

Judges 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Judges chapter 21. Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, no one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin. And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. And they said, O Lord, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?

And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And the people of Israel said, Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the Lord? For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah, saying, He shall surely be put to death. And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives? And they said, What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah? And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-Gilead to the assembly. For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead was there. So the congregation sent twelve thousand of their bravest men there and commanded them, Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead with the edge of the sword, also the women and the little ones.

This is what you shall do. Every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction. And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead four hundred young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him. And they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them. And Benjamin returned at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-Gilead, but they were not enough for them.

And the people had compassion on Benjamin, because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. Then the elders of the congregation said, What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin? And they said, There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters. For the people of Israel had sworn, Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin.

So they said, Behold, there is the yearly feast of the Lord at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Labona. And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards, and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards, and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty. And the people of Benjamin did so, and took their wives according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went, and returned to their inheritance, and rebuilt the towns, and lived in them. And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and they went out from there, every man to his inheritance. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. One of the grimmest stories in the entirety of the scriptures, Judges chapters 19 to 21 tell the story of the city of Gibeah's abominable act and its horrific aftermath. In Judges chapter 19, the men of Gibeah raped and murdered the Levite's concubine.

[3 : 43] To provoke the people to address this enormity, the Levite sent her dismembered corpse through the tribes of Israel. The people assembled at Mizpah and sent messengers throughout

Benjamin, calling for them to condemn the guilty men of Gibeah to death. But more faithful to bonds of blood than they were to the covenant, the Benjaminites refused to do so. Consequently, Israel went to war against one of its tribes. The tribe of Benjamin had become like the Canaanites in the land, to be purged out. We should remember the way that the Levite passed by Jebus to stay at Gibeah, preferring to stay in an Israelite city than in the city of the pagan Jebusites. Yet Jebus could not have been worse than Gibeah proved to be. Israel suffered terrible losses on the first two days of battle against the Benjaminites, losing a tenth of their force, 40,000 men. As in the battle against Ai, they were engaged in a sort of holy war while harbouring unfaithfulness in their own midst, likely the Levite who greatly distorted the truth in his account of what had happened at Gibeah. After weeping before the Lord and offering sacrifices at Bethel, they returned for a third day of battle. This time they followed the battle plan that Joshua had followed in the successful attack upon Ai. They tempted the Benjaminites out and away from the city of Gibeah, and then an ambush party took the city and burnt it down. In all, well over 60,000 men lost their lives in this sanguinary civil war. Chapter 20 concluded with 600 Benjaminites fleeing to the rock of Rimmon in the wilderness. Chapter 21, the final chapter of the book of Judges, begins with a problem. The Benjaminites, on account of their siding with the men of Gibeah, had become like Canaanites to the Israelites, being placed under the ban. Their cities were destroyed, and the rest of the Israelites had vowed not to intermarry with them, taking the same approach to them, as they did to the Canaanite peoples. However, the outcome of this would be Israel's loss of one of its tribes. Benjamin was the youngest of the sons of Jacob. His mother Rachel had died giving birth to him on the road to Bethlehem. Both of Rachel's sons had been lost, or nearly lost.

Joseph was taken down into Egypt, and his family presumed him to be dead. The brothers had thought that Benjamin would be lost too, when, returning from Egypt, the silver cup of the mysterious Egyptian official was found in his possession, and he was subject to a death sentence. Then Judah had interceded for his brother. Now, however, it seems that Benjamin is going to be lost entirely.

The final five chapters of Judges seem to allude to the story of doomed Rachel and her sons at several points. In the parents' unwitting curse of the child, in the unsuccessful pursuit of the stolen teraphim, in the prominence of stolen silver, in the woman's death on the road from Bethlehem, in the towering in the father-in-law's house, does any hope remain for Rachel's son?

Distraught at the realisation of what the loss of Benjamin would mean for the nation, the people mourn before the Lord at Bethel. As at the turning point of the preceding chapter, after the first two days of unsuccessful battle against the Benjaminites, the people offer burnt offerings and peace offerings, and call upon the Lord. They have bound themselves by two great oaths. The first oath is that they would not intermarry with Benjamin.

