

THE FALLEN PEOPLE IN ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

The final chapters of Judges contain two stories that complete the picture of Israel's fallen moral condition. These stories occur early in Israel's national life in Canaan (shortly after Joshua's death), which show the early influence of the Canaanites on the people of God. Baal worship affected Israel in many adverse ways which made it necessary for God to punish them in order to lead them back to Himself.

Many sins are revealed in these stories, but the sins in the first story revolve around a disregard for the proper worship of God in His sanctuary. The sins in the second story revolve around a disregard for the dignity of God-given human rights in the area of proper sex. A phrase that expresses the source of the problem in each case is repeated once in each story, "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25). This statement indicates the refusal of most Israelites to submit themselves to the rule of God in their lives.

These last chapters are replete with tragedies: an Israelite who made idols for private worship (17:4-5; 18:24); a tribe that did not claim its God-given inheritance (18:1); a Levite who responded in indignation to an open violent sin of fornication by the wicked men of Gibeah (19:22-30); and a civil war that almost destroyed one of the tribes of Israel (20:43-47). No book of the Bible begins with greater hope (1:2) and ends with greater despair (21:25) than does the book of Judges. This book is a commentary on the downward spiral of man into sin when left to his own devices.

I. Idolatry — 17:1-18:31

A. By Micah — 17:1-13

17:1 — "Mount Ephraim" - this was not a mountain as such, but this term referred to the hill country of Ephraim. It was very rugged country, but very good for producing crops. It was much better than Judah's hill country.

"Micah" — the story of Micah with his idolatry is typical of the people that lived in the generation that followed Joshua's death. It did not take long for the apostasy to gain a stronghold in Israel.

17:2 — "Eleven hundred shekels" - the value of the shekel can be seen by the ten shekels given for the annual wage to the Levite priest who worked for Micah (17:10). Eleven hundred shekels at that rate would pay a priest's wages for 110 years.

"Cursed" — Micah's mother put a curse upon the one who stole the eleven hundred shekels from her. This curse bothered Micah so much that he confessed to her, "I took it."

"Blessed be you of the Lord" — although Micah's mother cursed the person who took her money, she quickly tried to soften the curse when she learned that her son had done it, by pronouncing a blessing on him. Notice, she asked the Lord (Jehovah) to bless him, while she was offending Him with her idolatry (17:3). Micah's mother was fickle and lived by her emotions. She had no apparent concern regarding the effect of Micah's stealing on God or His law. Her feelings were her main concern. If she was angry, she cursed; but when she was pleased, she blessed. God's standards meant nothing to her.

17:3 — "A graven image" - this was a wooden image overlaid with a precious metal - silver in this case.

"A molten image" — this was made of solid metal (here it was silver). Micah's mother broke the second of the ten commandments by making these idols. It shows the corrupting influence of the Canaanites on the Israelites.

17:5 — "House of gods" - although Micah lived in Ephraim, not far from the Tabernacle in Shiloh, he had his own house of worship. The LORD had commanded that there be only one place of worship in Israel (Deut 12:4-14). Micah violated the law by making another place for worship. Furthermore, Micah broke the law by making an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrating one of his own sons as a priest. All priests had to be Levites, and only those Levites who were of the family of Aaron.

"Ephod" — an apron that was worn over the priest's garment. In this case, it was used for a cultic purpose (8:27).

"Teraphim" — these were household gods. Most were small, but some may have been as large as that of a man (1 Sam 19:13, 16).

17:6 — "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" - when the Israelites rejected God's law, they replaced it with their own laws. As a result, Micah made his own gods, his own house for the gods, and his own priesthood to mediate between him and these gods.

17:7 — "A man out of Bethlehem-Judah...a Levite" - this Levite was Jonathan, the great grandson of Moses (18:30). He was looking for a better place than the one given to him by God. Every Levite was appointed to a Levitical city. He was to remain in that city and be content to serve God there. This Levite was disobedient. He was not content to stay in his appointed place. His presence in Bethlehem indicates that he already had made one move before this story began, because Bethlehem was not a Levitical city. Then he left Bethlehem and traveled north to Ephraim where he found Micah. Later he left Micah and moved once more to go with the Danites and live in the northernmost part of Israel where the Danites settled. His moves were contrary to God's law. He was an opportunist.

17:8 — "Where he could find a place" - he was searching for a place of service. He had such a place from God, but he wanted a better place.

