

JUDGES (3)

Gideon the Ambiguous



Stephen Gunawan

- Gideon

Aside from Deborah and later Samson, Gideon’s story took the most length. It is also the most tricky of all the anecdotes, because the story of Gideon contained a great deal of hidden meanings; which was probably intentionally so.

The story of Gideon is perhaps by far the most spectacular of all the judges; and one in which the most number of signs and wonders are recorded. It was also ridden with bewildering contradictions which might be purposefully left there to stimulate the inquiring minds of the readers (or hearers).

Now let me first explain what I think about the mysterious style of writing. As depicted in *Table 1: Summary of the Judges’ Stories* above, I put Gideon as the ‘turning point’ judge. Prior to Gideon, the previous judges did not have their weaknesses revealed. They were praiseworthy men (and woman) of faith. But with Gideon, the situation begins its reversal. This is why even some commentators put Gideon in very positive light, whilst others put him negatively. Here are some things we can ponder about; some contradictions in the story itself:

Which one was Gideon?		
Was Mighty	OR	Was Cowardly
Had Heroic Faith	OR	Was a Consistent Doubter
Fought Miraculous Battle	OR	Had Ordinary Victory
Caused people to Worship God	OR	Induced Idolatry
Glorified only God	OR	Desired Glory for Himself

- **Contradiction 1: Was Gideon mighty or cowardly?** The angel of the Lord called Gideon a mighty warrior (6:12); but he responded by showing doubt and weakness (6:15). He even seemed cowardly because he did not dare to break Baal’s altar openly because he was afraid of what his family and his townspeople might do to him (6:27).
- **Contradiction 2: Did Gideon have faith, or did he not?** Gideon asked for very clear signs from God not once but three times; and God entertained him each time without even reprimanding him for his lack of faith. He seemed extremely doubtful in **Judges 6**. However, in the very next chapter in **Judges 7**, he was shown as a totally different man! He did not protest the slightest bit when he was required to almost unreasonably bring down the number of fighting men from 32,000 to 10,000 to mere 300! Not only that, Gideon needed but one Midianite dream loosely interpreted by another Midianite to be utterly convinced that God had given them victory!
- **Contradiction 3: Impossible battle won with ordinary trickery?** God had made clear the reason why He massively brought down the number of Israel He would send to war: “*You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against Me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’*” (7:2). After this sort of reasoning, and the amount of convincing it took for Gideon to go to war, I had expected something like fire from heaven throwing the enemies into disarray, or another parting of some water that would prove an undeniable fact that God had been with them. But what happened was anything but extraordinary. Gideon used a strategy to confuse the enemies, thinking that they were ambushed with numerous enemies that were already within their camp. They panicked and

ended up killing one another and drastically reducing their number. Now, this could easily go down in history as a battle won by a master strategist; but not one which could bear the mark of undeniable divine intervention.

- **Contradiction 4: Did Gideon encourage the people to worship God, or be involved in idolatry?** Gideon denied being made ruler in **8:23** and concluded that “*the Lord will rule over you.*” Israel was not to worship idols, and Israel was not even to give lordship to mere men; but only to God. However, right after he said that, Gideon did something resembling what Aaron did when he fashioned an idol with the gold earrings of the Israelites (compare **Ex 32:2-4** with **Jdg 8:24-27**), and with the exact same result, with the Israelites prostituting themselves to idol worship (compare **Ex 32:8** with **Jdg 8:27**).
- **Contradiction 5: Did Gideon desire glory, or did he not?** Upon securing a great victory, the Israelites offered Gideon a dynastical rule, where not only Gideon, but descendants after him would be secured of the position. When this was said of him, Gideon answered in the humblest, God-glorifying, self-denying way possible: “*I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you*” (**8:23**). But look at how the writer of Judges carried on with his story. They chose an unlikely candidate to zone in upon. We are told that Gideon had many wives, and seventy sons (**8:30**), but we are then asked to focus on one particular concubine and one particular son by the name of Abimelech who desired what his father apparently denied, and appointed himself king. But wait a minute. It seems as if this desire did not begin with Abimelech after all, for the name Abimelech meant “my father is king.” Now, here was Gideon, refusing to be made king, but naming his son “my father (none other than himself) is king.” Now did he or did he not desire the throne?

