Benjamin’s Brides
Different Forms of Violence in Judges 21

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Abstract:
The story in Judges 21 about how the tribe of Benjamin was saved from extinction by providing the men with the women necessary for procreation evokes different reactions. Is it horror or humour? After a short survey of the history of the interpretation of this passage, the following study intends to show that within its present context, the horrific aspect takes precedence over the originally more humorous character of the second part of the story. This argument will be based on an analysis of the chapter’s place within the structure of the book of Judges and the way in which older traditions have been incorporated.

Evaluating These Stories
According to J. Clinton McCann, there is “nothing to laugh about” in Judges 17–21. In agreement with most scholars, he sees this final part of the book as the completion of a downward spiral. The last three chapters in particular demonstrate that Israel’s “deterioration is complete.” What we read in 21:16–24 can be described as “a story about collective rape condoned by the entire nation of Israel.” In recent studies, Judges 21 has been related to all kinds of violence in our age: to the suffering of Korean “comfort women,” to the Holocaust, and to present-day violence in South Africa and the USA. However, there are also scholars who find something humourous or ironic.

in these chapters. Robert Boling states that it is important “to grasp the tragicomic vein of the narrative” in order to arrive at a correct interpretation. With regard to the stories in chapter 21, he remarks: “The incidents that unfold here poke fun at the institutional linkage of piety.” Karel Deurloo makes a similar remark when he calls the story about the theft of the virgins of Shiloh a joke. In his opinion it should not be taken literally, as those who presume some kind of historical background to the story do. It is – in Lillian Klein’s words – “primarily dramatic irony, which invites the perceptive reader to recognize the ignorance of the protagonist and also invites that reader to self-recognition.” According to Roger Ryan, on the other hand, the ancient storyteller is inviting the reader to look critically at Yhwh. In his view, the author criticizes Yhwh indirectly: he is “as inactive and silent in the events in the closing chapters as are the non-existent Canaanite Baals.”

Walter Groß, who pays much attention to the question of the evaluation of chapters 19–21, bases his own answer on a diachronic analysis. According to the author of the original story taken up in Judges 19–21, Israel responded correctly to the violations perpetrated by the men of Gibea. Only in the final redaction, which is also responsible for the present framework (19:1 and 21:25), would it have been presented negatively, as an example of what can happen without the authority of kingship.

Katherine Southwood rightly remarks that the narratives about the virgins given to the Benjamites as brides may be too easily dismissed on the basis of our modern Western value system. In her opinion, the story should be read against the background of a culture in which such examples of “marriage by capture” were more common and accepted. More specifically, she suggests that we read it as relating to the context of the exiles’ return from Babylon. The real problem would have been intermarriage with members of a rival ethnic group, as described in Ezra 9–10: “Like the people of the land Ezra, the Benjamites have a claim to participate within Israel. In both texts, an internal group is treated as a foreigner whom Israel is not to participate in marriages with.”

Southwood presents her study as a recontextualisation of the story with the help of anthropological studies of marriage customs. Something similar can be said about the historical-critical studies that differentiate between the time of the story, the context of the writer and/or editor, and the context of the modern reader. Of course, every serious study of the story – including the present one – should start with an analysis of the literary context. To this I will add some observations on the canonical context before making a new attempt to make sense of the two stories of the brides for Benjamin.

[L.1] The Place of Chapter 21 within the Book of Judges

8 Robert G. Boling, Judges (The Anchor Bible 6A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 278.
9 Ibid., 293.
12 Roger Ryan, Judges (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 176.
13 Walter Groß, Richter (HThKAT; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2009), 826–27, “Problem der Wertungen.”
14 Ibid., 876–77.
15 Southwood, Marriage by Capture, 1.
16 Ibid., 232.
Judges 21 is part of the story about the Benjamites in chapters 19–21, which begins with the brutal murder of a concubine in the Benjamite city of Gibeah. It has the same structure as the previous story about the Danites in chapters 17–18: a domestic quarrel is resolved; this is followed by an aetiological story about an Israelite tribe; and a Levite travelling between Benjamin and Mount Ephraim plays a central role. On the one hand, this clearly differs from the repeated structure of the stories about an individual judge or saviour in chapters 3–16. On the other hand, there are clear links between the first two and the last five chapters of the book of Judges. The first verses of the book are repeated almost verbatim in 20:18:

1:1 It was after the death of Joshua that the children of Israel inquired of Yhwh, saying: “Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites at the beginning to wage war against them?”
1:2 Yhwh said: “Judah shall go up; look, I have given the land into his hand.”
20:18 They arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God. The children of Israel said: “Who shall go up for us first in the battle with the children of Benjamin?” Yhwh said: “Judah first.”

