

# THE INTRUSIVE PROPHET: THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF THE NAMELESS PROPHET IN JUDGES 6

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## Abstract

This paper utilizes a literary theological approach to explore the role of the prophet of Judges 6 within the narrative context of the Midianite oppression, the story of Gideon and the larger narrative of the book of Judges. Although the appearance of the nameless prophet is commonly regarded as a late addition to the Gideon cycle (Judges 6-8), it is argued here that the literary dimensions of the final form of the text should be considered. It is concluded that elements of the prophet's message intersect with prominent motifs in the Gideon story and in the broader context of Judges and that the prophetic speech signals the onset of the second of three stages in the narrative structure of Judges.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies of the compositional history of Judges 6 have yielded the consensus view that the appearance of the anonymous prophet is a "late insertion" (Gray 1977:229; cf. Auld 1984:163) to the Gideon cycle and that it is "distinct in source" (Burney 1918:177) from the material around it. This conclusion is based in part upon the claim that Judges 6:7-10 has "no connection to the context" (Soggin 1981:112) and that the message not to fear the gods of the Amorites is irrelevant within the context of the Midianite threat (Gray 1977:229). Graeme Auld (1998:163) argues that the story of the nameless prophet is out of place, since it "interrupts" the narrative of the Gideon cycle,

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and Leslie J. Hoppe agrees, declaring that the prophetic speech is “clearly intrusive” (1982:141).<sup>2</sup>

I agree entirely with the critical consensus on one point – the prophet of Judges 6 is intrusive. I agree that he interrupts, and that his message is distinct in source. Intrusion, however, is a common trait of the biblical prophet. Is it not true that the prophets often intrude unexpectedly? Do they not disturb settled opinions and interrupt continuities? Do they not appear out of place in the flow of the normal, as if uprooted from another reality and inserted at an embarrassing moment? Do they not often seem to be out of context, and irrelevant to those who are comfortable in the assured narrative? Do they not bring a word that originates from another and distinct source, a source that both intrudes upon trusted realities and testifies to an alternative?

Yes, the prophet of Judges 6 is intrusive, in more ways than one. First, this anonymous prophet intrudes into the narrative structure, disrupting the usual form of the cyclical pattern of Judges. When the Israelites cry out for help, the reader expects Yahweh to respond by naming a deliverer, as he has done in the earlier cycles. Instead of a deliverer, however, Yahweh sends a prophet. Second, this prophet intrudes into the expectations of the oppressed Israelites, who desire not correction but salvation and whose desire is not for a word but for a “wonder” (Judges 6:13). The intruding prophet, therefore, is considered by his audience to be irrelevant to their perceived context; consequently, when he has

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<sup>2</sup> Only three short mss of the book of Judges survive from Qumran, and only 4QJudg<sup>a</sup> preserves the section of the scroll that would contain 6:7-10. The brief ms, however, omits Judges 6:7-10, suggesting the existence of a text of Judges that is shorter than the MT. All other extant Hebrew and Greek witnesses include Judges 6:7-10. The existence of a text that is different from the MT is not surprising, however, given the variations in the LXX of Judges, and the variety of text types that find witness among the scrolls of other biblical books. The Judges mss are published in Ulrich and Cross (1995). See Barrera (1989:229-45), who concludes that the Qumran ms represents a text that is earlier than the MT; but see also Hess (1997:122-28), who argues that the evidence is too slim to make a determination.

finished speaking to them the word of Yahweh they ignore him completely.

My purpose here is not to employ the intrusive nature of Judges 6:7-10 as an argument either for or against the compositional unity of the Gideon cycle; but rather my goal is to explore the literary theological dimensions of the text in its present form. I propose, therefore, to examine the narrative function of the nameless prophet within the immediate context of the Gideon cycle, and within the larger context of the book of Judges. I propose not only that the intrusive *form* of the text points subtly to the prophetic *function* of the text but that Judges 6:7-10 is not entirely intrusive, in that it includes several thematic connections that emerge from the preceding context and that foreshadow the subsequent Gideon story (cf. O'Connell 1996:147, note 178).

## THE INTRUSION OF THE PROPHET

### The Midianite crisis

With each cycle in Judges the narratives grow longer and the characters grow more numerous and more complex. Othniel's story is no more than a summary of the cyclical pattern, a mere five verses. The next cycle, which tells the story of Ehud, consumes nineteen verses, in which every part of the cycle is expanded. Then, after the one verse devoted to Shamgar, the cycle of the prophet Deborah requires fifty-four verses.

The Deborah cycle concludes with a song that creates a mood of hope and optimism. That hopeful mood, however, is replaced immediately by a mood of extreme desperation (Scherman 2000:151; also Webb 1987:144) when the Israelites rebel yet again (6:1), and Yahweh gives them into the hand of the Midianites and Amalekites, who for seven years rob the Israelites of their crops

and livestock, leaving the land impoverished and the people helpless.<sup>3</sup> The narrative portrays Israel's suffering as more severe than in earlier cycles, a fact that builds the tension to a higher level, indicating that "things may be getting worse" (McCann 2002:63) and that Judges 6 may register the beginning of a second stage in the progress of the central narratives of Judges. For the first time in Judges, the Israelites resort to hiding in the hills and caves as protection from the invading enemy (6:2). Furthermore, the enemy destroys all crops (6:3-4) and livestock (6:4), and they encamp on Israelite land in massive numbers, "like locusts for multitude; they and their camels without number, and they came into the land to destroy it" (6:5), bringing their own livestock that graze on Israelite land (6:4, 5). The fact that the Midianites repeatedly encamp on Israelite land, bring in their livestock for grazing and strip the land completely bare (6:4) suggests more than temporary military incursions.<sup>4</sup>

The Midianites are not content to rule or to rob the Israelites; apparently they are intent upon rendering the land uninhabitable for the Israelites, thus displacing them entirely (Lieberman 1979:116).<sup>5</sup> The intensity of oppression is amplified further by the repetition of the cry of the Israelites. In earlier cycles, their cry to Yahweh is mentioned only once, but in this cycle it is stated twice (6:6-7).

