

Judges 19:1-30

The Levite and His Concubine

Although this is one of the most shocking narratives in the Bible, Jews are instructed to read the story out loud publicly, along with other passages that might embarrass or besmirch the honor of a patriarch, a king or a tribe. (Tosefta Megillah 3:33)

If these were common historical accounts they would have been suppressed because they reflect detrimentally on Judaism. The fact they are included is evidence of the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit in assembling these writings for us over centuries.

Still, references in the Midrash and among the Church fathers to Judges 19-21 is vanishingly small and those few are merely tangential to the main issues of the story. It seems that everyone who reads it is unnerved by the tale.

Judges 19:1 - "And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehemjudah."

The phrase "there was no king in Israel" brackets this tale, here and at the end in **Judges 21:25**. There was no recognized central authority. No one appealed to the High priest at Shiloh. The Tabernacle and its services were neglected. Levites were scattered, roaming around as free-lance priests and ministers for hire. The Torah law was nowhere enforced, and only appealed to when it suited them.

The phrase translated "concubine" in Hebrew means "a wife, a concubine" - she held a secondary status, taken without a betrothal period or a dowry, but still considered a wife, only without the usual honor and privileges.

Judges 19:2 - "And his concubine played the whore against him, and went away from him unto her father's house to Bethlehemjudah, and was there four whole months."

We just read the book of Ruth at Pentecost, where we see the righteous Boaz pursue the Maobitess widow Ruth, grandmother to King David, in what is one of the Bible's great love stories, and which serves as a type of Christ and the Bride. A vulnerable stranger is treated with grace.

This story is the opposite, and is meant to show the contrast. The Levite's concubine is also from Bethlehem.

"And his concubine played the whore against him" - This crucial phrase "*zanah*" is subject to different translations.

Josephus says only that she did not return his feelings, and her beauty increased his frustration. "They quarreled one with another perpetually; and at last the woman was so

disgusted at these quarrels, that she left her husband and went [back] to her parents.”

The Septuagint says *ὠργίσθη αὐτῇ* -- she was angry, disgusted with him. The rabbis explain that they quarreled frequently, and because of his ill-treatment, she left him and at some point had an affair. But this is not certain. The sad state of Israel in the time of the Judges could mean either she committed adultery or simply fled back to her father's household.

Under normal Torah law, as an adulteress she would have been stoned or, as the wife of a Levite, burned to death. But she was not.

The rabbis say: Every expression of [the verb] *נָזַח* means the expression *נפקת ברא*, or "[she is one who] goes outside" (per Targum Onkelos on Genesis 34:31), [thus the concubine was] departing from her husband to love others.

But their bottom line is instructive of what was really going on:

Said R. Hisda, “A man should never cast too much fear on his household, for lo, as to the concubine of Gibeah, he cast too much fear on her, and she caused the death of how many tens of thousands of Israelites.”

"and was there four whole months" - This was the amount of time to determine if she had become pregnant. Once the Levite determined she was not pregnant, he plans to sweet-talk her into returning to him, so he would be able to control her again.

This is a "textbook" manipulative pattern we've seen in domestic abuse situations before. It's ugly and creepy. Any talk of affection we know to be false from his later actions.

Judges 19:3-9 describes the chummy relationship between the men when the Levite comes to find his concubine from her father. Her father should have acted as a sanctuary and protected her from her abuser. But nowhere in the story does this woman find a covering.

The effusive display of hospitality displayed by the father-in-law here is meant to contrast with the twisted concept of hospitality displayed by the Levite and the old Ephraimite later when the concubine is turned over to the mob. Their moral compass is completely out of whack.

Judges 19:11-12 - "And when they were by Jebus, the day was far spent; and the servant said unto his master, Come, I pray thee, and let us turn in into this city of the Jebusites, and lodge in it. And his master said unto him, We will not turn aside hither into the city of a stranger, that is not of the children of Israel; we will pass over to Gibeah."

