

THE STORY OF GIDEON

EJH: Jewish tradition groups Gideon, Jephthah and Samson together as “the three least worthy of the judges” [Nahum Sarna]. Each of them is seriously flawed.

Judges Chapter 6

1 And the Bnei Yisrael did that which was evil in the sight of YHVH; and YHVH delivered them into the hand of Midian (for) seven years.

Alter: Unlike the Canaanites encountered by Deborah and Barak, the Midianites were nomads whose chief territory was east of the Jordan.

DS: During the time of Moses, Midian was in the south of Canaan. When Joshua conquered the land he also captured part of Midian. The captives remained in Israel, increased in number, and then began to terrorise and plunder Israel.

2 The hand of Midian prevailed against Israel; because of Midian the Bnei Yisrael made dens in the mountains, caves, and strongholds.

3 After Israel had done its sowing, the Midianites, Amalekites, and the Children of the East (Ishmaelites?) came up against them.

Me: Ramban thinks the Easterners were Ishmaelites. **Me:** See 8:24.

4 They made camp, destroyed the produce of the land all the way to Gaza, and left nothing alive in Israel, not a sheep, ox or ass.

Alter: The Midianites were not an invading army but ruthless marauders; they pillaged the fields or used them for grazing and confiscated the Israelites' livestock.

JSB: The nomadic tribes caused great damage with their grazing flocks and cattle destroying all the crops. The Israelites were forced to go into hiding and to conceal their grain in the hills.

EJH: While continuing their pastoral-nomadic society, the Midianites were attempting to develop a trading empire along the “king’s highway” which ran between Damascus and the Gulf of Aqabah through Amman, Moab and Edom [Norman Gottwald]. They need to control those states and to have access to the east-west roads leading from the Mediterranean coast. One of the most important of these ran from Dor on the coast (c. 19 miles south of Mt Carmel) to Bet-Shean at the eastern end of the valley of Jezreel. Control of this road would give them access and potential domination of the north-south trade route from Egypt to Mesopotamia. A subdued northern Israel would suit this purpose well.

Radak: Sheep were needed for milk and wool. Oxen were needed for ploughing and donkeys for other types of work.

5 They came up with cattle and tents, as numerous as locusts; they and their camels were numberless; they came to the land to destroy it.

Alter: Only recently domesticated towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, camels were the distinctive mounts of the desert-dwelling Midianites. The Israelites used donkeys.

6 And Israel was brought very low (impoverished) because of Midian; and the Bnei Yisrael cried to YHVH.

8 And YHVH sent a prophet to the Bnei Yisrael; and he said to them: “Thus says YHVH, the God of Israel: I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage.

9 I delivered you from Egypt, and from the hand of all that oppressed you, and drove them out from before you, and gave you their land.

10 I said to you: ‘I am YHVH your God; you won’t fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell; but you haven’t listened to Me.’”

11 The angel of YHVH came and sat under the terebinth in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite; Gideon, his son, was threshing wheat in the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.

Alter: Gideon’s name comes from ‘gada’ – to hack down. **Me:** The same verb: **Deut 7:5:** “you will cut down their asherim trees” + **Deut. 12:3:** “you will cut down the graven images of their gods.”

JSB: In contrast to a threshing floor, a winepress is sunk in the ground and therefore is more effective for hiding the grain from the Midianites.

Me: The terebinth is the tree that produces pistachio nuts.

12 And the angel of YHVH appeared to him and said: “YHVH is with you, mighty man of valour.”

Alter: Gideon has not yet earned this epithet; he seems a rather fearful man. **EJH:** Faint-hearted. **Me:** The Book of Judges introduces Jephthah as a “mighty man of valour” [Judg. 11:1].

Me: An unwelcome surprise for Gideon? **EJH:** God has faith in what Gideon could become. The angel’s words are meant to be confidence-building.

13 And Gideon said to him: “Oh, my lord, if YHVH be with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wonders of which our fathers told us, saying: ‘Did not YHVH bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and delivered us into the hand of Midian.”

Me: How interesting. Gideon knows the history of the Israelites but his family worships Baal (v.25). Either the family is polytheistic or they have abandoned Israel.

14 And YHVH turned towards him, and said: “Go with this strength of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; have not I sent you?”

Alter: It would appear that power has been conferred on Gideon. **EJH:** Gideon has received his commission. Note how the angel turned towards him and looked him straight in the eye.

