

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3

Judges spends four chapters dealing with Gideon and his son Abimelech (Judges chapters 6-9). This portion of Judges and Gideon, in particular, is an inflection point in Hebrew history. Gideon starts out as fully assimilated into Canaanite culture. God guides him out of that culture and into a tenuous faith walk. He slowly drifts back to relying on his human nature. His son Abimelech goes even further. After Gideon, things go downhill. The Israelites become worse than the Canaanites.

In Gideon, we see precursors of the future history of Israel. Good kings return to faith in Yahweh, chopping down and removing idols like Gideon. Note that the name Gideon means “hewer” as in chopping down. Evil kings return to assimilation to the Canaanite culture.

In a few verses, Gideon will kill two kings. Subsequently he will be offered the position of ruler.

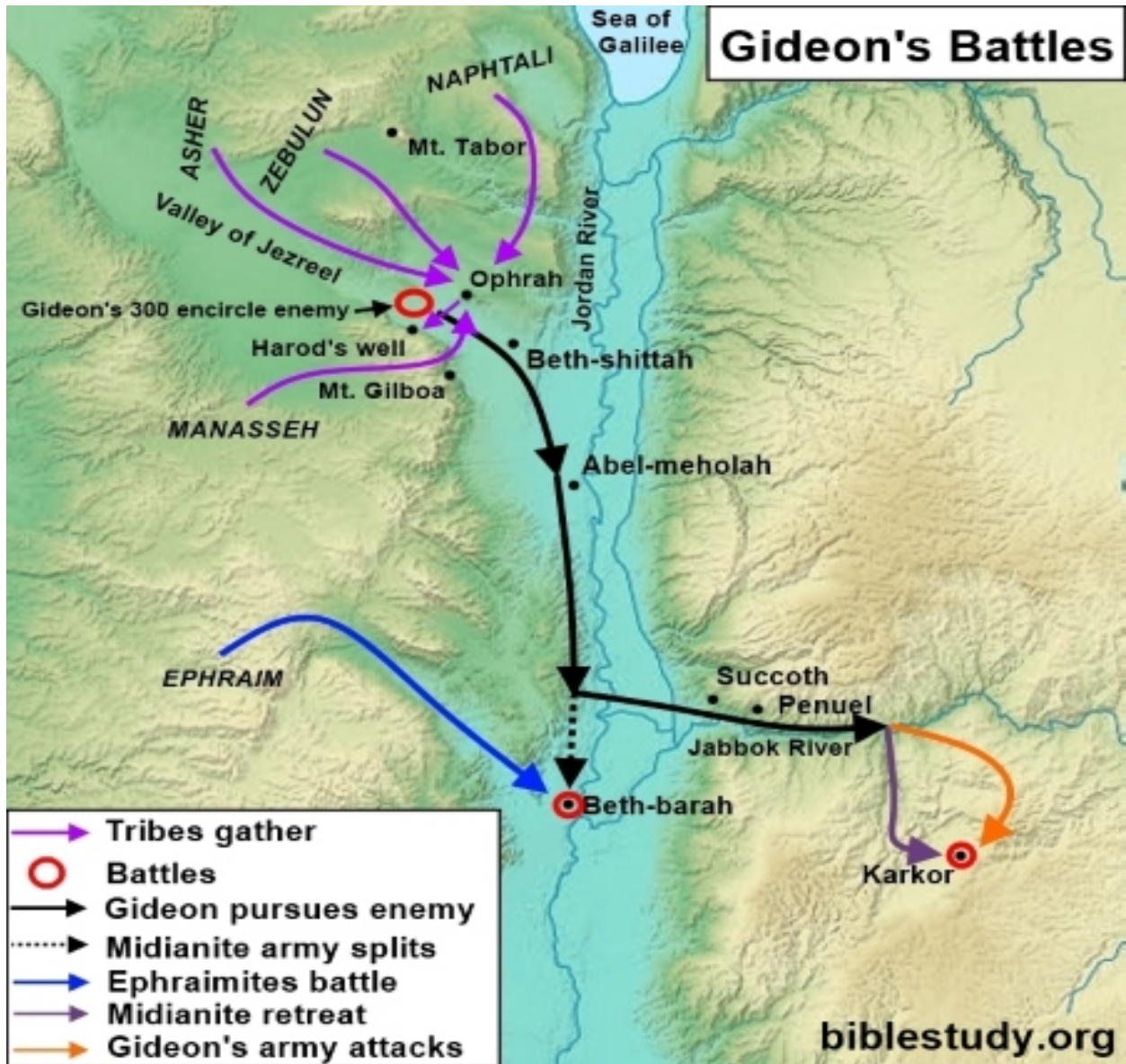
This portion of Judges also highlights the growing fracture in the unity, the cohesion of the tribes of Israel. This is perhaps a precursor to the need of a king, from a human perspective as well as the eventual split of the future kingdom into two parts, northern and southern. Robert Chisholm says it this way, “But a deeper crisis lies below the surface, the continuing crisis of Israelite identity. Why will Gideon’s own relatives not help a leader from another tribe in his pursuit of enemies who have stifled and terrorized western Israelites for several years? Is Israel so divided and so unconscious of its divine calling as a nation that no leader can bring them together? Or is Gideon just not the right kind of leader to provide the unity Israel needs?”