Let me try to explain away the confusion. I will be assuming that the readers will do their own reading of Judges 6-9. As opposed to story-telling, I will attempt to put some difficult issues into their proper perspectives so as to facilitate more fruitful reflections.

- **The severity of the oppression.** The Midianites oppression was described in length, promoting its cruelty and severity. **6:2** describes the Midianites as being “*so oppressive*” so as to force the Israelites into hiding. They prevented the Israelites from gathering power by ruining all their crops and killing off all animals (**6:4**). They were an extremely powerful and numerous foe, so much so that the Israelites were totally impoverished (**6:5-6**). The number that Gideon would later defeat in his battle was 135,000 men (**8:10**). They prevented the Israelite from uniting and from gaining resources so as to gain fighting power. They were made docile.
- **Gideon’s condition.** Gideon was introduced to us as he was threshing wheat not in the usual high ground but rather in a winepress to hide it from the Midianites (**6:11**). The plunder-massacre by the Midianites had happened often enough that it had left the mentality of the Israelites defeated; and perhaps even more so for Gideon, whose brothers were killed in battles against the Midianites (**8:18-19**). He was bitterly discouraged about the situation and had interpreted it to mean that the Lord had abandoned His people Israel (**6:13**). This perception was held by Gideon despite the prophet that had been sent, who had explained why the misery had come upon them. This was a legitimate question, given the hopelessness of the situation the Israelites were in. God had helped peoples in ages past, but not us. At this present time, we are left to fend for ourselves. (Is that not the very thought we often harbor about our conditions? That God is no longer active in history?) Daniel’s own family and townspeople were already more committed to worshipping Baal than they were to worshipping Yahweh, and though Gideon knew and seemed to disagree with this, he stood

by and did nothing (6:27). When the angel told Gideon that God was going to use him to deliver Israel, here's what he needed to contend with: ① Gideon was not a man of great background or repute (6:15) ② The Israelites were divided and hiding (6:2) ③ Their morality was low; they were helpless and hopeless (6:6) ④ Their food and horses, and indeed every needed resources for war was virtually non-existent (6:4) ⑤ Their enemies the Midianites were desert dwellers with almost limitless resources (6:5). In short, the situation was HOPELESS, and Gideon was doubtful.

- **The persistent doubt.** Now, the angel appeared to Gideon perhaps in an ordinary manner, and Gideon was not 100% certain who he was speaking to (at least not until 6:22 when he finally realized and was frightened). But from his manner of conversing, he probably knew the person he was talking to was divinely sent to him; perhaps another prophet. Gideon needed a two-step convincing.
 1. *Fear for his own life.* If he were mistaken in identifying God's command, he would be marching to certain death. Who was the messenger Gideon was speaking to? The first sign was intended to put this question to rest, and God supplied Gideon with the sign he requested; whereupon Gideon built an altar to the Lord and admitted his allegiance (6:24). This was grace supplied prior to human response. However, after Gideon's faith was put to the test. Immediately after, God commanded Gideon to make a stronger statement of faith by destroying the idol his own father had built and then building an altar to the Lord there (6:25-26). Faith without deed is dead, so we see Gideon consenting without a single protest, despite the mortal risk he knew he faced (which was why he did it stealthily, he was afraid – 6:27). And it was indeed the case – the townspeople demanded that Gideon be killed for destroying Baal's altar and the Asherah pole (6:30). Gideon had the answer he needed. God was the one who called him, and he would risk his life in obedience.
 2. *Fear for the people.* Now if Gideon was already willing to risk his own life to obey God and risk being put to death by his own townspeople, I don't see any reason why he would be so afraid of fighting the Midianites that he needed two more signs. What more had he to lose if he was already willing to lay his life?

