

Judges 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 19. In those days when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem and Judah. And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem and Judah, and was there some four months. Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys, and she brought him into her father's house. And when the girl's father saw him, he came with joy to meet him. And his father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and spent the night there. And on the fourth day they arose early in the morning, and he prepared to go. But the girl's father said to his son-in-law, Strengthen your heart with a morsel of bread, and after that you may go. So the two of them sat and ate and drank together. And the girl's father said to the man, Be pleased to stay the night, and let your heart be merry. And when the man rose up to go, his father-in-law pressed him, till he spent the night there again. And on the fifth day he arose early in the morning to depart.

And the girl's father said, Strengthen your heart and wait until the day declines. So they ate both of them. And when the man and his concubine and his servant rose up to depart, his father-in-law, the girl's father said to him, Behold, now the day has waned toward evening. Please, spend the night. Behold, the day draws to its close. Lodge here, and let your heart be merry, and tomorrow you shall arise early in the morning for your journey and go home.

But the man would not spend the night. He rose up and departed and arrived opposite Jebus, that is, Jerusalem. He had with him a couple of saddle donkeys, and his concubine was with him.

When they were near Jebus, the day was nearly over. 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. And his master said to him, We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel, but we will pass on to Gibeah. And he said to his young man, Come, and let us draw near to one of these places, and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah.

So they passed on and went their way. And the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. And they turned aside there to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. And he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night. And behold, an old man was coming from his work in the field at evening.

[2 : 3 6] The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was sojourning in Gibeah. The men of the place were Benjaminites. And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveller in the open square of the city. And the old man said, Where are you going, and where do you come from? And he said to him, We are passing from Bethlehem and Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem and Judah, and I am going to the house of the Lord, but no one has taken me into his house. We have straw and feed for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and your female servant, and the young man with your servants.

There is no lack of anything. And the old man said, Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants. Only do not spend the night in the square. So he brought him into his house and gave the donkeys feed, and they washed their feet and ate and drank. As they were making their hearts merry, behold the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house beating on the door.

And they said to the old man, the master of the house, Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him. And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, Know my brothers, do not act so wickedly, since this man has come into my house. Do not do this vile thing. Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now, violate them, and do with them what seems good to you. But against this man do not do this outrageous thing. But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. And 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. And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, Get up, let us be going.

But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey, and the man rose up and went away to his home. When he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine, he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. And all who saw it said, Such a thing has never happened, or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day. Consider it, take counsel, and speak.

The story of Judges chapter 19 and the subsequent chapters are some of the most shocking and appalling accounts in all of the scriptures. The callousness of the old host and the Levite, and the monstrous brutality of the men of Gibeah, leaves us feebly scrabbling for words by which to surmount our dumbfoundedness. Yet the actions of the old man and the Levite in chapter 19 are only some of the initial events in a litany of cruelties, crimes, and catastrophes, as the evils of that night in Gibeah exploded into a conflagration that engulfed the entire nation, and almost eradicated the tribe of Benjamin from Israel. Despite the violence and wickedness of Judges chapter 19 to 21, this dark passage in Israel's history is not excluded from the musical order of scripture. Rather, its true meaning is only perceived within the broader context established by that order, as within that order it is related to other events and times. Indeed, its presence at the end of Judges, although out of historical sequence, as we can see from the presence of Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron in the following chapter, serves to frame it as a narrative that climactically expresses the moral state of

[6 : 18] Israel. In such a manner it can bring the themes of the book to a head, much as the events of 2 Samuel chapter 24, although out of historical sequence too, serve to highlight the movement of the themes of the book towards the future establishment of the temple. Most attentive readers of this text will swiftly appreciate that it invites extensive comparison with the story of Lot and Sodom in Genesis chapter 19. In both cases, two visitors arrive at a wicked city in the evening. They plan to stay in the open square, but prevailed upon by a man of the city, whose origins were from outside of the city, they stay in his house instead, where they are fed and given something to drink. The house is then surrounded by men of the city who wish to rape the male visitor. The men of the city are resisted by the host, who offers two women to the crowd instead of the male guest. All of these things happen in both the book of Genesis chapter 19 and also in the book of Judges chapter 19. In both accounts there is a lot of attention given to the doorway as the threshold between safety and death, and to the contrast between the night and the dawn. In both cases the outcome is the guest's condemnation of the wicked city, leading to its utter destruction, the death of a woman at dawn, followed by an ill-fated or tragic attempt at repopulation. There are however noteworthy contrasts between these accounts.

