# Dictionary of BIBLICAL IMAGERY

An encyclopedic exploration of the images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, figures of speech and literary patterns of the Bible

GENERAL EDITORS: Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III

canopy of the heavens and are fated for the gloomiest darkness. The image of stars in this context evokes celestial, angelic beings and parallels Jude's reference to the vagrant angels who are kept in deepest darkness awaiting judgment (Jude 6).

Vivid images of judgment sear the text of Jude. Divine judgment is executed in two parallel realms: the heavens, or spiritual realm, and the earthly, or natural realm. Angels who abandoned their assigned positions are now imprisoned "in eternal chains in deepest darkness" awaiting the great day of judgment (Jude 6 NRSV). Michael calls on the Lord to "rebuke" (*epitimaō*, a powerful word of effective and shattering judgment) the devil. Sodom and Gomorrah, their appetites sated on sexual immorality and unnatural lust, underwent "a punishment of eternal *fire" (Jude 7 NRSV). And believers are to save their fellows who have gone astray "by snatching them out of the fire" (Jude 23 NRSV); for even Israel, saved out of Egypt, experienced the subsequent destruction of those who did not believe (Jude 5). While the image of courtroom conviction is briefly invoked (Jude 15), it is preceded and overshadowed by the Book of Enoch's refurbished and thundering biblical imagery of the coming *divine warrior with his heavenly army: "See, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones to execute judgment on all" (Jude 14-15 NRSV).

Finally, the false teachers are compared in thumbnail profile to a triad of wayward rogues from the OT: the way of *Cain, the error of Balaam and the rebellion of Korah (Jude 11). These names and their brief tags evoke archetypal stories of sin and its dire consequences, further unfurled in scrolls of Jewish tradition familiar to Jude's readers.

*See also* PETER, SECOND LETTER OF.

## JUDGE.

*See* JUDGMENT.

## JUDGES, BOOK OF

Although Judges is replete with images, there is a central motif that organizes the entire book—the cycle. The book of *Joshua narrates Israel's history of the conquest in a linear fashion under the *leadership and faithfulness of the man Joshua. In contrast, Judges begins with a distinctly different picture. There is no leader who replaces Joshua subsequent to his death, no one man or woman to unite the people in a single-minded *quest. As a result of the loss of visionary leadership, the history of the nation of Israel degenerates into a cycle of disobedience and punishment (*see* Crime and Punishment).

This cycle proceeds as follows: (1) The Israelites commit evil in the eyes of the Lord (Judg 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1); (2) God punishes Israel by using alien nations to oppress Israel (Judg 2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:9); (3) The Israelites *repent and cry to the Lord for deliverance from their enemies (Judg 3:9, 15; 6:6-7; 10:10); (4) The Lord raises up a leader to deliver his people from oppression (Judg 2:16; 3:9, 15; 10:1, 12); (5) A time of *peace is followed by the death of the judge and the return to *apostasy (Judg 3:10-11; 8:28-32; 10:2-5; 12:9-15). Contrary to some interpretations of the book, we should note that this cycle includes good as well as bad, that it is the same paradigm that exists throughout the Bible (including *Genesis, the *exodus wanderings and the historical chronicles) and human experience generally, and that it should therefore not lead us to cast everything that happens in the book of Judges in a negative light.

Within the macro pattern noted above we find a sequence of extraordinary individual acts of deliverance, and the book is, in addition to a melancholy history of a nation in decline, a collection of hero stories in which God raises up charismatic and courageous leaders to rescue a repentant nation. The book of Judges strikes the balance that Milton does in the vision of future history narrated in the last two books of Paradise Lost, where Michael tells Adam at the outset of the vision that he must expect to hear "good with bad, . . . supernal grace contending with sinfulness of men." The book of Judges presents a similar mingling.

