

FROM GILGAL TO BOCHIM: THE NARRATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANGEL OF YAHWEH IN JUDGES 2:1

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ABSTRACT

Although the compositional history of Judges 1 and 2 has been the subject of much investigation, the narrative role of Judges 2:1-5 has not been fully appreciated. The purpose of this paper is to examine one element of Judges 2:1-5, namely, the appearance of the angel of Yahweh, his identity and his narrative significance. This study argues that the visit of the angel accentuates the contrast between the victories of Joshua and the failures of Judges 1, connects the Judges narrative to the Exodus tradition, and serves as a harbinger of the conflict that is to follow in the book of Judges.

INTRODUCTION

The visitation of the angel of Yahweh in Judges 2:1-5 has been recognized by historians as an etiology for Bochim, and as the occasion for the transference of the ark to Bethel. Biblical scholarship, however, has devoted little attention to the narrative function of the passage, the identity of the angel, the reason for his movement from one location to another and the connections of this text to the narrative of Judges. This paper, through a rhetorical theological approach, suggests ways that we might hear the voice of this text within the larger context of Judges.

The narrative setting of Judges is immediately subsequent to Joshua's death, and the agenda of Chapter 1 is the completion of the conquest of Canaan. Before entering into battle, the Israelites seek Yahweh's direction, which is the first canonical instance of Israel's inquiring of Yahweh. In response to Israel's

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inquiry, Yahweh names Judah as the tribe of leadership (Judges 1:2), and the next sixteen verses (1:3-18) are devoted to Judah's battles, in which he defeats numerous enemies and claims new cities. The victories continue until v. 19, and this first admission of failure is followed by a long register of failures, which lists the tribes and their lack of success. Finally, we learn that some time after Dan had possessed his inheritance, the Amorites drive him out, leaving Dan without an inheritance (1:34).

Although Chapter 1 begins with a mood of hope and promise, it ends with a mood of uncertainty and despair. At the end of this chapter, the reader is faced with the reality of Israel's failures, yet the text is entirely void of any evaluative comments by the narrator. Notwithstanding this lack of critique, the narrative's rapid progression from a list of victories to a list of defeats is unsettling and somewhat confusing to the reader, who may question the import of such an unprecedented negative progression.

THE ANGEL OF YAHWEH

As the second chapter opens, the interpretation and ramifications of Chapter 1 are revealed without delay (Brown 2000:151):

And the angel of Yahweh went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and he said, '[I said] "I will bring you up from Egypt," and I brought you into the land that I had sworn to your ancestors. And I also said, "I will not violate my covenant with you forever. As for you, you shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars." But you have not heard my voice. What is this you have done? And I also said, "I will not drive them out from before you; and they will become [thorns] in your sides, and their gods will become snares to you.'" And so it was, when the angel of Yahweh spoke these words unto all the Israelites, that the people lifted up their voice and wept. And they called the name of that

place Bochim; and they sacrificed there unto Yahweh (2:1-5).²

The angel of Yahweh arrives with a reprimand for the Israelites, a reprimand issued on account of their actions that were detailed in Chapter 1. Since Chapter 1 does not include any type of evaluative comment, the reprimand of Chapter 2 is “essential to the purpose” of the narrative (Lindars 1995:125). Daniel Block, agreeing that the two chapters function as a larger unit, describes the connection between chapters 1 and 2 as “two sides of one coin, report and interpretation respectively” (1999:109).

THE IDENTITY OF THE ANGEL OF YAHWEH

The angel of Yahweh is mentioned seventeen times in Genesis through Numbers but has not appeared by explicit designation since Numbers 22:35, when the angel rebuked Balaam. The mention of Gilgal, however, recalls the angel who is described as the “captain of Yahweh’s army” who appeared to Joshua at Gilgal (Joshua 5:13-15). The actions of the captain of the army of Yahweh are similar to those of the angel of Yahweh as found in earlier canonical texts. He stands with his sword drawn as in Numbers 22. He commanded Joshua, “take the shoes off your feet, the place where you stand is holy” (Joshua 5:15), using wording identical to Exodus 3.5 except for the omission of the word “ground”. Finally, if he is still present in Joshua 6:1-2, he speaks in the place of Yahweh (Joshua 6:2), as he does in Genesis 16.13; Exodus 3.4-7; and Judges 6.14. Therefore, as Block suggests, the angel of Yahweh and the captain of Yahweh’s army are one and the same angel (1999:111). He who came to aid Joshua and the Israelites at the beginning of their conquest of Canaan now comes to enjoin them to finish the work.

