

STUDIES IN JUDGES No. 8

Judges 6:1-32

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Up to this point in the account of the various judges, the career of each one has been reported in a summary way with little or relatively little detail. Othniel took a paragraph; Ehud a small chapter; Shamgar two sentences. Even Deborah and Barak receive only a medium length chapter, though a substantial poem doubles that account. But now, with Gideon, we enter new waters. The narrative of his judgeship takes three substantial chapters, as the book of Judges is conventionally organized, with a fourth, chapter 9, as something of an appendix to the Gideon narrative. We get the familiar formula in 6:1 that begins the account of a judge and Israel's deliverance – "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord..." – but we don't get the familiar concluding formula – "the land enjoyed peace forty years" – until 8:28. As we will see, there is a measure of detail that far exceeds that of the previous narratives.

The length of this material has prompted scholars to study its organization, to see if this longer section has some internal organization of its own. And it seems that it does. One scholar has proposed this outline.

6:1-32	Gideon's fight against idolatry
6:33-7:25	Gideon's fight against the Midianites
8:1-21	Gideon's fight against his own people, the Israelites
8:22-32	Gideon's lapse into idolatry

In such a scheme, idolatry both begins and ends the narrative, leaving Israel at the end in the same spiritual crisis she was in at the beginning. That agrees with the thesis of the prologue of Judges that the history recorded in the book is the history of a downward spiritual spiral that is not arrested by any of the deliverances that the Lord provides for Israel when she cries out to him. The Gideon material that begins so well, ends bitterly: inter-tribal conflict, Gideon's manufacture of an ephod that became a spiritual snare to Israel, and Gideon's son, Abimilech, whose rule proved to be a disaster and a cause of civil war. [Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 48] The middle set – first the narrative of Gideon's defeat of the Midianites and then the narrative of the tensions that rose between Gideon and several Israelites groups and Gideon's fight with them – illustrates that God's deliverance of Israel from the enemies who oppressed her did not, alas, purify the people of Israel. Her sins continued and resulted in ever greater fissures in her national life. Sin always divides; always alienates people from each other. Remember the book of Judges ends with a lengthy account of another and still more bitter civil war. Seen in this way, the Gideon material, like the material before and after it, demonstrates the main lessons of the book: the folly of Israel's accommodation to the pagan culture around her (remember we have said the book is about the "Canaanization of Israel"); the inevitable disintegration that follows unfaithfulness on the part of God's people; the certainty of God's wrath; and the greatness of the Lord's mercy that he remains faithful to his covenant at all when his people prove so unfaithful.

Text Comment

- v.1 The introductory formula, coming immediately after the great celebration of the Lord's deliverance of Israel in the poem of chapter 5, is a striking contrast to what has gone before and a great disappointment. The first-time reader naturally has expectations of better things but the narrative immediately plunges us back into the same morass of Israel's infidelity. We are in this way reminded of the irrationality of Israel's unbelief and disobedience. She is unwilling to resist the surrounding paganism no matter how terribly she suffers for that accommodation, no matter what the Lord does for her. [Webb, 146]

The next five verses are a description of Israel's oppression at the hands of the Midianites, so it is important to note the understated explanation in the second half of v. 1 that all that follows is *the Lord's* doing, *his* judgment upon his unfaithful people. "*he* gave Israel into the hands of the Midianites for seven years..." He was punishing his people for their sin and, as so often, using other peoples eager for conquest to do it.

- v.3 The Midianites were semi-nomadic people of western Arabia who, in this case, made common cause with some other peoples like them to take advantage of Israel's weakness.
- v.5 The invaders plundered Israelite fields at harvest, reaping what the Israelites had sown, and so devastated the local economy. Afraid of these brutal and powerful invaders, the Israelites put up scarcely any resistance. They fled whenever the Midianites appeared, taking refuge in natural fortifications sufficiently impregnable that the Midianites apparently made no effort to dislodge them.
- v.6 As before, Israel cried out to God in her distress. As before, apparently, no repentance, just a cry of pain. [Block, 253]

Now what follows is the call of Gideon, the longest narrative of a judge's call in the book.

