

# GIDEON OR JERUBAAL

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Of the charismatic leaders called in the Bible "Judges," who ruled at various times in ancient Israel in the pre-monarchic period (c. 1200-1030 BCE), Gideon is the most illustrious in two respects:

1 The account of his exploits is the longest of all for Judges, amounting to 103 verses in three chapters (Jud. chs. 6-8).<sup>1</sup>

2. His alternative name "Jerubaal" is specifically mentioned in two places outside of the Book of Judges; I Samuel 12:11<sup>2</sup> and in II Sam. 11:21, where he is referred to in the variant form "Jerubbeshet."<sup>3</sup> His memory is also evoked by the mention of the defeat of the Midianites (Isa. 10:26, Ps. 83:11), and the killing of the two Midianite generals, Orev and Ze'ev and the two kings Zevah and Tsalmuna (Ps. 83:12).

In this paper, I shall focus upon an important characteristic of this biblical personality: his two names. But before doing that, it would be helpful to say a brief word about biblical names in general.

The overwhelming majority of biblical names are theophoric; that is, they are compounded with the name or symbol of a deity, either with any one of the forms of the name of the God of Israel such as the prefix Yo or Y'ho, or the suffix Yah or Yahu, or some pagan god such as Baal. Then there is a class of names that are symbolic; they are a one-word description of the person's character or experience. This is particularly applicable to the names in the Book of Ruth.

In a third category, there is a small number of names each of which is provided with an etymological explanation. In most of these, the explanation is essentially a midrash, a fanciful interpretation. The philological relationship between the name and the verb upon which the text claims it depends is highly dubious; at best, the relationship is only phonetic. Two of the most familiar names in the Bible can serve as illustrations of this: Eve and Moses. "Eve" is the Anglicized version of the Hebrew "*Chavvah*,"<sup>4</sup> and the etymology given reads: *because she was the mother of all the living* (Gen. 3:20).<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word in the text for "the living" is *chay*, hence her name should have been

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*chayyah*. The name Adam gave her has no philological relationship to the verb *chay*.<sup>6</sup>

The name "Moses" is given an even more far-fetched etymology: *She* [Pharaoh's daughter] *named him Moses saying 'I drew him out of the water'* (Ex. 2:10). The Hebrew root *mashah* means "to draw out of water," but did the Egyptian Princess know Hebrew? And even if she did, would she give this child, whom she would raise as her own, a hated Hebrew name?<sup>7</sup> Here we have what appears to be a linguistic relationship between the name and the verb from which it is allegedly derived, but what we really have is a phonetic similarity between the Hebrew verb and the Egyptian name. This etymology is then a lovely midrash whose purpose is to give the great leader of the Exodus, who spoke to God "face to face," a Hebrew and not an Egyptian name.

Let us now return to Gideon/Jerubaal.

At the beginning of Judges 6, we learn about the troubles and difficulties brought upon the Israelites by the Midianites and other nomadic tribes. Then, without any preliminary explanation, we are introduced to a man named Joash of the clan of Aviezer and his son Gideon. This name appears consistently in the story of the struggle between the Israelites and the Midianites as it unfolds in chapters 6, 7 and 8. At no point does the text offer any etymology for this name, but the perceptive reader with a knowledge of biblical Hebrew would recognize in this name the root *gada* which means to hew, to cut down.<sup>8</sup> He might also bring to mind the passage from Deuteronomy 7:5 in which this verb is used: *cut down their sacred posts*,<sup>9</sup> and perhaps also the passage from II Chronicles 3:4: *The pillars will be broken and the sacred posts cut down*.<sup>10</sup> The reader would also take note of the association of *gada* with "sacred posts," that belonged to the pagan cult of the goddess Asherah.

With respect to the name Jerubaal there is a lengthy explanation, an elaborate midrash, in fact. When God commissioned Gideon to lead the forces of Israel against the Midianites, it was necessary for him first to be cleansed of the pagan Baal-worship practiced in his family: smash his father's altar to Baal, cut down the *asherah* attached to it,<sup>11</sup> and replace them with an altar to the God of Israel and offer a sacrifice upon it. Gideon does all of this during the night, and when the townspeople discover this in the morning, they are furious. Finding out that the culprit was Gideon, they demand that Joash produce his son so they can kill him. Joash fends them off by telling them that

this is not their problem, it is Baal's. He said to them: *'Let Baal quarrel with him for tearing down his altar.'* And he was called on that day Jerubaal meaning *let Baal quarrel with him* (6:27-32).

This is an extreme instance of a midrash-on-name; one in which there is neither a philological nor a phonetic relationship between the prefix of the name and the verb from which it is presumably derived. Y. Kaufman<sup>12</sup> makes this point as well. He correctly notes that in keeping with this story the name should have been Yarivbaal with the actual verb for "quarrel" prefixed to Baal.<sup>13</sup> What, then is the meaning of the prefix Yeru-Jeru?

