

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRAITS OF GIDEON AS REFLECTED IN HIS SONS JOTHAM AND ABIMELECH

HAYYIM ANGEL

The Gideon narrative in Judges 6-7 adds several new elements to the stereotypical judge cycle: the faith development of the judge; a retrospective of the Exodus as a distant memory; the destruction of a local Baal shrine; and an angelic revelation. Despite these features, however, the overall effect of Judges 6-7 is fundamentally the same as the preceding narratives. The Israelites had sinned and therefore suffered years of oppression. After the people cried out, God appointed a savior. Gideon organized an army and led the people to victory. The land then enjoyed an extensive period of peace.

Following the pattern noted for the earlier judges, one would expect the Gideon narrative to conclude at the end of Chapter 7, closing with a formulaic statement that the land was tranquil for 40 years (as it finally does in 8:28). This does not happen, though. Chapter 8 adds new variables to the Book of Judges, and to Gideon's career. It appears that every act in Chapter 8 was intended to be ambiguous: each can be both justified and criticized.

Chapter 9 seems to separate out the two opposite constituents of a complex Gideon into the personalities of his two sons. Jotham reflected Gideon's most positive aspects, while Abimelech reflected the most negative. In this essay, we will briefly survey these issues in Chapters 8-9, and then consider how Gideon's career is the key turning point in the Book of Judges.

SUCCOTH AND PENUEL

After Gideon succeeded in avoiding conflict with the tribe of Ephraim (8:1-3), his requests for assistance were snubbed by the residents of Succoth and Penuel. Gideon swore that upon his return from pursuing the Midianites, he would torture the elders of Succoth, and tear down the tower of Penuel. When he returned, he carried out his threats, possibly with a magnitude that exceeded the threats: *And he took the elders of the city and, [bringing] desert*

Hayyim Angel is Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City (the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, founded in 1654) and teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. He has published articles on Tanakh in journals such as Tradition, Nahalah, Jewish Thought, Or HaMizrah, and in several collections of essays.

thorns and briers, he punished the people of Succoth with them. As for Penuel, he tore down its tower and killed the townspeople (8:16-17).

One might try to justify the severity of the torture and the massacre at Penuel. Gideon, as a judge, had king-like status. The people had a responsibility to feed the famished troops as part of the national defense efforts. Abarbanel adopts this argument, viewing Gideon's actions as a national leader's rightful prerogative to punish rebels.¹ Based on his studies of comparative cultures, Abraham Malamat has argued similarly; that is, that Gideon acted in accordance with the standard practice of that era.² In addition to the historical context, the narrative itself appears to support Gideon's behavior in light of the positive treatment it accords him.³

On the other hand, the sheer magnitude of the torture – threshing the people of Succoth with thorns, and massacring the people of Penuel (after he had explicitly promised to destroy only their tower) appears excessive. Radak and Abarbanel (on 8:17) suggest that the people of Penuel must have resisted when Gideon came to destroy their tower, so Gideon was left with no choice but to fight back and destroy the city.⁴ However, it is difficult to blame the people of Penuel for defending themselves against an attack. This negative dimension finds some support in Gideon's surprising justification of punishing the people of Succoth – they had mocked him: *Then he came to the people of Succoth and said, 'Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you mocked me, saying, Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give your famished men bread?'* (8:15). By injecting Gideon's personal feelings instead of an objective claim of authority, the narrative appears to mitigate the rationale of Gideon's punishing these cities solely in the name of national security.⁵

Gideon's response to the cities' non-participation contrasts with that of Deborah, his predecessor. In her victory poem, Deborah condemned those who did not participate in the battle against Sisera (5:15-17, 23), but did not inflict physical harm on them. Surprisingly, Gideon's attacks on Succoth and Penuel bear a closer resemblance to Abimelech's subsequent attacks on those who resisted his authority (Ch. 9).

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRAITS OF GIDEON

GIDEON AVENGES THE LOSS OF HIS BROTHERS

Then he asked Zebah and Zalmunna, 'Those men you killed at Tabor, what were they like?' 'They looked just like you,' they replied, 'like sons of a king.' 'They were my brothers,' he declared, 'the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had spared them, I would not kill you.' And he commanded his oldest son Jether, 'Go kill them!' But the boy did not draw his sword, for he was timid, being still a boy (8:18-20).

