

LIVING BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGNS: SEEKING BUT NOT
DIVINING THE WILL OF GOD¹

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Introduction

The title of this essay is loosely based on the statement in 2 Cor 5:7 that Christians “walk by faith, not by sight,” which has become somewhat of a slogan or cliché in Christian circles. Simply put, “walking” or “living” by faith consists of obediently following and trusting in God, rather than relying on yourself or on things that are seen. Such a perspective permeates a Christian understanding of the life of faith. However, when it comes to making big and/or difficult decisions in our lives often we Christians subtly abandon this principle.

In the recent past I have had some big decisions to make. Not long ago I participated in an interview process for a new faculty position in Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College. The interview day proved to be fairly stressful, with two other candidates, both of whom were well qualified and established scholars, being present on campus and going through the interview process on the same day. But for myself the events of that day were actually the culmination of a process of decision-making and an attempt to discern God’s will for my life and the life of my little family. In my situation, naturally, several decisions preceded the interview day itself. I had to decide conclusively

1. This article is the revised text of Dr. Evans’s address on the occasion of his being inducted as Assistant Professor of Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College on March 24, 2010.

whether to apply in the first place—I had to decide whether I would really leave a great academic position I already held at another fine institution. Second, I had to decide how much time to put towards preparation for the interview as my work at my former institution and my family life had already kept me more than busy. Finally, once offered the position, I had to decide whether to accept and move 3,000 kilometers eastward to the Hamilton area.

Making decisions is not always easy. As a person of faith, in a relationship with God, I find that making decisions ultimately concerns discerning God's will in my life. As a Christian and an Old Testament scholar I would affirm that God's will is revealed in his Word. Any decision that goes against God's explicit will, inscripturated in the Bible, would obviously be unacceptable. For example, a decision whether to steal, kill somebody, or commit adultery would obviously be against God's will. But often Christians are faced with decisions where no clear biblical precedent is given. In such instances, what processes are available for Christians to aid us in decision making? There are several approaches that are common at the popular level.

Popular Decision-Making Approaches

Signs

Some Christians seek a sign to aid in the decision-making process. Often this entails interpreting what may otherwise appear to be coincidence as a sign confirming or disconfirming what one thinks the will of God is regarding a particular decision. There is abundant anecdotal evidence for both the existence of this approach and its putative effectiveness. For instance, one pastor told me that he had a church parishioner who was unsure of a decision he made to go on a trip and was at the airport waiting at the gate for his flight to begin boarding and feeling quite anxious. He thought it better that he call a friend and ask what he thought of his decision to go. As he dialed the number 747-2303 he suddenly realized that he was going to be boarding a 747 aircraft and thus the phone number he was dialing confirmed his decision to go.

While this example may be a bit humorous, many of us like to ask God for signs. Sometimes we attempt to assist God in communicating to us. We give God a mechanism whereby he can communicate to us in a way we will understand. Usually the difficulty of the requested sign is in direct proportion to how much a person wants to do, or wants to avoid doing, something. That is, we say, “God, if a volcano erupts in my city tomorrow, I will take it as a sign for me to become your missionary to Pakistan.” Or “God, if the sun shines tomorrow—anywhere in the world—I will take it as a sign for me to take the day off from work and relax.”

To make it more personal, perceived signs initially contributed to my interest in coming to McMaster Divinity College. After moving from southern Ontario to the Canadian Prairies in 2006, I was in my third year of teaching Old Testament studies at another academic institution when my family and I came to southern Ontario (Toronto) for a brief visit in November of 2008. Though immensely enjoying the ministry in which I was involved at that time, my wife and I missed several aspects of living in Ontario, not the least of which was the company of some very close friends. Before our short visit to Toronto I had prayed to God that he would make our longings for Ontario dissipate unless it was his will that we return there to live someday soon. However, when we visited Toronto these feelings did not miraculously disappear. This was probably due to the fact that in early November when we visited it was 25 degrees Celsius in Toronto and 15 below zero in the city we were residing in at that time. (Of course, there is the fact that we were staying with close friends and enjoying their company.)

As it would turn out, this lack of the requested sign coincided with my receiving an email while in Toronto informing me of the opening at McMaster Divinity College, and I was sympathetic to viewing the coincidence as a sign that this would be the position that would bring us back to Southern Ontario. However, my own personal history regarding the role of signs as a means of determining God’s will for my life led me to view such coincidences with a healthy degree of skepticism.

Growing up in the church I heard many stories of Christians putting out a “fleece” to find help in making a tough decision. There is ample anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of this method. However, relying on anecdotes as a rationale for this method runs the risk of justifying superstition on the basis of unsubstantiated reports. Rather than relying on the authority of anecdotes, I must first ask whether there is biblical support for such a method of obtaining direction from God.

“Words” from the Bible

In attempting to be “biblical” some Christians turn to the Bible to get a “word” from God to make a decision. This method has sometimes been referred to as “Scripture flipping” or the “random Bible” method, and many have used it superstitiously. Adherents close their eyes, open the Bible to a random page, and look at the first word that their finger hits. Again popular stories abound in evangelicalism about how God has communicated to his faithful through this method. Of course there are also well-known jokes regarding its unreliability. For instance, it has been said that someone performed the rite, closed their eyes while fanning their Bible and stuck their finger in, and it landed right on the verse: “Judas hung himself.” Thinking this must be a mistake, they tried it again and found the words: “Go, thou and do likewise.” Alarmed at this, they tried one last time and landed on the text: “What thou doest, do quickly.” Despite such potential for disaster, the method is still employed to this day.