### The cycle interrupted

As before, the Israelites cry out to Yahweh for help, but he does not

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<sup>3</sup> 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. Cf. Auld (1998:259).

<sup>4</sup> The verb forms **וַיִּהְיֶה**, **וַיֵּעָלֶה**, **וַיֵּעָלוּ** (6:3), **וַיֵּעָלוּ**, and **יָבֵאוּ** (6:5) are repetitive/habitual; cf. Wilcock (1992:77); Niccacci (1990:181-183) and Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze (1999:148, 169).

<sup>5</sup> This is contra Lee (2002:71-72) who limits his description of the Midianite threat as a "series of raids". Gaining control of the trade route may be the Midianite objective, which requires the removal of the Israelites. Cf. Gottwald (1979:432).

immediately raise up for them a saviour: “The Israelites cried to Yahweh because of the Midianites, and Yahweh sent a prophet to the Israelites” (6:7-8). The usual cyclical pattern is interrupted when, before he raises up a deliverer, Yahweh sends to them an unnamed prophet (cf. Claassens 2001:56 and Olson 1994:792).<sup>6</sup>

This makes two consecutive cycles in which a prophet has entered the story at precisely the same point, and the reader might anticipate that this prophet would function as a judge, in much the same fashion as Deborah functioned in the previous cycle (Klein 1988:50). Moreover, the prophet is introduced as “a man, a prophet” which harks back to the introduction of Deborah (“a woman, a prophet”). No other prophet in the Hebrew Bible is introduced with this formula. This prophet, however, brings a new complication to the deepening narrative conflict and functions differently from Deborah in at least three ways: (1) the nameless prophet addresses the whole people of Israel, whereas Deborah addresses only Barak, an individual; (2) Deborah arises with an encouraging word of victory, but the anonymous prophet brings a stinging word of reprimand (Pressler 2002:169); and (3) the prophet of Chapter 6 interrupts the cyclical pattern while Deborah functions within the pattern, fulfilling the role of judge (Olson 1994:795-796). The uniqueness of this prophet’s role adds to the intrusiveness of his appearance. Up to this point in the narrative of Judges, he is the only person who breaks into the cyclical pattern. It should be noted, however, that Yahweh himself, in similar fashion, intrudes into the Jephthah cycle (10:11-16).

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<sup>6</sup> The prophet of Judges 6 is the first anonymous prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. One stream of Jewish tradition names Phinehas as the prophet here and throughout the book of Judges; cf. Scherman (2000:153).

## THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE PROPHET'S MESSAGE

In spite of the prophet's unexpected intrusion into the narrative, the content of his message is consistent with the larger context of the book of Judges. Having been sent by Yahweh in response to the cries of the Israelites, the prophet speaks the word of the Lord:

Thus says Yahweh, 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 Yahweh 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).

By introducing his speech with the messenger formula (כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה) the prophet declares his intention to speak words that are not his own; they are the words of Yahweh.<sup>7</sup> As words of Yahweh, they are words invested with ultimate authority and worthy of the hearer's undivided attention. At this point in the biblical narrative, the messenger formula serves as a prestigious introduction since it is used previously only by Moses and Joshua.<sup>8</sup> In light of the obvious parallels between Judges 6 and Joshua 24, the hearer of Yahweh's second speech in Judges might recall the covenant renewal ceremony of Joshua and Israel's

<sup>7</sup> Analysis of prophetic speech forms was begun by Gunkel (1917) and the standard work is Westermann (1967:98-128) who discusses the messenger formula. While recent works on prophetic speech are rare, see section 4 of Sweeney and Zvi (2003:269-325) for a commendable attempt to place form criticism within the current *Sitz im Leben* of biblical studies.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 4:22; 5:1; 7:17; 8:1; 8:20; 9:1; 9:13; 10:3; 11:4; 32:27; Joshua 7:13; 24:2. Although Joshua functions as a prophet, he is never designated as a prophet. Judges 6:8 is the only occurrence of the messenger formula in Judges, and it appears next in the mouth of another nameless prophet who speaks a word of judgment to Eli (1 Samuel 2:27).

subsequent violations of the covenant.<sup>9</sup> Also, it should not be overlooked that both passages depend heavily on the Exodus tradition, a theme that is carried forward from Yahweh's first speech (Judges 2:1-5) and is continued into the Gideon narrative (6:13). The prophet's dependence upon the exodus tradition mitigates his intrusiveness and places his message within the mainstream of the narrative of Judges.

