

The Book of Judges

Lesson 27 - Chapters 20 and 21 (End of Book)

Today marks the end of the book of Judges for us, and we're going to move fairly rapidly through Judges chapters 20 and 21 as it is mostly a self-explanatory historical account of perhaps the worst atrocity committed by Hebrews that is recorded in the Bible. Our next study will be the book of Ruth because the time of Ruth was during the period of the Judges.

Last week we studied the gut-wrenching story of a Levite man and his unnamed concubine who lived in the hill country of Ephraim. The time frame is perhaps 20 years (more or less) after Joshua died. The couple got into some type of serious argument that led to the woman leaving her husband and going home to her father that lived in Bethlehem. After the Levite thought it over, he decided she was worth winning back so he journeyed the substantial distance from his home to retrieve her (if she was willing to come back). She was, there was reconciliation, and so they (along with a servant the Levite brought with him for a traveling companion) began their journey home and stopped the first evening in the city of Gibeah.

Gibeah was tribal territory belonging to Benjamin. The Levite had the option of stopping a couple of hours earlier as they passed near **Jevus** (later called **Yerushalayim**), but because in that era **Jevus** was still controlled by one of the many Canaanite peoples he decided to keep going a little farther so they could overnight among fellow Hebrews. Big mistake.

After arriving at the city of Gibeah and no Benjamite offering the customary hospitality (that was actually a sacred duty of the residents more than it was a nicety) an old man that was sojourning for awhile in Gibeah noticed the threesome and offered his home as a safe place to stay. But no sooner had they gone inside did a crowd of worthless men gather and demand that the old man send out his houseguest (the Levite man) so they could have homosexual sex with him. The old man was in an impossible position, as he didn't have the means to defend himself or his hosts from these men, as he was duty bound to do according to Middle Eastern custom. Therefore in eerie reminder of Lot and the city of Sodom story, he offered to send out his own unmarried daughter as well as the Levite's concubine for them to have their way with.

While the old man and the Levite huddled inside in fear, all night long the Benjamite men of Gibeah raped and otherwise tortured the concubine until later when they were through with her she crawled back and died outside the old man's doorway. The Levite packed her body onto one of the two donkeys he brought with him from the hills of Ephraim and took her back to his home in Ephraim. But rather than giving her a proper burial, in outrage and anger, he cut her body up into 12 pieces and sent one piece to each of the 12 tribes as a message to ask Israel what they intended to do about such a horror that has happened to this woman and to him. At the center of it all was what would Israel do about a brethren tribe, Benjamin, which has

brought disgrace upon the entire Israeli nation and spiraled out of control. The answer was not long in coming. That is what we are going to read about now.

To best understand the response of Israel and what would happen next, we're going to read all of chapters 20 and 21 consecutively and without stopping.

READ JUDGES CHAPTERS 20 AND 21 **all**

Verse 1 says that **all** the people of Israel answered the call to do something about the murder of the Levite's concubine by some wicked Benjamites. It also makes the point that despite the tension that existed between the 2 ½ tribes who had elected to make their homes east of the Jordan River and the 9 ½ who had entered the Promised Land with Joshua and settled there as they were supposed to, the warriors from Gilead also responded to the call. Gilead was technically a specific area occupied by the tribes of Gad and Manassah in the Trans-Jordan, but it was also used as a general term at times to refer to all the members of those 2 ½ tribes. The writer (or better editor) of the book of Judges uses the term "from Dan to Beer-sheva" to mean all of Israel. This makes the subtle point that this narrative was written AFTER Dan had migrated to the north of Israel and conquered the city of Layish. But because there is constant mention of the phrase, "at that time there was no king in Israel", it is also obviously making the point in relation to a time that Israel DID have a king. So this was very likely written during the era of Kings Saul, David, or Solomon.

