




# Questions of Peace: Judges 6:11-32 and the Obstacles to Harmony between Gideon and His Elders

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## Abstract

The Hebrew Bible exhibits a deep interest in the transmission of the faith tradition from one generation to the next, and the book of Judges is no exception. As Judges begins, the passing of a generation is signaled by the death of Joshua (Judges 1:1), which is soon followed by the story of Caleb, his daughter, and his nephew (1:12-15). Then, Israel's failure to pass on the faith to the next generation is noted in Judges 2:10. Throughout the book, the narratives of the judges report the ups and downs of each succeeding generation as one judge after another rises up, brings deliverance, and eventually dies (3:7-16:31). Near the center of the book, we find the story of Gideon (6:12-8.32), whose goal is the defeat of the Midianites and the restoration of peace to his community (6:24). Gideon's first conflict, however, is with his own father and with the other elders in his village. In response to Yahweh's dramatic visitation, Gideon names his new altar "Yahweh is Peace," but he soon learns that peace is complicated and elusive. This brief study of Gideon's pursuit of peace will be structured around four piercing questions found in the narrative: "Where are all his wonders?" (6:13), "How can I save Israel?" (6:15), "Who has done this thing?" (6:29), and "Would you plead for Baal?" (6:31). Each of these questions probes Gideon's engagement with his elders and causes the reader to question the possibility of peace.

**Keywords:** angel of the Lord, discipleship, obedience, unity, idolatry, hypocrisy, elders.

## Introduction

The Hebrew Bible exhibits a deep interest in the transmission of the faith tradition from one generation to the next (Boda, 2012:21149). The book of Deuteronomy, for example, represents itself as Moses' attempt to inculcate faithfulness to the covenant in the generation that grew up during the wilderness wanderings. In great detail, Moses recounts the events of the exodus and the content of the Sinai covenant. His testimonial story enables the younger generation to imagine and experience the awe and wonder of God's mighty acts, thereby forming their worldview and shaping their faith. Prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah served as mentors to younger generations. Elijah handed down to Elisha a "double portion" of the Spirit (2 Kings 2:9); and both Elijah and Elisha devoted significant attention to the training of the "sons of the prophets (1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3; 4:1; 6:1; etc.). Isaiah's prophetic ministry included his mentoring of a prophetic community that spanned the generations from the time of Uzziah to Hezekiah (Moore 2007:155-172), and children are mentioned more than 45 times in the book of Isaiah (cf. 1:2; 7:3, 14; 8:18; 9:6; 66:8; etc.). Moreover, the last of the Old Testament prophets speaks of the return of Elijah,



who will turn “the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6).

Given the Bible’s concern for healthy relationships between generations, this article will examine Judges 6:12-32, giving special attention to Gideon’s interaction with his father and with the other elders in Ophrah. Interactions between elders and the younger generation figure prominently in several episodes throughout the book of Judges. As Judges begins, the passing of a generation is signaled by the death of Joshua (Judges 1:1), which is soon followed by the story of Caleb, his daughter, and his nephew (1:12-15). Then, Israel’s failure to pass on the faith to the next generation is noted in Judges 2:10. Also, the narratives of the judges report the ups and downs of each succeeding generation as one judge after another rises up, brings deliverance, and eventually dies (3:7-16:31). Within this main section of the book, concern for the family is registered in Deborah, who refers to herself as “a mother in Israel” (5:7). Family strife reaches its height in Abimelech, who murders his brothers and then reigns as king (9:5-6). Violence within the family continues with Jephthah, who is expelled from his household (10:2-3) and who later sacrifices his daughter to the Lord (11:39). Samson defies the wishes of his parents and marries a Philistine woman (14:1-3). Conflict between Micah and his mother over a silver idol initiates the action in chapter 17. Finally, the war against the tribe of Benjamin decimates the tribe, and Benjamin’s future generations are in doubt (21:1-23).

Near the center of the book, we find the story of Gideon (6:12-8.32), whose ultimate goal is the defeat of the Midianites and the restoration of peace (שלום) to his community (6:24). Gideon’s first conflict, however, is with his own father and with the other elders in his village. Lawson G. Stone (2012:277) observes, “Before confronting the pagan hordes oppressing Israel, Gideon must confront the pagan tendencies of his family and town.” In response to Yahweh’s dramatic visitation, Gideon names his altar “Yahweh is Peace” (יהוה שָׁלוֹם), but he soon learns that peace is complicated and elusive.