17:10 — "Be unto me a father and a priest" - Jonathan, the Levite, was not authorized by God to be a priest; only Levites of the line of Aaron had this privilege. He was of the line of Moses. Yet he was willing to become a priest. His apostasy became even more obvious when he accepted a place of service in a house of idols. He was content to dwell with Micah under these abominable conditions (17:11). He had no convictions. He was ungodly in his life because he had rejected God's law in his heart just as Micah had done.

17:13 — "The LORD will do me good" — since Micah had gotten himself a Levite to be his priest, he felt secure and very proud about his achievement. However, he was totally unfit for receiving any blessings from the LORD. His hope for blessings was based on superstitious beliefs.

B. By the Danites — 18:1-31

18:1 — "In those days there was no king in Israel" - this phrase is repeated four times in these five chapters (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The author of Judges reminds his readers that when Israel was a leaderless people, they were in grave danger of sin. They were easy prey because they had rejected God as their king. He seems to suggest that they needed a righteous king who would lead them back to God and back to righteous living.

"Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in" — the Amorites had forced Dan into the mountains and would not let them dwell in the plain (1:34). This weakness on the part of the Danites was a big disappointment for all Israel. Dan was the second largest tribe when they came into the land under Joshua with 64,000 fighting men (Num 26:43), and yet they failed to possess their part of the inheritance. This failure deprived Israel of some very rich land and the important seaport of Joppa. Their lack of faith in God to defeat the Amorites caused them to forfeit their

rightful inheritance. As a result, they turned to their own devices to find land to accommodate their people.

18:2 — "Children of Dan sent . . . five men" - Danites sent five important men ("men of valor") to search out the land to find for their people a better place in which to live. If they had been content with the good land that God had promised them, they would have determined by God's power to drive out the enemy and would have possessed their own land. But they sinned against the LORD by letting the Amorites stay and keep their land while they searched for a different land to possess.

18:3 — "They knew the voice of...the Levite" - at least some of the Danites on this special mission had lived close enough to Bethlehem to become acquainted with Micah's priest before he left Bethlehem. Now they found him working in Ephraim and asked what he was doing in that place.

18:5 — "Ask counsel...of God" - these men were not very discerning about spiritual matters to ask counsel of a man who worked as an unlawful priest in a house of idols.

18:6 — "Go in peace" - the carnal priest promised the Danites that the LORD would bless them in their search for a new land. Sometimes the LORD gives men the desires of their hearts, but sends leanness to their souls (Ps 106:15). This is what happened to these Danites.

18:7 — "Laish" - called "Leshem" in Joshua 19:47. Since this migration was recorded in Joshua, it was an event that occurred early, shortly after Joshua's death. It was located north of the Waters of Merom on the southern slope of Mt. Hermon. This area is known as the Huleh Valley. It is well watered and has very fertile land. Water comes from every rock and hill as a result of the melting snow on Mt. Hermon.

"They were far from the Zidonians" — reference to Sidon on the Mediterranean Sea. These people had no protection from Sidon.

"Had no business with any man" — these people at Laish were totally unprotected by anyone.

18:11 — "Out of Zorah and Eshtaol" - this was the very area in which Samson was to grow up (13:2; 16:31), but Samson lived almost three hundred years later.

18:15 — "Saluted him" - the word is "shalom," a greeting which was often used for "peace."

18:17 — "Took the graven image" - the 600 Danites robbed Micah of his gods just as he had once robbed his mother of eleven hundred pieces of silver. Thievery was a common practice in that day.

18:20 — "The priest's heart was glad" - when the offer was made to Jonathan to serve the tribe of Dan instead of a mere family, he was happy to say, "Yes." This readiness to accept the offer shows the materialistic attitude that he possessed.

18:21 — "The carriage" - "valuables" seems to be a better translation.

18:24 — "You have taken away my gods which I made" - Micah tried to rescue his gods, but to no avail. The 600 men of Dan were too strong for him. When men make their own gods, they also are responsible for protecting them. They must be protected because they have no life to protect themselves. God says those who make their own gods are like unto them (Ps 115:4-8).

"What have I more?" — Micah was so dependent on the gods that he made that he felt life was empty and worthless without them.

18:26 — "He turned and went back to his house" - Micah went back empty handed. He received the just recompense for his sin of idolatry (Gal 6:7, 8).

18:30 — "Children of Dan set up the graven image" - the city of Dan began with idolatry and it later became a major center of idolatry for Israel. One of the two golden calves was set up in Dan by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:29).

"Manasseh" — there is strong evidence that Manasseh should be Moses. Jonathan was the great-grandson of Moses, but he lacked the convictions and character of Moses.

