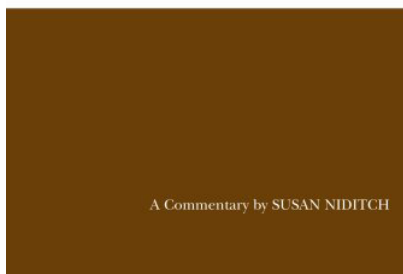


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Judges



Niditch, Susan

Judges: A Commentary

Old Testament Library

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“To be a good biblicist is, in fact, to be a good folklorist”—thus writes Susan Niditch in the preface to her commentary on the book of Judges. And indeed her contribution to the awareness of the importance of folklore and oral literature to the study of biblical literature is tremendous and significant. She is the author of *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (1987) and of *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (1993). Her influential book *Oral World and Written Word*, which was published in 1996, became a basic book for everyone who is interested in biblical studies. Niditch also deals with the ethics of violence and in this context wrote *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*. The book of Judges, which is a collection of war stories whose protagonists are frequently regarded as epic heroes, is the appropriate opportunity to combine her two fields of interest. Here she promises the reader that her commentary “offers an exciting opportunity to study closely one rich collection of biblical tales from the perspective of the field of early and oral literatures” (vii). Naturally, this approach influences the whole commentary from the beginning to its end.

The introduction (1–26) is already different from the customary introductions we are used to. For example, it does not include entries such as “Title” or “Composition and Structure.” Niditch prefers to focus on issues such as “Story, Characters and Themes: Epic

Implications,” “Epic Heroes,” “Social Bandits,” “The Epic-Bardic Voice,” “Repetition and Epic Language,” “Poetry and Prose, Oral and Written,” and more.

The commentary itself (27–212) follows the Christian biblical division into chapters. However, it has only nineteen units, not twenty-one, because the stories on Samson and his marriage with the Philistines (14:1–15:20) are one unit, and the same with the story on Micah’s house-shrine and the founding of the town and the temple of Dan (17:1–18:31). In other words, the logic of the commentary’s division is not thematic but technique-based: the reader moves from one biblical chapter to the other and not from one subject to the other.

In the commentary, every unit has three sections. The first section is the translation of the Hebrew biblical text, then comes the second section, which is a detailed and systematic comparison of the Masoretic Text to its different old textual traditions. Niditch pays careful attention to this comparison because she assumes that “these various texts may reflect different ways in which communities of Jews and Christians understood the tradition. Scripture was heard in different words, and the medium was important to the message” (23). In the third section she brings her various interpretative comments on the specific biblical chapter with its different subjects, among them historical, philological, literary, and traditional-style culture comments. Thus, pages 50–59 are devoted to the third chapter of Judges, and there Niditch deals with the explanations for Israel’s failure to displace its enemies (3:1–6), what she calls “the covenantal introduction,” which is actually the continuation of chapter 2. Then she moves to Othniel, Ehud, and the brief report concerning Shamgar. Her attention is always paid to issues of tradition. As the Amalekites are mentioned in this chapter (12:13), she adds “They, like Ammon and Moab, serve as iconic enemies in Israelite tradition” (57). From her point of view, Othniel is less interesting because his description exhibits intense use of formulas. She prefers the epic account of Ehud and declares: “The narrative weight of Judges 3 is located in the tale of Ehud” (56–57). There she can focus on the left-handedness of Ehud and compare it to other traditional cultures, where “the left side is also the symbolic dark side” (57); there she can also focus on Ehud’s short blade and compare it to a phallic image and the whole assassination to a rape.

The book ends with an appendix (213–82), which is a literal translation of the whole book of Judges, and an index (283–90). While the translation included in the commentary “seeks to aid comprehensibility and readability by converting the Hebrew syntax to a more standard English word order whereby the subject precedes the verb, the version in the appendix, however, retains the Hebrew word order and even more closely conveys the register of the Hebrew” (26).

Niditch's approach is refreshing and forces the reader to pay attention to issues one might ignore—and sometimes to observe the acceptable issues through different glasses, instead of looking for the layers of redaction, to listen to the voices emerging from the text, the voices of the people who preserved these traditions and produced the book of Judges. Niditch has found three major voices: the epic-bardic voice, who presents the ancient epic; the voice of the theologian, who is actually the Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic writer; and the voice of the humanist represented mainly in Judg 1 and 17–21. According to Niditch, this last and late voice is not interested in heroic individuals but in vagaries of power and in the temporariness of political and military control. She suggests that this voice is postexilic and suits the Persian or the early Hellenistic period.

Although I have difficulties in finding the humanist voice and none of the judges seems to me a kind of Robin Hood, I found the book stimulating, thought-provoking, and enriching in terms of my associations. However, I feel that I have to finish this review with a personal touch. The book begins with sixteen pages of bibliography (xiii–xxviii), which include some Hebrew items too. But, alas, my commentary on the book of Judges, published in 1999 as part of the series *Mikra Leysra'el* by Magnes Press of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is absent. I am sure that if it was mentioned in Niditch's book, at least more English readers could have known about my isolated one.