

Series: God & Abraham #1190

Title: Genesis 14.14-16

The Size of Ancient Armies

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. Welcome back. For the last couple of days we have done something I like to do in our weekday Bible study, and that is to cross-reference one Bible passage with another (or more than one other). So, we read Genesis 14 alongside Judges chapters 6, 7, and 8 in order to draw out the similarities in what God did in the lives of his two competent commanders: Abram and Gideon.

And, as we read the texts, we learned again that God is victorious! He fights His battles His way and God always wins. He never loses. It was, it is, the job of the people He puts in charge to obey God and do things His way. And God used Abram to defeat the armies of the northeast and rescue Lot. And God used Gideon to defeat the Midianites. And each did so with a small number of men: 318 for Abram and 300 for Gideon. It was the theologian Martin Luther who said, "One with God is the majority," and that applies here. All we need is one *with God* and we have a majority. The humble man of faith *in* God led a minority battalion and *won!*

Well, a second task I favor in our study of God and His Word is to draw your attention to extrabiblical texts that shed light on what was happening outside of what we read in the Bible, but at or near the same time as biblical history was unfolding. Having acknowledged, in Genesis and Judges, how small these armies were it is important to show you that at this point in history a force number around three-hundred was not as small as we might think. And there are two other battles, written about in Egyptian hieroglyphics, that demonstrate the size of militaries in Hebrew Bible times. The point being, armies were sometimes smaller in those days.

So, let's have a little fun on a Friday and dig in to – I think we have time for – *one* ancient text, written in Egyptian hieroglyphics and translated for us into the English by James Henry Breasted. He was an American archaeologist and Egyptologist, also an historian, who taught at the University of Chicago. He lived in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He wrote the book *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents*. I have that here and I am looking at *An Egyptian Account of the Battle of Megiddo*. Before I quote from it, you should know the Battle of Megiddo is a famous battle that took place in 1,479BC. (1,479BC, so this fits Bible times.)

In this conflict the armies of the Egyptian king plow into a rebellious coalition of Canaanite vassal states led by the king of Kadesh. And immediately these names are ringing bells in your brain filled with Bible. There is Egypt. There is the land of Canaan (where Megiddo is located; this is actually an important sight in all of the Bible, including territory instrumental to the future that we read about in the Revelation of Jesus Christ). There are the Canaanite vassal states and there is the king of Kadesh. We have been talking about Kadesh just recently here on *God Is*. That is definitely a popular location in the Scripture. So, you can see how what I am going to read to you applies to the time of the Bible.

Listen to what the Egyptians recorded concerning this battle. I am quoting the ancient text now, "That wretched enemy, the chief of Kadesh, has come and entered Megiddo. He is there at this moment...He speaks, 'I have arisen to fight against his majesty in Megiddo.'" I'll insert "his majesty" is the Egyptian Pharaoh. Moving down in the passage, I continue the reading now (quote), "Then was set-up the camp of his majesty, and command was given to the whole army, saying, 'Equip yourselves! Prepare your weapons! For we shall advance to fight with that wretched foe in the morning.' Therefore the king rested in the royal tent, the affairs of the chiefs were arranged, and the provisions of the attendants. The watch of the army went about saying, 'Steady of heart! Steady of heart! Watchful! Watchful! Watch for life at the tent of the king.'"

I'll pause the reading there to tell you the Egyptians marched out and won! Listen to the report of what was brought to the king of the Egyptians after his victory. This is what I really want you to capture.

Quoting again, "Behold, the chiefs of this country came to render their portions, to do obeisance to the fame of his majesty, to crave breath for their nostrils, because of the greatness of his power, because of

the might of the fame of his majesty the country came to his fame, bearing their gifts, consisting of silver, gold, lapis lazuli...bringing clean grain, wine, large cattle, and small cattle for the army of his majesty.”

And then this, listen: “340 living prisoners, 83 hands, 2,041 mares, 191 foals, 6 stallions, a chariot, wrought with gold, its pole of gold, belonging to that foe, a beautiful chariot, wrought with gold, belonging to the chief of Megiddo, 892 chariots of this wretched army; total: 924 chariots, a beautiful suit of bronze armor, belonging to the chief of Megiddo, 200 suits of armor belonging to his wretched army, 502 bowls, 7 poles of myr wood, wrought with silver, belonging to the tent of that foe. Behold, the army of his majesty took 1,929 large cattle, 2,000 small cattle, 20,500 white small cattle... (*Ancient Records of Egypt*, 407FF).”

That is interesting, isn't it? Listen to all that detail. It was written down, preserved, discovered, and now we read it. Here is the key. The Egyptian's captured 340 living prisoners and killed 83. From this, we can tell that the army of the rebellious coalition of Canaanite vassal states led by the king of Kadesh was small in number.

As we consider Abram with 318 men and how they were able to overcome the armies of the northeast, certainly we must focus on the fact that God was with them, bringing them victory. God gets the win, and I have emphasized that. However, skeptics will criticize and say we are being, the biblical text, is being too full on faith and too short on historical facts to suggest that 318 could defeat the men of the victorious, retreating armies of the northeast in Genesis 14. And so it is significant for us to respond with historical realities.

Let me quote our friend Dr. Aalders. As part of what he writes, you will hear him refer to the Amarna Tablets (I have introduced you to those already) and to another famous battle (a text from which I do not have time to read today, albeit here on my desk). Quoting now, “Many of the armies in ancient times were comparatively small by present-day standards. The Amarna Tablets tell about army divisions which numbered 40 to 50 men, and even 10 to 20 men...In one of the greatest battles of ancient times, between the forces of Egypt and the Hethite armies, at Kadesh in 1,288BC, the entire Egyptian army numbered only 15,000 to 18,000 men, and only half of those took part in the battle.

Even if we were to assume that Chedorlaomer's force was of that size, which is most unlikely, when we take into account the losses they must have sustained during their long campaign, losses which could not be replaced because of the distance from their homeland, the remaining force would have been seriously cutdown and weakened. Abram, taking skilled advantage of every factor in his favor, could very well have routed the leftovers of the invading force with 318 well-trained men (*Bible Student's Commentary: Genesis Volume I*, 287-288).” End of quote.

Friends, without taking anything away from God's glory and power, I invite us to acknowledge the historical conditions of some armies and military forces – that is, sometimes they were small, at least by our standards. And, of course for any of you who know history, then you know we can point to other military engagements in which small numbers of warriors beat their much larger competitors. Do you know the story of Thermopylae? You *don't*? Well, do yourself a huge favor and set aside some time this weekend for a coffee or a tea and look into the Battle of Thermopylae.

To wet your appetite, I will tell you that in this battle (one of my favorites to read) 300 Spartans successfully defend a narrow coastal pass from a significantly larger Persian army. There is that number 300 again. Unfortunately, our time is up, but there will be much more in God's Word on Monday's God Is.

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