

2 Samuel Chapter 21

Chapters 21 – 24 form an appendix to the books of Samuel.

The matters covered here are not in exact chronological order and come from various stages of David's life.

21:1 – 24:25

This is the final division of 2 Samuel.

Like the book of Judges (Judges 17:1 - 21:25), it concludes with this epilogue that contains material, not necessarily chronological, that further describes David's reign.

There is a striking literary arrangement of the sections in this division of the book.

The first and last sections (21:1-14; 24:1-25), are narratives that describe two occurrences of the LORD's anger against Israel.

The second and fifth sections (21:15-22; 23:8-39), are accounts of David's warriors.

The third and fourth sections (22:1-51; 23:1-7), record two of David's songs.

Verses 1-2

“David,”:

Recognizing that the three-year famine was a divine judgment, inquired and learned that the “famine” was due to Saul's violation of the long-standing covenant between “Israel” and the citizens of Gibeon (Joshua 9:15-27).

Saul, in his zeal had committed a serious sin: he had broken a covenant that had been made 400 years before between Joshua and the Gibeonites, who were in the land when Israel took possession of it.

They deceived Joshua into making the covenant, but it was, nevertheless, a covenant.

Covenant keeping was no small matter to God (See Joshua 9:20).

According to (Joshua 9:7), the Gibeonites were Hivites.

The term “Amorites” is used here often, as a common word for the original inhabitants of Canaan (see the note on 1 Sam. 7:14-17).

The story of how “Saul” broke Joshua’s treaty with Gibeon and put some of the Gibeonites to death is not recorded in Scripture, but it is consistent with Saul’s ruthlessness.

His sin caused a “famine” throughout Israel.

This incident appears to have occurred after David’s kindness to Mephibosheth (Chapter 9), but before Absalom’s rebellion (16:7-8).

Verses 1-14

This event occurred after the display of David’s kindness to Mephibosheth (verse 7; compare 9:1-13), and before Shimei’s cursing of David (16:7-8).

2 Samuel 21:1 "Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, [It is] for Saul, and for [his] bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites."

“A famine”:

When Israel experienced 3 years of famine, David recognized it as divine discipline (Deut. 28:47-48), and sought God for the reason.

This chapter is not in chronological order after (chapter 20).

In fact, this happened many years before the happenings we just studied about.

Famines are caused by the withholding of rain from the land by the LORD Himself.

Notice, David went to the LORD for the answer to the famine.

This happened soon after the death of Saul perhaps.

This is not because of David's sin, but the sin of Saul.

Saul had made a peace treaty with these people for them to be his servants.

Saul broke the treaty and killed the people.

Saul had given his word in the sight of God and then went back on it.

God held him responsible.

2 Samuel 21:2 "And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites [were] not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah.)"

“Gibeonites ... Amorites”:

Names sometimes used to designate all the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan (Gen. 15:16; Joshua 24:18; Judges 6:10).

More precisely, the Gibeonites were called Hivites (Joshua 9:7; 11:19).

Saul's zeal in killing them after making a peace treaty with an oath to God, has now, caused this great famine.

It seemed that Saul kept God's law when it was convenient.

If he could acquire land or valuables, it did not bother him to break an oath and kill the people.

This is similar to when he killed the priests to further himself.

Verses 3-14

Why David handed over the few remaining descendants of Saul to atone for Saul's sin is puzzling, because it seems contrary to God's command (in Deut. 24:16), that children not be put to death for their father's sins.

No commentary is offered here as to whether or not David's decision was according to God's will or not.

However, it did eventually lead to relief from the famine and was therefore enough (or more than enough), to atone for Saul's sin.

2 Samuel 21:3 "Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? and wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the LORD?"

“The inheritance of the LORD”:

See note on 20:19.

The breaking of the oath put them out of favorable relationship with God and the sin must be atoned for.

David asked the Gibeonites what he should do to receive atonement, since the sin was committed on them.

David realizes this famine will not stop until restitution is made.