Let me reiterate that it was Hebrews from the tribe of Benjamin who wanted to homosexually gang rape the Levite man, but then accepted his concubine to somewhat assuage their perverted sexual appetites. And they weren't satisfied until they killed her in the process. But I find it equally appalling that the Levite's response to all this (which was to butcher his concubine's corpse) was apparently considered justifiable when in fact the Levite ought to have been prosecuted for such a ghoulis dismembering of her. But such was the condition of Israel at that time and generally throughout the period of the Judges that there is no hint of objection to his actions.

Verse two explains that 11 of the tribes gathered at Mitzpah; this was considered a holy convocation to engage in a kind of Holy War (even though we can't really give it an official Holy War status) and thus the Hebrew words used to describe it are **kahal ha edah** meaning the congregation of the people. This phrase is generally reserved for a gathering of the people of Israel to worship God. 400,000 armed men showed up; this is further proof of the early date of this event (even though it was not written about until perhaps 300 years later) because Israel still had a sense of unity about it (a holdover from the days of Joshua). As you have already learned from reading about the **Shophetim** (Judges) of Israel, during their day (beginning with Othniel) Israel was very divided and each tribe generally cared only for themselves.

The tribal prince of Benjamin had no doubt also received a portion of the concubine's body in expectation that he and his tribe would want to join their brethren in punishing the men of Gibeah; but the leadership of Benjamin chose to harbor the murderers instead; so of course they knew what was going on and that the other tribes were gathering for war.

Once everyone was gathered at Mitzpah the tribal elders of Israel asked the aggrieved Levite to tell his story to them as a group so they would all have the same information. Not surprisingly he lied; the Levite told them that the men of Gibeah wanted to kill him, which was not the case at all, so things started off on bad footing.

Verse 8 is essentially the making of an oath before God by the 11 tribes; and it was that they would not return to their homes without taking retribution on Benjamin. As an aside what the Scripture actually says is they will not return to their **ohel** or their **bayith**. **Ohel** means “tent”, and **bayith** means dwelling or house made of stone, brick or wood. Thus again proof of how soon after entering Canaan this occurred, because many of Israel had not yet conquered their territories fully and were still living in goatskin tents like they used during their exodus journey (while others indeed were living in stone dwellings).

Apparently a protracted battle with Benjamin was anticipated because the first thing the leaders of the 11 tribes did was to agree to assign 10% of their men the task of establishing a supply line to the fighters. Benjamin was already known as among the best and most fierce and stubborn warriors of Israel and the 11 tribes were not about to take them for granted just because of the large advantage in numbers that they enjoyed. But Benjamin had another advantage that we'll explore shortly: terrain.

Without doubt this grand meeting at Mitzpah was but a formality as they would never have mustered their armies and marched them there if it was only to have a discussion; their collective minds were made up before they ever left home. But, since the goal was to punish the guilty, the next thing that happened was that runners were sent to various of the clan leaders of Benjamin with the message to hand over the men of Gibeah for proper justice: execution. But instead Benjamin refused to either invoke justice on their own (as they should have since what those men of Gibeah did was patently against the Laws of Torah and they committed a capital crime), nor would they allow the 11 tribes to do it for them. Instead they chose to fight against their brethren on behalf of these degenerates for no other reason than they were also Benjamites.

So here we see another side to tribalism, and a little later on in this story yet another decision will be made to illustrate that ancient mindset. It is that above all tribes remain loyal to themselves and do not easily accept outside interference, even from a brother tribe. Although tribes (that are always divided up into clans) would regularly have blood feuds going on amongst themselves, God forbid an outsider would want to inject their influence into the matter. Just watch the evening news about the goings on in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, and other places in the Orient where tribalism still rules and you'll see this exact pattern dominating to this very day. It is nigh on to impossible for Westerners to wrap our minds around this foundational cultural aspect of the Middle East, but we can learn all about it simply by proper study of the Bible because it was the same then as now. Understand: it is Islam's intent to return the entire globe to tribal governance. So if you still think it wise to consider peace through appeasement with Islam, you might want to realize the end result first.

