

WILL THE REAL GIDEON PLEASE STAND UP? NARRATIVE STYLE AND INTENTION IN JUDGES 6–9

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In the 1960s there was a popular television show in the United States in which a host would interview four characters, three of whom pretended to be the mystery person and the fourth who actually was. Based on the comments of these individuals the audience would have to identify which of the candidates was the actual celebrity of the night. After the verdict of the people was in, the host would announce: “Will the real So-and-So please stand up?” As I have been poring over the account of the life of Gideon in Judges 6–9 I have frequently found myself waiting for the host to call out: “Will the real Gideon please stand up?” Scholars have answered that question in several different ways.

I. THE CLASSICAL CRITICAL RESPONSE

For more than a century scholars have exploited the contradictions, discrepancies and tensions in the text of Judges 6–9 to reconstruct the evolution of the literary account and in the process have come up with some interesting conclusions. In the past, classical source analyses have tended to find in the Gideon narratives extensions of the hypothetical Pentateuchal sources. As a representative of this approach we cite the conclusions of G. F. Moore,¹ according to whom the earliest impression of the man is provided by the Yahwist.² The Yahwist portrays Gideon as a man specially called by Yahweh (Judg 6:11–24), empowered by being clothed with the Spirit of Yahweh (6:34), reassured by Yahweh through a Midianite’s dream (7:13–15), victorious for Yahweh with a ridiculously small band of men and absurd weapons, pitchers and torches (7:16–22), persistent in his pursuit of the enemy (8:4–21), commemorating the victory with the erection of an ephod at the holy place of Ophrah (8:22–27a), and being rewarded for his work with an ideal family of seventy sons, plus a son from his concubine whom he piously names Abimelech, “The [Divine] King Is My Father” (8:30–32).

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¹ G. F. Moore, *Judges* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895) 175–177 and *passim* in 177–270.

² J = part of the older material incorporated in Judg 6:2–6a, 11–24, 34; 7:1, 9–11, 13–15 (with minor editorial traces), 16–21 (the parts involving jars and torches), part of 22b; 8:4–21, 24–27a, 30–32; 9:26–41.

The Elohist paints a different literary portrait of Gideon.³ The first appearance of Gideon has him destroying the pagan cult installation on his father's property and being renamed Jerubbaal (6:25–33). Thereafter he is seen testing God with the fleece, entering the battle with all the forces he could muster (32,000 men) but having them reduced by God to 300 (7:2–8), arming his men with trumpets (7:16b, 18a, 20a, 22), recalling the rest of his troops to pursue the enemy (7:23–8:3), rejecting the kingship (8:22–23), and settling down in his house (8:29), though it is evident from chap. 9 that his authority (and that of his sons) extended to Shechem.

II. THE CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL RESPONSE

As in the study of the Pentateuch, contemporary critical scholars have distanced themselves greatly from the positions of their mentors. The seminal challenge to the traditional critical approach was provided by Martin Noth.⁴ Instead of explaining the tensions in the historiographic texts in terms of divergent literary sources, Noth attributed the contradictions to different traditions preserved simultaneously in different places and among different groups but conjoined by a later (Deuteronomistic) editor or editors to produce the present composite picture. This tradition-analytical method has been rigorously applied to the book of Judges⁵ as a whole and the Gideon narrative in particular by a series of subsequent scholars, including Wolfgang Richter,⁶ Herbert Haag,⁷ Hartmut Rösel,⁸ Timo Veijola,⁹ A. Graeme Auld,¹⁰ Uwe Becker,¹¹ and most recently Ernst Würthwein, who argues that Jerubbaal, the father of Abimelech, was actually a Canaanite and that the identification with Gideon of Ophrah was a late development.¹²

³ E = part of Judg 6:2–6, 7–10, 25–32, 33, 35a, 36–40; 7:2–8, 16–21 (the parts involving horns), 22a, 22b (part), 23 (E₂?), 24–25; 8:1–3, 22–23 (E₂), 29; 9:1–25, 42–57. These E-parts do not necessarily derive from a single hand. Judges 6:7–10 in particular appears to be secondary.

⁴ M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien I: Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1943; 2d ed. Tübingen, 1957); available in English as *The Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 15; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981).

⁵ Although the rendering of the Hebrew term *šōpēt* as "judge" is fundamentally flawed, for the sake of convenience this article stays with the traditional reading. A much more appropriate translation would be "governor" or "chieftain," but this is not the place to resolve the issue. For a recent popular discussion of the matter see E. Easterly, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Judges in Judges Don't Judge," *BibRev* 13/2 (1997) 40–43, 47.

⁶ W. Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch* (BBB 18; 2d ed.; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1966). The Gideon narrative is dealt with on pp. 112–245; the Abimelech account, which is treated independently, is discussed on pp. 246–318.

⁷ H. Haag, "Gideon-Jerubbaal-Abimelech," *ZAW* 79 (1967) 305–314.

⁸ H. Rösel, "Studien zur Topographie der Kriege in den Büchern Josua und Richter. Schluss," *ZDPV* 92 (1976) 10–46.