2 Samuel 21:4 "And the Gibeonites said unto him, We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel. And he said, What ye shall say, [that] will I do for you."

Money compensations for sins of blood were extremely common among all ancient nations, but were expressly forbidden in the Law of Moses (Num. 35:31), and in this respect the Gibeonites appear to have accepted the teaching of the law of Israel.

"Kill any man in Israel":

Notwithstanding that the guilt of Saul's sin, until it should be expiated, rested upon all Israel, the Gibeonites recognize that it had been committed by him, and do not seek that, apart from their connection with him, any Israelite should suffer on their account.

David appreciates the fairness of their view of the matter, and promises beforehand to do whatever they shall require.

David agreed to do whatever was right in their sight.

They did not want the wealth of Israel, or even the life of the Israelites in restitution.

2 Samuel 21:5 "And they answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us [that] we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel,"

Declaring expressly what they would have done: the man that consumed us; meaning Saul, who lessened their number by cruel oppressions of some, and by taking away the lives of others.

"And that devised against us, that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel": who had formed schemes, and published edicts, for banishing them out of the land.

Perhaps at the same time that he put away wizards and those that had familiar spirits out of the land, under the same pretense for zeal for the glory of God, and the good of the people of the land (1 Sam. 28:3).

2 Samuel 21:6 "Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, [whom] the LORD did choose. And the king said, I will give [them]."

"Seven ... of his sons":

"Seven" symbolized completeness, not necessarily the number of Gibeonites slain by Saul.

"Sons":

These could be either sons or grandsons.

“Gibeah of Saul”:

See note on 1 Sam. 11:4.

Saul is dead, and he is the one who broke the oath.

The people of Gibeon do not want the name of Saul to live on in Israel, so they want his male children killed.

The reason they asked for seven, is because they were aware of how many there were.

Seven means spiritually complete as well.

They were to be hanged in the streets publicly to demonstrate the fact that God had allowed this for the breaking of an oath.

Verses 7-8

Note that there are two Mephibosheths.

The one born to “Jonathan” was spared, but the one born to Saul and his concubine “Rizpah” was hung.

2 Samuel 21:7 "But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the LORD'S oath that [was] between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul."

“The LORD’s oath” ... between David and Jonathan”:

Because Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, he was spared in accordance with the covenant between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:14-15), and also between David and Saul (see note on 1 Sam. 24:22).

David was not aware there was a Mephibosheth until after the 7-1/2 year reign over just Judah.

This had to happen after that time.

Jonathan, Mephibosheth's father, had made a covenant with David; so David could not allow Mephibosheth to be killed.

2 Samuel 21:8 "But the king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bare unto Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite:"

“Rizpah”:

Saul’s concubine (see 3:7).

“Mephibosheth”:

A son of Saul, different from the son of Jonathan with the same name.

“Michal”:

Michal was the mother of these 5 sons.

She was the wife of Adriel (1 Sam. 18:19).

“Barzillai the Meholathite”:

A different man than Barzillai the Gileadite (17:27; 19:31).

2 Samuel 21:9 "And he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the hill before the LORD: and they fell [all] seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first [days], in the beginning of barley harvest."

“Before the LORD”:

These pagans were not bound by the law of (Deut. 21:22-23), which forbade leaving a dead body hanging overnight.

Their intention was to let the bodies hang until God signaled He was satisfied and sent rain to end the famine.

Such a heathen practice, designed to propitiate their gods, was a superstition of these Gibeonites.

God, in His providence, allowed this memorable retaliation as a lesson about keeping covenants and promises.

“The beginning of barley harvest”:

April (see Ruth 1:22).

The execution of Saul’s sons seems to be at variance with the law of just punishment expressed (in Deuteronomy 24:16).

However, these sons likely were also involved in the Gibeonite raid.

Moreover, their deaths would eliminate possible political strife later.

This is a perfect example of the sins of the father being paid for by his sons.

Rizpah was actually a concubine of Saul.

She was a foreign woman, a Hivite.