TB Rosh HaShanah 25b: The three less distinguished figures of Gideon, Jephthah and Samson were to be considered the equal of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, three of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people. This comes to tell you that Jerubaal in his generation is worthy of being treated like Moses in his generation... This serves to teach you that even the lightest of the light, i.e., the least distinguished individual, once he has been appointed as a leader over the community, must be treated like the greatest of the great, and all are required to heed him and obey his rulings.

15 And he said to Him: “Oh, my Master, with what shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in **Manasseh**, and I am the youngest in my father's house.”

Alter: Such professions of inadequacy occur regularly in the narratives of the prophets. **Me:** Jeremiah claims he is too young [[Jeremiah 1:6](#)].

JSB: A polite refusal is characteristic of appointment stories. Gideon's family is depicted as prosperous. The choice of youngest is also a repeated motif whose function is to emphasise divine intervention through the unexpected.

Me: Gideon's answer to God was similar to Moses' answer [[Ex. 3:11](#)]. Did he not see himself worthy of the task assigned to him and was he afraid that because of him Israel would not succeed?

Me: Gideon's home town of Ophrah in Manasseh is in the Jezreel valley – [the first connection to the Deborah story](#).

16 And YHVH said to him: “Because **I will be with you**, and you shall smite the Midianites **as one man**.”

EJH: Gideon is being empowered. God will be with him just as He was with Moses [[Ex.3:12](#)]. Gideon should be confident that he will unite the scattered people to throw off the oppressor's yoke.

17 And he said to Him: “If now I have found favour in your sight, then **show me a sign** that it is You that speaks with me.

18 Do not move, I pray You, until I come and bring my meal offering and lay it before You.” And He said: “I will stay until you return.”

19 And Gideon came and made ready a kid and matzot of an ephah of meal; the meat he put in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought it out to Him under the terebinth, and presented it.

20 And the angel of God said to him: “Take the meat and matzot, and lay them on this rock, and **pour out the broth**.” And he did so.

Me: This is similar to the soaked sacrifice that Elijah offered God on Mt Carmel in front of the people [[1 Kings 18:34](#)].

21 The angel of YHVH put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and matzot; and **fire went up from the rock, and consumed the meat and matzot**; and the angel of YHVH departed from his sight.

Me: Samson's parents witness a similar miracle when an angel visits them [[Judg. 13:20](#)].

22 And Gideon saw that he was an angel of YHVH; and Gideon said: “Alas, O YHVH God! for I have seen an angel of YHVH face to face.”

Me: Samson's father, Manoah, says something similar [[Judg. 13:22](#)].

23 And YHVH said to him: “**Peace be with you; fear not**; you shall not die.”

EJH: Gideon claimed his family was poor, but his father owned the property on which the city shrine was built and he had servants at his disposal. Gideon's trouble was more psychological. He had an inferiority complex because of his own minority position in his family. He was overwhelmed by the disaster which had befallen his people and he was doubtful of God's power to deliver. He kept asking God for signs and was overcome by fear that he had been too close to God, even though the initiative lay with God. Notwithstanding, he remained God's choice.

24 Gideon built an altar there to YHVH and called it '**YHVH-Shalom**'; until this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

JSB: The account is a stereotypical scene composed of seven stages: meeting, presentation of the mission, refusal, encouragement, request for and giving of a sign, acknowledgement and fear, and further encouragement. The appointment of Moses [[Ex. 3:1-4:17](#)] has a similar structure but in a different sequence.

EJH: SHALOM carries the sense of power to live, protection against the forces of death and destruction, and divine favour in all undertakings. [[Priestly blessing: Num. 6:24-26](#)].

Me: Abraham [[Gen. 12:7](#)] and Jacob [[Gen. 35:7](#)] had built altars after experiencing a divine revelation.

25 That night YHVH said: “Take your father's bull and the second one of seven years old; tear down your father's altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah that is on it.

26 And build an altar to YHVH, your God on top of this rock, in the proper order(?); take the second bull and offer up a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you will cut down.”

27 Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as YHVH had spoken to him; because he **feared** his father's household and the men of the city, to do it by day, he did it by night.

Me: *Gideon still lacks conviction.*

28 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah that was on it was cut down, and the second bull was offered up on the altar that was built.

29 And each man said to his neighbour: "Who has done this thing?" They inquired and sought, and they said: "Gideon, son of Joash, has done this thing."