**Heroes and Heroines.** The title of the book at once suggests its main image, though not in the manner commonly supposed. Only one of the judges (Deborah) is recorded as filling the function of judge (Judg 4:5). A better translation would be "warrior-ruler." The "judges" were essentially ad hoc military deliverers whom God raised up in times of military crisis to deliver the nation of Israel. The judges were, moreover, charismatic figures, not self-appointed or elected leaders. They were people whom "the LORD raised up" (Judg 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15 RSV). Seven times we read that "the Spirit of the LORD" came upon or possessed various judges. The essential role of these leaders was to deliver (nearly two dozen references), and the book itself is a small anthology of *rescue stories. The pattern is outlined early in the book: "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them" (Judg 2:16 RSV). The high point of the rescue motif is the famous patriotic song of victory known as the Song of Deborah (Judge 5), which lingers lovingly over the details of the conquest.

At one level these stories of deliverance are success stories. After Ehud's assassination of Eglon and the subsequent military victory, "the land had rest for eighty years" (Judg 3:30 RSV). By any political standard this is a remarkable success. Other formulaic codas give similar verdicts: "the land had rest for forty years" (Judg 3:11; 5:31; 8:28 RSV); "the land had rest for eighty years" (Judg 3:30 RSV); "he had judged Israel twenty years" (Judg 16:31 RSV). Elsewhere we read about enemies "subdued" (Judg 3:30; 4:23; 8:28; 11:33) and about the nation of Israel "delivered" (half a dozen references). The fact that some of the judges themselves displayed character flaws or that during the era of the judges the nation of Israel slid into moral decline does not negate the genuine achievements of people, just as it does not

do so elsewhere in the Bible. The heroic judges did what David is praised for doing, namely, serving God in his generation (Acts 13:36).

**Human Giftedness.** At the level of heroic accomplishment the book of Judges rings the changes on the theme of human giftedness. Of course God is the one who confers the gifts, but the agency by which he accomplishes deliverance is overwhelmingly human. What the judges have in common is that God raised them up and that they are resourceful in leading a nation. They are skillful in the techniques that are required of them, and the narrative often records their strategies in sufficient detail to enable us to see that those strategies are important.

Beyond the common thread of shared giftedness, the judges share a rich diversity. The book of Judges is built around surprises, as God's hand falls where it will—on women, on a southpaw, on the youngest of a clan, on a Nazirite whose life was accompanied by miracles. The individual judges use varied strategies, do different deeds, have different strengths and flaws. As the book of Judges celebrates human giftedness, it displays a remarkable democracy of spirit in the process. Even treachery is not bad under all circumstances. What we find here is the potential value of every person—for good as well as for evil.

The experience of Gideon can be taken as an illustration of the motifs noted above. In the first half of his story he is a case study in the inferiority complex. He is timid, slow to accept God's call and believe God's promise to equip him, and reluctant to accept leadership. Throughout the first half of the story we are led to expect that any deliverance will have to be achieved by God rather than a human. But the "making" of a hero during the first half of the story is replaced by the demonstration of heroic qualities in the second half. God drops out of the list of named characters, and the focus is placed on Gideon's sheer mastery of every situation with which he is confronted. When the nation wishes to confer *kingship on Gideon, he responds in wholly admirable fashion with the sentiment, "I will not rule over you; . . . the LORD will rule over you" (Judg 8:23 RSV). It is true that Gideon stumbles when he makes an idol that leads the nation into idolatry (Judg 8:27), but the narrator refuses to exploit the failure, giving it only a single verse. Virtually all of the space in the story is devoted to God's fashioning and using of a human hero.

