

Power, Sexual Status, and Religion in the 'Promised Land'

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ABSTRACT

According to the biblical narratives, the Israelites had wonderful expectations of the Promised Land which was to be theirs. The land was visualised as a land of plenty, God's gift to Israel, who would enjoy its fruits and all good things (cf. Deut 8:7, 8). This idyllic picture contrasts vividly with later conditions. Unfortunately a lot of blood and tears had to be shed first. In the first chapter of the book of Judges we encounter a situation of war or coexistence, feudal relationships or shared power with the enemy. Shows of power, violence and civil wars were the order of the day. Society decides upon certain boundaries within which people must operate, or else have to face hostile emotions and even violence. In more than one way the three indicators of these boundaries, power, sexual status and religion, were violated during the times of the Judges. Power, sexual status and religion are analyzed in the two formal institutions of the Mediterranean biblical world: politics and kinship. All ideologies are initially founded upon a firm religious base, yet, we also experience frustration over Paradise Lost, because liberation never equals freedom.

A INTRODUCTION

The country is undergoing political unrest; power sharing is the order of the day, though there is also a lot of emphasis on customs and traditions; other peoples are lurking on the border, waiting for a chance to exploit the situation; tribal conflicts arise and civil wars break out; women and children become the victims of violence every day; national leaders get together to search for solutions, but when peace negotiations fail, authority is imposed first with threats and then with power and violence; groups feel disaffected if they are not consulted; minority groups are in danger of being submerged by the majority; the part of the population which was exploited by others and driven from their land does the same to another group, and also claims that God is on their side; women are subjected to sadistic rape and exploitation; everyone seems to do whatever suits them.

This may sound a lot like the present-day situation in South Africa or somewhere else, but it actually is a description of the situation in the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. According to the biblical narratives the Israelites had wonderful expectations of the new country which was to be theirs. The land was visualised as a land of plenty, God's gift to Israel, who would enjoy its fruits and all good things (cf. Deut 8:7, 8). This idyllic picture contrasts vividly with later conditions. Unfortunately a lot of blood and tears had to be shed first. In the first chapter of the book of Judges we encounter a situation of war or coexistence with the enemy, feudal relationships or shared power.¹ Facts show the harsh reality in the Promised Land.

Early Israel was 'an association of tribes or clans that emerged in Canaan as a political entity after the break-up of the traditional powers of the Bronze Age' (Dearman 1992:11).² The use of the term 'Israel' in this study is in no way intended to oversimplify what is an intensely complex issue; it refers to 'a socio-cultural polity', 'an ethnic designation for the community' who settled in the highlands, and not to a geographic region (Miller 2005:1; cf. Dearman 1992:34). At least one can say that the Merneptah Stele³ (c. 1207 BCE), as well as the Egyptian Inscription found in Bet-Shean and the Amarna letters (cf. Lemche 1988:88) are 'direct positive evidence that the term "Israel" was used for some entity in the highlands of Canaan in the parlance of Late Bronze II B sources' (Miller 2005:4).

Dearman (1992:8) concludes that '... [n]either biblical text nor material culture gives evidence of a golden age where Israel's faith was practiced in cultural isolation and Israel was free from the influence of competing world views or immune to the possibility of internal corruption'. Society decides upon certain boundaries within which people must operate, or else have to face hostile emotions and even violence. In more than one way the three indicators

¹ The book of Judges in the Bible forms a sequel to the story of Joshua (which relates to the occupation) and makes that account a continuation of the narrative in the book of Deuteronomy (Hamlin 1990:2). To situate the book, the historian has to appreciate the time lapse between the events described in the book and its final composition. A re-formationist group of historian-theologians most probably wrote a history called the Deuteronomistic history (Deut – 2 Kgs), and they gathered traditions concerning the heroes of the period before the monarchy and incorporated them into the book of Judges (Hamlin 1990:8).

² It is not a foregone conclusion that there were indeed tribes. 'Tribes' are usually linked to specific tribal areas, but it is improbable that these can be indicated as such in early Israel. In this connection, I therefore prefer to use the notion of 'clans' to acknowledge this uncertainty. The order of size is usually taken as from a family to a clan and from a clan to a tribe.

