESIS OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POST-CRITICAL HERMENEUTIC

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Abstract

It has been argued recently that pre-critical approaches to biblical studies are superior to critical methodologies. In this article pre-critical interpretations of the book of Judges are examined in depth, and it is suggested that several elements of the pre-critical approach might be helpful in the construction of a post-critical hermeneutic of Scripture. A full return to pre-critical exegesis, however, is unjustified.

A. Introduction

Recently, David C. Steinmetz and others have called for a return to pre-critical methods, claiming that pre-critical exegesis is superior to critical methodologies.¹ According to Steinmetz, pre-critical exegesis is 'true' because it allows for multiple levels of meaning, while historical criticism is 'false'

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¹ Cf. David C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', *ThT* 37 (1980), pp. 27-38; Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 96-131; and Richard G. Swinburne, 'Meaning in the Bible', in S. R. Sutherland and T. A. Roberts (eds.), *Religion, Reason and the Self* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1989), pp. 1-33.

because it searches for a single meaning in the biblical text.² In this article I will examine the pre-critical interpretations of the book of Judges in order to clarify the presuppositions and goals of the interpreters.³ I will then suggest ways in which a post-critical hermeneutic might benefit from the reappropriation of pre-critical approaches. Finally, I will offer a critique of Steinmetz' argument based upon the findings of my research.

B *Ante-Nicene Fathers*

The book of Judges receives little attention prior to the seventeenth century; therefore, virtually every significant pre-critical work on Judges can be mentioned here. The only lengthy commentary comes in the form of the nine homilies of Origen, covering Judges 1-8, and Augustine's *Questions on the Heptateuch*, of which fifty-six questions are devoted to Judges 1-16.⁴ Other Church Fathers referred to Judges numerous times, but most of the references are short, and they often serve only to illustrate another Scripture text.⁵

² Steinmetz, 'Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 27.

³ The history of Judges research has been detailed in Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn, 'Judges', in John Haralson Hayes (ed.), *Book Judges* (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), I, pp. 637-47; Rüdiger Bartelmus, 'Forschung am Richterbuch seit Martin Noth', *TRu* 56 (1991), pp. 221-59; and Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., 'Judges in Recent Research', *CurBR* 1, no. 2 (2003), pp. 159-85.

⁴ Neither of these primary sources has been translated fully into English. Origen's *Homilies* are available in Latin as translated by Rufinus in J. P. Migne, *PG* (Patrologiae Cursus Completus; Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1969), XII, pp. 951-990; and Augustine's *Questions* can be consulted in Joseph Zycha (ed.) *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Quaestionum in Heptateuchum Libri VII* (CSEL, 28 pt. 2.; Vindobonae: F. Tempsky, 1895), pp. 449-506. Selections from both Origen, Augustine and other ancient writers appear in English in John R. Franke and Thomas C. Oden, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel* (ACCOSOT, 4; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), pp. 99-180.

⁵ Many of these references are discussed in David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), which is the most extensive treatment of the reception history of Judges. The strength of Gunn's work is in the sheer volume of material that he accumulates and in his astute analysis. His weakness is in his lack of direct quotations from primary sources and in his complete omission of mainstream works such as Origen's *Homilies on Judges*, *PG*, XII; John Wesley and G. Roger Schoenhals, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1987); F. C. Cook and J. M. Fuller, *The Bible Commentary* (Barnes Notes on the Old Testament; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953); C. F. Keil and Franz Julius Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (trans. James Martin; Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872); Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History* (7 vols.; Boston: Bradley & Woodruff, 1872); Beverly Carradine, *Gideon* (Bible Character Series; Philadelphia, PA: Pepper Pub. Co., 1902). The omission of Origen's *Homilies* is particularly surprising. Although Gunn includes music and art in his effective history, he does not mention Handel's oratorio entitled *Deborah*, and he omits important works of art, such as those of Lucas Cranach the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Speckaert, Anthony van Dyck and Mark Chagall. Gunn discusses Peter Paul Rubens, but does not show any prints of his work, and he gives us only one of Rembrandt's many paintings from Judges. On the other hand, he includes prints of artless copies and cartoons that he could have mentioned but which do not deserve illustration (plates 3.1b, 3.1c, 3.4c, 7.5d, 7.10c). Sadly, the failure to include any color plates (probably because of cost) betrays a general lack of appreciation for artistic interpretations.

Examples from Origen, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian should be sufficient to demonstrate the approaches used in in the ante-Nicene period.

