



Judges - Chapter Nineteen

III Judges 17:1-21:25 - The Depths of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nineteen

These verses recount one of the most sordid stories in the Bible. The rape and murder of a Levite's concubine, and callous indifference lead to the death of an innocent woman and, eventually, to civil war.

III.b Judges 19:1-21:25 - Moral and Social Corruption

This second concluding section deals with outrageous actions perpetrated at Gibeah against a Levite's concubine and the aftermath of those actions. The story is similar to the assault on Lot's household in Sodom in Genesis Chapter 19, placing Gibeah on the same debased plane as Sodom: <<*Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord*>> (Genesis 13:13), <<*Their vine comes from the vine-stock of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter*>> (Deuteronomy 32:32), and: <<*The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves*>> (Isaiah 3:9).

This section is linked with the previous account in Judges Chapters 17-18 by Levites as protagonists in both (Judges 17:7 and 19:1); in the first section, a Levite from Bethlehem travels to the hill country of Ephraim, while in the second, a Levite from the hill country of Ephraim travels to Bethlehem to be reconciled with his concubine. One horror seems to lead inexorably to another, apparently with no way out, as the people's unfaithfulness takes its devastating toll.

III.b.i Judges 19:1-30 - Moral outrage at Gibeah

Refer to the chapter summary above.

III.b.i.1 Judges 19:1-21 - The Levite's Concubine

A Levite's concubine had returned to her father's house in Bethlehem following a domestic argument. Her husband went to reconcile her to himself and did so but his return journey to Ephraim was delayed by his father-in-law's extended hospitality. Eventually, he and his concubine commenced their homeward journey and came to Gibeah at nightfall. They were going to spend the night in the square when an old man saw them and offered them food and a bed for the night.

¹ In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.

Judges 19:1

In those days, when there was no king in Israel. This set the stage for the terrible story in the following chapters. No king in Israel meant more than the absence of a political monarch; it also meant that they refused to recognise God's leadership over them.

A concubine was a female servant or slave regarded as part of the family. Her usual function was childbearing to enlarge the family, as seen with Abraham's concubine Hagar (Genesis Chapter 16); Jacob's concubines Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 30:4-13); Caleb (1 Chronicles 2:46); King Saul (2 Samuel 3:7); King David (2 Samuel 5:13); King Solomon, who had 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3); and King Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 11:21). Significantly, this kind of family life is never blessed by God.

In Matthew 19:4-6 Jesus makes it clear that from the beginning God's plan was one man and one woman to be one flesh forever, and each man, especially those called to ministry, is to be a one-woman man: <<Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher>> (1 Timothy 3:2).

Bethlehem in Judah was also the origin of Micah's priest: <<Micah said to him, 'From where do you come?' He replied, 'I am a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to live wherever I can find a place'>> (Judges 17:9).

Introduction to Judges 19:2-9

An elaborate and extended ritual of hospitality is played out here: the Levite stayed in the home of his concubine's father for five days, on the insistent urging of the father. Strict codes of hospitality still play a part in many tribal Near Eastern cultures. The elaborate hospitality described here stands in sharp contrast to what follows in the ensuing episodes.

² But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for some four months. ³ Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. When he reached her father's house, the girl's father saw him and came with joy to meet him. ⁴ His father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him for three days; so they ate and drank, and he stayed there.

Judges 19:2-4

Her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. Here, the Levite was an example of how an offended spouse should act when there is a domestic dispute that leads to separation. Although it was the concubine who had broken the bond between them for whatever reason, he worked hard to bring the relationship back together and succeeded. Jesus said: <<***Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate***>> (Mark 10:9).

Although the woman was not his wife under law, the man was still considered to be her husband, with all the legal rights and responsibilities that come with marital status.

The girl's father saw him and came with joy to meet him. Perhaps the father was glad to see the Levite and his daughter back together, or perhaps the father was simply glad to have his daughter out of his house again. While under his roof, she was his responsibility and possibly a financial burden.