³ The earliest non-biblical reference to 'Israel' in the stele of the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah in the late thirteenth century states that Israel is the name of a people or group living in Canaan (Dearman 1992:12).

of these boundaries, namely power, sexual status and religion, were violated during the so-called period of the Judges. It sounds more like *Paradise Lost* than anything else.

In this article, power, sexual status and religion will be analyzed in the two formal institutions of the Mediterranean biblical world: politics and kinship. Religion embedded in kinship is concerned with the moral order controlled by elites and operating to maintain the public order (Pilch & Malina 1993: xxxvii). 'The kinship system operative in a given society also has implications for the status of women within that society' (Hackett 1985:19).

B HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although the many uncertainties make it difficult to reconstruct the history of early Israel, the following bird's eye view is tendered to facilitate an attempt at situating the book of Judges. Large parts of the land of Canaan were brought under Egyptian rule as a result of a series of campaigns conducted by Thutmose III (1490-1435 BCE; Schwantes 1965:84). Egypt played an important role in the Ancient Near East and controlled Palestine from 1500 to 1150 BCE. The country continued to exist as a patchwork of minor city-states whose kings and princes were vassals of the Egyptian Pharaoh who chose to retain, in its entirety, the feudal organisation of society introduced into the land by the Hyksos (Schulman 1966:17). The contents of close to 400 Amarna letters which were excavated at Tel el-Amarna in Egypt in 1887 represent the correspondence between local rulers of Canaanite city-states and Egyptian authorities (Noth [1950]1960:30-33).⁴ A policy of divide and rule by the Egyptians was to have disastrous consequences for the Canaanite city-states and their petty chieftains who, by the thirteenth century BCE, were transformed into the most politically disorganised and vulnerable of people (Bright 1972:109).⁵

The confrontation with the Hittites⁶, the Libyans and the Sea Peoples⁷ brought a noticeable weakening of the Egyptian influence in Canaan. This oc-

⁴ Given the topography and modest potential, the central authorities that developed in Canaan during the period were generally small in scale. They usually consisted of a fortified administrative centre (such as Gaza, Jaffa, Bet-Shean, Lachish and Hazor; Grant 1984:15) with satellite towns and villages in a supportive rural hinterland (Gottwald 1985:29). That enabled Egypt to control corridors of passage to Lebanon and Syria and to exploit Canaan economically.

⁵ The Amarna letters bear witness that there was no support whatsoever from the side of Egypt. They ask in vain for any assistance from Egypt against their enemies (ANET: 483-490).

⁶ During the fourteenth century the Hittites from the New Kingdom in Anatolia came into conflict with Egypt at Kadesh, at the River Orontes (Noth [1950]1960:30). The indecisive outcome of this conflict and the treaty between equals brought a balance of power, favouring neither the Hittites nor the Egyptians (Jagersma 1982:59). The Canaanite city-states remained within the much weaker Egyptian

curred at the turn of the century (about 1150), and made it possible for Israel to emerge as a political force in Canaan.

During this same period the Assyrians' position was greatly weakened by the attacks of nomadic tribes of Akhlamu or Aramaeans (Fensham & Pienaar 1982:83). They were nevertheless a rising power who later became a threat to the Israelites again.

One may conclude that the uncertain international political situation at about 1200 BCE was constituted in a way which facilitated the Israelite settlement in Palestine. However, the new enemies of the Israelite clans, the Canaanites, the aggressive Philistines and other opportunistic neighbours, would contribute to make life difficult for Israel in times to come (Anderson 1975:147; Le Roux 1995:21).

C DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTEXT

The purpose of organising a community is, among other things, to exercise control over individual members in order to ensure the proper functioning of a society and to set boundaries within which people must operate (Deist 2000:276). Ancient Israel gradually developed from a clan society into a state. It therefore experienced different forms of domestic political and social organisation.

sphere of influence (Redditt 1988:41). The final military campaign against the Hittites came from the Assyrians (about 1200 BCE) and in 1190 their capital possibly fell in the hands of the Kaskian barbarians. 'The demise of the Hittites thus conveniently coincided with the Israelites' gaining influence in Palestine. They thus posed no direct threat to the emergence of the Israelites' (Scheffler 2001:37).

