

## Judges Chapter 20 Part 1

In chapter 20, the tribe of Benjamin is almost wiped out as a result of a civil war in Israel.

Here is the outline of the Benjamin episode as viewed by Robert Chisholm:

Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited (19:1b-30)

Retrieving a wife (19:1b-10)

Stopping in Gibeah (19:11-15)

Hospitality extended (19:16-21)

Evil personified (19:22-30)

**Bye Bye Benjamin! (20:1-48)**

**Considering the evidence (20:1-17)**

**Round one to Benjamin (20:18-21)**

**Round two to Benjamin (20:22-25)**

**Benjamin down and out (20:26-48)**

Six Hundred Brides for Six Hundred Brothers (21:1-25)

Feeling regret (21:1-3)

Murder and kidnapping (21:4-14)

Dodging a vow (21:15-25)

Before we get started I would like to add something to what I said last week. After going back to the text with the help of Robby Dean's notes, the Levite cut his concubine into pieces and apparently sent all the pieces together around Israel. So he only needed one courier and they all saw all the pieces of the concubine. Or, according to other commentators, he could have sent individual pieces to individual tribes. The commentators have differing views on this. In any case, all the tribes were privy to at least a piece of the body of the Levite's concubine. Since there was no refrigeration in those days, the pieces were soon undergoing decay, much

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like the nation of Israel. The dismembered body was enough to incite the tribes to war against Benjamin.

Something to also remember when reading the Old Testament. It is something I have to keep reminding myself of. The Church dispensation did not start until the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. So the rules are somewhat different in the dispensation of Israel.

**Judges 20:1 Then all the sons of Israel from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, came out, and the congregation assembled as one man to the Lord at Mizpah.**

**All the sons of Israel.** This was not just a few tribes like the individual judges, but ALL the sons of Israel. Israel was united at the beginnings of the book of Judges (1:1 (implied); 2:4 (all the Israelites); 2:6 (when Joshua dismissed the Israelites)). Perhaps it is fitting that early on the tribes were united until each tribe went to its own inheritance. Then they split. Here in chapter 20 they are united again, but to conduct a civil war. At the end of the book of Judges:

**Judges 21:24 The sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one of them went out from there to his inheritance.**

Back to Judges 20:1.

**From Dan to Beersheba.** Look! Israel is described as from “Dan.” That would lead us to believe this episode does in fact follow after the last episode in which the tribe of Dan conquered a little town to the north of Israel.

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**Came out and assembled.** Here we have the two verb punch. They came out of their individual lands and assembled at Mizpah for a meeting.

**Assembled as one man to the Lord.** Amazing. When the individual tribes went in to occupy their inheritance, they went in individually to conquer it. As a result, there was mixed to no victory. The exception was Judah with Simeon. Had the tribes stayed together in some fashion, they might have had greater success. So here, they do what is right.

**Assembled.** In the LXX this is a verb derived from the word for church in the New Testament. So just a side note: Some Christians see the word *eklessia* in the Old Testament/LXX, point to it and say, “See, the Church is in the Old Testament.” The basic meaning is to gather together, to meet. That is how it is translated because that is what it means here in the Old Testament. This is not a reference to the Church. The Church was not revealed in the Old Testament, it was a “mystery.” This is just to alert you, that this is one way people try to say that the Church and Israel are the same. Dispensationalists say that there is a difference between the Church and Israel. There are others that do not. Herman calls their theology, “replacement theology.” It is also known as “supersessionism.”

**Land of Gilead.** This is on the east side of the Jordan. So in order to attend the meeting, these people had to cross the Jordan River.

**As one man.** They are united in their purpose. This is what they were supposed to be. Great freedom but with unity in the covenant worshipping the Lord.

**To the Lord at Mizpah.** This insinuates that the tabernacle was at Mizpah. Note that there were several towns called Mizpah. The word itself means watch tower (per Unger). However, later in the text it says the ark of the covenant was in those days at Bethel. There is an obvious

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logical question here. Did they assemble to the Lord separate from the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant? Possibly.

