

The Most Disturbing Story in the Bible (Judges 19-21)

I. Background

- a. I originally taught this lesson at an apologetics class held on the Harvard campus to a mixed group that includes many skeptics. Apologetics is simply about defending the faith. I taught that class because I want to challenge people, including both Christians and those who are skeptical about the Christian faith, to think more deeply. I chose to do this by tackling what most would consider an extremely disturbing story.
- b. Many, even among devoted Christians, have a hard time defending some of the terrible things found in Scripture, especially in some of the Old Testament stories.
- c. We see wars, genocide, slaughter of innocent people, oppression, abuse, slavery, and all kinds of horrible things happening to people.
- d. The tendency can be to avoid these stories or to explain them away, rather than asking why are these in the Scripture and what are we supposed to learn from them. Things like these can be obstacles to people coming to faith who may wonder:
 - i. “How could a good and loving God allow (or even command) such terrible things to happen?”; OR
 - ii. “How can the God of the Old Testament be the same God as the one who sent Jesus, in the New Testament?”; OR
 - iii. “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)
 1. Paul writes this after quoting from one of the psalms.
 2. According to Paul, the Old Testament was written *for the benefit of the Christians!*
 3. So we should be asking, what is there *for us to learn* in some of these terrible stories?
- e. The two most disturbing stories in the Bible, in my opinion, are:
 - i. #2 (the second most disturbing story) is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in **Genesis 19**. Lot offers his two daughters to the violent crowd, in an attempt to save himself and his visitors.

- ii. #1 (the most disturbing story) is the story of the Levite and His Concubine, in **Judges 19-21**. This story is not nearly as well known as the other one.
- f. My goal today is to take what is possibly the most disturbing story in the Old Testament and to make sense of it.
 - i. To try to explain the reason why we have this story.
 - ii. To answer the question, "*Where is God* in this tragedy?"
 - iii. To attempt to redeem a story that, on the face of it, would appear to be *unredeemable*.
- g. Keep in mind that early Christians understood that Old Testament stories like this should be considered on *three levels*. While the second or third level are not involved in every story, these perspectives *should at least be considered* when reading stories from the Old Testament. The three levels for the reader to consider are:
 - i. Basic storyline
 - 1. Understanding the facts and events, taken at face value.
 - ii. Moral lessons for us
 - 1. Example: Don't be like Esau and live a godless life. He sold his birthright for some short-term pleasure of the flesh, for one morsel of food" (**Genesis 25:29-34**; explained in **Hebrews 12:16**).
 - iii. Foreshadowings of Christ
 - 1. Example: the story of the Passover Lamb (**Exodus 12**), which foreshadowed Christ (as explained in **1 Peter 1:19** and **1 Corinthians 5:7**).

II. Background for this Story

- a. Takes place during the time of the judges (from death of Joshua until Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel).
- b. In very rough numbers, we might place the events in the period of the Judges in the timeframe of about 1400-1050 BC, over 1000 years before Jesus and after the Jews left Egypt under Moses.
- c. My own assumption is that the last few chapters of Judges are not arranged in chronological order related to the rest of that book. In other words, the events of the last three chapters (**Judges 19-21**) did not occur after

everything else in the book. There are a few reasons for that conclusion; one is that this story speaks of Phinehas, which would suggest it is from an earlier part of the Judges period.

III. Rocky Start to a Marriage

- a. Read **Judges 19:1-9**
- b. Levite from Ephraim marries a concubine from Bethlehem
 - i. Ephraim is in the north; Bethlehem is in the south, slightly south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem, at this point in history, was a relatively insignificant town.
 - ii. This was in the days before Jerusalem (then called Jebus, home of the Jebusites) was conquered by the Jews.
 - iii. A concubine = lower status wife (for example: could be of lower social status, less rights, or not the same formal wedding)
 - iv. The wife leaves her husband and returns to her father in Bethlehem. The young man returns to Bethlehem to bring back his wife. His father-in-law is very pleased and continues to ask him to stay longer.
 - v. You may note that in **Judges 19:2** the Masoretic Text (which most modern Bible translations use for their Old Testament text) says she “played the harlot” in going back to her father. Not sure whether that is intended to be taken literally (she committed adultery) or figuratively (she abandoned her husband).
 1. However, in the Septuagint texts there is no corresponding negative comment on her moral character. Either it just says she departed, or says she was upset with her husband (therefore, no clear indication of sin on her part).