Just as surely as the messenger formula in Judges 6:7-10 reveals that the speaker is Yahweh, the verb forms in the passage indicate that he is the primary character within the speech itself. The first six verbs have Yahweh as their subject: (1) "I myself I brought you up (אָנֹכִי הֶעֱלִיתִי) from Egypt"; (2) "I brought you out (וְאֶצִּיא) from the house of bondage"; (3) "I delivered you (וְאֶצִּיל) from the hand of Egypt"; (4) "I dispossessed them (וְאֶגְרֹשׁ) from before you"; (5) "I gave to you (וְאֶתְּנֶה) their land"; and (6) "I said to you, 'You shall not fear (לֹא תִירָא) the gods of the Amorites'". Thus, by this unbroken series of assertions, Yahweh claims to be Israel's God, Israel's saviour, Israel's victor, and Israel's provider. The emphasis upon the person of Yahweh is strengthened further by the emphatic pronoun that precedes the first verb. This combination of pronoun and verb produces a phrase that occurs here for the first time in the Old Testament: "I myself brought you up (אָנֹכִי הֶעֱלִיתִי) from Egypt".<sup>10</sup> Yahweh alone is Israel's saviour.

## The Exodus theme

As in his earlier speech to the Israelites in Judges (2:1-5), Yahweh begins his

<sup>9</sup> It has been argued that Yahweh's speeches in Judges 6:8-10 and 10:6-16 and Jephthah's interchange with the king of Ammon in Judges 11:11-28 have their origins in the covenant lawsuit, which has been adapted here to serve narrative purposes. See Beyerlin (1963:27-29), and O'Connell (1996:193) who provides an extensive bibliography on the covenant lawsuit.

<sup>10</sup> This combination of pronoun and verb (אָנֹכִי הֶעֱלִיתִי) is found only in two other Old Testament texts: 1 Samuel 10:18 and Amos 2.10.

address with a reminder of the Exodus: “I myself brought you up from Egypt” (6:8). Some four generations have passed since the first speech, however, and the Exodus is now an even more distant event than it had been when the angel of the Lord spoke of it. During that interim God has saved the Israelites from three enemies, demonstrating that “the God of the exodus continues to effect a series of new exoduses throughout the book of Judges” (McCann 2002:63). Nevertheless, the situation of the Israelites has deteriorated significantly, and this testimony of the Exodus serves as reassurance that Yahweh “acts powerfully on behalf of Israel when Israel is helpless and has no power of her own” (Brueggemann 1977a:64), and that the power of Yahweh “is more than a match for the powers of oppression” (Brueggemann 1997:174), powers which are embodied in the Midianite encampments.

The Exodus theme is expanded further by Yahweh’s second affirmation: “I brought you out (וַאֲצִיא) from house of bondage” (6:8). The reference to their slavery may cause the Israelites to compare their current extreme situation to the earlier Egyptian bondage. Is it possible that they had been brought so low by the Midianites that their condition was as woeful to them as slavery? Even so, Yahweh, who had brought them out from the house of bondage, is able to bring them out from their enslavement to the Midianites.

Yahweh continues his speech with a third reference to the Exodus: “I delivered you (וַאֲצִיל) from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors (לְיַד־צָרִים)” (6:9).<sup>11</sup> Yahweh not only reiterates his act of delivering the Israelites from Egypt, but he expands that deliverance to include his rescue from their enemies subsequent to the Exodus.

It is from the “hand” (יָד) of Egypt and subsequent enemies that Yahweh has delivered Israel. Forty-nine times in the book of Judges the word “hand” serves

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<sup>11</sup> The phrase “from the hand of the Egyptians” (מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם) precedes Judges 6:9 only in Ex 3:8; 14:30; 18:9-10.

as a metaphor for “power”.<sup>12</sup> On one occasion the enemy is subdued under (תחת) the hand of the Israelites (3:30), and ten times a reversal of power is signified by either Israel or the Canaanites being sold (בכר) or given (נתן) into the hand of the other. Furthermore, the metaphorical use of the hand to signify power (6:9) combines with the term “oppressors” (לְהַצְיִי־כֶם) to form a graphic depiction of Israel’s plight. Since “oppressors” is a participle of the Hebrew לחץ, which means literally “squeeze” (Brown et al. 1979:537; Clines 1993:IV, 539), the image is that of Israel being squeezed in the hand of the Midianites, causing both “physical and psychological oppression” (Swart 1997:792). God, however, affirms that he has delivered the Israelites from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all other oppressors,<sup>13</sup> with the implication that he is now able to deliver them from the hand of the Midianites.

The interval between the Exodus and Judges 6 includes numerous episodes of divine intervention, in which Yahweh saves the Israelites by the agency of Joshua, Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah; but this is the first use in Judges of the word “deliver” (נצל).<sup>14</sup> The verb נצל is quite forceful, as Brueggemann (1997:174) explains, “This verb references an abrupt physical act of grasping or seizing — often, as here, grasping or seizing in order to pull out of danger ... Israel is “snatched” out of the danger of Egyptian slavery in a forceful, physical gesture by Yahweh” (cf. Köhler 2001:I, 717, who offers the translation “to tear from”). The Israelites are now languishing in the “hand of the Midianites” (6:1),

<sup>12</sup> Judges 1:2; 1:4; 1:35; 2:14, 15, 16, 18, 23; 3:8, 10, 28, 30; 4:2, 7, 9, 14, 24; 6:1, 2, 9, 36, 37; 7:2, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15; 8:3, 7, 22, 34; 9:17, 29; 10:7, 12; 11:21, 30, 32; 12:2; 13:1, 5; 15:12, 13; 15:18; 16:23, 24; 18:10; 20:28. Also, the word “palm” (כַּף) means “power” in Judges 6:13, 14; 8:6, 15; and 12:3. Cf. Brown et al. (1979:389), Holladay (128:1988) and Köhler (2001:I, 888) .

