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## Gideon's Fleece: A Biblical Narrative Providing a Framework for Discussion of Issues in the Relationship between Scientific Inquiry and Divine Revelation

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Gideon's Fleece: A Biblical Narrative Providing a Framework for Discussion of Issues in the Relationship between  
Scientific Inquiry and Divine Revelation

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### Abstract

The story of Gideon's attempt to determine God's will by placing a fleece on the ground overnight and observing its moisture content relative to the surrounding ground, given in Judges 6:36-40, provides a framework for the discussion of several issues related to scientific inquiry and its relationship to divine activity and revelation. Issues noted in this paper include proper experimental design and execution, the manner in which God interacts with nature, human expectations of God's interactions with nature, the roles of general and special revelation in knowing God's past, present, and future activity, and the contrast between faith based on observation and faith based on revelation. Comparing Gideon's actions to the scientific method indicates that elements of the scientific method were applied by common people in Old Testament times. Placing Gideon's experience with the fleece into the broader account of Gideon's life suggests caution to the biblically-based scientist with respect to reliance on narrowly-drawn standards for determining when God has acted in the natural world and suggests that God may act in ways that could also be explained by natural laws or in ways that appear to contradict natural laws. Gideon's story also provides a warning regarding the tendency to emphasize faith in human observations over faith in divine revelation. Also noted are parallels between the story of Gideon and other biblical accounts of individuals using observations of the natural world to understand God's will. In addition, the recognition that Scripture portrays God working with and through Gideon despite his imperfections and the recognition that Scripture portrays Gideon as accomplishing great things by faith are shown to be important aspects of the biblical record of Gideon's life. These points are essential in applying Gideon's story to the education and spiritual growth of science students as they learn to exercise faith in God and His Word while properly using scientific reasoning.

*Keywords:* Gideon, fleece, framework, scientific inquiry, revelation, experimental design, human expectations, observation, education, spiritual growth, scientific reasoning

## **Gideon's Fleece: A Biblical Narrative Providing a Framework for Discussion of Issues in the Relationship Between Scientific Inquiry and Divine Revelation**

The phrase "putting out a fleece" is commonly used in Christian circles to describe the process of seeking to know God's will by asking Him to provide a tangible, observable sign answering a believer's question. Christians believe that God is able to interact with His creation in meaningful ways that humans can observe through the use of their senses and mentally interpret, and that these observations and interpretations can positively contribute to human understanding of God's thoughts and desires. Consequently, understanding how these physical manifestations relate to other ways in which God communicates with humanity is important for Christian faith and practice.

For those Christians who practice science, the idea that God interacts with creation raises additional issues. Christian scientists must also more carefully consider the nature of the relationship between God and His created works, and how that relationship may be manifested in the interactions between God and created things (living and non-living). Having reasonable expectations about when and how God interacts with the world we live in is important for Christians who practice science. Whereas atheistic scientists deny the possibility of any divine activity, theistic scientists must include the possibility of divine involvement in the observations they make, in framing their hypotheses, and in forming their conclusions. These considerations require Christian scientists to think more carefully about how the Bible portrays the relationship between the Creator and creation.

### **The Story of Gideon's Fleece**

The story of Gideon literally putting out his fleece to determine what God wanted him to do (Judges 6:36-40) is a concise narrative that simply describes God interacting with nature in a way that is easy for the modern reader to visualize. It thus provides a useful framework that allows for a straightforward exploration of the nature of divine interactions with people and the environment in which they live and some of the important implications for how those interactions affect how Bible-believing scientists should conduct science. An understanding of how Gideon's use of the fleece fits into the larger context of his biography also presents practical help in strengthening faith in God and cautions against ways of thinking that may weaken faith. All of these are important aspects in the

education of scientists who will practice their discipline in ways that affirm faith in God and in the foundational position of Scripture in Christian living.

We begin our study of these issues with the record of Gideon's experience. (All Scripture references in this paper are taken from the New American Standard Bible.)

<sup>36</sup>Then Gideon said to God, "If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken, <sup>37</sup>behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken." <sup>38</sup>And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. <sup>39</sup>Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground." <sup>40</sup>God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground (Judges 6:36-40).

