

## Chapter Six

1) The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. 2) And the hand of Midian prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens which are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. 3) For whenever the Israelites put in seed the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up and attack them; 4) they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or ass. 5) For they would come up with their cattle and their tents, coming like locusts for number; both they and their camels could not be counted; so that they wasted the land as they came in. 6) And Israel was brought very low because of Midian; and the people of Israel cried for help to the Lord. 7) When the people of Israel cried to the Lord on account of the Midianites, 8) he Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel; and he said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage; 9) and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you and drove them out before you and gave you their land; 10) and I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not given heed to my voice." 11) Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. 12) And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor." 13) And Gideon said to him, "Pray, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? And where are all his wonderful deeds which our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has cast us off and given us into the hand of Midian." 14) And the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" 15) And he said to him, "Pray, Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." 16) And the Lord said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall smite the Midianites as one man." 17) And he said to him, "If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who are speaking with me. 18) Do not depart from here, I pray you, until I come to you and bring out my present, and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay till you return." 19) So Gideon went into his house and prepared a kid and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot and brought them to him under the oak and presented them. 20) And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes and put them on this rock and pour the broth over them." And he did so. 21) Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and there sprang up fire from the rock and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. 22) Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face." 23) But the Lord said to him, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die." 24) Then Gideon

built an altar there to the Lord and called it, The Lord is peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites. 25) That night the Lord said to him, "Take your father's bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal which your father has and cut down the Asherah that is beside it; 26) and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here with stones laid in due order; then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down." 27) So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him; but because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night. 28) When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered upon the altar which had been built. 29) And they said to one another, "Who has done this thing?" And after they had made search and inquired, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." 30)] Then the men of the town said to Joash, "Bring out your son that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it." 31) But Joash said to all who were arrayed against him, "Will you contend for Baal? Or will you defend his cause? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down." 32) Therefore on that day he was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him" because he pulled down his altar. 33) Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and crossing the Jordan they encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. 34)But the Spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. 35)And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh; and they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali; and they went up to meet them. 36) Then Gideon said to God, "If you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, 37)behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand as you have said." 38) And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. 39) Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me, let me speak but this once; pray, let me make trial only this once with the fleece; pray, let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." 40) And God did so that night; for it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

This new chapter begins in depressing yet familiar terms as introduced with the conjunctive  $\nu$ , not translated in the RSV as here but as again in the NIV. The last time we found these exact same words was at the beginning of Chapter Four after the death of Ehud. The forty years of rest or *shaqat* at the end of the last chapter was added with a certain reluctance, knowing full well that it wouldn't last. Behind this scepticism is the question, how long will this cycle last? When will the Israelites finally reject worship of alien gods...or will they? Their future identity as a nation depends on this choice. While the *shaqat* was genuine, those more attune to Israel's true situation—always precarious in Canaan—knew new it wasn't going to last. They may have

used this interval between evils, if you can put it that way, to keep as many Israelites uncontaminated from the worship of local divinities and preserve a remnant of sorts. The future of this remnant was uncertain; chances are it couldn't flourish, let alone survive, among a people essentially hostile to them. And as we know from later history, the idea of a remnant is central to Israel's history, and it may have had its roots here.

As noted elsewhere in such circumstances, the *rah* or evil as in Chapter Four consists not so much in worship of Canaanite gods but in the awareness that the Israelites were doing it in full view of the Lord, "in the sight of the Lord" or more directly, "in the eyes of the Lord." When engaged in such *rah*, the people weren't thinking directly of the Lord, but their consciences must have been gnawing at them even though no one admitted it publically. The other familiar expression used to punish the Israelites is used, "into the hand of Midian," hand suggestive of absolute control and manipulation. This affliction had lasted seven years. Vs. 1 has the first reference to Midian, singular being used though the plural as in a tribe is inferred. Memory of Midian remained strong among the Israelites for two reasons. Positively speaking, Moses had fled to that area after having slain an Egyptian and took refuge with Jethro (cf. Ex 2.15+). On the negative side, chapter thirty-one of Numbers recounts a war against Midian. While that occurred in the Sinai wilderness, the Midianites must have harried Israel throughout their wanderings even into Canaan where they made alliances with the local population.

Although seven years is relatively short, Midian's hand must have been harsh because it's mentioned a second time in vs. 2 as prevailed or *hazaz* (cf. 3.10) which suggests strength intensified by the preposition *hal*, literally "upon Israel." Because of this, the Israelites abandoned their settlements and sought refuge in both dens and caves which became strongholds or *metsad*. "And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness" [1Sam 23.14]. The Midianites knew, of course, about these places yet tended to stay away, at the same time keeping them isolated as much as possible. Much later when David was fleeing King Saul he must have thought of this period in his nation's history, of how he could imitate people like Deborah, Barak and Gideon who soon was about to make his appearance.

Such difficult circumstances forced the Israelites to fend for themselves as vs. 3 recounts. Each time they attempted to sow seed, the Midianites would pounce upon them...not just them but the Amalekites people from the east. The first are mentioned in 3.13 under the leadership of Eglon, king of Moab but were defeated by Ehud though this tribe isn't specified as having done so. Nevertheless, their ignominious defeat lingered, so now it was time for revenge. Those from the East seem to have been nomadic raiders who allied themselves with the Midianites who perhaps saw the diminished Israelites as a threat to the west squeezing in their allies.

Vs. 4 continues as one sentence from the previous verse with the two groups, Midianites and nomadic raiders, encamping against or *hal* (upon) the Israelites. The notion here is that the Israelites were holed up literally speaking with their enemies on the outside waiting to pounce. But instead of a direct assault, the two peoples preferred to weed out their foe by gradual starvation, that is, they would leave no sustenance or *michyah*, a noun which is related to life. "I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of apparel and your living" [17.10]. Vs. 5

describes them as locusts covering the land and wasting it, the latter verb being *shachat* noted last in 1.19 as “behaved worse.”

The verse at hand puts this more vividly by saying that such *shachat* took place as the Midianites and their allies entered the land, that is, laying was as soon as they were in the vicinity of any Israelites stronghold. Israel’s reaction is typical of earlier circumstances. The nation as a whole cried for help or *zahaq* (cf. 4.13) to the Lord. Note that despite their adherence to Canaanite deities they didn’t *zahaq* to them which suggests more a half-hearted allegiance. When things got tough, immediately they abandoned these divinities and returned to the Lord.

Vs. 7 has another instance of *zahaq* to the Lord (the **RSV** lacks ‘for help’ but is implied) where the conjunctive *v-* translates as when. This happened towards the end of the seven years of Midianite oppression noted in vs. 1, building up to a crescendo until the Israelites couldn’t take it any longer, being holed up, literally speaking. This prompted the Lord to take action which he did by sending a prophet whose name isn’t mentioned in vs. 8. He establishes his authority, if you will, by uttering words typical of so many prophets which begin with “Thus says the Lord.” His presence among the Israelites isn’t long, just running through vs. 10 after which he disappears, making way for Gideon. The prophet reminds his people about their bondage in Egypt from which they had escaped not long ago. This will become a familiar theme, almost mantra-like, which will be repeated throughout Israel’s history. It’s designed to have this deliverance sink into Israel’s collective memory and stay there which, as events have proven so far in Judges, has failed quite miserably.

Despite efforts at maintaining this memory, the people have a poor track record which demanded the appearance of various judges, prophets and military leaders. The heart of the matter or very close to it as noted many times so far, has been the irresistible attraction of Canaanite deities and the exotic liturgies centered around them. We have no details about this except that it contrasts sharply with Israel’s experience of a transcendent God as revealed through Moses in the Sinai wilderness. The anonymous prophet focuses upon worship of Amorite gods (vs. 10) which most likely includes Canaan in its entirety. *Yare’* is the common verb to fear which fundamentally connotes trembling found last in 4.18 but not noted there. The prophet concludes his message with a short sentence which has haunted Israel ever since it had entered Canaan: “But you have not given heed to my voice.” The importance of such hearing is stressed by the preposition *b-* prefaced to *qol* (voice; cf. 2.2) which reads literally “in my voice.” As for this prophet, we have no report as to his reception nor his fate.

The conjunctive *v-* as now introduces vs. 11 and shows the immediate connection between the anonymous prophet and Gideon, the next-in-line hero destined to rescue Israel...not only this but rather early in the occupation of Canaan which for all intensive purposes, remains tentative. To show that the Lord is in earnest about rescuing Israel, he sends an angel, the last instance being 5.23 where he is mentioned briefly as part of the victory song of Deborah and Barak. On the other hand, the last concrete intervention by a *mal’ak* is 2.2 whose message is

pretty much the same as the anonymous prophet, that is, recounting how the Lord had rescued Israel from Egypt.

The *mal'ak* in vs. 11 lacks a name which parallels the just mentioned anonymous prophet. Being a messenger is the very nature of such a being where emphasis is upon the Sender (the Lord) rather than the person addressed; the intermediary is of less importance though certainly vital for the connection between the two parties. On the other hand, the prophet at hand is kept anonymous by reason of speaking directly as with the words "Thus says the Lord." that is to say, the-prophet-is-the-Lord while he is uttering his prophecy. As soon as he finishes, he ceases being the Lord, if you will.

The place from which the *mal'ak* comes isn't specified as with the one in 2.1, "from Gilgal to Bochim." However, he sits under an oak tree not so much for shelter from the sun but to make his presence less obvious. After all, the Midianites were out and about searching for Israelites whom they might either capture or slay. As with the other angel, we have no details as to his exact form, but it must have been a human one because Gideon shows no surprise at his external demeanor. Anyway, that's secondary to the issue at hand, rescuing Israel from the latest round of oppression. The angel...messenger...knew he was in the right place and was fully informed of the Midianite oppression which forced the Israelites to hide in holes, etc. Besides, he didn't want to be seen by any local Canaanites. While concealed sufficiently by the oak tree, the angel noticed Gideon beating out wheat in the wine press. In other words, Gideon used the in-ground press to conceal himself from the Midianites, a clever idea.

In vs. 12 the angel/messenger approaches Gideon after observing him, having admired his courage for risking his life to provide sustenance. There seems to be some distance from the angel under the oak tree to the wine press which is why he appeared to Gideon, that is, without moving from place to place. The common verb *raha* is used (to see) as in vs. 10 which means that the angel stood at the edge of the press as he looked down. Right away the angel said that the Lord is with him, not unlike his compatriot Gabriel who later will visit Mary: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you" [Lk 1.28]! Right after the angel gets Gideon's attention he calls him a "mighty man of valor" which is composed of the adjective *gibor* modifying the noun *chayl*. For the first, cf. 5.23 and for the second, 3.29; in both instances they are not noted. Gideon must have felt flustered because he seems to have no experience in military matters, immediately comparing himself with his two most recent illustrious predecessors, Deborah and Barak.

In vs. 13 Gideon responds to the angel calling him sir or 'adon (cf. 4.18 but not noted there) which also means lord or master and related to 'Adony as referring to the Lord God. This is prefaced by the exclamation pray or *by* which applies to asking or making a petition. It is found in 4.19 but not noted there.

Gideon shows no astonishment at this angel/messenger, perhaps because he was in human form. Or judging by the question he is about to ask, he's too preoccupied with his safety and that of his family whom the Midianites could swoop down and kill at any moment. Gideon

wastes no time in questioning his angel/messenger, throwing right back at him that if the Lord is with him, it's to no avail. Israel continues to suffer terribly. The verb *matsa'* here means to find and here translates as befallen, as though the affliction has sought out Israel which in fact it has through the Midianites. In other words, *matsa'* brings home this affliction even more.

"If now I have found favor with you" [vs. 17]. In the same breath Gideon questions past deeds the Lord had done for Israel and his apparent failure. Even he seems ignorant of the theme that has persisted throughout Judges thus far, that ultimately Israel is responsible for the current oppression, the earlier ones mirroring the current crisis. Thus he echoes, as it were, the collective tendency to forget the Lord, the real source of evils for Israel. That's why he says "wonderful deeds which our fathers recounted to us," *saphar* being the verb which means to inscribe. "When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade" [5.13]. In essence Gideon is repeating the most familiar strain throughout Israel's history, its redemption by the Lord from Egypt. Because that event wasn't terribly far distant, at the stage of the game it retains some of its freshness.

Vs. 14 begins with the familiar conjunctive *v-*, this time the Lord, not the angel, having turned to Gideon, *panah* being the verb as in 18.21: "So they turned and departed." One gets the impression that Gideon was so preoccupied with complaining that he failed to notice the nature of the one he was speaking with. Although the angel/messenger had been dispatched, the verse at hand has the Lord about to speak which is not unlike those "Thus says the Lord" moments as in vs. 8. In other words, the angel is so identified with his message that they are one, meaning in essence that the Lord himself stepped in and was addressing Gideon. The Lord knew Gideon was capable of greatness despite his complaining about the Lord having forsaken him which, as pointed out numerous times, was Israel's fault by adhering to the worship of alien gods.

The angel-Lord (i.e., messenger-sender) tells Gideon simply not just to go but to do so "in this might of yours," *koach* also meaning strength. "Entice him and see wherein his great strength lies" [16.10]. Note the phraseology, "of yours," an almost casual attitude, where he tells Gideon to stop whining and get on with the business of rescuing Israel. More properly, he is to deliver Israel, *yashah* being the verb (cf. 3.18). In the same breath the angel-Lord asks rhetorically, "Do not I send you?," present tense being used intimating that Gideon is to intervene immediately. Gideon comes up with a typical excuse (vs. 15) but is polite about it using the expression pray or *by* as in vs. 13. He claims that his clan (Manasseh) is the weakest of the twelve tribes, *dal* being the adjective which often applies to those who are poor and oppressed. "Blessed is he who considers the poor" [Ps 41.1]! Equivalent to this *dal* is Gideon's own insignificance which he puts as *tsayar* which also means the youngest. "I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts" [Ps 119.141], this verse being closely associated with Gideon's spirit.

In vs. 12 the angel-Lord says that he is with Gideon whereas in vs. 16 that he "will be with you"...future tense...at the time when he is to smite the Midianites, *nakah* being the verb which connotes striking. "With the jawbone of an ass have I slain a thousand men" [15.16]. When Gideon heard that he is to do this not just to Israel's enemies but to strike them as one man,

he realized that the Lord would have to be with him. It was natural to ask for a sign or *'oth* which also can be a portent or military emblem. "When he wrought his signs in Egypt and his miracles in the fields of Zoan" [Ps 78.43].

Gideon wishes this now that he has found favor with the Lord, *chen* being suggestive of goodwill. "And why have I not found favor in your sight" [Num 11.11]? The angel-Lord was expecting this and was prepared to comply. However, Gideon interrupts the conversation, feeling that he had failed to show proper hospitality to this visitor who appeared suddenly. He climbs out of the winepress and rushes off for a present or *minchah* (cf. 3.18) which also means an offering. That means Gideon had to crawl into the hole or cave in which he and his family had been hiding from the Midianites. The angel-Lord agreed to remain and wait which must have weighed on Gideon since he was unattended.