Two of her sons were killed and hung out until the rain came.

This perhaps is speaking of step-children of Michal, because she was barren and had no children.

These 5 children are possibly, children of Merab, the daughter of Saul.

The barley harvest happened about our April.

This seems so cruel, but in the law, bloody killings must be paid with blood.

Verses 10-14

Rizpah's protection of Saul's slain sons, so when the rain fell again the bodies could be properly buried, moved "David" to secure the remains of "Saul" and "Jonathan", and give them a proper burial.

2 Samuel 21:10 "And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night."

"Sackcloth ... spread":

Rizpah erected a tent nearby to keep watch over the bodies, to scare away birds and beasts.

It was considered a disgrace for the bodies of the slain to become food for the birds and beasts (Deut. 28:26; 1 Sam. 17:44, 46; Rev. 19:17-18).

"Water dropped upon them":

An unseasonably late spring or early summer shower.

Possibly this was the rain that ended the drought.

This shows the great love of this mother for her sons.

The sack cloth was the only shelter she had from the blazing sun.

It could have been six months until the fall rains came.

When the rain came, they would take them down, because the atonement had been made and then accepted.

Verses 11-14

Finally, after the rain had come, David, encouraged by the example of the woman's devotion to her dead family members, ordered the remains of Saul and Jonathan transferred from their obscure grave in Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam. 31:11-12), along with the 7 son's bones, to the honorable family grave in Zela (Joshua 18:28; 1 Sam. 10:2; "Zelzah"), This location is unknown.

2 Samuel 21:11 "And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done."

Whether this was told out of good will or ill will is not certain.

However, it was not disagreeable to David, but served to move pity and compassion in him to the woman, and to stir him up to give an honorable interment to Saul and his sons.

And which would show that this fact was not done out of personal pique and revenge to his family, but in obedience to the will of God, and the honor of his name.

2 Samuel 21:12 "And David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabesh-gilead, which had stolen them from the street of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa:"

Which, according to Bunting, was fifty two miles from Jerusalem; though perhaps David did not go thither in person to fetch them, but by his messengers (see 2 Sam. 21:14).

"Which had stolen them from the street of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa": For the history of all (see in 1 Sam. 31:8).

2 Samuel 21:13 "And he brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged."

Which had been buried under an oak tree (1 Chron. 10:12).

"And they gathered the bones of them that were hanged":

The seven sons of Saul, who had been lately hanged; who either had hung so long that their flesh was consumed, and the bones dropped upon the ground, from whence they gathered them.

Or they took them down and burnt the flesh off of them, and took the bones to bury them, which was not usually done.

David gave Saul, Jonathan, and those seven who were hanged, a burial place.

Saul's and Jonathan's bones had not been recovered until this time.

2 Samuel 21:14 "And the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son buried they in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the sepulcher of Kish his father: and they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God was entreated for the land."

“God was entreated for the land”:

The famine ended and God restored the land to prosperity.

They were all buried in the homeland in the sepulcher of Kish, Saul's father.

Verses 15-22

This section describes the defeat of 4 Philistine giants at the hands of David and his men.

Though these events cannot be located chronologically with any certainty, the narratives of victory provide a fitting preface to David's song of praise, which magnifies God's deliverance (22:1-51; see 1 Chron. 20:4-8).

See the notes at (1 Sam. 17:50 and 1 Chron. 20:4-8).

The “Philistine” campaigns saw the end of the fabled giants of the Philistines: “Ishi-benob” (verses 15-17), “Saph” (or Sippai, 1 Chron. 20:4), Lahmi (1 Chron. 20:5), and the unnamed “giant” of “Gath” (verses 20-21; 1 Chron. 20:6-7), as well as Goliath, whom “David” had slain previously (1 Sam. 17:51).

2 Samuel 21:15 "Moreover the Philistines had yet war again with Israel; and David went down, and his servants with him, and fought against the Philistines: and David waxed faint."