<sup>13</sup> The most recent enemy who is called an “oppressor” of Israel is Jabin, king of Canaan (Judges 4:3).

<sup>14</sup> In chapters 1-5, the idea of Yahweh’s rescue is indicated by the phrases “Yahweh saved (ישע) Israel” (2:16, 18; 3:9, 15, 31) and “Yahweh subdued (בנע) the enemy” (3:30; 4:23).

but the same God who had snatched them from the “hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all” their oppressors (6:9) can now snatch them away from the power of the Midianites.

### The theme of the land

Just as the exodus theme places the prophet within the mainstream of the message of Judges, so does the theme of the land. The prophet reassures the Israelites of Yahweh’s power to save, and he also assures them of Yahweh’s power to secure the land of promise. He highlights two elements of the Israelite settlement: (1) Yahweh’s removal of the Canaanite inhabitants and (2) Yahweh’s granting of the land to the Israelites as a gift (Goldingay 2003:451-528). Yahweh says, “I dispossessed them (וַאֲרִבְתֶּם) from before you and I gave (וַאֲתַתֶּנָּה) to you their land” (6:9). After Yahweh dispossesses the inhabitants of Canaan he gives (נָתַן) their land to the Israelites (6:9), bringing to mind his earlier word: “I will bring you to the land ... and I will give (נָתַן) it to you for a possession; I am Yahweh” (Ex 6:8).<sup>15</sup> Although the Canaanites are more numerous and stronger than the Israelites (Deut 4:38), Yahweh promises to drive them out and give the land to the Israelites as an inheritance. Martens writes, “Israel cannot take the land or grasp it. The land is beyond her power to acquire. It can be hers only as a gift” (Martens 1981:104; cf. Brueggemann 1977b:3). The gift of land, however, must not be taken for granted, for all land ultimately belongs to Yahweh (Lev 25:23), and as surely as he gives the land to the Israelites he can withhold it from them (Deut 28:21). In order to maintain possession of the land, the Israelites must remain faithful to their Yahweh, their covenant king, who sets before the Israelites both promise and warning:

You shall eat your bread until you are full, and dwell in your land safely. And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down,

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<sup>15</sup> For other examples of Yahweh’s promise “to give” the land to Israel, see Ex 12:25; Lev 14:34; 20:23-24; 23:10; 25:2; Num 15:2; Deut 1:8; 4:1.

and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid the land of evil beasts, neither shall the sword go through your land ... I am Yahweh your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves ... But if you will not hear me ... will set my face against you, and you shall be slain before your enemies; they that hate you shall reign over you (Lev. 26:6-17).

In Judges 6 the promise of a fruitful and secure land is imperilled by the invasion of Midianites. Yahweh's promise to make the land fruitful (Lev 26:4) is threatened by the Midianites, who destroy "the increase of the land" (6:4), the fruit, the crops and the livestock. The Israelites should be eating bread until they are full (Lev 26:5), but the Midianite strategy leaves nothing to support the Israelites and their families. The Israelites should be living in safety, without fear (Lev 26:5, 6), but because of the Midianites, they flee to the caves and hiding places in the hills. If the Israelites had been faithful, the land would be free of conflict (Lev 26:6), but in Judges 6 the hordes of Midianites enter "the land to destroy it", driving the Israelites out of the land.

It is universally recognized that the theme of "the land" is central to the book of Joshua, yet its importance to the book of Judges has not been fully appreciated. The fulfilment of Yahweh's promise of rest in the land is reflected in the refrain, "and the land rested" (3.11, 30; 5.31; 8.28). The land is given to Israel as a place of rest, safety, and security (Deut 12:9-10; Goldingay 2003:516; cf. Joshua 1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4; 23), thus the land is the place where Israel enjoys "freedom from harassment of enemies" (Martens 1981:107). In Judges 6, the harassing attacks of the Midianites disturb the promised rest and threaten to destabilize the Israelites' settlement of the land and to endanger their future in Canaan. The importance of land can hardly be overstated since "land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith" (Brueggemann 1977b:3). I would suggest that Judges represents a significant time of transition between the conquest of Joshua and the settled period of the monarchy in which the

Israelites face repeatedly the threat of losing the land because of their erratic and unfaithful behaviour.<sup>16</sup> The Israelites are in danger of being landless once again by reason of the Midianites' attempts to move into the land and dispossess Israel (6:4-5). Yahweh dispossessed the Canaanites in favour of Israel,<sup>17</sup> and now the Midianites are attempting to dispossess the Israelites (Soggin 1981:106). This more intense focus upon the land is another element that points to Judges 6 as the beginning of a second stage in the narrative progress of the Judges stories.

### The theme of fear

Yahweh completes his self-testimony with one more word. He declares, "I said to you, 'I am Yahweh your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites'" (6:10). The first appearance of the phrase "I am Yahweh your God (אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם)"<sup>18</sup> is connected to the Exodus: "Then I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Ex 6:7). Yahweh claims the Israelites as his people, and he gives himself to them to be their God. In Leviticus, his identification as the God of the Israelites extends in its connections to the giving of the land: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God" (Lev. 25:38). In light of the covenantal connections of Yahweh's

<sup>16</sup> The epilogue of Judges seems to use the idolatry and moral degradation of the Judges period as justification for the later institution of monarchy. Historically, however, it may be also the constant threat of losing the land that motivates the Israelites to inaugurate the monarchy. Cf. Gottwald (1979:431) who writes, "Possibly we should look to the role of the Midianites ... as a decisive factor in hastening and strengthening monarchic institutions".