Vows to God

Sometimes Christians make vows to God in order to get God to do something for them. In fact, in as a teenager when I wanted something really badly I would sometimes make a vow to God. I would vow to do a good thing if God would make something happen for me. For example, I would pray: “If that girl will just say yes when I ask her out, I will serve you whole-heartedly O God.” While this is obviously humorous in hindsight, I was quite serious at the time. Invariably, such vows are extremely self-centered. They are in reality an attempt to manipulate God into giving you your way.

Spiritual Guides

Some people entrust their decision to a *spiritual guide* in their life, that is, a pastor or other perceived “spiritually-in-tune” person. At this point I must make clear that asking advice is both biblically substantiated (Prov 11:14; 15:22), and pragmatically wise. However, the danger lies in an attitude that completely or blindly relies on the opinion of another for a difficult decision. After all, is anyone so close to God as to be able to tell you exactly what is God’s will for your life? Unfortunately, such an approach is perpetuated in some circles where pastors are supposed to have an almost unquestionable authority. In my own experience I have run across some pastors who thought they could really pronounce God’s will on people’s lives. Some church contexts consider a pastor’s word as “from God” and therefore an individual’s total responsibility to discern and decide is given entirely over to the pastor. Sometimes pastors are referred to as the “anointed,” and the quasi-biblical motto, “don’t touch the Lord’s anointed” is thrown around as a defense for the authority of the pastor.² However, is this biblical? Are “anointed ones” in the Bible infallible? In the Old Testament, priests, prophets, and kings were all anointed. *Did they ever fail?*

“Hearing” from God

Finally, sometimes people simply talk of needing to “hear” from God. They are frustrated when they do not get an answer. As Christians, we all want to “hear” from the Lord. But what do we mean by that? What type of hearing should we expect?

Biblical Precedents

As a biblical scholar I would naturally first want to determine whether these types of “seeking God’s will” are “biblical.” What precedents (if any) are there for these methods of discerning God’s will? Any search for biblical precedent must first begin with the Old Testament. Due to its length and perhaps its foundational nature, the Old Testament touches on a broader range of

2. Johnson and VanVoderen, *Subtle Power*, 111.

issues than the New Testament. Of course, the New Testament does not claim to be exhaustive on its own but assumes the foundation of the Old Testament.³ While some of what I will conclude could be based on statements in the New Testament, it is the Old Testament that gives the most detailed response to some of these issues—and it does so in the form of narrative. In order to assess these popular methods of “seeking God’s will” I want to look briefly at the stories of Gideon, Jephthah, and Saul.

The Story of Gideon (Judges 6)

The story of Gideon and his “fleece” is one of the more famous Bible stories. As a result, it has carried much weight for those who seek specific direction from God. In the biblical account, an angel appears to Gideon (6:11) and he is told he will deliver Israel (6:14). Gideon is doubtful and asks for a sign (6:17). In fact, Gideon does not believe the divine message until a miraculous sign is given (6:22).⁴ This practice of “doubt, then confirmation-by-sign” (or “seeing-is-believing”) becomes Gideon’s *modus operandi*. After the Spirit takes hold of Gideon (6:34) and he musters the troops, Gideon says to God, “If you are really going to use me to rescue Israel as you said, prove it to me this way” (6:36–37a).⁵ The mechanism that Gideon gives God for confirming the truthfulness of his promise is the famous miracle of the fleece. However, when the first sign is granted (dry ground, wet fleece)⁶ it is not enough for Gideon. Instead he

3. As Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 25, notes, “the New shows more signs of recognizing the authority of the Old than of reckoning it has authority over it.”

4. The sign entailed fire springing up from a rock and consuming the meal Gideon had brought to the angel (6:21).

5. All Bible verses quoted are my own translations.

6. Some have suggested that this was the easier of the two signs since a fleece would get wet at night due to “the differentials of condensation and evaporation” (Boling, *Judges*, 141). Presumably, the rest of the ground was dry due to the fleece soaking up the dew. Boling suggests that it is the second sign requested that is the “true miracle” (141). However, it seems the initial request is equally miraculous, as dew would wet the ground despite a wool fleece (though the fleece would naturally get wet). However, requesting that the dew not wet the ground at all is asking for an amazing miracle. In fact, his initial

needs a second sign (dry fleece, wet ground) to convince him that God will keep his word.⁷

At this point we should probably ask whether the “fleece” story should serve as a model for discerning God’s will. First, it should be noted that through this process no words were communicated. This fact is underscored when it is realized that in the book of Judges, God invariably communicates through divine words.⁸ Since divine communication through words is obviously clearer than other types of communication, this hardly holds up Gideon’s fleece as a model of first rank. Second, in asking for this sign Gideon is clearly *not* a model of trust. His request for this sign was not an attempt to discern God’s will, it was a stubborn resistance to what Gideon knew clearly to be God’s will. God had already communicated his will to Gideon (6:16). Gideon was not asking for clarity but looking for a loophole. As Block notes, Gideon “uses every means available to get out of the mission to which he has been called.”⁹ Would Gideon have asked for a second sign if the first one told him he did not have to fight? It is unlikely. Third, Gideon’s request for a sign stems from a pagan view of reality. In the ancient Near East people frequently would set up a test/ordeal or request a sign when doubtful of which direction to take or in order to discern an answer.¹⁰ Gideon’s request flows right out of his cultural environment—which was pagan. The book of Judges shows how Israel worshipped other gods such as the Baals throughout this period, so Gideon’s pagan perspective should not really come as a surprise.¹¹

request was probably supposed to be impossible, thus (so Gideon thought) allowing him to get out of the military service to God to which he had agreed.

7. As Block, *Judges*, 273, notes, by demanding a second sign “unlike Yahweh, Gideon is not true to his word.”

8. As Polzin, *Moses*, 172, points out, only here and in the incident where Gideon hears the Midianites’ dream does God send “a communication without any divine words being reported.”

