

In our last session, we looked at Gideon's defeat of the Midianites and their allies. This week we will need to answer the question "Was Gideon an antihero?" The definition of an antihero is a protagonist who lacks the characteristics that would make him a hero. Using this definition let's look at chapter eight of Judges and you make the decision. But first we must deal with the anger of the Ephraimites.

According to v1, the Ephraimites were angry about three things: First, they were not summoned in the original call of 6:35; second, they were not involved in the primary rout of the Midianites; and third, they were called in at the last minute to prevent the Midianites escape through their territory. The Ephraimites saw these actions as a personal snub against them and they complained vehemently. When confronted by the Ephraimites, Gideon responds with tact and diplomacy in v2-3a. Gideon answers them with three questions and an observation. First, Gideon asks: "What have I accomplished compared to you?" He follows that question with another question: "Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer?"

Gideon is drawing a contrast saying that the full grape harvest was the initial victory over the Midianites while the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes was the mopping-up operations and the slaying of the two Midianite princes. Gideon was saying that the part in the battle played by Ephraim while less spectacular than the initial victory of Abiezer, the part played by Ephraim was of greater importance in the final victory because if the fords of the Jordan had not been seized in time, the advantages of the initial success would have been lost. The Ephraimites not only made sure that the battle ended in success, it was they, and not Gideon, who captured the two key princes of the Midianites.

Verse 3b records their response: "At this, their resentment against him subsided." This is a good example of the truth of Proverbs, which teaches a soft answer turns away wrath (15.1). The care with which Gideon chose his words, in vv. 2-3, was like that of the experienced diplomat. Gideon provided a four-dimensional response. First, he minimizes his role by asking a rhetorical question. Secondly, he flatters the Ephraimites with a well-placed proverb and another rhetorical question that elevates the accomplishments of the Ephraimites above his. Thirdly, he suggests that God Himself blessed the importance of their accomplishments by granting them the privilege of capturing the two key Midian princes, Oreb and Zeeb. Fourthly, by the judicious use of a third question he again emphasizes the importance of the role the Ephraimites plays while minimizing his own.

This short episode is significant for several reasons. First, lost in translation is that the fact that Gideon refers "to God "Elohim rather than Yahweh (v3)." The question formed by the commentator Daniel Block is why? "Does this reflect his own fundamental disaffection from Yahweh, or is he accommodating his response to the spiritual disaffection of the Ephraimites? It is hardly accidental

that his use of "Elohim" echoes the comment of the Midianite in 7:14."

A second issue is raised by the very nature of Gideon's defense of his own actions to the Ephraimites. Why didn't he explain his call by Yahweh, or mention that he was operating under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit? Why doesn't he speak to the fact that Yahweh wanted to use a minimal force so there would be no mistaking who was responsible for the Israelites victory of the Midianites? As Block observes, "Instead, his arguments are all psychologically rather than theologically based."

This irony of this brief account is that some among the tribes of Israel are so fearful that they would rather not fight (7.3), while some are offended when they were not called to fight. The problem with Ephraim will arise again in Judges 12:1-6, but then things will end with tragic consequences. In the Book of Judges, the Ephraimites are presented as self-centered, factious, easily offended, and having an inflated estimation of their own importance within the nation itself. "The tribal cohesion is crumbling. Unlike the period of conquests under Joshua, it is impossible for the nation to operate in concert. More specifically this episode exposes a fundamental problem with the Ephraimites that will resurface in 12:1-6. They are a self-centered and fractious lot, easily offended, and with an inflated estimation of their significance within the nation. Even in victory Israel remains her own worst enemy."

Gideon's pursuit, capture, and execution of the two Midian kings, Zebah and Zalmuna, are the subject of verses 4-21. In chapter seven the writer created the impression that God had given the outcome of the battle against Midian in the hands of Gideon and his force of three hundred. While there are similarities between the accounts in chapter seven and eight, it is the differences between the accounts that draw our attention. Block provides a list of the key differences:

1. Yahweh is not involved in this phase of the plot at all (except in Gideon's own glib comments).
2. The two captured Midianite leaders have strange names and are called "kings" rather than "commanders."
3. The campaign takes Gideon and his men far a field to Karkor east of the Dead Sea.
4. Gideon runs into serious conflict with his Tran Jordanian countrymen.
5. Gideon is involved in the capture and execution of the enemy kings.
6. Personal blood vengeance replaces national deliverance as a motive for Gideon's action.
7. Gideon, the fearful young man, has become a brutal aggressor.

