I'LL SIT HERE UNTIL YOU COME BACK: GIDEON AND THE PATIENCE OF GOD

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Source-criticism, the interpretative method that theorizes that many biblical stories are the composite of two or more texts, seems to have a very strong case in the story of Gideon in Judges 6-8:

1. There seem to be repeated theophanies and demonstrations of God's power; after Gideon seems convinced and has acted, he still asks for more proof in 6:36-40;
2. There seem to be two different Divine names, the LORD and God in this story, which is consistent with the approach of the Documentary Hypothesis;
3. Combining these two points, Judg. 6:36-40 seems to be a superfluous passage that has the names Gideon and God;
4. There seem to be two names of the main character, Gideon and Jerubaal;
5. There seem to be two sets of two names of enemy generals, Oreb and Zeeb (7:25), and Zebah and Zalmunna (8:4-21).

In the most comprehensive critical commentary on the Book of Judges in recent years, if not in modern scholarship, Mark Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith present an analysis of Judges 6 that covers nearly one hundred detailed pages.[1] The Smiths speak of "paired sections," 1-6 is one introduction, 7-10 a second introduction; 11-24 is one commission of Gideon story, 25-32 a second commission story. 33-35 echoes 1-6, and 36-40 resumes the pairs, with two fleece demonstrations of the Divine power. While our concern here is restricted to Judges 6, the Smiths state that "such pairings will continue in chapters 7-8, suggesting a larger compilation operative in the Gideon cycle." Here is a synopsis of the chapter, using my divisions but summarizing how these source critics see the structure and development of this passage.

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SYNOPSIS WITH CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

A. 6:1-6 – Introduction: After the Israelites follow other gods, the LORD allows the Midianites and their allies to come with a mighty horde, possess the land and oppress the Israelites, who are weak and beleaguered and cry out to the LORD.

Critical Perspective: 6:1-2a is a First Introduction, a formula of the Deuteronomistic cycle of sin, punishment, and Divine help (see Judg. 2:11-23). The Smiths reject claims that these verses should be given a "premonarchic or even monarchic dating." They see 6:2b-6a as a Secondary, even later intrusive Introduction with non-Deuteronomic insertions.

B. 6:7-10 – A human prophet's denunciation of the people's Baal worship. Despite this reminder that the LORD saved the people from Egypt, the people do not stop worshipping Baal.

Critical Perspective: The prophet's message is an "orphan of a composition;" it is not original to the passage. It was added, much later, to answer the question, "Why is this happening to the Israelites?" that Gideon will ask in the next section, indicating that the prophet's explanation was not known to him or the first writer. It is an "expansion of a biblical story, a feature common in early Jewish biblical interpretation" and "shows one feature of later Jewish midrash."[2]

B. 6:11-18 - First part of the First Theophany. An angel of the LORD (which seems to be a physical manifestation of the Divine, as opposed to an intermediary being) appears, sitting under the terebinth at Ophrah. The angel speaks to Gideon, hailing him as a valiant warrior. Gideon replies that the LORD has not protected Israel as He had done in the past. The LORD turns to Gideon and appoints him as His messenger to deliver Israel. Since Gideon sees a physical being, he asks for a sign "that it is You who are speaking to me." The sign will be that the Being will not leave until he returns with an offering. The LORD agrees.

Critical Perspective: The Smiths do not accept other critical proposals that the angel and the LORD are the products of two different accounts, and see their complementary roles, with the angel appearing physically and taking physical actions, and the LORD speaking. "The double divine agents express double support for Gideon … their appearance together may convey human uncertainty in the face of the divine." I will return to this insightful observa-

tion below. Still, they split this section into parts; they find 19-24 to be primary, and 12-16, with its quotations or allusions to other call stories, to be secondary, with 17-18 tying the pieces together.

B. 6:19-24 – Second part of the First Theophany. When Gideon returns with a meal, the angel of God is still there. The angel of the LORD performs a miracle with His rod and disappears. Gideon realizes "that it was an angel of the LORD" and becomes fearful that he will die after this experience. The LORD speaks to him and reassures him that he will not die. Gideon builds an altar to the LORD.

Critical Perspective – This may be the original story, which was based on a local, northern tradition: "Thus, an older core story consisting mainly of 19-24 was elaborated on and connected to the call story of vv. 12-16" (p. 434). The Smiths find v. 20, where the angel tells Gideon to put the food on a rock, to be a secondary intrusion.

B. 6:25-26 – Second Theophany; the LORD speaks to Gideon at night and tells him to take two bulls, pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to his father Joash, cut down the sacred post which is next to it, build an altar to "the LORD your God" "on top of the stronghold," and sacrifice "the other bull" as a burnt offering, using the wood from the sacred post.