Origen, the father of the Alexandrian School, set an important precedent in his interpretations of Judges, which were almost entirely allegorical and decidedly anti-Jewish. Although I would attribute his use of allegory primarily to his Hellenistic training, he justifies the search for the deeper spiritual meaning by citing 1 Cor. 10.11, where Paul states that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are 'written for our sake, upon whom the end of the ages has come'.⁶ Origen concludes that the literal sense of the Old Testament was addressed to Israel, and there must be a deeper sense that addresses the Church. Origen assumes that the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit; they are a true record of history; and they testify at every point to Jesus Christ.

In his first homily on Judges, Origen finds meaning for the Church by allegorizing the elders who lived in the days of Joshua (Judg. 2.7), declaring that they are the Apostles of Jesus.⁷ In his second homily, he writes that the death of Joshua (Judg. 2.8) means that Jesus is dead in sinners and he lives in Christians.⁸ He states in his third homily that God's handing over of Israel to Cushanrishathaim (Judg. 3.8) teaches that God continues to deliver the proud over to the enemy for a humiliation that brings healing.⁹ Furthermore, Cushanrishathaim represents a spiritual enemy and Othniel the hero is his spiritual counterpart, one of the archangels who comes to bring deliverance to God's people (Judg. 3.10).¹⁰ In his fourth homily, Origen uses etymologies to bring out the allegory. Ehud means 'praise'; Eglon means 'round'; and Moabite means 'flow', thus Ehud is able with his praise to cut through the circle of evil ways that flows with the philosophy that pleasure is the highest good (Judg. 3.15-30).¹¹ The fifth homily teaches that Jael, who kills Sisera with a stake, is the church, who kills the carnal man with the wood of the cross (Judg. 4.17-21).¹² The next homily declares that the kings who are called together in Deborah's song (Judg. 5.3) represent Christians who are made kings because Christ reigns in them.¹³ Origen writes in his seventh homily that just as Israel was handed over to Midian when they sinned against God (Judg. 6.1), so the church is handed over to demons when they neglect the commandments of God.¹⁴ In the eighth homily Gideon's wet fleece (Judg. 6.38) is the Jewish nation, blessed with the law and the prophets, and the dry fleece (Judg. 6.40)

⁶ Migne, *PG*, XII, p. 958.

⁷ Migne, *PG*, XII, pp. 953-54.

⁸ Migne, *PG*, XII, pp. 956-57.

⁹ Migne, *PG*, XII, pp. 961-62.

¹⁰ Migne, *PG*, XII, pp. 963-64.

¹¹ Migne, *PG*, XII, p. 967.

¹² Migne, *PG*, XII, p. 971.

¹³ Migne, *PG*, XII, pp. 976-77.

¹⁴ Migne, *PG*, XII, pp. 978-79.

represents the Jews' rejection of Jesus Christ, with the wet ground being the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world.¹⁵ In his ninth and final homily, Origen concludes that Gideon's command for the fearful to go home (Judg. 7.3) symbolizes the Gospel's call to the Christian to deny self and bear the cross.¹⁶

Irenaeus, also pursuing the allegorical approach, writes that Gideon's ten servants (Judg. 6.27) mean that Gideon was helped by Jesus Christ,¹⁷ and that Gideon's fleece represents the people and the dew is the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Irenaeus offers three comments regarding the Samson story. First, the jawbone of the ass that Samson uses to kill one thousand Philistines (Judg. 15.15) typifies the body of Jesus Christ. Second, in a non-allegorical comment, Irenaeus deduces that after Samson commits fornication (Judg. 16.1), the Spirit of the Lord does not come upon him again because fornication is a sin against the body, which is the temple of God.¹⁹ Third, allegorizing Samson's victory/death scene, Irenaeus writes:

"The little boy, therefore, who guided Samson by the hand, pre-typified John the Baptist, who showed to the people the faith in Christ. And the house in which they were assembled signifies the world, in which dwell the various heathen and unbelieving nations, offering sacrifice to their idols. Moreover, the two pillars are the two covenants. The fact, then, of Samson leaning himself upon the pillars, this, that the people, when instructed, recognized the mystery of Christ."²⁰

Unlike Origen, both Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian lift up the literal sense of Judges. Clement constructs a chronology of Israel that includes Judges in order to prove that Jewish institutions predate the Greek culture.²¹ Tertullian comments on Israel's repeated idolatry and suggests that God used the enemy nations to inflict discipline on Israel, a conclusion that is little more than a restatement of the text of Judges.²²

These examples demonstrate that the ante-Nicene Fathers approached Judges primarily through the lens of allegory, and they assumed the nature of the book as inspired Scripture, its accuracy as sacred Jewish history, and the Christian significance of its deeper meaning. The deduction of Timothy Beal and David Gunn that the ante-Nicene writers referred to Judges 'primarily in

¹⁵ Migne, PG, XII, pp. 984-85.

¹⁶ Migne, PG, XII, pp. 986-87.

