

Gideon the judge

Alfred Edersheim (1825–1889)

*Midianitish Oppression – The Calling of Gideon – Judgment
begins at the House of God – The Holy War – The Night–battle
of Moreh – Farther Course of Gideon – The Ephod at Ophrah –
Death of Gideon*

With the calling of Gideon commences the second period in the history of the Judges. It lasted altogether less than a century. During its course events were rapidly hastening towards the final crisis. Each narrative is given with full details, so as to exhibit the peculiarity of God's dealings in every instance, the growing apostasy of Israel, and the inherent unfitness even of its best representatives to work real deliverance.

The narrative opens, as those before, with a record of the renewed idolatry of Israel. Judgment came in this instance through the Midianites, with whom the Amalekites and other "*children of the east*" seem to have combined. It was two hundred years since Israel had avenged itself on Midian (Numbers 31:3–11). And now once more, from the far east, these wild nomads swept, like the modern Bedawin, across Jordan, settled in the plain of Jezreel, and swooped down as far as Gaza in the distant south–west. Theirs was not a permanent occupation of the land, but a continued desolation. No sooner did the golden harvest stand in the field, or was stored into garners, than they unexpectedly

arrived. Like the plague of locusts, they left nothing behind. What they could not carry away as spoil, they destroyed. Such was the feeling of insecurity to life and property, that the people made them "*mountain-dens, and caves, and strongholds*," where to seek safety for themselves and their possession. Seven years had this terrible scourge impoverished the land, when the people once more bethought themselves of Jehovah, the God of their fathers, and cried unto Him. This time, however, before granting deliverance, the Lord sent a prophet to bring Israel to a knowledge of their guilt as the source of their misery. The call to repentance was speedily followed by help.

1. The calling of Gideon. – Far away on the south-western border of Manasseh, close by the boundary of Ephraim, was the little township of Ophrah,¹ belonging to the family of Abiezer² (Joshua 17:2; 1 Chronicles 7:18), apparently one of the smallest clans in Manasseh (Judges 6:15). Its head or chief was Joash – "*Jehovah strength*," or "*firmness*."

As such he was lord of Ophrah. In such names the ancient spiritual faith of Israel seems still to linger amidst the decay around. And now, under the great oak by Ophrah, suddenly appeared a heavenly stranger. It was the Angel of Jehovah, the Angel of the Covenant, Who in similar garb had visited Abraham at Mamre (Genesis 18). Only there He had come, in view of the judgment about to burst, to *confirm* Abraham's faith – to enter into fellowship with him, while here the object was to *call forth* faith, and to prove that the Lord was ready to receive the vows and prayers of His people, if they but turned to Him in the appointed way. This may also explain, why in the one case the heavenly visitor joined in the meal,³ while in the other fire from heaven consumed the offering (comp. Judges 13:16; 1 Kings 18:38; 2 Chronicles 7:1).

1 Ophrah means township. This Ophrah is to be distinguished from that in Benjamin.

2 "*My father is help*."

3 The Targum puts it: "*they seemed to eat*," and Cassel argues that, as theirs was not real humanity, neither was their eating. This, of course, is quite different from the eating on the part of our Lord, which was real – since His humanity and His body were real and true.

Close by the oak was the winepress of Joash, and there his son Gideon⁴ was beating out the wheat with a stick.⁵ Alike the place and the manner of threshing were quite unusual, and only accounted for by the felt need for secrecy, and the constant apprehension that at an unexpected moment some wild band of Midianites might swoop down upon him. If, as we gather from the Angel's salutation, Gideon was a strong hero, and if, as we infer from his reply, remembrances and thoughts of the former deeds of Jehovah for Israel had burned deep into his heart, we can understand how the humiliating circumstances under which he was working in his father's God-given possession, in one of the remotest corners of the land, must have filled his soul with sadness and longing.