B. 6:27-32 - Gideon and ten of his servants do all this under the cover of night, for fear of his father and the townspeople. In the morning, the villagers want to kill him. His father defends him, mocking the power of Baal. "That day they named him Jerubaal, meaning, "Let Baal contend with him, since he has torn down his altar."

Critical Perspective – This section has features "that comport with a Persian period date." The Smiths say that 6:25-32 are unnecessary. Jerubaal, like Jerusalem, had to have been a positive name, in this case carried by a Baal-worshipper. The narrative inverts the meaning of the name to indicate one who "contended" with and defeated Baal.

B. 6:33-35 – The Midianites and their allies join forces and camp in the valley of the Jezreel. Three other northern tribes rally to Gideon of Manasseh as "the spirit of the LORD" envelopes him.

Critical Perspective: These verses "show little connection with the preceding story." In a way, they say, if one reads 1-6, and then v. 33, one would not be missing anything important.

B. 6:36-40 – Third Theophany: The Fleece miracle, in two parts. After the miracle and the reverse, there is no narrative comment about Gideon's reaction.

Critical Perspective: This passage only has the name God, which is mentioned three times; there is no reference to the "angel of the LORD" or "the LORD." This section was "derived from another setting and is recontextualized here" (473). This passage about the fleece lacks a close biblical parallel in divinatory practices.

This quick summary of nearly one hundred pages does not do justice to the way the Smiths carefully distill all the critical scholarship on this chapter. It does, however, give one the sense that this is the culmination of the source- and form-critical approaches to this text. The question is whether it has illuminated what the story is about.

READING JUDGES 6

I will now present Judges 6 in a way that I hope will demonstrate its unique logic and depth.

A. 6:1-6 – Introduction: After the Israelites follow other gods, the LORD allows their enemies to oppress them; the Israelites now cry out for help from the LORD.

A. 6:7-10 – In direct response, the LORD sends a human prophet to remind the Israelites that the reason for their current plight is that while the LORD defeated the Egyptians and other oppressors, the Israelites have worshipped the other gods. We do not learn anything more about this prophet, his name, where or to whom he spoke, but these verses function to show that the LORD is in control of this entire situation. The emphasis on the liberation from Egypt also serves to introduce the message in the next section. Since the Israelites do not change after the prophet has spoken, the LORD must take the next step: A human prophet's denunciation of the people's Baal worship. Despite this reminder, the people continue to worship Baal.

C. 6:11-18 – First part of the theophany – A *malakh*, or divine messenger, as opposed to a human prophet, sits under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belongs to Joash the Abiezrite. We learn about the terebinth of Ophrah first, and then Joash's name, before the name of the main character in this story.[3] The angel speaks to Gideon, hailing him as a valiant warrior. Gideon replies

that the LORD has not protected Israel as He had in the past. The LORD turns to Gideon and appoints him as His messenger to deliver Israel. Since Gideon sees a physical being, he asks for a sign "that it is You who are speaking to me." The sign will be that the Being will not leave until he returns with an offering. The LORD agrees.

The Divine Being comes to Gideon (C) at this particular moment after the Israelites have cried out (A) but have not, despite the condemnation of the human prophet (B), desisted from Baal worship. The only way to cure the Israelites' misery is for them to turn back to the LORD, not only in their crying but in their worship. Therefore, the LORD will direct Gideon to destroy one of the Israelites' altars to Baal; He will upend Midianite control and defeat the oppressive forces once the Israelites have turned back to the LORD in their worship.

We now meet the main character. When the angel speaks to Gideon, he is polite and respectful but is unafraid to speak his mind. If the LORD is so powerful, if He did such wonders for their ancestors, as the prophet had explicitly proclaimed, why are the Israelites in their current plight? Note how v. 14 says, "The LORD turned to him and said…" as if He looks at him squarely and reassuringly. Gideon is open and sincere, and the LORD is patient, leading Gideon step-by-step towards his mission. I return to the Smiths' insight that the angel of the LORD and the LORD display double support in his very human uncertainty in the face of the divine.

The reader of the Bible recognizes this type of scene; it follows the formula of the call-narrative as in Exodus 3, Isaiah 6, and Jeremiah 1:[4]

- Divine confrontation.
- Introductory Divine word.
- Divine commission of the human agent.
- An objection on the part of the human agent.
- Divine reassurance to the human agent.
- A divine sign to the human agent.

