

Toxic Text -- 2 Samuel 21:1-14
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Sacred Texts
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Within the biblical Davidic narrative is an account that is not only out of context chronologically, but an account that seems out of context with the message of a Hebrew God who is “slow to anger and abounding in mercy”¹. The text of 2 Samuel 21:1-14 is at first glance the story of the human sacrifice of seven men to appease God’s wrath and end a famine. Such an archaic bloodthirsty deity does not seem to be the same God revealed in Jesus Christ. This paper will attempt to examine this first testament scripture with a Christocentric lens, concluding with reflections on how Christ is revealed figuratively and prophetically in this narrative. God-the-Father and God-the-Son are not to be found in the violence of this passage but are seen counteracting the violence that is present by the continual encouraging of interactions that are both righteous and just. With that understanding, this historical narrative then elucidates the need for violence and retribution in the crucifixion event as a human demand and not a divine one.

Background

This Davidic story is part of an appendix at the end of 2 Samuel which includes four stories and two poems, interrupting the chronological narrative between 2 Samuel 20, and the first 2 chapters of Kings, which conclude the story of David. It is a hard story to place chronologically with the details provided, but it is assumed David’s interactions with the

¹ Exodus 34:6

Gibeonites likely took place near the beginning of David's kingship, probably between 2 Samuel 8-9.² Biblical readers first meet the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 where the Gibeonites are concerned the advancing Hebrew army will annihilate them. Although they have a history in the land, they deceptively dress up as travellers and ask for Israelite protection. Joshua, motivated by compassion, grants this protection with a covenant. 2 Samuel 21 is the first time the reader learns of Saul's unjust attack on the Gibeonites. To summarize, a foreign tribe (Gibeonites), brought under the protection of Israel, through deceit, are wronged by one king (Saul). They make a claim for retribution through the next king (David), and are granted it.

The Problem

Why does it matter theologically that a foreign tribe seeks revenge on a now deceased Saul through the slaughter of his sons and grandsons? The dissonance of this passage lies in the fact that David gives permission for this to happen under the guise of a leading from the LORD to right a wrong and heal the land. It paints the God of the Hebrews the same as any other archaic deity requiring human sacrifice to control the weather. "With its references to blood vengeance, human sacrifice and rain magic, it points to a world which was banished by the Old Testament itself."³

The Text

The text of 2 Samuel 21 opens with a national crisis; a famine in the land, occurring during the reign of David. David's response is to seek the LORD for Divine guidance to the

²Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 635.

³ Robert Barron, *2 Samuel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, A division of Baker Publishing Group, 2015), 183.

reason for the famine. God answers David, revealing there is blood guilt on the people of Israel due to Saul's unjust killing of Gibeonites. As foreigners, the Gibeonites had no ability to right this wrong legally; they were a victim with no recourse of action. This divine answer reveals two things, first there is a connection between Israel flourishing in their God-given land and acting justly, and secondly, it reveals a Hebrew God that sides with outsiders who have been treated unjustly regardless of whether or not the foreigners are righteous themselves.

David proceeds to own the sin of Saul and attempt to make it right. He does so, not by inquiring of the LORD how to heal this wrong, but by asking the Gibeonites. In Robert Alter's translation David asks, "how shall I atone, that you [the Gibeonites] may bless the LORD's heritage?".⁴ The Gibeonites respond with a request for blood in payment for the blood Saul spent. They specifically want Saul's blood through the sacrifice of seven of Saul's sons. David agrees to their terms. The storyteller is then quick to remind the listener that David is merciful, saving Mephibosheth, Jonathan's lame son, and that David is a covenant keeper in that act per his vow with Jonathan. The reader already knows this information from the chronological Davidic story,⁵ yet even with this reminder that David is merciful and faithful, it remains hard to ignore David's willingness to hand over seven innocent people to be killed as a public spectacle. It seems convenient for David that the requested righting of a wrong by the Gibeonites was to demand anyone with a claim to the throne be murdered. The handing over of these seven men is an atonement sacrifice, but it is not to God, it is to the Gibeonites.