Although vs. 2 says that the Israelites had taken refuge in dens and caves, the **RSV** of vs. 19 has Gideon entering his house which isn't in the Hebrew and seems more in line with dwelling in the strongholds of vs. 2. However, it could refer to a regular dwelling because a bit later Joash (cf. vs. 11) is revealed as being a worshiper of Baal. This may have put him in favor with the Midianites or at least contributed to mitigating being persecuted by them. The incident at hand is reminiscent of Abraham who entertained three visitors with Gen 18.10 paralleling vs. 14 of Judges, that is, the three speaking earlier followed by the Lord. Also Abraham prepared a meal according to vs. 7 of the Genesis chapter. In both instances (a calf and kid plus other items) considerable time was involved before the food could be served which meant the visitors had to hang around for a while. So while Gideon was in his house/cave or den, the angel-Lord went back to the oak tree to wait, but because he is divine, the passage of time was irrelevant. Still, he had to wait for Gideon's response and not force him to make a decision.

Vs. 20 has Gideon first bringing the kid and unleavened bread along with some broth and presenting it to the angel-Lord. Note the unleavened bread; not just because it was quicker to prepare but can have intimations with the same type of bread the Israelites had prepared on the verge of their leaving Egypt. The act of presenting this food or *nagash* (it means to draw near) suggests what is to happen next, that is, bringing it near as an offering, something which Gideon hadn't a clue. "And Abimelech...drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire" [9.52].

Vs. 28 has the angel speaking, not the Lord, telling Gideon to prepare the meat and unleavened bread by putting them on a rock and soaking both with the broth. Immediately (yet another conjunctive *v-*) the angel used his staff or *mishheneth* to touch the food, this noun also meaning a support. "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me"[Ps 23.4]. As soon as the tip of this staff touched (*nagah*; cf. 20.34) what essentially an offering, fire came not from heaven as it did with Elijah on Mount Carmel (cf. 1Kg 18.38) but from the rock itself. As soon as this happened, the angel-Lord vanished which literally reads "went from his eyes."

The vanishing or going from Gideon's eyes in the previous verse happened with the same rapidity as the fire which sprang from the rock. Then vs. 21 continues this sense of rapidity by

the conjunctive *v-* as then or when Gideon perceived his visitor was an angel, the common verb *ra'ah* or to see. In other words, he didn't know the angel's identity nor had asked, but the sudden miraculous devouring by fire of the food was sufficient proof. Next Gideon exclaims that he has seen the Lord's angel (*ra'ah*) crying out '*ahah* or alas which reveals both fear and the fact that he has missed an opportunity to greet him as such for he has seen the Lord.

Although vs. 21 says that the angel-Lord had departed from Gideon, vs. 23 has him come back, if you will, for he speaks with Gideon a second time. Note that he does this as the Lord, not the angel. Perhaps just as he had departed after igniting the offering he heard Gideon's exclamation and decided to turn back to help him. This time the angel-Lord says peace or *shalom* (cf. 4.17), not wanting to allow Gideon to do something foolish such as harming himself. These words were enough to calm Gideon, for without further hesitation (again, the conjunctive *v-* as then signifying immediacy) he built an altar "there" which possibly means it was within the wine press where he had been beating out wheat. To erect it elsewhere would invite swift retaliation from the Midianites. The peace Gideon had experienced was so profound that he called the altar such, that is, an altar of *shalom*. Furthermore, it is close to the rock on which the offering had been consumed by fire, the two forming a shrine of sorts. Despite any vicissitudes that were to follow, it remains in place "to this day" [vs. 24]. These words are intended as a reminder not only of past victories against the inhabitants of Canaan but more importantly, of the many times Israel had followed their gods which got them into trouble. The Lord knew the altar of *shalom* wouldn't break this cycle, but it was reassurance that would remain with his people in future crises.

Vs. 25 begins with "that night" which reads "in that night" when yet again the Lord communicates with Gideon, that is, after he had spent the day erecting the altar of *shalom*. Gideon was careful not to rouse his family members so as to draw attention to what was going on. They've had enough sleepless nights with off and on raids by the Midianites. Gideon also thought it best to keep the altar of *shalom* quiet until the right time. Besides, his family had suffered enough already and were suspect of any would-be savior. So what the angel-Lord proposes is quite dramatic, using his father's bull (precious in the sense of being used for breeding) to tear down an altar of Baal and accompanying images of the Asherah. At this point we're in for a surprise, learning that Joash, Gideon's father, was no better than the majority of Israelites because he had exchanged worship of the Lord for Canaanite deities. For that reason the Midianites may have been more lenient toward him and not subjecting him and his family to persecution. We also learn that Gideon himself must have been among the small majority of Israelites who remained faithful to the Lord, else he wouldn't have appeared to him.

In place of the altar to Baal (already it was in competition with the one of *shalom* in vs. 24), Gideon is to build one to the "Lord your God" [vs. 26]. Note emphasis upon "your," not that of Joash nor his any member of his family. It's position is on top of (literally, on the head;) the stronghold in which the family had been living, that is, one of the dens or caves. *Mahoz* is the noun and differs from *metsad* of vs. 2 by reason of a place which is more fortified compared with the defensive nature of the latter. "The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid" [Ps 27.1]? The Midianites were used to seeing these dotting the landscape and didn't

interfere. Their primary task was, at least for now, to keep the Israelites confined in such places. Furthermore, this altar is to be comprised of stones not just laid one on top of each other but laid in good order or *maharakah* which also means a battle array. “Why have you come ut to draw up for battle” [1Sam 17.8]?

Once this fortification which already had been in place is made to look even more formidable, the Lord bids Gideon to offer his father’s second bull, this being in vs. 26. Gideon is to increase the insult already done by using the images of the Asherah for fuel in offering the bull. He had at his disposal ten men and some of his servants for the job, being terrified of his family which means not only did his father worship Baal and the Asherah but they did. Fear of his own family contrasts later with the courage he demonstrated against the Midianites, an external enemy, perhaps considering his own more a threat because it was so close. Included with his family were Israelites of the town. Gideon’s father dwelt in a house due to his worship of local deities which had won them some privileges, the apparently wholesale adherence to such gods revealing how pervasive was that influence which lay at the source of Israel’s troubles. And so Gideon and his trustworthy band built the altar at night, being careful to do it quietly so as not to arouse attention. Their fellow Israelites were to be feared just as the Midianites if not more, this act meaning immediate retribution.

Vs. 28 begins with the conjunctive *v-* as when or at daybreak with regard to the townsmen getting up. The verb *shakam* specifically applies to early rising, perhaps during twilight, because someone had heard Gideon and his men building the altar despite them being as quiet as possible. *Hineh* or behold as found here isn’t something the people exclaimed but is indicative of their collective astonishment colored with fear. Concomitant with this fear is the greater one of the Midianites. If they discovered this, This altar is so prominent on top of the stronghold that its discovery was simply a matter of time followed by serious repercussions. The altar to their gods would signal a renewed struggle between their gods and the Lord, so they would seek to tear down the altar which would act as a rallying point for other Israelites.

Vs. 29 has the locals asking each other about whom had ruined their insurance, if you will, against the Midianites, the noun *davar* (cf. 3.20) used for thing which applies more specifically to word as expression. Indeed, what Gideon has just done is a word—a blatant proclamation—high upon the fortified place which, in turn, probably is situated on a mountain for all to see, whether Israelite or Canaanite. Not knowing who had done this leads to both searching and inquiring, *darash* and *baqash*. The former suggests treading or trampling as in the eagerness of discovery and the latter can apply to touching and thus is more intimate and personal. “In the pride of his countenance the wicked does not seek him (God)” [Ps 10.4]. “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking” [4.22; not noted there]. Such *darash* and *baqash* led quickly to the discovery that Gideon was responsible. Perhaps his father inadvertently told others about his missing two prized bulls, not having a clue that his son was responsible.

Vs. 30 has the men of the city rushing to Joash demanding that his son be put to death at once. City may apply to places where adherents of Baal and local Canaanite deities were able to live more or less freely, applicable to those who weren’t forced to flee to the hills for refuge,

Joash being one of them as mentioned above. This must have come as a real shock, Joash not believing people with whom he grew up and hoping that they were misinformed. He starts by taking what seems the side of someone faithful to the Lord, perhaps because he was under pressure. The words “arrayed against him” (vs. 31) demonstrate this communal pressure, reading literally “they stood upon (*hal*) him.” At this tense moment Joash blurted out words as though he were on the Lord’s side, possibly knowing that all along his son was faithful and hoping to divert their collective hostility. He fired off two successive questions, the first asking if any of them would contend for Baal, *ryv* (cf. the next verse) which can also mean to strive or to plead a cause. The second question asks if any of his accusers will defend (his) cause, *yashah* noted in vs.14 and more directly pertains to saving or rescuing.

Either the forceful words Joash is speaking comes from the heart or from being forced into a corner, his life and that of his son under threat. Again he uses *ryv* in a mocking way, that is, if any one of them thinks he’s a god (that is, someone like Baal or one of his many consorts), he has the power to deal with this god on an equal footing. It was a risk, but Joash had no choice, grateful for having stopped his accusers dead in their track. From this point on Joash fades into the background whereas Gideon comes to the fore, now being called Jerubbaal (cf. vs. 32). The **RSV** has a footnote with regard to this as being one of several inconsistencies in Judges saying that this name “is not the natural one; the bearer of such a name was certainly a worshiper of Baal, not an antagonist.” Also note that throughout the **RSV** this proper name is sometimes spelled with two rr’s. As for the name, it consists of the just mentioned verbal root *ryv* (to contend) and the proper name, Baal. Anyway, Joash saved the day for his son which meant his accusers would have to seek some kind of excuse to the Midianites for the destruction of their gods but before that, it might be too late.

Word got out immediately as to what Gideon had done, causing the Midianites, Amalekites and people of the East (cf. vs. 3) to assemble against the rebellious Israelites. Throughout the seven years (cf. vs. 1) of Midianite domination such rebellions, more or less here and there, were put down easily. However, destruction of their gods was a sacrilege that had to be dealt with at once, for it just might signal another uprising, the memory of Deborah and Barak being fresh in mind. While crossing the Jordan some of them had a sense of foreboding at the memory of Joshua when he had led Israel across on dry land not terribly long ago, whereas these had to either take boats or swim across. Surely they avoided the place of commemoration of that second exodus, for the twelve stones removed from the Jordan’s bed would have thrown upon them a curse. As for the place of encampment, it was Jezreel towards the north.

The conjunctive *v-* begins vs. 35 as but which follows the previous verse having the conjunctive as “then” or when Israel’s foes gathered together to plan an attack on them. In other words, in situations like these the conjunctive lends a special sense of immediate action. The twelve memorial stones of the last chapter transmitted to Gideon that invasion was immanent which is why the Spirit or *Ruach* came upon him just as with Othniel (cf. 3.10). The verb at hand is *lavash* which basically means to clothe. So for Gideon to be clothed by the divine *Ruach* or wind, he was transformed into something like a tornado against which nothing could stand. Also such clothing made him invisible as wind to his foes and thus doubly dangerous. They

could hear him but not see him. “The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength” [Ps 93.1.]. According to a footnote in the NIV, *lavash* is used in this vivid sense two other times: 1Chron 12.18, 2Chron 24.20.

Being so empowered by the *Ruach*, Gideon sounded the trumpet, *taqah* meaning to clap as with the hands or to smite. “But Jael...drove the peg into this temple until it went down into the ground” [4.21]. Those whom Gideon summoned or *zahaq* (cf. 6.7) are Abiezrites, an apparently obscure group of Israelites belonging to the tribe of Manasseh (cf. Jos 17.2). The Hebrew text lacks the verb to follow, being part of *zahaq*. As to the sounding of the trumpet, Gideon gave the first blow after which others took it up and passed it along, this method of communication covering much territory in a brief period of time. As for the Abiezrites, perhaps of all the tribes of Israel they and other sub-division of Manasseh plus Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali remained faithful to the Lord, the latter three mentioned in vs. 35. However, the Abiezrites stood out among these less known tribes. The paucity of those responding to Gideon isn’t surprising, given the consistently sad state of affairs detailed thus far or up to Chapter Seven of a book with fourteen more chapters to go.

Vss. 36 and 37 form one extended sentence, again, with the conjunctive *v-* which here is rendered as then. The idea is that the tribes just summoned by trumpet blast are present with Gideon or close by as he addressed the Lord. Gideon is forthright in his words, the situation at hand being desperate, for he puts it to God that should he deliver (*yashah*, cf. vs. 31) Israel, a sign is required. Gideon asks for something incontrovertible, namely, fleece kept overnight to see if it’s moist or dry the next morning. Note that Gideon wants to put it on a threshing floor, most likely the in-ground wine press where he had been beating out wheat in vs. 11 and where place he encountered the angel a short time ago. That would be an additional way of putting the Lord on the spot to prove himself trustworthy. Vs. 36 has the possibility of *yashah* or saving “at my hand” or literally “in my hand,” a more direct way of making an appeal.

Vs. 38 has the short sentence, “And it was so” intimating that Gideon’s proposal was acceptable and precluding the need for the Lord to respond. With this done, Gideon went to sleep, albeit fitfully. Many a time that night he was tempted to sneak over to the press and check on the fleece but knew if he did, nothing would happen. As soon as it was light or even before (a little cheating this early on was okay), Gideon rushed over to the press and found the fleece filled with enough water to fill a bowl. He shows no particular amazement, not even a hint of disappointment, though his request had been fulfilled. Still, Gideon isn’t satisfied, wanting the Lord to perform the miracle in reverse fashion, that is, the fleece being dry and the floor wet. He begins his petition saying that he wishes the Lord to be angry, the noun *‘aph* used as in 3.8 which connotes heavy breathing through the nostrils along with making a loud, rapid sound. As its last used in 3.8, *charah* or burn intimates something of a fire-breathing divinity, almost like a dragon. Gideon’s careful wording is similar to Abraham pleading the Lord to spare Sodom and Gomorrah: “Oh let not the Lord be angry (*charah*)” [Gen 18.32].

Gideon’s boldness is exactly what the Lord is looking for and doesn’t mind if he speaks of making one more trial with the fleece, *nasah* (cf. 3.4), that is, having the fleece be dry and the

ground wet with dew. God complied, so on the next day Gideon arose after another fitful night of sleep and found things as promised. In both instances he was tempted to sneak a look; even if he did, the dew accumulated so slowly that he wouldn't have noticed until quite late.

## Chapter Seven

10 Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. 2) The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' 3) Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.'" And Gideon tested them; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained. 4) 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 he of whom I say to you, 'This man shall go with you,' shall go with you; and any of whom I say to you, 'This man shall not go with you,' shall not go." 5) So he brought the people down to the water; and the Lord said to Gideon, "Every one that laps the water with his tongue as a dog laps, you shall set by himself; likewise every one that kneels down to drink." 6) And the number of those that lapped putting their hands to their mouths, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. 7) And the Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand; and let all the others go every man to his home." 8) So he took the jars of the people from 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. 9) That same night the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp; for I have given it into your hand. 10) But if you fear to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant; 11) and you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men that were in the camp. 12) And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts for multitude; and their camels were without number as the sand which is upon the seashore for multitude. 13) When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, "Behold, I dreamed a dream; and lo, 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." 14) And his comrade answered, "This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; into his hand God has given Midian and all the host." 15) When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped; and he returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise; for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand." 16) 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. 17) And he said to them, "Look at me, and do likewise; when I come to the outskirts

of the camp, do as I do. 18) 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.'" 19) 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. 20) And the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars holding in their left hands the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" 21) They stood every man in his place round about the camp, and all the army ran; they cried out and fled. 22) When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah by Tabbath. 23) And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Mid'ian. 24) And Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters against them as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan." So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they seized the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan. 25) And they took the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the wine press of Zeeb as they pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

As with most chapters, this new one begins with the conjunctive *v-* as then to show the close connection between events which here pertains to the twofold miracle of the fleece and Gideon's defeat of the Midianites. Obviously there was a temporal interval between the two miracles—when Gideon received divine inspiration and his summoning of the Israelites—but that is secondary to the story's intent. Gideon is introduced by the name of Jerubbaal given in 6.32 by reason of his pulling down of his father's altar of Baal, a name not used until 8.29. Chances are the Midianites and others associated with them got wind of this, fearing that Gideon would similarly tear down their altars, the first step in subduing the land of Canaan once and for all. Such a gesture would fulfil the Lord's words to Joshua when Israel was about to cross the Jordan River.

