

Honor Above All: The Paramount Value of Honor in the Thought of Abarbanel

By: YITZHAK GROSSMAN

Is “Honor” A Foreign Word to the Jew?

Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky, in an essay rejecting the uncritical admiration of the (putative) “heroically” suicidal defenders at Masada, flatly declares that “‘honor’ is a foreign word to the Jew”:

It is not our place, and it is not necessary for us, to judge the individuals on Masada, assuming they existed. They may have held out against the Romans and committed suicide for fear of unbearable torture. In such an event, G-d judged them, and we can rest assured that their slate is now clear. The story of Masada, though, emphasizes their honor and heroism, and it is the story we have to deal with.

Halachah and *hashkafah* clearly say that “honor” is a foreign word to the Jew. We must do what is right, not what seems honorable. We surrender to save lives, to save *Klal Yisrael*, we commit suicide for *kiddush Hashem* and for no other reason, and we do not have the arrogance to assume that we control the world by our actions.¹

R. Jonathan Sacks similarly liked to contrast what he considered the “guilt culture” of Judaism (and Christianity) with other “shame cultures”:

[Anthropologist Ruth Benedict] taught the distinction between shame cultures, like ancient Greece, and guilt cultures like Judaism and Christianity.

They both teach people how they ought to behave, but they have very different approaches to wrongdoing. In shame cultures what matters is what other people think of you: the embarrassment, the ignominy, the loss of face. Whereas in guilt cultures it’s what the inner voice of conscience tells you. In shame cultures we’re actors

¹ Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky, *Timepieces* (2014), pp. 297-98.

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playing our part on the public stage. In guilt cultures we're engaged in inner conversation with the better angels of our nature.²

But as I always like to insist, no absolute, unqualified statement of the form "Judaism believes X" is ever correct. To at least one eminent, (relatively) traditional Jewish thinker, it is indeed right to "love the name of honor more than [one fears] death"³. This essay explores the views of R. Don Yitzchak Abarbanel on the paramount importance of honor, even relative to life itself.

The Massacre of Shechem

There is much discussion in Jewish literature of the moral and halachic justification for Simeon and Levi's massacre of Shechem.⁴ We consider here a different problem with their actions, the one raised by their father Jacob, that they had invited annihilatory retaliation by the Canaanites and Perizzites. Their response: "Should he treat our sister like a harlot?"⁵ What kind of answer is this? Jacob did not deny the enormity of the wrong done to Dinah and their moral right to do as they did, but merely made the sober, calculating argument that their family was not strong

² R. Jonathan Sacks, "The difference between Shame and Guilt cultures" (*Thought for the Day*) [Nov. 4, 2013]. Cf. *Covenant and Conversation*, "The Power of Shame" (*Metzora* 5776) [Apr. 11, 2016]; "The Scapegoat: Shame and Guilt" (*Acharei Mot–Kedoshim* 5775) [Apr. 20, 2015].

³ *Julius Caesar*, Act I Scene II.

⁴ Genesis 34:13-29. See Rambam, *Yad HaChazakah*, *Hilchos Melachim* 9:14; Ramban to Genesis 34:13; *Moshav Zekeinim*, Genesis 34:31; *Chizkuni*, Genesis 34:31; Ralbag, *VaYishlach*, *biur divrei haparashah*; *Gur Aryeh*, Genesis 34:13; *Or HaChayim*, Genesis 34:25. See also R. Yechiel Goldhaber's extensive survey of the literature on this question in his essay *Maaseh Harigas Ir Shechem*, in *MiShulchano shel Yechiel Goldhaber*, *VaYishlach* 5772. (Incidentally, I am perplexed by R. Goldhaber's declaration that "the explanation of the Rambam [that the entire population of Shechem were culpable to the point of deserving of death for their failure to judge Shechem himself for his theft] was not brought in the other works of the Rishonim [aside from *Moshav Zekeinim*], but only by most of the early Yemenite scholars." In addition to *Moshav Zekeinim*, the same justification for the massacre of Shechem is also found in Chizkuni and Ralbag.) Cf. R. Shaul Yisraeli, *Amud HaYemini*, *siman* 16, *perek* 2; R. Prof. Neria Gutel, *Lechimah BeShetach Ravni Uchlusiah Ezrachis*, in *Techumin*, vol. 23, p. 18; R. Yoel Amital, *Parashas VaYishlach – Maaseh Shechem*.