This repetition emphasizes a change of situation: the story of Israel as a unified force confronting the Canaanites is replaced by the conflict between the tribes of Israel. A similar reversal can be observed in the repeated reference to the people’s weeping, after which they offer sacrifices. The events at Bochim (2:4–5) recur in the story of the conflicts between the Benjamites and the other tribes (20:23, 26; 21:2–4). Both the parallels and the differences between 2:2–5 and 21:2–3 attract our attention:

2:2 “And you, you should not cut a covenant with those who dwell in this land. Their altars you should demolish. But you did not listen to my voice. What have you done?
2:3 So now I say: I will not drive them out from before your face and they will be (a whip on your) sides to you and their gods will be a snare to you.”
2:4 It happened, when the messenger of Yhwh had spoken these words to all the children of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice and wept.
2:5 They called the name of that place Bochim and they sacrificed there to Yhwh.
21:2 The people came to Bethel and sat there until the evening before God. They raised their voice and wept, a great weeping.
21:3 They said: “Why, Yhwh, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that today one tribe is missing in Israel?”
21:4 It happened on the next day that the people rose up early and built there an altar and offered up burnt offerings and peace-offerings.

Both texts describe how the Israelites “raised their voice and wept” (2:4; 21:2) and sacrificed to Yhwh (2:5; 21:4). By referring to “a great weeping” (21:2), the author indicates that at the end, the sorrow is even more intense than it was in Bochim. There are also some remarkable contrasts. Whereas in 2:2 a probing question is posed to the Israelites (“What have you done?!”), in 21:3 the Israelites address Yhwh in a similar way: “Why, Yhwh, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that today one tribe is missing in Israel?”
In addition to these two parallels, we can add the repeated application of the ban (1:17; 21:11), the repeated reference to Jerusalem/Jebus as inhabited by foreigners (1:21; 19:12), the migration of the tribe of Dan (1:34; 18:1), the use of spies (1:22; 18:2), and the mention of the Israelites finally returning to their inheritance (2:6; 21:24). All of these motifs are mentioned only at the beginning and the end of the book of Judges. In scholarly literature, the relation between these parts of the book is used not only as an argument for a synchronic approach defending the coherence of the book,17 but also as an indication of editorial activity, of placing older stories in a new framework.18

A formal characteristic which relates chapter 21 to the rest of the book is the use of the number three. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the number three and its multiples are used many times and in many ways in the book of Judges.19 This is especially clear in the story of Samson, which mentions thirty companions at Samson’s wedding (14:11), thirty men Samson kills (14:19), three hundred foxes (15:4), three thousand men of Judah (15:11), and three thousand Philistines (16:27). The “ternary principle” is also attested in the story of Gideon20 and elsewhere. We find it in groups: three sons of Anaq (1:20); Gideon’s army of three hundred (7:6), divided again into three groups (7:16; cf. 9:43, which tells of Abimelech doing the same); thirty sons of Jair (10:4); thirty sons of Ibser (12:9); thirty grandsons of Abdon (12:14); and thirty men killed by the Benjamites (20:31, 39). We also find it throughout the book in the form of specific words or actions used and described three times within a short sequence. In the final chapters of the book, we note that we are told three times that the Levite comes from Bethlehem (17:7–9); the Danite spies put three questions to the Levite (18:3); three times the text tells us that the people of Laish lived “quiet and secure” (18:7, 10, 27); three times we are told that Micah made the ephod himself (18:24, 27, 31); three times the Levite stands up to go, and three times his father-in-law persuades him to stay (19:5–9); three times the text says of the Israelites that they are “as one man” (20:1, 8, 11); three times the tribes march against Benjamin after having asked Yhwh’s advice (20:18–29); and three times the Benjamites “turn” to flee from the Israelites (20:42, 45, 47). The fact that a curse is pronounced three times against those who give one of their daughters as a wife to the tribe of Benjamin (21:1, 7, 18) also fits into this framework.