It is when "*the strong warrior*" is at the lowest, that the Messenger of the Covenant suddenly appears before him. Not only the brightness of His face and form, but the tone in which He spake, and still more His words, at once struck the deepest chords in Gideon's heart. "*Jehovah with thee, mighty hero!*" Then the speaker was one of the few who looked unto Jehovah as the help-giver; and he expressed alike belief and trust! And was there not in that appellation "*mighty warrior*" a sound like the echo of national expectations – like a call to arms? One thing at least the Angel immediately gained. It was – what the Angel of His Presence always first gains – the confidence of Gideon's heart. To the unknown stranger he pours forth his inmost doubts, sorrows, and fears. It is not that he is ignorant of Jehovah's past dealings, nor that he questions His present power, but that he believes that, if Jehovah had not withdrawn from Israel, their present calamities could not have rested upon them. The conclusion was right and true, so far as it went; for Israel's prosperity or sufferings depended on the presence or the absence of Jehovah. Thus Gideon's was in truth a confession of Israel's sin, and of Jehovah's justice. It was the beginning of repentance. But Gideon had yet to learn another truth – that Jehovah would turn from His anger, if Israel only turned to

4 "*One who cuts down,*" a warrior.

5 The term in the original conveys this.

Him; and yet another lesson for himself: to put personal trust in the promise of God, based as it was on His covenant of love, and that whether the outward means to be employed seemed adequate or not.

But Gideon was prepared to learn all this; and, as always, gradually did the Lord teach His servant, both by word, and by the sight with which He confirmed it. The reply of the Angel could leave no doubt on the mind of Gideon that a heavenly messenger was before him, Who promised that through him Israel should be saved, and that simply because He sent him. It is not necessary to suppose that Gideon understood that this messenger from heaven was the Angel of the Covenant. On the contrary, the revelation was very gradual. Nor do the questions of Gideon seem strange – for such they are rather than doubts. Looking around at his tribe, at his clan, and at his own position in it, help through him seemed most unlikely, and, if we realize all the circumstances, was so. Only one conclusive answer could be returned to all this: *"I shall be with thee."* The sole doubt now left was: Who was this great I AM? – and this Gideon proposed to solve by *"asking for a sign,"* yet not a sign to his unbelief, but one connected with worship and with sacrifice. Jehovah granted it. As when Moses sought to know God, He revealed not His being but His character and His ways (Exodus 33:18; 34:6), so now He revealed to Gideon not only Who had spoken to him, but also that His *"Name"* was *"Jehovah, Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin."*

It would be almost fatal to the proper spiritual understanding of this, as of other Biblical narratives, if we were to transport into it our present knowledge, ideas, and views. Remembering the circumstances of the nation, of Gideon, and of Israel; remembering also the stage of spiritual knowledge attainable at that period, and the difficulty of feeling really sure Who the speaker was, we can understand Gideon's request (6:1–17): *"Work for me a sign that THOU (art He) Who art speaking with me."*⁶ It is difficult to imagine what special

⁶ So literally.

sign Gideon was expecting. Probably he had formed no definite idea. Suffice it, he would bring a sacrificial gift; the rest he would leave to Him. And he brought of the best. It was a kid of the goats, while for the "*cakes*," to be offered with it, he took a whole ephah of flour, that is, far more than was ordinarily used. But he does all the ministry himself; for no one must know of it. To dispense with assistance, he puts the meat and the cakes in the "*bread-basket*,"⁷ "*and the broth in a pot*." Directed by the Angel, he spreads his offering on a rock.

Then the Angel touches it with the end of His staff; fire leaps out of the rock and consumes the sacrifices; and the Angel has vanished out of his sight. There was in this both a complete answer to all Gideon's questions, and also deep symbolic teaching. But a fresh fear now fills Gideon's heart. Can one like him, who has seen God, live? To this also Jehovah gives an answer, and that for all times: "*Peace to thee – fear not – thou shalt not die!*" And in perpetual remembrance thereof – not for future worship – Gideon built an altar there,⁸ and attached to it the name, "*Jehovah–Peace!*"

2. One part was finished, but another had to begin. Jehovah had called – would Gideon be ready to obey? For judgment must now begin at the house of God. No one is fit for His work in the world till he has begun it in himself and in his own house, and put away all sin and rebellion, however hard the task. It was night when the command of Jehovah came. This time there was neither hesitation nor secrecy about Gideon's procedure. He obeyed God's directions literally and immediately. Taking ten of his servants, he first threw down the altar of Baal, and cut down the Asherah – the vile symbol of the vile service of Astarte – that was upon it.⁹

⁷ This is the uniform meaning of the word.

