

"GIDEON AND HIS BOYS"¹

Judges

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In many sermons and Bible study lessons Gideon is often portrayed as a valiant and brave warrior, a true model for us. Yet a close reading of this story suggests he is perhaps more complex than that and, like many of the other judges, has some serious flaws in his character.

The story opens by informing us that the Midianites are now raiding Israel whenever they please, stealing any livestock, food, or other valuable items they find. Note the irony of this, for the Israelites soundly defeated and plundered the Midianites back in Numbers 31 as they made their way from the wilderness toward the Promised Land. So for the Midianites to be plundering the Israelites signifies a serious reversal of the "exodus/salvation" story.

An angel of the Lord comes to Gideon and finds him threshing wheat, hidden down in a winepress in an attempt to hide from the Midianites. The Lord himself calls on Gideon to deliver Israel and promises that "I will be with you," the famous promise of God's empowering Presence (6:11–16). Gideon, however, is not convinced and asks for a sign (6:17), as if the conversation with the angel of the Lord is not evidence enough. As the story progresses, it takes repeated miraculous signs (four of them) to keep Gideon on board. In addition, as the story moves along, Gideon's fear is underscored in other ways (6:27; 7:10–11).

The angel of God delivers the first sign to Gideon by sending fire that miraculously consumes a small offering Gideon had prepared (6:20–22). Gideon is still rather timid and afraid (6:23–31), but God sends his Spirit on him, and he calls Israel together for war. But even after the conversation with the angel of the Lord and the miraculous sign of the fire, Gideon still wants more signs. He asks God for two more signs, specifically related to dew on a fleece and on the ground. God complies and gives him these two additional signs (6:36–40).

God, however, apparently has a sense of humor and, since Gideon has been testing him, now gives Gideon two "tests" to comply with. Gideon, already timid and afraid, is told he has too many men, and through two different exercises God has him trim down his army to only three hundred men (7:1–8), even though the Midianites are as thick as locusts, and their camels were like the sand on the seashore (7:12)! God wants the Israelites to know it is his powerful hand that will give them victory, and not their numbers.

Gideon, however, is still frightened (7:10–11), so God gives him one more sign, allowing him to overhear a dream of one of the Midianite soldiers that foretells an Israelite victory (led by Gideon). Finally, Gideon seems to "get it" and decides to attack (7:15–18), although he apparently wants to share the glory with the Lord, calling to his troops as they attack, "for the Lord and for Gideon" (7:18). God gives the Israelites a great victory, and as Gideon leads them, Israel thoroughly routs the Midianites (7:17–8:21).

The story, however, does not end yet, and the way in which a story ends is usually very important to its overall meaning. Unlike after the previous defeat of the Midianites (Num. 31:48–54) or after the capture of Jericho during the original conquest (Josh. 6:24), there is no mention in Gideon's victory of dedicating the captured gold and silver to the Lord by placing it in the tabernacle. Instead, Gideon collects a portion of the gold the Israelites captured and makes it into an "ephod," a garment that priests traditionally wore. Then, rather than placing this in the tabernacle, Gideon puts it in his own hometown, and "all Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it [the golden ephod] there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family" (8:23–27).

Furthermore, Gideon does not leave a good legacy, for as soon as he dies, Israel returns to worshiping Baal (8:33–35). In addition, Abimelech, one of Gideon's sons (the name Abimelech means "my father is the king"), murders his seventy brothers and has himself crowned king (9:1–6). His reign is short, however. After only three years he is killed in a siege by a woman who drops a millstone on his head (9:50–55). Thus like the Canaanite Sisera in the Deborah story, Abimelech is killed by a woman. He is not considered one of the judges.



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