



# Laying Out the Fleece: Reading Gideon's Requests with Reception History

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Within certain Christian traditions, the phrase “lay out a fleece” denotes a practice of petitioning God to provide a sign to an individual so that the person can make a decision according to God’s will. The phrase stems, of course, from the story of Gideon in the book of Judges. An engraving by Jan Goeree and Jan Baptist, originally published in the Netherlands in 1700, captures the scene: Gideon is dressed as a stereotypical soldier, complete with a helmet, wringing out water from a fleece into a bowl.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he looks over his shoulder where, in the distance, his army of fighting men awaits him. Gideon, whose complete story is found in Judg 6–8, is perhaps most famous for his repeated requests for signs and divine assurance before he is willing to go into battle (Judg 6:11–24, 36–40). In particular, Gideon’s requests for signs are often held up as evidence that though the text calls him a “mighty warrior,” he is anything but that. In the long interpretive history of Gideon’s story, he is, on the one hand, “a runt stuck in a rut.”<sup>2</sup> On the other, Gideon is “the quintessential biblical hero.”<sup>3</sup> Regardless of how

<sup>1</sup>To see the image, visit: [http://www.pitts.emory.edu/dia/image\\_details.cfm?ID=112449](http://www.pitts.emory.edu/dia/image_details.cfm?ID=112449) (accessed April 24, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Nelson, *Refuel: The Epic Battles: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2005) 53.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 89.

*When it comes to reading difficult or obscure biblical passages, it can be very instructive to understand how faithful persons over the centuries have read them. The reception history of a text can spark the reader’s imagination and broaden the ways in which the biblical text can be appropriated.*

Gideon is described, his appeal for divine assurance is likely an unquestionably recognizable character trait for many. Who among us hasn't, if we are being honest, wished for (more) guidance and assurance in the face of uncertainty?

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Bookended by the more well known texts of Joshua and Samuel, the book of Judges depicts divinely ordered retributive wars, reluctant heroes, child sacrifice, rape, murder, and suicide—to name only a few of its strange, unsettling (and often ignored) tales. Undoubtedly, the disquieting stories explain why texts from Judges rarely appear in Christian lectionaries. Often, if we know the characters and stories of the book, it is through hazy memories of Sunday School lessons (“Samson the Strong Man!”) or the rose-colored lens of Hebrews in the New Testament:

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith 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. (Heb 11:32–34)

The author of this passage both recites a list of famous figures from the book of Judges and revises their stories, turning characters like Jephthah, who killed his only child to fulfill a rash vow to God, and Samson, who committed murder-suicide in an act of revenge for the loss of his eyes, into models of faith and justice. Our own hesitant hero Gideon could easily be described as winning “strength out of weakness,” becoming “mighty in war,” and putting “foreign armies to flight.”

Gideon's story is set within the larger book of Judges' well-known cyclical framework: the Israelites forget YHWH; YHWH is angered and gives them into the hands of an enemy; the Israelites cry out to YHWH for help; YHWH raises up a deliverer who successfully saves the Israelites from the enemy; the land has rest and the deliverer dies.<sup>4</sup> Though Gideon's fame as a warrior spans the reception history of his story, from as early as Heb 11:32–34 to the more recent *Veggie Tales: Gideon Tuba Warrior*, the narrative first recounts several instances where Gideon asks for divine assurance that he will be victorious in battle. In other words, Gideon gets stuck between YHWH raising him up as a deliverer and finally going into battle to successfully save the Israelites.

Gideon, “one of the most pleasingly insecure of the biblical heroes,” alone out of all of the so-called judges in the book requests (repeated) divine assurance.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Of course, as many readers of the book of Judges notice, the pattern eventually begins to break down and disappears entirely by the time readers reach Judg 17–21. For more on this, see J. Cheryl Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 523 (July 1990) 410–432.

<sup>5</sup>Niditch, *Judges*, 92.