Benjamin gathered their fighting men together for war; 26,000 of them. Remember; a fighting man was generally regarded to be someone from around 20 years of age to perhaps 50.

Those younger and older men of Benjamin were NOT counted in this 26,000.

Verse 14 begins with a poor translation in our CJB's; it says there that the "people of Benjamin" gathered and went to Gibeah to fight. What it says in Hebrew is that the "**ben**" of Benjamin gathered and went to Gibeah to fight. In the passage just before it also alludes to the "**ben**" of Israel. The thing is that while it certainly makes sense just the way it is, this is actually an expression. Used in this context, saying "the children of Benjamin" didn't mean all the people of Benjamin, nor did it mean merely "sons", nor certainly did it mean non-adults. Rather the idea is that these are the representatives of Benjamin, or earlier, representatives of Israel; they do NOT constitute ALL. In fact it is an endearing saying meaning that they are doing a service on behalf of their tribe or nation.

In addition to the 26,000 fighters of Benjamin were 700 Benjamite men of the city of Gibeah (many who would have been the criminals who killed the concubine) giving a combined total of 26,700 soldiers. The additional reference to the 700 left handed stone slingers were only a special group of Benjamites within that 26,700. And this is no small thing: those 700 stone slingers were deadly accurate and the stronger men could sling stones that weighed up to a pound each at 90 m.p.h. speeds!

It's helpful to notice that the 400,000 soldiers of the combined Israelite army only represented 2/3rds of the size of the available army under Joshua so there were reserves if needed. However Benjamin was outnumbered almost 20 to 1 so I imagine such a need was not even remotely contemplated. With the battle lines and forces set and described the assault began, but not before the army of Israel went up to Beit-El to consult with God. First, the entire army would not have moved to Beit-El, only the commanders. But second, why go to Beit-El at all? Well there is a much disagreement among scholars over this matter; however as time goes on evidence mounts to explain it, and it has to do with the location of the Wilderness Tabernacle.

When Israel first arrived in Canaan the Tabernacle was first set up in Shechem; a while later it was moved to Shiloh, but only briefly before it was moved to Beit-El. After some time it was moved back to Shiloh from Beit-El and it remained there for several hundred years. So we've arrived at the point in time (in this particular story) of the era when the Sanctuary (and therefore the central religious authority, the Priesthood) was located in Beit-El. Thus we see in verse 18 that the main reason they went to Beit-El was to inquire about how to proceed in battle (something they remembered from the days of Joshua); so it says that they asked God how to proceed and the answer to their question was, "Judah first". But did God actually audibly speak His answer to somebody in this situation? No; it was that the Urim and Thummim as carried and operated by the High Priest were consulted and the two sacred stones indicated God's specific will. We don't know exactly how the stones indicated the divine answer (possibly by lot or maybe by one or the other of the 2 stones glowing) but in no way did they speak God's voice or was any other audible means employed that is recorded. So in this story when we see such responses as "Judah should go first", it is not that these are YHWH's words it is that this is the indicated result of the questions to the Urim and Thummim.

Having received their answer the army attacked Gibeah with Judah in the lead; they were slaughtered, presumably with Judah taking the brunt of the casualties. 22,000 of the Israelite

army's soldiers were killed. How could Benjamin do so much damage against such great odds? Well for one thing the terrain worked for them. Gibeah is located in hilly country and thus it favored the defense. No matter how many soldiers Israel had available, only a small portion of them could approach the city to assault it while the bulk of the forces waited their turn as replacements for the fallen. But no soldier is anxious to throw himself into battle over the strewn bodies of his comrades; so they skulked away defeated.

