



Judges - Chapter Twenty One

III Judges 17:1-21:25 - The Depths of Israel's Apostasy (continues/ concludes)

III.b Judges 19:1-21:25 - Moral and Social Corruption (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twenty One

The war against Benjamin hardly solved Israel's spiritual and social problems. Chaos continued to reign. After the defeat of Benjamin, the remaining Israelites regretted that one of the tribes might cease to exist. Thus, the chapter shows the provision for Benjamin's continued survival. Four hundred wives were obtained through a punitive action against Jabesh-gilead, which had not joined in the original battle. Two hundred more wives were obtained through an action at Shiloh, legitimised on more flimsy grounds. The book ends with one final editorial comment about the apostasy in the land.

III.b.iii. Judges 21:1-25 - The Benjaminites Saved from Extinction

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Now the Israelites had sworn at Mizpah, 'No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.'

Judges 21:1

Now the Israelites had sworn at Mizpah. This oath was presumably made when the people gathered together at Mizpah: <<*Then all the Israelites came out, from Dan to Beer-sheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled in one body before the Lord at Mizpah*>> (Judges 20:1).

No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin. Considering their anger against Benjamin, this probably seemed like the right thing to do. However, this foolish oath had unforeseen consequences. Justice not only brings punishment to evildoers, but it also guards against punishment that is too harsh.

² And the people came to Bethel, and sat there until evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. ³ They said, ‘O Lord, the God of Israel, why has it come to pass that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?’

Judges 21:2-3

They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. Once again, there seems a superficial desire to repent before God and to call for his help, yet that is not the case, for the next statement clearly shows they had not understood their part in the guilt of what was happening in the land.

O Lord, the God of Israel, why has it come to pass that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel? They cried out to God, almost as if it was his responsibility that the tribe of Benjamin was on the edge of extinction. The question, “Why has it come to pass?” was easily answered: it was because of the excessive vengeance of the tribes of Israel against the tribe of Benjamin.

One tribe lacking in Israel. Down to almost only a few hundred men and those men unable to marry because of the curse pronounced in v.1, the tribe of Benjamin was almost extinct.

⁴ On the next day, the people got up early, and built an altar there, and offered burnt-offerings and sacrifices of well-being. ⁵ Then the Israelites said, ‘Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the Lord?’ For a solemn oath had been taken concerning whoever did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah, saying, ‘That one shall be put to death.’ ⁶ But the Israelites had compassion for Benjamin their kin, and said, ‘One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. ⁷ 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 as wives?’

Judges 21:4-7

For a solemn oath had been taken. A second, ‘greater’ oath provided the justification for raiding Jabesh-gilead to provide wives for the Benjaminites. No doubt all the tribes were expected to participate in the campaign at Gibeah, since all twelve had been sent the gruesome remains of the Levite’s concubine; refer to Judges 19:29.

⁸ Then they said, ‘Is there anyone from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah?’ It turned out that no one from Jabesh-gilead had come to the camp, to the assembly. ⁹ For when the roll was called among the people, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. ¹⁰ So the congregation sent twelve thousand soldiers there and commanded them, ‘Go, put the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead to the sword, including the women and the little ones. ¹¹ This is what you shall do; every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.’ ¹² And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young virgins who had never slept with a man and brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

Judges 21:8-12

Is there anyone from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah? Here again Israel did something that seemed right at the time, but was actually a horror. They decided to slaughter the entire inhabitants of a city of Israel, a city that refused to join with Israel in the fight against Benjamin. This was doing one wrong thing to make up for another. Israel instead should have repented of their foolish oath made at Mizpah, and they should have agreed to give their daughters as wives to the men of the tribe of Benjamin, renouncing the foolish vow of v.1 and allowing their kin to re-establish itself.

Every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction. The phrase devote to destruction is found throughout the Book of Joshua describing the Israelites’ destruction of the Canaanites; refer also to the comment made on Deuteronomy 20:16-18. Here, ironically, the total destruction was directed against an Israelite city, not a Canaanite one; Israel acted on its own, without God’s command to take such action.

And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young virgins. In the ungodly massacre at Jabesh-gilead, they killed all but four hundred young virgins. Still, this was not enough, i.e. <<**but they did not suffice for them**>> (v14); they needed to find more women if the tribe of Benjamin were to survive.

The rebuilt city of Jabesh-gilead figures in King Saul’s history; refer to 1 Samuel 11:1-11 and 31:11-13.

¹³ Then the whole congregation sent word to the Benjaminites who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them.

¹⁴ Benjamin returned at that time; and they gave them the women

whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead; but they did not suffice for them.

Judges 21:13-14

The whole congregation sent word; Benjamin returned at that time. Despite the recent fierce battles between the two sides there was still trust when their word was given that they could return in peace. No matter what the conflict, people of God are called to reconciliation and peace: <<*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*>> (Romans 12:18), and: <<*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you*>> (2 Corinthians 13:11).

¹⁵ The people had compassion on Benjamin because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. ¹⁶ So the elders of the congregation said, ‘What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since there are no women left in Benjamin?’ ¹⁷ And they said, ‘There must be heirs for the survivors of Benjamin, in order that a tribe may not be blotted out from Israel. ¹⁸ Yet we cannot give any of our daughters to them as wives.’ For the Israelites had sworn, ‘Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin.’ ¹⁹ So they said, ‘Look, the yearly festival of the Lord is taking place at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.’ ²⁰ And they instructed the Benjaminites, saying, ‘Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, ²¹ and watch; when the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. ²² Then if their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, “Be generous and allow us to have them; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them.”’ ²³ The Benjaminites did so; they took wives for each of them from the dancers whom they abducted. Then they went and returned to their territory, and rebuilt the towns, and lived in them. ²⁴ So the Israelites departed from there at that time by tribes and families, and they went out from there to their own territories.

Judges 21:15-24

Look, the yearly festival of the Lord is taking place at Shiloh. It seems that the Tabernacle was in Shiloh and that this was one of the three mandatory gatherings prescribed by law: <<*Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths*>> (Deuteronomy 16:16).

Each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh. They answered the problem of wives for the remaining Benjaminites by creating a little drama where the Benjaminites were allowed to kidnap women who, it is hoped, were willing, so that the marriages could be arranged without official approval.

Rather than go through this charade, they should have simply confessed their sin of making a foolish oath and done the right thing instead of trying to make two wrongs equal a right.

They went out from there to their own territories or every man to his inheritance. The exact same statement is found in the Hebrew at the end of Joshua: <<*So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances*>> (Joshua 24:28), but now things were far worse. However, the tribe of Benjamin was sufficiently restored to provide Israel with its first king, Saul.

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

Judges 21:25

In those days there was no king in Israel. This kind of moral, political, social, and spiritual chaos could only happen where there was no recognised king over Israel, and where people forgot about God as their King.

All the people did what was right in their own eyes. Generally, the 400-year period of the Judges was marked by this radical individualism. They rejected the standard of God's Word and accepted the individual standard of what was right in their own eyes.

The final editorial comment echoes earlier ones. Israel's apostasy had reached the depths, and the stage was set for the coming of a godly king, David, a man after God's own heart and with whom God would make an everlasting covenant: <<*The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David*>> (Ruth 4:17); refer also to 1 Samuel Chapter 16 and 2 Samuel Chapter 7. The sympathetic reader who has followed the whole narrative is left yearning for such a king.