9. Block, *Judges*, 273.

10. For an example see Dijkstra, “KTU,” 105–9.

11. Polzin, *Moses*, 169.

In my view, what is more remarkable than the miracles themselves is the fact that God responds to Gideon's requests. Gideon is trying to get out of his commission and attempting to manipulate God, but God condescends to answer Gideon at that level. In one way God allows himself to be manipulated.¹²

Gideon continues to be reliant on signs in Judges 7 as we see Yahweh tell Gideon directly (7:9) that he is giving Gideon the victory over Midian. It is quite evident that Yahweh knows Gideon very well, as God offers further assurance to this doubting judge that he is not lying to him. God says, "If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp . . . and hear what they are saying, then you will be encouraged to attack" (7:10–11). Gideon must be afraid, as he proceeds to sneak into the Midianite camp and overhear a Midianite describing a dream that is interpreted as meaning that God has given the Midianites into Gideon's hand (7:13–14). Again we see that Gideon does not trust God's words as much as a "sign" or "dream" that he hears about second-hand in the mouth of a pagan.

Interestingly, the Midianite that Gideon overhears only uses the generic term for God in Hebrew (*elohim*). In the Old Testament, this word is used of both the true God, Yahweh, and false gods.¹³ The use of the generic term, and the fact that a pagan is speaking, could suggest that Yahweh is not the "god" intended by the speaker (nor by the narrator). (While we might think that a pagan would only reference Yahweh in generic terms, when the pagan Rahab makes similar statements in Josh 2:9–10 she refers to Israel's God explicitly as Yahweh.) Gideon (who is frequently called Jerub-baal) may have also understood it to be referring to another god (perhaps Baal).¹⁴ After all, when Gideon destroyed Baal's altar, he was given a new name, "Jerub-baal,"

12. Block, *Judges*, 274, suggests that God allows himself to be manipulated because "he is obviously more interested in preserving his people than they are in preserving themselves."

13. E.g., Exod 12:22; 34:15; Deut 4:28; 6:14; Josh 24:15.

14. As Polzin, *Moses*, 172, points out, "god" in the Midianite's dream "refers to a deity whose identity, from the point of view of the speaker uttering his name or in view of the speaker's audience, is not Yahweh himself."

and Baal was asked to “contend with him” (6:32).¹⁵ In Gideon’s quasi-pagan perspective, the dream may have indicated that not only has Yahweh promised to deliver Israel, now the “god” referred to by the Midianite has also undertaken to assist Gideon in this endeavor.¹⁶ Only after hearing about the dream does Gideon have enough confidence to actually attack. Unfortunately, this sign means more to Gideon than God’s spoken word.

However, before we conclude that God never communicates through signs and dreams, we must acknowledge that *he does just that* in this narrative. Therefore, we cannot say that God *never* responds to such requests, despite their springing from doubt and a pagan perspective. But in such cases God is not obligated to respond—if and when he does, it is pure grace.

Sadly, at the end of his life, we see the end result of Gideon’s reliance on signs. After having experienced such success with signs Gideon moves into pure pagan superstition. After victoriously delivering Israel, Gideon requests that the Israelites give him some gold (8:24), which he subsequently uses to create an “ephod” in his home town of Ophrah (8:27). Some have suggested that what is meant here by “ephod” is an idol or image of Yahweh.¹⁷ However, elsewhere in Scripture ephods are clearly associated with oracles and function as oracular devices.¹⁸ Given Gideon’s earlier success with superstitious guidance and oracles, and the association of ephods with such practices, it seems most likely that Gideon’s ephod was intended to function as an oracular device for divining the will of the deity. Those who wanted to divine God’s will or get information from the deity would come to Gideon, pay their fee, and get an answer. The narrator notes that Israel *prostituted* themselves to this method (Judg 8:27). That is, they were “unfaithful” towards God by their use of this mechanistic way of divining God’s will. This ephod was not that

15. Polzin, *Moses*, 168, suggests Joash is suggesting “that Baal himself will manifest his own divinity by taking care of” Gideon.

16. Polzin, *Moses*, 172.

17. E.g., Norman, “Gideon,” 411. Block, *Judges*, 300, suggests Gideon built an image of Baal, not Yahweh.

18. Cf. 1 Sam 30:7–8; Exod 28:30.

of the Israelite high priest but a syncretistic and paganistic use of this ritual object. Sadly, if one could attempt to sum up Gideon's *modus operandi* in Judges, we could say *Gideon lived not by faith but by signs*.

Jephthah

It is obvious upon reading the book of Judges that the "judges" are hardly pious, virtuous heroes to be emulated in most respects. After the first judge, Othniel, there appears a clear degeneration in their character. Judges 2:19 nicely sums up the situation in Israel during this time period:

But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

Unfortunately, the situation with the judges of Israel is no different. The story of Jephthah is a good example of this degeneration. When Jephthah is off to battle the Ammonites, in order to ensure his success, he makes a vow to Yahweh.

If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be Yahweh's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. (Judg 11:30-31)

Often it has been thought that this was a "rash" vow.¹⁹ That is, Jephthah uttered it in the heat of the moment, and did not realize the possible implications (that it might mean sacrificing a human) and that he only intended to sacrifice an animal. However, both the historical and literary context would militate against this conclusion.

Historically, although ancient Israelite houses contained animals, they were not kept in houses as pets.²⁰ As M. Bal has pointed out, in the ancient world animals did not go out to meet

19. E.g., Boling, *Judges*, 207; Klein, *Triumph*, 95.

20. For example, people had dogs but they were not kept in the house and were not pets.

victorious warriors.²¹ Therefore it would appear that Jephthah's vow was more calculated than rash and that he actually intended a human sacrifice.²² This conclusion is also supported by the literary context, which sets Jephthah's story in the context of Israelite unfaithfulness when they had been worshipping the gods of the Ammonites and Moabites (Judg 10:6). Chemosh, the Moabite god, had children sacrificed to him (2 Kgs 3:27) and Milcom/Molech worship (1 Kgs 11:7) is infamous for its association with human sacrifice (cf. 2 Kgs 16:3; 23:10).²³ Therefore, both the historical and literary context make it likely that Jephthah intended to sacrifice a human if he was victorious over the Ammonites. Like Gideon's ephod, Jephthah's vow arose from a syncretistic religious outlook.²⁴ Jephthah was so determined to achieve victory that he was willing to kill his own child in order to obtain divine guidance and assurances.

