

Judges, chapters 17-21 The Depths of Israel's Apostacy

I | INTRODUCTION / CONNECTIONS / CONTEXT

1 / As we have already learned, the Book of Judges is divided up into three distinct larger sections—though each of these sections will have other sub-divisions within them:

[I] **chs 1—3.6: The Roots of Israel's Apostacy [Lesson 3]**

[II] **chs 3.7—16.31: The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostacy [part 1, Lesson 4; part 2, Lesson 5]**

[III] **chs 17-21: The Depths of Israel's Apostacy [this lesson]**

2 / **What will we find in these concluding chapters of Judges?** These five concluding chapters of Judges tell two more 'short stories.'

[1] The first story will be told in **chs 17-18**. This story is about a man named Micah, **a man of the hill country of Ephraim**. He has established a **shrine**, or 'house of gods,' or a place of idolatrous worship. He hires a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah who is sojourning in Ephraim, and thinks by doing so, he can invoke the blessing of Yahweh on his idolatry. He ends up losing everything he has made by the works of his own hands. He lost his 'house of gods' to tribesmen of the tribe of Dan who paid his Levite 'priest' more than he could afford to pay.

[2] The second story is told in **chs 19-21**. This is a dark, sordid story of murder and sodomy—so dark and sordid that the Judges narrator intentionally invokes numerous parallels between **Judges 19** and the accounts of Sodom in **Genesis 19**. We won't be able to point out all those parallels, but they are there for the studious reader. What occurred in Gibeah of Benjamin then led to the near extinction of a whole tribe of Israel—Benjamin. That part of the story is told in **chs 20-21**.

3 / **Why are these stories told and included in Judges?** They are a fitting conclusion to what we found in the introductions of Judges in **chs 1—3.6**. There, we found that Israel began their downward spiral into apostacy by two over-arching practices which they have cycled over and over throughout the 'short stories' of the judges: **[1] they broke faith with Yahweh and the covenant obedience He had commanded them by their idolatrous practices**. They forgot, forsook, and abandoned **The LORD** to go after all the gods of the peoples around them; and **[2] they failed to drive out the inhabitants of the Land which The LORD had given them for their inheritance**. They chose to coexist with the wicked Canaanites; and as a consequence, they became like them.

4 / Each of these two stories contains three scenes or movements. All we will be able to do here is give the 'Cliff's Notes' summary of how these stories unfold. But they will tell the story of just how far downward Israel had descended into the abysmal pits of apostacy and corruption when they forsook The LORD. They are representative and illustrative of the effects of sin and disobedience against God.

5 / I will add just one more clue to interpreting the narrator's purpose in telling these stories—as it relates to his overall scheme in the developing storyline of the coming of Christ, the King, into the world. We are all familiar with the Judges theme of **"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** That line is repeated four times in Judges, and all four are found in these two stories: **17.6; 18.1; 19.1; 21.25**. That summary statement will 'book-end' both of these concluding stories. That line is first of all an indictment against Israel...because **they did, in truth, have a King! Their King was Yahweh! But they rejected Him and His rule over their lives**, thus leading to their total corruption and apostacy. AND, these concluding stories will also prepare them [and us] for the next chapters of their history when they do choose a king to rule over them. Two tribes are prominently mentioned and repeated throughout these concluding stories: Judah and Benjamin. Judah, of course, is the tribe from which David will come [as we will find out in Ruth]; and Saul will come from the tribe of Benjamin. The influences of both of these tribes will stand out in their future selections of a king. Just as Benjamin does not turn out well in the conclusion of Judges, neither will Saul turn out well in the history yet to come...

II | chs 17-18 | The Story of Micah, his 'house of gods,' and his Levite

ch 17.1-6 | Micah's shrine or 'house of gods'

This story took place in **the hill country of Ephraim** which was situated in the allotment just north of Judah's. The main character's name is Micah, which means 'Who is like Yahweh?' Apparently, this Micah thought 'whoever I choose to make to be like Yahweh is like, or even better than, Yahweh.' He stole a significant portion of his mother's silver; then returned it to her with an apology; then she gave it back to him to make carved images to set up in his 'shrine,' or 'house of gods.' In the opening movement, the Holy Spirit wants us to see that when you forget God, you then do whatever is right in your own eyes. Look at the commandments he violated: he coveted his mother's silver; he stole his mother's silver; he dishonors his mother when he steals her silver; he worships other gods before Yahweh; he makes a carved image; and he takes the Name of The LORD in vain when he and his mother call on Yahweh to bless his idolatry [**"Blessed be my son by The LORD," v 3; "Now I know that The LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest," v 13**]. So this Micah establishes his own place of worship to the gods he has made for himself, ordains one of his sons to be his priest, and sets up his own religion—all IN THE NAME OF THE LORD! **Here is the first entry of the Judges theme line: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."**

ch 17.7-13 | Micah's 'ordination' of a Levite to serve as his priest

We are introduced in v 7 to a **young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there**. Remember: the Levites had no physical inheritance in the Land because **The LORD was their inheritance**. They were charged with serving the priests in the Tabernacle in the worship of Yahweh. But they were given cities and fields in numerous locations among the other tribes. This Levite lived in Bethlehem in Judah. He goes to live in Ephraim where he meets up with this Micah, who sees this excellent opportunity to 'sanctify' his man-made religious system and idolatrous 'house of gods' with a Levite. So, he hires him to be his priest and thinks that he has obligated Yahweh to bless him.