30 The men of the city said to Joash: "Bring out your son that he may die; he has shattered Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah on it."

31 And Joash said to all that stood against him: "Will you contend for Baal? Will you save him? He that will contend for him will be put to death in the morning; if he be a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been shattered."

JSB: *Yoash puts Ba'al to the test before his believers. This motif is reminiscent of Elijah's test at Mt Carmel [1 Kings 18: 19-40].* **EJH:** *If Baal is indeed God, he needs no one to save his reputation.*

32 And he called him on that day Jerubbaal, saying: 'Let Baal contend against him, because he has broken down his altar.'

JSB: *Originally, Jerubaal was a name praising Ba'al – "Ba'al strives."* **Me:** *It can also mean "Baal establishes."*

33 All Midian, Amalek and the Easterners gathered together; and they crossed over (the Jordan), and camped in the valley of Jezreel.

34 But a spirit of YHVH clothed Gideon; and he blew a shofar; and Abiezer were called together after him.

35 He sent messengers through all **Manasseh**; it was called together after him; he sent messengers to **Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali**; and they came up to meet them.

DS: *Gideon sent messages to the northern tribes but not to the southern tribes as they were separated by the Midianites.* **Me:** *Zebulun and Naphtali responded to Barak's call – 2nd connection.*

36 And Gideon said to God: "If You will surely save Israel by my hand, as You have spoken,

37 behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there be dew only on the fleece and on all the ground it be dry, then I will know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have spoken."

EJH: *Even though Gideon has been granted God's spirit, he still has doubts.*

J. Cheryl Exum: *Is Gideon no longer under the influence of the spirit of God when he asks for a sign? Does the spirit not obviate the need for a sign?*

38 And it was so; for he rose early the next day, squeezed the fleece, and **wrung dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water.**

EJH: *Dew is a symbol of plenty [Gen. 27: 28 + 39], security, prosperity and victory – in short, of SHALOM [Deut. 33:28-29]. God's blessing on Israel is like the gentle descent of dew [Hos. 14:6].*

39 And Gideon said to God: "Let not Your anger be kindled against me; I will speak but this once: let me test, I pray You, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew."

Israel Drazin: *Gideon's plea is nearly verbatim Abraham's final plea to God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18:32.*

40 And God did so that night; for **it was dry only on the fleece and on all the ground there was dew.**

Alter: *This is a more miraculous outcome because fleece would naturally absorb moisture that might well evaporate from the ground.*

JSB: *The first half of this story is rich in miracles and Gideon is portrayed as a coward requiring divine support. The second half is concerned with problems of leadership. There are no miracles and Gideon is displayed as a charismatic leader. This contrast illustrates the central problem of Judges: What is the preferred leadership? Divine leadership rich in miraculous signs or human rule?*

Drazin: *There are two ways to interpret this chapter – accept the literal reading of Gideon experiencing repeated supernatural encounters with God or choose a symbolic interpretation of a man who, because he is facing imminent danger, experiences fear through dream images such as Jacob wrestling with an angel who symbolised Esau [Rambam's Guide for the Perplexed 2:42].*

Judges Chapter 7

1 Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon, and all the people that were with him, rose up early, and pitched beside Ein-Harod; and the camp of Midian was on the north side of them, by Gibeat-Moreh, in the valley.

Me: *The Midianites' camp was in the Jezreel E. of modern Afula. Steinsaltz: Givat Moreh is a mountain located between Mt Tabor and Mt Gilboa, 5 miles north of Ein Harod.*

DS: *Ein-Harod is SW of Ophrah, on the border between Issachar and Manasseh. Me: Ein Harod is SE of Afula. Steinsaltz: A spring at the foot of Mt Gilboa.*

Me: *Ein Harod means Spring of Fear. Gideon must finally come face-to-face with his enemy. The verb, charod, means to shake or tremble with fear. Hence the term haredi.*

Me: *Another confrontation in the Jezreel valley – the third connection to the Deborah story.*

2 And YHVH said to Gideon: “The people that are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast to Me, saying: ‘my own hand has saved me.’

Alter: *Behind this tale may lie a historical memory of a small group of guerrillas that defeated numerically superior Midianite forces in a surprise attack.*

3 Now proclaim in the ears of the people, saying: ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return and depart early from Mt Gilead.’ And 22,000 turned back from the people and there remained 10,000.