Two weeks ago, the lesson ended with Gideon asking two cities in the area belonging to the tribe of Gad for loaves of bread for his men. Let’s

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

start there with an overlap from that lesson and move forward and conclude the hostilities against the Midianite forces.

As a help in the review, here is a map of Gideon's battles from biblestudy.org.



(from biblestudy.org)
Gideon's Battles

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Judges 8:4 Then Gideon and the three hundred men who were with him came to the Jordan and crossed over, exhausted yet still pursuing.

An additional note, not included in the previous lessons:

Once Gideon crosses over the Jordan, it is as if he now reverts back to his sin nature. He has forgotten the lessons of faith. Success can do that to you. Immediately after a faith victory in your life, you may have great temptations to which you succumb.

Sometimes, commentators stumble across something and have an amazing insight. From Robert Chisholm, “Block asks if the narrator is “deliberately painting a picture of a human deliverer who is the antithesis of the divine Savior.” Interesting. Very interesting.

Judges 8:5 And he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.”

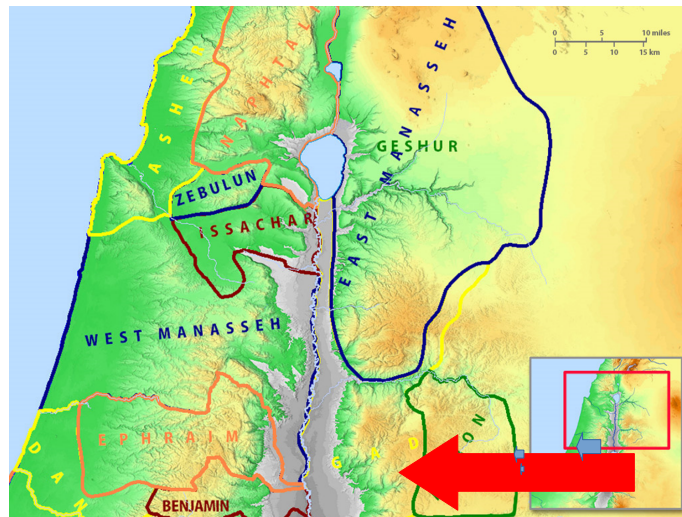
Succoth. From Bibleatlast.org: “After parting with Esau, Jacob journeyed to Succoth, a name which he gave to the place from the "booths" which he erected to shelter his cattle (Genesis 33:17). It was in the territory of Gad, and is mentioned with Beth-nimrah (Joshua 13:27). In his pursuit of Zeba and Zalmunnah, Gideon seems to have retraced the path followed by Jacob, passing Succoth before Penuel (Judges 8:5). Their churlishness (lack of civility or graciousness) on that occasion brought dire punishment upon the men of Succoth. Gideon on his return "taught them" with thorns and briers (Judges 8:16).”

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3 Judges Chapter 8

Zebah and Zalmunna. Per Thomas Constable “Gideon routed the remnant of the Midianite alliance, and captured the two kings of Midian: "Zebah" ("Victim") and "Zalmunna" ("Protection Refused"). Their names, like that of "Cushan-rishathaim" earlier (3:8, 10), may have been nicknames that the Israelites, and or the writer, gave them.

These are two leaders of the Midianite tribes, literally “kings.”

Gideon initially spared them. Ehud and Barak were witness to the deaths of the enemy king. Ehud killed him. In Barak’s day Israelites killed the enemy king. That is what was expected in victory. Ensure the head of the snake is cut off. But here, Gideon hesitates and does not kill the two kings.



(from freebibleimages.com)

Judges 8:6 But the leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?”

This is the human viewpoint of the wicked son. They do not recognize the familial ties to Israel. Instead, whoever poses the greatest threat is who I align myself with.