⁸ The added notice as to its continuance at the time of the writer throws light upon the date of the authorship of the book.

⁹ The two were very generally connected, and formed the grossest contrast to the pure service of Jehovah.

One altar was destroyed, but another had to be raised. For, the altar of Jehovah could not be reared till that of Baal had been cast down. It was now built, and that not in some secret hiding-place, but on "*the top of this defense*" – either on the top of the hill on which the fort stood, or perhaps above the place where the people were wont to seek shelter from the Midianites. Upon this altar Gideon offered his father's "*second bullock of seven years old*" – the age being symbolical of the time of Midian's oppression – at the same time using the wood of the Asherah in the burnt-sacrifice.

Such a reformation could not, and was not intended to be hidden. The Baal's altar and its Asherah were indeed Joash's, but only as chief of the clan. And when on the following morning the Abiezrites clamored for the death of the supposed blasphemer, Joash, whose courage and faith seem to have been re-awakened by the bold deed of his son, convinced his clan of the folly of their idolatry by an unanswerable argument, drawn from their own conduct. "*What!*" he exclaimed, in seeming condemnation, "*will ye strive for Baal? Or will ye save him? He that will strive for him let him die until the morrow!*"¹⁰ *If he be a god, let him strive for himself, because he has thrown down his altar. And they called him on that day Jerubbaal*¹¹ ('let Baal strive'), *that is to say, Let the Baal strive with him, because he has thrown down his altar.*"

3. The Holy War. – Gideon had now purified himself and his house, and become ready for the work of the Lord. And yet another important result had been secured. The test to which Baal had been put had proved his impotence. Idolatry had received a heavy blow throughout the land. In Ophrah at least the worship of Jehovah was now alone professed. Moreover, the whole clan Abiezer, and, beyond it, all who had heard of Gideon's deed, perpetuated even

¹⁰ That is, if any should seek to vindicate Baal today let him die; wait till tomorrow to give him time!

¹¹ In 2 Samuel 11:21 he is called Jerubbesheth – besheth, "*shame*," being an opprobrious name instead of Baal. May this throw any light on the names of Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth? In 1 Chronicles 8:33, 9:39, at least Ishbosheth is called Ish-baal, while in 1 Chronicles 8:34 we have Meribbaal ("*strife of*," or else "*against Baal*") instead of Mephibosheth ("*glory*" or "*utterance*" of Baal).

in his name, were prepared to look to him as their leader. The occasion for it soon came. Once more the Midianitish Bedawin had swarmed across Jordan; once more their tents covered the plain of Jezreel. Now or never – now, before their destructive raids once more began, or else never under Gideon – must Israel arise! Yet not of his own purpose did he move. In the deeply expressive language of Scripture: "*The Spirit of Jehovah clothed Gideon*,"¹² like a garment round about, or rather like an armor. Only after that he blew the trumpet of alarm. First, his own clan Abiezer "*was called after him*." Next, swift messengers bore the tidings all through Manasseh, and that tribe gathered. Other messengers hastened along the coast (to avoid the Midianites) through Asher northwards to Zebulun and Naphtali, and they as well as Asher, which formerly had not fought with Barak, obeyed the summons.

All was ready – yet one thing more did Gideon seek. It was not from unbelief, nor yet in weakness of faith, that Gideon asked a sign from the Lord, or rather a token, a pledge of His presence. Those hours in the history of God's heroes, when, on the eve of a grand deed of the sublimest faith, the spirit wrestles with the flesh, are holy seasons, to which the superficial criticism of a glib profession, that has never borne the strain of utmost trial, cannot be applied without gross presumption. When in such hours the soul in its agony is seen to cast its burden upon the Lord, we feel that we stand on holy ground. It is like a stately ship in a terrific gale, every beam and timber strained to the utmost, but righting itself at last, and safely reaching port.¹³ Or rather it is like a close following of Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane – with its agony, its prayer, and its victory. In substance, though not in its circumstances, it was the same struggle as that which was waged in the night when Jacob prayed: "*I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me*;" the same as when, many centuries afterwards, the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "*Art Thou He, or do we wait for another?*"

¹² So, Judges 6:34, literally.

¹³ The thought is beautifully carried out in one of the Hymns of St. Joseph of the Studium (translated by Dr. Neale in his Hymns of the Eastern Church).