However, before the Lord provides Israel with a leader, he sends a prophet to her and explains to her why she is in her present distress.

- v.10 The speech ends on that cryptic note and we are left to wonder what the Lord's response to Israel's distress will be, given her infidelity and her ingratitude for the Lord's goodness to her. What is clear after the prophet has finished speaking is that if the Lord comes to help Israel it will not be because she deserves it. But there is something more. The harkening back to Egypt and the exodus prepares us for the author presenting Gideon to us as a kind of second Moses.
- v.11 There is some support for the conclusion that "Gideon" was a nickname – the word means "hacker" or "hewer" and he is soon going to hack to pieces his father's altar to Baal and cut down his Asherah pole. His given name appears to have been Jerubbaal, a name that is also used in this narrative.

His father Joash was a substantial man in the community. His son we will learn later had a number of servants and he himself sponsored the site where Baal was worshipped by the community around.

- v.12 A greeting designed to provoke a question? Gideon, a mighty warrior? He's hiding from the enemy, for goodness sake.
- v.13 Gideon has some correct theology, but spiritual understanding is absent. He says nothing of Israel's spiritual defection from the Lord or that her present dismay is the Lord's just judgment for her sins. There have been great multitudes of folk in Christian history just like Gideon. They know the creed, they know what the Bible says about what Christ has done, but they find all of that irrelevant because of their present problems and they cannot apply gospel truth to themselves.
- v.14 The messenger speaks as if he hadn't even heard Gideon's reply to his first remark.
- v.15 Like Moses, Gideon downplays his own status and capacity, probably more than was justified. We've already said that his father had some wealth and influence and that his family was a substantial one. In any case, in his timidity and hesitation he is not only like Moses but like Barak before him. We are getting used to the fact that God is going to use flawed heroes to rescue his people.
- v.16 As in the face of Moses' quibbling, the Lord gives Gideon two encouragements in the form of promises: 1) he will be with him; and 2) Gideon will lead Israel in a great victory over their enemies.
- v.17 Moses had been given signs by the Lord (his staff turned into a snake; his hand turned leprous); now Gideon asks for signs as well.
- v.19 The nature and size of the offering indicates that Gideon thought he was giving a gift for a god. A specially picked animal, a huge amount of flour turned into bread (between 5 and 6 gallons) and a pot of broth.
- v.22 In the ANE, when a deity consumed a worshipper's offering, it was a sign that the man has found favor in the god's sight. Gideon, at this point, apparently thought like a typical ANE idolater. But, though the Lord gave him this encouragement, Gideon doesn't take it. He fears that he must die because he has seen the Lord face to face.
- v.23 Given the fact that the messenger of the Lord disappeared in v. 22, we cannot say how the Lord spoke to Gideon this next time.
- v.24 As one commentator interprets this statement: "Like a footnote in a research paper, the author hereby invites his readers to check out the veracity of his story by going and visiting the site." [Block, 265]

Now, it seems clear that the ‘messenger of the Lord’ was in fact Yahweh himself in the form of a man. This is called a ‘theophany,’ an appearance of God, and there are, as you know, other such appearances in the Bible. It is not an incarnation. The Lord did not take to himself, and permanently, a human nature. He was not *becoming* a man, he merely assumed a form by which he might appear to Gideon. Angels do that in the Bible and so does the Lord on several occasions. It is worth remembering, however, that, given the teaching we receive in the NT, we are expected to understand that the person of the Godhead who appeared to Gideon was God the Son, whom we know in his incarnate life as Jesus Christ.

- v.26 Normally, we would expect the narrative to proceed directly to v. 33 and take up the account of Gideon’s taking on the Midianites; but there in an intervening episode. We are surprised to learn that Gideon and his own family have been thoroughly paganized. There is a sanctuary to Baal at Gideon’s own home. While we learned in v. 13 that Gideon knew the theology of previous generations of Israel, while he knew the traditions of his family, as it were, in fact he was, as was his father, a thorough-going pagan, practicing the rites of Canaanite worship. Before the Lord will use him to deliver his people, he demands that Gideon cleanse the apostasy from his own home. Remember, Moses also had to cleanse himself of some overt defection from God’s law before he could fulfill the mission that God had given him. He had, you remember, to circumcise his son before the Lord would use him to deliver Israel from Egypt.

