

Judges 17:1-18:31
“Illustrating the Spirit of the Age-pt. I”

Introduction:

This book is one that has been traditionally designated as being a part of the collection that are labelled as the Historical Books of the OT. Though this is probably the best English designation that one can give them, the modern reader needs to be aware that there is a vast difference in the Historical Books of the Old Testament and modern secular books of history. The purpose of general history books in our era is to simply record what took place, and whatever interpretation an author offers of the historical information is considered secondary at best. However, the Book of Judges is not primarily a record of historical events. It is a theological work. The primary purpose of the Book is to teach about God, and how His people are to relate to Him. Therefore, the way this book is structured serves that purpose. Knowing this helps us understand how we are to interpret these last five chapters of this book.

This chapter begins the third major section of the book. The conclusion of the Samson narrative brings to an end the narratives of the judges who delivered Israel from various oppressive powers prior to the establishment of Israel’s monarchy. In that portion of Judges there is a clear presentation of an ongoing degeneration among those who were leading Israel during this period. In focusing on the leaders, the book to this point has given only brief insights into the spiritual/moral character of the average Israelites. Each cycle began with the sin of the people and Yahweh’s response to it, which was to send foreign nations against them to oppress them as punishment for their disobedience to the Covenant. As these cycles have continued the reader is presented with a progressive picture of the Canaanization of the Israelite people. Now the author turns to give us a glimpse into the spiritual and moral lives of the ordinary Israelites during this same period. This concluding section will confirm that this Canaanization had thoroughly impacted the entire nation and not just its leaders.

Since these chapters make up the last section of the book, a reader might assume that the events in this chapter occurred chronologically after the time of Samson. However, details within the narratives indicate that both of these episodes took place early in the period of the judges. In 18:30, the Levite in the first story is identified as the son of Gershom, and grandson of Moses. This would mean this Levite was part of the first generation that lived the majority of their lives after the conquest. This is paired with a reference in 20:28 where we are told that Phineas the son of Eleazar, the grandson of Aaron was High Priest at the time. Phineas was a contemporary of Joshua (Josh.24:33), and this too requires that the stories took place in the beginning of the judges period. The best estimate of the approximate date of these events would be during the Judgeship of Othniel between 1365-1360 B.C.; about 20-25 years after the death of Joshua and just under 300 years prior to the judgeship of Samson).

Structurally, this section divides into two parts; each of which is meant to give an insight into what was characteristic of the private lives of the Israelites. The

first part does this by focusing on the fate of the Danites (17:1-18:31), and the second part focusing on the fate of the Benjamites (19:1-21:25). These two stories focus on two different tribes and two different situations, but are linked in the following ways:

1. Both tribes, Dan and Benjamin, were allotted territory in Israel's heartland between Judah and Ephraim, indicating that what occurs in these stories was not indicative of border territories, but of those at the center of Israelite life.
2. Both tribes faced the prospect of ruin. The Danites were unable to secure their allotted territory and thus had the challenge of finding a place of their own in the Promised Land, while the Benjamites faced the prospect of possible eradication because of hostilities between themselves and their brother tribes.
3. In both accounts the defining crisis was set in motion by a nameless Levite.
4. In both accounts the Levite had connections to Bethlehem in Judah.
5. Both of the Levites lived in proximity to Mount Ephraim.
6. Both accounts involve priestly characters inquiring of God concerning the outcome of a proposed plan of action.
7. Both accounts conclude with a reference to Shiloh.
8. In both accounts, military contingents, consisting of six hundred men played a critical role.
9. Both accounts are punctuated by the twin theme statements "*in those days there was no king in Israel*" and "*everyone did what was right in their own eyes*".

The events described in these chapters illustrated that Samson's was not unique, the majority of the Israelite people shared his vices and his lack of concern to please Yahweh. Therefore, they did not need a king who would do what was right in his own eyes (which is the sort of king Samson would have been); for the people at large had already embraced that orientation to life. The argument of these stories does not seem to indicate that there was a need for a different sort of human king; but that there was a general need among the people for a submissive posture before the Divine king of Israel, Yahweh. This is easier to see if one is familiar with the Old Testament in general. The backdrop to the Book of Judges and all the historical books (from Joshua through II Kings) is the second giving of the Law as recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy. In that Book of the Law, laced throughout its structure are cultural reinforcements to seeing Yahweh as Israel's king. This will also be born out in I Samuel when the request for a human king is seen specifically as a rejection of Yahweh as the rightful king of Israel (8:7).

Theologically chapters 17-21 constitute an epilogue giving illustrations of the religious apostasy and social degradation that characterized the period of the judges. Those conditions were viewed by the author (probably writing early in the monarchy of Saul) as indicative of the anarchy which prevailed when "Israel had no king" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

I. The Pursuit of Self-Made Religion: (17:1-6)

In the first verse of this chapter we read, “*Now there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.*” The name of the central character indicates that his family at least in a superficial way, worshipped Yahweh. Micah means, “*who is like Yahweh*”, with the implied answer being, no one, and thus it means He is incomparable. As the story goes on, the character of Micah is shown to be someone who was significantly unfaithful to the Covenant, as revealed by the choices he made in regard to worship. Therefore, this man’s name serve as a bit of irony in the story.

In verse two we read, “*And he said to his mother, ‘The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears — here is the silver with me; I took it.’ And his mother said, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!’*” At some point prior to what is recorded in this narrative, Micah had stolen a substantial amount of wealth from his mother. The fact that he could steal this much from her indicates that she possessed a significant fortune. The account begins with the son’s confession of his theft of his mother’s money. The implication from the story is that his mother’s curse motivated him to return what he had stolen. Indicating that he had a superstitious orientation to spiritual things. His mother, upon receiving back the wealth, reversed the curse she had pronounced on the thief (having not known at the time that the thief was her son) and in its place pronounced a blessing on her son. That she does so in the name of Yahweh, rather than Ba’al or some other tribal god indicates once again that she is meant to be understood broadly to be a worshipper of Yahweh. The figure of eleven hundred shekels represented a very large amount of silver. A shekel during this period would have been equivalent to about eight grams. Therefore, the total weight of the silver would have been 310.4 ounces (valued at approximately \$4,800.00). In the curse, Yahweh was called upon as witness (Num.5:21). The 1,100 silver shekels are not to be confused with the same amount that each of the Philistine rulers gave Delilah centuries later (16:5, 18), it simply represents a historical coincidence that made for an appropriate bridge in this Book.

In verse three we read, “*So when he had returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, ‘I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you.’*” In this narrative, eight troubling issues are presented to the reader about the main characters:

1. Though named in such a way as to honor Yahweh, Micah chooses to specifically disobey two central commandments of Yahweh’s Covenantal law (stealing and not honoring his mother).
2. Micah’s motivations are suspect, it was the pronouncement of his mother’s curse that influenced him to return the money, not a guilty conscience.
3. The mother in dedicating the silver to Yahweh does not bring it to the priest at Shiloh, where it was supposed to be sent in such cases, but gives it to her son for his private use.

4. Though the silver is dedicated by the mother to Yahweh it is immediately converted into a molded image thus breaking one of the two most fundamental commandments of the Covenant.
5. Even with the abomination of the use of the silver, only 200 shekels of the 1,100 shekels total are given for the idol, and no mention is made of how the rest was supposed to serve Yahweh.
6. Micah possessed a cult shrine in violation of Deuteronomy 12.
7. Micah designed and manufactured his own cult accoutrements, one of which he identified as an Ephod (an item which was only meant to be used by those who were authorized to function as priests).
8. Micah installed one his own sons to serve as priest in violation of the stipulations of the covenant that made this a role only for Aaron's sons.

The making of sacred images was forbidden in the Law (Ex.20:4). This is yet another demonstration of the lawlessness that dominated the period of the judges. However, this was the common practice among the Canaanites and because of their influence this practice became prevalent among the Israelites as well (Gideon's ephod-8:27). Idols were carved out of wood or stone as well as cast from precious metals (Ex.32:1-4; I Kings 12:28). Molds for the casting of gods have been found at several Canaanite sites. It may be presumed that the material employed was consecrated at the beginning of the process, and certain rituals and ceremonies were performed to bring the object to life. Then the final product was consecrated in the service of the god that the image represented.

In verse four we read, "*Thus he returned the silver to his mother. Then his mother took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah.*" The phrase "*a carved image and a cast idol*" sounds like two objects of false worship were made, an image carved out of stone or wood, and a cast idol made out of melted metal poured into a mold. But the phrase could also be a hendiadys (referring to only one molded image), a wooden idol overlaid with silver which Micah's mother had made and placed in the house.