The character of Jephthah becomes even clearer in his reaction to his daughter. Judges 11:35 records his response as: "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable (lit. brought me low) and you have caused my ruin (lit. you are the one ruining me)." Rather than a heartbroken sorrow, his reaction is accusatory as he blames her for his own actions. In reality, it was Jephthah's own superstition and selfishness that led him to this point. The nature of vows remains the same today as it was in Jephthah's time—vows are usually extremely self-centered. Not much has changed in 3000 years.

To sum up, Jephthah's approach to spiritual guidance was based on a selfish paganistic perspective. His vow was a manipulative attempt to get his own way and ensure his success. It is noteworthy that the "word of God" is absent from the story. The narrator does not tell us of Yahweh's reaction to the vow, nor link God's deliverance to it in any way. Just as Gideon's reliance

21. Bal, *Death*, 45.

22. Moore, *Judges*, 299. Block, *Judges*, 367.

23. Cf. Mosca, "Child Sacrifice."

24. Though Block, *Judges*, 367, would see a distinction between the two with Gideon being spiritually immature and Jephthah outrightly pagan. However, Gideon's actions and use of the ephod can hardly be explained as immaturity.

on superstitious signs ended up becoming a trap (מוֹקֵשׁ) that ensnared “Gideon and his household” (Judg 8:27), Jephthah’s own superstition ensnares his entire family as he sacrifices his only child on the altar of his ambition.²⁵ Sadly, Jephthah’s case is somewhat typical of a generation of Israelites that lacked spiritual guidance and instead “did what seemed right in their own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25).

Saul

Concurrent with the tenure of the last judge of Israel (Samuel) we are introduced to Israel’s first king, Saul. In a word, Saul is superstitious. Similar to Gideon and Jephthah before him, Saul is obsessed with ritualistic ensurance of signs of success.²⁶ Though his reign brings an end to the era of the judges, Saul proves that the superstition that permeated the era of the judges lived on during the regency of the first king of Israel. While the narrator of the book of Judges anticipated a positive change with the rise of the monarchy in Israel (Judg 17:6; 21:25), the story of Saul shows that this rectification still awaited the ascendancy of the Davidic monarchy.

King Saul inclines towards using orthodox Israelite ritual in ways close to sorcery and divination.²⁷ This aspect of his character is evident even when Saul is initially introduced in 1 Samuel 9, where Saul is seeking out supernatural guidance to aid in the recovery of his father’s lost donkeys.²⁸ While this attempt to gain prophetic insight leads him to Samuel, who will subsequently *anoint* Saul (note that Saul is an anointed one) as leader (*nagid*) over Israel (1 Sam 10:1), Saul’s superstitious interests will soon become a trap for him and his household.

Shortly after Saul’s ascendancy to the throne, Israel was at war with the Philistines (1 Samuel 13). Things were not going too well and the Philistines were mustering a large army against

25. Polzin, *Moses*, 180.

26. Polzin, *Samuel*, 135.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Saul believed that such guidance could be bought for a price (1 Sam 9:7).

Israel (1 Sam 13:5). Some Israelites were abandoning Saul's cause (1 Sam 13:8) and Samuel did not show up at the appointed time to offer the pre-battle sacrifices (1 Sam 13:8). Saul was faced with a difficult decision. Given the aggression of the Philistines (1 Sam 13:5), military engagement was imminent and inevitable. Saul could not continue to wait for the tardy Samuel. Saul could either lead his troops into battle without the good luck that the offering of ritualistic sacrifices would bring, or go ahead and offer the sacrifices himself before engaging the Philistines. Again we see the superstitious character of Saul come to the fore as he takes matters into his own hands and chooses to offer the sacrifice. It is clear that Saul thinks he has to offer a sacrifice in order to succeed (1 Sam 13:12). Of course, Samuel finally arrives and chides him for not obeying the Lord's command (13:14), but significantly for our purposes here, we are given another glimpse into Saul's superstitious ways.

In the next chapter, as the Philistine threat persists, we see Saul waiting with his army at the outskirts of Gibeah (1 Sam 14:2), while (unbeknownst to Saul) his son, Jonathan, spearheads an assault against the enemy. At this point it is significant to note that Saul is accompanied by the priest.²⁹ What is more, this priest is explicitly said to have an ephod with him (1 Sam 14:3). As is well known, one of the hallmarks of Hebrew biblical narrators is their economy of expression and the high value placed on conciseness.³⁰ Rarely does a biblical narrator give long descriptions of places, persons, or background. Given this reality, when such descriptions are given, their import is underscored. In this instance it is highly significant that we are explicitly told that the priest had the ephod with him. Once again, we see superstitious Saul ensuring that he has ready access to ritualistic guidance. Ironically, despite the presence of this religious expert, we are told "no one was aware Jonathan had gone" (1 Sam 14:3). Apparently there was no unique or prophetic insight present in this group.

29. It is noteworthy that this priest is said to be from the Elide house as that line was prophetically condemned in 1 Sam 2:27–36.

30. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114–30.