But this is why I think Gideon needed further assurance. Gideon asked for another sign right after he had gathered the Abiezrites to follow him. They were Gideon's own townspeople, or in other words, the very same people who had just tried to kill Gideon in fear of Baal. Gideon's townspeople were genuinely afraid that Baal would be angry with them. Sure, Joash's defense might indicate that some were in fact worshipping Baal more out of societal pressure rather than conviction, perhaps being more afraid of persecution. He gave a defense that indicated his doubt: "if Baal is really a god" (6:31)ⁱ. But this proved that the people were under such great pressure that even those who thought they were practicing vanity were unwilling to stand up for what was right. And others were still unconvinced that Baal was a mere idol who was helpless in defending himself. Now, notice the question Gideon posted: that if God had found favor in God's eyes (6:17) and if that meant that he was called to deliver Israel by his own hands (6:36-37). Gideon was enquiring his calling to be a leader who would lead the people into battle with the fearsome enemy. There was a squaring off of opponents: The Abiezrites and the rest of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali were called to arms (6:34-35), whilst the

Midianites, Amalekites, and other eastern peoples joined forces (6:33). The enemy was overwhelmingly fearsome, and the people cowardly. How would Gideon inspire these people as Deborah had done before? Would the people trust Gideon? And would these people really be ready for battle? Or would Gideon really be leading them into certain death?

Gideon's request for signs reflected this struggle. By himself, he had no confidence whatsoever that he would be able to unite the peoples. And this concern was not unfounded, as we shall later learn, many of the Israelites would decline to help Gideon in fear of the enemy. Now, the first struggle was a risk to Gideon's own life. The second struggle would mean that we would possibly be leading tens of thousands of his own men to certain death. He needed to be sure, and was even aware that he might be risking his own safety by trying God's patience (6:39).

Gideon's apparent persistence to ask for signs, therefore, reflected his heartfelt struggles. ① Whether God still remembered His people (6:13), ② Why God would choose the insignificant Gideon (6:15), whether he was indeed called by God to lead Israel (6:17; 6:36-37). It was less about not having faith in God and more about the loss of personal and national identity which had resulted from the years of oppression. This was probably the reason God did not rebuke Gideon for his apparent lack of faith – it was a genuine struggle which God patiently helped Gideon deal with.

- **A committed heart.** After the doubts had been dealt with once and for all, Gideon was now set in his heart to do what the Lord had commanded him. We shall see that from here on out, Gideon no longer exhibited the doubt that he began with, but rather showed complete confidence in God and His calling to deliver Israel from the enemies. He did not utter a single word of protest when God brought down the number of his army from 32,000 to 10,000 (7:3). This initial step might have made a little sense, because it filtered out those who were afraid; and having the majority of the army afraid might demoralize the rest. But when God again brought down the number from 10,000 to 300, Gideon still obeyed quietly, not uttering a single protest (7:7). God repeatedly explained that his filtering down of the fighting men was meant to prove with absolute certainty that it was not by Israel's might that the battle was won, but because God was with them (7:2, 4). But even then, the way God elected the fighting men were not haphazard, or done in contradiction to wisdom. He chose first the 10,000 who were brave, then the 300 who were ready (those who lapped to drink would maintain their alertness in case of ambush). Gideon displayed a very committed heart, and he did everything that the Lord commanded even when humanly speaking, he would have desperately needed the 10,000 brave men to fight against the overwhelming number of Midianite army they initially did not have hope of defeating (6:5-6). Okay let's now square off the odds. The number of enemies to be defeated was 135,000 men (8:10), and even if Gideon did not know the exact number, he would have been able to approximate. And so he was rightly a little concerned, and God knew this. He commanded Gideon to spy on the enemy prior to attacking them, and overheard a dream an unnamed Midianite had, and the interpretation of his unnamed friend. It was rather strange that the enemy interpreted the dream to mean that Gideon would be granted victory by the Lord, but it did seem that the repute of Yahweh amongst the strongest of enemies had always remained so powerful that even when these enemies were much stronger or even were winning, they remained fearful of Israelⁱⁱ. Gideon turned doubtful obedience into confidence,

and he returned with a renewed vigor and inspired the 300 men to wage war against impossible odds.