¹⁷ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325* (10 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., American reprint edn, 1956), I, p. 571.

¹⁸ Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), ANF, I, p. 445.

¹⁹ Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), ANF, I, p. 575.

²⁰ Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), ANF, I, p. 572.

²¹ Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), ANF, II, pp. 324-27.

²² Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), ANF, III, p. 636.

regard to its recurring plot pattern of transgression-punishment-deliverance' is a mischaracterization of the Patristic exegesis of Judges, but it is an understandable statement in light of their complete neglect of both Origen and Irenaeus who contributed heavily to the allegorical tradition.²³

The earliest Christians, especially those who were Jews and proselytes, accepted the Old Testament without difficulty because they had been made familiar with its content by its use in the synagogue. However, once the New Testament books had been written, and as more and more Greeks were converted, the place of the Old Testament grew uncertain. Allegorical interpretation was one attempt, based upon a Greek approach, to assure the Old Testament's relevance to the Church. The practice of allegorical reading was justified by Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 3.6 that 'the letter kills but the Spirit makes alive' (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III.5.9). David Steinmetz suggests that the Fathers used allegory for three reasons: (1) their belief that 'What appears to be history may be a metaphor or a figure instead';²⁴ (2) the relationship between Israel and the Church, which led to the assumption that the Old Testament was meant literally for Israel but spiritually for the church;²⁵ and (3) the difficulty of finding spiritual edification in many of the Old Testament stories.²⁶

C *Post-Nicene Fathers*

Excerpts from Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine show that the allegorical method continues in the post-Nicene period. Ambrose writes that when Gideon was winnowing the wheat (Judg. 6.11) he was

"separating the elect of the saints from the refuse of the empty chaff. For these elect, as though trained with the rod of truth, laying aside the superfluities of the old man together with his deeds, are gathered in the

²³ Beal and Gunn, 'Judges', Book Judges, p. 637. Beal and Gunn also state erroneously that Augustine referred substantially to Judges only ten times (p. 638), when, as stated above, his *Questions in the Heptateuch* alone include 56 questions on Judges. The article is a helpful but unbalanced introduction to the interpretation of Judges. Regarding the ante-Nicene period, a period they do not seem to understand, they totally omit Origen and Irenaeus. Their discussion of Rabbinic exegesis is quite good, but the Protestant commentaries of the post-Reformation period are completely absent (Poole, Henry, Wesley, Cook, Clarke, Keil, etc.). Nearly forty percent of the article is devoted to the period from 1975 to the present, an amount that seems to be unnecessary since this period is most easily accessible to the article's readers. Furthermore, the bibliography is useful only in regard to recent works.

²⁴ Steinmetz, 'Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 29.

²⁵ Steinmetz, 'Pre-Critical Exegesis', pp. 29-30.

²⁶ Steinmetz, 'Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 30.

church as in a winepress. For the church is the winepress of the eternal fountain, since from it wells forth the juice of the heavenly Vine."²⁷

Further describing the Gideon story, Ambrose surmises that the squeezing of water from the fleece prefigures that 'Jesus Christ would wash the feet of his disciples in that heavenly dew'.²⁸ Also, Gideon's pitchers, torches and shouts are 'our bodies, fashioned of clay, which do not know fear if they burn with the fervor of the grace of the Spirit, and bear witness to the passion of the Lord Jesus with a loud confession of the voice'.²⁹

In his *Concerning Widows*, Ambrose offers a surprising interpretation of Deborah that takes into account the literal sense. He writes that Deborah was only one of many great women of her time, and he observes that she is the only one of the judges who is without fault. Assuming she is a widow, Ambrose says of Deborah:

*"And so one widow both ruled many thousands of men in peace and defended them from the enemy. . . I think that her judgship has been narrated and her deeds described, that women should not be restrained from deeds of valor by the weakness of their sex. A widow, she governs the people; a widow, she leads armies; a widow, she chooses generals; a widow, she determines wars and orders triumphs. . . It is not sex but valor which makes strong. . . And so according to this history a woman, that the minds of women might be stirred up, became a judge, a woman set all in order, a woman prophesied, a woman triumphed, and joining in the battle array taught men to war under a woman's lead."*³⁰

Ambrose's interpretation assumes that Deborah's story serves as a theological precedent for women to accept responsibilities outside their traditional socially-assigned roles. Then, after his discussion of the literal meaning, he adds the allegorical interpretation that Deborah represents the 'battle of faith and the victory of the church'.³¹

Jerome continues the allegorical tradition in his references to Judges. He determines that Caleb's springs of water (Judg. 1.13-15) 'typify the redemption which the sinner finds for his old sins in the waters of baptism',³² and that Gideon's fleece is the 'Lamb of God; whose fleece bright and clean was made wet with the dew of heaven'.³³

²⁷ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series* (14 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1952), X, p. 93.

