

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

Overview

The next three chapters describe Gideon, another judge whom Hebrews singles out. His home is in Ophrah (6:11). Of several options for the location of this town, the most likely¹ is in the Jezreel Valley (map), making Gideon a representative of the tribe of Manasseh (Figure 1, chart). The history is closely linked with Abimelech, ch. 9.

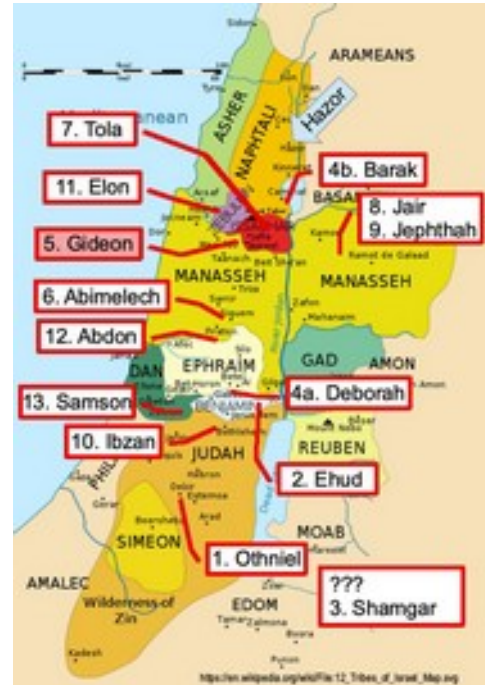


Figure 1: Origins of the Judges
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg

6:1-10, Opening the Cycle

1-6, Rebellion, Retribution, and Repentance

Judg 6:1 And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD:—The cycle begins with the usual report.

Usually (Judg. 3:12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1) the writer adds the word “again.”² Only in the introduction (2:11), the initial cycle with Othniel (3:7), and here is it lacking. A reasonable inference is that in these three instances, the cycle does not follow a previous one. Rather, Gideon takes us back to the beginning of the period of the Judges (Figure 2, chart).

and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years.—The Midianites, like the Amalekites, are a perennial enemy of Israel. They appear often in Israel’s early history (chart).

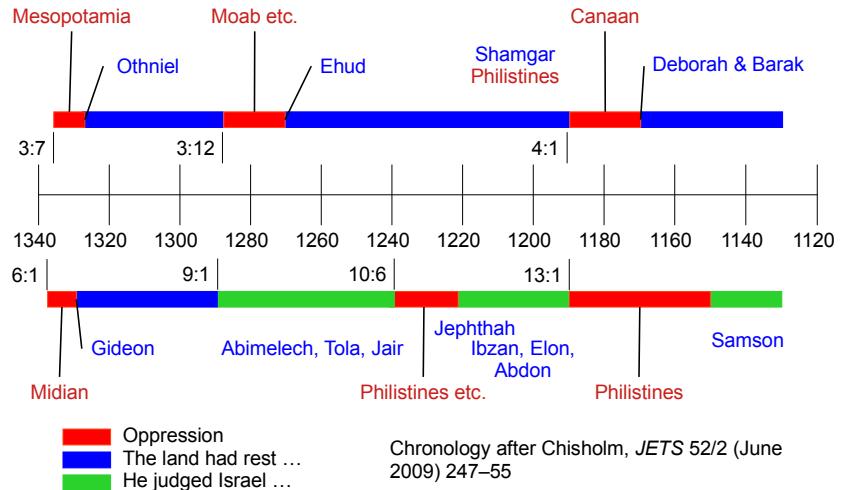


Figure 2: Timeline of the Judges (after Chisholm)

- In Genesis 37:28, Judah and his brothers sell Joseph to a caravan of Midianites.
- In Exodus 2-4, Moses, fleeing Pharaoh, takes refuge in the land of Midian, and marries a Midianite girl (cf. Num 10:29).
- In Numbers 22, the Midianites support Balak king of Moab in hiring Balaam to curse Israel.
- In Numbers 25, a Midianitish woman seduces an Israelite.

1 See Lilley’s discussion in *New Bible Dictionary*

2 וַיִּשְׁפָּט בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הָרַע ... See Chisholm *JETS* 52/2 (June 2009) 247–55. But (1/10/21) see my notes on chapters 10-12 for problems with this scheme and an alternative, superior one.

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- In Numbers 31, Israel fights against Midian.
- In 1 Ki 11:14-18, Midian shelters Hadad the Edomite, adversary to Solomon.

Except when they shelter Moses,³ they always oppose Israel, as they do here.

The persistent opposition of nations like Midian and Amalek reminds us that God’s people will always attract opposition. They are models of our persistent adversary:

1Pet. 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

Predators are never satisfied. They must continually be on the hunt for their next meal. We must always be vigilant against their attack.

The Lord’s retribution is described in a chiasmic alternation aBAb. Midian and Israel alternate (aA vs. bB), while the chiasm (letter case) is between summary and detailed description (Figure 3).

2 And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel:—This is the strongest statement of the success of the enemy that we will see in the book. In most episodes, the enemy is named, but there is no description of what they did. In the two cases where there is a description, it focuses on the process, not the outcome.

- Jabin oppressed them (4:3 להץ H3905, push or squeeze).
- The Philistines and Ammonites will vex and oppress them (10:6 רעץ ורעץ H4792, 4533).

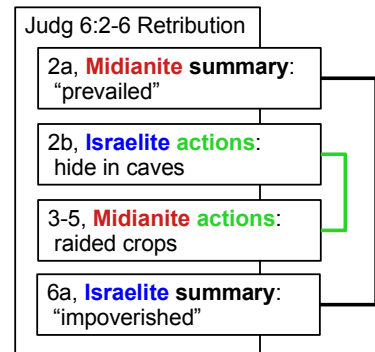


Figure 3: Chiasmic alternation in 6:2-6

But Midian achieves victory. The verb appears elsewhere in Judges only in 3:10, describing Othniel’s victory over Chushan Rishathaim.

and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds.—The Israelites were driven out of their homes, to hide in mountain strongholds. As in our present pandemic, people show their fear by hiding. We will shortly see that this fear of the Midianites is symptomatic of a far deeper fear.

3 And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and even the children of the east, even they came up against them;—As in Judges 3 (Ehud), Israel faces a coalition, and again Amalek is part of it. Here and in v. 33 Midian and Amalek are together called “the children of the east,”⁴ because they attack Israel from the desert.

4 And they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. 5 For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it.—

The comparison to grasshoppers (locusts) is a vivid image of their activity. Accustomed to grazing their cattle on natural grasslands, they delight to find the Israelites’ crops growing, and come in and help themselves, like a swarm of locusts stripping the land. Because of their great

3 See notes for the ambiguity in the name “Midianite,” between designating descent and locale. It is possible that Moses’ family was a distinct group from the Midianites who opposed Israel. Certainly the adversaries in Judges are called Midianite because of their home territory, not their descent, which, like the caravan that bought Joseph, is from Ishmael (8:22, 24).

4 Thus Webb, NICOT.

numbers, they devastate the harvest.

Gideon’s activity is around the Jezreel Valley, but the adversaries oppressed them as far as Gaza, to the south along the Mediterranean.

6 And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites;—As with Midian’s summary, a single verb summarizes the impact on Israel: they are brought low (ללל H1809). In 3:8, 14, they were only said to serve (עבד H5647) Chushan Rishathaim and Eglon.

and the children of Israel cried unto the LORD.—As we expect, Israel eventually gets the message and cries to the Lord.

7-10, Rebuke

The Gideon cycle has an additional feature not found in most of the others. After the Repentance and before the Restoration, God sends a rebuke to the nation.

This is one of three great rebukes that God gives the nation through the course of the book (Table 1, charts). The first, in ch. 2, introduces the summary of the cycles later in that chapter. The third interrupts Israel’s cry to the Lord in ch. 10, the history of Jephthah. Here it intervenes between Israel’s cry and the Lord’s Restoration through Gideon. In each case, a messenger from the Lord (or the Lord himself) reminds them of the Exodus, and rebukes their sin.

7 And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD because of the Midianites,—The message in Judges 2 falls outside the cyclical structure of Rebellion, Retribution, Repentance, and Restoration, but in Judges 6 and 10 it follows Israel’s cry to the Lord. Sometimes, when we cry to the Lord, he gives us what we ask. But sometimes, he answers by speaking to us: “Now that I have your attention, there’s something I want you to think about.”

	Judges 2	Judges 6	Judges 10
Israel’s Cry		6 and the children of Israel cried unto the LORD. 7 And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD because of the Midianites,	10 And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, saying, We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim.
Message from the Lord	1 And an (the) angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said,	8 That the LORD sent a prophet [-man] unto the children of Israel, which said unto them,	11 And the LORD said unto the children of Israel,
The Exodus	I made you to go up out of Egypt,	Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; 9 And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians,	Did not I deliver you from the Egyptians,
Victories over Enemies		and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you,	and from the Amorites, from the children of Ammon, and from the Philistines? 12 The Zidonians also, and the Amalekites, and the Maonites, did oppress you; and ye cried to me, and I delivered you out of their hand.

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	Judges 2	Judges 6	Judges 10
Gift of the Land	and have brought you unto the land which I swore unto your fathers;	and gave you their land ;	
Assurance of Covenant	and I said, I will never break my covenant with you.	10 And I said unto you, I am the LORD your God;	
Governing Command	2 And ye shall make no league [covenant] with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars:	fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell:	
Disobedience	but ye have not obeyed my voice:	but ye have not obeyed my voice.	13 Yet ye have forsaken me , and served other gods:
Consequences	why have ye done this? 3 Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you.		wherefore I will deliver you no more. 14 Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation.
Israel's Cry			15 And the children of Israel said unto the LORD, We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. 16 And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD: and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

Table 1: The Three Rebukes in Judges

An example of this in the NT is Paul's prayer for his thorn in the flesh.

2Cor. 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. 9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

The answer Paul wanted was deliverance from his physical handicap. The answer he got was a message from the Lord. He might be discouraged that God did not grant his request. But he received something far better—a direct message from the Lord, and the privilege of a deeper experience of God's grace.

8 That the LORD sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them,—In all three messages, the Lord communicates with his people verbally, but in different ways. In ch. 2, the Lord sends “the angel of the Lord,” a character who appears more times in Judges (19, once per 1000 words) than in any other book. Later in Judges, people recognize him as God, and we tentatively identify him, in the OT, as a preincarnate appearance of the Messiah, “whose goings forth have been from of old” (Mic 5:2).⁵ But this time, the Lord sends אִישׁ נְבִיא, a “prophet man,” unmistakably a human. In the third encounter in ch. 10, the Lord speaks directly to them.

This diversity of channels reminds us of Hebrews 1:

Heb. 1:1 God, who **at sundry times and in divers manners** spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son,

But though God’s revelation reaches its highest clarity and authority in the One whose name is the Word of God, the Lord still speaks to his people “at sundry times and in divers manners,” in personal prayer over the Scriptures, through insights shared by other brothers and sisters, and sometimes by direct communication. Like Abraham, we are called to “walk before [the Lord] and be perfect,” conscious of his constant awareness and supervision (Gen 17:1). Like Hagar, we should continually confess, “Thou God seest me” (Gen 16:13).

Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; 9 And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians,—All three messages (chart) also remind them of the deliverance from Egypt. Throughout Israel’s history, this experience of redemption is the basis of all his subsequent dealings with them. In the same way, our redemption at the cross is the basis for all of God’s dealings with us, and when he needs to rebuke us, as he here rebukes Israel, he takes us back to that foundational event:

Heb. 10:26 For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, 27 But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. 28 He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: 29 Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?

and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land;—In the second and third messages, he reminds them of subsequent deliverances as well. The reference here emphasizes the gift of the land, so it refers to the initial conquest under Joshua, and fits well with our proposed chronology putting Gideon early in the period of the Judges. In ch. 10, later in the period, the corresponding section will mention some of the adversaries whom the Lord suppresses through the judges.

10 And I said unto you, I am the LORD your God;—At this point, the first two messages (chart) emphasize the covenant relation that God established with the nation at Sinai. In 2:1, the reference to the covenant is explicit. Here, the reminder takes the form of half of the key formula characterizing this relation. While the people were still suffering in Egypt, God promised to establish the covenant in terms of a relation between a people and their God:⁶

Ex. 6:6 Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out

5 The title can refer to a human prophet, such as Haggai (Hag 1:13); see also 2 Chr 36:15, 16.

6 The formula is quite common; compare Lev. 26:12; Is. 40:1; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek. 36:28; Joel 2:26–27. It even lies behind the severe rebuke in Hos. 1:9, where the people’s conduct calls the relation into question.

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from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: 7 And **I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God:** and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Recall the sequence in Exodus 19-20. When the people arrive at Sinai, God offers them:

Ex. 19:5 Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then **ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people:** for all the earth is mine: 6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.

They accept the offer, and in the next chapter, the Lord states the other side of the pair:

Ex. 20:2 **I am the LORD thy God,** which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Now, in Judg 6:10, the Lord reminds them that he is their God, though by their conduct they have not lived up to the requirement to be his people.

fear⁷ not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell:—The first two messages continue with a reminder of the expectations attached to the covenant (chart). 2:2 forbade any league, literally “covenant,” with the local nations, but banned their pagan altars. Now the command forbids participating in that worship themselves.

The choice of the term *Amorites*, rather than Judges’ preferred term⁸ *Canaanites*, is telling. The word comes from the Sumerian term *martu*, meaning “the west,” and describes the land of Canaan from the standpoint not of its inhabitants (Canaan being a grandson of Noah, Gen 9:18), but of its location from the standpoint of Mesopotamia. Israel’s adversaries are described as “the children of the east” (6:3, 33). It may have seemed politically savvy to Israel to make peace with the western pagans by adopting their religion, and no doubt many thought this policy would bring peace more quickly than attacking them. But they have forgotten that even if the west is pacified, the Lord can bring his rod from the east, as he has done here.

Note the use of the verb “fear” to describe worship. The people’s fear of the Midianites is symptomatic of their fear of other gods. Our fear, like our love (Deut 6:5), should be reserved for God alone. If it is, we will not fear other threats. Conversely, the Israelites’ fear, cowering in their caves like hunted rabbits (6:2), reflects their fear of the gods of the Amorites. Fear belongs in a category with many other terrible sins:

Rev 21:8 But the **fearful**, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

When we sense fear in our lives, we should repent of it, and cling more closely, not to material solutions, but to the Lord.

but ye have not obeyed my voice.—All three messages from the Lord include this sober assessment. Israel has failed in its covenant responsibilities, and that is why she is suffering.

