

SOCIETY FOR OLD TESTAMENT STUDY
MONOGRAPH SERIES

YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges

An Object – Relations Analysis

Deryn Guest

YHWH AND ISRAEL IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

In the Book of Judges the narrator presents an image of the good parent YHWH whose enduring love and loyalty is offset by his wayward child Israel who defaults on the relationship repeatedly. Biblical scholars have largely concurred, demonstrating the many faults of Israel while siding with YHWH's privileged viewpoint. When object-relations theory (which examines how human beings relate to each other) is applied to Judges, a different story emerges. In its capacity to illuminate why and how relationships can be intense, problematic, rewarding and enduring, object-relations theory reveals how both YHWH and Israel have attachment needs that are played out vividly in the story world. Deryn Guest reveals how its narrator engages in a variety of psychological strategies to mask suppressed rage as he engages in an intriguing but rather dysfunctional masochistic dance with a dominant deity who has reputation needs.

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SOCIETY FOR OLD TESTAMENT STUDY

MONOGRAPH SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between YHWH and Israel as depicted in the Book of Judges is, to say the least, torrid – as passionate in rage as it is in love. The two parties are irrevocably, ardently enmeshed, even when one party abandons the other in favour of alternative deities, or when YHWH throws a tantrum and tells the objects of his obsession to go cry to these rival gods instead. As relationships go, it is a prime candidate for magazine ‘problem pages’. This attachment, however, is routinely addressed within two main scholarly genres: commentaries (in an introductory subsection on ‘theology of Judges’ or permeating more pervasively, depending on the audience for whom the commentary is written) and broader ‘Old Testament Theologies’ where the rollercoaster relationship between deity and people is usually assessed across a range of canonical texts. But here lies a problem. These two genres remain embedded in a scholarly framework that has been irretrievably fractured by recent scholarship on the date of biblical texts, their genre and function, and the vexed question of their relation to history. Revisionist shifts have significance for how we read and interpret the YHWH–Israel relationship in texts like Judges. Put baldly, if the biblical narratives under consideration are late Persian/Hellenistic constructs where YHWH is present ‘as a fictional character, much like the incompetent god who loses a bet to his Adversary in the book of Job’ (Noll, 2013: 133–134), then using stories from Judges in theologies intended to enlighten readers about what God desires, or God’s attributes, could be referencing a character who is a flawed and dysfunctional construct.

In this book I examine the YHWH–Israel relationship in the light of object relations theory.¹ Using psychology as an interdisciplinary

¹ ‘Object relations mean interpersonal relations. The term object . . . refers simply to that which will satisfy a need. More broadly, object refers to the significant person or thing that is the object or target of another’s feelings or drives’ (St Clair, 1986: 1).

tool is not new, but a psychologically informed approach has not yet been applied extensively to the YHWH–Israel relationship in the Book of Judges.² I demonstrate how key interests of traditional theologies – the character of YHWH, his relationship with Israel, covenant, the human condition – can and should be more critically explored through the psychological concepts of repression and splitting, attachment theory, and studies of the causes and effects of masochism, without losing a firm grounding in contemporary revisionist biblical studies.

As readers may have already surmised, my approach necessitates a de-privileging of YHWH's perspective. This should not immediately alienate readers disappointed with such a stance. Yes, my suggestions inevitably conflict with the confessional standpoint implicit within many, if not most, Old Testament theologies and also with 'theologies of Judges' contained within commentaries. They also conflict with the starting point of those who use psychological theory to describe the life of faith. Miner, for instance, finds great value in attachment theory, but only when it is fully engaged within a theological framework 'which assumes the existence of, and revealed nature of, God' (2007: 112)³. Her work concerns the spiritual lives of believers and their attachment to a deity conceived of as an omnipotent, metaphysical reality; but this is not my starting point. Nonetheless, this does not mean that a confessional approach and the approach advocated here should view each

² Psychology has informed biblical studies in various ways. Brueggemann (1995) makes reference to ego-strength and the dangers of 'false self' development in his work on Psalms of lament. Joyce (1993) reads Lamentations in terms of bereavement and reactions to the experience of dying. Kamionkowski (2003) demonstrates how Ezekiel contains indicators of psychological trauma caused by the events surrounding the Babylonian exile. She uses Freud's (1963) case of Dr Schreber and the work of Anna Freud (1942) on humiliation, shame and rage in order to unpack Ezekiel's experience of emasculation and explain why he imagines himself and his community as the wife of God. Rashkow (1993) has queried what makes a reading of a text psychoanalytic and provides engaging psychologically informed readings of Genesis. More recently, Rollins and Kille (2007) document the emerging interdisciplinary field between biblical scholarship and psychological theory, and the essays within illustrate how psychological criticism has contributed to our understanding of biblical texts and their interpreters. Studies by Lasine (2001, 2002 and 2013) encourage further investigations. There is also a growing field of trauma and memory studies that explores how psychological trauma leaves its imprint on the text.