JSB: *A law of war from Deut. 20:8: "What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, that he should not cause the heart of his brothers to melt, as his heart."*

Boling: *Mt Gilead? Very odd. Gilead is on the east side of the River Jordan. It could be Mt Fearful from the Akkadian verb, “galadu,” to be afraid. Me: Some scholars think it is Mt Gilboa.*

4 YHVH said to Gideon: “The people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will sift them for you there; of whom I say to you: This one will go with you, he will go with you; and all of whom I say to you: This one will not go with you, he will not go.”

5 So he brought the people down to the water; and YHVH said to Gideon: “Every one that laps of the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, set him apart; and every one that bows down on his knees to drink, set him apart.”

Alter: *Likening men to a dog – generally a reviled animal in the biblical world – might not appear to be a recommendation for a good soldier. Me: Caleb was clearly an exception.*

6 Those that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was 300; all the rest of the people bowed down on their knees to drink water.

Alter: *Fighters, who scoop up water in their palm and lapping it, remain alert and ready for combat even as they drink. Me: Were the others more likely to be idol-worshippers?*

JSB: *According to rabbinic tradition, the lappers were chosen because they did not bow down to an idol.*

7 And YHVH said to Gideon: “By the 300 men who lapped will I save you and give Midian into your hand; let all the other people go, each man to his place.”

8 So they took the provisions of the people in their hand and their shofarot; and he sent all the men of Israel each to his tent, but retained the 300 men; and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

9 And it came to pass the same night, that YHVH said to him: ‘Arise, go down to the camp; for I have delivered it into your hand.’

10 But if you fear to go down, go with Purah your lad down to the camp.

11 And you will listen to what they say; and afterward shall your hands be strengthened to go down on the camp.’ Then he went down with Purah his servant to the edge of the armed men that were in the camp.

Me: *Gideon still demonstrated fear.*

12 Now Midian, Amalek and the Easterners lay along the valley like locusts in multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude.

13 And when Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his fellow, saying: “Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, came up to the tent, struck it and turned it upside down, that the tent lay flat.”

14 His fellow answered: “This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: into his hand God has delivered Midian, and all the host.”

15 And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and its interpretation, that he bowed down; he returned to the camp of Israel, and said: “Arise; for YHVH has delivered into your hand the host of Midian.”

Alter: *Gideon’s bowing down may be a gesture of obeisance to God. Me: And thanks.*

JSB: *A dream was understood by the ancients as revealing God’s will. Drazin: Joseph reflects the ancient notion that God reveals information to humans through dreams [Gen. 41:25].*

16 He divided the 300 into three companies and put shofarot into the hands of all of them, and empty jars with torches inside the jars.

Me: *The Hebrew for torches is lappidot, the same name as Deborah’s husband – the fourth connection to the Deborah story.*

17 And he said to them: “Look to me and do the same; when I come to the edge of the camp, as I do, so shall you do.”

Me: *Nathan Klaus identifies a pivot pattern, a form of chiasmic style. Gideon is now decisive and instructs his troops to copy his actions.*

18 When I blow the shofar, and all that are with me, blow the shofarot on every side of the camp and say: ‘For YHVH and for Gideon!’”

EJH: *The Spirit of YHVH did not bring extraordinary physical power to Gideon but wisdom to deliver his people by a clever stratagem. Me: Using shofarot should remind us of Joshua at Jericho.*

19 So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came to the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch; and they blew the shofarot, and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands.

Alter: *The time would have been approaching midnight, when the Midianites would have been deep in slumber.*

EJH: *Smashing the jars recalls God talking to Jeremiah: “so said the Lord of Hosts: ‘so will I break this people and this city, as one breaks the potter’s vessel” [Jeremiah 19:11].*

20 And the three companies blew the shofarot, broke the pitchers, and held the torches in their left hands, and the shofarot in their right hands with which to blow; and they cried: “The sword for YHVH and for Gideon!”

Alter: *With a torch in their left hand and a shofar in their right, they relied entirely on the panic this generated, and their swords must have remained strapped to their sides.*

JSB: *The description emphasises the passivity of the (Josephus: cowardly) Israelites whose only task is to blow the shofar, cry out and watch God’s deliverance. To emphasise that the sword is God’s, Gideon’s men had their hands full and never unsheathed their swords.*

EJH: *Stunning contrast between the flame of grace (Me: revelation?) from God and the flame of liberation from oppression as symbolised by Gideon’s torches.*

EJH: *The torches - lappidot – are best understood as symbols of “salvation that burns like a torch” [Isaiah 62:1].*

21 And every man stood in his place round the camp; and all the army ran off, shouted and fled.

22 And they blew the 300 shofarot, and YHVH set every man’s sword against his fellow throughout all the army; and the army fled as far as Bet-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah by Tabbat.