⁷ The Sea Peoples, probably from the vicinity of the Aegean Sea, Cyprus, and the coast of Asia-Minor (Aharoni 1978:20), first set foot on Caphtor (Crete? Amos 9:7; Jer. 47:4) before they occupied the coastal areas of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt (1184-1153) by land (with ox wagons) and by sea (with warships). Ramses III (1175-1144) depicted and recorded these events on the walls of the temple in Medinet Habu (in Thebes; ANET: 262-263). They did not manage to conquer Egypt and had to settle on the coastline of Canaan, but they certainly contributed to the demise of Egypt. In all likelihood they were directly responsible for the fall of the Hittite kingdom in 1190 and they destroyed the city of Ugarit. The Medinet Habu inscriptions distinguish seven groups related to the Sea Peoples. One of these groups, the Philistines of the Bible (this later became the name of the land, Palestine) settled south of Joppe /Jaffa and established five well-organised and fortified cities, namely Ashkelon, Gaza, Ashdod, Ekron and Gad. The Israelites had to observe the Philistines claiming the most fertile land and gaining control of access to the sea and thereby important trade (Gottwald 1985:411). The Israelites had to be satisfied with residing in the highlands. According to the biblical narrative, the Philistines' imperialism in the interior brought them into bloody and intense conflicts with the Israelite judges Shamgar, Deborah and Barak, Jephthah and Samson.

The search for cultural and political analogies for tribal Israel has gone in several directions.⁸ One model employs the analogy of pastoral nomadic tribes from the Mari texts (Alt 1969; Gottwald 1985:277; Malamat 1988:165-176; cf. Dearman 1992:26-28). Other proposals have looked into associations, for example a federation of twelve tribes organised on the principle of the Greek amphictyony (e.g. Apollo of Delphi; Noth [1950] 1960); pre-Islamic Arabian tribes (cf. Lang 1983); or African tribal societies known as 'segmented societies', for analogies (cf. Crüsemann 1978; Malamat 1988).

Another model has leaned heavily on the depiction in the Amarna texts of fourteenth-century Palestine as a collection of small city-states under the oppressive rule of Egypt. A retribalisation took place among indigenous peoples as Egyptian control declined, resulting in an egalitarian society. According to this view Israel's origins are therefore linked with the resettlement process of non-sedentary elements already in Canaan (cf. Miller, in Miller & Hayes [eds] 1977:213-284; Gottwald 1979:464-487). Scheffler (2002:62) mentions a 'primitive' or 'traditional' democracy, which 'may be defined as referring to a form of government in which internal sovereignty resides in a large proportion of the governed, namely in all free, adult, male citizens without distinction of fortune or class'. According to this model the assembly of the people (cf. Josh 24; 1 Sam 9) is regarded as carrying most power in the community.

Space constraints mean that these models of the clan societies will not be discussed here in detail. Dearman (1992:27 and others), however, suggests that more than one model should be used as 'heuristic devices which assist one in seeing patterns and connections in the Old Testament material itself'.

During the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BCE) the land of Canaan was noted for its extraordinary diversity of people.⁹ All these elements contributed to the complexity of the domestic political situation during the Iron Age (the so-called period of the Judges; *circa* 1200 – 1000 BCE).

Unlike the book of Joshua, the book of Judges gives us what may be a more accurate picture of the actual situation in the Promised Land at the time of the Judges. Politically speaking, things might not have gone as well as Joshua describes them, but the Israelites had to adapt to many difficult situations.

According to the book of Judges the Canaanites have been defeated by Judah in the South, and the old corrupt society is being replaced by the new. Places such as Hebron, Jerusalem, Sephat (Hormah) and Debir are mentioned in this regard.

⁸ Cf. Neu, 1986, 'Israel' vor der Entstehung des Königtums, *BZ* 30, 204-221 and Thiel, 1985, *Die soziale Entwicklung Israels in vorstaatlicher Zeit*.

⁹ We read about the Canaanites, the Horites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Girgashites, the Hittites, the 'apiru and the Shasu (cf. Dearman 1992:22).

