

# GIDEON THE BLACK BELT

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## 1. Setting the Stage

The Bible is truth. While it does not contain all truth, what it does contain is truth. The Bible is a timeless book about living, and as such it addresses a wide spectrum of life. Thus, it comes as no surprise to the serious student of the martial arts to find out that martial arts skills did not originate in the Far East. To be sure, most modern systems can trace their roots to China, Okinawa, Japan or Korea, but, the roots go deeper and can be traced back at least four millennium ago to the Middle East by a variety of sources.

In their classic treatment of the martial arts<sup>1</sup>, Donn Draeger and Robert Smith bring the martial arts back to at least 400 B. C. Keith Yates refers to martial arts skills being practiced in ancient Egypt dating back to 4000 B.C.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Bruce Haines refers to Egyptian and Roman fighting arts<sup>3</sup>. John Corcoran also alludes to ancient Egyptian tombs and the walls of Beni Hassan (Middle East circa 2500 B.C.) as sources of the martial arts<sup>4</sup>. These avowed experts in the martial arts and several others point to the Middle East as the cradle of the martial arts.

## 2. An Old Testament “Black Belt”

If the martial arts existed in the Middle East well before the time of Christ, then one would expect to find examples of martial artists and their technique in Biblical writings. One should also anticipate examples of the technique in the Biblical text. One such classical example can be found in the story of Gideon. His story is found in the sixth and seventh chapters of the book of Judges. Written around the eleventh-century B.C., the book of Judges covers a span of about 300 years. As we look at this story of Gideon and how he managed to gain the victory over an army of 135,000 with a faithful band of 300 soldiers, we will see the following:

- the character of a true martial artist
- the roots of the martial arts in the Old Testament
- the ratio of those who persevere to the rank of black belt
- the attitude of a martial artist towards battle
- the usage of “*ki/chi*” in battle
- the role of mind-leading in defeating the enemy without a fight
- the importance of the leader (sensei) in training his soldiers

## 3. The Readiness of the Black Belt

The call of Gideon to be the leader of the Israelite soldiers occurs in Judges 6:11-12. The Angel of the Lord found Gideon all alone yet actively serving and with a burden for his people. The martial arts sensei who has a proper understanding of solitude and meditation, is actively seeking ways to serve others, and has a burden to develop and grow others in the “way” of the martial arts is one who God can effectively use.

In verse 12, Gideon is addressed as a “mighty man of valor.” The meaning of the original Hebrew word for valor (*kahl yil*) carries with it the meaning of “mighty warrior, soldier,

strength, power, training, virtuous.” It comes from the root word *kheel* meaning to “stomp and dance” - very similar to the martial arts katas.

In Judges 6: 13 Gideon objects to his calling, much as Moses did in the wilderness. The Lord dealt with him in a way to help him understand why he was the right choice. When you consider the kind of man Gideon was at this time, you wonder why God selected him; but God often chooses the “weak things of this world” to accomplish great things for His glory (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Sang Kyu Shim in his masterful text on the Making of a Martial Artist<sup>5</sup> tells us that the ideal master “persuades rather than forces others to right action.” God is always ready to make us what we ought to be if we’re willing to submit to His will (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12-13).

#### **4. The Preparation of the Black Belt**

In verses 14 through 24 the Lord gently persuades Gideon that he has the character, the right relationship with God, the burden, and the training for this task. Thus in verses 25 through 40 Gideon finally submits and dismantles the false altars of Baal. Prior to entering the larger battle he must be prepared by God just as the successful sensei has been carefully prepared in the dojo by accomplishing several small responsibilities under the watchful gaze of his instructor. Before God gives His servants great victories in public, He sometimes prepares them by giving them smaller victories at home. Before David killed the giant Goliath in the sight of two armies, he learned to trust God by killing a lion and a bear in the field where nobody saw it but God (1 Sam. 17:32-37). When we prove that we’re faithful with a few things, God will trust us with greater things (Matt. 25: 21). He is now prepared for battle as the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, issues a call for soldiers and seeks a sign from the Lord through the laying out of the fleece. This “laying out of the fleece” may have been appropriate for Gideon as an Israelite in that the Jews require a sign (1 Cor. 1:22). But, in this age, God speaks to his children by the Holy Spirit through the church, prayer, circumstances, and the Word.

#### **5. Qualifications of a Warrior**

Now in Chapter 7, his army is assembled and faces off against the Midianite army of 135,000. But, God is not yet ready to let Gideon go into battle. Gideon needs to develop his army of 32,000 into a well-honed unit and give them the proper training. The Bible frequently makes mention of the use of the “mind” in battle rather than just brute strength. Psalm 33: 16 tells us that “a mighty man is not delivered by much strength” and in Ecclesiastes 9: 16, we read that “Wisdom is better than strength.” Thus the development of these martial artists of old prepared their minds for battle.

In verses three through six of the seventh chapter the army is reduced from 32,000 to 300. This is done in two stages. First, using the precedence of Deuteronomy 20:8, those who are fearful and fainthearted are culled out and sent home. The fearful and trembling man God cannot use. Fear has a way of spreading and one timid soldier can do more damage than a whole company of enemy soldiers. John Wesley said, “Give me a hundred men who fear nothing but sin and love nothing but God, and I will shake the gates of hell!”