Alter: *In other accounts of Israel’s victories, we are told that God “panicked” the enemy. Only here do we get the mechanism, which was a stratagem devised by Gideon.*

EJH: *The astonishing victory may be seen as an “elaborate prank” which worked on the superstitions of the Midianites [Boling].*

23 And the men of Israel were gathered together out of Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued Midian.

24 And Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill-country of Ephraim, saying: “Come down against Midian and take from them the waters, as far as Bet-barah, and the Jordan.” All the men of Ephraim gathered and took the waters as far as Bet-barah, and the Jordan.

Alter: *The prominence of water in the destruction of Midian loops back to the lapping test. Me: cf. Barak and Sisera – fifth connection with Deborah - and Pharaoh at the Reed Sea.*

25 And they took the two commanders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they slew Oreb at the Rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the Wine-press of Zeeb, and pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

Alter: *Oreb means raven and Zeeb means wolf. Animal names were common among Northwest Semites, including the Israelites.*

Drazin: *The number 3 appears many times in this chapter: i) 300 men; ii) dividing these men into three units; iii) the three items that each man brings – shofar, jar and torch; iv) the three night watches; v) three other tribes, apart from his own, are summoned for the pursuit - Naphtali, Asher and Ephraim [Me: What happened to Zebulun (6:35)?]; and the three stages of the battle.*

Judges Chapter 8

1 And the men of Ephraim said to him: “Why have you served us thus, that you did not call us when you went to fight with Midian?” And they chided him sharply.

JSB: Ephraim was insulted because they were only invited to the chase and not to the battle; they were concerned for their status among the tribes.

EJH: Ephraim’s complaint against Gideon is the first note of discord in the book of Judges.

2 And he said to them: “What have I now done in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?

3 God has delivered into your hand the commanders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger towards him was abated, when he had said that.

Alter: Gideon exhibits a new skill as a leader – the shrewd use of persuasive rhetoric. **JSB:** Gideon calmed them, preventing a civil war. **Steinsaltz:** Gideon responded with humility and deference.

4 And Gideon came to the Jordan and passed over, he and the 300 men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing.

5 And he said to the men of Succot: “Give, I pray you, loaves of bread to the people that follow me; for they are faint and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.”

JSB: Succot is in Gad’s territory. **Drazin:** Succot is where Jacob built dwellings when he returned to Canaan after an absence of 20 years [Gen. 33:17].

6 And the leaders of Succot said: “Is the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?”

Alter: The town elders do not believe that Gideon will succeed and fear Midianite retribution if they help him. **Polzin:** Succot and Penuel will only give bread to those who have passed the test of victory. They need reassurance, just as Gideon sought it many times from God.

Steinsaltz: “...Is the palm” is an allusion to the ancient practice of amputating the limbs of enemy captives or casualties in glorification of victory. This custom appears in ancient records, such as the Ugaritic Baal Cycle from the 15th C. BCE, an Assyrian inscription from the 9th C. BCE, and Egyptian murals that display a scribe counting hands in summation of a battle.

7 Gideon said: “When YHVH gives Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with the thorns and briers of the wilderness.”

Alter: This is less a matter of personal vengeance than of dispensing military justice.

MD and Radak: Just as he threshed the wheat, so Joshua will thresh the people of Succot.

Me: The Hebrew for briers is *barkanim*, which contains the word *barak*. If this is not coincidental, this is the sixth reference to the Deborah story.

8 He went up thence to Penuel and spoke to them in like manner; the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succot had answered.

JSB: Penuel is east of Succot, close to it and the ford across the R. Jabbok. **Steinsaltz:** It was on an important crossroads above the river. **Drazin:** It is where Jacob wrestled an angel [Gen.32: 25-30].

9 And he spoke to the men of Penuel, saying: “When I come back in peace, I will smash this tower.”

10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their armies with them, about 15,000 men, all that were left of the Easterners; for 120,000 men that drew sword had fallen.

JSB: Karkor is a desert oasis on the caravan route of pilgrims to Mecca, about 100 miles SE of Amman.