This brings us to the concept of power sharing, especially in the North of the land, in contrast to the narrative of a massive, unified, military conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua (cf. Hamlin 1990). At the time of the Israelite 'invasion and settlement'¹⁰ the Canaanites were running established city-states, each with its own characteristic system, on behalf of Egypt. The book of Judges (Judg 1:27, 29-31, 33) lists seventeen of these cities where the Israelites did not succeed in expelling the Canaanites and where 'the Canaanites persisted in dwelling' (cf. Miller 2005:118). In some cases the original inhabitants were not expelled but made tributaries (Judg 1:33). Under the control of a new society, members of the old society coexist (Le Roux 1995:51). It looks as if Asher, and perhaps also Zebulon and Naphtali, served the Canaanite seafarers in the coastal regions (Judg 5:17). This was not the concept they had had of their Promised Land (Le Roux 1992:150, 151).

Thus far I have only mentioned a few peaceful situations that prevailed between the Israelites and the Canaanites, without referring to the numerous wars which also took place. I am not trying to make out that power sharing was necessarily the answer for the Promised Land, because disorder, shows of power, violence and civil wars were still the order of the day. One of the most important characteristics of the Israelite clans in Canaan was their militaristic behaviour.

D THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND RELIGION

1 Holy wars

War and religion were inseparable in ancient times. In the Ancient Near East, war was usually a sacred undertaking during which the honour of the deity concerned was at stake. In that sense, every war was a holy war, although not every war was necessarily a religious war (De Vaux 1973:258).¹¹

The 'holy wars' in Joshua's time were part of the process of bringing Yahweh's promises to execution (Josh 3:10). He was known as the God of War who gave the order to fight the oppressors, and also promised victory. This perception of a God of Battles legitimised the violence committed under Joshua's leadership. It motivated them to obtain power; in God's name, they killed (Albertz 1994:65). According to the biblical narrative, Joshua kept on hearing the Lord say 'Kill and destroy!' (Wolfe 1982:113; Le Roux 1995:120). Their aim was possibly to remove the alien influences of the Canaanite religion from

¹⁰ A discussion of the emergence of Israel and different models of settlement is beyond the scope of this study.

¹¹ This concept only came to the fore at the time of the Maccabees.

Yahweh's sight. The wars were fought, but the Canaanite influence was never eradicated.¹²

The God of Israel, Yahweh, was primarily regarded as a warrior God¹³ (Exod 15: 3, Isa 42: 13), the God of the armies of Israel (1 Sam 17: 45). 'Though God was essentially beyond human sexuality, the image of God was in reality strongly tied to the male world' (Gerstenberger 1996:87) Gerstenberger emphasises that 'since there was no female counterweight; this fact resulted increasingly in discrimination against women' (1996:87). This interpretation had an effect on the social and sexual status of women in the society (even today) but also the role she played in politics. Since God is seen as male, only males could become pope or a priest as representatives of God on earth (in some churches, cf. the R.C.C. and Greek Orthodox Church).

Nevertheless, the Old Testament notes many holy wars and often refers to them.¹⁴ Each of the stories proceeds to describe in similar fashion of severe oppression and lack of control, usually because of a neighbouring power.¹⁵ A few of the judges or chieftains are remembered specifically for their military activities. Unfortunately we can only refer to a few such activities.¹⁶ The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 actually tells of such a war. This particular military action by the leaders was defensive. The Israelite clans did not take the initiative in waging war in the time of the Judges, but simply defended themselves. One's first impression on reading these stories is that we meet here several strong women. Without embarrassment, the patriarchal narrator/s allow(s) a woman to carry out the highest leadership functions in politics and religion. Deborah was

¹² According to these narratives the clans of Israel wanted to take over power in the land of Canaan at any price. They felt entitled to it – 'the Lord Himself had promised it to them' (Josh 3:10), and they had the right to be there. In fact, the land already belonged to them. Some scholars ascribe the clans' aggressive attitude to Joshua. Moses almost never supported military action; he might have preferred to negotiate and, where possible, avoid conflict. Perhaps things could have been different if Moses had led the people into the Promised Land (Wolfe 1982:113). Nevertheless, the charismatic leaders who took over after Joshua also shared his perception about a holy war.