²⁸ Schaff and Wace (eds.), *NPNF2*, X, p. 95.

²⁹ Schaff and Wace (eds.), *NPNF2*, X, p. 112.

³⁰ Schaff and Wace (eds.), *NPNF2*, X, pp. 398-99.

³¹ Schaff and Wace (eds.), *NPNF2*, X, p. 399.

³² Schaff and Wace (eds.), *NPNF2*, VI, p. 200.

³³ Schaff and Wace (eds.), *NPNF2*, VI, p. 200.

Augustine interprets Judges allegorically, but in addition to allegory, he utilizes numerology and the literal sense of Scripture. Regarding Gideon's fleece, his interpretation is almost identical to that of Origen, but with added material. The wet fleece represents Christ's coming first to the lost sheep of the Jews, and the dry fleece surrounded by wet ground is Christ's coming to the

*"other sheep who were not of the former people of Israel . . . We now understand that the nation of the Jews has remained dry of Christ's grace, and all the nations throughout the whole round world are being rained upon by clouds full of Christian grace."*³⁴

Augustine's reading of the episode in which Gideon chooses only the soldiers who lap water like a dog (Judg. 7.4-7) is an example of allegory mixed with numerology. He concludes that the three hundred men who lap like a dog represent allegorically the sign of the cross, because the number three hundred is signified in Greek by the letter T, which forms the shape of the cross.³⁵ In his discussion of Jotham's parable of the bramble king (Judg. 9.8-15), Augustine reflects creatively on the value of fictional narrative to teach truth: 'Surely, all this is invented in order that we may reach the matter intended by means of a narrative [that is] fictitious, to be sure, but bearing a true and not a false signification' (*Against Lying* 13.28).³⁶

Augustine's interpretation of Jephthah and his vow (Judg. 11.30-40) is a quite lengthy and detailed examination of the text. He reaches several conclusions regarding the story: (1) human sacrifice is prohibited in Scripture; (2) Jephthah had a human victim in mind when making the vow; (3) Jephthah did indeed literally sacrifice his daughter; (4) the text's lack of evaluation of Jephthah's actions challenges the readers to judge for themselves; and (5) God was displeased with Jephthah's actions.³⁷ Augustine's close reading of the text demonstrates his concern to discover the literal sense before turning to the spiritual sense.

In addition to the writers that I have mentioned, Franke cites a number of other ancient and medieval scholars who commented upon Judges: Athanasius, Basil the Great, Caesarius of Arles, Ephrem the Syrian, Eusebius, Evagrius of Pontus, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Great, Isaac of Nineveh, John Cassian, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Maximus of Turin, Methodius, Paulinus of Nola, Procopius of Gaza, Prudentius, Salvian the Presbyter, and the Venerable Bede. At some points these writers value the literal sense of the text, but most of their comments perpetuate the allegorical interpretations of Origen.³⁸ In the post-Nicene

³⁴ Philip Schaff (ed.) *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. First Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. R. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), VIII, p. 329.

³⁵ Schaff (ed.) *NPNF1*, VIII, p. 295.

³⁶ Quoted in Franke and Oden, *Josh.-Sam.*, p. 133.

³⁷ Zycha (ed.) *Augustini Quaestionum in Heptateuchum*, pp. 481-501. Cf. Gunn, *Judges*, pp. 138-39.

³⁸ Franke and Oden, *Josh.-Sam.*, pp. 99-180.

period, however, both Ambrose and Augustine evince signs of movement toward a literal approach that appreciates the Old Testament narrative as theologically relevant to the Church.

D *Reformation and Post-Reformation*

The lack of attention to Judges continues in the Reformation period, with neither Martin Luther nor John Calvin writing a commentary on Judges. In the *Works of Martin Luther*, the index shows fourteen references to Judges, all of which are brief citations used as support or illustrations of Luther's argument. In his introductory comments to the Old Testament, Luther describes the Pentateuch, wisdom literature, and the prophets; but he makes no comments on Joshua-Kings.³⁹ One of Luther's most lengthy references to Judges explains the reason that God allows trouble to come to the Christian. Citing Judg. 3, Luther refers to God's disciplining of Israel:

*"Wherefore also God let many of its enemies remain and would not drive them out, in order that they should not have peace and must exercise themselves in the keeping of God's commandments, as it is written, Judges iii. So he deals with us also when he sends us all kinds of misfortune: so exceedingly careful is He of us, that He may teach us and drive us to honor and call upon His Name, to gain confidence and faith toward Him, and so to fulfil the first two Commandments".*⁴⁰

Luther's method includes historical investigation, study of the original languages, and movement away from allegory to an analogical application, which is one of the interpretational approaches of the New Testament.