All of this indicates that one should be reluctant to read chapter 21 as separate from the rest of the book or merely as an appendix, as part of chapters 17–21. In addition to the more formal relations with the rest of the book, as noted in this section, there are also some interesting thematic ties.

[L1] Recurring Themes: Marriage, Fathers, and Daughters

The final chapter is related to other parts of the book of Judges in its repetition of the theme of marriage. The first time we hear about marriage in the book of Judges is in 1:12–15, in which Caleb gives his daughter Achsah in marriage to Othniel. In 3:6, the Israelites are blamed for marrying Canaanite women and giving their daughters in marriage to the sons of the Canaanites. In 12:9, the text suggests that the judge Ibsan filled his days by arranging marriages for his daughters and sons. Chapter 14 tells of Samson’s marriage to a Philistine woman.

In these and other stories, the relation between father and daughter plays a particularly prominent role. In the first story about Caleb and his daughter, we note that the daughter – unlike many other women in the book of Judges – not only gets a name, but also takes the initiative and speaks when she asks her father for a more generous wedding present. According to Johanna Stiebert, this “makes her a more active character than the majority of daughters of the Hebrew Bible.” The quintessential story about a father and his daughter is the one about Jephthah and his unnamed daughter (11:30–40). In a way, this is also a story about marriage, because it explicitly mentions that the girl died before she had intercourse with a man (sex outside of marriage was not intended here). Whereas the girl (we have to assume that she is a woman of marriageable age) is not named, she is presented – like Achsah – as a woman of character in the way she reacts to her fate. In the story of Samson’s failed marriage, the father of the bride plays a special role (15:1–2). Corrine Lanoir, who also pays special attention to the theme of father and daughter, wants to leave this father aside. It is interesting, however, to note the contrast with the father-in-law in chapter 19. In this chapter, the woman’s father shows much more consideration for his daughter’s husband and seems to play a positive role in reuniting the spouses (19:2–4). In the story about the Levite and his concubine, this father finds his counterpart in the father who offers his virgin daughter, together with his guest’s wife, to the men of Gibeah to do with the women what they will (19:24).

Following all of these stories about fathers and their daughters, the reference to the fathers of the virgins of Shiloh in 21:22 seems to present these fathers as powerless and inactive. Even before they have a chance to intervene on behalf of their daughters, the text indicates that their action is useless. We are not even told whether they actually tried to intervene, because the outcome was predictable in any case. The powerlessness and passivity of both these fathers and their daughters contrasts sharply with what we were told about Caleb and Achsah at the beginning of the book.

[L1] Israelites Becoming Like Canaanites

A related theme that can be found in a number of places in the book of Judges as a whole – and which also returns in the final chapter – is role reversal between the Israelites and the Canaanites. In the parallel between 1:1–2 and 20:18 discussed above, I have already noted that the role of the Canaanites as the enemy is transferred to the Benjamites. Something similar can be observed with regard to Abimelech’s death. His demise is caused by a woman throwing a mill stone down on his head (9:53). This millstone should not be misunderstood as one of the two big circular stones between which grain is ground in a mill, which would have had to be moved by a strong animal.

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22 Ibid., 39.
24 Ibid., 116n8.
The woman from Tebez threw a much smaller upper millstone, which she had probably taken with her from her kitchen, where she normally used it to grind the daily grain. This can be compared to the weapons Jael used to kill the Canaanite general Sisera – namely, a peg and a hammer (4:21). In this case, it is not the Canaanite, but rather the Israelite leader who suffers this humiliation.

