



**Klaas Spronk**

***Judges***

Historical Commentary on the Old Testament

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The value of a commentary may be measured by how well it serves the requirements of those who employ it as an aid to interpretation. In scope, precision, and clarity, Klaas Spronk's contribution to the study of Judges will certainly be a standard reference for those who wish to understand the historical dimensions of the emergence and transmission of Judges, as well as the history of its reception and scholarly interpretation. Its explicit focus on historical matters is especially important, given that Judges has for some decades been a significant battleground in the conflict between diachronic approaches and an increasingly abundant stream of reader-oriented, synchronic interpretations that concentrate solely on the final form of the canonical text.

This commentary proposes that Judges was the product of a single talented author working in the early Hellenistic period who utilized traditional sources of various sorts in order to create an introduction to the history of Israelite kingship as recounted in Samuel and Kings. Judges exhibits parallels with Greek and Hellenistic culture and literature. These correspondences have long been recognized but generally attributed to the influence of a shared Mediterranean environment. Spronk, however, has assembled such an impressively large number of these parallels that his proposal for a Hellenistic date deserves serious consideration. These connections range chronologically from Homer down to Plutarch and Livy. Manetho and Berossus may provide examples of what motivated the scribal author of Judges to recast and preserve portions of Israel's national literature. Moreover, many matters in Judges prefigure or anticipate incidents in Samuel

and Kings. Spronk takes this circumstance as evidence that the author of Judges intended to point forward to narratives and themes that had already been laid out in those books. For Spronk, the hypothesis of a Deuteronomistic History has lost so much persuasiveness that it can no longer be used to explain such internal connections within the Former Prophets.

The commentary has assembled a rich treasury of bibliographic resources on Judges as a whole and on its individual issues and segments. This bibliography is not simply an amorphous catalog. Rather the reader is offered intense and wide-ranging overviews of, and interaction with, both long-established and more recent scholarship on all significant interpretative questions. Close attention is paid to matters of vocabulary and syntax, as well as stylistic elements, chiasmic structures, wordplays, and other indications of scribal virtuosity. The commentary takes the task and benefits of text criticism seriously, not only seeking out the earliest recoverable form of the text but also recognizing and exploring the recensional character of divergent Greek text forms and (in the case of Judg 6:7–10) the Qumran evidence. A thought-provoking appendix charts out the different ways that Judges was divided into paragraphs or pericopes by the six major Masoretic and Greek codices.

Helpfully, commentary on each section of Judges begins with the author's translation, followed by a short section ("Essentials and Perspectives") that offers a nontechnical summary of exegetical results and a review of the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation. Following this, two detailed and technical segments of "Scholarly Exposition" make up the main body of commentary. The first of these sections looks at broader issues, including stylistic and structural matters. The second is divided into smaller portions of text and provides a thorough investigation of textual, grammatical, and other interpretive questions. This structure increases the usefulness of the commentary in that the needs of both nonspecialists and professional scholars are met. It should be pointed out that German and French language quotations are not translated.

It may be instructive to sample one section of the commentary in order to illustrate its overall character. The test of drinking method used by Gideon to reduce his over-large army remains a classic crux of interpretation (Judg 7:1–8). The initial summary section of commentary traces interpretations of Gideon's character from Josephus and Pseudo-Philo through rabbinic literature and Calvin. The first exposition section looks at how scholarly opinions have slotted the testing narrative into various reconstructions of the composition history of the Gideon material and the supposed place of the incident at the heart of a chiasmic arrangement. In the second, more detailed exposition segment, there is a discussion of the location of the Spring of Harod and an apparent wordplay on its name, an exploration of the reduction-of-force theme to the divine war legislation in Deuteronomy, an investigation of the meaning of a puzzling *hapax legomenon*, and some ideas concerning what can be intended by the odd phrase "depart from Mount Gilead" in 7:3.

As to the mechanics of the drinking test itself, the MT is taken as the preferred text. The reading of LXX<sup>A</sup> is plainly an attempt to create a more coherent story. There is no discussion of the practice commonly adopted in modern versions (e.g., CEB, NABRE, NRSV) of reordering the words of 7:5–6 so that it is the kneelers, not the lappers, who put their hands to their mouths. In MT as it stands, the comparison of the chosen three hundred who lick the water to the way dogs drink (7:5) is admittedly confusing. However, this wording means that this group remained standing in order to drink and drank by bringing up the water in their hands, licking it up the way a dog laps. *Hands* come in to play because the author is creating a chiasm with the hand into which Yahweh will deliver Midian (7:6–7), and licking *dogs* seem to be a way of insulting those who are chosen as those who “would fit best in the role of loser” (227). There is a brief review of interpreters who have understood the way the chosen soldiers drink as an indication of wary fearfulness and thus unfitness for battle (Josephus, for example) and modern commentators who instead see drinking upright as a sign of alertness and worthiness. Characteristically, Spronk suggests that the number three hundred may be related in some way to the size of the Spartan contingent that delayed the Persians at Thermopylae.