In verse five we read, "*The man Micah had a shrine, and made an ephod and household idols; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.*" Archaeological excavations at sites throughout Syro-Palestine have uncovered house-shrines. These private sanctuaries would have served the needs of households and perhaps extended families within a village culture. In larger population centers, more formal temples and shrines also existed to serve as worship and sacrificial centers for all devotees and as a base of operations for the priestly community of the particular god worshipped by the community. However, the biblical text makes the point that Micah's shrine was not a proper center for Yahweh worship, and the inclusion of an idol graphically demonstrated the danger of unsupervised local worship (Deut.12:2-7). An ephod was part of the priestly garments to be worn exclusively by Aaron and other high priests (Ex.28:6-14). It was probably an apron-like garment, made of special fabric and woven with a mixture of woolen and linen thread as well as gold. The breastplate containing the

twelve stones representing the Israelite tribes was attached to the ephod (Ex 28:25). The association of the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim (the lots used in divining God's will), makes the ephod a part of this oracular procedure. As such it could have eventually been so closely associated with the divine that it too was worshiped. Micah's ephod is designed to add legitimacy to his personal shrine, and the fact that it is listed in association with his idols suggests it was also an object of worship (18:14-31). Graven images of any sort are strictly forbidden by God's law (Ex.20:4-6; 34:17). Yet the existence of idols made of metal, wood and stone was a continual reality in ancient Israel (Isa.40:19-20; Hos.8:4-6). It is therefore not surprising that Micah created idols. However, the official sanction given to them by the Levite heightens the scandal. Like Jephthah in 11:30-40 Micah and his mother are very sincere in their religious devotion, but it is a pagan form of worship to which they are devoted.

In verse six we read, "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" In this verse, the author ceases narrating the events of the story and inserts an editorial observation that puts what has just been written in its cultural context before returning to the narrative. The author connects the lawless behavior of the Israelites with the absence of a king. As noted above this does not mean that this book was written in order to make a positive case for a monarchy, nor that he was trying to convey that installing a king would have been the solution to the spiritual/moral chaos of the times. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit this prophetic book was written in the knowledge that the monarchy would simply create new and different manifestations of wickedness. Instead, the idea was to emphasize the peoples' general disregard for Israel's covenant relationship with God and the disintegration of their society that resulted from this disregard, which eventually resulted in the institution of an authoritarian regime. The phrase "*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*" had its source in Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy:

*"And you shall do **what is right and good in the sight of the LORD**, that it may be well with you, and that you may go in and possess the good land of which the LORD swore to your fathers"*

Deuteronomy 6:18

*"Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do **what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.**"*

Deuteronomy 12:28

*"because you have listened to the voice of the LORD your God, to keep all His commandments which I command you today, to do **what is right in the eyes of the LORD your God.**"*

Deuteronomy 13:18

Therefore, this phrase expresses that the people were doing what was right according to their own judgment, rather than living according to the expressed

moral will of Yahweh. And we see this same pronouncement made later in the historical books in regard to the kings:

“and tore the kingdom away from the house of David, and gave it to you; and yet you have not been as My servant David, who kept My commandments and who followed Me with all his heart, to do only what was right in My eyes”

I Kings 14:8

“Omri did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and did worse than all who were before”

I Kings 16:25

Therefore, the difference between pre-monarchical times and monarchical times was that during the period of the judges, the people on their own engaged in disobedience to God; whereas in the era of the kings, the kings often led the nation into disobedience.

Given limited central authority, the judges were not able to undertake significant spiritual or social reform among the people, nor were they in a position to adjudicate intertribal squabbles. More importantly, throughout the book, the priesthood, the tribal leadership and the judges are demonstrated to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Inauguration of a central, civil authority would have seemed to have the potential to resolve some of these problems, but only the appropriate view of kingship would result in progress. As I Samuel 8-12 will point out, there are drawbacks to kingship as well, and it is a dangerous error to think that a spiritual problem can be resolved with a political solution.

II. Seeking to Enhance What was Worthless: (17:7-13)

In verse seven we read, *“Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there.”* Here the scene of the story shifts to introduce a new individual who plays a significant part in the story. We are told a number of things about this individual:

1. He is identified as a *“youth”*. This designation refers to a young adult in the age range of 13 to 29, one who was no longer a child, but not old enough for priestly service. This young man’s youth that compounds the irregularity of his later appointment as a personal priest.
2. His geographic roots are traced to Bethlehem in Judah. This then joins the member of the most significant tribe to the south, to a person from the most significant tribe in the north, and they suffer from the same deviant character. Together these individuals link this story to the Israelites as a whole.
3. Though the young man had lived for some time in Judah, he was ethnically of the tribe of Levi. It is important to remember that the Levites had been given 48 cities in which to dwell in the Promised Land as they had not been given their own territory. They were to specifically dwell among the other tribes. However, Bethlehem was not one of those Levite cities. Meaning this

young man had some time previous to this (or his family had) relocated to this city leaving his specific allotted place behind.

The most likely reason that the individual is not named until the end of chapter eighteen is that the reader is meant to generalize what we read about this young man as being representative of the Levites as a whole during the era of the judges.

In verse eight we read, “*The man departed from the city of Bethlehem in Judah to stay wherever he could find a place. Then he came to the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, as he journeyed.*” What we read here is that the Levite is looking for a place where he can exercise his role, but not in reliance upon where God would send him but simply wanders to find whatever would be the most convenient to his circumstances. Therefore, we see already that this individual operates with no sense of Divine calling or responsibility to fulfill God’s will. The implication here is not that Micah’s home was the Levite’s intended destination, but rather it was a stop along the way.

In verse nine we read, “*And Micah said to him, ‘Where do you come from?’ So he said to him, ‘I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am on my way to find a place to stay.’*” This verse records the beginning of the negotiations between the young Levite and Micah. In this interchange the dialogue reveals to us the opportunism of these two men. Beyond answering the question of where he was from, the young man added that he was a Levite and that he was open to taking whatever position might open up. As noted, the Levites did not receive a specific territorial allotment because they were to serve all of the tribes in support of the priests (Josh.18:7). Thus, it would not have been out of character in this period for a young Levite to go on a journey and seek employment in his profession. The real problem is that there is no indication that any of his choices or actions were guided by or based on true service to Yahweh. Also, this Levite took a job at a private shrine, rather than serving with the Levitical community at the central cult site in Shiloh. Therefore, he became a rogue priest engaging in heterodox Yahwehism at a private shrine. This heterodox Yahwehism was characterized by:

- The presence of cult objects that represent Yahweh
- The use of unacceptable procedures for discerning the Divine will
- The veneration and consultation of the dead

Additionally, since only the descendants of Aaron were to function as priests (Num.8:5-26), this appointment by Micah was in violation of God’s Law.

Micah evidently perceived the young man’s arrival as fortuitous and offered him a position as a household priest. The job is summarized in three propositions:

1. “*Dwell with me*”, Micah invited the young Levite to give up his sojourning and find a true home with him.
2. “*Be my father*”, father is used here as an honorific title. It would apply to the young man’s role as priest, since he would exercise spiritual authority and care to those entrusted to him. Micah’s use of this title suggests a willingness to subordinate himself to the young man. There is likely an ironic sense in the title (indicating the inappropriateness of the designation) since this individual is initially identified as a “*youth*”.

3. “*Be my priest*”, is a call to be his personal representative before God and to perform those functions of worship that God required at Micah’s personal shrine.

It must be kept in mind, if one is to understand the theological purpose of the story that Micah was ignoring the instructions of God in regard to where and how to worship and had instead, set up his own shrine, set in place an idol made at the direction of his mother, he had engaged his own priest and thus had created his own religious system that was bound to prove worthless and be unable to quell any sense of doubts he might have had during difficult times. This would be due to the fact that none of this was sanctioned by the true God.

Micah’s original choice was to appoint one of his sons as the priestly administrator of his shrine. However, when the opportunity arose to install a Levite, he jumped at this opportunity to legitimize his sanctuary. The practice of using local or family priests would at various times be stopped in the future as particular kings attempted to be obedient to Yahweh and bring all worship into harmony with the Law of God (II Kings 18:4; 23:5-9). However, there was no one in the position to do this at this time, nor was there a general willingness among the people to be obedient to God’s Law.

In the Mosaic Law there was no provision for a priest to receive a salary. Instead, the Law (Ex.28:1; 29:26-28) prescribed that a portion of the sacrificial offering was to be set aside for the priests, and later (Josh.21:3-40) towns and pasturelands were allotted to the Levites for this sustenance. However, the offering of a specific amount of precious metal as wages functions more as a bribe or retainer for a prized employee.

