

Judges 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Judges chapter 20. Then all the people of Israel came out from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled as one man to the Lord at Mizpah.

And the chiefs of all the people of all the tribes of Israel presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand men on foot that drew the sword. Now the people of Benjamin heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah, and the people of Israel said, Tell us, how did this evil happen? And the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. And the leaders of Gibeah rose against me, and surrounded the house against me by night. They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead. So I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel, for they have committed abomination and outrage in Israel. Behold you people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here. And all the people arose as one man, saying, None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. But now this is what we will do to Gibeah. We will go up against it by lot, and 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 people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel. So all the men of Israel gathered against the city united as one man, and the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What evil is this that has taken place among you? Now therefore give up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel. But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel. Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel.

And the people of Benjamin mustered out of their cities on that day twenty-six thousand men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered seven hundred chosen men. Among all these were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed. Every one could sling a stone at a hare and not miss.

And the men of Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand men who drew the sword. All these were men of war. The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God, Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin? And the Lord said, Judah shall go up first. Then the people of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah.

And the men of Israel went out to fight against Benjamin. And the men of Israel drew up the battle line against them at Gibeah. The people of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and destroyed on that day twenty-two thousand men of the Israelites. But the people, the men of Israel, took courage and again formed the battle line in the same place where they had formed it on the first day. And the people of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until the evening. And they inquired of the Lord, Shall we again draw near to fight against our brothers, the people of Benjamin? And the Lord said, Go up against them. So the people of Israel came near against the people of Benjamin the second day.

[3 : 19] And Benjamin went against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed eighteen thousand men of the people of Israel. All these were men who drew the sword. Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. And the people of Israel inquired of the Lord, for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days. And Phinehas the son of Eliezer, son of Aaron, ministered before it in those days, saying, Shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers, the people of Benjamin, or shall we cease?

And the Lord said, Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand. So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. And the people of Israel went up against the people of Benjamin on the third day, and set themselves in array against Gibeah, as at other times. And the people of Benjamin went out against the people, and were drawn away from the city. And as at other times they began to strike and kill some of the people in the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel, and the other to Gibeah, and in the open country about thirty men of Israel. And the people of Benjamin said, They are routed before us as at the first. But the people of Israel said, Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways. And all the men of Israel rose up out of their place, and set themselves in array at Baal Tamar. And the men of Israel, who were in ambush, rushed out of their place from Meir-e-Gebe. And they came against Gibeah ten thousand chosen men out of all Israel. And the battle was hard, but the Benjaminites did not know that disaster was close upon them. And the Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel. And the people of Israel destroyed twenty-five thousand one hundred men of Benjamin that day. All these were men who drew the sword.

So the people of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. The men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. Then the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah. The men in ambush moved out, and struck all the city with the edge of the sword. Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in the main ambush, was that when they made a great cloud of smoke rise up out of the city, the men of Israel should turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel. They said, Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle. But when the signal began to rise out of the city in a column of smoke, the Benjaminites looked behind them, and behold, the whole of the city went up in smoke to heaven. Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness. But the battle overtook them, and those who came out of the cities were destroying them in their midst. Surrounding the Benjaminites, they pursued them and trod them down from Nohah, as far as opposite Gibeah on the east. Eighteen thousand men of

Benjamin fell, all of them men of valour, and they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon. Five thousand men of them were cut down in the highways, and they were pursued hard to guide him. And two thousand men of them were struck down. So all who fell that day of Benjamin were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword, all of them men of valour. But six hundred men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months. And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin, and struck them with the edge of the sword. The city, men and beasts, and all that they found, and all the towns that they found they set on fire.

[6 : 59] In Judges chapter 19, after the death of the Levite's concubine, in a grisly scene the Levite chops her body into twelve pieces and sends them throughout the land of Israel. An extreme abomination had been committed in the land of Israel, and a collective response had to be given to it. Those guilty of this abomination, and anyone siding with them, had to be utterly cut off, lest the Lord's judgment come upon the nation as a whole. Even in the nation's fractured state, the Lord would deal with them as one covenant people, and where abominations in their midst were not adequately dealt with, the judgment of the Lord would fall upon the entire nation. Such a situation arose at the beginning of the book of Joshua, where the sin of one man, Achan, which was not addressed, led to the whole nation suffering consequences in the defeat at Ai. However, as we read chapter 20, it will be clear that the men of Gibeah are not the only guilty parties in this situation.

