

Judges

Lesson 15

(d) Gideon Attacks the Camp

(i) At the Middle Watch – What Gideon Did (7:19)

Let us set the timing of this battle. Gideon and his men arrived at the spring of Harod during the day. That day, Gideon culled the troops from thirty-two thousand men to three hundred men. After dark, Gideon and his servant, Purah, spied on the camp of the Midianites in the valley. Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, worshipped the LORD, divided the troops, prepared his army for the battle, all in the same night. The night was not over. It was time to move on the Midianites that night. Gideon attacked the camp at the middle watch. All the Israelites watched what Gideon did. Verse 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 posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands."* (7:19)

When was the middle watch? All people of this time and for centuries have divided the dark of the night into military watches instead of by hours. Because the sun does not shine at night, the ability to reckon time in hours with a sundial was impossible. Without the sun, a sundial cannot be used. What about an hourglass? The hourglass filled with sand would not be invented for another two thousand years. We are unsure how time was reckoned in the dark of the night, but nevertheless, the Jews, Greeks, and Romans had a way. The Jews divided the night into three watches. The first watch lasted from sunset until about ten o'clock PM. The middle watch lasted from ten o'clock until about two o'clock AM. The last or morning watch lasted from two o'clock AM until sunrise. Each watch began with the changing of the guard.

Our passage tells us that Gideon arrived with his men at their post at ten o'clock and began the battle with the blowing of the trumpets and the smashing of the pitchers with the torches inside.

(ii) At the Middle Watch – What the Three Hundred Did (7:20-21a)

At the middle watch, we see what the three hundred did. They did what Gideon did. Verse 20. *"When the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"²¹ Each stood in his place around the camp...."* (7:20-21a)

Surely, the army of Gideon had swords at their sides. Nevertheless, picture the scene. Three hundred men were spaced around the camp. The trumpets had been blown; the pitchers had been broken; the torches were in the hands of the men. All at ten o'clock that night.

(iii) At the Middle Watch – What the Midianites Did (7:21b-22)

At the beginning of the middle watch, we see what the Midianites did. They ran. Verse 21b. *"... and all the army ran, crying out as they fled. When they blew 300 trumpets, the LORD set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath."* (7:21b-22)

With the blast of the three hundred trumpets, the army camped in the valley began to run. Second, they began to fight each other. Third, those not killed by their comrades in the valley fled to *"Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath."*

Beth-shittah means *house of acacia* in Hebrew. It is a town not far from the Jordan River.

Zererah is also called *Zererath* in the Scripture, and it sits about three miles west of Beth-shean. Beth-shean sits at the junction of the Valley of Jezreel and the Jordan River Valley. However, we are not told that the Midianites made it to *Zererah* or *Beth-shean*. *Zererah* is mentioned for the sole purpose of recording the direction of the fleeing of the Midianites from the valley. They ran east.

We are also told they ran to the “*edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath.*” *Abel-meholah* means *the meadow of dancing*, and it sat on the west side of the Jordan River ten miles south of Beth-shean. It will be the birthplace of Elisha several hundred years in the future (1st Kings 19:16). The word “*edge*” means the *lip*. In this case, it was the lip of the meadow by Tabbath, and it means the cliff where the valley ends with a steep descent to the Jordan River.

Tabbath means *to celebrate*. It is mentioned only in this verse in the Scripture. It sat by the meadow of dancing but where; we do not know. If it is the current *Tubukkat-Fahil*, according to Smith’s Bible Dictionary, it has a “natural bank 600 feet high ... embanked against the western face of the mountains ... and descending with a steep front to the river.”⁴

The point being made in this passage is the Midianite survivors who were not killed by their comrades in the valley near Mount Gilboa had made it to the waters of the Jordan River that night as they ran from Gideon’s three hundred men.

(e) Gideon Calls the Tribes (7:23-25)

As the men in the Midianite camp fled away to the river, Gideon calls the tribes. Verse 23. “*The men of Israel were summoned from Naphtali and Asher and all Manasseh, and they pursued Midian.*”²⁴ *Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, “Come down against Midian and take the waters before them, as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.”* So all the men of Ephraim were summoned and they took the waters as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.²⁵ *They captured the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and they killed Zeeb at the wine press of Zeeb, while they pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon from across the Jordan.*” (7:23-25)

These were not new men from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh. To muster new soldiers would have taken too long for the word to make it to the villages in those tribal areas and for the new soldiers to travel to catch up with the fleeing Midianites and their allies. These were the three hundred men with Gideon from the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh.