³ In this vein, see also the work Paul (1999) who uses object relations theory to discuss Christian conversion, or Burns-Smith (1999) who applies theological categories to psychological theory in order to demonstrate how some psychological approaches within pastoral care will be a better 'fit' with the counsellor's theological allegiances.

other with animosity. There is not only room for both within biblical studies but they could effectively complement each other. For example, I have found confessional commentaries and theologies to be profoundly insightful when it comes to exploring the character of YHWH and his relationship with Israel. It is precisely because they have faithful readers in mind that writers such as Brueggemann (2008), Webb (2012), Hamlin (1990) and Martin (2008) confront, head on, the gruesome violence in Judges, the questionable morality of some of its protagonists, the cold indifference of a deity in sending tribes to their destruction, the dismemberment and rape of woman for the purpose of getting across a pedagogical message, or the (failed) genocide of indigenous peoples. These matters become theological cruxes and while YHWH is exonerated in such studies, there is a troubled consciousness that recognises how these conundrums require serious investigation. The resolutions offered have been engaging and informative. I believe my alternative approach is equally insightful, thought-provoking and challenging for those who are practical or pastoral theologians, writers of Old Testament theology, or writers of commentaries for the faithful. If Judges promulgates a view of human–divine relationship that is damaging and distorted when read from a psychological perspective, then such practitioners will need to think about its endorsement. Rather than aligning themselves with YHWH as a default position, this book challenges those engaged in faithful hermeneutics to think again about the model of divine–human relationship they are reinforcing. I want the conversation to continue, not to end.

I appreciate, however, that the conversation might be difficult to sustain. A main assumption of theology is that the deity worshipped by Christians and Jews today is revealed in biblical texts and that his character lies beyond human comprehension and scrutiny. Robert Alter complains that ‘a merely psychologizing approach cannot do justice to the imaginative and spiritual seriousness’ of a biblical author, not least because, while human characters act out their parts in the foreground, in the background lie ‘forces that can be neither grasped nor controlled by humankind’ (1992: 22). Accordingly, ‘there is little to be gained . . . by conceiving of the biblical God . . . as a human character—petulant, headstrong, arbitrary, impulsive, or whatever. The repeated point of the biblical writers is that we cannot make sense of God in human terms’ (1992: 22–23).⁴ Alter’s check on

⁴ Alter’s check on investigating the character of God can also be found in Sternberg’s work; the latter likens the biblical narrator to the general of an army

psychological approaches can also be found in Brueggemann's work. In his discussion of how tempting it might be to think of biblical writers projecting a YHWH to suit their own ends, he resists this way of looking at things, noting that it would mean that 'the literary character of YHWH falls victim to the projections of human urgency' (2008: 136). The reason given for why the temptation must be avoided is telling; it is because such interpretation operates 'as though there were no "real" YHWH in the narrative. It does so, moreover, without reckoning with the slippery slope that our preferred YHWH may also be a projection, a point of course scored by Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud' (2008: 136). Here, we see Brueggemann acknowledging that we do indeed create YHWH in our own image, but simultaneously distancing himself from that projection. For him, YHWH's character in biblical texts reveals something of YHWH the actual deity. His caution, if accepted, would prevent this monograph from being written.

I resist his suggestion that using psychological theories of projection puts us on a 'slippery slope'. If, brazenly, we slither down regardless, Brueggemann implies we will end up in a place of halls and mirrors where the only YHWH present is the one that we want to see, distorted by our all-too-human wishes and desires. Against this, Brueggemann's appeal to the 'real' YHWH encourages his readers to hold on to a belief that the biblical scribe is a conduit for revelation and that some biblical writers present a more authentic portrayal of this deity than others.⁵ However, the elision of the

unfortunate enough to have his king enlisted in his forces. He quickly qualifies this image: the narrator's task is 'not to destroy an enemy but to redeem and establish control over his own people and . . . to manipulate them into the reverential obedience that his lord exacts as his due' (1985: 154). I concur, but I cannot follow Sternberg's approach, much as I admire his close reading of biblical texts. The problem with Sternberg's analysis is that the method that results in such excellent close readings, that analyses so well the interplay of perspectives engaged by his privileged narrator, ultimately leads to a mirroring of that narrator's agenda. I thus concur with Fuchs's assessment that Sternberg's method positions the critic 'as the obedient son to the father-text (2000: 39), but for different reasons. Fuchs criticises how his investigation of the gaps in narration has an androcentric focus, considering, for example, the gaps in David, Uriah and Joab's motivations and actions and knowledge, but without any probe of what Bathsheba may think or know. I am critical of a narrative analysis that reads so astutely but so readily with the text and in so doing privileges the perspective of YHWH.

⁵ For example. Brueggemann (1988) is critical of royal, statist ideology implicit within some biblical texts, seeing it as the promotion of vested interests by self-interested groups. He offsets this with the views of other biblical writers who are deemed to have more altruistic and authentic knowledge.

character of YHWH with the God of faith has boxed commentators and theologians in; compelled to align themselves, largely uncritically, with the perspective of this character, they vindicate his behaviour and, as a result, castigate the Israel represented in Judges as wayward and disloyal. When psychological theories of object relations and attachment are employed more robustly, a different view of Israel emerges as we will see.