After the Israelites had set up camp, the Lord speaks to Gideon in vs. 2, having in mind the recent twofold miracle of the fleece and wanting to turn the tables, if you will, with regard to trusting in him. Gideon perceives this and regrets putting the Lord to the test not once but twice. The Lord makes a simple observation, namely, those with Gideon are too many, words that set Gideon on edge right away, for he knows where this is going before the Lord says anything further. The fear is that Israel would vaunt itself against him, *pa'ar* meaning to be proud, to be adorned in the sense of having ornamentation. "Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it" [Is 10.15]?

The vaunting as depicted here is the ultimate source of Israel's chronic tendency to adopt Canaanite gods and worship, so the Lord has to take some fairly drastic action in order to counter it. With the Midianites camped nearby, the Lord decides on a course of action that

goes contrary to the wishes of both Gideon and those under his command. He tells Gideon to reduce the number of soldiers just when they thought they might be able to overcome their oppressors. Although a good number of Israelites had switched allegiance back to the Lord because of the stress they were under, the Lord was aware that they would reverse themselves if they proved successful in the military sense. In sum, Israel would claim its own hand would bring about victory, the verb *yashah* being used for deliver noted last in 6.14. *Yashah* suggests not so much conquest but simply freedom to live in peace after Israel had been weakened due to its adoption of the worship of foreign gods.

Vs. 3 shows the seriousness of the Lord in what he's doing, that is, he bids Gideon not just to proclaim or *qara'* (cf. 4.10 as summoned) to the people but to do so in their very ears. In other words, the Lord wishes the people not only to know the seriousness of the situation but that their future relationship with him depends upon cutting their association with Canaanite deities. The Lord doesn't want anyone who is fearful and trembling or *yare'* (cf. 6.10) and *charad*; the former is a verb whereas the latter, also connoting fear, is an adjective. "For his (Eli) heart trembled for the ark of God" [1Sam 4.13].

While the **RSV** has in the second sentence of vs. 3 "And Gideon tested them," The **NIV** follows the Hebrew: "and depart from Mount Gilead" with the note "Perhaps used here as another name for Mount Gilboa." As far as the Book of Judges goes, the last reference is 5.17, among the tribes both Deborah and Barak had rebuked for not coming to their aide: "Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan." Thus one way of looking at this is twenty-two thousand left Gideon and from now on would be associated with the earlier failure of Gilead to assist in a time of grave need. Although no action was taken against them, their cowardice can be taken as contributing to further unfortunate relapses into Canaanite idolatry. As for testing as in the **RSV**, compare with that of the next verse which does have a verse.

With this warning out of the way, the Lord wastes no time, the conjunctive *v-* beginning vs. 4 indicative of this. The Lord tells Gideon that ten thousand men are far too many to fight against the Midianites, Amalekites and people of the east mentioned in 6.33. Still, to have summoned such a large number was no mean feat, given the constraints under which the Israelites were living, basically holes in the ground. Just organizing them under the watchful eye of their oppressors was a miracle in itself, this being done with the aid of the angel of the Lord (cf. 6.11).

The Lord has Gideon take all these men to the spring of Harod where they were camped (cf. vs. 1) and tests them, the verb being *tsaraph* which fundamentally means to melt metal or purge a precious metal of its dross as in Is 1.25: "I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy." And so those by the spring are about to be smelted not by fire but by water, if you will. The Lord will take direct action in choosing each individual, not Gideon, which means Gideon must be both extremely passive on one hand and active on the other, no mere balancing act. Chances are the men formed several lines as they approached the spring but not so crowded together as to prevent Gideon being on the watch for how each man was about to drink water.

This selective process was unusual, but given the character of Gilead with his unquestioning attention to the angel of the Lord demonstrated earlier, he didn't hesitate to lead all these men to the water. He was fully confident that the Lord would take things from there. His men picked up on this right away. Even those whom the Lord is about not so much to reject but to let go retained unquestioning trust in his judgment though they may have not know the reason for their rejection at the time. As for those whom Gideon...rather, the Lord...chose, they were even more highly motivated to follow.

The criterion making the proper choice? Those who lapped up water like a dog are to be set aside or *yatsag* (vs. 5). "And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah" [8.27]. It turned out that nine thousand seven hundred men found themselves sidelined not knowing why. A mere three hundred ended up drinking water as a human, that is, putting their hands to the mouth. The amount who did this was so tiny that those present must have wondered what was going through Gideon's mind. Yet that trust in him never wavered which was essential.

Once this winnowing process is complete and the two groups have been separated, in vs. 7, the Lord again speaks to Gideon who perhaps initially thought the three hundred were ones who had been deemed not suited for battle. This communication put in terms of "And the Lord said" is frequent not just as here but throughout the Bible. Though it comes across as something that has happened literally, it means that a person like Gideon is receptive to both the situation at hand and to an expectation of divine intervention favorable to resolution of a difficult situation. Gideon could see this resolution potentially accomplished by the separation of the two groups and knew the ten thousand could be sent home, *maqom* (found in 2.5 but not mentioned there) generally meaning place which consist of those dens and caves into which the Midianites had forced them. We have no information as to what this large group thought, hoping that Gideon had made the correct decision. All they could do was to wait, and that wouldn't be long because their foes were encamped in the Valley of Jezreel (cf. 6.33) ready to annihilate the Israelites, or so they thought.

The opening words of vs. 8 in the **RSV** are "So he took the jars of the people from their hands" which read literally as "And the people took provision in their hands." *Tsedah* is the noun here which often applies to meat obtained through hunting which would fit in with the text. "To bring provisions for the people" [20.101]. Just before these men departed, Gideon took their trumpets, instruments the three hundred are to employ in a ruse against the Midianites and their allies. He informed neither group as to his next step, for that could spoil the element of surprise.

In vs. 9 Gideon sent the rest of Israel to their tents which differs from vs. 7 as *maqom* as home. Nevertheless, he must have kept some on reserve in case they were needed should the ruse fail. The phrase serves to contrast the bulk of Israel's defense with a mere remnant which is to take on their enemies. *Chazaq* (cf. 3.11) is the verb for retained and means to be strong or firm suggesting that once the rest of Israel departed, they would coalesce around Gideon in a

manner that earlier wasn't possible. The second half of vs. 9 says with some drama that "the camp of Midian was below him in the valley." This highlights the bold move on Gideon's part as inspired by the Lord and the fact that already Midian was conquered, i.e., below him and the three hundred Israelites.

Vs. 9 begins with (literally) "And in that night," the familiar conjunctive *v-* once more showing continuous action between events in the context of an urgent situation. It can be assumed that it was night in vs. 2 when the Lord began speaking with Gideon once he and the Israelites had set up camp. Now the Lord says (keeping in mind the observations two paragraphs above about this communication) that Gideon is to arise followed by go down or *qum* (cf. 4.14) and *yarad* (cf. 1.9 but not noted there) in (*b-*) the Midianite camp. These words are to be taken with vs. 8 in mind, that is, "the camp of Midian was below him in the valley" meaning that once Gideon and his small band of troops arose, they went down literally *in* the enemy camp not unlike a giant boulder rolling down a hill. The customary words used here in such a situation "I have given it into your hand" is almost an understatement in light of this inexorable downward force.

Vs. 10 has the conjunctive *v-* translated as but, that is, closely connected with the impending battle. Despite the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself dealing with Gideon—he was just as impressive, if not more so, than Deborah and Barak—he steps in and makes a provision out of concern for him and the three hundred men under his command. That is to say, the Lord doesn't claim outright that Gideon is afraid but "if you fear" (*yare'*, cf. vs. 3). He suggests going down to the Midianite camp with his servant, Purah, who is mentioned only here and in the next verse. Purah (means branch) must have been exceptionally reliable and assisted Gideon when he tore down his father's altar to Baal. Chances are that this servant was among the first with whom Gideon shared his divine communications and would continue to do so in the future should they occur.

Both Gideon and Purah approach the camp in the dead of night when it's the most quiet and are bidden by the Lord to listen what they're saying among each other (vs. 11). Most likely any words that filtered up on the night air came from guards, giving Gideon a general idea of their defensive perimeter and so forth. This takes place still at some distance, for Gideon and Purah didn't have to go far in order to hear any talk emanating from the camp. It seems that the guards were discussing among themselves as well as with soldiers who couldn't sleep their doubts about their current venture. In normal circumstances they wouldn't dare speak like this for fear of being put to death but here in the dead silence of night they expressed themselves more freely. Their conversations give courage to Gideon, for the Lord told him that his hand would be strengthened or *chazaq*. "Upon the men of Shechem who strengthened his hands to slay his brothers" [9.24].

Yet this proximity to the camp wasn't close enough for the Lord tells them to go against the camp or literally "go in the camp." Now the two reached the outposts or *qetseh* which also means end (cf. 6.21 but not noted there). These defensive positions belonged to armed men or *chamishym* which literally means fifty, perhaps referring to a troop of fifty soldiers located in

the camp. “Commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties” [Dt 1.15]. Perhaps the Lord has in mind that the two actually enter those fortified places because they were closest to the Israelites. Most of the troops within them were sound asleep in their confidence of prevailing in the coming battle.

In contrast to the apparently measly three hundred Israelites high on the cliff overlooking their enemies, vs. 12 describes the Midianites along with their allies as locusts laying along the valley, the verb being *naphal* which means to fall (cf. 5.27). The image is zillions of locusts flying having darkened the sun and now have covered every part of the valley once night had fallen. Along with these ravenous insects, if you will, are camels used to haul supplies. The phrase “for multitude” is another way of emphasizing the overwhelming superiority of hostile forces arrayed against Israel. Of course, the Midianites had no idea that they were facing a mere three hundred men—even the original twenty-two thousand was insignificant—and would have made an immediate frontal assault if they were aware of the situation.

Vs. 13 begins (conjunctive *v-*, of course) with “When Gideon came.” Supposedly Gideon has entered the armed outposts and is startled by the words he was hearing, one man telling his fellow about a dream. *Hineh* (cf. 6.37) or behold conveys this astonishment. Actually it’s found two more times in this verse in a different context. In the dead of night when some soldiers couldn’t sleep, they left their tents to share thoughts which they wouldn’t dare utter otherwise during the day. Such was the case when Gideon overheard the guards a few verses above. The dream Gideon overheard consisted of a cake of barley bread which can be viewed in light of 6.3 or when the Midianites struck the Israelites at their attempts to grow grain. Judging from the verbal root of *tse<sup>l</sup>lul* (only use of this noun in the Bible) or cake, it’s something rolled up in a ball and can imply Gideon’s forces about to roll down the hill and wipe out their foes. That’s why this anonymous man...soldier or guard...says it tumbled into his camp, *haphak* meaning to turn. “The men of Israel should turn in battle” [20.39]. Once the roll of barley had done this, it struck, fell and turned upside down, flattening the tent, this perhaps belonging to the king of the Midianites and representing the camp as a whole.

The man who listened to this account responded in vs. 14 that surely the dream referred to Gideon, not just him but to his sword which did the tumbling, striking, falling, turning upside down and flattening everything and everyone in its path. In other words, he knew for certain that God has given the host (the same word for camp) into Gideon’s hand from which no one will escape. Obviously the two men were terrified for what the morrow would bring and vowed not to share this dream with anyone. Chances are that Gideon followed the example of Joshua who spared Rahab and her family for harboring the spies. Therefore he passed out orders to spare them that they might escape the impending slaughter.

Having accidentally eavesdropped on the two soldiers whose conversation wafted up on the night air, Gideon knew the words he had heard was a sign from the Lord of a major victory on the morrow. Not only did he heard the soldier give an account of the dream but more importantly, its interpretation or *shever* which literally means breaking, this word itself suggesting the fate of the Midianite army. “You have made the land to quake, you have rent it

open; repair its breaches, for it totters” [Ps 62.2]. Gideon could barely contain himself, dying to tell the three hundred men anxiously awaiting to do battle, most of whom couldn’t sleep. His first response was one of worship, *shachah* meaning to bow down as in 2.19. Vs. 15 continues with Gideon returning to the camp...rushing as quickly as his legs would carry him is more like it. The first word out of his mouth is arise or *qum* (cf. vs. 9) which he meant literally, for his men were still asleep not knowing about his escapade. Essentially he repeats what he had overheard in vs. 14, that the Lord has given the Midianites into Israel’s hand. The RSV has host whereas the Hebrew has camp.

Vs. 16 has Gideon preparing his small force of three hundred men in the pre-dawn hours, something he had rehearsed in his mind earlier. He had to put his plan into action quickly, that is, before sunrise. Next he formed three units with trumpets and empty jars containing torches within them. *Kad* is the word for these jars, more like buckets for carrying water as well as storing food. “Pray let down your jar that I may drink” [Gn 24.14]. With the three hundred men divided into three groups Gideon told them all to look at him and to follow as example, he also having a trumpet and torch within a jar. As soon as Gideon sounds his trumpet, the three bands are to do the same simultaneously, crying out in vs. 18 literally “To (*L*) the Lord and to (*L*) Gideon.” This preposition prefaced to the two proper names suggests directness and anticipation of completion.

As to be expected, the previous verses begin with the conjunctive *v-* (when being common) just as vs. 19 as so, for the flow of action is quick as well as intense. To be sure, a keen sense of this would be missing if it weren’t for the conjunctive. In this verse Gideon accompanies one band while the other two apparently are held in reserve, for we have no report as to what they were to do though surely a plan was in place. Thus these one hundred men approached the camp, the same route Gideon had taken earlier with his servant Purah (cf. vs. 11). As for the torches, at this stage all three bands had not lit them, that being a dead giveaway as to their presence.

Gideon had planned his assault when the middle watch had just begun (vs. 19), that is, around midnight or the dead of night which means his earlier scouting mission with Purah had taken place during the first watch or not long after sunset. As soon as the Midianite watchmen had taken their positions Gideon gave the command to sound the trumpets and break the jars crying aloud (literally) as noted in vs. 18, “To (*L*) the Lord and to (*L*) Gideon.” All the Israelites had to do now was to wait and see what would happen, they not knowing the result.

Vs. 21 has the three hundred Israelites divided into three bands standing (*hamad*, cf. 2.14) in his place which reads literally “man under him” all around the camp. Given the size of the Midianite army “like locusts for multitude” [vs. 12], the Israelites were spread out pretty thinly. However, their blowing on the trumpets and flashing of torches (apparently the jars served to conceal the flames) gave the impression of a huge invading army taking the Midianites by surprise. Just a few hours ago that soldier who was sharing his thoughts about being delivered into Gideon’s hands now came to pass. So without delay the Midianites fled and started killing one another in the mass confusion since it was virtually impossible to discern friend from foe.