Lot puts himself in a position of extreme danger to protect his guests, going out to the mob and addressing them directly. He offered his daughters to the crowd in an extreme last-ditch measure designed to protect his guests from this ritual humiliation. By contrast, the old man of Gibeah offered his daughter and the Levite's concubine one of his guests, and it's possible that the old man only originally extended hospitality to the Levite when he realised that he came from the same region as he did. In the end it was the concubine, a guest, who was cast out to the hostile mob.

Lot's sinful willingness to sacrifice his daughters was a wrong marginally mitigated by the fact that he was clearly motivated by the extreme demands of hospitality. The old man of Gibeah, who seemed to be in no personal danger, was prepared to sacrifice a guest. In Genesis chapter 19, the angelic guests protect those within the house and prevent Lot from coming to harm. Rather than allowing the mob to do whatever was right in their eyes, they struck the eyes of the crowd with blindness. The Levite, by contrast, does not act as a guardian, but is prepared to sacrifice his concubine for his own skin.

The Levite is shockingly callous towards his concubine. The reader is given the impression that he turns in for the night while she is being brutally raped and mistreated outside. In the morning he wakes up and eager to get on his way, addresses a rough command to her, without even betraying the faintest concern for her well-being after the horrific treatment she had suffered in the night.

Indeed, to increase the horror of the scene, it isn't even clear whether or not she is dead at this point. In the parallels between Gibeah and Sodom, we see that Israel has sunk to the level of repeating the most signal sin of the people of the land who preceded them, a fact that is accentuated by the reality that the Levite purposefully chose to stay in Gibeah rather than in a non-Israelite city in verses 11 to 12. In consequence, Gibeah suffered the same destruction as the paradigmatic Sodom and the cities of the plain, its smoke rising up to heaven in the following chapter. This judgment and its unsavory aftermath bring the era of the judges to its grim nadir. If the golden calf was Israel's initial fall at Sarniai, Gibeah is Israel's great fall in the land, the sin that reveals that they have become indistinguishable from the people that they were sent to drive out. Much as in the story of Sodom, we might also see here a sort of inversion of the story of the Passover, the threat at the doorway, death outside and life inside, death coming at night and safety being enjoyed in the morning. We've already seen a false tabernacle, false priesthood, false exodus and false conquest in the preceding chapters, and here we have a inversion of the Passover. However, before we are enveloped by the thick darkness of Gibeah and its terrors, the account of Judges chapter 19 opens with a peculiar yet faintly foreboding vignette.

[10 : 33] The Levite's concubine is unfaithful to him and goes to her father's house, where she stays for four months. Seeking the return of his unfaithful concubine, the Levite goes to Bethlehem to win her back. He finds her and speaks kindly to her, after which she brings him to her father's house, where the Levite has shown generous hospitality. However, in this episode, as in the episode that follows at Gibeah, the relationship seems to be strongest between the two men, the concubine herself being marginal to proceedings. Several verses are devoted to describing the Levite's towering in the house of his father-in-law. The father-in-law successfully delays the Levite's departure on five different occasions, until finally the Levite insists on leaving. The sense is given of an urgent journey, dangerously delayed. The lateness of their departure from the father-in-law's house is one of the precipitating factors for the events that follow. If we were the editors of the book of Judges, I suspect that we would suggest that the author omit almost the entirety of the first half of chapter 19 as unnecessary to the story. Why go into such extensive discussion about the concubine's unfaithfulness, her flight to and stay in her father's house, and the Levite's lengthy towering there? How does any of this advance the plot? Rather, it seems to delay our movement toward the important second half of the chapter, where all the significant things happen. Yet scripture doesn't waste its words. When we have an account with extensive yet seemingly extraneous details, those details probably are not extraneous after all. As we read on in the narrative, we will see direct symmetries with the opening of this chapter in the events of the following chapter. These opening verses also suggest that the story is functioning on different levels, drawing the reader's attention to parabolic dimensions within it. In his commentary on the book, James Jordan remarks,

