

Right in Their Own Eyes

Part One--Introduction

Welcome to what is, without doubt, one of the most mysterious, most puzzling, and most bizarre sections of the Word of God. I'm referring to Judges 17-21. For years I've pondered these five chapters, trying to make "heads" or "tails" of them. I've gone to conferences and meetings where I've hoped to hear older, wiser men than I address them--but, alas, none have dared tackle them. But, where "wise men fear to tread", Webb rushes in! I wish, in this series, to share a little of the light I believe I've gleaned from my studies. I don't pretend to have the "final word" on the subject. I hope that my observations may stir other, more capable men than I to explore the matter.

The Layout of Judges

The main body of Judges relates the ups and downs of Israel's spiritual condition, especially in regards to its affliction by outside enemies. In Judges 2, we are informed of a pattern of Israel's behavior as a nation. A godly generation, such as that one which conquered Canaan, would pass off the scene. They would be followed by another generation that knew not God. Because of their sins, God would send enemies upon them. They would then cry to the Lord. The Lord would hear and raise up "judges"--"saviors"--who would deliver them out of the hand of their enemies and return them to a proper worship of God. The judge would then die, and the cycle would repeat itself. Thus, Israel's spiritual history during this period resembles the ups and downs of a roller-coaster ride. The main section of Judges relates Israel's transgressions matter-of-factly in a very condensed manner. It is only in this final section that a detailed glimpse is given into the internal, everyday life of Israel.

In these last five chapters of Judges, we find four events recorded. The first concerns the rise of a false religious system in the home of a man named Micah; the second involves the migration of the tribe of Dan; the third relates the murder of a Levite's concubine; and the fourth tells of the almost complete annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin. These four sagas can be considered as two pairs of stories. The events of the second story are connected to those of the first. Likewise, the fourth story flows directly from the events of the third. All four stories, however, are tied together by a common theme to all. We find it first in Judges 17:6: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." It surfaces again in Judges 18:1 and 19:1 in an abbreviated fashion. Finally, the full version of the statement is found again at the very end of the section, in Judges 21:25. So, we may deduce that these four stories form a connected unit, related internally by a common theme--a theme reiterated, either in a full or abbreviated fashion, in each of the stories. This section appears to form a kind of "appendage" to the book of Judges, much as the book of Ruth does. Whereas the book of Ruth relates a very uplifting, heart-warming story, this "appendage" reveals another, darker side to life in Israel.

The Last is First?

A very important consideration involves the historical time frame of this section. Let me state my conviction, that though the section is located at the end of the book, it relates

events occurring at the beginning! Since the serious Bible student normally recoils at such suggestions, and since the historical timing is so critical to one's proper understanding of the events, let me explain how I arrived at that conclusion.

The only internal evidence useful in dating the events of this section is found in Judges 20:28. Here we are told that these events transpired during Phinehas tenure as the High Priest of Israel. That gives us a clue as to where these events belong historically. Remember that Phinehas was the son of Eleazar, who was the son of Aaron. Moses and Aaron were followed, after their deaths, by Joshua and Eleazar, respectively. Joshua and Eleazar die, more or less currently, as related in Joshua 24:29-33. As Judges continues the history of Israel after Joshua's death (Judges 1:1), it's apparent that Phinehas would have been the High Priest of Israel concurrent with the events recorded in the first chapters of the book.

Perhaps someone might counter that Phinehas could have been alive both at the beginning and at the end of Judges. After all, life spans were much longer in those days than now. Moses lived to one hundred and twenty, and Joshua lived to be one hundred and ten. While this idea might sound viable at first, it just doesn't hold up. In Acts 13:20, Paul states that the period of the judges lasted for four hundred and fifty years. Even though we have no record of his death, it doesn't seem likely that Phinehas, alive at the beginning of the book of Judges, would have lived more than a few chapters into the history which it relates.

As to who actually penned these accounts, my best guess would be Samuel. The statement "in those days there was no king in Israel" implies that this is being written by someone living when there is a king. Samuel, living during the reign of Israel's first king, Saul, would be a prime candidate as its author. Note also that Mt. Ephraim figures prominently in the first three of the four stories (Judges 17:1; 18:2,13; 19:1, 16). It is related in Joshua 24:33 that Eleazar was buried in a hill that belonged to Phinehas, his son, in Mt. Ephraim. So we might speculate that knowledge of these events was passed down through the High Priesthood to Samuel, who compiles the history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is, admittedly, speculation, but it seems plausible.

What Does It Mean?

More important to our study is the matter of the meaning of the theme binding all four stories together. What does it mean to say that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes"? This phrase is, practically speaking, just about the only portion of this section of scripture familiar to the average church-goer. When quoted from the pulpit, it is generally implied that this statement indicates a condition of moral anarchy. This is, however, not the first time this phrase is encountered in scripture, nor did it originally imply moral decadence.

In Deut. 12, as Israel is about to enter Canaan, Moses gives specific instructions about how they are to worship once they enter the promised land. They are told that the heathen, into whose land they will come, worship a multiplicity of gods, in a multiplicity of ways, and in a multiplicity of places. Moses warns Israel that they must not worship their God in a like manner. They are not free to decide for themselves how God is to be worshipped. Rather than erecting altars in places of their own choosing, like the heathen, they were, rather, to resort for sacrifice to the one place which God would choose. Note

carefully Deut. 12:8-9: "Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes. For ye are not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance which the Lord your God giveth you." Moses employs this very formula to describe how the Israelites worshipped God in his day! In that setting, there was nothing inherently wicked about Moses' description of Israel's worship. Of necessity, in her wilderness wanderings, Israel had worshipped God in a variety of places. Such, however, was to cease once Israel became settled in the promised land.

Perhaps now the nature of this key phrase, as well as the nature of the section of scripture before us, will become more evident. What is being described here is not so much moral anarchy among the wicked but religious anarchy among God's people! The bizarre events recorded here are merely a sampling of the kinds of fruits that inevitably result when men set aside God's revelation and attempt to worship in their self-chosen way. There is moral degeneration here for sure, but it is that which comes as a consequence of God's people deviating from His prescribed way of worship. It is the moral perversion that follows spiritual perversion!

Maybe now you will also see why this section of scripture has so much to say to us today. For if ever there was a society claiming to be worshippers of God on the one hand, yet remaining self-choosing when it comes to how they will do so, it is ours! The religious world around us is "market-driven". Our society overflows with a virtual smorgasbord of religious offerings set before it by the "Christian" church. You may pick the kind of "god" you wish to worship, select doctrine to suit your taste, and even choose the type of "Christian" conduct in which you wish to engage. I assure you that, whatever you desire, whatever tickles your religious fancy, there is some segment of "Christianity" in our culture that can hardly wait to serve it up to you. It is a "buyers' market". Small wonder then that we witness such bizarre behavior and strange fruits on the religious stage--everything from air-conditioned dog houses, to folks laughing like hyennas, to preachers pretending to "blow the man down"--all performed in the name of God and claiming to have His blessing! How did we ever get in such a mess?

It all starts, as we shall see in this study, with a turning away from God as He reveals Himself to be, a refusal to worship Him in the way He Himself has chosen, and an attempt to approach Him on other terms than those He Himself has dictated. This section of scripture is not about the heathen's refusal of God, serious as that might be. It concerns, rather, a people who once held the truth but now turn from it. It is about reprobation and its awful fruits. In other words, it is about a situation which very strikingly resembles our own!