

Judges 21:25

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Analysis

This sobering conclusion to Judges encapsulates the book's central problem: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (ba'yamim hahem ein melek beYisrael ish hayashar be'ainav ya'aseh). The phrase appears four times in Judges (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), forming an inclusio framing the book's final chapters depicting Israel's moral and spiritual collapse. "No king in Israel" points forward to the need for monarchy (1 Samuel 8), yet also indicts Israel's rejection of God as their true King (Judges 8:23). The phrase "right in his own eyes" (hayashar be'ainav) contrasts sharply with doing what is right in God's eyes (Deuteronomy 12:8, 25). Proverbs 21:2 warns: "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts." This verse diagnoses the root of Israel's chaos: moral relativism and autonomous self-determination replacing divine authority and revealed law. When objective moral standards are abandoned, society descends into anarchy, violence, and depravity—illustrated by the horrific narratives of Judges 17-21 (idolatry, theft, murder, rape, civil war, kidnapping). The solution isn't merely human kingship (which brings its own problems, 1 Samuel 8:10-18) but the divine King who writes His law on hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) and establishes His kingdom through the true King—Jesus Christ, David's greater Son.

Historical Context

Judges 21:25 concludes the book's horrific final section detailing civil war, mass slaughter, and the near-extinction of Benjamin's tribe. The context involves

Benjamin's protection of gang-rapists who murdered a Levite's concubine (chapter 19), Israel's punitive expedition killing 25,000 Benjamites (chapter 20), and the scheme to provide wives for surviving Benjamite men without breaking vows (chapter 21). This descent into barbarism demonstrates covenant breakdown—Israel acts like Canaanites rather than God's holy people. The phrase "no king in Israel" points to the period's lack of centralized authority following Joshua's death (approximately 1375-1050 BCE). Israel functioned as a tribal confederation bound by covenant to Yahweh, but lacking permanent human leadership. Judges were temporary, regional deliverers raised up during crises rather than national rulers maintaining order. This structure worked only when Israel maintained covenant faithfulness; when they abandoned God, chaos resulted. The repeated apostasy-oppression-deliverance cycle of Judges demonstrates human inability to maintain faithfulness apart from divine grace. The historical setting of Late Bronze Age collapse and early Iron Age transition (1200-1000 BCE) saw widespread political instability, making strong leadership crucial for survival. The book's conclusion prepares readers for the monarchy narratives of Samuel and Kings, while warning that human kingship alone cannot solve the deeper problem of human sinfulness requiring divine transformation through the new covenant in Christ.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. In what specific areas of your life are you tempted to do what is right in your own eyes rather than submitting to God's revealed will in Scripture?
2. How does contemporary culture's embrace of moral relativism and autonomous self-determination mirror Israel's chaos during the judges period?
3. What does the failure of Israel's theocratic ideal (God as king) during the judges period teach about human nature and the need for heart transformation through the gospel?

Interlinear Text

בָּמָּ יוֹם	הָיָה מָ	אֵין מֶלֶךְ	בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְ	אֵין יִשׁ
In those days	H1992	H369	there was no king	in Israel
H3117			H4428	H3478
				H376
הַיֵּשׁ ר	בְּעֵינָיו יוֹ	יַעֲשֶׂה:		
that which was right	in his own eyes	did		
H3477	H5869	H6213		

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 12:8 (Parallel theme): Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes.

Judges 17:6 (Kingdom): In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Proverbs 3:5 (Parallel theme): Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

Ecclesiastes 11:9 (Parallel theme): Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Proverbs 14:12 (Parallel theme): There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

Judges 19:1 (Kingdom): And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Beth-lehem-judah.

Judges 18:1 (Kingdom): In those days there was no king in Israel: and in those days the tribe of the Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in; for unto that day all their inheritance had not fallen unto them among the tribes of Israel.