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Introduction

The Ephraimites are angry with Gideon because he did not call them particularly to his assistance; he pacifies them, Judges 8:1-3. Gideon and his three hundred men pass over Jordan, pursuing the Midianites; and, being faint, ask victuals from the princes of Succoth, but are refused, Judges 8:4-7. They make the like application to the people of Penuel, and are also refused, Judges 8:8, Judges 8:9. Gideon defeats Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, and takes them prisoners, Judges 8:10-12. He chastises the men of Succoth and Penuel, Judges 8:13-17. He slays Zebah and Zalmunna, who had killed his brethren, Judges 8:18-21. The Israelites offer him the kingdom, which he refuses, Judges 8:22, Judges 8:23. He requires from them the gold rings which they had taken from the Ishmaelites, and makes an ephod, which he sets up at Ophrah; and it became an instrument of idolatry, Judges 8:24-27. The land enjoys peace forty years; Gideon dies, having seventy-one sons, Judges 8:28-32. The Israelites fall into idolatry, and forget their obligations to Gideon's family, Judges 8:33-35.

Verse 1

The men of Ephraim said - This account is no doubt displaced; for what is mentioned here could not have taken place till the return of Gideon from the pursuit of the Midianites; for he had not yet passed Jordan, Judges 8:4. And it was when he was beyond that river that the Ephraimites brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to him, Judges 7:25.

Verse 2

Is not the gleanings, etc. - That is, The Ephraimites have performed more important services than Gideon and his men; and he supports the assertion by observing that it was they who took the two Midianitish generals, having discomfited their hosts at the passes of Jordan.

Verse 3

Then their anger was abated - A soft answer turneth away wrath. He might have said that he could place but little dependence on his brethren when, through faint-heartedness, 22,000 left him at one time; but he passed this by, and took a more excellent way.

Verse 4

Faint, yet pursuing - The Vulgate paraphrases this, *et prae lassitudine, fugientes persequi non poterant; et per fatigam, non potuerunt persequi fugitivos.*

Verse 5

Give, I pray you, loaves of bread - As Gideon was engaged in the common cause of Israel, he had a right to expect succor from the people at large. His request to the men of Succoth and Penuel was both just and reasonable.

Verse 6

Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand - They feared to help Gideon, lest, if he should be overpowered, the Midianites would revenge it upon them; and they dared not trust God.

Verse 7

I will tear your flesh - What this punishment consisted in I cannot say; it must mean a severe punishment: as if he had said, I will thresh your flesh with briers and thorns, as corn is threshed out with threshing instruments; or, Ye shall be trodden down under the feet of my victorious army, as the corn is trodden out with the feet of the ox. Succoth was beyond Jordan, in the tribe of Gad. Penuel was also in the same tribe, and not far distant from Succoth.

Verse 9

I will break down this tower - Probably they had not only denied him, but insultingly pointed to a tower in which their chief defense lay; and intimated to him that he might do his worst, for they could amply defend themselves.

Verse 10

Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor - If this were a place, it is nowhere else mentioned in Scripture. Some contend that *קָרְקֹר* (karkor) signifies rest; and thus the Vulgate understood it: Zebah and Zalmunna requiescebant, rested, with all their army. And this seems the most likely, for it is said, Judges 8:11, that Gideon smote the host, for the host was secure.

Verse 13

Returned from battle before the sun was up - This does not appear to be a proper translation of חָזַר אֶל־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּעוֹלָמוֹ (milmaaleh hechares). It should be rendered from the ascent of Chares: this is the reading of the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Arabic.

Verse 14

He described unto him the princes of Succoth - The young man probably gave him the names of seventy persons, the chief men of Succoth, who were those who were most concerned in refusing him and his men the refreshment he requested.

Verse 16

He taugth the men of Succoth - Instead of שָׁחַטָם he taugth, Houbigant reads שָׁחַטָם he tore; and this is not only agreeable to what Gideon had threatened, Judges 8:7, but is supported by the Vulgate, Septuagint, Chaldee, Syriac, and Arabic. The Hebrew text might have been easily corrupted in this place by the change of שׁ (shin) into ט (ain), letters very similar to each other.