In 8:19, we learn that Gideon's maternal brothers had been killed in an earlier battle against Midian. This is the first time in Judges that a leader acted from personal revenge, not purely for God and for Israel. Although it is not inherently bad to have personal motivations when engaged in a battle of national defense, Gideon complicated the moral issue by saying *if you had spared them, I would not kill you* (8:19). If he meant that statement literally, it would cast light on his massacre at Penuel and torture at Succoth. One can imagine a scenario where Gideon would have let the Midianite kings go free, even after severely punishing Israelite cities for not assisting in their capture!⁶ In the final analysis, however, Gideon did help his nation by defeating the Midianites. Even if his actions in the battle may have been tinged with some personal motivations, Gideon appears to receive full support in the narrative.

GIDEON DECLINES THE MONARCHY

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule over us – you, your son, and your grandson as well; for you have saved us from the Midianites.' But Gideon replied, 'I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord alone shall rule over you' (8:22-23).

With these words, Gideon exemplified a high level of religiosity. Rather than exploiting a spectacular military victory to propel himself and his family into power, he reminded the people of their religious obligation to God. His words echo those of the prophet Samuel, who similarly favored Divine kingship over human monarchy: *'But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was advancing against you, you said to me, "No, we must have a king reigning over us – though the Lord your God is your King"'* (1 Sam.

12:12). Yairah Amit aptly remarks that Gideon was worthy of the monarchy precisely because he realized that kingship belongs to God.⁷

Although Amit appears correct on one level, her argument needs modification based on what had transpired in Chapter 8. Gideon acted as a king by torturing Succoth and massacring the people of Penuel; he used a national war for personal revenge; he ordered his eldest son Jether to execute the Midianite kings – furthering a family vendetta, and also possibly training his son as a likely successor (cf. Abarbanel). Even the Midianites recognized Gideon as a king-like figure. When Gideon asked Zebah and Zalmunna: *'The men you killed at Tabor, what were they like?'* *'They looked just like you,' they replied, 'like sons of a king'* (8:18). Until Gideon emphatically declined the monarchy, it seemed that Gideon was particularly anxious to be king and indeed accorded that status to himself.

THE EPHOD

Gideon made an ephod of this gold and set it up in his own town of Ophrah. There all Israel went astray after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and his household. Thus Midian submitted to the Israelites and did not raise its head again; and the land was tranquil for forty years in Gideon's time (8:27-28).

Gideon's actions after declining the monarchy also require further investigation. It would appear that Gideon built an ephod from the spoils in order to remind the nation that their victory had been miraculous (Rashi, Radak). Additionally, the ephod could have been intended as a divining agent (R. Isaiah of Trani, Yehudah Elitzur).⁸ Nevertheless, the narrator unequivocally blames Gideon for leading Israel to sin. While Rashi and Radak assume that the people went astray only after Gideon's death, there is no mention of that chronological detail in the text. It is possible that the people already turned illegally to the ephod during Gideon's lifetime.⁹ In any event, the negative judgment of the narrator clouds the purely noble motivations Gideon might have had when making the ephod by blaming him directly.

MULTIPLE WIVES, ABIMELECH

Gideon had seventy sons of his own issue, for he had many wives. A

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRAITS OF GIDEON

son was also born to him by his concubine in Shechem, and he named him Abimelech. Gideon son of Joash died at a ripe old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. After Gideon died, the Israelites again went astray after the Baalim, and they adopted Baal-berith as a god. The Israelites gave no thought to the Lord their God, who saved them from all the enemies around them. Nor did they show loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal-Gideon in return for all the good that he had done for Israel (8:30-35).

Although Gideon emphatically declined kingship, he had many wives and sons – a hallmark of a monarch.¹⁰ In fact, his sons went on to succeed him in positions of leadership (9:2). Even more surprisingly, he named one of his sons "Abimelech" [my father is king]! If Gideon were opposed to monarchy, this would be an unlikely name to give to his son.