The "*sign*" was of Gideon's own choosing, but graciously accorded him by God. It was twofold. On the first night the fleece of wool spread on the ground it was to be full of dew, but the ground all around dry. This, however, might still admit of doubt, since a fleece would naturally attract the dew. Accordingly, the next night the sign was reversed, and the fleece alone remained dry, while the ground all around was wet with dew. The symbolical meaning of the sign is plain. Israel was like that fleece of wool, spread on the wide extent of the nations. But, whereas all the ground around was dry, Israel was filled with the dew, as symbol of the Divine blessing (Genesis 27:28; Deuteronomy 33:13; Proverbs 19:12; Isaiah 26:19; Hosea 14:5; Micah 5:7.). And the second sign meant, that it was equally of God, when, during Israel's apostasy, the ground all around was wet, and the fleece of Jehovah's flock alone left dry.

4. The battle: "*For Jehovah and for Gideon!*" – The faith which had made such trial of God was to be put to the severest trial. Israel's camp was pitched on the height; probably on a crest of Mount Gilboa, which seems to have borne the name of Gilead. At its foot rose "*the spring Harod*" – probably the same which now bears the name Jalood. Beyond it was the hill Moreh (from the verb "*to indicate*," "*to direct*"), and north of it, in the valley,¹⁴ lay the camp of Midian, 135,000 strong (Judges 8:10), whereas the number of Israel amounted to only 22,000. But even so they were too many – at least for Jehovah "*to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.*" In accordance with a previous Divine direction (Deuteronomy 20:8), proclamation was made for all who were afraid, to "*turn and wind about*"¹⁵ *from Mount Gilead.*"¹⁶

Still, Gideon must have been surprised, when, in consequence, he found himself left with only 10,000 men. But even these were too many. To "*purify*

¹⁴ "*And they camped upon the spring Harod, and the camp of Midian was to him from the north, from the height of Moreh in the valley*" (Judges 7:1).

¹⁵ So literally; possibly referring to circuitous routes.

¹⁶ Gilead was probably another name for Gilboa. Cassel suggests that it may stand for Manasseh.

them" (as by refining – for such is the meaning of the word), Gideon was now to bring them down to the spring Harod, where those who were to go to battle would be separated from the rest.¹⁷ All who lapped the water with the tongue out of their hands (out of the hollow hand), as a dog lappeth water, were to go with Gideon, the rest to return, each to his own place. Only three hundred were now left, and with these God declared He would save, and deliver the Midianites into Gideon's hand. If we ask about the rationale of this means of distinction, we conclude, of course, that it indicated the bravest and most ardent warriors,¹⁸ who would not stoop to kneel, but hastily quenched their thirst out of the hollow of their hands, in order to hasten to battle. But Jewish tradition assigns another and deeper meaning to it. It declares that the practice of kneeling was characteristic of the service of Baal, and hence that kneeling down to drink when exhausted betrayed the habit of idolaters. Thus the three hundred would represent those in the host of Israel – "*all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal*" (1 Kings 19:18).¹⁹ They who had been selected now "*took victuals from the people*²⁰ *in their hands, and the trumpets*" – the rest were sent away.

That night the small company of Israel occupied an advanced position on the brow of the steep mountain, that overhangs the valley of Jezreel.²¹ Effectually concealed, probably by the shelter of wood or vineyards, the vast straggling camp of Midian spread right beneath them. That night came the Divine command to Gideon to go down to the camp, for God had given it into his

17 First the Divine promise, and then the Divine command to our faith (Judges 7:7). So it is always.

18 Josephus (Ant. v. 6, 3) holds, that the three hundred were the most fainthearted. But it is surely unreasonable to suppose that, when all who feared had been dismissed, the most fainthearted should in the end have been chosen.

19 Cassel attempts to find a special meaning in the comparison: "*as a dog licketh*," as referring to a kind of dog (of which the ancients and the Talmud speak), which was wont, when the crocodile was asleep, to throw itself into its gullet and to kill it.