The narrative simply describes Gideon's words, actions, and observations. The account begins with Gideon talking to God; his choice to speak to God and the words he speaks reveal important aspects of Gideon's perception of God. Gideon's words demonstrate that Gideon believes that God exists and that God can hear when people speak to him. It is also apparent that Gideon believes that God is capable of expressing Himself understandably without speaking audibly. These beliefs had their basis in Gideon's prior interactions with God, as recorded earlier in the chapter. Gideon understands this proposal to be the initiation of a dialogue with God that will provide an answer to his question.

Based on this understanding of God, Gideon states his question: Has God chosen him to lead the Israelites against the Midianites who are oppressing them? He then tells God how he expects God to answer his question, telling God that if the answer is yes, then the fleece he sets out will be wet the next morning and the ground will be dry. Gideon's observation the next morning of a very wet fleece and dry ground is then reported without interpretation. Following this observation, Gideon very apologetically asks the same question again but expects to observe something different if God's answer is yes—a dry fleece and wet ground. Gideon's observation of a dry fleece and wet ground is reported, but on this second morning, God is explicitly mentioned as causing what Gideon

observed. The account leaves little, if any, room for ambiguity in understanding what Gideon said, did, and observed.

What is not explicitly stated in these verses is why Gideon asks the question a second time. The obvious assumption is that Gideon asked a second time because he was not sufficiently convinced that the results he saw on the first morning were the result of divine action, and he wanted to be sure that God was communicating with him. Multiple commentaries on this passage take this view, as does Ellen White in her writings on this passage (Nichol, 1978; Keil and Delitzsch, 1996; Walton, Matthews, & Chavalas, 2000; White, 1890). Why might this assumption be reasonable? We know that wool has a propensity for absorbing water vapor from the air; this is one reason why wool is often used as a base layer of clothing, as it readily absorbs large amount of perspiration as it vaporizes from the skin and incorporates the moisture within its fibers without feeling wet while in contact with the skin. On this basis, the assumption that Gideon believed that the fleece's wetness was caused simply by exposure of the fleece to humid air seems reasonable.

The story of Hezekiah related in 2 Kings 20 may give additional insight into what Gideon might have been thinking, although it occurred a few hundred years later. As the chapter begins, Hezekiah is deathly ill and is told by the prophet Isaiah that he will die. Hezekiah at this point prays, not wanting to die, and appeals to God on the basis of his life of devotion to God to heal him. God hears Hezekiah's prayer and sends Isaiah back to tell Hezekiah that he would be healed and live for another 15 years. Hezekiah, like Gideon before him, seeks a physical sign from God expressing His will.

<sup>8</sup>Now Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "What will be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD the third day?" <sup>9</sup>Isaiah said, "This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten steps or go back ten steps?" <sup>10</sup>So Hezekiah answered, "It is easy for the shadow to decline ten steps; no, but let the shadow turn backward ten steps." <sup>11</sup>Isaiah the prophet cried to the LORD, and He brought the shadow on the stairway back ten steps by which it had gone down on the stairway of Ahaz (2 Kings 20:8-11).

Hezekiah, like Gideon before him, wanted to see something that he would interpret to be the clear and unmistakable result of divine action. Given the choice of two signs that God could use to confirm what Isaiah had

spoken to him, Hezekiah would, therefore, have to choose the sign that would be most consistent with his belief about what it would look like if God directly interacted with nature. On this basis, he chose the sign that contradicted the behavior he would normally expect the shadow to exhibit, dismissing the other option as being “easy.” The word “easy” comes from the Hebrew word *qalal*, which is often translated as “cursed,” “small,” or “trivial” (Strong, 1990). This suggests that Hezekiah felt that the sign of the shadow moving forward was in some way beneath God to perform and therefore inconsistent with what an act of God should look like. Hezekiah's basic assumption here appears to be that when God acts, it should be in a way that contradicts the normal expectations of the way nature operates and defies an explanation that is consistent with human knowledge. His assumption remains common among those who believe that God is active in the world. But is this assumption correct? Can God act in ways that might otherwise be logically explained by reference to processes that are distinct from direct divine activity?

If God is omnipotent, and is therefore not limited in the means and methods by which He acts, then God can act in ways that are also consistent with some kind of natural, godless explanation that we could propose. Considering this possibility challenges our common assumptions about what God is like, how God acts in the natural world, and when and where we might expect to observe God's interaction with the world in which we live and work.