Verse 18

What manner of men were they whom ye slew at Tabor? - We have no antecedent to this question; and are obliged to conjecture one: it seems as if Zebah and Zalmunna had massacred the family of Gideon, while he was absent on this expedition. Gideon had heard some confused account of it, and now questions them concerning the fact. They boldly acknowledge it, and describe the persons whom they slew, by which he found they were his own brethren. This determines him to avenge their death by slaying the Midianitish kings, whom he otherwise was inclined to save. He might have heard that his brethren had been taken prisoners, and might have hoped to have exchanged them for the kings now in his hand; but when he found they had been all slain, he decrees the death of their murderers. There is something in this account similar to that in the 12th Aeneis of Virgil: - When Turnus was overthrown, and supplicated for his life, and Aeneas was inclined to spare him; he saw the belt of his friend Pallas, whom Turnus had slain, and which he now wore as a trophy: this immediately determined the Trojan to sacrifice the life of Turnus to the manes of his friend. The story is well told: -

Stetit acer in armis

Aeneas, volvens oculos, dextramque repressit.

Et jam jamque magis cunctantem flectere sermo

Cooperat: infelix humero cum apparuit ingens

Balteus, et notis fulserunt cingula bullis

Pallantis pueri; victum quem vulnere Turnus

Straverat, atque humeris inimicum insigne gerebat.

Ille oculis postquam saevi monumenta doloris

Exuviasque hausit: furiis accensus et ira

Terribilis: Tunc hinc spoliis indute meorum

Eripiare mihi? - Pallas, te hoc vulnere Pallas

Immolat; et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit.

Hoc dicens furrum adverso sub pectore condit Fervidus.

Virg. Aen. lib. xii., ver. 938.

In deep suspense the Trojan seem'd to stand,

And, just prepared to strike, repress'd his hand.

He roll'd his eyes, and every moment felt

His manly soul with more compassion melt.

When, casting down a casual glance, he spied

The golden belt that glitter'd on his side;

The fatal spoils which haughty Turnus tore

From dying Pallas, and in triumph wore.

Then roused anew to wrath, he loudly cries,

(Flames, while he spoke, came flashing from his eyes),

Traitor! dost thou! dost thou to grace pretend,

Clad, as thou art, in trophies of my friend? -

To his sad soul a grateful offering go;

'Tis Pallas, Pallas gives this deadly blow.

He rais'd his arm aloft; and at the word,

Deep in his bosom drove the shining sword.

Dryden.

The same principle impels Gideon to slay Zebah and Zalmunna which induced Aeneas to kill Turnus: and perhaps the ornaments which he took from their camels' necks, Judges 8:21, were some of the spoils of his slaughtered brethren.

Verse 20

He said unto Jether his first-born - By the ancient laws of war, prisoners taken in war might be either slain, sold, or kept for slaves. To put a captive enemy to death no executioner was required. Gideon slays Zebah and Zalmunna with his own hand. So Samuel is said to have hewn Agag in pieces, 1 Samuel 15:33. Benaiah slew Joab, 1 Kings 2:25. Saul orders his guards to slay the priests who had contributed to the escape of David, 1 Samuel 22:17; and David caused one of his attendants to slay the Amalekite who pretended to have slain Saul, 2 Samuel 1:15.

Verse 21

Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise, thou, and fall upon us - It was disgraceful to fall by the hands of a child; and the death occasioned by the blows of such a person must be much more lingering and tormenting. Some have even employed children to despatch captives. Civilis, a Roman knight, headed a revolt of the Gauls against Rome, in the year of the city 824. Of him Tacitus says, Hist. lib. iv., c. 61: Ferebatur parvulo filio quosdam captivorum sagittis jaculisque puerilibus figendos obtulisse: He is said to have given to his little son some prisoners, as butts to be shot at with little darts and arrows. This was for their greater torment and dishonor; and to inure his child to blood! Could any thing like this have been the design of Gideon?