The reference to the ‘second’ bull has long been a problem because there is no mention of a ‘first’ bull. The simplest solution is to take the word translated ‘second’ in the NIV as an adjective meaning ‘prime’ or ‘prize.’ There is a reason to do this; it requires deriving the Hebrew word from a different root. But it seems a very likely and sensible solution to the problem. So it is a prize bull, seven years old. It had to be a strong animal to pull the altar down and it had to be prime to be worthy of sacrifice to God.

By ordering Gideon to build an altar to the Lord on the very site of what had been a sanctuary for the worship of Baal, he is as much ordering Gideon to reclaim the spiritually lost territory for the Lord.

But the Lord was also requiring Gideon to throw down the gauntlet to the Baal worship of his community by desecrating Baal’s sanctuary and using the wood to make a sacrifice to Yahweh.

- v.27 Gideon obeys immediately. He has obviously been impressed by the appearance of the Lord. But then we are disappointed to learn that he was still afraid of what the townspeople would do to him if they knew who had committed this outrage against their altar and Asherah. Here Israel’s spiritual situation is revealed to be so corrupted that they not only worshipped Baal, but they would punish violently anyone who came to the defense of the ancient faith.

v.32 We are left wondering what Joash really thought about all of this. His bull had been sacrificed, his son had stirred up the town against him, we might have expected him to be put out with Gideon and perhaps he was. He was, after all, a Baal worshipper himself. But, whether out of any new spiritual interest or only out of concern for his son, he seems rather easily to see the ridiculousness of paganism's position: instead of the people needing defense from an angry god, the pagan god needs the people to come to his aid. That is clearly the author's sarcastic viewpoint as well. The prophets, you remember, beginning with Elijah on Mt. Carmel, raise this same mockery of pagan idols to an art form. To this mocking argument, Joash – who does seem to be a man with resources – adds a naked threat. "Touch my son and you will pay." We suspect it was the latter threat, not the former argument, that calmed the people down and persuaded them to go home. Not too many people die for idols!

In a really revealing moment, typical of the book of Judges, Gideon is named, or renamed "Jerub-Baal" or his given name is given a new explanation and we're not precisely sure what this means. The name is ambiguous, at least in the total context. We don't expect an Israelite hero to have Baal in his name, especially a name such as a worshipper of Baal might also have, such as this name is. The reason given sounds fine, but we remember that Gideon never fully breaks the back of Baal worship among the Israelites and, indeed, at the end of his life takes steps that actually serve to strengthen Israel's attachment to Baal. If "Let Baal contend with him..." is the story of Gideon's life, there is a one sense in which Baal did contend with Gideon *and prevailed*. We already know, after all, from what we read in the prologue, that this story is not going to have an altogether happy ending. Things get worse, judge by judge, not better. We have already been told that. Nevertheless, Gideon begins pretty well and strikes a blow for the worship of Yahweh in Israel.

We began by saying that the greater detail in the Gideon narrative invites greater reflection. And as we begin the greater detail in the description of Israel's spiritual situation, her embrace of Canaanite worship, invites greater reflection on the nature and character of her corruption. What we have by Gideon's time is a situation in which, rather clearly, if we compare v. 13 and v. 25, the ancient faith has not been forgotten, nor entirely forsaken, but it has been overlaid with pagan worship and a pagan worldview. Gideon still knows the story of Israel's redemption. He knows something of the covenant that God made with Israel. But those realities have receded into the background. Front and center are the delicious, erotic, contemporary rites of Canaanite paganism. Gideon still thinks of himself as an Israelite, but he has learned from his father that being an Israelite doesn't mean that one cannot embrace the world around and its way of doing things, even its way of thinking about God and prosperity.

