

## ***Gideon: The Battle is the Lord's***

Gideon and his campaign allow us further insight into the tactics of God. Why do you suppose the Lord used so unusual a method to determine who would go with Gideon in the initial attack? How does the Lord determine whom He will use today?

The time is about forty years after Deborah and Barak destroy the army of Sisera and subsequently Jabin, king of Canaan. The children of Israel return to apostasy and then servitude. The Lord brings the Midianites to discipline Israel's unfaithfulness. According to Judges 6 Israel had been pressed hard by the enemy to the point that they routinely escaped to the mountains to avoid the Midianites raiding parties. Gideon's upcoming campaign would be somewhat different in that the Midianites raiding parties did not use chariots but camels.

It is difficult to grasp what was being experienced by Israel since we live in a civilized nation where such things are just not allowed to continue. Really? I suspect there are many similarities between the Midianites and the violent and vicious gang today known as MS-13. Major cities in the United States have experienced upsurges of criminal activities on a scale that could only be dealt with by Federal intervention. Members of this gang are known for their vicious attacks, rape, robbery, extortion, drugs, and murder particularly violent murder.

Task forces targeting this gang and other similar-acting gangs find their hands full because of the multitude of criminal endeavors. I suspect that the mode of transportation (camels) might be the only major difference separating the activities in Gideon's time and the present.

Review of the passages and subsequent events indicate that prior to Gideon being chosen by the Lord as a commander he must have had prior battle experience. He is referred to as a mighty man of valor. (Judges 6:12)

In spite of his valor and determination to obey God, Gideon is terrified of the prospect of having to lead an army against these marauders. Like Moses before him, Gideon proclaims that he is not up to the task. (Judges 6:15) Resistance does not move the Lord, in typical fashion. It is as if the Lord has to wait for us to get over the shock of His initial call.

The Lord's comeback is, "I behold; I will do it." In our own wars, it is acceptable to acknowledge our own inability to accomplish tasks set before us by the Lord. It is the Lord who accomplishes the task, and we are His tools. Like Barak, Gideon, Moses and a host of other righteous warriors, the power and glory belong to the Lord.

Gideon is not quickly convinced. Fine, Gideon thinks, here is an angel, but guess who is going to be putting his life on the line. So Gideon asks for proof. Quickly proof is presented, and Gideon recognizes that he is dealing with the commander of the army of Israel. The next evening the Lord gives Gideon a task to complete in order to test his willingness to obey. The test involved tearing down the popular idol in town.

If Gideon had failed to do what was asked, then the Lord, for the task of freeing His people, would not have chosen him. Sometimes we confuse being called by God to perform a task and being chosen. (Matthew 22:14)

God calls many, but many fail to respond to the training and discipline required to accomplish a task. Many fail simply because they refuse to put aside their playthings. When this happens, God must raise up a replacement. More often, God raises up a man and for a good

while he serves faithfully. Then he becomes unusable to God through pride, greed, or other failure.

Solomon is an example. Solomon starts out making the right decisions, proclaiming justice in the land, and building a grand temple. However, his many wives entice him away, and the kingdom is eventually torn apart under Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Every warrior should take warning. Service is predicated on obedience.

It is the rare Christian who has not acquired some experience in Baal bashing. Usually however, it is the other fellow's god. Gideon knew Baal was impotent but was afraid to destroy the idol. The Baal's of this age are impotent as well, but what is perplexing about Gideon's situation is his apparent fear of Baal.

Whether it is fear of Baal, or the people, Gideon sees that Baal never so much as lifts a finger to help his devotees. He never provides food, clothing, or shelter. He never protects them from God Almighty.

The question challenges us today. What is the appeal of our idols? Why do we return repeatedly to our idolatry? Israel could hardly live a generation without returning to Baal—are we so different?

Knowledge of Baal worship in the Old Testament is central in understanding the failure of Israel to remain loyal to the Lord. Israel wanted God Almighty, but she also wanted the gods of the land in which she dwelt. In the words of Joshua, Elijah, and the other prophets God sent, the people must choose whom they will serve. It is not acceptable to serve both, but that is what is desired.

The popular worship of Canaan revolves around Baal and Asherah. The major act of worship is observed by intercourse with temple prostitutes who mimic the relationship between

Baal, the storm god, and Asherah, the female goddess. The sexual relationships include homosexuality, bestiality, and other forms of aberrant sex. The debauchery explicit in Numbers 25 reflects some of the sexual aspects of the worship.

Excavations in several locations throughout Palestine have brought to light temples where these activities took place. Many Asherah with exaggerated sexual organs have been recovered from various archeological sites in the Middle East. It would seem that a host of variations of Baal worship existed and were practiced throughout the ancient world.