¹³ The image of God as warrior presents him as an active hero like Baal or Enlil (the supreme authority), the head of the Sumerian pantheon (cf. Porter 2000).

¹⁴ In Israel the assembly of clan chiefs had the deciding voice in the administration of the clan (Thiel 1985:92-145). Apparently the charismatic leaders themselves interpreted the threats of war as 'wars of the Lord', thereby classifying them as sacred.

¹⁵ A typical pattern in the book of Judges is that the children of Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and then the Lord gave them into the hands of the enemy; they then called upon the Lord and he raised a deliverer for them who succeeded, through the Spirit of the Lord, in saving them from their oppressors (Judg 2; 6:34, etc.).

¹⁶ Ehud put an end to the exploits of the king of Moab (Judg 3:12-30).

both a prophetess and a judge. She was even honoured with the title 'mother in Israel'.¹⁷ Her function as judge was to declare the battle a holy war, in other words, to legitimise the battle. Deborah (and Barak) led eight or ten clans¹⁸ (Judah and Simeon were excluded; cf. Judg 5) against a coalition of Canaanite city states which had been threatening and exploiting them with high taxes and such. We do not see Deborah carrying weapons and fighting, we do not see Barak fighting either. It is part of the genre of 'holy war' battles that they are won, not by their human participants, but rather by Yahweh acting on Israel's behalf (Judg 4:15; 5:20-21; Hackett 1985:27).

We should also appreciate the figure of Jael in Judges 4 and 5. Her act too, is described without surprise or negative judgement by the narrators. Themes of sex and violence, death and seduction are particularly strong in the artistry of Judg 5:27 (Niditch 1989:46). Scholars such as Taylor have drawn comparisons between Jael, assassin of Sisera, and Ancient Near Eastern goddesses such as the Canaanite Athtart, the Greek goddess Artemis and the daughter of the legendary worthy Agamemnon (Niditch 1989: 70, n. 18). Niditch is convinced that Jael is not modelled after Ancient Near Eastern goddesses, but like such figurines she is heroic and luminal, a warrior and seducer, alluring and dangerous, nurturing and bloodthirsty. Association between sex and violence is a very old one.

These stories suggest a question: What features in the society of Israel in that period encouraged such active participation by women? One of the noticeable features of the social organisation of this period is its lack of centralisation (Hackett 1985:24).¹⁹ It further portrays a public sphere that does not seem to be widely separated from the private. Judges 4:4-5 allows us to assume that Deborah could perform her duties as judge while still resident in her own area (cf. Gideon, Judg 8:29). Her public life as judge need not have interfered with her domestic life. Women could fill leadership roles in this era of decentralised power and ad hoc leaders, being equal to the men in the same office. Alongside descriptions of their heroic acts, both women are still pictured in more traditional roles. They are identified as the wives of their respective husbands. Nevertheless, women's status and roles as seen in the book of Judges are more varied than they might have been at other times in biblical Israel.

¹⁷ Levine (in Niditch 1989:57, n. 41) suggests that the writer is a woman, composing a polemic against sexual abuse (cf. Hackett 1985:28). One is tempted to suggest that some of these stories in fact derive from literature composed by women or preserved in women's circles (Hackett 1985:32).

¹⁸ This action provided an opportunity for the largest number of clans to take part.

¹⁹ The cry for participation in war, for example, did not come from a centralised government, but rather from a covenantal agreement that there would be occasions when concerted actions were necessary and, in Israelite terms, demanded by Yahweh (Hackett 1985:23).

Gideon (Judg 6) and three hundred men from the Abiezrites (a family from Gilead), Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali put an end to the raids of the Midianites, Amalekites and children of the East (Judg 7:12). Jephthah also, together with men from Gilead (Judg 11), defended the Israelites against attacks by the Ammonites.

