

43. The Need for a King

Judg 17-21

But a king *will* be necessary, says this addendum to Judges, to prevent wrong behavior. The bad examples are two: the heretic Danites in the far north, and the always problematic Benjaminites, who are here almost exterminated.

The need for a king is openly stated, as a leitmotif in the section. In the two Dan chapters, we hear it two times:

Judg 17:6. In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Judg 18:1. In those days there was no king in Israel, and in those days the tribe of the Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in, for up to that day inheritance had not fallen to them among the tribes of Israel.

Two more frame the Benjamin chapters, which follow. Surely no text could make its intentions more plain. Here first is the tale of Micah and his image.

Dan

Judg 17:1. And there was a man of the hill-country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. [2] And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou didst utter a curse . . . behold, the silver is with me; I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be my son of Yahweh . . .

From the stolen silver, two calf images were made. Micah consecrated his son as their priest. A Levite of Judah came by; Micah hired him instead. The “tribe of the Danites,” looking for land, asked Micah’s Levite for divine advice. He replied, “Go in peace, Before Yahweh is your way wherein ye go.”

Judg 18:7 Then the five men departed and came to Laish, and saw the people that were therein, how they dwelt in security . . .

Laish was conquered. With its stolen gods, it was now the City of the Danites. Every step in this story, from the stolen silver to conquered Laish, is despicable. The next story, about the Benjaminites, will be worse. It too features a Levite.

Benjamin

Judg 19:1 . . . there was a certain Levite sojourning on the farther side of the hill-country of Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehem-judah. [2] And his concubine played the harlot against him, and went away from him unto her father’s house to Bethlehem-judah, and was there the space of four months. [3] And her husband arose, and went after her, to speak kindly unto her, to bring her again, having his servant with him, and a couple of asses . . .

He is well received and feasted, and they set out late for the return journey. His servant suggests stopping for the night in Jerusalem, but he refuses:

Judg 19:12 . . . We will not turn aside into the city of a foreigner . . . but we will pass over to Gibeah. . . . [14] So they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down upon them near to Gibeah, which belongeth to Benjamin.

An Ephraimite takes them in. In an echo of Lot in Sodom, the Benjaminites demand to “know” the visitors. The host’s daughter and the guest’s concubine are put outside to appease the lustful crowd. The concubine is raped all night, and dies in the morning. The Levite finishes his journey . . .

Judg 19:29. And when he was come unto his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her through all the borders of Israel.¹

They assemble, and the following war occupies a second chapter.

Judg 20:3. And the children of Israel said, Tell us, how was this wickedness brought to pass? [4] and the Levite . . . answered and said, I came into Gibeah that belongeth to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to lodge. [5] And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and beset the house round about me by night; me they thought to have slain, and my concubine they forced, and she is dead . . .

Men are chosen and the battle begins, at first with huge losses. On the third try, the attackers finally succeed with an ambush strategy:²

Judg 20:28. And the men of Israel turned again upon the children of Benjamin, and smote them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city, and the cattle, and all that they found; moreover, all the cities . . . they set on fire.

After these awful stories, no one can doubt that yes, we *do* need a king in Israel.

A Last Addition to the Addendum

But in a strikingly inconsistent fifth chapter, the defeated Benjaminites are after all *preserved as a tribe*. The forty Benjaminite survivors are given forty wives taken from another people, and that not being enough, they are told:

21:19 . . . there is a feast of Yahweh from year to year in Shiloh . . . [20] Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and see . . . if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance . . . then come you out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh . . . [23] And the children of Benjamin did so, and took them wives according to their number, of them that danced, whom they carried off; and they went and returned unto their inheritance . . .

And so we end with a last ambush, not for killing foes, but for gaining family.

This drastic reversal of the preceding stories must be later. *How much* later? Some Jews returned to Jerusalem under the Persians in 538; the theme of national renewal would have been in the air. Such, complete with the carrying off of festival dancers, was the Roman “Rape of the Sabine Women” (c0805). An allusion to the Sabines would be possible at any time in the Persian period.

As for the argument between Judges and its original addendum, that is part of the old kingship debate. The final phase of that argument is told (and retold) in the tale of Priest Samuel (§45). We will encounter it presently.

¹An allusion to Saul’s summoning Israel to war against the cruel Ammonites by sending around twelve pieces of two cut-up oxen, in 1 Sam 11:6-7.

²Borrowed in detail from the Hebrews’ ambush of Ai in Joshua 8, a real event which seems to have been remembered in this much fictionalized account.