As for the call to the tribe of Ephraim, that was a different story. Messengers were sent to Ephraim for new recruits. Gideon thought the Midianites and their allies would run the western bank of the Jordan River south until they could find a ford to cross safely to the east side of the Jordan River. Once on that side of the river, they could cross through a pass in the mountains and pick up the King’s Highway headed south or north to their respective homes.

According to the text, Ephraim did its job. An army of Ephraim took to the west bank of the Jordan River and secured it all the way north to *Beth-barah*. *Beth-barah* must have been the major ford in the Jordan River where the army could cross. We will hear of it again in chapter 12 when Jephthah kills the men of Ephraim there. We will also hear of it in the New Testament as a place where John the Baptist baptized. But because of the constant changes in the river with the flow of the seasons, the natural places to ford the river change in time. *Beth-barah* was not the name of a village or city; it was the name of the ford where the river could be crossed. The name means *the house of the crossing*. Today, we are uncertain as to the location of this ford in the Jordan River.

Nevertheless, we are now told the names of the two Midianite leaders of the oppression of Israel – Oreb, and Zeeb. These were the Hebrew names for these Midianite leaders. In the same order, their Hebrew names mean *Raven and Wolf*. The place where Oreb was killed by the Ephraimites was named by the Israelites as the “*rock of Oreb*.” Many hundreds of years later, Isaiah will pronounce the defeat of Assyria and compare it to the scourge the LORD sent in the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb (Isaiah 10:26). Isaiah knew where the rock of Oreb stood, and he knew about the slaughter of thousands of Midianites and their allies by the Ephraimites. But not all the Midianites and their allies were killed at the rock of Oreb; many were killed at the “*winepress of Zeeb*.”

⁴ Smith, W. (1986). In *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

As for the “*winepress of Zeeb*,” Zeeb did not own the winepress. The winepress was simply the place where Zeeb found to hide himself on his run. The same was true of the *rock of Oreb*. It was simply the place where Oreb tried to hide with his men. For the winepress of Zeeb, the Jewish Targum tells us this was a plain with natural walls around it that resembled a winepress. In that plain, Zeeb and thousands of men were killed by the Ephraimites. The slaughter in the plain resembled a winepress, and thus the Hebrews gave it the name *the winepress of Zeeb*. As for the current locations of the *rock of Oreb* and the *winepress of Zeeb*, both are unknown. However, both are within the boundaries of the west side of the Jordan River, where the Ephraimites took control of the river valley as called upon by Gideon to do.

In Psalms 83, Asaph cries out to the LORD to handle all the enemies of Israel in the same way He handled Oreb and Zeeb. Here are verses 9 – 12. Notice more familiar names than just Oreb and Zeeb.

*Deal with them as with Midian, As with Sisera and Jabin at the torrent of Kishon,
Who were destroyed at En-dor, Who became as dung for the ground.
Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb And all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
Who said, “Let us possess for ourselves The pastures of God.”* (Psalm 83:9-12)

Finally, chapter 7 ends with the words “*...and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon from across the Jordan*.” In the first telling of this story found here at the end of chapter 7, our writer also tells us the movement of Gideon and his men while the Ephraimites were fulfilling their order. Gideon and his three hundred had crossed to the east side of the Jordan River to pursue some of the oppressors. The Ephraimites caught up with Gideon there on the east side and presented him with the heads of Oreb and Zeeb as proof that they had completed their task. Oreb and Zeeb were the leaders of the Midianite forces; they were not the kings of Midian or the forces. We will learn of the kings later in the story. Nevertheless, the writer tells us what they did with the heads of these military leaders. Was that the custom in that day? Absolutely. Many years after this point in the story, David will take the head of Goliath to Saul (1st Samuel 17:54). Goliath was not a king, but in a sense, he was a military leader of the Philistines. Later, with the death of King Saul, his son, Ish-bosheth, took the throne as king of some of the tribes of Israel, while David was crowned king of the others. After two years of being king, Ish-bosheth was murdered, and his head was delivered to David as proof (2nd Samuel 4:8). The practice of presenting the heads of the losing rulers to the victors was common in that day.

But with the Midianites and their allied forces defeated, one hundred and twenty thousand men to that point in the story, it would seem that the nation of Israel would be happy. But that was not the case. One of the tribes was offended. To make things more complicated, Gideon was not done with the Midianites. He still had to deal with two kings and fifteen thousand more troops. Remember, military leaders and armies are easily replaced, but with kings, that was not the case. Gideon still had these kings to deal with at a place called Karkor.