

Judges 21

Judges 21:1-4 Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage." ² So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. ³ And they said, "Why, YHWH, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be *missing* today in Israel?" ⁴ And it came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

Analysis of vv. 1-4:

- 1) The men of Israel vowed not to give their daughters to Benjamin in marriage.
- 2) Apart from the punishment of Benjamin, the men of Israel weren't compelled to make such an oath.
- 3) Further, once an oath was sworn it was basically viewed as unalterable with limited possibilities of being freed from it (2 Chron. 15:15 cf. Josh 2:17, 20).
- 4) With only 600 males remaining, this complicated the perpetuation of the tribe.
- 5) Of course, marrying the pagans around them was not a valid option (Ex. 34:16, Deut. 7:3).
- 6) At some point the people once again assembled at Bethel.
- 7) Usually a triumphant army celebrates its victory. Instead of jubilation, Israel lamented the near destruction of their brother tribe and wept bitterly.
- 8) To weep bitterly is an expression of extreme distress (2 Kings 20:3).
- 9) V. 3 provides the content of their lament when they "lifted up their voices."
- 10) Their grief was centered on the fact that Benjamin was nearly annihilated and therefore "missing."
- 11) While seeking God guidance, they built an altar and once again offered burnt offering and peace offering (Judges 20:26).

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Judges 21:5-7 Then the sons of Israel said, "Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up in the assembly to **YHWH**?" For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to **YHWH** at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death."⁶ And the sons of Israel were sorry for their brother Benjamin and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel today."⁷ "What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by **YHWH** not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?"

Analysis of vv. 5-7:

- 1) In addition to the oath taken in v. 1, the men of Israel swore an oath regarding those who didn't assemble and fight Benjamin.
- 2) Regarding those that were absent they swore, "He shall surely be put to death."
- 3) Literally the sentence is "dying you will die."
- 4) The Hebrew emphasizes that death was certain for the one who didn't assemble (cf. Gen. 2:17, Lev. 20:2).
- 5) The author describes their oath as a "great oath."
- 6) The adjective "great" stresses the seriousness of the oath.
- 7) Recall in Judges 19:29 that the sending out of gruesome parcels by the Levite was a symbolic act, by which the crimes committed against the murdered concubine were placed before the eyes of the entire nation.
- 8) It was the responsibility of all the tribes to take action against Benjamin. Opting out of the fight was not permitted (cf. 1 Sam. 11:7).
- 9) In v. 6 the sons of Israel expressed their sorrow for the tribe of Benjamin and its near extermination.
- 10) The verb "were sorry" frequently connotes regret, sorrow, or compassion (Judges 2:18).
- 11) Although the fight against Benjamin was righteous, the other tribes still felt compassion for their brother tribe.
- 12) Due to their first oath which they swore by God, the tribes were in a dilemma.
- 13) In v. 7 they pondered how to find wives for Benjamin.
- 14) The dilemma of the first oath was partially resolved by the outcome of their second, great oath.

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Judges 21:8-12 And they said, “What one is there of the tribes of Israel who did not come up to **YHWH** at Mizpah?” And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead to the assembly. ⁹ For when the people were numbered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. ¹⁰ And the congregation sent 12,000 of the valiant warriors there, and commanded them, saying, “Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword, with the women and the little ones. ¹¹ “And this is the thing that you shall do: you shall utterly destroy every man and every woman who has lain with a man.” ¹² And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 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.

