

Exegesis of Judges 19**by Elodie Ballantine Emig (Denver Theological Seminary)**

It seems logical to move from Genesis 19 to Judges 19, because the two stories have similar elements. At the same time, because the settings and outcomes of the stories are so different, we will begin our study with a brief comparison of their historical backgrounds. Abraham probably journeyed to Canaan sometime between 2000 and 1800 B.C. Though difficult to date exactly due to overlapping judgeships and the fact that Jephthah says that Israel had occupied the land for three hundred years (Judges 11:26), the period of the Judges is placed by most scholars between 1200 and 1020 B.C. That is, we locate it from fifty years after the conquest of Canaan to the most probable date for the anointing of Saul as King. If, on the basis of Judges 11:26 among other things, those who argue for a 15th century conquest of Canaan are correct, we need adjust only the earlier date, leaving 1020 B.C. as the end point of the period of the Judges.

So we are looking at a gap of somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 years between the two stories. One half of a millennium is a long time. As we know from even the sparsest knowledge of Old Testament history, a great deal happened between the promise to Abraham and the death of Joshua and his contemporaries. We will, for what I hope are obvious reasons, jump past the period of the patriarchs of Israel, past slavery in Egypt, past the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, past the conquest of Canaan to a very dark episode in Israel's history. As the book of Judges itself repeats, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25, TNIV). Whether one follows the consensus of modern scholarship and takes such a comment as that of an editor of the period of the monarchy, or pushes things a step further and sees a reference to God as King, it remains the case that Israel was kingless during the time of the Judges.

Certainly, throughout the period there were those who knew God and remembered what He had done for Israel, but they were few and far between. What characterized the time of the Judges was not so much the deliverers (judge = deliverer, or savior) God raised up to save various ones of the twelve tribes, but that the people "did as they saw fit." A "central problem," according to La Sor et al., was "the Israelites' forsaking of Yahweh and turning to the gods of the Canaanites" (La Sor, Hubbard & Bush, Old Testament Survey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 213).

After that whole generation [Joshua's] had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals (Judges 2:10).

The "nations the Lord left to test" the Israelites corrupted them (Judges 3:1). God had allowed people to be left in the land; Joshua's conquest was not total. But rather than to become like them, the Israelites had been told by the angel of the Lord, "I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars" (Judges 2:2). During the period of the Judges, Israel repeatedly, cyclically failed the test. They forgot God and became like their neighbors.

When looking at the laws regarding homosexuality in Leviticus, I made the case that with those laws, God was preparing His people for what they would encounter in the promised land. The Canaanites permitted homosexuality (Ham's legacy?); Sodom and Gomorrah had certainly indulged in it. Now, some 500 years later, it had become an issue for at least one of the tribes of Israel.

Most commentators outline the Book of Judges in three sections: 1) the introduction - the story of the incomplete conquest of Canaan and an introduction to the period of the Judges (1:1-3:6); 2) the stories of the individual Judges (3:7-16:31; and 3) the appendices - Micah and the Danites and the Outrage at Gibeah and subsequent war against the Benjamites (17:1-21:35). (This particular outline is from A. Cundall's commentary on Judges in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1968), 50.) The introduction and appendices frame the rest of the book and characterize the period as a whole as a bleak one. The stories in the middle show how God, ever faithful to His covenant, rescues His people when they cry out to Him.

Judges 19, the story of the "Outrage at Gibeah," of course, is found at the end, which means, if our assumptions about the arrangement of the book are correct, it is a story typical of the entire period. Although scholars do convincingly argue that the war against Benjamin took place towards the beginning of the period of the Judges, the story makes for an apt ending to a book about forsaking the Lord. The people and society depicted in the story are almost completely disgusting. They illustrate as well as any that not much good can come of a people who refuse to have God as their King and continue to do as they see fit.

Our story's principal character is a Levite from Ephraim, whose angry (the "unfaithful" of the NIV and KJV are almost certainly incorrect) concubine had left him and returned to her father's house in Bethlehem. The Levite, after some three or four months, went to Bethlehem to persuade her to return. Obviously pleased to see him, the Levite's father-in-law showed him the sort of lavish hospitality we saw in the story of Lot and the two angels. In fact, it was after five days, not the customary three, that the Levite was finally allowed to leave for home with his concubine. Rather than spending the night in Jebus, the Canaanite city which later became Jerusalem, the Levite company continued to the Israelite town of Gibeah. Although the Levite was amply provided for, with two laden donkeys and a servant, no one offered him and his companions hospitality for the night. Eventually a fellow Ephraimite, who was living in Gibeah, took them in and gave them food and drink.