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

We already saw that a victorious army sometimes took body parts as trophies or to prove victory. That is what the tribe of Ephraim did in Judges 7:25.

Leaders. Same word used of the Midianite military commanders, Oreb and Zeeb. They were put to death for what they did to Israel. Now the leaders of Succoth refuse to help Gideon.

Judges 8:7 So Gideon said, “For this answer, when the Lord (Yahweh) has handed over to me Zebah and Zalmunna, I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars.”

When the Lord. Gideon uses the name of God, the God of the covenants, Yahweh, to remind the inhabitants of Succoth that they are under the covenant just as Gideon is. Yet, they have forgotten their Lord God and have allegiance to the Midianites.

Thrash. It can be used of threshing like an ox pulling a plow creating furrows in the dirt. Here is an entry from the TDOT: “As an Expression for Cruel Military Acts. Jgs. 8:7, 16 certainly has in mind cruel military acts, although these verses do not specify in detail how Gideon punished the elders of Succoth it is clear that he did not actually use threshing with disks. We will have to be content to say with Myers: “What threshing with thorns and briars meant we do not know, but we may imagine that it meant death by torture.””

Thorns. This word means thorns. Here it is used “as instruments of corporal punishment (TDOT). I suspect there is a play on this word. There is another aspect to thorns in the TDOT: “The noun *qos* is used metaphorically for hostile alien peoples and what befalls them. Isa. 33:12

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

compares the fate of the peoples to thorns that are cut down and burned in a fire, destroyed because they are of no value.”

Briars. Gesenius and Young’s Literal Translation suggest this was actually “threshing instruments.” When we get to Judges 8:16 we will see the realization of this threat.

Gideon said God will give him victory. But then he is going to take vengeance on fellow Israelites for failing to support Gideon’s farmer army. The sin nature is now beginning to predominate his thinking.

Judges 8:8 Then he went up from there to Penuel and spoke similarly to them; and the men of Penuel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered.

Judges 8:9 So he said also to the men of Penuel, “When I return safely, I will tear down this tower.”

Penuel. From bibleatlas.org “(peni’el, "face of God"; Eidos theou): This is the form of the name in Genesis 32:30. In the next verse and elsewhere it appears as "Penuel." The name is said to have been given to the place by Jacob after his night of wrestling by the Jabbok, because, as he said, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." It was a height evidently close by the stream over which Jacob passed in the morning. Some have thought it might be a prominent cliff, the contour of which resembled a human face. Such a cliff on the seashore to the South of Tripoli was called theou prosopon, "face of God" (Strabo xvi.2, 15). In later times a city with a strong tower stood upon it. This lay in the line of Gideon's pursuit of the Midianites. When he returned victorious, he beat down the place because of the churlishness of the inhabitants (Judges 8:8, 9, 17).” <https://bibleatlas.org/penuel.htm>

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Are these two placenames reminders of God's provision to Jacob? And reminders to Gideon of what God has done for him? Didn't Gideon see the Lord face to face?

Genesis 32:30 So Jacob named the place **Peniel**, for he said, "**I have seen God face to face**, yet my life has been spared."

Judges 6:22 When Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord, he said, "Oh, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord **face to face!**"

Gideon travels to Succoth

Genesis 33:17 But Jacob journeyed to **Succoth**, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named **Succoth**.

Judges 6:24 (YLT) And Gideon buildeth there an altar to Jehovah, and calleth it **Jehovah-Shalom**, unto this day it [is] yet in **Ophrah of the Abi-Ezrites**.

There may also be a tie to the feast of booths, but that may be a little complicated to present here.

Whether they realize it or not, place names in Israel serve as a reminder of what God did there. This reminder is not just for Gideon but also for modern day people in Israel. They visit the tombs of dead Old Testament heroes. Names like "Bethel" or House of God are staring them in the face. Yet there are many "secular" Jews.

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Tear down. From the TDOT, “The primary meaning characterizing the use of *nts* is “break up, demolish, tear down (an edifice or some construction).” The verb refers to the violent “tearing down” of houses, towers, walls, entire cities, as well as altars, sanctuaries at high places, and other cultic institutions. Apart from a few examples of metaphorical usage, *nts* refers consistently to the destruction of edifices or objects constructed by human hands. The concrete notion of “tearing down” is so strong that the more general meaning of “destroy” is wholly inappropriate.”