In verses eleven and twelve we read, “*Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him. So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah.*” These verses indicate that all three aspects of Micah’s proposal were accepted. The Hebrew word translated as “*consecrated*” literally means to fill something and is often used in this sense in the OT, and in general had the sense of installing someone to a role. However, since here this term is added to the Hebrew word for “*hand*” it is possible, though far from certain, that since there is a specific reference to the money that this priest was paid that the filling of the hand had the secondary and ironic sense of pointing out that since Micah paid him, the young man was willing to act out the role of priest for profit, and thus the consecration was actually a sham from a spiritual perspective. The implication is that both parties regarded the association as beneficial, since the young Levite became like one of Micah’s sons. However, there is also considerable irony in the statement. First, the Levite in receiving his role, had replaced one of Micah’s own sons. This implies that the role of son did not carry much value in that household. Second, the Levite was originally hired as a father and a priest, having a position of some status and responsibility. However, over time, he came to be regarded like one of Micah’s sons. Therefore, Micah seems to have given the young man a position of authority

and status, only to undermine that authority by eventually assuming ultimate control.

In verse thirteen we read, “*Then Micah said, ‘Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest.’*” Apparently, Micah had doubts about the efficacy of his religion with his own son serving as priest, but now with a Levite as his priest he was satisfied that He would be blessed by God. It is clear however, that the worship this man was offering was entirely pagan, despite that worship being directed in name to Yahweh (Micah expressed his expectation that Yahweh specifically would be good to him). In reality, the Levite was more of a good luck charm than a serious attempt to truly please the God of Israel. The Levite of course was no better, for instead of denouncing the abominable cult of Micah as an expression of pure disobedience to Yahweh, he ignored those things and instead capitalized on the lucrative opportunity. Micah rejoiced because of his superstitious notion that having a Levite for his priest would bring blessings from Yahweh, when in fact it was forbidden in the Law (Num.3:10). But the Levite was more to blame for having accepted the position, since he should have known that what he was doing was wrong. Overall, these chapters make it clear that acts of disobedience to God’s Law were typical of the Israelites in the time of the judges.

It is helpful to understand that the Hebrew word translated as “*good*” here indicates Micah’s expectation of material prosperity. But Micah’s assessment should stimulate questions in the reader’s mind. First, how had he determined that he would be blessed in this way? The answer seems to be that this was Micah’s orientation to worship in general, his worship was motivated by materialistic greed. Second, why did Micah conclude that he would be blessed “*now*”? Perhaps the reader is assume that the previous priest (Micah’s physical son) was not as successful in manipulating Yahweh for material blessings as Micah had planned. If so, it obviously had not occurred to Micah that the reason he had not prospered was actually because he had violated Yahweh’s Covenant with Israel by setting up an illicit shrine containing graven and molten images. He apparently believed that simply having an authentic Levitical priest ministering his sanctuary would result in real prosperity. Something else we are to notice is that ultimately Micah will be proven wrong also about his expectations regarding the young Levite. As the next chapter will reveal, Micah was in fact about to lose everything he cherished.

We have come to a major turning point in the development of the plot. Micah’s personal fortunes, which have risen steadily throughout the first two episodes, are about to undergo a sudden reversal. From now on nothing will go right for him, and this reversal involves significant irony.

The chapter closes with us having been given a glimpse into just how profoundly the spiritual life of Israel had degenerated. The next chapter will take this same story and add more dimensions to it and bring it to its conclusion.

III. The Theft of Sacrilegious Worship: (18:1-31)

At this point in the narrative there is a transition in the plot of the story that is told in chapters 17-18. It is signaled by a shift from past tense verbs to participles

along with a shorter re-statement of the earlier reference that there was no king in Israel during these days (17:6). This repetition invites the reader to reflect back on what was read in the previous chapter and interpret those events in light of this statement. According to the Law as recorded in Deuteronomy, Micah's fellow Israelites should have risen up against him, brought him to justice, and a judge should have sentenced him to stoning for establishing idolatry in Israel. The implication of the re-statement of the theme verse is that this sort of chaos led the elders of Israel to conclude that strong central leadership was needed in the form of a king, like all the surrounding more successful nations had. This transition leads to the new chapter, where in the providence of God the Danites become His agents in punishing Micah for his sins. But ironically, rather than seeing Micah's action as sinful, the Danites followed his rebellious example.

In verse one we read, "*In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for itself to dwell in; for until that day their inheritance among the tribes of Israel had not fallen to them.*" The allotment assigned to the tribe of Dan was between that of Ephraim and Benjamin along the coastal plain (Josh.19:40-48).

In order to properly interpret this verse, there are a number of interpretive questions that must be answered about some of the things that are written in it. First, since there is no subject associated with the Hebrew text for the verb "*fallen*", what must be determined is, what had fallen? One suggestion is that it was the lot that had not fallen. It is argued that this means that at this time of the casting of the lots, it had not yet been indicated what specific portion of the land was to be allotted to Dan. This conclusion is reflected in at least two translations:

- "*for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel*" (vs.1-NASU)
- "*for until then no territory among the tribes of Israel had been allotted to them*" (vs.1-NRSV)

However, this interpretation is very unlikely because the language used is completely inconsistent with what is used elsewhere in reference to the casting of lots. Further and more importantly, the first chapter of this book already explained that the problem here was that the Danites had failed to take their allotted land because the Amorites proved to be more powerful than the Danites (vs.34-36). So, clearly the land had been designated by God as being theirs through Joshua prior to this. Instead, in harmony with the language usage found in Ezekiel 47:14, the author was saying that it was the land itself that had not fallen to the Danites, meaning they had not been able to take the land that had been allotted to them (Josh.19:40-48). The second question is what is the reader to make of the reference to Danites living in Zorah and Eshtaol (2:8; 13:2) if they were unable to take their allotment? The answer is that the reference to their not taking their allotment must be understood in the sense that they were not able to take their territory in its entirety (or even a significant portion of it). The two towns that are mentioned as being occupied by Danites were in the hilly areas near Ephraim to the extreme eastern edge of their allotted territory. This would have been the first place to

which this tribe came and it was doubtlessly taken in the general conquest led by Joshua when the entire nation fought together. The Danites (as with other tribes) were able to secure the hill country, but they were unable to take the plains because the Canaanites (and later the Philistines) employed chariots that were far more effective on the mostly level ground of the plains. The Danites would have used these initial towns as the points from which to launch their efforts to take the rest of their allotment. But then they fled back to these towns in the hills when they were defeated by their enemies. Of course, ultimately, the reason for the failure was their lack of faith and spiritual apostasy, since if they had been obedient God, He would have given them victory no matter how strong their opponents were. Third, we need to clearly understand what the author was referring to when we read the English word “*inheritance*”. The word refers to what the Danites were seeking. It is a translation of the Hebrew word “*nahala*”. The word is used here in an ironic sense, because it does not refer to inheritance in the normal sense; instead, the word was a feudal expression, referring primarily to land given by a lord to one of his faithful vassals as a reward for past military services. The irony is this; the word speaks of solidarity between a lord and his servant and would have been appropriate for land won by Yahweh for them, but in this case, the Danites were looking to win land for themselves in disobedience to their lord at the expense of another tribe of their kin to whom this territory was allotted (Naphtali).

Since Israel had no king, this lack of a central authority to muster an Israelite army no doubt aggravated the problem faced by the tribe of Dan, namely, Dan’s inability (ultimately due to a lack of faith) to take the portion of the land that Yahweh had allocated to them. At the point of time when these events took place, the Philistines were forcing the tribe of Dan more and more eastward into the territory of Benjamin and Ephraim. Because of the extremely limited territory available to the tribe of Dan, the people of the tribe decided to seek new territory into which they could settle. The tribe of Dan would have been closest to and most immediately affected by the presence of the Philistines (see Samson’s exploits in chapters 13-16) and seem to have eventually concluded that they would never be able to effectively occupy the land that was now in the hands of the Philistines.