IV. Journey Back, Overnight Stay in Gibeah

- a. Read **Judges 19:10-24**
- b. The Levite and concubine get a late start on the fifth day, so don't get very far before night approaches.
- c. Jerusalem is still held by the Jebusites (not the Jews), so the Levite does not want to stop there.
- d. Therefore, they continue a little further and stop in Gibeah, a Benjamite city.
- e. An older man from Ephraim shows hospitality and takes them into his home where they share a meal that includes bread and wine.

- f. Wicked men surround the house and demand to have sex with the visiting Levite man.
 - i. **Question:** Does this remind us of *any other story* in the Bible?
 - ii. **Answer:** This part of the story has surprising similarities to how the story of Sodom and Gomorrah begins. (Compare with **Genesis 19:1-10.**) Unusual similarities include:
 - 1. Travelers enter a town in evening.
 - 2. They are shown hospitality by an older man, who takes them in so they don't have to spend the night in the city square.
 - 3. After a meal together with bread, a mob of wicked men surround the house and demand to have sex with the man/men who are visiting the city.
 - 4. Two women are offered to the mob, instead.
 - 5. (Later, we will see that the city ends up getting destroyed at the end, as a result of the wickedness of its people.)
 - 6. **HOWEVER**, there are *significant differences* in the outcome.
 - a. Fortunately, angels protect the lives of the inhabitants of the house (Job and his daughters) from the depraved mob in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.
 - b. In contrast, there are *no angels to save the threatened people* in the story of the Levite and His Concubine.
 - i. As we will see this difference leads to a tragic outcome for the concubine, who is *not* saved by any angels.

V. The Atrocity

- a. Read **Judges 19:25-30.**
- b. This is extremely disturbing.
- c. The Levite takes his concubine and gives her to the crowd.
- d. They rape and abuse her all night. She is found dead in the morning, hands on the threshold of the door.
- e. Her husband takes her body back home, cuts it into 12 pieces, and sends the parts out to all the tribes of Israel. (Keep in mind that there is no king ruling over the nation of Israel at this time.)

f. **Questions to Consider:**

- i. *Why* is this story even in the Bible?
 - ii. *Why* did God allow this to happen to the woman?
 - iii. Does the Bible in any way condone the *oppression of women* in this story?
 - iv. *How do you feel about the husband* of the woman, and what he (and the other man) did?
- g. This story reflects the depravity of the world. These types of atrocities have happened in the past and continue to occur today. The Scriptures present a realistic picture of the horrible things that *really do occur* in the world.

VI. The Aftermath

a. Read **Judges 20:1-17**.

- i. Everyone gathers in Mizpah (located near Gibeah, in Benjamin).
- ii. The assembled men of Israel decide “as one man” to punish the wicked men of Gibeah.
- iii. They ask tribe of Benjamin to turn over the wicked men from Gibeah, to be put to death. They are seeking justice.
- iv. The Benjamites refuse to cooperate. They show more allegiance to the wicked men of their own tribe than to God and to justice.

b. Summary of the battle (**Judges 20:18-47**)

- i. 400,000 men of Israel confront smaller, but highly skilled warriors of Benjamin.
- ii. Israel inquires of the Lord. He says that Judah should lead the attack, and 22,000 Israelites die in the first day of battle.
- iii. Israel inquires of the Lord regarding the second day battle. This time 18,000 more men die.
- iv. All Israelite men weep, pray and fast, make offerings before the ark of the Lord; the Lord tells them to press the attack again for victory.
- v. On the third day, after fierce battle and a successful ambush, Israel utterly defeats Benjamites.
 1. Only 600 Benjamite men survive, who flee to the “rock of Rimmon” for protection.

2. Later, special arrangements are made to provide wives for those men, so that the tribe of Benjamin does not go extinct.
3. Recall the **Genesis 49:27** prophecy about Benjamin, who is described as “*a ravenous wolf*”. How true, given the terrible rape and murder of the concubine by the men of Benjamin, and then how the rest of the tribe protected these evil men from just punishment.
4. Later, the Israelites from the city of Jabesh Gilead are put to the sword for failing to respond to the call to deal with the wickedness of the tribe of Benjamin.