The other two messages (chart) go onto warn that the Lord is abandoning them to their enemies, but in this case, we move on to read of the deliverer whom the Lord sends, Gideon.

7 References to “fear” in the story (see discussion on 6:23) are marked in red.

8 16 vs 11 instances in Judges, though in Joshua-Judges each term appears 31 times, and “Amorite” is a little more common overall in the OT (87 vs. 73).

6:11-8:35, Restoration under Gideon

After the rebuke, the cycle resumes with God's restoration of the nation by raising up a heroic leader, Gideon, from the town of Ophrah, probably the modern Afula, in the Valley of Jezreel at the foot of the Hill of Moreh (Figure 4, Figure 5, chart). Thus this history occupies the same terrain where Barak later meets Sisera.

First God calls Gideon to his work (6:11-23). We cannot confront external foes until we deal with internal spiritual problems, and his first task is to destroy the local altar of Baal and set up an altar to the Lord (6:24-32). That done, the Lord prepares Gideon and his troops for battle (6:33-7:15), and then Gideon leads them in an unorthodox but spectacular defeat of Midian (7:16-25). But the story ends with a reminder of the inherent weakness of the nation in this era between the



Figure 4: Geography of Gideon

Conquest and the Kingdom, as the author recounts internal dissension among the tribes (8:1-21) and rising arrogance in Gideon himself (8:22-35), which blossoms in the next chapter with the failed attempt of Gideon's son to make himself king.

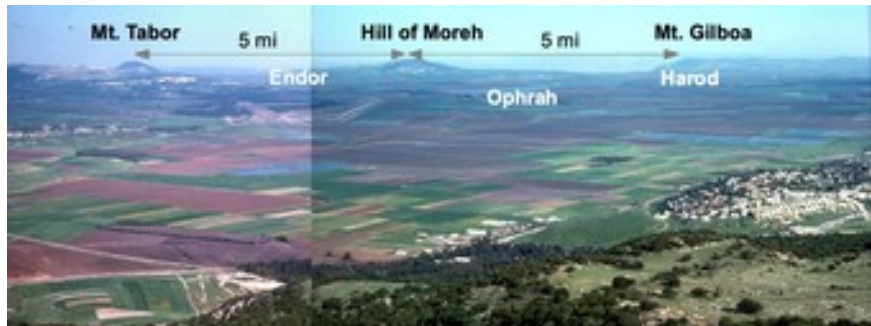


Figure 5: Jezreel Valley from Mukhraqa. Moreh is about 15 miles away, as the crow flies. Van and Anita Parunak, May 1975

6:11-24, The Call of Gideon

Gideon's call follows a pattern that appears repeatedly when God commissions someone for a task. We can trace it not only with Gideon, but also with Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, and is also reflected in Abraham's commissioning of his servant to seek a bride for Isaac.⁹ The cases where God commissions someone share six features (Table 2, chart):

1. *Divine confrontation*, where the Lord appears to the person to be commissioned.
2. *Introductory word* initiating the interchange
3. *Commission*, the actual charge given to the person
4. *Objection* by the one being commissioned
5. *Reassurance* to address the objection
6. *Sign* to confirm the charge that has been given.

⁹ See Habel, ZAW 77 [1965] 297-323

This pattern has several practical lessons for us as we seek to walk before the Lord.

- The first three elements remind us that we must respond to the Lord, and not just our own ideas or desires.
- The fourth element, the objection, encourages us when what God requires of us seems greater than we can bear. God always stretches his servants.
- The fifth and six assure us that the Lord will not leave us in uncertainty, but will strengthen us and validate his call over time.

Table 2: The Form of the Call Narrative

Element	Gideon	Application
1. Divine Confrontation	11-12, Appearance of the Angel of the Lord	Respond to the Lord, not our own ideas or desires
2. Introductory word	12 "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor"	
3. Commission	14 "Go in this thy might ... have not I sent thee?"	
4. Objection	15 "Wherewith shall I save Israel"	Expect to be stretched
5. Reassurance	16 "Surely I will be with thee"	God will strengthen and encourage us
6. Sign	17-20 "Show me a sign ... there rose up fire ..."	

11-12, Confrontation

11 And there came ~~an~~ the angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah,—The confrontation begins with the angel of the Lord taking his place under an oak, watching Gideon thresh grain.

The names of Gideon and his clan are significant in the development of the story (Table 3, chart).

Name	Abiezer—my divine Father is my help	Gideon—hacker, hewer
Divine Word	12 The Lord is with thee,	thou mighty man of valour
Gideon's Questions	13 If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?	15 I am the least in my father's house
Reassurance	16 Surely I will be with thee,	and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man

Table 3: Symbolic Names

that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite:—Abiezer means “the divine Father (or perhaps:¹⁰ the God of my father) is my helper” (cf. Exod 18:4).

and his son Gideon—“Gideon” means “hacker,” cf. his action (described with a synonym) in 6:25, and the word itself in Deuteronomy, telling Israel what to do with Canaanite sanctuaries:

Deut. 7:5 ... ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and **cut down** their groves, and burn their graven images with fire. ... 12:3 And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall **hew down** the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place.

So these names capture two themes: God’s promised help for his people, and Gideon’s destiny as one who will fight for God.

threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.—The relevance of the winepress becomes clear from excavations at El Jib, ancient Gibeon, a few miles north of Jerusalem (Figure 6, chart). The winepress was not above ground, as in some other ancient cultures, but a basin cut into the limestone. By threshing nearby, Gideon could rapidly hide the

¹⁰ Garsiel, VT 43:3 (1993) 304

finished grain in the winepress, cover it with brush, and thus conceal it from the marauding Midianites.

12-13, Introductory Word

12 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him,—Visualize the scene. The angel of the Lord is sitting under an oak by the threshing floor, but Gideon does not notice him at first. Then the visitor makes himself visible.



Figure 6: An ancient Israelite winepress (Gibeon, modern el Jib). Photo: Van and Anita Parunak, Sept 1974

and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.—The greeting reflects the same two themes we saw in the names.

- “The Lord is with thee” is reflected in the name of the clan, Abiezer.
- Gideon the “hacker” is called a mighty man of valour. He is the first individual in the Bible to bear this title (גבור חיל H1368, 2428),¹¹ which is later applied to Jephthah (Judg. 11:1), Kish the father of Saul (1 Sam. 9:1), David (1 Sam 16:18), Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:28), Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1), Boaz (Ruth 2:1), and many men classified as a group as “men of valour.” It is a characteristic term for a capable warrior, and in Joshua is used only in this sense, though Boaz and the men of 2 Ki 15:20 appear to bear the title because of their wealth.

Gideon’s two statements in vv. 13 and 15 respond to and challenge these two themes.¹²

13 And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord,—The expression *בִּי אֲדֹנָי* (here and v. 15) has the sense of “pardon me,” excusing oneself for what one has done or is about to do.¹³ Gideon is about to contradict his impressive visitor. He is polite, but assertive. *אֲדֹנָי adoniy* is a rough equivalent of our word “sir.” He says, “Excuse me, sir, but . . .” But his address to his visitor will change as the interview progresses.

if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us?—His first statement responds to the angel’s assertion, “The Lord is with thee.”

and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?—He is echoing the message of the prophet-man in 6:8.

but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.—To forsake is the direct opposite of being with someone. And in fact the Lord has not been with “us,” the nation, but he is announcing that he is with “thee,” that is, with Gideon.

14, Commission

14 And the LORD looked upon him,—Now the title of the visitor changes. He is no longer “the angel of the Lord,” but “the Lord,” indicating that this character is an appearance of God in human form. We find the same transition in other accounts of the angel of the Lord (chart):

When Hagar flees from Sarah in Genesis 16,

11 Though the plural is used of groups in Josh. 1:14; 6:2; 8:3; 10:7

12 The 14-15 response is part of other calls, but they do not include a rejection of the introduction like 12-13.

13 See Joüon-Muraoka §105c for exhaustive discussion. See v. 15 for the subtle change from singular to plural.

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Gen. 16:7 And **the angel of the LORD** found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur.

Four times in vv. 7-11 her visitor is called “the angel of the LORD.” But when she reflects on the experience, we read,

Gen. 16:13 And she called the name of **the LORD that spake unto her**, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?

When Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22, the one who interrupts him is the angel of the Lord, who goes on to identify himself as the intended recipient of the offering:

Gen. 22:11 And **the angel of the LORD** called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. 12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son **from me**.

In Exodus 3, when God calls Moses to deliver Israel (using the same pattern as with Gideon),

Ex. 3:2 And **the angel of the LORD** appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. . . . 4 And when **the LORD** saw that he turned aside to see, **God** called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

In Judges 2, the first divine rebuke, the speaker is introduced as the angel of the Lord, but then speaks of himself as doing things that God himself did:

Judg. 2:1 And ~~an~~ **the angel of the LORD** came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, **I** made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which **I** swore unto your fathers; and **I** said, **I** will never break **my covenant** with you.

And in Judges 13, he appears to Samson’s parents, who later conclude that he is God:

Judg. 13:3 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son.

He is called “the angel of the Lord” or “the angel of God” twelve times in the chapter. But after he leaves them, they recognize the one who has visited them as deity:

Judg. 13:22 And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen **God**. 23 But his wife said unto him, If **the LORD** were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have shewed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these.

When the Lord promised his disciples, “I am with you alway” (Matt 28:20), it was not a new experience for the people of God. Both before and after his incarnation, one who is both God and distinct from God has always watched over God’s people. As Micah will prophesy of Bethlehem,

Mic. 5:2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee **shall he come forth** unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; **whose goings forth have been from of old**, from everlasting.

The One who “shall come forth” is the one “whose goings forth have been from of old.”

and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?—Here is the commission. Gideon has not just “thy might,” his personal

strength, but “this thy might,” the promise that “The Lord is with thee” (v. 12).

15, Objection

15 And he said unto him, Oh my Lord,—The change in the narrator’s description of the heavenly visitor is accompanied by a subtle change in Gideon’s apologetic **בִּי אֲדֹנָי**. In v. 13, the word “my Lord” is **אֲדֹנָי** *adoniy*, a polite term of address like our “Sir,” but here, it is **אֲדֹנָי** *adonay*, the plural form, used throughout the OT to describe the Lord God. He still disagrees with his visitor, but at least he recognizes him as a heavenly messenger, not just a nosey neighbor.

wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.—The first objection (v. 13) denied the name of his clan, “Abiezer,” and the divine word “The Lord is with thee” (v. 12), while this one denies his own name as a mighty hacker and the divine word “thou mighty man of valor” (Table 3, chart). The objection may be more an excuse than reality. His father must have been a prominent citizen, for he sponsored the local sanctuary of Baal (v. 25).

16, Reassurance

16 And the LORD said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.—The reassurance echoes the introductory word in v. 12. The promise “I will be with thee” extends the statement of fact “The Lord is with thee,” and the promise that he will defeat Midian easily is appropriate for a “mighty man of valor.”

17-23, Sign

17 And he said unto him, If now I have found grace in thy sight, then shew me a sign that thou talkest with me. 18 Depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come unto thee, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee.—Gideon asks for a sign. He wants the his guest to accept a meal from him.

The scene that unfolds is strikingly similar to Abraham’s encounter with the Lord in the plains of Mamre (Table 4, chart).

- Both begin with the title **אֲדֹנָי** in the plural, indicating a recognition of the visitor’s divine nature. (But Abraham immediately recognizes his visitor and addresses him thus from the start; Gideon only comes to this realization as the interview progresses, and his request for a sign shows that he is still uncertain about the one with whom he has to do.)
- Both ask the visitor to wait for an offering.
- There are striking parallels between the offerings—meat, a huge quantity of bread, and drink.

The similarity to Abraham’s treatment of his guests suggests that Gideon is using the Scripture he already has to guide his conduct. As he becomes more convinced who this is, he asks himself, “Let’s see—how does one entertain a divine visitor? Oh, yes, Abraham had that experience. I’ll follow his example.”

And he said, I will tarry until thou come again.—Both visitors agree to wait.

19 And Gideon went in, and made ready a kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour: the flesh he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot,—In both cases the host serves a

three-course meal: meat, bread, and something liquid (butter and milk in Abraham’s case; broth in Gideon’s).

Gideon’s cake is huge. An ephah is something more than a bushel, about 16 kg or 32 pounds of dry flour. But his inspiration appears to come from Abraham, who asked Sarah to prepare three measures of flour, an amount equal to an ephah.¹⁴

Gideon imitates Abraham’s offering of the bread, but instead of a calf, he brings only a kid. The difference may reflect his status. Abraham was the head of the family, able to authorize the slaughter of a calf, but Gideon is still a son in his father’s house, and a young goat is all he can bring on his own authority.¹⁵

Abraham, Genesis 18	Gideon, Judges 6
3 [he] said, My Lord, אֲדֹנָי (plural)	15 And he said unto him, Oh my Lord אֲדֹנָי (plural)
if now I have found favour in thy sight,	17 If now I have found grace in thy sight,
pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant:	18 Depart not hence, I pray thee,
5 And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts;	until I come unto thee, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee.
And they said, So do, as thou hast said.	And he said, I will tarry until thou come again.
6 And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes ...	19 And Gideon went in, and made ready a kid ,
7 And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it.	and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour: the flesh he put in a basket,
8 ... butter and milk ...	and he put the broth in a pot,
8 And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed,	and brought it out unto him under the oak,
and set it before them;	and presented it.

Table 4: Serving a Heavenly Guest

and brought it out unto him under the oak, and presented it.—In both cases the host brings the meal out to the guests, then stands by while they eat.

20 And the angel of God¹⁶ said unto him, Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth. And he did so.—Abraham’s guests eat the meal. But Gideon, unlike Abraham, has asked for a sign, and a sign he shall have.

21 Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.—Finally, we have the sign that completes the commissioning.

The sign anticipates Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 (Table 5, chart). In both cases an offering is saturated with water, and then consumed with supernatural fire. The parallels are not accidental. While the summary account of Israel’s rebellion in 2:13 mentioned

14 Devaux, *Ancient Israel* I.200, cites Ex 16:36 and Isa 5:10. In both places the LXX translates “ephah” by “three measures.”