The leaders of the army went back to Beit-El and wept and beseeched Yehoveh for the reasons why they failed, given that they seemed to have His backing and followed His instructions. They again consulted God (by means of the High Priest and the two stones), and asked if they should attack once more; the answer was "yes". After regrouping they prepared for another attack upon Gibeah. Even though it says that this occurred on the 2nd day, it doesn't mean the day after the 1st battle. It simply means the 2nd time they battled, and several days (or even weeks) could have passed in between the 1st and 2nd battles. They were again defeated and Israel lost an additional 18,000 men.

So in verse 26 we find Israel trudging back to Beit-El, tails between their legs, dismayed and confused but not ready to give up. This time they took a different approach to inquiring of God. They fasted and they offered sacrifices and then again asked God what to do. The answer was unequivocal: attack Gibeah one more time. But the Lord communicates that this time it will be different, this time Benjamin will fall to the sword. The Israelites were contrite before God; they now understood that repentance and humility were needed to properly approach the Creator of all things and that numbers alone never guarantees success. So they switched tactics and instead of a direct frontal assault upon Gibeah they planned an ambush much in the same mold as was used in the battle for Ai as led by Joshua.

Here we find that the war priest for Israel was none other than Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron whose resolute action of using a spear to run through the Midianite woman and Hebrew man who were having intercourse inside the camp of Israel, killing them both, saved Israel from God's wrath. Phinehas' bold action (when everyone else was paralyzed or utterly disinterested) atoned for Israel's rebellion before the Lord and ended a divine plague that had already killed 24,000 Israelites. This Phinehas is one of the more unrecognized OT bible heroes. He had taken a lead role in the war against Midian and acted as a mediator during a time when the 2 ½ tribes east of the Jordan were suspected of disunity and apostasy due to the erection of a memorial altar. Interestingly like Moses, he had been given an Egyptian name for some reason. **Pe-nehasi** is the Egyptian pronunciation and it means "Nubian" or more appropriate for this situation "the dark skinned one". Just as Moses' given Egyptian name was Mose and it later was Hebraized to Mosheh (and then English-ized to Moses) so **Pe-nehasi** was later Hebraized to Peh-nehk-aws (and we say Fin-e-has in English). Bottom line: Phinehas was a noticeably darker skinned man than the average olive-skinned Hebrew.

The 3rd attack upon Gibeah commences just like the previous two. The Benjamites assumed that since the method of assault seemed the same they could expect the same result. What they didn't know was that this was a trick; when it appeared that the Israelites were being routed they turned and ran and the warriors of Benjamin gave chase. Once they were a fair distance outside of Gibeah's defensive walls, a hidden company of Israelites stole into the city

and captured it and burned it. When the Israelites who were running away saw the thick black clouds of smoke rising upward, that was the signal for them to turn around and begin attacking the Benjamites who were pursuing them. With their city captured, and caught in a vise between two forces, the army of Benjamin was doomed. 18,000 men of Benjamin died defending Gibeah, and the rest ran to try and save their lives but the warriors of Israel were ready for that and easily caught up to them and killed them. 5,000 fled towards the Rock of Rimmon (Rimmon means Pomegranate tree) and were slaughtered on the road; another 2,000 headed for the city of Gidom and were also killed. 600 more made it to the Rock of Rimmon and hid there for 4 months, and thus survived.

After this the Israeli army executed every last man, woman, child, and even all the livestock that had anything to do with Gibeah. The tribe of Benjamin lay on the verge of complete extinction.

Let's move on to chapter 21.

Some time passed, the heat of the battle was over, and the victorious Israelites had time to think over what had transpired; and they fell into grief over it. They reflected on what the results of their actions meant for the future of Israel and they repented. Even though it was Benjamin who necessitated this war by their outrageous position of defending the deranged men of Gibeah who turned to homosexuality and behaved exactly as the heathen of Sodom (and at the time it must have seemed reasonable that just as God annihilated Sodom that the same justice upon Gibeah was in order), perhaps Israel had gone too far.