Some interpreters, however, have argued that the angel of Yahweh who appears in Judges 2:1 is not an angel at all. Since the Hebrew word for “angel” (מַלְאָךְ) can be translated “messenger”, it is possible that a prophet or priest is implied. On this basis rabbinical literature identifies this messenger of Yahweh as a prophet, namely Phinehas the priest (*Lev. Rab.* 1.1 and *Judges Rab.* 16.1;

² Unless noted otherwise, scripture citations are translated by the author.

cf. Gieschen 1998:162). The rabbinical view must be questioned, however, since the only biblical reference that unequivocally identifies the angel of Yahweh as a human is Haggai 1:13, which reads, “Then Haggai, the messenger of Yahweh, spoke.” In the case of Haggai, he is clearly named before the appellation “messenger”.

One side of the rabbinical tradition, reflected in the *Zohar*, allows that the angel is the manifestation of Yahweh:

The scripture uses the words ‘The angel of the Lord’ as a metaphoric appellation of the Divine Being, as did also Jacob when blessing Ephraim and Manasseh saying, ‘The angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads.’ In Genesis 48:16 and furthermore in Exodus 14:19 the Almighty is referred to and designated as ‘The angel of the Lord that went before the camps of Israel removed and went behind them’ (de Manhar 1980:258).

The other side of the tradition contends that the angel is a human messenger (cf. Lieberman 1979:117-121, 144-147). In order to maintain this position, Lieberman must recast the miraculous acts of the angel as coming from the imagination of the observers. For example, while the text of Judges 13:20 says that the angel “ascended in the flame of the altar”, Lieberman says that Manoah and his wife “assumed” that the angel ascended in the flames (1979:146). Other Jewish commentators leave the question open (e.g., Scherman 2000:197-199).

The actions of the biblical character known as the angel of Yahweh demonstrate that he is not a human being. He speaks from heaven (Genesis 22:11); he appears in a flame of fire (Exodus 3:2); and he can be invisible to humans (Numbers 22:22). In the book of Judges he appears to Gideon (6:12), lights a fire with the tip of his staff then disappears (6:21), and he ascends to heaven in a flame (Judges 13:20). Therefore, in accordance with other usage, it seems likely that the angel of Yahweh of Judges is a supernatural character, manifested to declare a word from God.

Schneider understands the angel to be a sign of Israel’s alienation from Yahweh. She writes, “The rebuke did not come directly from the deity, because there was no longer a clear communication link with the deity, but through an

unnamed messenger” (2000:27). I would suggest three obstacles to Schneider’s interpretation. First, there is no signal in the text that Israel had lost their means of communicating with Yahweh. Second, Schneider’s use of the word “unnamed” suggests that the Israelites did not know the identity of the messenger, but in Hebrew מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is always a definite noun – “the” messenger of Yahweh, not “a” messenger, which would be מַלְאָךְ לַיהוָה (cf. נָבִיא לַיהוָה in 1 Kgs 18:22; also 1 Sam 3:20; 1 Kgs 22:7; 2 Kgs 3:11; 2 Chron 18:6; 2 Chron 28:9). The fact that the messenger is unnamed does not mean that he is unknown. The biblical tradition surrounding the angel of Yahweh includes an aura of mystery, and part of that mystery is his reluctance to be named (cf. Genesis 32:29; Judges 13:17). Even without a name, however, he would be recognized by the readers of Judges. Third, Schneider’s view disregards the theophanic character of the angel of Yahweh throughout the entire tradition of the Hebrew Bible. The angel of Yahweh is well known in the biblical tradition, and if he is not the visible manifestation of Yahweh, he is at least nearly so. In Scripture, the persons to whom the angel of Yahweh appears react as if they have seen God (Genesis 16:13; 31:13; Exodus 3:4; 14:19-24; Judges 6:16, 24; 13:22). As in other texts, the angel’s speech here in Judges 2:1 is cast in the first person, without the prophetic messenger formula, a fact which characterizes his appearance as a theophany (Block 1999:111; Brown 2000:152; cf. Genesis 16:10). For this reason, Pressler can say that the angel of Yahweh is “an earthly manifestation of God, not an entity separate from Yahweh” (2002:134); and Martin can insist, “it is God himself who is speaking” (1975:30; cf. Brown 2000:151); and Block can say that the angel of Yahweh “functioned as the alter ego of God” (1999:110). Therefore, the appearance of the angel of Yahweh does not indicate distance from Yahweh; rather, it represents his immanence.