15 In Lk 15:29, the elder son considers a kid as a reasonable allowance from his father for his discretionary use.

16 10x in the OT, 8x anarthrous (Gen. 31:11; Ex. 14:19; Judg. 6:20; 13:6, 9; 2 Sam. 14:17, 20; 19:27) and twice anarthrous, both dealing with non-Israelites (Gen. 21:17; 1 Sam. 29:9), compared with 58 instances of *angel of the LORD*.

Baal, and while his role as the god of rain certainly plays a role in the battle with Sisera, Gideon is the only judge who specifically attacks the Canaanite God, who looms so large in Israel's later history. In the next scene, it is Baal's altar that Gideon destroys spiritual precondition to deliverance from the Midianites. It would be entirely natural for Elijah (ca. 900-850 BC), in his ultimate face-off with Baal, to draw guidance from the history of Gideon some 450 years

	Judges 6, Gideon	1 Kings 18, Elijah
Saturated sacrifice	20 And the angel of God said unto him, Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth.	33 And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.
Fire from heaven	21 Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes.	38 Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.
If Baal is a god ...	31 And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar.	24 And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.

Table 5: Anticipating Elijah

earlier. Just as Gideon imitates the scriptural example of Abraham, so Elijah will later imitate the example of Gideon. The Bible contains many examples of God's people following the examples preserved for them in earlier Scripture, and the pattern is a good one for us to adopt.

22 And when Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD!—Here is the high point of Gideon's addresses to the Lord. He started with אָדֹנָי *adoniy* "Sir," then moved to אֲדֹנָי *adonay* "Lord" (but without using the divine name). Now he cries out, אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה *adonay YHWH* "Lord Jehovah," in full recognition both of the visitor's identity and of his subjection to him as master. And instead of the combative "Excuse me" construction, we hear an expression of fear and humility, "Alas."

for because I have seen an the angel of the LORD face to face.—Gideon knows not only Genesis, but also Exodus, where God says to Moses (chart),

Ex. 33:20 And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.

But the supernatural sign persuades him that the one to whom he speaks is in fact the Lord.

23 And the LORD said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.—The angel is gone, but the reassurance from the Lord remains. He hears a voice even in the absence of the angelic visitor, showing him the truth of the central promise, "I will be with thee."

From this point on, Gideon never sees the angel of the Lord again, but the Lord often speaks to him (6:25; 7:2, 4, 5, 7, 9). Gideon required a special appearance of the Lord to break through his fear and dullness of heart, but once he learned to recognize the voice of the Lord, he was sensitive to it even without a visible sign. So as we grow in grace and spiritual maturity, we learn

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

to walk more by faith and less by sight, recognizing the voice of our Lord through long and familiar interaction. Recall our Lord's words in the upper room, after his resurrection:

John 20:29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

The Lord's words to Gideon in v. 23, "Fear not," mark a recurring theme in Gideon's history. Of the eight instances of the root $\sqrt{\text{אָרָא}}$ (verb H3372, adjective H3373) in Judges, six are in ch. 6-8 (Figure 7, chart). We also see fear in Israel hiding in caves (6:2), Gideon threshing by the winepress (6:11), and two place names, "the spring of Fear" and "Mount Trembling." Israel "fear[ed] ... the gods of the Amorites" (6:10), so the Lord brought them under fear from the Midianites, but now Gideon is learning to fear the Lord.

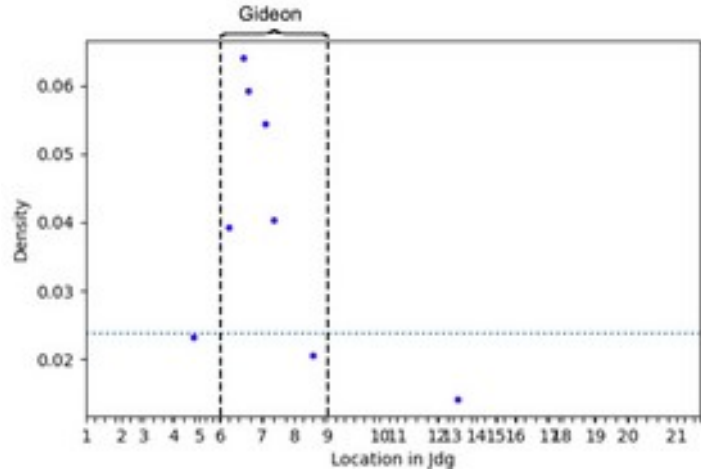


Figure 7: Fear $\sqrt{\text{אָרָא}}$ in Judges

24, Transition

24 Then Gideon built an altar there unto the LORD, and called it Jehovahshalom:—Gideon builds an altar and gives it a name, "Jehovah Peace." Compare Jacob's actions at Shalem, near Shechem, when he first returned to the land of promise (chart):

Gen 33:20 And he erected there an altar, and **called it** El-elohe-Israel [God, the God of Israel].

Naming an altar as Jacob and Gideon did is a simple extension of the practice of Abraham and Isaac, to join sacrifice with proclaiming the name of the Lord:

Gen 12:8 And [Abraham] removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, ... and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and **called upon the name of the LORD.**

Gen 26:25 And [Isaac] builded an altar there [at Beersheba], and **called upon the name of the LORD,** and pitched his tent there:

We saw in our study of Gen 4:26¹⁷ that this expression "to call upon the name of the Lord" means "to make proclamation in the name of the Lord." It refers to public declaration, not private prayer. When a worshipper gives an altar a name, we have a hint of the meaning of his worship.

When Jacob named the altar at Shechem "God, the God of Israel," he was celebrating the new name "Israel" that had just been given him in 32:28, when he wrestled with the angel:

Gen 32:28 And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

17 <https://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/genesis/notes/Genesis4b.pdf>

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

Now, back in the land, he follows the example of his father and grandfather in making an altar to God, and acknowledges his allegiance to God, under the name that he has received. “The One I worship here is indeed God, and he is my God.”

So what is the significance of the name “Jehovah Shalom” that Gideon gives his altar? Recall the evolution in his thinking during his engagement with the Angel of the Lord. At the outset, he doubts the angel’s greeting, “The Lord is with thee” (6:12),

Jdg 6:13 And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.

He and his countrymen have no peace in the presence of the Midianites. But the Lord assures him of coming peace,

Jdg 6:16 And the LORD said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.

Then, when the angel of the Lord demonstrates his deity by burning up the offering, he fears that he has no peace with God:

Jdg 6:22 And when Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face.

Again, the Lord assures him:

Jdg 6:23 And the LORD said unto him, Peace שלום be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.

So God has assured him of peace—peace in defeating Midian, and peace with God. With this altar, Gideon acknowledges that peace publicly.

unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.—

The reference of Ophrah of the Abiezrites forms an inclusio with v. 11, concluding the call narrative (Figure 8, chart). But something seems out of place.

- Building an altar is not part of the call pattern that we see elsewhere.
- In the next scene, the Lord commands Gideon to build an altar, but that action is not described, and the altar is mentioned only in passing (v. 28).
- The altar of v. 24 ends up being remembered, while that in 26-28 is mentioned only in passing.

Did Gideon build two altars, one on his own initiative that ended up being remembered, and another at the Lord’s direction that was later forgotten?

Probably there is only one altar, and this verse is a transition to what we are about to read: “Then Gideon built an altar unto the Lord. And here’s how that happened: ...”

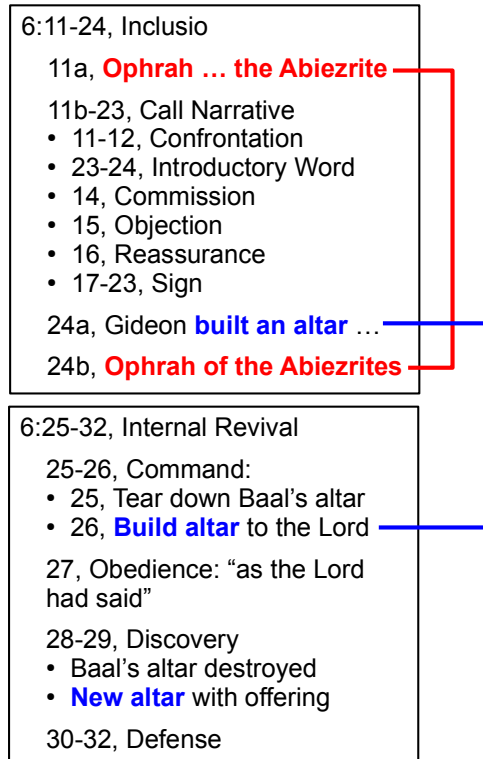


Figure 8: Structure of 6:11-32

6:25-32, Internal Revival

As the rebuke in 6:7-10 made clear, facing the external foe requires correcting internal apostasy.

25 And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, ~~even~~ and the second bullock of seven years old,—The most straightforward understanding of the text sees here two bullocks. Probably both were used to pull down the altar, and then only the second was sacrificed.

and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath,—For the first time we learn how close the apostasy was to Gideon. His own father sponsored the local cult of Baal, and the Lord's command tests whether Gideon will follow his family or the Lord. To obey the Lord, he must oppose his family's support of the cult of Baal. We may again compare Abraham's experience:

Gen 12:1 Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:

and cut down the grove that is by it:—The altar, built of stone, is to be thrown down; the grove of wooden idols is to be cut down, as the Lord commands in Deut 7:5; 12:3.

26 And build an altar unto the LORD thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place,—The term "ordered place" is commonly used of a line of battle, and may refer to a prominent location in the defenses that the family had erected against the Midianites (recall 6:2).

and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down.—Then he is to offer one of the bullocks as a sacrifice, the one that is seven years old. Its lifespan reflects the duration of the Midianite oppression. Offering it to the Lord indicates that Gideon at least is turning to the Lord, preparatory to ending that oppression.

At first glance, this instruction is a bit puzzling. God instructed the nation *not* to sacrifice in local sanctuaries, but at a central one [chart].

Deut 12:10 But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; 11 Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes, and the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice vows which ye vow unto the LORD: ... 13 Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest: 14 But in the place which the LORD shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee.

Shouldn't Gideon take his offering to the tabernacle at Shiloh (Josh 18:1)? This is not the only time we will read of someone offering sacrifices away from the tabernacle, apparently with divine approval. Samuel, though raised in the tabernacle at Shiloh, built an altar to the Lord at Ramah (1 Sam. 7:17), and offered sacrifice at Mizpeh (1 Sam 7:9), Gilgal (1 Sam. 10:8; 13:8ff.), and an unnamed town somewhere south-west of Bethlehem (1 Sam 9, cf. 10:2) when he anoints Saul. When he goes to Bethlehem to anoint David, the Lord tells him,

1Sam. 16:2 Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to **sacrifice** to the LORD.

The resolution of the puzzle lies in the first verse of Deuteronomy 12:

Deut 12:10 But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and **when he giveth you rest** [נוח C H5117] **from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety;** 11 Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there ...

The requirement to restrict sacrifice to a single location depends on the Lord's choice of a place where his name would dwell, and that choice is contingent on Israel's achieving rest from her enemies. The rest anticipated in Deut 12:10 (נוח C H5117) goes beyond the rest that repeatedly characterizes Judges, "the land had rest (שקט G H8262) from war X years" The word in Judges means simply a cessation in hostilities ("rest from war"), while the term in Deut 12:10 refers to a deep abiding peace. The single sanctuary belongs to a time when Israel "dwell[s] in safety בטה H983," but the only people said in Judges to dwell in safety are Israel's enemies (8:11; 18:7). The theme of Judges is that Israel cannot attain such peace without the divinely chosen king. As a result, until the time of David, we see decentralized sacrifice.

Here is another lesson for our age. During the Millennium, all nations will go up to a single sanctuary in Jerusalem (Isaiah 60; Zechariah 14). Until then, between the conquest and the Kingdom, God's people are to worship "in every place," as envisioned by Malachi,

Mal. 1:11 For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and **in every place incense shall be offered** unto my name, and a pure **offering**: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.

In this age, any attempt to define a geographical center for our worship reflects human pride, not the work of the Spirit of God.

27 Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the LORD had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father's household, and the men of the city, that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night.—Gideon has learned to hear the voice of the Lord, and has bowed to his authority, but he is still fearful of the rejection he may face from his father, the sponsor of the pagan altar, and from the city that looked to it as its sanctuary

28 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built. 29 And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they enquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing.—An operation that requires ten assistants is bound to have leaks, and it will soon be discovered whose barn is lacking a bullock. Gideon's secret comes out.

30 Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die: because he hath cast down the altar of Baal, and because he hath cut down the grove that was by it.—Gideon's obedience to the Lord places him in grave danger, but the Lord intervenes.

31 And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar.—The Lord opens the eyes of Joash, in spite of the loss of his bullock and his altar. He suddenly realizes that his son's action clearly demonstrates the impotence of Baal, and in another anticipation of Elijah's combat with Baal on Mount Carmel (Table 5, chart), challenges the people to face the evidence.

32 Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar.—The episode gives Gideon his second name, “Let Baal plead.”

6:33-7:15 Preparations for Battle

This section is an alternation, ABC-ABC (Table 6, chart), where

- A (6:33-34a, 7:1) compares Gideon with the Midianites,
- B (6:34b-35, 7:2-8) prepares Gideon’s army, and
- C (6:36-40, 7:9-15) prepares Gideon himself.

Gideon and the Midianites	6:33-34a Midian in Jezreel vs. Spirit in Gideon	7:1 Midian at Moreh vs. Gideon at Harod
Preparation of the Army	6:34b-35 Mustered	7:2-8 Refined
Preparation of Gideon	6:36-40	7:9-15

Table 6: Alternation in the Preparation of Gideon's Troops

33 Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and even the children of the east, were gathered together, and went over,—As in 6:3 and 7:12, the Midianites and Amalekites are collectively called “the children of the east,” since they come into Israel from the desert to the east of the Jordan. Apparently they do not disrupt the transjordanian tribes, who (like them) are herders, but rather invade the areas where people live by raising crops, like the Jezreel Valley.

“Children of the east” contrasts with the description of Israel’s territory in 6:10, “the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell.” “Amorites” comes from the Sumerian term *martu*, meaning “the west.” It describes the land of Canaan from the standpoint not of its inhabitants (Canaan being a grandson of Noah, Gen 9:18), but as seen by those in the desert and Mesopotamia. It may have seemed politically savvy to Israel to make peace with the western pagans by adopting their religion, and no doubt many thought this policy would bring peace more quickly than attacking them. But even if the west is pacified, the Lord can bring his rod from the east, as he does here.

and pitched in the valley of Jezreel.—They are now in Gideon’s home territory (Figure 4, Figure 5, chart).