This came about more precisely when the Israelites sounded their trumpets in unison, all three hundred of them.

Vs. 24 has Gideon not losing the advantage of his surprise attack by sending messenger throughout Ephraim whose men were to seize the “waters against them” which applies to the Jordan River. That is to say, the men of Ephraim are to station themselves at strategic places there to prevent the Midianites from escaping, thereby facilitating the complete annihilation of Midian. Finally they captured and then slew two princes, Oreb and Zeeb, all but forgotten except for mention in Ps 83.11-12: “Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said, ‘Let us take possession for ourselves of the pastures of God.’”

## Chapter Eight

1) And the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight with Midian?" And they upbraided him violently. 2) And he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer? 3) God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; what have I been able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger against him was abated when he had said this. 4) And Gideon came to the Jordan and passed over, he and the three hundred men who were with him, faint yet pursuing. 5) So he said to the men of Succoth, "Pray, give loaves of bread to the people who follow me; for they are faint, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." 6) And the officials of Succoth said, "Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand that we should give bread to your army?" 7) And Gideon said, "Well then, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers." 8) 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. 9) And he said to the men of Penuel, "When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower." 10) Now Zebah and Zalmunna 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 a hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword. 11) And Gideon went up by the caravan route east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked the army; for the army was off its guard. 12) And Zebah and Zalmunna fled; and he pursued them and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic. 13) Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. 14) And he caught a young man of Succoth and questioned him; and he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. 15) And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand that we should give bread to your men who are faint?'" 16) And he took the elders of the city and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught

the men of Succoth. 17) And he broke down the tower of Penuel and slew the men of the city. 18) Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where are the men whom you slew at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were they, every one of them; they resembled the sons of a king." 19) 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 slay you." 20) And he said to Jether his first-born, "Rise, and slay them." But the youth did not draw his sword; for he was afraid because he was still a youth. 21) Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself and fall upon us; for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon arose and slew Zebah and Zalmunna; and he took the crescents that were on the necks of their camels. 22) Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian." 23) Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you." 24) And Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you; give me every man of you the earrings of his spoil." (For they had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites.) 25) And they answered, "We will willingly give them." And they spread a garment, and every man cast in it the earrings of his spoil. 26) And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold; besides the crescents and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian and besides the collars that were about the necks of their camels. 27) And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah; and all Israel played the harlot after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. 28) So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they lifted up their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon. 29) Jerrubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. 30) Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. 31) And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. 32) And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. 33) As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and played the harlot after the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god. 34) And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their Go, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side; 35) and they did not show kindness to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

Contrast vs. 1 with 12.1 where Gideon placates the anger of the tribe of Ephraim with Jephthah who brings defeat and humiliation to it. In other words, Gideon used gentle words compared with the contentious attitude of Jephthah: "The men of Ephraim were called to arms...and said to Jephthah, 'Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you?'" Also compare 7.24 with the current situation: "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters against them as far as Beth-barah and also the Jordan." So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they seized the waters as far as Beth-barah and also the Jordan." Despite every last Ephraimite coming out, apparently it wasn't enough, a kind of secondary action compared with the real fighting against the Midianites.

Vs. 1 begins with the familiar conjunctive *v-* to show the close connection between the defeat of Midian and the events depicted in this new chapter. While the **RSV** reads “And the men of Ephraim” the Hebrew has the singular “man” in order to describe the complaint of Ephraim coming from that tribe as a whole. These people put their complaint in terms of a *davar* (this) which means word as expression noted last in 6.29 where it reads as thing. Thus *davar* may be taken as words spoken to the Ephraimites by Gideon which didn’t sit well with them.

Apparently the Ephraimites were eagerly standing by for word...*davar*...from Gideon to come out against Midian, the preposition *b-* being used which reads literally “in Midian.” As a consequence of what appears a misunderstanding, this tribe—as one man, if you will—upbraided Gideon. The verb here is *ryv* which, as last seen in 6.32, suggests contention. Not only contention but in a very strong fashion rendered in Hebrew by the noun *chezqah* (cf. 4.8) prefaced with the preposition *b-*, literally as “in force.” Such terms intimate that Ephraim just might come to blows with the other tribes which would impede Gideon’s pursuit of the Midianites and putting an end to their oppression once and for all.

In this tense stand-off Gideon responds the best possible way by asking rhetorically two questions. First he compares himself with the Ephraimites, that their role is just as important if not more so than his. The second question pertains to the left-over grapes or gleanings, *holleloth* which has five other biblical references, one of which being Is 17.6: “Gleanings will be left in it as when an olive tree is beaten—two or three berries in the top of the highest bough.” In other words, what the Ephraimites had left behind at the grape harvest is better than the entire harvest of Abiezer. Abiezer is, of course, the clan to which Gideon belongs. “The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite where his son Gideon was threshing” [6.11]. When the Ephraimites put two and two together, they recalled the now famous story of Gideon being summoned by the Lord while threshing which is not unlike the gleanings at hand. Thus the two have something in common.

Gideon realizes he has the upper hand and capitalizes on his momentum saying that the Lord, not he, has given into their hands both Oreb and Zeeb (cf. 7.24). With this thrown out there for all to see, Gideon poses his last rhetorical question saying that the Ephraimites had accomplished more than he. Surely a wise move, for that silenced them, their anger being abated or *raphah* which fundamentally means to let down, to be feeble. With these alternate definitions in mind, the idea we get is that the Ephraimites’ anger was deflated quickly like a balloon. “Behold, now the day has waned toward evening” [19.9]. As for the word anger, it’s *ruach* (cf. 6.34) or more commonly, spirit or wind, adding to the image of a deflated balloon. As the text says, this deflation happened when Gideon spoke with the Ephraimites, *davar* being the verb which effects it.

Typically, vs. 4 begins with the conjunctive *v-* to show the rapid sequence of events, the Ephraimites’ dispute with Gideon as a kind of interruption in the conflict at hand. The verb *havar* (cf. 2.20) for passing over the Jordan conveys a sense of urgency and haste. Gideon does this along with the three hundred chosen men, the same amount which attacked the Midianite camp without losing a single man. They crossed the Jordan both faint and pursuing, *hayeph* (cf.

vs. 5) and *radaph* (cf. 3.28). This is a gamble of sorts, for the best troops at Israel's disposal left the rest of their people unattended. Hopefully the confusion at hand would preclude any of the Canaanites to rise up and seize an opportunity to slay the Israelites.

Having crossed the Jordan weary yet determined, Gideon and his band encountered the inhabitants of Succoth, well to the east and mentioned here for the first time. Surely he must have thought of the earlier generation...Joshua...who had led Israel from the Sinai wilderness and wondered about all the events that had transpired since then. In effect his current military action was a direct result of Israel's multiple failures to live up to the Lord's commands where the Midianites are playing a second-hand role, if you will. Gideon may have had in mind Jacob's experience in Succoth where he settled down after his encounter with Esau (cf. Gen 33.17). Hopefully memory of that great patriarch was still been alive among the current inhabitants, thereby promising a welcome.

Once Gideon and the three hundred arrived at Succoth exhausted from their pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna, he asks the inhabitants for bread. The relationship between these troops and their leader is described literally by the expression in vs. 5 as "in my feet." Now out of the clear blue the village of Succoth finds itself swamped by a small yet formidable band of crack troops. A short time earlier the two Midianite princes had passed through hastily and with some fifteen thousand men, a sight that by no means went unnoticed. Quickly representatives of Succoth who are called princes (*sar*, cf. vs. 3 but not noted there) met with Gideon while his men were encamped outside the village, a sight that put the Succothites on edge as to their intent. However, in vs. 6 the princes rebuked...rather mocked Gideon...as they gazed at his exhausted troops, no match for the remnant of Midianites who still posed a threat even if on the run. Still, the Midianites had no true idea of the number of Israelites, thinking that Gideon was in command of a formidable large force thanks to his clever ruse of rushing the camp during the night. Also the Succothites figured that the Midianites were too intent on saving their own skins instead of posing a threat to their way of life while Gideon just might upset a comfortable order of things, worship of local gods, to which the people had adapted.

To date Gideon has been known for his moderation as well as a bold leader, taking inspiration from both Deborah and Barak as well as their predecessors. So here he was, speaking with what he had hoped would be if not allies but people sympathetic to his cause. Actually there's no information as to the identity of the Succothites; it's assumed they were Israelites, but then again, not all Israelites wanted unnecessary confrontation with the native inhabitants. Even if they decided to feed Gideon's men, three hundred was asking a lot from a small village to offer hospitality.

The **RSV** of vs. 7 has Gideon responding ominously to the rebuke he just received, "well then" or *laken* (therefore) compared with his polite "Pray, give (*tenu-na*) loaves of bread" in vs. 5. He prefaces what turns out to be a threat with the confident words of the impending defeat of the two Midianite princes. After this victory which he was certain to effect he'll return to Succoth and flail them. *Dush* is the verb also meaning to thresh, this verb conjuring up a device with iron teeth which reduces grain into small pieces. "Now Ornan was threshing wheat" [1Chron

21.20]. Instead of iron teeth, Gideon will use thorns and briars, making quick and total destruction of the Succothites. The princes of that village didn't respond, regretting that they had treated him and his band of soldiers in such a dismissive manner. As they and the inhabitants watched the Israelites leave the city, still weary and faint (cf. vs. 4) yet with renewed determination, they knew Gideon was a man of his word and would treat them just as he is about to treat Zebah, Zalmunna and their armies. All they could do now was hold their breath, anxiously awaiting their fate.

Gideon decided to ask the inhabitants of another village called Penuel last mentioned in Gen 32.31, a place where Jacob stayed after his contest with the mysterious man during the night. Gideon's high hopes had been tempered with the inhabitants of Succoth even it too was associated with the same patriarch, Jacob. By now his situation was desperate and hoped for the best. To his disappointment, the Penuelites responded the same way as the princes of Succoth who perhaps sent word on ahead to deny aide, an act of desperation at their impending fate of being flailed with thorns and briars. At Penuel there's no mention of princes, but they can be assumed as present. This time Gideon threatens them with tearing down their tower or *migdal* which he does later in vs. 17. This seems to be both a fortification and watchtower implying greater defenses than Succoth. Just as with Succoth, the inhabitants of Penuel give no response, forcing Gideon to move on again this time with even greater concern for the welfare of his men. Perhaps the Penuelites felt secure in refusing to assist Gideon because his troops were more worn out. Also they put reliance in their tower as a place safe from attack from an apparently rag-tag army. Note that Gideon responds with confidence as to leveling the tower saying that he will come in peace or *shalom* (cf. 6.24). The NIV translates *shalom* as triumph which is more like it. Although the Penuelites perceived this, they may have thought that Gideon would treat them more lightly than the Succothites despite his threat of destroying their precious tower.

Vs. 10 has the familiar conjunctive *v-*, obviously typical of the last few verses as well as others, but here suggesting Gideon's quick approach to Zebah and Zalmunna. The Midianites have taken refuge in nearby Karkor, the only mention of this place...town?...in the Bible which turned out to be fortunate for Gideon, given the condition of his men. The survivors from the now famous night battle number approximately fifteen thousand out of one hundred and twenty thousand. Obviously a huge reduction but nevertheless a force to be reckoned with. Although these Midianites were survivors from an army they considered much larger and were in fear of being pursued by it, they were well rested in comparison with Gideon's tiny force. So as Gideon drew closer, he had to conceal the small number of his troops to maintain the illusion.

Now Gideon decided upon another ruse to trap the Midianites, going by a caravan route, the nature of which implies a well-traveled road. There must have been several in the area which is why Gideon chose which less used, for vs. 12 says that the Midianite army was caught off guard. This reads literally "the camp was safety" or *betach* being a noun which also means trust. "The people...dwelt in security after the manner of the Sidonians" [18.7]. No specific reason is given for this trust, if you will, but probably it had to do with a confidence that they

were secure, even for the time being. Apparently they didn't even post guard on the caravan route east of Nobah, thinking no one would come that way.

Now Zebah and Zalmunna show their true colors. As soon as they were aware of Gideon's surprise attack, they fled at once (cf. vs. 12), having abandoned their army. Both thought that Gideon had a force as large as theirs, if not larger, completely unaware of this second ruse. As for the army, nothing is said of their fate, but Gideon must have slew them all or most because immediately he went after the two princes. This was no mean feat, given the forced march from the Jordan and encounters with the reluctant inhabitants of Succoth and Penuel. On top of Gideon's agenda was the capture of Zebah and Zalmunna, for that would effectively put an end to further resistance. Word of this cowardly desertion quickly spread among the troops which brought further resistance to an immediate end. The text puts it in terms of a panic, *charad* (cf. 7.3) meaning to tremble. Nothing is said about this *charad*, just that it had occurred, leaving it up to the reader's imagination. The same applies to the tiny band of three hundred Israelite soldiers.

In vs. 13 Gideon is identified as son of Joash in a formal sort of way, the next being vs. 29 which can be taken as praise for his courage under stress and elevation as one of Israel's greatest heroes. He and his army don't return as they had come but by another way, the ascent of Heres in vs. 13. This road back home was chosen deliberately to sneak up upon Succoth and Penuel in order to take out his revenge. Gideon also wished to avoid an ambush; after all, his force was small and by now completely worn out. While en route back and careful to be as stealthily as possible, Gideon hits upon a youth from Succoth possibly sent out to spy on him and bring back word as to his fate (cf. vs. 14). Without further ado, Gideon told him to write down the names of those princes and elders, some of whom he had met earlier and rejected his appeal for bread. The number was seventy-five, quite a lot it seems for a small village. Note that nothing is said of Penuel, at least for now. Perhaps Gideon had in mind the rather formidable tower which he'd deal with later. Under normal circumstances it could be taken, but here he was after a lengthy forced march, victory over Zebah and Zalmunna plus the equally arduous journey home, again without the possibility of procuring bread.

The young man complied with Gideon's request. We don't know what happened to him, but his life may have been spared for giving up the names of those elders. In vs. 15 Gideon arrives at Succoth (bypassing Penuel but certainly under the watchful eyes of men there from their famous tower). Without further ado, Gideon carries out his promise of flailing the elders with thorns and briers (cf. vs. 16) which, as noted in vs. 7, are from the wilderness and hence a worse variety by reason of growing in the desert. In other words, they were much sharper and capable of causing considerable damage. It's uncertain whether Gideon had actually killed these seventy-five; he may have wanted to teach them a lesson which is why the verb *lamad* (cf. 3.2) is used: "and with them (that is, the briers and thorns) he taught the men of Succoth" [vs. 16].

Right after this, Gideon turned back to Penuel, having bypassed it after coming from the ascent of Heres. No question...the elders of Succoth gave him and his army the bread they earlier had refused so now the Israelites were strengthened physically for the first time in a long time. The

Penuelites knew this, for afar off they could see Gideon's men approaching their village with a strength they had lacked previously. Here Gideon showed no mercy as with Succoth. The text says simply that he torn down the tower and slew the men of the city.