In verse two we read, “*So the children of Dan sent five men of their family from their territory, men of valor from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and search it. They said to them, ‘Go, search the land’. So, they went to the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there.*” We read here that the clans of the Danites sent five warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol to explore the land. Early on their journey they lodged for the night in the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim (17:1). It is helpful to observe that those who are assigned to the task of seeking out a new territory are referred to in the translation as “*men of valor*”, which more literally means they were individuals of abundance. This abundance could refer either to being very successful warriors, or it could mean that they were among the highly esteemed of this tribe (or perhaps even wealthy). This too should be understood in an ironic sense, because these scouts will demonstrate in this chapter that they were neither heroic nor noble from God’s point of view in light of

what they would do. The language of this verse somewhat mirrors that of the account of the spies that Joshua sent out to investigate the Land. This is seen more clearly when we set this verse beside Joshua 2:1

Judges 18:2	Joshua 2:1
<p>So the children of Dan <u>sent five men</u> of their family from their territory, men of valor from Zorah and Eshtaol, <u>to spy out the land and search it.</u></p> <p>They said to them, "Go, search the land."</p> <p><u>So they went to</u> the mountains of Ephraim, <u>to the house of Micah,</u> <u>and lodged there.</u></p>	<p>Now Joshua the son of Nun <u>sent out two men</u> from Acacia Grove</p> <p><u>to spy secretly, saying, "Go, view the land,</u> especially Jericho."</p> <p><u>So they went, and came to</u> <u>the house of a harlot named Rahab,</u> <u>and lodged there.</u></p>

Among the interesting things that is suggested by this parallelism is that the house of Micah is equated with the house of a prostitute, and an Israelite with a pagan. This may also explain why the Levite and not Micah is the focus of the narrative in the next few verses; as the Levite was the facilitator of this spiritually adulterous activity. It is helpful to observe that this time there was no reference to Divine initiative even on the surface of things. The spies were simply sent by their fellow clansmen. There is nothing remarkable about this in itself, but the comparison with earlier references (13:25), and the sustained absence of God, along with all that follows, will turn out to be a distinctive and significant aspect of how this particular narrative is construed.

In verse three we read, "*While they were at the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. They turned aside and said to him, 'Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What do you have here?'*" The Danites recognized the voice of the Levite (probably meaning they recognized his Judean accent since nothing comes up later regarding a previous encounter). Then the Danites inquired concerning his presence and activities in Ephraim. The interesting thing about this dialogue is that if the Levite had been faithful to the spiritual role that God had given the Levites in general, he would have turned the questions around and asked the Danites the very questions they were asking him. If the Danites had answered the questions honestly the dialogue would have gone like this:

- Who brought you here? *The tribe of Dan has sent us.*
- What are you doing in this place? *We have come to spend the night.*
- What do you have here? *We are scouting for a land where we can live and claim as our own.*

And if the Levite was being faithful to his intended role, he would have sternly rebuked their answers in the following way:

- You should be going where Yahweh sent you.
- You should not spend the night in the home of this apostate
- You should be taking possession of the land that Yahweh has granted you as your possession.

The point of drawing this out is to help us read these things from the standpoint of the theological context in which they were written. The author assumes we understand the OT Law and therefore when we read what actually happened, we should be shocked that things were unfolding so differently from what should have taken place. It is not that a few things were being done wrong; godlessness permeates everything about this narrative. No one was doing the right thing.

In verses four and five we read, “*He said to them, ‘Thus and so Micah did for me. He has hired me, and I have become his priest.’ So they said to him, ‘Please inquire of God, that we may know whether the journey on which we go will be prosperous.’*” As the Levite answered the question, he revealed that he had no spiritual motivation at all; instead his answer revealed that his religious service was self-serving. His primary dedication was revealed to be to whomever would pay him the most, and not to Yahweh. When the Danites learned that the young Levite was functioning as a priest, they superstitiously sought some word on whether or not God would bless their mission. That they sought such a blessing demonstrates the spiritual ignorance of these men. A Levite could not simply assume the role of a priest, by law only a descendant of Aaron could be priest. Second, they should have realized that Yahweh would never bless through a priest who unlawfully assumed this role. But clearly the Danites were oblivious to these facts. In regard to the request itself, they were seeking an ocular inquiry. One of the most common forms of such Divine inquiries that was employed in the Ancient Near East involved asking a god a yes or no question. This might require the casting of lots or, as in this instance, inquiring of a prophet or priest at a shrine. It is possible that the ephod and the teraphim (household gods) were possibly used in the process of inquiring of Yahweh. For these items were often associated with oracular inquiry, and it is possible that the sight of these things may have contributed to the Danite’s question. While such an inquiry might seem to eliminate ambiguity, the Levite’s answer suggests that a question could be answered with a non-informative statement. In these verses we are beginning to see that the response of the Danites to the Levite mirrors that of Micah. Micah felt that his cult lacked credibility and authority without the Levite, and now the Danite scouts’ mission is seen as lacking the same thing, they were without an oracle from a legitimate source for such things.

In verse six we read, “*And the priest said to them, ‘Go in peace. The presence of the LORD be with you on your way.’*” One wonders about the source of the priest’s confident answer: Your journey has Yahweh’s approval. The outward success of their mission did not correspond with Yahweh’s revealed plan for the tribe of Dan, and their plan eventuated in the establishing of a major center of idolatry (cf. 18:30-31; 1 Kings 12:28-30). But there are more things to note about the response of the Levite to the Danites request that he inquire of God. First, it is the reader who

thinks of Yahweh, because no specific reference to Yahweh is made in the Danite's request. Although the Levite has Yahweh in mind (by his use of the Divine name), the use of the generic name for a god by the Danites is out of step with expressions of this sort made by godly individuals quoted throughout the Old Testament. This is a hint from the author that not all is well here. Second, the immediate response that the Levite gives allowed for no time to actually consult God. In ancient times an oracle was understood to be a Divine pronouncement, and instead it seems that the Levite simply assumed that he already knew the mind of God on this matter. Third, as was typical in much of paganism, the oracle that the Levite gives is extremely vague. This and many English versions give a very interpretive translation of the Hebrew here. Literally the text reads "*the course on which you are going is before Yahweh*". This statement could be interpreted in two ways: positively, it could be interpreted to mean that their way received the approval of Yahweh's watchful eye; or negatively it could be interpreted to mean that God was looking disapprovingly upon their venture. Many oracles were given this way by the pagans because the flexibility of the statement meant it could be claimed to have been accurate afterward no matter how things turned out. But, in this case, the Danite scouts chose to interpret the words positively; most likely because that is what they wanted to hear. The discerning reader understands that in truth, Yahweh would not sanction this faithless and disobedient endeavor. But as so often happens with religious charlatans, God is said to give His blessing on objectively evil pursuits for the financial profit of the charlatan.

In verse seven we read, "*So the five men departed and went to Laish. They saw the people who were there, how they dwelt safely, in the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure. There were no rulers in the land who might put them to shame for anything. They were far from the Sidonians, and they had no ties with anyone.*" Laish was located at the foot of Mount Hermon in the extreme northern portion of the land of Canaan (the town was also known as Leshem in Josh.19:47). This city was about one hundred miles from Dan's assigned territory and about 25 miles north of the Sea of Kinnereth and 27 miles east of Tyre. One of the sources of the Jordan River was located nearby, and the land in the area was known to be extremely fertile.

The impression of the spies regarding the people of Laish is summarized in two words, "*secure*" and "*quiet*". The words convey in an ambiguous way that these people were resting securely with no concern about being in any danger. The ambiguous element is whether the idea was that they were confident in their situation, or lax in their preparedness for an attack. The use of these words together might have been meant to imply both. As to why they would have felt secure, the passage gives us four clues and history provides a fifth and sixth:

1. "*they dwelt in the manner of the Sidonians*": the word translated as "*manner*" is a form of the Hebrew word for "*judgment*", and it can refer to an authoritative pattern (set by edict or custom). If it means by custom, the translation above would capture the idea. However, if it means by edict, then it would be better translated as "*rule*". Given that the Sidonians were not

known as a people who were unconcerned with security, this most likely means they felt secure because they were subject to the Phoenician Empire, of which Sidon was one of its capital cities. Therefore, they would not expect to be attacked.

2. “*There were no rulers in the land who might put them to shame for anything*”; this simply means they had no history of having suffered humiliating military defeats.
3. “*There were no rulers in the land*” this part of the quote indicates they were not experiencing any sort of oppression from anyone, including those to whom they were subject. Meaning the relationship was mutually beneficial (which fits what we know about Phoenician culture).
4. “*They were far from the Sidonians*” this might seem like a reason for them to feel insecure, but the intent is that the physical distance from the capital made it less likely that the Sidonians would ever attempt a more repressive relationship with this city as most of their resources were focused on their commercial fleets that sailed around the Mediterranean.
5. They were geographically isolated from the Arameans. By this period the Aramean tribes were aggressively moving into the area of Palestine, but a mountain range in what is now Lebanon separated them from going into Laish.
6. Archeologists have found that this city at this point in history was protected by massive earthen ramparts, rather than stone walls. These would have been more difficult to take than the conventional fortification as they would be less vulnerable to having a hole punched through them or of someone digging under them.

Overall, the town of Laish was a tempting target for the Danites. On the one hand it was a land that offered the possibility of a comfortable future life, and on the other hand it was underdefended and unsuspecting of an attack. It would thus be an easier target for their soldiers than their original allotment of land. But the reader is meant to recognize that Laish and its inhabitants were outside the area that Yahweh had given to the Israelites to conquer.