VII. The Second Level: Are there Any Moral Lessons in this Story, for Us?

- a. Evil exists. This world has some very wicked people in it.
 - i. There are people in this world who are consumed with evil. The idea that *all people* are “deep down, really good (but perhaps they just had difficult childhoods)” is just *not true*. If you have not yet encountered truly wicked people in this world, you probably will at some point!
 - ii. Origen (c. 185-255 AD) teacher in the early church from Alexandria, in refuting a pagan critic of the Christians named Celsus, gives this story as one example of the activity of Satan among men. Origen wrote:
 1. “...with respect to the ‘sons of Belial’ in the **Book of Judges**, whose sons they are said to be, save his [*referring to Satan*], on account of their wickedness?” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, chapter 43; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 593)
 2. This term “the sons of Belial”, also rendered “sons of wickedness” or “sons of lawlessness” is from **Judges 19:22** and **20:13**.
 3. Origen is saying here that these Benjamite men who raped and murdered the concubine woman were sons of the devil, wicked and lawless.
 - iii. As in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Flood of Noah, the wicked will be destroyed in the end (**2 Peter 2:4-9**).
- b. We are in a battle of good versus evil.
 - i. Over 40,000 Israelite *men lost their lives* to bring justice for the death of one woman.
 1. This story is not about the Scripture placing a lower value on the worth and value of women. Just the opposite: the men of

Israel were outraged at the crime. Thousands of men lost their lives in order to bring justice for the evil done to one woman.

- ii. It took perseverance and a great struggle to overcome evil. Even with God on their side, it took three attempts (at tremendous sacrifice in lives lost) before they prevailed at last.
 - 1. We should expect that our own battles against evil today will require great sacrifice and perseverance. It likely will not be easy, and we may not see immediate victory.
 - 2. There may even be times it appears we are losing battles and taking great hits, even experiencing defeat. Yet, just like in this story, God sometimes allows losses in our struggle.
 - 3. Even so, we must remain faithful to the end, and allow God to bring about the ultimate victory as He so determines.
- iii. We are in a spiritual battle today, fighting against evil (**Ephesians 6:10-20**). We must be prepared to stand *in our own battles*, using God's spiritual weapons.

VIII. The Third Level: Are There any Foreshadowings of Christ?

- a. **Questions:** Why is this story in the Bible *at all*? Why all the *specific details* in this story, many of which do not appear to be necessary?
 - i. Why the details about the young man not leaving his father-in-law, continuing to be delayed until the *fifth* day?
 - ii. Why does the story tell us he had *two* donkeys?
 - iii. Why does the story tell us that they went on *just outside of Jerusalem*?
 - iv. There are many details that seem extraneous. Why are these included, when have nothing to do with the moral lessons for us?
 - v. Is there *something else* we are to learn from this story?
- b. Let us consider this story once more, from the perspective of a possible third level application. Is there *anything* in this story that might *point to the story of Christ*? Consider:
 - i. The journey begins in Bethlehem.
 - 1. In **Matthew 2:1**, Christ's life begins in Bethlehem.
 - ii. The journey to the city where the murder will take place involves two donkeys.

1. At the end, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on two donkeys, according to **Matthew 21**.
 2. “Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, “The Lord has need of them,” and immediately he will send them.’ All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” (**Matthew 21:1-5**; the prophecy quoted is from **Zechariah 9:9**)
- iii. An evening meal takes place on the evening of the fifth day. This is the last meal of the concubine’s life. It is in someone else’s home. The meal involves eating bread, drinking wine and foot washing.
1. Jesus’ Last Supper took place on the evening of *the fifth day of the week*, Thursday night. (Sunday was first day of the week, and Saturday, the Sabbath, was the seventh.)
 2. This meal was in the guest accommodations in the house of another man. (**Mark 14:12-16**)
 3. The Last Supper of Jesus involved:
 - a. Bread and wine (**Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-26, Luke 22:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26**)
 - b. Foot washing (**John 13:1-17**)
- iv. Two people are offered to the wicked crowd: the concubine and one other person.
1. Jesus and Barabbas were offered to the crowd in Jerusalem, by Pilate. (**Matthew 27:15-21**)
- v. The crowd selects one of the two, bringing about the death of that person. The blood of that innocent person, who is abused and then murdered, is on the hands of the people in that crowd.
1. The crowd wants Barabbas released, but calls for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate refers to Him as a just person, but the crowd says, “His blood be on us and our children.” (**Matthew 27:22-26**)