- **The Divided Nation.** Chapter 8 records the disunity of the tribes of Israel which was a result of the absence of a national leader. Ephraim got upset because Gideon did not invite them to share the glory of defeating Zebah and Zalmunna (8:1-3). Those at Sukkoth and Peniel refused to give Gideon and his men food, but they declined to help probably because they were afraid the Midianites would return with a vengeance if Gideon and his men failed to subdue them (8:4-9). Gideon's reaction to them was noble, as he reacted not according to how those men treated him personally, but on whether they shared the faith that God would grant Gideon victory. Although the Ephraimites "*challenged him vigorously,*" (8:1), Gideon answered them very humbly and diplomatically. However, to the men at Sukkoth and Peniel who doubted that God would indeed deliver Zebah and Zalmunna into Gideon's hands, he was very angry and promised them very harsh discipline (8:7, 9).
- **Personal Interests.** So far in the story, we have seen a very noble side of Gideon. However, what happened next showed a pattern of corruption that would worsen with the remaining judges. Gideon's endeavor was tainted with personal benefits, vendetta and ambition. In 8:18-21, Gideon revealed that the battle was also motivated by a personal vendetta, of vengeance for his brothers who were killed by the Midianites. Gideon even said that had Zebah and Zalmunna spared his brothers' lives, he would not have killed them (8:19).
- **Unauthorized Worship.** Next was the very strange act of making an ephod after refusing to be made ruler. Again, there are stark similarities between this occurrence to that of Ex 32:2-4, when Aaron made the image of a golden calf but called it "*the God who brought you up out of Egypt.*" Aaron was not advocating an idol-worship, but rather tried to make an image of the God of Israel and thus degrading Him into a man-made image. In my opinion, it is similarly unlikely that Gideon was advocating some sort of idolatry, but that his unauthorized action of creating an object of worship became a snare that caused the people to deify an object. An ephod was supposed to be a priestly garment worn by Aaron and his descendants (see instruction for it in Ex 28:6-14) when fulfilling their priestly duties, but Gideon made the ephod not to be worn by a priest, but rather placed it in his town (8:27); and this in turn caused the Israelites to see it as some sort of charm and worshipped it. Ceremonial laws were given as very accurate commandments, and compliance to these strict rules is required. Aside from the fact that they are all foreshadowing Christ (Heb 8:5; 10:1), there was also the need to ensure that these acts of worship were not misused because sinful men do have the tendency to worship creation instead of the Creator (Rom 1:25).
- **Whose Ambition?** Gideon's actions showed a gradual shift to personal ambition. Despite the fact that he declined the throne, Gideon's actions indicated the desire for power.
 1. Although his instructed battlecry "*for the Lord and for Gideon*" (7:18) does give God the ultimate glory, but it gives the stark reminder to the people that Gideon was the one through whom God delivered the enemy. Also, to the officials of Sukkoth, Gideon said, "*when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand...*" (8:7) clearly ascribing the glory to God, but said to those at Peniel, "*when I return in triumph...*" (8:9) noticeably emphasizing his own role.

2. Whilst Gideon refused the dynastical throne, the very opposite happened, as his descendants was set to inherit the leadership roles (9:2). Note that the office of a judge (as opposed to the kingly office) is not one that is meant to be hereditary. Later on in the history of Israel, God did promise the dynastical rule to David and his descendants, which gives the tribe of Judah the exclusive right to the throne. But Judges were raised by God as and when the situation required it, and was not meant for hereditary succession.
3. He made the ephod and placed it in his home, probably so that people would remember the role he played in the deliverance of Israel.
4. He lived the way the kings did, with many wives and concubines (8:30-31). Compare this to Deut 17:17 – pagan kings habitually multiply wives.
5. He named one of his sons Abimelech, which meant “my father is king,” which is by far the clearest clue that he deeply desired the throne.