This brief study of Gideon’s pursuit of peace will be structured around four piercing questions found in the narrative: “Where are all his wonders?” (6:13), “How can I save Israel?” (6:15), “Who has done this thing?” (6:29), and “Would you plead for Baal?” (6:31). Each of these questions probes Gideon’s engagement with his elders and causes the reader to question the possibility of peace.

### **“Where are all his wonders?” (Judges 6:13)**

For the fourth time in the book of Judges, “The Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord” (6:1); and the Lord disciplined them. The four cycles of idolatry/judgment and cry/salvation begin at 3:7; 3:12; 4:1; and 6:1. The repeating cycle is foretold in the prologue (2:11), and a fifth cycle is implied in the brief report regarding Shamgar (3:31). This time the Lord gave them into the hand of the Midianites and Amalekites, who for seven years robbed the Israelites of their crops and livestock, leaving the land impoverished and the people helpless. Archaeological evidence suggests that early Israelite settlements had little or no fortifications; therefore, the kind of conflicts described in Judges 6:1-6 are believable (Auld 1989). “Utter breakdown is portrayed” (Nelson, 2017:126). The oppression was so intense that the Israelites resorted to hiding in the hills and caves as protection from the invading enemy (6:2). Furthermore, the enemy destroyed all crops (6:3-4) and livestock (6:4), and they encamped on Israelite land in massive numbers (6:5).



As before, the Israelites cry out to the Lord for help, but he does not immediately raise up for them a savior. Instead, he sends a prophet who speaks this warning to the Israelites:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "I myself brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you out from the house of slavery. And I delivered you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors, and I dispossessed them from before you, and I gave you their land. And I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell,' but you did not hear my voice" (Judges 6:8-10).

The message of the unnamed prophet is both assuring and accusatory. It is a word of assurance in that the Lord reaffirms his power to save, but it is accusatory in that once again he points the Israelites to their deafness and disobedience (cf. 2:1-5, 20).

After the prophet's stinging speech, the Lord moves to raise up another deliverer. The scene shifts suddenly from the prophet to a man named Gideon, who is threshing his grain in the winepress so that he will not be discovered by the Midianites. Gideon is greeted by the angel of the Lord (see Eichrodt 1967:23), who says "The Lord is with you, valiant warrior" (6:1), and Gideon replies, perhaps sarcastically (Guest, 2003:194), "If the Lord is with us, then why has all this happened to us?" (6:13) Commentators have considered Gideon's question to be unreasonable since he is well aware of the idolatry within his own community (cf. Block, 1999:260). Thus, Gideon knows why all the trouble has come. Moreover, the fact that his own father maintains an altar to Baal (6:25) should provide Gideon with enough evidence that God is justified in his disciplinary action. However, if the worship of the Lord is continuing alongside the worship of Baal (Cundall, 1968:106; Polzin 1980:171), then Gideon might assume that the Lord is obligated to demonstrate his superiority, just as he demonstrated his power over all of the gods of Egypt.

Gideon asks further, "And where are all his wonders that our ancestors recounted to us saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites" (6:13). It is clear that Gideon is familiar with the tradition of the exodus (García Bachmann 2018:94), but he has not experienced the Lord's wonders (נפלאות) for himself. He is one of the "new generation ... who did not know (ידע) the Lord nor the works that he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). The Hebrew term "to know" (ידע) suggests a kind of knowledge that goes beyond simple intellectual awareness. It is a relational term that usually indicates knowledge gained by experience or by relationship. Therefore, word ידע can indicate "the most intimate acquaintance," and it can refer to "sexual intercourse" (e.g., Genesis 4:1; Harris, Archer, & Waltke, 1980). The new generation would certainly have heard of the Lord, and they would have been aware of the exodus tradition (as Gideon indicates); but they apparently had neither a personal commitment to the Lord nor an experience of his "works."

It is appropriate that Gideon should inquire about the "wonders" of the Lord (v. 13), because the word "wonders" (נפלאות), often translated "miracles," is used several times in the Hebrew Bible to describe God's acts of salvation. In the call narrative of Moses, the Lord promised, "I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders (נפלאות) that I will do in it; then he will let you go" (Exodus 3:20). After the deliverance at the Red Sea, Moses sang, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11; see also Exodus 34:11; Joshua 3:5; Psalms 77:11; 135:9; Jeremiah 32:20). Salvation was accomplished through the wonders of the Lord; entrance to the Promised Land was accompanied by the wonders of the Lord; and deliverance from oppression is a *wonder* for which Gideon now yearns.