Although Martin Luther's commentaries are at times brilliant, they lack consistency, often becoming too polemically caustic for continued usage. John Calvin, on the other hand, produced consistently sound exegesis, while only occasionally giving way to anti-Catholic or anti-Jewish polemic. Although Calvin did not write a commentary on Judges, he did compose commentaries on twenty of the thirty-nine Old Testament books, using an exegetical methodology that quickly became the dominant model for Christian biblical studies. Calvin's rejection of allegory insured its demise as a validated interpretive strategy. He expresses his distaste for allegory in the following comment on Zechariah's vision of four chariots that emerged from two mountains of brass (Zech. 6.1-3):

"But as the vision is obscure, interpreters have given it different meanings. They who think that the four Gospels are designated by the four chariots, give a very frigid view. I have elsewhere reminded you, that we are to avoid these futile refinements which of themselves vanish

³⁹ Martin Luther, Henry Eyster Jacobs, and Adolph Spaeth, *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes* (6 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, Philadelphia edn, 1982).

⁴⁰ Luther, Jacobs, and Spaeth, *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*, I, p. 214.

away. Allegories, I know, delight many; but we ought reverently and soberly to interpret the prophetic writings, and not to fly in the clouds, but ever to fix our foot on solid ground."⁴¹

Apparently, however, the practice of allegory was so deeply ingrained that even Calvin himself would occasionally slip back into its use. After mocking those who practice allegory and rejecting the view that the four chariots are the four Gospels, he insists that the mountains of brass are God's immutable decrees:

"the two mountains where the chariots were seen were mountains of brass. The Prophet no doubt understood by these mountains the providence of God, or his hidden counsel, by which all things have been decreed before the creation of the world; and hence he says, that they were mountains of brass, as they could not be broken".⁴²

With the exegetical examples of Luther and Calvin, with the liberty granted by the Reformation, and with the influence of the Enlightenment *Zeitgeist*, post-Reformation interpretation divided gradually into two streams, one emphasizing rational scientific study of Scripture and the other emphasizing confessional (but still rational) investigation into the text. Skeptics such as Spinoza and Voltaire questioned the historical accuracy of Judges,⁴³ while Protestant commentators also appealed to reason in their efforts at harmonizing the biblical voices. Matthew Poole, for example, published a two-volume commentary on the whole Bible (1685) which consisted of his translation from the original languages accompanied by annotations or explanatory notes. His stated purpose was to communicate the 'plain sense of the Scripture, and to reconcile seeming contradictions'.⁴⁴

The first major commentary on Judges was completed in 1708 by Matthew Henry, and his purpose for writing lies firmly within the tradition of the spiritual interpreters who came before him. According to Henry, he writes his commentary:

*"in order to the reforming of men's hearts and lives. If I may but be instrumental to make my readers wise and good, wiser and better, more watchful against sin and more careful of their duty both to God and man, and, in order thereto, more in love with the word and law of God."*⁴⁵

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (trans. John Owen; 5 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), V, p. 140.

⁴² Calvin, *Minor Prophets*, V, p. 141.

⁴³ Gunn, *Judges*, pp. 20, 100.

⁴⁴ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (3 vols.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), I, p. vii.

⁴⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (6 vols.; New York: Fleming H. Revell, rev. and corr. edn, n.d.), II, p. iii.

In the face of Enlightenment skepticism toward the accuracy of biblical narratives, Henry, like Poole before him, includes an apologetic for the veracity of Scripture. Concerning alleged contradictions in the Bible, he states, 'I have not indeed met with any difficulties so great but that solutions might be given of them sufficient to silence the atheists and antiscrpturists, and roll away from the sacred records all the reproach of contradiction and inconsistency with themselves'.⁴⁶ Henry's view of Scripture is adopted by conservative Protestant writers for the subsequent two hundred years. In five statements Henry describes his understanding of the nature of Old Testament narrative:

*"I. That it is history . . . we are sure that in this history there is no matter of fact recorded but what has its use and will help either to expound God's providence or guide man's prudence. II. That it is true history, and what we may rely upon the credit of, and need not fear being deceived in . . . III. That it is ancient history, far more ancient than was ever pretended to come from any other hand . . . IV. That it is church history, the history of the Jewish church, that sacred society, incorporated for religion, and the custody of the oracles and ordinances of God, by a charter under the broad seal of heaven, a covenant confirmed by miracles . . . V. That it is a divine history, given by inspiration of God, and a part of that blessed book which is to be the standing rule of our faith and practice . . . here we meet with many who were figures of him that was to come, such as Joshua, Samson . . ."*⁴⁷

