CHAPTER FIVE

NO KING IN ISRAEL:
UNDERSTANDING THE EPILOGUE’S REFRAIN

In the previous chapters, a case is slowly being built that the three major sections of Judges may in fact show a significantly greater degree of compositional unity that has heretofore been recognised. But in order for the case to be convincing, one must address the issue of alleged contrasting viewpoints within the book. After all, according to historical critical scholarship, internal inconsistency is one of the sure signs of multiple redactions since a unified piece of literary composition is expected to be internally consistent with regard to its viewpoints and perspectives.

When it comes to Judges, a major area of alleged inconsistency has to do with the book’s implied attitude towards the monarchy that would eventually succeed the rule of the judges. In this matter, while there seems to be broad agreement especially among critical scholars that an anti-monarchical bias is present in the Deuteronomistic central section of the book, when it comes to the epilogue, many are convinced that it actually reflects a positive view of the monarchy. How then does one explain the coexistence of these seemingly opposite viewpoints if the book is indeed a unified piece of literary composition?

To answer this question, two things need to be noted. First, while the argument for an alleged anti-monarchical sentiment in the central section comes from a number of different episodes, the alleged pro-monarchical sentiment in the epilogue seems to be based primarily on a plain reading of the refrain that repeatedly punctuates

---

1 See, for example, Noth, 1991:77; Richter, 1963:320,336–39; Buber, 1967:69–76; Becker, 303–06. A notable exception is Veijola (115–22), who argues for a pro-monarchical stance in the basic Deuteronomistic redaction and attributes the anti-monarchical sentiments to the later DtrN.
3 Such as the negative portrayal of foreign kings throughout the section, Gideon’s rejection of the kingship offer in 8:22–23, and the narrative about Abimelech’s disastrous rule as king in 9:1–57, including the allegedly most anti-monarchical fable told by Jotham in 9:7–15.
the narratives in that section. The full formula of this refrain, which brackets the epilogue towards its beginning (17:6) and at its end (21:25), informs the readers that “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes (בימיםこれらのים ההם).” The reduced formula, which is found in 18:1 and 19:1, consists only of the first half of the full formula.

Second, although at first glance, the meaning of this refrain seems clear, yet a number of diverse interpretations have surfaced, thus betraying an underlying complexity to any attempt at understanding its true meaning.

In light of these observations, it seems that one possible route to exploring whether contrasting viewpoints are indeed present within the current form of Judges is to begin with an attempt at understanding what exactly the refrain is meant to convey. For if it turns out that the refrain is in fact not pro-monarchical as many seem to think, then the alleged inconsistency within the book will no longer pose a problem that stands in the way of understanding Judges as a unified piece of literary composition.

**Does the Refrain Constitute Positive or Negative Comment?**

In order to understand the meaning of the refrain, one of the first questions that need to be asked is how the refrain functions within the epilogue. In particular, one must determine at the outset whether the refrain is meant to be taken as a positive comment about the narratives in the epilogue or a negative one, whether it is intended to bring comfort or express lament.

In this regard, one of the few scholars to argue for a positive reading of the refrain is Boling. Taking the repeated statement of “no king in Israel” to mean that YHWH was still king, Boling essen-

---

4 Boling, 1974:41; 1975:273. Although Boling considers the refrain in 17:6 and 18:1 to have been penned by a Deutronomic redactor, while the refrain in 19:1 and 21:25 was penned by a later Deuteronomistic redactor, he apparently understands both redactors as using the “no king in Israel” formula to indicate that YHWH was still king. But in this, Boling seems less than consistent. For while he affirms in his 1974 article that 18:1a is intended to show how YHWH was in fact still king, in his commentary (1975:258), he reads the same statement as a lamentation of the lack of acknowledgement of YHWH’s kingship in Israel. Now although