We've talked about the issue of swearing oaths and making vows in God's name, and how it is such a dangerous undertaking. We moderns like to think otherwise, but we really don't take these oaths and vows all that seriously in general. But to the ancient, it was unthinkable to violate an oath or a vow because the consequence was probably going to be devastating and long lasting. So making a rash oath or vow is a doubly bad idea; but Israel now realized that they had done just that before they had even shot one arrow in anger at Benjamin.

As the Israelite force of 400,000 gathered in Mitzpah in war council before heading towards Gibeah, they had made a vow that sounded good but now faced them with a terrible dilemma. The vow was that no one from any of the 11-tribe coalition would allow his daughter to marry a Benjamite. The problem was that a mere 600 men remained of Benjamin, and with no women to bear children for them the line of Benjamin would end. As bad as that sounds to us, it was horrific to the mind of the ancient Hebrew. That one of Jacob's sons would lose his place among the family of Hebrews was too awful to contemplate. In tribal society, it is one thing for inter-related tribes to war and kill amongst themselves in order to punish or achieve dominance; it is quite another to kill off an entire bloodline and this was usually avoided at all costs.

When the victorious Israelites realized that the utter demise of Benjamin was a very real probability now, they went before God (back up in Beit-El) and wept and asked for forgiveness as well as trying to understand why God might allow such a thing to happen. They offered sacrifices of repentance to Yehoveh and sought a solution. They absolutely could NOT break

their vow of refusing to give Benjamin their daughters for marriage and child bearing, so how do they keep Benjamin from extinction? Verse 7 sums up the problem very well: "**How are we going to obtain wives for those who remain alive, since we've sworn by ADONAI that we won't let our daughters marry them?**"

They find an answer to the problem in a very convoluted and unexpected way, and it starts with Israel's search to find out if any clan of Hebrews had failed to show up to contribute to the war effort. It turns out that the people of the city of **Jabesh-Gilead** (meaning the people who lived in the city of **Jabesh** in the territory of Gilead, east of the Jordan) did not answer the call. Understand: this was in violation of a much earlier and perhaps more fundamental oath; and that oath was that all of Israel was united under the God and Laws of Moses and thus duty bound to act together as one in times of crisis. Jabesh were traitors to God and to Israel. Not only that, at the time of the war council in Mitzpah an oath was sworn that the punishment for whomever didn't participate in the war against Benjamin was to be killed.

A strike force of 12,000 was sent across the Jordan to take vengeance; everyone was to die except for girls of childbearing age who were virgins. These girls were to be captured and brought back to Shiloh; it turns out there were 400 of them. A plan was forming to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. First was to execute those of Jabesh in order to satisfy the vow of killing those who refused to participate, but second was to find wives for the remaining 600 men of Benjamin. These virgin girls of Jabesh would provide a good start to remedy the problem.

Let's back up just a bit. The 600 men were NOT all that remained of Benjamin. Some number of elderly and perhaps some infants and very young children remained alive. The key is that these 600 men were those of an age who were able to impregnate women. And the reason that the virgin girls of child bearing age were captured was that by being virgins, it made them desirable as wives and gave them many years in which to bear as many children as possible.

Let me show you another interesting thing: in verse 11 the order is given to "completely destroy" every man, woman and child of Jabesh-Gilead (except the virgins of course). What is usually translated (like in our CJB) as "completely destroy" is in Hebrew **herem**. That ought to be word that sounds familiar to you; it is in other places in the OT translated as "ban". Herem means to destroy something for the purpose of giving it to God. It is a Holy War term; it indicates that since the true commander of a Holy War is God Himself, then the spoils of war goes to Him alone. But how does one give the spoils of war to God? He says it is in the form of a kind of burnt offering. Thus the spoils must be destroyed and burned. In this way it is dedicated (banned) to God and at the same time the people cannot partake of it because it has all been destroyed.