In chapter 8, we see another "metamorphous" of Gideon. In the first two chapters of the Gideon story we "witnessed his transformation from a fearful private citizen to a fearless agent of God, willing to take on the enemy against all odds, not to mention a sensitive diplomat." Yet here in chapter 8 we are provided with an

entirely different picture of Gideon. The view of Gideon in chapter 8 is one of a "tyrant, arbitrary in his treatment of the enemy and ruthless in his handling of his own countrymen." The spotlight in chapter 8 is not on Gideon fighting and destroying the enemy but on a Gideon who is fighting and destroying his people.

In our last session, we raised the possibility that Gideon's addition of his own name to the battle cry in 7:18, 20), might have been the writer's hint to us of a future problem—this is it. The picture we are about to see is one of a "human deliverer who is the antithesis of the divine Savior." The contrast between Yahweh's patience and grace with his people is unmistakable compared to Gideon who "turns out to be an impatient and ruthless ruler."

Verses 4-7 pick up the narrative from Judges 7:23. Gideon and his three hundred men come to and cross the Jordan River, in pursuit of the remnant of Midianite forces. They were tired from the fight and the pursuit, but still moving. Gideon requests food for his men from Succoth, that they could regain their strength and continue their pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian. Gideon is very diplomatic in his request for food and shelter where it would have been acceptable for him to simply taken what he needed. In contrast, the leaders of Succoth deny Gideon's request abruptly because they want proof of victory before providing the supplies, if Gideon fails and the Midianites would take vengeance on Succoth. The cohesiveness between the Promised Land and the Trans-Jordanian tribes that we saw in the Book of Joshua has broken down. They do not see themselves as one people anymore.

Dismissing a diplomatic response, Gideon responds to the princes of Succoth with a threat: "Just for that, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briars." This threat may mean one of two things. One possibility is that he threatens to drag them over thorns as a threshing sledge is dragged over grain. The second possibility is that Gideon intended to lay them upon thorns and thresh them by drawing threshing sledges over them. Either way, the result would be death.

Leaving Succoth without the asked for supplies, Gideon and his men continue to the town of Penuel and Gideon repeats his request for food. He is confronted with the same response at Penuel that he had received at Succoth. Gideon responds without tact or diplomacy and promises that when he and his men return they will destroy the tower stronghold of the Penuelites. The tower was the stronghold, which formed a refuge in time of danger for the inhabitants of an unwalled town.

What was the writer's purpose for including these two glimpses of Gideon's Transjordan campaign? First, it shows the reader that the tribes could not agree on a policy of "your enemy is my enemy." So we are left with a picture that there was not a lot of tribal support among the confederacy of Israelite tribes. Yet the

purpose of the writer is deeper than this. These two examples are intended to reflect the general attitude of the Transjordan tribes toward Gideon. The intent is to show the difference between the positive response of the northern tribes to answer Gideon's call to join in fighting the Midianite oppressors and the less enthusiastic response or "show me first" attitude of the Transjordan tribes. It is the writer's way of distinguishing between "Gideon's wars of liberation and his personal crusades (cf. vv. 18–21)." This alerts the reader to a change in agenda. If Gideon was about Yahweh's work the tribes were ready to help but now that Gideon and his three hundred men were off on a private campaign, the tribes are reluctant to participate. "The divinely chosen force has become his private army."

Verses 10-12 describe Gideon's capture of the two Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmuna. Zebah and Zalmunna had retreat to Karkor, located about one hundred miles east of the Dead Sea, very close to the Midianite homeland. Gideon and his forces pursued the Midianites by the way of the road used by the nomads and the caravans on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah. Gideon and his forces attack the remaining fifteen thousand Midianites. Surprised, because the Midianites did not expect Israel's pursuit to extend this far south, so close to their home territory, Gideon captures the kings of Midian and routs the remaining Midianites, inspiring new panic among the enemy.

Gideon celebrates his victory over the Midianites by returning to the towns of Succoth and Penuel and punishing them in verses 13-17.

Verses 13-14 record the return of Gideon to Succoth and explain how Gideon could get a list of all seventy-seven names of the elders of Succoth, the decision-making body of the city. Block tells us that: "This is the first time elders are mentioned in the book. In the absence of a king, towns were governed by a body of senior members of the community, usually heads of the clans, who conducted the community's business in the city gate."

Gideon, presumably with the elders gathered before him, reminds the elders of their own words and Gideon then fulfills the threat of Judges 8:7, by threshing the elders of the city with thorns and briers. It was a painful and deadly object lesson.