The angelic proclamation affirmed the Lord's presence – “The Lord is with you,” but Gideon has experienced only the Lord's absence (cf. Goldingay, 2003:588). Gideon's question reveals his unfulfilled expectations, his disappointment with the theology handed down to him. Gideon is not satisfied with a divine word of mere affirmation or a vague promise of comfort in the time of affliction. Gideon demands that the God of the exodus show himself to be God in the present crisis. In effect, Gideon is asking, “I have heard the testimonies of what the LORD has done in the past, but where is he now, in this desperate time?” (cf. 2 Kings 2:14). Thus, Gideon's question could be interpreted to mean “Is God dependable?”

However, he might also be asking, “Can the elders be trusted?” Gideon's question may indicate that he is skeptical of the testimony that he has heard from his elders. He admits that he has heard the testimony of the exodus, but he does not profess to believe it. Gideon does not say, “The Lord brought us up out of Egypt;” instead he remarks, “*they said*, ‘The Lord brought us up’.” Gideon knows the testimony and cites it, but he falls short of confessing agreement with his elders. Perhaps he doubts that the testimony of the exodus is reliable and relevant. Perhaps he is unsure that the testimony of the elders can be trusted.

The narrative offers a reason for Gideon's reticence to accept the testimony of his elders – the objective data seem to contradict their testimony. To Gideon, the Midianite oppression is a sign that the Lord has abandoned Israel (Smith, 2021:419). If the testimony about the exodus is true, Gideon reasons, the Lord would act and bring deliverance. Gideon's question implies either that the testimony of the elders may be less than truthful or that God has changed in his relationship to the Israelites. The testimonies of the distant past do not seem to be sufficient in the face of Gideon's present reality of daily suffering and crushing oppression. Israel's covenant with the Lord should grant to them a position of privilege and entitlement in regard to the Lord's protection, but that protection has not been forthcoming. The Midianites continue to plunder the Israelites, devastate their crops, and terrorize their villages. Gideon's immediate experience suggest that, for whatever reason, the Lord is inactive.

Therefore, although Gideon remembers the testimony of the exodus, the stories of the Lord's presence in the past serve only to bring attention to the Lord's absence in the present (Younger, 2002:180). Gideon apparently wants to believe in a God who is reliable across generations, but he has his doubts. For Gideon, the Lord is no longer the God who saves.

The irony in Gideon's story is that while he is skeptically questioning the truth of what he has heard, the Lord is already preparing to intervene in a way that is consistent with the elders' testimony. He has heard the cries of Israel (6:6), and he sends his angel to commission Gideon, proving that he is indeed the God of the exodus testimony, the God who never ceases to act on behalf of those who suffer. Thus, even as Gideon is yearning for salvation, the Lord is moving to revisit Israel with “all his wonders,” and he has chosen Gideon as the new Moses, who will bring his people out of bondage (Martin, 2008:186-89).

### **“How can I save Israel?” (Judges 6:15)**

At first, Gideon was unaware that he was talking with the angel of Yahweh. Moreover, Gideon did not listen very well. The angel said, “The Lord is with *you* ...” (אִתְּךָ) in the singular, but Gideon replied, “If the Lord with *us* ...” (אִתָּנוּ) in the plural. Therefore, Gideon failed to recognize that the message from the angel was for him as an individual (Webb 2012:230), and that it was the



beginning of a calling to him for action (Nelson, 2017:120). God was addressing him personally and saying, “I am *with you* to bring salvation to your people.”

Despite Gideon’s confusion, his answer in the plural may imply, on a positive note, that he was not entirely self-absorbed and self-centered. Although this cannot be stated with certainty, the fact that Gideon speaks in terms of “us” rather than “me” may suggest that that he was concerned about his community. When he said, “Is the Lord with us?,” he was thinking about the larger community and his family and the suffering that he saw around him. Perhaps he was thinking about his children and the oppression they were enduring. Perhaps Gideon’s care for his community was the reason God chose him.

The angel of the Lord does not reply to Gideon’s complaint that the Lord has not saved them; instead, he points to Gideon himself as the instrument of salvation. The Lord turns to face Gideon and says, “Go in this your might, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites” (6:14). Thus Gideon, who charges God with failing to save Israel, is himself charged with the task of salvation. Notwithstanding Gideon’s objections, the Lord promises to “be with” Gideon, enabling him to defeat the enemy (Judges 6:16; cf. Exodus 3:12). The Lord’s charge reveals that God has appeared to Gideon not just for Gideon’s sake but for the sake of all Israel. Gideon’s encounter with God is in the context of the community of faith and for the good of the world.