As we look at Gideon's experiences with the fleece, this broader understanding of how God works in nature helps us to understand that God communicated His will to Gideon with equal clarity through the wet fleece on the first morning and through the dry fleece on the second morning. Interestingly, in Judges 6:38 when the discovery of the wet fleece is reported, the text says, “And it was so.” But in Judges 6:40, when the discovery of the dry fleece is reported on the second morning, the text explicitly says, “God did so....” The language used in these texts suggests that Gideon shared Hezekiah's assumptions about what might reasonably be expected to be attributed to divine activity and that what Gideon observed on that first morning was not consistent with his ideas of what would be a clear manifestation of God acting to express His will.

### Implications for Science

It is important for those who believe in God and practice science to understand that while God's activity may be most easily observed in those phenomena that defy any natural explanation that we can come up with, it is also possible to see God act in ways that we may be able to provide alternative explanations for—explanations that may not require any direct involvement by God. If we assume that God acts only in ways that defy scientific explanation, we will be led to think that if a phenomenon can be explained without invoking divine intervention, it must have occurred without divine intervention.

There are important implications that lead to significant consequences when we limit our expectations of when, where, and how God acts. If we practice science under the assumption that God only acts in ways that defy scientific explanation, we will conclude that if we can conceive explanations that do not require God's active intervention, then God did not act to produce the observations we are explaining. This leads to what is often referred to as the "God of the gaps" perspective, in which anything that we can explain using human knowledge, logic, and reasoning happened without God, and anything that we cannot explain must be something that God did. The important practical problem with that perspective is that as we learn more about the world in which we live, and as we come up with more explanations of how the world around us functions, the number of phenomena that we believe to be the result of divine activity decreases. Eventually God's role in the world becomes so small that He is no longer effectively present anymore, as godless explanations render His involvement unnecessary.

This line of thinking eventually leads to one of two possible destinations. The first of these is deism. God, while a real and powerful Creator, has withdrawn from His creation, leaving it to operate without His personal presence or concern. He has no desire to communicate with humans or to affect how they live their lives. The second is atheism. The absence of evidence of divine communication and interaction with the world is the natural consequence of the absence of a God. In short, if an event could happen without God, it did happen without God, and, therefore, there is no God.

An important consideration that counteracts the assumptions limiting our perceptions of divine activity is the understanding that God is the Creator of all of the natural laws by which the world operates and which underlie the "godless" explanations of natural phenomena. For example, God created gravitational attraction, therefore



things fall in a manner described by natural laws as a consequence of properties that God established. Within this understanding, natural laws describe the tools that God may use to express and accomplish His will.

This should affect how we think about numerous common situations in which scientific knowledge and divine activity may be considered as competing explanations for what we observe. For instance, consider how we think about the involvement of God in healing from disease or injury. Our tendency is to think that if there is some sort of miraculous healing—an outcome that contradicts our scientific understanding of the healing process or is outside our understanding of that process—then God was responsible for that outcome. But if healing results from the actions of doctors and/or other trained medical professionals, then God was not responsible for that healing. Instead, what may be true is that when healing is brought about surgically, through medication, or through other forms of treatment, it is also the result of God's work because God gave the knowledge and the skill needed to diagnose and to treat the condition. God may work through medical professionals or alongside them. The existence of an explanation for healing based on what we know about medical science does not preclude the personal and direct involvement of God in that healing process.

Consider what may happen in an automobile accident in which the airbag deploys upon impact and a person walks away from the vehicle with minor injuries. The godless explanation is that the impact and the operation of the airbag occurred as the expected consequence of natural behavior. We understand how a car moves on the basis of the laws of motion, the forces that are involved when the car impacts another object, and how natural laws are employed in causing the airbag to be activated, and no divine action needs to be invoked. Alternatively, we can understand that God established these laws so that things would happen in a certain way to protect that person from serious injury or death or that God was at work alongside those natural laws. Again, the existence of a godless explanation for these events does not preclude or contradict the involvement of God in what is observed. God does not act only in the ways we find obvious or consider miraculous, but God can and does also act in the world in ways that we do not quickly attribute to Him or consider miraculous. The words of Elihu to Job in Job 33:13,14 provide a succinct description of our tendency to mistakenly exclude God from our thinking.

<sup>13</sup>“Why do you complain against Him that He does not give an account of all His doings? <sup>14</sup>Indeed God speaks once, or twice, yet no one notices it.”