Gideon continues delivering retribution as he returns now to Penuel, "whose fate at his hands turns out to be more tragic than that of Succoth." Gideon did as he promised and destroys their stronghold tower. But Gideon did more than destroy their stronghold he went on to murder all the men in the city. This might have been justified if Penuel was Canaanite city but these men were Israelites. Block suggests: "Gideon's behavior could be justified if Penuel were a Canaanite city, but these were fellow Israelites! His character has been transformed again—he acted like a general out of control, no longer bound by rules of civility, let alone national loyalty." The irony is that Gideon does to a Jewish city what should have by now been done to all the Canaanites.

Verses 18-21 depict the interrogation and execution of the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna. Gideon asks the kings of Midian: "What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?" What this question shows is that not only did the Midianites plunder Israel, they also committed murderous acts against the Jewish population. The kings' answer would lead to their execution as they each respond: "Men like you, . . . each one with the bearing of a prince." Gideon's response confirms the identity of the Mount Tabor victims, saying, that they were his brothers, the sons of his mother. So now Gideon must become the avenger of the blood.

Gideon offers the chance of vengeance to his firstborn son, since it would add to the kings' humiliation to be killed by a youth, inexperienced in war. Gideon's oldest son, Jether, does not respond and the kings request that Gideon does it himself. This shows that the kings of Midian were not afraid to die, but also that they wished to avoid the agony of a protracted death due to an inexperienced hand. Gideon performs the execution himself, and takes the crescents that were on their camels' necks. The Hebrew word for crescents is *saharonim*, a word used only in this chapter and in Isaiah 3:18. It refers to crescent-shaped jewelry, which adorned the necks of the camels. Gideon now takes these crescent, moon-shaped ornaments as spoils.

Verse 22 is a pivotal passage as Gideon's countrymen respond to his victory over the Midianites by offering to establish a dynasty with him and his offspring as rulers over Israel. Israelites are now beginning to see the advantages of a king to provide a central, strong leadership to save them from their enemies. But in verse 23, Gideon rejects the offer while insisting that Yahweh is their King and will rule them. Nevertheless, Gideon will begin to act like a king, and, in fact, one of his sons will be crowned a city king.

There are several points worth mentioning about this offer of kingship in verse 22. First, the writer makes it seem like that it was all of Israel that made this offer of kingship to Gideon. At least it would likely have been the three hundred men initially selected by Yahweh and at the most it would have been leaders of the tribes that were involved with Gideon in the battle against Midian, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali, Ephraim. Block tells us: "Regardless of the consistency of the delegation, the author deliberately characterizes them as 'the men of Israel' making this look like a pan-Israelite assembly offering rule over the entire nation. Their offer is symptomatic of a nationwide problem. On the surface, it appears laudable that the tribes have finally united, but as the sequel demonstrates, it was for the wrong agenda."

Secondly, the term king or the phrase "to reign as king" are not explicitly used in "Israel's" offer of the throne to Gideon. The word for rule "*masal*" means "to rule in a general sense, it is often used of royal and divine dominion." This and the fact that Gideon was offered a dynastic position and the wording of Gideon's refusal would argue for the idea that it was indeed an offer of kingship. Block suggests that the writer "may have avoided the term *melek* (king) because the

issue in Gideon's statement is not a title or an office but performance, which from beginning to end belongs to God."

Thirdly, the offer of kingship made to Gideon does not comply with Mosaic requirements for kingship in Deu 17.14-20. Gideon had not been anointed by God to be king. The fact that Israel's first foray into kingship deals with dynastic rule would indicate, as Block says, "Israel's paradigm for kingship was derived from the surrounding nations."

The last point is both the most distressing and the most telling about the state of Israel as a nation. Israel makes this offer of dynastic rule to Gideon because he saved them from the hands of Midian. But somehow the real message of who did the saving has been lost. Through the Gideon cycle the word interpreted saved or delivered has been applied to God. The most important one being 7.2: "The Lord said to Gideon, You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her." Israel, as Block comments, has "misinterpreted the nature and the agent of their own deliverance." The writer emphasizes that Yahweh, "Not Gideon, nor Israel, is the one who saves, the people have either failed to recognize the hand of God at all or the image of the latter heroism of Gideon has eclipsed the memory of Yahweh's involvement." This maybe the point of the writer noting that Gideon himself had shouted, "A sword [belonging] to the LORD and to Gideon (7:18, 20)." The short memory of Israel has never been more on display. "In the end, despite the miraculous nature of the victory over the Midianite camp (7:22), they forgot the first part of the challenge and attributed the outcome of the conflict entirely to the human agent."