The Levite refers to Jebus as "a town of aliens who are not of Israel." But it is not the pagan Jebusites who commit atrocities, it is fellow Israelites - the Benjamites in Gibeah.

Ancient traditions of hospitality said you must take in a traveler who arrives at dusk. But none of the Benjamites would take in the travelers, only an old man who was also of Ephraim, "sojourning" in Gibeah like the traveling Levite.

The Levite claims he is on his way to the house of the Lord - the Tabernacle at Shiloh. This is one of the few mentions of the Tabernacle in Judges. Perhaps he wanted to make a thank offering for his successful journey. Maybe he was lying to make himself seem more pious. But whatever the reason, it was twisted by his own agendas and the general slack observance of Torah. Like everything else, it would be "according to what was right in his own eyes."

The Demands of the Benjamites

Judges 19:22 - "Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him."

The similarity of this incident to the one in Sodom in **Genesis 19** is remarkable. The narrative uses many of the same phrases from that story to show that Israel had fallen to the abominable state of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In **Judges 19:22-23** we read:

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse 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 know him.' 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!'

In **Genesis 19:4-7** we similarly find:

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly!'

In **Genesis 19:8** Lot offers his two virgin daughters; in **Judges 19:24** the host likewise offers two women, his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine. The host himself offers to bring them out and then adds, 'humiliate/ravish them and do what is good in your eyes to them' (**Judges 19:24**). 'Humiliate' or 'ravish,' derived from the Hebrew root 'nh, is the same verb used of Shechem in **Genesis 34:2** when he took Dinah and lay with her and raped her. 'Do what is good in your eyes,' too, is a phrase reminiscent of Lot's words to the men: "do to them as that which is good in your eyes" (**Genesis 19:8**).

'Sons of Belial'

The mob is called "certain sons of Belial" - very wicked, lawless, ungovernable, worthless, and unprofitable creatures, men under the influence of Satan, and their own lusts.

The meaning of "Belial" is obscure. The rabbis - by changing one vocalization - explain "sons of Belial" to mean "sons who have broken the yoke of heaven from off their necks."

Other interpretations produce ""worthlessness" or "not prospering."

- **2 Samuel 22:5** - "When the waves of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men (*b^elîya'á*) made me afraid" (Also repeated in Psalm 18:4)

- **Psalm 41:8** - "An evil (*b^elîya'á*) disease, say they, cleaveth fast unto him: and now that he lieth he shall rise up no more."

i.e. a disease or plague of not rising up - or a "mortal disease."

There is makes more sense as a synonym for death or *sheol*, the grave. Even more so, it refers to the Abyss - "the place from which one comes not up."

Thus the sons of Belial would be those who displayed "abysmal" wickedness. A similar term in Aramaic refers to "a deep pit, or hell."

Idolators are called sons of Belial:

- **Deuteronomy 13:13** - "Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known"

Also, the the sons of Eli (**1 Samuel 2:12**)

The Dead Sea Scrolls depict Belial as the Angel of Darkness, the King of Evil and Prince of Darkness, leader of he sons of darkness. It was Belial who inspired the Egyptian sorcerers, Jochaneh and his brother, to oppose Moses and Aaron.

The 2nd-Century Book of Jubilees refer to all uncircumcised Gentiles as "sons of Belial."

The first-century Ascension of Isaiah calls Belial "the angel of lawlessness, who is the ruler of this world"

Paul uses it as a reference to Satan:

- **2 Corinthians 6:15** - "And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?"

Bottom line - "son of Belial" is about the worst thing you can call someone.

Judges 19:24 - "Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing."

They were demanding to rape the Levite and his servant. This was homosexual rape, but was not so much about homosexuality as a sexual orientation but rather about lust mixed with power and violence and a desire to humiliate and degrade despised and vulnerable strangers from a different tribe. This pictures the degree that one tribe had already dehumanized members of neighboring tribes, and explains their readiness to go to war later.