As noted above, I do not wish to alienate those who use biblical texts as grounding for theologies; rather, I wish to open a conversation. While I no longer own any personal allegiance to YHWH of the Bible I do not doubt that biblical texts can very eloquently and profoundly point its readers in the direction of the *mysterium*. Our difference is that I do not grant YHWH a privileged special character status that is beyond human comprehension, because I focus on the biblical scribe who scripts YHWH's part. I concede that it becomes rather tedious to tag 'which is always to say the narrator's construction' every time I refer to YHWH's view. But in order to remind readers that YHWH is a constructed character replete with the scribe's projections and externalisations, there needs to be some turn of phrase that puts us at a critical distance from the elision of literary character and divinity, so that the relationship between YHWH and Israel can be assessed without any inherent adoption of the narratorial voice.

Accordingly, in order to distance this venture from what has conventionally been known as Old Testament theology, the first step is to offer a new name for this project. The use of 'Old Testament' is now more routinely replaced with 'Hebrew Bible' or 'Hebrew Scriptures'. As for 'theology' this has been recast by Clines (1995) as the study of the ideology of implied authors. The benefit of shifting to 'ideology' lies in the critical distance it creates between scholars and the texts they interpret. For example, Clines contrasts his approach with that of scholars who investigate theologies of biblical texts in order to elaborate on them for their readers, as if 'the scholarly study of the Bible has reached its goal when it has attained an "understanding" of the texts (1995: 19). Rather, argues Clines, the biblical text needs to be evaluated critically by an external yardstick that is not caught up with the ideological commitments promulgated within a text. A faithful scholar could certainly do this work so long as they were 'wide awake' to the 'designs that texts have on them' so that they did not 'find themselves succumbing to the ideology of the texts, adopting that ideology as their own, and finding it obvious and

natural and common-sensical' (1995: 21). However, an external source of standards that throws the ideology of the text into stark relief helps to facilitate the wake-up required, providing 'a counterpoint' that is 'alien' to the given text. The counterpoint I use is psychological theory, which I believe enables readers to read the relationship dynamics of biblical texts in a very different light to the one usually employed.

Changing the terminology from Old Testament theology to 'ideologies of the Hebrew Bible' has at least two benefits. First, reference to 'Hebrew Bible' rather than 'Old Testament' indicates that this project makes no assumption that its texts are fulfilled in the New Testament. There is no Christocentric focus. While I would like Christian readers to engage with my proposals, I do not expect my findings to be assimilated easily or readily into a broader Christian framework of Biblical theology. So whereas Webb's (2012) commentary contains a section on 'Judges as Christian Scripture', it is not this project's remit. Others, however, may take what they find here and think through what it means for Christian faith and practice.

Second, and more significantly, the word 'ideologies' does not have the religious connotations of 'theology'. The findings of this study may well have a serious impact for the way in which Hebrew Bible texts are used to model divine-human relationships in contemporary confessional contexts, but it makes no assumption that the character of YHWH in Judges can be related to a transcendent deity. I understand why this view will be criticised by those who believe all human perspectives and stances should be put under the scrutinising eye of the inscrutable deity, but that is what existing Old Testament theology already offers.

Of course, if I embraced the terminology of 'ideologies' rather than 'theology' I would need to differentiate my approach from the interest in rhetoric that features in some narrative approaches. The narrative critic's focus on rhetorical interests is usually grounded in the politics and themes *of the text*. The danger here is that narrative criticism repeats back to us the rhetoric of the text in the 'understanding and explaining' way that Clines (1995) has rightly criticised, without recognising that a study of textual rhetoric is, itself, an 'interested' project.⁶ Narrative criticism's inevitable close, detailed

⁶ Mieke Bal (1988) has ably demonstrated how writers elevate rhetorical interests and themes that the narrator has deliberately drawn to our attention, rather than the interests that have been suppressed.

work on the text thus reflects back its politics and interests rather than evaluating whether those interests are morally dubious and what we should do about it. I am pursuing, rather, an approach that can be critical of the text, using an external discourse to highlight the text's strangeness, its questionable values and politics.

However, I am not convinced that 'ideologies of the Hebrew Bible' is a more suitable terminology. It has benefits, but the fact remains that the issues I want to address *can* be justifiably described as theological. Actually, in some ways, they are both. If we understand ideology as 'the kind of large-scale ideas that influence and determine the whole outlook of groups of people' and the 'will to power expressed in ideologies' (Clines, 1995: 11) then this project is certainly a study of ideologies, particularly in the way texts can 'give the appearance of sincerity and either moral fervour or objectivity' while actually disguising the 'issues of power, of self-identity and security, of group solidarity, of fear and desire, of need and greed' that lie beneath the surface (Clines, 1995: 24). But if we understand the close study of YHWH, his character and the way in which the scribe constructs his interaction with Israel as primary interests of theology, then this study is also theological.