This, of course, is what has often occurred in Christian history. Christians continue to think of themselves as Christians, there is still some biblical history and vocabulary in their traditions, but, for all intents and purposes they are living and they are relating to God like the world around them. This became widely true again later in Israel's history. The prophets called Israel back from her flirtation with the world around her but failed by and large to secure from her a renewed loyalty to Yahweh and his covenant.

The same can be said to have happened in Christendom from the 4th century onward. The church accommodated herself to the thinking of the world around her, religious and ethical thinking, and became increasingly less Christian and more pagan. The same thing happened again after the Reformation, especially in the 17th century and thereafter. The church overlaid a Christian tradition and a Christian vocabulary with the thinking of enlightenment philosophy, Darwinian evolution, Freudian psychology and the like. It is doing the same in our time, accommodating the Christian faith to feminism, sexual liberation, relativism and so on.

What is more, no matter how paganized, no matter how corrupted her thinking and living had become, the church was and is defiantly confident of the rightness of these developments and staunchly resistant to reform.

Even with Assyria and then with Babylon at her gates, Israel could not and would not see that she had brought this upon herself *precisely by her disloyalty to God and to his covenant with her*. And it has always been the case. The Arians in the 4th century and the medieval popes were unrelenting in their rejection of orthodox and evangelical voices in the church. *They* were true Christianity, not Athanasius and Chrysostom; not Augustine; not Luther, Calvin, and Knox. And so into the 20th century. The arch-liberal, Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist who nevertheless was preaching in a Presbyterian Church during the days of the controversy for the faith in the Presbyterian Church, whose famous sermon, ‘Shall the Fundamentalists Win?’ – remember, ‘fundamentalist’ in those days meant simply a Christian of the orthodox, historic type – became a rallying cry for liberal Protestants, once said that he had never met an intelligent Christian who believed in the Virgin Birth. True Christianity in his view, the only Christianity worth preserving, was a Christianity unencumbered by such myths as the Virgin Birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was as sure that his liberal Christianity, his Christianity accommodated to modern thought, was the only true Christianity as J. Gresham Machen was sure that Fosdick’s religion wasn’t Christianity at all, it was, in fact a completely different religion, a false religion, as false as was the ancient worship of Baal.

And from time immemorial so it has gone. ‘You are betraying Christianity.’ ‘No, you are betraying it.’ ‘Nuh uh.’ ‘Yes huh.’ Not very satisfying, is it? And so today. Two very different, indeed more than two very different understandings of Christianity both claiming to be the true and authentic one. Is there a way to break the impasse? Is there a way to tell who has a right to the name and to tell what Christianity really is and what it is not?

And the answer of our text is that there is. There is a way to tell. It is not simply one man’s opinion set over against another’s. Do you remember the famous exchange between Elijah and Ahab the King of Israel? Elijah had appeared at court and announced a famine from God as a judgment for Israel’s betrayal of the covenant God had made with her, especially by her embrace of pagan worship, the worship of Baal and all the ways of thinking about God and man that went with that worship. Then Elijah disappeared and no one could find him. For three years the famine continued until the economy of Israel had been virtually destroyed. Then finally Elijah reappeared. Ahab met him with these words: ‘Is that you, you troubler of Israel?’ To which Elijah replied, ‘I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father’s family have.’ So far we have only a ‘I say/you say’ contest.

But Elijah goes on to break the impasse. He not only says “I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father’s family have.” He continues, “You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals.” There is the objective standard. There is the way to tell. God has spoken. He has revealed his covenant, his law, his will. He has revealed himself not only in his great works of redemption, but in the Word of God which he caused to be written for his people’s perpetual remembrance of the truth.

Well, we find the same appeal to Scripture here in Judges 6, though it is not quite so overt and plain-spoken. Remember we said at the beginning of our studies in Judges that this book is in many ways a reflection on the book of Deuteronomy. Over and over again the language of Deuteronomy and the teaching of that great covenant document is recalled in Judges, either explicitly or implicitly. Again and again Israel is punished for her infidelity in just the ways God said he would punish her in Deuteronomy. Here the connection between Judges and Deuteronomy is implicit but no less obvious for that. And it is in the relationship between these events and Deuteronomy that the lesson of this text lies.