Homosexual rape was viewed as a particularly severe attack on male honor, the rape of a woman was deemed more acceptable, at least to the men. Note that the concubine was just as much a guest as the Levite was. The man had no right to offer the Levite's concubine in the first place.

Judges 19:25 - "But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go."

One 2nd-century A.D. Jewish author saw this as a "measure-for-measure" or "talionic" retribution for her earlier sexual sins.

From the Pseudo-Philo - "They entered by force and dragged him and his concubine outside. After letting the man go, they abused his concubine until she died, for she had strayed from (transgressed against) her man at one time (*quoniam transgressa fuerat virum suum quodam tempore*), when she committed sin with the Amalekites (*cum peccasset cum Amalechitis*), and on account of this the Lord God delivered her into the hands of sinners."

Nevertheless, the concubine was still treated with inhuman cruelty, and the cowardice shown by the Levite and his host are inexcusable. But with no central authority, a lawless land will always spawn violence and mob rule.

A Levite Without Pity

Judges 19:27-28 - "And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way: and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down at the door of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold. And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her up upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place."

The horror of indifference is magnified many times if the reader is careful to notice the biblical allusions in his truncated two curt words "arise (*qum*) and let us go (*bo'*)" with that of the rustic lover in the Song of Songs "arise (*qum*) my beloved, my fair one, and come (*bo'*)" (2:10,13). Our passage leaves out those tender words "my beloved, my fair one."

The Levite's coldness and emotionless response to finding his dead concubine is shocking. But the Levite is meant to show us that when we abandon God we also lose contact with mercy, love and even our own humanity. We turn to stone. Or as it says in **Psalm 115** of idolatry, we become like the idols we serve - losing contact with our senses and emotions, like the stone idols we serve.

One test of our humanity is reverence for the dead. While the "image of Gd" is still visible, almost every society has rituals to mourn for and bury or send off loved ones to the afterlife after they die.

The Levite's concubine gets no such respect.

A Heartless call for War

Judges 19:29-30 - "And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel. And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds."

The Levite returned home and "he took the knife" just as "Abraham took the knife" in **Genesis 22:10** to offer Isaac as a sacrifice at the Lord's request. The angel stayed the hand of Abraham; no one stays the Levite's hand.

There is a scholarly opinion that this story was based on a real event, but written by Jeremiah as a commentary on the evil activities of King Saul and then the later kings of Judah and Israel that led to the Babylonian invasion and the exile.

Saul was from Gibeah and of the tribe of Benjamin, and Gibeah would later become the temporary capital of Saul.

The Levite distributes these pieces (*nētah*) amongst the tribes of Israel just as Saul had cut up an oxen and distributed the pieces (*nētah*) throughout Israel as a call to war (**I Samuel 11:7**).

The idea was that although "there was no king in Israel and every man did what was good in his own eyes," the kings - bad ones like Saul and even good ones like David - also ended up doing what seemed right in their own eyes, rather than what God commands, and caused an even bigger disaster, the exile. Only Messiah would provide perfect kingship in an everlasting spiritual kingdom.

"consider of it" - The expression 'consider it' in Hebrew is literally "to place the heart" *sim leb*; however, in our verse the idiom has been truncated *simu-* the word 'heart' *leb* has been omitted. The Levite has most subtly omitted his heart, his compassion, his love for his concubine.

Judges 19 ends by saying nothing like this had happened "from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day." By mentioning the Exodus, the blood of the slain lamb on the doorposts at Passover is contrasted with the blood of the murdered concubine found at the doorpost by the Levite.

Resources:

See 'The Connection between the idol of Micah and the concubine at Gibeah'
https://jbqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/412/jbq_41_2_idolofmicah.pdf

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/concubine-of-levite-midrash-and-aggadah>

<https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/26962/in-what-sense-is-the-word-%D7%96%D7%A0%D7%94-used-in-judges-192>

http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1010-99192020000300006&lng=en&nrm=iso