Samson's behaviour as a judge was highly controversial in its day (Judg 13-16). It is debatable whether his activities can be termed a holy war. According to the information we have, he never once led a people's army into battle against the Philistines, preferring to employ guerrilla tactics. For example, he set fire to unharvested grain, hay, vineyards and olive trees, attacked some Philistines viciously and slaughtered them. This was done more from motives of personal vengeance, because his father-in-law had given his wife to someone else, than from concern for the interests of the Israelites (Judg 15:8). If it was not his own people wanting to deliver him up to his enemies, it was Delilah, a woman from the valley of Sorek whom he fell in love with. It is no new insight to say that women got the better of Samson, time and again.

Other judges whose military roles at this time of settlement in the Promised Land were less prominent are known to some scholars as the lesser judges. At least we know that Shamgar struck down six hundred Philistines with an ox goad.

Each judge led a military expedition only once, drawn from clans, and then resumed his/her usual position in society.

2 Civil wars in the Promised Land

Apart from the holy wars waged against enemies from outside, there were also wars among the Israelites' clans and chiefdoms. It is amazing that people who had sweated and toiled for so many years to occupy a country could still find the energy to fight among themselves and to treat their own people so badly. It is all about power. Often one group, for example the Ephraimites was insulted or humiliated by another, and then it took considerable diplomacy to restore relations; if that did not work, the result was violence in the form of military action. Ephraim's impassioned objections that Gideon did not consult them in the fight against the Midianites were dealt with very diplomatically by Gideon (Judg 8:1-3).

For a second time, the book of Judges indicates (Judg 12:1-3) that the clan of Ephraim felt hurt because they did not have the opportunity to share in a military victory. As we said above, the point for the Ephraimites was the threat to their position – the point was power. Jephthah met the Ephraimites' aggression with counter-aggression – no diplomacy was used to settle the matter, only force. Aggression usually leads to aggression.

The search for land is the main theme in Judges 18. Land issues have always been emotional, right up to the present. The Danites were not brave enough to fight for their right to possess the land which was initially given to them in the south-west of the country (Josh 19:40-46, 48) and as a result of their oppression and victimisation by the Ammonites and the Philistines, they became embittered, hot-tempered men, angry fellows (Judg 18:25). As the only clan without a permanent home, they were now prepared to take land from others by force not thinking for a moment that the present inhabitants might have rights to the land themselves. They used cowardly tactics, not only stealing Micah's priest and idols, but also wiping out the peaceful, unsuspecting city of Laish (later known as Dan). Instead of a brotherly covenant (Amos 1:9), this was a foolhardy land grab, 'blessed' by the stolen priest and his idols and justified by the principle that might is right. This incident had far-reaching consequences for the people (Judg 18:30).

The last story in the book of Judges (19-21) takes place during a time of economic prosperity in the country. The irony of the story is that the people did not sink to their moral nadir while they were being oppressed by other peoples, but in a time of prosperity and freedom under the leadership of their judges. It seems that the Israelites suffered no shortages, they did not need anything (Judg 19:19; cf. 19:4, 6, 8, 22; 21:19-20).

This story started in the lonely hills of Ephraim with two strangers, a Levite priest and his concubine from Bethlehem. The concubine had gone back to her father for four months, but the Levite went to fetch her, and persuaded her to go back with him. On the way back, they avoided the alien city of Jebus and chose to spend the night with their own people in Gibeah, who were Benjaminites; nobody offered them accommodation for the night until an old man from the hills of Ephraim, who was also a stranger in Gibeah, came past and offered them a place for the night. That night, some wicked men from the city assaulted and raped the Levite's concubine until she died. Their host found it preferable for the concubine, and even his own daughter, to be raped than the Levite who was his guest. The next morning the Levite found the woman dead on the doorstep. He then cut her into twelve pieces and sent them all over the territory of Israel (cf. 1 Sam 11:7).

This event led to one of the largest assemblies of the Israelites that we know of in the time of the judges (it took place at the sanctuary at Mizpah; Judg 20:1). All the chiefs of the highlands were there to discuss the matter in the 'presence of the Lord'. Peace negotiations failed when the children of Benjamin refused to hand over the wicked men of Gibeah (Judg 20: 13). Apparently they would not accept any interference in their domestic affairs. They kept insisting on their freedom, unhampered by moral constraints, so that each of them could do what was right in their own eyes. According to the narrative a bitter civil war broke out in which many lives were lost; the 'tribe of Benjamin'

was almost exterminated by over-enthusiastic soldiers and, worse, almost lost its position among the clans (Judg 20:34, 35; 21:1-6; cf. Miller 2005:119; Hos 9:9; 10:9). Instead of singing victory songs, the people of Israel assembled at Bethel to lament (Judg 21:2). They did not come together to thank Yahweh for the victory, but to complain to Yahweh about the 'tribe of Israel' that was missing. Civil war brought more grief than joy, as one senseless murder followed another (Judg 21:6, 10, 11).

