

DPURC BIBLE STUDY JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2022

The story of Gideon – possibly two stories combined – fills three chapters at the centre of the Book of Judges. It is almost certainly not based on historical events, yet the community which first revered it as scripture must have believed that it in some way transmitted God's truth. Given that it is a bloodthirsty narrative of intolerance, conflict and revenge, set in a context which depicts one people taking and settling the land of others, it can be a challenging task for modern Christians to identify that truth. Perhaps that is why we seldom encounter Gideon in our Sunday lectionary. But reading his story can be a useful exercise in considering how we 'discern the Word of God in Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit' (URC *Basis of Union*, article 12).

In the opinion of many modern scholars, Judges is part of the 'Deuteronomistic history', an historical narrative designed to put the central section of Deuteronomy in context and show the outworking of the covenant between God (Yahweh) and Israel. Though the story is set in the 2nd millennium BC, the covenant theology found in Deuteronomy emerged later. It could well be a product of the later years of the independent kingdom of Judah (7th century BC), whilst the 'history', including Judges, may reflect the views of that theology's advocates – the Judaeen élite – already coming to terms with their forcible relocation to Babylon in the 6th century.

The message of the books from Deuteronomy to Kings is, broadly, that Yahweh is the only God, with whom Israel, a community distinguished from its neighbours by descent from the patriarch Jacob, enjoys a special relationship or 'covenant'. Israel's side of the covenant calls for fidelity to God's Law (as set out in Deuteronomy, though its most distinguishing features, circumcision and dietary rules, may be much older). God's side of the covenant is to treat Israel as his special people and give them Canaan, the Promised Land. But (a refinement reflecting the experience of relocation to Babylon) God does not promise the Israelites constant prosperity. Whenever they break their side of the covenant they can expect negative consequences; though God's fidelity is shown in that such consequences do not last for ever.

Israel's home in Canaan is promised in Deuteronomy, achieved in Joshua and defended in Judges. Much of Judges follows a cycle whereby Israel 'follows other gods' and their tenure of Canaan is accordingly threatened; a charismatic leader (or 'judge') arises, under whose guidance they repel the threat; a period of peace then ensues, after which the people turn back to 'other gods' once more. Gideon's story is one such cycle. A period of peace follows the days of the previous 'judge' (Deborah); Israel's backsliding leads to a coalition of enemies, typified by the Midianites; Gideon contests the following of 'other gods' and routs the Midianites; there is then peace in his time but the next cycle begins with fresh backsliding after his death.

I suggest our three-week study might divide the topics as follows, reading passages by theme rather than consecutively; although, since the material for Week 2 is rather short, we may pass on to the first couple of topics allocated here to Week 3. It would be good if participants could read the suggested passages for each week before attending the session.

Week 1 : The framework story – Israel versus Midian

Read Judges 6 : 1-10 The interval between Deborah and Gideon sets the scene
Judges 6 : 25-32 Gideon destroys the altar and grove of Baal

Judges 7 : 9-15 Gideon overhears the Midianites' premonition of disaster

Judges 7 : 16-23 The Midianites routed

Judges 8 : 28-32 The sequel : a further peaceful interval

- **Consider** : The story describes Gideon being called by God to destroy a Baalite place of worship. The Baalite altar belongs to his father, yet his father defends his actions. What is our attitude to other religions?
- After a dream, a Midianite predicts the defeat of his people's vast army. Gideon is heartened when he overhears the dream related. Can we sometimes learn more from the experience of others than we can from our own?
- Light and noise confuse and unnerve the enemy. Though Gideon's men do not attack the Midianite troops, they turn their swords on each other and then flee. When have we experienced God achieving results in unexpected ways?

Week 2 : (a) Testing the call; (b) Victory in God's strength alone

Read Judges 6 : 11-24 Gideon is called and demands proof

Judges 6 : 33-40 In the face of threats, Gideon demands proof again

Judges 7 : 1-8 The Israelite army is slimmed down

- **Consider** : When have we taken decisions that we ascribe (at least in retrospect) to God's call? Were some of these decisions surprising? Were we sometimes doubtful about them? What (if anything) made us feel God was behind them?
- Are we tempted to take the credit for success rather than ascribing it to God?

Week 3 : (a) The late involvement of Ephraim; (b) The aftermath

Read Judges 7:24 – 8.3 The latecomers' hurt pride

Judges 8 : 4-17 Succoth and Penuel punished for refusing aid

Judges 8 : 18-21 Vengeance for Gideon's brethren

Judges 8 : 22-23 Gideon declines the crown

Judges 8 : 24-27 and 33-35 : Ingratitude and fresh backsliding

- **Consider** : Do we sometimes feel hurt when our help is not called upon? What might leaders learn from Gideon's exchange with the Ephraimites?
- Why did Succoth and Penuel refuse supplies to Gideon's forces? Was Gideon justified in punishing them?
- Gideon turns the cause of Israel into a blood-feud for his brothers. How, if at all, do we discern the Word of God for our time in this story of revenge?
- Why does Gideon refuse kingship? Does his attitude accord well with the general message of Judges (cp. 17:6, 18:1, 21:25)? How do we view the relationship between faith and government?
- Gideon's ephod is reminiscent of Aaron's golden calf (cp. Exodus 32). What is the warning in both stories? Is ingratitude such a typical human trait as the story suggests? Do we ever learn from our mistakes?

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