In light of Henry's view of Scripture and his perceived role as commentator, it is not surprising to find that he shrinks back from any critical inquiry that might be deemed unfaithful or that might appear to disparage Scripture. His conclusions regarding Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter provides a case in point. Although he admits that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, Henry is not alarmed by it and succeeds in finding positive lessons in Jephthah's actions. He insists (1) that 'it is very good, when we are in the pursuit or expectation of any mercy, to make vows';⁴⁸ (2) 'what we have solemnly vowed to God we must conscientiously perform';⁴⁹ (3) 'it well becomes children obediently and cheerfully to submit to their parents in the Lord';⁵⁰ and (4) that Jephthah's daughter 'cheerfully submitted to the performance of his vow'.⁵¹

John Wesley, who usually praised Matthew Henry, is incensed at Henry's apparent devaluation of human life. Wesley is so appalled at the thought of human sacrifice that he is unwilling to entertain even the possibility

⁴⁶ Henry, *Commentary*, II, p. iii.

⁴⁷ Henry, *Commentary*, II, p. iv.

⁴⁸ Henry, *Commentary*, II, p. 196.

⁴⁹ Henry, *Commentary*, II, p. 196.

⁵⁰ Henry, *Commentary*, II, p. 196.

⁵¹ Henry, *Commentary*, II, p. 196.

that a biblical hero could have considered such an outrageous act. Wesley writes:

*"It is really astonishing, that the general stream of commentators, should take it for granted, that Jephthah murdered his daughter! But, says Mr. Henry, "We do not find any law, usage or custom, in all the Old Testament, which doth in the least intimate, that a single life was any branch or article of religion." And do we find any law, usage or custom there, which doth in the least intimate, that cutting the throat of an only child, was any branch or article of religion? If only a dog had met Jephthah, would he have offered up that for a burnt-offering? No: because God had expressly forbidden this. And had he not expressly forbidden murder?"*⁵²

Both Henry and Wesley approached the Jephthah story with a concern to avoid indicting Jephthah the hero, but they used two different strategies in their efforts to save Jephthah's reputation. Henry admitted to the human sacrifice but downplayed its significance, and Wesley denied outright that the sacrifice ever took place. The pre-critical approach to Scripture usually prevented these and other writers from wrestling genuinely with the difficult texts of Judges.

Wesley's response to the Jephthah story may be symptomatic of his general lack of regard for the book of Judges. According to existing records, Wesley never preached a sermon from Judges, and he made few references to Judges within the body of his sermons.⁵³ Wesley had no desire to write a commentary on the Bible, but because of continual pressure from those around him, he finally consented and composed the work near the end of his life. His notes on Judges display his wide range of reading, but Wesley himself focused his comments mostly on his own interests, which included his theology of holiness and other Christian applications.⁵⁴

The nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of Bible commentaries, most of which continued to pursue a confessional approach. Adam Clarke, a follower of Wesley, finished his commentary on the whole Bible in 1826.⁵⁵ Clark was a genuine scholar of Scripture and all the attendant disciplines, including languages, history, geography, culture, philosophy, archaeology. His commentary represents the transitional period between pre-critical and critical study of the Old Testament. Although Clarke clearly writes from a

⁵² Wesley and Schoenhals, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible*, p. 171.

⁵³ John Wesley and Albert Cook Outler, *The Works of John Wesley* (25 vols.; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, Bicentennial edn, 1984), I-IV. Outler's index of Wesley's works includes only twelve citations from Judges.

⁵⁴ See for example his application of Judg. 6.8-10: Wesley and Schoenhals, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible*, p. 168.

⁵⁵ Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testament: Including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts, with a Commentary and Critical Notes* (6 vols.; Syracuse, NY: Wesleyan Methodist Publishing Association, Ward, a new rev. and corr. edn, 1881).

confessional stance, elements of his commentary suggest that he is moving toward a critical methodology in his interpretation. He incorporates the most recent discoveries in Ancient Near Eastern religions and writings. All of his citations of ancient languages are typeset in their original scripts. He compares numerous ancient versions and writings, including the Targums, the Vulgate, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, Theodotian, Rabbinical texts, and classical Greek texts. Occasionally, he allows the LXX or another version to take precedence over the Masoretic Text (particularly if that version offers a less controversial reading).⁵⁶ He includes chronological data on almost every page, placing side-by-side the Jewish calendar, Greek calendar, and Gregorian calendar. Although he includes a running chronology, he allows that the narratives of Judges may not be in chronological order, and he rejects allegorical and typological methods.