We cannot help but notice the way the writer emphasises how the father-in-law tried to detain the Levite. We might expect the writer to say that the girl's father tried to get the Levite to prolong his stay, but when we read over and over and over again that the father-in-law persuaded him to stay a bit longer, we are alerted to a theme of detaining. Now the Levite was a man with a calling, a task.

He was supposed to be pastor of a local congregation in the remote part of Ephraim. For him to be gone too long would result in a neglect of his task. Thus, after three days, he wants to depart. The girl's father, however, detains him. It seems to me that we are reminded here of Laban, how he sought to detain Jacob, and of Pharaoh's detaining of Israel. Once again, there is no indication of a moral parallel between this father-in-law and Laban or Pharaoh, but there is a formal parallel. After three days is indeed the proper time for a definitive break, to be out and getting on one's way. But the father-in-law persuades the Levite to stay.

In all, the father-in-law is shown trying to get the Levite to stay five times, in verses 4, 5, verses 6 and 7, and verses 8 and 9. The number of verses devoted to this episode, and the frequent repetition within them, suggests that it is a more important part of the narrative than often presumed. In verse 13, there is a reference to Ramah, which in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 15 is associated with Rachel, who died after giving birth to Benjamin on the road to Bethlehem.

Faintly sounding beneath the surface of the text, perhaps we hear the story of Rachel, a woman detained for too long with her husband in her father's house, who later died in an interrupted journey on the Bethlehem road. The treatment of the Levite's concubine by the Benjamites of Gibeah takes on a new level of tragic significance when the concubine's similarities with Rachel are taken into account. The Benjaminites kill a woman who recalls the mother who once died giving birth to them. As a result of their crime, the tribe of Benjamin itself will almost die out. We have already seen allusions to the doomed matriarch and her doomed children in the preceding two chapters, with the stolen teraphim, the pursuit, and the parents' unwitting curse of their child. An account of night-time death at the threshold recalls the great events of Exodus, as we have noted, as the Israelites prepared for the plague of the death of the firstborn and the celebration of the Passover by marking the doorposts and the lintels of their houses with blood.

[14 : 52] Several significant themes surround the events of the Passover, not least themes of giving birth and the firstborn. Through the Passover the Lord sanctified to himself all of the firstborn males of Israel. Later he took the Levites instead of the firstborn. The Levites were charged with guarding the Lord's house and with representing the divine husband to his bride. Through the events of the Exodus, the Levites were set apart as the tribe that had the charge of the threshold. They were the liminal tribe that upheld the boundaries and the appropriate crossings of them. They defended realms against trespass. They themselves dwelt on the threshold of Israel, depending upon the hospitality of the nation. Neither straightforwardly insiders nor outsiders. They had been set apart from the nation as the Lord's special possession. Although they had cities, they didn't have territory in the same manner as the other tribes, as their inheritance was the service of the Lord. The cities of the Levites were within other territories and the cities of refuge were all Levite cities. That the primary protagonist in the narrative of Judges chapter 19 is a Levite is worthy of note, not least because it reveals something of the importance of the themes of inhospitality that pervade the narrative. Although the Levite walks in the house of the Lord, no one will take him into their house. The fact that the visitor was a Levite compounds the inhospitality of the city. The Levite represents the Lord and is peculiarly cast upon the hospitality of Israel. That no one should offer him hospitality is a sign of the attitude of the people of the city to the God who gave them their home within the land. It also accentuates the cruelty and wickedness of the Levite in his treatment of the concubine. The Levite is charged with guarding the thresholds of Israel, with protecting the Lord's bride, and with representing the loving divine husband. The Levite's life is threatened, much as the firstborn's lives were threatened in Exodus, and being on the right side of a protective threshold was all important. However, rather than guarding the threshold, the Levite allows his security to be bought at the cost of concubine's life. Rather than protecting the bride, the Levite thrusts her out to the dogs of Gibeah to be torn apart. Rather than representing the divine husband of Israel, the Levite displays an exquisite callousness towards his concubine. It is important to recognise that there are no heroes in this story, nor is there anyone who is not unfaithful or wicked in some respect, including the concubine herself, within the broader picture of the narrative. She is not just an innocent victim. She is also unfaithful to her husband. The concubine of the Levite are figures for unfaithful Israel and her unfaithful religious guardians. What emerges from this text is a devastating indictment of the religious guardians of Israel. The guardians are indifferent to the safety, well-being, and restoration of the

