

Judges 20:1-48

Atrocity Leads to Civil War

The disharmony between the Levite and his wife results in an atrocity that leads to a civil war between the tribes.

Rav H̄isda says: "A person should never impose excessive fear upon the members of his household, as the husband of the concubine of Gibeah imposed excessive fear upon her and this ultimately caused the downfall of many tens of thousands of Jews in the resulting war " (see **Judges 19–20**). - Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 6b

Judges 20:1 - "Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man, from Dan even to Beersheba, with the land of Gilead, unto the LORD in Mizpeh."

The Levite's act of sending pieces of his concubine to each tribe succeeds in bringing the tribes to a meeting.

Judges 20:4-5 - "And the Levite, the husband of the woman that was slain, answered and said, I came into Gibeah that belongeth to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to lodge. And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and beset the house round about upon me by night, and thought to have slain me: and my concubine have they forced, that she is dead."

The Levite leaves out his own culpability in the tragedy.

The tribes are indignant and vow vengeance.

Judges 20:10 - "And we will take ten men of an hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and an hundred of a thousand, and a thousand out of ten thousand, to fetch victual for the people, that they may do, when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, according to all the folly that they have wrought in Israel."

But first they send messengers throughout Benjamin, in hopes they will either punish the evildoers themselves or turn them over.

The Benjamites respond with pride and belligerence.

Judges 20:13-14 - "...But the children of Benjamin would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel: But the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together out of the cities unto Gibeah, to go out to battle against the children of Israel."

The Benjamites felt they could defeat the other tribes because of their particular battle skills:

Judges 20:16 - "Among all this people there were seven hundred chosen men

lefthanded; every one could sling stones at an hair breadth, and not miss."

In two different sorties against Benjamin - directed to do so by God - the Israelites were sorely defeated.

Judges 20:26-27 - "Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the LORD, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And the children of Israel enquired of the LORD, (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days,"

This is another rare mention of the Tabernacle at Shiloh, and of appealing to the High Priest.

Judges 20:28 - "And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days, saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the LORD said, Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand."

This confirms that this incident happened earlier in the time of the judges, because Phinehas was still High Priest.

Some authorities read "House of God" as a place name - Beth-el. In that case, according to Judges 20:26–28, the Ark, and thus possibly the Tabernacle, was at Bethel while Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, was still alive. But in Joshua 18:1 the Tabernacle was said to be set up in Shiloh and remained there for 350 years. It's possible that the Ark might have been sometimes moved to different locations "in those days," but this is not explained.

Laying an Ambush

The Israelite tribes pretend to flee, drawing the Benjamites away from the city. But a separate detachment then emerges from hiding and attacks the city and begins burning buildings. When the other Israelites see the smoke, they turn and confront the Benjamites, winning the battle this time.

Most of the Benjamites were killed. But 600 of them flee to a rugged area called Rock Rimmon in the wilderness and hide there for four months.

One midrash finds the generation's leaders — the Great Sanhedrin and the High Priest Phinehas — responsible for the death of seventy thousand Israelites in the ensuing civil war, since they were remiss in their duties to let the moral decay advance so far.

As punishment for the incident of the Levite's concubine at Gibeah, the Israelites assembled and went forth to war; seventy thousand (from all the tribes of Israel, including Benjamin) were killed at Gibeah, and the leaders of the generation were responsible for their deaths.

“They should have tied iron ropes around their loins, lifted their garments above their knees, and gone through all the towns of Israel teaching proper conduct: one day in Bethel, another in Hebron, and a third in Jerusalem, during the first, second, and third year, until Israel had settled in its land. However, they did not do so; rather, when the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, each went to his vineyard and his wine, said ‘It is well with me,’ and engaged less in Torah study. When they committed such ugly and improper acts in Gibeah of Benjamin, God desired to destroy the entire world. He said: ‘I gave My Torah only to those who will read it, study it, and learn proper behavior from it.’” - (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, chap. 12)

In the view of the Rabbis, the name “Ben-oni” that Rachel had given to her son Benjamin was realized in the episode of the concubine at Gibeah. When Rachel gave birth to him, she saw that he was exceedingly delicate [*mitonen*] and feared that he would die, and therefore she named him “Ben-oni [“son of my strength].” The tribe of Benjamin was now again vulnerable and weak, almost annihilated in the war at Gibeah in Benjamin, which left only six hundred surviving males from the tribe (Midrash Aggadah [ed. Buber] Num. 26:38).