34 But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon,—The structure of this verse encourages point by point comparison with v. 33 (chart).¹⁸

- Corresponding to Midian and Amalek is the Spirit of the Lord.
- They assemble and pass over the Jordan. The Spirit “clothes himself.” The English translation is a bit misleading: the Spirit is not upon Gideon, but rather within him. He becomes the embodiment of the divine power.
- They control the valley of Jezreel, but the Spirit controls Gideon. A man possessed by the HS is always more powerful than any battle position that the enemy may hold.

and he blew a trumpet; and Abiezer was gathered [summoned] after him. 35 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh; who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulun, and unto Naphtali;—In addition to his own clan, the tribes surrounding the valley answer (Figure 1, chart), but Issachar, which occupies the

¹⁸ Both are disjunctive clauses, with the order subject, verb, adjunct indicating location. Compare the contrast of combatants that we saw in 5:19-22.

eastern end of the valley, the center of the conflict, is missing. Perhaps the Midianite presence was so strong that they were unable to respond. Or were they already where Gideon gathered? **and they came up to meet them.**—“Came up” probably refers to Mount Gilboa, on the south side of the valley. Maybe Issachar was already huddled there (6:2).

But now Gideon faces a moment of doubt. He has seen the angel of the Lord and learned to hear the Lord’s voice. The Spirit of the Lord has clothed itself with him, and the surrounding tribes have rallied to his call, 32,000 in number (7:3). But suddenly he is uncertain, and sets out to “test” (נסה D H5254) the Lord. This is risky—God uses this verb to describe Israel’s episodes of unbelief in the wilderness (chart):

Num. 14:22 Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have **tempted** me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; 23 Surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it:

God is longsuffering, but eventually his patience wears out. He gave Israel ten chances, but when they refused to enter the land, that was the last straw.

Gideon’s tests lead to obedience, not stubbornness. But his weakness is reflected in the use of “God” rather than “LORD” (יהוה) throughout this episode.

36 And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, 37 Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. 38 And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.—The specific test that Gideon proposes is appropriate to the spiritual contest that he engaged when he tore down the altar of Baal. For Baal is the god of precipitation, dew as well as rain, and in the Ugaritic myths, one of his daughters is named “Dew.” Gideon wants to be sure that the divine voice to which he has been responding is indeed superior to the Canaanite deity whom he has rejected.¹⁹

The Lord grants his request, but Gideon has an afterthought. Even in modern times, people in desert areas sometimes collect water by leaving out a fleece overnight.²⁰ So he asks a harder sign.

39 And Gideon said unto God, Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let me **prove, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. 40 And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.**—In his longsuffering, God grants the second request, and now Gideon is satisfied.

7:1 Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon, and all the people that were with him, rose up early,—

19 Compare 1 John 4:1, “try the spirits whether they are of God.” But the verb there is δοκιμάζω, which never translates נסה in the LXX; the consistent reflex is πειράζω. The negative overtones of נסה are unavoidable.

20 Hubbard and Hubbard, *Neolithic Dew-Ponds and Cattle-Ways*, London: 1916, p. 115 give a contemporary example: “Consider, for instance, the case of the three islands known as the Desertas. Their nearest point is about twelve miles from Madeira, and they are close together: the largest measures about ten miles by two miles. As their name implies, they are desert islands on which we believe that rain never falls. They are streamless and springless and uninhabited, except by a few fisher men who live on the largest. These men live by water obtained by spreading out fleeces in the evening, and wringing the dew from them in the morning.” https://www.google.com/books/edition/Neolithic_Dew_ponds_and_Cattle_ways/kJILAQAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

As though confirming his renewed faith, the writer now reminds us that Gideon is the one with whom Baal must contend.

and pitched beside the well of Harod:— Better, “the spring עין H5869 of Harod.” The term refers to a flowing spring, in contrast with בור H953, a cistern that captures rain water or באר H875 a hole that reaches down to the water table.²¹

The name appears nowhere else in the OT, but apparently refers to an ample spring at the foot of Mount Gilboa (Figure 10, Figure 9, chart). It is cognate to a Hebrew root that means “trembling,” translated “afraid” in v. 3 and in the causative form “discomfited” in 8:12. The Arab name, Ain Jalud, uses another Semitic root גלד meaning “fear,” and such place names often preserve ancient memories. Given the theme of fear throughout the story, the name may have originated with the history of Gideon, when God tested the people at this spring for their fear.

so that the host of the Midianites were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.—The word translated “host” here and throughout this account (מחנה H4264) is not the usual word (צבא H6635). The latter term refers to the army, the collection of people, and in the Gideon story appears only in 8:6, where it is rendered “army.” The word here rather means “encampment.” The entire Midianite population was quite large, and spread throughout the valley (7:12), but the army had a more localized encampment.

The later reference to the battle in Psalm 83 suggests that their camp was near En Dor, north of the hill (Figure 4, chart). Note the chiasmic reference to the two adversaries and where they were defeated:

Psa 83:9 Do unto them as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kison:
10 Which [the Midianites] perished at Endor: they became as dung for the earth.

If this reconstruction is correct, Gideon’s activities on Mount Gilboa and at Harod Spring, both on the south side of the Hill of Moreh would be obscured from the Midianites.

2 And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.—7:3 shows that Gideon had 32,000 soldiers, against 135,000 of



Figure 10: Harod Spring emerges from cave in cliff (to right of bush). Van and Anita Parunak, November 1974.



Figure 9: Pool at Harod Spring. Van and Anita Parunak, November 1974.

²¹ The latter can also be called a “spring,” as in Gen 24:11 (“well”) and 24:13 (“spring”).

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

Midian (8:10). Even at 32,000, the Israelites are outnumbered, but the Lord wants even higher odds to make clear that he is the one giving the victory.

Contrast the situation with that of Barak and Deborah. There, the problem was that too few responded, and many tribes took no interest in the battle. Here, there are too many soldiers. Perhaps people were more eager early in the period (Gideon) than toward its end (Barak).

3 Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid קָרַד, let him return—“Afraid” is the word from which the spring got its name, Harod. The exclusion of the fearful was prescribed by Moses (chart):

Deut 20:1 When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the LORD thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 2 And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, 3 And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; 4 For the LORD your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

5 And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that **hath built a new house**, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. 6 And what man is he that **hath planted a vineyard**, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. 7 And what man is there that **hath betrothed a wife**, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.

8 And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, **What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted?** let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart.

Note the repetition of the quotation formula in vv. 5 and 8. The provision for the fearful is a separate category from the other three. The first three are temporary deferments to avoid disrupting the natural rhythm of life, but the fourth is a fundamental disqualification. The Lord’s battles are not to be fought by the fearful.

It is worth noting that the writer of Judges, sometime around the time of David, knows of this regulation, consistent with the biblical assignment of Deuteronomy to Moses.

and depart early from mount Gilead.—The only Mount Gilead we know from the OT is on the eastern side of Jordan, far from the action here (chart). But having introduced us to “the well of fear” in v. 1, the narrator is probably using another figurative title for what is elsewhere called Mount Gilboa. Recall the modern Arab name for the spring, Ain Jalud, “Spring of Fear,” of which “Well of Harod” is a synonym. By changing only one letter, the writer turns “Mount Gilboa” הַר גִּלְבֹּעַ into הַר גִּלְעָד, a pun for הַר גִּלְעָד “Mount Dread.”²² Once again, the writer emphasizes the recurring theme of fear. (See notes for an alternative symbolism.)

And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand. 4 And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many;—Gideon’s force, already much smaller than the Midianite host, has been reduced by more than two-thirds, yet the Lord still is not satisfied.

22 C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 2d ed., London: Rivingtons, 1930; cited by Boling.

bring them down unto the water, and I will try [צרף H6884] them for thee there:—Literally, “I will refine them for thee there.” He describes Gideon’s army as though it were a precious metal contaminated with dross, and proposes to refine them so that Gideon has only the best.

The Lord’s logic here invites us to contrast two different kinds of churches. One kind strives for large numbers of people, but with little effort to “discern the body” (1 Cor 11:29); the other is often small, but seeks disciples who are committed to following the Lord. The latter are the ones who will do the real work of spiritual combat.

and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go.—The final decision is not up to Gideon, but to the Lord. If Gideon’s favorite comrade does not make the cut, he must be left out.

5 So he brought down the people unto the water: and the LORD said unto Gideon, Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink.—Some men buried their faces in the cool water. Others only knelt down and scooped up water with their hands. The first group became oblivious to what was going on around them. The second group remained alert even while they took necessary refreshment.

6 And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water. 7 And the LORD said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place.—The Lord has indeed refined the people. Gideon now has less than 1% of the original force that responded to his call to arms.

8 So the people took victuals in their hand, and their trumpets: and he sent all the rest of Israel every man unto his tent, and retained those three hundred men:—Now he has his army.

and the host of Midian was beneath him in the valley.—In 7:1, Gideon and his army were encamped beside the spring, which is already in the valley. Since “the host of Midian was beneath him,” Gideon and his 300 men must now have moved from the spring to an elevation, probably to the Hill of Moreh overlooking the valley around Endor.

Now the Lord offers Gideon a choice of two courses of action, marked by the distinct prepositional phrases “unto the host” במחנה (into the camp, to attack them) in 9 and 11, and “to the camp” אל-המחנה (to the camp, approaching but not entering it) in 10.

9 And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand.—Gideon may attack right away. The Lord has refined his army, removing the fearful and careless and limiting the number so that the Lord’s hand will be clear. All is in readiness; Gideon may attack right away.

10 But if thou **fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host: 11 And thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host.**—But if he is still fearful, the Lord suggests a reconnaissance mission.

The Lord graciously makes provision for this weakness, reassuring Gideon before he enters into battle. Why is fearful Gideon still in the army, after 22,000 fearful soldiers were sent away?

Those who departed were self-selected. Gideon invited anyone who was fearful to leave. He could have left himself, but in doing so he would have been disobeying the Lord's commission in 6:14. There may have been others as well, whose sense of duty was stronger than their fear. We must often wrestle with opposing impulses. Recall the father of the demoniac son in Mark 9, who cried out to the Lord (9:24), "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

The precaution in Deuteronomy 20 was to avoid contaminating the rest of the force with fear. Gideon, though fearful, does not spread his fear to others. Instead, he consistently obeys the Lord—in destroying the altar of Baal, in mustering the troops, in making the radical cuts the Lord has asked. Now the Lord graciously calms his inner apprehensions. "The one indispensable requirement for a leader of God's people is not fearlessness, but obedience" (Webb).

Then went he down with Phurah his servant unto the outside of the armed men that were in the host. 12 And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude.—Note the distinction between "the host" (המחנה H4264), the military encampment made up of armed men, and the much larger crowd of nomads with their camels. The nomads were spread throughout the valley, but the military had a central encampment with a clear boundary, apparently at En Dor. As they approach, they overhear a conversation between two of the soldiers who are standing watch.

13 And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host [במחנה, as in vv. 9, 11] of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along.—Imagine a loaf of bread knocking down a military tent!

14 And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.—The Midianites, because of their pervasive presence throughout the valley, must have known of the messages Gideon sent to the surrounding tribes to gather against Midian. The Lord has put into the hearts of the Midianites the fear from which he has delivered Gideon and his soldiers.

15 And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian.—He first prostrates himself before the Lord in gratitude. Then he returns to his men and assures them of the Lord's provision.

7:16-8:21 The Defeat of Midian

The description of the battle falls into two parts: the attack on the Midianite camp, and the rout of the army, pursuing them as they flee back to the desert. The first part is clearly the working of the Lord, but the second part increasingly shows the work of the flesh.

7:16-22, The Battle at the Camp

16 And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet שופר in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers. 17 And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and, behold, when I come to the outside of the camp, it shall be that, as I do, so shall ye do. 18 When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp,—Gideon's plan to

surround the enemy makes sense only when we remember the distinction between the military encampment at En Dor (here *מחנה* is translated “camp” rather than “host”) and the much larger Midianite population that is spread throughout the valley. His men are to take their places all around the camp, with their unconventional weapons.

and say, *The sword of for the LORD, and of for Gideon.*—Note the italics. “Sword” is added in translation, to conform to v. 20, but a key point of the attack is that they did not use swords! Instead, they use trumpets, pitchers, and lamps.

The preposition *ל*, translated “of,” here probably means “for.” Their attack is for the glory of the Lord. Gideon may add his own name because the Lord has showed him that the Midianites would recognize it as the one predicted by the dream of the barley loaf.

The episode repeatedly mentions the trumpets. In planning his attack, Gideon may well be guided by the example of Joshua at Jericho. Other than Ehud’s trumpet call in 3:27 to summon Ephraim to pursue the Moabites, these are the only references to trumpets in Judges, and the conquest of Jericho is the only reference to them in Joshua (Figure 11, chart).²³

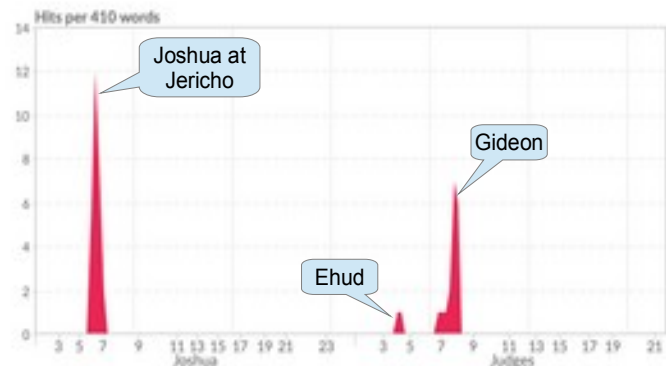


Figure 11: Trumpet שופר in Joshua and Judges

19 So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle

watch; and they had but newly set the watch:—“Middle watch” suggests that the Hebrews were accustomed to divide the night into three periods, roughly four hours each (sunset to 10 PM, 10 to 2 AM, and 2 to 6 AM) (Hervey, Pulpit Bible). There are no biblical references to the first or evening watch, but the morning watch appears in Exod. 14:24 and 1 Sam. 11:11.

