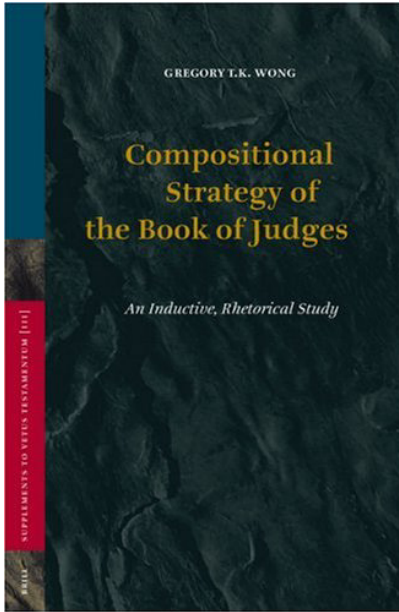


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Wong, Gregory

Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study

Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 111

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In this intriguing but in the end not entirely convincing study, Gregory Wong, a student of Graeme Auld, tries to demonstrate that the book of Judges in its current form is the work of a talented and playful author who (using the words of Wong) in a “subtle” way (having “a penchant for riddles and puzzles”) re-created a number of “bizarre” stories into a meaningful narrative about the “progressive deterioration” of the people and its leaders in a period of Israel’s history. This would plead against the classic theory of a Deuteronomistic History as formulated by Martin Noth, because according to this analysis the book of Judges is a “self-contained composition” with a different line of thought and message than the surrounding books. Wong does not speculate on the date of this composition but leaves open the possibility to call the author Deuteronomistic (albeit “in a way significantly different from what was envisioned by Noth”). These and other remarks concerning the diachronic analysis remain marginal and rather superficial, bringing back the discussion about the Deuteronomistic History to a choice between Martin Noth or—as Wong is inclined to do—Robert Polzin. Although Wong does not want to dismiss a diachronic approach, he is of the opinion that priority should be given to synchronic literary analysis. “Otherwise,” he states in the final line of his book, “one runs the risk of subjecting a text to a fragmentary bias where in fact, what is called for is an integrative approach to a unified text” (258). Having read the book, however, one can

hardly escape the impression of a bias on the part of Wong himself toward unification. The dilemma of diachronic and synchronic cannot be solved as easily as suggested here.

Wong is well aware of the problems he is facing here, as can be derived from his “critical survey of previous scholarship on Judges” (1–26). This covers the secondary literature until 2001 and thus misses the recent diachronic studies by Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah* (2004; reviewed in *RBL* 04/2005), and Andreas Scherer, *Überlieferungen von Religion und Krieg* (2005; reviewed in *RBL* 02/2007), and also the synchronic study by Elie Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest* (2006; in the same series: VTSup 106; reviewed in *RBL* 05/2007). Of course, the author cannot be blamed for that; apparently his study was concluded earlier. He can be criticized, however, for leaving out a reference to and discussion with Louis Jonker’s dissertation, *Exclusivity and Variety: Perspectives on Multidimensional Exegesis* (1996), in which Jonker attempts to find the balance between the different approaches to the exegesis of the stories about Samson. Eventually, it would probably not have made much difference if the studies since 2001 had been included. The conclusion would have been the same: both the diachronic and the synchronic approach lead to very different conclusions with regard to, respectively, the growth and the structure of the book. Discouraging as this situation may be, Wong takes up the challenge and even claims to have found a way to combine the good things of the different approaches and that this could be—which is even more astonishing—acceptable to all parties by using an “inductive” approach (see the subtitle of his book), “which means that instead of assuming a certain conclusion at the outset and trying to prove its validity, the available evidence will first be examined before a conclusion is allowed to emerge from that evidence” (24). In Wong’s opinion, the best starting point is to take the book “as an integrated whole” and to try to justify this assumption of unity by describing the internal relationships with the help of rhetorical analysis (see the subtitle). This is his answer to the critique of G. Andersson in *The Book and Its Narratives: A Critical Examination of Some Synchronic Studies of the Book of Judges* (2001) that in recent synchronic studies researchers find too much coherence and consistency in the book of Judges, resolving the obvious tensions and ambiguities too simply as literary devices. See now also the more elaborate reaction by Wong in his “Narratives and Their Contexts: A Critique of Greger Andersson with Respect to Narrative Autonomy,” *SJOT* 20 (2006): 216–30 (also mentioned in his book on 269, but with the wrong page numbers).