Vs. 18 has Zebah and Zalmunn already in captivity whom Gideon now brings forward to speak with and shortly after he flailed the elders of Succoth and slew the inhabitants of Penuel. Obviously it wasn't a good sign for these two princes. Gideon has a short dialogue with them, the nature of which are put in the words of a footnote in the RSV, "Gideon's motives were not merely religious or patriotic but personal." Perhaps he was referring to relatives whom the Midianites had slain earlier while they were oppressing the Israelites. The two princes told Gideon that those they slew at Tabor were like the son of a king, *to'ar* being a noun which means a form, usually applied to something beautiful or noble. "Leah's eyes were weak but Rachel was beautiful (i.e., fair of form) and lovely" [Gen 29.17]. These words enraged Gideon who said that he would spare them if they had let these sons of a king live, but now it was too late.

Gideon thought the captive of two enemy princes was a golden opportunity to teach his first-born son Jether a lesson. In vs. 20 he tells him to kill Zebah and Zalmunna, for they admitted to having slain family members. In other words, it was a perfect time to take revenge. Gideon thought Jether would keep in mind this opportunity in case he had to assume the role of leadership and save Israel yet again from his nation's proclivity to worship alien gods. However, Jether declined because of his young age which didn't seem to bother Gideon; he figured there would be further opportunities to prove himself. While this was going on, the two princes mocked Jether and turned to Gideon, telling him to perform the deed which he did and with pleasure. Then Gideon took the crescents on their necks, *saharonym* meaning little moons which perhaps were some kind of amulets. This noun has two other biblical references, vs. 26 and Is 3.18, the latter being cited here: "In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands and the crescents." Gideon wanted to remove these decorations as quickly as possible so that they wouldn't remind his troops of Israel's tendency to worship what they represent.

Vs. 22 begins with the conjunctive *v-* translated as then which sows a quick succession of events as well as their connection. Here the men of Israel ask Gideon essentially to be their king, the verb *mashal* meaning to rule and found next in 9.2: "Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you or that one rule over you?" The preposition *b-* (in) is prefaced to "you" reading literally, "rule in you" suggesting the total lordship Samuel outlines later on as being the rights of a king (cf. 1Sam 4.11-17). Note in those verses the reoccurring theme of "take:" that is, the king will take everything an individual owns and appropriate it for himself. As for the demand made of Gideon, not only did it apply to him but to his son and grandson; even Jether's reluctance to slay Zebah and Zalmunna failed to dissuade them. Obviously Jether heard these words which to his tender ears sounded very tempting. His father's rejection of them may have been a source of division between the two which is implied but not recorded. If and when a similar crisis arises—and surely it will, given Israel's inclination to perversity—Jether will make the situation worse rather than heal it by reason of his greed.

There's no clear indication about the identity of these Israelites. Perhaps the three hundred (or less than that number, the survivors) or others who came out to welcome Gideon upon return home from his astounding twofold victory. However, vs. 24 names those whom Gideon is addressing as Ishmaelites suggesting that it is the three hundred. Let's suppose that Gideon, being eminently qualified to rule Israel, accepted. Uniting the twelve tribes is one thing; how to manage a kingdom within territory still largely controlled by the Canaanites is another. This incident may be compared with the people's demand for a king from the prophet Samuel in 1Sam 8.4-20, a proposal he rejected vehemently but finally gave in. Perhaps shortly after Samuel had conceded, he regretting not having mentioned the example of Gideon which haunted him for the rest of his life.

Gideon says outrightly in vs. 23 that he won't be allowed to be made ruler or king or *mashal*; instead, the Lord will do it (cf. vs. 22). Keeping in mind the *b-* or *in* as pointed out two paragraphs above, we could say that Gideon wanted no part ruling "in" the people; such in-ness, if you will, belongs solely to the Lord. The people's request echos the Lord's response to Samuel in 1Sam 8.7: "For they have not rejected you (Samuel), but they have rejected me from being king over them."

Gideon makes a request, the verb *sha'al* (cf. vs. 14 but not noted there) and the noun *she'elah* used with the preposition *min* (from) which reads literally, "from you"...indicating that he is exacting something from them, if you will. It consists in giving him earrings from the spoil of the recent engagement with the Midianites, *nezem* being the noun found in the next two verses and also used as a nose ring. "Like a gold ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion" [Prov 11.22]. The **RSV** puts in parentheses the fact that the Midianites slain were Ishmaelites which isn't mentioned earlier in Judges even though Gideon had been aware of this fact when the Lord was choosing the three hundred. Given their background as descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham, these were among fiercest warriors in the land of Canaan which can be deduced from Ishmael described in Gen 16.12 as a wild ass of a man and thus antagonistic to Israel.

In vs. 25 the Ishmaelites responded to Gideon's request for earrings willingly and handed them over at once which came to a substantial amount. They also threw in other valuables described as belonging to the kings of Midian perhaps referring to the booty taken from Zebah and Zalmunna. Not unsurprisingly, Gideon must have had in mind the incident at Ai when the people violated the oath of taking booty and suffered an ignominious loss which infected everyone due to the disobedience of one person (cf. Josh 7.1 +). He was fully aware of the people's tendency toward apostasy and wished to forego it by making a public example. If three hundred of Israel's finest swore allegiance to the Lord, the victory they had wrought would be transferred, as it were, to the benefit of their own people.

In vs. 27 Gideon makes an ephod which usually is associated with a holy garment worn by priests. However, the ephod doesn't seem to be for priestly service which isn't mentioned but more as a display of Gideon's allegiance to Lord for whom he had risked his life and reputation.

Gideon places it in his own city of Ophrah for safe keeping and perhaps with the intent of building a temple to the Lord where the ephod would remain to remind the people not so much of victory against the Midianites but of Israel's submission to the Lord. This garment others related to it are described in considerable detail in Ex 28.6-30 where vs. 1 has the ephod as comprised "of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked." Within Judges ephod is found next in 17.5: "And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and teraphim and installed one of his sons who became his priest."

Sad to say but totally predicable, in the same verse (27) we read that Israel played the harlot, the phrase "all Israel" being used to show the extent of such perversity. *Zanah* is the verb and used early on, that is, in 2.17 which is worth quoting in full: "And yet they did not listen to their judges; for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so." The act of the entire nation prostituting itself is made worse by reason of taking place within Gideon's own hometown of Ophrah. Unfortunately it affects him and his family as vs. 27 continues, becoming a snare or *moqesh*, the exact same reason as depicted in 2.3.

On the bright side (and this was only temporary), the nation of Midian was subdued (*kanah*, cf. 4.23) to such an extent that they were no longer able to raise their heads. However, this is misreading, countered immediately by the words in vs. 28 that the land experienced rest (*shaqat*, cf. 5.31) for forty years as had been the case with the victory wrought by Deborah and Barak. Given the immediate apostasy just described, even in Gideon's household, such rest must have been tenuous. That tension between the majority of Israelites who subscribed to alien gods and those who had remained faithful to the Lord was present and ever grating since they had entered the land of Canaan. We have no information about Gideon's response, how he must have felt betrayed not only by Israel but by most of if not all his three hundred chosen men responsible for defeating Midian.

This tragedy reveals the almost impossible task of eradicating Israel's persistent attraction appetite for Canaanite deities. While Gideon and his illustrious predecessors, that is, the judges, had saved Israel repeatedly, he wondered if the entire enterprise of Israel entering the so-called promised land was a mistaken, even an illusion. To him and others loyal to the Lord, Canaan turned out to be pretty much an extension of the Sinai wilderness; even Egypt seemed better where the Israelites shared a common misery. Gideon was sorely tempted to identify with the cry uttered in Ex 16.3: "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full. For you have brought us out into this wilderness (the wilderness of Canaan) to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

At this stage toward the end of Gideon's life, vss. 30-31 reveal what seems to be a shocking discovery: he had seventy sons, many wives and a concubine. Implied is that before being called by the Lord to rescue Israel, Gideon dabbled in the worship Canaanite gods, some if not all his wives being natives, not of Israelite origin. As for the concubine, she bears him a son called Abimelech whose tragic story will unfold in the next chapter. After this revelation about

Gideon's personal life, vs. 32 concludes with the observation that he died a good old age, "good" taken tongue-in-cheek insofar as his life ended under a certain cloud as far as his personal life went but gloriously as far as being savior of Israel.

Vs. 33 begins with the conjunctive *v-* along with *ca'asher*, the translation being as soon as and applied to Gideon's death. In sum, these words make no bones about the rapid descent of Israel into idolatry where it seems the entire nation played the harlot, *zanah* echoing the words of vs. 27. *Zanah* is used with the verb *shuv* (cf. 2.19) meaning to turn again or turn back, the attraction never having wavered. Here return to idolatry is with respect to the Baals (cf. 3.7) made all the worse (if that could be such given everything be described here) by installing Baal-berith (cf. 9.4) as their god. This god's name translates as "god of the covenant," a mockery, if you will of the covenant between Israel and the Lord. The verb *sum* for made implies a setting up or placing which here intimates that the covenant, if you will, with Baal-berith usurps the Lord and permanently expels him.

The expulsion of the Lord from Israel is reflected in vs. 34 where Israel failed to remember him, *zakar* being found here for the first time in Judges and next in 9.2. From *zakar* derives the noun for male in the sense that a man is responsible for the lineage of a family and its continuation. So by failing to *zakar* the Lord, Israel fails to give birth to his memory for future generations, like refusing to engage in the vital process of propagating children. This catastrophe is made all the more poignant by the Lord having rescued Israel, *natsal* meaning to pull out or snatch from danger. "And there was no deliverer because it was far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone" [18.28]. The words "on every side" heighten such repeated gestures of snatching Israel from its own perversity.

Chapter Eight concludes with what happened shortly after the death of Gideon. The Israelites failed to show kindness to his family, that is, they did not show *chesed* (cf. 1.24). Often the untranslatable *chesed* is used to describe the character of the Lord, what he excels in doing because he is *chesed* itself, the New Testament *agape* being not unlike it. So if Israel has no memory of the Lord, that ability to beget it, how could it pass on memory of his *chesed*? Vs. 35 ironically calls Gideon Jerubbaal as in vs. 29, for Israel was busy worshiping Baal-berith. Another contrast in this overall tragedy is that the last words of this chapter are "to Israel" where the preposition *hin* translates as "with Israel." At least what is intimated in these last verses have the benefit of preparing the reader for the continued misfortunes laying ahead which is not much a consolation.

## Chapter Nine

Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's kinsmen and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, 2) "Say in the ears of all the citizens of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh." 3) And his

mother's kinsmen spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the men of Shechem; and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." 4) And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. 5) And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and slew his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, upon one stone; but Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. 6) And all the citizens of Shechem came together and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem. 7) When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you men of Shechem, that God may listen to you. 8) The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' 9) But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my fatness by which gods and men are honored and go to sway over the trees?' 10) And the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come you, and reign over us.' [\*11\*] But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go to sway over the trees?' 12) And the trees said to the vine, 'Come you and reign over us.' 13) But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine which cheers gods and men and go to sway over the trees?' 14) Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'Come you and reign over us.' 15) 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.' 16) "Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and honor when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved—17) for my father fought for you and risked his life and rescued you from the hand of Midian; 18) and you have risen up against my father's house this day and have slain his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant king over the citizens of Shechem because he is your kinsman—19) if you then have acted in good faith and honor with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; 20) but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the citizens of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech." 21) And Jotham ran away and fled, and went to Beer and dwelt there for fear of Abimelech his brother. 22) Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. 23) And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech; 24) that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come and their blood be laid upon Abimelech their brother who slew them and upon the men of Shechem who strengthened his hands to slay his brothers. 25) And the men of Shechem put men in ambush against him on the mountain tops, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was told Abimelech. 26) And Gaal the son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his kinsmen; and the men of Shechem put confidence in him. 27) And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards and trod them and held festival and went into the house of their god and ate and drank and reviled Abimelech. 28) And Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who are we of Shechem, that we should serve him? Did not the son of

Jerubbaal and Zebul his officer serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem? Why then should we serve him? 29) Would that this people were under my hand! then I would remove Abimelech. I would say to Abimelech, 'Increase your army and come out.'" 30) When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. 31) And he sent messengers to Abimelech at Arumah, saying, "Behold, Gaal the son of Ebed and his kinsmen have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. 32) Now therefore, go by night, you and the men that are with you, and lie in wait in the fields. 33) Then in the morning as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city; and when he and the men that are with him come out against you, you may do to them as occasion offers." 34) And Abimelech and all the men that were with him rose up by night and laid wait against Shechem in four companies. 35) And Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city; and Abimelech and the men that were with him rose from the ambush. 36) And when Gaal saw the men, he said to Zebul, "Look, men are coming down from the mountain tops!" And Zebul said to him, "You see the shadow of the mountains as if they were men." 37) Gaal spoke again and said, "Look, men are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the Diviners' Oak." 38) Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your mouth now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the men whom you despised? Go out now and fight with them." 39) And Gaal went out at the head of the men of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. 40) And Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him; and many fell wounded up to the entrance of the gate. 41) And Abimelech dwelt at Arumah; and Zebul drove out Gaal and his kinsmen so that they could not live on at Shechem. 42) On the following day the men went out into the fields. And Abimelech was told. 43) He took his men and divided them into three companies and laid wait in the fields; and he looked and saw the men coming out of the city, and he rose against them and slew them. 44) Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city while the two companies rushed upon all who were in the fields and slew them. 45) And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city and killed the people that were in it; and he razed the city and sowed it with salt. 46) When all the people of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the house of El-berith. 47) Abimelech was told that all the people of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. 48) And Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the men that were with him; and Abimelech took an axe in his hand and cut down a bundle of brushwood and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. And he said to the men that were with him, "What you have seen me do, make haste to do, as I have done." 49) So every one of the people cut down his bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women. 50) Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and encamped against Thebez and took it. 51) But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the people of the city fled to it, all the men and women and shut themselves in; and they went to the roof of the tower. 52) And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. 53) And a certain woman threw an upper

millstone upon Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. 54) Then he called hastily to the young man his armor-bearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" And his young man thrust him through, and he died. 55) And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man to his home. 56) Thus God requited the crime of Abimelech which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; 57) and God also made all the wickedness of the men of Shechem fall back upon their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

This is the longest chapter in Judges consisting of fifty-seven verses and begins with Gideon's son born of a Canaanite concubine (cf. 8.31). In effect, he "had many wives" [4.30]; whether or not they were Israelite or Canaanite isn't specified. Let's say some are Canaanite which can be intimidated by the concubine. It doesn't forebode well for Israel as a whole after Gideon's death, reminiscent of King Solomon who "loved many foreign women...and his wives turned away his heart" [1Kg 11.1 & 3]. Such foreboding is conveyed by use of the conjunctive *v*- which introduces Chapter Nine as "now."

Abimelech is identified as "son of Jerubbaal," not Gideon as is the case throughout this chapter, which harkens back to 6.32: "Therefore on that day he was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him" because he pulled down his altar." In other words, it's as though the author of Judges is saying that the name of Gideon, despite the heroic feat just accomplished, is blotted out right after his death. In actuality, it's just another incident in a series of apparently endless tragedies where Israel forsakes the Lord in favor of Canaanite divinities. Although such calamities have been noted earlier even as the Lord's interventions got increasingly dramatic, the rapidity of backsliding boggles the mind. The one at hand is indicated by Abimelech who wastes no time as he heads off to Shechem, site of the Canaanite god Baal-berith (cf. 8.33). Also Shechem is the home of the relatives of Abimelech's mother who were delighted at his coming. Surely they took an active role in swaying the son of Israel's greatest hero to come over to their side which he was more than willing to do.