An emphasis on ideologies somehow reduces the (psychological) interest I have in how biblical texts can point to the numinous as part of their engagement with profound human mysteries or experiences. Judges, no less than any other biblical text, deals with existential questions in a story world inhabited by gods, goddesses, forces and energies, often perceived as holding human inhabitants in their grip. When I refer to YHWH as the construction of the scribe I am aware that YHWH is simultaneously described by that scribe as an external force that drives events, intrudes upon human consciousness and is a stirring presence within nature, a force that works behind the scenes in a way aptly described by Alter as 'a high-voltage current' which 'can energise and transform', but also 'paralyze and destroy' (1992: 23). This *mysterium* that the narrator grapples with is an important aspect of the way he explains his experience of an uncontrollable natural world whipped about by an energy that seems to hold human destiny in its grasp. However, as I have noted, it can be too easy to then elide references to this energy with the Jewish and Christian deity and interpret the actions of the *character* YHWH as revelations of a transcendent *divinity*. As will be demonstrated in the chapters that follow, the unfortunate consequence of that elision is to privilege the words and actions of YHWH and to assume that

whatever viewpoint is attributed to him is 'the' viewpoint against which all other positions must be measured. Once one takes that route, it tips the balance of the tension between human construction of a divine character and the experience of suprahuman energies far too much to one side. The speech and actions of the 'divine' character become authoritative dogma, not to be questioned, and the profundity of the text is narrowed. This results in the anxiety, ambivalence and existential discomfort of a world where supernatural energies can act unexpectedly, with capriciousness, assuaged only by making such energies part of the inscrutable ways of YHWH that mere humans cannot comprehend. But this does not maintain a balance between an ancient scribe's attempt to grapple with the *mysterium* and the way in which he constructs YHWH as a major character, replete with all the neuroses and complexes that humans project onto others, both in reality and in literary worlds. We need to use the insights of narrative critics who have provided the tools for examining characterisation, narrators and rhetoric. And we need to use the theories of psychologists, who can illustrate how notions of splitting, fragmentation, attachment and projections help us understand the dynamics of a text. But this does not mean we have to revert to a position that denudes the text entirely of its soul, reading in a solely 'academic' manner that brackets out all issues of whether or not the text has anything interesting to say about human quests for meaning, for encounters with energies that seem extrahuman. I fear that recourse only to a discussion of 'ideologies' might risk such narrowing.

Accordingly, I propose the terminology of 'God-talk' to forge a middle way that is neither caught up with Christian assumptions and allegiance to the supposed divine viewpoint within scripture, nor too rigidly bound by a non-confessional focus on ideologies that mean we focus on the text as a largely political enterprise. The phrase God-talk obviously echoes Ruether's significant book *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), which signalled a critique of theological tradition from a feminist perspective. It is in a similar spirit of standing outside the interpellation of the biblical text that I adopt the term 'God-talk'. It recognises that the subject matter of this book *is* about theological concerns, but the more informal formulation 'God-talk' points to this being 'talk', not fundamental revealed truths. The biblical text of Judges produces its conversation about YHWH and his relationship with Israel, albeit with the ideological will to power that Clines (1995) recognises, but it is a

dialogue nonetheless, a conversation that the reader hears but then responds to from their own standpoint.

My approach to the text can be likened to the position a therapist finds themselves in as they begin their work with a new client. A good therapist will listen most carefully to the presenting story, but not be sucked into alignment with it. Rather, the therapist observes the client and their own reaction to that client, alert to any feelings of countertransference. Being aware of 'how this account and this person makes me feel' grants the therapist an insight into the client's own feelings of frustration, distress, anger, happiness or whatever. Thus, if the therapist feels, say, trapped, indignant or highly constrained by the approach of the client and their storytelling, if they feel as if they are being attacked or unduly put upon, it is possible that they have an insight into the situational experiences and issues of the client. Of course, I cannot do this with the actual scribe of Judges, but my hermeneutical approach involves immersion in object relation theory alongside being aware of what this text does to me when I read it. This is a subjective move, but it is consciously so. I am fully aware that I am putting myself into an empathetic position that listens attentively to the scribe's voice, trying to be alert to the emotive content, as well as the grammar; the affect of the text as well as the rhetoric.⁷ In so doing, I listen for the words that highlight possible complexes, psychodramas that lie beneath the surface account, alert to how relationships are being constructed, to the behaviours of the primary participants, to trigger events and their resolution, to the snags in the narrative, and to the key words or events that connect with the psychological literature. The relationship with the text is thus one of active listening accompanied by critical examination of the effects of the presenting story,

