



Judges: A Public Canon for Public Theology

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The book of Judges is potentially canonical for the secular public, not in the sense of a work valued as a matter of inherited tradition or religious conviction, but as an “existential canon” that presents a theater of values embodied in character. The book of Judges resonates with our age. Violence, the battle of the sexes, tyranny and oppression, ethnic conflict (and cleansing), problematic religious loyalties, mass migrations, and social instability are all present. Because of this, Judges can function as a resource for the church’s public theology.

PUBLIC THEOLOGY AS PUBLIC ADDRESS

Public theology is theology addressed into the public square. It is concerned with how faith speaks to society as a whole. It supposes that elements of Christian belief have relevance in the public sphere and seeks to proclaim that relevance. Consequently, public theology addresses everyone, not just those of the household of faith.

Linell Cady usefully clarifies the special nature of public theology by drawing out three oppositions. First, it is public, not parochial. Although it builds on a particular set of religious traditions, public theology does not appeal to dogmatic first principles and authorities. Second, it is public, not private. It seeks to analyze,

Reading the story of Gideon for insights into the kind of values displayed by the character of the participants in the drama can draw the account into the public arena, making it available for a public audience (not just believers) to consider and evaluate notions of leadership applicable to the present as well as the past.

transform, and build up public life as an indispensable foundation for human good. Third, it is public, not professional. To address the public square effectively, it uses arguments that can be understood by those who are not professional theologians or philosophers. “A public theology will not only address itself to the public realm, but it will do so in a genuinely public fashion.”¹

SCRIPTURE AS A RESOURCE FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

To be effective, public theology seeks to be persuasive. It must use arguments and discourse that can conceivably be accepted by and are potentially convincing to a secular audience. It cannot rely on arguments from the church’s dogmatic tradition or from special biblical revelation.

Bruce Birch offers guidelines for the use of Scripture in public theology. He suggests that we should measure any particular use we make of Scripture against the whole canon. We must be transparent about the processes used to select and interpret Scripture and be open to criticism about these processes. We must take full account of the pluralism and diversity within Scripture. Finally, because the church’s life is the lens through which the secular public will view and judge the Bible, the church’s own life and practice must be visibly that of a community formed by Scripture.²

This excellent advice fails to address our central dilemma, however. How can public theology use the Bible when addressing a secular public? Does the Bible have anything to offer in the way of values or insights that can flourish outside the religious context of Judaism or Christianity? By what mechanism can the Bible speak effectively when it is not viewed as divinely authoritative, and what sorts of things might it be expected to say?

CANON AS A THEATER OF VALUES

Building on Charles Altieri’s work on literary canons and applying insights from the field of character ethics, I suggest that a fruitful approach to this question is to understand biblical books like Judges in terms of a theater of values and character.

Altieri proposes that a literary canon “is best understood as a permanent theater helping us shape and judge personal and social values, [and] that our self-interest in the present consists primarily in establishing ways of employing that theater to gain distance from our ideological commitments.”³ Societies need a public theater in which to rehearse and debate ideals and alternatives, and canons can provide that theater. A canon offers a forum or theater for debates about choices,

¹Linell E. Cady, “H. Richard Niebuhr and the Task of a Public Theology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 72/4 (1990) 384.

²Bruce C. Birch, “The Role of Scripture in Public Theology,” *Word & World* 4/3 (1984) 266–267.

³Charles Altieri, “An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983) 40. Reprinted in *Canons*, ed. R. von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 41–64.

conflicting values, underlying principles, and true self-interest. Canons articulate values that emerge from a past shared by text and reader and in so doing provide a theater to ponder and negotiate values in the present. That is to say, canons address themselves to present readers out of a specific historical past and make value-laden and moral claims on those readers. The irreducible “pastness” of classic texts generates a reality of otherness for readers, which makes it possible for them to gain distance from their own unconsidered ideological commitments.⁴

A THEATER OF VALUES EMBODIED BY CHARACTER

As theater, the Bible is rarely an arena of disembodied values. In its narrative portions, it is a theater of values exhibited by characters. Biblical narratives about characters (in the literary sense) who exhibit character (in the moral sense of virtue or vice) have the potential to construct character within readers. Biblical characters that are presented in any sort of depth or roundness tend to be entirely believable. Readers are implicitly invited to admire or despise them. Generally, there is enough ambiguity about a character’s situation and behavior to generate evaluations and responses that are mixed and complex.

