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The Golden Ephod and the Golden Calf

8: 22-32

The golden ephod and the golden calf DIG: How did Gideon respond to the people's request to be their king? How did Gideon go from a great military leader to someone who led his people into idolatry? What does it say about him, that he had about 140 children? How did his pride affect the people after his death?

REFLECT: What tends to be an ephod in your life? In what situations do believers struggle with pride? When using your spiritual gift(s) and producing good fruit, do you give God the glory? Is there anything in your life that an unbeliever might look at and say, "You're a hypocrite?"
Memorize Proverbs 16:18.

The book of Judges charts the progressive disintegration of a people who will not serve the God who saves them.

The great question mark hanging over the book of **Judges** from its earliest chapters, like some dark thundercloud, concerns the matter of central and effective leadership. As the chapters unfold, we note how **the tribes of Isra'el** have slowly fallen away from **their** mission only to embrace Canaanite **idolatry**. **They** had abandoned the unity that the early stages of the conquest of the land required. **Judges** came and went, but none ever succeeded in rallying **the tribes** as one or in preserving their positive reforms for long. Also, no **judge** ever produced a child that could rule in his or her place. Inevitably, the demise of **the judge** spelled the end of the brief period of **rest** associated with **their** rule, to be ominously followed by the familiar refrain: **Then the children of Isra'el did evil in the sight of ADONAI (2:11, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1)**. Now, for the first time, **the Israelites** raised the subject by intimating that **Gideon** might be a candidate for **kingship**.¹⁹⁹

The rejection of the kingship (8:22-23): While **Gideon** was not received well in the Transjordan, it is clear that those in the **Israelite** heartland west of the Jordan considered **him** a conquering hero (**to see link click [Bf](#) - The Final Defeat of**

the Midianites). The slayer of **kings** had achieved a kingly status in the eyes of **his** followers, who attributed **their** escape from **the Midianite** yoke directly to **him**, and made this the basis of **their** offer that **he** and **his** family rule **Isra'el** in perpetuity.²⁰⁰ **The men of Isra'el** came to **Gideon** and said: **Rule over us, both you and your son and grandson because you have rescued us from the Midianites (8:22 NLT)**. The final chapter of **Gideon's** life is a distinct anticlimax to **his** earlier heroic actions. **The man** who was a **mighty warrior (6:12)**, now set such a deplorable example of self-indulgence that **he** led the whole nation into a downward spiral. Perhaps it is easier to honor **God** in some courageous action in the limelight of a time of national emergency than it is to honor **Him** consistently in ordinary, everyday life, which requires a different kind of courage. **Gideon**, who came through the test of adversity with flying colors, was not the first nor the last to fail in the test of victory.²⁰¹

But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son. ADONAI will rule over you" (8:23 NLT)! If the rationale of the offer was that the one who saves is entitled to rule, that honor belonged to **ADONAI**, not to **Gideon**, and even less to **his son and grandson**. **Gideon** knew that. However, **he** would begin to act like a **king**, especially in **his** dispensing of summary justice on those who resisted **his** authority. In crossing **the Jordan** **he** had already exceeded **his** mission and began to move toward the kind of **rule** offered to **him**.²⁰²

Gideon's ephod (8:24-27): After **Gideon** refused to become **king**, **he** increasingly took on the trappings of royalty. After thinking about it, **he** said: **I do have one request - that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder, for it was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings (8:24 NIV)**. The term **Ishmaelites** originally referred to another nomadic tribe descended from Hagar (**Genesis 16:15**), but the term apparently took on a broader usage so that **it** is applied here to **the Midianites**.²⁰³ This was a symbolic gesture of submission. By **gladly giving their plunder to him, the Israelites** were acknowledging that **they** were his vassals. **They** answered: **We will be glad to give them. So they spread out a robe, and each threw a gold earring that they had gathered from the plunder. The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 [shekels] or about 43 pounds of gold, beside the royal ornaments and pendants, the purple clothing worn by the kings of Midian, or the chains that were on their camels' necks (8:25-26 NIV)**.