The second oath was that any part of Israel that did not participate in the judgment upon Benjamin should be put to death. The logic here is that described concerning apostasy in places like Deuteronomy chapter 13 verses 5 to 9. But that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him, or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. Apostate parties and those who commit abominations had to be cut off, lest the Lord's wrath come upon the people more generally on their account. And all parties needed to participate in and concur with the judgment, lest their failure to stand against the sin lead to them being judged with the guilty party. Those who fail to stand against the wicked can find themselves sharing in the judgment of the wicked. Apostasy is like a sort of gangrene, and it must be removed as a matter of greatest urgency. If it's not dealt with quickly and effectively, whole parts of the body politic might need to be amputated. Desiring to redeem their brother Benjamin, on the brink of death as a tribe, the Israelites wonder how Israelite wives could be obtained for the remnant of the Benjaminites.

[8 : 54] At this point, there are 600 survivors of Benjamin who have escaped, a number reminiscent of the company of the Danites in chapter 18. An apparent solution to the problem raised by their first solemn oath presented itself in the second solemn oath that they had sworn. Jabesh Gilead, one of the cities of the Transjordan, had not sent any of its inhabitants to the mustering, failing to participate in Israel's collective act of judgment upon the Benjaminites. For its sin, Jabesh Gilead must also fall under the ban. Its people, all of its men and all of its women who have lain with men, are marked out for destruction. The Israelites determined to strike Jabesh Gilead with a force of 12,000 men and to take unmarried women captive from the city as brides for the remnant of the Benjaminites. We should recognize here the close similarities with the events of Numbers chapter 31. Back in Numbers 25, Balaam and the Midianites had provoked Israel to sin, and in Numbers chapter 31, the Lord executed vengeance upon the Midianites for their attempt to corrupt Israel. A force of 12,000 men under the leadership of people like Phinehas, the zealous grandson of Aaron, went to attack the Midianites and killed all of their men.

However, when Moses discovered that they had allowed the women to live, he commanded them to kill all the women who had lain with a man, arguing that the women had played a key role in causing Israel to betray the covenant. They were not innocent victims and bystanders, but directly complicit in the seduction of Israel described in Numbers chapter 25. Only the women who were virgins were spared, and the Israelites were permitted to marry them. The virgins of the city were seen as the only salvageable tissue of the body politic that could potentially be preserved from the pervasive rot of its moral corruption. We might recall the way that, even though they escaped the destruction of Sodom, the daughters of Lot took the ways of Sodom with them, and consequently the wickedness of Sodom was not completely eradicated.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, is also involved in the events of Judges chapter 20 and 21, adopting the same approach to dealing with Jabesh-Gilead as had been followed with the Midianites and Moabites, peoples who, although not Canaanites, had directly tried to subvert the covenant. 400 virgins were found in Jabesh-Gilead, and they were brought to Shiloh. Then the people declared peace to the 600 Benjaminites survivors, giving them the spared women of Jabesh-Gilead. However, there was a shortfall of 200. Numbers play a prominent role in the final five chapters of the Book of Judges, especially sets of numbers that don't quite add up. Micah's mother used 200 pieces of silver of the 1,100 stolen pieces of silver to make the images back in chapter 17. In chapter 20, the numbers of deaths don't tidally add up, and the numbers 1,100, 900 and 200 might be alluded to within them in different ways. Now, once again, there is a shortfall, the numbers aren't adding up, and there is a need for 200 more women. The Israelites, however, still have the problem that, on account of their oath, they cannot give their daughters to the Benjaminites. They ended up settling upon a plan to address the problem that they wanted to give Israelite wives to the Benjaminites, but could not directly do so without breaking their vow. There was a yearly religious festival in Shiloh, and the virgin daughters of Shiloh would come out to dance in the dancers. The Benjaminites were to wait in ambush in the vineyards, perhaps implying, as Trent Butler suggests, that the festival was connected with the grape harvest, and each of the 200 men lacking a wife was to snatch a wife for himself from the Shiloh virgins. By the Benjaminites seizing the women, the fathers of the women could be held innocent of breaking the oath. The women had been taken, not given. Perhaps we are supposed to see some similarity between the Benjaminites' ambush and the tempting of people away from the safety of the city, and the means of Israel's defeat of Gibeah in the preceding chapter. Verse 22 is a bit convoluted and difficult to interpret, with some commentators speculating that the men of Shiloh had taken female captors from Benjamin for themselves, or otherwise responsible for the shortfall of wives for the Benjaminites. As Barry Webb observes, when the men of Shiloh protested, they were to be told to accept the abduction of their daughters and sisters as a *fait accompli*, much as the Danites expected