The united congregation of Israel assembles as one to Mizpah, although it seems that members of the tribe of Benjamin are absent. In front of the whole company, the Levite gives his account to what occurred at Gibeah. When, on occasions like this in scripture, events that have been related to us by a narrator are told to us again in the voice of one of the characters, it's important to compare and contrast. Where does the character place the emphasis in contrast to the narrator? What details are added? What details are excluded? Chapter 19 gave us a very negative portrayal of the Levite, especially in the second half. However, as the Levite describes the situation here, he presents himself as if he were the chief victim, and an innocent one at that.

I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night, and the leaders of Gibeah rose against me, and surrounded the house against me by night. They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead. The Levite here speaks about the death of the

concubine, as if it were a sin committed primarily against him. What's more, of course, he does not mention his own role within the situation, that he was the one who thrust her outside, that he was so callous towards her, and showed little concern to protect her from the mob. The people take the Levite's account at face value. There seems to be no cross-examination of him, or questioning of the details. So outraged by what they heard, the people of Israel determined that they must purge this evil from their midst.

In verse 10, they commit themselves to giving a tenth of their men to fight this battle against Gibeah. This tenth might make us think of the tithe, the portion of the people presented to the Lord to represent his claim upon them as a holy people to himself. Before they attack Gibeah, they give the Benjaminites the opportunity to purge the people who had committed this abomination from their midst.

If they'll only put the guilty parties to death, they could free themselves from any complicity in the matter. As we see in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, guilt in such matters spreads, and so it needs to be stopped as soon as possible. If those guilty of abominations are not cut off from a people, that whole people shares in their guilt. However, the Benjaminites are not receptive to the voice of the other tribes, and they join together to fight against the Israelites in defence of Gibeah. On account of their loyalty to bonds of blood, they betray the covenant of the Lord. They muster 26,000 men from among the tribe, and 700 men from Gibeah. Interestingly, we are told of 700 men who are left-handed slingers. There is, of course, a bit of humour in this fact, as the left-handed slingers are from a tribe named from its association with the right hand.

[10:30] It might also remind us of the character of Ehud back in chapter 3, another left-handed Benjaminite. The Benjaminites fighting for Gibeah do not come off well in the comparison with Ehud. Having mustered 400,000 men, the people of Israel enquire of the Lord as to who should go up first. They are told that Judah must lead them. This detail reminds us of the opening two verses of the book. After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel enquired of the Lord, who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites to fight against them? The Lord said, Judah shall go up. Behold, I have given the land into his hand.

While in chapter 1, Judah was leading the people in a battle against the Canaanites, here Judah is leading the people in a battle against one of their brothers, Benjamin. The next day they go out to battle against Benjamin at Gibeah, but the battle turns against them. They lose 22,000 people on that day. Dismayed at such a terrible loss of life, the people weep before the Lord and ask whether they should go up again the next day, and the Lord instructs them to do so. Yet the next day the situation is much the same. 18,000 fighting men of Israel are killed. At this point the whole army goes up to Bethel and weeps before the Lord as a company. They fast and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Clearly, although Benjamin is to be judged, there is great sin in their midst, and they are suffering too. They had given a tithe of the people of the land to fight the battle, 400,000 men, and now the Lord had taken a tithe from that, 40,000 men who had fallen on those first two days of battle.

Here we learn that Phineas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, is present with them. Phineas is most famous for events at the end of the book of Numbers in chapters 25 and 31. Most notably, in chapter 25, he had stopped a plague by zealously executing the Lord's wrath against a couple who were sinning flagrantly in front of the whole congregation, thrusting them through with a spear. Here he also has the task of leading the people as they seek to execute judgment and purge out evil from their midst. Inquiring again whether they should go out to battle the next day, the Lord instructs them to do so and promises that he will deliver the people of Benjamin into their hand on that day. The next day they change their approach. Essentially, they take the battle plan that Joshua followed against the city of Ai. In Joshua chapter 7, Israel was surprisingly defeated at the city of Ai on account of the sin of Achan, a wicked man in their midst who had committed a trespass, bringing the Lord's judgment upon them as a people. When they purged out Achan, the next assault upon the city of Ai was successful. On that occasion, they tempted the people of Ai out of the city to pursue them, while they had an ambush behind, who successfully invaded and burnt the city while its main force had been removed from it.