Gideon's story continues long after he receives the last sign from God that he will be victorious in battle, and the interpretive map that stretches beyond the story of Gideon now found in Judg 6–8 is exceedingly wide and filled with many paths. Consequently, I will only focus on his requests for signs and divine assurance in 6:11–24 and 6:36–40, how they have been understood and interpreted over the years, and what we, as later readers, might learn by reading with others. Accordingly, the trail ahead of us stops at only three junctures: first-century CE Jewish retellings, early Christian, and the story of how Gideon ended up in hotel rooms across the world.

### RECEPTION HISTORY

Thinking about the ways that Gideon's story has been received means participating in reception history, which is a far richer endeavor than a (often endless) list of the ways interpreters have used and reused any given text over the centuries.<sup>6</sup> To borrow from Uhlrich Luz, knowing the reception history “provides us with ‘different eyes’ through which we can look upon our own texts in a new way.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, when we read with those who come from different time periods or geographical contexts, or from different religious or cultural traditions, we can see biblical texts in both familiar and new ways, some of which are strikingly diverse. Reading with the reception history also allows us to appreciate how both texts and their interpretations “functioned in history,” and to think about their “results and failures.”<sup>8</sup> In short, engaging with reception history helps us to remember that the Bible has “effected love and hatred, peace and war, segregation and tolerance, androcentricism and female piety, fraternal fellowship with Israel and anti-Judaism, justification by faith alone and self-legitimation, triumphalism and humility.”<sup>9</sup> Such a reading practice aids us in pausing and asking: How might we, as would-be faithful readers and interpreters, learn from readings that have helped or hurt, built bridges or fractured relationships, promoted certain behaviors or discouraged others, or encouraged digging deeper or only skimmed the surface?

<sup>6</sup>Timothy K. Beal writes, “The reception history of the Bible is concerned, most basically, with the history of the reception of biblical texts, stories, images, and characters through the centuries in the form of citation, interpretation, reading, revision, adaptation, and influence,” including “not only academic and theological readings, but also biblical appearances in visual art, literature, music, politics, and other works of culture, from ‘high’ to ‘low.’” (“Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 19/4 [2011] 359).

<sup>7</sup>Uhlrich Luz, “The Contribution of a Reception History to a Theology of the New Testament,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of Robert Morgan*, ed. Christopher Roland and C. M. Tuckett (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 132. Luz’s article inspires much of what follows in the pages below, but there are many resources for—and ways of thinking about—reception history. As only a starting place, readers are pointed to Brennan W. Breed’s *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), as well as Beal’s work “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” cited in fn. 6 above.

<sup>8</sup>Luz, “Contribution of a Reception History,” 133.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

### Case Study 1: Moses Asked For a Sign

Our first stop in how readers have understood Gideon's requests for signs lands us in the late first century CE, with *Jewish Antiquities*, a work written by Josephus, a Jewish historian living in Rome after 70 CE, and with Pseudo-Philo, a Palestinian Jew, and his *Biblical Antiquities*. Both *Jewish Antiquities* and *Biblical Antiquities* are sometimes labeled "Rewritten Scripture," one form of early exegesis. Here scripture is "rewritten" through direct citation, but also through deleting passages, expanding sections, and revising stories in ways that provide us, as later readers, clues to the contextual concerns and questions of these early authors.

On the one hand, Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* simply excludes Judg 6:17–40 when retelling the Gideon narrative; the story moves from Gideon's eager acceptance of God's divine promise of victory in battle to the building of Gideon's eager-to-serve army.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars argue that Josephus, as a Jew living in Rome, was engaged in an apologetic project when he wrote *Jewish Antiquities*, trying to explain Jewish scriptures and the Jewish religion in terms that would have been attractive to his Roman neighbors. Accordingly, the excision of the signs material from the Gideon story makes perfect sense: a character like Gideon could too easily be construed as reluctant, fearful, faithless, and overly dependent on miracles.<sup>11</sup> For Josephus, the problem was easily solved: remove the signs and miracle stories from the Gideon narrative, and a new, braver, more "mighty" Gideon emerges, one better suited as a model for explaining Jewish heroes and history to Josephus's Roman audience.