2. Pilate, “wanting to gratify the crowd” (**Mark 15:15**, NKJV), “delivered Jesus to their will”. (**Luke 23:25**, NKJV)
 3. Jesus was abused and violated: mocked, scourged, spit upon, and crowned with thorns before being crucified. (**Mark 15:15-20**)
 4. As someone noted after this class was taught, unlike in Sodom and Gomorrah there were no angels to rescue the concubine. Consider what Jesus said when the soldiers came to arrest him in the garden: He *could have* had angels come to rescue him; *but did not*.
 - a. “Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” (**Matthew 26:53**, NKJV)
- vi. The concubine dies on the sixth day (Friday), in a city outside of Jerusalem, at the transition between darkness and light.
1. Jesus was crucified and died on Friday (the sixth day, the Day of Preparation). That was the day before the Sabbath, which is the seventh day of the week. (**John 19:30-33**)
 2. He died at the ninth hour (equivalent to 3pm), at the end of a three-hour period of darkness. (**Matthew 27:45-50**)
 3. Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem
 - a. “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.” (**Hebrews 13:12**, NKJV)
- vii. The concubine was found dead with her hands on the threshold.
1. Jesus was found dead with his hands nailed to the cross.
 2. After the resurrection, Thomas said, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” (**John 20:25**, NKJV)
- viii. Twelve pieces of her body were sent throughout the land, as a testimony to the great crime that had been committed.
1. The apostles were sent out to all the nations. (**Matthew 28:18-20**)

2. After Judas died, they had to appoint another man to get the number of apostles back up to twelve (**Acts 1:15-26**). There Peter quotes from the psalms, “let another take his office” (**Psalm 109:8**, NKJV; designated **Psalm 108:8** in the LXX).
3. The apostles proclaimed the crime that the Jews had committed in murdering Jesus.
 - a. Peter preached to the Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (**Acts 2:36**, NKJV)
 - b. In the sermon at Solomon’s portico Peter said, “But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.” (**Acts 3:14–15**, NKJV)
 - c. Peter said to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household: “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree.” (**Acts 10:39**, NKJV)
- ix. The city where the evil people lived was destroyed, as a punishment for the great crime its people had committed, in brutally murdering the innocent person.
 1. Jesus warned that Jerusalem would be surrounded, then destroyed by a powerful army. He said that destruction would be unlike anything they had ever seen.
 - a. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (**Luke 21:20–24**, NKJV)

- b. “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.” (**Matthew 24:21**, NKJV)
 - i. Some may think that Jesus’ extreme language in **Matthew 24** was just a figure of speech. However, the historical account of the destruction of Jerusalem suggests that in some respects, this could have been *the greatest disaster of them all*.
2. Destruction of Jerusalem after the death of the Christ was prophesied by Daniel, about 550 years before the time of Jesus, in the famous prophecy of the “70 weeks” or “70 sevens”.
 - a. (After Jerusalem is rebuilt and Christ, the Prince comes) “the Anointed One [= *the Christ*] shall be put to death, yet there shall be no upright judgment for Him; and he shall destroy the city and the sanctuary with the prince who is coming...” (from **Daniel 9:26**, LXX, OSB)
 - b. This prophecy (as well as **Daniel 11:31** and **Daniel 12:11**) also discusses “the abomination of desolation” appearing in the temple, which Jesus refers to in **Matthew 24:15**, and the temple sacrifices being taken away.
 3. In the parable of the wicked vineyard tenants (**Mark 12:1-12**, **Luke 20:9-19** and **Matthew 21:33-46**), Jesus explained the reason why God would destroy Jerusalem: *because they killed the one beloved son of the owner of the vineyard!*
 - a. The *reason* that Gibeah was destroyed was because its men had abused and murdered the concubine.
 4. Ancient writers (like Josephus and Eusebius) wrote about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus in AD 70. According to Jewish historian Josephus, who saw it happen personally:
 - a. Titus waited to start the siege until the time of Passover, when the city was full of Jews who had come from other places for the religious feast. He refused to let the Jews leave the city, to magnify the impact of the starvation.
 - b. The starvation was so severe that people were driven to gruesome acts. For example, one mother cooked and ate her own infant.