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Notions derived from character ethics offer valuable insights when considering the Bible as a theater of values directed toward the public square. Character ethics works an end run around rules, legalism, and moral universals. Instead, it speaks of the importance of virtues. The central ethical question is not immediately, “What are we to do?” but first and more deeply, “Who are we to be?” Character ethics takes full account of the importance of community. Community develops character in its members, and character in turn serves the community. Character ethics assumes that people are moral agents, capable of being molded into disciplined habits of behavior by communities. Character may be formed by classic or canonical texts cherished by a community.

Treating the Bible as theater does not mean ignoring either its historical origin or its cultural strangeness. To read for character is obviously a literary exercise, but engaging in purely literary or synchronic readings would sunder us from the concrete historical communities behind the texts. Biblical characters and the dramas in which they act were formed in a concrete past context by particular communities of tellers/authors and readers/hearers. Later, transmitting communities passed on and modified these texts and to a large extent shared their values and assumptions. It would be a mistake to ignore the Bible’s concrete past origin and its

⁴*Ibid.*, 43, 46–50, 53.

cultural distance from us and read biblical narratives as though they were simply equivalent to contemporary literary productions. Doing so would undermine their canonical value as voices from the past that offer an alternative and strange way of seeing things and have the potential to cause us to reevaluate our own viewpoints and values.

JUDGES AS A THEATER OF VALUES AND CHARACTER

The book of Judges may be read as an interactive drama of complementary and conflicting ideals or principles about shared public life. Judges offers that sort of theater in which the virtues and vices of characters play a major role, alongside lively action, conflicting values, and the insistent viewpoint represented by the evaluative voice of the narrator. Values are negotiated concretely through the presentation of about a dozen major characters along with numerous more minor, but highly interesting, people.

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I am not advocating naïve moralizing. Indeed, the nature of the characters in Judges resists this. They are for the most part dubious and complex. They display strengths, weaknesses, and conflicts and so populate an arena in which values may be negotiated and explored. Jephthah or Samson may be disappointing for the moralist and infuriating for the feminist, but they make for great theater! Among these complicated characters is, of course, God.⁵

Is Ehud a patriotic trickster or an underhanded terrorist? Barak is hesitant when called and needs the support of a prophet whose words come true in an unexpected way. Jael undermines the values of hospitality and loyalty (compare 4:17), but slays the oppressor. Jephthah is a wily negotiator who uses his skill to overcome a negative social background and deal with enemy forces, but fails tragically in negotiating with God, unintentionally vowing away his daughter's life. Samson's mission is undermined by sexuality and private revenge. The threatened Levite treats his concubine in a vicious way that plays off the values of hospitality, patriarchal honor, heterosexuality, solidarity between man and woman, and the manipulation of public opinion. The character of God is especially stimulating to our reflection on values. God is passionate and jealous, demanding sole loyalty. God answers cries from the oppressed and gives second chances. God mixes into human politics (9:23). God suffers from compassion fatigue (10:13–16).

⁵L. Juliana M. Claassens, "The Character of God in Judges 6–8: The Gideon Narrative as Theological and Moral Resource," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23/1 (2001) 51–71.

The story of Gideon in Judg 6–8 can serve as a test case for the notion of a theater of values displayed by character. The complex character of Gideon exposes and negotiates values important to public leadership. This complex of values clusters around three pairs of contrasting concepts: religious commitment and open-mindedness, confidence and skepticism, altruism and tyranny.

RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND OPEN-MINDEDNESS

The value negotiated most obviously in the Gideon story is that of Israel's commitment to Yahweh as its exclusive God. Stated overtly and blatantly, this value sounds totally sectarian and not intuitively something that might be part of a truly public theology. Yet it is an essential part of the dramatic script of Judges. In terms of theater, it is offered up for readers' consideration, not forced upon them by an authoritarian claim of revealed truth. Moreover, the text itself presents a subtle counterargument to religious fanaticism or fundamentalist extremism in the character of Joash.