Enter Rizpah into the story. Women serve a fascinating literary function in the

⁴ 2 Samuel 21:3. All quoted scriptures are from Robert Alter's translation.

⁵ 2 Samuel 9.

Davidic narrative. In the book of Samuel, women's concerns for life (and death) bring them dangerously into conflict with the powers that be,⁶ their presence regularly transitions the storyline as the women act in ways that embody justice.⁷ The addition of Rizpah to this Davidic story pulls the reader away from the dominant narrative of us vs them, Israel vs Gibeonites. Rizpah was a concubine of Saul and the mother of Saul's two sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth who were sacrificed for the sins of their father. When the seven men were killed on the hill at Gibeah they were not alone. Rizpah was there and Rizpah stayed. The narrative is not clear on dates,⁸ but it is implied that Rizpah stayed with the dead bodies much longer than was comfortable for her and much longer than was comfortable for the people who had to watch her actions. She stayed to mourn and she stayed to protect the bodies of her family, she stayed as a witness to state-sanctioned injustice. Rizpah had no power or authority to stop the killing of her sons, but she used her body to highlight the injustice of it, effectively changing the whole story. Without Rizpah it is a story of retributive justice between the Gibeonites and David. With Rizpah it becomes a story about the failure and the pain of retributive justice and presents the need for a better means of atonement.

Rizpah does not just mourn on the hilltop amidst the dead bodies, she protects the bodies from birds and beasts. Commentaries would agree that leaving the dead bodies exposed seemed to be part of the request of the Gibeonites.⁹ Burial of the dead was

⁶ Luise Schottroff, Marie-Theres Wacker, and Martin Rumscheidt, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: a Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012), 143.

⁷ Cheryl You, "The Historian's Heroines: Examining the Characterization of Female Role Models in the Early Israelite Monarchy," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 9, no. 1 (2019): 197.

⁸ Beginning of the harvest (April) till rains come, possibly fall.

⁹ Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 641.

important to the Hebrews; sometimes they would even bury their enemies after a battle.¹⁰ To be left for the birds and the beasts to devour was a sign of punishment and that one was an enemy of God.¹¹ In this account either David was valuing the request of the Gibeonites or he had distanced himself from the hilltop proceedings, but Rizpah's righteous actions reached the king's ears. Moved by Rizpah's quiet stand for justice, David himself is spurred to act justly giving the bodies a proper burial. He also remembers Saul and Jonathan were not given a respectful burial and finding their remains, he buries them too. "Rizpah's sustained act of maternal heroism finally achieves its end: the king is shaken out of his acquiescence in the Gibeonite inhumanity."¹² It is after this act of justice towards David's enemies that God answers the cries of the people for their land and the famine ends.

Looking for Christ

If the law and the prophets testify of Christ,¹³ where is Christ in this ancient narrative? Is Christ seen in the sacrifice of men for the greater good to settle a score? Picturing seven men killed on a hill with a woman at their feet, bearing witness to violence, does invoke comparisons to Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross. Although all injustice prefigures Christ's unjust suffering on the cross, these two stories are opposite in nature. Samuel tells a story of sacrificial religion that demands vengeance in the form of violence and spilt blood, Christ tells a story of self-giving love. "In Christ, God nullifies punishment, vengeance and sacred violence in favor of mercy, forgiveness and surrender."¹⁴ It is

¹⁰ 1 Kings 11:15

¹¹ See Jezebel in 2 Kings 9.

¹² Robert Alter, *The David Story*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1999), 332.

¹³ John 5:39.

