

Judges 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Judges chapter 8 And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the three hundred men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing.

So he said to the men of Succoth, Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zeba and Zalmanah, the kings of Midian. And the officials of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmanah already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?

So Gideon said, Well then, when the Lord has given Zeba and Zalmanah into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars. And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way.

And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. And he said to the men of Penuel, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower. Now Zeba and Zalmanah were in Karkor with their army, about fifteen thousand men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the east, for there had fallen one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Noba and Jogbaheer, and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zeba and Zalmanah fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zeba and Zalmanah, and he threw all the army into a panic.

[1 : 45] Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heraz, and he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men.

And he came to the men of Succoth and said, Behold Zeba and Zalmanah, about whom you taunted me, saying, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmanah already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?

And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briars, and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. And he broke down the tower of Penuel, and killed the men of the city.

Then he said to Zeba and Zalmanah, Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor? They answered, As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king. And he said, They were my brothers, the sons of my mother.

As the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you. So he said to Jethar his firstborn, Rise and kill them. But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man.

[2 : 48] Then Zeba and Zalmanah said, Rise yourself and fall upon us, For as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose and killed Zeba and Zalmanah, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian. Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you.

The Lord will rule over you. And Gideon said to them, Let me make a request of you. Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil, for they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.

And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, and the pendants, and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels.

And Gideon made an ephod of it, and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel hoared after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more.

[4 : 02] And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon. Jerubal, the son of Joash, went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives.

And his concubine, who was in Shechem, also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. And Gideon, the son of Joash, died in a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash's father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again, and whored after the Baals, and made Baal-bereth their guard. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side.

And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubal, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel. In Judges chapter 8, Gideon has just won the battle against the Midianites, and in the mopping up stage, he summons people from other tribes to assist, particularly the Ephraimites, who deal with the Midianites at the fords of the Jordan.

The Ephraimites, however, are annoyed that they were not summoned at first. They were denied a part of the glory of the battle. Now, the victory of Gideon was not one that was achieved for his own glory.

[5 : 13] Had the Ephraimites been with him, they would have been whittled down just like everyone else, and there would only have been a small number who would ever have taken part in the battle. He responds in a very gracious manner.

The Ephraimites had captured two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb, the raven and the wolf, and the grape harvest of Abiezech, Gideon's people, was eclipsed by the supposed gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim.

Even though Gideon's men and Abiezech supposedly enjoyed the harvest, and only left the gleanings for the Ephraimites, the gleanings far exceeded in quantity the actual harvest. Gideon and his men themselves had not captured any of the leaders, but the Ephraimites had.

By this gracious response, Gideon didn't play a competitive honour game, and he mollifies the Ephraimites' anger. It's not a good sign of the relationship between Ephraim and the rest of Israel, though.

Gideon and his men pursue the remaining body of the army of the Midianites, and their leaders, Zeba and Zalmanah. And while on the way, they need aid. They need support and food and provisions, and these two towns of Succoth and Penuel refuse to provide any.

[6 : 22] The towns refuse to provide aid, as he does not have Zeba and Zalmanah in his possession. If he had, then they would feel safe doing so. However, as long as the Midianites are free, they fear that if they help Gideon, the full wrath of the Midianites will descend upon them in vengeance for helping and aiding their enemy.

Gideon's response, considering that at the start of the story he was afraid to act, and was hiding from the Midianites, could have been one of mercy. But instead, it's not a very gracious response at all, and it's quite cruel.

He threatens to thresh Succoth with thorns from the wilderness, and to tear down Penuel's tower, removing their defence. Zeba and Zalmanah are captured, and their army is thrown into panic.

They have already lost 120,000 people. Israel has taken its large portion from their numbers. This is 12 times 10,000. Great victories over the Canaanites and the Perizzites in chapter 1 verse 4, and the Moabites in chapter 3 verse 29, involved 10,000 people being defeated or killed.

Now it's 12 times that number. It's a great victory blown up to Israelite proportions. This is a truly devastating defeat of the locust army of the Midianites.

[7 : 35] It's one of the reasons why it's recalled in later history, as a paradigm of God's victory over his enemies. Gideon returns by the ascent of Herod. He avenges himself upon the towns of Penuel and of Succoth.

However, he finds that Zeba and Zalmanah have killed his brothers at Tabor. Gideon at this point makes it a matter of family honour and vengeance, and he instructs his firstborn son Jethad to kill Zeba and Zalmanah.