Besides what is before recorded in this and the preceding book; being animated to it partly by the number of giants among them, and partly by the decline of David's life, and it may be chiefly by the insurrections and rebellions in Israel.

Though some think that these battles were not after the rebellions of Absalom and Sheba and the affair of the Gibeonites; though here recorded.

But before, and quickly after the war with the Ammonites, next to which they are placed in (1 Chron. 20:1); but they seem to be placed here in their proper order.

"And David went down, and his servants with him":

To the borders of the Philistines, perceiving they were preparing to make war against him.

"And fought against the Philistines":

Engaged in a battle with them.

"And David waxed faint":

In the battle, not able to bear the fatigues of war, and wield his armor as he had used, being in the decline of life; after he had been engaged a while, his spirits began to fail, not through fear, but through feebleness; but, according to Josephus, it was through weariness in pursuing the enemy put to flight, which the following person perceived, and turned upon him.

This is the beginning of a new record of the things that happened here.

This was a time, when David was leading the battle with his servants.

In this particular battle, David becomes faint.

Sometimes, they did not eat for a long time and that could have caused the faintness.

2 Samuel 21:16 "And Ishbi-benob, which [was] of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose spear [weighed] three hundred [shekels] of brass in weight, he being girded with a new [sword], thought to have slain David."

"The giant":

The Hebrew term used in verses 16, 18, 20, 22 is "*rapha*."

This was not the name of an individual, but a term used collectively for the "Rephaim" who inhabited the land of Canaan and were noted for their inordinate size (Gen. 15:19-21; Num. 13:33; Deut. 2:11; 3:11, 13).

The term "Rephaim" was used of the people called the "Anakim" (Deut. 2:10-11, 20-21), distinguished for their size and strength.

According to (Joshua 11:21-22); the "Anakim" were driven from the hill country of Israel and Judah, but remained in the Philistine cities of Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod.

Though the Philistines had succumbed to the power of Israel's army, and then the appearance of some great champion revived their courage and then invited their hope for victory against the Israelite invaders.

"Three hundred shekels":

Approximately 7.5 pounds.

"A new sword":

Literally "a new thing."

The weapon was not specified.

The giant, spoken of is possibly, Goliath that David had killed.

This son of the giant had a spear half the size of Goliath's.

Goliath's weighed 16 pounds, and this one weighed almost 8 pounds.

The new sword was to slay David with.

2 Samuel 21:17 "But Abishai the son of Zeruiah succored him, and smote the Philistine, and killed him. Then the men of David swore unto him, saying, Thou shalt go no more out with us to battle, that thou quench not the light of Israel."

David's men demonstrated loyalty.

Their oath was an indication that David was the national hope, and the Israel's security and existence depended on him (1 Kings 11:36).

"Abishai":

See note on 2:18.

"Light of Israel":

David, who with God's help brought the light of prosperity and well-being to the whole land of Israel, was the symbol of Israel's hope and promise of security.

Continued blessing resided in David and his house.

This was during the time that David was king of Israel.

Zeruiah was David's sister.

Abishai then, was the nephew of David.

He saved David's life when he killed the son of the giant.

David was their king and they wanted him to remain safe as king of their land.

He was the symbol of Israel.

2 Samuel 21:18 "And it came to pass after this, that there was again a battle with the Philistines at Gob: then Sibbechai the Hushathite slew Saph, which [was] of the sons of the giant."

“Gob”:

Near Gezer (1 Chron. 20:4), about 22 miles west of Jerusalem.

Another son of the giant Goliath decided he would kill David and he fought with Sibbechai and Sibbechai killed him.

Sibbechai belonged to the prominent family of Judah, the Zarhites.

He was Captain of the army of 24,000 men of David's army.

2 Samuel 21:19 "And there was again a battle in Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim, a Beth-lehemite, slew [the brother of] Goliath the Gittite, the staff of whose spear [was] like a weaver's beam."

“Elhanan ... slew the brother of Goliath”:

The minor scribal omission of “the brother of” (in the Hebrew), belongs in this verse, as it is missing in some translations.