There are only two other names in the Bible that have this prefix and both are place names: Jerusalem [*Yerushalayim*] and Jeruel (II Chr. 20:16). Scholars disagree on the meaning of this prefix: one opinion is that it means "possession of," another "foundation of," and a third "city of."<sup>14</sup> As a personal name, Jerubaal could well be taken to mean "possessed."<sup>15</sup> In this period, the element "baal" -- that as a common noun can mean "lord" or "master" -- still appears in Israelite names. King Saul had a son named Ishbaal, and Jonathan had a son named Meribaal.<sup>16</sup>

Now, Judges 9 is a kind of epilogue to Gideon's story, since it deals with his son Abimelech and the latter's bizarre and tragic involvement with the city of Shechem (today called Nablus). Nowhere in this chapter is Gideon mentioned; where we would expect his name, we have instead Jerubaal. Abimelech is *ben Yerubaal* (9:1), his 70 brothers, whom he kills, are called *b'nai Yerubaal* (9:5). Jotham, the only brother who survived the massacre, is called *ben Yerubaal* (9:5, 57). It is *the house of Jerubaal* (9:19).

From the unexceptional use of Jerubaal for the paterfamilias, we cannot escape the conclusion this was not a nickname engendered by some incident but a birth-name. Moreover, it seems quite certain that Gideon is not an arbitrary name but one with a very specific meaning and given for that specific purpose. The name simply means "the one who cut down." Nor can we escape the conviction that this name is connected to the cutting down of the *asherah*.

From all the above, I would suggest that Joash named his son at birth Jerubaal and not Gideon. The author of Judges, a staunch, unswerving devotee of the God of Israel, could not write the story of the hero who had been chosen by God to drive out the Midianite menace whose name was associated with

Baal.<sup>17</sup> Hence, he devised the name Gideon to be used only in telling this story and nowhere else in the Bible, a name that his contemporaries, and it is hoped later generations of readers, would appreciate as appropriate: that it was associated with a key event in this tale, the cleansing of the hero from the taint of idolatry, making him fit for his Divinely-assigned task.

The author could then revert to the use of Jerubaal in Abimelech's story, because the chosen hero was not involved, and the players could be properly identified. Indeed, he may have relished the opportunity of associating Abimelech, who was such an evil character, with Baal. He was able to heap further ridicule upon Baal by telling how the name Jerubaal came to be. He may also have hoped to evoke in the mind of the reader the famous "debate" between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (I Kg. 18).

Reading Judges 6-9, one cannot help but wonder why in the story of the struggle with the Midianites, only the name Gideon is used while in the Abimelech story it is Jerubaal. This glaring difference cries out for an explanation. This paper suggests a plausible explanation; there are undoubtedly others.

#### NOTES

1. We might add to this number the 57 verses of chapter 9 - the story of Abimelech the son of Jerubaal - which is a sort of sequel to Gideon's story. The next longest account is of Samson, which runs to 96 verses in chapters 13-16.
2. See Samuel's farewell speech to the people. Other Judges mentioned in this verse are Jephthah and one named B'dan. The latter is not found in The Book of Judges; some say it refers to Samson who was from the tribe of Dan, while others think it is an error for the name Avdan (Jud. 12:13-15) See Moshe Zvi Segal, *The Book of Samuel* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1956) p.88.
3. On this form, see Note 16 below.
4. The first letter of the Hebrew name is a "het," which we are writing phonetically as "ch." Bible scholars designate this letter by an "h" with a dot beneath it.
5. New Jewish Publication Society Translation, 1986, similarly other translations.
6. See U. Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1943) pp.113-114.
7. Consequently, traditional scholars insist, contrary to the plain meaning of the text, that *and she named him* refers to Jochebed, Moses' mother. Of course, she did not draw him out of the water; she put him into the water. Modern scholars point out that "Moshe" is Egyptian for "born of." See *The Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962) p.100, footnote "a," and elsewhere.

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8. Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955) p.154.

9. *Sacred posts* is the NJPS rendering of "*asherah*".

10. In Deuteronomy 12:3 this verb is used in connection with "the images of their gods."

11. Y. Kaufman argues that "Baal" here is not the Canaanite god but is another appellation for the God of Israel. See Y. Kaufman, *The Book of Judges* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1968) p.168.

12. Kaufman, *ibid*.

13. The Book of Ezra 10:18 lists "Yariv" as one of a priestly family; and there is also Merivbaal, both from the root "to quarrel".

14. Brown, Driver and Briggs, *op. cit.* 436

15. In I Chronicles 7:2 we find the personal name Jeri'el, theophoric with El instead of Baal. Scholars say it is equivalent to Yeru'el, (II Chronicles 20:16) as Peni'el = Penu'el (Genesis 32:31, 32).

16. In II Samuel 2:8 and 4:4, the names of Saul's son Ishbaal and Jonathan's son Meribaal have been changed by the redactor to Ishboshet and Mephiboshet, by substituting the word "boshet" [shame] for "baal." See Segal, *op. cit.* pp. 240, 255: It should be noted that Segal, after Kaufman, believes that "Baal" is equivalent to "Adonai," so that the name means "May Adonai [the Lord] take our part [in the quarrel.]"

17. Another instance of this attitude is evident in the name of the city that King David conquered and made the capital of Israel. Its ancient name prior to the conquest (in its Hebrew form) was *Yerushalem*, *shalem* being the name of a Canaanite god. After Solomon built the Temple, pious Judeans changed the name to *Yerushalayim*, retaining the consonants but changing the pronunciation so that the name Shalem would not be said or heard. All the translations of the Bible kept the original form of the name as seen in the English "Jerusalem." See also my article "From Jerusalem to Yerushalayim," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. XXV:4 (October 1997) pp. 241-245.

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