Clarke, therefore, comes very close to writing a critical commentary, but his pre-critical concerns continue to control much of his exegesis. Thus, he avoids discussing some difficult passages, such as Judg. 10.13, where Yahweh refuses to save Israel again. Also, he displays a tendency, like Henry and Wesley, to soften the rough edges of the characters, referring to Jephthah's mother as an innkeeper instead of a harlot (Judg. 11.1), and interpreting Jephthah positively by arguing for the appropriateness of his vow and by denying that he killed his daughter. Thus, dispelling any questions regarding Jephthah's faith and his integrity, Clarke writes, 'That Jephthah was a deeply pious man appears in the whole of his conduct'.⁵⁷

Other commentaries that appear later in the nineteenth century, including those by F. C. Cook⁵⁸ and C. F. Keil, follow the tradition of the Protestant commentaries that preceded them.⁵⁹ Keil's interpretation is the pinnacle of pre-critical exegesis, showing evidence of keen intellect, linguistic acumen, and broad knowledge of Scripture. Unfortunately, he refuses to engage historical criticism, believing it to be a passing fad. Keil's inability to face the difficulties in the text of Judges results in a commentary that lacks depth and creativity and suffers from the same pre-critical confessional shortcomings as Henry, Wesley, and Clark.

⁵⁶ E.g., the reading of the LXX is more sympathetic toward Barak than is the MT. Clarke, *Commentary*, n.p. (Clarke's commentary has no page numbers).

⁵⁷ Clarke, *Commentary*, n.p. In contrast to most other confessional readings, James M. Gray, *The Concise Bible Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. 307, circa 1930, ventures to condemn the behavior of the judges. He writes, 'No apology can be made for the action of Jael the Kenite woman of verses 17-21 . . . She was the meanest of maddest murderers. It must not be supposed that although her action was foreknown to God it was sanctioned by Him; neither that because Deborah praises it in her song (chap. 5), therefore she is pronouncing a eulogy on the moral character of the woman'.

⁵⁸ Cook and Fuller, *The Bible Commentary*.

⁵⁹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*.

The beginnings of the historical critical study of Judges overlap the pre-critical period. The roots of historical criticism were put down in the soil of the Protestant Reformation: a modern view of history, the rejection of allegorical hermeneutics, the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, renewed study of the original languages of Scripture, resistance to ecclesiastical control of interpretation, beginnings of humanism, moves towards individualism, and the rise of rationalism and the scientific method. These critical roots are evident in all of the commentaries on Judges in the immediate post-Reformation era, but the confessional stance of the pre-critical writers prevents their complete adoption of historical critical method.

In summary, post-Reformation confessional commentators mostly ignore modern criticism, while choosing to insist upon the historical truth of the biblical narrative. They believe firmly in the divine inspiration of Scripture and the overall unity of Scripture while downplaying the human participation in the origin of Scripture and the divergent voices within Scripture. Although the post-Reformation writers abandoned allegory as a method, they continue to view the Old Testament primarily as a prophetic witness to Jesus Christ and they strain to find a direct Christological referent in every Old Testament word.

E REAPPROPRATING Pre-critical Approaches

In the pre-critical period interpretation was controlled by the church and served the interests of the church, but in the critical period the academy determined what was acceptable in biblical studies. In the pre-critical period questions of spirituality and Christian doctrine dominated the study of Judges, but in the critical period questions of history became paramount. Unlike the move from pre-critical to critical study of the Bible, the move from critical to post-critical study has not yet reached a clear point of separation where the newer methods completely replace the previous methods. That is, historical critics completely abandoned the presuppositions and conclusions of pre-critical scholars, but the post-critical methods continue to retain many critical findings as a foundation for their approaches. At the present time, critical and post-critical approaches to Judges are utilized simultaneously. Critical scholars continue to investigate the world behind the text, while literary critics examine the world within the text, and advocates of newer approaches pay attention to the world in front of the text.⁶⁰

I conclude from this brief survey that the pre-critical studies of Judges include a variety of elements that could be employed in a post-critical hermeneutic. One aspect of pre-critical exegesis, the synchronic interpretation of the canonical text, is already practiced (with variations) by numerous

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the three worlds of the text, see W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), pp. xx-xxvi.

biblical scholars.⁶¹ Confessional interpreters can agree with the pre-critical assumption that the book of Judges holds canonical authority over the church. They can also appreciate the pre-critical goal to find spiritual meaning in Judges, thereby making Judges relevant to the church as theology and as a resource for spiritual and moral transformation. Furthermore, as R. R. Reno argued, biblical studies should reclaim the pre-critical appreciation of the particularity of the text (as opposed to the critical tendency toward abstraction).⁶² Walter Brueggemann's suggestion for an integrated approach to the study of Psalms is applicable as well to the study of the Old Testament as a whole.