The remaining 10,000 potential soldiers are told to go to the brook and get a drink. Those who dropped to all fours and lapped at the water like a dog were sent home. Those who remained on their feet, in a squatting position and brought water up to their mouth in a cupped hand were kept. This test identified those who were so eager to satisfy their physical desires that they would let their guard down. It is difficult to resist the appetites of the flesh. Often times it is necessary to do so and be in a state of readiness. Those who were willing and able to deny themselves immediate satisfaction for the sake of staying alert and ready for battle were allowed to remain.

The resultant number of trained and equipped soldiers was 300, a number remarkably close to the number of “trained servants” that Abraham took into battle in Genesis 14. The ratio of 300 soldiers remaining from a field of 32,000 is similar to my experience with modern day black belts. In over two decades of teaching the martial arts, I continue to see a ratio of one black belt for every 100 beginning students. The same ratio of eager young soldiers of nearly 3,000 years ago who made it to the warrior rank.

## **6. Using Your Mind in Battle**

In verse 8 the Lord is now ready to deliver the enemy into Israel’s hands. He has his select, conditioned, alert, and disciplined warriors in place. But why go to physical battle, if a leader can win without raising the sword? Similar stories are told of Bushi (Sensei) Matsumura and his battle with Uehara as told in Gichin Funakoshi's book<sup>6</sup>. Funakoshi's admonition was that it was most admirable to win a match without striking a blow.

Verses 10 and 11 demonstrate the power of mental preparation as God sends Gideon into the camp of the Midianites at night to discover the morale of the Midianite soldiers. They were fearful, had experienced bad dreams, and had heard stories of Gideon and his sword. The enemy had already been defeated in their mind. Conversely, Gideon was strengthened by what he heard. An important step in any battle or effort is to win it in your head first. In the martial arts, this is one aspect of what we call *Ki/Chi*. While much of *Ki/Chi* development involves physical conditioning, a major factor comes from the proper character and balanced living (spiritual, mental and physical) of the practitioner as demonstrated by Gideon. This concept is also in agreement with the excellent text on *Ki* written by Jan Wellendorf of Karate International<sup>7</sup>.

In spite of the fact that the Midianites greatly outnumbered the Israelites (“they were as grasshoppers for multitude” and “their camels were without number, as the sand by the seaside for multitude”), the Midianites had already lost the battle in their minds. They had dreams and premonitions of disaster. It is significant to notice that Gideon paused to worship the Lord after hearing the Midianites talking before he returned to his army. Before we can be successful warriors, we must first become sincere worshipers. A revived leader, Gideon returns to his soldiers with the good news and lays out God's battle plan.

His plan involves “mind-leading,” the use of actions, eyes, voice and posturing, to “lead” the opponent's mind to a position of vulnerability and defeat. This technique was used frequently in the Bibles and has been documented in modern texts by Thomas Nardi and John LaTourrette.

## **7. Engaging the Opponent**

Gideon's attack was made at night, just after the changing of the Midianite guard at 10 PM. An attack at night concealed the real size of the Israelite force and Midianite soldiers milling about their camp returning from guard duty would be mistaken as attacking soldiers.

Each of Gideon's soldiers was given a trumpet, constructed from an animal's horn which made a very sharp and shrill sound. These rams' horns (the *shofar*) were similar to those such as Joshua used at Jericho and perhaps this connection with that great victory helped encourage Gideon and his men. They also carried a torch that had been lit and was then placed inside a clay jar to conceal the light. Arrayed around the camp of the Midianites on the higher ground, they were made to look like three large battalions (verse 16).

Gideon then told them in verse 17 to “look on me and do likewise.” As the leader, he would set the example for others to follow. This theme was also reflected in Sang Kyu Shim's text<sup>5</sup>. One of the highest callings of the martial arts master is to set the personal example (spiritually, mentally and physically) for others to follow. The Apostle Paul echoed this thought in Philippians 4:9 as he admonished his listeners, “Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do.”

At the same moment, verse 20, the 300 soldiers, blew their trumpets, broke the jars to let the lights shine forth, and cried with a loud shout, “The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.” This was just what the Midianites had feared (verse 14). The Midianites arose in terror, began to fight with themselves, and finally fled. The Old Testament marital artist and his soldiers had a great victory.

## **8. The Perfect Plan**

There are five ingredients in this battle plan which are also necessary for all victorious service for God: Timing, Insight, Testifying, Waiting and Completing.

- 1) In Judges 7: 19, the battle is begun around midnight.
- 2) Gideon had gained an understanding of the opponent and had also ensured that his soldiers understood that their cause was greater.
- 3) As they shouted with a loud voice, “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon,” they gave God the honor.
- 4) The impulse of the Israelites would have been to immediately pursue the fleeing Midianites. By waiting with patience, the enemy turned upon themselves.

5) Reading the rest of the chapter, we see how the fleeing enemy runs directly into the presence of former volunteers who have lingered near by to hear of God's victory. The enemy is completely vanquished.

These are common elements in any successful engagement in the life of a martial artist.

## **9. Conclusion**

The story of Gideon began with a man hiding in a winepress (6: 11), but it ended with the enemy prince being slain at a winepress (7:25). Martial artists of today can benefit much from studying martial arts principles found in the stories of the Old Testament. As predecessors of the Oriental martial arts, the Middle Eastern artists practiced the principles and character development which is a reflection of Biblical truth.

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