In 5:30, “wise ladies” reassure Sisera’s mother – who is impatiently waiting for her son’s return – by referring to the customary activities of soldiers after a victory, which is probably the reason for his delay: “Are they not finding, dividing booty, a lap or two laps for each man?” The one who reads these words realizes how wrong these women are. Sisera and his men have lost the battle. They are not in the position of reducing defeated enemy women to sex objects, referring to them in soldier slang as no more than a vagina. On the contrary, their general has been killed by a woman. However, the fate which did not befall the Israelite women – thanks to Deborah and Jael – in the battle against the Canaanites did befall the virgins of Jabesh, according to 21:12. Both the parallel and the role reversal are underlined by the fact that the city of Jabesh and its inhabitants are “devoted to the ban” (21:11), which was the normal procedure with regard to the Canaanite population of the promised land.

[L1] Foreshadowing Saul and David
The role of Jabesh in this story brings us to another element which chapter 21 has in common with the rest of the book – namely, its relation to the stories in the books of Samuel and Kings, and especially to King Saul. The reference to Jabesh is presented as a surprise, with the repeated exclamation “Look!” (יָרָא in vv. 8–9). One would have expected that this exception would have been mentioned earlier, due to the emphasis on the unity of the people (“as one man” in 20:1:11), as with the inactive tribes in 5:15–17. In 1 Samuel 11, Jabesh is mentioned (also as “Jabesh-Gilead” in v. 1; cf. Judges 21:9) as the first place where Saul presented himself as the leader who would be able to unite the Israelites (cf. 1 Samuel 11:7, “as one man”) against a foreign enemy. According to 1 Samuel 31:11–13, the people of Jabesh paid due respect to Saul after his death. It can hardly be a coincidence that the story about the Benjamites also begins with a reference to a city related to Saul. In chapter 19, the city of Gibeah is the place where the problems began, whereas Gibeah is also known as the hometown of the future king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:26; cf. 15:34, “the Gibeah of Saul”). Judges 19 contrasts Gibeah with Bethlehem and Jebus. Bethlehem, which is presented as a place of hospitality, is the town where Saul’s rival David was born. Jebus is presented as a city which was not a safe place, because David had not yet established his kingship there. The reference to these cities appears to foreshadow the stories about Saul’s failed kingship and his rivalry with David. The story in chapter 21 about taking Benjamin’s brides from Jabesh insinuates that the Benjamite Saul was born as one of the descendants of this unhappy coupling of the surviving Benjamites with the women of Jabesh. In this respect, the story could be compared to the story of the shameful births of Ammon and Moab in Genesis 19:30–38. This is the counterpart to the far happier story that takes place in Bethlehem – the story of Ruth as David’s great-grandmother.

This implicit anti-Saul polemic is another element which relates chapter 21 to the rest of the book. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, there are many indications throughout the book of

Judges pointing to the fact that it can be read as a prefiguration of the books of Samuel and Kings.\footnote{178–88; Mario Liverani, “Messages, Women, and Hospitality: Inter-tribal Communication in Judges 19–21,” in \textit{Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography} (ed. Z. Bahrani and M. Van De Mieroop; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 160–92, esp. 191–92. On this point, Southwood (\textit{Marriage by Capture}, 10) is reluctant.} This also concerns the above-mentioned repeated reference “to enquire of Yhwh” (1:1) and “to enquire of God” (20:18), using the verb הָזוּשׁ with the preposition א. This is not only an important element in connecting the beginning and the end of the book of Judges; it also plays a central role in the stories of Saul and David. It is connected to Saul’s downfall, as becomes clear in the story of his attempt to make contact with the spirit of Samuel, who is dead, when it is no longer possible for him to make contact with Yhwh (1 Samuel 28:6, 16). David’s rise to power, on the other hand, is related to his successful attempts to obtain divine advice (1 Samuel 22:10, 13; 2 Samuel 2:1).

Another example of this concerns the parallel between Deborah and Samuel, who are the only persons in the Hebrew Bible to be called both judge and prophet. As with Saul and David, the association of characters with specific cities is important here – namely, with Rama and Bethel (Judges 4:4–5; 1 Samuel 1:19; 3:20; 7:15–17). The story of Saul is also foreshadowed in the sad history of Abimelech. God sends both Abimelech and Saul an evil spirit (9:23; 1 Samuel 16:14). Abimelech’s request that his weapon-bearer kill him to spare him a dishonourable death (9:54) is reminiscent of a similar situation at the end of King Saul’s life (1 Samuel 31:3–4). The fact that Samson was blinded, bound in two bronze fetters, and brought to the enemy capital (16:23) can be read as foreshadowing the fate of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah (2 Kings 25:7). The story in chapters 17–18 of the sanctuary at Dan can be read as defaming the sanctuary established in that place by King Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:26–32). Negative references to Bethel, Jeroboam’s other cultic centre, can be found in 20:18 and 28. In these verses, Yhwh seems to mislead the Israelites, advising them to go up against the Benjamites. Instead of the expected victory, they suffer heavy losses. In the final chapter, Bethel is a place of weeping (21:2). Only in Shiloh – not in Bethel (21:19) – will some kind of success be found (21:12).