The Gideon story, like those of the other judges, is set into a cyclical framework of sin, punishment, Israel's cry, God's provision of a deliverer, and rest. With Gideon, however, the text also reveals a new start within this cycle. Instead of moving directly to sending a deliverer to respond to Israel's cry (as in 3:9, 15; 4:4), God sends a prophet instead (6:8). God announces, "[Y]ou shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites....' But you have not given heed to my voice" (v. 10). Clearly, Israel's cry (v. 6) does not mean they have repented or turned back to God. They cry out simply "on account of the Midianites" (v. 7). Yet God is not calculating disobedience and punishment at this point. God as dramatic character is personally involved. The first person singular is insistently repeated in vv. 8–10: "I led.... I delivered.... I said.... I am [Yahweh]." By calling Gideon rather than simply leaving Israel to its fate, God reveals a desire to be in relationship with Israel.

Nevertheless, God also continues to expect commitment and loyalty. Baal worship in Gideon's hometown proves the reality of the prophet's accusation. So God's first command to Gideon is to "pull down the altar of Baal" (6:25). This call to active counter-apostasy is unique in Judges. It illustrates not only Gideon's (somewhat reluctant) zeal, but also a militant commitment to Baal on the part of the citizens of Ophrah. Values collide. Before he can deliver Israel, Gideon must radically violate the core social taboo of loyalty to hometown and family in service of monotheistic exclusivity. That the altar "belongs to your father" in v. 25 highlights Gideon's dilemma.⁶

References to "night" (vv. 25, 27) and his need for ten helpers point to Gideon's fear. In contrast, the townspeople "rose early" (v. 28) as a sign of determination and enthusiastic action. Their perception of the state of the now-ruined altar corresponds exactly with the Lord's command (compare v. 28 to vv. 25–26). The

⁶The Hebrew text repeats the phrase exactly: "bull that belongs to your father...altar of Baal that belongs to your father."

reader is invited to conclude that Baal is powerless, for the new altar of the Lord stands right on top of Baal's destroyed one, and the wood of the sacred pole has proved to be merely firewood (compare 2 Kings 19:18; Isa 44:19).

This sounds very contemporary. Opposing religious commitments lead to a clandestine raid on the installations of a rival faith and a demand that the one who has insulted true religion must die (see Judg 6:28–30). Yet religious commitment is not the only value on view in this theater. Joash manages to preserve peace with a shrewd and wonderfully ambiguous answer (Judg 6:31) that both saves his son and permits him to acknowledge his own faith in Baal. “Let the gods sort out their own problems,” he says, in effect. Joash both affirms Baal and insinuates that the fanaticism of Baal's devotees actually questions Baal's power in a way that deserves death. He acknowledges that this is a serious situation for Baal and that Baal's godhood depends on whether Baal acts or not. However, proper faith in Baal, he says, requires that we leave the matter in Baal's hands.

CONFIDENCE AND SKEPTICISM

The narrative spends an extraordinary amount of time on Gideon's hesitant reaction to his call and various confidence-building signs that delay actual military action.

From one perspective, Gideon's skepticism when addressed by the angel seems entirely appropriate. Of course, call stories often contain an element of resistance to be overcome (Exod 3:13; 4:1, 10; Isa 6:5; Jer 1:6). But in this case, the angel's address, “mighty warrior” (Judg 6:12), seems to be completely at odds with the reality of Gideon's hiding in a wine press! Gideon's skepticism about “the LORD is with you” is entirely reasonable, given the negative message just delivered to the Israelites (6:8–10). In effect, Gideon argues: “Of course in the past God brought Israel out of slavery, delivered us from oppression, and gave us the land of promise, just as God has said and just as our elders have taught us.”⁷ However, now Israel continues to worship the gods of the Amorites. Considering this, the evidence of the present makes it clear that the Lord is not with us now, for God no longer does the wonderful deeds of yesteryear. Indeed, the exact opposite is the case. God has “cast us off and given us into the hand of Midian” (v. 13; in agreement with v. 1). Both recent experience and prophetic revelation indicate that God is definitely *not* with Israel.

Gideon's initial request for a sign (6:17) seeks an answer to the question whether in fact “it is you who speak with me.” If Gideon is being visited by a merely human guest, the food Gideon has to offer would be received as an ordinary meal (compare Tob 12:19). However, if this is truly the (angel of the) Lord, the food will instead be a sacrifice. The sign is twofold. First, the visitor does not eat, but extraordinary fire jumps upward from the rock and eats (v. 21, NRSV “consumed”) what is

⁷Note the reversed correspondence between vv. 8b and 13b: “I brought you up from Egypt” and “from Egypt the Lord brought us up.”

offered. Broth poured over the food increases the wonder of the miracle (compare 1 Kings 18:34–35; 2 Chr 7:1). Second, the angel vanishes suddenly (compare Judg 13:20–21; Tob 12:21), which leads Gideon to recognize his identity and properly fear what has occurred (v. 22). Verse 23 gives assurance to Gideon’s fears: you are safe both in the presence of God (v. 22) and in regard to the oppression of the Midianites (v. 11). This is indeed God, for the voice speaks even after the numinous figure has disappeared.