⁷ Moore and Fine's explanation of the term 'affect' is helpful. 'Various distinctions have been drawn between feelings, emotions, and affects. Feelings refer to the central, subjectively experienced state (which may be blocked from consciousness); emotions, to the outwardly observable manifestations of feelings; and affects, to all the related phenomena, some of which are unconscious. The terms are often used interchangeably, however, to refer to a range from primitive to complex, cognitively differentiated psychic states. A relatively stable and long-lasting affective state, evoked and perpetuated by the continuing influence of unconscious fantasy, is called a mood' (1990: 9). Affects can be manifested in physical ways such as 'blushing, sweating, crying' (1990: 9) in response to experiences of shame, joy, fear, surprise etc. 'Affects have an important adaptive function in alerting and preparing the individual for appropriate response to his or her external and internal environment' and for making it visible to others (1990: 10).

without being pulled into its rhetoric. It quickly becomes clear that my approach differs most pointedly from the commentary tradition in this refusal to be sucked in to any alignment with the scribe and his presentation of 'YHWH's viewpoint'. Specifically, I do not have any investment in reinforcing his strategy or compulsion to 'keep YHWH good'. On the contrary, it is precisely the effort to keep YHWH good that becomes one of the most interesting features for consideration.

The idea that a scholar's observation of countertransference could be worthwhile is hinted at by Patrick Vandermeersch, who notes how religious texts can 'provoke particular reactions . . . determined partly by the personality of the reader, but also partly by the text that addresses specific aspects of the reader's psychology . . . Texts can evoke compassion, admiration or horror, but also irritation, an experience of absurdity or even the fear of becoming mad' (2001: 19). Vandermeersch is also right to remind us that that biblical scholars are not only engaged in the interpretation of texts in a very conscious way, but that we all have an active *unconscious* engaged in the process which inevitably affects our interpretation. Of course, as it is unconscious we are not aware of how we are manipulated to respond to storylines in particular ways, or how some story features may act as trigger points for our own psychic reactions. He notes, for example, how Wellhausen, looking ever like the objective textual critic, emended Gen. 24:67 so that Isaac makes love to Rebekkah in his father's tent rather than his mother's. Beneath this scholarly activity lurks the psychological motivation to change the text, since the latter prospect of a mother hearing her son making love was evidently unthinkable or intolerable.

Vandermeersch does not specifically raise the question of countertransference in this discussion, but it is mentioned by other contributors to the volume. Carlander's chapter on the Saul–David relationship draws on Melanie Klein's theories and confirms the value of looking at texts in terms of countertransference, suggesting that the genre of tragedy, in particular, evokes responses in the reader that are 'built on the countertransference reaction' (2001: 79). Raguse also draws on countertransference when noting how readers can be negatively affected by texts to a point when one simply wants to stop reading; i.e., 'when one gets the impression that the text is trying to do something "unpleasant" to the reader' or 'when the text tries to impose a certain role on the reader' (2001: 59). I cannot be aware of my own unconscious responses when reading

Judges, but I can note my countertransference reaction. This includes being intrigued, sometimes amused, but mostly feeling uncomfortable and rather annoyed. The scribe is not likeable. He intones with repetitive tedium the unworthiness of Israel and the wondrous patience of YHWH. The individual stories offer light relief, but the repeated message of unfaithfulness and the 'badness' of Israel wears thin very quickly. I begin to sympathise with the early historical-critical scholars who contrasted the supposed source material with the editorial hand of the Deuteronomist whose relentless aim was 'to impress upon his readers the lesson that unfaithfulness to Yahweh is always punished . . . Yahweh is Israel's God; and the religion of Israel is to keep itself to him alone' (Moore, 1898: xvi). I can empathise with Wellhausen's (1885: 229–236) remarks about the pedantic editor whose rather dull, clerical work is contrasted with the supposed livelier source material. These moments of disquiet, however, become useful markers for further consideration. If I feel irritated by his heavy-handed narration, the question arises: what does this tell me about the scribe and his story? Might it hint at some kind of underlying annoyance in the scribe himself? As with therapy, it took years rather than weeks or months to locate the ulterior and deeply submerged layer in the text that would explain this and Chapter 4 is where I do the work of bringing it, finally, to the surface. It was the depth of reading in object relations theory that provided the leverage. It proved to be vitally important that this theoretical material existed outside the world of biblical studies, for its 'alien' counterpoint made sense of the affect, the readerly discomfort, and gave me the language and rationale for starting from a different place to the more usual commentary writers.

The results of this study are primarily addressed to biblical scholars, not Old Testament theologians. However, it is difficult (and not necessarily desirable) to draw a clear demarcation between the two. Commentaries on Judges can be overtly written with faithful readers in mind, containing plenty of theological claims and ponderings, yet historical-critical commentators are not averse to moments of theologising either. I have found this theological content largely instructive when identifying how the scribe's rhetoric, say in keeping YHWH 'good', has been powerfully convincing; reinforced for millennia in the history of reception. The complicity of biblical scholars is a matter I return to on several occasions, noting how it has prevented them from noticing some glaring oddities in the text, or from resisting some very dubious behaviour on