Abarbanel (on 8:27) pieces together the evidence by suggesting that Gideon made the ephod to enshrine his own heroism. By placing the ephod in his hometown of Ophrah, Gideon thought the people would have a permanent reminder of his victory – and this would legitimize his sons' future positions in leadership. Similarly, Abarbanel (on 8:31) adds that Gideon named his son "Abimelech" to hint that he would succeed him as ruler.¹¹

On the other hand, the name "Abimelech" could mean "God is king" rather than "my father is king".¹² From this point of view, Gideon was not giving expression to latent dreams of monarchy; he was glorifying God. The same reasoning would apply to the ephod – Gideon established it solely for the honor of God, converting the spoils of war into a sacred object.

One also could posit a middle position: Throughout Chapter 8, Gideon appears to have served both God's and his own interests. It is likely that Gideon had both intents in mind when naming Abimelech and when placing the ephod in his hometown. Through his actions and words, Gideon repeatedly proclaimed both God's kingship and his own kingship.¹³

Although Gideon died at a ripe old age (8:32), and the land was tranquil for 40 years (8:28), Gideon's tenure is the first time that a judge's career ends on a negative note. The frame of the Gideon narrative remains largely positive and sympathetic to Gideon; but cracks appear already during his lifetime, and certainly after his death.

ABIMELECH AND JOTHAM

After Gideon's death, Abimelech immediately usurped power by massacring his brothers. Jotham, the sole surviving brother, related his parable of the trees in condemning both Abimelech and the people who supported him. The nightmarish regime of Abimelech evolved into a reign of terror, until a woman finally killed him by dropping a millstone on his head from the tower at Thebez (9:53).

Through the deeds of Gideon's two sons, the reader is exposed to the conflicting elements within Gideon concerning the monarchy. The multifaceted dimensions in Gideon were separated out into their purest components in his sons. Jotham represents one aspect of Gideon – the pure, religious, anti-monarchy leader who defended his nation and encouraged the people to serve God. Fittingly, the name Jotham [God is perfect] reflects this dimension of his father's worldview.¹⁴

Abimelech, in contrast, inherited Gideon's desire for power. The elements of attacking Succoth and Penuel for their mockery; Gideon's vendetta against Midian; his desire for multiple wives and sons to ensure succession in positions of leadership; and naming his son Abimelech [my father is king] capture the more personal, and pro-monarchy elements of Gideon.

To be sure, there are clear contrasts between Gideon and Abimelech: Gideon refused to reign; Abimelech seized power. Gideon converted spoils of war into a religious national monument (ephod); Abimelech used money to hire people to commit murder. Gideon destroyed his father's Baal shrine; Abimelech received his funding from the temple of Baal-berith. Gideon avenged the loss of his brothers and defeated the enemies of Israel; Abimelech murdered his brothers and destroyed Israelite towns.¹⁵

Yet, several uncomfortable similarities link the two as well. Gideon massacred the people of Israelite cities, set up a shrine that led to spiritual disaster (possibly even during his lifetime), and carried out a personal vendetta. Abimelech emulated all of these ambiguous actions with unambiguous negativity. As noted above, one should contrast the city massacres: Gideon was acting like a king, and national security was at stake. In contrast, Abimelech attacked Israelite cities to assert his personal authority, not for national interests. However, Gideon threshed the people of Succoth with thorns – and Abimelech was a thorn bush in Jotham's parable;

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRAITS OF GIDEON

Gideon destroyed the tower of Penuel – and Abimelech was killed storming the tower of Thebez. These striking similarities add a note of condemnation to Gideon's actions by the author of the Book of Judges. They were part of a continuum towards the more extreme, and completely immoral, actions of his son Abimelech.

