

Background Characters in the Old Testament

Rizpah: The Influence of Faithfulness

Lesson #9 for November 27, 2010

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:19; 2 Samuel 3:6-11; 21:1-9; Mark 13:13.

1. Our background character for this lesson, Rizpah, lived in a time of transition in the government of Israel. Saul was dead. His three older sons were dead. And his fourth son, Ishbosheth, trying to establish his kingdom on the other side of the Jordan River at Mahanaim, was trying to pull together the 10 northern tribes in opposition to David who ruled over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (and portions of Simeon and Levi) in the south.
 2. There are only two passages in Scripture which tell us about Rizpah: 2 Samuel 3:6-11 and 2 Samuel 21:1-14. Rizpah was a concubine of King Saul. She bore him two sons. We do not know exactly what her status was in the government or what the status of her two sons was. We do not even know exactly what her relationship was with King Saul.
 3. The normal custom in the days of Saul and David was for the new king to take the wives of the former king as his wives or concubines. (2 Samuel 16:21,22; 20:3; 1 Kings 2:21,22)
 4. Apparently, Ishbosheth was following that tradition and was taking some responsibility for Rizpah. We do not know if she became his concubine. We first read about Rizpah when Ishbosheth accused Abner, the general of the army of the northern ten tribes, of sleeping with her. So, why is this even mentioned in the Scriptures? Was she very beautiful? Why were the two most powerful men in the nation of Israel fighting over her?
 5. We do not know exactly the timing of this first mention of Rizpah. (2 Samuel 3:6-11) There was a period of approximately 7 ½ years after Saul's death during which time David was king of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; but Ishbosheth assumed the role of king of the northern tribes, reigning from Mahanaim. Clearly, it was during this period that we first meet Rizpah.
 6. What do we know about concubines? How many different men in the Bible had concubines? How many concubines are mentioned in the Bible? (Genesis 25:5,6; Judges 8:30,31; Judges 19; 2 Samuel 5:13-16; 1 Kings 11:2,3)
 7. Concubines often were taken from the ranks of female slaves or maids of a family. Their express purpose was to produce heirs, and once they had produced male offspring, their status and social standing were similar to those of regular wives. A man was regarded as his concubine's husband (*Judg. 20:4*), and their children appeared in genealogies (*Gen. 22:24*) and would receive a part of the inheritance (*Gen. 25:5,6*). It is interesting to note that concubines appear mostly in the patriarchal period; during the early monarchy, concubines were connected to royal households.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, for Sunday, November 21)
- Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines! What was the status of each of them?
8. The name Ishbosheth means "man of shame." In 1 Chronicles 8:33, he is called Ish-Baal or the "man of Baal." Why do you suppose that was? Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, which means "exterminating the idol," also had another name, Marib-Baal, which means "Baal is my advocate." Why were such names given to the children of Saul?

9. Did Rizpah play any part in the conflict? Or, was she simply a passive participant? Was she attracted to Abner? We are told that if a man lusts after a woman, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:28) Assuming for the moment that she was a beautiful and attractive woman and this was the reason why Abner may have been interested in her, had she already been taken by Ishbosheth as one of his concubines?
10. Are there any reasons you can think of why Rizpah may have been so influential? As suggested above, was she perhaps beautiful? Was she influential because she had two sons with the king? Was she influential because she was connected to powerful families in the area? Why was Rizpah even mentioned in the Bible? As a result of this dispute over her, both Abner and Ishbosheth were murdered, and the house of Saul disappeared! Was 2 Samuel written as a textbook for the schools of the prophets? Was this story told to explain how David ultimately became king?
11. Right in the middle of this story about Ishbosheth, Abner, and Rizpah, we note in 2 Samuel 3:2-5 that David's wives and children are mentioned as being in Hebron. Is that a subtle suggestion by the writer that Ishbosheth was on the decline while David was on the rise?
12. Whether or not Abner was attracted to Rizpah or even perhaps had had an affair with her, judging from his strong reaction, are we to assume that sleeping with one of the king's concubines was a very serious offense? What other stories and other passages in Scripture tell us how serious that might have been? (2 Samuel 16:21,22; 20:3; 1 Kings 2:21,22) In fact, two of David's sons—Absalom and Adonijah—apparently sealed their own deaths by sleeping with or even wanting to sleep with one or more of their fathers concubines!
13. What was the result of this heated exchange between Abner and Ishbosheth over Rizpah? Abner defected to David's side where he was made David's general but was soon murdered by Joab who Abner was to be replacing. (2 Samuel 3:27,30) Soon after Abner left, Ishbosheth was also murdered by two other man. (2 Samuel 4) Both of them ended up getting themselves killed because of this concubine! It also effectively ended the war between Judah and Israel.
14. Was Rizpah then taken into David's family? We do not know. (Compare Abigail)
15. The next time we hear about Rizpah is in 2 Samuel 21:1-14. There had been a famine in Palestine that apparently had lasted at least three years. David prayed to the Lord for an answer to this serious problem. By some means which we do not currently know anything about, the answer came that Saul—David's predecessor—had killed a number of the people of Gibeon. Would God send a famine in David's time because of some sin that had been Saul's?
16. The Gibeonites were among the tribes who were supposed to have been driven out of Palestine (Exodus 23:16-18) or perhaps even destroyed (Deuteronomy 20:16-20) when the children of Israel entered the land of Canaan. God was doing everything possible to prevent His children from being contaminated by their pagan worship rituals. However, some of the Gibeonites, pretending to be from a far country, approached the Israelites and sought to make a treaty with them. As a result of that deception, their lives were preserved, but they were made to be servants or slaves of the Israelites. (Joshua 9:3-27)
17. Do you believe that the slaughter of some of the Gibeonites by Saul had anything to do with the famine? If so, was God involved? If Saul was at fault, why didn't the famine occur during his time as king?