⁹ T. Veijola, *Das Königtum in der Beurteilung der deuteronomistischen Historiographie: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1977).

¹⁰ A. G. Auld, "Gideon: Hacking at the Heart of the Old Testament," *VT* 39 (1989) 257–267.

¹¹ U. Becker, *Richterzeit und Königtum: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Richterbuch* (BZAW 192; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990). Gideon is dealt with on pp. 140–208.

¹² E. Würthwein, "Abimelech und der Untergang Sichems: Studien zu Jdc 9," *Studien zum Deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk* (BZAW 227; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994) 12–28.

After an exhaustive and exhausting analysis of the narrative, Becker proposes a complex evolution of the text, the first two stages of which may be summarized as follows. First, underlying chaps. 6–9 are two sets of relatively disparate (preliterate) traditions: (1) local traditions of Gideon and his role in the battle against Midian (6:11–24; 7:11–15, 16–22; 8:5–21 [with minor deletions]), and (2) an account of the rise and fall of Abimelech ben Jerubbaal (9:1–6, 21, 24–41, 46–54). Second, a Deuteronomistic historian (DtrH) created a coherent Gideon–Abimelech story by linking these traditions with a cleverly devised renaming of Gideon to Jerubbaal (6:25–32). His rhetorical agenda, however, is clear. In the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the failed monarchy, DtrH sought to demonstrate that in Israel's premonarchic period two fundamentally opposed principles were operative: (1) the rule and reign of Yahweh, as represented by Gideon through whom Yahweh works, and (2) the rule of a king, as represented by the brutal Abimelech. Gideon represents an office that offers an alternative to kingship, a perspective that is highlighted by DtrH's narrative framework (6:1–6; 8:28[29–32]), the completeness of the call narrative (6:11–24), the emphasis on divine deliverance (7:11–22), Gideon's speech (8:22–23), and especially the application of the preexistent fable (9:8–15) to Abimelech (9:16a, 19b, 20–21).¹³

Many scholars are even more explicit in drawing absolute distinctions between the two characters Gideon (the Manassite judge who delivers Israel from the oppression of the Midianites) and Jerubbaal (the father of Abimelech). The former tradition is usually associated with the town of Ophrah, the latter with the city of Shechem. The present identification of the two is the work of later redactors and editors for whom the issue of kingship became an important agenda.¹⁴ This position is adopted even by some historians who tend to have a more positive disposition toward the text. Baruch Halpern, for example, dismisses the etiological account of Gideon's destruction of the Baal altar in 6:25–32 as an insertion "motivated by the preceding narrative concerning the construction of an altar at Ophrah, for which it is a partial doublet." The equation of Gideon and Jerubbaal in 7:1 and 8:35 is imputed to the same kind of scribal expansion that one finds in LXX^B and 4QSam^a, which correct the (intentionally) corrupt Mephibosheth with "Memphibaal."

¹³ According to Becker the present composition contains numerous expansions on the basic composition of DtrH, the most significant additions being the work of DtrN, whose moralistic and anti-idolatrous stance is evident in 8:24–27, 33–35; 9:16b–19a, 24, 56–57. This editor does not recognize DtrH's sharp contrast between Gideon and Abimelech. Later editors also inserted 6:7–10, a prophetic speech from the Dtr school; 7:24–8:3, a report of the conflict between Ephraim and Abiezer, which derives from an ancient tradition; and miscellaneous expansions (6:33–34; 6:35 + 7:1–7; 6:36–40).

¹⁴ Becker explicitly draws this distinction in *Richterzeit* 152; cf. Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche* 112–318; Veijola, *Königtum* 110–115; R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 770–771, 801–802; B. Lindars, "Gideon and Kingship," *JTS* 16/2 (1965) 324–326. Auld, "Gideon" 257–267, argues that the original story was about Jerubbaal and that the Gideon elements represent late additions made in the Persian period.

Most evangelicals will not be disappointed to learn that not all critical scholars have been convinced by this bifurcation of the narrative into accounts of two separate individuals. John A. Emerton, for example, objects that the Israelite tradition asserts that the names belonged to one and the same person and that no satisfactory alternative theory had been proposed at the time of his writing. Accordingly he recommends that we continue to assume that Gideon and Jerubbaal refer to the same person, even though the reason why Gideon might have been called Jerubbaal remains uncertain.¹⁵

III. THE TRADITIONAL PIOUS RESPONSE

The source and traditio-historical critics cited above cannot be faulted for a lack of diligence and painstaking attention to detail. On the other hand, they share a contemptuous and cavalier disposition toward the text. Ascribing problematic details to different hands affords interpreters the luxury of eliminating difficulties and absolves them of responsibility to deal with difficulties in context. But the wide disparities in the results of their analyses do not inspire confidence either in their methodology or their conclusions. Plagued by subjective, idiosyncratic and anachronistic standards of stylistic and logical consistency, an excessive commitment to these methodologies incurs the guilt of the most egregious cultural imperialism: We condemn the final redactors as stylistic bunglers and destroy what the community of faith accepted as a coherent and canonical literary product.

