CHAPTER SIX

COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGY AND RHETORICAL PURPOSE OF JUDGES

In the preceding chapters, rhetorical links that connect the major sections of Judges have been explored. It is therefore time to bring the results of these explorations together so that a comprehensive picture can emerge regarding the overall compositional strategy of the book.

Furthermore, in the process of doing so, one expects also to gain significant insight about the rhetorical purpose that guides the book’s composition. This purpose, which allows one not only to grasp the central message of Judges, but also to see with greater clarity how the component parts interact to advance that message, will also be discussed in the present chapter.

Compositional Strategy of Judges

Before any attempt is made to uncover the overall compositional strategy of Judges, it is perhaps desirable to first review briefly some of the conclusions drawn in preceding chapters about the relationships between the major sections of Judges.

In chapter two, it has been argued that not only do specific episodes in the prologue and epilogue demonstrate significant thematic unity and progression, but the pervasive use of ironic allusions to Joshua in both sections to highlight the failures of the generation after Joshua also suggests that the same hand may have been responsible for the composition of both sections.

In chapter three, it has been shown that contrary to accepted wisdom, the epilogue may actually be intimately related to the central section as the bizarre behaviour of each of the epilogue’s protagonist seems to mirror similarly bizarre behaviour displayed by one of the major judges in the central section. This suggests that rather than it being an unrelated appendage artificially attached to the central section, the epilogue may have been composed with the central section in mind to serve as an evaluative conclusion to the judges narratives.
In chapter four, it has been shown that the prologue introduces a progressive deterioration theme that also dominates the central section. Since this theme is developed in both sections along a similar south-to-north geographic trajectory, it is likely that the prologue is designed to be a paradigm for the central section so as to provide structural clues for the interpretation of the latter. This means that, rather than the two sections being independent compositions, the prologue may have been composed expressly as an introduction for the central section.

Incidentally, the above conclusions from the three chapters actually dovetail quite nicely into each other. For if the prologue and the epilogue are not composed independently of the central section, but specifically to serve as paradigmatic introduction and evaluative conclusion for the central section, then the idea that they may have originated from the same hand becomes all the more feasible.

Moreover, this compositional unity between the prologue and epilogue is further substantiated by a complex link discovered while considering the book’s stance on kingship. This link, which connects all three sections of Judges, is constructed by first connecting the narrative of Abimelech with that of Adoni-Bezek through the common themes of brutality against seventy rivals and the eventual receipt of divine retribution. In so doing, Abimelech is effectively portrayed as being thoroughly Canaanised and more. This extreme Canaanisation theme then shows up again in the epilogue as the perversity of the Gibeathites is presented as a re-enactment of Sodom. Since this Sodom-like behaviour of the Gibeathites is bizarre and inexplicable in the same way that the behaviour of the other protagonists in the epilogue is bizarre and inexplicable, and since subtle allusions to Israelite leaders in the central section are almost inevitably found when the protagonists in the epilogue behave bizarrely and inexplicably, one can argue that the bizarre display of extreme Canaanised behaviour by the Gibeathites very likely alludes to a similar display of extreme Canaanised behaviour by Abimelech in the central section. If so, the Canaanisation of Abimelech may in fact be subtly presented as a precedent for the Gibeathites, just as the actions of the major judges are also subtly presented as precedents for the actions of the various protagonists in the book’s epilogue.

What is especially interesting about this complex link, however, is that in order to present both Abimelech and the Gibeathites as thoroughly Canaanised and more, their respective behaviour needs to