

HANDLING "HEROES" IN HEBREWS 11

Judges

Kenneth Way¹

I can understand why the so-called "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11 includes luminaries like Abel and Enoch who have untarnished records in Genesis. I can also appreciate why imperfect people like Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses and Rahab are included among the faithful. But what about characters like Jephthah and Samson in Hebrews 11:32? These infamous figures from the book of Judges appear to be severely faith-challenged. So what are they doing in this august list?

Recently I have been working on research for a commentary on the book of Judges (for the forthcoming Teach the Text commentary series with Baker Publishing Group), and it is painfully obvious that the period of the judges was spiritually a very dark time in the history of Israel. Over the years many scholars have observed that the so-called "major" judges (in chapters 3-16) are arranged from, relatively speaking, best to worst. Thus Othniel is the moral apex and Samson is the moral nadir.

So this brings me back to Hebrews 11. Why in verse 32 does the author mention Gideon and Barak (who had reluctant/fearful faith) and Samson and Jephthah (who had ignorant/shallow faith)? Wouldn't he have done better to mention the "better" judges like Othniel, Ehud and Deborah? Or perhaps he should have skipped over the judges altogether and gone straight to David? I think that questions like this can be addressed by some basic principles of hermeneutics.

First, it is important to clarify that the author of Hebrews 11 is merely listing people from biblical history who demonstrated some faith. He is not technically interpreting the book of Judges or any other specific book of the Old Testament (at least not by our modern "objective" methods). Rather, he presumes that his audience already knows about the depressing message of the book of Judges; so he intentionally does something different. Notice that Hebrews 11:32 actually runs some of the judges together in a litany that includes David, Samuel, and "the prophets." Thus, he is neither expounding on the book of Judges nor on the book of Samuel; he is merely drawing illustrations from biblical history.

Second, it is important to interpret both Hebrews 11 and Judges according to their respective messages, or "big ideas." This is derived from what an author says or does not say and from how the author says it. The point of Hebrews 11 is to inspire us to grow in our faithfulness to Jesus; the point of the book of Judges is to warn us about our tendency toward apostasy (or faithlessness)! Since Hebrews 11 has a positive objective, the author selectively includes only the positive details from people who had imperfect faith. Judges, on the other hand, has a negative objective; so the author selectively emphasizes the negative details about Israel's imperfect leaders.

The "big idea" of a biblical passage also relates to theology proper. If the ultimate purpose of the Bible is to reveal God, then our interpretations must always be "theocentric" in focus (cf., G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* [Zondervan, 2003] 98, 106). With regard to Hebrews 11, one must



¹ *The Good Book Blog, Talbot School of Theology Faculty Blog, May 9, 2011*

read past the chapter division into the following verses where the reader is exhorted to look “to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,” and to “Consider him...so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb 12:2-3). The point is that one should not focus on any of the feeble “heroes” of chapter 11 per se, but rather, one should focus on Jesus. The selected stories of faith in Hebrews 11 should be viewed as catalysts that point us to God.

Likewise, the book of Judges should not be read as an anthology of “hero” stories, unless, of course, the hero is Yahweh himself. God is clearly the one in the book of Judges who sends oppressors, raises up leaders, sends his Spirit, and grants deliverance. God is therefore identified in the book as the ultimate ruler (8:23) and the ideal judge (11:27).

In light of these general considerations, I would suggest the following principles for interpretation:

1. ***Avoid making any biblical character into a role model or behavioral example to follow (positively or negatively). Whereas the human characters are incidental, God is the only “hero” in the biblical drama: He is ultimately the one who is revealed and the one who must be imitated*** (see J. H. Walton and K. E. Walton, Bible Story Handbook [Crossway, 2010] 13-30, 129, 131, 135, 140).
2. ***Abstain from reading the book of Judges through the “lens” of Hebrews 11.*** Judges has its own God-inspired message and it stands on its own two feet as Scripture. This means that the message of Judges is understandable without the aid of Hebrews 11 (and vice versa). We need to appreciate the distinct/different messages of the books of Hebrews and Judges. That is to say: let Hebrews 11 be Hebrews 11 and let Judges be Judges. We should not blend the two texts into something new which represents neither one.
3. ***Don’t try to replicate the subjective method that is employed by the inspired author of Hebrews 11.*** It should go without saying that we are not inspired in the same sense as the biblical authors, and thus we do not have the freedom to handle biblical texts in the same subjective manner that they did. For example, to argue on the basis of Hebrews 11 that the book of Judges provides behavioral role models for Christians to imitate would be to put aside more objective hermeneutical methods and impose a more subjective reading on the text of Judges that ignores authorial intentions (see J. H. Walton, “Inspired Subjectivity and Hermeneutical Objectivity” The Masters Seminary Journal 13/1 [2002] 65-77).

In conclusion, I would suggest that in Hebrews 11 we have not so much the “Hall of Faith” but rather the “Hall of Feeble Faith.” The only real “hero” in this passage is Jesus himself (Heb 12:2-3). The point in Scripture is never that we should be like Abraham or Moses, or—God forbid!—Jephthah or Samson. While all of these characters may have exhibited some measure of faith, the purpose is to point us to God so that we can be formed into his likeness (see Eph 5:1-2).

So let’s not put Bible characters on pedestals or make them into role models. Snapshots from the lives of these imperfect characters are recorded in order to direct us God-ward by showing us who He is based on what He has done in the past. The truth is that all of us are faith-challenged and are works-in-progress (see Rom 3:4). This is what makes “role modeling” so precarious. The proper way to imitate a faithful saint is explained by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” In other words, we should only be like Paul insofar as he is being like Jesus.