On the surface the traditional interpretation of the Gideon narratives has been based upon a more positive attitude toward the text. Prior to the rise of the historical-critical method, few would have taken the liberty to dissect the text this way. Although the narrative hints at flaws in Gideon's character, on the whole he must be evaluated positively. In fact there is much about Gideon that is admirable.

(1) His name is Gideon, "Hacker," presumably because of his hewing down of the altar of Baal (6:25–32).¹⁶

(2) He is engaged in responsible activity, supporting the economy of his family at the time of his call (6:11).

(3) When the angel of Yahweh greets Gideon at the first encounter he addresses him as *gibbôr hayil*, "valiant warrior" (6:12).

(4) The angel tells him to go and deliver Israel from the Midianites "in this your strength" (6:14).

(5) Gideon's response—that he is the least of the least family in Manasseh—seems to fit the Biblical ideal of humility in its leaders (6:15).

¹⁵ J. A. Emerton, "Gideon and Jerubbaal," *JTS* 27/2 (1976) 289–312.

¹⁶ The verb *gd*^c does not occur in these chapters nor anywhere else with reference to idolatry in the so-called Deuteronomistic history, but a sensitive reader cannot fail to recognize in his name an echo of Deut 7:1 (which commands the "hacking" down of Asherim); 12:3 (the "hacking" down of pagan images [*pēsālim*]). So also Auld, "Gideon" 264–265, who interprets the account of the event as an etiological tale.

(6) The angel responds favorably to Gideon's request for a sign that he (the angel) is actually addressing him (6:17–23).

(7) Gideon responds to the sign with a spontaneous expression of worship and faith (6:24).

(8) Yahweh responds to every expression of doubt by Gideon with words and signs of reassurance (6:36–40; 7:9–15).

(9) Gideon dutifully destroys the pagan cult installation at Ophrah even though he knows it will antagonize the entire town, and in so doing he demonstrates the impotence of Baal (6:25–32).

(10) Gideon is "clothed with the Spirit of Yahweh," a fact that is publicly recognized in the response of the northern tribes to his call to arms (6:33–35).

(11) Gideon allows Yahweh to reduce his already inferior troops from 32,000 to 300 and then enter the battle with a ridiculous if divinely-ordered strategy (7:1–8, 15–22).

(12) Through Gideon Yahweh achieves a victory over the Midianites that would become paradigmatic for divine intervention on Israel's behalf.¹⁷

(13) Gideon skillfully and diplomatically mollifies the Ephraimites when they complain about not having been involved in the campaign against Midian (8:1–3).

(14) Gideon rejects dynastic rule¹⁸ over Israel when representatives want to reward him for his exploits on their behalf (8:22–23).

(15) The land of Israel was blessed with a lengthy (forty-year) period of tranquility coterminous with the life of Gideon (8:28).

(16) Gideon names one of his sons Abimelech, which translates as "The [Divine] King Is My Father" and may be interpreted as an expression of faith (8:31).¹⁹

(17) The narrator's note that Baalism broke out afresh after the death of Gideon seems to imply that he had a restraining influence on Israel's spiritual drift into paganism (8:33).

(18) The narrator explicitly recognizes "all the good" that Gideon did for Israel (8:35).

(19) Jotham eulogizes his father in glowing terms, particularly his self-sacrificial efforts against the Midianites (9:16–17).

(20) God personally sees to it that the treachery committed against Gideon is avenged by sending a "spirit of disaster" upon Abimelech and the lords of Shechem (9:23–24, 56–57).

¹⁷ Cf. Isa 9:4 (MT 3); 10:26.

¹⁸ Some see in the use of the verb *māšal* ("to rule") rather than *mālak* ("to be king") an intentional downplaying of the offer (cf. D. Howard, "The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets," *WTJ* 52 [1990] 101–115), but in the light of Judg 9:1–6 the first functions as a stylistic variant of the second.

¹⁹ Cf. J. D. Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew: A Comparative Study* (JSOTSup 49; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 50–52; S. C. Layton, *Archaic Features of Canaanite Personal Names in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM 47; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990) 116–117, 145–150; B. Halpern, "Abimelech," *ABD* 1.21.

In the light of this impressive catalogue of data it is not surprising that modern readers of these narratives idealize and idolize Gideon. Here is a typical response from only one of many widely circulating reference tools:

Gideon was surprised by God's orders. He found out God wanted to use him to help defeat the Midianites—but he had a few doubts. He still felt responsible for his family. He wasn't sure this was really God's command, or if he was the right person for the task. Sometimes we ask questions about God's Word because we really don't want to obey. God was patient with Gideon's questions and doubts because he knew Gideon wanted to obey. Gideon made mistakes, but he was still God's servant. You can be sure that God will guide you as long as your desire is to serve and obey him wherever you are.²⁰

This idealized interpretation of the book of Judges as a whole and the story of Gideon in particular has deep and ancient roots. The OT itself contains no hints of this idealizing tendency, preferring to focus entirely on the great mercies of God.²¹ But attitudes seem to have changed drastically during the intertestamental period. Writing in the early second century BC, Jesus ben Sirach provides the first extant extra-Biblical witness to this time and/or this book. His disposition toward the judges in general is obvious from 46:11–12: “The judges also, with their respective names, whose hearts did not fall into idolatry and who did not turn away from the Lord—may their memory be blessed! May their bones send forth new life from where they lie, and may the names of those who have been honored live again in their children!”