In verses eight and nine we read, “*Then the spies came back to their brethren at Zorah and Eshtaol, and their brethren said to them, ‘What is your report?’ So they said, ‘Arise, let us go up against them. For we have seen the land, and indeed it is very good. Would you do nothing? Do not hesitate to go, and enter to possess the land.’*” It should be noticed that for brevity’s sake the author chooses here not to include information that the reader already knows, but that would have to be given in the original report. For instance, when the Danites sent the scouts to scope out a place for them to go, they did not have a specific area in mind. However, here in the narrated report the scouts refer to going against “*them*” without identifying whom they were talking about, and that the tribe should attempt to possess “*the land*” without mentioning what land they are speaking about. In regard to the final clause of the verse, it would have been understandable that the Danites upon hearing the report of the spies would be hesitant to adopt the spies’

recommendation. The Danites' failure to successfully occupy their original allotment would justifiably make them cautious to set out on yet another major migration into unknown territory.

In verse ten we read, "*When you go, you will come to a secure people and a large land. For God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth.*" The five scouts describe the land that they recommend invading in an almost utopian way:

- The land is very beautiful
- The people are unsuspecting
- There is plenty of room for all
- It has no deficiency of resources

This description was clearly intended to fire up the enthusiasm of the tribe so that they would agree with the scouts, as each of the qualifiers above represented a direct contrast to the challenges they were facing in their allotted territory. The final point to convince their brethren to follow the suggested course was the assurance that "*God has given it into your hands*". They felt that God had given it to them, and though their theological affirmation was completely unfounded, they anticipated an inevitable victory. This particular phrase is used elsewhere. Joshua had said the same thing (Josh.2:24), but that was based on faith in what God had specifically promised. Here it is a presumptuous statement that reflects the scouts' own conclusion, and the assumption that God was in favor of it. This rings of hollow religiosity in light of the complete disregard for Yahweh's commandments. In addition, in this book we see that the author frequently cites the rebellious Israelites invoking the generic title of "*elohim*" (God), rather than His specific covenant name. This use of the generic title frames the discussion as one that has a superficial religious tone.

In verse eleven we read, "*And six hundred men of the family of the Danites went from there, from Zorah and Eshtaol, armed with weapons of war.*" Apparently, The scouts' report did not win universal approval by the Danite tribe. The respondents to the call to arms are only 600 which is significantly less than some of the other armies amassed by other tribes going to war during this time (for instance the 10,000 led by Barak against Sisera from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali-4:14; or the 32,000 Gideon recruited from Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali, and Manasseh-7:3). Further support for this conclusion is that the Hebrew preposition translated as "*from*" Zorah and Eshtaol suggests a portion of that population not the entire population. Finally, though the entire "*tribe*" sent out the scouts (vs.1), only a "*clan*" (i.e. the meaning of the Hebrew word translated as "*family*") departed to make war against Laish.

In verse twelve we read, "*Then they went up and encamped in Kirjath Jearim in Judah. (Therefore they call that place Mahaneh Dan to this day. There it is, west of Kirjath Jearim.)*" Kirjath Jearim was listed as a city within Judah (Josh 15:60), the site was nine miles west northwest of Jerusalem (about six miles east of the Zorah-Eshtaol area).

In verses thirteen and fourteen we read, “*And they passed from there to the mountains of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah. Then the five men who had gone to spy out the country of Laish answered and said to their brethren, ‘Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod, household idols, a carved image, and a molded image? Now therefore, consider what you should do.’*” Though, the army of six hundred Danites set off for Laish, the narrative indicates they intentionally went there by way of the house of Micah. This stop is somehow (as the narrative will show) part of the Danite’s plan of invading Laish. When the troop comes to Micah’s compound, the five spies informed their fellow warriors about the house and shrine of Micah. The speech by the five scouts as they approached Micah’s house was subtly manipulative. They casually asked whether their associates knew about the Ephod and the other religious items. The purpose of the question was more likely to inform them of the existence of these things. The scouts then responded to their own question with the instruction “*now understand what you should do*”. The ambiguity of the words suggest that they may have been hinting at something sinister, perhaps they had mentioned only the Ephod, the teraphim, and the idols because it was those very objects that they themselves were interested in at this moment (rather than the usefulness of seeking an oracle). Therefore, they may have been intentionally planting the idea of a theft. It would seem that the scouts were leading their clan along this indirect route because they wanted to take these religious articles to enhance the likelihood that Yahweh would bless them and give them victory. The first words of verse fourteen seem to imply that the spies were acting as guides to the Danites. There is a reference here to “*houses*” (plural). This was probably a reference to the numerous houses occupied by Micah’s extended family.

In verses fifteen through nineteen we read, “*So they turned aside there, and came to the house of the young Levite man — to the house of Micah — and greeted him. The six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the children of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate. Then the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up. Entering there, they took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image. The priest stood at the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men who were armed with weapons of war. When these went into Micah’s house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image, the priest said to them, ‘What are you doing?’ And they said to him, ‘Be quiet, put your hand over your mouth, and come with us; be a father and a priest to us. Is it better for you to be a priest to the household of one man, or that you be a priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?’*” There is no record of the armed men’s response to the scouts’ question; but their response is made clear by what they do. The armed troop went directly to the Levite’s house on Micah’s compound and in the midst of this hostile approach, greeted the Levite warmly. In light of the violent intent of their ultimate purpose toward Micah, their greeting indicates that by contrast they were currying the Levite’s favor. At the same time, the Danites were employing a type of blackmail, for by stationing their six hundred armed men at the gate of the compound they left the Levite with few if any options but to

comply with their invitation. While the Danite scouts steal Micah's possessions, the armed men compel the Levite to keep quiet. For whatever reason, they seemed to not want Micah to find out what they were doing. Since the scouts knew where the religious articles were, they were sent in to steal them. This particular portion of the episode ends with the Danites appealing to the Levite's self-interest by offering him a larger sphere of influence and thus a more important position than the one he currently had. As we read on, apart from a few mild protests to the way things were done, the Levite was clearly eager to accept the better position for himself.

The practice of attacking and looting shrines and temples was simply part of warfare in the ancient world. Since these places were often storehouses of grain and other commodities and contained valuable objects made of precious metals, they were a natural target. At times, sacred images would be taken for ransom payments from those whom the idols had belonged.

In verse twenty we read, "*So the priest's heart was glad; and he took the ephod, the household idols, and the carved image, and took his place among the people.*" Here we read that the young Levite found the Danite's offer very attractive and joined them on their trip northward. Again, we see the materialistic attitude of the Levite, who evaluated the opportunities of ministry first by wealth now by size. The subject of all the verbs in this verse is the priest, making him the focus of attention at this point in the narrative. The young Levite now besides prostituting his religion was also participating in grand larceny and had acted treacherously toward his benefactor. Both acts recorded here have symbolic significance. By taking these tokens of priestly office from the five men, he effectively accepted reconsecration by their hands. And by moving into the midst of the migrating Danites he symbolically cut himself off from Micah and accepted the Danites as his new constituency. It is a complete act of betrayal, but entirely in keeping with the Levite's character as we observed it. The Levite's fickle and mercenary attitude reflected the state of the priesthood in general during this period. It was equally deplorable that one tribe would steal from another with impunity. This treacherous behavior by the tribe of Dan in their dealings with both Micah and the town of Laish illustrates the serpent nature that Jacob had predicted centuries before would characterize Dan (Gen.49:17).

In verse twenty-one we read, "*Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones, the livestock, and the goods in front of them.*" The departure of the Danites from Micah's compound is shown to have been carefully planned. Ahead of the armed troops, they sent their children, livestock, and treasured belongings. This arrangement of their advance was designed to prepare the migrating group from an attack from behind. Clearly then they were anticipating that Micah would pursue them, as normally this would not be the way they would organize their march toward a military target.

In verse twenty-two we read, "*When they were a good way from the house of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house gathered together and overtook the children of Dan.*" Micah soon discovered that he had been robbed and accompanied by the men of his compound (most likely members of his extended

family) he pursued the Danites. We are not told how much of a head start the Danites had; most likely it was whatever time was involved for Micah to discover the theft and to rally his family to assist him. Since Micah would not be travelling with children or livestock, he would be able to overtake the Danites rather quickly.