Lord's bride. They have abandoned their post at the threshold, and have rendered the very place that is elsewhere associated with new birth, a site of death. Israel the bride, having pursued her sin, and being greatly mistreated by those who should have guarded her, is now dismembered, cut into 12 pieces. We might also see the way that the people of the city of Gibeah represent the way that the children of Israel had become towards their very mother, in their brutality and inhospitality towards each other. They were killing their mother, as it were. In 1 Samuel, there is a striking retracing of themes from Judges chapter 19 to 21. We saw some of this in the preceding chapters, as the story of Hannah and Samuel looks back to the story of Micah and his mother, a positive account that serves as a strong contrast to the events of chapters 17 and 18. In 1 Samuel, this contrast to the story of chapter 19 and following is as Saul is established as the new guardian of Israel, a story that begins with a lot of promise, even though it soon turns sour. The story of the Levite and the concubine begins with the

Levite, his servant, and two donkeys, why tell us about the two donkeys, setting off to find the lost concubine. The story of Saul begins with Saul and a servant setting off to find some lost donkeys.

However, Saul soon learned that the donkeys had already been recovered. The real figure being sought and found was Saul himself, the much sought-after bridegroom of the nation, the one on whom was all the desire of Israel in 1 Samuel chapter 9 verse 20. Saul is supposed to be a new guardian of the house of the nation. Saul himself was a Benjaminite, a man from a tribe that had been almost entirely wiped out.

When Saul says to Samuel, am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, it is the entire history of Gibeah and the national tragedy that followed that lurks in the background. Indeed, Saul comes from the city of Gibeah, the very city whose wickedness had occasioned Benjamin's near obliteration. However, from the ashes of the tribe of Benjamin, the Lord laid the foundations of the kingdom. The story of the Levite and his concubine opens with a reference to the fact that there was no king in Israel in those days. In the story of Saul, we see this problem being addressed.

