

SHATTERING ITSELF AGAINST THE COVENANT:

Reading Judges 2:20-22 with Thomas F. Torrance

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This article seeks to read Judges 2:20-22 in light of T. F. Torrance's contributions to theology. In this pericope, the Lord directly charges Israel for their unfaithfulness and punishes them by refusing to drive out the nations in order to "test them" and thereby expose their sin and need for atonement. Torrance's understanding of Israel's vital role in the history of redemption and Christ's fulfillment of that role in his mediating work of incarnation and atonement greatly contribute to the church's interpretation of this pivotal passage in the introduction of the book of Judges.

Thomas F. Torrance argues that an attempt to understand God's glorious plan of redemption without the conceptual "tools" of knowing Israel's history is futile. God created a context for people to understand sin, salvation, and God's love for his people and for all of creation, and the study of the literary and historical contexts of Old Testament is one of the conceptual tools necessary for understanding Christ's incarnation and atonement.¹ Biblical scholars likewise need the conceptual tools of systematic theology (among other disciplines) in order to rightly interpret the Bible. It will be the aim of this article to study Judges 2:20-22 in light of T. F. Torrance's theology.

¹ Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 41.



Barry G. Webb describes Judges 2:20-22 as “the climax of the second part of the introduction, and to the introduction as a whole.”² It summarizes the key question of the book of Judges (Why did Israel not fully possess the land?) and offers the answer (Because of their relentless apostasy).³ Underlying both question and answer is the unrelenting love and holiness of their covenant God, “keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Exodus 34:7). Judges 2:20-22 records the Lord’s rebuke of Israel for breaking his covenant and desiring to be like the idolatrous nations in her midst. His rebuke consists of an indictment of Israel’s sin (v. 20), the consequence of her sin (v. 21), and the motive for the Lord’s choice of punishment (v. 22). These three movements in the pericope will guide the discussion of this article.

²⁰So the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he said, “Because this nation has transgressed my covenant, which I commanded their ancestors, and they have not listened to my voice [indictment],

²¹I myself will no longer drive out a man from before them from the nations, which Joshua left when he died [consequence]

²²in order to test Israel by them, whether or not they will keep the way of the Lord, to walk in them just as their ancestors kept them [motivation].”⁴

We know from the preceding context (vv. 11-19) that Israel’s specific transgression was apostasy. She chose the idols of her enemies over the God who loved her. The consequence for Israel’s sin fits the crime: The Lord will no longer drive out those enemy nations. The purpose of this judgment, however, reflects God’s grace in the form of testing Israel and teaching her to be a dependent covenant partner. The book of Judges is composed of well-known cycles, outlined in Judges 2:11-19 and

² Webb, *The Book of Judges*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 33.

³ Ibid., 34.

⁴ All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

fleshed out in the judges narratives: the people of Israel sin, the Lord hands them over to the oppression of their enemies, they cry out for deliverance, and the Lord raises a deliverer to save them, only for Israel to return full circle to the apostasy that began the cycle.⁵ This pattern of apostasy, judgment, and deliverance is not unique to the book of Judges, but can be traced from the time of the exodus until the culmination in the exile.⁶

The fact that this repeated cycle continued through Israel's history is particularly important because the book of Judges was written looking back at this period, from the perspective that had witnessed even more of Israel's covenant failures. Scholars disagree over the authorship and compositional history of the book. Some conservatives maintain the rabbinic tradition that Samuel was the author (*B. Bat.* 14b). Trent C. Butler opts for a time during Rehoboam, in the tenth century BC.⁷ Daniel I. Block contends that the book of Judges was most likely written during the "long, spiritually ruinous reign of Manasseh," in the first half of the seventh century BC.⁸ Most scholars follow and refine Martin Noth's view of the Deuteronomistic History, that a single, mid-sixth century BC editor (the Deuteronomist) worked from an early version of Deuteronomy to edit Joshua,

⁵ Most commentators note that this repetitive cycle is also a downward spiral wherein Israel's sin and the sin of her representative judge gets progressively worse. This is highlighted by the breakdown of the cycle elements; each cycle contains fewer components until in the final cycle (the Samson cycle) when even Israel's cry for deliverance is absent — Israel has become complacent under enemy oppression.

⁶ J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

⁷ Butler, *Judges*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), vol. 8, lxxiv.

⁸ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), vol. 6, 66.