At this point, the drawn-out process of Gideon’s call would seem to be finished. Certainly, wondrous fire should be enough to set his doubts to rest! Yet Gideon is still not convinced and continues to test the waters. Conflict between confidence and skepticism continues.

After 6:33–34, Gideon seems ready to take decisive action. Then he unexpectedly requests another sign. Gideon’s loss of nerve seems indefensible, for he explicitly doubts exactly what God has explicitly promised. Indeed, Gideon repeats God’s promise to bracket his first request: “Will [you] deliver by my hand, as you have said[?]” (vv. 36b and 37b, referring to vv. 14 and 16). God answers with a decisive yes (v. 40).

Gideon’s concern has been about the question of deliverance “by my hand.” God wants it to be clear that victory will be achieved by God’s hand.

Then, for a second time, the narrative returns us to the chief concern, the camp of Midian (7:1, compare 6:4, 33). By rising early in the morning, Gideon signals eager determination and readiness for action. But now it is God who delays matters with a test of God’s own. This screening seems in part to be a reaction to Gideon’s continued skepticism. Gideon’s concern has been about the question of deliverance “by my hand” (6:36–37). God wants it to be clear that victory will be achieved by God’s hand (7:2, compare 7:7). Gideon seems anxious about his own glory; God insists on full credit. The soldiers chosen are such a small contingent that God’s responsibility for victory will be obvious.

The text returns a third time to the main topic, the camp of Midian (7:8; compare 6:4, 33; 7:1). Again there is a postponement based on Gideon’s lack of confidence. This time God volunteers a dream sign (7:13–15). This sign operates on two levels. First, what God predicted takes place (the dreamer is right there so Gideon can hear what is said). Second, properly interpreted dreams predict the future, and verbal correspondence in v. 13 signals that the interpretation offered is correct. The barley cake “turned every which way” (NRSV “tumbled”) and the tent “turned upside down” (using the same verbal root). The tumbling cake comes down unpredictably and unexpectedly, corresponding to Gideon’s plan of attack. The upshot is that Gideon can now announce publicly and confidently the promise he has heard privately (vv. 9, 15).

The dream sign finally gets military action moving. Up until this point, Gideon has been an insecure skeptic. After this, Gideon never doubts again. Wondrous fire, dry fleece, and persuasive dream have countered Gideon's skeptical question in 6:13: "[W]here are all his [God's] wonderful deeds?" Confidence converts the fearful leader (6:11, 27; 7:10) into the fearless hero.

ALTRUISM AND TYRANNY

History records many leaders whose motives at the start were altruistic, but who became tyrants as their careers moved forward. The story of Gideon evidences a curiously paradoxical evaluation of his motives and achievements. At first, he seems concerned with the crisis facing the whole nation. However, from 7:15 onward, his motives appear to be inconsistent, oscillating between the needs of the nation and his own agenda. Gideon's personal vendetta dominates 8:4–21. Then ambiguity returns.

Gideon's first response to the angel's words (6:13) evidences altruistic concern for his oppressed nation. He converts the angel's singular address "the LORD is with *you*" to the plural "if the LORD is with *us*." In fact, "us" occurs six times in the verse. In v. 15, Gideon's doubts are as much about the fate of Israel as his own future: "[H]ow can I deliver Israel?" However, the emphasis changes to a focus on his own glory in the twice-repeated question of 6:36–37: "whether you will deliver Israel by my hand."

The incident with Ephraim (8:1–3) shows Gideon's altruistic leadership qualities at their finest. The Ephraimites' complaint comes at a most inappropriate time, right in the middle of the pursuit (7:23 and 8:4). Yet Gideon does not use violence or even harsh words against them, but the rhetoric of persuasion, and allows them the glory they crave. Gideon puts national welfare above parochial or personal concerns. Yet the careful reader may note that in placating Ephraim, Gideon refers only to what he himself has done ("What have I done?" v. 2), saying nothing about the Lord's actions. He mentions God in regard to the achievements of Ephraim, but not in regard to his own.