20 This seems to be the real meaning of Judges 7:8, whether or not it be deemed needful to emendate the text.

21 So we understand the expression: "*And the camp of Midian was beneath him in the valley.*"

hand. And yet, alike in condescension to Gideon's weakness, and to show how thoroughly the Lord had prepared the victory, He first allowed him to ascertain for himself the state of matters in the camp of Midian. Quietly Gideon and his page Phurah ("*the branch*") crept from rock to rock, over where the last patrol of the advance-guard²² kept watch around the camp-fire.

Here they overheard the tale of a strange dream. Alike the dream and its interpretation are peculiarly Eastern and in character. Both would make the deepest impression on those sons of the desert, and, communicated to the next patrol, as the first watch was relieved by the second, must have prepared for that panic which, commencing with the advance-guard, was so soon to spread through the whole camp of Midian. The dream was simply this: "*Behold, a loaf of barley-bread rolled itself into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent (the principal one, that of the general), and struck it, and it fell, and it turned from above*²³ *and it was fallen!*" To which his neighbor (comrade) replied: "*This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel; given hath the God*²⁴ *into his hand Midian and all his camp.*" So wondrous seemed the dream and its interpretation, that, when Gideon and his armor-bearer heard it, they bent in silent worship, assuredly knowing that God had given them the victory. In truth, with the tale of this dream the miracle of the victory had already begun.

There is such pictorialness and such truthfulness of detail about all this narrative, that we almost seem to see the events enacted before us. That camp of Bedouins, like locusts in numbers – with their wives, children, and camels, like the sand by the seashore; then the watchfire by which alone they keep guard; the talk over the camp-fire; the dream so peculiarly Bedouin, and its rapid interpretation, no less characteristically Eastern – and yet the while all ordered and arranged of God – while that small band of three hundred

²² Judges 7:11: "*The end of the advance-guard*;" the latter seems to be the meaning of the Hebrew word. See Joshua 1:14.

²³ So that the upper part was downwards.

²⁴ "*The Elohim*," emphatically, with the article.

Israelites lies concealed on the neighboring height, and Gideon and his "*young man*," are close by, behind the great shadows which the watch-fire casts, hidden perhaps in the long grass! Then the dream itself! It was all quite natural, and yet most unnatural. The Midianites – especially the advanced-guard, that lay nearest to Israel, could not be ignorant that Gideon and his host occupied yonder height. Fame would spread, probably exaggerate, the "*mighty valor*" of Gideon, and the valor of his followers – while the diminished numbers of Gideon would, of course, not be known, as they had retired by circuitous routes. Moreover, the Midianites must also have been aware that this was to Israel a religious war; nor can they have been ignorant of the might of Jehovah.

The fears which all this inspired appear in the interpretation of the dream. But the dream itself was the result of the same feelings. Barley-bread was deemed the poorest food; yet a loaf of this despised provision of slaves rolls itself into Midian's camp, strikes the tent of the leader, turns it upside down, and it falls! Here is a dream-picture of Israel and its victory – all quite natural, yet marvelously dreamed and told just at that particular time. And still, often do dreams, excited by natural causes, link themselves, in God's appointment, to thoughts that come supernaturally. We have throughout this history marked how often what seemed to happen quite naturally, was used by God miraculously, and how the supernatural linked itself to what, more or less, had its counterpart in the ordinary course of nature. It had been so in the history of Moses and of Israel; it was so when Joshua defeated the allied kings before Gibeon, and when Barak encountered the invincible chariots of Sisera. In each case it was the Lord, Who gave miraculous victory through terrific tempest. So also it had been in an hour, when thoughts of Israel's past and present must have burned deepest into the heart of Gideon, that the Angel stood before him, even as it was by means most natural that God separated from the rest the three hundred who had not bent the knee to Baal, and who alone were to go to the holy war. Thoughts like these do not detract from, they only make the supernatural the more marvelous. Yet they seem also to bring it nearer to us,

till we feel ourselves likewise within its circle, and can realize that even our "*daily bread*" comes to us straight from heaven!