⁵ Genesis 34:31. All translations of Biblical verses are from ArtScroll's editions.

enough to withstand a combined attack by Shechem's allies.⁶ What was Simeon and Levi's response to this objection?

Abarbanel explains:

The overall meaning of their words was that this shame obligated them to place themselves in danger, for death with honor is better than life with disgrace and contempt. ...

And this tale was written ... also to inform us how seriously men of stature and honor take any disgrace and infamy that is inflicted upon them, that they take their lives in their hands, to risk themselves, their wives, and their children, and everything they have, to avenge themselves against their enemies.⁷

Abarbanel is actually not the first to explain Simeon and Levi's position this way; R. Yosef Bechor Shor had already done so centuries earlier, albeit more tersely:

Should we treat our sister like a barlot? It is better for us to be in danger but not to accept this disgrace.⁸

Now, one can certainly argue that even if this was Simeon and Levi's attitude, it does not exemplify normative Jewish values. After all, their father, the Patriarch Jacob, did not subscribe to their view, to the extent that even decades later, upon his deathbed, in the course of blessing most of his sons, his remarks to Simeon and Levi consist primarily of deploration of their violent temperament and imprecations on their homicidal rage, in apparent reference to the massacre of Shechem (as well as their conduct toward their brother Joseph).⁹

Abarbanel, however, insists that G-d Himself sided with Simeon and Levi!

And Hashem agreed with them, because "there fell a G-dly terror on the cities which were around them, so that they did not pursue Jacob's sons."¹⁰

⁶ See Radvaz, *Hilchos Melachim*, *ibid.*, who apparently assumes that Jacob's objection was rooted in a moral-halachic objection to the massacre itself, independent of the issue of the danger it might engender; I do not understand this assumption.

⁷ Abarbanel to Genesis, end of chapter 34. All translations of Abarbanel and other medieval sources are my own.

⁸ *Bechor Shor*, Genesis., 34:31.

⁹ *Genesis Rabbah*, *parashah* 98, cited by Rashi to Genesis 49:6.

¹⁰ Abarbanel, Genesis., 35:5.

He explains Jacob's deathbed critique to have been an objection to the massacre of the entire city, beyond the person of Shechem himself. In a remarkable inversion of the straightforward sense of the passage, he understands that pure, righteous rage would have been an entirely legitimate motivation for murderous revenge upon Shechem himself; what was unacceptable was the extension of their revenge to the entire city, which revealed their true motivation to have been vulgar avarice:

For in their rage they murdered people, i.e., if they had done that act in rage and fury at the desecration of honor, they should have killed Shechem alone, and I would then have conceded to them that *For in their rage they murdered that man*, but why did they kill the rest of the people of the city, given that they had entered the covenant of the L-rd? There is no doubt that they did not do this out of rage, since the men of the city did not sin in that affair, but *they hamstringed an ox*, i.e., the entire city, in order to steal its possessions ...¹¹

So according to Abarbanel, Simeon and Levi were justified in their basic decision to uphold the family honor by exacting bloody vengeance upon Shechem himself even at the risk of their lives, a point conceded by their father Jacob, and even G-d Himself.

A perspective similarly sympathetic to Simeon and Levi is found in Radak. In a very brief but quite pregnant comment summarizing the argument between Jacob and his sons, Radak writes:

And Jacob was characteristically (כמנהגו) terrified, but his sons were men of [stout] heart, to avenge the disgrace upon their souls.¹²

We are told that a single word of a Rishon can convey vast meaning; Radak's use of the word כמנהגו is an acute and fascinating depiction of Jacob's character. There is a popular idea, based on the Biblical phrase תָּתֵן אֶמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב,¹³ that Jacob's key character trait was honesty.¹⁴ But a *peshat*-oriented reading of the book of Genesis suggests a very different signature characteristic of Jacob: anxiety, worry, and fear. The Bible records at least six instances of Jacob expressing such sentiments. In addition to our context, he worries about his father, Isaac, discovering his pretending to be Esau in order to obtain his blessing¹⁵; he is frightened

¹¹ Abarbanel to Genesis 49:6.