"The devotional tradition of piety is surely weakened by disregarding the perspectives and insights of scholarship. Conversely, the scholarly tradition of interpretation is frequently arid, because it lingers excessively on formal questions, with inability or reluctance to bring its insights and methods to substantive matters of exposition. . . . What seems to be needed (and is attempted here) is a postcritical interpretation that lets the devotional and scholarly traditions support, inform, and correct each other, so that the formal gains of scholarly methods may enhance and strengthen, as well as criticize, the substance of genuine piety in its handling of the Psalms."⁶³

It is clear, however, that Brueggemann's esteem for 'precritical passion, naivete, and insight of believing exposition'⁶⁴ does not imply the abandonment of critical gains. A post-critical approach should exercise the rigor of critical methods and be informed by the discoveries of critical scholars, who, for example, have lifted up the historical and human dimensions of Scripture. Also, the findings of historical criticism can bear directly upon the understanding of specific biblical texts. Furthermore, although a post-critical approach might see itself as serving the church, it should not allow itself to be constrained by the fear of ecclesiastical powers, nor should it shrink from wrestling honestly with difficult biblical texts.

F Conclusion: The Impossibility of Returning to the Past

Finally, although I suggest that interpreters of Judges can reach back and claim elements of the pre-critical approaches, I would insist that it is neither

⁶¹ One canonical approach is proposed by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1st American edn, 1979).

⁶² R. R. Reno, 'Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis', in Craig G. Bartholomew and Elaine Botha (eds.), *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), p. 389.

⁶³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Augsburg Old Testament Studies; Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984), p. 16.

⁶⁴ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 18.

advisable nor even possible to revert to a previous era and to restore its methods of biblical interpretation. David Steinmetz argues vigorously for a return to pre-critical exegesis, but in spite of his valid criticisms of historical critical methodology (as proposed by Benjamin Jowett), he is not convincing in his broader argument. In arguing that the 'medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text . . . is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning . . . is false,'⁶⁵ Steinmetz argues from the same rationalistic perspective that he claims to oppose, and he sets up an unnecessary dichotomy. Steinmetz argument is dubious, first of all, because he unfairly caricatures historical criticism. Even a cursory reading of the commentaries will demonstrate that many historical critical scholars recognize the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament text.⁶⁶ Secondly, the choice between the medieval model and the historical critical model is not the only choice that is available. Current approaches to Old Testament study demonstrate that scholars are now recognizing multiple meanings of the text. Consequently, a better choice is to recognize that the polyvalency of the text emerges from the interface between the text and the reader (hearer). Most of the Bible is narrative, and by its very nature narrative evokes multiple meanings. Thirdly, although Steinmetz seems to understand the philosophical and theological reasons for pre-critical allegory, he fails to perceive the historical particularity of those reasons. In other words, even if allegory is seen as a legitimate method for Patristic exegesis and the fourfold model is acceptable for medieval interpretation, it does not follow automatically that those methods must be adopted by exegetes of this century. Every methodology contributes to and is conditioned by its historical context, and since the conditions that produced allegory no longer exist, the allegorical method is no longer appropriate as a hermeneutical approach. Brueggemann declares wisely, 'We are not pre-critical people. We are heirs of a scholarly consensus that must not only be taken into account, but must be embraced as our teacher',⁶⁷ and Mary Boys adds,

"The contention that biblical studies need to move to an era of post-critical work mandates the acceptance of critical methodologies but also the recognition of their limitations. Obviously, this means not a return to a pre-

⁶⁵ Steinmetz, 'Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 27. A stronger proposal that includes a critique of historical criticism and offers a helpful way forward is presented by Pieter Martinus Wisse, 'Scripture between Identity and Creativity: A Hermeneutical Theory Building upon Four Interpretations of Job', (Ph.D., University of Utrecht, 2003), pp. 197-236. Wisse concludes that historical criticism can inform religious interpretation if it will refrain from atheistic reductionism and discontinue its dependence upon the criterion of dissimilarity (p. 236).

⁶⁶ As evidence of their spiritual interests, it should be noted that scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, Sigmund Mowinkel, and Claus Westermann functioned as preachers in addition to their roles in the academy. Donald K. McKim, *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 505, 527, 535.

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 17.

*critical fundamentalism but, to the contrary, conscious and systematic attention to the integration of contemporary scholarship into the life of the churches and 's praise of the allegorical method and his calls for a return to medieval exegesis are based upon a romanticized view of the past and a misdirected vision of the future. We cannot and should not go back to old synagogues.'*⁶⁸

Steinmetz outdated methods, neither can we (or should we) prevent further progress. The best and most productive use of our energy is to take full advantage of the situation as it stands and to press forward with careful and creative work in the context of pluralism and global diversity. Efforts to revert to the past or to restrain the future will amount to nothing more than striving against the wind.

⁶⁸ Mary C. Boys, 'Religious Education and Contemporary Biblical Scholarship', *Religious Education* 74 (1979), p. 187.