The temporal context is important. Gideon “attacks” when night has fully fallen. Most of the soldiers would be asleep, and so would be disoriented by the sound of the attack. Only the torches would be visible, so the Midianites couldn’t see the small number of attackers. He also schedules the attack at the start of the watch, “when those going off-duty were tired and distracted, and their replacements were not yet properly settled” (Webb).

and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. 20 And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal:—The sounds of the smashing jars and trumpets, and the light of the torches on every side, would give the impression of a much larger attacking force than Gideon actually had.

and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.—The people add the reference to a sword, perhaps to make the Midianites think they are under attack by armed men. Or perhaps they are itching for a share of the action themselves, as shown in the sequel.

21 And they stood every man in his place round about the camp:—But they do not actually attack. They stand still, around the outside of the camp.

²³ Dave Nelson notes that a verbal cry is also a part of both attacks, though the verbs used are different (*רוע* H7321 and *תרועה* H8643 in Josh 6, *אמר* H559 and *קרא* H7121 in Judg 7:18, 20).

and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. 22 And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host:—The Midianites expect that such a cry and tumult would be accompanied by soldiers rushing in with swords, and strike out in the dark at everyone they see with a sword, killing their own comrades.

This is the first of several instances where the Lord moves Israel's enemies to destroy themselves. When Jonathan and his armorbearer attack the Philistine garrison at Michmash, the two of them slay twenty Philistines, but the Lord sends an earthquake, and the Philistines, thinking they are under attack by a much larger force, begin slaying one another (chart):

1 Sa 14:16 And the watchmen of Saul in Gibeah of Benjamin looked; and, behold, the multitude melted away, and they went on **beating down one another**.

Jehoshaphat has a similar experience 450 years after Gideon:

2Chr. 20:1 It came to pass after this also, that the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, and with them other beside the Ammonites, came against Jehoshaphat to battle. ... 10 And now, behold, the children of Ammon and Moab and mount Seir, whom thou wouldest not let Israel invade, when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them, and destroyed them not; 11 Behold, I say, how they reward us, to come to cast us out of thy possession, which thou hast given us to inherit. ... 22 And when they began to sing and to praise, the LORD set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab, and mount Seir, which were come against Judah; and they were smitten. 23 For the children of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of mount Seir, utterly to slay and destroy them: and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, **every one helped to destroy another**.

Later, Isaiah describes Egypt's civil wars in the 25th dynasty (744–656 BC²⁴):

Isa 19:2 And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and **they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour**; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom.

Internal strife is a sign of God's judgment. In later years, the defeat Midian becomes an emblem of Israel's deliverance from all her adversaries, at the coming of the Prince of Peace (chart):

Isa 9:4 For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

and the host fled to Bethshittah in Zererath, and to the border of Abelmeholah, unto Tabbath.—The only location known with any certainty is Abel-Meholah, which is the home of Elijah (1 Ki 19:16) and part of Solomon's fifth administrative district (1 Ki 4:12) (Figure 4, chart). 8:5 shows that Gideon crossed near Succoth in pursuing them, which indicates a southerly flight to the fords of the Jordan, and then back to the eastern country from which they came.

From this point, the Lord gives no further directions to Gideon. The enemy has been routed, and Israel should go back to their own business. But some of those who left the army at Gideon's invitation when Midian looked so strong, now have second thoughts.

7:23-8:21, The Rout

Two details suggest that the Israelites pursue the Midianites in the strength of the flesh.

24 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty-fifth_Dynasty_of_Egypt. Watts calls attention to Breasted's description of the civil dissolution at this time: J. H. Breasted (History of Egypt [New York: Scribner's, 1905] 536)

1. The narrator nowhere attributes any of the events in this section to the Lord (though Gideon himself does, 8:7). We have no direction by the Lord, as in the battle itself.
2. The operation leads to increasingly to internal strife among the tribes.

This section is organized by the people who did (or did not) participate in it and the elements of the adversary that are vanquished (Table 7, chart).

Ironically, as the Midianites flee, Israel itself is weakened, until finally Gideon leads the nation back into idolatry.

	Pursuers	Pursued	Motive
7:23	Men of Israel (from the fearful of 7:3)	General population	Greed? (cf. 8:22-25)
7:24-8:3	Ephraim	Princes of Midian: Oreb and Zeeb	Block the ford of Jordan (cf. Ehud, 3:28)
8:4-21	Gideon	Kings of Midian: Zebah and Zalmunah	Vengeance, Greed

Table 7: The Rout of Midian

7:23, Opportunists pursue the General Population

23 And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites.—Perhaps these men come from the 22,000 who were released earlier. Zebulun does not join them. This time they are not called by Gideon, but gather at their own initiative. When they were part of a small force facing a Midianite army four times their size, they gladly took advantage of the invitation to leave because of fear. Now, seeing the success that God has given, and contemplating the possibility of spoil (cf. 8:24-26), they are eager to join in the pursuit.

How many there are in the Christian life who withdraw in fear when the enemy seems strong, but when God gives the victory, they are eager to share in the fruits of victory. But Gideon’s history warns that when the battle has reached this stage, the danger of spiritual apostasy is very great.

7:24-8:3, Ephraim defeats the Princes

This stage of the rout is chiasmic, beginning and ending with Gideon’s interactions with Ephraim, and the combat in the middle.

24 And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites, and take before them the waters unto Bethbarah and Jordan.—Gideon also seeks to expand the victory on his own initiative. He started fearful and hesitant, but now, emboldened by the success the Lord has given him, he goes on in his own strength.

In particular, he recruits Ephraim, a tribe not directly affected by the depredations of Midian in the Jezreel Valley (Figure 1, chart), but with the most direct access to the important ford over the Jordan that leads to Succoth and then the valley of the Jabbok.

Then all the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and took the waters unto Bethbarah and Jordan. 25 And they took two princes [רַבִּי H8269] of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb;—The names mean “Raven and Wolf,” reflecting their fierceness in battle.

and they slew Oreb upon the rock Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb,—They were able to capture and execute two princes of Midian, an event so memorable that the place later took its name from these victims. The defeat of these two princes is so notable that Isaiah recalls it in predicting the destruction of the Assyrian,

Is 10:26 And the LORD of hosts shall stir up a scourge for him according to the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb:

and pursued Midian, and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side Jordan.—The Ephraimites did not stop there. They continued to pursue Midian, following Gideon, who was by this time already across the Jordan²⁵ (as we see in the next segment).

8:1 And the men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply.—Seeing the success of the campaign, and probably contemplating the spoil that the Midianites must have left behind in their camp when they fled, the men of Ephraim are jealous that Gideon did not include them in the initial call to arms in 6:35.

2 And he said unto them, What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? 3 God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb: and what was I able to do in comparison of you? Then their anger was abated toward him, when he had said that.—Gideon graciously appeases them by suggesting that the honor of capturing princes exceeds his accomplishment of simply routing the army. This diplomatic, irenic approach to dealing with his countrymen stands in contrast with the behavior that we will see in the next section.

Note the metaphor about grapes and vintage. The defeat of Midian ends as it began, at a winepress (6:11; 7:25). “The marauders have been forced out of the land as juice is pressed out of grapes” (Webb).

This structural marker is reinforced by the new time frame (backing up to Gideon’s crossing of Jordan) and reintroduction of Gideon by name in 8:4. He has fulfilled his divine commission to “save Israel from the hand of the Midianites” (6:14). What he does from this point on is a separate mission, motivated not by obedience to the Lord, but by personal vengeance and greed.

8:4-21, Gideon takes vengeance on the Kings

The princes have been subdued, but the kings of Midian are still at liberty, and Gideon pursues them. Again Gideon tries to recruit support for his pursuit, this time without success.

Succoth (Josh 13:27), and probably Penuel as well,²⁶ were part of the tribe of Gad, so Gideon is engaging yet another of the tribes in his conquest, another that is remote from the original scene of the battle. However, the location is strategic. One of the most accessible routes from the eastern steppes across the Jordan follows the valley of the Jabbok (Figure 4, Figure 12, Figure 13, chart). This is the route Jacob follows when he returns from Haran, and wrestles with the angel at Peniel (“the face of God”) (Gen 32:30), also called Penuel (32:31).

Gen. 32:30 And Jacob called the name of the place **Peniel**: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. 31 And as he passed over **Penuel** the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh.

When he reaches the Jordan valley, after meeting Esau, he builds booths (*succoth*) for his cattle, anticipating the other city:

25 Thus מעבר לירדן elsewhere (Josh. 13:32; 14:3; 17:5; 18:7; 20:8).

26 Penuel is not assigned to a tribe, but if Coughenour’s identification with Tel edh-Dhahab esh-Sherqiyeh (BASOR 273 (1989) p. 60, followed by Rainey and Rasmussen) is correct, it is on the south of the river, and thus likely also in Gad.

Gen. 33:17 And Jacob journeyed to **Succoth**, and built him an house, and made booths for his cattle: therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

It is apparently the route follows by the surviving Midianite troops as they flee, and in all likelihood was the route they followed coming into the country in the first place.

The section alternates between his interactions with Succoth and Penuel and the defeat of the kings.

4 And Gideon came to Jordan, and passed over, he, and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing them. 5 And he said unto the men of Succoth, Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me; for they be faint, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, kings [מֶלֶךְ H4428] of Midian.—He does not ask them to take part in the conflict, but simply to refresh his troops. The names of the kings mean “Slaughter and Protection Refused,” again nicknames, this time anticipating their fate (8:18-21).

6 And the princes of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thine army?—The men of Succoth have apparently lived in peace with the Midianites as they migrate back and forth across the Jordan to invade the western tribes. We might expect Gad would defend those tribes by resisting these invasions. Instead, they will not even support Gideon as he pursues the kings, fearing Midianite retaliation.

7 And Gideon said, Therefore when the LORD hath delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into mine hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers. 8 And he went up thence to Penuel, and spake unto them likewise: and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered him. 9 And he spake also unto the men of Penuel, saying, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.—Notice how confident Gideon has become—but at the same time, how vengeful and authoritarian. He still invokes the name of the Lord, but there is no evidence that the Lord is leading him.



Figure 12: Jabbok toward the Jordan (from Amman-Gerash road) (Van and Anita Parunak, June 1975)



Figure 13: Jabbok looking east, from Amman-Gerash road (Van and Anita Parunak, June 1975). Note small house at right center of Figure 12 and left center of Figure 13.

This transformation in Gideon also appears in some Christian movements. They begin as the Spirit strengthens weak, fearful people, and does great things with them. But eventually those people become over-confident, and if their movement persists, it is in danger of become carnal.

10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their hosts with them, about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of all the hosts of the children of the east: for there fell an hundred and twenty thousand men that drew sword.—This verse shows us that the original military force was about 135,000. The best candidates for Karkor (Rainey p. 139) are in the Wadi Sirhan in the Arabian desert, far beyond the area settled by the transjordanian tribes. In pursuing them out of Israel's territory, Gideon is clearly going beyond his divine mandate.

11 And Gideon went up by the way of them that dwelt in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and smote the host: for the host was secure.—Nobah (originally called Kenath, Num 32:42) is far to the east, 57 km east of the Sea of Galilee; Jogbehah is near Amman, to the south. He appears to have circled around the location of the Midianite camp so that they felt "secure" and unthreatened, once again surprising them by a night attack (cf. v. 13).

12 And when Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued after them, and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and discomfited all the host.—Again the enemy flees, but this time there is no supernatural turning of their swords one against another.

13 And Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle before the sun was up, 14 And caught a young man of the men of Succoth, and enquired of him: and he described unto him the princes of Succoth, and the elders thereof, even threescore and seventeen men. 15 And he came unto the men of Succoth, and said, Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, with whom ye did upbraid me, saying, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thy men that are weary? 16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. 17 And he beat down the tower of Penuel, and slew the men of the city.—On his way back to his own territory, he fulfills his cruel threats to Succoth and Penuel, showing a very different spirit than that with which he dealt with the men of Ephraim.

18 Then said he unto Zebah and Zalmunna, What manner of men were they whom ye slew at Tabor? And they answered, As thou art, so were they; each one resembled the children of a king. 19 And he said, They were my brethren, even the sons of my mother: as the LORD liveth, if ye had saved them alive, I would not slay you.—Now we finally see one of the motives driving Gideon to pursue the two kings far beyond the area settled by Israel. While they were at En Dor, they slew some of Gideon's relatives near Tabor. Gideon wants vengeance.

Was this really wrong? After all, the OT recognizes that a kinsman-redeemer can not only deliver a relative from debt (Leviticus 25), but also seek vengeance for murder (2 Sam 14:6-7), and provides cities of refuge to give relief for the latter as it does the Jubilee for the former. But providing remedy for an act does not justify it—compare Deuteronomy 24, which tells what to do in the case of divorce but does not authorize it. And already in Deuteronomy, God claims the sole prerogative to execute vengeance:

Deu 32:35 **To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence;** their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.

Gideon's actions were culturally acceptable, but he is acting on his own account, and no longer fulfilling the work with which God charged him.

20 And he said unto Jether his firstborn, Up, and slay them. But the youth drew not his sword: for he feared, because he was yet a youth.—This is the final reference to fear in the Gideon story.

21 Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise thou, and fall upon us: for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose, and slew Zebah and Zalmunna, and took away the ornaments that were on their camels' necks.—Here we see the other motive for Gideon's pursuit far beyond Israel: he is greedy for the spoil that decorated the camels of the Midianites.

8:22-28 The Perils of Victory

22 Then the men of Israel²⁷ said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.—Their request is based on the assumption that Gideon is responsible for the deliverance.

23 And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.—Gideon corrects their request, but not their motive. He understands, as the Lord later tells Samuel, that requesting a king is rejecting the Lord's rule:

1Sa 8:7 And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.

But he does not emphasize to them that the deliverance was also the work of the Lord. Instead, taking advantage of their view that he is the deliverer, he asks for something else.

24 And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey.—He demands a special share of the spoil they have collected. This request has a special significance.

(For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)—The description of the Midianites as Ishmaelites helps clarify the double reference to the same ethnic groups in Genesis 37, without any need to invoke multiple sources:

Gen 37:28 Then there passed by **Midianites** merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the **Ishmeelites** for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Apparently, “Midianite,” originally an ethnic term, has come to refer to a region (see notes).

25 And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a garment, and did cast therein every man the earrings of his prey. 26 And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold; beside ornaments, and collars, and purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were about their camels' necks.—A shekel is about 11.5 grams,²⁸ so the total amount of gold is about 43 pounds.

27 Curiously, in this common designation of the collective (22x), שָׂרָא is always singular.

28 Wikipedia reports weights across many nations ranging from 7 to 17 grams, but a recently discovered two-shekel weight from the first temple period confirms other data placing the biblical shekel at 11.5 grams (<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/temple-at-jerusalem/iron-age-weight-found-near-temple-mount/>).

