



Rizpah

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THE STORY OF RIZPAH AND HER REMARKABLE VIGIL IN 2 SAM 21:1-14 HAS LONG struck me as one of the strangest, most disturbing, and, at the same time, moving stories in the Bible. Yet it is rarely written about and, I suspect, even more rarely preached about. This account has received considerably less attention from biblical scholars than other material dealing with events in the life of King David. Whereas much scholarly attention has been devoted to the so-called succession narrative or court history of David in 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2,¹ the material in between in 2 Samuel 21-24 is often passed over simply because it is regarded as an appendix or insertion into that famous literary corpus. It may also be the case that the story of the ritual execution of seven of Saul's descendants and Rizpah's vigil over their corpses suffers neglect because it is such a disturbing story. My students, at any rate, are surprised to discover that it is in the Bible. The picture this story gives of King David could be considered unflattering and, even more serious, the picture of God that emerges is not a particularly nice one.

¹See R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1968); David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978).

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Though Rizpah is silent in this strange and disturbing story of human sacrifice, her heroic vigil over the bodies of the seven victims gives the story its power and makes the story hers.

The subject of 2 Sam 21:1-14 is a human sacrifice that is made to satisfy the wrath of Israel's god. Not only is the sacrifice made to Israel's god and not, for example, in violation of his commands, to some pagan god, it also has the appearance of being sanctioned by God and of achieving the desired result, his appeasement. The story is also about the exposure, for a considerable period of time, of the corpses of the sacrificial victims, and it is difficult for any reader not to be scandalized by the denial of the elemental right of the dead to burial. Most of the themes developed in this story might strike us as more at home in the realm of Greek tragedy than in the Bible: divine displeasure caused by bloodguilt, atonement through ritual sacrifice, pollution of the land and its purification, and, especially, the silent vigil kept by Rizpah over the exposed bodies of the dead.² A central feature of the story, the legitimate claims of the state versus the fundamental right of the dead to burial, is the theme of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Rizpah's stance on behalf of the dead invites comparison with Antigone as well. As Martin Buber observed, in a perceptive study of this text written in 1929, "The Jews, too, know of the eternal Antigone, in their own Jewish way."³

Who is Rizpah? 2 Sam 21:11 identifies her as a wife of Saul. The English translation "concubine" (so NRSV) is misleading in my opinion, since it suggests that Rizpah was not Saul's lawful wife; the Hebrew term פִּלְגִישׁ, however, refers to a legal wife of secondary rank. Rizpah, then, is a widow of the former king and a member of a divinely rejected house. She is the mother of two sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth, whose deaths are called for to settle a claim against that house. As a member of the deposed house of Saul, a woman, and a widow, she has no official power to oppose their execution, yet the dramatic deed she performs afterwards is of such magnitude that it influences a king to give them a proper burial.

Is the story in 2 Sam 21:1-14 really a story about Rizpah? Not exactly. It is about Saul and bloodguilt against his house that has resulted in a three-year famine, and about David's efforts to alleviate the crisis. Rizpah is not the main character in the story; David, the Gibeonites (the wronged party), and God have greater roles. Moreover, they have speaking parts, whereas Rizpah is silent. Her action is described in one verse, but it is absolutely pivotal, for it changes the entire course of events. Not only does Rizpah not speak, no one does after v. 7, when the seven sacrificial victims are chosen. Since Hebrew story-telling relies heavily on dialogue, this shift from dialogue at the beginning of the story to narrative report in v. 7 is noteworthy. It creates distance between us and the characters, whose personal anguish we are not permitted to witness directly. No one—not Rizpah nor David nor the seven hapless victims—does anything to avert the inevitable sacrifice, though Rizpah's response to it serves as a powerful protest.

To understand the story of Rizpah, we need to know something about the story of Israel's first king, Saul. Chosen by a god who resents his own rejection by

²For an analysis that reads this story in terms of its tragic themes, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992) 109-119.

