

Gideon and Baal: A Test Case for Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

The practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) provides a unique resource for interfaith dialogue. This process brings together Muslims, Jews, and Christians to converse about their respective canonical texts (Qur'an, Tanakh, Bible). Treating the Christian Bible as a theater of conflicting values demonstrated by characters allows it to move beyond being a sectarian canon to become a focal point for negotiating religious and ethical diversity.

Scriptural Reasoning

What role can canonical texts play in inter-religious dialogue? Many Christians expect the Bible to be the chief source and foundation of what they have to say in the public square. Muslims and Jews also treat their scriptures as normative documents. Yet the Christian Bible treated as a sectarian canon would seem an unhelpful resource for interfaith dialogue about public issues, more likely to induce resistance and hostility than to facilitate understanding. This question is especially critical given the increasing religious diversity of North America and Europe.¹

During a recent stay in Cambridge, England, I encountered a lively movement called "scriptural reasoning." This process brings together Muslims, Jews, and Christians to converse about their canonical texts. Scriptural reasoning is the practice of gathering in a neutral site (or sites that rotate among the three faiths) to read sacred scriptures and use them as a basis to reason together about contemporary issues. Participants strive for an open, honest relationship with each other, while remaining committed to the truth of their own faith and scriptures. Because of the dangers posed by power imbalances among the three faiths in predominantly Christian countries, every effort is made to achieve equality in leadership and involvement. At present, scriptural reasoning flourishes predominantly in England and North America.²

Because I was studying the book of Judges when scriptural reasoning came to my attention, the story of Gideon and particularly Gideon's attack on the local altar to Baal (Judges 6:25-32) appealed to me as a test case. How might this story of religious conflict involving the destruction of a rival religion's sacred place work in an arena of interfaith dialogue around the question of interfaith relations?

Scripture as a Theater of Values³

It is important, first of all, to approach scripture from a new angle within the context of interfaith dialogue. Most important is the distinction between its use in *prescriptive* and *descriptive* discourse. *Prescriptive* language urges and commands or discourages and forbids action: "Love your neighbor. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." *Descriptive* discourse simply tells us how things were or are, without suggesting

that we should imitate what we read about. Judges 11 describes human sacrifice, but does not command it. Judges 17 portrays idolatry, but does not encourage it.

Within the community of faith, the Bible encourages Christians to believe, tells them what and in whom to believe, and guides and motivates actions. In this sense, scripture is *prescriptive*. However, when using the Bible as but one of several canonical texts in public discussion, it is important to bracket off its prescriptive claims. Instead one needs to focus on the Bible as a text inherited from the past that is *descriptive* of human values and character. Some of what it describes is admirable, some is problematic.

Society needs a public theater in which it may rehearse and debate ideals and alternatives, and canons (either scriptural or literary) can provide such a theater. Scripture, when understood as descriptive rather than prescriptive, can provide a forum for debates about choices, conflicting values, and underlying principles. Biblical narratives about characters (in the literary sense) who exhibit character (in the moral sense of virtue or vice) can be a platform for public discussion. Biblical characters who are presented in any sort of depth tend to be entirely believable and completely human. Readers are invited to admire or despise them. There is usually enough ambiguity about a character's situation and behavior to generate evaluations and responses that are mixed and complex.

Judges has great potential as a theater of values for public interfaith discussion. Careful reading exposes conflicting core values on every page. The book establishes a cyclical structure of historical events, but soon begins to undermine it. Evaluative summaries and editorials offer competing interpretations of events. Judges rule "all Israel," but the stories themselves betray a parochial horizon. The main figures are both "deliverers" and "judges." Patriarchy is asserted, but at the same time subverted. Kingship leads to tyranny, but Israel must have a king in order to avoid moral chaos. The virtues and vices of characters play a major role, alongside lively action, conflicting values, and the insistent viewpoint of the evaluative voice of the narrator. Judges is not prescriptive (except for its prohibition of apostate worship), but descriptive of the ways that its characters reveal their values and personal integrity. Values are negotiated concretely through the presentation of about a dozen major players along with numerous more minor, but highly interesting people. These characters are for the most part dubious and complex, displaying strengths, weaknesses and internal conflicts. In this way they create a theater or arena in which values may be negotiated and explored. Jephthah or Samson may be disappointing for the moralist and infuriating for the feminist, but both make for great theater!

Judges 6:25-32: Religious Commitment Versus Open-Mindedness.

The value negotiated most obviously in the Gideon story (Judges 6 – 8) is that of Israel's commitment to Yahweh as its exclusive God. Ostensibly, this value sounds sectarian, rather than a basis for interfaith dialogue. Yet as 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, embodied in the character of Gideon's father Joash.