[19 : 49] Gibeah isn't the only significant place name within the story of Saul. Saul receives the first sign of the kingdom that Samuel foretold by Rachel's tomb, the place where the mother of the tribe of Benjamin had died after giving birth, and which had since been associated with the tribe's near destruction, became the site where the first shoot of new life broke the once scorched earth. In 1 Samuel chapter 11, the city of Jabesh-Gilead is severely threatened by Nahash the Ammonite. In Judges chapter 21, the city of Jabesh-Gilead was almost completely destroyed for their failure to join the rest of Israel in their fight against the Benjaminites. The news of Jabesh-Gilead's plight reached Saul in Gibeah. Like the Levite cut the body of his concubine in pieces and sent it throughout Israel, Saul cut a yoke of oxen in pieces and sent the pieces throughout Israel, calling everyone to respond to his summons or suffer the same fate. However, unlike the Levite, Saul handled the situation justly. As we will see in the following chapter, the actions of the Levite following the rape and murder of his concubine were a continuation of his shameful self-absorption and callousness in many respects. He treated the body of his concubine as a prop and pursued a destructive vengeance while hiding his own complicity in the matter. He is at the centre of his account of events. The laws of Gibeah rose up against him, surrounded the house because of him, and sought to kill him. He doesn't mention the fact that he allowed his concubine to be cast to the mob, somehow managing to present himself as if he were the primary victim. Had there been a king in Israel, one suspects that these events would have been handled more carefully. Instead, we see, as in the case of Dinah in Genesis chapter 34, to which we might hear allusions here, in the references to the outrage and abomination in Israel, and also to the speaking kindly to win someone back, the mistreatment of a woman is answered not with true justice, but with an outburst of male-focused vengefulness, with further women being caught up as victims as a result, especially as we see in chapter 21. When Jabesh Gilead was surrounded by threatening men, calling for them to come out to them and face a cruel fate in 1 Samuel chapter 11, the new guardian of Israel, the Spirit of God coming upon him, fought to protect them. The atrocity of Gibeah and its horrific aftermath are overcome as the themes of Israel's sin are taken up and slowly unworked by divine grace. The old associations of wickedness are replaced by the new associations of deliverance and the Lord's goodness. Jabesh Gilead was becomes the site of rescue. Gibeah, once synonymous with the deepest wickedness of the period of time when there was no king in Israel, is now Gibeah of Saul. We'll see further connections with Saul in the chapters that follow. The Levite first sets off from Bethlehem, as his concubine had played the harlot and returned to the house of her father. At the beginning of the story, it seems as though he was a just man. He doesn't seek vengeance against her, but rather sought to speak kindly to her and to win her back. Unfortunately, as the story unfolds, the Levite is revealed to be other than what he first appears to be. Edith Davidson, in her book *Intracacy, Design and Cunning in the Book of Judges*, closely observes the symmetries of the book. There are episodes, scenes and characters that are very striking, yet serve as mirror images of each other. For instance, there are two women who betray sleeping men with a pin on their heads, one good and one bad. Jael invites Sisera into her tent and then, while he is sleeping, drives a tent pin into his temple. The treacherous Delilah uses a pin upon

Samson's hair when she weaves his hair, seeking to betray him to the Philistines. Davison notes points of connection between the figure of the concubine and the figure of Aksa, the daughter of Caleb at the beginning of the book. Both women are connected with a donkey. In both stories, the dealings between a father-in-law and a husband are important. In chapter 1, at the beginning of the book, Aksa receives a faithful bridegroom and dismounts from her donkey. In chapter 19, at the end of the book, we have a dead woman placed upon a donkey by her uncaring husband. The manner in which the divided body of the concubine evokes sacrificial themes and other narratives of forms of human sacrifice is observed by Davison and others.

Jephthah's daughter is one such narrative. Another is the story of the binding of Isaac, and it's noteworthy that the Levite's taking of the knife to cut up his concubine so closely resembles Abraham's taking of the knife to kill his son Isaac. The events of Gibeah are only alluded to in one prophetic book, that of Hosea, in chapter 5 verse 8, 9 verse 9 and 10 verse 9. That Gibeah should be referenced in that particular book is probably no accident. The prophet Hosea is himself instructed to take an adulterous wife, illustrative of Israel's own spiritual adultery towards their divine husband.

Hosea's prophetic actions and message declare a God who pursues and graciously restores his adulterous bride. Where priests or kings have both proven negligent or unfaithful in their charge, the Lord will seek and win back his people himself. The Levite of Judges failed to represent the divine husband as he ought to. However, in the book of Hosea, we see the pursuing divine husband, the one whose kind words to his bride do not prove hollow. The Lord comes in person to deliver his bride from the clutches of death. The book of Hosea is a book of changed names and faiths, where those called not my people are declared the sons of the living God. It anticipates the one who will rewrite the darkest pages of Israel's history in the ink of grace. Rather than throwing his bride to the murderous mob, he will sacrifice himself for her sake. Beneath a sky scoured of its light, his body will be the one torn and pierced. Unlike that Levite who once lightly surrendered his concubine to the grave, this faithful bridegroom will wrest his bride from the grave's grasp. Where once a murder spelled the doom of a people, his life-giving will spell its restoration from the dead.

A question to consider. In the preceding story of Micah and the Levite, there were two figures, one from Bethlehem and Judah, one from the hill country of Ephraim, and one of them a Levite.

[26 : 01] We have the same thing in chapter 19 of Judges. What connections might we see between these stories? How might we take both of the stories together and get a fuller portrait of the dysfunctional and unfaithful character of Israel being parabolically represented?