³"Auch die Juden wissen um die ewige Antigone. Auf ihre, jüdische Art"; Martin Buber, "Weisheit und Tat der Frauen," in *Kampf um Israel: Reden und Schriften (1921-1932)* (Berlin: Schocken, 1933) 114.

the people (1 Sam 8:7-9), Saul and his house are, in their turn, rejected by God. Try as he may, Saul seems unable to please God. Disobedience to the divine command, in ambiguous, if not extenuating, circumstances costs him the throne (1 Sam 13 and 15). His descent into madness (God sends an evil spirit to torment him; 1 Sam 16:14) and despair is painfully detailed, as jealousy over David's rising popularity with the people leads him to seek David's life and alienates him from his own children. His attempts to kill David are futile, for God always intervenes on David's behalf. Abandoned by God and desirous of obtaining an oracle before meeting the Philistines in a crucial battle, Saul consults a medium, a practice forbidden by Saul himself, only to have Samuel's ghost denounce him and predict his death (1 Samuel 28). His troubled reign ends on the battlefield, where, wounded and seeing no possibility of escape, he takes his own life.⁴

THE FAMINE, ITS CAUSE, AND THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

Though dead, Saul dominates the account in 2 Sam 21:1-14. Bloodguilt on his house for a crime committed in the distant past infects the land, and the famine of three years' duration is a sign of divine displeasure. Interestingly, although 1 Samuel provides a damning catalogue of Saul's sins, the offense attributed to Saul here is one we have not heard about before: Saul violated the treaty made between Israel and the Gibeonites in the days of Joshua by seeking to exterminate the Gibeonites. Verse 2 explains that the Gibeonites are not Israelites, but rather "the remnant of the Amorites." Possibly their presence within Israelite territory posed a threat to Saul's nascent kingdom in its struggle with the Philistines.⁵ According to Joshua 9, the treaty Israel made with the Gibeonites resulted from the Gibeonites' deception and the Israelites' failure to consult God. Ironically, then, Saul is guilty of violating a treaty that should not have been made. Whereas the Israelites should have been zealous, wiping out the Gibeonites in the time of Joshua, Saul's zeal for his people wrongly leads him to crimes against people protected by treaty.

To set things right, David calls the Gibeonites to a royal audience. Though God has told him the problem rests with Saul, David makes no mention of his

⁴So 1 Samuel 31 tells us. 2 Samuel 1 has another version of Saul's death: an Amalekite takes credit for killing him. One can easily imagine, however, that the Amalekite is lying in the anticipation of receiving a reward from Saul's rival, David. The story in 2 Samuel 21 gives us yet a third version: the Philistines killed him (v. 12). For an assessment of Saul that sees him as a victim of God, "kingship's scapegoat," see David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980); for an argument that Saul is guilty of disobedience and deserves to be rejected by God, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985) 482-515. Although I lean to Gunn's interpretation, I have tried to stress that Saul is both guilty and a victim of circumstances beyond his control; see Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, Chapter 2, "Saul: The Hostility of God," 16-42.

⁵Abraham Malamat, "Doctrines of Causality in Hittite and Biblical Historiography: A Parallel," *Vetus Testamentum* 5 (1955) 10-11; J. Alberto Soggin, "The Reign of 'Esba'al, Son of Saul," in *Old Testament and Oriental Studies* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1975) 47-48. On the treaty background, see also F. C. Fensham, "The Treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites," *Biblical Archaeologist* 27 (1964) 96-100; Robert Polzin, "HWQY' and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel," *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969) 233-240; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel: The Role of Gibeon and the Gibeonites in the Political and Religious History of Early Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972) 91-93. For a different view, see Keith W. Whitlam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1979) 116-117.

predecessor. As king, he takes responsibility upon himself for dealing with the situation, asking, "What shall *I* do for you? How shall *I* make expiation that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" The Gibeonites reply, "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul and his house, nor is it our place to cause the death of a(ny) man in Israel." What their statement seems to mean is that they do not want a monetary payment as compensation, but, as resident aliens in Israel, they do not have the right to put anyone to death. The king has that right, and so David asks, "What do you say I shall do for you?"⁶ The Gibeonites call for seven of Saul's sons to be given over to them to be sacrificed to God in a public ritual "at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord."⁷ David's acceptance of these terms is stated in one word, "I will give," a terser, and thus starker reply in the original than in translation. It is the last word spoken in the narrative, for, in a sense, nothing more remains that could be said.