"Captivity of the land" — this captivity could refer to a number of captivities, but it seems best to refer it to the time when the Philistines overran the land, captured the Ark of the Covenant and ruined the Tabernacle at Shiloh.

II. Immorality — 19:1-21:25

A. By the Concubine — 19:1-4

19:1 — "A concubine" - this is a second class wife who had been a slave.

19:2 — "Played the whore against him" — there is some question about the concubine's adultery. Did she actually commit a physical act of adultery with some other man or did she commit it mentally by leaving her husband and going back to her father? Either case would be bad, but the latter situation explains why the Levite would pursue her and why the father was so friendly. He knew he was wrong in taking his daughter back and felt guilty about it. His friendliness was an attempt to remove his guilt feelings and be fully reconciled to his son-in-law.

19:3 — "To speak friendly" - probably the Levite had been cruel to his concubine, causing her to sin, but now he repented and spoke lovingly to her and won her consent to return.

B. By Gibeah — 19:5-30

19:10 — "Jebus" — this is the name of Jerusalem when it was controlled by the Jebusites. It was located about four miles south of Gibeah.

19:12 — "City of a stranger" - the Levite did not feel it was safe to lodge in a Gentile city, so he traveled another four miles to be in an Israelite city. He could not have been treated worse in Jebus than he was in Gibeah.

19:15 — "Sat down in a street of the city" - he was not treated with proper hospitality by the people of Gibeah, so he prepared to sleep in the street (the town square?).

19:16 — "An old man" - this man was not from the tribe of Benjamin, but from Ephraim. This was the same tribe as the Levite. He was the only one who would show hospitality to this stranger in the street of Gibeah.

19:18 — "House of the Lord" - literally, "Bethel." The destination of this Levite was Bethel.

19:22 — "Sons of Belial" - this term is reserved for those who were lawless or immoral. It was used of those involved in idolatry (Deut 13:13); rebellion (1 Sam 2:12); and drunkenness (1 Sam 1:16). Here it was associated with sodomy.

"That we may know him" — the men of Gibeah wanted to have sexual relations with the Levite. They were sodomites. This incident is reminiscent of the situation when the two angels visited Lot's house in Sodom (Gen 19:5).

"Here is my daughter, a maiden, and his concubine" — although the man was trying to do his part as a good host by protecting the Levite, it shows the low place a woman had in society. A woman could be used to protect a man. Her rights were far less than a man's.

19:25 — "They knew her, and abused her all the night" - terrible acts of violence and perversion accompany sodomy wherever it is tolerated and practiced.

19:27 — "Her hands were upon the threshold" - the concubine made it back to the house where her husband was sleeping, but her strength was gone. She died at the entrance to the house.

19:28 — "Up, and let us be going" - the Levite seems cold and unfeeling toward his concubine. He had slept in the security of the house, while his wife had been left alone in the street to be abused by sex-crazed men. There seems to be no concern on his part for her condition after such an ordeal. She was treated the same as his donkey, "Up, it is time to go."

"But none answered" — the concubine was dead. Her adultery against her husband came back to her with frightful vengeance. She may not have truly repented of her sin, even though she was returning home with her husband. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23).

19:29 — "Divided her . . . into twelve pieces" - the Levite used this method to startle the nation of Israel and awaken his people to their moral senses. It was their responsibility to cleanse Israel of this wickedness.

C. By Benjamin — 20:1-21:25

20:1 — "As one man" - Israel was aroused and united in cleansing itself of the wickedness done by the men of Gibeah (cf. 20:8, 11).

"From Dan even to Beersheba" — from the northernmost city to the southernmost city, i.e. the whole nation.

20:2 — "Foot men that drew sword" - 400,000 soldiers were gathered from all the tribes to fight against Benjamin if it became necessary.

20:10 — "Ten men of an hundred" - of the 400,000 soldiers present, 40,000 would be chosen by lot to attack the men of Benjamin.

20:13 — "Deliver us . . . the children of Belial" - it was a reasonable request. Only the wicked men of Gibeah would be put to death, not the whole city.

"Benjamin would not hearken" — the men of Benjamin were stubborn. They decided to protect these wicked sodomites, evidently on the basis that they all were of the tribe of Benjamin. When they justified the wicked, they became as abominable as the sodomites themselves (Prov 17:15). If sin is punished properly, the health of a nation is preserved; but if it is condoned and defended, that nation is sick.

20:14 — "To go out to battle against . . . Israel" - Benjamin chose to fight against tremendous odds to protect a few wicked men. It was senseless. Sin blinds the intellect.