Judges, Samuel, and Kings as an explanation for the exile.⁹ At the very least, explanatory notes, such as the reference to the exile in Judges 18:30 (“until the day of the captivity of the land”) suggests that the final form of the book took shape after the exile.¹⁰

That the book of Judges was most likely written after the monarchy had proven itself incapable of securing Israel’s faithfulness is significant for understanding the purpose of the book. Block is right to argue that the book of Judges, at least in its final, canonical form, is not foremost an apology for the monarchy. While Israel’s political and spiritual fragmentation was certainly an underlying problem (to be solved in part with the Davidic covenant¹¹), the primary

⁹ Noth’s theory was first published in *Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten-Gesellschaft, Geisteswissenschaftliche Klasse 18* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1943), and influenced English-speaking scholars long before its translation into English in 1981 as *The Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 15: Sheffield; JSOT, 1981). For a discussion of Noth’s influence on the understanding of the compositional history of the book of Judges, see M. A. O’Brien, “Judges and The Deuteronomistic History,” in *The History of Israel’s Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. S. L. McKenzie and M. P. Graham, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) and, more recently, the edited volume by Udo Rüterswörden, *Martin Noth — Aus der Sicht der HeutiGenesis Forschung*, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 58 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 2004).

J. Clinton McCann is more interested in the canonical context of the book, its prophetic function, and the interpretive context of its final form, which he strongly contends was borne out of the exilic community’s search for a reason for their predicament, *Judges, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), see especially 1-25.

¹⁰ Additional such notes that point to a time far later than the events described include Judges 1:11, 23; 3:1-2; 19:10; 20:27-28, Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 64.

¹¹ Avraham Gileadi helpfully explains that the Davidic covenant put the responsibility of individual Israelites on their representative king: “After the conquest of Canaan when Israel’s loyalty to YHWH lapsed, YHWH’s protection of his people also lapsed But the Davidic covenant did away with the necessity that all Israel — to a man — maintain loyalty to YHWH in order to merit his protection. In the analogy of suzerain-vassal relationships, David’s designation as YHWH’s ‘son’ and ‘firstborn’ (2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:6-7; 89:27) legitimized him as Israel’s representative,” “The Davidic Covenant: A Theological Basis for Corporate Protection,” In *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 160.

While this arrangement sometimes worked in Israel’s favor, it sometimes did not, as Israel and Judah’s histories of apostate kings illustrates.

problem in the book of Judges is Israel's "Canaanization," their apostasy.¹² The refrain "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his/her own eyes" (17:6; 21:25) does not mean that things would have been better with a king, since kings were largely responsible for leading Israel into apostasy, into what was right in the kings' own eyes. Block argues, "Israel did not need kings to lead them into idolatry, since the people did it on their own."¹³ Rather, the reference to Israel's lack of a king is most likely a chronological statement, i.e., "During the pre-monarchian period." If anything, the author or editor is emphasizing Israel's lack of obedience to their heavenly King. This means that the book of Judges is primarily about Israel's need for atonement, not their need for an earthly king. It is primarily about their persistent sin and God's reaction to it.¹⁴

The vantage point of the exile and post exile is also significant in interpreting the book of Judges because it is most likely during this time that the book received its final form.¹⁵ The covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, which Israel had only tasted in part before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, had now been fulfilled. God had meted out his judgment upon his own people, and yet they remained his covenant people by virtue of his steadfast love. An even more

¹² According to Block, "The theme of the book is the Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of the settlement," *Judges, Ruth*, 58. Elsewhere, Block attributes Israel's apostasy in part to the lack of centralized authority, maintaining that the primary concern is Israel's faithlessness: "It is not the tracing of Israel's *political evolution*, but the recounting of her *spiritual devolution*. He has exposed the total Canaanization of Israelite society [emphasis original]," "The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, 48.

¹³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 483. The partial refrain "in those days there was no king in Israel" in Judges 18:1 and 19:1 further support the chronological (and structural) function of the refrain.

¹⁴ Another indication that Judges was not written primarily as an apology for a king is the presentation of kingship throughout the book. Canaanite kings are emphatically referred to as "king" (for example, Eglon is referred to as "king" five times in the short narrative in Judges 3:12-19) giving kingship a negative connotation. Moreover, Gideon's superficially-pious refusal of kingship is undermined by his king-like actions. His brutal retribution towards Succoth and Penuel (Judges 8:4-17) is more akin to the unrighteous kingships of the Canaanites. He also violates the Deuteronomic laws for an Israelite king in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 by acquiring many wives (Judges 8:29) and leading the people into idolatry (Judges 8:27) rather than keeping the Law.