The next verse, however, suggests, albeit briefly, that David might change his mind and refuse to cooperate with the Gibeonites' demand for vengeance. The word that comes after "I will give"—again, one word in Hebrew—is "he had compassion."⁸ But David's compassion extends to only one of Saul's descendants, Jonathan's crippled son Mephibosheth, because of the oath of friendship between David and Jonathan. In contrast to Saul, who broke an oath sworn by Israel to the Gibeonites, David is portrayed as a king who keeps an oath. But though he spares Mephibosheth, he hands over for execution the seven "sons" (descendants) of Saul demanded by the Gibeonites: Saul's two sons by Rizpah and five grandsons, all sons of Saul's daughter Merab.⁹

THE SACRIFICE

The means by which Saul's sons and grandsons are put to death is uncertain. Ritual dismemberment seems likely, though hanging, impalement, crucifixion, being broken on the wheel, or cast down from a height have all been suggested. Whatever the method of execution, the retribution taken also included the exposure of the corpses.¹⁰ The treatment of the corpses of Saul's descendants by the Gibeonites (and sanctioned by David) calls to mind the Philistines' desecration of the bodies of Saul and his sons by hanging them on the wall of Beth-shan (1 Samuel

⁶Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel*, 92; H. Cazelles, "David's Monarchy and the Gibeonite Claim (II Sam. xxi, 1-14)," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 87 (1955) 170.

⁷The phrase is often emended to "before the Lord at Gibeah on the mountain of the Lord" (so, among others, NRSV), but the irony of the Hebrew text should not be dismissed. The reference to "Saul, the chosen of the Lord," occurring as it does amid repeated references to David as king, serves as a pointed reminder of the rejection of Saul and his house in favor of David.

⁸The reference to compassion serves as an ironic reminder of the disasters that befell David's own house because David did not have compassion (2 Sam 12:6).

⁹The Masoretic text reads "Michal" in 2 Sam 21:8, but some ancient witnesses read "Merab." The text is usually emended to read "Merab," since Merab was the wife of Adriel and, according to 2 Sam 6:23, Michal had no children.

¹⁰See Fensham, "The Treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites"; Polzin, "HWQY' and Covenantal Institutions"; A. R. W. Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975) 164-167; Cazelles, "David's Monarchy and the Gibeonite Claim," 167-168.

31).¹¹ Whereas ritual execution like that described here constituted punishment for treaty violation in the ancient near east, the disrespect of the elemental right of the dead to burial poses a serious problem.¹² Can the natural order, the end of the famine and the renewal of nature, be reestablished by an act against the dead that violates the natural order (what Antigone calls “what the gods have lain down without words”)?

RIZPAH'S VIGIL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Up to v. 10, our attention has been focused upon the problem of famine and the initiative of David and the Gibeonites to solve it; now the focus shifts to one action, presented with minimal commentary, but decisive in the resolution of the crisis. Rizpah's long and solitary vigil outwardly dramatizes her private loss in a public action that commands David's attention. Above, I compared Rizpah to Antigone. But whereas Antigone confronts her uncle Creon with eloquent and powerful rhetoric and boldly defies him, Rizpah is silent and does not interfere with the decreed execution. Rizpah has no relation to the Davidic house. She belongs to the deposed house, and the fact that she and David never interact in the story reflects the division between the two royal houses, the Davidic and the Saulide. Authority rests with the royal house of David: “the king took [Saul's descendants] and he gave them into the hand of the Gibeonites,” vv. 8-9; “they did all that the king commanded,” v. 14. A childless widow, with no one to serve as her protector, Rizpah has no recourse. But like Antigone, Rizpah upholds the right of the dead to burial and, like Antigone, she represents the obligations of familial loyalty (and in her case maternal devotion) as over against the power of the state.

Although Rizpah's protest, unlike Antigone's, is silent, it is not without its own literary eloquence. In my opinion, impassioned pleas and angry outbursts would lessen the impact of the story and detract our attention from the act itself. Silence gives Rizpah a preternatural magnitude and underscores the gravity of the ritual she performs.

Whereas the most narrative space is devoted to the dialogue between David and the Gibeonites, vv. 1-6, the handing over of Saul's sons and their deaths, vv. 7-9, and the burial of the bones of the dead, vv. 12-14, the narrative power is concentrated in the account of Rizpah's vigil, vv. 10-11:

Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth
and spread it out for herself on the rock
from the beginning of the harvest until
rain fell upon them from the heavens.
She did not let the birds of the heavens rest upon them
by day or the beasts of the field by night.

¹¹The Philistines cut off Saul's head, but the text does not supply details, such as whether or not they hung his head along with his body on the wall. Compare the similar textual reticence about Ishbosheth, whose severed head is buried in Abner's tomb but without mention of the rest of his body (2 Sam 4:12).

¹²Cf. Deut 21:22-23; Josh 8:29; 10:26-27.