In verses twenty-three and twenty-four we read, “*And they called out to the children of Dan. So they turned around and said to Micah, ‘What ails you, that you have gathered such a company?’ So he said, ‘You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you have gone away. Now what more do I have? How can you say to me, ‘What ails you?’*” The question of the Danites with its posture of pseudo innocence would have been intentionally insulting in that culture, suggesting that Micah was needlessly creating antagonism. Micah’s response is expressed in an unusual way. The objects of the verb are thrust to the front of the sentence for emphasis. The objects of the verb are Micah’s gods (identical in Hebrew to the generic form of the word God, which frequently used in the plural even when referring to Yahweh). The stress then is that he had lost his gods. Part of the author’s point in this Book (and a point that is made in a number of other OT Books like Isaiah) is the absurdity of idolatry. God should be looked to for protection and provision. Yet, these gods were not able to protect themselves from theft or Micah from loss. Though this irony was lost on Micah, the reader is to see the pathetic state of these people who were so spiritually blind, and who had degenerated so far in their understanding from Joshua’s generation. Micah’s pathetic question concerning his idols “*What else do I have?*”; reflects the emptiness of idolatry. Not only had Micah been robbed and betrayed, but from his viewpoint, having lost his gods and his priest he would feel completely vulnerable to the random evil forces at work in the world. Therefore, to someone like Micah, the Danite’s question “*what ails you*” would have been heard as painful mockery. Micah’s gods and his priests had failed him and the confidence he had placed in them had been exposed for the folly that it was.

In verse twenty-five we read, “*And the children of Dan said to him, ‘Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry men fall upon you, and you lose your life, with the lives of your household!’*” The threat to the life of Micah and his family was meant to intimidate him and prevent him from taking action. This demonstrates that the Danites were brutal and profoundly evil men. In this one incident they were guilty of breaking a number of the central commandments of the Covenant (“*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image*”-Ex.20:3-4; “*you shall not steal*”-Ex.20:15; “*you shall not covet*”-Ex.20:17) and they were threatening to break another (“*you shall not murder*”-Ex.20:13). The phrase “*angry men*” is a translation of a Hebrew idiom meaning “*bitter of soul*”. These men here are characterized as hardened bitter. The use of this idiom seems to have been a way of threatening Micah with violence without actually taking responsibility for it, suggesting that some hotheads among them might lose patience with Micah and take matters into their own hands, so it would be wise for Micah to leave at once. Finally, they demonstrated their contempt for

Micah by simply resuming the journey while he was there, as though his presence didn't matter.

In verses twenty-six through twenty-eight we read, "*Then the children of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house. So they took the things Micah had made, and the priest who had belonged to him, and went to Laish, to a people quiet and secure; and they struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. There was no deliverer, because it was far from Sidon, and they had no ties with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth Rehob. So they rebuilt the city and dwelt there.*" As the portion of the story, which includes Micah, comes to a close it is important to remember that the things he suffered did not fall upon an innocent person but were the result of events set in motion by his own terrible sins and lack of character. In this case God simply used worse sinners to punish a lesser one.

At the time of the Danite conquest of Laish, it was a village controlled by the Sidonians. The exact location of Beth Rehob is unknown, although it most likely was to be found near Hamath (Num.13:21), in the Huleh valley where it links with the Bekah valley of southern Lebanon. This reference to Beth Rehob reminds the reader that it was a portion of the Promised Land that had been spied out by the original twelve spies sent by Moses. Therefore, it creates an interesting juxtaposition. On the one hand the destruction of the town was within the instructions given to the nation as a whole to eliminate the Canaanite tribes living in the allotted land. However, this was not done in any attempt to fulfill God's will but was simply the result of these clans seeking according to their own notions a place to live. So, the failure is not what they did to this town, but that they were operating independently of their God.

The unsuspecting people of Laish were no match for the determined Danites who defeated them and burned down their city. The people of Laish were 27 miles from Sidon and thus had no allies close enough to come to their rescue.

In verse twenty-nine we read, "*And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel. However, the name of the city formerly was Laish.*" The new city of Dan was located at the foot of Mount Hermon and was watered by a number of springs which serve as one of the sources of the Jordan River. We are told that for some undisclosed reason the Danites first burned down the city, and then they rebuilt it. Though it is impossible to know why they was done for sure (since the text doesn't tell us), the best speculation is that they may have burned the city for the purpose of driving its inhabitants out into the open where they could be killed in combat.

In verse thirty we read, "*Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.*" The Levites were to serve as spiritual leaders for all of the tribes. Thus, it is a glaring contrast to what God had established that this Levite is referred to as the priest of the tribe of Dan. This Levite had come to his position by first serving as a

household priest in Ephraim and officiating before idols, and then by consenting to the confiscation of these sacred images from Micah's house. In that sense he perpetuated a form of false worship along the lines of those priests condemned by Hosea for failing to convey the true knowledge of God to the people (Hos 4:6). The Danites established a tribal center of idolatrous worship under the priesthood of this Levite which continued through his descendants until "*the day of the captivity of the land*". It is widely assumed that this is a reference to either the Assyrian captivity of Israel in 722 B.C. (II Kings 17:6) or to when the Galilean population was taken captive by Tiglath-Pileser III in 732 B.C. (II Kings 15:29). However, this seems unlikely, because that would mean that during David's reforms, he allowed this cultic center to keep operating, and that would be contrary to his overall intended purpose at the time. Another reason this is unlikely is because the next verse ties this event to the period where the sanctuary was at Shiloh. We know from I Samuel (ch.4) that the Philistines destroyed the house of God and Shiloh when they reasserted their dominance over Israel during the time of Samuel. At that time the sanctuary was moved from Shiloh and never returned there. For these reasons it seems better to conclude that the reference here is to that event recorded in I Samuel ch.4.

What we are told next involves a slight corruption in the text of this passage. In the New King James we read, that the young Levite descendant a "*Manasseh*". However, in other translations we read that he was a descendant of "*Moses*". There is evidence that at some point Jewish copyists chose to adjust the text, most likely to show respect for Moses. We are also told that his name was Jonathan. This late revelation about the background of the Levite was meant to shock the reader that a grandson of Moses could possibly have strayed so far from the example of his illustrious grandfather. This revelation in a sense captures the terrible and tragic spiritual degeneration that the Book as a whole seeks to convey. The unfolding Canaanization of the people, includes someone who was a descendant of one of the godliest families in Israel. If Moses' own family were now breaking the Covenant Law and were worshipping idols, how much worse must have been happening elsewhere in Israel (a question to be answered in the final portion of the Book).

There is something else noteworthy that we can deduce from this short genealogical reference. This story took place early in the portion of the period of the judges. For we are told that this Levite was only two generations removed from Moses. This would put these events during the latter part of the judgeship of Othniel.

In verse thirty-one we read, "*So they set up for themselves Micah's carved image which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.*" The shrine at Shiloh operated as the worship center of Israel throughout the time of the judges (21:19) and in the time of Samuel (I Sam.1:3), but it was apparently destroyed by the Philistines after the battle of Ebenezer (I Sam.4:1-11). Statements made in Ps.78:60 and Jer.7:12; 26:6-9 suggest the shrine was rebuilt and used until David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (II Sam.6). Shiloh was about halfway between Bethel and Shechem. This seven-and-a-half-acre site was situated in a

strategic location where it enjoyed fertile land, a reliable water source and access to the main north-south route through the heartland of Israel. But this reference to the house of God in Shiloh clearly implies that the worship at the Danite shrine opposed the true worship of Yahweh at Shiloh (Josh.18:1). This false worship in Dan was a forerunner of what would be established by Jeroboam I who later established a Northern Kingdom shrine at Dan (cf. 1 Kings 12:28-31). Though no temple or shrine has been found from this period by archeologists (at least not yet), Jeroboam may have been following earlier tradition when he constructed the temple in Dan when the nation was divided in the tenth century B.C. (I Kings 12:29-30). The record of the establishment of this shrine demonstrates the people's rebellion against the proper worship of Yahweh and their inclination toward complete disobedience to Israel's covenant with Yahweh. Again, not just by this tribe, but as demonstrative of Israel in general.

Conclusion:

This story conveys that the people of Israel during this period were characterized by three observable trends:

1. Religious syncretism
2. Moral relativism
3. Extreme materialism

It is a lesson to future generations of God's people to beware of the temptation to fall into these sins.

Judges Chs.19-21
“Illustrating the Spirit of the Age-pt.2”

Introduction:

In this account, there is an escalation of a trend within Israel that was already seen in the two previous accounts (that of Micah and the Danites [chs.17-18], and that of Samson [chs.13-16]). What began as a personal dispute within a private household developed into a crisis for an entire tribe and ultimately jeopardized the integrity of the entire nation of Israel. This account is one of the longest single coherent stories in the entire Book (only the accounts of Gideon and Samson are comparable in length). As the narrative unfolds, the reader becomes aware that the story here is presented in a way that is different from all the others in the book. In this story almost all of the characters of the narrative remain unnamed, including the major players in the story. Only the priest who officiates at Bethel is named (20:28). The reason for the anonymity seems to have been to structure the story in such a way as to present these characters as examples of general characteristics that were present in the Israelite people as a whole. In this way the reader was meant to understand that this story did not represent an isolated incident but was indicative of things happening throughout the nation and during the entire period of the judges. Thus, the reader is led to draw the conclusion that is specifically given by the author at the conclusion of the story, that “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*”. So, the Levite represents Levites in general; the concubine represents women in general; the father-in-law represents hosts in general, and the old man residing in Bethel represents the average Israelite elder. The idea is not that every individual did these things; but because of the general spiritual degeneracy, the behavior of a great many in Israel matched what is recorded in this account. Therefore, the namelessness in this chapter represents the dehumanization of individuals in Israel as they have become more and more like their Canaanite neighbors among whom they lived in the Promised Land.