Without skipping a beat, Abimelech puts a question directly to the inhabitants of Shechem or his mother's kinsmen, a term used in vs. 1 which can include a sizeable amount of the town's population. The words of vs. 2 emphasizes the urgency of the question, that is, it is to be said "in the ears of all the citizens of Shechem." Here as in vs. 6 they are called such, *bahal* also meaning a master or husband. He hoped they in turn would persuade their fellow citizens and even threaten them should they fail to comply. Abimelech asks in a quasi-threatening manner whether they'd like to have one ruler or his father's seventy sons, all born of multiple wives compared with his mother, a Canaanite concubine. The verb to rule is *mashal* as in 8.22 when the Israelites asked Gideon essentially to be their king which he refused. Actually he told them outrightly that his son wouldn't do the same; instead, "the Lord will *mashal* over you" [8.23]. Abimelech heard about this when he grew up, the story having been embellished considerably by his mother and her family members sympathetic to the Canaanite divinities. So when he came into his own, he goes to Shechem which is where we are right now. This veiled threat is followed by another, that is, Abimelech reminding the people that he is one of their by birth;

Gideon's seventy sons were a mixed breed of Israelites and Canaanites and hence disqualified to exercise authority, at least that was Abimelech's persuasion.

Abimelech's extended family hoped that the reputation of his father, even though he had defeated the Midianites or fellow inhabitants of the land, would show the same leadership skills but now on their behalf. It was a gamble, but chances are they used forceful tactics to make everyone comply. Although vs. 3 has these kinsmen canvassing on Abimelech's behalf and got ready compliance, chances are it glosses over the fact that some didn't go along. It was difficult to trust this half-breed, if you will, with their future even though the track record shows that the Israelites always succumbed to native deities despite intervention of a hero on their behalf. Thus the words of vs. 3 "He is our brother" may be taken tongue-in-cheek.

Under pressure from Abimelech's kinsmen the inhabitants of Shechem handed over seventy pieces of silver from the house of their local deity, Baal-berith, that is, the temple which acted as a treasury with his mother undoubtedly exerting a heavy hand in this regard. With this considerable amount he wasted no time in hiring a group of undesirables the text calls worthless and reckless, *reyq* and *pachaz*. The former is an adjective meaning empty in the sense of vain found last in 7.16 but not noted there. The latter is a participle meaning to be wanton or lascivious and has one other biblical reference, Zep 3.4: "Her prophets are wanton, faithless men; her priests profane what is sacred, they do violence to the law." In fact, both *reyq* and *pachaz* describe Abimelech himself perfectly. With this rag-tag group he went to his father's house and slew his seventy sons who were his half-brothers. Nothing is said about Abimelech taking part in this slaughter; if not directly, he was looking on while taking great delight. Only one survived by the name of Jotham, the youngest of the seventy.

As a result of this massacre—all the worse because it involved Gideon's extended family—the citizens (*bahal*, cf. vs. 2) of Shechem, as well as those from Beth-millo, assembled (the word can be taken as a play on *baal* which also means a master). Without further delay, they made Abimelech their king perhaps fearful of his band of thugs who were keeping a menacing eye over the proceedings. They did this at the oak of the pillar of Shechem which we can take as diametrically opposed to the oak under which the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon in 6.11...a counter-oak or parody of the real thing. As for the pillar or *mutsav*, it also means a garrison where soldiers are stationed as in 1Sam 13.23: "And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash."

This threat by Abimelech to make himself king also has something abominable about it in addition to he being half Israelite and half Canaanite. The attempt to unite the two warring factions is directly against the Lord's wishes made abundantly clear with Joshua as he was about to enter the land. He figures that if the Shechemites came over to his side, it would set in motion a chain of events that would bring this misdirected goal to fruition. King David's son Absalom would try something not unlike this and nearly succeeded because he had the integrity and charisma which Abimelech sorely lacked.

In the meanwhile Gideon's youngest son Jotham was trying to cope with his recent traumatic experience of having just escaped death. Apparently he was in the dark concerning recent events, hence the words of vs. 7, "When it was told." Jotham wasted no time in responding. Although there's no divine intervention as with an angel to his father, he showed himself, at least initially, a worthy son, the only of seventy brothers. He headed for the summit of Mount Gerizim to the south of Shechem. Regardless, the choice was ideal in light of Dt 11.29, a fact which didn't escape Jotham: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal."

Apparently Gerizim overlooked the town because from the summit Jotham cried out to the Shechemites below, asking that God may listen to (*shamah*, cf. 5.3) them, not the imposter Abimelech. Surely Jotham must have had in mind when his father overlooked the camp of Midian, the Shechemites essentially a potential threat as that recent one had been though for different reasons. Once he got everyone's attention (perhaps many didn't recognize he was the only surviving son of Gideon), he launched into an extended parable. It begins in vs. 8 and centers around a bunch of trees seeking to have a king anointed (*mashach*) over them, this verb occurring one other time in Judges, vs. 15.

The trees that initiated this approached three trees, the first being an olive tree, a natural choice, because it's both fruitful and produces oil for anointing. This tree's response was a sharp retort, not wanting to leave its fatness, the verb *chadal* (cf. 5.6) with the noun *deshen* as in Ps 63.5: "My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat." By its own juice...olive oil...both men and gods are honored, that is to say, anointed, where the verb *kaved* is used. It is found in 1.35 but not noted there as "rested heavily." Surely being content with producing such a precious product pales in comparison with ruling over trees of lesser stature, the verb being *nuah* or to sway as in the wind. Here the verb intimates a waste of time. *Nuach* is found in vss. 11 and 13 with regard to the next two candidates, the fig tree and the vine.

After that flat-out refusal the trees move on to the next logical candidate, a fig tree, which offered a rebut in the form of a question as did the olive tree. Why should such a fruitful tree leave behind its sweetness or *moteq*, this being the only biblical reference (cf. vs. 11)? Better to stay put and continue offering its benefits than to take up rule over a bunch of unruly trees.

The third candidate turns out not to be a tree but a vine which produces wine for the benefit of gods and men just like the olive tree in vs. 9. The two types of trees plus vine are vital for sustenance of life. To have them switch roles, even with the temptation of lording it over fellow trees, is unthinkable. The trees that asked for such a ruler came away stunned, thinking that the first candidate (olive tree) would jump at the chance.

So when the trees which desperately were in search of a ruler left, vs. 14 has them deciding upon a bramble or *'atad* (a proper name as in Gen 50.10). "Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away" [Ps 58.9]! The trees attempting to come to a decision must have disputed vigorously among themselves before

approaching the bramble. They also knew that unlike the olive, fig and vine, it would accept the proposal. In vs. 15 this thorny bush asked the trees whether or not they were making their request in good faith or *'emeth*. Although we're dealing with a bramble full of thorns, it must get credit for putting an honest response to the trees questioning it. To demonstrate that they are on the level, the bramble bids them to take refuge in its shade which essentially isn't much compared with the other trees, *chasah* being the verb which implies trust as well as a shadow. "My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge" [Ps 18.2].

The trees which solicited the olive, fig and vine find themselves up against a dilemma from which there's no escape. That is, should they refuse this offer by the bramble, it would issue forth fire to devour the cedars of Lebanon. Such cedars are representative of the best timber for construction (as in Solomon's temple) and can apply to the inhabitants of Shechem. And so the trees seeking someone to rule over them must choose to take shelter in the bramble or if they refuse, will be consumed by fire.

In vs. 16 Jotham's address from the top of Mount Gerizim to the Shechemites takes a different turn. He opens with pretty much the same words as the bramble, that is, questioning their faith or *'emeth* as in vs. 15. To this faith he adds honor or *tamym*, an adjective which means perfect as well as upright and found next in vs. 19. In one voice Jotham mentions Abimelech and his father (Jerubbaal as well as his house), an embarrassing reminder of how he had defeated the Midianites and thus rescued Israel from annihilation. He continues by reminding them how he fought on their behalf which the Shechemites repaid by rising up against his house...not just that but "to this day" [vs. 18]. Furthermore, they slew his seventy sons on one rock. So by juxtaposing Gideon and Abimelech Jotham is pleading with the people to make the right choice which boils down to choosing him. That's why he went into some detail about the story concerning the three trees and the bramble.

After the truth of the situation concerning Abimelech's attempt to become king becomes known, Jotham fled. Up until now the Israelites had judges; the delicate issue of a king would have to wait until Saul some generations later. Abimelech now shows his true colors by the bold move of addressing the Shechemites and heads off to Beer out of fear of the presumptive king. Except for a brief mention in the last verse of this chapter, Jotham disappears from the scene, a disappointment for those who thought he might take after his father. Nevertheless, the curse in vs. 47 associated with his name did go a long way to prevent Abimelech from usurping power and ultimately revealed his downfall. So with Jotham basically out of the way, the stage is set for continued tension between Israel and the inhabitants of Canaan. This will remain basically unchanged until the next hero comes along in the person of Samson in Chapter Thirteen.

Vs. 22 begins with the conjunctive *v-* which isn't translated in the **RSV** and performs its customary task as showing a close connection between events. With Jotham effectively out of the way (though his curse will take effect later on), Abimelech becomes king not only over the Shechemites but Israel which at this time is still a scattered group of tribes struggling to survive in Canaan. The verb here is *sarar* meaning to hold dominion as well as being a prince

(the noun derives from it) and is more general that kingship associated with the verb *mashal* noted above. “By me princes rule and nobles govern the earth” [Prov 8.16]. Like that bramble of Jotham’s parable, his rule continues for three years with the people taking refuge in it. At the end of this time God himself stepped in and sent an evil spirit, a *ruach* (cf. 8.3) which is *rah* (cf. 6.1) between the Shechemites and their king, This was destined to spread quickly to the rest of Israel.

It seems that Abimelech had been enthroned for three years after which this evil spirit made its appearance. In the meanwhile its manifestation had been building up during that time, now ready to pounce full force. What it consists of isn’t specified but sufficiently troublesome for the town’s inhabitants to deal treacherously with Abimelech. *Bagad* is the verb with the preposition *b-* or literally “in Abimelech” connotes doing this in a covert fashion or behind the scenes. “But they turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow” [Ps 78.57]. So if Abimelech thought he could lord it over the Israelites, he was in for a rude awakening which took the form of the people doing the same violence as to Gideon’s seventy sons. *Chamas* is the noun here as in Ps 11.5: “The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and his soul hates him who loves violence.” Thus they never forgot what Abimelech had done to their hero’s sons despite their hostility towards Gideon described both in 8.35 and vs. 9: “and they did not show kindness to the family of Jerrubbaal.” “And his mother’s kinsmen spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the men of Shechem.”

The Shechemites decided upon an ambush or *ma’arav*, the best way to take out Abimelech. It could be passed off as a group of robbers thereby absolving them of the deed. *Ma’arav* has three other biblical references, one of which is Ps 10.8: “He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent.” Those involved had to determine when their king was passing through a mountainous region by keeping a close eye on his activities which was quite easy to do. Apparently the Shechemites were shrewd enough to station so-called robbers in the area who took it upon themselves to commit some crimes beforehand which is why vs. 25 says “and it was told Abimelech.”

A certain fellow by the name of Gaal had moved to Shechem along with his kinsmen which, as noted earlier, can apply to an extended family. There’s no information as to where he came from nor the reason for such a move which caused quite a stir because of so many people tagging along with him. Apparently he is a man of some repute, for quickly the townsfolk put trust in him, *batach* being the verb. Perhaps the same applied to his kinsmen or at least some of them. Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were there, how they dwelt in security” [18.7].

Gaal and his clan arrived around harvest time—the plot against Abimelech put on hold, so it seems—because everyone went out into the field for a festival after having gathered grapes, the noun in vs. 27 being *hilulym* being derived from the verbal root to praise or *halal* and has one other reference, Lev 19.24: “And in the fourth year all their fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord.” It culminated by worship of the local god— certainly not the God of Israel—in the local temple. There they continued their revelry during which they reviled Abimelech,

*qalal* being the verb which sounds like *halal* just mentioned. “You shall not revile God nor curse a ruler of your people” [Ex 22.28]. It was safer to do this in the confines of a temple, for it seems the king wasn’t present although he must have been around at another time for the celebration of such an important event.

Although a newcomer, Gaal felt sufficiently secure and welcomed to ask aloud in the temple (we have no information whether he was a believer in the God of Israel) what everyone else was thinking. That is to say, why are we inhabitants of Shechem tolerating Abimelech as king? In the same verse (28) he speaks like a native and brings up the fact that Abimelech is the son of Jerubbaal or Gideon who had been at the service of the father of Shechem who had founded the town in which they were now living. Then he utters what everyone was hoping for, that is, a desire to be leader after which he’d get rid of Abimelech. More precisely, Gaal would challenge him to gather his army and meet him in open combat.

Such inflammatory words by Gaal, not a native of the town, were bound not to pass by unnoticed. Right away Zebul, Abimelech’s officer (cf. vs. 28), passed word of this budding rebellion on to his king in vs. 31. He put it in vivid words which literally run in Hebrew, that he’s besieging the city, *tsur* being the verb as in 2Kg 6.25: “And there was a great famine in Samaria as they besieged it.” Zebul proposed a strategy not unlike his fellow citizens had done earlier against Abimelech, that is, an ambush. The king and his armed men are to approach Shechem at night shortly after the festival out in the field, an ideal time when they were still in a relaxed mood. The next morning Abimelech would make an attack by rushing upon the city, *pashat* being the verb which means to expand or spread out. Everyone in the town would be overcome with wine; in essence, they’d be suffering from a hangover. “Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city” [vs. 44].

In vs. 34 Abimelech puts his plan of attack into motion by having his men laying in wait against Shechem, *arav* (found in vs. 32 but not mentioned) being the verb. They do this divided into four companies, most likely with one on each side of the town thereby surrounding it. This caught the people by surprise with Gaal exclaiming that the attackers resembled shadows coming down from the mountains (cf. vs. 36). That, of course, was an assault by one company with two others approaching simultaneously. One comes from the center of the land, *tabor* meaning a lofty place (cf. vs. 37) and has one other biblical reference, Ezk 38.12: “I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land.” The third assault comes from the so-called Diviners’ Oak (cf. vs. 37), *hanan* being a participle, the verb meaning to cover and thus implies magic and sorcery.

All the while Zebul, Abimelech’s official, was present within the city along with Gaal who doesn’t seem to know the two were conspiring to assault Shechem. Finally when the three-pronged attack (the fourth company doesn’t participate, perhaps held in reserve) is under way, Zebul blurts out to Gaal, mocking his words to the people about ridiculing Abimelech. Zebul urges Gaal to engage his king which he does, knowing full well that defeat is inevitable. He

bursts out of the city gates, joins Abimelech, and is routed but not killed, after which we don't hear from him. Those left in the city awaiting their fate must have cursed this newcomer who boasted so confidently that he'd drive out Abimelech once and for all. Now they are about to pay the price for their disloyalty even though Abimelech is a self-proclaimed king.

