

JUDGES 7

GIDEON SURPRISES AND ROUTS THE MIDIANITES

Gideon having been duly commissioned in the previous chapter (Judges 6:11–24), the seventh chapter of Judges narrates, among other things, Gideon’s gathering his army (verses 1–8) and their first excursion against the Midianites (verses 15–23).

The first section of the chapter, verses 1–8, describes how the Lord commanded Gideon to reduce the number of troops in his army from 30,000 to 300. The reason for this was to show that Israel’s expected victory over the Midianites could be attributed only to divine power, not to any human capability (verse 2). Accordingly, the Lord commanded Gideon to select for battle only those men who drank water by lifting their hand to their mouth, not by kneeling down and drinking directly from the source with their mouth (verses 4–7). The specific purpose of this exercise is not clear, but it may have had something to do with showing the difference in alertness between the two groups (that is, perhaps those who crouched and drank with their hand showed their readiness as opposed to those who bent on their knees).

Before the attack, Gideon and his servant Phurah scouted the enemy camp to gather intelligence (verses 9–15). The symbolism in the Midianite soldier’s dream overheard by Gideon—that of a barley cake rolling down a hill and crushing the tents—makes sense in the social context of Judges (verses 13–14). The barley cake, which represents the agricultural Israelites, rolls down and smashes the tents of the seminomadic Midianites. What is remarkable about this, however, is that the dream (which is clearly meant to be prophetic in some capacity) came to a non-Israelite enemy instead of to Gideon or one of his soldiers! This is not too unusual, however, since Pharaoh also had prophetic dreams in Genesis 41.

After this divine assurance of victory, Gideon made his first strike against the Midianites and their allies (verses 15–23). This took the form of a midnight raid on the enemy camp (verse 19). In a clever ruse, Gideon made use of sound and light to confuse the enemy and throw them into a panic. He equipped each soldier with a torch and a trumpet, thereby disorienting the enemy (verses 18–20). The trick worked so well that the Midianites turned against their own comrades, apparently mistaking them for their Israelite attackers (verse 22).

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