This trend is also evident in Josephus, who characterizes Gideon as “a man of moderation,” “excelling in every virtue.”²² According to Louis Feldman, Josephus perceives Gideon as a man possessing the cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, justice and piety:

. . . wisdom, as seen by his ability to use calculated reflection in making decisions; courage, as seen particularly by his ability to overcome the Midianites with a meager force of three hundred cowards; temperance, as seen by the

²⁰ *Life Application Bible for Students: The Living Bible* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1992) 235. Cf. p. 237, where the heading to chap. 8 is “Gideon's Wise Answer.”

²¹ Allusions to the period of the judges are found in the historiographic writings (1 Sam 12:11; 2 Sam 11:21), the Psalms (Pss 78:56–64; 83:9–12; 106:34–46) and the prophets (Isa 11:4, which suggests that by the late eighth century BC “the day of Midian” had become proverbial for the saving intervention of God on behalf of his people). The most likely reference to the Biblical book is found in the Levitical confession preserved in Neh 9:27–28: “Therefore you gave them into the hands of their enemies, who made them suffer. Then in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hands of their enemies. But after they had rest, they again did evil before you, and you abandoned them to the hands of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you rescued them according to your mercies.” The vocabulary and style of this survey of Israel's spiritual condition during the dark days of the judges suggest strongly that the composers of this poetic piece were familiar with the prologue to the book of deliverers (Judg 2:6–3:6; note the identification of the judges as *môšî'im*, “saviors,” in v. 27) and with the narratives that follow in 3:7–16:31.

²² Josephus *Ant.* 5.6.1–7.

modesty which he displays when he is approached to undertake his mission against the Midianites; justice, as seen by the fact that all his pronouncements of judgment had binding weight; and piety, as seen by his being described as “beloved of G-d.”²³

In order to maintain this image Josephus must omit whole episodes that reflect negatively on Gideon or do not suit his apologetic purpose,²⁴ diminish the role of Yahweh,²⁵ stress Gideon’s diplomatic achievements with the angered Ephraimites, tidy up obscurities (like the lapping of the men), and increase the dramatic element in the victory over the Midianites.²⁶

This is precisely the image of Gideon communicated by the author of the book of Hebrews, who speaks of him in the same breath as other “heroes of faith”: Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. With hyperbolic praise the author cites the common denominator of these figures: Through faith they “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” These are the lenses through which pious Christians have been looking at Gideon for two thousand years, and this is the picture that pervades Sunday-school manuals and lessons to this day.

IV. A HOLISTIC LITERARY RESPONSE

Anyone who has investigated the account of Gideon in Judges 6–9 with the view to determining the narrator’s perspective on the man knows that this idealized picture can be maintained only by disregarding an impressive list of contrary data. Indeed, from beginning to end the narrative raises a host of nagging questions.

(1) Why is Gideon’s response to the angel of Yahweh’s announcement of God’s presence so cynical? His declaration of divine abandonment in Judg 6:13 is certainly correct theologically, but the tone in his voice is quite wrong.

(2) Why does Gideon require a sign that he has found favor in God’s eyes (6:17)?

(3) Why does God call someone from a household on whose property the village shrine devoted to the worship of Baal is located (6:25)?

(4) Why does God call someone whose neighbors are so committed to Baal that they are ready to kill the person who dared to destroy their place of worship (6:30)—precisely the punishment that was to be imposed upon anyone who sponsored such apostasy (Deut 13:6–18)?

(5) Why does the narrator’s explanation of Gideon’s new name sound so lame, if not downright false? “Let Baal contend [against him]” interprets

²³ L. H. Feldman, “Josephus’ Portrait of Gideon,” *REJ* 152 (1993) 27. He provides a detailed study on pp. 5–28.

²⁴ This compares with Josephus’ accounts of other prominent OT characters for whom he frequently doubles the Biblical amount of space devoted to the personality. See *ibid.* 6.

²⁵ He omits the comment that the Spirit of Yahweh clothes Gideon.

²⁶ Cf. Feldman, “Portrait” 27–28.

yērubbaʿal as a jussive, but this understanding is problematic for several reasons. First, nowhere else does *yārûb* ever occur as the jussive of *rib*, “to strive, contend.”²⁷ Second, by adding *bô*, “against him,” the interpretation offered by Joash is in fact the opposite of what this form of theophoric name would have meant to a person not familiar with this story. Jerubbaal is a verbal sentence name following the prevalent predicate-subject order with “Baal” functioning as the subject of the verb “will contend.”²⁸ Normally names of this sort lauded the deity for action on behalf of the one who gave or bore the name, in which case the name reflects Joash’s fundamentally pro-Baalistic stance.²⁹ Indeed, judging from the following narratives in this book and the references to this man in later writings it seems that Jerubbaal was in fact his real name (1 Sam 12:11). But later horror at the name is reflected in the historian’s deliberate corruption of it to Jerubbesheth, “Let shame contend.”³⁰

(6) Why, despite being clothed with the Spirit of Yahweh and despite the response of his northern countrymen, does Gideon continue to seek ways (the fleece) to get out of attacking the Midianites (Judg 6:36–40)?