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

In Num 31:21-29, when Israel fights Midian after the episode of Baal-Peor, the Lord gives instructions for dividing the spoil (chart). First, it is divided between those who actually fought and the rest of the congregation.

Num. 31:27 And divide the prey into two parts; between them that took the war upon them, who went out to battle, and between all the congregation:

Then each of these groups gives a portion of what they receive for the service of the tabernacle. The tax on the warriors is one part out of 500, or 0.2%, and goes to the high priest.

Num. 31:28 And levy a tribute unto the LORD of **the men of war** which went out to battle: **one soul of five hundred**, both of the persons, and of the beeves, and of the asses, and of the sheep: 29 Take it of their half, and give it **unto Eleazar the priest**, for an heave offering of the LORD.

The tax on the noncombattants is 2%, distributed among the Levites:

Num. 31:30 And of **the children of Israel's** half, thou shalt take **one portion of fifty**, of the persons, of the beeves, of the asses, and of the flocks, of all manner of beasts, and give them **unto the Levites**, which keep the charge of the tabernacle of the LORD.

From the use that Gideon made of the spoil, it appears that he is basing his request on this antecedent. As we have seen before, he knows previous Scripture (the history of Abraham; Joshua's conquest of Jericho). But here he abuses it, for he is not a Levite, and has no claim on the perquisites of the priests. His history anticipates what happened in liturgical churches, with their institution of a non-levitical priests as church leaders.

27 And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah:—The word “ephod” refers to the high priest's tunic (apron) (Figure 14), embroidered with gold, blue, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with precious stones (Exod 28:6-12). At the Lord's command, he had previously constructed an altar in Ophrah, one that was accessible years later, when Judges was written (6:24). Now, on his own initiative, he constructs a costly priestly garment. It looks as though Gideon is trying to establish himself as leader of a sanctuary in competition with the tabernacle at Shiloh. He claims for himself as priest of this sanctuary a portion of the spoil, in keeping with the law of spoil in Numbers. In other words, he rightly rejects kingship, but wrongly claims priesthood.

Use of earrings to make a cult object has an ominous antecedent. At Sinai, when Moses delayed to come down from the mount, Aaron asked the people for golden earrings, and used them to make the golden calf:

Ex 32:2 And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me. 3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. 4 And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it



Figure 14: High priest with ephod (tunic or apron).

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c6/LEV_8-_High_priest_in_robos_and_breastplate.jpg

a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

The tribute that Gideon receives from Israel similarly leads the nation back into idolatry.

and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house.—To “go a whoring” refers to the nation’s unfaithfulness to its divine husband. This comment confirms the idolatrous character of the worship at the sanctuary of Ophrah.

28 Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon.—This is the same expression elsewhere translated “the land had rest” (3:11, 30; 5:31), bringing to a close the formal cyclical structure of Gideon’s work.

8:29-9:57 Abimelech

The history of Abimelech is closely linked with that of Gideon his father. The introduction of the name “Jerubbaal” in 8:29 seems to mark the break, as it also does in 7:1 (see Table 6).

29 And Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. 30 And Gideon had threescore and ten sons of his body begotten: for he had many wives.—Though Gideon rejected the kingship, he fell into two of the three royal sins against which Moses warned (chart):

Deut. 17:16 But he shall not multiply **horses** to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. 17 Neither shall he multiply **wives** to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself **silver and gold**.

He didn’t gather horses, but he did have many wives, and we have seen his greed for gold. Perhaps his real reason for rejecting the throne was to avoid being constrained by this law.

31 And his concubine that was in Shechem, she also bare him a son,—Shechem, a city of Ephraim close to the border with Manasseh (Josh 17:7), guards the pass between Mount Gerizim on the south and Mount Ebal on the north (Figure 4, Figure 15, chart), on a major route from transjordan up the Wadi Faria. It was where Abraham first camped when he entered the land of promise (Gen 12:6ff), and Jacob after meeting Esau and crossing the Jordan (Gen 33:18). Recall the scandal when the Hivite inhabitants of the city, under their leader Hamor, were attracted to Dinah, Jacob’s daughter (Gen 34). After the conquest, Joshua appointed Shechem as a Levitical city of refuge (Josh 20:7; 21:21).



Figure 15: Shechem (low white elevation just above animals) between Ebal (right, north) and Gerizim (left, south). (Van and Anita Parunak, November 1974)

But as elsewhere in Judges, Israel did not secure what they had conquered. The people of Hamor the Hivite continue to be leading citizens, and chafe under Israelite claims to dominion:

9:28 And Gaal the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? is not he the son of Jerubbaal? and Zebul his officer? serve the men of **Hamor the father of Shechem**: for why should we serve him?

In Jacob’s time problems came from a liason between a Shechemite man and an Israelite woman (Dinah), and now they come from a liason between an Israelite man (Gideon) and a Shechemite.

whose name he called Abimelech.—The name means “My father is king.” Ancient Semitic names typically say something about the deity. Thus Isaiah means “Yah saves,” and Jehoshaphat means “Jehovah judges.” According to this pattern, *Abi*, “my father,” should refer to the divine father, as in other examples, e.g., *Abidan* “my divine father is judge,” *Abihail* “my divine father is mighty,” *Abiram* “my divine father is exalted.” But the name could also mean, “my (human) father is king.” This may be the sense of the term as a throne name of several kings of the Philistines (Genesis 20 in the days of Abraham, Genesis 26 in the days of his son Isaac, title of Psalm 34 in the days of David). Gideon’s choice of this name may reflect second thoughts about rejecting the offer of the throne.

32 And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and was buried in the sepulchre of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.—Gideon, however, does not live to see these problems, but lives to a ripe old age and dies in peace.

Let’s summarize some of the main lessons from the life of Gideon (chart).

- Fear is a major hindrance to God’s work (Figure 7).
- The presence of God’s Spirit can turn a fearful person into a hero of the faith.
- God chooses to work with a few faithful people rather than many fearful ones.
- The objective of the Lord’s work is his own glory.
- Spiritual success can lead to carnal stumbling.

Abimelech’s history reflects the same cycle that we have seen before, though it omits any mention of Israel’s repentance or of resulting rest (Table 8)

Rebellion	8:33-35	Whoring after Baalberith
Retribution	9:1-6	Shechem, led by Abimelech
Repentance		(Lacking)
Rebuke	9:7-21	Jotham’s Fable
Restoration	9:22-55	Abimelech destroys Shechem Woman kills Abimelech
Rest		(Lacking)

8:33-35, Rebellion

Abimelech’s history begins as the other cycles do, with Israel’s rebellion against the Lord.

33 And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again,

and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god.—That is, “Baal of the Covenant.” In direct denial of YHWH’s covenant with them, they attribute the covenant to Baal. We will see in 9:4 that a major sanctuary of this deity is in Shechem, to which the action now shifts. But the emphasis here is on spiritual adultery by “the children of Israel,” and the focus is probably on the impure worship initiated by Gideon at Ophrah in 8:27. Gideon’s liason with Shechem may in fact have shaped the worship he offered in Ophrah.

34 And the children of Israel remembered not the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side:—To emphasize this departure, this section uses אלהים instead of יהוה (except in 8:34). The people abandon the covenant of Sinai as they submit to a pagan deity.

Table 8: Abimelech as a Judge

35 Neither shewed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shewed unto Israel.—Here we see their fickleness. In 8:22 they wanted him to be king, and they accepted his priestly functions at the sanctuary in Ophrah, but after his death, they are ready to reject him, as we see in the history of Abimelech.

9:1-6, Retribution

This time the Lord's judgment comes not from a foreign power, but from within, Shechem, led by Gideon's son Abimelech. He is both oppressor and deliverer. First he joins with the devotees of BaalBerith to slay his own brethren, but will ultimately destroy those devotees.

9:1 And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem unto his mother's brethren, and communed with them, and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, 2 Speak, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem,—Throughout this chapter, the "men of Shechem" designates the signatories of a covenant (as in Gen 14:13, see note). The obvious covenant is that with Baal, leading to his designation in 8:33; 9:4, 46 as "Baal of the Covenant." This title is pervasive in this chapter: the people of Shechem are the leaders in the apostasy.

Whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you? remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.—Abimelech recalls the people's request in 8:22 that Gideon would "rule thou over us." Though Gideon rejected that invitation, Abimelech (perhaps encouraged by the literal meaning of his name) uses the same verb used in 8:22-23 (למשל H4910) to exalt himself.²⁹

3 And his mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men of Shechem all these words: and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech; for they said, He is our brother. 4 And they gave him threescore and ten pieces of silver out of the house of Baalberith, wherewith Abimelech hired vain and light persons, which followed him.—Corruption in campaign financing is nothing new! Abimelech funds his bid for rule from the temple of the pagan God to whose worship the Israelites have devoted themselves.

The value that Abimelech puts on his brethren is one piece of silver per man. Joseph was sold as a slave to the Midianites for twenty pieces of silver (Gen 37:28); the remuneration for a slave who is gored by an ox is thirty pieces of silver (Ex 21:32), the price that Judas accepted to betray our Lord (Matt 26:15). These comparisons show how utterly Abimelech despises his family.

5 And he went unto his father's house at Ophrah, and slew his brethren the sons of Jerubbaal, being threescore and ten persons, upon one stone: notwithstanding yet Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left; for he hid himself.—His first action in consolidating his rule is to kill off all possible contenders, the numerous sons whom Gideon fathered. This slaughter constitutes the Retribution stage of the regular cycle. God brings judgment, not from some foreign power, but from factions within Israel itself, as the nation descends into civil war.

6 And all the men of Shechem gathered together, and all the house of Millo,—A nearby town, like "the tower of Shechem"?

and went, and made Abimelech king, by the plain [oak βάλανος ἰῆξ H436] of the pillar [the memorial oak]³⁰ that was in Shechem.—Trees in Shechem trace the nation's history (chart).³¹

²⁹ Compare Gehazi pursuing Naaman in 2 Kings 5. In both cases, a subordinate rejecting the example of a superior one for personal advancement, leading to disaster.

Gen 12:6 And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the **plain oak** δρῦς ἰλήξ H436 of Moreh. . . . 7 And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an **altar** unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.

Gen 35:4 And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under **the terebinth** τερέμινθος ἰλήξ H424 which was by Shechem.

Josh. 24:25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. 26 And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under **an oak [terebinth] τερέμινθος ἰλήξ, that was by the sanctuary** of the LORD.

Abimelech may hope to legitimize his reign by associating it with Abraham, Jacob, and Joshua.

But note the irony. Shechem, as a city of refuge, was responsible for discerning accidental manslaughter from murder. They have so far abandoned their privileged position that now they fund a mass murderer and then endorse him as their king!

At this point, we expect the children of Israel to cry unto the Lord. Their failure to recognize the problem and their need to turn to the Lord shows the depth of their departure.

9:7-21, Jotham's Rebuke

As in the cycles of Gideon and Jephthah, a divine rebuke intervenes between the Retribution and the Restoration—this time addressed not to the oppressed Israelites, but to their oppressors. It is delivered by the one brother of Abimelech who survived the purge, Jotham. The rebuke consists of a fable about the political life of trees, followed by the interpretation. The interpretation in turn outlines the Restoration section of the cycle, and a chiasmic summary closes the entire Rebuke-Restoration chapter (Figure 16, chart)

7 And when they told it to Jotham, he went and stood in the top of mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried, and said unto them, Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem,—Shechem lies at the mouth of a pass between Mount Ebal on the north and Mount Gerizim on the south. Jotham delivers his fable from the southern mount (Figure 17, chart).

When the nation first enters the land, they gather at Shechem to proclaim blessings and curses:

Deu 11:29 And it shall come to pass, when the LORD thy God hath brought thee in unto the land whither thou goest to possess it, that thou shalt put the blessing upon mount Gerizim, and the curse upon mount Ebal.

Gerizim was the mount of blessing, but now Jotham utters a curse from it. The people have chosen cursing, and now the blessing is departed.

30 Most commentators, as well as AV, understand or emend מצב in the sense of מצבה “pillar,” and Boling even relates it to the pillar found in the temple area at Shechem and visible at the left foreground of Figure 17. But the form, a Hofal participle of צב, is understandable adjectivally as “the oak that was set up,” either a carved tree or a reference to a ceremonial designation of a natural one (Cassel, Webb).

31 Both אֵלֶּה / אֵלֶּה (which occurs 14x in the OT) and אֵלֶּון / אֵלֶּון (which occurs 19x) come from אֵל, describing a “godly” tree, either the common (Tabor) oak or the terebinth, but different commentators assign them differently or inconsistently, and some translations (the KJV) don’t distinguish them at all. LXX uses δρῦς and βάλανος indiscriminately for both sets of words, but reserves τερέμινθος for אֵלֶּה. This aligns with Zohary’s definitions (*Plants of the Bible*, Cambridge, 1982), which I follow. See notes.

that God may hearken unto you.—The people do not repent, but at least Jotham warns them that the time may come when they will, and they must prepare by listening to him now.

8 The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them;—The trees are the men of Shechem, and Abimelech is the one they end up appointing king. He is the fourth of four candidates they consider, each represented by a different kind of plant.

The trees seek a king to reign “over” them. One would expect them to prefer a tall tree, and the four plants mentioned are in descending order of height.

and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us.—The olive tree (Figure 18, chart) is the tallest of the trees mentioned. It can grow to 45 feet, but is often pruned shorter to facilitate harvest.

9 But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man,—The olive tree is proud of its legitimate function. Its oil honors God in the tabernacle, as the fuel for the lampstand (Ex 27:20) and the vehicle for the anointing oil (Ex 30:24). It honors men in anointing kings, the very action that the trees are contemplating (9:8).

and go to be promoted over the trees? —“To be promoted” נרע H5128 is literally “to wave or shake.” The olive tree recognizes how fickle is the public support that underlies the invitation to the throne, and how unstable is the resulting position.

