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## Review: Judges

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suggests that the phrase itself only describes the guilt which weighs upon the violator of the law, which may result in punishment or forgiveness. The second instance is when Sklar translates *kipper* differently in contexts of sin (“the effecting of a *kōper*-payment,” p. 184), and impurity and consecration (“to effect purgation,” p. 135), even though a *kōper* payment was necessary in both cases (p. 135). Sklar’s translation in contexts of impurity and consecration has placed the emphasis upon the consequences of the *kōper* payment, rather than upon the meaning of *kipper* itself.

Second, Sklar suggests translating the verb *’āšam* as “to suffer guilt’s consequences,” a suggestion that has at least two significant problems. First, he argues for “consistency of translation” (p. 41) between Lev 4:3 and 13, implying throughout his discussion that *’āšam* occurs in both instances. The verb *’āšam* does indeed occur in v. 13, but in verse 3 it is the noun *’asmāh*. One should not assume that a verb and a noun that share the same root must, for that reason, share the same semantic range (see Barr, *Semantics*). Second, the examples that Sklar uses for the consequential meaning of *’āšam* are all from non-priestly sources.

Sklar has written a superb monograph that evidences careful scholarly research. While interaction with Gane’s recent monograph *Cult and Character* would have been interesting, most likely this work was not available at time of publication. Anyone who has the capacity to wade through Sklar’s technical study will be deeply enriched. It is an excellent contribution to the scholarly study of sin in the Scriptures.

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*Judges*. By Susan Niditch. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008, xxviii + 290 pp., \$44.95.

Susan Niditch is Samuel Green Professor of Religion at Amherst College. She is perhaps best known for her work in orality in ancient Israelite literature, *Oral World and Written Word* (1996), and her short book *Ancient Israelite Religion* (1998).

The commentary’s format is consistent with that of other OTL volumes, a series that expressly aims to be readable while discussing the most significant linguistic, literary, historical, and theological elements in the biblical text. In this regard, Niditch’s work is a model of uncluttered, focused discussion of the text, peppered with concise summaries of interpretive options and succinct judgments. The bibliography covers fourteen pages, and introductory matters of redaction, textual history, epic characterization, and literary structure are held to thirty pages.

Niditch does the reader a service by stating her presuppositions and aims clearly. After reviewing the standard models for approaching *Judges*, Niditch adopts “a theoretical approach that is interested in history and takes seriously the idea that *Judges* includes material that would have been meaningful in some form to Israelite audiences before there were kings in Israel” (p. 8). She adds that her approach does not involve “matching narrative details with specific historical events or testing for historical verisimilitude” (p. 8). The conquest narratives are the result of the work of pro-monarchical writers adapting “epic-bardic” poetry to suit their agenda (p. 9). Aside from epic poetic material, two other voices come through for Niditch: the “voice of the theologian” and the “voice of the humanist” (pp. 10–12). The former is the familiar Deuteronomist, whose

stories are judgmental with respect to loyalty to Yahweh. This voice should not be confused with biblical theology. The commentary offers next to nothing in that regard. The latter voice is a teller of olden tales whose material is fictional and non-critical, aiming only to preserve ancient stories.

Niditch's commentary offers not one but two new translations of Judges. One translation, sensitive to "oral and aural aspects," opens each chapter. This translation "seeks to aid comprehensibility and readability by converting the Hebrew syntax to a more standard word order" (p. 25). The second translation, more literalized than the first, appears in an appendix at the end of the book. This translation "retains the Hebrew word order and even more closely conveys the register of the Hebrew" (p. 26).

Each chapter translation is followed by a short technical section that deals with textual, grammatical, syntactical, and literary issues. These notes are footnoted in the translation. For those interested in grammatical-historical interpretation, these notes are the meat of the commentary. Lastly, Niditch summarizes the content of the chapter in traditional commentary style. Her summations are not broken into pericope units, but are instead organized by grouping verses together for analysis. The emphasis in the explanatory section is clearly on literary features and observations of inter-textuality. The streamlined format and presentation make the commentary quite easy to scan to discern whether or not the author has something to say about a particular verse, phrase, or word. There is nothing in the commentary that reflects a homiletic aim.

Readers who know Niditch for her work in Israelite religion will be disappointed with this commentary. Judges offers a number of passages that could be illumined against ancient Near Eastern religious practice. The most obvious are the angel of Yahweh appearances. It is telling that Niditch regularly translates "the angel of the LORD" as "an angel of the LORD." It is a basic rule of Hebrew grammar that a definite *nomen rectum* dictates a definite translation of the noun in construct. Her translation seems to convey a bias against the normative rendering for an unstated reason and disconnects this figure in Judges to his appearances in other biblical references—linkages useful for formulating a canonical theology. The reference in Judg 4:5 to Deborah sitting under a tree of divination gets only a note telling us the tree was considered sacred (p. 62), which is hardly enlightening. The stars fighting "from their courses" are awkwardly referred to as fighting "from their orbit" (p. 75), though stars do not have orbits. Some insight into how this fairly obvious reference to astral religion may have served a polemical purpose for the writer would be in order. Numerous other examples occur where toponyms, personal names, and other phrases that are cultic in nature and deserve explanation in terms of religious worldview receive little attention in that regard. Sadly, Niditch is too concerned with literary analysis to the neglect of her other strengths.

For its economy of presentation of technical notes, the volume is useful for the reader adequately prepared with Hebrew. However, it should be used alongside a more substantial commentary on Judges, such as that by Block (NAC, 1999).

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*The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary.* By Robert Alter. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007, xl + 518 pp., \$35.00.

Robert Alter has done it again. Following his previous "commentaries" on Genesis (1996), 1 and 2 Samuel (1999), and the Pentateuch (2004), comes his close reading of the Psalter. Writing on biblical poetry is hardly new for Alter, but this engagement with