(7) Why is Gideon still afraid to attack the Midianites despite being clothed with the Spirit and being told that Yahweh has given the enemy into his hands (7:9–10)?

(8) Why does Gideon add his own name to the Lord’s in the battle cry, “Belonging to Yahweh and belonging to Gideon”?³¹ This declaration seems innocent enough, as if Yahweh is the commander-in-chief and Gideon is his deputy. But in the light of what follows in chap. 8, one wonders if the narrator does not intend some ambiguity here.

²⁷ Presumably *rûb* functions as a biform of *rib*, a pattern not uncommon in hollow verbs (e.g. *šim/šûm*, “to set, put”). The imperfect form *trwb* occurs in Prov 3:30 (Kethib) and the infinitive construct *rwb* occurs in Judg 21:22 (Kethib). In both cases, however, the scribes recognized the problem and called for a more conventional Qere reading. M. Noth (*Die israelitische Personennamen im Rahmen der Gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* [Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1928; reprint 1966] 206) derived *yārib* from *rābab*, “to be great,” hence “Let Baal Prove Himself to Be Great.” Less likely is the derivation of the verb element from *rbb*, “to hurt, shoot,” as proposed by M. Tsevat, “Ishbosheth and Congeners,” *HUCA* 46 (1975) 82.

²⁸ Cf. Fowler, *Theophoric* 84–111.

²⁹ So also Würthwein, “Abimelech” 16, though I disagree with his claiming the name as evidence that Jerubbaal was really a Canaanite. Note the Yahwistic name of his father.

³⁰ 2 Samuel 11:21. Compare similar alterations of Ish-Baal, “Man of Baal” (1 Chr 8:33; 9:39), to Ishbosheth, “Man of Shame” (2 Sam 2:8), and Merib-Baal (1 Chr 8:34) to Mephibosheth (2 Sam 11:21).

³¹ Cf. David’s fuller comment when he faced Goliath in 1 Sam 17:47: “Yahweh does not deliver by sword or spear, for the battle belongs to Yahweh (*kî lyhw̄h hammilḥamâ*), and he will deliver you into our hands.” Cf. also 2 Chr 20:15. The significance of the *lamed* before Yahweh’s and Gideon’s names is not specified here, but several minor MSS Tg Syr add “a sword for” in conformity to v. 19 (cf. Moore, *Judges* 210; R. H. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* [VTSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1996] 374 n. 16). In both cases the *lamed* is best interpreted as a *lamed* of ownership rather than of dedication. The truncated construction expresses the excitement of the moment (GKC §147c). C. R. Krahmalkov (“The Foundation of Carthage, 814 B.C.: The Douimès Pendant Inscription,” *JSS* 26 [1981] 85–86) interprets this form as the soldier’s oath of allegiance to God and ruler.

(9) Why does Gideon summon the forces of Manasseh, Asher and Naphtali (7:23) to finish off the Midianites when Yahweh had said he would deliver the Midianites into the hands of the 300 (7:7)?

(10) Why is there no reference to Yahweh's involvement in chap. 8? Yahweh's name does indeed appear three times, but only in flippant comments by Gideon (8:7, 19, 23).

(11) Why does Gideon deal so ruthlessly with his own countrymen living in Succoth and Penuel, to the point where he treats them like the Canaanites were to be dealt with (8:4–17)?

(12) Why does Gideon lose sight of Yahweh's agenda as the crusade against the Midianites progresses, and why does he become increasingly preoccupied with personal vengeance (8:18–19)?

(13) Why does the narrator bother to report that Gideon demanded of his young son, his firstborn, that he kill the kings of Midian (8:20–21)? Even his enemies recognize this as an ignoble if not cowardly demand.

(14) Why does Gideon's rejection of the kingship sound so pious but turn out to be so hollow (8:22–23)? First, he requests that each of his men give him a gold earring from their share of the spoils of war,³² which amounted to 1700 shekels (= 43 pounds),³³ a treasure fit for a king. Second, Gideon retains the king's symbols of royalty: the crescent amulets worn by the camels (cf. v. 21), the pendants,³⁴ the purple robes formerly worn by the Midianite kings, the neckbands worn by the camels around their necks. Third, Gideon assumes a king's role as sponsor of the cult by crafting an ephod³⁵ and erecting it in his city, Ophrah, to which the whole nation came "to play the harlot." Fourth, in so doing he has established this town as his capital, and his house as his palace where he "sat" (v. 29).³⁶ Fifth, the ephod is said to have become a snare to Gideon "and his household (*bêto*)," which in context has dynastic overtones. Sixth, Gideon fathers numerous progeny from a large

³² The comment in v. 24 is clarified with a parenthetical comment: "They had gold earrings, for they were Ishmaelites." Strictly speaking, Ishmael was the (elder) son of Abraham by Hagar (Gen 25:12). But the present identification of Midianites as Ishmaelites (cf. also Gen 37:27–28, 36) suggests that either the latter gentilic could also be used of desert people in general or the Midianite alliance extended beyond the Amalekites and the "sons of the east" mentioned earlier, in which case Zebah and Zalmunna may actually have belonged to the Ishmaelite branch of this alliance.