Once again, Gideon questions the angel’s words, and he asks, “How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house” (v. 15). Both logic and tribal custom inform Gideon’s objections. The defeat of Midian would require vast resources, but Gideon’s clan (אלף) is the least (דל) of all families in the tribe of Manasseh (cf. Branson, 2009:92). The Hebrew word “least” (דל), found in Judges only here, means “poor” and, by extension, “weak” or “dejected” (Clines, 1993). Gideon seems to be saying, “I do not have the resources necessary to defeat the Midianites.” Moreover, Gideon may also be saying that he does not have the influence, reputation, and authority necessary to mount a defense. He says, “I am the least in my father’s house,” a statement that raises questions about tribal leadership customs. The Hebrew word for “least” (צעיר) signifies “small, insignificant, both in size or number or politically” or “in social status” (Clines, 1993). Because of his low position in the family, it would be inappropriate for Gideon to assert himself. Thus, Lawson G. Stone (2012) writes, “Stepping out to lead his people, Gideon would appear to sidestep the entire structure of authority in his community.” This is not a move that Gideon is ready to make. Gideon apparently knows that to assert leadership would create tension in his family and in his community. Furthermore, the text describes Gideon as a farmer, with no military experience.

The dialogue between God and Gideon concludes with Gideon’s request for a sign and God’s gracious performance of that sign. When Gideon brings an offering of meat and bread and places it upon a rock, the angel touches the offering with his staff, and flames burst forth from the rock and consume the sacrifice. The angel vanishes, causing Gideon to fear for his life, because he realizes that he has “seen the angel of the Lord face to face” (6:22). The Lord then speaks a final word of assurance to Gideon: “Peace be to you; fear not; you will not die” (6:23). Gideon then builds an altar to the Lord and names it “Yahweh is Peace” (יהוה שָׁלוֹם). In the context of Judges 6, this is a significant statement. It means that Gideon is entertaining the possibility that peace can come.

Ironically, that same night, Yahweh speaks the second time to Gideon, commanding him to destroy his father’s altar to Baal and the Asherah beside the altar (cf. Judges 2:2; regarding the Asherah, see Moore, 1910:191), actions that will certainly disturb the peace in his family and in



his community (Butler, 2009:205). Gideon is ordered to build an altar to Yahweh on the site of the razed altar and offer up a whole burnt offering to Yahweh (6:25-26). Gideon obeys, but he works surreptitiously by night because he is “afraid of his father’s household and of the elders of the city” (6:27). While his fear is not entirely unexpected, given that he is destroying his father’s property (Brensinger 1999:83); it is nonetheless quite distressing and even tragic. It is distressing in light of the Old Testament’s ubiquitous warnings against idolatry and its repeated commands to demolish all idolatrous implements, images, altars, and shrines. It is tragic that an Israelite would be afraid to stand up against idolatry. As far back as the time of Moses, the Israelites had been given the following command: “Be very careful never to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, or it be a snare among you; but you shall pull down their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their Asherah poles” (Exodus 34:12-13; cf. Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:3). Earlier in Judges, the angel of Yahweh had reminded the Israelites of the command to destroy the offensive idolatrous altars (Judges 2:1-2). Gideon’s fear suggests that his community had violated the covenant so thoroughly that it not only had embraced idolatry but would also be angered by overt acts of devotion to Yahweh. “Things were getting worse among the Israelites” (McCann, 2002:65).

### **“Who has done this thing?” (Judges 6:29)**

The next morning, the elders of the city were outraged. When they discovered that the altar of Joash had been destroyed, they demanded, “Who has done this thing?” (6:29). After some investigation, they learned that it was Gideon who had torn down the altar to Baal. The elders considered Gideon’s act to be so hideous that they threatened to execute him. Never mind that Gideon had acted in obedience to the Lord’s command. Never mind that Gideon had struck a blow against the evils of idolatry. The elders want to know, “Who dares to challenge our established practices and upset the status quo?”

The hypocrisy of the elders, which only now is fully revealed, could be a second compelling reason for Gideon’s skepticism regarding the testimony of his elders. We noted first that Midian’s oppression of Israel called into question the elders’ teaching that the Lord was Israel’s savior. Now, we observe still another basis for Gideon’s doubts. In addition to the fact that Yahweh had not subdued the Midianites, Gideon witnesses the hypocrisy of the elders themselves. They testify of the Lord’s wondrous works, but all the while their worship of Baal contradicts their testimony. Gideon’s father may have believed that the Lord brought up Israel from Egypt, but his construction of an altar for the worship of Baal (Judges 6:25) reveals his lack of devotion to the Lord. Most likely, the entire community was committed to the worship of numerous gods (Judges 6:28-32) in violation of the covenant with Yahweh. The vacillation of the elders contradicts their own testimony. Can the younger generation believe the testimony of elders who have come to depend upon idols?