What is different here, and unique, is that Gideon *asks* for a sign. This does not happen in any other story. Nevertheless, this is completely acceptable to the LORD. He is like a quiet guide or teacher, bringing the student along in the way that he needs.

A. 6:19-24 – Second part of the First Theophany. When Gideon returns with a meal, the angel of God is still there. The angel of the LORD performs a miracle with His rod and disappears. Gideon "realized that it was an angel of the LORD" and becomes fearful that he will die after this experience. The LORD speaks to him and reassures that he will not die. Gideon builds an altar in Ophrah to the LORD.

At first, Gideon may have thought that the messenger was a prophet, as in the previous section. When Gideon returns with a meal, the angel is still there, performs a miracle with His rod and disappears. The LORD speaks to him and reassures him that he will not die. Again, God is patient. He does not say: 'Would I have gone to all this trouble only to kill you?'

A. 6:25-32 – Second Theophany; the LORD speaks to Gideon at night and tells him to tear down the Baal altar and erect one for the LORD. He does so, but under the cover of night, because Gideon still has his doubts. To paraphrase: 'Are You truly a Power that can repel our enemies? You used to perform such miracles, but what have You done for us lately? It's been a long time between miracles and salvific acts. If I hack that Baal altar, the locals are only going to be my initial problem. I am going to reap the whirlwind. I need to be sure, beyond any doubt, that this is all for real.'

Indeed, the villagers want to kill him. His father defends him, mocking the power of Baal. Some of the delays may be about testing whether the Israelite LORD, rather than Baal, has the ultimate power in the contest that is to ensue. Perhaps it was not Gideon who became known as Jerubaal, but Jerubaal who becomes Gideon, as Jacob becomes Israel, or Abram becomes Abraham. After all, his father had an altar to Baal and may have named his son with a theophoric Baal name.

A. 6:33-35 – The Midianites and their allies join forces and camp in the valley of the Jezreel. Three other northern tribes rally to Gideon of Manasseh as "the spirit of the LORD" envelopes him.

What is the relationship between Gideon's act and the massing of the enemy forces? If one reads the story as independent pieces, one might assume that there is no cause and effect. The forces were about to attack; they did so on a constant basis. Gideon shows that an attack is expected by covertly beating the wheat in a winepress.

If one reads the story in its logical sequence, however, there is direct cause and effect. This act is a provocation, not just an act of religious zealotry but an act of rebellion and religious nationalism. This is why the forces mass. The Midianites and their allies would not need a massive force just to raid the Israelite villages and procure wheat from already beleaguered farming folk. Baal worship is this passage is understood as a kind of state cult; to knock down the altar of Baal is equivalent to Mattathias's action at the altar at Modein in I Maccabees. Gideon's act seems to have aroused the full, massive attention of the oppressors. On the other side, his act was a rallying cry for several Israelite tribes who rush to Gideon's side even though he had never played a leadership role even in his own tribe. The logic is that his ritual act was religious/theological but also dramatically political. The altar-breaking is an act of rebellion. Gideon, "Hacker," initiates a revolution, like the "Hammers," the Maccabees.

A. 6:36-40 - And now Gideon asks for still another test, and God, without a verbal response, gives him two demonstrations of His Power. Gideon is scared to go to war and needs reassurance. God does not verbally respond but shows him evidence of His power in two tests. Gideon speaks to God twice and God does not respond in words, only in actions.

GIDEON'S FEARS AND GOD'S RESPONSE

By splitting Judges 6 apart into earlier versions and theoretical pieces, source-criticism misses the very smooth logic of the story that makes wonderful sequential sense. The aspect of the story in which Gideon has doubts and asks for and receives evidence of Divine power is rare if not unique in the ancient world; for example, we know of nothing like it in the hero texts of the Greek world. Gideon's repeated insistence on proof, and God's patience, only can be appreciated by reading the text as it is. Indeed, the story makes so much sense that if this is a composite, the editor must have been a brilliant writer who produced a very unified and coherent text, and the result is as good as that by any individual writer.

What does Gideon doubt, that he is seeing a Divine being or that the Divine being from the Israelite God is more powerful than Baal? Is his doubt theological, or is it a function of his fear? We may speak about aspects of Gideon's fear:

- Fear of the Midianites
- Fear of the LORD.
- Fear of the townspeople; he is scared to knock down the altar and needs reassurance and even then, does it at night.
- Fear that he cannot defeat the Midianites.

In understanding all these fears, God is willing to give him all the theophanies he wants. The progression is from

- A human prophet.
- To a physical angel.
- To proof that the angel is from the LORD.
- To hearing the LORD's voice without the angel.
- To speaking to him at night.
- To answering requests for further signs from Gideon.