¹⁵ McCann, 11.

vivid theological vantage point has been granted to God's people today. Whereas the exilic community stood in Babylonian or Persian dust wondering how the hopes of the prophets could be fulfilled amongst a sinful people who had lost its status as a nation, the people of the new covenant stand on dust around the world, knowing and rejoicing from whence their salvation has come, namely Israel fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. If the final editors of the book of Judges viewed Israel's tumultuous relationship with Yahweh through the lens of a repeated cycle of sin, judgment, and salvation, we view that relationship through the lens of the gospel, through that same cycle worked out once and for all in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With that interpretive context in view, let us now focus our lenses on the divine rebuke in Judges 2:20-22, looking at Israel's sin, its consequences, and God's warrant for judgment.

Israel's Sin: Shattering Itself against the covenant (Judges 2:20)

Torrance often used the imagery of "shattering" or "dashing" to describe Israel's active disobedience against God and his grace, as well as the result of his subsequent judgment.¹⁶ God gave Israel his Word, his grace, his covenant, and his love, but the more that He gave and the closer that he came, the harder Israel pushed back in defiance. Torrance explains this paradoxical opposition:

The astonishing thing here is that the more God gave himself to his people, the more he forced this people to be what it was in its sin and self-will, to be in truth what it actually was, a rebel. The very self-

¹⁶ For example, Israel "shattered itself on the unswerving persistence of the divine purpose of love" (*Incarnation*, 47; "Israel of God: Israel and the Incarnation," *Interpretation* 10/3 (1956): 308), "shattered itself on the cross" (*Incarnation*, 49; "Israel of God," 310), and "broke themselves again and again upon the word of God, dashing themselves against the covenant in which he had laid hold of them and help them in unswerving love" (*Incarnation*, 42); and "shattering itself against the mercies of the covenant" ("Israel of God," 318).

Karl Barth, Torrance's mentor, uses similar language of Israel being "wrecked" by virtue of their unique relationship to Yahweh, which he calls "the historical greatness and tragedy of Israel." Barth further argues that Israel's wreckage is nonetheless her determination; though she continually wrecked herself on the covenant, her status as God's people is "indestructible," *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, III.4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 319.

giving of God in holy love not only revealed Israel's sin, but intensified it; it intensified the enmity between Israel and Jahweh and intensified the contradiction between Jahweh and Israel.¹⁷

God's covenantal love exposed and even exacerbated Israel's sin, but to what end? Did not God desire his people to be holy as he is holy (Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 19:2)? Did he not desire their love and worship (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 6:5; Josh 22:5)? And did he not need a faithful people who would be his instrument to reach the ends of the world with his salvation (Genesis 12:3; 28:14; Isaiah 42:6)? Yes, yes, and yes. Just as Jesus made it clear that his mission was to the needy, to those who recognized their sin and their need for a savior (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31), so also Israel needed to recognize her sin and her need for God. Yahweh had come not for those who thought that they were already righteous, but for the needy. Only then would Israel fully love the Lord, only then would she share his holiness, and only then could she be an ambassador for God's saving grace.¹⁸

Israel's sin takes many forms throughout the Old Testament, from her perpetual lack of trust through the wilderness (Exodus 16; Numbers 11) to her idolatry (Exodus 32) to her rebellion and inner-fighting (Numbers 14). The sin highlighted in the book of Judges is idolatry, or more precisely apostasy, which is arguably worse because it is specifically the turning away of previously loyal subjects. The cycles of sin and deliverance brought Israel to her spiritual nadir, represented in the horrors of Judges 19-21 and fundamentally in her rejection of God's grace.

Judges 2:20 introduces the direct divine discourse with "the anger of the Lord burned against Israel," which is little surprise after the description of their

¹⁷ "Israel of God," 309.

¹⁸ Karl Barth also believed that God's people could not help but transgress God's law until they recognize their guilt, their need for forgiveness, and that the only means of universal salvation is through the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ, who represents all transgressors and yet redeems them with his perfect obedience, *Church Dogmatics, III.4 The Doctrine of Creation*, 232-234.

continual relapse into apostasy (2:11-13, 17, 19).¹⁹ Israel worshipped a holy God whose righteousness and goodness were false attributes apart from his justice and anger towards sin. The Lord's accusation against Israel in v. 20 gives two, parallel reasons for his kindled anger. First, Israel has transgressed his covenant, or disobeyed the rules of their relationship. Second, they have not listened to the Lord's voice. This poetic way of emphasizing Israel's disobedience adds a personal flavor to Israel's unfaithfulness, the intimacy that God grants his people through the gracious gifting of his revelation has been rejected by an ungrateful people.²⁰