ch 18 | The Danites steal Micah's 'house of gods' and his Levite priest

1 / But, Micah's religious system is short-lived. When you **depart from the Living God** and strike out on your own to practice the religion of your own choosing and making, then your 'god' and your religion are up for grabs to the highest bidder for whatever religious fulfillment you are seeking. And so it happened to Micah and his priest and house of gods. **Here is the second repetition of "In those days there was no king in Israel [and we supply in our minds, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."]**

2 / What happened here was that the tribe of Dan had failed to drive out the Canaanites from the allotment that was assigned to them in the original allotment [see ch 1.34-35]. So they start trekking northward to see if they can find another locality where they can settle. The Danites sent out a search party to scout the lands to their north, and they happened to come to the city and house where Micah had set up his house of gods. Lo, and behold! they recognize the voice of Micah's Levite 'priest.' He tells them about his cushy arrangement he has found for himself. So they ask him to **inquire of God for them to see if their mission will be blessed by The LORD**. Of course, he tells them that The LORD has blessed them. They do go a little farther north and do find a spacious city, Laish, and lands that are wealthy—and unprotected. An easy take for themselves. The scouts go back to their fellow Danites and give them this good news. So now 600 armed Danites to take the city and lands for themselves. However, on their way, they stop again at Micah's house of gods—and long story short, they outbid Micah for the services of Micah's Levite priest. They re-hire him for more money than Micah is giving him and offer him a more prestigious position he can't refuse: **"Keep quiet; put your hand on your mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?" And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people," ch 18.19-20**. Poor Micah! All he can do is

helplessly protest, cry, wring his hands, and mourn his losses: **“You take my gods that I made and the priest, and go away, and what have I left?” v 24.** The Danites then go on to destroy the city of Laish, burn it to the ground, kill the inhabitants—then rebuild the city to live in it, and renamed it Dan. This city will come up again centuries later when Jeroboam, the first king of the newly-seceded kingdom of northern Israel, will again set up an idolatrous calf in Dan for Israel to worship. In Jeroboam's day, there *will be a counterfeit king in Israel who is again...still...doing what is right in his own eyes! [1 Kings 12.25-33].*
 3 / Our Judges narrator now reveals the name of the Levite ‘priest,’ and what a shameful besmirching of his family's name—he is a great-grandson of Moses! **see ch 18.30.**

III | chs 19-21 | The Story of the Benjaminite's' Abominations and Near-Extinction

ch 19 | The Benjaminites have become Sodomites

1 / Here in this second ‘short story’ of Israel's plunging into the depths of apostacy, the opening line is the third repetition of **In those days, when there was no king in Israel... [see also 17.6; 18.1]** And here we will see the depths of the moral depravity, debauchery, and perversion to which Israel had descended. The events of this chapter transpire in the city of Gibeah. Gibeah is in the tribal allotment of Benjamin. The narrator is taking us back to the opening introduction of Judges, back to **ch 1.21**, where the failure of Benjamin to drive out the Jebusites from their allotted inheritance—but rather chose to let them live and live among them is recorded. [*As we have seen earlier, Gibeah is also the king Saul's hometown later on.*] But when the Benjaminites failed to drive out the Canaanite inhabitants, they became just like them.

2 / The story also is about another Levite. In the previous story, that Levite went from Bethlehem to the hill country of Ephraim. In this story, this Levite will go in reverse: from the hill country of Ephraim down to Bethlehem. The gist of this story is that this Levite had taken [married—he is called her husband] a concubine from Bethlehem and brought her to Ephraim to live with him. But she abandoned him and went back to her father's house in Bethlehem [*just like Israel had unfaithfully abandoned her Heavenly Husband, Yahweh*]. But her Levite husband loved her and **arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back [19.3].** *This is the same theme and language of Hosea.* When he arrived in Bethlehem to fetch her back, her father was glad to see him; and through a lot of cajoling, he persuaded him to stay for five days—two days longer than he had intended—while he hospitably wined and dined him. Until on the evening of the fifth day, the Levite husband insisted they had to go, even though it was late in the day. They did leave—the Levite husband and his wife—and they traveled north.