The similarity between the defeat of the cities of Gibeah and Ai might suggest that the story of Achan can offer insight into what's taking place here. Perhaps the Levite, who has not confessed his true sin, is like Achan in the midst of the people. Thinking that they were going to be successful against the Israelites as they had been in the previous two days, the Benjaminites went out and

pursued them, starting what they considered was another great slaughter of the Israelites. They killed about 30 of them before they realised what had happened. An ambush had been set, the city had been struck, and now they faced destruction themselves. In burning up the city and destroying all of its people, it's treated as one of the Canaanite cities. It had committed a Canaanite-type sin, a sin reminiscent of the sin of Sodom, and so it suffered a similar judgment. The destruction of the Canaanites was never primarily about ethnicity. It was about wickedness or righteousness. Persons within Israel who behaved like the Canaanites would suffer similar judgment. The Israelites surrounded the Benjaminites and pursued them. They were cut down in three different waves, 18,000 at first, then 5,000 of them as they fled on the highways, and then 2,000 more of them at Gidon. Altogether, 25,000 of them, rounded down, were killed.

[14 : 28] 600 of the Benjaminites then fled to the Rock of Rimon, where they remained for four months. James Bajon has done a lot of work on the numbers of the Book of Judges, and one of the things that he observes here is our struggle to make the numbers add up. We are given two different totals for the people who are killed on the third day, and clearly this is not a complete number of the Benjaminites who were killed in the whole battle, because there's a difference between the number of people who are mustered and the number of people who remain at the end, 600 men. Looking more closely, he observes that there is a difference of 900 between the 26,000 that were gathered out of Benjamin, not including the people of Gibeah, and the 25,100 people who were killed in the battle.

If we add the full numbers at the end, we also find a discrepancy between the 26,700 people that were totally mustered by Gibeah and Benjamin together, and the 25,600 men of Benjamin and Gibeah who are accounted for in the final verses. That difference is 1,100. These differences of 1,100 and 900 clearly remind us of the story of Micah and his mother and the stolen silver, but that is not the only place in the story where we see these numbers seemingly represented. The men of Israel who were killed on the first day were 22,000 men, 20 times 1,100. On the second day, 18,000, 20 times 900. The number of men killed on those two days together, 40,000, 200 squared. We've already noted the significance of the 1,100 in its connection with the story of Samson. Is it also significant in its relationship to the story that follows, the story of Gibeah? In chapter 17, we noted the question of where the money went. 1,100 pieces of silver were stolen, and when returned, 200 pieces of silver were given to the silversmith, presumably with 900 pieces of silver left over. Where did that money go to? As the rest of the book presents us with missing numbers and the struggle of adding things up, note the significance of the 200 brides in the next chapter to make up the full number of brides for the Benjaminites. We might also note that it was 200 shekels of silver that Achan stole in the story of Joshua. There's a further number in the story of chapter 18 that seems to connect with a number here. 600 men of Benjamin flee to the wilderness to the rock of Rimon. In chapter 18, 600 men of the Danites flee north. James Bajon also observes that while we have 600 Benjaminites gathered at the rock of Rimon here. In 1 Samuel chapter 14, Saul is on the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Migron with 600 men. Pomegranate is the same word as Rimon. Once again, the character of Saul is portrayed against the backdrop of Gibeah and the history of Benjamin that preceded him. A question to consider. At the beginning of chapter 19, the Levite's concubine fled to her father's house where she remained for four months.

Then when her husband went to get her back, he stayed there for three days and was tempted to stay for two more, being delayed until the fifth day. In chapter 20, it seems that we have one day of mustering, followed by two days of battle, bringing us to the third day, Israel having failed to defeat the Benjaminites on those days. Then a fourth day of mourning before the Lord and offering sacrifices, followed by a fifth day of battle where they are successful. This might remind us of the five days of tarrying at the house of the Levite's father-in-law. And then the four months at the beginning of the story, the period of time where the Levite's concubine was at her father's house, seems to be matched here with the four months that the Benjaminites spend at the Rock of Rimon. How might the beginning of this story help us to understand more fully the meaning of what happens at the end of it?