20:18 — "Israel . . . went up to the house of God" - literally, they went to Bethel (house of God). It seems that the ark was taken to Bethel for this special crisis with Benjamin. It was taken to Bethel because it was a significant religious site and it was near the scene of conflict. When the war was over, presumably the ark was returned to Shiloh.

"Asked counsel of God" — there seems to be no deep concern in their first approach to God. It was simply a matter-of-fact approach to get special instructions from God for their battle. They were not yet spiritually prepared for this cleansing.

"Judah shall go up first" — the whole tribe of Judah would not go first, but its group of representatives, chosen by lot, would lead the 40,000 men that were chosen from all the tribes of Israel (20:10). These would oppose the 26,000 men of Benjamin (20:15).

20:23 — "Israel went up and wept before the Lord" - the loss of 22,000 men in the first battle with Benjamin caused Israel to be more spiritually sensitive. Here they weep as they approach God.

20:26 — "Came to the house of God, and wept" - this was the third time the Israelites came to Bethel (house of God) for counsel from God, and the second time that they wept. The occasion for this weeping was another loss of 18,000 men. Israel's total losses now stood at 40,000 soldiers.

"Fasted . . . offered burnt offerings and peace offerings" — the Israelites were driven to their spiritual knees by great losses on the battle field. They examined themselves through prayer, weeping and fasting. They tried to please God by surrender to Him and dedication of themselves. Galatians 6:1 sets forth the same principle: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted."

20:27 — "For the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days" - a clear statement that the ark was in Bethel (20:18, 26) presumably brought there for the conflict. (Some believe that this story actually occurred before the ark was placed in Shiloh and was still temporarily located at Bethel.)

20:28 — "Phinehas" - this was the well-known high priest in the days of Joshua that helped to mediate the problem that occurred at the Altar of Witness (Josh 22:13, 30-32). Since he was involved in this conflict with Benjamin, this story also had to be early in the national life of Israel in Canaan.

"Tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand" — this was the first time that the Lord promised to give them victory. Now Israel was spiritually prepared to receive the victory.

20:29 — "Israel set liers in wait round about Gibeah" - this was the first time that any planning can be discerned on the part of Israel. Apparently they thought that their sheer numbers would overcome the men of Benjamin, but they were wrong. So they resorted to an ambush, similar to the one Joshua used to defeat Ai (Josh 8:1-29).

20:35 — "The LORD smote Benjamin before Israel" - the men of Benjamin were destroyed by Israel through the power of the LORD. There were 25,000 Benjamite soldiers that died in that battle.

20:37 — "Smote all the city with the edge of the sword" - All the people in the city of Gebesh were killed.

20:47 — "Rock Rimmon" - 600 soldiers of Benjamin fled to the rock Rimmon for safety and stayed there for four months. This rock is about four miles east of Bethel.

20:48 — "Smote them . . . the men of every city" - every Benjamite (man, woman and child) in all the cities of Benjamin was killed and their cities were burned. The only men of Benjamin who remained alive were the 600 soldiers on the rock Rimmon. The price for protecting the sodomites was extremely high.

21:1 — "Men of Israel had sworn" - the oath that the Israelites took before the battle with Benjamin seemed logical and clear, but now it created a serious problem for them. The problem of finding wives for the 600 survivors on the rock Rimmon was difficult because they had vowed not to give their daughters to the men of Benjamin. If they could not find wives for them, a tribe would be eliminated from Israel.

21:8 — "There came none . . . from Jabesh-Gilead" - when a search of the records was made, no one came from Jabesh-Gilead to help fight against Benjamin. Since they had not come, they had not participated in the vow. Furthermore, they needed to be punished for not helping in the battle. Therefore, it was decided that all the people of Jabesh-Gilead should die except the virgins. It seems like a rash decision, but it was done, and 400 virgins were found by this method. These virgins were given to 400 Benjamite soldiers to be their wives. Possibly some of these men went to live in Jabesh-Gilead to repopulate that city. At least there seems to be a close tie between the people of Benjamin and the people of Jabesh-Gilead in the days of Saul (a Benjamite king). He fought and won a significant battle from the Ammonites defending the people of Jabesh-Gilead at the beginning of his reign (1 Sam 11:1ff).

21:20-22 — Every year the maidens danced at a festival near Shiloh. The 200 men of Benjamin who were yet without wives were advised to wait in the vineyards nearby until the maidens danced. Then they were told to go and catch themselves a wife. In that way no Israelite father would be guilty of giving his daughter to a Benjamite. Thus the problem of saving Benjamin from extinction was solved.

21:25 — "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" - this was a fitting conclusion to this story and to the book of Judges. This statement is also made in 17:6.