On the other hand, Pseudo-Philo includes a slightly rewritten version of the divine messenger's visit found in Judg 6:11–24, while also alluding to the fleece story in 6:36–40. There are, however, notable differences. When the angel of YHWH appears in Judg 6:12, he famously greets Gideon by proclaiming, "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior." For many later readers, it is precisely the disconnect between the title "mighty warrior" and Gideon's repeated requests for divine assurance that creates a problem: What kind of mighty warrior fearfully requests multiple signs before going into battle? Pseudo-Philo seems to fix the problem through rewriting and revision; instead of greeting Gideon as a "mighty warrior," the angel simply asks, "From where have you come, and where is your destination?"<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Pseudo-Philo removes Gideon's insistence that he comes from a weak clan and is the "least in [his] family" (Judg 6:15). Instead, Gideon simply asks, "Who am I and what is the house of my father that I should go up against the Midianites for battle?"<sup>13</sup> In other words, as Frederick Murphy notes, Pseudo-Philo "rewrites Gideon's protest so that he questions the propriety" of God's decision to pick Gideon in the first place, but Gideon does not claim weakness on his own part

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 6:2–3.

<sup>11</sup>See Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 169.

<sup>12</sup>Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 35:1–2.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 35:5.

or on the part of his family.<sup>14</sup> The divine messenger replies, “Perhaps you think that, as the way of men is, so the way of God is. For men look for the glory of the world and riches, but God for the straight and good and for meekness.”<sup>15</sup> By rewriting Gideon’s response, Pseudo-Philo radically changes the narrative: what is important is not strength, but “goodness, uprightness, and humility.”<sup>16</sup> Gideon then asks for a sign, but in a manner that is “more respectful of God” than in the book of Judges: “Behold Moses the first of all the prophets asked the LORD for a sign, and it was given to him. But who am I, unless perhaps the LORD has chosen me? May he give me a sign so that I may know that I am being guided.”<sup>17</sup> After all, “If Moses, the greatest of the prophets, needed a sign, then of course Gideon would need one also.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, any trace of audacity is removed from Gideon’s request in Pseudo-Philo’s retelling of the story; rather, at least at the beginning of Pseudo-Philo’s narrative, “Gideon is a pious server of God, awaiting God’s direction.”<sup>19</sup>

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Like in the biblical narrative, the divine messenger acquiesces, though the sign that follows the request is strikingly different than the biblical account: the angel asks Gideon to pour water from a nearby lake onto a rock, and to request “what you wish to be made from it, either blood or fire, or that it not appear at all,” and Gideon responds: “Let it become half blood and half fire.”<sup>20</sup> The result: the water becomes “half flame and half blood,” and “the blood did not extinguish the fire nor did the fire consume the blood.”<sup>21</sup> Pseudo-Philo concludes, “And Gideon saw these happenings and sought other signs, and they were given to him. Are they not written in the Book of Judges?”<sup>22</sup> From here we see one of the most important aspects of so-called “Rewritten Scripture”: Pseudo-Philo points his readers to the book of Judges for more information, while simultaneously changing the narrative—and Gideon’s character—in his retelling. These early Jewish interpreters both clearly respect the scriptural text and want readers to be familiar with it, but are also happy to adjust and modify as they see fit.

<sup>14</sup>Frederick James Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 157.

<sup>15</sup>Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 35:5.

<sup>16</sup>Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 157.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 158; Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 35:6.

<sup>18</sup>Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 158.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* Of course, there is also the problem of what to do with the end of the Gideon narrative, especially the events in Judg 8. For how Pseudo-Philo rewrites that portion of the story, see Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*.