I. A Levite’s Concubine: (19:1-21)

In verse one we read, “*And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote mountains of Ephraim. He took for himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.*” This passage begins and ends with the formula statement, “*pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel*” (see 21:25). Since Israel refused to acknowledge Yahweh as their king, the nation lacked a theological reason for not sinking to the ethical level of the Canaanites at the personal, tribal, and national levels. At the same time the Israelites did not need to wait for a human monarch to lead them in sinful and treacherous ways; they were doing this just fine on their own. Although the Israelites claim to be worshippers of Yahweh, their actual conduct and their subsequent fate contradicted this claim. The reference here to the fact that Israel at this time was without a king sets the stage for what will unfold. The story will illustrate the anarchy and injustice that prevailed when the Israelites did not have the centralized authority of a king. As noted before, the author’s purpose in

pointing this out was not to advocate the necessity of having a human monarch, or to argue that having a king would have improved Israel's situation; it was written merely to help the reader understand how the events of this period convinced the elders of the nation to think a king was necessary. As the first portion of I Samuel will point out, having a king did not solve their problems, it just gave the nation a different set of problems.

The Levite who serves as the central character in this chapter is said to have had a concubine. A concubine was a secondary wife who had probably come into the marriage without a dowry. Traditionally, her children would only receive a portion of their father's estate (assuming that he chose to publicly acknowledge them as his heirs). This sort of arrangement was at times thought to be necessary when the first or principal wife was infertile (for example Hagar in Gen.16:1-4 and the maids of Leah and Rachel in Gen.35:21-22). However, in most cases in which a marriage contract was made with the father of a woman who was to be considered a concubine, there was an assumption that she would receive a lesser status than a regular wife. Thus, the Levite may have simply contracted for a sexual partner, since his social status would ordinarily have required a wife of certain attributes (Lev.21:7). This may explain why he was in no hurry to bring his concubine home (vs.2).

It is helpful to recognize that the Levite mentioned in this chapter is not Micah's Levite though both had connections with Bethlehem in Judah and both lived in the hill country of Ephraim.

In verse two we read, "*But his concubine played the harlot against him, and went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there four whole months.*" In distinction to the translation above from the NKJV, it is interesting to read how two other translations give the first half of the verse a distinctly different rendering:

"But his concubine became angry with him" (NRSV)

"But she became angry with him" (NLT)

The question this discrepancy raises is of course, why would some translations refer to the concubine playing the harlot, and others refer to her as becoming angry with her husband. The word in the Hebrew text literally means to act as a prostitute, or commit fornication. Therefore, based on that text the NKJV, NASU, NIV, & ESV all render the problem as her sexual promiscuity. However, there are several ancient versions including the Septuagint which use verbs that mean being angry or displeased with someone. Of course, the assumption is that at one time the Hebrew text that was the basis for those translations contained a different word than the current Hebrew text. These other translations pre-date the oldest Hebrew manuscripts we currently possess, and so at times those readings are preferred.

On the other hand, a common reason why some interpreters prefer the idea that fornication was originally in view is because in that culture, even if a woman simply abandoned her husband for any reason, she would have been considered as acting

like a prostitute. This was due in large measure to the fact that a woman in Israel at that time could not divorce her husband, and since she would be unlikely to support herself, it would be assumed that some man other than her husband would be providing for her. In the end, whatever led to the estrangement, it did not cause a breach so severe that it would have led to permanent separation. This is seen in how the wife and father-in-law are welcoming to the Levite when he comes for her. We are told that the woman returned to her father's home in Bethlehem of Judah. The geographical distance between where the Levite lived and Bethlehem would have been about thirty miles. To travel the distance would have required at least a full day and this explains why the travelers must stop for the night after a later afternoon departure (vs.8-11).

In verse three we read, "*Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back, having his servant and a couple of donkeys with him. So she brought him into her father's house; and when the father of the young woman saw him, he was glad to meet him.*" The four-month interval may represent the Levite waiting for her to return, and when it became apparent that she would not, he went down to retrieve her. Or as suggested above, he was simply not in a hurry to bring her home. The expression "*speak kindly to her*" carries the sense of pleading and seeking to persuade and thus further supports that this was his intent in going down for her.

In verses four through nine we read, "*Now his father-in-law, the young woman's father, detained him; and he stayed with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there. Then it came to pass on the fourth day that they arose early in the morning, and he stood to depart; but the young woman's father said to his son-in-law, 'Refresh your heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward go your way'. So they sat down, and the two of them ate and drank together. Then the young woman's father said to the man, 'Please be content to stay all night, and let your heart be merry.' And when the man stood to depart, his father-in-law urged him; so he lodged there again. Then he arose early in the morning on the fifth day to depart, but the young woman's father said, 'Please refresh your heart'. So they delayed until afternoon; and both of them ate. And when the man stood to depart — he and his concubine and his servant — his father-in-law, the young woman's father, said to him, 'Look, the day is now drawing toward evening; please spend the night. See, the day is coming to an end; lodge here, that your heart may be merry. Tomorrow go your way early, so that you may get home.'*" Nothing is said as to why the father-in-law seems so happy to see the Levite, but the idea seems to be that he and the daughter were both in favor of reconciliation. In these verses a tension develops in the story over the father-in-law's insistence on rendering hospitality and the Levite's desire to return home. Because of the social mores of the day, the Levite would have felt that he had to concede to his father-in-law and accept the invitation to stay for the four days. The text does not directly state why the father-in-law continued to pressure his son-in-law to go on staying in his home day after day. However, whatever the historical reason was, from the way the narrative continues, we can discern that the author includes this detail (and stresses it by all

the space he devoted to it) because the subject of showing proper hospitality is so important to properly interpreting the story. Part of the reason of course is to explain why the Levite ends up in the threatening situation on the way home that he did not encounter on his journey down south to retrieve his concubine. However, the main reason was that this sets an example for the sort of hospitality that one would expect in Israel, as a contrast to what the Levite receives in Gibeah. At no point in the narrative is the father-in-law pictured as doing something wrong. We might tend to be sympathetic with someone wishing to leave, but the story actually is not indicating excessiveness in regard to the hospitality offered (at least not from a middle easterner's perspective).

In verse ten we read, "*However, the man was not willing to spend that night; so he rose and departed, and came opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). With him were the two saddled donkeys; his concubine was also with him.*" The city of Jerusalem would have been only about four miles north of Bethlehem. The city at that time was known as Jebus (so named for the Amorite group the Jebusites who lived there). The Jebusites were like the Hittites and Hivites in that they were a non-Semitic people. It seems like the reference to the place and its inhabitants by the title Jebus, was to provide a context to understand the ethnic ramifications for what was going to take place later in the narrative.

In verse eleven we read, "*They were near Jebus, and the day was far spent; and the servant said to his master, 'Come, please, and let us turn aside into this city of the Jebusites and lodge in it.'*" The servant was recorded as making the logical suggestion that the travelers seek refuge in Jebus in light of how late in the day it was by the time they arrived in that vicinity.

In verses twelve and thirteen we read, "*But his master said to him, 'We will not turn aside here into a city of foreigners, who are not of the children of Israel; we will go on to Gibeah.' So he said to his servant, 'Come, let us draw near to one of these places, and spend the night in Gibeah or in Ramah.'*" Although the Levite rejects his servant's proposal, both the servant's suggestion and the reasons for its rejection are critical elements in the plot. The Levite correctly recognizes Jebus as a foreign city, and its inhabitants as ethnically distinct from the Israelites. But his response leaves the reader wondering why, when the Israelites generally had been living comfortably among the Canaanites, that the three of them could not stay in this foreign city. Not a word is said about Yahweh's instructions about staying separate from the people of the land, nor is there a reminder that the Israelites were supposed to have conquered these people; a mandate that the Israelites had abandoned long before. In fact, there is no reference to God or Yahweh at all in the chapter, except for a self-serving reference to his role as a Levite (vs.18). Instead, the focus is again on hospitality. The Levite would not expect the Jebusites to make any effort to keep them safe while among them, and so in order to have that security, he decided to travel on to Gibeah. Scholarly consensus now places the site of Gibeah about four miles northeast of Jerusalem. Although it is described as a village in the tribal territory of Benjamin, Gibeah would later serve as Saul's fortress city when he became Israel's first king (I Sam.10:26). The Levite's

determination to move on to more friendly territory will turn out to be an ironic and unfortunate decision in view of the following events.