<sup>17</sup> Yahweh's violent overthrow of an indigenous people has been the subject of intense scholarly debate, but it is not questioned in the book of Judges.

<sup>18</sup> Previous to Judges 6:10, the Hebrew phrase אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם is used 22 times in Leviticus and it is found in Ex 6:7; 16:12; Num 10:10; 15:41; and Deut 29:5.

claim to be Israel's God, his renewal of that claim through the word of the prophet in Judges 6 serves as a condemnation of the Israelites' idolatry that is implied in their doing of "the evil" (Judges 6:1), and it serves as a fitting prerequisite to the prohibition "You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites" (6:10), in which Yahweh and the Amorite gods are set in juxtaposition.

Using the introductory phrase, "And I said", Yahweh cites an earlier speech in which he said to the Israelites, "You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites", but the exact wording of the prohibition is found nowhere else in the biblical text. At first glance, the prophet's mention of the Amorites might be viewed as an indication that his message is out of place. After all, it is the Midianites and not the Amorites who pose the threat to Israel in Judges 6. Closer inspection, however, demonstrates the appropriateness of the prophetic prohibition against fearing the Amorite gods. The Amorites are well-known in the biblical narrative, being mentioned sixty times in Exodus through Joshua,<sup>19</sup> but the phrase "the gods of the Amorites" appears in only one other text, in which Joshua challenges the Israelites, "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living" (Joshua 24.15). By offering only the three options – Yahweh, the gods beyond the river, and the gods of the Amorites – Joshua seems to be designating the gods of the Amorites as the paradigmatic or quintessential gods of Canaan. Joshua's paradigmatic usage of the phrase explains why it appears in Judges 6:10, where the enemy is not the Amorites but the Midianites. Furthermore, in the prologue to Judges, the Amorite gods are listed (along with others) as the objects of Israelite idolatry (3:6). Thus, although it is the Midianites who threaten the Israelites materially, it is the Amorite gods that threaten them spiritually. Furthermore, the description of these idols as the "gods of the Amorites, in whose land you

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<sup>19</sup> As compared to 44 references to the Canaanites, 27 references to Midianites and 18 references to the Amalekites in the same material.

dwelling” designates these gods as the gods of the land, which means that the Israelites’ worship of the gods of the land is what endangers their continued possession of the land.

While it is true that Yahweh’s command, “you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites”, does not appear verbatim in the Hexateuch, several passages include the juxtaposition of the Exodus, the word “fear” and the prohibition against serving gods other than Yahweh. For example,

Then beware lest you forget Yahweh, who brought you out of the land of **Egypt**, out of the house of bondage. You shall **fear** Yahweh your God, and serve him, and shall swear allegiance to his name. You shall not go after **other gods**, of the gods of the people which are round about you (Deut 6:12-14, emphasis added).

Since the Old Testament mentions the fear of Yahweh or the fear of God approximately one hundred times (mostly in Deuteronomy, Psalms and Proverbs), it is somewhat surprising that the prohibition against “fearing” (אירא) other gods is quite rare, occurring outside of Judges 6 only in 2 Kings 17:35-38, and Jeremiah 10:5. When speaking of lifeless idols, Jeremiah intones, “Do not fear them, for they will do no evil, neither can they do good” (Jer 10:5), suggesting that since idols are powerless, they are undeserving of fear. The narrator of the Kings text, after the Assyrian deportation, accuses the inhabitants of Israel of not fearing Yahweh (2 Kgs 17:34), and he reminds them of Yahweh’s word to the Israelites of the past:

... with whom Yahweh made a covenant, and commanded them, saying, ‘You shall not **fear other gods**, nor bow down to them, nor serve them, nor sacrifice to them; but you shall **fear** Yahweh, who brought you up out of the land of **Egypt** with great power and a stretched out arm, and him shall you worship, and to him shall you sacrifice. And the statutes, and the ordinances, and the law, and the commandment, which he wrote for you, you shall observe to do forever; and you shall **not fear other** gods. And you shall not

forget the **covenant** that I made with you; neither shall you **fear other gods**. But you shall **fear** Yahweh your God; and he will **deliver you out of the hand** of all your enemies' (2 Kgs 17:35-39, emphasis added).

The Kings text cites Yahweh's command not to fear other gods in terms very similar to Judges 6:10, mentioning the Exodus and Yahweh's promise to deliver the Israelites from the hand of their enemies.

I would argue that the citation in Judges 6:10 is not an exact quote, but is a paraphrase of the earlier prohibitions against idolatry, and the verb "to fear" is used both here and in Kings with the meaning "to worship", "to reverence" and "to serve" (cf. Clines 1993:IV, 278 Köhler 2001:I, 433). On several occasions Yahweh prohibits the Israelites from worshipping other gods (Deut 11:16), serving other gods (Deut 13:6) or going after other gods (Deut 6:14), and the Decalogue begins with this word: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2-3; cf. Boling 1975:126). The word "fear", therefore, is substituted for other words denoting worship and service. Although it is impossible to determine the reason for the writer's choice of one synonym over another, the prominence of "fear" in the Gideon story (6:11-8:31) may suggest that the word "fear" is used in Judges 6:10 as a foreshadowing of the Gideon narrative (Lindars 1965:317, note 1).

