

JUDGES 6

Judges 6:1–10. The Midianite Oppression

Another judge cycle begins with the opening of Judges 6. This cycle involves Gideon, who enjoys one of the lengthier narrative treatments in the book of Judges (spanning Judges 6–8; the narrative on Samson is also lengthy, spanning chapters 14–16). The oppressor this time was the Midianites, a seminomadic people from the region east of the Jordan River. The Midianites featured in biblical history as early as Genesis, where they famously appeared in the Joseph story as the caravanners who took Joseph into captivity (see Genesis 37:28, 36). In the wilderness narratives, the Midianites were depicted as Israel’s enemy (see Numbers 31:2–3, 7), thus making them an old foe at the time of their reintroduction in Judges.

The Midianites (with their Amalekite confederates) attacked Israel at harvest time in seasonal raids that targeted the land’s food supply (Judges 6:3–5). The author here indulged in some poetic license with his exaggerated statement that “both [the Midianites] and their camels were without number” (verse 5), which he probably did to emphasize Israel’s plight and create a sense of drama. The result of the attack was, unsurprisingly, that Israel was made “greatly impoverished” and undoubtedly driven to great desperation (verse 6). In response to this crisis, the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, who sent them an unnamed prophet with a divine oracle of reassurance (verses 7–10).

Judges 6:11–40. The Commission of Gideon

After introducing the latest conflict that required the intervention of a new judge (Judges 6:1–11), the second half of Judges 6 introduces the judge himself: Gideon, whose commission is narrated at verses 11–24. Gideon’s call parallels Moses’s prophetic commission in Exodus 3–4 in a number of remarkable ways. These include a divine charge (verse 14), followed by the reluctance on the part of the recipient

(verse 15), divine reassurance (verse 16), and finally theophany (verse 22). The intent is clearly to depict Gideon as a divinely ordained Moses figure—not unlike how the author of the book of Joshua depicted the eponymous hero of that text.

Gideon’s theophany and commission is also striking in how strongly it depicts God, or the “angel of the LORD” (that is, Jehovah),¹ in humanlike terms. At the outset of the narrative, the Lord sat under an oak tree while Gideon worked in the field (verse 11). Gideon also appeared at first to mistake the Lord for another human, since the two carried on an extended conversation without Gideon recognizing it was Jehovah until later, at verse 22.² This passage thus contains significant biblical evidence for the idea that God is embodied or otherwise has a human form.³

The first thing Gideon did after his divine commission was cut down his father’s altar to the Canaanite deity Baal and its accompanying sacred poles (“wood of the grove”) commemorating the female deity Asherah, thus beginning his judgeship of Israel by becoming judge of his own family (verses 25–32). Among other things, this act played on Gideon’s name, which derives from the root *gd’*, meaning “to cut off, scatter.” Gideon is thus portrayed as the one who hacks down the altar to Baal, foreshadowing his military career. The nickname bestowed on Gideon by his kinsmen, Jerubbaal (verse 32), also forms a pun on Gideon’s action: “Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal [yerubba’al], saying, Let Baal plead against him [yareb *bo haba’al*], because he hath thrown down his altar.”

As seen previously at Judges 3:10 with Othniel, Gideon’s legitimacy as judge is ratified at the end of the chapter with the comment that Gideon enjoyed the divine power that comes with having the Spirit of the Lord (6:34).

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1 Note how in verse 20 this personage is identified as “the angel of God” (*‘elohim*).

2 Throughout verses 12–21, Gideon used the honorific title *‘adonai* (“my lord”) while he addressed his interlocutor. It was not until after the conversation was over at verse 22 that Gideon realized he was speaking with Jehovah, finally pronouncing the divine name.

3 Gideon’s altar, identified in verse 24 with the name Jehovahshalom (“Jehovah is peace”), further indicates that the warrior’s interlocutor was none other than the Lord himself.