How should the understanding that God may act through or in conjunction with natural processes affect our understanding of God's role in creation? Science has produced numerous explanations for the origin of the universe and of the life it contains that do not involve direct action by God, and various theological schools of thought incorporate these explanations under labels such as progressive creation or theistic evolution. However, in the case of creation, we have been given the clear account in God's Word telling us that the universe and life in it is the result of direct divine action rather than the indirect result of laws and processes established by God. The scientist whose foundation is the Word of God, therefore, has no need to use scientific reasoning to determine how our universe and life came to be; that question has already been answered. While other explanations formulated without considering Scripture's testimony may be consistent with our observations and may have some predictive value (making these explanations useful), this does not preclude the existence of other explanations that do include God that can equal and exceed these explanations in usefulness and in truth.

Those who accept Scripture's testimony of the direct involvement of God in creation, however, need to be cautious in their criticism of those explanations that reject His involvement. It is one thing to claim that God did not act in a certain way in history, but it is a different thing to claim that God could not act in a certain way in history. A biblically-based scientist should exercise appropriate care in remembering and stating that a rejection of evolutionary explanations for origins is not based on the belief that God could not act over long periods and in indirect ways, but on a belief that Scripture shows us that God did not act in these ways. One must be careful to avoid contradicting beliefs that incorrectly limit the ability of God to act in certain ways by introducing positions that incorrectly limit the ability of God to act in other ways.

#### **Gideon's Use of the Scientific Method**

In examining Gideon's use of the fleece in Judges 6, we see that Gideon's actions and responses largely correlate with the methodology that we commonly refer to as the scientific method, although this type of problem solving is not necessarily limited to use in a scientific context. The scientific method varies somewhat in its formulation, but there is general consensus upon the elements of the method. The process begins with asking a question, often based on an observation. In this case, Gideon's question was, "Has God called me to deliver Israel?" Following the formulation of the question, he developed what we call in scientific terms a hypothesis—an

educated guess about what the answer to the question is. Gideon's hypothesis was that God was able to answer this question in a clear, understandable manner. And so, as all good scientists do, Gideon designed an experiment. He set out his fleece, experimenting with God to see how God would answer the question. Having conducted the experiment by using the fleece to collect data, Gideon collected his data from the experiment by taking the fleece, wringing it out, and getting a bowlful of water out of the fleece. Upon gathering this data, Gideon then analyzed the results of the experiment and drew the conclusion that the experiment was inconclusive, for reasons discussed above. And as scientists do when determining that the results of the experiment are inconclusive, he cycled through the process again, performing a second experiment. On repeating the experiment, Gideon obtained a result that he considered to be clear and unambiguous, fitting in with his more limited understanding of how God acts.

There is, however, a significant flaw in Gideon's application of the scientific method. That flaw can be expressed in scientific terms by words attributed to the famous chemist Frank H. Westheimer: "Why spend a day in the library when you can learn the same thing by working in the laboratory for a month?" (Corey, 2007). In other words, a scientist shouldn't spend time designing experiments to answer questions that have already been answered. If the question has already been answered, a scientist conducts all subsequent inquiries on the basis of that answer unless there is evidence to suggest that the previous answer is incorrect. To do otherwise would be a waste of time, effort, and resources.

Judges 6:36 clearly indicates that Gideon understood that he already had an answer to his question, as it states, "...if You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken...." In other words, Gideon knew that God had already spoken to him, telling him that he was chosen by God to deliver Israel. Gideon did not have to put out the fleece in order to answer this question because God had already said what the answer was. Gideon failed to give proper weight to the answer he had been given, suggesting that his faith in the prior answer was weak.

Judges 6:39 states, "please let me make a test once more with the fleece...." The word translated here as "test" is *nasah*, used in 33 other places in the Old Testament (Strong, 1990). One interesting place in which it is used is in the first chapter of Daniel when Daniel and his friends were confronted with the choice of whether to eat the food offered them by the king or to obey the dietary laws given by God.

<sup>12</sup>“Please test(*nasah*) your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>13</sup>Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.” <sup>14</sup>So he listened to them in this matter and tested(*nasah*) them for ten days. (Daniel 1:12-14)

Like Gideon, Daniel proposed to perform an experiment. But there is a critical difference between the experiment that Daniel proposed to his overseer and the experiment that Gideon proposed to God. Gideon's test was designed to determine what God would say; Daniel's test was designed to demonstrate what God had said. This reveals a key difference in Gideon's faith versus Daniel's faith. Gideon had heard the Word of God spoken to him, giving him instructions as to what he should do. But he wasn't willing to accept God's Word; instead, he needed to have a visual indication of what God wanted him to do. Daniel understood and accepted God's Word regarding what he was supposed to eat, and the purpose of his test was to demonstrate the truth of what God said to his captors in Babylon.

