

"ANARCHY ENGULFS A NATION "

(excerpt from *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*)

(Robert B. Chisholm)

Thematic Emphases

Israel had persisted in paganism and had no competent, godly leaders to remind them of the Lord's covenant standards. Paul Miller observes: ". . . when the covenant relationship between God and God's people is neglected, the faculty of moral judgment atrophies. It not only becomes impossible to do right, it becomes impossible to know what is right" (2003, 103). In this spiritual void the covenant community became as morally corrupt as ancient Sodom and was eventually torn apart by conflict. The moral disease infecting Benjamin had contaminated even the male victim of the hideous crime at Gibeah and the men responsible for avenging the wrong. By the end of this story, Israel's attempt to bring the criminals of Gibeah to justice had exploded in their faces. An entire tribe was left decimated and six hundred women were horribly violated. Once again a foolish, misguided oath left death in its wake (cf. 11:29-40), only on a much larger scale.

The passage drips with tragic irony. Though unable to unify in their effort to take the land from the Canaanites, the tribes unified to fight one of their own. Sisera's mother's vision of Israelite women being abused in the aftermath of battle (5:30) became a reality, but the culprits were Israelites, not Canaanites. Benjamin's conflict with Judah (the Levite's concubine was from Judah and Judah led the attack against Benjamin) is antithetical to the brotherly love shown by Judah towards Benjamin in Genesis 44. Worse yet, it foreshadows tensions to come (cf. the Saul-David conflict in 1-2 Samuel).

Exegetical Idea: *As God's people persisted in paganism and had no competent, godly leaders to confront them with God's standards, a moral cancer invaded the covenant community, making it capable of the vilest sins. Uncontrollable lust and cruel disregard for the vulnerable and helpless characterized a community contaminated by moral pluralism, where individuals and communities lived by their own self-serving "standards" of right and wrong, rather than by God's covenant principles. God's people desperately needed godly leadership.*

Theological Principles

Like the preceding story, Judges 19-21 depicts the antithesis of pure religion. A moral cancer invaded the covenant community, bringing with it uncontrollable lust and cruel disregard for the vulnerable and helpless. (See the earlier discussion of "Theological Themes" related to 17:1-19:1a.)

As in the story of Abimelech (chapter 9), God appears in the role of just king as he defeats the Benjaminites (20:35). Yet the necessity of God acting in punitive judgment was not the ideal. In this story and the preceding one the need for theocratic kingship emerges (21:25; cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). This editorial comment envisions the kingship ideal depicted in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. The presence of such a leader could have prevented the abuses described in the epilogue. Yet the remainder of the history (1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings) tells how the monarchy, despite some success in bringing moral order to the land, eventually failed and collapsed as the king went into exile with his people. The royal ideal envisioned in Judges and both the former and latter prophets is ultimately realized through Jesus the Messiah. Though Judges does not ostensibly have a messianic theme, its vision of a royal ideal prepares the way for the developing messianism that follows in the Hebrew Bible.



Theological Idea: *When God's people persist in paganism and have no competent, godly leaders to confront them with God's standards, a moral cancer can invade the covenant community, making it capable of the vilest sins. Uncontrollable lust and cruel disregard for the vulnerable and helpless are signs of a community contaminated by moral pluralism, where individuals and communities live by their own self-serving "standards" of right and wrong, rather than by God's covenant principles. God's people desperately need godly leadership.*

Homiletical Trajectories [Preaching Applications]

- (1) As the just king of Israel, God works to preserve order in the midst of chaos. He punishes evildoers and those who support them. Yet ideally he purposes to create a community that promotes justice modeled by an ideal leader. (See point three below.)
- (2) When the covenant community becomes like the surrounding pagan world, it can sink to unprecedented moral depths. People become lustful and cruel, and will give personal "honor" and pride higher priority than morality and ethics. The community becomes prone to strife that inflicts pain and suffering on innocent and helpless people throughout the community.
- (3) The covenant community needs godly leadership because sinful people are prone to rebel. It is here that Judges yields a Christotelic theme that should be the capstone of the exposition of the book. The epilogue to Judges anticipates the rise of the Davidic monarchy, but the historical kings ultimately failed. God's ideal leader is Jesus the Messiah, who will establish his kingdom on earth. He is currently ruling over his Church, whose leaders and members are to model the character of their Lord and King.

Preaching Idea: *We must reject the paganism of the surrounding culture and seek competent, godly leaders to confront us with God's standards. Otherwise lust and cruelty can contaminate the new covenant community as people live by their own self-serving "standards" of right and wrong, rather than by God's covenant principles.*

If we want to develop the Christotelic dimension, the moral chaos and leadership void described in these chapters (as well as in chapters 17-18) can be used as the dark backdrop against which we point God's people to the messianic hope. A preaching idea might be: Though the covenant community can be contaminated by the pagan culture around it, our King will eventually establish his just rule on earth in which his perfect standard of morality and ethics will displace the injustice produced by human lust and cruelty.