

# Judges 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Judges chapter 6 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains, and the caves and the strongholds.

For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them. They would encamp against them, and devour the produce of the land as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey.

For they would come up with their livestock and their tents. They would come like locusts in number. Both they and their camels could not be counted, so that they laid waste the land as they came in.

And Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the people of Israel cried out for help to the Lord. When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel.

And he said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land.

[ 1 : 13 ] And I said to you, I am the Lord your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell, but you have not obeyed my voice. Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valour. And Gideon said to him, Please, my Lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?

And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.

And the Lord turned to him and said, Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Do not I send you? And he said to him, Please, Lord, how can I save Israel?

Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. And the Lord said to him, But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.

[ 2 : 19 ] And he said to him, If now I have found favour in your eyes, then please show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you.

And he said, I will stay till you return. So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephor of flour, the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them.

And the angel of God said to him, Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them. And he did so. Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes.

And fire sprang up from the rock, and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord. And Gideon said, Alas, O Lord God, for now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face. But the Lord said to him, Peace be to you. Do not fear, you shall not die.

[ 3 : 26 ] Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it, The Lord is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites. That night the Lord said to him, Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father

has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it, and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order.

Then take the second bull, and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down. So Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the Lord had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night. When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built.

And they said to one another, Who has done this thing? And after they had searched and inquired, they said, Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing. Then the men of the town said to Joash, Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal, and cut down the Asherah beside it.

But Joash said to all who stood against him, Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.

[ 4 : 54 ] Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubael, that is to say, let Baal contend against him, because he broke down his altar. Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the valley of Jezreel.

But the spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him.

And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them. Then Gideon said to God, If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor.

If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said. And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water.

Then Gideon said to God, Let not your anger burn against me. Let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.

[ 6 : 06 ] And God did so that night, and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. In Judges chapter 6 we move on to a new judge, Gideon, and with him a new enemy of Israel.

Othniel fought against a king of Mesopotamia, Ehud against a Moabite king and his Ammonite and Amalekite allies, Shamgar fought against the Philistines, Deborah and Barak against a Canaanite king from Hazor, and now the threat comes from the people of the east, from Midianites and Amalekites.

These deliverers were also based in different parts of the country. Othniel lived in the territory of Judah in the south, Ehud was a Benjaminite, Shamgar likely wasn't an Israelite, Deborah lived in the south of Ephraim in the middle of the land, Barak in the very north of Naphtali in the top of the country, and Gideon is from the western half of the tribe of Manasseh.

Once again we shouldn't presume that these judges arose in succession, one after another. There were a number of different enemies oppressing different parts of the land, a land that had prior to the coming of the Israelites been occupied by several nations.

The Israelites' identity as a nation would be forged in part through the fact that the land had regions with very different terrain and enemies, occupied by different peoples and tribes.

[ 7 : 23 ] Successfully occupying the land required warding off predatory nations and peoples on various fronts, and developing a shared identity as a people would depend heavily upon their recognition of a bond of brotherhood, coming together to each other's aid in times of trouble, and also upon their practice of shared worship.

In times of oppression and apostasy, however, one could imagine the shared identity of Israel being largely eclipsed, as each region and tribe had to fight their own battles. The threat of the Midianites was so severe that the Israelites had to hide in mountain dens and caves and strongholds.

The Midianites are described like a plague of locusts descending upon the land, numerous like the locusts and varying like the locusts. In chapter 8, an army numbering 135,000 people is described,

an immense number that Israel could never hope to repel.

The Midianites seem to come on specific occasions. They devour the harvest and they take the livestock. The Midianites seem to descend upon Israel from the Jezreel Valley down to the limits of their settlements in the south in Gaza, territory that would largely later be under Philistine control. Israel was surrounded by a number of groups of people that were related to them. Both closely related and more distantly related. The Edomites in the south were descended from Israel's twin brother Esau and the Horites.

[ 8 : 48 ] Moab and Ammon to the east were descendants of Lot. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham by Keturah and here they were accompanied by the Amalekites who came from one of the lines of Esau's descendants.

The Midianites had previously troubled Israel when, in Numbers chapter 22 to 25, they had been involved in Balak and Balaam's actions against Israel.

They seemed to be enjoying many of the blessings promised to the descendants of Abraham, not least in their vast numbers. Israel had been compared to Locus at the time of the Exodus, and the plague of Locus seems to be a symbolic presentation of Israel within the land of Egypt.

They were a numerous people, covering the face of the earth, but now they face another such people. The Midianites lay waste to the land. Like Locus, their intent does not seem to be to dwell in the land.

Rather, they are simply devourers of the produce of others. Israel is suffering the curses of the covenant, those mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 38 to 42.

[ 9 : 51 ] You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather in little, for the Locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worms shall eat them.

You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. You shall father sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity.

The cricket shall possess all your trees, and the fruit of your ground. Now in that reference, they are probably referring to actual physical insects, but these nations are compared to insects, and they have a similar effect upon the produce of the people.

Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 49 to 52 takes things further. The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old, or show mercy to the young.

It shall eat the offspring of your cattle, and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed. It shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds, or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish.

[ 11 : 03 ] They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns, throughout all your land, which the Lord your God has given you.

Israel is not here experiencing the full force of that curse, but they do have some limited experience of it. At this point, the Israelites cry out to the Lord for deliverance.

For a second time in the book, the Lord sends a messenger to Israel, this time a prophet who recounts what the Lord did for Israel, and how they have rejected him and disobeyed his voice. They have disobeyed the most fundamental of the commandments. Rather than obeying the voice of the Lord and worshipping him alone, they have served the gods of the Amorites. Gideon receives a call from the Lord.