Daniel's purpose in his test in Babylon was like Elijah's purpose in conducting the test at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. Although the word “test”(*nasah*) is not used in that passage, Elijah's intent was clear: to provide to Ahab and the people of Israel a demonstration so that they would know that Yahweh is God (1 Kings 18:37). The results of that test were clear and convincing to those present, just as the results of Daniel's 10-day experiment provided clear physical evidence of the value of Daniel's proposed diet to his overseers.

In Exodus 17, the argumentative children of Israel were rebuked by Moses because of their tendency to “test the Lord.” (Exodus 17:2). Like Gideon in years to come, they were unwilling to accept the evidence of God's prior directions and His activity on their behalf, but the Israelites' unwillingness led well beyond doubting what He had already told them. They openly rebelled against God, accusing Him of leading them into the wilderness to die of thirst. Despite their lack of faith, God provided water for them by bringing water from a rock for them. As Moses reminded Israel of this event before they entered Canaan, he warned them that they should not “put the Lord your God to the test.” (Deut. 6:16). In other words, Moses warned them against the temptation to demand physical signs of His will in light of all that He had previously spoken to them and done for them.

The gospels record several instances in which the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees asked Jesus to perform some sort of miraculous sign to demonstrate to them that He was the Messiah. The incident related in Matthew 16:1-4 is particularly noteworthy:

<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. <sup>2</sup>But He replied to them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' <sup>3</sup>And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? <sup>4</sup>An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away.

Like Gideon before them, these people had narrow conceptions of how they expected God to act. But unlike Gideon, whose sign-seeking was a timid attempt to determine God's will, these religious leaders demanded that Jesus act in a way that conformed to their expectations and to their will. In this instance, Jesus compared their ability to observe and interpret available physical evidence to draw conclusions about the natural world to their inability to observe and interpret available evidence to draw correct conclusions about the nature and work of the Messiah. Had they properly accepted the evidence of God's Word that was already available to them, they would not have felt the need to validate the Word through additional tests and observations (John 5:33-47).

As the end of this world approaches, God's people are consistently cautioned about the danger of signs and wonders produced in support of Satan's deceptive agenda (Matt. 24:24, 2 Thess. 2:9, Rev. 13:13,14). These physical manifestations are only capable of successfully leading people astray if they discount or distrust the evidence previously given to them through God's prior words and actions. But if people recognize that "In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation," (White, 1911. p. vii) then they will not find it necessary or desirable to look for additional signs and/or communication to provide answers that have already been given. In these last days, it is not only those physical manifestations produced by supernatural beings in support of an anti-Scriptural agenda that require our diligent awareness and discernment; we must also be cautious not to be led astray by understandings of natural phenomena that contradict Scripture. How then do we guard against being led astray by scientific investigation and understanding?

### **Implications for the Conduct of Biblically-Based Science**

As scientists operate within a biblically-based worldview, we must understand that the purpose of science is not to prove God's existence nor is it to determine whether God has acted or continues to act. Science provides us with a tool to demonstrate the ways in which God has acted and continues to act on His creation throughout history. When we base our inquiries on the Bible, we do so believing in the validity and veracity of God's Word, taking it as it has been given to us. We do this not to prove that Scripture is truthful, but to show how the truths of Scripture can be applied to the world in which we live. The will of God and the Word of God define boundaries that prevent us from pursuing unfruitful lines of research and encourage us to consider perspectives ignored by those who overlook the possibility of divine activity. We ask God to work through us so that others will see the truth of what He has already told us.

We phrase some of the questions we pose as scientists a little bit differently because we understand that God's Word has already given us some answers. Instead of looking for evidence that God created the earth and life on it, we look for those things that are a consequence of God's creation. Instead of looking for the geological evidence proving that a global flood caused major geological changes and death on a massive scale, we look for those phenomena that we would expect to be caused by flooding of that extent. Instead of studying the effects of certain behaviors on health in order to establish the wisdom and utility of those health principles given in Scripture, we look at how the application of biblical principles produces positive changes in human health. Although the way in which we formulate and express our research questions is somewhat different from the way someone who does not regard Scripture as foundational would frame those questions, the methods that we use to collect data and the way in which we design our experiments remain largely the same. In many cases, there is no substantial difference in the questions we ask because Scripture is silent on those particular topics.

