

JUDGES 8

Judges 8:1–21. Gideon’s Triumph and Vengeance

After defeating the Midianite army in a nighttime raid, Gideon’s next exploit was to defeat Zebah and Zalmunna, two Midianite kings, and their remaining forces (Judges 8:1–21). The need to defeat and capture these two kings is punctuated by the refusal of the people of Succoth and Penuel to assist Gideon in his campaign (verses 4–9). Were Gideon to fail, his army would face starvation (verse 5).

The text indicates how Gideon had, at this point, already defeated 120,000 enemies from the Midianite confederation (verse 10). The number as it stands at face value is implausibly inflated. This could be explained a number of ways. One way is to see the numbers in the book of Judges as being exaggerated by the narrator for dramatic effect. Alternatively, it could be that the Hebrew *‘elef*, commonly translated as “one thousand,” actually describes a military unit of an undefined number of soldiers, so that Gideon defeated one hundred twenty *‘elef* (units) of soldiers rather than one hundred twenty *thousand* soldiers.¹

In any case, Gideon was successful in overtaking Zebah and Zalmunna and in making good on his threat to the people of Succoth and Penuel (verses 12–17).

Judges 8:22–35. Gideon’s Idolatry and Death

Gideon’s time as a judge in Israel ends in Judges 8 on a rather ambivalent note. On the one hand, the text narrates Gideon’s own apostasy. After defeating the Midianites, Gideon returned to his hometown of

¹ David J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 1 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 299–300. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 59–60. Compare also James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153–159.

Ophrah, where the people wished to make him king by acclamation (Judges 8:22). Gideon refused this request, instead asking for war spoils (verses 23–26). With this he made an ephod, a sort of divinatory object (verse 27). Whether this was similar to the high priest’s ephod² or merely a different object with the same name is unclear. In any case, the narrator portrays this action in a negative and darkly ironic light since with this deed Gideon had now himself fallen prey to the very thing he sought to destroy as a judge in Israel: “And all Israel went thither a whoring after it [the ephod]: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house” (verse 27).

On the other hand, Gideon is still given a somewhat positive final eulogy. Verses 29–32 explain how Gideon lived to a ripe old age and enjoyed the comforts of post-war retirement. The text does not totally condemn him, stopping just short of calling him wicked outright—perhaps out of a reluctance to do so given his heroic feats as a judge. Even still, the narrator concluded his portrayal of Gideon by noting Israel’s relapse into apostasy (verses 33–35), leaving some lingering doubt in the mind of the reader as to what degree Gideon’s own idolatry was responsible for Israel’s subsequent troubles. Gideon was not the only morally ambiguous judge, as both Jephthah (Judges 11) and Samson (Judges 13–16) fall into this category.

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² Compare Exodus 28:6–30; 39:2–7; 1 Samuel 2:18.