What follows is the most interesting and best part of the book: the description of the many relations between the introduction (1:1–2:5), central section (2:6–16:31), and epilogue (17:1–21:25) of the book. First the many connections between the prologue and the epilogue of Judges are described convincingly (27–77). Next to a number of clear thematic links (the Jebusite threat, oracular consultations, specific military action, weeping at Bethel, arranged marriages), Wong points to the shared dependence on the

book of Joshua (allusions to the taking of Jericho and Ai, sending out spies, dealing with potential transgressors). Even more interesting is the surprising number of links between the stories about the judges and the “bizarre” (a word used frequently by Wong) episodes in the epilogue (79–141); for instance, the idolatry of Micah in chapter 17 echoes the idolatry of Gideon; in violating all the rules, the Levite of chapter 17 looks like Samson, who never acted according to the rules for the Nazirite; the harshness with which Benjamin is dealt with in chapter 20 echoes a similar harshness with which Gideon and Jephthah dealt with their fellow Israelites. Not every thematic link is immediately obvious, but Wong’s precise and detailed observations lead in most cases to convincing new insights and arguments for a surprising internal coherence.

It appears also possible to link the prologue to the central section of the book (143–90). Next to a geographical line from south to north, Wong sees in both parts negative developments: “decreasing faith”; “increasing prominence of the judges’ self-interest” (note the parallel with the study of Assis!); “decreasing participation of the tribes”; “increasing harshness in dealing with internal dissent”; and “YHWH’s increasing frustration.” All this is not new, and it is less surprising than the findings in the previous chapters. Wong can refer to the results of earlier, primarily synchronic, studies. It is even possible to add elements supporting this line of “progressive deterioration,” for instance, by looking at the place of women in the book.

Wong is more original again, but now unfortunately less convincing, in his interpretation of the epilogue’s refrain: “there was no king in Israel in those days” (191–223). He wants to explain this as a reference to the divine king, YHWH. He has to go a long way to prove his case, piling up a lot of circumstantial evidence, like a farfetched comparison with 2 Chr 15:3. When reading this, one gets the impression that Wong is not working as inductively as he suggests in his introduction, because he is now doing precisely the thing he wanted to avoid: “assuming a certain conclusion at the outset,” namely, the unity of the book (in this case, the negative view on the human king) and the relation between epilogue and prologue “and trying to prove its validity.” It remains far more likely that this refrain is the way in which Jud 17–21 is linked to the following books, just as we can find such links in the stories about Samson (especially the repetition of 13:2 in 1 Sam 1:1, the reference in 13:5 to the final liberation from the Philistines, and Samson being blinded just like King Zedekiah at the end of 2 Kings).

In the final chapter of the book about the “compositional strategy and rhetorical purpose of Judges” (225–58), Wong seems to overstate his case, trying to put all the details into the framework of the one author with his simple message within this one book. As with his unusual interpretation of the phrase “there was no king in these days,” Wong must reason long to explain why the references to the minor judges and the episode of 16:1–3 at first

sight seem to undermine his theory but in the end turn out to provide extra arguments in its favor. This does not give the impression of a “careful and thoughtful design” by the assumed author of the book of Judges. It does raise the question whether there are other possible and more probable solutions (be it on the basis of a diachronic or a synchronic analysis) to the problem of these texts that do not fit so nicely within the suggested meaningful structure.

Summarizing, this book can be recommended because of its many interesting and original literary observations but hardly on its redaction-critical conclusions.