CHAPTER THREE


While the previous chapter examined the narrative analogy formed by the account of an entire battle, the conquest of Ha-Ai in Joshua 8, the present chapter explores the way in which the narrator employs the vehicle of the metaphor analogy with regard to a single significant segment of his battle report. Judges 20 tells of three battles against the tribe of Benjamin conducted over three days and constitutes one of the longest battle reports in the biblical record. In contradistinction to the first two days of battle in which the tribe of Benjamin scored victories over the allied tribes of Israel, the account of the third day witnesses a turn of fortune and tells of the decimation of the tribe of Benjamin. In this chapter the account of the decimation of the tribe of Benjamin as related in Judg 20:40-48 will be explored as a metaphor analogy to the story of the rape of the concubine as reported in Judg 19:22-27.

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1 The account of the earlier events of the third day of battle between Israel and the tribes of Benjamin, those prior to the rout of Benjamin (20:29-39), has presented exegetical difficulties. These result from its numerous repetitions, lacunae and inconsistent use of pronouns to refer to the various forces in action in the theatre of battle. Of those who have attempted a synchronic reading of the account, some have proposed a strategy of resumptive reading (E.J. Revell, “The Battle with Benjamin [Judges xx 29-48] and Hebrew Narrative Techniques,” VT 35 [1985] 417-33; P.E. Satterthwaite, “Narrative Artistry in the Composition of Judges xx 29ff,” VT 42 [1992] 80-89), while others have attempted to see cohesiveness in the text by positing the employment of summary headings followed by detailed elaboration (Yehuda Elitzur, The Book of Judges [Daat Miqra; Jerusalem, Mossad Harav Kook, 1976] 177-79 [Hebrew]; Martin Noth, Das System der Zwölff Stämme Israels [Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1930] 166-68; Gershon Galil [ed.], Judges [Olam HaTanakh: Tel Aviv: Davidson-Eti, 1994] 162-65 [Hebrew]; Rachel Reich, “The Concubine at Gibeah: Judges 19-21—A Literary Analysis,” M.A. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1985 108 [Hebrew]). Still others, undaunted by the repetition (twice Israel prepares to fight Benjamin; two accounts of a retreat [32, 39]; two times Benjamin falls thirty soldiers [31, 39], twice Benjamin believes that victory is theirs [31-32, 39]), have maintained that the account here tells of two primary stages of
J udges 20:41 and the Semantic Field of הַעֲרַע

Our investigation of the action begins with 20:40, where we are told that having charged out of Gibeah to pursue the feigned retreat of the Israelite force, the Benjaminites turned around to behold the entire city going up in smoke. This had been the appointed sign for the Israelite troops executing the feigned retreat to reverse direction and go on the attack (41a). The men of Benjamin are taken by surprise, “for they realized that disaster (הָעֲרַע) had overtaken them” (v. 41b). Reich has drawn attention to the semantic field created around the term הָעֲרַע in light of its earlier appearances in the story.² It recalls the old man’s censure to the inhabitants of Gibeah in 19:23, “Do not commit such a wrong” (גָּאַל הָעֲרַע נָ), which is further echoed by the subsequent charge of the tribes, “What is this evil thing (הָעֲרַע הָאָרָא) that has happened among you?” (20:12) and the demand that they be handed over, “hand over those scoundrels... so that we may... stamp out the evil from Israel” (20:13).

While Reich’s evidence is perhaps suggestive of a connection between the two episodes, we need first to subject the appearance of the phrase “for they realized that disaster (הָעֲרַע) had overtaken them” to a test of significance. If the phrase is found to be commonplace in battle narratives as a description of a force’s mood concerning impending defeat then the argument for meaningful parallelizing to the story of Judges 19 becomes less compelling. A priori, this phrase could give expression to the collective feeling of any troop facing defeat on the battlefield. Upon inspection, however, the phrase is, in fact, found to be a singular one within the corpus of biblical battle reports. In no other battle report do we find the mental state of a vanquished

battle, which both happened to contain several common elements (Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Book of Judges [Jerusalem: Kiryath Sefer, 1968] 294 [Hebrew]). It is this author’s position that none of these three approaches has been proven conclusively. It may well be that an expanded, or even different analogy could be adduced were one of these positions to be adopted regarding these verses. But then our conclusions would be that more tenuous as well, for we would be basing our findings upon only one of several options for accounting for verses 29-39.

The narrative that records the latter events of the third day (vv. 40-48), the decimation of the tribe of Benjamin, however, presents far fewer difficulties. All synchronic opinions have read these verses chronologically. We may focus upon this stage of the battle and draw conclusions that in theory would be commensurate with all three positions mentioned above concerning vv. 29-39.