In vv. 29ff. you have an unmistakable echo of Deuteronomy 13. There, in that famous chapter, Israel is ordered to root idolatry out of her life should she ever learn that any among her were practicing it. There was to be a careful investigation (13:14) – just such an investigation as the men of Ophrah propose and conduct in v. 29 – and if it is found that an Israelite was guilty of idolatry he must be put to death. The implication of Judges 6:30, confirmed by Joash’s response, is that death was precisely what the men of Ophrah intended for Gideon for what he had done to Baal’s sanctuary.

In other words, as any Israelite reader of Judges would immediately realize, you have an exact reversal of Deuteronomy 13 here in Judges 6. The investigation is conducted not to discover if someone had been practicing idolatry, but to find the one who had destroyed the idol’s shrine. The punishment to be meted out for the idolater is now to be meted out to the one who has prevented the practice of idolatry in Israel. Israel had stood the Word of God completely on its head and was not simply disobeying it but practicing the exact reverse of its commands.

There is the way to tell who is faithful and who is not; who is really a Christian and who is not; who is an advocate of the truth and who is not: compare what someone says and does to the teaching of the Word of God. Those who practice the Word of God are true believers; those who do not are not.

We must never forget the simplicity of this calculus. Fidelity to God is measured by fidelity to his Word; it is as simple as that; always as simple as that. That is the burden of Judges and its accusation against Israel. God had revealed his will to his people and they were ignoring or positively disobeying the divine will revealed in the Word of God. Had Gideon been a biblically minded man, he would have known immediately why Israel was being oppressed by her enemies. God had said in Deuteronomy that this would be her punishment if she betrayed his covenant. But because Gideon did not take God’s Word seriously, because he had not been raised by his father to take God’s Word seriously, because he did not take it to heart, he looked right past the obvious and could no longer make sense of Israel’s situation.

So it has always been and so it continues to be today. For example, liberal Protestants accuse us of betraying the faith with our hateful, fearful, discriminatory approach to homosexuality; or having a narrow and unloving faith for insisting that only Christians will go to heaven. We in turn accuse them of having abandoned the true faith. Who is right? It is very easy to tell. Those who remain faithful to God's Word, who believe its teaching, who seek in faithfulness to practice its commands are the true people of God.

Abandoning the Bible did not make Israel less passionate about its religion. They were ready to execute Gideon for what he had done. It did not make them less confident of their own rightness. They were possessed of moral outrage when they awoke to find the sanctuary destroyed. The world would be a much simpler place if only the orthodox had zeal. But it is not the case and has never been the case. The one faithful to the Word has often been viewed as the criminal, the betrayer of the faith, the corrupter of the people of God. The Jews despised Jesus and then his apostles and were absolutely sure of their rightness. The Arians hated Athanasius, spoke derisively about his teaching and tried to silence him, and so did the Romanists toward the Reformers, and the lackadaisical Anglicans about the Great Awakening men; and the liberal Protestants about Machen and the defenders of historic Christianity. Judges 6 is a tract for the times. It reminds us of what will always be the case – the corrupters of the faith in the name of the faith arrogantly dismissing its defenders. These Israelites were zealous for Baal, zealous for Baal within the context of what they took to be a truly authentic Israelite faith.

But it wasn't authentic and it was easy to tell that it was not. That faith had been defined in the covenant documents that God had revealed through Moses. They were the touchstone as the entire Bible is for us today. True faith has a measure; there is way to detect it and to detect its loss. Conformity to the Word of God is that way. It is a point that we are tempted to think is too obvious to mention. But the entire Bible and the history of Christianity since teaches us that, far from being too obvious to mention, it is a conviction that must be taught, confirmed, preserved, and defended by every generation. When fidelity to the Word of God ceases to be a living power in the hearts of God's people, when they cease to define their faith according to that Word, guide their lives by its promises and laws, seek the blessing of God according to its principles, it will not be long before they have erected shrines to Baal in their backyards.