the part of YHWH. When Old Testament theologians work from the groundwork of biblical texts and have as their resources scholarly commentaries that basically uphold the ideology of the scribe and privilege the perspective of YHWH, then the work of biblical scholars is caught up with the theologies that emerge. So, while I do not engage Old Testament theologians primarily or directly, I do engage with the scholars whose work on the text can inform theologies. I would like commentators on biblical texts to think more seriously about the kind of divine–human relationship their work endorses. Generally speaking, biblical scholars have been good at questioning or resisting the role and fate of women in Judges, distancing themselves from the gore and violence, and querying the ethics of genocide, but when it comes to the basic and fundamental relationship between Israel (the always wayward, rebellious, manipulative ‘bad’ Israel) and YHWH (the enduring, loving-while-punishing, ‘good’ YHWH), the appetite for questioning or resisting simply seems to fall away. I hope that this monograph makes it far more difficult for future commentaries to follow that trajectory so readily, whether or not they have faithful audiences in mind. It is in the interests of all to recognise how biblical texts, which are so culturally significant and influential, contain a template for a relationship dynamic that is contrary to wellbeing. In saying this, I am aware that biblical texts such as Judges contain one particular view of that relationship, one that could be contrasted with views portrayed elsewhere in the canon. I am also aware that the Judges portrayal is more tragic and disturbing than the depictions of the YHWH–Israel relationship available in Second Temple and early Jewish literature. I am not saying that the depiction of the YHWH–Israel relationship in Judges holds the last word, or is the most important word on the matter. It is one depiction amid a kaleidoscope of other depictions. However, this does not excuse us from doing the work on this particular text or from challenging the way biblical scholars so often endorse its portrayal of what, in my view, proves to be a dysfunctional relationship. If this monograph makes scholars think again about how the scribe constructs the character of YHWH, and how he has this character interact with a ‘past’ Israel, then, ultimately, this may have a knock-on effect for rethinking the representation of the YHWH–Israel relationship in other texts and, indeed, on how biblical texts are used in future Old Testament theologies. This can only be a good thing, discomfoting though it may be.

My objective, then, is to provide a psychologically informed critical assessment of the way in which YHWH is projected as an ideal, loving-but-correcting, enduringly loyal parent to his hopelessly wayward, ignorant, children of Israel. The following chapters explore what is happening in that presentation through the filter of object relations theory, attachment theory and psychological discussions of masochism.

In Chapter 1, the relationship between the child/Israel and the parent/YHWH is explored through the lens the object relationship theory developed by paediatrician and psychologist Donald Woods Winnicott (1896–1971). I justify the choice of Winnicott as a primary theorist, introduce five key concepts from his work, and explain how and why his ideas have applicability to an ancient biblical text. Winnicott's work proves particularly illuminating for analysing YHWH's intrusions, subterfuge, anxieties and claims upon Israel, prompting reflection on how Judges scholars continue the scribe's investment in 'keeping YHWH good' despite his curious and dubious behaviour.

Chapter 2 turns attention specifically to the cyclical framework that characterises the Book of Judges, assessing whether this can profitably be understood, in psychological terms, as a traumatic stutter. The extent to which Janzen's (2012) work on trauma and the Deuteronomistic History could profitably be applied to Judges' cyclical framework is explored. Ultimately, the thought that we are dealing with a traumatised victim of the Babylonian exile is discounted. The pervasive humour and literary artistry of the text, and the observations of revisionist scholarship that date the text much later than previously envisaged, render the idea that an exile-induced trauma has directly affected the portrayal of the YHWH–Israel relationship unlikely. I conclude that the cyclical framework of Judges would be better illuminated through the work of attachment theorists. In this chapter the reader will find an overview of revisionist scholarship that compels a complete overhaul of previous assumptions concerning the transmission history of Judges and its genre. Once, one could talk about a lengthy transmission history for Judges, from origins in the folk stories of pre-monarchic Israel, to an early written collection in a *Retterbuch*, to Josianic and exilic redrafts. Now, shifts to late Persian or early Hellenistic dating of texts render that long line of transmission suspect. Once, commentaries were punctuated with archaeological and topographical information, implying or overtly making a connection between the stories

of Judges and pre-monarchic Israelite history. Now, faith in that connection has been seriously undermined by the new archaeology that interprets the artefacts of the early Iron Age in terms of indigenous Canaanite developments, and the revisionist histories of Israel that divorce the story told in the Primary History from the realities of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Once, it could be assumed that the traumatic experience of the exile has left its indelible mark on biblical depictions of the YHWH–Israel relationship. Now the assumed continuity between the producers of biblical literature and an exiled community is being questioned. Once, it was largely taken for granted that religious interests and experiences drove the creation of biblical narrative, that of course ‘theology’ was an appropriate word to use when examining the YHWH–Israel relationship in Judges. Now, the idea that biblical narratives were originally driven by ‘religious’ interests is under review, and the character of YHWH is understood more as a by-product of a more philosophical wisdom-like discussion. These radical shifts within biblical studies create an opportunity for reading Judges and its YHWH–Israel relationship not as part of a layered account of a distant past but as an important feature of a largely fictional past that serves the rhetorical and psychological needs of an educated member of the intelligentsia.