**To the Lord.** Literally to Yahweh.



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The Levite was able single-handedly to unite all the tribes (minus Benjamin) into one unified whole for the purpose of war.

**Judges 20:2 The chiefs of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, took their stand in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 foot soldiers who drew the sword.**

**The chiefs.** Chiefs is OK as a translation. The NIV has “leaders.” Looking at the English I would have suspected a different Hebrew word.

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The TDOT suggests “pillars of the community.” It comes from an architectural term for capstone or cornerstone.

**Foot soldiers.** Literally “men of foot.” In a military context today we might say, “infantry.”

**Who drew the sword.** This suggests organization and training. This indicates they have been doing what the Lord commanded: train for war. Unfortunately they are about to use this training in a civil war. Note that in the previous episode, the “Dan episode,” that tribe also was prepared for war. There is no mention up to this point of a standing army. So, these farmers may have been part of a “National Guard.”

**400,000.** Commentators don’t like the large numbers of people referenced in the Old Testament. One must consider that the families perhaps had more than just the replacement number of children. Jacob had 12 sons. David had several brothers. One effect of providing the numbers of soldiers is to show the enormity of the losses during battle. Some speculate that the word for “thousands” is actually a term for a military unit. For now, I will stick with the literal meaning of the word.

**Judges 20:3 (Now the sons of Benjamin heard  
that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.)  
And the sons of Israel said, “Tell us, how did  
this wickedness take place?”**

**Sons of Benjamin.** Likely the tribe had been invited to the conclave. And likely they decided not to attend. The text does not tell us this exactly so we have to fill in the gaps logically.

**This wickedness.** Literally “the evil.” The NIV has “awful thing.” I think that is too weak a word for this context.

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**Judges 20:4 So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, “I came with my concubine to spend the night at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin.**

This is all true. He also had a servant with him who could have also testified (the second witness). But he was apparently never asked.

**The husband of the woman.** Here the concubine is identified as a woman by the author. Remember, there are often multiple perspectives expressed in the text. Here you have the Levite, “all” the sons of Israel, the author and the tribe of Benjamin. This is the same word used in Genesis chapter 2 for the “woman” who was Eve. The author’s perspective is that she is a woman, a person, not a concubine who is “property.” The Levite sees the woman as “concubine” and perhaps as property. So in this one verse two differing perspectives on the Levite’s wife are presented: woman and concubine.

**Who was murdered.** This is from the author’s perspective. The woman was murdered. This word means “murdered,” not just “killed.” The same word is used in Exodus 20:13, “Thou shalt not murder.”

**Judges 20:5 But the men of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me; (they never said they were going to kill him, only that they wanted “relations” with him.) instead, they ravished my concubine so that she died.**

**Men of Gibeah.** The word “men” is actually from the word “ba’al.” In this case it can mean the lords. It also has the meaning of “owner.” Per TDOT, it can mean “husband” as the owner of his wife. The Levite is

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talking and refers to the men of Gibeah as lords using a word that can also mean the god Ba'al.

**Rose up against me.** The Levite leaves out important details like the fact that he was in a house and that in order to save himself he forced the concubine on the Benjamites.

**They intended to kill me.** Here the word used is “to kill,” not the word for murder. Interesting contrast between the author’s perspective of what happened to the woman and what the man says the Benjamites wanted to do. He does not mention that the Benjamites wanted (sexual) relations with him.

**Judges 20:6 And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout the land of Israel’s inheritance; for they have committed a lewd and disgraceful act in Israel.**

The Levite is telling an evil lie in order to obtain vengeance. There is an element of truth. Actually, most of what he says is true. But, he leaves out the important information. The point is he shoved his concubine out the door and invited the local Benjamite men to abuse her. He did that. He did not take it to the Lord in prayer. He did not attempt to defend the house. He was a coward trying to save his own skin. She was expendable.