Now, don't be mistaken that this meant that Gideon had gone rogue and ceased to become a servant of God. The concluding statement and testimony of his life was that “*no sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals*” (8:33), which meant that under his leadership the people still remained faithful to God. And lest we forget, Gideon made it to the Faith Hall of Fame of Hebrews 11 (Heb 11:32). In fact, all the judges that would come after – even Samson – made it to the list. And since they all made it, we will discuss what this means at the very end of this chapter.

- **Reaping what was sowed.** I shall group Abimelech not as separate from Gideon. For one, Abimelech was never a legitimate judge. He was not appointed by God, and used treachery, deceit and murder to usurp the throne. Abimelech is the legacy of Gideon's desire for power. To name a son born of a slave-concubine (8:30; 9:18) “my father is king” is one hint of this desire. The fact that the whole town of Shechem was already under the belief that all of Gideon's sons would rule over them also meant that Gideon did nothing to abide by his own words. In fact, he might have lived the rest of his life in a royal manner and created the wrong assumption that it was indeed a dynastical rule like that of a kingdom.

Abimelech usurped the throne, and ruled independently of God. It was ironical that he used “*I am your flesh and blood*” (9:2) to gain support but after that killed his 69 brothers in cold blood. He killed them in the city of Shechem, no less, which was supposed to be a city of refuge (see Jos 20:7), which meant its inhabitants also failed in carrying out their duties. Jotham later cursed him, and his curse was backed by God. Jotham used the illustrative story of the olive tree, the fig tree, the vines and the thornbush; each of which was asked to be king over Israel. All of them rejected except for the thornbush. Now, the olive tree, the fig tree and the vines:

① Are all representatives of the blessing of God for Israelⁱⁱⁱ. The olive tree gave glory, the fig tree was good and sweet and the vines gave pleasure. The three bespoke of Israel as the elect which God uses to dispense religious, national and spiritual blessing.

② Are the legitimate trees that can offer shades, representing the true God-appointed leaders^{iv}. Note that the thornbush cannot give shade, and is destined for fire^v.

But see what the result of Abimelech's reign? All of Gideon's legitimate sons are dead except for one, who was on the run. His dynastical rule was at an end. Abimelech's rule was short but bloody. He revealed himself as a man who would do anything to get and retain power;

killing his own brothers to get it, and then again killing the townspeople to retain it. But Jotham predicted how the episode will end. Shechem will be destroyed with fire as fire comes out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon (9:15, 45-49) but would later on be killed as well (9:20, 50-54). Abimelech's desecration of Shechem and the confidence he must have gained from it ended up with him being accidentally but mortally wounded by a woman dropping a millstone upon his head (9:53). And despite how he wanted to cover the shame of being murdered by a woman (notice the striking similarity with what happened with Sisera), his name did indeed go down in history as "the idiot who didn't know better and got too close to the city so that a woman dropped a millstone on his head and killed him" (2 Sam 11:21).

The story of Gideon marks the turning point. Prior to Gideon, none of the judges have their faults openly revealed in the Book. The way the writer told the story of Gideon was somewhat contradicting. The manner by which he wrote it seemed to exude a positive tendency, but it is ridden with negative implications. Personally, I think this is because of the 'turning-point' nature of Gideon. After Gideon, the faults of the Judges are openly exposed, showing clearly the decline of spirituality that had happened.

But in closing, here are a few trends which I want to bring our attention to:

- **The Judge(s):** Was written in ambiguity. The overall tone was still generally positive, however was filled with negative connotations.
- **The People:** Were starting to be disunited. The people of Manasseh tried to kill Gideon for destroying the idols. The Ephraimites were jealous of Gideon's merit in battle. Those at Sukkoth and Peniel refused to give aid. Gideon's call to arms were met with suspicion and distrust, which signified an overall lack of faith.
- **Legacies:** The good judges left a legacy in which one or two generations after their rule still remained faithful to God. But Gideon was the first judge that doesn't leave this legacy: "*no sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals*" (8:33). Notice how this shall be the pattern to come; as we look at the 'compromised' judges.