Analysis of vv. 8-12:

- 1) Once again the question is posed regarding the identity of those who failed to assemble at Mizpah.
- 2) Evidently no one had assembled from Jabesh-gilead.
 - a) Jabesh-gilead was located approx. 9 miles southeast of Beth Shan and two miles east of the Jordan River.
 - b) The city’s location would have been in the territory of Gad in the region of Gilead.
- 3) A careful census was taken and not even a single inhabitant from Jabesh-gilead was present.
- 4) The leaders of the tribes dispatched 12,000 “valiant warriors” to fulfill their oath.
- 5) They were ordered to execute the men, women, and children of Jabesh-gilead.
- 6) Elsewhere in judges we have seen the refusal to unite and fight for a righteous cause led to severe punishment (Judges 8:15-17 cf. Judges 5:23).
- 7) The indifference of Jabesh-gilead, like Benjamin, led to severe punishment.
- 8) The failure of the leaders and able soldiers led to the collective punishment of the whole tribe (i.e. cursing by association, cf. Num. 16:27ff, Deut. 11:6).
- 9) Of the inhabitants, 400 hundred young virgins were spared (cf. Num. 31:17-18).
- 10) These women were taken back west across the Jordan to Shiloh.
- 11) The aim in preserving these women was to provide wives for Benjamin.

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Judges 21:13-18 Then the whole congregation sent *word* and spoke to the sons of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them. ¹⁴ And Benjamin returned at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had kept alive from the women of Jabesh-gilead; yet they were not enough for them. ¹⁵ And the people were sorry for Benjamin because **YHWH** had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. ¹⁶ 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?" ¹⁷ And they said, "*There must be* an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe may not be **wiped out** from Israel. ¹⁸ "But we cannot give them wives of our daughters." For the sons of Israel had sworn, saying, "Cursed is he who gives a wife to Benjamin."

Analysis of vv. 13-18:

- 1) Four months after their victory, Israel sought to reconcile with the survivors of Benjamin who had been living at the rock of Rimmon (cf. Judges 20:47).
- 2) "The whole congregation sent word" indicates that the other tribes were unanimous in their desire to restore their relationship with Benjamin.
- 3) The assembly of Israel sent Benjamin a formal offer of peace (lit: "They called peace to them").
- 4) Their animosity had by now subsided to a point that Benjamin accepted the offer of peace.
- 5) One may surmise that these survivors were eager to give up their precarious existence and get on with life.
- 6) As part of the peace offer, Benjamin was given as wives the 400 women that had been spared in Jabesh-gilead.
- 7) Yet there were not enough as there were 600 survivors.
- 8) As a reiteration of v. 6, the people felt compassion for Benjamin because of the circumstances.
- 9) Specifically because God "made a breach in the tribes of Israel."
- 10) The noun "breach" literally refers to a gap or hole, usually in a wall.
- 11) Here, it figuratively portrays God's righteous judgment on Benjamin. Their near annihilation was comparable to a wall with a gaping hole.
- 12) The elders or leaders of Israel pondered where they would get wives for the remaining Benjamites since the women of the tribe had been "destroyed."
- 13) The term "destroyed" usually refers to a sudden destruction or catastrophe as is common in war (שָׁמַד, *shamad*, Josh 24:8).
- 14) The context indicates that the tribes of Israel considered the nation incomplete without Benjamin.
- 15) The leaders insisted on maintaining an inheritance for Benjamin so the tribe would not be "blotted out."

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- 16) The term translated “blotted out” means “to wipe out, obliterate, annihilate.”
Translate, “wiped out” (מָחָה, machah, Gen. 6:7, 7:4, 23).
- 17) Clearly with out wives and offspring, Benjamin would be unable to re-establish the tribe.
- 18) However, in v. 18, the leaders recall their first oath which prevented them from giving their daughters as wives to Benjamin (cf. v. 1).
- 19) The one who violated the oath would be “cursed” which carries the threat of severe punishment.
- 20) In other contexts the “cursed” refers to the punishment inflicted upon those who reject God’s directive will (Deut. 27:15ff, Judges 5:23, Jer. 17:5).
- 21) Again the men of Israel were not morally compelled to swear the oath, but once it had been spoken, they were obligated to abide by it.