THE MOVEMENT OF THE ANGEL OF YAHWEH

It may seem unusual to hear of an angel traveling from one place to another, since the biblical tradition usually presents angels as messengers who simply appear on the scene (Genesis 16:7; 19:1; 22:11; Exodus 3:2; Numbers 22:22; etc.). In most texts, however, the angel of Yahweh is invested with

anthropomorphic qualities, and spatial movement is one of those qualities. For example, in Exodus 14:19 he “moved” and “went behind them”; in Numbers 22:26 he “went further”; in Numbers 22:32 he “went out”; and in Judges 6:11 he “came and sat under an oak”. These human-like qualities function as rhetorical devices, and in Judges 2:1 the angel’s relocation is a narrative event that is “loaded with meaning” (Wilcock 1992:26).

The angel’s movement draws attention to Gilgal, a location that represents Joshua and his victories. The Israelites encamped at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan river (Joshua 4:19), and there Joshua erected the pillar of twelve stones that he had taken from the river (4:20). Joshua 4:20-24 recounts the setting up of the stones and expounds their memorial significance:

Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, ‘When your children ask their parents in time to come, “What do these stones mean?” then you shall let your children know, “Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.” For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever’ (NRSV).

Furthermore, Gilgal served as the Israelites’ base of operations during the first part of the book of Joshua as they were conducting their initial campaigns against the Canaanites (9:6; 10:6; 10:15; 10:43; 14:6).

Gilgal is also associated with the theme of obedience to the covenant. It was there that Joshua circumcised the Israelites (5:2-9) and celebrated the Passover (5:10). Circumcision and Passover are possibly the two most important rites in the biblical tradition, and both of these were restored into practice at Gilgal:

When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of

Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho (Joshua 5:8-10 NRSV).

The reinstatement of circumcision was rewarded by Yahweh, who said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled the reproach (חֲרִפָּה) of Egypt from you.” The Hebrew word חֲרִפָּה means “reproach which rests upon one, condition of shame, disgrace” (Brown et al. 1979:358), and a text in Genesis specifically links חֲרִפָּה to the state of being uncircumcised. Regarding Dinah’s desire to marry Shechem, her brothers said, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace (חֲרִפָּה) to us” (Genesis 34:14). It seems likely that the “disgrace of Egypt” is Israel’s failure to circumcise their male children. We might deduce that, since the Pharaoh had ordered the death of all male infants, any ritual ceremony such as circumcision would have drawn unwanted attention to the presence of the young boys. The failure to perform the ritual circumcision would be linked, therefore, to the conditions of servitude in Egypt. Now that Israel had been delivered from servitude, they are emboldened to restore their traditional covenantal acts. To commemorate God’s blessing on this restoration, the place was called Gilgal (Kalland 1980, Vol. I:162-165; Munderlein 1978, Vol. III:222).

In spite of the etiology in Joshua 5:9, historians have claimed that the name “Gilgal” refers to a circle of stones used as a cultic center (Moore 1895:57). They argue that Joshua 4:20-24, which describes Joshua’s erecting of twelve stones from the Jordan River, may reflect the tradition of such a circle of stones (Burney 1918:37). Block writes, “naming the site Gilgal, The Circle, may reflect the arrangement of the stones” (1999:111). Later in his discussion, Block at least mentions the etiology of 5:9; but Wilcock, for example, speaks of the so-called “circle” of stones without any reference to 5:9 as the possible basis for naming Gilgal (1992:26). It may be true that Gilgal was named for a circle of stones, and I am not opposed to such a historical reconstruction if there were evidence to support the theory. The fact remains, however, that the narrative in Joshua associates the name with the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt.