This is not the justice of the Lord's warfare. He had been willing to spare them on that account. But this is personal vengeance and a vendetta. We might also contrast his initial willingness to let Zeba and Zalmanah live, and the way that he treated Succoth and destroyed Penuel.

These are not the actions of a wise and good and gracious leader. As James Bajon notes, the name of Zeba, sacrifice, and Zalmanah, refuge is withheld, fit with their fate.

The spoil from the war becomes a snare. This is not the first time that this has happened. It will not be the last. They want to make Gideon into a king, and he rightly rejects this.

[8 : 41] The Lord is their king. However, his motive seems to be apathy. While he gives an appropriate and pious reason, his real reluctance lies elsewhere. This is suggested by the parable in the following chapter, in verses 8 to 15.

The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, Rain over us. But the olive tree said to them, Shall I leave my abundance by which gods and men are honoured, and go hold sway over the trees?

And the trees said to the fig tree, You come and rain over us. But the fig tree said to them, Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go hold sway over the trees? And the trees said to the vine, You come and rain over us.

But the vine said to them, Shall I leave my wine that cheers god and men, and go hold sway over the trees? Then all the trees said to the bramble, You come and rain over us. And the bramble said to the trees, If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade.

But if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon. In response to their request that he be their king, and his refusal, Gideon offers an alternative.

[9 : 49] He requests their earrings. We've heard this story before, back in Exodus chapter 32, verses 1-4. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, Up, make us gods who shall go before us.

As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So Aaron said to them, Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters, and bring them to me.

So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a golden calf. And they said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

In Exodus chapter 32, the golden calf is a replacement for Moses, who seems to be lost at the top of Mount Sinai. Here, the ephod is a replacement for Gideon.

Instead of depending upon Gideon to lead the people, they're going to look to the ephod. The way that these two events are described in similar ways invites us to consider parallels between them. Yoram Hazoni in his book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, discusses the way in which similar stories invite us to reflect upon uniting themes.

[11 : 06] Of this particular instance, he observes, What a newly liberated people want more than anything else, the narrative suggests, is to have someone above them again, someone who can bear responsibility for them, so that they do not have to shoulder this terror and dread themselves.

And when this man, this Moses or Gideon, proves unwilling to play a role so similar to that played by their recent oppressors, this people will seek something that is more solid than man, something enduring that will not abandon them in need.

The calf, the fetish. Even leaders such as Aaron or Gideon, who have been the agents of God's will and know the folly of mistaking anything else for God, are not less in danger than the people themselves, since their ear is given to the people's needs, and they are moved to give the people what they want, ostensibly so that they will not do yet worse things.

On this view, the act of liberation carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction, tending immediately to tear open a void in the lives of those who have been freed that is most easily filled by idolatry, whether of one form or another.

The ephod was something that contained the urim and the thummim, and it was a means of determining the will of the Lord. It would be a form of divination for Gideon's house. It functions then as a sort of idol.

[12 : 23] Gideon had once removed the Asherah pole and the altar of Baal, and now he creates a different snare in their place. This snare is also a snare in part because it challenges the exclusivity of the tabernacle as the site of Israel's worship.

It establishes a rival site that people come to receive the word and direction of the Lord, and Gideon presumably is set up as a sort of priest judge. In an exceptional way, the Lord had instructed Gideon to establish an altar earlier on and to sacrifice upon it.

But this was not supposed to be a normal way for Gideon to act, for Gideon to establish himself as a sort of priest, as an alternative to the Levitical priesthood. The judge or the king was supposed to guard the integrity of the worship of the Lord, and yet here Gideon is doing the exact opposite. He's undermining it at a fundamental level. He's setting up something in competition to the true worship of the Lord. And he starts to act the part of a two-bit ancient Near Eastern ruler. He establishes a harem for himself. He has 70 sons. These numbers are related to the number 7, which is common throughout the Gideon narrative. Now at the end of his life, he has brought 40 years of rest.

[13 : 34] It's the last time such rest is mentioned in the book of Judges. And when Gideon dies, the people end up just returning back to the Baals. They don't even honour Gideon's family for what the Lord did for them through Gideon.

They forget Gideon, just as the people forgot Joseph earlier on in the story of the Exodus. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can erect idolatries to protect us from having to deal with God and our responsibility as free people before him?

