

Judges 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 25 June 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 7 And the Lord said to Gideon, The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there.

And anyone of whom I say to you, This one shall go with you, shall go with you. And anyone of whom I say to you, This one shall not go with you, shall not go. So he brought the people down to the water.

And the Lord said to Gideon, Everyone who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise everyone who kneels down to drink. And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was three hundred men.

But all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the Lord said to Gideon, With the three hundred men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.

So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel, every man, to his tent, but retained the three hundred men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

[1 : 3 5] That same night the Lord said to him, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, and you shall hear what they say.

And afterward your hand shall be strengthened to go down against the camp. Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east lay along the valley like locusts in abundance.

And their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade. And he said, Behold, I dreamed a dream.

And behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat. And his comrade answered, As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped.

And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars with torches inside the jars.

[2 : 5 5] And he said to them, Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and shout, For the Lord, and for Gideon!

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp, at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets, and smashed the jars that were in their hands.

Then the three companies blew the trumpets, and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!

Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade, and against all the army.

And the army fled as far as Beth Shittah, towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-Meholah by Tabath. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali, and from Asher, and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian.

[4 : 0 0] Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites, and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan. So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.

And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeb they killed at the winepress of Zeb. Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeb to Gideon across the Jordan.

In Judges chapter 7 verse 1, Gideon is initially spoken of as Jeroboam, the name that he was given after the destruction of Baal's altar, and the removal of the Asherah pole. He encamps with his men beside the spring of Harod in the valley of Jezreel, while the Midianites are to the north of them.

He has a large crowd with him, 32,000 people, but the Lord doesn't want them to boast, so he drastically limits their numbers. First, they lose 22,000 people by applying the test of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verse 8.

And the officers shall speak further to the people and say, Is there any man who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.

[5 : 1 3] So all the people who are trembling are removed. And the place name is Harod, which is the same Hebrew consonants as the verb for tremble used here. And it's not an accident that we have this parallel.

Only 10,000 remain at this point. And this seems an auspicious number. It's the same number of the Canaanites and Perizzites who were defeated in chapter 1 verse 4, or the number of the Moabites killed in chapter 3 verse 29.

However, it is far too many for the Lord. He establishes a further test, applied as the men are taken down to the water. All of the men who lap the water like dogs are to join the company.

As Peter Lightheart suggested, this connects with the name of Caleb, which means dog. The Lord wants 300 Caleb-like men. James Bajan notes that as they are hunting a raven, Oreb, and a wolf, Zeb, dogs are appropriate.

The Lord is testing his people and the test is not an arbitrary one. The first test selects for people of faith and the second test for men that remind us of Israel's faithful hero, Caleb.

[6 : 2 0] John Baruch compares this to the process of threshing Israel. Gideon is separating the wheat from the chaff. However, these aren't crack troops selected for fighting skills so much as people who are selected for qualities associated with faith.

We might also think of Samson, who in a few chapters time, in chapter 15, will use 300 foxes with torches to cause chaos among the Philistines. Here, 300 dogs with torches will do the same.

The Lord instructs Gideon to go against the camp of the Midianites. But once again, he graciously gives him a sign first. With his servant Purah, Gideon goes down to the camp of the Midianites and overhears a man telling another his dream and the man's companion giving its interpretation.

A cake of barley tumbles down into the camp of Midian and overturns the tent, presumably the tent of the commander of the army. The barley bread is poor food.

It represents presumably the Israelites and the loaf rolls into the camp. It takes the initiative and strikes unawares against the camp, rather than directly facing the Midianites in battle.

[7 : 28] The loaf is extremely small, but it has a huge effect. It overturns the tent. Perhaps there are Jewish feasts playing in the background here as well, as next chapter we will encounter Succoth.

The Midianites are clearly fearful of Israel, but perhaps more than that, Gideon's name and reputation has preceded him, and this would have been a source of great encouragement for him.

Gideon then divides his men into three separate groups, gives them trumpets and empty jars with torches. They come to the camp in the middle watch of the night, and they make a commotion with the trumpets and breaking the jars.

The torches are then revealed, and this would suggest 300 companies of men surrounding the camp. And the people in the camp are woken up and startled. It's the middle of the night, seeing other armed people running around, they start attacking each other.

The Lord has struck terror upon them in panic, and so they end up destroying each other. The blowing of the trumpets clearly reminds us of Jericho, another occasion where God acted on behalf of his people, and the way that they stand in their place while the Lord wins the victory might also recall the Red Sea.

[8 : 36] After the Midianites are confused and kill many of each other, the Israelites come to complete the victory. They trap the Midianites as they try to cross back over the Jordan. Gideon summons the Ephraimites to help with this.

Oreb and Zeb, the raven and the wolf, are captured at the rock and the winepress respectively. The Israelites were hiding from the Midianites in the rocks in chapter 6 verse 2, and Gideon was hiding in the winepress in chapter 6 verse 11.

So now the tables have completely turned. The event of the defeat of the Midianites is recalled later in scripture. Most notably, perhaps, in the book of Isaiah, chapter 9 verses 3 to 5.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. And then in chapter 10 verses 26 to 27. And the Lord of hosts will wield against them a whip, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb, and his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it, as he did in Egypt.

[9 : 54] And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. In Isaiah then, the defeat of the Midianites is an example of the sort of defeat that God will win over his enemies in the future.

It's one of the great victories that God has wrought. It's also referenced in the New Testament in a far more subtle and poetic way. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 6 to 10.

For God, who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

We are, according to Paul, like jars of clay containing light within them, much as Gideon won his victory with weak jars of clay hiding light. So we are those who have light within us, and we will be used by God to win his victory again.

[11 : 11] Even though we are greatly outnumbered, the surpassing power does not belong to us. It belongs to God. James Bajon has observed a fascinating further example of a place where we have an echo of this story.

It's in 1 Kings chapter 18, where in verse 22 we read, Then Elijah said to the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men.

Now, what's significant about that is the fact that Gideon's men were outnumbered 450 to 1, and just as Gideon was famous for opposing the worship of Baal in pulling down Baal's altar, and in cutting down the Asherah pole, so Elijah has a great conflict with the priests of Baal and the priests of Asherah on Mount Carmel.

It would seem that we're invited to compare these two events. A question to consider.

What further parallels can we see between this story and the story of 1 Samuel chapter 11? What might we learn from the comparisons between the character of Saul and the character of Gideon?