Gideon and Phurah have returned to the waiting host. In whispered words he has told what they had witnessed. And now the three hundred are divided into three companies. It is not the naked sword they grasp, for in that night not Israel, but **Jehovah** is to fight. In one hand each man holds a trumpet, in the other, concealed in a pitcher, a burning torch. Each is to do exactly as the leader. Silently they creep round to three different parts of Midian's camp. The guard has just been relieved, and the new watchers have settled quietly by the watch-fire. Suddenly a single trumpet is heard, then three hundred – here, there, everywhere the sound of war is raised. The night is peopled with terrors. Now with loud crash three hundred pitchers are broken; three hundred torches flash through the darkness; three hundred voices shout: "*The sword for Jehovah and for Gideon!*" Then is the enemy all around the camp! No one can say in what numbers. Again and again rings the trumpet-sound; wave the torches. The camp is roused. Men, women, children, camels rush terror-stricken through the dark night. No one knows but that the enemy is in the very midst of them, and that the neighbor whom he meets is an Israelite, for all around still sounds the war-trumpet, flash the torches, and rises the war-cry. Each man's sword is turned against his neighbor. Multitudes are killed or trampled down, and their cries and groans increase the terror of that wild night. A hopeless panic ensues, and ere morning-light, the site of the camp and the road of the fugitives towards Jordan are strewn with the slain.²⁵

The tide of battle had rolled towards the Jordan. The fugitives seem to have divided into two main bodies. The quickest, under the leadership of Zebah and Zalmunna, succeeded in crossing the Jordan, and hastened towards the wilderness, while the main body of the army, encumbered with women and cattle, fled in a south-easterly direction, trying to gain the more southern fords

²⁵ It is interesting to notice, that both classical and modern history record similar night-surprises, with ensuing panic and slaughter, though, of course, not of the miraculous character of this narrative.

of the Jordan within the possession of Issachar, and almost in a straight line with that of Ephraim. The two kings were the object of Gideon's own pursuit, in which he was joined by those of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh, who had shortly before been dismissed from the battle. To overtake the other body of fugitives, Gideon summoned the Ephraimites, directing them to occupy "*the waters*," or tributaries of Jordan, unto Beth-barah (the house of springs) and the Jordan. The success of Ephraim was complete. A great battle seems to have been fought (Isaiah 10:26), in which the leaders of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb ("*the raven*" and "*the wolf*") were taken and slain. The Ephraimites continued the pursuit of the fugitives to the other side of the Jordan, bringing with them to Gideon the gory heads of Oreb and Zeeb. Strange and sad, that their first meeting with Gideon after this victory should have been one of reproaches and strife, on account of their not having been first summoned to the war – strife, springing from that tribal jealousy which influenced for such evil the whole history of Ephraim. Nor was the reply of Gideon much more satisfactory than their noisy self-assertion (8:1–3). To us at least it savors more of the diplomacy of an Oriental, than the straightforward bearing of the warrior of God.

While Ephraim occupied "*the waters*" and the fords of the Jordan, Gideon himself had crossed the river at the spot where Jacob of old had entered Canaan on his return from Padan-Aram. "*Faint yet pursuing*," the band reached Succoth; but its "*princes*" refused even the most useful provisions to Gideon's men. The people of the neighboring Penuel acted in the same heartless manner – no doubt from utter lack of interest in the cause of God, from cowardice, and, above all, from scorn for the small band of 300, with which Gideon had gone in pursuit of the flower of Midian's army. They had calculated the result by the outward means employed, but were destined soon to feel the consequences of their folly. Making a detour eastwards, through the wilderness, Gideon advanced on the rear of Midian, and fell unexpectedly upon the camp at Karkor, which was held by 15,000 men under the command of Zebah and Zalmunna ("*sacrifice*" and "*protection refused*"). The surprise ended in defeat and flight, the two Midianite leaders being made prisoners and

taken across Jordan. On his way,²⁶ Gideon "*taught the men of Succoth*," by punishing their rulers²⁷ – seventy–seven in number, probably consisting of either seven, or else five "*princes*," and of seventy or else seventy–two elders – while in the case of Penuel, which seems to have offered armed resistance to the destruction of its citadel, "*the men of the city*" were actually slain.

The fate of Gideon's princely captives did not long remain doubtful. It seems that he would have spared their lives, if they had not personally taken part in the slaughter of his brothers, which may have occurred at the commencement of the last campaign, and while the Midianites held Jezreel – possibly under circumstances of treachery and cruelty, prompted perhaps by tidings that Gideon had raised the standard of resistance. It may have been to investigate the facts on the spot, that Gideon had brought back²⁸ the two princes, or he may have only heard of it on his return. At any rate, the two Midianites not only confessed, but boasted of their achievement. By the law of retaliation they were now made to suffer death, although the hesitation of Gideon's son spared them the humiliation of falling by the hand of a young lad.