The attitude of "fear" is not necessarily absolute, as the case of the Samaritans of 2 Kings demonstrates. We are told that they "were fearing Yahweh, but they were serving their own gods", which they had brought from other nations (2 Kgs 17:33). The fear of Yahweh, therefore, "does not always signify the ideal of exclusive worship" (Hobbs 1985:239; cf. Cogan and Tadmor 1988:212). We are told in the very next verse that those Samaritans, who are "fearing Yahweh" (17:33), in fact "do not fear Yahweh", because they "do not follow the statutes or ordinances or the law or the commandments

which Yahweh commanded the sons of Jacob” (17:34; Hobbs 1985:239). When understood in light of 2 Kgs 17, genuine fear of Yahweh is tantamount to “loyalty to the covenant” (Fuhs 1974:306-309; Stähli 1997:575), and fear that is less than genuine amounts to syncretism, which is not acceptable to Yahweh as true worship (Fretheim 1999:194). In Judges 6, Yahweh does not accuse the Israelites of forsaking him; he accuses them only of fearing other gods, which leaves open the possibility that they were continuing to worship Yahweh and the Amorite gods simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> When compared to Yahweh’s earlier rebuke (Judges 2:1-5), this prophetic speech suggests that the Israelites have regressed in their covenant relationship to Yahweh although they have not abandoned him altogether. In the earlier speech, Yahweh rebukes the Israelites for their passive failure to tear down the Canaanite altars, but now he scolds them for a more active role in illicit worship.

Although the Hebrew term אָרָא usually means “worship” when its object is deity, its most basic meaning of “fear, be afraid” is still present (Clines 1993:278), because it is the awesomeness of divine power that generates admiration. Humans worship what they fear. Fuhs argues that “fear of the numinous embraces an inner polarity: terror, retreat, and flight on the one hand; attraction, trust, and love on the other” (Fuhs 1974:298). While I accept the fundamental polarity that Fuhs suggests, I would not take it quite as far as to include “trust, and love”. Power attracts and provokes wonder, but it does not necessarily give rise to trust and love; and it is on this count that the fear of Yahweh is different from the fear of other powers. Yahweh asks that the Israelites worship him not only because of his might, but also because of his mercy. It is not enough that Yahweh defeats the gods of Egypt and shows

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<sup>20</sup> Historical, archaeological, and social research on early Israel suggests that the worship of multiple gods was the rule rather than the exception, and that the term “syncretism” itself must be reconsidered. See Gerstenberger (2002:274-281); Smith (2002:7, 45); Dever (1990); Dever (2005:269); Goldingay (2003:38-40); and PENCHANSKY (2005:33).

himself superior in strength; his acts go beyond a simple demonstration of power. Yahweh's power is exercised toward salvific purposes in bringing the Israelites out of slavery, and the covenant is founded not upon the abstract notion of divine power but upon the concrete expressions of divine care. Moses declares to the Israelites that they are chosen by Yahweh, not because of their own attributes but

because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath which he swore to your forefathers, Yahweh brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deut 7:8).

Furthermore, although Yahweh's power is beyond description, Moses draws attention to his affection:

Behold, to Yahweh your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. Yet on your fathers did Yahweh set his affection to love them, and he chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is today (Deut 10:14-15).

Consequently, Yahweh, in demanding a depth of worship that exceeds fear and reverence, calls for a human response of affection, devotion and love. Yahweh insists that his awesome acts of grace toward the Israelites are deserving of the joint responses of fear and love. Moses commands the Israelites

... to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in all his ways and love him, and to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut 10:12).

You shall fear Yahweh your God; you shall serve him and cling to him, and you shall swear by his name. He is your praise and he is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you ... You shall therefore love Yahweh your God (Deut 10:20-11:1).

Thus, when Yahweh says, "I am Yahweh your God, you shall not fear the gods

of the Amorites”, he is insisting that his acts of salvation and his giving of the covenant establish him as the only deity who is deserving of the worship of the Israelites. His manifest love for the Israelites calls for their reciprocation, and his gracious acts of salvation require the Israelites’ exclusive reverence.

### **The theme of “hearing”**

Yahweh here summarizes Israel’s entire rebellion in one concise judgment: “But you did not hear my voice” (6:10). The impact of this singular verdict is made all the more striking by its rude appearance following the long series of verbs that declare Yahweh’s faithful deeds. Thus, the contrast between Yahweh’s integrity and Israel’s lack of integrity is sharpened. The speech focuses almost entirely on Yahweh, who says, “I brought you up; I brought you out; I delivered you; I drove out the enemy; I gave you their land; and I said to you”. The only action attributed to Israel is found in the final clause of the speech, “you did not hear my voice”.

Once again, the prophet pursues a theme that is consistent with the message of Judges. According to the introductory prologue to the book, the Israelites’ root problem is their refusal to hear and obey God’s word. The angel of Yahweh declares, “You have not heard (שמעו) my voice” (2:2), and the charge is repeated two more times in the prologue: “They would not hear the judges” (2:17a); “They have not heard my voice” (2:20).

The prophet’s speech comes abruptly to an end with no pronouncement of penalty, no statement of consequences for the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, and no response from the Israelites. Yahweh rebukes the Israelites for failing to hear his voice in the past, but they do not repent nor weep. This abrupt ending of the prophet’s speech (6:10) suggests to some historical-critical scholars that it was shortened by an editor before its insertion into the pre-existing text of Judges. For example, Moore (1895:177, 181) argues that the Israelites’ lack of response to the speech and Gideon’s apparent unfamiliarity with the speech

establish it as a later addition to the narrative (cf. Martin 1975:81).