18. We are quite familiar with the story of Elijah and the famine that was declared in his day. (1 Kings 18,19) In that case, there was a direct conflict between Yahweh, the God of heaven, and Baal, the god who was being promoted by Jezebel the new queen and wife of Ahab in Israel. Baal was supposed to be the god who brought the rains and fertility to the land. So, it is easy to understand why *Yahweh* would cut off the rains to prove that Baal was no god at all.
19. But, why should David take responsibility for Saul's sins? Why should Saul's descendants die because of his mistakes? Aren't we individually responsible for what we do? (2 Samuel 21:1-6; Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:29,30; Ezekiel 18:1-32; 33:10-20)
20. Did David, in fact, truly receive a message from the Lord to do that terrible deed? Or, was that just a clever way for David to eliminate potential competition?
21. Consider the following texts regarding the Gibeonites and their fellow Canaanites. (Exodus 23:23,28; 33:2; 34:11; Deuteronomy 7:1; 20:17; Joshua 3:10). Were the ancient Israelites who did not do as God directed at least partly responsible for what happened in Saul's day?
22. In any case, Rizpah's two sons and Merab's five sons were to be executed to atone for Saul's sin. Consider Rizpah's situation at that point. Her husband had died in battle. The new king who was supposed to be looking after her had also been murdered. She had been accused of having an affair with the general who then joined David's forces and was murdered. Then, her two sons who were her last means of support were to be killed because of her husband's sins! Could any more tragedy befall her?
23. Read 2 Samuel 21:3. The Hebrew word *kaphar* often translated "atonement" is used to suggest that the death of her two sons along with their stepbrothers would bring about an atonement. What can that barbaric act have to do with atonement? It is important to notice that it was not David and certainly not God who suggested the handing over of those seven men to be killed. It was the Gibeonites.
24. Is this story so bizarre that all we can do is say, "God has said it, and I believe it, and that's all there is to it"? Is it impossible for us to understand what was really going on at that point in history since we are so far removed from the actual events and the cultural situation in David's day?
25. It is important to notice that in the slaughter of the descendants of Saul, Mephibosheth (Jonathan's son) was preserved because of Jonathan's friendship with David and David's promise to Jonathan.
26. What did Rizpah do following the deaths of her two sons and their stepbrothers? How did they actually die? (2 Samuel 21:9) The Hebrew word can mean hanged, impaled, exposed, even "allowed to die slowly." In any case, no one took it upon himself to bury the bodies; so, they were left out exposed in the weather, apparently on a rock.
27. Rizpah built herself a small shelter of sackcloth and protected the corpses of her two sons and their stepbrothers from birds and wild animals through the entire summer until the fall rains began. In commenting on this story, once again, the writer mentioned Rizpah's father but when referring to David, mentioned him only by name without mentioning that he was king. Was the writer trying to suggest that Rizpah was more honorable and faithful at that point in history than even David? Or, was the writer aware that everyone knew David?
28. In the ancient Near East it is common for the king to be understood as the

embodiment of the state and representative of the people. During the reign of the Hittite king Mursilis, a 20-year plague was determined to have been the result of offenses committed by his predecessor, and attempts were made to appease and make restitution.—John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), page 350.

29. We are still left with the plaguing question: What is the relationship between these mistakes or sins committed by previous kings and the plague or famine which came later? Was God intentionally inflicting justice on human nations?
30. This raises another question. To what extent are individual citizens of a country responsible for promises made previously by their government, culture, or ancestors? Are we?
31. Fortunately, David heard about Rizpah's faithfulness and took it upon himself to collect the bones of Saul and his sons as well as the grandsons and provided them with a proper burial. This action taken by David—honoring his predecessor even though at times he had been an enemy—no doubt, helped to cement the nation back together.
32. Many nations and cultures in ancient times felt very strongly about burying the dead. As we know, the Egyptians developed almost an entire culture around dealing with the dead. In any case, in this story the gathering of the bones and providing a proper burial seemed to mark the end of intertribal fighting and led to the reuniting of Israel.
33. So what happened next? Apparently, they prayed. Surely, that was not the first of their prayers for God to answer them by ending the famine. It is impossible to tell just from reading the available text whether the rain came because the bones were buried properly or whether God responded to their prayers or whether God blessed them because they stopped fighting!
34. Notice once again that in her very quiet and even passive way, Rizpah brought about events which impacted the entire nation.
35. Do we ever have opportunity to do small things which might have much larger consequences than we at first recognize?
36. Daniel and his three friends requested a change in diet. That might seem like a relatively small thing, but apparently it contributed to their success in final exams and, thus, their rising to very high positions in the Babylonian government. We are not sure if that had any impact on the way Nebuchadnezzar treated them on the plains of Dura. (Daniel 3)
37. In this week's lesson, we have studied the story of a concubine. As Christians, we should deplore the fact that a woman would be a concubine. This particular concubine proved to be very influential. What was the basis of her influence? Was it her beauty? Was it her relationship with King Saul? Was it the influence of her family or even her two sons? This side of the kingdom of God, we have no way of knowing.

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