The angel travels from Gilgal to Bochim, which means “weepers”. The location of Bochim is unknown, and since this is the only place in Scripture where it is mentioned, there is some doubt about its actual existence. Most commentators believe that it is “not an actual place name but an artificial construct, most likely as a pseudonym for Bethel” (Block 1999:112). The evidence for this theory begins with the narrative connection in the Torah between Bethel and “weeping”. “And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse died, and she was buried below Bethel under an oak: and the name of it was called the Oak of Weeping” (Genesis 35.8). Another piece of evidence linking Bochim and Bethel is found in the LXX, which expands Judges 2:1, stating that the angel came “to Weeping Place, even to Bethel, even to the house of Israel.” The Greek text reads: ἐπὶ τὸν Κλαυθμῶνα καὶ ἐπὶ Βαιθηλ καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον Ἰσραηλ (Rahlfs 1979, Vol. I:411). It should be noted that in the handwritten text of Codex Leningrad, there remains an anomalous blank space after the word “Bochim” (See Freedman, et al. 1998:284). The space is long enough to accommodate the Hebrew equivalent to the text of the LXX, but Moore argues that the space is “probably connected with an older or discrepant division of the verses,” not an indicator of a lacuna in the Hebrew text (1895:60-61; cf. Lindars 1995:88). Although the Greek text probably represents an addition to the original Hebrew, it demonstrates that, in at least one stream of tradition, Bochim was associated with Bethel. Still another indication that Bochim (“weepers”) may be identified with Bethel is found later on in the book of Judges: “Then all the Israelites, the whole army, went back to Bethel and wept, sitting there before Yahweh” (Judges 20:26).

If Bochim is an alternative name for Bethel, then the arrival there of the angel of Yahweh may relate directly to the actions of the tribe of Joseph in Chapter 1. It was at Bethel that the tribe of Joseph offered freedom to a Canaanite inhabitant and his family in exchange for information about the city (1:22-26). By allowing the man and his family to go free, the tribe of Joseph was acting in disobedience to Yahweh’s commands. If Bochim is Bethel, then “Israel’s unfaithfulness causes the ‘house of God’ to become a ‘house of weeping’” (Brown 2000:152).

Even if Bochim cannot be identified with Bethel, the movement of the angel of Yahweh still carries deep significance. In light of the associations of Gilgal as Joshua's victory headquarters and the place of Israel's renewal and blessing, the movement of the angel of Yahweh from Gilgal to Bochim recalls the victories of Joshua as they stand in sharp contrast to the defeats just recounted in Judges Chapter 1. In Gilgal the Israelites carry out the terms of their covenant with Yahweh, and he delivers them from the reproach of Egypt. They are free of the "reproach of Egypt", but now (in Judges) they are burdened with the reproach of the Canaanites. The angel of Yahweh departs from the victorious camp of Joshua because the Israelites themselves no longer dwell there. The angel comes to the place where they now reside, to Bochim – "Weepers". Since the name "Weepers" is given at the beginning of the episode, Boling argues that the Israelites had assembled even before the angel arrives and that they were weeping in an "occasion of public lamentation" (Boling 1975:66-67). Even if they were not yet weeping, the naming of the location "Bochim" sounds an ominous tone even before the messenger himself has spoken.

THE ANGEL OF YAHWEH AND THE EXODUS TRADITION

Although the angel of Yahweh came from Gilgal, where he had encouraged Joshua at the beginning of the conquest, Heinz-Dieter Neef (1995:69) argues that the angel's appearance may hark back to an even earlier text, a text that is also connected to the conquest of the land. At the very beginning of the Israelites' journey toward the Promised Land, the angel of Yahweh appeared to protect them from the Egyptians (Exodus 14:19) and to aid them in reaching their goal (Exodus 23:20), and he now appears at the end of the journey to urge them to complete that goal. Block agrees (1999:110; cf. Moore 1895:57, who associates Judges 2:1 with Exodus 32:20), linking the angel to the Exodus tradition, noting specifically the texts where Yahweh promises to send his angel in front of the Israelites as protection while they drive out the inhabitants of the land (Exodus 23:20-33; 32:34; 33:2). Furthermore, the presence of the angel is closely connected to commands and warnings that parallel those of Judges 2:1-5. The Israelites are enjoined to "hear his voice" (Exodus 23:21), to "tear down"