⁵ On the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, 'Fortify yourself with a bit of food, and after that you may go.' ⁶ So the two men sat and ate and drank together; and the girl's father said to the man, 'Why not spend the night and enjoy yourself?' ⁷ When the man got up to go, his father-in-law kept urging him until he spent the night there again. ⁸ On the fifth day he got up early in the morning to leave; and the girl's father said, 'Fortify yourself.' So they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate and drank. ⁹ When the man with his concubine and his servant got up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, 'Look, the day has worn on until it is almost evening. Spend the night. See, the day has drawn to a close. Spend the night here and enjoy yourself. Tomorrow you can get up early in the morning for your journey, and go home.'

Judges 19:5-9

On the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go. This portion explains why the Levite and his concubine were delayed in Bethlehem at the home of the concubine's father. He intended to leave on the fourth day, but was persuaded to stay one more night.

¹⁰ But the man would not spend the night; he got up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine was with him. ¹¹ When they were near Jebus, the day was far spent, and the servant said to his master, 'Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it.' ¹² But his master said to him, 'We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah.' ¹³ Then he said to his servant, 'Come, let us try to reach one of these places, and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah.' ¹⁴ So they passed by and went on their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. ¹⁵ They turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night.

Judges 19:10-15

But the man would not spend the night; he got up and departed. This explains why they left late in the day instead of early in the morning, which would normally be a more sensible time to depart for a long journey. Had they not been delayed and had left early in the morning then they would not have had to stop overnight in Gibeah and the resulting atrocity would not have occurred.

Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). Jerusalem was at this time in the hands of the Jebusites and so is referred to as a city of foreigners. The Levite and his concubine considered a pagan town too dangerous. They therefore went on to Gibeah, a city of Israel, because they thought they would be safer there.

Gibeah was about 4 miles or 6 km north of Jerusalem. Archæologists have discovered a massive-destruction level at the site of Gibeah from circa 1100 BC, which may correspond with the destruction in Chapters 19-20. The city was soon rebuilt, with an imposing rectangular fortress dating to the time of Saul. Gibeah was, in fact, Saul's hometown (1 Samuel 10:26). The Levite considered Gibeah a safer place to spend the night than Jerusalem, because it was a Benjaminite city; this, however, was a tragically fatal misjudgement.

No one took them in to spend the night. The Levite and his concubine found no hospitality in Gibeah. This reflects poorly on the people of Gibeah, because God commanded such hospitality among the people of God: <<*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God*>> (Leviticus 19:33-34), <<*If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens*>> (Leviticus 25:35), <<*for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me*>> (Matthew 25:35), and: <<*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it*>> (Hebrews 13:2). There is something wrong when there is no such hospitality among God's people.

¹⁶ Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. (The people of the place were Benjaminites.)

¹⁷ When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, 'Where are you going and where do you come from?' ¹⁸ He answered him, 'We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home. Nobody has offered to take me in. ¹⁹ We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more.' ²⁰ The old man said, 'Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square.' ²¹ So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

Judges 19:16-21

An old man residing in Gibeah. In a striking irony – and a commentary on the degenerate state of affairs in Israel – the Levite found hospitality, not from the residents of Gibeah, but from an outsider, a sojourner also from the hill country of Ephraim where the Levite also lived.

I am going to my home is literally 'I am going to the house of the Lord,' which indicates that his home may have been located in Shiloh, the location of the Tabernacle at that time: <<*So they maintained as their own Micah's idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh*>> (Judges 18:31).

III.b.i.2 Judges 19:22-30 - Gibeah's Crime

The hospitality offered by Gibeah was no hospitality at all; it was the hospitality of Sodom (Genesis Chapter 19), an outrageous affront to the Levite and especially to his concubine. This section closely echoes Genesis 19:4-9; indeed, it is likely that the author intentionally patterned this text after the Genesis account, as if to say, "Things are as bad now as they were in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah!"