As mentioned, while Saul and his militia waited near Gibeah, Jonathan moved in on the Philistines. Interestingly, the superstitious nature of Jonathan is seen here as he also acts in accordance with a self-proclaimed “sign” (1 Sam 14:10), which seems to work out for him.³¹ Perhaps Jonathan’s superstition is due to his father’s influence, but the motivation appears different than Saul’s. First, he prefaces his sign with a faith statement that “perhaps Yahweh will act for us” and “nothing can hinder Yahweh from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam 14:6). Second, his sign does not appear to be set up towards selfish ends that would help him to avoid his duty or avoid taking risks. In fact, Jonathan’s requested sign appears weighted towards his engaging the enemy in battle. Jonathan decides that when he reveals himself to the enemy, if they say, “come up here and fight” it is a sign he will succeed, but if they say, “stay there until we come down to fight you” it is a sign he should not engage the Philistines because he will not succeed. It seems to me that an army sitting on top of a hill would rather have the fight come up to them (where they are stationed and have the high ground), than choose to come down-hill to attack. So Jonathan’s sign is not too difficult a sign. As mentioned above, usually the difficulty of the requested sign is in direct proportion to how much a person wants to avoid doing something. Here Jonathan is willing to go fight the enemy (if God will help him) and he makes the most likely reaction of the Philistines the sign that he should fight. As well, as Polzin writes, “Jonathan’s procedure is less dogmatic [than Saul’s]: he prefaces it with a ‘perhaps’ . . . and understands from the start that [the sign] may not be given.”³² Contrarily, Saul *demand*s signs and is paralyzed from action until he obtains one.

Following Jonathan’s assault on the Philistines, God sends a panic into the Philistine camp (14:15) and begins to deliver the Philistines into Israel’s hands. When Saul sees what is happening

31. Polzin, *Samuel*, 134, contrasts Jonathan’s and Saul’s rituals of inquiry in 1 Samuel 14 and concludes that Jonathan’s ritual only “hoped” for a sign and did not attempt to coerce God into giving one, while Saul’s does exactly that as “Saul forces an answer by lot when none is initially given through sacred inquiry.”

32. *Ibid.*

he still does not act! (1 Sam 14:16, 18). *Saul will not participate in God's deliverance until he gets ritualistic guidance.* Instead Saul first says, “Bring the ark³³ of God!” (v. 18)—which, at the very least, can be seen as a good luck charm (from Saul’s perspective). Then he begins talking to the priest. Given the description of the priest as the one with the ephod, Saul was clearly trying to obtain an oracle. As the oracular process proceeded, the tumult in the Philistine camp increased to the point that it could no longer be ignored. The fact that God was giving the Philistines into their hands finally became so obvious that even superstitious Saul could not hold out any longer. Finally, even without ritual confirmation, Saul chooses to join in the deliverance that God is bringing and orders the attack on the Philistines. In order to do this, he is forced to interrupt the oracular procedure he has initiated.³⁴ When Saul and the Israelites finally engage their enemy, they find the Philistines in confusion and killing each other (1 Sam 14:20).³⁵

However, this is not good enough for Saul. Despite the God-given panic in the camp and the fact that Philistines are killing each other, Saul still needs some ritualistic ensurance of success in battle, so he utters an oath over the people.

Saul bound the people under an oath, saying, “Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!” (14:24)

The self-centered nature of the vow is worth noting: “avenge *myself*, on *my* enemies.” As noted above, this type of vow is

33. Interestingly, the LXX reads “bring the ephod” (Προσάγαγε τὸ εφουδ) instead of “bring (אֶת־אֲרוֹן־יְהוָה) the Ark” at this point in 1 Sam 14:18. This also parallels David’s request to the priest (אֶת־אֲרוֹן־יְהוָה אֶת־אֶפְרוֹדִית) to “bring the ephod” right before inquiring of the Lord in 1 Sam 23:9. Thus it is possible that the LXX reflects the original reading.

34. Ordering the priest to “withdraw his hand” (1 Sam 14:19). Tsumura, *Samuel*, 366, suggests this meant for the priest to withdraw his hand from the ephod.

35. While the Hebrew may be a bit ambiguous here (note NRSV’s translation “every sword was against the other”) the context seems to make it clear that it is the Philistines who are killing each other and are in confusion. So Tsumura, *Samuel*, 367.

usually quite self-centered. The superstitious nature of the vow is obvious, as is the contrary-to-good-sense nature of the vow. Forbidding your troops sustenance in the midst of a long battle in order to ensure success is foolhardy. Naturally, his army gets weak.

His son, Jonathan (unaware of the vow), eats some honey that he finds on the way (14:27) and then finally, due to their extreme hunger, the Israelite troops (though aware of the vow) end up eating meat with the blood still in it (14:32). Saul is culticly astute enough to know that eating the meat with the blood is sinful (1 Sam 14:34) so he arranges a place for them to properly slaughter their meat and even builds an altar to Yahweh (1 Sam 14:35). Again, in keeping with his character, Saul attempts to deal with his problems through the use of ritual.

Saul decides to continue the attack on the Philistines and the people concur (14:36). The priest demands of the king that they first inquire of Yahweh (14:36). However, this advice from the priest (an “anointed one”) actually makes things worse as Saul inquires of Yahweh but does not receive an answer (14:37). Saul extrapolates that this lack of answering must be due to sin, so he proceeds to draw lots—to demand a “sign” to help them find the “sinner.” Keeping in mind the context, Saul already knows that the people have sinned against Yahweh (14:34) by eating the blood. Also, he must realize that this unfortunate situation has been created by the rash vow he imposed on his people. What does Saul need to know? Why does he need further ritual confirmation regarding who has sinned?

