



Meditation— 2samuel 21.¹⁻¹⁴

¹Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, "It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites."

²And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah.) ³Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the Lord?"

⁴And the Gibeonites said unto him, "We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel." And he said, "What ye shall say, that will I do for you."

⁵And they answered the king, "The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, ⁶let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord did choose."

And the king said, "I will give them."

⁷But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. ⁸But the king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bare unto Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite: ⁹and he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the hill before the Lord: and they fell all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest.

¹⁰And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night. ¹¹And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done.

¹²And David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabesh-gilead, which had stolen them from the street of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa: ¹³and he brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged.

¹⁴And after that God was entreated for the land.

Meditation 1

It is common to hear people testify that "the scriptures are true." While scripture has held no end of fascination for me since I began studying them seriously at around the age of 16, and while I occasionally find these words escaping my own mouth, I generally avoid saying them. In part, this stems from the fact

that these words mean something different to everyone. It also stems from the fact that these words probably mean something different to me than what others think that they mean to me.

Today's text is a good example. Is it "true?" If so, what is it that is true about it? Some might ask, "Did David really exist?" or "Was there really a three-year famine?" But, I am far more interested in assertions that are made in the reading. For example, there is no question but what ancient peoples often felt and claimed that cataclysmic events, such as the famine found in today's reading, were acts of God. And not just passive acts of God, but direct and active ones. So, I wonder, is the assertion that this drought-induced famine was the result of a conscious and punishing act of God "true?" And again, was God pleased and appeased by the hanging of Saul's seven descendants such that He pushed his cosmic "end drought button?"

In the end, I am very skeptical about these two truth claims. Yet, I believe in the value of this text and that it is "true." How can I maintain both skepticism and belief regarding this text? I believe that the author/editors accurately or "truly" reported the reality that people held such beliefs. From a theological perspective, they accurately reported that a people truly believed in the kind of god who acted out of revenge—and it was a grossly delayed revenge, to which we will return in a separate meditation—and the kind of god who was pleased and appeased when bloated corpses hung from the end of ropes in desperate hope of ending divine punishment.

No, I do not believe in such a god. If the author/editors were promoting such a god in this narrative, I ain't buying what they are selling. But if they were simply reporting, "This is what David really thought, this is how he really spoke to god, this is what he really thought he heard god reply, this is what god really demanded to end the famine, etc. without necessarily condoning and propagating it, then, yes, I can buy that. Such ignorance and violence against God, after all, hasn't even been completely stamped out in my own good ole 21st century.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

Meditation 2

This reading, I have maintained (meditation 1), is "true" in the sense that it accurately or "truly" reports the beliefs of David and others of his time about God and the actions that flowed from those beliefs. This may seem like faint praise, but we can learn much from the past, even when the past is less than inspiring. However, the fact that I do believe the text is true in describing David's beliefs about God, does not mean that I accept David's beliefs about God to be "true" or that the actions that flowed from his false theology were in harmony with the character of God or the demands He makes of His followers.

This text is a good example why Jesus' mortal example as found in the New Testament Gospels is so important. The Gospel witness is that Jesus and his Father are one in character and purpose; that Jesus is a manifestation of the fulness of God. It is simply impossible to imagine Jesus having anything to do with the theology or the behaviors that flow from the theology found in this reading. It is, therefore, impossible to imagine God doing as this text claims.

Having said all of that, there is much to learn from this text. Above all else, to quote the Psalmist, "By thy word is thy servant warned" (Ps. 19.¹¹). Through the ugliness of the acts reported in this reading—acts that I do not believe pleased, please, or ever will please God—I am warned away from creating a God that incites such violent and ugly atrocities. The world is alive, including among "Christians" who should

know better, with such gods and the atrocities that their followers believe please him. Texts such as this one, they believe, justify their violent theology and the violence that they then perpetrate upon others. But, I wonder if those who do so have not only missed the Gospels' witness but have, in addition missed the wizard behind the screen of this narrative. More on that in Meditation 3.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

Meditation 3

I will grant that it is highly likely that the author/editors of this text believed as David is reported to have believed, worshipped the same sort of god that David worshipped, and deemed David's actions as accomplice to the killing of seven men in order to appease an offended God as appropriate, justified, and even "godly." However, it is also a fact that the authors/editors never come right out and straight up either condone or condemn the thoughts and actions of David and others.

It is true that after the executions the text reports "water drop[ping] upon them out of heaven," and that "God was entreated for the land." But even here, the text does not tightly connect the rain with the killing itself—besides, a few drops of rain does not the end of a draught make. In fact, if one is determined to connect human behavior with climate events, the alleged end of the drought might just as easily be connected to the compassion that Rizpah showed for the seven dead men as she sought to protect their corpses from being picked apart by birds and wild animals (Or, to the kindness of David's respectful reinterment of Saul's and Jonathan's remains). Could this be a way for the author/editor's to subtly and safely condemn the execution of the seven men?

But, if so, why do it so subtle—so subtle as to create future confusion? Was it always safe to condemn the actions of a king, especially one that the tradition respected as this one did David? Perhaps the author/editors hoped against hope that the very ridiculousness of the claims and the perversity and ugliness of the actions would be enough to warn away any true servant from believing and adopting such a belief system and acting with such callous disregard towards those whom God loves and values so much? If so, it seems that they underestimated the human love for a violent god and the violence that such a god allows humans to perpetrate and justify, no matter the era in which they live. For it is surely the case that nothing has caused more human blood to be spilt than religious dogmas that respect only the god who is the superior killer.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

Meditation 4

This text reports, seemingly without judgement for or against, the execution of seven men for a crime committed a generation earlier; a crime that offended god and required "blood atonement." I have already made know my acceptance that something like this likely really happened during David's reign—and, sadly, many other times and in many other places. I have also made known my skepticism that, though He is presented as the initiator of it, the One and True God had anything to do with it—who doesn't claim god as justification for evil and for the legitimization of power?

I would, however, like to have a closer look at one small point. Whoever wrote/edited this narrative placed it chronologically toward the end of David's reign—of course, it is impossible to know for sure how accurate this chronology is. Nevertheless, whenever it took place, the author/editor did not find it to be inconsistent with the latter times of David's reign. Nor did they consider the timing of god's retribution out of the ordinary. It is this timing that bears closer scrutiny.

According to generally accepted Biblical chronology, Saul reigned from around 1050 to 1010 BC. David reigned from around 1010 to 970 BC. So, based on the fact that the final redactor of the book located the events of this narrative toward the end of David's reign, we can say that some 25 to 35 years—if not more—lapsed between Saul's sinful massacre of Gibeonites and the famine that served as god's response to it. However long the Lord's delay was between the massacre and the demand that Saul's descendants be executed for it, the individuals and generation responsible for the atrocity were long gone—nowhere does the text even hint that the executed men were present at or participated in the massacre.

Even if we like a vengeful god who demands blood atonement—and I do not—we may question why he waited so long to initiate the punishment that the drought represented and why he demanded the blood of those who had nothing to do with the spilt blood of massacre. At least as far as the text goes, their only crime was to have the same blood coursing through their veins that had coursed through their dead ancestor, Saul. As for myself, I have asked the questions and concluded, as I have said, that, though the events might have occurred, God was not responsible for punishing the crime with a drought that could be explained in any number of naturalistic ways, or for demanding the death of innocent victims so that his blazing temper could be doused with blood.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)