This is based on (1 Chron. 20:5), which includes “the brother of” and because clearly the Scripture says that David killed Goliath as recorded (in 1 Sam. 17:50).

It appears the entire family of Goliath was out to kill David.

Elhanan kills the brother of Goliath, who had to be a giant also, because his spear was like a weavers beam.

We know very little of Elhanan, except what we read right here.

He was of the tribe of Benjamin.

2 Samuel 21:20 "And there was yet a battle in Gath, where was a man of [great] stature, that had on every hand six fingers, and on every foot six toes, four and twenty in number; and he also was born to the giant."

Besides the battles in the above place or places; for this does not necessarily suppose that one of the said battles had been there, only that this, which was another battle, had been there.

"Where was a man of great stature":

For so the sense of the word appears to be from (1 Chron. 20:6); though here it signifies a man of strife and contention, a man of war, and both were true of him.

"That had on every hand six fingers, and on every foot six toes, four and twenty in number":

Twelve fingers on his two hands, and twelve toes on his two feet.

"And he also was born to the giant":

A son of a giant.

"Gath":

About 12 miles south of Geza and 26 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

This is speaking of one of the sons of Goliath being born with 6 fingers on each hand and 6 toes on each foot.

It appeared there was a large family of the giants, related to Goliath.

2 Samuel 21:21 "And when he defied Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimeah the brother of David slew him."

"Jonathan":

David's nephew, the son of Shimeah, also called Shammah (in 1 Sam. 16:9), different from the son of Saul.

Shimeah was the brother of king David, and Jonathan killed this giant with the twelve fingers and twelve toes.

2 Samuel 21:22 "These four were born to the giant in Gath, and fell by the hand of David, and by the hand of his servants."

Not to Goliath, for one of them was his brother, but to some giant or another of that place, for which it was famous; they were all of them of the race of the giants.

And so, the Septuagint version, they were "the offspring of the giants in Gath, whose family was Rapha;" and this Rapha, or Arepha, as the Vulgate Latin version, according to Abarbanel, was a woman of the daughters of the giants.

The Talmudists make her to be the same with Orpah (Ruth 1:4).

These giants, it is highly probable, were the descendants of the Anakim which remained in Gath after they were cut off by Joshua in other places (Joshua 11:22).

"And fell by the hand of David, and by the hand of his servants":

The first, Ishbi-benob, fell by the hand of David assisted by Abishai, and the other three by the persons mentioned.

It appears that David killed the first of this family of giants when he killed Goliath.

David's men killed the other three giants.

2 Samuel Chapter 21 Questions

1. How long did the famine, mentioned in verse 1, last?
2. David inquired of the _____.
3. The famine was for the bloody house of _____.
4. What are famines caused by?
5. What terrible thing had Saul done?
6. Who was Saul's sin committed against?
7. Who were the Gibeonites?
8. Who did David ask what he was to do to atone for the sin of Saul?
9. What did they ask for?
10. Why did they want this?
11. The king spared _____.
12. What was David's reason for saving him?
13. Who was the mother of two of the sons, who were killed for the sin?

14. Who was the mother who lost 5 sons?
15. Who hanged the boys?
16. When is barley harvest?
17. What unusual thing did Rizpah do?
18. How long would the seven have to hang there?
19. When the rain came, it showed what?
20. What was Rizpah to Saul?
21. When David found out what Rizpah did, what did he do?
22. Where did they bury Saul and Jonathan?
23. What happened to David in the battle with the Philistines in verse 15?
24. How much did the spear of Ishbi-benob weigh?
25. Why was he wearing a new sword?
26. Who killed the giant Ishbi-benob?
27. What did the men of David's army ask of him, after this battle?
28. What relation was Abishai to David?
29. Who slew the giant, Saph?
30. What family did Sibbechai belong to?
31. Who slew the brother of Goliath?
32. What was strange about the giant in verse 20?
33. Who had killed the first giant, Goliath?