The abrupt closure and lack of narrative transition might be interpreted as a sign that the prophetic speech has been inserted in a foreign context, but another explanation is also possible. I would argue that the lack of response by the Israelites leaves the impression that they are continuing to disregard Yahweh's voice just as they had done before. They have cried out to Yahweh for his aid, but they do not hear when he answers. The Israelites' lack of response to Yahweh's pronouncement, "You have not heard my voice", may be understood as a manifestation of their utter spiritual deafness. The abrupt ending of Yahweh's speech, therefore, may be interpreted as a literary device whereby the rhetorical structuring of the narrative contributes to its meaning.

## CONNECTIONS TO THE GIDEON STORY

Although the nameless prophet interrupts the cyclical pattern of the Judges, I have shown that his message contains elements that are drawn from the preceding context. In this section, I will show that major themes in the prophetic speech are continued into the subsequent narrative of Gideon.

After Yahweh's stinging speech, the scene shifts suddenly from the nameless prophet to a man named Gideon, who is threshing his grain in the wine press so that he will not be discovered by the Midianites. He is approached by the angel of Yahweh, who commissions him as the next deliverer. Gideon's story (Judges 6-8) includes repeated references to Gideon's timidity and to his need for divine assurance.

The placement of Yahweh's speech in the midst of the cyclical pattern, rather than outside the pattern, makes it an integral part of the Gideon cycle, and themes of the speech are continued later in the Gideon narrative. Wilcock (1992:78) argues that the speech is given to explain the oppressive presence of

the Midianites: “The prophet of Judges 6 is sent to make Israel understand what is going on”. I contend, however, that the speech functions beyond the simple level of explanation, and, as shown above, indicates a downward turn within the unfolding of the overall narrative of Judges. Yahweh’s verbal intrusion into the cycle anticipates the rising tension that develops in the narrative of Gideon as he struggles to hear the voice of Yahweh, who speaks directly and extensively to him. Schneider (2000:102) contends that the speech “contextualizes and to some extent counteracts Gideon’s upcoming statements”. Yahweh’s speech, therefore, foreshadows the Gideon narrative in at least four ways: (1) it highlights the repetition of the Egypt/Exodus tradition;<sup>21</sup> (2) it portrays the Israelites as syncretistic worshipers; (3) it introduces the theme of fear; and (4) it calls attention to the continuing theme of hearing.

## **Egypt and the Exodus**

Gideon is greeted by the angel of Yahweh, who says “Yahweh is with you” (6:1), and Gideon replies with a reference to the Exodus:

If Yahweh is with us, then why has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonders that our ancestors recounted to us saying, ‘Did not Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?’ But now Yahweh has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites (6:13).

His response is the first indication of a narrative contrast between the perspective of Gideon and the perspective of Yahweh. Whereas Yahweh speaks of the deliverance from Egypt as a point of assurance, Gideon sees the same tradition as a point of suspicion. The reader, however, knows that the cause of the Midianite oppression is to be found in the sin of the Israelites and not in the unfaithfulness of Yahweh (Auld 1984:162).

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<sup>21</sup> Egypt is mentioned in nine verses of Judges: 2:1, 12; 6:8, 9, 13; 10:11; 11:13, 16 and 19:30; and the Exodus seems to be in the background of Judges 5:5 and 21 (cf. the language of Ps 77:14-20, which is similar to Judges 5).

The Exodus theme is strengthened considerably by the obvious similarities between the stories of Gideon and Moses (Auld 1984:162; Martin 2007:248-49) and casts Gideon as a new Moses, invested with divine authority, who will deliver the Israelites from oppression. The references to the Exodus and the similarities between Gideon and Moses combine to place the “Gideon saga in the framework of the Yahweh covenant” (Lindars 1965:317).

### **Syncretistic worship**

In the prophet’s speech, Yahweh does not accuse the Israelites of forsaking him; he accuses them only of fearing other gods, which leaves open the possibility that they were continuing to worship Yahweh and the Amorite gods simultaneously. This interpretation of Judges 6:7-10 explains how Gideon can question Yahweh’s faithfulness: “If Yahweh is with us, why has all this happened to us?” (6:13). Up until now, commentators have considered Gideon’s question to be quite unreasonable, since he is well aware of the idolatry within his own community. The fact that his own father maintains an altar to Baal (6:25) provides Gideon with enough evidence that God is justified in his disciplinary action. However, if the worship of Yahweh is continuing alongside the worship of Baal, as affirmed by Cundall (1968:106) and Polzin (1980:171), then Gideon might assume that Yahweh is obligated to demonstrate his superiority, just as he demonstrated his power over all of the gods of Egypt.

### **Fear**

Fear is another significant element in the Gideon story that is continued from the prophet’s speech (cf. Webb 1987:150). J. Paul Tanner (1992:160) argues that the Gideon narrative is structured to highlight Gideon’s fear and to show the change that transpired in Gideon as God crafted the circumstances in such a way that Gideon moves from fear to faith.

The importance of fear to the Gideon story is evidenced by the repetition

throughout the narrative of the Hebrew word ירא. When Yahweh ordered Gideon to destroy his father's idolatrous altar, Gideon obeyed, but he did the work surreptitiously by night "because he was afraid" (6:27). Even before Gideon's nocturnal destruction of the Baal altar, he displays his fear in the sight of the angel of Yahweh, who says to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; (ירא) you shall not die" (6:23). Then, when assembling the Israelite army, Yahweh gives the following instructions: "Whoever is afraid (ירא) and trembling (חרד), let him return and depart from Mount Gilead" (7:3).<sup>22</sup> Also, before Gideon sneaks into the Midianite camp, Yahweh says to him, "If you are afraid (ירא) to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp" (7:10). After the battle, when Gideon is no longer afraid, the theme continues to show itself. Gideon commands his son to execute two of the enemy leaders: "So he said to Jether his first-born, 'Rise, kill them'. But the youth did not draw his sword, because he was afraid (ירא), because he was still a youth" (8:20).