In reality, the casting of lots backfired, as Jonathan was chosen. We have already noted the guilt of the people. Saul himself was clearly guilty through his refusal to wait for Samuel and his choice to offer the sacrifices himself. Jonathan was the least guilty of all but was chosen by lot.³⁶ First, Jonathan did not

36. As Polzin, *Samuel*, 138, notes, “The lot results in the least guilty of all sides having been taken and the more guilty having escaped.” It is clear that the ritual here involved the use of Urim and Thumim. The MT reads “give Thamim” (14:41) but the LXX reflects the original text, which requests Urim and Thumim. Cf. Toeg, “Textual Note,” 493–98. So McCarter, *Samuel*, 247.

know of the oath (14:27) when he ate the honey. Second, Jonathan did not eat of the spoil with the blood in it, as did the people. Third, it was Jonathan who spearheaded the assault on the Philistines and through whom God was bringing his people victory.

The superstitious nature of Saul is further underscored in his response to Jonathan's being implicated by lot. Saul uttered another oath, this time, swearing that Jonathan would die for tasting the honey (14:44). Rather than showing remorse of any kind (even a selfish remorse like we saw in Jephthah) Saul appeared happy to execute his son and uttered a self-imprecation should he fail to do it. Luckily for Jonathan, the people stood up for him (and "ransomed" him 1 Sam 14:45).

It is significant for our purposes in this essay that the sign (the lots) appeared clear, but was clearly wrong. This is a perfect illustration of the problem with signs. I have experienced such problems with signs in my own life. Some time after applying to McMaster Divinity College, I earnestly prayed that if I was not going to get the position that God would soon give me some indication. (The impetus for the prayer was the difficulty of containing the excitement over the possibility of taking the job and moving.) Shortly after that prayer I heard fairly definitively through "the grapevine" that McMaster Divinity College was looking to hire a scholar who was further along in their career than I was. I took this as an answer to prayer and a clear sign that God was *not* calling me to McMaster Divinity College.

As the tragic story of Saul continues, in 1 Samuel 15 we find Saul under divine orders to wipe out the Amalekites and not spare anyone (15:3). However, Saul fails to implement the ban and spares the best of the animals. The rationale for this disobedience is clear—the animals will be better put to use as sacrifices (1 Sam 15:15) than merely killed in battle. Clearly Saul believes that sacrifice trumps obedience. After all, ritual is the most important thing. It is best to appease the deity with sacrifices. When God informs Samuel of what Saul has done, he confronts these skewed values head on:

And Samuel said, “Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is *the sin of divination*, and stubborn insistence is iniquity and *idolatry*. (1 Sam 15:22–23)

Rebellion is “the sin of divination/witchcraft” and stubbornness is “idolatry.” It is no accident that Saul’s rebellion and stubbornness are likened to divination and idolatry. Saul’s gradual descent into divination and witchcraft is clearly seen as his narrative progresses. From his initial attempt to inquire from the man of God regarding his father’s donkeys, to his oath of fasting, his frustrated efforts to inquire of Yahweh, his casting of lots to seize the sinner, his willingness to perform ritual rather than obey, to his oath to kill Jonathan, we see how Saul moved towards using orthodox Israelite practices in divinizing ways.³⁷ This progression is reminiscent of Gideon who initially made divinatory-like requests of God and ended up creating an ephod for himself that he could use for divination. Both men were obsessed with gaining divine insight that would ensure the success of their endeavors.

What is ironic about Saul’s progression is that as he leans towards divinatory practices, Yahweh refuses to answer him.³⁸ This culminates in 1 Sam 28:6 where we read: “Saul inquired of Yahweh, Yahweh did not answer him, not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets.” The occasion for Saul’s inquiring in this chapter is once again war with the Philistines. Saul is afraid (1 Sam 28:5) and he wants to ensure his success through obtaining a divine oracle or some other ritualistic sign. Despite his previously expelling the mediums and spiritists from Israel (1 Sam 28:3), Saul is so desperate for some superstitious reassurance that he decides to consult a medium in Endor. Saul has gone *all the way* this time. He has gone from using proper Israelite institutions as divinatory aids to now actually employing witchcraft. Furthermore, after the séance is completed the narrator tells us that Saul has also been fasting (1 Sam 28:20)—which was a further attempt by Saul to obtain some divine favor

37. Polzin, *Samuel*, 218.

38. *Ibid.*

or sign.³⁹ Saul was at rock bottom. God was not answering him, he was fasting in an attempt to obtain divine guidance and now he consults a medium, who conjures up Samuel.

At this point we might ask, what did Saul want to know? It is evident that these attempts at divination were not a search for knowledge as much as they were an attempt to get his own way. When Samuel appeared in the séance he only reiterated what he had already told Saul: “Yahweh has done for himself as he spoke through me: Yahweh has torn the kingship out of your hands” (1 Sam 28:17). Saul already knew the answer—he just didn’t like it. He was trying to change the divine will and get his own way. Similarly, Gideon had already heard the word of God clearly but then required more signs. Like Gideon, his obsession with signs became a trap for his whole family, just as Samuel’s post-mortem apparition declared that both Saul and his family would die that day at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 28:19).

Again, not much has changed through the ages. Sometimes our praying can amount to something like: “Lord bless *my* plans—but don’t change them (as I know my plans are right before I even come to pray to you).”⁴⁰ When we pray “show me your will” do we mean it? Or do we just want God to ease our conscience about something and are asking that God’s will become like ours? The error in this approach is the *difference between God being God and our trying to use God as a diviner*. Similarly, we may pray about something but do not want God to take over the matter but instead pray all around it—dodging the issue.⁴¹ Such prayer is actually a refusal to submit to God.

The Sin of Divination and Idols

This takes us back to Samuel’s statement to Saul in 1 Sam 15:23. How is rebellion like divination/witchcraft (קספים) and stubborn

39. Saul evidently thought that fasting was one way of ensuring success. That would explain his oath of fasting put on his troops and his fasting in 1 Samuel 28 in the face of Philistine aggression.