The lesson is a warning to us - that by departing from trusting in God, the tribes of Israel were on a path to self-destruction. They were accusing each other and “talking past” one another. Pride, animosity and resistance to compromise and cooperation results in a civil war.

The conclusion of the story, and the end of the Book of Judges in Chapter 21, shows further self-delusion and self-justification and the results of a rash vow.

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

Keep the Unity of the Spirit!

More specifically, this story has a lesson for us as a church fellowship. It's a warning against divisions.

We've often talked about heresy as false doctrine, but that's only part of the meaning of the word. It basically means the destruction of unity.

In Greek, "heresy" or *haíresis* means “dissensions arising from diversity of opinions and aims, or a chosen course of thought and action; sects and schisms”

This is often because of choosing a false teaching:

- **2 Peter 2:1** - "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies (*haíresis*), even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

The false teachings brought "damnable divisions"

A similar word is used in Titus 3:10

- **Titus 3:10** - "A man that is an heretick (*hairetikos*) after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."

"*hairetikos*" is used only once in the New Testament and means someone who causes division or tries to split people into factions. Earlier in Titus 3 Paul exhorts believers "To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men" (3:2) and to turn from "malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another."

In Galatians, Paul lists a number of works of the flesh we don't expect:

- **Galatians 5:19-20** - "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft ..." - so far so good.

But then: "hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,

"hatred" = *echthra* - hostility

"variance" = *eris* - strife, contentious debate, wrangling

"emulations" = *zēlos* - zeal, excessive indignation, contentious rivalry, jealousy

"wrath" = *thymos* - fierce, sudden boiling anger (like what happens when someone challenges your idolatry, or "pushes your button" over an issue)

- **2 Corinthians 12:20** - "For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates (*eris*), envyings (*zēlos*), wraths (*thymos*), strifes (*eritheia*), backbitings (*katalalia*), whisperings (*psithyrismos* - secret slanderings), swellings (*physiōsis*), tumults (*akatastasia*):"

"swellings" = *physiōsis* - inflation, puffed up (with pride)

tumults = *akatastasia* - instability, a state of disorder, disturbance, confusion "without setting down firmly in order"

- a situation very much like "there was no king/authority in Israel, and every man did what what seemed good in his own eyes."

- **Ephesians 4:31** - "Let all bitterness, and wrath (*thymos*), and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice"

"strife" = *eritheia* - intriguing for office or power, a desire to put one's self forward, a partisan and fractious spirit

"seditions" = *dichostasia* - dissension, division, disunion

"heresies" = *hairesis* - actions of someone who causes division or tries to split people into factions

- **Romans 16:17** - "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."

False teachings can cause divisions like these, but also disagreements over all kinds of things - how things are done, personality clashes or especially political issues.

In the early Jerusalem church, a disagreement over the distribution of funds and relief widows almost caused a division between Greek and Jewish church members.

- **Acts 6:1** - "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations."

A quick solution was provided by the appointment of seven deacons to handle the distribution.

With the help of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual sensitivity of the apostles, the "murmuring" (*gongysmos* - a secret displeasure not openly avowed) was detected before it could become a *hairesis* - a division.

Frank and honest discussion and even debate over church procedures, direction of ministry or points of scriptural interpretation is healthy and part of what it means to be a functioning fellowship of believers. Exhortation and even rebuke are in order if made with the right spirit.

The problem comes when someone tries to create a faction and, when discussion and consensus fails, forces people to take sides against one another.

In the example from **Judges 19-20**, the level of openness to the Spirit had sunk so low that the combination of delusion, self-justification, rationalizing and hostility caused a sort of chain reaction that exploded into civil war.

That's why Paul urges us...

- **Ephesians 4:1-3** - "...to walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have received: with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, and with diligence to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."