Then Gideon made an ephod from the gold (8:27a Hebrew). **Gideon** sought to commemorate **his** great victory over **Midian** with some tangible monument. Elsewhere in the TaNaKh, **the ephod** is mentioned as one of the more ornamented outer garments of **the high priest** that was also used in the ritual of enquiring of **God** and seeking **His** guidance (see the commentary on **Exodus Gb - The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions**). But the fashioning of **the image** only spelled trouble, for it eventually became an object of **worship** in **its** own right, satisfying **the people's idolatrous** desires. **Gideon** thus met **the people's** request for **a king** with a request of **his** own, but while **he** admirably turned down **their** misplaced aspirations, **he** unwittingly provided **them** with a dangerous stumbling block.

In this connection, it is intriguing to note the similarities between this account and the narrative of **the golden calf**, cast by **Aaron** the priest when **Moses** lingered in **his** descent from Mount Sinai (see **Exodus Gr - Aaron Made an Idol in the Shape of a Calf**). In both cases, a leader figure gathered **golden earrings** from **the people**, and with the best of intentions, fashioned **them** into an object that

quickly became an **idol** to be **worshipped**. Both well-intentioned, but both fundamentally flawed. But there is also a glaring contrast between **the Golden Calf** incident and the **Judges** passage: There, **the people** demanded a god figure in place of **Moses**, pressing a reluctant **Aaron** to proceed; here, it is **Gideon**, the leader of **the people**, who unleashed the tragic consequences to follow.²⁰⁴

The nature of **the ephod** is not clear. If **the ephod** was indeed a copy of **the high priest's** garment (see the commentary on **Exodus Fz - Make the Ephod of Gold, Blue and Purple Yarn**), then **Gideon** was definitely out of **God's** will in duplicating **it** and using **it**, because **he** wasn't a **priest**. If it was a standing **idol**, then **Gideon** was disobeying **God's** commandment (see **Deuteronomy Bm - Do Not Make Idol's**), and corrupting **the people** as well. It was just a short step from **worshipping the ephod** to **worshipping Ba'al (8:33)**.

Gideon missed a great opportunity to bring **restoration**, and perhaps revival to the Land. **He** had **torn down his father's altar to Ba'al (6:25-32)**, but there were many households in **Isra'el** that were still devoted to Ba'al, and those **idols** needed to be destroyed as well. The great victory over **Midian** gave **Gideon** good reason to call the nation back to **ADONAI** and obedience to **His Torah**. But instead of using the victory for **God's glory**, **he** used it for **his** own profit, and the nation eventually lapsed back into sin once more.²⁰⁵

Furthermore, **Gideon placed it in his hometown of Ophrah** with two disastrous results (**8:27b Hebrew**). First, **soon all Isra'el committed spiritual adultery by prostituting themselves by worshiping it there. Ophrah** became the center of **idolatrous worship**. And second, **it became a snare to Gideon. He** took on **himself** the role of a **priest**, and **he** established a **worship** center away from the Tabernacle, which was in Shiloh. **And it became a snare to his family**, because it would ultimately result in the slaughter of all of **his sons**, but two, with one dying in battle later (**8:27c Hebrew**).²⁰⁶ Whatever **Gideon's** intentions were, **the people worshiped the ephod**. So, for the first time in the book of **Judges**, it was a **judge** who began to promote **idolatry**. Thus, **Gideon's** career ended by ushering in the very **idolatrous worship** that **he** had so vehemently fought at the beginning of **his** calling.²⁰⁷

Rest (8:28): In this way Midian was subdued before the Israelites, which never recovered. The Midianites would never again play a major role in the biblical record. During **Gideon's** lifetime, the land had **rest** (Hebrew: *shaqat*) for forty years (**8:28 NLT**). This means the land had **rest** from war (see **Joshua**

11:23 and **14:15** where the same verb, *shaqat*, occurs). No enemy incursions, no invaders gathering **the land** of **its** produce, no pillaging of villages. But there is a reason to underline **verse 28**. It's the last note of **rest** in **Judges**. After **verse 28** **the land** no longer recovers **its rest**. This was a gift that **Isra'el** lost, an enjoyment **she** forfeited. **Judges** charts the progressive disintegration of **a people** who will not serve **the God** who saves **them**. **People** who persistently despise **God's** gift will lose it.²⁰⁸