It was told to David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah,
the wife of Saul, had done. (My translation)

The account is brief and controlled, suggesting that the narrator dare not let emotion be expressed lest it could not be contained. The emphasis on the passing of time and the cycles of day and night bears testimony to Rizpah's determination and tenacity, while her watchfulness in protecting the corpses from birds and beasts until nothing but their bones are left (v. 13) shows further that she gives no thought to herself. (In this selfless single-mindedness, too, she resembles Antigone.) The vigil lasts "from the beginning of the harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens"; that is, from late April until the fall rains (although some suggest late spring or early summer rain). And it lasts day and night; it would seem she never rests.

Rizpah's deed forces King David to act. When he learns of her vigil, David has the bones of the dead interred. Here, as earlier in the story, David's actions are determined by others. He handed over Saul's sons and grandsons for execution because of what the Gibeonites *say* ("What do you say I should do for you?" v. 4). Now his decision to have the bones of the dead buried comes in response to what Rizpah *does* ("It was told to David what Rizpah...had done," v. 11). What has Rizpah done? She has prevented the desecration of the bodies of Saul's sons and grandsons, and now she brings to an end their disgraceful exposure. Moreover, she is apparently not only responsible for the burial of their bones, though their burial is never explicitly mentioned,¹³ but also for the return of Saul's and Jonathan's bones from Jabesh-gilead and their burial also in their ancestral tomb.

This act of heroism on Rizpah's part, which prevents a terrible desecration, calls to mind an earlier one, the heroism of the men of Jabesh-gilead, who rescued the bodies of Saul and Jonathan from disgraceful exposure (1 Sam 31:11-13). When we consider the praise David had for the men of Jabesh-gilead (2 Sam 2:5-7), we might wonder what his silence about Rizpah's heroism says about his own ambivalent role in these events.

THE ROLES OF GOD AND DAVID

The interests of the Davidic state and the divine case against Saul's house correspond rather (too?) neatly. It is God who sets events in motion with his grievance against Saul's house:

There was a famine in the days of David, three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the Lord. The Lord said, "Against Saul and against his house there is bloodguilt because he sought to kill the Gibeonites." (2 Sam 21:1; my translation)

This is a convenient situation for David, for it is very much in David's interest, as king, to eliminate any members of Saul's house who might be seen to have a

¹³This is yet another uncertain, and thus disturbing, feature of the story, yet I think we are meant to assume that the burial of the bones of the seven sacrificial victims takes place along with the burial of Saul's and Jonathan's bones.

legitimate claim to the throne. We may remember that the transfer of the kingship from Saul's house to David's has not been a simple matter. Although the biblical narrator presents the kingdom as God's gift to David, he nonetheless leaves us with incriminating evidence to the contrary. Saul was God's anointed king, and in spite of his rejection as king (was this public knowledge?) and his own feeling of isolation (1 Sam 22:7-8), he had his loyal followers. In the account of David's rise to the throne (1 Sam 16-2 Sam 5),¹⁴ David's loyalty to Saul is publicly demonstrated on numerous occasions, while his inward thoughts and feelings about the kingship and the house that stands in his way are never revealed to us. He always manages to be in the right place at the right time to make Saul look bad and to do and say the sorts of things that indicate he would be the ideal leader. After Saul's death, we witness the members of Saul's house eliminated, one by one, and David is never far away. Mephibosheth, here spared, is apparently no threat to the throne due to his physical disability (2 Sam 4:4).

The portrayal of God in 2 Sam 21:1-14 is not out of character when we consider God's attitude to Saul and his house in 1 Samuel. Throughout Saul's turbulent kingship, God has seemed to have a grudge against him—at least, Saul can never do anything right in God's eyes—and Saul's male relations all meet untimely deaths, while his daughter Michal suffers a cruel fate for a woman in ancient Israel: she dies childless.¹⁵ In typical biblical fashion, Saul's entire house suffers for his crimes. Although the human sacrifice is presented as the Gibeonites' idea, and not God's, it remains the case that God allows the execution to proceed and apparently accepts it as retribution. At least, there is no divine censure of the sacrifice.

David, too, is very much in character here; that is, his role in the affair is characteristically ambiguous.¹⁶ Although he delivers Saul's sons to the slaughter, he does not emerge as a villain. He responds to a crisis from God in the form of a natural disaster and to a solution supplied by God and the Gibeonites. His effort to alleviate the crisis posed by the famine, his compassion on Mephibosheth, and his command to bury the bones of the dead all reflect favorably on him. As in the story of his rise to the throne, we may suspect that there is more to David's involvement than meets the eye. It is, however, the Gibeonites who emerge as the sinister force in the story. Their call for the deaths of Saul's sons and grandsons relieves David, as it relieved God, of direct responsibility for wiping out Saul's house.