Chapter 3 explores how attachment theory can illuminate what is happening in the repeated cycle where Israel serves other gods, is punished by proxy agents and cries out for help before being rescued by judges of varying quality. I apply the ground-breaking work of Ainsworth, Bowlby and more contemporary theorists such as Bartholomew, to three key passages – Judg. 2:11–23, 10:6–16 and 1 Sam. 12:7–25 – in order to analyse the ups and downs of the on–off YHWH–Israel relationship (justification for the inclusion of the latter passage is provided in Chapter 3). When considered in the light of secure, insecure and detached attachments, the YHWH–Israel relationship is cast into a quite different light than that found in theologies and commentaries. The chapter concludes that our biblical scribe repeatedly throws Israel into hostile situations, not because he is traumatised by an experience of Babylonian warfare and deportation, but in order to present the reader with a ‘bad’ Israel (wayward, in need of firm and repeated discipline) and a ‘good’ Israel (as presented in his alignment with the perspective of YHWH). The gains to be made by such splitting become clear in the following chapter on masochism.

Chapter 4 turns to one of most theoretically rich object relations theorists: William Ronald Dodds Fairbairn (1889–1964), a Scot whose delineation of endopsychic structure has been influential. His work on the internalisation of ‘bad objects’ and the splitting or fragmentation of the ego is applied to the portrayal of the YHWH–Israel relationship, noting particularly how Israel is split into good and bad. The ‘bad’ Israel is the one of ‘history’ who has repeatedly behaved outrageously, while the narrator himself is presented as YHWH’s ideal child, loyal, obedient and submissive, delivering his verdict upon his wayward badly behaving siblings, often by putting it in the mouth of the father/YHWH, who is also split between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects. This chapter uses Fairbairn’s work as a springboard for further assessment of what appears to be an on-repeat sadomasochist dance in Judges. Using contemporary theorists of masochism, the odd features of this dysfunctional relationship, its exchanges of power, its tantrums and grovellings, its splitting strategies and the underlying rage are illuminated in new and provocative ways.

By the time the reader arrives at the concluding chapter the overall argument is clear: read from the illuminating perspective of psychological theory, the relationship of YHWH and Israel as constructed in the Book of Judges is dysfunctional. It operates as a sadomasochistic dance in which YHWH is kept ‘safe’ as the ‘good parent’ who punishes-because-he-loves, while the constructed Israel of the ‘past’ takes on the repressed ‘badness’ of the YHWH character. Judges scholars, confessional or not, consciously or not, have been complicit with the dance. It is time to pause the music, investigate more closely the steps of this dance, and rethink whether a biblically oriented faith can afford to continue with it.

1

PROBLEMATIC PARENTING

Donald Winnicott and the YHWH–Israel Relationship

Introduction

In this chapter I employ the work of an eminent and influential British object-relations theorist to illuminate the relationship between father/YHWH and child/Israel. My aim is not to ‘analyse’ biblical characters but to use the insights of object-relations theory to understand the relational dynamics of the text as constructed by the scribe responsible for the final form of Judges.¹ Concerned with how infants develop in relation with their primary caregivers and how maturation and individuation is achieved, the work of Donald Woods Winnicott sheds new light on the relationship dynamic between YHWH and Israel. I demonstrate how a fundamentally flawed relationship script is embedded in Judges’ God-talk, unnoticed or suppressed by almost all existing commentators due to a built-in predisposition to privilege YHWH’s perspective (which is to say, the author’s construction of YHWH’s perspective).² The consequence is a scholarly regurgitation of a damaging relational script with insufficient critical attention to the effects of this for end-users of biblical texts. This chapter’s exploration of the parenting style reflected in the author’s God-talk marks a significant break with that trend.

I begin with a summary of five major concepts that emerge from Winnicott’s work. More detailed discussion of these ideas emerges in

¹ I recognise the distinction between author, implied author, narrator and implied narrator, but for the purposes of this project I use ‘scribe’ as a heuristic shorthand for the writer who constructed this text as it now appears in English Bibles. There is a more detailed discussion of the authorship of Judges in the next chapter.

² As noted in the Introduction, using such a convoluted expression would become tedious very quickly. Readers should assume henceforth that references to YHWH’s perspective do not assume that he is a ‘special’ character or that his perspective is to be aligned with a metaphysical divinity beyond the text. It should be understood that YHWH’s perspective is one constructed by the scribe.

subsequent sections, but the purpose at this point is to provide a snapshot, familiarising the reader quickly with Winnicott's terminology. The second section justifies the application of Winnicott's work to an ancient biblical text. I then justify the application of a twentieth century psychoanalyst's ideas to an ancient biblical text before demonstrating how Winnicott's theories illuminate the Book of Judges.