Micah to accept the loss of his images. The story of Judges chapter 21 is reminiscent of the rape of the Sabine women in the early history of Rome. The story of Judges ends in a manner like the end of the book of Joshua, with the people all returning to their inheritance. The problem of the near loss of Benjamin has been addressed, but the solution is a very ugly one, a story that began with Benjaminites in Gibeah seizing one woman and abusing her, ends with them seizing 200 virgins for themselves, after an incredible intervening loss of life. While in the context this presents itself as a solution to the immediate problem of the Benjaminites' need for wives, it raises a host of further

unsettling considerations and questions. There is no clean and tidy response to pervasive iniquity, and as we see in Judges chapters 17 to 21 more generally, sins mutate and compound. Even if we were to believe the abduction of the virgins of Shiloh represented a legally justified solution to the Benjaminites' problems, we should recognize that it greatly adds to the number of victims. Where sin is allowed to grow unaddressed, there are no neat solutions to its injustices, just more brutal and bloody blows of the sword of justice. The story began with one woman being taken by force, and even though they haven't been killed like the Levite's concubine, now 600 women have been taken by force, an entire tribe almost lost to the nation. The book of Judges began with a woman's hand being offered as a reward for a military victory, as Caleb gave his daughter Aksa to Othniel. It ends with 600 women being taken through such military victory. Edith Davidson also observes the way that this final episode of the book evokes the memory of Jephthah's daughter. Jephthah's daughter, the unfortunate child who was dedicated through her going out of the door of the house, has similarities to the Levite's concubine, who was thrust outside of the door, dedicated as a sort of perverse sacrifice to save the Levite's skin.

[15:18] Now 200 other women, coming out of their houses and city, are appointed as victims, supposedly to set things right. Jephthah's daughter's story ended with her lamenting her virginity, and with an annual women's feast. The dance at Shiloh also involves annual festivities celebrated by women. However, now the women appointed as sacrifices on account of men's vows are devoted because they are virgins. Israel may sacrifice its sons in battle, and its daughters in forced marriages for its sins, but while such losses may be inflicted by the sword of justice, they can never set things right. Judges' chapter 21 in the book of Judges more generally ends with everyone returning to their inheritance.

This ending recalls the end of the book of Joshua, where a similar expression is found in chapter 24 verse 28. The expression suggests that some sort of resolution has been reached, and indeed, Benjamin has been saved. There is some element of a positive outcome here. The elevens of the preceding chapters have been replaced by twelves, twelve thousand men going up against Jabesh-Gilead, and one thousand two hundred Benjamites with their wives. However, Israel at the end of this chapter is a much reduced Israel, an Israel that has suffered bitterly for its sins. Considering the presence of Phineas, Aaron's grandson, in these concluding episodes of the book, it is apparent that these events occurred very early in the historical period covered by the book of Judges. It is placed out of chronological sequence, presumably because it helps to characterise the entire period of the Judges. The stories of Judges 17-21 reveal the way that, when unaddressed, the rot of iniquity can spread throughout an entire nation, bringing judgment upon everyone and producing countless victims. The book concludes with the repeated refrain of the book, In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. We likely find subtle reflection upon themes associated with the kingdom in these concluding chapters. Gibeah and Bethlehem, the birthplaces of Saul and David respectively, are prominent throughout. There are lots of anticipations of the story of Saul. The fact that the future royal city of Jerusalem has not yet been taken from the Jebusites is highlighted in chapter 19. Yet the period of the Judges is a dark period, a period within which the people are fracturing and warring against themselves. A book that began chiefly with wars against surrounding nations is increasingly dominated by conflict within the nation itself. Jephthah's war against the Ephraimites and the war against the Benjaminites. Judges is a book that steadily descends into an increasing darkness. In its final words, the period is characterised and there is an implied anticipation of a better time, of a king who will come to deliver the people from their enemies and ultimately from their own sins.

[18:13] A question to consider, how does the story of Judges chapter 21 help us better to read the story of Saul in 1 Samuel?