11 Gideon went up by the way of the tent-dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and smote the army; for the host thought it was secure.

JSB: Gideon caught them off guard. The Midianites did not suspect that Gideon would get so far. **Me:** The Midianites and their allies had camels. How did Gideon catch up with them?

12 Zebah and Zalmunna fled; and he pursued them and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and discomfited all the army.

13 And Gideon, the son of Joash, returned from the battle from the ascent of Heres.

14 And he caught a lad of the men of Succot and questioned him; and he wrote down for him the leaders of Succot and its elders, 77 men.

15 And he came to the men of Succot, and said: “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying: ‘Is the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your men that are weary?’”

16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns and briers of the wilderness, and with them he lacerated the men of Succot.

Alter: Given that the men of Penuel were executed, we may infer that the elders of Succot died a slow and painful death.

17 And he smashed the tower of Penuel and slew the men of the city.

EJH: *One is left to conclude that God's spirit had left Gideon with his treatment of the men of Succot and Penuel.*

18 Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna: "Who are the men whom you slew at Tabor?" And they answered: "As you are, so were they; of one form with the children of a king."

JSB: *Zebah and Zalmunna relate to Gideon as to a king; contrast their behaviour with that displayed by Succot and Penuel. Me: A prelude to Gideon being offered the kingship of Israel?*

19 And he said: "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother; as YHVH lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not slay you."

Alter: *The kings flatter Gideon, but in divulging the family resemblance, they pronounce their own death-sentence. By the ethic of family blood-vengeance, he now feels obliged to kill them.*

EJH: *Zebah and Zalmunna have symbolic names with special meaning related to their fate. Zebah means sacrifice, referring to Gideon's revenge murder of the two kings for his brothers' deaths. Zalmunna means shadow/shade (protection from the sun) is withheld, describing Gideon's use of God's name to kill rather than to protect.*

Malbim: *It was prevalent not to kill a captured king unless he was brought to justice.*

20 And he said to Jether his first-born: "Up and slay them." But the youth drew not his sword; for he feared, because he was yet a youth.

Me: *Jether means "excellence" or "remnant/remainder". Moses' father-in-law is also called Jether [Ex.4:18]. The seventh connection to Deborah as Jethro and Jael were both Kenites.*

21 Then Zebah and Zalmunna said: "Rise and fall upon us; for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon rose and slew Zebah and Zalmunna; he took the crescents that were on their camels' necks.

EJH: *The once faint-hearted Gideon appears here as a man driven by an inordinate passion for revenge. This was usurping the authority of God who said, "Vengeance is Mine" [Deut. 32:35].*

22 Then the men of Israel said to Gideon: "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your son's son also; for you have saved us out of the hand of Midian."

JSB: *The army of five tribes sees Gideon, not God, as their deliverer.*

23 And Gideon said to them: "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; YHVH shall rule over you."

Alter: *This emphatic repetition of their proposal that he should establish a dynasty reflects an ideology circulating in pre-monarchic Israel which will be maintained by Samuel. The vehicle of God's rule is the spirit, or charisma, with which He invests the ad-hoc leaders of Israel.*

JSB: *Gideon's refusal may reflect the awareness that Israelite society was not yet ripe for a monarch. If a few tribes offered kingship, there would likely be civil war.*

JSB: *Throughout this conversation, the Hebrew verb is mashal – to rule, not malach – to reign.*

EJH: *Are we meant to refer to the saviour from Judah, the "last words of David": "The spirit of the Lord spoke in me and His word was upon my tongue. The God of Israel said, '....A ruler over men shall be the righteous (man), he that rules in the fear of God" [2 Sam. 23: 2-3].*

Steinsaltz: *The judges' prominence was attributable to their personalities; no one thought to bequeath their rule to their descendants. Me: But kings created dynasties.*

24 And Gideon said to them: "I would make a request of you, that every man of you would give me the earrings of his spoil." For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.

Alter: *Perhaps they were baffled or angered by Gideon's refusal to accept their offer of kingship. Gideon realises that he has to placate or reassure them.*

25 And they answered: "We will willingly give them." And they spread a garment and every man did cast into it the earrings of his spoil.

26 And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1700 shekels of gold; beside the crescents and the pendants, and the purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were on their camels' necks.