In basing our scientific understanding and practice on Scripture, we should always keep in mind that our understanding of Scripture is limited and subject to change as we study it further, just as our understanding of nature is limited and subject to change. It is possible to confuse our understanding of the message of Scripture with Scripture's actual message and to consequently base our work on ideas of human origin rather than divine inspiration. Although we remain confident that God has spoken through His Word, and that He continues to speak

to us through His Spirit and through others so that we can understand God as He wants us to, we must do so with humility, recognizing the human capacity for self-deception and Satan's ability to lead people astray.

### **Gideon's History of Dependence on Physical Manifestations**

In examining the life of Gideon before and after he performed his test with the fleece, we see a pattern of behavior that demonstrates a dependence on signs and manifestations as the basis of his belief instead of simply accepting the plain messages he was directly given by God. This dependence is manifested throughout Gideon's story, beginning with Gideon's initial conversation with the angel of the Lord in which God's plan for him was first revealed. Judges 6:12-17 provides the key elements of this exchange:

<sup>12</sup>The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior."

<sup>13</sup>Then Gideon said to him, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?"

And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." <sup>14</sup>The LORD

looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" <sup>15</sup>He said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in

Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." <sup>16</sup>But the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man." <sup>17</sup>So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found

favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who speak with me."

As Gideon responded to the angel, he initially disagreed with the premise that God was with him, and the basis of this disagreement was that his difficult circumstances and the absence of miracles like those seen in the lives of his ancestors led him to believe that God was absent. Gideon regarded his preconceptions about what the world should look like if God was present and active as more credible than the word spoken to him from God and questioned why the message did not fit his expectations of how God should act. It was difficult for him to take the Word of God at face value when God told him what He thought he could be and that He was with him. Despite Gideon's disagreement, God responded with a clear reiteration of His plan that could not have been interpreted differently. Following Gideon's continued explanations of why God's plan did not make sense to him, Gideon not only asked for a sign to confirm the truth of what God said to him, but he dictated that the sign should be based on

how the offering he brought would be treated. God agreed, giving Gideon a very clear and convincing sign by causing the offering to be burned up. So we realize that as Gideon laid out his fleece, not only had he been explicitly told what God's will was, but God had also accommodated Gideon's weak faith and skepticism by giving him a miraculous sign to confirm that God was speaking to him and giving him instructions. After this, Gideon still asked for additional confirmation twice more with the fleece.

After Gideon received the signs through his fleece, he went through the process of raising an army, only to have it whittled down to less than 1% of its original number under God's direction. He then took his small army by night to the Midianite camp, at which time God spoke to him again:

<sup>9</sup>Now the same night it came about that the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands. <sup>10</sup>But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, <sup>11</sup>and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp." So he went with Purah his servant down to the outposts of the army that was in the camp. <sup>12</sup>Now the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the sons of the east were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore. <sup>13</sup>When Gideon came, behold, a man was relating a dream to his friend. And he said, "Behold, I had a dream; a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat." <sup>14</sup>His friend replied, "This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand" (Judges 7:9-14).

Gideon could have expressed faith that God would do what He said He would, but because he was still afraid, he accepted God's offer to give him another sign to confirm what God had told him. God's word alone was still not sufficient for him. God, in His mercy, gave Gideon a fourth sign, following another clearly stated expression of His will. After Gideon accepted this additional evidence, he led his small army to victory over the Midianites.

Following Gideon's victory, the Israelites asked him to become their king. Gideon, to his credit, declined their request, but did make a request of his own.



<sup>24</sup>Yet Gideon said to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) <sup>25</sup>They said, "We will surely give them." So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil. <sup>26</sup>The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camels' necks. <sup>27</sup>Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household (Judges 8:24-27).