<sup>20</sup>Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 35:7.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

*Case Study 2: Like Rain upon a Fleece*

While Josephus deletes the request for signs entirely and Pseudo-Philo reworks the story so that Gideon is no longer a “mighty warrior,” patristic readings largely turned to allegory or typology: namely, an exegetical practice of reading the biblical texts figuratively rather than literally or as foreshadowing of events from the New Testament. On one hand, from a historical-critical perspective, Gideon’s fleece test can be explained as a traditional ancient Near Eastern oracular practice, in which a leader seeks a fortuitous sign before heading into battle (despite this, many contemporary commentators see in Gideon’s pre-battle tests a sign of Gideon’s character flaws [for example, his “persistent resistance to the call of God”]).<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, many early Christian writers read the signs stories from the Gideon narrative as foreshadowing New Testament events or as textual proof that God had rejected the Jewish people. Though any number of early church writers could be invoked here, from Caesarius to Jerome and beyond, Ambrose’s use of the fleece story provides a paradigmatic example. Writing in the fourth century CE, Ambrose begins:

Someone perhaps will enquire whether Gideon does not seem to have been lacking in faith, seeing that after being instructed by many signs he asked [for] still more. But how can he seem to have asked as if doubting or lacking faith, who was speaking in mysteries? He was not doubtful then, but careful so that we would not doubt. For how could he be doubtful whose prayer was effectual? And how could he have begun the battle without fear, unless he had understood the message of God?

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In Ambrose’s introduction of Gideon, we see a recognition that some might find Gideon’s enquiries suspect. But we also see the idea that, by “speaking in mysteries,” Gideon acts as prophet-like. Gideon’s words have multiple levels of meaning, and some point ahead to things that have not yet happened in Gideon’s time. Ambrose continues:

For the dew on the fleece signified the faith among the Jews, because the words of God come down like the dew. So when the whole world was parched with the drought of Gentile superstition, then came that dew of the heavenly visits on the fleece. But after that the lost sheep of the house of Israel (whom I think that the figure of the Jewish fleece shadowed forth), after that those sheep, I say,

<sup>23</sup>“Under normal circumstances the narrative should have proceeded directly from v. 24 to vv. 33–35, and then on to 7:1. But the normal sequence is interrupted twice to deal with a pair of abnormalities. The first is an objective issue, the presence of a pagan cult installation in Gideon’s father’s own backyard. The second is a subjective problem, Gideon’s persistent resistance to the call of God” (Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999] 265).

“had refused the fountain of living water,” the dew of moistening faith dried up in the breasts of the Jews, and that divine Fountain turned away its course to the hearts of the Gentiles. Whence it has come to pass that now the whole world is moistened with the dew of faith, but the Jews have lost their prophets and counsellors.<sup>24</sup>

As Ambrose interprets the fleece story, he sees the unfolding history of God's relationship to the Jews and to the Christians. First, Ambrose cites Matt 15:24, where Jesus says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” in order to explain that Jesus first preached to the Jews. This is, for Ambrose, the first of the two fleece tests, where the fleece was wet but the ground around it was dry (“the whole world was parched with the drought of Gentile superstition...”). For Ambrose, of course, the “fountain of living water” was Jesus, who he understands the Jews have refused. The second fleece test, where the fleece remains dry but the ground is wet, represents how “the whole world is moistened with the dew of faith, but the Jews have lost their prophets and counsellors.”

Ambrose finishes by invoking Psalm 72:6 (71:6 LXX), “He came down like rain upon a fleece, and like drops that drop upon the earth,” writing, “The divine Scriptures promised us this rain upon the whole earth, to water the world with the dew of the Divine Spirit at the coming of the Saviour. The Lord, then, has now come, and the rain has come; the Lord has come bringing the heavenly drops with Him, and so now we drink, who before were thirsty, and with an interior draught drink in that Divine Spirit.”<sup>25</sup> One helpful note for us as we read Gideon's request for signs alongside Ambrose is that we recognize that Ambrose is using a Latin translation of the psalm, which follows the Greek (LXX) translation of the Hebrew. We know this because Ambrose's version includes “fleece,” which comes from the Greek *pokon*, which is then found in the Latin *vellus*. In contrast, in Hebrew the verse reads, “May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass (*gez*), like showers that water the earth.” The version read by Ambrose, and other early Christian writers, provided an opportunity to see the fleece story as foreshadowing a messiah they believed the Jewish people had rejected: Jesus descended onto the fleece, but then later also onto the rest of the earth. In a similar vein, Augustine would write, “but like the rain in the fleece which God sets apart for His inheritance, not of debt, but of His own will, it was latently present, but is now patently visible amongst all nations as its ‘floor,’ the fleece being dry—in other words, the Jewish people having become reprobate.”<sup>26</sup> Such supersessionist readings of Gideon's fleece tests would continue (and do).