\textbf{[L.1] The Book of Judges as a Diptych}  
An important argument for treating chapters 17–21 as an appendix to the book of Judges is that it disturbs the chronology, because its references to the grandsons of Moses (18:30) and Aaron (20:28) take the reader back to the second generation after Joshua, which was already mentioned in 2:10. This prompted Josephus, in his retelling of the book, to reposition the events recounted in the final chapters, moving them to the beginning. It is also possible that the author did not intend to present the stories in a strict chronological sequence, but that he wanted to describe the events as a cycle.\footnote{Cf. Spronk, \textit{Judges}, 16–19.} The parallels between beginning and end, as noted above, would indicate that there has been no progress: “the effect of the end looping back temporally to the beginning establishes the sense of a ‘complete lack of goal’.”\footnote{Cf. Yairah Amit, \textit{The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing} (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 315: “the principle of cyclicity.”} However, it makes more sense to assume that the author/editor used the form of a diptych: after the introduction in 1:1–2:9, which ends with Joshua’s death, two panels follow about the subsequent generations in 2:10–16:31 and 17–21, respectively. The reference to the two grandsons at the end of the book is chronologically confusing, but it can be explained if we assume that their stories in chapters 17–21 function as a parallel to the previous part in chapters 2–16. From a different perspective and in different ways,
both parts tell the story of what happened when a new generation rose up after the generation that had lived under the guidance of the good leader, Joshua.

The book of Judges contains more examples of this phenomenon of “narrative juxtaposition,”\(^{30}\) presenting the information in parallel texts. In the book itself, the first example of this is already found in the fact that the beginning of the book of Judges can be read as a recapitulation of what was written about the incomplete occupation of the land in the book of Joshua. We find another example in the song in chapter 5, which recapitulates the narrative in chapter 4. In the story of Samson, chapter 16 is built up in the same way as are chapters 14–15; both parts end with the information that Samson judged Israel for twenty years (15:20; 16:31). These numbers represent a repetition and are not meant to be added up. The conflict between Benjamin and the other tribes of Israel in 20:29–41 is also told twice, from different perspectives. Similarly, the stories in chapters 17–21, “when there was no king and when everyone did what was good in his own eyes,” tell a parallel story to that which we read in chapters 2–16, about what happens when the Israelites “do what is evil in the eyes of Yhwh.”

[1.1] Diachronic Considerations
When it comes to the possibility of reading the book of Judges as a coherent unity, we cannot deny that it is clearly built out of very different materials. We have to assume that texts and traditions from different sources have been brought together here and put into a new framework. In 2:10–16:31, this is done with various stories and lists of leaders who were called upon to save or judge their tribes; in chapters 17–21, this is accomplished with stories about tribes which do not explicitly mention leaders. With regard to these final five chapters, it is also likely that the stories were taken from different sources. Traces of editorial activity can be found in the fact that the man from Mount Ephraim is presented at the beginning of chapters 19 and 20 as a Levite. In the following story, his identity does not play a role in the same way it did in chapter 17. Apparently, this was used as an element to connect the stories, just as the number eleven hundred in 17:2 connected the story of Micah with the previous one about Samson and Delilah (cf. 16:5). The threefold inquiry to Yhwh in 20:18, 23, and 26–28 also seems to have been added. Just like the presumed additions concerning the Levite, these additions function as a way of relating the different parts of the book.

It is precisely in these verses that we find the repetitions of elements from the first chapters: in addition to the inquiry and Yhwh’s answer in 1:1–2, there is also the weeping in 20:23 and 26, which reminds us of the weeping in 2:4.