While they were eating, men from the town beat on the door and demanded that the Levite be sent out so that they could "know" him. The host told the mob not to do such a vile thing and then offered his virgin daughter and the concubine instead. When the mob would not listen, the Levite threw the concubine out to them and closed the door. The woman was raped until dawn, at which point she made her way back to the house door and died. When the Levite came out to go home, he said to her, "Get up; let's go" (Judges 19:28). When she did not reply, he put her on one of the donkeys, took her home and cut her into twelve pieces. He sent one piece to each of the twelve tribes, hoping thereby to encourage the tribes to avenge the wrong, "because they [the men of Gibeah] committed this lewd and disgraceful act in Israel" (Judges 20:6).

Before going any farther, it is worth pointing out in a series on the Bible and homosexuality, that this story has very little to do with homosexuality. That the men of Gibeah wanted to have sexual relations with the Levite seems as clear as that the men of Sodom wanted to have relations with Lot's visitors. In the context of both stories, carnal knowledge is clearly in view. But because the Gibeah story takes such a different and horrifying turn, the issue of homosexuality is all but lost. This fact supports the point I made with the series on Sodom, that homosexuality is part and parcel of a depraved culture; no more, no less. It is also clear that the men of Gibeah were not exclusively homosexual, if whom men will gang rape is any indication of orientation. Frankly, I think that the only orientation that makes any sense here is that toward evil. Suffice it to say that the men of Gibeah were thoroughly vile, their sexuality wholly perverted.

Turning back to the story, we need to deal with its striking parallels to the account of the destruction of Sodom. Most modern scholars see some kind of literary dependence between the two stories. The more liberal scholars would trace both accounts back to a third, more primitive exemplar. I find such a notion to issue from the height of "modern" arrogance. To assume that the editor of Judges was unaware of the Sodom story in Genesis is ludicrous, as is the fairly recent belief that the "ancients" couldn't tell the difference between fact and fiction. I believe that both the Sodom and Gibeah accounts are factual and, at the same time, that the writer of the Gibeah story has the Sodom story in mind as he writes. Another modern prejudice seems to be that well crafted stories cannot also be true ones.

If the Gibeah story is dependent upon the Sodom story, as I think it is, it also turns the latter on its ear. I find Stuart Lasine's thesis that the Gibeah story is an "inversion" of the Sodom story to be quite compelling (Lasine, "Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot's Hospitality in an Inverted World," JSOT 29 (1984) 35-59). However similar the stories are, the differences are what is startling.

Lot's hospitality is genuine; the old man's in the Gibeah story is flawed. Lot offers his daughters to the mob; the old man offers his daughter and the concubine, certainly not a virgin and, more to the point, supposedly under his protection. Lot goes out to the mob, shutting the door behind him to protect his guests; the Levite throws his concubine out to the mob, closing the door behind her to protect himself. And who can overlook the callous inhumanity of one who would say to the woman who had been gang raped to save his life, "Get up; let's go," or who would lie about the situation when asked why he's sent body parts to the twelve tribes of Israel (probably itself an inversion, this time of I Sam. 11:7 (Ibid., 41)? What makes the Gibeah story work is that everyone in it, with the possible exception of the concubine, about whom we know almost nothing, is horrible. The story is a charade; it makes a mockery of the Sodom story. That is exactly its point; when people reject God and do as they see fit, nothing works as it is supposed to. Nothing works, from hospitality to holy war (Judges 20), when God is not honored as King.

I said above that homosexuality is a minor part of the story of Gibeah. Even so, it is important. Where the mob in Genesis 19 was made up of Sodomites, people of Canaan, descendents of Ham, the mob in Judges 19 was made up of Benjamites, people of Israel. Though they didn't commit any homosexual acts in the story, I think its wording forces one to think of the sexual sins of Sodom being committed in Israel. Homosexuality is the perfect example of sexuality gone wrong, when God has been rejected (the

inversion of God's intent for sexuality), just as idolatry is the prime example of worship gone wrong. And here we have God's chosen people indulging in everything contrary to God's will, everything His law was given to protect against. As it was in Sodom, homosexuality is one sin among many. The big difference is that Gibeah is in Israel. So similar a story is retold so differently, because the main characters are now God's chosen. They know better, or should, and, because they act as if they do not, take a harder fall. True hospitality is not shown, the strong do not protect the weak, the family is not honored, the holy war to avenge wrongs done is overblown and based on false testimony. However disastrous the monarchy was for Israel, the Book of Judges and our story in particular point up how badly Israel needed a king: the King.