The Judgeship of Gideon (8:29-32): Jerub-Ba'al son of Joash went back home to live (8:29 NIV). Acting like king Solomon, Gideon established a large harem and **fathered seventy sons for he had many wives (8:30 Hebrew)**. This was just **his sons**! Statistically, **he** could have had just as many daughters! That's about one-hundred-and-forty **children**! This makes you wonder how **he** had the energy to fight **the Midianites**! In any case, such families were rare among private citizens. This must be interpreted as one more violation of the Torah, for **kings** were not to have **many wives** (see **Deuteronomy Dh - The King**). **Jacob** had **two wives** plus **two concubines**, who gave birth to **twelve sons**; **David** had **eight wives** plus **concubines** who gave birth to **nineteen sons**. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that **Gideon** must have had at least twenty **wives**. But that wasn't enough. **He** also **had a concubine who was in Shechem, and also bore him a son. He named him Abimelech (8:31 Hebrew)**. While not explicitly stated in the text, it's nevertheless a clear inference that **she** was a Canaanite. **Abimelech's** own carefully worded argument of **9:2** will make this clear.

Gideon died when he was very old, and he was buried in the grave of his father, Joash, at Ophrah, where he was born, in the land of the clan of Abiezer (8:32 NLT). But the saga of **Gideon** is not over yet. In the next file, **his son Abimelech** will rise the issue of **kingship** one last time (see **Bh - The Rise and Fall of Abimelech**) before it's finally buried for almost two centuries, until the end of prophet **Samuel's** life and the ascent of **Sha'ul** to the throne.²⁰⁹ As Lawson Younger relates in his commentary on *Judges*, we can have our theology right and yet live as hypocrites. This is not to say that it's okay to have wrong theology, but our lifestyle should match our words. There is perhaps nothing that causes people to turn away from **God** more than the hypocrisy of someone who professes faith in **Messiah**. People make enough excuses not to trust **Yeshua** without those in the Church giving them ammunition!

In not correcting **the people** as **they** gave **him** credit for the victory over **the Midianites**, **Gideon** took what didn't belong to **him . . . God's glory**. **He** causes

others not to give **God** credit. What a contrast to **the Song of Debrah** (see [Au - Sing Praises to ADONAI](#)), in which **YHVH** receives the honor and praise that **He** is due and that is sung just before the **Gideon** account. When **the Lord** works through us, whether in a formal or informal way, we must give **Him** the honor and **glory**. The deep-rooted pride of achievement can blur our vision as to how we got to where we are. **ADONAI** has gifted us, and therefore, whatever we accomplish should ultimately be credited to **Him**. The athlete, the intellectual, the business man or woman, the pastor – all owe their achievements and accomplishments to **the LORD**. **Gideon** should have been grateful for being used to help accomplish the defeat of **the Midianites**. Instead **he** denied **God** and seized the praise of **his** countrymen.

The apostle **Paul** challenges us: **So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (First Corinthians 10:31)**. Whether it is a promotion, an achievement, a recognition, or a success, **the Lord** should be the first to receive the **glory**. To glorify **ADONAI** is our whole duty. **Yeshua** prayed: **I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your Presence with the glory I had with You before the world began (John 17:4-5)**. **Gideon** and his puny **three hundred men** did not win the battle . . . **ADONAI** did. As a result, all the boasting should have been in **the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23-24; First Corinthians 1:31; Second Corinthians 10:17)**.²¹⁰

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for helping me overcome myself and relying on Your strength to get me through tough times. **Lord**, keep me from the pride of thinking that I can accomplish anything on my own without **You**. Keep me from false pride. **Gideon** turned down **the kingship** only to act like **a king**. **Lord** help me not to profess **Your** name, but then continue on in self-sufficiency. Help me to **rest** in **You**. It is only thru **Your** wisdom, strength and power that I can win victories. To **the One** who sits at **Your Right Hand**. Amen*