¹² Radak to Genesis 34:30.

¹³ Micah 7:20.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Yalkut Shimoni* #743.

¹⁵ Genesis 27:11-12.

of having slept in the abode of G-d and the gate of the heavens¹⁶; he is afraid of Laban stealing his (Laban's) daughters from him¹⁷; he is very frightened and distressed over the news that his brother, Esau, is heading toward him with four hundred men¹⁸; and he is terrified of what may befall his son Benjamin if he sends him to Egypt along with his brothers.¹⁹ Radak, then, is explaining that Jacob's fear of the consequences of Simeon and Levi's actions should be understood in the context of his characteristic fearfulness, while his sons were simply braver than he.

Radak is not alone in his assessment of Jacob as excessively fearful; no less an authority than Rambam had earlier taken this view:

It is not a condition of a prophet that he possess all the positive character traits, to the extent that he not be diminished by any flaw at all ... [Rambam proceeds to list a number of what he considers to be character flaws of various prophets] ... and so we have found regarding Samuel that he recoiled before Saul, and regarding Jacob that his heart melted from his encounter with Esau ...²⁰

Desertion: The Mortification of Being Hissed At

Abarbanel echoes his view that death with honor is preferable to life with disgrace in his commentary to the Biblical prescription of the officers' exhortation prior to battle:

“Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, and let him not melt the heart of his fellows, like his own heart.”²¹

An additional benefit of these announcements was due to the shame and humiliation that would attach to those who retreat in reaction to the announcement. Behind them, the entire House of Israel sees and mocks them, *they hiss and gnash their teeth*,²² until without a doubt they will refrain from retreating due to this, and they will say “Is it not better for us to die *on the high places of the*

¹⁶ Ibid., 28:17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31:31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 32:8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42:35-38. One might also include in this list Jacob's concern for the welfare of his sons and sheep in Shechem (ibid., 37:13-14).

²⁰ *Shemoneh Perakim LeHaRambam*, #7.

²¹ Deuteronomy 20:8.

²² From Lamentations 2:16.

field?"²³, and they will choose death rather than a life of perpetual infamy and disgrace.²⁴

Chivalry: Real Men Don't Fight Women and Children

Abarbanel's understanding of military honor extends to a code of chivalry: he maintains that fighting women and children is dishonorable:

It is the way of the strong that they do not battle against the weak, and it is therefore improper for a man of valor to lay a hand upon women and children and kill them, since they are very weak and have no power to defend themselves.

He proceeds to adduce the Talmudic version of Alexander the Great's encounter with the Amazons in support of his position:

"Alexander ... went on his campaign. He came to a certain town whose entire population was women, and he wanted to wage battle against them. The women said to him: It is not in your interest to fight us. If you kill us, people will say: Alexander kills women; and if we kill you, people will say: Alexander is the king whom women killed in battle. ..."²⁵

And they have said in the tractate of *Tamid*, regarding Alexander of Macedonia who conquered most of the Eastern portion of the world, that when he came upon the kingdom of women who are called Amazons, he did not lay a hand upon them and did not engage them in battle, saying that it is not right for a man like him to battle against women, but only against men, *mighty, who from old*,²⁶ and it is because of this that the Torah says to pillage the women and the children when [the city] does not surrender and not to kill them, except for the Seven Nations for the reason that I have mentioned.²⁷

²³ From Judges 5:18.

²⁴ Abarbanel to Deuteronomy, 20:8.

²⁵ *Tamid* 32a. This and subsequent citations from the Talmud are from R. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz's translation, in the William Davidson Talmud, via Sefaria.

²⁶ An allusion to Genesis 6:4. The verse reads "הַמְּגֵרִים הַגְּבֻרִים אֲשֶׁר מֵעוֹלָם אֲנָשֵׁי הַשָּׁמַיִם" —*They were the mighty who, from old, were men of devastation.*" The sense of Abarbanel's *melitzah*, which cites only the fragment אֲשֶׁר מֵעוֹלָם הַגְּבֻרִים, is unclear.