Another aspect of this indictment is also very relational. The relative clause, "which I commanded their ancestors" in v. 20c reminds the reader that Israel's relationship with the Lord during this transitional period is no isolated event in history. The phrase "your ancestors" (or literally, "your fathers") is used throughout chapter 2 in order to underline the contrast between the generation of the judges and the faithful generations of their ancestors. It occurs first in Judges 2:1, in a similar rebuke from the angel of the Lord, who reminds this sinful generation that the Lord promised the land of Canaan to Israel's ancestors and that the covenant he made with them was permanent: "I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you.'" The phrase "your ancestors" is used four more times (2:10, 12, 17, 19) before it is used as a mild inclusion in vv. 20 and 22, making the contrast between

¹⁹ It is even questionable whether or not Israel's "cries" for deliverance (e.g., Judges 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6-7; and even 10:10) were cries of genuine repentance or just cries of distress. See Block (*Judges, Ruth*, 346-347) who interprets even Israel's cry of confession in Judges 10:10 as "purely utilitarian and manipulative," as well as the more detailed analysis by JoAnna Hoyt, "Reassessing Repentance in Judges," *BibSac* 169 (2012): 143-158.

²⁰ The collocation *šāmē'û lēqôlî* ("listen to my voice") is a common idiom for obeying someone, and is frequently used in parallel with commands of obedience (e.g., Deuteronomy 27:10; 28:45). However, the personal and intense nature of hearing the almighty God's voice should not be diminished in the idiom. Consider, for example, Israel's terror in Deuteronomy 4-5 (esp. Deuteronomy 5:24-29) when God spoke to them directly. That kind of immanence from the God of the universe struck fear and reverence into the hearts of his people, as it should today, K. T. Aitken, "שמע," *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 175-181.

faithful generations and unfaithful generations a theological lens through which to read this short pericope.²¹

But if the Israelites were not imitating their faithful ancestors, who *were* they imitating? Even though their status as a nation had been ratified at Sinai, Torrance notes that Israel is typically referred to as “the people of Israel,”²² literally “the children of Israel” (*běnê-yîsrā’ēl*) in Judges (and Joshua).²³ Israel was called foremost to be a people of God, a community of faithful worshippers. Their status as a nation was a resultant blessing of that covenant relationship (Genesis 12:2; 18:18; 46:3). However, Israel’s hallmark sin during this period was her desire to emulate the surrounding pagan nations rather than her ancestors. For Yahweh to refer to Israel in v. 20 as “this nation”²⁴ rather than “my people” or even “this people” is a direct and condemning comparison with the “nations” of v. 21, whom the Lord will no longer be driving out from the land.²⁵ Ironically, and tragically, Israel will get precisely what she wants: to be like the other nations. And, of course, by getting what she wants, she will risk losing what she needs, i.e., the faith that binds her to Yahweh.

How could this happen? How could Israel forsake the God who just two generations prior had dramatically rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and who had revealed his power and glory again and again in the conquest of Canaan? Israel would have envied the tangible nature of pagan idols and their claim to

²¹ Of course, as we have already noted, not every generation was characteristically faithful, as the generation of Moses is a case in point, even though they were the generation who first received the law. God is clearly referring only to the faithful ancestors in previous generations, most notably the generation of Joshua, whose faithfulness is contrasted with the following generation in 2:7-10.

²² The word typically translated as “people” (*‘am*) is rarely used in collocation with “Israel.”

²³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 51; *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 346.

²⁴ Several English translations, such as the ESV, KJV and NRS, miss this implicit charge by rendering *gôy* (“nation”) as “people.” Likewise, the Targum uses *‘am* (“people”), Willem F. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, Oudtestamentische Studiën 36 (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1995), 366.

²⁵ *Atonement*, 346.