The Levite's matter of fact reaction to his concubine's death illustrates his callousness. His gruesome response was to cut her into twelve pieces and send them around to the twelve tribes to rally them against Gibeah.

²² While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a depraved lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, 'Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.'

Judges 19:22

The men of the city, a depraved lot, is literally 'sons of Belial.' In the OT, the term Belial is used descriptively, speaking of perverted or worthless people: <<*Now then, hand over those scoundrels in Gibeah, so that we may put them to death, and purge the evil from Israel.*' But the Benjaminites would not listen to their kinsfolk, the Israelites>> (Judges 20:13), <<*But some worthless fellows said, 'How can this man save us?' They despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace*>> (1 Samuel 10:27a), and: <<*The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, 'Naboth cursed God and the king.'* So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death>> (1 Kings 21:13). In intertestamental literature, the term was used of Satan, and this is Paul's meaning: <<*What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever?*>> (2 Corinthians 6:15).

Surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. The verb form of the term pounding on the door indicates that there was an increasingly loud and violent beating on the door. This was in no way a polite or casual request, and it is clear these men would not go away empty handed.

So that we may have intercourse with him is literally 'that we may know him'. The word 'know' was the normal Hebrew euphemism for sexual intercourse: <<*Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord'*>> (Genesis 4:1), thus the translation here. The same expression is found in Genesis 19:5, where the men of Sodom wanted to have homosexual intercourse with Lot's guests, not for the

purpose of sexual gratification but to humiliate and destroy the character of the man they would attack.

²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴ Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.'

²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. ²⁶ As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

Judges 19:23-26

Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now.

Although the perverted men of Gibeah were clearly guilty, so were the Levite and the host of the home. They clearly should have been willing to sacrifice themselves before their women.

- Each person in this sordid drama was guilty, except of course for the concubine herself.
- The wicked men of Gibeah who were more like men of Sodom and Gomorrah than men of Israel were supposed to be.
- The master of the house who was willing to sacrifice his own daughter, who also could have become an innocent victim here.
- The Levite who cared nothing for his concubine.

There is a clear indication that the men of Israel at that time did not value the lives of their womenfolk as they should have. They may have had the status as head of the household but it was God's intention that it should be a role of protection not of casual ownership.

They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning.

When describing the full meaning of the original Hebrew, Adam Clarke, due to modesty, did not translate the meaning into English. He left it in Latin so only the learned could understand the full implications of the wickedness and perversion of the men of Gibeah. Centuries later, Israel still remembered this crime at Gibeah, and used it as an example of wickedness: <<*They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah; he will remember their iniquity, he will punish their sins*>> (Hosea 9:9), and: <<*Since the days of Gibeah you have sinned, O Israel; there they have continued. Shall not war*

overtake them in Gibeah?>> (Hosea 10:9). One can easily see why the concubine had left her husband in the first place. She was virtually sacrificed to save his skin as the men sexually abused her all night.

²⁷ In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸ ‘Get up,’ he said to her, ‘we are going.’ But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home. ²⁹ When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. ³⁰ Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, ‘Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, “Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.”’

Judges 19:27-30

‘Get up,’ he said to her, ‘we are going.’ This is a painfully clear demonstration of the heartlessness of the Levite towards his concubine. Even if she had survived the ordeal of the night before she would have been in no fit state to travel but would have needed medical attention and rest.

He cut her into twelve pieces. This was an obviously grotesque and shocking way to deliver a message, but the method worked. It was tragic that the Levite did not show this kind of concern for righteousness earlier. Saul later did the same thing with a yoke of oxen: <<*He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!’ Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one*>> (1 Samuel 11:7); a similar practice is known from Mari, in Mesopotamia.

Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? It is unclear what was being referred to here: the outrageous actions of the men of Gibeah or the cutting up of the concubine, but it is more likely the former: <<*We will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the troops, who are going to repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the disgrace that they have done in Israel*>> (Judges 20:10).