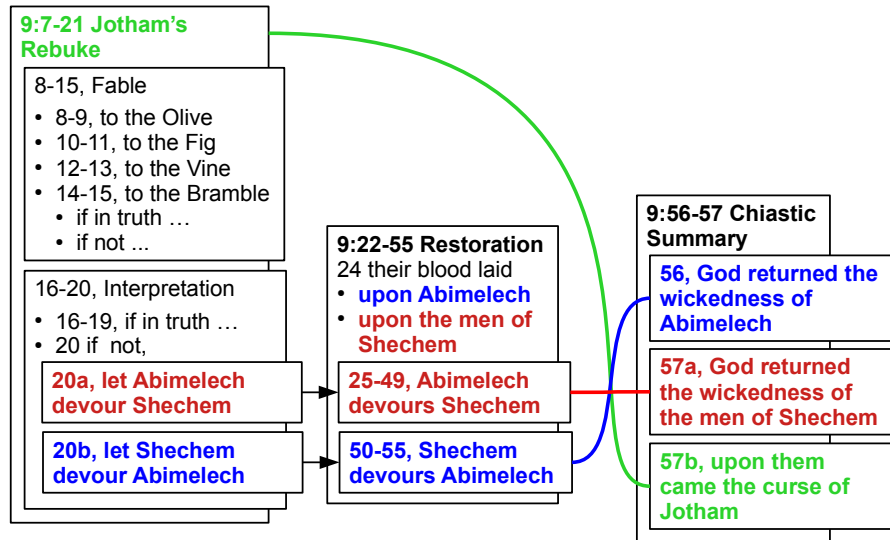


Figure 16: Structure of the Rebuke and Restoration



Figure 17: Mt. Gerizim from ancient Shechem (Van and Anita Parunak, November 1974)



Figure 18: Olive tree in Al Khadr. Sept 1974, Van and Anita Parunak

It is said³² that of China's 600 emperors, only 10% died a natural death. The olive tree judges it far better to provide a real, tangible service to both God and man.

The olive tree, refusing the offered kingship, is a picture of Gideon in 8:22-23, refusing the offered kingship. In fact, the alternative he planned for himself did not "honor God and man," but at least he recognized the insecurity of a royal position.

10 And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us.—The fig tree, like the olive, is a true tree. It is not as high as the olive, and is often grown indoors as an ornamental plant. In the middle east it sometimes attains a height of 15 feet (Zohary).

11 But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees?—But like the olive, the fig has intrinsic value, producing a delicious fruit.

12 Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us.—The vine is hardly a tree at all, especially in the arid middle east. Vines are grown close to the ground, where they can be watered by the morning dew (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Vineyard near Kfar Etzion. June 1975, Van and Anita Parunak

13 And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?—The vine, like the olive and the fig, is proud of its natural gifts. It cheers God through drink offerings in the tabernacle (Ex 29:40; Lev 23:13), and was so much the symbol of human joy that abstention from any product of the vine was central to the Nazirite vow of complete dedication to God (Numbers 6).

Society appreciates each of these three plants for its own proven contribution, and each is reluctant to leave its mission in order to "wave over the trees" in the unstable role of king.

14 Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us.—The identity of the "bramble" is not clear. The reference to shade suggests that the bramble thinks of itself as a tree,³³ but the sequence so far, from true trees (olive and fig) to a low-growing grape vine, suggests that Jotham has in mind one of the low-growing brambles common throughout Israel (Figure 20, chart).³⁴

15 And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you,—Contrast the bramble's attitude with that of the other three trees. Each of them was content with its role and proud of its fruit. Brambles bear no useful fruit. Their main use is as a barrier on top of walls, and as kindling to start fires.³⁵ The bramble, having nothing better to do, is quite willing to enter politics, and asks the other trees to affirm their commitment: "if in truth"

32 Du Xiaofeng, personal correspondence

33 On this basis, Zohary p. 154 and KD suggest the buckthorn, which does bear an edible fruit. But they are missing the progression in plant size and the irony of 9:15.

34 The photo is of the thorny burnet, *Sarcopoterium spinosum* (commonly associated with Heb טיר H5518)

35 The likely allusion of the only other instance of ארם in the OT, Ps 58:9 (MT 10).

then come and put your trust in my shadow:—It is supremely ironic for such a plant to invite the other trees to “come and put your trust in my shadow.” Only a mouse could take advantage of such an invitation.

and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.—If the trees do not follow through on their invitation, the bramble, recalling its common use as kindling, threatens to start a conflagration which will destroy even the highest trees, an action that will of course destroy itself in the process.

So the bramble’s response to the invitation is twofold. Having nothing better to do, it accepts the invitation, but then threatens those who would oppose its authority. This response highlights two characteristics of the political class in every age.

1. It often attracts those who cannot contribute substantively to society in other ways.
2. Once in power, its members hold on to it viciously, even harming those whom they lead.

Now Jotham draws out a parallel to each of these statements, with his half-brother Abimelech in the position of the bramble. First, he echoes the positive invitation, beginning with the same phrase as the bramble does, “if in truth.”

16 Now therefore, if ye have done truly and sincerely [if in truth and in integrity you have acted], in that ye have made Abimelech king,—This is a direct application of the first part of the bramble’s speech to Abimelech, “If in truth ye anoint me king”

and if ye have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands;—Abimelech claimed the throne in the name of Jerubbaal:

Judg 9:2 Whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you?

So the integrity of their action can be evaluated by their treatment of the house of Jerubbaal.

17 (For my father fought for you, and adventured his life far, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian: 18 And ye are risen up against my father’s house this day, and have slain his sons, threescore and ten persons, upon one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother;) 19 If ye then have dealt truly and sincerely [if in truth and in integrity you have acted] with Jerubbaal



Figure 20: Thorny burnet in hills above Beit Netofa valley. 11/23/1974, Van and Anita Parunak

and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you:— He repeats the condition of the bramble's first invitation. Abimelech's claim on the throne is through Jerubbaal, and their treatment of the house of Jerubbaal reflects their real devotion to Abimelech. They have not dealt in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal. They have not satisfied the condition of the bramble's first condition. Therefore they must consider the second.

20 But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech.—If they are insincere, Abimelech the bramble kindle a conflagration that will destroy Shechem, but then turn to consume him as well.

21 And Jotham ran away, and fled, and went to Beer, and dwelt there, for fear of Abimelech his brother.—Having given his rebuke, he flees to a place whose location we do not now know.

9:22-55 Restoration

Jotham's curse presents a paradox that unfolds in the restoration, and is then summarized chiasmically at the end of the chapter (Figure 16): Abimelech is both the one who will deliver Israel from its oppressor (Shechem), and also himself an oppressor who must be destroyed. We see both stories here, introduced by an explanation of how God brought it about.

22 When Abimelech had reigned three years over Israel,--This is the closest that the Abimelech story comes to a "Rest" section. Up to this point, we have had four periods when "the land had rest," after the work of Othniel (3:11), Ehud (3:30), Deborah and Barak (5:31), and Gideon (8:28). From this point on, we read no more of rest in the land, but only of the periods of time during which a given judge judges Israel (10:2, 3; 12:7; 9, 11, 14; 15:20; 16:31). Here, between the two, Abimelech doesn't give rest, and isn't even said to judge Israel, but we are simply told the length of his reign.

23 Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem;—The Spirit of God appears frequently in the history of the other judges, but as an anti-judge, Abimelech receives the influence, not of the Holy Spirit, but of an evil spirit. Contrast this "evil spirit" with the work of God's spirit with the other judges. See introductory study: seven of the 29 instances of רוח יהוה in the OT are in Judges, describing Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech: 24 That the cruelty done to the threescore and ten sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid upon Abimelech their brother, which slew them; and upon the men of Shechem, which aided him in the killing of his brethren.—The work of the evil spirit leads to both aspects of Jotham's curse, here introduced chiasmically: the destruction of Shechem, and the destruction of Abimelech.

The process outlined in these two verses is a sobering reminder of the consequences of departing from the Lord, as did Abimelech and the men of Shechem. God is longsuffering with them—for three years (9:22). But then he sends judgment, and does so by "an evil spirit." This evil spirit reminds us of the later prophecy of Micaiah the son of Imlah in 1 Kings 22, concerning the death of King Ahab of the northern kingdom (chart):

1Ki 22:20 And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. 21 And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. 22 And the

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. 23 Now therefore, behold, **the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets**, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee.

Table 9 highlights the parallels between the cases.

	Judg 9, Abimelech in Shechem	1 Kings 22, Ahab in Samaria
Lord sends evil spirit ...	23a God sent an evil spirit	23 the LORD hath put a lying spirit
... to cause someone to sin ...	23b the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech	22 I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets
... to bring God's judgment	24 That the cruelty done to the threescore and ten sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid upon Abimelech their brother ... and upon the men of Shechem	20 ... persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead

Table 9: Parallels between Judges 9 and 1 Kings 22

There are other instances as well, where the Lord enlists wicked spirits to do his work:

1 Sa 16:14 But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and **an evil spirit from the LORD** troubled him.

Is 19:2 And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom. ... 14 **The LORD hath mingled a perverse spirit** in the midst thereof: and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit.

2 Th 2:11 And for this cause **God shall send them strong delusion**, that they should believe a lie: 12 That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

It is important to note that in each case, the person to whom God sends the evil spirit is not neutral, but already in rebellion against his law. The evil spirit may lead them into further sinful actions, but the outcome is punishment for the original departure from the Lord.

Two fundamental principles lie behind these instances.

First, the opposite of the kingdom of God is not neutrality, but the dominion of Satan, whom our Lord three times calls “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He describes the current world order in his first epistle:

1John 5:19 And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in ~~wickedness~~ the wicked one

So when Paul speaks of the church excommunicating someone, he describes the consequence as delivering them to Satan:

1Tim. 1:20 Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have **delivered unto Satan**, that they may learn not to blaspheme. (also 1 Cor 5:5)

This spiritual conflict first appears in Eden, and characterizes God's people in every age. We are all born in sin, and God is slow to anger toward us (Exod 34:6), but if someone refuses his gracious offer of salvation and persists in rebellion, he brings judgment on them by the agents of that satanic order under which they were born and which they persist in supporting.

The second fundamental principle that we see in these episodes is that Satan's dominion is ultimately subject to our God. The demons must obey God's commands, and when God's purposes for allowing evil in this world are accomplished, Satan and his host will without fail be cast into the lake of fire.

9:25-49, Destruction of the men of Shechem

25 And the men of Shechem set liars in wait for him in the top of the mountains,—Their change of heart first leads to covert opposition. Abimelech is not living in Shechem, but in Arumah (9:41), in the mountains to the southeast of the city. So they attempt to assassinate him.

and they robbed all that came along that way by them:—But the rogues to whom they assign this duty do not restrict their violence to Abimelech. Once authorized to oppose the designated ruler of the territory, they become no better than common bandits.

and it was told Abimelech.—As the lawlessness spreads, Abimelech learns of it. So do others. Such a power vacuum cannot remain for long.

26 And Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brethren, and went over to Shechem:—The next character does not have roots in Shechem, unlike Abimelech, who could point to his mother. His name "Gaal" is likely a nickname, like Cushan Rishathaim "Double Evil" or Eglon "fat calf," for Gaal is from the Hebrew root meaning "to abhor, to despise," and might mean "the despiser."

He comes "with his brethren." Abimelech felt threatened by his half-brothers and took steps to destroy them. Gaal comes with family support to back himself up.

and the men of Shechem put their confidence in him.—Gaal comes to town and attracts the friendship of the "men of Shechem," the covenant lords who govern the city.

The danger of an outsider leading a group astray is a common theme in the Bible. The men of Shechem have already shown themselves to be particularly unreliable, so it is perhaps not surprising that they go astray, but even groups with a heart to serve the Lord need to be on their guard. Our Lord warned his disciples (chart),

Matt. 7:15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Paul told the elders of Ephesus,

Acts 20:28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

There is a fine balance here. On one hand, we must be open and welcoming to those who come in the name of the Lord. On the other, we should have our eyes open to the existence of opportunists who seek to gain control for their own purposes.

Gaal adopts a common strategy for gaining support: he gets everybody drunk.

27 And they went out into the fields, and gathered their vineyards, and trode the grapes, and made merry, and went into the house of their god, and did eat and drink, and cursed Abimelech.—In this environment, he is able to propose a coup.

28 And Gaal the son of Ebed said, Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? is not he the son of Jerubbaal?—In 9:2, Abimelech secured the loyalty of the men of Shechem by pleading his relation to them through his mother, a woman of Shechem. Gaal reminds them of his Israelite father, using the name for Gideon that suggests his animosity for the patron deity of the city. The two questions “Who is Abimelech” and “Who is Shechem” suggest the need for his hearers to decide whose side they support—this Israelite intruder, or the ancestor for whom the city was named (Gen 34:2).

and Zebul his officer?—We learn in 9:30 that Zebul is the ruler of the city, the one whom Abimelech left in charge of local affairs. Gaal mocks him as a mere puppet of the intruder.

serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem: for why should we serve him?—Once again, he invokes a name from hoary antiquity (about 600 years earlier, like someone today recalling the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg).

29 And would to God this people were under my hand! then would I remove Abimelech.—Finally, he plays his trump card. “I could fix this, if only I were in charge.” His move anticipates the rebellion of Absalom three hundred years later:

2Sam. 15:4 Absalom said moreover, Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would do him justice!

And he said to Abimelech, Increase thine army, and come out.—Having secured the endorsement of the leaders of Shechem, he then sends a direct challenge to Abimelech.

30 And when Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled.—One person in Shechem was not drawn aside by Gaal’s guile, the person who was in charge of the city.

31 And he sent messengers unto Abimelech privily, saying, Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his brethren be come to Shechem; and, behold, they fortify the city against thee.—He alerts Abimelech to the threat from Gaal.

32 Now therefore up by night, thou and the people that is with thee, and lie in wait in the field:—We do not know who “the people that is with thee” are. Though Abimelech’s original support was from Shechem, now he is based outside of Shechem, and appears to have gained other supporters. 9:55 suggests that they are Israelites from other cities. Apparently he has represented the slaughter of his brethren as Shechem’s fault, and used it to gain broader support.

33 And it shall be, that in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, thou shalt rise early, and set upon the city: and, behold, when he and the people that is with him come out against thee, then mayest thou do to them as thou shalt find occasion.—His invitation is similar to that of Gaal in v. 29, but with the additional suggestion that Abimelech get in position “by night,” to minimize the time that Gaal has to come out against him.

34 And Abimelech rose up, and all the people that were with him, by night, and they laid wait against Shechem in four companies.—Abimelech takes his advice.