Vss. 42-52 go into some detail as to how Abimelech engages the Shechemites, slays everyone and to top it off, sows the soil with salt (cf. vs. 45) so nothing will grow there. After he kills those who had taken refuge in a tower, the last defensive stronghold, he takes out his revenge against Thebez which seems to be allied with Shechem and shares an equal hatred of Abimelech. This town had a tower as well in which the inhabitants took refuge, a last stand of sorts. A woman threw down millstone upon Abimelech and killed him, a lucky hit if there ever was one. This brought the siege to an abrupt end, the attacking army taken by complete surprise, especially after their victory at Shechem. Nothing is said about this woman, an anonymous heroine of sorts. The author of Judges puts it thus: "Thus God requited the crime of Abimelech" [vs. 56], the noun being *rah* (cf. vs. 23) and the verb *shuv* (cf. 8.33) which means to return. As this verse continues, the crime is Abimelech, born of the illustrious Gideon though of his mistress, who had slain his father's seventy legitimate sons and set himself up as king over Israel. Surely this attempt, even if a dismal failure and for all the wrong reasons and something abhorred by the Lord, got some Israelites thinking about the potential advantages of a king so as to unite them. However, that would have to wait for Saul and shortly afterwards, David.

Chapter Nine concludes with the revenge of Jotham, that is, his curse or *qelalah* which he framed in the parable of a bramble representative of Abimelech. It falls upon the Shechemites who consented to allow Abimelech become their king and paid for it by their destruction, all due to a stranger, Gaal. "He loved to curse; let curses come on him" [Ps 109.17]! However, nothing further is said about Jotham who disappeared from the scene, a disappointment for the Israelites who thought he may have followed in the footsteps of his father Gideon. Certainly that was the impression he gave after having spoken the parable about trees in search of a ruler. Regardless, Judges will continue to recount the depressing slide of Israel to the worship of alien gods, the resulting distress followed by their redemption.

## Chapter Ten

1) After Abimelech there arose to deliver Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. 2) And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he die, and was buried at Shamir. 3) After him arose Jair the Gileadit, who judged Israel twenty-two years. 4) And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty asses; and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day which are in the land of Gilead. 5) And Jair died and was buried in Kamon. 6) And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the Lord

and did not serve him. 7) And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, 8) and they crushed and oppressed the children of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites which is in Gilead. 9) And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim so that Israel was sorely distressed. 10) And the people of Israel cried to the Lord, saying, "We have sinned against you because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." 11) And the Lord said to the people of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? 12) The Sidonians also and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you; and you cried to me, and I delivered you out of their hand. 13) Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. 14) Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress." 15) And the people of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you; only deliver us, we pray you, this day." 16) So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord; and he became indignant over the misery of Israel. 17) Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead; and the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. 18) And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, "Who is the man that will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

The Israelites must have been smarting quite a bit after the attempt of Abimelech to proclaim himself king. In essence, this grasp at kingship turned too many off who preferred to stick with local leaders or judges, at least until the time of Saul and the threat from the Philistines. As for judges, the last true-blue hero was Gideon, now just a memory, his son Jotham playing an indirect role by his curse of Abimelech. Chapter Ten mentions two judges (*shaphat*: the verb as in 3.11) in rapid succession, Tola from the tribe of Issachar and Jair. Each performed his duty for a considerable length of time, over twenty years, though nothing is said about what had transpired to what amounts to forty-five years. Vs. 4 offers what seems to be an amusing fact, that Jair had thirty sons who rode on asses and controlled thirty cities. Nothing is said as to their administration which means things have pretty much amounted to an uneasy stalemate or extended truce with the local tribes. If something dramatic occurred during the extended period of forty-five years, it would have been recorded. In sum, Israel must have drifted in and out of a relationship with local deities while others remained faithful to the Lord. This reached a deadlock of sorts, no one willing to antagonize a less than ideal situation. At least there were no military confrontations or people like Abimelech to stir up trouble.

Vs. 6 has the all too familiar depressing words made all the more so by the conjunctive *v-*: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." As in other instances such as 3.12, the verb *yasaph* is used which means to increase or advance suggesting that this evil or *rah* (cf. 9.56) has been present within Israel all along and growing while it creeps from one generation and into another. And this *rah* is viewed as the Israelites serving Canaanite divinities which have an irresistible and unbreakable hold upon the people.

Obviously the *yasaph* just mentioned crept along through the extended rule of both Tola and Jair but went underground, as it were, nevertheless growing all the while remaining out of sight.

Vs. 6 goes into some detail as to these alien gods: the familiar Baals and Ashtaroth while those of Siria, Sidon, Moab, Ammonites and Philistines are thrown in, a formidable array which seems impossible to overcome. In fact, it looks as though the entire people of Israel had abandoned the Lord except for a handful. Of them all, the Philistines will offer the greater resistance and challenge to Israel over the coming years. Just the list—and each group must contain a whole slew of gods and goddesses—is daunting enough to discourage any judge from standing up to them. As for the Levites and other priestly officials, we don't hear a peep from them. They're either tacitly compliant or struggling to keep alive worship of the God of Israel. So when vs. 6 says the people served these divinities, the verb used is *havad* (cf. 3.8) with its double meaning of being a slave to them. The concluding words of this verse sum up the situation, so endemic to Israel: "and they forsook the Lord and did not serve (*havad*) him." *Hazav* is the verb for forsook meaning to abandon noted early on as in 2.14.

Keeping in line with the fundamental orientation of Judges, vs. 7 begins with the conjunctive *v-* as and which shows the close connection between the Lord's response and the people's rejection of him. This swift response is appreciated by very few people who aren't mentioned but presumed to exist, else Israel would disappear from the face of the earth. Also the frequently words "in the sight (literally, eyes) of the Lord" means he has been watching this tragedy all along and was helpless to do anything about it not because of divine impotence but because of the people's incredible stubbornness. Reference to the Lord's anger is found first in 2.14 which as here consists of the noun *'aph* and the verb *charah*. The former applies to the nose and the latter to doing anything earnestly, so the idea is that the Lord is breathing forth anger in the form of fire. The intensity of this burning is amplified by the preposition *b-* (in) reading literally "in Israel."

Another conjunctive which ties in with the swift response from the Lord is that he sold Israel to the Ammonites. The frequent use of hands as in such instances indicates that the people now possessing Israel can manipulate them in any way they wish and from which there is no escape. Vs. 8 follows directly, the two verses forming one sentence. The hands of the Ammonites who are mentioned first in 3.13 as in the service of the king of Moab who uses them effectively to harass Israel. Even that experience, like all with regard to the Lord, are lost completely by Israel's collective memory...more like endemic amnesia from which there's no cure. These two hands, if you will, are used to both crush and oppress Israel or more accurately, "children of Israel," "children" used in a rather pathetic way to show their apostasy. The two verbs are similar in sound like what they're designed to do, *rahats* and *ratsats*. The former means to break into pieces and has one other biblical reference, Ex 15.6: "Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy." The latter is pretty much the same, more with the connotation of dashing and found last in 9.53 but not noted there.

This the Ammonites did for a full eighteen years, being more aggressive than previous oppressors by going after Israelites in Gilead as well as on the other side of the Jordan. And so the concluding words of vs. 9 are an understatement: “so that Israel was sorely distressed,” *tsarar* being the verb which fundamentally means to bind up. “Why have you come to me now that you are in trouble” [11.7]? In the verse at hand it’s used with the adverb *me’od* which connotes excessiveness with the preposition *l-* (to) prefaced to Israel reading literally, “and distressing to Israel exceedingly.”

The conjunctive *v-* beginning vs. 10 shows the close connection between the origins of Israel’s distress just recounted and the people (as usual) crying out to the Lord for help, *zahaq* (cf. 4.10). Again, they spontaneously expressed the fact that they have sinned which in essence is due to their having forsaken (*hazav*, cf. vs. 6) the Lord, an acknowledgment of forgetfulness which in actuality is partly deliberate and partly involuntary by reason of the strong attraction of Canaanite worship ceremonies. As in most other instances, the repentance is genuine though tinged with some reservations intimated by admitting they had served Baals. And those Baals are part of the list in vs. 6, the others not being mentioned.

Vs. 11 shows the immediate response by the Lord who, if reading the verse literally, is like a person addressing the Israelites. In actuality this didn’t happen which leads one to wonder how the divine communication was transmitted. Chances are the people flocked to places of worship dedicated to the Lord and stayed there a considerable amount of time. Then the religious leaders determined their sincerity as best as possible after which they eked out a confession followed by renewal of their original commitment. That’s why the Lord’s question is put in terms of past deliverances, to jog the collective memory of Israel about his delivery from the Egyptians, Amorites, Ammonites and Moabites. They didn’t require direct divine intervention, just recourse to their history. These were instance of oppression, the verb in vs. 12 being *lachsats* as in 4.3 after which the Lord delivered the people, *yashah* being the verb (cf. 7.7).

Vs. 13 has the conjunctive *v-* as yet where the Lord confronts the Israelites with the heart of the matter, the familiar forsaking him, *hazav* (cf. vs. 10) and their slavery, as it were (*havad*, cf. vs. 6), to other gods. Note that the Lord refers to these deities as such, not mentioning their names which fail to meet his respect. In the meanwhile the people expected a rote response so that they could get the situation cleared up and go back to their abominable behavior...not immediately but as soon as possible after their confession of guilt. Vs. 13 has the verb *yashah* as in vs. 11 but with the added importance of *yasaph* (cf. vs. 6) meaning again, that the Lord won’t be doing this in the future. We could take it as countering this tacit intent to fall back into worship of local divinities, the Lord matching the people’s backsliding one-for one.

In vs. 14 the Lord takes this *yasaph* one step further, if you will, by taunting the people, the command “go” in the sense of get-out-of-here and away from me, I’ve had enough. Since Israel was so persistent over so long in serving deities belonging to Canaan, the Lord baits them on, that they should cry out to them, *zahaq* (cf. vs. 10). After all, they had chosen (*bachar*; cf. 5.8 but not mentioned there) them or literally, “chose in (*b-*) them” and thus were invariably stuck with...in...them. The idea behind this is that the Israelites went along just fine while praying and

sacrificing to idols, but it was a different story when things went wrong. They discovered quickly that these deities were powerless to help them in times of distress, *tsarah*. “Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble” [Ps 10.1]?

Without missing a beat the people respond in vs. 15 (here’s where the conjunctive *v-* reveals its true nature, the immediacy between events) which may be how they behaved when gathered for a liturgical celebration, the results of it being put as such. They come off with the typical admission of having sinned followed by asking the Lord to “do to us according all good in your eyes” as it reads literally. Then they add the pleas for deliverance, *natsal* (cf. 8.34) meaning to pull out or snatch compared with the more general *yashah* as in vs. 11. Their desperation is so great they ask that this *natsal* be done “this day.”

The conjunctive *v-* as so of the next verse (16) continues this sense of urgency when the Israelites get rid of the foreign gods, *sur* being the verb which also means to turn aside (cf. 4.18). It’s as though they are putting away (*sur*) their turning away (*sur*) from the Lord, the gods who are *nekar* which is a noun making this read literally “turn aside the gods of strangers.” “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroath from among you” [1Sam 7.3]. The next step was to serve (*havad*, cf. vs. 13) the Lord. Another demonstration of quickness of action is one more conjunctive within this same verse with respect to the Lord’s response. *Qatsar* is the verb for became indignant or to become angry and more fundamentally means to be shortened or to reap. And so the Lord’s soul (*nephesh*, cf. 9.17 but not mentioned there) became shortened with regard to Israel’s predicament which is called misery, *hamal* which connotes labor as well as mischief. “Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and brings forth lies” [Ps 7.14]. In the verse at hand, *hamal* is used with the preposition *b-* (in), “in the misery of Israel.”

The past few verses are quite intense but unfortunately boring in that they repeat what has happened all too often in Israel’s history and which most likely will reappear. Vs. 17 takes a break from this, if you will, by the Ammonites waging war against Israel, this people first mentioned in 3.13 when Eglon, king of Moab, waged war against them to which the Lord referred in vs. 11. These people were called to arms which is rendered by the verb *tsahaq* as in 4.3, to cry out. The Ammonites must have recalled, albeit vaguely, some intervention on their behalf by the God of Israel who had strengthened them as recounted in 3.12 under Eglon’s leadership. The Israelites recalled that as well, that having been precipitated by one of their earlier backslidings. So while the Ammonites were in Gilead, the inhabitants of that town cried out for a leader to fight against these invaders. If such a man stepped forward, they’d make him king over their city. And so the stage is set for what will transpire in the next chapter.

## Chapter Eleven

1) Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. 2) And Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they thrust Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not inherit in our father's house;

for you are the son of another woman." 3) Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows collected round Jephthah and went raiding with him. 4) After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. 5) And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob; 6) and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader that we may fight with the Ammonites." 7) But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?" 8) And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." 9) Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head." 10) And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say." 11) So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah. 12) Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What have you against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" 13) And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming from Egypt took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." 14) And Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the Ammonites 15) and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, 16) but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. 17) Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom saying, 'Let us pass, we pray, through your land'; but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. 18) Then they journeyed through the wilderness, and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon; but they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. 19) Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, 'Let us pass, we pray, through your land to our country.' 20) But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. 21) And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites who inhabited that country. 22) And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. 23) So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? 24) Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us we will possess. 25) Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel or did he ever go to war with them? 26) While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages and in Aroer and its villages and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? 27) I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war

on me; the Lord, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon." 28) But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message of Jephthah which he sent to him. 29) Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. 30) And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 31) then whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me when I return victorious from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering." 32) So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. 33) And he smote them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim with a very great slaughter. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. 34) Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. 35) And when he saw her, he rent his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me; for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." 36) And she said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone forth from your mouth now that the Lord has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites." 37) And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months that I may go and wander on the mountain, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions." 38) And he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companion, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. 39) And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had made. She had never known a man. And it became a custom in Israel 40) that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

It comes as no surprise that this new chapter begins with the arrival of a new hero destined to rescue Israel, a fellow by the name of Jephthah. On the other hand, we wait with some fear and anxiety that at last the Lord will tire of this and abandon Israel once and for all due to her own machinations. The conjunctive *v-* translates as now, a story-like way of introducing someone new after the previous crisis. Yet as we move from crisis to crisis in Judges, you'd think the Israelites would get it into their heads to train their memories with regard to recollecting past interventions by the Lord. Failure to do this intimates that they had little interest in their tradition. As for the native Canaanites, obviously they have their own traditions and are more comfortable with them. After all, they are at home whereas the Israelites are still fairly newcomers to the land. Even after having gained considerable territory, the Israelites were prone to adopt local divinities which prompts us to know the unrecorded details about their worship, of why it is so attractive. Then again, this lack of information leaves it up to us to guess about these details which makes it more interesting to see parallels in our own day. One thing, however, is for certain. Israel emerged after forty years in the Sinai wilderness and suddenly was confronted with a plethora of divinities it hadn't encountered since leaving Egypt. Apparently during four hundred plus years in Egypt the Israelites were able to maintain their

own religious identity without falling into worship of the local gods. That too is a mystery, of how they accomplished it. No one of the present generation seems to have knowledge, let alone interest, which is unfortunate.

The opening verse presents a contrast with regard to Jephthah, he being a mighty warrior and born of a prostitute. Thus he's in a unique situation, a hero as well as a social outcast. From the Lord's perspective, we could say he chose Jephthah as an experiment, to see how this novel heritage would work for Israel's advantage. *Gibor chayl* is the phrase for his valiant side, the same words applied to Gideon by the angel (cf. 6.12) although here we have no information as to Jephthah's background in this matter. It seems he won his reputation by sheer personal force alone. Although the Israelites appreciated this side of their hero. Behind their backs they must have talked about his mother as well as his father named Gilead, the same name as the town which may have something to do with his background...not necessarily a founding father but of sufficient influence to share the name of the town.