³³ Calculated at .4046 ounces (11.33 grams) per shekel; on the weight of a shekel see Y. Ronen, "The Enigma of the Shekel Weights of the Judean Kingdom," *BA* 59/2 (1996) 122–126.

³⁴ The form *nētipôt* is from *nātap*, "to drip." Cf. *nātap* ("raindrop") in Job 36:27.

³⁵ The nature of this object is not clear. Elsewhere in the OT "ephod" (*ʿēpōd*) denotes the priest's special breastpiece (cf. Exod 28:15–30). In Judg 17:5; 18:14–20 the same word refers to the priestly vestments of Micah. But because this object is erected (*yāšab*) in Gideon's city and becomes an object of pagan worship this meaning seems unlikely here. The solution to the present problem may be suggested by the Akkadian cognate *epattu*, which in several Old Assyrian texts apparently refers to the costly garments worn by high officials and/or draped over images of the gods (*CAD* 4.183; cf. C. Meyers, "Ephod," *ABD* 2.550).

³⁶ For this usage of *yāšab* see Exod 18:13 (and Joel 3:12 [MT 4:12], "sit to judge"); Exod 18:14; Pss 2:4; 9:7 [MT 8]; 29:10; 55:19 [MT 20]; 61:7 [MT 8]; 102:12 [MT 13]; Lam 5:19; Zech 9:5–6; Mal 3:3. For discussion of this use of *yāšab* see M. Görg, "*yāšab*," *TDNT* 6.430–438.

number of wives (v. 30), the latter in direct violation of the Mosaic paradigm for kingship outlined in Deut 17:14–20.³⁷ Seventh, the number of sons (seventy) sounds like an idealized number, perhaps the number of a complete royal household.³⁸ Eighth, Gideon acted as if he were above the Torah and married a concubine from Canaanite Shechem.³⁹ Ninth, Gideon was buried in the dynastic tomb (Judg 8:32).⁴⁰

(15) Why does Gideon's naming of his son Abimelech sound so suspicious? Admittedly the name may be interpreted as "The [Divine] King Is My Father," but it may be interpreted in at least two other ways. It could be understood to mean "[The Pagan Deity] Melek Is My Father."⁴¹ Suspicion of a syncretistic significance is heightened by the fact that every one of the three other characters in the OT bearing the name Abimelech⁴² was a non-Israelite.⁴³ Or it could be taken to mean "The King [Gideon] Is My Father." As sanctimonious as the theological interpretation of the name may sound, given Gideon's earlier self-serving behavior, the name seems to reflect Gideon's egotism that is his own perception of his status in Israel. Whatever significance Gideon attached to the name, the person who bore it was driven by a ruthless passion to prove himself the heir of the human monarch Gideon.

(16) Why does the author consistently refer to this man by the name Jerubbaal rather than Gideon in chap. 9?

In the light of these questions it is difficult to accept the popular view of Gideon as a man of strong and pious devotion. Thankfully we have begun to witness a resurgence of a holistic hermeneutic that seeks to come to terms with and recognize the literary significance of tensions within the

³⁷ The added clause *kī nāšim rabbôt hāyū lô* echoes *wēlō^o yarbeh lô nāšim* in Deut 17:17.

³⁸ Cf. the seventy kings subject to Adonibezeq in Judg 1:7 and Abdon's seventy sons in 12:14. Elsewhere we read of seventy sons of Jacob (Gen 46:27), seventy elders in Israel (Exod 24:1) and the seventy sons of Ahab (2 Kgs 10:1–7). The table of nations in Genesis 10 lists seventy descendants of Noah's three sons (not counting the names in the parenthetical comments). See also the reference to the seventy kinsfolk (*hyw*) of Panammu, king of Y^oDY (*KAI* 215:3). In any case, such families are rare among private citizens. But the author may also have seen Gideon's family as a reflection of the Canaanite pantheon. According to the mythological texts discovered at Ras Shamra/Ugarit the high god El and his wife Asherah had seventy sons (*ANET* 134; see F. C. Fensham, "The Numeral Seventy in the Old Testament and the Family of Jerubbaal, Ahab, Panammuwa and Athirat," *PEQ* 109 [1977] 113–115). The city of Ugarit was destroyed c. 1180 BC, apparently at the hands of the so-called sea peoples (of whom the Philistines represented one group), precisely during the period of the judges.

³⁹ Exod 34:15–16; Deut 7:3–4; 17:8–19.