What is an ephod and why would Gideon take the opportunity afforded by his victory to make one for himself? An ephod was part of the clothing that the priests wore (Exodus 28:4-30). There are two reasons why having an ephod may have appealed to Gideon. The first is that as Gideon had previously offered a sacrifice that God accepted, he may have concluded that he was to serve as a priest and, therefore, needed to dress like a priest (White, 1890). The second reason is that part of the high priest's ephod consisted of a golden breastplate with precious stones, which was why Gideon specifically requested the gold jewelry. This part of the ephod appears to have had a functional role above and beyond designating that the wearer was the high priest; it also appears to have been used to provide a visual means of communication from God. One story that illustrates the use of the ephod for this purpose is found in 1 Samuel 23:9-12, in which David called for the ephod to receive answers from God. Given Gideon's history of seeking signs to base his belief on, it is reasonable to believe that he wanted an ephod so that he would have a means of receiving the physical evidence he had been dependent on. While Gideon had sufficient faith to follow God in leading Israel to victory over the Midianites, it appears that he may never have gotten to the point where he could trust God's Word in the absence of those physical manifestations he considered to be consistent with his ideas of how God should act. By the end of Gideon's story, this ephod had become a problem because the Israelites started to worship it as an idol. This illustrates a potential consequence that can result when we focus on the physical manifestations of God's activity and base our relationship with God on them. If we need physical demonstrations in order to maintain a relationship with God, where does that lead us? In the case of Gideon, his family, and his nation, it led to idolatry. We see throughout Scripture that people

who think they need a visible god make golden calves or worship Baal and other fictional deities because they want gods that they can see.

Idolatry is not the only way in which a focus on the physical manifestations of God's activity instead of a focus on God and His Word may result in divergence from His will. We may shift from worshipping the Creator to worshipping the creation. This may lead to a blurring of the lines between God and nature, as manifested in panentheistic religion, or in a complete obliteration of the distinction between God and nature, as observed in pantheistic religion.

For scientists, a different, far subtler danger is the temptation to worship our own reason. We may recognize the power and capacity of human minds to learn and to reason and begin to believe that we can make our own decisions and conclusions without God. Ellen White cautions against the tendency to elevate our reason above the testimony of Scripture:

"God desires man to exercise his reasoning powers; and the study of the Bible will strengthen and elevate the mind as no other study can. Yet we are to be aware of deifying reason, which is subject to the weakness and infirmity of humanity....When we come to the Bible, reason must acknowledge an authority superior to itself, and heart and intellect must bow to the great I AM" (White, 1892, p. 109).

When the deification of reason occurs, we become gods to ourselves, although we may not claim to be. When we have a mindset in which we only see God at work in the ways that we have decided that God should work, we essentially make ourselves a god over God as we attempt to limit God's work to fit within the boundaries of our making. God no longer has sovereignty over our work or our lives but instead becomes the God of our gaps, to be called upon only when we need His help to solve our problems as we direct.

Ellen White insightfully notes the effect of this way of thinking on our relationship to Scripture:

"Men consider themselves wiser than the word of God, wiser even than God; and instead of planting their feet on the immovable foundation, and bringing everything to the test of God's word, they test that word by their own ideas of science and nature, and if it seems not to agree with their scientific ideas, it is discarded as unworthy of credence. Thus the great standard by which to test doctrines and character is set aside for human standards" (White, 1884).

### Gideon in the New Testament

Understanding that the limitations of Gideon's faith were repeatedly demonstrated throughout his lifetime, his place in Hebrews 11, commonly regarded as one of the Bible's most eloquent expositions on faith, is noteworthy. In this chapter, as the author talks about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Rahab, verses 32-34 mention Gideon (and others).

<sup>32</sup>And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, <sup>33</sup>who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Here Gideon is listed as someone whose faith in God was significant, effective, and worthy of emulation. How do we reconcile this with the consistently demonstrated limitations of his faith? Perhaps this tells us one of the most important things about faith. Gideon's faith may have been limited and he may have been very reliant on seeing signs that fit within his definition of how God should act, but Gideon still acted on the faith that he had and accomplished God's purpose.

A scientist, therefore, can recognize that when inquiry leads to numerous additional questions and doubts about whether God is present or involved in some way, the presence of doubt is not what is important. As Ellen White states:

"God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration. Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith" (White, 1892, p. 105).

What is important is whether one is willing to hold on to the faith that remains, to act according to what God has revealed in His Word, and to work on nurturing that remaining faith. On acting on that faith, God will reward that faith just as He rewarded Gideon, and that faith will grow if it is allowed to, that is, if one is willing to trust

what God has already said and what God continues to say rather than waiting for God to work only on one's own terms within erroneous, humanly-defined expectations of how God can or should act. God must be God, able to work in His way and in His timing. When scientists place their work on this foundation, God will bless their inquiries, bring clarity to their analyses, and lead them to correct conclusions.

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