Later Jewish interpreters, like the medieval French rabbi Rashi, were apparently aware of such readings and would comment on Ps 72:6 by pointing to the Hebrew and making a case for the translation of “cut greens” or “mowings.” For

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 6–7.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup>Augustine, “On Original Sin,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 5: St. Augustine Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007) 248.

example, Rashi writes, “May his word come down in the midst of your people and into their ears like rain that descends on the cut greens (*gez*)” along with a reminder that the same word (again associated with cut greens/grass and mowings) occurs in Amos 7:1, “This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king’s mowings [*gez*]).”<sup>27</sup>

Reading with Ambrose and Augustine, alongside Rashi’s later commentary on the same psalm, reminds (or teaches) us that early Christian writers were sometimes reading different versions of the Bible than their Jewish counterparts. Seeing these different readings side-by-side also shows us how early readers made interpretive decisions based on the biblical manuscript traditions they were using. More importantly, it also shows us how these interpretive decisions influence theology. When we read with ancient interpreters, as James Kugel notes, we can see how (sometimes) “their interpretations soon become *what the Bible meant*,” and that “this *interpreted Bible* was *the Bible*...all throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and to a large extent, even up until today.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, if we have ever been taught that the New Testament has replaced the Hebrew Bible, or that texts from the Hebrew Bible foreshadow how God has chosen Christianity over Judaism, we can see how Ambrose’s interpretation, among others, became “*what the Bible meant*.” At the same time, we can reflect on the long influences that such interpretations have, stretching from the Crusades to more recent anti-Jewish incidents in the world around us today, and we can ask ourselves: Is this what we want our texts to do?

### Case Study 3: *We Shall Be Called Gideons*

Our third brief stop places us in a YMCA in Janesville, Wisconsin on July 1, 1899.<sup>29</sup> This is where John H. Nicholson, Sam Hill, and William J. Knights founded the organization known today as *The Gideons International*, famous for distributing Bibles in hotel rooms across the world. Originally, the three men thought of naming their new organization “The Christian Traveling Men of the United States of America.”<sup>30</sup> Knights, however, argued, “traveling men don’t have time to use such long names as that.”<sup>31</sup> Instead, according to Knights, the three men prayed: “I don’t know how it was, I think God must have suggested it, but instantly upon rising I said, “Gideon. We will just call ourselves Gideons.”<sup>32</sup> The men then “turned to the seventh chapter of Judges...and read about Gideon and the glorious work he did.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Rashi, *On Psalm 72*. [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Psalms.72.7?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Psalms.72.7?lang=bi). Author’s translation.

<sup>28</sup>James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2007), xiii.

<sup>29</sup>M. A. Henderson, *Sowers of the Word: A 95-Year History of the Gideons International* (Nashville: Gideons International, 1995).

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

One later explanation for the name was that the three men “agreed that Gideon was a man who was willing to do exactly what God wanted him to do, irrespective of his own judgment as to plans or results, and that this was also the desire of their hearts.”<sup>34</sup> Gideon as a “man who was willing to do exactly what God wanted him to do” is, of course, a far cry from “Gideon’s persistent resistance to the call of God.”<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the men who founded *The Gideons International* saw something worthy of emulation in the Gideon of Judg 7. Accordingly, despite—or perhaps because of—the repeated requests for signs, our third stop illustrates how readers of the Gideon story have often turned Gideon into a role model—especially for men.<sup>36</sup> The biblical text becomes a place to find behavior that should be followed, though choosing Gideon as a namesake seems surprising given the repeated requests for signs. (Perhaps these founders of *The Gideons International* would not have opposed “laying out a fleece”?)