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Judges 21:19-23 So they said, "Behold, there is a feast of **YHWH** from year to year in Shiloh, which is on the north side of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and on the south side of Lebonah."²⁰ And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards,²¹ and watch; and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to take part in the dances, then you shall come out of the vineyards and each of you shall **seize** his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin."²² "And it shall come about, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we shall say to them, **Have compassion on us for them**, because we did not take for each man of *Benjamin* a wife in battle, nor did you give *them* to them, *else* you would now be guilty."²³ And the sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they carried away. And they went and returned to their inheritance, and rebuilt the cities and lived in them.

Analysis of 19-23:

- 1) The leaders of Israel conceived of a human viewpoint plan, based on a loop hole in their oath.
- 2) There was an approaching "feast of YHWH" that was an annual event in nearby Shiloh.
- 3) The exact feast is not specified, but it was to be celebrated in close proximity to the vineyard. This suggests the Feast of Weeks or Tabernacles.
- 4) In part these feasts celebrated the produce of the land (Lev. 23:34ff, Deut 16:10ff).
- 5) The precise location of the feast in Shiloh was given to the remaining Benjamites.
- 6) The men of Benjamin were instructed to travel to the vineyards of Shiloh and wait in ambush for the festivities to begin.
- 7) Evidently dancing was part of the celebrations, and conveniently, the daughters of Shiloh were accustomed to taking part.
- 8) If a suitable woman was found, Benjamin was to come out of their concealment and "catch" her and go back to their territory.
- 9) The word translated "catch" occurs 2x in the OT and means to catch or seize (Psa. 10:9).
- 10) Here the better translation is "seize" considering that kidnapping is in view.
- 11) Of course this plan would outrage the families of the women so as part of the plan, the leaders of Israel promised to intercede on behalf of Benjamin.
- 12) They would explain to the men of Shiloh, on behalf of the Benjamites, "Give them to us voluntarily."
- 13) This clause should be translated, "Have compassion on us for them."
- 14) Furthermore the leaders would try to placate the wrath of the families with the fact that they were innocent of breaking the oath since they didn't give their daughters to Benjamin.

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- 15) Their plan to circumvent the oath was warped from its inception.
- 16) The oath prevented the men of Israel from **giving** their daughters to Benjamin, but it said nothing about their daughters being **taken** (i.e. kidnapped!).
- 17) What a loop hole. They were unwilling to violate their oath, but more than willing to propose kidnapping as a solution.
- 18) V. 23 indicates that the Benjamites followed the plan and “carried away” their wives.
- 19) “Carried away” means to rob, take by force, to tear away (גָּזַל, gazal, cf. Gen. 31:31).
- 20) Stealing and kidnapping in particular was serious offense under the law and was therefore indefensible (Ex. 21:16).
- 21) After kidnapping their wives, the survivors from Benjamin returned to their territory and began the process of rebuilding and repopulating their cities.
- 22) Apparently the leaders of Israel prevented retaliation from the men of Shiloh.

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Judges 21:24-25 And the sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one of them went out from there to his inheritance. ²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Analysis of vv. 24-25:

- 1) After dealing with Benjamin, the men of Israel disbanded and returned to their respective territories.
- 2) The task had been far more difficult than had been anticipated.
- 3) Moreover, what began as righteous action being taken by Israel against Benjamin, degenerated into a nefarious plot to kidnap 200 women.
- 4) V. 24 brings to an end the second episode dealing with the spiritual depravity which existed within Israel during the period of the Judges.
- 5) The book of Judges concludes with a final restatement concerning the lack of a dominant central authority (Judges 18:1, 19:1).
- 6) The Divinely established authorities of the period, the Judges, were often guilty of serious misconduct (e.g. Gideon, Sampson).
- 7) The statement that “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” epitomizes the general spiritual degeneracy of the nation (Judges 17:6).
- 8) The book of Judges illustrates God’s justice and grace.
- 9) Justice was exhibited in the punishment of sin via oppressors and grace when the people had a change of mind and turned to Him.
- 10) Also evident is that personal associations are of utmost importance in the success or failure of one’s spiritual life.

End: Chapter 21, the book of Judges.
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