But is human sacrifice what is needed to assuage God and thus bring the famine to an end? The answer is not unambiguous.

THE AMBIGUOUS CAUSAL CONNECTION

Divine displeasure initiates the crisis and divine appeasement resolves it. The

¹⁴See P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "The Apology of David," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980) 489-504; *1 Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 27-30.

¹⁵I examine the tragic fate of Saul and members of his house in *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*.

¹⁶On the complexity of the character of David in Samuel and Kings, see Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, Chapter 5, "David: The Judgment of God," 120-149.

story moves from crisis to solution to resolution, but the precise connection between events is not clear. A natural disaster—famine, “three years, year after year”—sets events in motion. David seeks to alleviate the problem by consulting the wronged party, the Gibeonites, who emerge as the villains in the story, with their sevenfold call for vengeance. A human sacrifice is made to God, and no divine pronouncement condemns it. To make matters worse, the corpses are exposed for a long time. Rizpah holds a vigil over the dead until the end of the famine is signalled by the coming of the rains, the bones of the dead are buried, and the story ends with the statement, “God heeded supplications for the land after that.”

The casual nexus between divine displeasure, atonement, and divine appeasement set up by the story is abruptly broken by Rizpah’s awesome display of the proper reverence due the dead. In the end, God is receptive to supplication (v. 14). Should we assume that this is the result of the propitiatory sacrifice of Saul’s sons? Clearly God has called for this: “there is bloodguilt upon Saul and upon his house....” The onset of the rain would thus be the sign that the expiation is effective, the famine is over, and David is now free to bury the bones of the victims. The burial of the bones of the dead would then not be the cause of the divine appeasement but rather its result. On the other hand, the reference to divine receptivity at the end of the story—that is, after the burial and not before it—supports a different reading. While the expiation perhaps produces the needed rain, it does not end the affliction of the land because of the sacrilege upon the dead. In this case, the real source of divine appeasement is the burial of the bones of the sacrificial victims, which Rizpah has brought about through her astounding vigil.

RIZPAH’S ROLE

Even though Rizpah’s deed receives only a small amount of narrative space, it is the focal point of the story. Her isolation from the other characters in the tale, demonstrated by her silence and her solitary vigil, symbolizes her “otherness,” her alliance with the dead. Whereas the Gibeonites and David are shown actively discussing and deciding the fate of Saul’s house, Rizpah’s vigil ultimately determines it. David and the Gibeonites offer a sacrifice of atonement, aimed at cleansing the land of evil. By protecting the exposed corpses from desecration and by prompting David to have the remains buried, Rizpah prevents a horrible sacrilege.

The resolution, not just of this story but of the whole unhappy chronicle of Saul’s house, occurs with the return of Saul’s and Jonathan’s bones to rest in their ancestral tomb and, as Martin Buber maintains, in the reconciliation between the houses of Saul and David symbolized by the burial at David’s command.¹⁷ Though

¹⁷Buber, “Weisheit und Tat der Frauen,” 113-114; cf. the analysis of J. P. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. III, *Throne and City* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1990) 289-291, who seeks to resolve the ambiguity. Fokkeman’s assumptions about David, e.g., that he “had of course been aware for a long time of what Rizpah was doing” and that he “had perhaps been appalled and deeply impressed by Rizpah’s dedication,” are totally unfounded in the text, which states simply that David was told what Rizpah had done and straightway had the bones buried (2 Sam 21:11-12).

the burial of the bones of the dead, like the execution of the seven victims, can only come at the king's command, it is Rizpah who influences David to act.

The story leaves many questions unanswered or answered only implicitly. In particular, the precise relationship between the ritual execution and exposure of the corpses, the reverence for the dead shown by Rizpah, the burial of the bones, and divine appeasement is never clarified. The uncertainties, the troubling loose ends, are what make the story so engrossing as well as disturbing. Rizpah's heroic vigil over the bodies of the seven sacrificial victims is what makes it so powerful, and also what makes it her story. Not only is Rizpah responsible for the resolution to the dishonor suffered by Saul's house but also, in some impalpable, though clear enough way, for the divine receptivity to human supplication that brings the story to closure. "God heeded supplications for the land after that" (v. 14). ⊕