

Why was Gideon beating the wheat in the winepress?

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Winnowing wheat in ancient Egypt

In the Book of Chronicles we read:

ומלאך יהוה אמר אל-גד לאמר לדויד: כי יעלה דויד להקים מזבח ליהוה בגרן ארנן היבסי.
“Then the messenger of *YHWH* commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up, and rear an altar to *YHWH* in the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite” (1 Ch 21:18; see also: 2 Sam 24:18).

וישב ארנן וירא את-המלאך, וארבעת בניו עמו מתחבאים; וארנן דש חטים.
“And Ornan turned back, and saw the messenger; and his four sons that were with him hiding. And Ornan was threshing wheat” (1 Ch 21:20).



In the Book of Jeremiah we read:

כי כה אמר יהוה צבאות אלהי ישראל, בת-בבל, כגרן עת הדריכה:
“For thus said *YHWH* of hosts, the God of Israel: The daughter of Babylon is like a threshing-floor at the time when it is trodden” (Jer 51:33).

In the Book of Ruth we read:

ועתה, הלא בעז מדעתנו אשר היית את-נערותיו; הנה הוא זרה את-גרן השערים-הלילה.
“And now is there not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maidens you were? Behold, he winnows barley tonight in the threshing-floor” (Ruth 3:2).

In the Book of Isaiah we read:

הנה שמתידך למורג חרוץ חדש-בעל פיפיות; תדוש הרים ותדק, וגבעות כמץ תשים;
תזרם ורוח תשאם, וסערה תפיץ אותם;
“Behold, I make you a new threshing-sledge having sharp teeth; You shall thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shall make the hills as chaff.
You shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them” (Is 41:15-16).

In the Book of Hosea we read: כמץ יסער מגרן - “as the chaff that is driven [with the wind] out of the threshing-floor (Hos 13:3).



We can conclude from these verses that גרן (*goren*) is indeed a threshing-floor where the dry wheat and barley were first crushed by compression and then separated to grain and chaff by tossing the ears of corn up into the air so that the wind would carry away the chaff.

In the Book of Judges we read that when Gideon was not sure whether God will save Israel by his hand, he said to God:

הנה אנכי מציג את-גזת הצמר-בגרן: אם טל יהיה על-הגזה לבדה, ועל-כל-הארץ חרב-
וידעתי כי-תושיע בידי את-ישראל, כאשר דברת.
“Behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there be dew on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the ground, then shall I know that You wilt save Israel by my hand, as You hast spoken” (Jud 6:37).

Yet earlier in this chapter we find:

ויבא מלאך יהוה וישב תחת האלה אשר בעפרה, אשר ליואש אבי העזרי; וגדעון בנו חבט חטים בגת, להניס מפני מדין.

“And the messenger of YHWH came, and sat under the terebinth which was in Ophrah, that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite; and his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress, to hide it from the Midianite” (Jud 6:11).

The information gained from the previous verses make us wonder why here Gideon was beating the wheat instead of winnowing it? Secondly, although he had a threshing-floor, why was Gideon processing the wheat in the winepress? Thirdly, it seems that the English translator assumed from the content of the text that here the word **להניס** means “**to hide**.” The Greek translator wrote here: “to escape” which is closer to the regular meaning of words from the same root, but here such understanding make little sense.

At the beginning of this chapter of the Book of Judges we are told:

והיה אם-זרע ישראל-ועלה מדין ועמלק ובני-קדם ועלו עליו. ויחנו עליהם וישחיתו את-יבול הארץ עד-בואך עזה; ולא-ישאירו מחיה בישראל, “And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east; they came up against them; And they encamped against them, and destroyed the produce of the earth, till you come to Gaza, and left no sustenance in Israel” (Jud 6:3-4).

וידל ישראל מאד מפני מדין; ויזעקו בני-ישראל אל-יהוה. “And Israel was brought very low because of Midian; and the children of Israel cried to YHWH” (Jud 6:6).

This state of affairs apparently forced the Israelites to hide from the Midianites and their associates, the little produce that they managed to save. It is therefore suggested that the words here: **וגדעון בנו חבט חטים בגת** is a letter-substitution error of **וגדעון בנו חבט חטים בגת** - “and his son Gideon was hiding the wheat in the winepress” (e.g. 2 Ki 6:29). As the harvest of the grapes occurs much later in the year, the winepress was empty and the Midianites had no reason to check it. Therefore Gideon was hiding the wheat in the winepress and not keeping in its usual place - the threshing floor, the place where the Midianites were expected to look for it.

It is also suggested that the last part of this verse **להניס מפני מדין** indeed means “**to hide it from the Midianite**” but then we have to assume that here **להניס** (*lehanis*) is a misspelled **להסתיר** (*lehashtir*) - “to obscure” (e.g. 2 Ki 11:2; Pro 9:17). Alternatively, the reading: **והצלתי צאני מפייהם** - “and I will deliver My sheep from their mouth” (Eze 34:10), suggests that **להניס** (*lehanis*) is a letter-substitution error of **להציל** (*kehatsil*) - “to deliver.”