²⁷ Abarbanel to Deuteronomy, Ch. 20, s.v. *bataanah hasheinis hi, shemiderech hagiborim*.

Chivalry: Speaking for the Trees

Abarbanel similarly interprets the Bible's obscure explanation of the rationale for the prohibition against cutting down fruit trees as an admonition to the strong against engaging the weak in combat:

כִּי־תִצּוֹר אֶל־עֵיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיָהּ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁקִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ לְגָדֶם
עָלֶיךָ גֵּרְזֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאַתָּה לֹא תִכָּרֵת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לֵבֵא מִפְּנֵיךָ
בַּמִּצְוָה:²⁸

It is improper to do battle with trees, but only with men, for it is improper for the strong to exert himself to do battle against the weak, and this is [the sense of the phrases] *and you shall not cut it down* — for it is a tree, and has no hands to do battle. *Is the tree of the field a man?*, i.e., is the tree of the field a man capable of entering the siege before you, for which reason you will destroy it? This is not the case, for the tree of the field is not a man that might enter the siege, and it is therefore improper to cut it down.²⁹

A Fair Fight Vs. a Millstone to the Head

In a similar vein, Abarbanel maintains that losing a fight is shameful, but only if the fight is “fair.” The tyrant Avimelech, upon being fatally injured by a millstone cast upon his head by a female defender of a fortress he was preparing to burn, directs his attendant to kill him, “lest they say of me, ‘A woman killed him.’”³⁰ Abarbanel considers Avimelech’s perspective ridiculous; being killed by a woman would indeed be infamous, but only were this to occur in fair, hand-to-hand combat on the field of battle, and not in this context:

This was truly a great folly of his, for the infamy of *a woman killed him* is only if he fights fairly with a woman, *hand to hand he will not be exonerated*³¹ if a woman shall overpower him with her strength, but if a stone is dropped upon his head from a tower, of what import is it whether it was done by a woman or a man, and what is the infamy in this?³²

²⁸ Deuteronomy 20:19. I have left this verse untranslated since even its basic meaning is the subject of great dispute among the commentators.

²⁹ Abarbanel to Deuteronomy, *ibid.*, s.v. *vehasibab hasbeinis*.

³⁰ Judges 9:50-54.

³¹ An allusion to Proverbs 11:21.

³² Abarbanel to Judges, end of chapter 9.

Cowardice: The Mutilation of Adoni-bezek

The converse of Abarbanel's reverence of honor is his contempt for cowardice, which receives horrific expression in his justification of the mutilation of Adoni-bezek:

They found Adoni-bezek in Bezek, and battled against him, and they struck down the Canaanite and the Perizzite. Adoni-bezek fled and they chased after him. They seized him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. Adoni-bezek said: "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to glean under my table; as I did, so G-d requited me."³³

This account is problematic on two levels: within the Biblical context itself, such dismemberment of a vanquished enemy is unique, and from our modern perspective, such behavior seems immoral and a violation of the laws and norms of war.

Of course, pre-modern thinkers were not necessarily bothered by the latter problem. Gersonides, for example, seems perfectly comfortable with his conception of the mutilation as state terrorism:

And they cut off the thumbs of Adoni-bezek and his toes to provoke [psychic] weakness in the other kings, so that they would fear waging war against Israel, in addition to this having been brought about by G-d, may He be blessed, to repay him measure for measure as [Adoni-bezek himself] noted: "As I did, so G-d requited me."³⁴

A more modern thinker such as Malbim, however, does acknowledge the legally problematic nature of the mutilation, as well as its irregularity:

And they cut off ... G-d thus inspired them to do to him what they did not do to any of their other enemies, and it is somewhat against the laws of Israel, for the killing of the Seven Nations is by the sword, [but] not to torture them in this manner. But G-d repaid him measure for measure.³⁵

Abarbanel, while also invoking the notions of Divine Providence and measure for measure requital mentioned by the other commentators, gives as his primary justification for the mutilation a unique reason of his own: Adoni-bezek had committed the unforgivable sin of cowardice by fleeing the battle:

³³ Judges 1:5-6.