The Gideon story, like those of the other judges, is set into a cyclical framework of sin, punishment, Israel's cry, and God's provision of a deliverer (Judg. 6:1-6). Yet instead of immediately sending a deliverer in response to Israel's cry (as in Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:4), God sends a prophet (Judg. 6:7-8) who announces, "I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites. . . . But you have not given heed to my voice (Judg. 6:10, NRSV)." Clearly Israel's "cry" (Judg. 6:6) does not mean they have repented or turned back to God. They have simply cried out "on account of the Midianites (Judg. 6:7)."

Yet God has not given up on Israel. As a dramatic character, God remains personally involved. The first person singular is repeated: "I led . . . I delivered . . . I said . . . I am Yahweh (Judg. 6:8-10)." By calling Gideon rather than simply leaving Israel to its fate, God reveals a desire to be in relationship with Israel.

God is willing to stay committed to Israel, but continues to expect commitment and loyalty on its part. Baal worship in Gideon's hometown of Ophrah proves the reality of the prophet's accusation. Thus, before any army is mustered or battle joined, God commands Gideon to "pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father (Judg. 6:25)." In the service of religious exclusivity, Gideon must go against his hometown and radically violate the core social value of loyalty to family. What follows illustrates both Gideon's (somewhat reluctant) zeal and a militant commitment to Baal on the part of the citizens of Ophrah. Values collide.

A repetition of the word "night" forms a bracket around Gideon's deed (Judg. 6:25-27). "By night" illustrates Gideon's fear and lack of conviction. In contrast, the townspeople rise "early in the morning" as a sign of determination and enthusiastic action (Judg. 6:28). Their perception of the state of the altar corresponds exactly with God's command (cf. Judg. 6:28; Judg. 6:25-26). This repetition underscores the impact this shocking sight has on them. The wording of their question, "Who has done this thing?" is repeated precisely in the answer, "Gideon son of Joash did this thing (Judg. 6:29)." The reader is invited to conclude that Baal is powerless, for the new altar of Yahweh stands right on top of Baal's destroyed one, and the wood of the sacred pole has proven to be simply firewood (cf. 2 Kings 19:18 and Isaiah 44:19). Opposing religious commitments lead to a clandestine, destructive raid on the installations of a rival faith and a call for the death of one who has insulted the 'true religion.' This sounds very contemporary.

But zealous religious commitment is not the only value on stage in this theater. Consider Gideon's father Joash, who manages to preserve peace with a shrewd and wonderfully ambiguous answer that both saves his son and permits him to acknowledge his own faith in Baal (Judg. 6:31). He says, in effect, "let the gods sort out their own problems." Joash both affirms Baal and brilliantly insinuates that the fanaticism of Baal's devotees actually questions Baal's power in a way that might warrant their deaths. He acknowledges that this is a serious situation for Baal and that Baal's godhood depends on whether Baal acts or not. Joash claims that true faith in Baal actually necessitates the inaction of his worshippers.

Joash has his say, but of course the value of Israel's exclusive commitment to Yahweh remains dominant. In passing, Joash lets slip that Baal's powerlessness has already been demonstrated, for "his altar has been pulled down (Judg. 6:31)." Nevertheless, two

values are at odds: “Pull down the altar of Baal” versus “If [Baal] is a god, let him contend for himself.”

What might using this wonderfully conflicted text as a springboard for interfaith discussion lead to? Nothing very comfortable, I suspect! Is true faith compatible with a genuine appreciation for other religions? Should the historical success of a religion really be considered as evidence for its truth? Can the struggle to advance one’s religion actually be considered a lack of confidence in the power of one’s God? What stance ought adherents of each religion take concerning their own faith’s history of destroying the temples, mosques, churches, and synagogues of other religions? Is government sponsorship of one faith over another (established churches, *sharia*, rabbinic courts) healthy and helpful?

What “scriptural reasoning” on this text might lead to is not really the point. However, a willingness to utilize the Bible as a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, theater of values that are in conflict and under negotiation may turn out to be one way that church leaders can engage in productive interfaith conversation.

Notes

¹ On the value of the Christian Old Testament as a resource for dialogue about public issues, see Richard D. Nelson, “The Old Testament and Public Theology,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 36 (2009): 85-94.

² Further background is available in Jeffrey W. Bailey, “Sacred Book Club: Reading Scripture across Interfaith Lines,” *Christian Century* 123 no. 18 (Sept. 5, 2006), 36-42, at www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk, and from *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, which has been published online since 2001 (<http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/>).

³ I derive the notion of canon as a theater of conflicting values exhibited by character in part from Charles Altieri, “An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 37-60. See also William Schwieker, “Images of Scripture and Contemporary Theological Ethics,” in William P. Brown. *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 34-52.

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