40. Anderson, “Will of God,” 97.

41. Ibid.

insistence like idolatry (תַּרְפִּים)? First, divination desires an independence not a submission. Therefore, it is rebellion against God. Mosaic law forbids mediums, wizards, and those who consult the dead (Deut 18:11; Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27). However, the fact that the matter had to be condemned is evidence that these arts were practiced in both Canaan and ancient Israel. Besides its being a blatantly false religion, the art of mediums and spiritists was condemned because it attempted to circumvent Yahweh himself by seeking from other spirits what only Yahweh can legitimately provide. Due to their role in divination, the rituals of both mediums and spiritists were actually in direct opposition to official religion. From a biblical point of view, God's freedom does not allow for divination. Saul's emphasis on ritualistic reassurance and his demand for signs showed his rebellion. Even today, a person wants divination when they do not want to submit to God's will. On the other hand, if rebellion is witchcraft, submission is faith in God. When we submit to God we put our faith in him and do not attempt to retain control for ourselves.

This brings us to the second half of Samuel's statement. How is stubborn insistence like idolatry? The Hebrew word I have translated "stubborn insistence" used here is **הַפְצַר**, the root of which is found only seven times in the Old Testament.⁴² Besides in our passage here, in each of these other appearances of the word **פָּצַר** means "to pressure" "to insist, persuade, or urge." It pairs well with the sin of rebellion. Rebellion will not submit to God and "stubborn insistence" demands its own way of God. That is, it attempts to force or manipulate God. That is why this sin is likened to idolatry. Attempting to manipulate or use God is treating God like an idol. Idols are well taken care of (dressed in expensive garments, offered sacrifices, have temples built for them, etc.) in the hopes that the god will take care of those who contributed to the care of the image. Saul attempted to force his will on God through his use of ritual. As noted above, prioritizing ritual over obedience evinces profoundly skewed values. In a way this is worshipping the ritual rather than the Creator.

42. Gen 19:3, 9; 33:11; Judg 19:7; 1 Sam 15:23; 2 Kgs 2:17; 5:16.

Biblical law is diametrically opposed to idol worship. The first three of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:3–7) are a guard against idolatry and the manipulation of Yahweh.

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God

The Bible shows throughout that God cannot be manipulated. However, these commands forbid people to attempt to manipulate God. As Walter Brueggemann writes,

An imageless quality is Yahweh's distinguishing characteristic . . . we may see in the prohibition of images an assertion of the unfettered character of Yahweh, who will not be captured, contained, assigned or managed by anyone or anything for any purpose.⁴³

At the heart of idolatry and divination is a refusal to submit to God and a rebellious attempt to manipulate him or conform him to our own wills. Not that this is always clear in the mind of the idolater. In outward appearances (and possibly in his own duplicitous evaluation of himself) Saul was a practicing Yahwist. This can be seen in his use of orthodox Israelite rituals, and his having expelled mediums and spiritists from Israel. As Tsumura writes, "Saul's action of driving these pagan practices out of the land indicates that he remains a faithful Yahwist, at least on the surface."⁴⁴ While on the surface Saul was orthodox, underneath he was bent towards idolatry and divination.

Application

The problems of the Judges and of Saul's failures are not just historical artifacts but are very relevant today.⁴⁵ The besetting sin in the era of the judges was syncretism. Rather than finishing the conquest of the Canaanites, the book of Judges shows how the Israelites became increasingly "canaanized."⁴⁶ The Israelites

43. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 184–85.

44. Tsumura, *Samuel*, 619.

45. Cf. 1 Cor 10:6, 11.

46. Block, *Judges*, 58–59.

were being conformed more and more to Canaanite culture. They mixed orthodox Yahwism with pagan practices. They worshipped Yahweh alongside of other gods. Today the church suffers from a syncretistic problem as Christians are often being conformed to the wider culture. This is not to say that Christians are being secularized. On the contrary, our culture is quite interested in spirituality. This is evidenced in the rise of metaphysical cults, the occult, the New Age movement, etc. Even in the “secular” West, we Westerners do want to tap into the supernatural, especially if it will bring power or security into our lives.⁴⁷ To greater or lesser degrees, parts of our culture can be quite superstitious. *It is not just Christians who look for signs.* Many non-Christians “do not believe in coincidences.” The danger is that if we Christians rely on methods like signs or vows to discern God’s will and we downplay the importance of biblical content, our “faith” actually degenerates into superstition and magic. The idea that “supernatural” signs are needed actually reflects a pagan spirituality quite similar to that of Gideon’s day.⁴⁸

Saul’s use of orthodox practices in divinatory ways is also relevant for the church today.⁴⁹ Christians can attempt to use orthodox means toward divinatory ends as well.

47. Armstrong, “Spiritual Power,” 71, suggested that modern culture is actually “moving into hyper-spirituality,” which Westerners are interested in if “it will bring power into their lives so that they can enjoy a better lifestyle.”

48. However, it also evinces a secular worldview. Rather than seeing the gift of rational thought, our own minds, free will, and the ability to choose, etc. as the realm of God’s gifting and/or influence, we see ourselves as completely secular except in cases of special “divine intervention” through signs etc.