A lingering question has to do with why he cut his concubine in pieces. Is there a special cultural perspective that we are missing? I don’t know. But here is a comment from one of the commentators (Younger), “To those at the assembly who have received the ghastly pieces it [the sending of the pieces] is interpreted as a zealous act of covenant fidelity and a call to religious war.”

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This brings up the Levite's view of life. Was he a believer with a knowledge of eternal security? Obviously, he was not living his life that way. He never goes to God for help. He "solves" his problem in order to save himself. This is another illustration of what happens when man attempts to solve his problem from human viewpoint and cuts God out of the equation.

**Proverbs 14:12 There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.**

**Israel's Inheritance.** Where did this inheritance come from? From God. That little fact is left out.

**Judges 20:7 Behold, all you sons of Israel, give your advice and counsel here."**

Before proceeding, we need to look at Mosaic Law. What did it say about witnesses? Then what did it say about this type of evil and how it should be punished.

**Deuteronomy 19:15 "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.**

So there is an error in the investigation. They take the word of one lying witness. Not only that, since the Levite was complicit in the actions, that is he invited the Benjamites to abuse his concubine, then he should have received the same punishment as the Benjamite murderers—death.

Now what was the responsibility of the tribes concerning this evil murder of the Levite's concubine? What does the Mosaic Law require?



**Deuteronomy 13:12 “If you hear in one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you to live in, anyone saying that**

**Deuteronomy 13:13 some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’ (whom you have not known),**

**Deuteronomy 13:14 then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly. If it is true and the matter established that this abomination has been done among you,**

You shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly. Key words which the sons of Israel did not do in respect to the Levite’s accusation.

**Investigate.** Often this word is translated “seek.” You are looking for something. Here they are looking for the truth. Investigate is OK.

**Search out.** This is a word for observation and evaluation. It is not a passive observation. It is targeted to a purpose. What is true? Search out is not a bad translation.

**Inquire thoroughly.** The word means to ask. You must ask the right questions. There is no indication that the sons of Israel conducted an interrogation of the Levite to ensure that he was speaking the truth. He had provided pieces of his concubine as his “second witness” so to speak so they didn’t bother to thoroughly inquire. The word for “thoroughly” is related to a word for “good.” In this context it can be translated as thoroughly, diligently. Ask diligently.

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**Deuteronomy 13:15** you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it and all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword.

**Deuteronomy 13:16** Then you shall gather all its booty into the middle of its open square and burn the city and all its booty with fire as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God; and it shall be a ruin forever. It shall never be rebuilt.

**Judges 20:8** Then all the people arose as one man, saying, “Not one of us will go to his tent, nor will any of us return to his house.

The Levite so incited the sons of Israel with the pieces of the dead concubine plus his one-sided story that there is now an immediacy to the action.

**Judges 20:9** But now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah; we will go up against it by lot.

**Judges 20:10** And we will take 10 men out of 100 throughout the tribes of Israel, and 100 out of 1,000, and 1,000 out of 10,000 to supply food for the people, that when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, they may punish them for

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**all the disgraceful acts that they have committed in Israel.”**

It certainly appears that they understand the concept of Deuteronomy 13:15-16 even if they are not living by the Torah.

**Judges 20:11 Thus all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united as one man.**

**United as one man.** This is repetition for emphasis.

**Judges 20:12 Then the tribes of Israel sent men through the entire tribe of Benjamin, saying, “What is this wickedness that has taken place among you?”**

**Judges 20:13 Now then, deliver up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and remove this wickedness from Israel.” But the sons of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the sons of Israel.**

The men from the other tribes expected the tribe of Benjamin to “deliver up” the evil men who had murdered the Levite’s concubine. But they didn’t. So, the sons of Israel are going to apply Mosaic Law mixed with maximum emotion to the problem without having thoroughly investigated the matter. What if the sons of Israel had gone to the sons of Benjamin and asked them what their side of the story was?