The ornaments that were on their camels' necks. - The heads, necks, bodies, and legs of camels, horses, and elephants, are highly ornamented in the eastern countries, and indeed this was common, from the remotest antiquity, in all countries. Virgil refers to it as a thing long before his time, and thus describes the horses given by King Latinus to the ambassadors of Aeneas. - Aen. lib. vii., ver. 274.

Haec effatus equos numero pater eligit omni.

Stabant tercentum nitidi in praesepebus altis:

Omnibus extemplo Teucris jubet ordine duci

Instratos ostro alipedes pictisque tapetis. Aurea

pectoribus demissa monilia pendent: Tecti auro

fulvum mandunt sub dentibus aurum.

He said, and order'd steeds to mount the band: In

lofty stalls three hundred coursers stand; Their

shining sides with crimson cover'd o'er; The

sprightly steeds embroider'd trappings wore, With

golden chains, refulgent to behold: Gold were their

bridles, and they champ'd on gold.

Pitt.

Instead of ornaments, the Septuagint translate ἱεροσολίμα, ἡμισέλην, the crescents or half-moons; and this is followed by the Syriac and Arabic. The worship of the moon was very ancient; and, with that of the sun, constituted the earliest idolatry of mankind. We learn from Judges 8:24 that the Ishmaelites, or Arabs, as they are termed by the Targum, Syriac, and Arabic, had golden ear-rings, and probably a crescent in each; for it is well known that the Ishmaelites, and the Arabs who descended from them, were addicted very early to the worship of the moon; and so attached were they to this superstition, that although Mohammed destroyed the idolatrous use of the crescent, yet it was universally borne in their ensigns, and on the tops of their mosques, as well as in various ornaments.

Verse 22

Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son - That is, Become our king, and let the crown be hereditary in thy family. What a weak, foolish, and inconstant people were these! As yet their government was a theocracy; and now, dazzled with the success of a man who was only an instrument in the hands of God to deliver them from their enemies, they wish to throw off the Divine yoke, and shackle themselves with an unlimited hereditary monarchy! An unlimited monarchy is a curse; a limited monarchy may be a blessing: the latter may be an appointment of God; the former never can. Those who cast off their allegiance to their Maker, are guilty of folly and extravagance of every kind.

Verse 23

The Lord shall rule over you - Few with such power at their command would have acted as Gideon. His speech calls them back to their first principles, and should have excited in them both shame and contrition. How different is this speech from that of Oliver Cromwell when the commons offered him the crown of England!

Verse 24

Give me every man the ear-rings of his prey - The spoils taken from their enemies in this warfare. This is a transaction very like to that of the Israelites and Aaron; when they brought him their golden ear-rings, out of which he made the molten calf, Exodus 32:2, etc. Whether Gideon designed this ephod for an instrument of worship, or merely as a trophy, is not very clear. It is most likely that he had intended to establish a place of worship at Ophrah; and he took this occasion to provide the proper sacerdotal vestments.

Verse 26

The weight of the golden ear-rings - was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold - Taking the shekel at half an ounce weight, the sum of the gold collected in ear-rings was seventy pounds ten ounces; and worth, as gold now rates, about £3,100 sterling. This computation of the weight of the golden ear-rings, taken from the slaughtered Ishmaelites, will bring to the reader's mind the slaughter of the Roman knights by the Carthaginians at the battle of Cannae, from whose spoils Hannibal sent three bushels of gold rings to the city of Carthage!

Verse 27

Gideon made an ephod thereof - That is, he made an ephod out of this mass of gold; but he could not employ it all in making this one garment, for it is not likely that any man could wear a coat of nearly one hundred pounds weight. It is likely that he made a whole tabernacle service in miniature out of this gold.

All Israel went thither a whoring after it - This form of speech often occurs, and has been often explained. The whole Jewish nation is represented as being united to God as a wife is to her husband. Any act of idolatry is considered as a breach of their covenant with God, as an act of whoredom is the breach of the marriage agreement between man and wife. God calls himself the husband of the Jewish nation, and their idolatries acts of whoredom, adultery, and fornication. All Israel paid idolatrous worship to the ephod or sacerdotal establishment made by Gideon at Ophrah, and this is called going a whoring after it; see on Judges 8:33 (note). For a description of the ephod, see Exodus 25:7 (note); and for the other garments of the priests, see Exodus 28:4 (note), etc.