This verb was used in chapter 6 of Gideon (the “Hewer”) when he tore down the stronghold to Baal. Now he threatens to tear down the tower or safe place of the people of Peneul. They have turned from the Lord and are trusting in man. Take note of a two Bible verses in this respect:

**Jeremiah 17:5 This is what the Lord says:
“Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind
And makes flesh his strength, And whose
heart turns away from the Lord.**

**Psalm 118:8 It is better to take refuge in the
Lord Than to trust in people.**

These verses were written after the time of Gideon, but they express a thought that Gideon may have had. Certainly, he was involved in the illustration of these thoughts.

This tower. TDOT on the word “tower:” “In older texts *migdal* refers to a fortified citadel inside the city itself offering a final place of refuge.” In other words, it provides security, or at least a sense of security. This word will be used several times in the next chapter.

Once again, we are given a reference to something with little explanation. “This” tower refers to a specific tower which up to this point

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

has not been identified. There was apparently a single place of refuge within the city, a single tower.

Judges 8:10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their armies with them, about fifteen thousand men, all who were left of the entire army of the people of the east; for the fallen were 120,000 swordsmen.

Judges 8:11 Gideon went up by the way of those who lived in tents to the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and he attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting (translated “surprised” in the NET Bible).

Unsuspecting. Here Robert Chisholm gives an interesting insight into the thrust of this word in this context here. “This verb translated “surprised,” used in 8:12 in the hiphil stem (Hebrew word omitted), literally means, “he caused to tremble.” It describes the effect of Gideon’s surprise attack on the Midianites. Its use here is ironic, for in 7:3 an adjective (Hebrew word omitted) from the same verbal root describes twenty-two thousand of Gideon’s frightened soldiers assembled at the spring of Harod (Hebrew word omitted meaning “trembling”). The repetition of the root draws attention to the role reversal that characterizes the story. Before the battle Israel’s army was trembling, but in the end the Midianites were overcome with terror.”

Judges 8:12 When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the entire army.

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Captured. Gideon captured the two kings alive.

Judges 8:13 (NASB) Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres.

Judges 8:13 (KJV) 13 And Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle before the sun was up,

Judges 8:13 (YLT) And Gideon son of Joash turneth back from the battle, at the going up of the sun,

The battle against the enemy is almost complete except for the execution of the kings. Now Gideon turns on the tribe of Gad.

The ascent of Heres. As you see from the Young's Literal Translation and the King James Version, there is some debate on how to translate this.

Judges 8:14 And he captured a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then the youth wrote down for him the leaders of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.

Judges 8:14 (YLT) and captureth a young man of the men of Succoth, and asketh him, and he describeth unto him the heads of Succoth, and its elders -- seventy and seven men.

Captured. Interesting that this is the same word used in verse 12 of capturing the enemy kings. Now Gideon is turning on the tribe of Gad and captured a youth.

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Youth. It means a youth, not a full grown man. There are differing estimates on the upper limit of the age. Some say this means the youth was no older than 20. In some Bible passages it is used of a baby. My guess is that this youth is a teenager. The Young's Literal Translation is correct in translating this as a "youth of the men."

Wrote down. The verb means to write. This may seem like a normal thing for a youth to write something down. After all, doesn't almost everyone go to school and learn reading, writing and arithmetic?

But, many commentators thought that, in the ancient world, only specialized people could read and write. Priests, kingdom administrators and such. More and more, archaeology is uncovering writings by common people which indicate literacy was more widespread than previously thought. Here is one of those passages in the Bible that would indicate this. Since this is the Bible, there have been many that said this could not be so or there was more to the story.

This brings up two topics: 1) the reliability, inerrancy of the Bible and 2) archaeological finds that indicate literacy in ancient times.

We start our studies in the Bible with the assumption that the Bible is inerrant. Bible critics are constantly pointing to some piece of information in the Bible which has no support in archaeology. One of my favorite stories is that of the Hittites. In the 1700's, critics said there were no such things as the Hittites because there wasn't a single piece of evidence anywhere that they existed. Here is some information from Wikipedia:

"Before the archeological (sic) discoveries that revealed the Hittite civilization, the only source of information about the Hittites had been the Old Testament. Francis William Newman expressed the critical view, common in the early 19th century, that, "no Hittite king could have compared in power to the King of Judah..."

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3 Judges Chapter 8

“As the discoveries in the second half of the 19th century revealed the scale of the Hittite kingdom, Archibald Sayce asserted that, rather than being compared to Judah, the Anatolian civilization “[was] worthy of comparison to the divided Kingdom of Egypt”, and was “infinitely more powerful than that of Judah”. Sayce and other scholars also noted that Judah and the Hittites were never enemies in the Hebrew texts; in the Book of Kings, they supplied the Israelites with cedar, chariots, and horses, and in the Book of Genesis were friends and allies to Abraham. Uriah the Hittite was a captain in King David's army and counted as one of his “mighty men” in 1 Chronicles 11.