**Images of Violence.** The world of Judges is a predominantly military world (*see* Army, Armies; Battle Stories). The exploits that are narrated are mainly military ones, broadly defined to include individual acts of prowess such as Jael's impromptu assassination of Sisera using household tools, Ehud's assassination of Eglon using a home-made sword and *Samson's solitary forays using such unconventional weapons as a jaw bone and foxes with their tails on fire. An atmosphere of *violence emerges from the imagery of mutilated flesh, broken *bones, crushed *heads, gouged eyes, pierced entrails, dismembered bodies and similar atrocities. Worst of all is the gang *rape of the Levite's concubine, ending in her death (Judg 19:22-30). Whatever heroism exists in the world of Judges is colored in any reader's imagination by the sordidness of the circumstances in which the heroism occurs. The grotesqueries of the book are introduced early: "Adonibezek fled; but they pursued him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes. And Adonibezek said, 'Seventy kings with their thumbs and their great toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has requited me'" (Judg 1:6-7 RSV).

**Pictures of Apostasy.** The positive theme of the book of Judges is balanced by the negative theme of national *apostasy and failings in the lives of some of the judges themselves. The motif of *blindness is one of the image patterns by which the recurring cycle of self-destruction is presented. The cycle of disobedience and punishment (*see* Crime and Punishment) is brought on by chosen blindness to the Deuteronomic law. Throughout the book of Judges, the people do evil in the sight of the Lord (Judg 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). In other words, they do what is right in their own eyes (Judg 17:6).

The blindness of the leaders does not happen at once but only gradually throughout the narrative. Beginning with Gideon, each judge appears on the scene just a little more blind and oblivious than the preceding judge. Gideon leads Israel into idolatry; Jephthah sacrifices his daughter; Samson sacrifices himself; the Levite sacrifices his wife, which becomes the catalyst for Israel to nearly destroy the entire tribe of Benjamin. The characterization of the judges becomes a literary image to portray people who lose sight of God by doing what is right in their own eyes.

Gideon in some ways inaugurates the cycle. His narrative commences with an anonymous *prophet openly retelling the story of the *exodus (Judg 6:7-10). Gideon misses the recital as he hides in a wine press, *threshing wheat. Gideon is slow to recognize the *angel of the Lord who appears, insisting on his famous fleece test "to see whether God will deliver Israel by my hand" (Judg 6:36 NRSV). Similar slowness to see is repeated in the refusal of Manoah, the father of Samson, to see the Lord. Manoah, like Gideon, carries on an entire conversation with the Lord without recognizing with whom he is talking (Judg 13:16). Even here, though, the theme is not wholly negative: the characters do, in fact, come to perceive God, and they act accordingly. Gideon may miss the recital of the exodus, but it is precisely he who is granted the vision of God, as the angel of the Lord appears to him and singles him out for leadership.

Many images find their fulfillment in *Samson, who ends up blind and grinding grain around and around the prison mill. Samson is a man of vision, but his vision is skewed because he desires to appropriate everything he sees ("I saw a Philistine woman at Timnah. Get her for me, because she pleases me," Judg 14:2-3 NRSV). And in the end, he is destroyed

by his own desires, his own sight—that is the irony of Samson. His punishment is telling—the Philistines gouge his eyes out. He becomes an incarnate image of Israel, a flesh and blood metaphor of a people who lose sight of God.

The final image that expresses the loss of the vision of God occurs in Judges 19 with the Levite and the concubine. On their way to the hill country of Ephraim, they stop in Gibeah and stay with an old man. A strangely familiar scene (cf. Gen 19) is repeated: the men of the city gather around the host's house and ask to "have intercourse" with the visitor, the Levite (Judg 19:22 NRSV). Again, the imagery is most telling. In Genesis God delivers Lot and his family from this tragic ordeal by striking the men with blindness. But not so in Judges. In Genesis the wicked men are aliens from Sodom and Gomorrah. In Judges the wicked men are Israelites from the tribe of Benjamin. Because the people have chosen to do right in their own eyes, God has disappeared from their sight; because they have repeatedly done evil in God's eyes, they do what is right in their own eyes.

After the rape of the Levite's concubine, the Levite dismembers her body into twelve pieces. Then he sends one piece of her body to each tribe of Israel to muster them for battle against Benjamin—one of their own. The image of the dismembered wife is symbolic of the self-mutilation that Israel will do with its own people and tribe. Because they have lost a vision of Yahweh, they have turned upon themselves and set about dismembering themselves.