The theme of fear is expressed not only by the repetition of ירא, but by the presence of another word for "fear" in the episode at the spring of Harod (עין חרד Judges 7:1). The verb means "to tremble" and the noun means "anxious" (Judges 7:3; Köhler 2001:I, 350). The importance of the name of the spring is recognized by Auld, who translates it "Fearful Spring" (1998:264; cf. Garsiel 1993:310 and Tanner 1992:158, n. 27). Gideon and his army pitch their tents beside the Fearful Spring (7:1), and it is there that Yahweh gives instruction for any who are afraid or "trembling" to return home (7:3). Yahweh's command for the fearful to depart, therefore, "may be a deliberate echo of the place named in" Judges 7:1 (Baumann 1986:168).

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<sup>22</sup> A comparison with Akkadian coupled with the theme of fear that is prominent in this text suggests to Boling (1975:145) that the reference to Mount Gilead (7:3) should be translated "Mount Fearful".

## Hearing the voice of Yahweh

The prophet rebukes the Israelites for failing to hear the voice of Yahweh, and that failure is exemplified in the story of Gideon. He is approached by the angel of Yahweh, who commissions him as the next deliverer, and before the story comes to an end, Gideon has received thirteen distinct communications from God in four different episodes: 1) Gideon's call narrative; 2) Yahweh's command to destroy the altar of Baal; 3) Yahweh's command to reduce the size of Gideon's army; and 4) Gideon is told to go down to the Midianite camp. In spite of Yahweh's multiple communications, Gideon continues to display doubt and fear.

The fourth and final communication from Yahweh to Gideon comes just before Gideon engages the Midianites in battle. Yahweh tells Gideon to go down to the Midianite camp where he will "hear what they say" (7:11). At the camp Gideon overhears a Midianite soldier recounting a dream in which a loaf of bread rolled into the camp and flattened a tent. The soldier interprets the dream as a prediction of Gideon's victory by the power of Yahweh. As soon as Gideon hears the dream, "he worshiped" (7:15), and he returned full of confidence to his awaiting army.

The fact that it is Yahweh who directs Gideon to go down into the camp of Midian suggests that Yahweh himself is the source of the prophetic dream. Yahweh's words, "you will hear (שמע) what they say", may convey both the literal sense of Gideon's overhearing the Midianite soldier and the theological sense of Gideon's finally perceiving the authenticity of God's word. Ironically, although Gideon does not hear the declarations of the angel of Yahweh, and does not hear the voice of Yahweh himself, and he does not hear the confirmations inherent in multiple signs, he finally hears the voice of Yahweh speaking through an enemy soldier (Judges 7:9-11).

## **The intrusive prophet as the beginning of the second section of Judges**

With each new cycle in Judges 3-5, the narrative grows more detailed and complex, but the cycle that begins at Judges 6:1 shows evidence that narrative tension is escalating and the plot of Judges is moving toward a crucial point in the action. Specific elements in the cycle point to its identification as a critical event within the plot of Judges. First, the severity of the Midianite threat that is reported in Judges 6:1-6 indicates an increasing level of conflict. Second, Yahweh's breaking into the cycle to speak directly to the Israelites further heightens the tension and may show that his anger is "intensified" (Klein 1988:49). Olson argues that this speech marks a transitional point in the narrative of Judges and begins the second major section of the book (Olson 1994:795-96; the third major section is begun by the speech in Judges 10:11-16). Third, the foundering of Gideon places him in a category quite apart from his predecessors. At the beginning he is fearful, doubtful and hesitant; and at the end he contributes to the apostasy of his family and community. Although Gideon is finally successful in defeating the Midianites and bringing "rest" to the land, Stone (1988:469-471) argues that Gideon is the transitional judge, placed between the victorious judges (Othniel, Ehud and Deborah) and the "tragic" judges (Jephthah and Samson),<sup>23</sup> and Exum points out that "Gideon and the important figures after him reveal disturbing weaknesses, if not serious faults" (1990:412).

## **CONCLUSION**

From a narrative perspective, the intrusive prophetic speech in Judges 6:7-10

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<sup>23</sup> For a listing of Gideon's positive and negative traits, see Block (1997:359-363).

registers the rising level of conflict in the book, lifts up several vital themes of the book of Judges, points to Judges 6 as the beginning of a new division in the narrative, and foreshadows the Gideon story. The prophet's unexpected appearance draws attention to the role of Judges 6 as a crucial point in Judges, and his message pushes forward the story of Judges. At least five major themes that are also prominent in earlier parts of Judges and in the Gideon narrative are set forth in the prophet's speech: 1) the exodus tradition; 2) the land; 3) idolatry; 4) fear; and 5) hearing the voice of Yahweh.

The prophet of Judges 6 represents the second time in Judges that Yahweh speaks to the Israelites as a people. In response to Yahweh's first speech, the Israelites had wept and offered sacrifices to atone for their sins (2:5), but this second speech seems to fall on deaf ears. The Israelites offer no response to the voice of Yahweh. After he speaks, the intrusive prophet withdraws from the scene, and the Israelites continue to stumble blindly down the spiralling path toward chaos.

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