49. Polzin has pointed out that Saul’s use of prophecy is critiqued in 1 Samuel as manipulative and improper for a king. While prophets are obviously ordained by God, Saul attempts to use them toward his own ends. Saul seeks out prophets and actively inquires of them. Conversely, whenever a prophet speaks to David, he has rarely taken the initiative. E.g., David passively waits in his stronghold, saying, “I will wait until I find out what God will do for me” (1 Sam 22:3)—i.e., until the prophet Gad tells him what to do (22:5). That is, it is God who seeks David out. In fact, the only time David is described as approaching a prophet for help is in 2 Sam 7:2 and he is rewarded with incorrect advice (2 Sam 7:3). As Polzin, *Samuel*, 184, sums up, “for the Deuteronomist, God appropriately takes the initiative with prophets, but humans should not.” It would appear that the Bible opposes the divinatory use

The popular book *Experiencing God* by Blackaby and King⁵⁰ lists four standard orthodox means for discovering God's will: the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church. However, as we have seen, all of these can be used in "divinatory ways." For example: the Bible—the random method (Scripture flipping) or simply taking verses out of context; prayer—bargaining, vowing or asking for arbitrary signs; circumstances—viewing coincidence as divine guidance; and finally the church—hearing the opinion of someone else as infallible prophetic guidance.⁵¹

How Do We Know God's Will?

While this essay has largely been a caution against improper attempts at discerning God's will, what would the Bible say about finding God's will? The narratives I have briefly surveyed above are all found in what critical scholars often refer to as "the Deuteronomistic History," that is, the great historical narrative running from Joshua through to 2 Kings.⁵² Basically it is well-known that these narratives are written in light of the Book of Deuteronomy.⁵³ Deuteronomy provides the foundational perspective from which the author of these books views and interprets the events in his history. This makes statements of Deuteronomy quite relevant for interpreting these narratives and understanding their message. Deuteronomy 30:11–14 states:

For this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us that we might hear it and observe it?" And it is not over the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross over to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us that we might hear it and observe it?" For the

of prophecy and the book of Samuel uses the characterization of David to show correct attitudes toward prophecy (Polzin, *Samuel*, 186).

50. Blackaby and King, *Experiencing God*, esp. chs. 4, 5

51. When even anointed ones like Saul and the priest fail. Even Samuel is likely portrayed as a flawed character. Cf. Polzin, *Samuel*, 80–125.

52. Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*.

53. Though there is some debate surrounding the dating of these books, all acknowledge Deuteronomy's formative influence on them.

word is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart to observe it.

The point here is that Israel had the Word of God, the law, and that law was all they needed. They were not told to seek additional revelation or signs, but were to obey what had already been revealed. Israel did not need to “hear” an additional word from God. In the New Testament Paul quotes from this passage saying that Christians also do not need an additional word (Rom 10:6–8). Paul concludes that Christians already have what they need, the gospel message being proclaimed by the apostles. Christians do not need to pursue signs in order to determine God’s will. It has been laid out in the gospel itself.

At this point it is worth noting that some mistakenly think that asking for signs was appropriate in the Old Testament era though perhaps it is not appropriate today. However, the biblical narratives I have surveyed in this essay would argue against any normative value for signs. This appears to be the general biblical perspective. This can be seen in the book of Isaiah when Isaiah orders the evil king, Ahaz, to request a sign from God. Ahaz piously rejects Isaiah’s request to ask for a sign, saying, “I will not ask, and I will not put Yahweh to the test” (Isa 7:12). Though Ahaz is actually defying the divine will in his “pious” refusal, he is probably quoting the orthodox position that asking for a sign is a way of putting God to the test.⁵⁴

This negative view of requesting signs is carried on in the New Testament by Jesus. In Matt 12:38–39 we read:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.” He answered, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign!”

When Jesus refers to an “adulterous generation” it is hard not to think of the generation of the Judges. In a programmatic statement near the beginning of the book of Judges, the Israelites are described as a new “generation” (Judg 2:10) that “played the

54. Interestingly, the sign Ahaz is given (Isa 7:14–16) is one of several signs given in the Old Testament that actually only function in hindsight. See Isa 8:1–4; 37:30–31.

harlot after other gods” (Judg 2:17). The syncretism of the Judges period is characterized as adulterous. Jesus sees a similarity with what the Pharisees are requesting. In the context of Matthew 12, the request for a sign from Jesus was an evasion of the issue. They did not like what Jesus was saying to them so they demanded a sign (a pagan/adulterous request). Again, the request for a sign is evidence of underlying resistance to God’s revealed will.

In conclusion, what should Christians who are seeking to know God’s will do? First, daily reorientation to the truth revealed in Scripture is required. Eugene Peterson has insightfully commented that Christians have an “ancient predisposition for reducing every scrap of divine revelation that we come across into a piece of moral/spiritual technology that we can use to get on in the world.”⁵⁵ The Bible is not to be used as a tool of divination. We must resist reading the Bible selfishly. Instead, we must read to get to know God. The Bible is not meant to give us some mystical guidance to get us through the day.⁵⁶ Second Timothy lists the purposes of Scripture as chiefly salvific (2 Tim 3:15) and says it is also useful “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Note that “direct mystical guidance for daily decisions” does not appear on this list. When we read the Bible we should notice what it tells us about God and not try to pull out some indications of what specifically we should do today or what decision we should make in each situation we come across. As Walton has commented, “The paganism in each of us drives us to be self-absorbed, but God’s revelation draws us to himself.”⁵⁷ In other words, *it’s not about you*—despite our culture’s consumerist, self-centered orientation—it is about God.

The Christian life is one of walking by faith not by signs. In the end, despite the incongruity of the perceived signs regarding my own journey in coming to McMaster Divinity College, I have taken up the position here and do believe God has led me to this

55. Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality*, 30.

56. Walton, *Genesis*, 387.

57. *Ibid.*

place. Ironically, after all that I have said regarding the problem with reading coincidence as signs, it turns out that my inauguration service (where I first orally delivered this essay), was coincidentally exactly one year to the date after I gave my first lecture at MacDiv as part of the interview process on March 24, 2009.⁵⁸ I did not realize this until shortly before the day of my inauguration arrived. I guess I can take this as a providential sign that God wanted me at McMaster Divinity College.

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58. Initially, my inauguration was scheduled for the week before, and was moved for pragmatic reasons.

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