It's a call that's similar to that which Moses received back in Exodus chapter 3 and 4. There the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses, who felt insufficient and inadequate for his calling.

[ 12 : 01 ] Yet he received authorization and confirming signs from the Lord. The angel of the Lord comes to meet Gideon at the terebinth in Ophrah, sitting under the tree, as Deborah sat under her palm.

Gideon is beating wheat in the winepress to hide from the Midianites, far from the most ideal place to beat wheat. At the end of the next chapter, some of the enemy will be found hiding in a winepress.

So the site where Gideon is found prepares us for the turning of the tables that will occur. The activity of threshing, separating wheat and chaff, maybe gives a sense of the activity for which Gideon is being set apart.

He will thresh Israel and its enemies, dividing them as wheat from chaff. The threshing floor can be described as a place of judgment in Scripture, a judgment place for the enemies of the Lord.

For instance, in Micah chapter 4 verses 11 to 13, Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, Let her be defiled, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion. But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord, they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor.

[13:06] Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for I will make your horn iron, and I will make your hooves bronze, and you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth.

The angel of the Lord greets Gideon with a surprising greeting, referring to him as a mighty man of valour. Gideon seems anything but this. Gideon requests some explanation for the statement of the Lord's being with him.

If the Lord is indeed with Gideon and Israel, why is the nation in such dire straits? Why do the great acts of the Lord for the deliverance of his people seem to be a matter of the past?

Gideon requests a sign from the angel of the Lord, and the identity of the angel of the Lord seems to be an important part of the story here. The revelation that the angel of the Lord is some sort of divine theophany is a demonstration of the Lord's presence with Gideon and with Israel, much as the angel at the burning bush, or the commander of the army of the Lord near Gilgal.

Gideon's awareness of the identity of the angel only slowly dawns on him, however. Gideon is acutely aware of his own limitations. He is from a weak Manassite clan, and he is the least in his father's house.

[14:18] We later discover that he has a son who is at least in his mid-teens. In chapter 8, verse 20, he also has at least ten servants, so he is not a man altogether without resources, nor is he especially young.

However, relatively speaking, there are very many who are greater than him. Gideon has very weak faith. He requests a sign to which request the Lord consents.

He prepares a large meal, which serves as a sort of peace offering. The angel of the Lord directs him to place the elements of the meal upon the rock and to pour the broth over it.

The angel of the Lord then touches the meal with the tip of the staff that he is carrying, and it is burned up, as if an offering on the altar. This is a sign of the Lord's acceptance of Gideon and his work.

When the angel disappears, Gideon fears, as he has seen the angel of the Lord face to face, but he is reassured by the Lord at this point. He builds an altar at the place where the Lord burned up his offering, as it had already functioned as an altar.

[15:18] And he names the altar, The Lord is Peace, to memorialise the event that had just occurred. The Lord then instructed Gideon to take his father's bull. It isn't immediately clear whether there are one or two bulls involved here.

It seems most likely to me that there was only one bull, described as the second bull, perhaps in reference to rites involving two bulls, where the second bull served as an offering for the community, such as in Leviticus chapter 4 verse 21, or Numbers chapter 8 verse 8.

The age of the bull is stipulated, seven years old. Israel has been oppressed by the Midianites for seven years as a result of their idolatry. Now that bull must be used to tear the false altar of Baal down, and then be sacrificed on the Lord's altar.

The bull deals with the sin of Israel's idolatry, for which they had suffered for seven years, and then that bull is offered for atonement. Gideon's own name means hewer, and he hews down the Asherah pole.

Again, there's some poetic justice here. When Gideon's action comes to light, in the next morning, Joash, his father, comes to his defence. If Baal really is a god, he should be able to look out for his own interests, and avenge himself.

[16:33] The result is an even greater humiliation of the false god Baal, whose impotence is demonstrated by his failure to destroy Gideon, who thereafter bears testimony to the humiliation of Baal in his own new name, Jerubbaal.

The Midianites and the Amalekites cross the Jordan, and they camp in the valley of Jezreel again. But this time, the spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon, and he summons the Abiezrites by sounding the trumpet, and then gathers people from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. Gideon, clothed by the spirit, is a rather different Gideon from the Gideon that we first encountered. But Gideon once again requests a sign. Gideon's faith remains weak, but the Lord doesn't rebuke him for requesting a confirming sign.

The Lord can be gracious to people of weak faith, helping them with their unbelief. And as a sign, there was probably some meaning to be discerned in it. It's a fleece laid out on a threshing floor, much as Gideon himself was threshing at the beginning of the story in the winepress.

The first night, God's dew falls upon the fleece only, leaving it sodden, while the rest of the threshing floor is left dry. And at this point, Gideon requests a second sign.

[ 17 : 43 ] In the second sign, the fleece is completely dry, while the surrounding ground of the threshing floor is wet with the dew. Here, the fleece might symbolise the acceptable sacrifice of the Lord, while the threshing floor is Israel.

That's something that James Jordan claims. But I would suggest that the fleece is the spirit-blessed leader. It represents Gideon himself. As the anointed leader is then wrung out, the whole nation is washed in the same spirit.

The threshing floor here becomes the site of the heavenly dew of blessing. The two stages of the sign represent, first of all the spirit coming upon Gideon, and then through Gideon, as Gideon is wrung out in his service, the entirety of the nation being drenched with the dew of the spirit.

A question to consider. At how many points in this account do we see the Lord making accommodations to Gideon's hesitancy, his uncertainty and his fear? What lessons could Israel take from this?

And what lessons can we take from it?