Over and over again, critics are eventually proved wrong and the Bible correct. The argument “from silence” is a dangerous one to employ. Just because you haven’t found any evidence to back up the Bible doesn’t make the Bible wrong. You need to look harder.

Now, about writing.

From https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/do/search/?q=author_lname%3A%22Parker%22%20author_fname%3A%22Emily%22&start=0&context=3316043&facet=

A presentation of Emily Parker (student) at Southern Adventist University

““...do not!”. These two words are among the few identifiable bits of script etched into an ancient storage vessel. Though equivocal in meaning and in form, this ostrakon inscription unearthed during a 2008 excavation in Khirbet Qeiyafa adds to the growing evidence that knowledge of reading and writing were widespread among the Israelites during the Iron Ages.”

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3 Judges Chapter 8

From the website:

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/press-release/literacy-in-ancient-israel-and-judah/>

This article is written by Megan Sauter who is the Associate Editor at Biblical Archaeology Review

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WASHINGTON, D.C. (April 6, 2020)—Also known as the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible was composed over a long span of time. Numerous opinions exist as to when the earliest biblical traditions were first put down in writing.

Many scholars think they could not have been written before the eighth century B.C.E. However, Matthieu Richelle of the Faculté Libre de Théologie Évangélique and the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris) questions this assumption. After examining the epigraphic and archaeological evidence of ancient Israel and Judah, he thinks the biblical traditions could have been written down during the ninth or even tenth century B.C.E. In the Spring 2020 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Richelle details his reasoning in the article “When Did Literacy Emerge in Judah?”

There are two significant reasons to think that writing was prevalent in Israel and Judah during the early first millennium B.C.E.:

- (1) They developed a national script in the ninth century.
- (2) Within this script, they developed cursive features already in the ninth century.

The existence of a national script, the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet, in the early ninth century B.C.E. suggests that they were writing lengthy texts, not just short notes. Further, some inscriptions from Tel Rehov and Megiddo—dated to the tenth or ninth century B.C.E.—have cursive features. The use of cursive in texts is indicative of an existing literary production.

This is not proof that biblical texts were written during the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E., but it certainly shows that they—or other literary works—could have been.

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Merrill Unger wrote, "Writing is first distinctly mentioned in Exodus 17:14, and the connection clearly implies that it was not then employed for the first time, but was so familiar as to be used for historic record."

Exodus 17:14 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly wipe out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

Judges 8:15 And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are weary?'"

Judges 8:16 Then he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them.

Judges 8:17 And he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Judges 8:18 Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where were the men whom you killed at Tabor?" But they said, "You and they were alike, each one resembling the son of a king."

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Another intriguing comment by Robert Chisholm. “Their description of those they had murdered allows the narrator to introduce an important theme into the book of Judges, that of kingship. The Midianite kings describe their now-dead enemies bluntly: “No difference between you and them; each has the appearance of a king’s sons” (Judg 8:18). For the first time, the thought is slipped into the reader’s mind that Gideon may have come from royal stock, or that he may be on the road to royal rule. But the Midianite kings, who should know, cannot describe Gideon as a king, only as one like his brothers with the appearance of princes who have not ascended the throne and who do not have royal authority. Thus, in reality, “this response is both evasive and ambiguous” (Block,294).”

Here is another artifact indicating that Gideon is taking the country down the road to the future kingdom.

Judges 8:19 And he said, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if only you had let them live, I would not kill you.”

Again, some insight from Robert Chisholm: “Gideon seemed more willing to show mercy to Zebah and Zalmunna than he did his own countrymen (Klein 1988, 62). He executed the Midianite kings only when he discovered they had murdered his brothers. In fact, one can see a desire for personal vengeance as the primary motive in each of the violent actions attributed to Gideon in this chapter (vv. 16-17, 21).”

Judges 8:20 So he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them.” But the youth did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

Judges Chapter 8 Part 3
Judges Chapter 8

Here is another “youth.” The first one was caught, interrogated and then wrote down the names of the leaders of his city. Here the youth is the firstborn son of Gideon. He put his son in a difficult situation. It is one thing to kill a man in battle when there is imminent danger. Here they are being slaughtered. The youth sees living beings eye to eye and is commanded to kill.

Judges 8:21 Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise up yourself, and attack us; for as the man, so is his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent amulets which were on their camels’ necks.

I wonder if Zebah and Zalmunna taunt Gideon so that he kills them quickly.