The deliverance of Israel was now complete. It had been wrought most unexpectedly, and by apparently quite inadequate means. In the circumstances, it was natural that, in measure as the people failed to recognize the direct agency of Jehovah, they should exalt Gideon as the great national hero. Accordingly, they now offered him the hereditary rule over, at least, the northern tribes. Gideon had spiritual discernment and strength sufficient to resist this temptation. He knew that he had only been called to a temporary work, and that the "*rule*" which they wished could not be made hereditary. Each "*judge*" must be specially called, and qualified by the influence of the

²⁶ In Judges 8:13 the rendering should be, "*from the ascent of Heres*," probably a mountain–road by which he came – instead of "*before the sun was up*."

²⁷ The notice in 8:14 (literally rendered), that the lad "*wrote down for him*" the names of the princes, is interesting as showing the state of education at the time even in so remote a district.

²⁸ We gather that this took place either in Jezreel or at Ophrah from the circumstance that Gideon's son had joined him: 8:20.

Holy Spirit. Besides, the latter was not, as since the ascension of our Blessed Savior, a permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a Person, but consisted in certain effects produced by His agency. The proposal of Israel could therefore only arise from carnal misunderstanding, and must be refused.

But Gideon himself was not proof against another temptation and mistake. God had called him not only to temporal, but to spiritual deliverance of Israel. He had thrown down the altar of Baal; he had built up that of Jehovah, and offered on it accepted sacrifice. Shiloh was deserted, and the high priest seemed set aside. Ophrah had been made what Shiloh should have been, and Gideon had taken the place of the high priest. All this had been by express Divine command – and without any reference to the services of the tabernacle. Moreover, Gideon's office had never been recalled. Should it not now be made permanent, at least, in his own person? The keeping of Israel's faith had been committed to his strong hand; should he deliver it up to the feeble grasp of a nominal priesthood which had proved itself incapable of such a trust? It was to this temptation that Gideon succumbed when he asked of the people the various golden ornaments, taken as spoil from the enemy.²⁹ The gold so obtained amounted to seventeen thousand shekels – or nearly the weight of fifty pounds. With this Gideon made an ephod, no doubt with the addition of the high-priestly breastplate and its precious gems, and of the Urim and Thummim. Here, then, was the commencement of a spurious worship. Presently, Israel went to Ophrah, "*a whoring after it*," while to Gideon himself and to his house this "*thing became a snare*."³⁰

In truth, the same spiritual misunderstanding which culminated in Gideon's arrogating to himself high-priestly functions, had appeared almost immediately after that night-victory of Jehovah over Midian. Even his reply to

²⁹ It is well known that the Midianites delighted in that kind of ornaments. We recognize in this, even to the present day, the habits of the Bedawin. If we bear in mind that the host of Midian consisted of 150,000 men, the weight of gold will by no means appear excessive.

³⁰ The Rabbis find here tribal jealousies against Ephraim, within whose territory were Shiloh and the tabernacle.

the jealous wrangling of Ephraim does not sound like the straightforward language of one who had dismissed the thousands of Israel to go to battle with only three hundred. Again, there is what at least looks like petty revenge about his dealings with Succoth and Penuel; while it is difficult to understand upon what principle, other than that of personal retaliation, he had made the lives of Zebah and Zalmunna wholly dependent upon their conduct towards his own family. And the brief remarks of Scripture about the family-life of Gideon, after he had made the ephod, only tend to confirm our impressions. But, meantime, for "*forty years in the days of Gideon*," "*the country was in quietness*," and, however imperfect in its character, the service of Jehovah seems to have been, at least outwardly, the only one professed. Matters changed immediately upon his death. Presently the worship of Baalim becomes again common, and especially that of the "*Covenant-Baal*" (Baal-berith). There is a sad lesson here. If Gideon had made a spurious ephod, his people now chose a false "*covenant-god*." And, having first forsaken the Covenant-Jehovah, they next turned in ingratitude from their earthly deliverer, "*neither showed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal*." Thus sin ever brings its own punishment.