“specialization” over separate areas of life; Baal was responsible for the fertility of the land and Astarte claimed responsibility for the fertility of the female womb.²⁶ However, Torrance gets to the root of Israel’s sin. When Adam and Eve transgressed the Lord’s command in the Garden of Eden, they did so — at least in part — in an effort to be like God (Genesis 3:5-6).²⁷ Here again we meet with tragic irony: in their efforts to be more like God, rather than more dependent on him in their creaturely otherness, the bond between God and humanity was broken. Not only did sin break the bond between God and humanity, but also the bond between Adam and Eve (individuals in general) and even the bond within themselves, leaving humanity isolated and in constant effort towards “re-socialisation,” often through sinful means.²⁸ Torrance describes the root and consequence of sin saying, “It is a double story. On one side it is the atomisation of mankind, for the internal rupture results in individualisation and conflict. On the other it is the story of human attempts at re-socialisation.”²⁹ Just like when humanity tried to create their own bonds in order to build a city and a tower in the plains of Shinar in order to make a name for themselves and remain united (Genesis 11:1-9), so also Israel attempted to create their own bonds during the generation of the Judges by becoming like the nations surrounding them. And just as God thwarted the people Genesis 11 in order to protect them from their own pride and independence, so also God judged the generations of the judges in order to both intensify their sin and to make them dependent and faithful.

The generations of the judges were defined by these broken bonds and Israel’s sinful attempts at restoring them. The refrain “everyone did what was right

²⁶ For a helpful introduction to these prominent Canaanite deities, see Daniel Block, *Judges*, in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 2: *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. John Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 120.

²⁷ John Calvin is probably correct to qualify that “unfaithfulness” in general was “the root of the Fall” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 245) but the motive for their unfaithfulness clearly seems to be their desire to be like God (as the serpent said in Genesis 3:5) and to be wise (as Eve desired in Genesis 3:6).

²⁸ *Incarnation*, 38.

²⁹ *Incarnation*, 39.

in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25), the lack of centralized worship or governance, and the individualization that currents throughout the book are direct results of Israel's sin and in total opposition to what it means to be humans made in God's image and in covenant with him. Israel's only attempts at unification are with the enemy and their gods, or in a unified effort to nearly exterminate an entire tribe (Judges 21:3, 6) and apply the holy war that they were commanded to wage on the Canaanites on one of their own cities (Judges 21:10-11)! Again, the reader is not surprised that "the anger of the Lord burned against Israel" (Judges 2:20a).

The Consequences of Israel's Sin: Shattering Itself against the covenant (Judges 2:21)

God promised that he would not break his covenant with Israel (Judges 2:1), but the blessings of the covenant, including their peace and safety in the land, were dependent on Israel's obedience. The blessings and curses of the covenant are detailed in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. While the Israelites tasted the covenant blessings when Joshua led them into the promised land, their disobedience brought a foretaste of the covenant curses during the period of the judges.³⁰

In Judges 2:21, the Lord reveals his punishment for Israel's apostasy: he will no longer drive out the inhabitants of the land whom Joshua left for succeeding Israelites to complete the task. As the angel of the Lord mentioned at the end of the first introduction to the book (Judges 1:1-2:5), God has changed his plan and will no longer be ridding the land of Israel's enemies and their tempting idolatry (2:3). The reference in Judges 2:21 to Joshua is natural in this section of backtrack and overlap starting in Judges 2:6, but it also serves as a reminder of Joshua's warning in Josh 23:13, repeated here with very similar terms, though with added

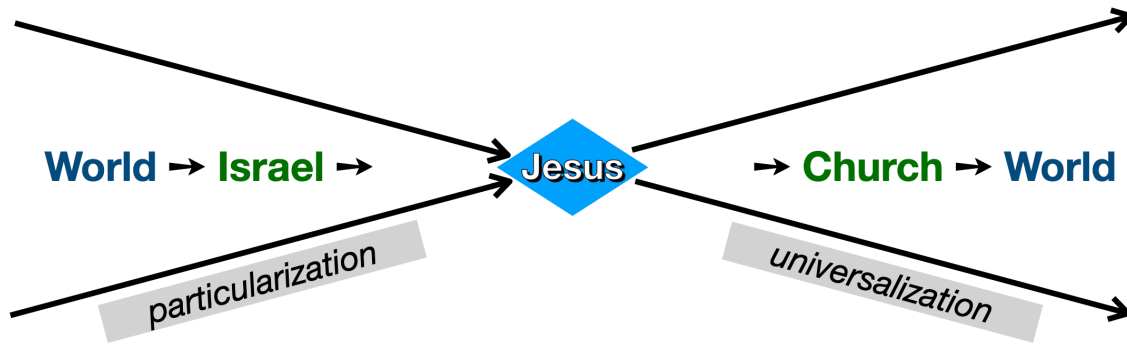
³⁰ Although the full force of the covenant curses awaited the destruction of Jerusalem and exile in 587 BC, foretastes of the curses are seen clearly in Judges: Israel's enemies will steal their crops (Leviticus 26:16; Deuteronomy 28:30-33; c.f., Judges 6:4); their fiancés will be taken by another (Deuteronomy 28:30; c.f., Judges 14:20) God will use their enemies to defeat them (Leviticus 26:17; throughout Judges); their enemies will rule over them (Leviticus 26:17; throughout Judges); wild beasts will destroy the land and people (Leviticus 26:22; c.f., Judges 14:5); and their roads will be deserted (Leviticus 26:22; Judges 5:6).