- c. *Over 1 million Jews died*, between the starvation and multiple battles with the Romans who repeatedly assaulted the city over several months. The Romans then obliterated Jerusalem and destroyed the temple for the last time, exactly as was prophesied.
 - 5. Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD), an early Christian writer from Carthage in North Africa, quoted from the **Daniel 9** prophecy to explain to them why their city and nation had been destroyed by the Romans.
 - a. “[after quoting from the **Daniel 9** prophecy] In such wise, therefore, did Daniel predict concerning Him, as to show both when and in what time He was to set the nations free; and how, after the passion of the Christ, that city had to be exterminated.” (Source: Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, chapter 8; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 158.)
- c. *If this is a true allegory* of the life and death of Christ, designed by the Holy Spirit:
 - i. The *lowly concubine* from Bethlehem represented Jesus; the one who was abused and tortured, whose life was given to protect the lives of others (or as a ransom for others’ lives).
 - 1. While it may seem strange to have *a woman* representing Jesus, let us recall that He was also foreshadowed by:
 - a. A *lamb* that is slain (Passover Lamb of **Exodus 12**; also alluded to in **John 1**, **Isaiah 53** and **Revelation 5**)
 - b. A *lion* (**Genesis 49:9** “lion of the tribe of Judah”, also referenced in **Numbers 24:9** and **Revelation 5:5**)
 - c. A *bronze snake* being lifted up on a pole (**Numbers 21:4-9**, **John 3:14-15**)
 - d. A *disobedient Jewish prophet* who ran away from God and got swallowed up by a whale. (**Jonah 1-2**, **Matthew 12:39-41**)
 - e. A *pagan (Gentile) priest/king*, Melchizedek. (**Genesis 14:18-20**, **Hebrews 5-7**, **Psalms 110:4** [designated **Psalms 109:4** in the LXX])
 - ii. The *last meal of that woman* foreshadowed the Last Supper of Christ (bread, wine, foot-washing).

- iii. The *wicked men of Gibeah* represented the mob in Jerusalem, who cried out demanding that of Jesus be crucified.
 - iv. The *threshold* on which the hands of the dead woman are found represented the cross, on which Christ's hands were nailed.
 - v. The *twelve parts of the woman's body* which were sent throughout the land to testify against the crime represent the apostles, parts of "the body of Christ" which went throughout the land to testify to the death and resurrection of Christ.
 - 1. The church is referred to as "the body of Christ" (**Colossians 1:24, Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:11-12, etc.**)
 - vi. The *destruction of Gibeah* by the armies of Israel represented the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, accomplished under Titus in AD 70.
- d. Either these apparent parallels were woven into the story by the Holy Spirit on purpose, to foreshadow what would be accomplished in the future, or else this is all just a coincidence. How can we know which is the case (after all, this story as an allegory is not mentioned in the New Testament)
- i. I use what I personally call, "the Mount Rushmore test".
 - 1. Mount Rushmore in South Dakota is a famous landmark, a mountain into which the likeness of the faces of four U.S. presidents were carved: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt.
 - 2. It took an artist leading a team fourteen years to carve these faces into the mountain, using scaffolding, jack-hammers and dynamite. They based their work off of smaller-scale mock-ups of the rock sculpture.
 - 3. This famous landmark includes tremendous detail (Theodore Roosevelt's trademark glasses and mustache, Lincoln's chin beard, etc.).
 - 4. Imagine someone hiking along a nearby trail who did not know about Mt. Rushmore suddenly saw the monument for the first time. What would they think?
 - a. Would any rational person, seeing the precise detail of the carving in the likeness of the four presidents assume that this was just a coincidence, a random artifact of nature (such as wind, rain, and erosion)?

- b. Or would they assume it was designed by someone, created on purpose (even though they could not see the designer)?
- c. Clearly it was *designed*, on purpose.
 - i. Because there is *too much detail* that lines up exactly with the features of four men.
 - ii. Because it is far *too purposeful* and significant to be random (the heads of four famous US presidents).
- ii. Look back on the *details* of the story we just looked at, which otherwise would not be essential to the main story line:
 - 1. Starts in *Bethlehem*
 - 2. *Two donkeys* mentioned
 - 3. Final meal on the evening of *the fifth day*
 - 4. An innocent person who suffers terribly to save the lives of others
 - 5. Hands of the dead person *on the threshold*
 - 6. The murdered one dies outside of Jerusalem
 - 7. *Twelve parts* of the body sent out as testimony to the crime
- iii. Consider the evidence, study this out for yourself, and consider. Is this just a coincidence, or a true story with amazing allegorical significance, designed by the Holy Spirit, based on events that occurred over 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus? *Then, you decide!*