

The Book of Judges

Barry G Webb G

NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012

AND

Judges

Serge Frolov

FOTL; Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2013

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These two commentaries on the Old Testament book of Judges appeared in a matter of months from each another at Eerdmans Publishers. Both were published in well-known commentary series, each with its own focus and perspective. Both offer an extensive and valuable introduction in which discussions on exegetical method occupy prominent positions. Both offer in-depth and meticulous commentary on the different sections in the text of Judges.

And yet these are two very different commentaries! Apart from the fact that the one commentary (Webb's) was written over a number of years (xvii) and the majority of the other (Frolov's) during a semester-long research leave (xv), they also employ very different methodologies. Webb's commentary keeps to the conventions of the NICOT series by paying particular attention to the text's literary features, theological themes, and implications for the life of faith today. It stands firmly in the tradition of evangelical interpretation in which the Bible is seen as more than just an ancient literary artifact. Frolov's commentary, also in line with the approach of the series FOTL, deliberately follows a form-critical study, claiming that it is the first full-scale form-critical treatment of the book of Judges since Hugo Gressmann's 1992 volume.

Barry Webb starts his commentary with an extensive introduction of over seventy pages. He first argues that Judges should be seen as an "Israelite Classic" (4ff.) which forms a "conceptual unit", before discussing the period of the Judges in Israel's history. Relying mainly on conservative historical studies which take the information in the Old Testament as reliable descriptions of events of the past, he dates the exodus in 1446 B.C. with the period of the judges starting in 1326 B.C. He indicates his position in the following words: "While making full allowance for the theological agenda of Judges and its literary quality (to which we will give much attention in this commentary), there is no reason in principle why it should not preserve, and indeed be anchored in, real historical knowledge of the period in question. Nor is it necessary, or even right, to subordinate its witness about this history to reconstructions based on the current state of archaeological knowledge" (17). The introduction also includes a very useful overview of recent scholarly study of Judges, ending with an appreciation of the valuable commentary by Walter Gross (HThKAT) which appeared in 2009. Moreover Webb discusses the functioning of Judges as Christian Scripture (Judges in the New Testament, Women in Judges, and Judges and Violence), before concluding the introduction with a

discussion of the state of the Hebrew text of Judges and problematical issues involved in the translation of the book (such as the use of the divine name and large numbers). For the purpose of the commentary Webb structures the book of Judges in three main parts, namely the Introduction (1:1-3:6), Careers of the Judges (3:7-16:31) reaching a climax with the Samson story, and the Epilogue (17:1-21:25). The last chapters, according to Webb, “complete the book in a rhetorical-literary sense. An effect of literary bracketing or closure is produced by the way these closing chapters of the book pick up and complement elements from the introduction” (509). They also “echo things that have featured in the body of the book” (511) and “[i]n all these ways the two narratives of chapters 17-21 complement those in the rest of the book and bring to an end its account of Israel’s turbulent history in the judges period – the complete literary and theological treatment of an era” (512). Useful summaries of results are given at the end of each main section, and some interesting excursions are interspersed in between the discussions.

Serge Frolov’s introduction to his commentary concentrates mainly on methodological issues. He starts with an appreciation of a form-critical approach which is, according to him, “by far the most universal among the basic tetrad of modern exegetical approaches to the study of the HB” (1), but simultaneously “perhaps the most misunderstood and underappreciated of all biblical criticisms” (2). He is therefore clear that “the present commentary introduces the audience not only to the biblical text that it analyzes, but also to the methodology that it employs” (2). In his brand of form criticism Frolov gives preference to the synchronic form of the text, “specifically, since the entire Enneateuch (Genesis-Kings), including Judges, presents itself as an integral composition, it will be mostly read as such, i.e. from the synchronic perspective” (3).

However, that does not mean that diachronic analysis should be neglected. However, the diachronic analyses should be prompted by the text’s final form: “First, investigation of a literary unit may indicate that it had a setting of its own.... Second, synchronic reading may discover factual contradictions, inconsistencies of outlook, structural abnormalities, doublets, repetitions, and other features potentially incompatible with it due to their association with redactional intervention, a diachronic activity par excellence” (3). With reference to the structure of the book of Judges Frolov argues as follows: “A major premise underlying all reconstructions of the allegedly symmetric structure of the canonical Judges is that Judg 1:1-3:6 is an ‘introduction’ to it and Judges 17:1-21:25 its ‘epilogue’... [I]n terms of syntactic layout, subject matter, and operative concepts Judges 1:1-26 belongs with what precedes it (in other words, with what we know as Joshua) rather than with what follows... As to Judges 17-21, recurrent formulaic patterns clearly include this fragment in the Philistine cycle that ends only in 1 Samuel 7” (25). He therefore concludes: “[T]here is very little, if anything, to define what we know as Judges as a self-contained unit of any kind.

What lies beneath the placid, one-dimensional surface of the canonical book is a complex combination of several literary entities of varied length, some of which extend well beyond the book’s limits. “It is possible therefore to discuss only the structure, genre, setting, and possible intention of these entities and their constituent parts, not of Judges as a whole” (27-28). He distinguishes three “major components”, the third with subsections and sub-subsections, which structure the commentary. The first component is Judges 1:1-26, the second Judges 1:27-3:6, and the third major component stretches from Judges 3:7 to 1 Samuel 7:17. In the discussions of these components and their subsections Frolov engages in meticulous textual studies and sometimes (very) elaborate structures which attempts to express the form-critical interest of the commentary.

He ends the commentary on a methodological note again in the two chapters that are included in the Appendix. He summarizes the intention of these last two chapters as follows: “With the terminus of the canonical book of Judges reached in the previous chapter, the commentary may appear to have accomplished all of its tasks. Yet, it would be somewhat premature to call it a day at this point because at least two of the commentary’s conclusions warrant further investigation. First, it has found that all literary units within the confines of what we know as Judges emerged as components of a larger whole that has been referred to as the Enneateuch. But what exactly is the nature of this whole? More specifically, what are its structure, genre, setting, and intention and what role do the texts included in Judges play in them? The present chapter will briefly address these questions. Second, the commentary has discovered that the default, synchronic mode of reading loses its equilibrium, albeit on a limited scale, in a number of points scattered across Judges, which suggests that its text may have a diachronic dimension to it; the next, concluding chapter will explore this dimension” (333).

Both these commentaries have their strengths and their weaknesses. Both are methodologically very conscious, and overtly so. Both are meticulous in their analyses, and lead the reader into the depths of the textual features. These should be appreciated. However, Webb’s drive towards embedding the book of Judges at all costs into some historical context, and Frolov’s vigour to analyze the texts into their minutest form-critical details, may deter some readers who prefer a more balanced approach in their scholarship. Both these commentaries are certainly worth buying (despite their fairly high prices), but some readers would want to read them in conjunction with other types of commentaries and scholarship on Judges.