emphasis. Joshua had warned his own generation that if they conformed to the ways of the remaining pagan nations, rather than the love and command of Yahweh, then “the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you.” God relates the fulfillment of that warning emphatically in Judges 2:21, emphasizing the Lord’s action (literally, “On my part, I myself will no longer”) as well as the fact that he will no longer drive out even one man from the Canaanites (literally, “drive out a man from before them, from the nations”). Of course, God is true to his word. Every victory that the Lord secures in the book of Judges is a victory of deliverance from foreign oppression, not a victory of conquest. His aid is defensive, not offensive.

We have noted the irony of this punishment, that Israel is essentially getting what they think they want. Perhaps even more ironically, God’s punishment not only fits the crime, but it even intensifies the crime. Israel will grow increasingly sinful as the book progresses and as the history of the settlement period unfolds. This type of punishment seems counter-intuitive to the short-sighted. Personally, if I had a teenaged child who snuck out of the protection and wisdom of my house and care after curfew in order to hang out with friends who were a poor and dangerous influence on her, the last punishment that I would give would be to stop interfering with her poor friendship choices or allow her to move out of my house! Fortunately, God is not short-sighted, and fortunately my analogy is imperfect. Again, Torrance’s theology of Israel and her relationship to Yahweh is important. God had a dual-purpose for Israel, both to allow her to become the rebel she was naturally-inclined to be, thus allowing her to break herself down again and again until she recognized her need, and also to shape her as a potter shapes clay, picking up the broken, now-malleable clay to create vessels in need of redemption, and vessels prepared for righteousness.

Moreover, how do we reconcile Israel’s punishment (and the command to drive out the Canaanites in the first place!) with God’s universalistic plan of blessing all of the families of the earth through Abraham’s seed (Genesis 12:3)? Torrance’s view of particularization helps to elucidate the relationship between the particularization in Israel’s election and covenant relationship and the universalization of his redemptive plan. God chose the nation of Israel to mediate

his covenant to the world. Their failure in mediating that covenant resulted in the foreordained plan of God himself becoming Israel in the flesh and reconciling the sin of Israel to a holy God, thereby making salvation possible for all sinners. This movement can be illustrated by the following:



According to Torrance, God's plan was particular in its instrumentality through one people, Israel, but universal in its goal:

This movement was paradoxical in character — the more particular it became, the more universal it also became; the deeper the bond between God and man was driven into the human existence of Israel, the closer redemption made contact with creation; the more intimately Israel was tied to the one and only God, the God of all, the more the activity of grace broke through the limitations of national Israel and reached out to all the world.³¹

This particularization must be seen through representation as well. God chose Israel to represent humanity in both their sinfulness and their faithfulness. Israel ultimately failed in her calling as faithful covenant partners, prompting God to take the responsibility upon himself by becoming man, becoming Israel incarnate, thereby representing Israel in all its sin and need for atonement, and also Israel's role as a faithful mediator of God's covenant.

³¹ "The Israel of God," 311-312.

Recognizing that Israel was given the land, not by virtue of her own merit, but by virtue of God's promises to Israel's patriarchs and the sins of the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 9:5-6), and that Israel was chosen as an instrument of God's universal plan of salvation to anyone of any nation who would believe in the saving grace of God, partially explains why God first charged Israel to drive out the Canaanites. His punishment of leaving the Canaanites in the land was not a mercy to them, that they might witness the covenant faithfulness of God's people, but a part of his grander, more complex plan. By leaving the enemy nations in the land, God was making it that much easier for Israel to reject him, and rejection is a crucial part of redemption.

According to Torrance, atonement has two components: cleansing of sin (which requires sacrifice) and reconciliation (which requires rejection of the unholy).³² According to Torrance, this rejection was necessary in order to fulfill God's plan of universal redemption: Israel would necessarily reject the ultimate manifestation of God's grace, Jesus Christ. Torrance explains,

Israel was elected also to reject the Messiah. If the covenant partnership of Israel with God meant not only that the conflict of Israel with God became intensified but was carried to its supreme point in the fulfilment of the Covenant, then Israel under God could do no other than refuse the Messiah. And, as Peter announced on the day of Pentecost, that is precisely what God had intended, in his determination to deal with our sin at the point of its ultimate denial of the saving will of God.³³

Just as Israel rejected and cast out the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:10), so also Israel would many years later reject and cast out their Savior, who would thereby bear the penalty for Israel's guilt by being rejected by his own people (Isaiah 53:3).³⁴ In so doing, Israel would be rejecting herself, because Jesus was the representation of all that Israel was supposed to be. God

³² *Incarnation*, 52.