I have already noted that chapters 17–18 and 19–21 are built up in the same way. This appears to be characteristic of the author’s style, because the same phenomenon can be observed in chapters 14 and 15–16,\(^ {31}\) and also in the two stories in chapter 21 about the women taken for the Benjamites (vv. 5–14 and 15–23).\(^ {32}\) After the introduction in verses 1–4, we are presented with two series of actions intended to solve the problem, both of which use similar words:

- Israel’s compassion (יהלום) (v. 6 // v. 15);
- Question: What can we do about it? (למה הopenid) (v. 7 // v. 16);
- First hint at the solution, introduced with הנה, “look” (v. 8 // v. 19);

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• Instructions to the Benjamites, beginning with "הַלֵּךְ", “go” (v. 10 // v. 20);
• Elaborate instructions with no description of their execution (vv. 10–11 // vv. 20–22);
• The Benjamites return (ָּשְּׁבֹתָם) and receive women (v. 14 // v. 23; in the opposite order).

These observations can be related to the suggestion that we are dealing with two originally independent stories – a suggestion which has been made by many scholars.\(^\text{33}\) The most likely scenario is that the author of the book of Judges based this final chapter on the second story, about the women of Shiloh who were captured and forced into marriage by the Benjamites, and added the story about Jabesh. This sequence can be derived from the fact that the question in verse 16 does not refer to the first attempt to find a solution to the problem. One also notes the lack of reference to the specific number of missing women, as in the previous story. Moreover, two important elements are added to the story in verses 1–14. Firstly, the central role of the city of Jabesh establishes a similar association with Saul as does Gibeah in chapter 19. Secondly, Yhwh is much more involved.

These presumed editorial activities can easily be related to the way the older stories about the saviours and judges in the first part of the book have been edited. According to many scholars, it is likely that the stories about Samson received a Yahwistic introduction through the addition of chapter 13. A similar “revision through introduction” seems to have taken place with the stories about Gideon: the introduction in chapter 6 gives Yhwh a more prominent role than he plays in the other chapters devoted to this judge.\(^\text{34}\) In addition, the introduction to the stories about the saviours and judges in 2:10–3:4 can be seen as an addition which emphasises the importance of the Israelites’ relation with Yhwh. All of this, including the editing of the final chapters, can be attributed to one editor who was clearly motivated to show that good leadership depends on whether or not the leader is prepared to do what is right in Yhwh’s eyes. Anyone who is familiar with the stories about the future kings in the books of Samuel will understand that such leadership will not be found under King Saul, but only under King David.

**[L1] Conclusion**

In their present form, the stories about Benjamin’s brides are part of an introduction to the period of the monarchy. The context of the stories is characterised as a time in which there was no king and in which everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The latter suggests immoral behaviour. In the story about the Benjamites, this is illustrated first with the murder of the concubine in chapter 19. The solution to the problems caused by this killing, as presented in chapter 21, can be regarded as another of these questionable deeds. Devoting most of the inhabitants of an Israelite city to the ban as if they were Canaanites goes against the ideals with which they had entered the promised land. The places related to both events – Gibeah in chapter 19 and Jabesh in chapter 21 – can be connected to the first part of the refrain. They foreshadow the period in which there will be a king, namely Saul. They indicate that in and of itself, kingship is no guarantee of well-being. What is needed is a king who does what is right in the eyes of Yhwh. To this one could add that, by associating Saul with rape and bloodshed, there is also much violence in the harsh judgment itself on the first king of Israel.

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In the second story about the Benjamites taking the virgins of Shiloh as brides, this negative perspective is less clear. Without the preceding story, it reads like a history of marriage by capture, which was not uncommon in the ancient Near East. Originally it may have evoked a smile for the first hearer. Only after it was incorporated into the book of Judges and became part of the introduction to the stories of the first kings does it leave the reader with serious questions about Benjamin and their brides. What good can come from a monarch who is descended from this kind of marriage? Note the difference between this story and the narrative about King David’s descent in the story of Ruth! We also note the difference with regard to Yhwh’s role in these stories. If Yhwh had been consulted from the beginning, in the right way, things would certainly have taken a different, more peaceful turn.

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