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Yet if the founders of *The Gideons International* saw in Gideon a practical role model for men, other readings are not as straightforwardly positive. For example, the 2005 Biblezine entitled *Refuel: Epic Battles of the Old Testament*, whose audience is teenage boys, has a cover that advertises articles like “Men of the Sword: How Unstoppable Warriors Got Awesome” and “How to Impress the Girls!”<sup>37</sup> In the first few pages, the Biblezine announces how “Warriors like Joshua, Gideon, and David overcame their insecurities and fears to confront and conquer their enemies, liberating and leading the nation of Israel to the place promised to them by God. *Their lives serve as godly examples to guys today.*”<sup>38</sup> Alongside a translation of the biblical texts, *Refuel* includes insets and sidebars designed to teach young (male) readers the lessons of faith that can be gleaned from these stories. In the pages devoted to Gideon, one sidebar is titled “Radical Faith Judges 6:15,” reading:

A runt stuck in a rut. That is what Gideon was. An angel of God appeared to him out of nowhere telling him that he would save Israel, and what was his first response? Complaints of insecurity and inadequacy. It didn’t matter that this angel had just called him a mighty warrior a couple of verses earlier. In his own eyes, Gideon would always be the weakling, the last guy picked for teams. What

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 265.

<sup>36</sup>For more on the relationship between reception history, idea(l)s of masculinity, and the composition of the Gideon narrative, see the forthcoming work by Kelly J. Murphy, tentatively titled *Mighty Warrior: Rewriting Masculinity in Judges* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>37</sup>*Refuel: Epic Battles of the Old Testament*, “Introduction,” n.p.; italics mine.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., (italics mine).

is worse, he clung to that mantra, making it necessary for God to repeatedly prove himself until it got through Gideon's thick skull: When God says you can do it, you can do it.<sup>39</sup>

*Refuel* criticizes Gideon's requests for signs ("he clung to that mantra, making it necessary for God to repeatedly prove himself"), while also holding Gideon up as a possible role model for *Refuel's* young readers (as long as they overcome their insecurities).

Readings like both the origin story of *The Gideons International* and *Refuel: Epic Battles of the Old Testament* illustrate the continued way that texts are used, with biblical characters held up as role models, often for a particular group (in these cases, for men and young boys, with certain expectations for masculinity rolled into the interpretations).

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## CONCLUSIONS

So what do these three stops at junctures in the interpretive map of Gideon's requests for signs tell us? Why do they matter? When we read the story of Gideon alongside others, we learn (or are reminded) of a number of realities about biblical interpretation and our place in interpreting the Bible. First, they remind us that there has often been flexibility in how readers approach texts, and a willingness to revise and rewrite as needed while also clearly valuing Scripture. Second, readers have not always read the same version of the biblical texts, and seeing a text read from different manuscript traditions shows us how strikingly different conclusions might arise, while also reminding us that what we read may affect our theologies. In other words, translations matter. Third, reading with reception history shows us how many and varied interpretations can emerge from the same text, and this can serve as notice that the texts of the Bible do not belong to any one group or person alone. Is Gideon a weakling or a mighty warrior? The interpretive decisions we make on questions like Gideon's status as role model often spill out into the real world, in this case affecting cultural ideas about masculinity and what it means to "be a man." (We could easily see how this works with Deborah from Judg 4–5 and questions of what it means to "be a woman," too.)

When we read about Gideon, "one of the most pleasingly insecure of the biblical heroes," we might find ourselves condoning him or condemning him for his repeated requests for signs and divine assurance.<sup>40</sup> Yet as we do this, we might also

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>40</sup>Niditch, *Judges*, 92.

invite ourselves to awareness for how depictions of Gideon—and the interpretation of other biblical characters and stories—can affect those within and beyond our community, whether by privileging our own reading over all others, condemning a neighbor whose religion is different than ours, or promoting a particular behavior against another. Reading with reception history is one way to responsibly claim our own role in interpreting and using biblical texts. Reception history can serve as a powerful call to wakefulness as we read and a reminder that interpretation is not a passive endeavor, but is also always an active and even ethical act. ⊕

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