



March/April 2024 [Randall Price](#)

Is the Book of Judges Really History? (Part 2)

The reluctant judge Gideon is one of the Bible's most well-known and colorful characters. Selected by God for the work of a warrior while hiding from Israel's enemies, he learned to trust God through a process since termed "putting out the fleece" to discern His will ([Judg. 6](#)). Through Gideon's weakness, the Lord brought Israel victory during the difficult days of the judges (chaps. 7—8). As a result, Gideon is remembered as one of the faithful heroes "who through faith subdued kingdoms" ([Heb. 11:32-33](#)).

However, some may be tempted to think the account of Gideon is only a story, not history. Telling stories to emphasize the main message of a scriptural text has become popular in many churches. While storytelling helps listeners retain a passage's central idea, it often minimizes the reality of the people, places, and events that form the account. Archaeology helps recover the past's physical

evidence, thereby restoring the Bible's historicity and helping a post-modern generation develop a real faith for daily life.

In 2019 archaeologists unearthed a 3,100-year-old inscription from the site of Khirbet al-Ra'i, a settlement in the southern Judean hills between Kiryat Gat (the ancient Philistine city of Gath) and the central Canaanite city-state of Lachish, which became a Judean city destroyed by Assyrian King Sennacherib (ca. 701 BC). Because Philistine-style pottery was found in the excavations at Khirbet al-Ra'i, the settlement fit well the biblical description of the Philistine city of Ziklag.¹ Radiocarbon dating revealed the date for the site was the 10th century BC, the time when the Davidic kingdom began and Ziklag came under Israelite control. The Philistine King Achish gave David Ziklag, where David once defeated an invading Amalekite army; and some of the Israelites returned there after the Babylonian exile ([Neh. 11:25, 28](#)). However, the city also functioned during Gideon's judgeship, as mentioned in the book of Joshua (15:20, 31).

Archaeologists discovered a potsherd (broken pottery) from a small jug at Khirbet al-Ra'i. The name *Jerubbaal*, which means "May Baal be great," was inscribed in ink. This name, a nickname Gideon received after tearing down Baal's altar ([Judg. 6:31-32](#)), points more clearly to the biblical judge than the more popular biblical name *Gideon*. The potsherd is dated around the time (ca. 1100 BC) when many biblical scholars believe Gideon lived.

This discovery marks the first time an inscription of the rare name *Jerubbaal* has ever been excavated. Later biblical writers used the word *ba'al* (the second part of Gideon's compound nickname) to refer specifically to the Canaanite warrior god Baal, but the Israelites of Gideon's time understood the word simply to mean "lord" and would have used it in reference to the God of Israel. Preserving this ancient nickname indicates the historicity of the Gideon account because, while

this name would be inappropriate for an Israelite of a later period, it fits precisely in the Judges period.

Gideon's legacy as a hero of the faith reminds us that God can and will use anyone, despite his or her fear and limitations, who yields to Him. Gideon is more than just a storybook figure; he is a part of history, along with each of us who believes in faith and trusts in the Lord. As a judge (or "deliverer," or "savior") of Israel, Gideon also reminds us that the Lord intervened in history to conquer sin and redeem all who will trust Him as Savior.

ENDNOTE

"Biblical Town of Ziklag May Have Been Discovered," *Bible History Daily*, blog of the Biblical Archaeology Society (September 22, 2022).



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