Beginning with 8:4, Gideon's story degenerates into tyranny. Gideon's successful and altruistic leadership stance, which has dominated up to 8:3, is now supplanted by the single-minded pursuit of his own personal agenda. Yet there have been earlier hints of this side of his character. In the test of the fleeces, his concern was "[Will you] deliver...by my hand[?]" (6:36–37). Gideon knows that the proper formula is the Lord gives "into your hand" (7:9, 14, 15), but certain details in the unfolding battle may have caused the reader to have suspicions about his altruism. Do his orders in 7:17–18 represent an admirable style of leading by example or an inappropriate focus on himself ("Look at me.... [D]o as I do")? In the battle cry that he prescribes, Gideon claims the spotlight with God (7:18), and his troops seem to have the same idea (v. 20). Adding "sword" to the slogan inserts a human element to a victory won by the power of God.

Judges 8:4–21 offers stories of personal vengeance. Gideon’s formulation of the situation in v. 5 (“*they* are exhausted, and *I* am pursuing”) takes apart the collective grammar of v. 4 (“he and the three hundred...exhausted and pursuing” [Heb.]) and, thus, highlights his own role at the expense of his soldiers. He is pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna specifically and does not mention Midian as a whole, again suggesting a personal agenda. Succoth and Penuel recognize this: “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your [singular] hand?” (v. 6). As Gideon responds, everyone else seems to have disappeared from the Israelite campaign: “given...into *my* hand” (v. 7); “[w]hen *I* come back victorious” (v. 9).

After Gideon captures the two kings, he pursues his agenda against his Israelite detractors. Turning the war stratagem of captured intelligence against own people (contrast 1:24), he teaches the citizens of Succoth a painful lesson (8:16). His accusation—“taunted me” (v. 15)—indicates that he is punishing their insult to his honor more than their failure to support his troops. The slaughter at Penuel in 8:17 goes far beyond his original threat of v. 9. The leader who once broke down the altar of Baal (6:31) now breaks down the tower of Penuel (8:17; the same verb is used).

Gideon’s concern is personal, not national. His confiscation of the royal pair’s crescents for himself underlines this.

In 8:18–21, the narrator ensures that we will view the execution of the two Midianite kings unfavorably, as involving an error in judgment on Gideon’s part. Ordering his inexperienced son to kill Zebah and Zalmunna indicates that this is a matter of personal retribution for the death of his brothers. However, it is also a grave insult to these two victims, who are, after all, kings. The reader is likely to agree when they insult Gideon in return: only a coward would fail to do his own killing (“strength comes with manhood” NJPS). Gideon’s concern is personal, not national. His confiscation of the royal pair’s crescents for himself underlines this.

The last incident illustrating the tension between altruistic leadership and tyranny comes as the people offer permanent rule to Gideon and his descendants (8:22). They attribute deliverance directly to Gideon without mentioning God. “[Y]ou have delivered us” is a contradiction to 7:2 that Gideon fails to correct. Although the word “reign” is not used, this is effectively an offer of kingship (permanent individual dynastic rule). Gideon’s refusal in 8:23 is a model of altruism and piety. Yet Gideon’s later actions speak more loudly than his assent to the principle of no king but the Lord. He has many wives and sires seventy sons (v. 30; compare Deut 17:17; 2 Kings 10:1).

Gideon’s ephod brings the contrast between altruism and tyranny together into a paradoxical package (8:24–27). It is possible to see positive value in the ephod as an object by which God’s guidance may be sought, as a concrete symbol

of God's ruling power, and as an unselfish use of spoil taken in holy war. However, the request for jewelry and the specification of *earrings* can only be a cross-reference to Aaron's golden calf (Exod 32:2–4). Setting the ephod up in Gideon's hometown suggest a claim on his part to honor and authority. It became a snare specifically to his "house" (Judg 8:27 Heb.), hinting at least at the potential for a royal dynasty.

Because public theology seeks to speak using arguments that have the potential to persuade a public audience, the question of resources becomes critical. One way to use biblical books like Judges as such a resource is to bracket off its role as authoritative religious canon and to present it instead as a literary and cultural canon understood as a theater of values revealed by character. Principles and ideals of public importance will emerge in all their complexity and ambiguity on the stage of this theater. Then the public audience can evaluate and negotiate them in open dialog. ⊕

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