Me: *One shekel = c.11gm. Therefore, 1700 shekels = c. 18.7kg or over 41lbs (imperial weight).*

Steinsaltz: *The purple dye (Hebrew argaman) was used for the covers of the Tabernacle vessels and the vestments of the High Priest. In the Roman period, purple dye was used mainly by priests, kings and ministers. Due to its importance and expense, its production was monitored. It was prohibited to freely trade in it.*

27 And Gideon made them into an ephod, and put it in his city, in Ophrah; all Israel went whoring after it there; and it became a snare for Gideon and his house.

Alter: *The clear allusion is to Aaron fashioning the golden calf from the golden ornaments that he collected from the Israelites. In other contexts, the ephod is a priestly breastplate in which are placed the oracular Urim and Tumim. Gideon's ephod was treated as a sacred icon to be worshipped instead of God.*

JSB: The ephod here is a statue intended to commemorate the deliverance, which over the course of time became an object of pagan adulation.

EJH: This was a very natural process. Gideon had displaced the Baal priests in Ophrah at YHVH's command. He had performed the duty of a priest himself by offering a sacrifice at the oak shrine with divine blessing. He had offered the sacrificial bull on the YHVH altar. He had successfully inquired of YHVH before going into battle as a priest should do. It was quite natural for him to recall those moments and wish to make them permanent by seeking a priestly role for himself after he had refused the offer of royal power.

EJH: For his "self-consecration as a priest" (**Baruch Halpern**), Gideon used captured gold ornaments and royal garments to make an ephod, which was probably an "elaborate, priestly vestment" (**Robert Boling**), to make inquiry of YHVH, possibly by the use of Urim.

28 Midian was subdued before the Bnei Yisrael and lifted up their heads no more. And the land had **rest** 40 years in the days of Gideon.

EJH: Gideon is the last judge to give the land "rest." **Me:** The Hebrew is sheket, i.e., the land was quiet, undisturbed.

29 And Jerubbaal, the son of Joash, went and dwelt in his own house.

30 And Gideon had 70 sons, issue of his loins, for he had many wives.

Victor H. Matthews: In the context of kingship, Gideon's polygamy emulates David and Solomon. King Ahab had 70 sons. **Me:** All were murdered on Jehu's orders [**2 Kings 10:7**]; cf. **Judges 9:5**.

31 And his concubine who was in Shechem, also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.

Alter: Avimelech I and II appear in **Gen. 20 & 26**. It incorporates "king," the very role that Gideon rejected. However, this reprobate son will try to arrogate the position for himself. **Me:** His name means "The king [presumably God] is my father." Given how this son behaves, his name turns out to be a sick joke.

32 And Gideon, the son of Joash, died in a good old age, and was buried in the sepulchre of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

33 As soon as Gideon was dead, the Bnei Yisrael again went whoring after the Baalim, and made Baal-Brit their god.

JSB: Baal-Brit had a temple in Shechem [**Judges 9:4**]. **Me:** Baal of the Covenant – Baal has replaced YHVH as the god who made a covenant with the Israelites.

EJH: It is ironic that the hero who began the process of liberation by breaking down the altar and idols of Baal worship should end by creating a snare which, after his death, would lead the people back to the seductions of Baal and Asherah.

34 And the Bnei Yisrael did not remember YHVH their God, who had delivered them out of the hand of all their enemies on every side

35 and they did not show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shown Israel.

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- This story starts badly and ends badly. Gideon is hero and villain. And he comes from one of the northern tribes, Manasseh.
 - And the tribe that should have been the most brotherly to Manasseh, Ephraim, picks a quarrel with Gideon.
 - Gideon's son, Avimelech, murders 69 of his 70 half-brothers. He was from Shechem, which was in Ephraim (or possibly Manasseh).
 - Depending on how you interpret Deborah's song [**5:14**], Ephraim did or did not come to Deborah's aid.
 - Ephraim will pick a quarrel with Jephthah which will culminate in a civil war. Ephraim will lose.
 - A Levite from Ephraim will acquire a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah who is raped by men from Gibeah in Benjamin and dies from the assault. This will initiate a dreadful civil war against Benjamin. Benjamin will lose.

Drazin: The book of Judges seems to extol the tribe of Judah and belittle the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin. This led some scholars to believe that Judges was composed in the southern kingdom of Judah after the defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, in order to humiliate Israel which had seceded from the Judean nation of King David's son, Rehoboam, some 200 years earlier.

I told you that I liked a good conspiracy theory.