35 And Gaal the son of Ebed went out, and stood in the entering of the gate of the city:—Three times in the next ten verses, we learn of “the entering of the gate of the city.” Recall that the gates of ancient cities typically had multiple doors separated by chambers. In time of war, an attacker would have to penetrate multiple barriers, facing soldiers waiting behind each one. In time of peace, this shaded area was a popular place to meet. Shechem’s east gate (Figure 21, chart) follows this pattern, but the gates themselves were of a design not found elsewhere in Israel. Instead of swinging on a doorpost, the doors had rollers that allowed them to move between pairs of large vertical stones.³⁶ There would have been an upper story, reached by stairs behind the stone blocks, so that defenders could get above attackers, and there would be a roof over the entire structure.



Figure 21: East gate of Shechem. Arrow shows doorway to stairwell leading to second story. Van and Anita Parunak, Nov 1974

Shechem’s defenses were formidable. It was the largest fortified city between Jerusalem and Gezer to the south, and Megiddo and Bethshean to the north (Wright, *Shechem*, p. 4). Abimelech would be hard pressed to overcome such a fortress, if it were closed up anticipating an attack. But in the morning the guard pushed these doors open so the people could go in and out between the city and their fields. Gaal and Zebul stand about where our classmate is standing in the photograph, but instead of looking toward the interior of the city, gazing out across the valley to the hills on the other side (Figure 22). Abimelech’s residence, Arumah, was in the mountains to the right of the photograph.



Figure 22: From the east gate of Shechem, looking toward Jordan. Arrow shows direction of Arumah. Van and Anita Parunak, November 1974

and Abimelech rose up, and the people that were with him, from lying in wait.—Seeing the city open, Abimelech decides to attack.

36 And when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, Behold, there come people down from the top of the mountains. And Zebul said unto him, Thou seest the shadow of the mountains as if they were men.—Up to this point Zebul has not disclosed to Gaal his loyalty to Abimelech. As the two men stand at the gate of the city, they see the approach of one of Abimelech’s four

³⁶ The depression between the two sets of stones is the result of excavation to find what lay below the gate of Abimelech’s day; this area would have been level with the bottom of the stones while the gate was in use.

companies, but Zebul, to delay Gaal's counterattack as long as possible, tries to persuade him that there is nothing there.³⁷

37 And Gaal spake again and said, See there come people down by the middle of the land, and another company come along by the plain oak of Meonenim soothsayers.—But now two more of the companies come into view.

38 Then said Zebul unto him, Where is now thy mouth, wherewith thou saidst, Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him? is not this the people that thou hast despised? go out, I pray now, and fight with them.—At this point, Zebul discloses his support for Abimelech, and challenges Gaal to carry out his boast of 9:29 to “remove Abimelech.”

39 And Gaal went out before the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. 40 And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him, and many were overthrown and wounded, even unto the entering of the gate.—Gaal is no match for Abimelech, who drives Gaal's forces back into the city.

41 And Abimelech dwelt at Arumah: and Zebul thrust out Gaal and his brethren, that they should not dwell in Shechem.—It would appear at this point that the insurrection is over and the city is secure. One would think that Abimelech would be eager to restore the confidence of the people of Shechem.

42 And it came to pass on the morrow, that the people went out into the field;—They apparently think that the conflict is over, and try to get back to their daily lives, dealing with their crops. But the evil spirit stirs up Abimelech's bitterness against them for having tolerated Gaal in the first place.

and they told Abimelech. 43 And he took the people, and divided them into three companies,—This time, Abimelech organizes his forces in three groups rather than four as he did in 9:34.

and laid wait in the field, and looked, and, behold, the people were come forth out of the city; and he rose up against them, and smote them.—He ambushes the people who have left the city.

44 And Abimelech, and the company that was with him, rushed forward, and stood in the entering of the gate of the city:—Then Abimelech leads one of his three groups into the city, taking control of it.

and the two other companies ran upon all the people that were in the fields, and slew them.—The other two groups slaughtered the farmers who had assumed that hostilities were over.

45 And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt.—Salt renders the soil sterile so that it cannot grow crops. Abimelech is seeking to make the city a perpetual ruin.

46 And when all the men of the tower of Shechem heard that, they entered into an hold of the house of the god Berith.—Because the excavations at Shechem uncovered a temple-fortress (visible in Figure 17), “the tower of Shechem” and “the house [צריח H6877, stronghold] of the god Berith” are often identified as one and the same, and identified with these remains. But we have just read that Abimelech slew the people in Shechem, which wouldn't leave anyone to take

37 Block favors an alternative reconstruction, in which Zebul approaches the city leading one of Abimelech's contingents, and Gaal seeks to distract his attention.

refuge in a sanctuary within the city. We have also heard of one nearby village, Beth Millo (“the house of Millo, 9:6, 20). It’s likely that “the tower of Shechem” is also outside the city proper, though closely allied with it.

If this is correct, we see the extent of Abimelech’s rampage. It was reasonable for him to put down Gaal’s uprising. It was not reasonable for him to seek further vengeance on Shechem. Now, even more unreasonably, he is seeking to wipe out nearby towns associated with Shechem, even though there is no evidence that they supported Gaal.

47 And it was told Abimelech, that all the men of the tower of Shechem were gathered together. 48 And Abimelech gat him up to mount Zalmon, he and all the people that were with him; and Abimelech took an axe in his hand, and cut down a bough from the trees, and took it, and laid it on his shoulder, and said unto the people that were with him, What ye have seen me do, make haste, and do as I have done. 49 And all the people likewise cut down every man his bough, and followed Abimelech, and put them to the hold, and set the hold on fire upon them; so that all the men of the tower of Shechem died also, about a thousand men and women.—“Hold” is the same word as “house” in 9:46. The first half of Jotham’s curse is complete. Fire has come out of the bramble to destroy the men of Shechem.

9:50-55, Destruction of Abimelech

The second half of Jotham’s curse comes as Abimelech continues his rampage to nearby villages.

50 Then went Abimelech to Thebez, and encamped against Thebez, and took it.—Like the house of Millo and the tower of Shechem, Thebez is probably a nearby town. Shechem was the largest city between Jerusalem and Megiddo at this period, and would have had considerable political influence throughout the region.

51 But there was a strong tower within the city, and thither fled all the men and women, and all they of the city, and shut it to them, and gat them up to the top of the tower. 52 And Abimelech came unto the tower, and fought against it, and went hard unto the door of the tower to burn it with fire.—Emboldened by his success at the tower of Shechem, he seeks to apply the same tactic here.

53 And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech’s head, and all to brake his skull.—In a striking echo of Jael’s murder of Sisera, a woman of Thebez crushes Abimelech’s head.

Deborah explained the meaning of Jael’s action (chart):

Judg. 4:8 And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go. 9 And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.

The destruction of Sisera by a woman reflects the weakness of Barak in the leadership that God expects of him. Similarly, the destruction of Abimelech by a woman reflects the total collapse of Israelite society. Isaiah generalizes on this theme:

Is. 3:1 For, behold, the Lord, the LORD of hosts, doth take away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stay and the staff, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water, 2 The mighty man, and the man of war, the judge, and the prophet, and the prudent, and the ancient, 3 The captain of fifty, and the honourable man, and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer,

and the eloquent orator. 4 And I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. . . . 12 As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them.

54 Then he called hastily unto the young man his armourbearer, and said unto him, Draw thy sword, and slay me, that men say not of me, A woman slew him. And his young man thrust him through, and he died.—He sought to avoid the humiliation of being slain by a woman, but in later years that was exactly how it was remembered. When Joab engineers Uriah's death at David's command and sends news back to the king, he anticipates that the king may criticize the military tactics, based on this event:

2Sam. 11:20 And if so be that the king's wrath arise, and he say unto thee, Wherefore approached ye so nigh unto the city when ye did fight? knew ye not that they would shoot from the wall? 21 Who smote Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? did not a woman cast a piece of a millstone upon him from the wall, that he died in Thebez? why went ye nigh the wall? then say thou, Thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.

55 And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man unto his place.—With Abimelech gone, Israel's first attempt at kingship comes to an end, and the Israelites who supported him dissipate.

9:56-57, Chiastic Summary of Rebuke and Restoration

56 Thus God ~~rendered~~ returned the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren:—In recapping the events of this chapter, the writer first recalls Abimelech's death in 9:50-55.

57 And all the evil of the men of Shechem did God ~~render~~ return upon their heads:—Next, he recalls the destruction of Shechem by Abimelech in 9:25-49.

and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.—Finally, he takes us back to the curse of Jotham that predicted both of these events.

Lessons from Abimelech

The story of Abimelech is not a pleasant one, but it offers us several lessons for our day (chart).

The risks of syncretism: Gideon's dalliance with Shechem corrupted Israel's worship.

Jdg 8:31 And his concubine that was in **Shechem**, she also bare him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. . . . 33 And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made **Baalberith** their god. . . . 3 And his mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men [covenant participants] of **Shechem** all these words: and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech; for they said, He is our brother. 4 And they gave him threescore and ten pieces of silver out of the house of **Baalberith**, wherewith Abimelech hired vain and light persons, which followed him.

The weakness of political systems: Jotham's fable gives us two warnings about political leaders.

1. They often are those who do not contribute to society in more substantive ways.
2. Once in power, they cling to it, even harming those they rule.

Human history proves that people are incapable of governing themselves. We must urge people to repent of their sin against God, and submit themselves to the coming king, our Lord Jesus.

Judges 6-9: Gideon and Abimelech

The danger of false prophets: Opportunists like Gaal sense dissension in a group and exploit it to promote themselves. There is a fine balance between welcoming all who love the Lord and discerning wolves in sheep's clothing who will harm the flock.

God's sovereignty over tyrants: In spite of Abimelech's growing power and ruthless attitude, God is able to destroy him, in the most unlikely and humiliating way. He can always raise up a Jael or unnamed woman of Thebez to unseat the most powerful ruler.

Notes

Discourse Role of 6:24

Does v. 24 conclude Gideon's encounter with the Angel of the Lord, or introduce the purging of the Baal sanctuary in 25-32?

The *waw consecutive* introducing 6:24 suggests a strong connection with the previous narrative, while the וַיִּבֶן in 6:25 is a strong scene marker, leading most commentators to associate v. 24 with the previous scene. But it is not part of the standard call pattern, and also presents a puzzle: if the altar of 6:24 is distinct from the one that Gideon is commanded to build in 6:26 and that his townspeople discover in v. 28, why is the first altar the one that is commemorated down through the years, while the second one, the one commanded by the Lord, is mentioned only in passing?

I suggest that 6:24 is transitional, a summary of what is about to be discussed. "After the Lord put his mind at ease, Gideon built an altar. And here's how that happened: the same night, the Lord said unto him,"

Midianites and Ishmaelites (8:22, 24)

Both Midian and Ishmael were descendants of Abraham—Ishmael from Hagar, Sarah's handmaid (Gen 16:15), and Midian by Keturah, whom he married after the death of Sarah (Gen 25:2). But often the associated gentilics "Ishmaelite" and "Midianite" are used of the same people:

Gen. 37:28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

The resolution appears to lie in the use of "Midian" to describe a region (compare the application of the name "Gilead," Manasseh's son, to territory later inhabited by both Gad and Manasseh): Ex 2:15; 4:19. This was the land where Moses fled from Pharaoh, the home of his father-in-law Jethro. Ishmael settled in the desert of Paran (Gen 21:21).

7:3 Mount Gilead

Dave Nelson offers an alternative symbolism that might lie behind the use of "Gilead" to describe Mount Gilboa in 7:3. Though Gilboa is recognized in the Bible as a single geographical entity, it is divided—physically by the Jabbok River, and politically between Manasseh (to the north of the Jabbok) and Gad (to the south). According to 6:35, "all Manasseh," not just the western half-tribe, was called to the battle, so the distinctive character of Mount Gilead as a divided region would be well recognized among at least some of the soldiers. Perhaps the name, disclosed in connection with the sending away of the fearful, is meant to suggest "the mount of division," where the army was divided between those who would go on to fight and those who were dismissed.

Ch. 9, the “Men of Shechem” בעלי שכם

This expression dominates in Judges (16 out of 20 instances). The others are Josh 24:11 (בעלי יריחו, defined in apposition as “the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Girgashites, the Hivites”), the lords of Keilah in 1 Sam 23:11-12 who betrayed David to Saul, and the men of Jabesh Gilead in 2 Sam 21:12. In Judges, only one instance is not in the Abimelech story, the men of Gibeah (20:15). Much more commonly (75x, 12x in Judges) we have אנשי plus a place name, never used of Keilah, but (by Israelites) of Jabesh Gilead in 2 Sam 2:4, 5, and of Jericho in Neh 3:2 (but there describing returned Israelites, not the Canaanite inhabitants).

Table 10 shows the distribution of the two expressions in Judges, by place. Note the overwhelming dominance of the term with Shechem. Block, following Lewis (JBL 115/3 (1996) 401-423), perceptively comments:

If a *ba’al bērit*, “one who owns a treaty,” is a technical term for one who enters into a covenant relationship with another, then a plurality of treaty partners would be designated *ba’ālē bērit*,

“owners of a treaty.” Indeed this usage of *ba’ālīm* is attested in Gen 14:13, where Abraham’s allies are referred to as *ba’ālē bērit*. Accordingly, the aristocrats in this text may represent the human signatories to the covenant with El/Baal-Berith. Support for this interpretation may be drawn from v. 4a, which has Abimelech’s allies financing his campaign of violence with seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith. Further support is found in vv. 46–47, where the nobles, identified as “lords of [NIV, “citizens in”] the tower of Shechem,” seek asylum in the temple of El-Berith, their divine covenant partner and patron.

This usage would also make sense of the apposition in Josh 24:11, where the six nations would then be designated as “the covenant partners of Jericho.”

Place	בעלי Lords of ...	אנשי Men of ...
Succoth		8:5, 8, 14, 15, 16
Penuel		8:8, 9
Shechem	9:2, 3, 6, 7, 18, 20 (2x), 23 (2x), 24, 25, 26, 39	
Tower of Shechem	9:46, 47	9:49
Gilead		12:4 (2x), 5
Gibeah	20:5	

Table 10: References to “the men of X”

Oaks and Terebinths

Table 11 shows the correspondences. LXX δρῦς is ambivalent, but the other two Greek words are unambiguous, and agree with Zohary. LXX uses the ambiguous term only in Gen 12:6; the other instances are unambiguous.

	δρῦς	βάλανος “acorn”	τερ[ε]βινθος	Total
אלה	8	0	4	14
אלון	11	5	0	19
Total	20	6	8	

Table 11: Vocabulary for “oak” and “terebinth” in the OT