Look at the remarkable progression, as the Teacher holds Gideon by the hand and leads him, reassuring him. Could this logical sequence really be a mere compilation of atomistic pieces?

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE GIDEON STORY

In the Book of Judges, this divine interaction with a human is unique, and is different from communication through an oracle as in 1:2, 20:18, 23, 28. As we have seen, Gideon's request for signs departs from the formula of the biblical call-narrative.

I began to wonder how unique the story might be in the ancient world. After consulting many classical scholars, the closest parallel to Gideon's doubting and testing of God that I can find is in resistance to the installation of new Dionysian rites. Goedde speaks of "resistance" to the god's message "which brings into relief the stunning otherness of the divine presence." She writes: "Epiphany is a crucial point in foundation narratives: the question whether humans accept a divine cult is connected to the issue of whether they can recognise or bear the god's divine presence and appearance."[5]

Of course, this is very different: Gideon is not resistant to a different wild new cult but to restoring the cult of his fathers. Still, it may be useful to speak of Gideon's resistance:

- to believing he is experiencing a true epiphany
- to committing an act that will endangers his life

- to leading the resistance against the oppressors.

The resistance is polite and respectful and even a little awestruck, but it is resistance, nonetheless. It is certainly not quick acceptance and submission. And yet, through that resistance, God continues to provide him with everything that he asks, and more.

ASSURANCE THROUGH REPETITION

A source critic will see God's announcement of a child to Abraham and Sarah in their old age in Genesis 17 and 18, with Abraham falling on his face and laughing in 17: 17 and Sarah laughing in the tent in 18:12, both plays on the name Yitzhak, as two versions of the same story. A different way to read these chapters, however, is that God displays patience with Abraham for mocking the idea of this miracle child and protesting that Ishmael should be his heir (17), and so comes again (18), this time in the manifestations of the three angels, to give Abraham further signs that this supernatural miracle will come to pass. God does not reprimand Abraham for his doubts but shows patience and understanding.

A source critic will see the Call of Moses at the Burning Bush in Egypt in Exodus 3 and again in Egypt in Exodus 6 as two versions of the same story. Indeed, there are so many similar elements that the two chapters have been used as a textbook example of the validity of source criticism.[6] A different way to see this parallel, however, is that after a setback with Pharaoh in Egypt, Moses is in despair that he has made the life of the slaves even harder and needs reassurance. God gives the whole speech that He had given at the Burning Bush all over again in Egypt to assure Moses that He will save the Israelites.

The Gideon story in Judges 5 shares the theme with these biblical passages that God understands that even His greatest leaders sometimes need signs and assurances, which then is a comfort for all those who have their times of doubt in the face of difficult realities.

In a sense, Judges 6 story is about more than the relationship between Gideon and God. One of the central biblical messages is that the Israelites have been given countless miracles and the inspiration of charismatic heroes and truth-telling prophets, but they go right back to worshipping other gods. And yet, we see God's patience, understanding, and flexibility, with the calm re-

assurance that even when Israel goes away, He will be waiting for them to come back.

NOTES

1. Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judges 1* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2021), pp. 377-473.

2. Mark S. Smith, "'Midrash' in the Book of Judges: The Cases of Judges 3:31 and 6:7-10," *CBQ* 78 (2016), pp. 256–71.

3. We should pay attention to Joash. It is his terebinth. Since a terebinth could be a sacred place, the theophany occurs at a sacred space. This terebinth belongs to an individual, so that individual sems to be a figure of import. It is his altar to Baal, and it is he who saves his son. Joash gives a powerful rhetorical answer to the threatening villagers, worthy of young Abram in the Midrash (Gen. Rab. 38) in the story where after hacking his father's idols, the hero mocks them as powerless. The midrash about Abram may be inspired by Joash's remarkable rebuke and cynical analysis of the power of Baal. One wonders: Did Joash suddenly change his beliefs to save his son? Gideon may have come from very special stock and may not have been chosen randomly. Perhaps Joash, even with his theophoric name, had turned with his fellow-villagers to Baal but is now inspired by his son to return to the Israelite God.

4. Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965), pp. 297-323.

5. Susanne Goedde, "Resistance to Origins Cult Foundation in the Myths of Dionysus, Apollo, and Demeter," in Jacqueline Klooster and Antje Wessels (Hg.): *Inventing Origins. Aetiological Thinking in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 142, n. 58.

6. Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), p. 146. Is it a coincidence that Jewish tradition divides the weekly *sidrot* between the two announcements of Isaac's birth and just before the second call of Moses?

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