The renown which Jephthah gained on his own merits didn't fare well with his wife and children, for in vs. 2 we see their harsh response to his maternal background (they didn't dare question his father with a name like Gilead), that is, his offspring threw him out unceremoniously, the verb *garash* also meaning to expel or to plunder (cf. 3.2). They did this as soon as they came of age (Jephthah certainly could sense this coming much earlier) and didn't put up a fight. His brothers whose number isn't given didn't want him to inherit anything which would continue to taint the name of Gilead further. It took some courage to do this, for Jephthah was a *gibor chayl*, certainly capable of handling himself.

The only alternative for a social pariah like Jephthah was to leave his native town as quickly as possible which he did promptly and headed for the land of Tob. Later its inhabitants allied themselves with the Ammonites against David (cf. 2Sam 10.6-8), so it seems to have had a long history of those who were at odds with Israel, especially the Ammonites whom Jephthah will confront shortly. Even at this time Tob was home to so-called worthless fellows, *reyq* being the adjective meaning vain and applied to those associated with Abimelech in 9.4. Perhaps they were attracted to Jephthah by reason of him being taunted as illegitimate. This combined with his well-known prowess as a warrior must have made him an attractive figure though he never was he tempted to become such a *reyq* even when suddenly he found himself at the head of a rag-tag army.

A new confrontation with Israel's arch-enemy the Ammonites takes place "after a time" [vs. 4] suggesting a period of peace which at its best must have been uneasy. Ironically this new threat looming on the horizon would be dealt with by a champion unceremoniously booted out of his native town. The conjunctive *v-* introducing vs. 5 intimates this unease by the elders of Gilead when they approached Jephthah at Tob. The threat of an Ammonite invasion, this time with revenge on their minds, loomed large and overcame any reluctance of asking their former hero to join them. The verb *laqach* (to take, bring) echos this desperation: "they went to bring Jephthah from the land of Gilead." That is, they didn't ask him but practically kidnaped him or something close to it. Also they knew that those less desirables associated with him, the *reyq*,

would make up for what they themselves lacked, that is, their fighting spirit and daring. So here came the elders both fearful of whom they were approaching but more so of the Ammonites, hoping he will be their leader or *qatsyn* which commonly applies to a prince. It's found next in vs.11 with another reference being Prov 6.7: "Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she (the ant) prepares her food in summer."

In vs. 7 Jephthah responds (the conjunctive *v-* again playing a key role) right away, cutting an intimidating figure backed up by his supposedly worthless supporters. The elders of Gilead expected a harsh response, no question there, but they're in deep trouble or *tsarah* (cf. 10.14) as he points out. Neither side backs down, the elders agreeing with Jephthah that they are desperate which is "why we have turned to you now" [vs. 8]. Now they throw out what they've kept in reserve, that they'd make Jephthah their leader to which he agreed, this pretty much resolving the tension. He'd be faced, however, with the problem of keeping his presumed worthless fellows in line when associating with the Gileadites.

To ratify an agreement to forestall what could have been a catastrophe where both sides would be losers, the elders propose that the Lord as a witness to what just transpired, the verb *shamah* (to hear, cf. 9.7) being used. In other words, that the Lord would consent to listen to both parties, he being in between or equidistant so as to pick up accurately what each party says and therefore allow it to pass through him from one side to the other and the other way around. Not surprisingly the Gileadites have recourse to the Lord as their predecessors had done; if there were no crisis, they'd go on with worship of Canaanite deities and all that entails. With this divine hearing in place, if you will, Jephthah goes off with the Gileadites and becomes their head and leader or *ro'sh* (cf. vs. 9 but not noted there) and *qatsyn* (cf. vs. 6). It seems that here the former pertains to head of government and the latter, a military role. Anyway, Jephthah ends up fully in control backed up by his men of whom the inhabitants of Gilead are wary. So the next step is to summon the Gileadites which he does at Mizpah, the place where the people had assembled in battle order against the Ammonites in 10.17. In sum, this tense dialogue takes place with the two armies facing each other, waiting for one to make a false move and thus providing an opportune time to strike.

In vs. 12 Jephthah wastes no time in getting to the heart of the matter. He dispatches messengers to the king of the Ammonites asking the nature of his grievance. Note that he says "against me" which shows the identity Jephthah forms quickly with the Gileadites despite their rejection of him. After all, he's dealing with the invasion of his home territory. The response is swift, the king (whose name isn't given) having sent a response in vs. 13. It seems his grievance goes a long way back, just yesterday as far as he's concerned; actually Joshua's invasion from the natives' point of view wasn't long ago, still smarting from it. Despite the bluster, the Ammonite king holds out one last chance, albeit impossible, that Jephthah restore all the territory ('my land') Israel had taken since leaving Egypt and entering Canaan. That is, he asks for it to be restored peaceably, *shalom* (cf. 8.9) prefaced with the preposition *b-*, "in peace." That means the Israelites would have to leave Canaan and return to Israel, an impossible request.

Jephthah sends another group of messengers in vs. 14, not one but several as before in order to make an impression that he means business. This time they are to be more adamant as indicated by the words “Thus says Jephthah,” the messengers speaking as though their leader were present with them before the Ammonite king. Actually Jephthah “speaks” at some length, that is, through vs. 27. He argues that when Israel came from Egypt, the people stopped at Kadesh. “And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh” [Num 20.1]. En route they approached Moab peacefully, asked the kings of both Moab and Edom to pass through but was refused. They did the same with Sihon of the Amorites, wanting to pass through his land (*‘erets*) to their country (*maqom*). The former is more general whereas the latter is more specific, “home” as in 7.7. Obviously this was an affront to Sihon, a supposed ruse to take over his *‘erets* and transform it into a *maqom*. As a result, Israel and Sihon engaged in a battle after which the former took possession of the Amorite territory (cf. vs. 21), *yarash* (cf. 2.21) also meaning to inherit which ties in with Jephthah’s claim of inheritance to their *maqom*.

In vs. 23 Jephthah poses two rhetorical messages to the king of the Ammonites. In the first he brings in the Lord who himself dispossessed (*yarash* again) the Amorites and challenges him to *yarash* it from them. In the second he speaks of the Ammonite god Chemosh, the only mention of this deity in Judges. In actuality Chemosh is the god of the Moabites. The rest of Jephthah’s plea continues through vs. 27 with the claim that he hadn’t sinned (*chata’*, cf. 10.10 but not mentioned there) against the king whom he’s addressing, that the responsibility for the current tension lays with him. Jephthah puts this in a way that makes the king responsible for having done him wrong, *rah* (cf. 10.6). Finally he brings in the Lord as judge, the verb *shaphat* being used (cf. 10.2) which will decide, *shaphat*. This extended message comes to a conclusion, as would be expected, by the king rejecting it.

In vs. 29 the conjunctive *v-* shows the close connection between the message sent to the king of the Ammonites and the Lord’s spirit or *ruach* (cf. 9.23) which came upon Jephthah. That is to say, as soon as he heard it read aloud—even before one of the delegated messengers finished reading it—this divine intervention happened. Compare with Gideon in 11.34 where the Spirit literally clothed him, *lavash*. The messenger and those around Jephthah knew something unusual had happened and discerned quickly that the *ruach* from God was at work. To be sure, it was a relief to everyone, and word spread quickly that the man the Gileadites had rejected would be their next Gideon. Chances are that the king of the Ammonites got wind of it too which must have frightened him though he was careful not to show it before his court and subjects.

Now guided by the divine *ruach* Jephthah engaged upon a whirlwind tour of the area as recounted in vs. 29. The reason isn’t given, but certainly this trip was to rouse the Israelites against the Ammonites. Upon completion he made a vow to the Lord, the verb *nadar* used with the noun *neder* found next in vs. 39 which will prove to be fateful. Without a doubt, this *nadar* is extreme and shows his determination to defeat the Ammonites, made all the more incredible by reason of having been rejected by the Gileadites. Jephthah did this privately, for he didn’t want to rouse unnecessary fear as to who might be sacrificed as a burnt offering or *holah*, this

noun being found in 6.26 but not mentioned there. This extreme measure is mirrored in his determination to return home victorious which is the noun *shalom* or peace (cf. vs. 13). This turned out to be so after a very great slaughter or *makah* which also means a striking and a plague. It's found in 10.20 but not noted there.

Vs. 34 begins typically with the conjunctive *v-* to show the close connection between Japhthah's victory and the tragedy that is about to unfold. He must have taken little or no comfort in having vanquished the Ammonites and was immune to any praise showered upon him as he made his way home to Mizpah. As soon as he arrived his daughter came out to greet him with timbrels and dances. At once Japhthah knew she would be the *holah* or burnt offering in accord with his vow. The text highlights this tragedy in three ways: the daughter's name isn't given almost out of embarrassment or if not that, then respect, she greets her father joyfully and in all innocence and finally, we have *hineh* (cf. 7.13) or behold to make her exit from the house that much more dramatic.

This three fold description of the young woman is contrasted by Japhthah's response who, upon seeing her, tore his garments, the verb *qarah* vividly capturing his shock. Nevertheless, despite the dread, he expected it would happen. "Then Joshua rent his clothes and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening" [Jos 7.6]. The violence of *qarah* is echoed by two other similar sounding verbs: *karah* (cf. 5.27) used twice meaning to be brought very low, fundamentally as to bend or to bow. In addition to this Jephthah cries out that his daughter, his only child, has become great trouble for him, *hakar* being another similar sounding verb implying evil. "A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself" [Prov 11.17]. Finally he exclaims that he cannot retract his vow with the words that he has opened his mouth saying it. Those in his company must have been astonished and wondered if he would go ahead and fulfill this terrible promise. Despite the tragedy, many who heard about it later silently concurred (but never would say it aloud...open their mouths) because they have been delivered from the Ammonite oppression, figuring that the sacrifice of one person would be worth it.

The daughter wastes no time in concurring with her father about the vow, acknowledging that he had gotten revenge against the Ammonites, *neqamah*. "O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth" [Ps 94.1]! This must have astonished Japhthah during this painful dialogue with his daughter held in private. Meekly she made one request after acknowledging his vow be accomplished which in vs. 37 is rendered as *davar*, namely, word found in vs. 28 but not mentioned there. The requests consists of going off for two months with some companions to mourn her virginity, the verb *yarad* (cf. 7.11) being used in vs. 37 as "wander" but means to go down. This adds to the tragedy in two ways. First, Japhthah would like to get the sacrifice over and done with, not agonizing two full months. Secondly, she is of marriageable age which means she could present her father with grandchildren. Without missing a beat, Japhthah consents. "Go," he said, being so overwhelmed and astonished that he couldn't say anything more at her matter-of-fact attitude.

And so this young woman prepared some provisions, summoned her companions and headed off for the mountains for what to her father were the longest two months of his life. While up there, Japhthah heard or thought he heard her and her companions mourning which echoed among the peaks, this being especially noticeable at night. She and her father were of such one mind that neither questioned the vow nor sought ways to get out from under it. Finally when the time was up, she returned and Japhthah sacrificed her as that burnt offering he had vowed though vs. 39 puts it more delicately as he “did with her according to his vow.” Chances are he sacrificed her secretly and later made it known to the Gileadites whom felt even more ashamed after initially having rejected him as leader. The poignancy of the situation is enhanced by the independent sentence in vs. 30, “She had never known (*yadah*, cf. 3.4) a man” and leaves it as that.

The third sentence in vs. 39 continues into the next verse, the conclusion of Chapter Eleven. The two month period of mourning of Japhthah’s daughter wandering and mourning over the mountains quickly became a custom or *choq* in Israel, this noun also meaning an appointed portion or statute. “For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob” [Ps 81.4]. It’s haunting memory which conjures up all sorts of romantic images over time and was reenacted by Israelites young women each year. When wandering through the same mountains for a period of four days they must have had some fear of encountering the ghost of this maiden along with her companions. In the end, it was hoped such a gesture would be a kind of bloodless sacrifice.

## Chapter Twelve

1)The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire." 2) And Jephthah said to them, "I and my people had a great feud with the Ammonites; and when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. 3) And when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand; why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?" 4) Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim; and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh." 5) And the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," 6) they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right; then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites. 7) Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead. 8) After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. 9) He had thirty sons; and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. And he judged

Israel seven years. 10) Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem. 11) After him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. 12) Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun. 13) After him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. 14) He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy asses; and he judged Israel eight years. 15) Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim in the hill country of the Amaekites.

The conjunctive *v-* introduces this opening verse to a new chapter showing the close connection between Jephthah's defeat of the Ammonites, the tragic sacrifice of his daughter and the contention with the men of Ephraim. This tribe showed a similar contentious spirit when Gideon didn't summon them to battle against Midian (cf. 8.1). There Gideon claimed that their tending to the grape harvest was just as important than engaging in battle, something they don't seem to have forgotten and thus bore a grudge against Jephthah. Though not mentioned, in both instances the prospect of getting booty from slain enemy soldiers must have played a part. Perhaps too Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter gave impetus to their argument. So without having time to mourn his daughter's death, Jephthah had to make a move against the Ephraimites who, as vs. 1 says, were called to arms, *tsahaq* being the verb with the same meaning in 10.17.

In vs. 2 the Ephraimites made good on their threat, not taking into consideration Japhthah's recent defeat of the Ammonites, something he was capable of doing to them. The threat to burn his house was severe to which Japhthah tried to counter with reason. Now with no children or heirs, he felt emboldened, figuring that he had nothing to lose. He speaks of a great feud with the Ammonites, *reyv* also pertaining to the pleading of a cause. "Arise, O God, plead your cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all the day" [Ps 74.22]! In the verse at hand, *me'od* is an adjective meaning excessively for the adjective great.

Japhthah puts his complain to the people of Ephraim, those who were called to do battle, saying that they had failed to deliver him from the Ammonites, *yashah* being the verb (cf. 10.11). Vs. 3 has two uses of the word "hand:" that Japhthah put his life (*nephesh* or soul, cf. 10.16) into his own hand after which the Lord gave the Ammonites into his hand. Taken literally, his two hands are full and balanced off. One is a risk followed by the other which is the reward for having taken this risk. Such is the end of Japhthah's explanation and appeal to the men of Ephraim, for in vs. 4 he breaks off communication with the rhetorical question in the previous verse, also a complaint, and does battle, thereby defeating them. Unfortunately for the Ephraimites they failed to see their opponent's resolve made all the more firm by having fulfilled his vow to sacrifice his daughter. If he could carry out on that, without a doubt he could take on the Ephraimites. The Gileadites had been silent up to this point but were listening in on all this, eagerly joining their leader to take on their enemy who once had called them fugitives.

So when anyone from Ephraim attempted to go over to Gilead, the latter improvised a simple but effective test by reason of pronouncing the word Shibboleth because the Ephraimites couldn't pronounce the letters "sh." Failure to pass this test resulted in immediate death which came to forty-two thousand. Once this unfortunate conflict was resolved at a great price of human life, Japhthah judged (*shaphat*, cf. 11.27) for six years, pretty much heart-broken at all he had gone through. Vs. 7 gives him the honor of being called a Gileadite even though 11.1 calls him that; i.e., the Gileadites had rejected him by reason of his birth but now welcomed him as their hero.

Vs. 8-13 conclude this relatively short chapter with mention of three judges, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. Nothing is said of their tenure, good news if you will, after so much conflict, setting the stage for the famous judge Samson.