⁴⁰ Like Samson (Judg 16:31), Gideon was buried in the family tomb in his hometown. But unlike Samson, dynastic overtones are suggested by the narrator's reference to Gideon by the patronymic "son of Joash," the founder of the line from which this man came.

⁴¹ The deity Malik was worshiped at Ebla (third millennium BC), Ugarit (second millennium), Phoenicia (first millennium), the chief deity of Tyre being Melqart, a conflated form of *mlk* + *qrt*, "MLK/King of the City") and among the Ammonites (first millennium). The national deity of the Ammonites was Milkom. Cf. 1 Kgs 11:5, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13.

⁴² In fact they are all Philistines: Genesis 20; 26:1–33; Psalm 34 superscription. In the last case the name replaces Achish (cf. 1 Sam 21:10–15), the name of the king of Gath, lending support to the view that Abimelech functioned as a dynastic title for Philistine kings. Cf. V. H. Matthews, "Abimelech," *ABD* 1.21.

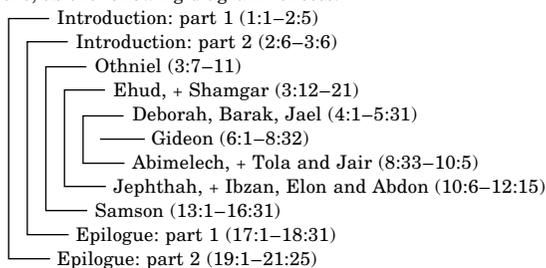
⁴³ This will occur again in Judg 13:24, where Samson is apparently named after the sun deity.

text.⁴⁴ Adopting this stance, one may only conclude that the ambiguity reflected in the name Jerubbaal itself, in the use of two names for the man, and in the pervasive interplay of negative and positive images of Gideon is intentional. But having drawn this conclusion one is forced to ask: “What is the narrator’s intention?”

This question may only be answered by examining the place of the Gideon narrative in the plot of the book as a whole. We welcome the increasing recognition of a single mind in the selection, arrangement, linking and shaping of the sources available to the author to achieve a specific ideological agenda and yield a coherent literary work. Few Biblical compositions present a plot as tightly knit as that found in the book of Judges.⁴⁵ The challenge for us is discovering the place of Gideon in the development of central thematic issues. Impressed by the refrain “There was no king in Israel,” which appears four times in the last five chapters,⁴⁶ scholars have often interpreted the book of Judges as a polemic for the monarchy in Israel. The chaos reflected in the narratives demonstrates the need for a centralized royal constitution. Support for this view may be derived from the circumstances that precipitated the request for a king by the elders of Israel in 1 Samuel 8. The fundamental anti-Ephraimite stance of the book is irrefutable. Marc Brettler’s treatment of it as “a political allegory fostering the Davidic monarchy,”⁴⁷ however, not only minimizes the significance of several

⁴⁴ For a welcome recent attempt at a holistic interpretation see O’Connell, *Rhetoric* 139–170. Unfortunately in O’Connell’s preoccupation with monarchic issues (in his view the rhetorical aim of the book is to idealize the monarchy of Judah at the expense of the Benjamite monarchy of Saul) he fails to pay due attention to the prophetic agenda of the narrator. See also R. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 168–176; B. G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSup 46; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 144–159.

⁴⁵ D. W. Gooding (“The Composition of the Book of Judges,” *ErIsr* 16 [1982] 70–79) in particular has recognized the centrality of the Gideon cycle in the book’s intentionally symmetrical structure, as the following diagram reflects:



⁴⁶ 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25.

⁴⁷ M. Brettler, “The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics,” *JBL* 108 (1989) 416. More particularly O’Connell (*Rhetoric*) argues that the book was written to convince the pro-Saulide Israelites to turn their allegiance to David. Cf. also similarly D. M. Howard, Jr. (*An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994] 101): “The purpose of the book was to show the consequences of disobedience to God and to point the way to a king, who, if he were righteous, would lead the people to God.” Cf. also R. K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969] 692): “The purpose of the Book was to show that a centralized hereditary kingship was necessary for the well-being of the Covenant theocracy.”

textual units that are critical of the monarchy⁴⁸ but also hardly accounts for the overall tenor of the book.⁴⁹ No more convincing is O'Connell's thesis that the book represents a political tractate intended to convince the northern tribes to shift their allegiance from the Saulide house to the Davidic monarchy.⁵⁰ As we have noted repeatedly elsewhere, this book is not a political tractate but a prophetic composition intended to expose the religious and ethical Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of settlement and to call the nation to return to the God of the covenant. The book has a contemporary relevance for the author's own day, however: to wake up his own generation to the same problem. This is an appeal to abandon all forms of paganism and return to Yahweh.