the Canaanite pillars (Exodus 23:24), and to “make no covenant with” the inhabitants of the land or with their gods (Exodus 23:32). The Israelites are told that the angel would accompany them into the land that God had prepared and that they were to listen to him. These connections between the angel of Yahweh and the Exodus tradition convey to the hearers a sense of theological continuity between the Exodus and their ongoing battles with the Canaanites.³ Just as the angel led them through the wilderness, into Canaan, and continued to aid the Israelites as they engaged the Canaanites in battle after battle, he might be expected to intervene in their present distress. In light of his previous guidance and aid, the angel’s appearance in Judges 2:1 should come as no surprise, but the content of his message may be a surprise indeed.

THE ALLEGIANCE OF ANGEL OF YAHWEH

The fact that the angel of Yahweh “went up” may indicate a symbolic relationship between Chapter 2 and Chapter 1 through the use of the Hebrew verb עלה (to go up). The Israelites ask Yahweh, “Who shall go up (עלה) first?” (1:1). The answer is “Judah shall go up (עלה)” (1:2). Judah said to Simeon, “Go up (עלה) with me” (1:3). So “Judah went up (עלה)” (1:4). “The descendants of the Kenite ... went up (עלה)” (1:16). “And the house of Joseph, they also went up (עלה) against Bethel” (1:22). Then, “The angel of Yahweh went up (עלה) from Gilgal to Bochim” (2:1). Webb observes that 2:1 corresponds to 1:1 where the word is used in relationship to the setting of the assembled Israelites (Webb 1987:102-103). Since עלה is used in Chapter 1 as an introduction to battle, the going up of the angel may serve as a harbinger of imminent conflict (cf. O’Connell 1996:54). When Joshua had asked the angel, “do you belong to us or to our enemies,” he had replied, “Neither” (Joshua 5:13-14), indicating that the allegiance of the angel of Yahweh is to Yahweh alone. In light of the angel’s unwillingness to confess allegiance to the Israelites, Olson goes so far as to say that the angel’s speech in Judges “marks a dramatic reversal of the conquest of

3 The Exodus is mentioned nine times in Judges (2:1, 12; 6:8, 9, 13; 10:11; 11:13, 16; 19:30), a frequency that suggests its importance as a theological underpinning of God’s actions in the narrative.

Canaan; previously God had gone up and fought *for* Israel, but now God goes up and fights *against* Israel” (Olson 1994, Vol. II:733).

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that even before the angel of Yahweh delivers his message, his movement from Gilgal to Bochim and his presence among the Israelites insinuate certain theological themes that foreshadow the content of his reprimand. I will now highlight three of these themes, thus placing the angelic visit within the broader narrative structure of Judges.

First, in light of the associations of Gilgal as Joshua’s victory headquarters and the place of Israel’s renewal and blessing, this movement of the angel of Yahweh recalls the victories of Joshua as they stand in sharp contrast to the defeats just recounted in Judges Chapter 1. Yahweh had accompanied the Israelites at Gilgal, where their reproach was rolled away; and now he visits them at Bochim, where they weep over their new reproach. This contrast between victory and defeat is one piece of the larger puzzle that shows Judges to be the negative counterpart to the more positive portrayal of the conquest that emerges out of the book of Joshua.

Second, the appearance of the angel of Yahweh reminds the Israelites of the angel’s presence during the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings and the initial stages of Joshua’s conquest. The theological connection between the angel of Yahweh and the salvation from Egypt may point to the Exodus as the paradigm for the continuing battles between the Israelites and the Canaanites. That is, the Canaanites are cast as the oppressors from whom the Israelites must be delivered by the power of Yahweh.

Third, the visitation of the angel of Yahweh may indicate the imminence of conflict, since he appears in earlier texts as a guide and helper in times of battle and since the phrase “he went up” is used consistently in Judges 1 as a military term. Finally, although the angel of Yahweh has often supported the cause of Israel, his allegiance is to Yahweh alone. Consequently, the Israelites, by their unfaithfulness to Yahweh and their concession to the Canaanites, find

themselves in a position of uncertainty, not knowing whether the angel has arrived to fight *for* Israel or *against* Israel.

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