3 / As the evening fell, they came to the city of Jebus [Jebusites—which would later become Jerusalem]; but the Levite husband didn't want to risk spending the night among Canaanite ‘foreigners.’ **“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 [Benjamin]” ch 19.12.** At least there, they will be among their own people. But what they found out is that the Benjaminite inhabitants of Gibeah were worse than the Canaanites—or at least just like them. No one in Gibeah offered them hospitality of staying the night with them, so they ‘camped out’ in the city square. But there was an old man coming home from working his fields; he saw them there in the open square; and knowing more about the Gibeah-ites than they did, told them they would not be safe in the square, and brought them home with him. He hosted them hospitably until they could resume their journey in the morning.

4 / What happened overnight is one of the most sordid stories in the Bible. *And it happened in one of Israel's own tribal cities—Gibeah of Benjamin.* This is where the narrator lays his story here in **Judges 19** right alongside the story of Sodom in **Genesis 19** to show us that when you forget, forsake, and abandon the Kingship and Lordship of God [apostacy] to do what is right in your own eyes—then there are no boundaries to the depths of perversion to which you will sink. The men of Gibeah surround the old man's house and demand that he **“Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him” [v 22]**—that is, have sodomite, homosexual relations with him. The old man offered them his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine, but they insisted on the man. The concubine was thrown out the door, and the men of Gibeah sexually abused her to her death. **It is called ‘murder’ in ch 20.4-5.**

5 / The Levite goes out first thing in the morning only to find her dead on the threshold. He is heart-broken [**remember v 3**], and takes her body home to Ephraim. He wants to publicize what an **abominable, outrageous, evil** act has been committed—even here in Israel. So **“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,”** ch 19.29. We don't know how much explanatory commentary he sent with the pieces of her body—we do know he will tell the whole sordid story when the elders and armies of the twelve tribes gather at Mizpah and he tells them what happened in Gibeah in **ch 20.1-7**. What we also know is that **“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...,’”** [ch 19.30]. Such is the depths of depravity, debauchery, and perversion to which a people will sink—even professing covenant people—when they forsake, forget, and abandon Yahweh their God to do what is right in their own eyes.

ch 20 | The tribe of Benjamin is attacked and all but exterminated, annihilated

1 / We will be able to only briefly summarize the events of these next two chapters. But this was the consequential, resulting bloodshed and destruction that came upon Israel, and especially the tribe of Benjamin, for their evil, abominable, and outrageous acts they had done in the sight of The LORD. **“Then all the people of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled as one man to The LORD at Mizpah...400,000 men on foot that drew the sword,”** vv 1-2. They heard the Levite husband's story behind his sending his concubine's dismembered body parts to them. They determined that the responsible Gibeah-ites must be executed **“that they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel,”** v 10. But when they demanded that the tribal elders of Benjamin deliver up the people of Gibeah **“that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel,”** v 13, Benjamin instead rallied to the support of Gibeah.

2 / So what happened was: Israel declared civil war against the whole tribe of Benjamin—their brothers—with the intent of exterminating and annihilating the whole tribe. Benjamin was heavily out-numbered: 400,000 Israelites v. 26,700 Benjaminites and Gibeah-ites. *That's a 15 to 1 numerical [dis]advantage!* What ensued was a three-day war with Israel suffering substantial casualties during the first two days of combat [vv 19-28]. Israel succeeded, though, on the third day by setting ambush strategies against Benjamin—and they were all massacred [vv 29-46] with the exception of 600 men who escaped to a wilderness hideout where they stayed for four months [v 47]. **“And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire,”** v 48.

ch 21 | Israel schemes to find wives for the 600 surviving men of Benjamin

1 / Then the men of Israel had a kind of change of heart. **“And they said, ‘O LORD, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?’”** [vv 3]. They were left with 600 surviving Benjaminite men without wives—without which, they could not perpetuate their tribe. But Israel had sworn a **great oath** to The LORD that no Israelite could ‘willingly give’ his daughter to a Benjaminite as a wife. So, what follows in **ch 21** is a whole series of pragmatic compromises they made to the ‘**great oath**’ they had made to The LORD at Mizpah. At the very best, these compromises were ‘loopholes’ or ‘work-arounds’ so they could at least maintain the appearance of keeping their oath—but yet give their fellow Israelites a way out of total extermination and annihilation.

2 / However, what follows is yet more slaughter of fellow Israelites of Jabesh-gilead which supplied 400 of the needed 600 wives [vv 8-15] and a deceptive ‘kidnapping’ and ‘stealing’ of the remaining 200 wives from among the virgins of Shiloh [vv 16-23]. None of this was on the ‘up and up’ in keeping with either Yahweh's covenant obedience, nor even with the keeping of their two-part ‘**great oath**’ they had made before Yahweh [vv 5-7]. **It was all still on the ‘down and down’ ... further and further into the ‘depths of Israel's apostasy.’**

3 / All of which makes our narrator give his fourth summary thesis of everything he's written in Judges: **“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”**