³⁴ Gersonides, *ibid.*

³⁵ Malbim, *Shfot HaShofim*, *ibid.*

And the king, in the weakness of his heart, fled, and they pursued him and cut off his thumbs and big toes, and I understand the reason for this to be that since he was the king, it was not proper for him to flee the battle, and it would have been better for him to die in battle than to survive it in a life of contempt and accursedness, with the loss of his kingdom and everything he had, and therefore since he fled and did not give battle they cut off his hands, because he did not battle and perform heroism with them, and his feet, because he fled with them. And this was also due to the providence of the L-rd, may He be blessed, to dispense to him the requital of his actions, as he had done to the other kings, as has been mentioned.³⁶

Lords and Lieges: The Tragedy of Don Roderic and Don Julian

We close by considering one final discussion of Abarbanel that touches on the subject of honor, although the “disgraceful” action in question is one that is certainly as reprehensible from a “guilt” perspective as it is from a “shame” one.

Abarbanel famously insists on taking the story of King David and Bathsheba at face value, dismissing *Chazal’s* ameliorative explanations as tendentious revisionism:

“Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said that Rabbi Yonasan said: Anyone who says that David sinned with Bathsheba is nothing other than mistaken, as it is stated: “And David succeeded in all his ways; and the Lord was with him” (I Samuel 18:14). Is it possible that sin came to his hand and nevertheless the Divine Presence was with him?”³⁷

And these things of our Sages of blessed memory are in the manner of *derash*, and I have nothing to respond to them, and it suffices [to infer from] that which they said “Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who descends from the house of David, seeks to teach [the verse] in favor of David,” that they considered this to be in the manner of *derash*, and Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi deviated from the truth of the matter due to his family connection and the fact that he was of the Davidic lineage, and not according to the truth.³⁸

Earlier in his discussion, Abarbanel lays out multiple indictments of King David’s conduct:

³⁶ Abarbanel, Judges, *ibid.*

³⁷ BT *Shabbos* 56a.

³⁸ Abarbanel, II Samuel, toward the end of chapter 11.

And the truth is, the *peshat* indicates that this act [of King David] was very disgraceful, from five perspectives. First, that David sinned with a married woman and slept with his friend's wife, and it is without a doubt more disgraceful for a king to sleep with the wife of his subject, and thus curse and destroy him, and *a fortiori* when [the subject] is occupied with his service and fighting his wars. Have you not seen what developed in Spain in the days of the King Don Rodrigo, that due to the fact that he slept with the daughter of the general Julian, who was residing in Sabtah [Ceuta], [the latter] brought all the Ishmaelites [i.e., Muslims / Arabs] from across the sea, and they took and captured all of Spain to exact his revenge from that king who had slept with his daughter.³⁹

What Abarbanel takes for granted to be authentic history is today considered a mythical account of the background of the Battle of Guadalete, the beginning of the Umayyad conquest of Hispania in the early eighth century of the Common Era. Don Roderic, the last king of the Goths [Visigoths], was an actual historical figure, but the tragic legend of his perfidy and its consequences is apparently largely mythical, recorded in poems, prose, operas, and even a musical, by the likes of Walter Scott, Robert Southey, George Frideric Handel, and Washington Irving (among others).⁴⁰ To Abarbanel, however, the searing lesson of the tragic consequences of such an arrantly dishonorable betrayal of a subordinate by his lord is a standard against which he can measure the Biblical King David and find him wanting.

³⁹ Ibid., earlier in chapter 11.

⁴⁰ See Wikipedia contributors. (2018, July 11). Roderic. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 16:57, September 26, 2018, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Roderic&oldid=849790765> and Wikipedia contributors. (2018, July 18). Battle of Guadalete. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 16:58, September 26, 2018, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Battle_of_Guadalete&oldid=850935697.