The author's agenda is evident not only in the individual units but also in the broad structure of the book as a whole. The prologue (Judg 1:1–2:5) explains the underlying causes of the Canaanization of Israel: the tribes' failure to fulfill the divine mandate in eliminating the native population (Deut 7:1–5). The major part, the book of deliverers (Judg 2:6–16:31), describes the consequences of Israel's Canaanization as well as Yahweh's response. The collection of hero stories has its own prologue (2:6–3:6), in which the theological agenda for the following hero stories is set. The sequence of six cycles of apostasy—punishment—cry of pain—deliverance not only reflects the persistence of the issue but also demonstrates the increasing intensity of the nation's depravity. The arrangement of the hero stories reflects this process, so that in the end we are left with antiheroes rather than truly great men of God. In the so-called epilogue (17:1–21:25), which really is the climax of the composition, the Danite and Benjamite tribes demonstrate the extent and intensity of the problem in the nation's religious and social dysfunction.

The deliberateness with which the author pursues his course is reflected in the integration and arrangement of elements of the respective parts, including the correspondence between the order in which the tribes are named in the prologue (1:1–3:6) and the order in which their representatives appear (mostly as deliverers) in the book of deliverers: Judah (Othniel), Benjamin (Ehud), Ephraim (Deborah), Manasseh (Gideon), (Gilead [Jephthah]), Dan (Samson). It is also evident in the way the agenda is set in the prologue to the book of deliverers and the manner in which that agenda is fulfilled in the accounts of the deliverers. If one takes 2:11–23⁵¹ seriously one is obligated to

⁴⁸ Gideon's sham rejection of kingship (Judg 8:22–32), Abimelech's kingly style (9:1–6) and Jotham's fable (9:7–15). On these texts see G. E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History* (SBLDS 87; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) 123–129. W. J. Dumbrell ("In Those Days There Was No King in Israel; Every Man Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes": The Purpose of the Book Reconsidered," *JSOT* 25 [1983] 23–33) argues for the opposite: The book is an anti-monarchic polemic by an exilic author who is calling for a return to direct theocratic reign freed from the encumbrances of human institutions, especially the bureaucratic monarchy.

⁴⁹ K. L. Younger ("The Configuration of Judicial Preliminaries: Judges 1.1–2.5 and its Dependence on the Book of Joshua," *JSOT* 68 [1995] 87 n. 33) rightly cautions against a pro-Judahite ideological orientation.

⁵⁰ O'Connell, *Rhetoric* 139–171.

⁵¹ Which incidentally makes no mention of kingship.

interpret the successive cycles of apostasy—oppression—outcry—deliverance not simply as six illustrations of the same problem but as evidences of increasing and intensifying spiritual and social degradation. What is often overlooked is that this process of degeneration is also reflected in the respective deliverers. The narrator clearly perceives Othniel as the most exemplary judge, but the holders of this office become more and more problematic thereafter. They reach their nadir in Samson, who embodies all that is wrong in Israel. Accordingly with Gideon, the fourth of six, the die has been cast and the narrative moves inexorably toward its denouement. In fact there is little that is redeemable in the characters of either Jephthah or Samson who follow him. Gideon's position in the sequence explains why the narrator paints his picture with both positive and negative strokes. As in Gideon's own life, under his reign the tilt of Israel's spiritual condition is obviously in the direction of paganism. Not only does his father host the cult of Baal; Gideon himself becomes a royal sponsor of apostasy. And when he dies, the nation is no longer satisfied with playing the harlot with the Baals. Now they make Baal-Berith their god (8:33). The character of Abimelech's reign, the account of which reads like a leaf out of the Canaanite political-science notebook (chap. 9), provides concrete testimony to the social implications of the Canaanization of Israelite society begun with Gideon.

V. CONCLUSION

I began this paper by asking the question: "Will the real Gideon please stand up?" In assessing this person we must not only read the beginning of the story or selectively isolate favorite episodes that support our idealized images. I wish I could see this man only as the author of Hebrews sees him. But I cannot. I must read the story to the end. And it does not conclude with Gideon's gloriously theological rejection of the kingship, or even with his death. As O'Connell has so convincingly shown, the account ends with chap. 9, not chap. 8.⁵² And in this chapter I find the real legacy of Gideon. His real name is Jerubbaal, and the god after whom he was named has taken up the challenge proposed by Joash (6:31–32) and, sad to say, has apparently successfully contended for himself and won.

This apparent victory by the native Canaanite religious system throws into sharper relief the amazing fact that God does indeed intervene on behalf of his people. As Polzin has demonstrated, in the book of Judges the Deuteronomic formula—obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings curse—is suspended. In this book God rarely if ever operates according to this principle. On the contrary: If God intervenes on Israel's behalf—and he does repeatedly—it is consistently in spite of rather than because of what the nation deserves. In this book we observe the mercy of God at work in as sharp relief as anywhere else in Scripture. The greatest threats to Israel's

⁵² O'Connell, *Rhetoric* 139–171.

existence do not come from outside enemies who may occasionally oppress them. Israel's most serious enemy is within. She is a nation that appears determined to destroy herself. Only the gracious intervention of God prevents this from happening. With hindsight we can recognize his motivation. He had made an eternal covenant with his people. He could not let them destroy themselves or let others destroy them. The mission for which he had called them could not abort. If anything positive happens to Israel in the period of the judges in general or through the agency of Gideon in particular, it has much less to do with the character of the human agents that God has at his disposal than with the character of him who would say in another time and in another place, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."