³³ *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 34.

³⁴ *The Mediation of Christ*, 36.

was shaping Israel to be the rejected and the rejecter so that all of the families of the earth could finally be saved. Far from being the arbitrary recipient of God's gracious favor, she was the instrument of God's universal salvation. Far from overlooking all of Israel's sin in his commands for Israel to drive out the Canaanites, God was intensifying Israel's sin for the salvation of the Gentiles.

God's Motivation for Judgment: Shattering Itself against the covenant (Judges 2:22)

God's final statement in this passage is his motivation for not driving out the Canaanites. In the previous section, we noted how God's refusal to drive out Israel's enemies fits into the canonical picture of God's plan of redemption for all sinners, including the Gentiles. In v. 22, God gives Israel a reason that is particular to their circumstances, but which contributes to our theology of his covenant relations with all of his beloved. God wanted to test Israel, and this test would demonstrate to Israel their own faithfulness or failure to uphold the commands of the covenant.³⁵ We will first examine the semantic use of "test" in this passage, and then look at Torrance's contributions to the concept of divine testing.

The idea of "testing" can be misleading to modern readers who generally associate testing as a means for the tester to determine the validity or capability of the object. The verb *nāsâ* ("to test") can be used this way in the Old Testament, but when God is the subject of the testing, it is often used as a means of measuring the obedience,³⁶ though not for the sake of God's knowledge (since surely he already

³⁵ A few verses later, in 3:2, the text seems to say that God left the nations for a different reason. The Hebrew syntax is difficult, but the JPS Tanakh translation probably offers the best sense: "so that succeeding generations of Israelites might be made to experience war — but only those who had not known the former wars." Judges 3:4 is parallel to Judges 2:22, that the testing for the sake of demonstrating Israel's loyalty or disloyalty. The function of Judges 3:2 is most likely a literary backtrack. The nations were originally left so that the generation immediately following Joshua (who were children during the wars of conquest) could experience warfare and the obedience it represented. Now, two generations after Joshua, God was leaving the nations in order to test Israel's faithfulness. For an excellent discussion of the interpretative options, see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 159-162.

³⁶ Terry L. Brensinger, "נסה," *NIDOTTE*, vol. 3, 112.

knows Israel's hearts!) but for the sake of his people. In other words, even in judgment, and even in testing, God is doing something for Israel. But what is he doing? When used in the Piel with the prepositional phrase "by them" (*bām*) as it does in Judges 2:22, it can carry the idea of "to train by means of."³⁷ God used the presence of the Canaanites as a training ground for Israel's faithfulness. This aspect of training, or teaching, is also used in Deuteronomy 8:2 with very similar language and syntax: "And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you and test you to know what is in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not." That same context makes it clear that the testing his people's faithfulness is for the sake of their future, for the sake of ultimate blessing: "in order to humble you and in order to test you, so that he can do you good in your future" (Deuteronomy 8:16). These positive aspects of testing, training and a good future, are illustrations of the dual realities of punishment and mercy that run throughout the book of Judges and throughout the history of Israel.

Torrance expositis another passage on divine testing that helps to elucidate the testing in the book of Judges. Perhaps the most famous testing in the Old Testament is the story of the Akedah ("binding") of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19. Torrance explains that there are two ways to be reconciled to God: (1) humanity trying their best to do so, which results in failure every time, or (2) God providing the sacrifice for them. God's testing (Genesis 22:1) in this passage was for the sake of Abraham, and the test did more than prove Abraham's faithfulness (Genesis 22:12, 16-17), and it even did more than show that God himself would provide the substitute sacrifice (Genesis 22:13-14) and that faithfulness was rewarded with covenant blessings (Genesis 22:16-17). Through this test, God showed Abraham that even his best was not enough to reconcile sinners with a holy God. God would have to give his best, his only son, his very self. Salvation belongs to God alone (Revelation 7:10); sinners can only receive it with faithfulness and thanksgiving.

Centuries after the testing of Abraham, God's testing of Israel again taught them a crucial lesson: they were, in fact, unable to "keep the way of the

³⁷ Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT), 2 vol. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 702.

