

Fawcett: A terrible political leader can still be an agent God has chosen

The Book of Judges seems to record an example of God sending Israel a deliverer who was also a calamitous leader.

The shadowy figure of Shamgar, son of Anath, is mentioned in two lonely verses in *Judges*. The first mention comes in 3:31. Wedged between two detailed, lurid, and compelling accounts of deliverance – that of Ehud’s stealthy assassination of King Eglon and of Deborah, Barak, and Jael who drove the spike through Sisera’s head – we are told, in an almost offhanded way, “After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.”

That’s it. No details about the context; no indications whether this was in the context of a battle, or whether Shamgar went out alone against them like Samson did with the jawbone of a donkey (Did he happen to be out working in the field when the Philistines came upon him, hence why he was holding an oxgoad, or did he have to use this as a weapon because the Philistines had taken all the Israelites’ swords?); no details at all about Shamgar himself.

This omission is even more intriguing given that neither he nor his father have a Hebrew name, and the name “Shamgar” itself means “he is here a stranger” (compare how Moses names his son Gershom, “for I have been a stranger in a strange land”). Is it possible that he was a foreigner God brought to Israel for the sole purpose of decimating the Philistines? We don’t know; the entire allusion is too brief and tantalizing. Josephus records that Shamgar was elected governor after Ehud, “but died in the first year of his government,” which is perhaps why he didn’t get around to doing anything else worth commemorating.

But this does not mean we know nothing about his reign. After their victory, Barak and Deborah break out in a triumphant song which includes these lines:

*“In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned;
travelers took to winding paths.
Villagers in Israel would not fight;
they held back until I, Deborah, arose,
until I arose, a mother in Israel.”*
(Judges 5:6-7)

The picture painted of his time is not very rosy. “The highways were abandoned”; the New Living Translation renders this clause as “people avoided the main roads,” and the Contemporary English Version renders it “roads were too dangerous for caravans.” “Village life ceased” (New King James Version).

This, by the way, was exactly what God threatened would happen to Israel if it departed from the covenant (*Leviticus 26:22*).

It doesn't seem like Shamgar, shall we say, restored law and order successfully. In fact, on his watch, things got so bad that Israel was helpless until God raised up Deborah, who calls herself a "mother" – a reminder that the biblical tradition sees civil rulers as being parents to their people. (Is there a divine irony, or rebuke to our expectations, that a burly action hero type like Shamgar failed to bring order to Israel, but a maternal figure like Deborah, along with the wily and seemingly domestic figure of Jael, were more successful?)

Deborah's song almost seems to portray Shamgar as a villain. The Cambridge Bible commentary notes that "gives the impression that he was an oppressor, not a deliverer, of Israel." It does seem as if, in Shamgar's days, Israel was still under some sort of oppression.

Ellicott's Commentary says that the highways were abandoned because "the unhappy conquered race whose necessities obliged them to journey from one place to another could only slink along, unobserved, by twisted–i.e., tortuous, devious–bye-lanes." But it seems more likely that Shamgar was not causing this oppression, but rather failing to free Israel from it; Deborah is contrasting how much Israel failed to resist under Shamgar to how they finally experienced freedom when God raised her up.

What it seems like is that God raised up Shamgar to deliver Israel from a specific threat at a certain point in time, which he did spectacularly by valiantly killing a bunch of tyrants with his ploughshare, but was otherwise unsuccessful liberating Israel, leaving it to languish under the iron fist of her enemies until Deborah came.

This is all so strange that some scholars have suggested that the story of Shamgar and the oxgoat was added later by the editors; they saw a reference to "Shamgar, son of Anath" in Deborah's song, found a similar story of a similar guy with a similar name elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, and copied that story here, putting it in front of the Deborah narrative to give her lyrics some context. "Shamgar, son of Anath" is really just Shammah, son of Agee, the Hararite, who also heroically killed a bunch of Philistines:

*"The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils; and the army fled from the Philistines. But he took his stand in the middle of the plot, defended it, and killed the Philistines; and the Lord brought about a great victory."
(2 Samuel 23:11b-12)*

Personally, I don't buy it. The details (such as they are) are too different for a simple copy-paste. I think it's better to think of Shammah as a new Shamgar that God raised up for another time in Israel's history – this time, instead of leading as a judge, serving under a king whom God has anointed,

whose reign will be characterized by justice and peace. Shamgarian warfare now serves the common good.

But this still leaves the original Shamgar as a mysterious and, to me, fascinating figure: An apparent foreigner, a “stranger” (foreign and strange even to us today, given the paucity of information about him) who miraculously kills many foreigners and “saves” or “delivers” Israel – the text is clear about this – but seemingly not “enough”, since oppression still continues in his time.

Maybe this is the result of the redactor of the text trying to fit different sources together that actually contradict each other. Maybe. Or maybe the ambiguity here is deliberate. Maybe Scripture is recognizing a reality about politics that too much partisanship today, no matter how hard-nosed and pragmatic it pretends to be, too often forgets: It’s complicated. A regime can be both heroic and liberating while also being inept, ineffectual, incompetent, even catastrophic.

At this point, everyone seems fairly aware of Winston Churchill’s personal and political failures ranging from his treatment of India to his botched gold-standard economic initiative to his simple sheer clutching greediness of power. But he got one thing right: The dangers of the Third Reich. And that one thing happened to be the most important thing in the world at that time.

We could sing lamenting dirges about his reign and say he “saved England.” John F. Kennedy, while remarkable for being president (young, handsome Catholic that he was), had a fairly unremarkable tenure as president (notwithstanding post-Dallas fantasies that he would have built a utopian Camelot had he survived), but during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he got one very important thing right – not to get too trigger-happy – and that happened to be the most important thing in the world at the time.

By the grace of God (and perhaps under the influence of Pope St. John XXIII), JFK in some sense saved the United States. (Besides, if Josephus is right, Shamgar also died before he could achieve anything lasting.) Abraham Lincoln is admitted to have been effectively a dictator who suppressed free speech during the Civil War, not to mention a proudly professed racist as far as his personal beliefs went, but he was right that slavery was an abominable evil that needed to be rooted out.

(This is why comparisons between Donald Trump and Lincoln should not offend anyone; not because that comparison especially ennobles Trump, but because it accurately reminds us of Lincoln’s glaring flaws. There is no reason for Republicans who are hostile to journalists and who want to use law enforcement against their political opponents to stop calling themselves “the party of Lincoln.”)

This, to me, is the message of *Judges'* inclusion of Shamgar, whatever the history behind that text might happen to be. What I learn from is that a political leader can be so bad that the country seems to be collapsing in his hands, and yet he can still be an agent God has chosen to root out a certain evil; that we can duly acknowledge the merits and virtues of certain government figures while still breathing a heavy sigh of relief that their tenure is over and things have improved since then.

No, I won't give any more contemporary examples where this might apply.

–Brett Fawcett is a teacher and columnist. He has degrees in theology and education and is the winner of the 2018 Lieutenant Governor's Award for Excellence in Social Studies Education.