**Worthless fellows.** Buried in the literal meaning is perhaps a double entendre. Literally this is “sons of worthlessness” or “sons of Belial.” Belial shows up in the New Testament:

## **2 Corinthians 6:15 Or what harmony has Christ with Belial (in the Greek spelled as Beliar), or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?**

But consider the different perspectives. The Levite lied so he would not be implicated. He wanted vengeance. The sons of Israel have been lied to and are now about to act on that lie. The sons of Benjamin likely consulted with the people of Gibeah and knew the involvement of the Levite in this crime. The men at Gibeah could have truthfully said that the Levite had invited them to have relations with the concubine. It would have been useless at this point for the Benjamites to say this. The sons of Israel believed the Levite and their emotions were on steroids. After all, had they not seen the dismembered body of the concubine?

Some say that the U.S. civil war might have been averted if people had not stirred up emotions on both sides of the issue of slavery. And even today, are there not two predominant but very different political/cultural views. And there are people who are trying to stir up the emotions.

**Judges 20:14 The sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah, to go out to battle against the sons of Israel.**

**Judges 20:15 From the cities on that day the sons of Benjamin were numbered, 26,000 men who draw the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah who were numbered, 700 choice men.**

**Choice men.** Chisholm translates this as “elite troops.”

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**26,000 men.** Again, the large numbers will factor into demonstrating the enormity of the losses.

**Judges 20:16 Out of all these people 700 choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.**

**Left-handed.** Often a left handed man will have an advantage in battle against a right-handed man. Left-handed people are estimated to be about 10% of the population. So when training, most right-handed people will train against other right-handed people. In the case of right-handed swordsmen, it will be sword against shield. But when meeting a left-handed person, the right-handed person has not trained sword against sword and shield against shield. He is at a disadvantage.

**Judges 20:17 Then the men of Israel besides Benjamin were numbered, 400,000 men who draw the sword; all these were men of war.**

**Judges 20:18 Now the sons of Israel arose, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God and said, “Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?” Then the Lord said, “Judah shall go up first.”**

**Inquired of God.** From the English, I would have expected the normal Hebrew word to “inquire.” But here is the word to ask. The word for God is Elohim not Yahweh. There seems to be a dullness on the part of the sons of Israel when approaching God.

**Who shall go up first.** Was this the right question to ask God?

**Judah shall go up first.** The answer from God to this question is the same as in Judges chapter 1, but with a slight but important difference.

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**Judges 1:1** Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the Lord, saying, “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?”

**Judges 1:2** The Lord said, “Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.”

Notice the difference between the two answers. In chapter 1 God added, “I have given the land into his hand.” And Judah was successful. But as we will see shortly, the sons of Israel are not initially successful. Indeed many of them died. God had not said they would be successful.

**Judges 20:19** So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah.

**Judges 20:20** The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah.

**Judges 20:21** Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel.

**Felled to the ground.** The word for felled means destroyed, ruined, spoiled, corrupted.

For the sons of Israel this was an unexpected outcome. After all, they asked God, didn't they. But, be careful what you ask for. They had already decided to attack Benjamin. Don't try to impose your will on God. God may answer your prayer in ways you did not expect. And like

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previous incidents, the soldiers may have had their pocket idols with them for good luck.

**Judges 20:22 But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day.**

Admirable that they picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and moved forward. However, if this is done apart from fellowship with God, you might expect some troubles.

**Judges 20:23 The sons of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and inquired of the Lord, saying, “Shall we again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin?” And the Lord said, “Go up against him.”**

This is just a repeat of the first time plus the weeping. Something is wrong. There is a lesson to be learned. If we are going to endeavor to do something, we need to be in fellowship and pray to God for guidance, not telling God what we are going to do and expect Him to bless us. As we will see, after being defeated a second time, the sons of Israel will go back and prepare correctly.