Appendix: The *Desafío*⁴¹

Abarbanel discusses dueling in the context of the fight of David versus Goliath. Although his discussion is not really germane to our theme, since it concerns dueling in the sense of single combat or trial by combat, with the goal of resolving a factual, legal, or moral question, as opposed to an “affair of honor,” where the combat (somehow) serves to preserve or restore one’s honor, we cite it here due to its interest and loose connection to our topic.

Abarbanel describes dueling (in heavily *melitzab*-infused prose) as follows:

A practice that is still today the custom in the lands of Christendom and Islam, that when there is a dispute between men, between law and law [...] matters of dispute,⁴² and the resolution is unclear, they agree to engage in combat, and they say that G-d the Judge shall judge between them, for He knows the hidden things of the heart and there is no forgetfulness and no tendentiousness before Him,⁴³ and they agree that he whom G-d shall choose and shall emerge victorious over the other to do with him as he wills and shall be successful, all the inhabitants of the world⁴⁴ will recognize and know that all the words of his mouth are with righteousness⁴⁵ since with Him are might and sagacity,⁴⁶ and if a fallen one falls,⁴⁷ his blood guilt shall be upon his own head,⁴⁸ and no-one shall save him from him, but he shall die with bitter soul, for he is wicked in his quarrel.

So, too, when nations gather together, camp against camp, sometimes they choose a man between them, one man each, two men fighting,⁴⁹ they put their lives in their hands⁵⁰ to fight for their na-

⁴¹ Abarbanel uses the non-Hebrew words *דישאפיו* and *ריקטו* to denote “duel.” The former is *desafío*, “challenge” in Spanish; I have been unable to figure out the precise meaning (or even intended language) of the latter.

⁴² Deuteronomy 17:8.

⁴³ *Avos* 4:22.

⁴⁴ Isaiah 18:3.

⁴⁵ Proverbs 8:8.

⁴⁶ Job 12:16.

⁴⁷ Deuteronomy 22:8.

⁴⁸ An allusion to Joshua 2:19.

⁴⁹ Exodus 2:13.

⁵⁰ I Samuel 19:5 and elsewhere.

tions, each is attached to the other,⁵¹ and according to their word shall be every grievance and every plague.⁵²

He relates having heard that Christian scholars disagreed over the propriety of dueling: its defenders adduced the precedent of the combat between “David, the anointed of the G-d of Jacob” and Goliath, while its critics argued that dueling in general has no theological rationale, since G-d’s ways are subtle and mysterious, and it is therefore naive to assume that G-d will necessarily grant victory to the deserving combatant. They assume that David acted according to a specific Divine instruction communicated via prophecy (either directly to himself, or to another prophet).

Abarbanel himself basically agrees with the latter view, declaring that:

It is Torah and justice that have been chosen for us as the means of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, and not that men should cut themselves with swords and spears.⁵³

But he also fundamentally rejects the assumption shared by both Christian schools of thought that the combat in question actually constituted a duel, arguing at length that it did not meet the formal and rigid conditions required of a proper duel:

1. A duel can only be fought to settle a contested point (of fact or law), and no such contest existed between David and Goliath or between Israel and the Philistines.
2. The precise terms of a duel must be prearranged, properly recorded, and attested to by witnesses, none of which was done by Israel or the Philistines.
3. The participants in a duel must bear weapons and armor of the same type, dimensions, and weight. Goliath fought heavily armed and armored, whereas David wore no armor and bore merely a stick, sling, and stones. (Abarbanel construes the inequality to have been in David’s favor: David planned to shoot a stone at Goliath from a distance, intending that “if he struck him, good, and if not, he would take to his feet and flee and run for his life, and Goliath would be unable to run after him.”)
4. A duel needs judges and arbiters to ensure fair play and the participants’ compliance with the duel’s terms “for otherwise, a

⁵¹ Job 41:9.

⁵² Deuteronomy 21:5. Abarbanel to I Samuel, Chapter 17.

⁵³ I Kings 18:28.

man could do whatever seemed proper in his eyes.”⁵⁴ This condition, too, was not satisfied by David and Goliath’s combat (as evidenced by the fact that the Philistines indeed did not abide by Goliath’s promise that were he to be defeated, the Philistines would be slaves to Israel). ❧

⁵⁴ Judges 17:6 and 21:25.