ⁱ In most cases, the society does need a strong leader to remind them what they already know. Joash wasn't that leader, and at this instance, Gideon wasn't yet ready. But it seems that some of the people was already aware of the silliness of worshipping gods made of wood or stone. This challenge would later be echoed and completed by Elijah when he strongly demanded "*How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal is god, follow him*" (1 Kings 18:21). Many times, people are involved in occult practices not out of conviction, but out of societal pressure or some sort of devious way of using religion to get what they want. The Chinese, for example, seemingly observe various religious duties that would, at surface, look silly. They burn paper money for the dead when most would actually concede that it's wasted practice; and they worship a variety of gods according to their needs and wants, like the god of fortune who had a big belly and carried gold. But beneath that surface lies strict societal pressure to conform and also a more selfish desire to benefit from religion.

ⁱⁱ See for example how the people in Jericho – a well-fortified city – reacted when they knew that Joshua was coming to attack them (Joshua 2). Now common sense dictates that the people in Jericho was well-protected, and had sufficient resources for war. And the people of Israel, being wanderers, were not equipped for war and had no barricade which could have protected them. What should have been an easy fight actually became so fearful. And notice another similarity – it was the spying that confirmed this fear. God had wanted to test if they would look at the situation with their fleshly eyes, or with the eyes of faith. Also, look at how the mighty Philistines cowered with fear when they heard they were about to face the God of Israel in battle (1 Sam 4:7-9).

ⁱⁱⁱ Note how the fruitfulness of these trees represent the glory of Israel (eg. **Joel 2:19, 21-22**), and how it was the very blessing of the promised land (**Deut 8:7-9**) and how the pagan king of Assyria attempted to imitate such blessing (**2 Kings 18:31; Isa 36:16**). This representation would climax during the time of Solomon, during which *“Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree”* (**1 Kings 4:25**). In the absence of material blessing, Habakkuk would compare such blessing to the actualized spiritual blessing of salvation (**Hab 3:17-18**).

^{iv} The nation of Israel is always pictured as Olive Trees (eg. **Jer 11:16**), Fig Trees (eg. **Hos 9:10**) and Vine (eg. **Isa 5:7**).

^v Thorns and thistles were the results of sin (**Gen 3:18**). Thornbushes are used to illustrate falsehood and sin (**Mat 7:15-20**) which hinders growth (**Hos 2:6, Mat 13:7, Num 33:55, Isa 5:6, Isa 55:13**) and is destined for fire (**Heb 6:8, Isa 33:12**). However, the grace of God is then shown in how He appeared to Moses in the burning thornbush and pronounced deliverance therefrom (**Ex 3:1-15**) which perhaps gave the great promise of how sinful men can attain deliverance with which they can approach the holy God without being consumed. Notice how this picture is plainly set in the language of **Isa 33**. **Verse 12** shows how thornbushes are destined for fire, and then in **verse 14** the question is asked *“who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?”* But the bush that was not consumed meant that God’s grace makes that possible. And so in **verse 22**, though the Lord is our Judge, our Lawgiver, He is also our King who saves us. Such imagery is again used in one of the materials used for the Tabernacle, the very symbol of the presence of God. Now, acacia wood comes from a small tree which branches are covered with long thorns. But note that most times the acacia wood is used, it is to be overlaid with pure gold (eg. **Ex 25:11, 13, 24; 26:29, 32, 37; 30:3-5**). The acacia wood used for the altar is overlaid with bronze (**Ex 27:2, 6**). Again, this was the sign that God would come and dwell with sinful men. In perhaps the final of such imagery, our Lord Jesus Christ was crowned with thorns; with which wounds we attain our salvation.