¹⁴ Brad Jersak, "One Story, Two Revelations, Four Voices: Reading Biblical Narrative Christocentrically," Accessed November 18, 2020. <https://www.clarion-journal.com/files/one-story-1.pdf>. 10.

possible to take this story of human sacrifice and use it as a lens to view Christ but such an interpretation paints Christ's experience on the cross and christianity as a sacrificial religion that demands vengeance, violence and blood. This paper wants to flip that narrative. Instead of understanding Christ through this Samuel lens, see this story in Samuel through the cruciform lens of Christ. If Jesus is self-giving love, where is self-giving love present in this story? Where self-giving love is absent, it is a story about sacrificial religion. Biblical narratives concerning sacrificial religion are not stories to be emulated, but are stories one can hold up as a mirror to better understand one's own humanness.¹⁵ This chronicle of the Gibeonites, David, Saul's sons and Rizpah is largely a sacrificial religion narrative. "The fact that the death of the Saulides does not result in the end of the famine clues the reader to what God does or does not constitute as acceptable sacrifice."¹⁶

Humanity functions with a desire to inflict vengeance when we have been wronged, and even agrees to vengeance against our own people when we have done the wronging as David does in this account. This story illustrates the human need for a scapegoat and the desire to distance oneself from the role of victim. The Gibeonites have a right to ask for vengeance and David gives it to them. It is the Gibeonites to whom David is making atonement with the sacrifice of Saul's heirs, not God. James Alison draws the comparison to our own salvation story. It is humanity's wrath that demanded the sacrifice of Jesus, not God's wrath.¹⁷ This tragic account at the end of 2 Samuel is a mirror allowing the reader to see how humanity seeks vengeance and enacts violence against victims in an endless cycle of retribution. It reveals our fears around being the victim. It shows that we are trapped in

¹⁵ Lazar Puhalo, *The Mirror of Scripture*, (Abottsford, BC: Saint Macrina Press, 2018), vii.

¹⁶You, *The Historian's Heroines*, 195.

¹⁷ James Alison, *Jesus The Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*. (Glenview, IL: Doers Publishing, 2013), 233. Scribd.

a cycle of our own making and need a power outside humanity to end this cycle. Alison writes that Jesus' perfect act of atonement is "the overcoming of our tendency to sacrifice each other so as to survive."¹⁸ Self sacrifice does not satisfy a request for vengeance, it turns the system that says vengeance is needed on its head.

In this narrative Rizpah comes closest to imaging a self-sacrificing love. Her compassion and love for the sacrificed men cause her to identify with the victims and in no manner turn her face away. By her presence she makes known the injustice of this act, not accepting this vengeful act as a solution to a problem. She is the voice in this story that gives the reader pause. She is the voice which embodies a counter narrative that blood for blood does not give rise to healing but engenders further injustice. Her powerless role as a woman allows the reader to see what a non-violent response could look like. It is Rizpah's actions that cause David to act justly and see the famine end.

It is not until David acts with respect towards his enemies that God changes the conditions of the land, ending the famine. It is the royal woman Rizpah who initiates the cultic acts that bring the return of divine favor and fertility to the land.¹⁹

Conclusion

This scripture in 2 Samuel 21 is saturated in the language of ancient retribution laws, and sacrificial religion. Just because God is mentioned in this text does not mean the Hebrew God is filled with wrath demanding human sacrifice. Quite the opposite. The embodiment of God in Jesus is the cipher needed to lay over troubling first testament texts and have revealed what the chroniclers were not able to see themselves. The invitation of

¹⁸ James Alison, "Some Thoughts on the Atonement." Lecture, (Brisbane, Australia: August 2004), 12. http://www.growmercy.org/wp-content/uploads/Alison_James_Thoughts_on_the_Atonement.pdf

¹⁹ Elna K.A. Solvang, *Woman's Place Is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and Their Involvement in the House of David*, (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 108.

God in this chapter was for Israel to treat the foreigner in their midst with the love and compassion God has shown Israel. David and the Gibeonites did not know how to do that without retributive justice. There is also an unspoken invitation for David to continue to honour and even love his enemy Saul, like he did in his youth. David fails miserably at this, but through Rizpah, the most Christ-like voice in this passage (even though she does not speak), David sees the invitation of God towards his enemies and honours their bodies. After this, God restores Israel's relationship to the land. This shows a God who is slow to anger and abounding in mercy as God honours the feeble and misguided attempts of David.

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