Five Key Themes in Winnicott's Work

The Capacity to Be Alone

One of Winnicott's best known papers is 'The Capacity to Be Alone', first published in 1958. He believes the ability to say 'I am' is grounded in this capacity, which 'is one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development' (1990a: 29). For adults it is a vital aspect of healthy living, and it enables the arena in which we imagine, dream and are creative. However, its healthy development depends on getting it right in childhood. The capacity emerges as the child builds up the ability to be absorbed in their own creativity while in the presence of the caregiver who might be similarly immersed in their own work. Ogden puts it well:

the child must have the opportunity to play alone in the presence of the absent mother, and in the absence of the present mother ... the mother is absent as object, but is there as the unnoticed, but present containing space in which the child is playing ... The development of the capacity to be alone is a process in which the mother's role as invisible co-author of potential space is taken over by (what is becoming) the child. In this sense, when the healthy individual is alone, he is always in the presence of (the self-generated environment) mother. (2013: 56)³

So, in order to be able to enjoy this capacity, there are two basic building blocks. First, there needs to be a steady accretion of experiences of the reliable caregiver so that even when not in the room, the child can conjure parental presence based on those past experiences and feel secure. Second, the child needs the reliable attention of the

³ Ogden, like several other theorists, uses the male pronoun when referring to the infant. I prefer to alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns, which coheres with Winnicott's own usage. He was a man before his time in such inclusive practice.

parent who holds off impingement so that the infant has the space to be and become. Impingements are disturbances that force the infant to respond and comply with an external other: 'He is wrenched from his quiescent state and forced to respond, or he is compelled to abandon his own wishes, to accept prematurely the feeble and unrealistic nature of his own demands, and to mold himself to what is provided for him' (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983: 194). In time, all humans have to negotiate the tension between enjoying the capacity to be alone and the external demands of others, but at this early stage the infant needs the provision of a space to *be*; a reliably secure space in which she can safely relax: 'able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person' (Winnicott, 1990a: 34).⁴ Winnicott provides an adult example of enjoying the aftermath of satisfactory love-making, where both parties appreciate the sharing of 'solitude' while together (1990a: 31).

When not held at bay, impingements compel the child to react, which, for Winnicott, 'annihilates' being. This is a strong verb, but Winnicott's emphasis is justified. Impingements, if they recur persistently, provoke fragmentation, described by Greenberg and Mitchell as becoming 'prematurely and compulsively attuned to the claims and requests of others', losing connection with one's 'spontaneous needs and gestures, as these bear no relation to the way his mother experiences him and what she offers him' (1983: 194). When this happens, the 'source of spontaneous needs, images, and gestures, goes into hiding, avoiding at all costs the possibility of expression without being seen or responded to, the equivalence of complete psychic annihilation' (1983: 194). Furthermore, Winnicott (1990a: 46) believed nothing less than the health of the central core of the ego is at stake here, for the 'pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli' (1990a: 34).

Linked closely to the capacity to be alone is Winnicott's 'continuity of being'. Perhaps the desire of all beleaguered adults, continuity of being is the ability to work on one's own projects, or to relax in one's preferred way without unwarranted interference from external

⁴ It seems paradoxical that the ability to be unintegrated is a sign of health, but as Abram (1996: 60) explains, the child who can fully relax into her mother's arms, surrendering into them with utmost trust, is the child who is developing integration and maturity.

demands. For Winnicott, it is early basis of ego-strength. If an infant is allowed to continue without 'serious interruption' she strengthens her sense of 'being real' and can begin to tolerate breaks in the continuity of being (1990a: 149). This prepares the infant for adult life where the tension between the demands of the external world and the desire for personal continuity of being has to be managed and tolerated continually. But failure to prevent impingement at the infant stage, failure to allow the child to become themselves rather than the child the parent desires, results in ego-weakening. Impingement throws the child into reactive episodes, which, if they were to recur persistently, 'sets going a pattern of fragmentation of being' (1990a: 60) between True and False Self.⁵

The True and False Self

In language that seems rather antiquated for a Judith Butler-informed scholarly context, Winnicott speaks unashamedly of a core self: we are born with an 'inherited potential which is experiencing a continuity of being, and acquiring in its own way and at its own speed a personal psychic reality and a personal body-scheme' (1990a: 46). Perhaps this could be linked to Butler's notion of identity congealing over time based on a series of performative actions, but Winnicott is far more confident in a psychic reality that may develop and shift but grounds being. However, this psychic reality is not something we can readily access because there is ultimately 'an incommunicado element . . . sacred and most worthy of preservation' (Winnicott, 1990a: 187). Indeed, 'Rape, and being eaten by cannibals, these are mere bagatelles as compared with the violation of the self's core' (1990a: 187); a violation that is tantamount to a 'sin against the self' (1990a: 187).⁶ This core self's communication is 'non-verbal; it is, like the music of the spheres, absolutely personal. It belongs to being alive. And in health, it is out of this that communication naturally arises' (1990a: 192).

⁵ I follow Winnicott's practice of capitalising 'True' and 'False', as these are significant existential terms.

⁶ This is why Winnicott believed silences are so important in therapy. Periods of non-communication allow 'the patient to creatively discover' rather than listen to the interrupting interpretations of an analyst. Analysts who interrupt are 'dangerous because we are too nearly in communication with the central still and silent spot of the patient's ego-organization' (1990a: 189).