Verse 28

Forty years in the days of Gideon - The Midianites were so completely humbled that they could make head no more against Israel during the forty years in which the government of Gideon lasted.

Verse 31

His concubine - A lawful but secondary wife, whose children could not inherit.

Whose name he called Abimelech - That is, my father is king, or my father hath reigned. This name was doubtless given by the mother, and so it should be understood here; she wished to raise her son to the supreme government, and therefore gave him a name which might serve to stimulate him to seek that which she hoped he should enjoy in his father's right. See the following chapter, Judges 9 (note).

Verse 32

Gideon - died in a good old age - Supposed to have been A.M. 2799; b.c. 1205.

Verse 33

A whoring after Baalim - This term has probably a different meaning here from what it has Judges 8:7; for it is very likely that in most parts of the pagan worship there were many impure rites, so that going a whoring after Baalim may be taken in a literal sense.

Baal-berith - Literally, the lord of the covenant; the same as Jupiter faederis, or Mercury, among the Romans; the deity whose business it was to preside over compacts, leagues, treaties, covenants, etc. Some of the versions understand it as if the Israelites had made a covenant or agreement to have Baal for their god; so the Vulgate: Percusseruntque cum Baal faedus, ut esset eis in deum.

Verse 34

Remembered not the Lord their God - They attributed their deliverance to some other cause, and did not give him the glory of their salvation.

Verse 35

Neither showed they kindness to the house of - Gideon - They were both unthankful and unholy. Though they

had the clearest proofs of God's power and goodness before their eyes, yet they forgot him. And although they were under the greatest obligations to Gideon, and were once so sensible of them that they offered to settle the kingdom on him and his family, yet they forgot him also; for, becoming foes to God, they could not be friends to Man. Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon. - This is improper; it should be Jerubbaal Gideon, as we say Simon Peter, or call any man by his Christian name and surname.

The ancients, particularly St. Ambrose and Augustine, have endeavored to find out a parallel between our blessed Lord and Gideon. We have already seen what Origen has made of the whole account, who is followed in the main by the above Latin fathers. As I believe no such parallel was intended by the Spirit of God, I must be excused from going into their details. It is no credit either to Christ or Christianity to be compared to such persons and their transactions.

1. Of Gideon the most we can say is that which the angel said, he was a mighty man of valor.

2. He was also a true patriot, he loved his country, and hazarded his life for it; and yet he would not stir till he had the most incontestable proofs that God would, by his supernatural assistance, make him victorious.

3. He was most evidently disinterested, and void of ambition; he refused the kingdom when it was offered to him and to his heirs after him. But, consistently with the belief he had in God, he could not accept it, as this would have been a complete alteration of the Jewish constitution, which acknowledged no ruler but God himself.

4. His motive in making the ephod is not well understood; probably it was done with no reprehensible design. But the act was totally wrong; he had no Divine authority to make such an innovation in the religious worship of his country. The ark was at Shechem; and there was the proper and only accredited priest. The act therefore can never be excused, whatever may be said of his motive.

5. His private character does not appear to have been very exemplary; he had many wives, and seventy sons by them, besides one by a concubine, which he kept at Shechem, where he was often obliged to go as judge, for the purpose of administering justice. In short, there is scarcely a trait in his character worthy to be compared with any thing in the conduct of the Redeemer of mankind.

6. Parallels to Christ, and the work of his Spirit in the salvation of men, have been diligently sought in the sacred writings, by both commentators and preachers; and we have had voluminous treatises on types and antitypes; and how little has sound doctrine or true piety derived from them! They have often served to unsettle the former, and have been rather inimical than favorable to the interests of the latter. When the Spirit of God says such things are types and such things are allegories, it is our duty to believe and examine; when men produce their types and metaphors, it may be our duty to doubt, be suspicious, and pass on.