E CONCLUSION

Society decides upon certain boundaries within which people must operate, or else have to face hostile emotions and even violence. As mentioned above, three indicators of these boundaries are power, sexual status and religion.

Power indicates the ability to exercise control over others. It is not necessarily accompanied by violence, but in the time of the Judges, diplomacy and negotiation repeatedly failed, and power was enforced by violent means.

Sexual status refers to the rights and privileges of the different sexes, and to the dos and don'ts applicable to men and women in the context of 'tribal' society. A woman's position in society during the period of the Judges was not worth much, but it was totally unacceptable to abuse the Levite's woman so badly that she died. Through the ages, women and children have been the victims of power and violence. Rape was often a political manoeuvre. In the world of the Bible rape was often a political challenge to the father of the household or the leader of a clan.

We need only read present-day newspapers and magazines to realise that women and children are still terrorised by power and violence. We can provide many examples of women who were simply handed over to the authority of men, ill-treated, pushed forward to save men's lives, raped, murdered, dismembered, captured and stolen without having any say in the matter (Judg 21). Violence towards women and children is an ongoing phenomenon in all cultures and countries. The amount of violence against women in a society indicates the health rate of a community. Many cases of rape, violence and sexual abuse are never reported (Claassens 2001:31). Gerstenberger (1996:97ff.) assumes that this situation might be related to the values taught by the religions of the world – that women are inferior and are therefore given over to the authority of men.

Religion deals with the attitude and behaviour which people can be expected to show towards those with authority over them; in the final analysis this authority is vested in their God or gods. Honour becomes an issue when these three boundary markers intersect. Honouring a person means openly acknowledging that his or her actions correspond with the socially accepted norms and values (sexual status and religious principles). If people's positions in society

are undervalued, however, their honour is at stake. The clan of Ephraim is a good example of this. Their honour was offended because they were not consulted on clan issues and because their position in the clan system was undervalued (Judg 8 & 12).

There can be no disputing that the question of violence in our society has become an endemic part of our problem. The question is whether holy wars still take place today. Are people entitled to wage war or to use violence if the three boundaries identified above are violated? How are we to understand Yahweh's instructions to Joshua and the Judges to 'kill and destroy'?²⁰ Should power and violence simply be accepted as givens? Our present-day global society is characterised by various conflicts which lead to violence. We see this daily in the form of mass action to enforce political views, acts of terrorism and attacks on innocent people, and also in the ethnic cleansing which has developed into one of the typical forms of violence in an already violent society. For years there was the hope that the cause of conflict in our society in South Africa could be found in the political structures of the country. But now that the previous structures (those originating from *apartheid*) have been removed, the momentum of the conflict is growing. Should we accept violence and conflict as integral parts of society, or can change happen?

It is also important to note that religion often changes together with the politics of the day. Everybody can use religion to justify their position and legitimise their violence. This is a process which happened previously in our situation, and the religious legitimisation of what is currently developing in South Africa is already under way. Is there not a danger that each of us might be applying the Bible and God in our own situations and for our own political purposes? What do we hear God saying to us when we feel disadvantaged in some or other situation? Was God on the side of the oppressed, or did He just want to get rid of heathen elements?

In our earnest search for a new South Africa which can be a land of milk and honey, we should take careful note of the power seekers and violent criminals who have been part of the political process through the ages. It might be that we will have to drastically scale down our unrealistic high expectations for a new system of government. More often than not the realities of history relativize ideology. This also holds true when such ideologies or expectations have initially been provided with what purports to be a firm religious base.

²⁰ ... and the reminder in Zech 4: 6 that 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts, will you prevail'.

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