SUMMARY CHART

Reason for punishing Succoth and Penuel

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
National Security	They mocked Gideon

Reason for killing Midianite kings

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
They were enemies of Israel	They killed Gideon's brothers

Reason for appointing Jether to kill Midianite kings

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
	Family vendetta
	Possibly to train his eldest son as his successor

Reason for declining monarchy

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
The Lord is your King	

Reasons for ephod

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
To commemorate God's miraculous role in the victory; possibly a divining agent.	To establish Gideon's hometown as a shrine, and to bolster his sons' claim as future leaders

Name of Abimelech

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
God is King	My father (= Gideon) is king

Gideon's sons

POSITIVE-IDEALISTIC MOTIVES	NEGATIVE-PERSONAL MOTIVES
------------------------------------	----------------------------------

Jotham (God is perfect):
anti-monarchy and the immorality
that arose from Abimelech's
massacre

Abimelech (my father is king):
usurped monarchy, received
funding from pagan shrine, and
attacked those who resisted his
authority.

Fact that Gideon had seventy sons
who then assumed positions of
leadership also is king-like behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Gideon belongs to the "good" half of the Book of Judges, bringing military salvation and religious guidance to his people as did his predecessors Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah. He died in peace and the land was tranquil for 40 years. He thus became the last of the judges to bring a full generation of peace to the nation. Yet, Gideon also paved the way for the decline in the second half of Judges: he was the first judge to act out of revenge and for being mocked. The military actions of Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson also would be colored by personal motivations and revenge. Abimelech and Jephthah harmed Israel, whereas Samson directed his anger towards the Philistines. Additionally, Gideon was the first judge to have many children. The so-called minor judges Yair (10:3-5), Ibzan (12:8-10), and Abdon (12:13-15) would follow suit. Thus, Gideon serves as the transitional figure in the Book of Judges. The positive elements in his career mirror those of his predecessors; the more personal, negative, and king-like components find expression in the second half of Judges.

The complexities in Gideon's career, and the multifaceted transition from Gideon to Abimelech (the only "dynasty" in Judges), are the ideal way to introduce the issue of monarchy in Israel. Given the complexities inherent in that office, the Book of Judges in general, and the intricate nature of the Gideon narratives in particular, pinpoint the positive and negative elements that were to become a central part of Israel's political landscape for centuries to come.

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRAITS OF GIDEON

NOTES

1. See Abarbanel's introduction to the Book of Judges, p. 93; and his commentary on 8:17.
2. A. Malamat, *History of Biblical Israel: Major Problems and Minor Issues* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) pp. 148-150.
3. Y. Amit, *Mikra LeYisrael: Shofetim* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 1999) p. 148, similarly views this passage as intended to demonstrate Gideon's authority as a national figure.
4. Alternatively, Ralbag suggests that Gideon intended to attack the people, and this intent is implicit in his earlier statement that he would destroy their tower.
5. Cf. T. J. Schneider, *Judges: Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, ed. D. W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000) pp. 123-124.
6. Cf. Y. Rozenson, *When the Chieftans Ruled: Interpretive Studies in the Book of Judges* [Hebrew] (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2003) p. 125.
7. Amit, p. 154; Y. Elitzur, *Da'at Mikra: Shofetim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976) pp. 100-101, n. 20, maintains that Gideon was not fundamentally opposed to the institution of monarchy. The nation's leaders believed that the oppressions were a result of their weak system of government. Gideon, following the position of the prophets, maintained that Israel's woes came as a result of infidelity to God; monarchy alone would not solve their problems.
8. Elitzur, p. 101.
9. Ralbag already notes the ambiguity of the timing of the people's going astray, but prefers to believe that this occurred only after Gideon's death.
10. In an effort to defend Gideon from the Torah's prohibition against a king's having too many wives (Deut. 17:17), Abarbanel (introduction to Judges, p. 94) maintains that technically, Gideon was not a king – he was only a judge, and therefore permitted to take numerous wives.
11. Cf. *Olam HaTanakh: Shofetim* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Divrei HaYamim Ltd., 1999) pp. 82-83.
12. See, for example, Y. Kaufmann, *Sefer Shofetim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1962) p. 194; *Olam HaTanakh: Shofetim*, p. 83; Y. Amit, *Mikra LeYisrael: Shofetim*, p. 162.
13. See Y. Rozenson, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
14. Cf. Amit, p. 164.
15. See Elitzur, p. 103; Amit, pp. 163-164.