Gideon discerns the duplicity of his elders. If the elders are able to remember the exodus account, that means they are aware of the “wonders” God performed in Egypt. Those wonders demonstrated God’s superiority over the Egyptian gods. The exodus proved God’s power to save from bondage. Furthermore, the exodus narrative demands Israel’s complete allegiance: “You shall have no other gods beside me” (Exodus 20:4). The worship of Baal in the time of Gideon indicates that the elders have broken the commandment against other gods. Their idolatry also indicates that they no longer trust God to save them, either because God is too weak, or because God is no longer committed to Israel.



The idolatry of chapter six involves a deadly circle of cause and effect. The worship of other gods is the cause of the Midianite crisis and the painful crisis in turn causes the Israelites to seek the help of other gods. Apparently, the Israelites are calling on as many gods as possible, hoping that one of them may offer assistance. The Lord rejects this syncretistic approach and declares it a breach of his commandment, saying to the Israelites, “I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites” (6:10).

Gideon’s destruction of Joash’s altar to Baal is the first and only time in Judges when a judge acts in direct opposition to the Canaanite gods, and the angry response of Gideon’s neighbors highlights their thoroughgoing idolatry.

### “Would you plead for Baal?” (Judges 6:31)

As soon as the elders threatened to execute Gideon, his father Joash spoke up in his defense. With “robust common-sense” (Wilcock, 1992:81), he asked the elders, ‘Would you plead for Baal, or would you save him?’ In the midst of a people who lived in covenant with Yahweh, it is tragic that Joash must ask, “How deeply are you committed to Baal?” Joash explained his argument further: “If he is a god, let him plead for himself, because someone has torn down his altar” (6.31). In just a few words, Joash cut to the heart of the matter and confounded the elders who opposed Gideon’s righteous act. Using the formal language of the courtroom (Niditch, 2011:91), he asked, “Would you plead for Baal?” In this context, to “plead” (רִיב) means to “contend, plead, conduct a lawsuit, make out a case, make a defense” (Clines, 7:487). Joash asks further, “Or would you save him?” Surely, if Baal were a god, he would be able to defend himself; but if he cannot defend himself, then he is no god (Brown, 2012:190). Israel needed a God who could save (ישע) them from the Midianites (6.14). The *sine qua non* of deity is power; therefore, if Baal cannot save (ישע) himself, then he is not worthy of Israel’s worship. Gideon’s father is suggesting that they leave the matter in the hands of the two gods—Baal, whose altar has been desecrated, and Yahweh, whose altar now sits atop the ruins of Baal’s altar.

### Conclusion

The biblical narrative would suggest that Gideon represents about the fifth generation removed from the exodus. Similarly, young people today may be several generations removed from the times of great revival movements as recounted by their parents and grandparents. Like Gideon, they have heard the testimonies of elders who witnessed God’s wonders. Like Gideon, the youth have questions. Like Gideon, they are concerned about the future. Like Gideon, young people have many reasons to be frustrated. Church youth hear their elders talking with much affection for the world as it was many years ago. The elders repeat nostalgic stories of the past, but young people may not have experienced God in the same way. They may accept the testimony that God acted in the past, but present circumstances could be interpreted to mean that God is less active in the present.

The contemporary church is faced with the same contradiction that confronted Gideon. Although the word of the elders encourages trust and faithfulness, their devotion to numerous idols that are set up in the church betrays their hypocrisy. Many of the younger generation are cynical and distrustful of leaders who seem to major in ecclesiastical politics and manipulation. Will the next generation believe the testimony of elders who have come to depend upon the gods of status, materialism, human ingenuity, and ambition? The younger generation can see the elders’



hypocrisy; therefore, if peace is to be possible between the generations, the elders must grant to the young people the right to challenge their allegiances and to destroy their 'altars to Baal'.

Although Joash had joined with everyone else in the worship of Baal, he came to the defense of his son Gideon (Schneider, 2000:109). Apparently, he loved his son more than he loved Baal (Evans, 2017:92); which begs the question, "What does the church love more, its idols or its young people?" Is today's idolatry so deep that we cause harm to the next generation? Is idolatry so deep that the church will continue to ignore God's commandments even when confronted by the young people? Will the church imitate the elders who sought to defend Baal, or will it imitate Joash, who stepped into the breach and brought peace?

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