The vilest of all the idolatry in Canaan is the worship of Moloch. (Several various spellings and different names are used to refer to the same god: Chemosh, Milkom, and Moloch, are just a few.) Cleitarchus, an ancient historian around 315 BC, gives this description of the idol and the associated worship ceremony: “There stands in their midst a bronze statue of Kronos (Moloch), its hands extended over a bronze brazier, the flames of which engulf the child. When the flames fall upon the body, the limbs contract, and the open mouth seems almost to be laughing until the contracted body slips quietly into the brazier.”<sup>1</sup>

Plutarch, (AD 46-127) another ancient historian, adds, “The whole area before the statue was filled with a loud noise of flutes and drums so that the cries of wailing [of the children being sacrificed] should not reach the ears of the people. The child was laid across the outstretched hands of the idol; this is referred to as passing through the fire and being burned alive.”<sup>2</sup>

The worship of Moloch was often practiced alongside Baal worship. Both forms of idolatry were part of the everyday life of the inhabitants and were the reason God wanted the

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<sup>1</sup> Cleitarchus

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch

people destroyed. Gideon had to struggle with the popularity and the social pressure of this idol worship, which included his own family.

The Baal and his consort are destroyed by Gideon, which leads to a confrontation with the town leaders. Gideon's father steps in, supporting Gideon, who quiets the crowd, and Gideon wins the people's support. Gideon then prepares for battle.

The call goes out and 32,000 troops respond, meeting Gideon at the spring of Harod, south of the Midian camp. The Lord advises Gideon that he needs a smaller number. Gideon, following the procedure given by Moses, inquires about those who are fearful. Twenty-two thousand acknowledge being terrified, and Gideon sends them home.

The Lord then tells Gideon that he needs a small select force. To determine the best fit for the job the Lord has Gideon observe the men as they are drinking at the spring. Those, in the fashion of Baal worship, drinking while bowing on their knees, are set aside. This group of 9700 is then sent by Gideon to take up a blocking position near Bethshittah.

The three hundred men who are left, God-fearers, and fearless, are then advised of the role they would be playing in the offensive. The 300 knew that God would be leading them into battle. Through Gideon, the Lord gives them specific instruction to be followed. The Lord then takes care of the last matter, that of Gideon's own fear. The Lord tells Gideon to infiltrate the camp, he and his servant Purah. Having done so, they learn something that would strengthen and encourage them in the coming battle.

Looking at the enemy's encampment, several things reveal themselves. The enemy is composed of two major groups, the Midianites and the Amalekites. They are camped in a shallow valley. "The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the

seashore.” (Judges 7:12) It is a huge camp with soldiers and families mixed together. In the mix, one finds camels, supplies, tents and all manner of goods.

Gideon is concerned upon seeing the huge army. The Lord tells him to send a reconnaissance mission to determine information about the camp: displacement of guards, routes of attack, and other intelligence necessary to exploit surprise.

When Gideon infiltrates the camp, he comes across two men talking to each other. One describes a dream he has just had, and his companion interprets the dream as a warning that Gideon, by name, would destroy the Midian force. Upon hearing, this Gideon and his servant slip out, breathless with excitement. In the mouth of the enemy God has declared the outcome of the coming battle.

Returning to his men, he divides them into three companies. Each company is comprised of some carrying trumpets and others carrying jars covering lanterns, along with personal weapons. The attack would come from three sides—north, south, and west, leaving the eastern route open in order that the enemy might flee towards the Jordan into the hands of the army of Ephraim, previously called up.

Panic and terror races through the camp of the Midianites as the pitchers are broken and cries of the charging Israelites fill the night air. As Gideon’s men enter the camp they begin throwing the torches into the tents. Men, women, and animals go crazy with fear and the mixture of Midianites and Amalekites begin to fight with each other. Terrified, some begin to flee. The retreat turns into a rout with a huge mass fleeing eastward into the hands of waiting army.

Gideon continues the pursuit across the Jordan. “Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, come to the Jordan and cross it. Tired and weary Gideon said to the men of Succoth, ‘Give my troops some bread; they are worn out, and I am still

pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.’ But the officials of Succoth said, ‘Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession?’” (Judges 8:4-6) This is a reference to the practice of both Egyptians and Assyrians to cut off the hands of the defeated enemies.<sup>3</sup> The town refuses to give Gideon aid. He will deal with them later.

Gideon continues to pursue until he finally captures Zebah and Zalmunna. Now it is learned that in a prior engagement these two kings killed Gideon’s brothers. Apparently, Gideon had sent a small force as a blocking action to stop the invasion of the Midianites until he could get the army together. Gideon informs them if they had shown mercy on his brothers he would have saved the kings’ lives. They did not, neither did Gideon.

Certain tactics stand out in the battle, which reminds us of Moses and Joshua for instance all three, Gideon, Moses and Joshua spy out the area prior to attacking. The Lord throws the enemy into a panic with both Joshua and Gideon. Both Joshua and Gideon go after the enemy and do not allow them to escape. Joshua and Gideon both put the leadership to death after they are captured. It is the similarity in tactics that we see repeating itself in those trained by the Lord. Gideon conducts himself well as the commander of the army. As also noted by the writer of Hebrews, Gideon is obedient to the word of the Lord, faithfully following the Lord’s instruction.

Service is predicated on obedience.

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<sup>3</sup> The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands, Vol. II., p. 260