CHAPTER ONE

THE GIDEON ACCOUNT (6–8)

1. Introduction

The Gideon account occupies a central place in the Book of Judges, both as regards its position in the centre of the book and as regards its length and its detailed descriptions. The Gideon account has one hundred verses and if we add to this the account of his son Abimelech, we will receive a narrative cycle of 157 verses, as opposed to 218 verses devoted to all the other judge accounts together. Most judge accounts deal with one or two main topics. For instance, the Ehud account deals principally with the assassination of Eglon, and the Deborah account mainly with Barak’s appointment by Deborah and the killing of Sisera by Jael. The Samson stories are indeed long and detailed, but the Gideon stories, in contrast, are diversified and they detail almost every stage in the plot. The account includes the detailed description of the oppression, Gideon’s appointment and his combating of the Baal worship. The organization of Gideon’s army, his many doubts, his war against the Midianites, and the pursuit that he conducted after the battle are all described in very great detail. The account goes on to describe internal clashes, firstly with the Ephraimites and subsequently with the men of Succoth and of Penuel. The execution of the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna is described exhaustively, after the execution of the Midianite captains Oreb and Zeeb had already been indicated. Unlike other accounts, the Gideon account does not end with the victory over the enemy. Here the story continues into the period after the victory, and describes how the people asked Gideon to rule over them, and how Gideon made the ephod, which led the people to transgress.

The diversified descriptions are also important in presentation of Gideon’s character. The diversity of the stories and the presentation of Gideon’s multifaceted character contrast sharply with the other judge accounts, which are far shorter. Gideon has the most round and multifaceted personality in the Book of Judges: He has doubts when initially appointed, but after a long process he leads the small
army confidently and he takes care of his people, but at the same time he also enters into clashes with them. He combats the Baal, but he sets up an ephod. The account closest to the Gideon account, is that of Samson, which contains 97 verses. However, even in comparison with the Samson stories, the Gideon stories are more diversified and Gideon’s personality is complex. The Samson stories describe how Samson was enticed by Philistine women, and the confrontations that followed this, with Samson smiting the Philistines severely. Samson’s personality is flat; throughout the account we discover his great weakness for women and his great physical strength.

Clearly, the position of the Gideon stories in the centre of the book is not incidental, and derives from the centrality of the Gideon account in the Book of Judges. What are the intentions behind the extensive and full descriptions in the Gideon stories?1 In this chapter I will elucidate the significance of the Gideon account through literary analysis; following this its place in the Book of Judges will also become clear.2

2. The Structure of the Gideon Stories

The Gideon stories are divided into three parts according to the plot development:3

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1 According to Boling the Gideon and Abimelech accounts were positioned at the centre of the Book as part of a pro-Judean polemic against possible alternatives to Jerusalem. See: Boling, *Judges*, p. 185. For a pro-Davidic intention of the Book of Judges see: Brettler, “The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics”, pp. 395–418.

2 The question of the origin of the Gideon story occupied the attention of scholars in the earlier stage of the research of the Book. In the nineteenth century and until the middle of the twentieth century the scholastic trend was to seek Pentateuchal sources in the account. See e.g. Moore, *Judges*, pp. 175–177; Burney, *The Book of Judges*, e.g. pp. 176–184. Simpson, *The Composition of the Book of Judges*, pp. 25–40, 108–110, 125–126. For a summary of the various opinions on the Gideon narrative, see Amit, *The Book of Judges*, pp. 224–225 nn. 2–14. From the mid-twentieth century this approach was replaced by the opinion that the Book is composed of different traditions that are embodied in a Deuteronomistic framework. See: Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 69–85. There are many variations to this approach, see e.g. Soggin, *Judges*, pp. 103–105. Most scholars consider that the Gideon narrative is pre-deuteronomistic (e.g. Noth, *op. cit.* pp. 70, 73–75). Auld believes that it is a later supplement to the Book A. G. Auld, “Gideon. Hacking and the Heart of the Old Testament”, *VT* 39 (1989), pp. 257–267.