The image of the *house is another informing metaphor for the book. By the time we reach the conclusion of Judges, the Israelites live in a land where a woman is not safe in her own home. In one of the most pitiful images of the Bible, the concubine collapses at the doorway of the house where her husband is staying, and her hand falls upon the threshold. This image evokes great pity but also condemns the true criminal. Ironically, grasping the threshold is an attempt to enter the supposed safety of the house. As is usual with the imagery in Judges, grasping the threshold of the door communicates two meanings. The concubine's hand also points to the man who did this heinous crime. The Levite, a man of the law, lost sight of right and wrong and sacrificed his wife to a ravenous mob. The narrative of Judges begins with two powerful and successful women: Achsah (Judg 1:13-15 ) and Deborah (Judg 4—5) but ends with the Levite sacrificing his wife. This is a strange, macabre act on the part of the Levite, but it summarizes and epitomizes how imagery in the book of Judges reverses normalcy and morality.

One need only contrast the action of the Levite with the action of Saul in 1 Samuel—Saul dismembered a yoke of oxen to muster the tribes in order to battle the Philistines (1 Sam 11:5-8). Even the stubborn King Saul did not stoop as low as the Levite. But in a strange twist of fate, the two images of dismemberment connect the failed king from Benjamin with the moral failure of the whole tribe of Benjamin. As is so typical with the use of imagery in Judges, the dismemberment condemns the Levite, the tribe of Benjamin and the future king from Benjamin. This is another instance where images interconnect and weave themes throughout the Bible.

More importantly, Judges ends the way it began. Even the narrative itself becomes an image. Israel at the end of Judges is stuck in the same cycle of disobedience and punishment. "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 17:6 NRSV; 21:25). After three hundred years of exhausting endeavors on the part of Israel and her judges, there is still no visionary leader who can unite the people in a unified vision as *Moses and Joshua did.

Thus the people, living in a pluralistic society, turn to their own ways and in turn lose a vision of God. The book of Judges describes what happens to a society that loses sight of God and finds meaning solely within the individual. The image of the cycle in the end collapses tragically into a downward spiral. The narrative of Judges becomes an image of decline through its use of plot, characterization and imagery. All the other major images in Judges underscore the reason and result of a leaderless society that loses its sight of God.

**Summary.** The ambivalence at the heart of the book of Judges is well encapsulated in its most famous judge—Samson. Part of his story adheres to the pattern of literary *tragedy, as the writer chooses for inclusion events that reveal the flaws of the protagonist. The flaws are multiple, as we see in brief compass an ever-expanding vision of how strong people go wrong through recklessness, weak will, self-indulgence, sensualtiy, over-confidence, self-reliance, appetite, religious complacency, bad company, misplaced trust and broken vows. In view of his giftedness, Samson is a case study in how to squander God's gifts.

But the story of personal ignominy is only half the picture. The literary tragedy is also a hero story. There are ways in which Samson uses his God-given strength very well indeed in delivering his nation from their enemies. For all his human weakness, we read repeatedly that "the Spirit of the LORD" came upon Samson. We read twice that Samson judged Israel for twenty years (Judg 15:20; 16:31); obviously he did much in addition to pursuing liaisons with Philistine women. Furthermore, after falling from God's favor, Samson returns to it, as symbolized by the growth of his *hair and God's answering his final prayer for a return of strength. In case we were in any doubt that the story of Samson is a story of success as well as failure, we find Samson included in the roll call of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 (Heb 11:32, which also names the judges Gideon, Barak and Jephthah).

*See also* APOSTASY; BLIND, BLINDNESS; BONDAGE AND FREEDOM; JOSHUA, BOOK OF; JUDGMENT; RESCUE; SAMSON; SAMUEL, BOOKS OF.