

Three Battles (c. 1380 – c. 1340 BC)

Judges 20:14–48

Marshaling the Troops

14 The sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah, to go out to battle against the sons of Israel.
15 From the cities on that day the sons of Benjamin were numbered, 26,000 men who draw the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah who were numbered, 700 choice men.
16 Out of all these people 700 choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.
17 Then the men of Israel besides Benjamin were numbered, 400,000 men who draw the sword; all these were men of war.

The First Battle—Benjamin Prevails

18 Now the sons of Israel arose, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God and said, “Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?” Then the LORD said, “Judah *shall go up* first.”
19 So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah.
20 The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah.
21 Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel.

The Second Battle—Benjamin Again Prevails

22 But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day.
23 The sons of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall we again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin?” And the LORD said, “Go up against him.”
24 Then the sons of Israel came against the sons of Benjamin the second day.
25 Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah the second day and felled to the ground again 18,000 men of the sons of Israel; all these drew the sword.

The Third Battle—The LORD Prevails

26 Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD.
27 The sons of Israel inquired of the LORD (for the ark of the covenant of God *was* there in those days, 28 and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, Aaron’s son, stood before it to *minister* in those days), saying, “Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?” And the LORD said, “Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.”
29 So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah.
30 The sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day and arrayed themselves against Gibeah as at other times.
31 The sons of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city, and they began to strike and kill some of the people as at other times, on the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, *and* in the field, about thirty men of Israel.
32 The sons of Benjamin said, “They are struck down before us, as at the first.” But the sons of Israel said, “Let us flee that we may draw them away from the city to the highways.”
33 Then all the men of Israel arose from their place and arrayed themselves at Baal-tamar; and the men of Israel in ambush broke out of their place, even out of Maareh-geba.

34 When ten thousand choice men from all Israel came against Gibeah, the battle became fierce; but Benjamin did not know that disaster was close to them.

35 And the LORD struck Benjamin before Israel, so that the sons of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day, all who draw the sword.

36 So the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. When the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah,

37 the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush also deployed and struck all the city with the edge of the sword.

38 Now the appointed sign between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise from the city.

39 Then the men of Israel turned in the battle, and Benjamin began to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel, for they said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle."

40 But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, Benjamin looked behind them; and behold, the whole city was going up *in smoke* to heaven.

41 Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were terrified; for they saw that disaster was close to them.

42 Therefore, they turned their backs before the men of Israel toward the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them while those who came out of the cities destroyed them in the midst of them.

43 They surrounded Benjamin, pursued them without rest *and* trod them down opposite Gibeah toward the east.

44 Thus 18,000 men of Benjamin fell; all these were valiant warriors.

45 The rest turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, but they caught 5,000 of them on the highways and overtook them at Gidom and killed 2,000 of them.

46 So all of Benjamin who fell that day were 25,000 men who draw the sword; all these were valiant warriors.

47 But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.

48 The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with the cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found.

The Crisis (c. 1380 – c. 1340 BC)

Judges 21

Recognition of the Crisis

1 Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage."

2 So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly.

3 They said, "Why, O LORD, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be *missing* today in Israel?"

4 It came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

A Bloody Solution

5 Then the sons of Israel said, "Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up in the assembly to the LORD?" For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death."

6 And the sons of Israel were sorry for their brother Benjamin and said, “One tribe is cut off from Israel today.

7 What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?”

8 And they said, “What one is there of the tribes of Israel who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah?” And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead to the assembly.

9 For when the people were numbered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there.

10 And the congregation sent 12,000 of the valiant warriors there, and commanded them, saying, “Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword, with the women and the little ones.

11 This is the thing that you shall do: you shall utterly destroy every man and every woman who has lain with a man.”

12 And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

13 Then the whole congregation sent *word* and spoke to the sons of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them.

14 Benjamin returned at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had kept alive from the women of Jabesh-gilead; yet they were not enough for them.

More Brides for Benjamin

15 And the people were sorry for Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.

16 Then the elders of the congregation said, “What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?”

17 They said, “*There must be* an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, so that a tribe will not be blotted out from Israel.

18 But we cannot give them wives of our daughters.” For the sons of Israel had sworn, saying, “Cursed is he who gives a wife to Benjamin.”

19 So they said, “Behold, there is a feast of the LORD from year to year in Shiloh, which is on the north side of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and on the south side of Lebonah.”

20 And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards,

21 and watch; and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to take part in the dances, then you shall come out of the vineyards and each of you shall catch his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.

22 It shall come about, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we shall say to them, ‘Give them to us voluntarily, because we did not take for each man *of Benjamin* a wife in battle, nor did you give *them* to them, *else* you would now be guilty.’”

23 The sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they carried away. And they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the cities and lived in them.

24 The sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one of them went out from there to his inheritance.

A Commentary on Judges (literary prelude to Samuel)

25 In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.