Lord" (Judges 2:22). Left to their own sinful will, they sought reconciliation and blessing through false gods and ineffectual means. They were in desperate need, not of a king to lead them in righteousness (the history of the monarchy and divided kingdom proves that kings more often led God's people astray!) but of their divine king to provide the atonement needed to reconcile them to their covenant God. The "testing" throughout the generation of the judges served to teach God's people of their need for God's saving grace.

Thus, this testing had more to do with demonstrating truths to Israel than determining their faithfulness. In Genesis 22, God knew that Abraham would be faithful in his offering of Isaac, but God's purpose was primarily to demonstrate to Abraham that even his best was not good enough for reconciliation; God had to provide the sacrifice. Likewise, Israel's testing during the settlement period was not so much to determine if they would remain faithful to Yahweh, but to demonstrate that they would not, that they were naturally inclined towards apostasy and, yet, God was naturally inclined towards faithfulness and mercy. Testing both exposed Israel's sin and refined them, making the elect more faithful and the non-elect more of what they were: apostates.

Whether we distinguish between the two groups or two reactions to God's presence as the elect and the non-elect, or more generally as the faithful remnant and the unfaithful, there are clearly two groups of people throughout Israel's history: those who listen to God's voice, obey his commandments, and trust in him, and those who rebel against his will and fall deeper and deeper into sin's grasp. In fact, the boundaries of these groups are fluid, since the same individual can move from one group to another. Solomon began his rule as a wise and faithful king, but ended his life as an apostate; whereas Paul persecuted the followers of Christ only to become Jesus' greatest missionary to the Gentiles. Of course, God desires that all sinners would turn from rejecting God's grace to accepting it in obedience and faith (1 Timothy 2:4). According to Torrance, Jesus' disciples illustrate this turn most dramatically. They rejected him, allowing him to go to the cross, but then they remembered that Passover meal and Christ's teachings and understood his passion. According to Torrance,

It was their sin, their betrayal, their shame, their unworthiness, which

became in the inexplicable love of God the material he laid hold of and turned into the bond that bound them to the crucified Messiah, to the salvation and love of God for ever.³⁸

Thus, the essential truth that binds together these opposing responses to God's grace is Christ's incarnation and atonement. In his incarnation, Jesus came in the "likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3)"; he represented Israel at its worst, at the point where the unfaithful among them had come to reject even the ultimate offer of God's grace: the life of his own son. Through his atonement, Jesus bore of the guilt and the penalty for sin (either of the world or of the faithful, depending on one's view) and secured new life through his victorious resurrection for anyone who recognizes their need and dependence on him.

Conclusion: Christ Shattering Himself for the sake of the Covenant

Interpreting Judges 2:20-22 alongside Torrance's theology has enriched our reading of the text, and of the book as a whole, in several important ways. First, Torrance helps explain the deep-seated nature of Israel's persistent apostasy, that sinners by nature reject God's grace. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, we can only reject God's grace and, yet, Israel's rejection of God's grace was part of God's grand plan of redemption. Second, Torrance elucidates the relationship between Israel and the Canaanites, and ultimately between Israel and world, that Israel's mediating role was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the ultimate manifestation of Israel, bearing the guilt of her sin in his perfectly faithful flesh. Third, Torrance offers a nuanced understanding of divine testing, that it demonstrates to God's people their need for a Savior.

While focusing on the sin of Israel and its place in God's redemptive plan, are we saying that Israel's role is finished? Did they play their tragic part of rejecting God's grace and are now only casualties of a spiritual war? Just as the disciples, and Saul of Tarsus, turned from rejecting the Messiah to accepting him, so also faithful Israel remains God's first love and remains an essential part of God's plan of redemption. As Paul himself wrote to the Romans, salvation, glory, honor, and

³⁸ *The Mediation of Christ*, 34.

peace are for “the Jew first and also the Greek” (Romans 1:16; 2:10). Torrance’s own words about Israel’s vital place in God’s redeeming grace are a fitting place to conclude:

[I]t was in the bearing of that very sin that reconciliation was driven into the depth of Israel’s being and nailed there in such a way that Israel has been bound to God for ever within the embrace of his reconciling love incarnate in Jesus Christ. That is why the vicarious mission of Israel in the mediation of reconciliation to mankind did not cease with the death and resurrection of Christ but continues to have an essential place throughout all history in the reconciliation of the world to God.³⁹

³⁹ *The Mediation of Christ*, 34-35.