So to the Israelites, they saw what they were about to do to the people of Jabesh-Gilead as a holy endeavor, and thus for them the killing of the people was under the law of herem. It was holy to their minds because it was carrying out an oath made before God to kill all who refused to participate in the war with Benjamin. Now, was this a good thing before the Lord? Hardly. It was just another case of men making a rash vow, and they would rather follow through with it (no matter what the consequences to others might be) than NOT following through and

accepting the consequences of their own sin of breaking that rash vow.

The 400 virgins of Jabesh were given to the lone male survivors of Benjamin, but that still left them 200 wives short. What to do? Well they came up with another clever plan. There was a festival to the Lord each year in Shiloh, and lots of women went to it. The young girls, especially the virgins, participated by dancing in the festival. Some leaders of the Israelites went to the leaders of the 600 remaining Benjamites and told them that if they'd go to Shiloh at festival time and hide, then when the virgins came to dance they could pounce upon them and cart them off for wives! The Israelites would be sure there was no interference and the men of Benjamin would be free to remove these girls back to the allotted territory of Benjamin.

Now, what happens when the fathers and other male family members of these stolen girls come to the leadership of Israel to complain about the theft of their daughters and seek justice? They would be told to do the leadership a favor, and just not react. Just let it be, because it was best for all Israel. Besides, they wouldn't be breaking their vow to God to not GIVE to Benjamin any daughter of Israel because their girls weren't given they were kidnapped! It's just that they chose not to retrieve them. Wow. It's no wonder so many Jews became lawyers.

Let me point out something that might go unnoticed, but it's important. The children born to the tribe of Benjamin from here forward were mixed. The 400 women of Gilead were mostly from the tribe of Manassah, but Gilead also consisted of some populations of Gad and Reuben. The remaining 200 women taken at Shiloh were some combination of members from the other 10 tribes. So even though the fathers of the next generation of Benjamites were generally themselves Benjamites by blood, not one mother of their children was a Benjamite by heredity. I've pointed out before that Israel is hardly a genealogically pure race with all genes coming from Abraham. Even Jacob, before he went to Egypt, acquired probably the largest part of his family during his stay at Shechem. It happened when his sons went on a raid of revenge for the rape of their sister Dinah, and in the process killed all the males of Shechem and captured all the females. In tribal society those foreign females would rapidly be assimilated into their captors' tribe. The women of Shechem were Hivites, not Hebrews, so the family of Jacob was of mixed race very early on. Then in Egypt there was much intermarriage, and thus the Torah tells us that a huge number of non-Hebrews (called a mixed multitude) followed Israel on their exodus. And here we see drastic action taken by Israel to save the tribe of Benjamin that resulted in all future Benjamites after the war at Gibeah being of mixed tribal blood of other Israelite tribes. No modern day Hebrew could ever possibly speak of purity of blood lines of his own tribe, let alone going back to Abraham or even Jacob. Rather the issue is of declared allegiance to the God of Israel, just like it is for us as both gentile and Jewish Believers in Messiah Yeshua.

One final thing, and we'll be done with the book of Judges. In the time of King Saul we're going to find an interesting relationship between Saul and the people of Gilead. When Ammon threatened the people of Gilead they turned to Saul for help. Later it would be the men of Gilead who recovered the bodies of Saul and his sons as their corpses hung on the walls of Beth-shan. Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin, and so we see how and why the tribe of Benjamin had a special bond with the people of Gilead; in point of fact they were closely

related by blood and it happened as the aftermath of the war with Benjamin.

The final words of the book of Judges ends most appropriately with: "At that time there was no king in Israel; a man simply did whatever he thought was right". I pray that we see that just as God was showing Israel that they needed a king so do we need a King, and His name is Yeshua. Unfortunately we are today reliving the time of the Judges; the state of Judeo-Christianity is as it was in the days Othniel, Debra, and Samson with every man doing what is right in our own hearts, doing deeds that seem pious and righteous outwardly and comfortable to us inwardly, but paying little heed to the actual Word of God.

This concludes our study on the book of Judges and next up is the book of Ruth.