Gideon's response to his countrymen's offer of kingship can be divided into two parts. V23 is a straightforward rejection of the Israelites' proposal. Gideon clearly rejects the offer to be Israel's first king or the founder of a royal dynasty. And he does so for all the right reasons, Yahweh is the only ruler in Israel. Yet, as with much of the story of Gideon, things may not be what they appear. Notice that while he declined to accept their offer, he did not take the trouble to correct the mistaken idea that he was responsible for victory over the Midianites. He does not insist that God was the author of Israel's victory. Instead of saying "It was not me but Yahweh that delivered you from the Midianites," Gideon says God is your ruler not me.

In the pursuit of the Midian kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, in 8:4, he has acted like a typical king of the day. Block summarizes Gideon's actions: "(1) he treated his subjects/countrymen ruthlessly (vv. 5-9, 13-17); (2) his actions were driven by a personal agenda rather than theological or national ideals; (3) he reacted to the death of his brothers as if they were royal assassinations requiring blood vengeance; (4) he made ridiculous demands on his people (v20); (5) he claimed for himself the symbols of royalty taken from the enemy." Israel's offer of

kingship to Gideon would seem to only be an attempt to make official what is already fact.

Despite his claims, Gideon increasingly took on the trappings of royalty (v24). By requesting the soldiers give him a gold earring from their share of the spoils of the war, he was demanding a symbolic gesture of submission. In verses 25 to 26, the people willingly give their assent. Gladly giving of their spoils to him, they acknowledged themselves to be his vassals. The total weight was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold or forty-three pounds of gold. The amount of gold taken in had the character of a royal treasury. Even that was not the total, for the uncounted included the crescents, and the pendants, and the purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and besides the chains that were about their camels' necks.

Verse 27 deals with Gideon making an ephod. The real meaning of the usage of the word here has been lost. We are left to speculate what the writer actually meant. There are three possibilities of what this may have been. First, it may have been a garment, after the pattern of the high-priestly ephod, with an unusual degree of gold ornamentation. Second, it may have been a pure gold replica of the high-priestly garment. Third, it may have been a freestanding image draped with the gold ephod. This last option is the most popular among modern scholars. Despite which of these three options it was, one thing is clear, for the first time in the Book of Judges, it was a judge who began to foster idolatry.

Furthermore, Gideon put the ephod in his city, Ophrah, with two disastrous results. First, the text states, all Israel played the harlot after it there; Ophrah became the center of idolatrous worship. Second, the ephod became a snare to Gideon, and to his house. It became a snare because his sin consisted of two things, first, he took upon himself the role of a priest; and second, he established a worship center away from the Tabernacle in Shiloh. His sin consisted in his encroaching on the prerogatives of the Aaronic Priesthood and drawing people away from the one chosen sanctuary. Gideon thereby not only undermined the theocratic unity of Israel, but also provided occasion for the relapse into the worship of Baal after his death.

Gideon may have put on the ephod and worn it as a priest when he wished to inquire and learn the will of God, or perhaps when he sacrificed on the altar that was built in Ophrah back in 6:24. The ephod became a snare to Gideon, for these reasons, and to his house, because it would ultimately result in the slaughter of all of his sons, but two, with one dying in battle later.

Gideon may not have assumed the title of King, but he did assume the role of king. Yet this does not follow the Mosaic standard for establishing the reign of an earthly king. Deu 17.15 "be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses." But just as the kingship is not of Yahweh, nothing of Gideon's "reign" is of Yahweh either. Compare Gideon's "kingship" with what Moses envisioned.

Deu 17.17-20 "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel." The first thing we find Gideon doing at the beginning of his reign is accumulating wealth for his benefit.

The irony we are left with is that Gideon, with maybe Samson, was the only judge clothed with the Spirit, yet Gideon did more harm to Israel than any of the other judges. Under Gideon, idolatry is now "officially sponsored by a leader of the nation." Block summarizes this succinctly: "Gideon, as representative and leader of the people, will do what is right in his own eyes and invite the people to follow him."

The subduing of Midian was such that they lifted up their heads no more. This shows the severity of their defeat. They never again play a major role in the biblical record. The duration of the rest was: And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

Verse 29 records the return of Gideon to his house, which now becomes the base of his judgeship. In verse 30, we find that Gideon continues to ignore the injunctions of Moses as he fathers 70 sons with many women. This is also indicative that Gideon assumed the prerogatives of a king. In v31 Gideon adds a concubine to his many wives and she bears him a son named Abimelech, who will play the major role in our next session.

Verse 32 records the death of Gideon. Gideon died and was buried where he had been born. Gideon went from poverty, to prosperity, to corruption. He rejected kingship, but he lived like a wealthy king, with many wives, including a concubine in Shechem. He even named the son of the concubine Abimelech, which means, "My father is king." Such is the end of the cycle of Gideon. Now you decide--hero or anti-hero?