In verses fourteen and fifteen we read, *“And they passed by and went their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. They turned aside there to go in to lodge in Gibeah. And when he went in, he sat down in the open square of the city, for no one would take them into his house to spend the night.”* The Levite and his companions pressed on and travelled four miles farther north to Gibeah where they stopped to spend the night. However, though they sat in the city square, the hospitality of the Benjamites was not forthcoming. According to the social customs of the Ancient Near East, it would have been expected that someone would offer to let these visitors spend the night in their home as an act of hospitality. What is implied here is that no one met the Levite’s party as they entered the village. The final clause of verse fifteen *“for no one would take them into his house to spend the night”* would have been shocking anywhere in the Ancient Near East; especially as these were Israelites among other Israelites. The spiritual degeneration of the nation had resulted in, among other things, a social disintegration. Israelites refused to open their homes to their brethren. Thus, those far from home would be forced to seek shelter in the city square. This place would be a poor refuge for travelers. Thus, having to spend the night in the city square would have been their last choice.

In verses sixteen and seventeen we read, *“Just then an old man came in from his work in the field at evening, who also was from the mountains of Ephraim; he was staying in Gibeah, whereas the men of the place were Benjamites. And when he raised his eyes, he saw the traveler in the open square of the city; and the old man said, ‘Where are you going, and where do you come from?’”* The narration slows down at this point to introduce a new individual who plays a part in the story. He is simply described as an old man, who like the Levite and his company, was an outsider in this town, and who was also from the hills of Ephraim. Though he has taken up only temporary residence here, he is known to the people of the town.

In verses eighteen and nineteen we read, *“So he said to him, ‘We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah toward the remote mountains of Ephraim; I am from there. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; now I am going to the house of the LORD. But there is no one who will take me into his house, although we have both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and bread and wine for myself, for your female servant, and for the young man who is with your servant; there is no lack of anything.’”* The Levite says that he was going *“to the house of Yahweh”*. It is best to understand this as simply a reference to his function as a Levite to attempt to get hospitality. There is absolutely no indication that he was going to the shrine at Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. It is telling about this man’s actual spiritual devotion that he only speaks of Yahweh in order to try to impress others and get something he feels he deserves, yet never invokes God’s name to rebuke evil, nor does God seem relevant to the Levite’s personal ethics. Verse nineteen heightens the social ostracism, because the Levite expresses that he and his companions do not even expect a meal from their hosts and are prepared to feed their own animals;

expressing that all they need is a bed. The point in delineating the details here is to show the social breakdown; in that those from a different tribe, or even those from a different town, were not seen as members of the same nation or larger family.

In verse twenty we read, *“And the old man said, ‘Peace be with you! However, let all your needs be my responsibility; only do not spend the night in the open square.’”* At the last minute they were saved from a night of danger in the city square by this old man from the hill country of Ephraim who invited them to spend the night at his house in Gibeah. The old man offered them hospitality, but without explaining why, he told the travelers that they must not spend the night out in the square. It should be noted that physical safety should not have been an issue since they were inside a walled city (and there is nothing in the story about the residents of the city expecting an invasion). Thus, this detail creates an ominous context for what comes next. There is a threat to the well-being of these travelers that will come from within their own nation.

In verse twenty-one we read, *“So he brought him into his house, and gave fodder to the donkeys. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank.”* It was typical for the host to make a modest offer to the guest (usually water, food, shelter and a foot washing). This did not preclude more being given to the guest, but it did protect the host who might find himself in the dishonored position of offering more than he could deliver. In any case the host would traditionally make every effort to ensure his guest’s comfort, and this would include cooling and cleansing hot, dusty feet (Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32).

II. Gibeah’s Crime: (19:22-30)

In verse twenty-two we read, *“As they were enjoying themselves, suddenly certain men of the city, perverted men, surrounded the house and beat on the door. They spoke to the master of the house, the old man, saying, ‘Bring out the man who came to your house, that we may know him carnally!’”* What follows echoes an account of the most notoriously evil story from Book of Genesis, the account of the angel’s visit to Sodom to rescue Lot. In the comparison below (particularly in the underlined passages), the reader can see how closely this episode about the Levite given shelter in Gibeah parallels what took place in Sodom:

Judges 19:22-24	Genesis 19:4-8
<p>“As they were enjoying themselves, suddenly <u>certain men of the city,</u> perverted men, surrounded the house and beat on the door.</p> <p><u>They spoke to the master of the house,</u> the old man, saying, <u>‘Bring out the man who came to your house, that we may know him carnally!’</u></p>	<p>“Now before they lay down, <u>the men of the city,</u> the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter, surrounded the house.</p> <p><u>And they called to Lot and said to him,</u></p> <p><u>‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them carnally.’</u></p>

<p><u>But the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my brethren! I beg you, do not act so wickedly!</u> <u>Seeing this man has come into my house, do not commit this outrage. Look, here is my virgin daughter and the man's concubine; let me bring them out now.</u> <u>Humble them, and do with them as you please; but to this man do not do such a vile thing!'</u></p>	<p><u>So Lot went out to them through the doorway, shut the door behind him, and said, 'Please, my brethren, do not do so wickedly!</u> <u>See now, I have two daughters who have not known a man; please, let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you wish; only do nothing to these men,</u> since this is the reason they have come under the shadow of my roof.'</p>
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The author crafted the account in order to show through this parallel just how far Israel had degenerated. In the Genesis account the scene was meant to demonstrate the difference between the righteous seed, and those who did not worship the true God. Here the account mirrors that language to show that the righteous seed was now indistinguishable from those who did not worship Yahweh. Of the words found in the Genesis account, almost one fourth (sixteen total) occur in the same form in these verses in Judges, the only variations being grammatically necessary in the context. In the narrative, the scene of hospitality provided by the old man is dramatically altered by the arrival of the other men of the town. They have not come to show hospitality, but rather with a wicked purpose. The men are described literally as “*sons of Belial*”, and this was an idiom referring to those who were characterized by wickedness. Since these are once again anonymous men, who are simply identified as some of the men of the city, these men are set forth as being representative of the overall wickedness of the men of Gibeah, and ultimately of all Israel. The idea then was, what was about to occur, and the evil of those who would do these things, were not unusual, but represented the sorts of things that were happening among the Israelites at this time. These wicked men of Gibeah surrounded the house and demanded that the old man send out the Levite to satisfy their homosexual desires. Such homosexual acts were a violation of the Law Moses and were punishable by execution (Lev.18:22; 20:13).

In verses twenty-three and twenty-four we read, “*But the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my brethren! I beg you, do not act so wickedly! Seeing this man has come into my house, do not commit this outrage. Look, here is my virgin daughter and the man's concubine; let me bring them out now. Humble them, and do with them as you please; but to this man do not do such a vile thing!'*” The host in rebuking his fellow townspeople from what they were planning describes what they were attempting to do as “*outrage*” and “*vile*”. These words are critical for interpreting the crimes perpetrated in this account. The first verb deliberately links the Gibeonites behavior with the general spiritual and ethical malaise of the nation during the age of the judges (for this is the very same word that is translated as “*evil*” in one of the theme statements of the Book “*Israel*

did evil in the sight of the LORD·2:11). The second verb refers to that which is foolishness, denoting what is empty or vain, lacking in moral restraint and thus moral turpitude. The crimes therefore were violations of the code of God's covenant law, and it meant that those who engaged in these sins did so because they lacked any real concern or interest in keeping God's law. These words reveal again that the Israelites were virtually indistinguishable from the Canaanites. What we see in the old man's offer of his daughter and the concubine are two evils that had become defining characteristics of the Israelite people as they became more and more like the Canaanites. First, an andro-centric view of life where men were valued so much higher than women, that women ended up being treated like property. Second, the subversion of morality, where social considerations took on more weight than actual moral imperatives. In this case the old man's sense of hospitality was threatened should he surrender his male guests to the mob. This takes precedence in his choices over the moral evil of the rape and molestation of the women, and over the homosexual perversion of the men. Yet another deviance related to the obsession with maintaining one's honor in regard to hospitality is that the man placed a stranger who is just passing through as being more important to protect than his own helpless daughter. Also, for the first time the host acknowledged the concubine, but only for her value as a sacrifice and offers the men the opportunity to rape her to protect his reputation. That the host offers to the men to "*do with them as you please*" ties this event to the overall theme, because the Hebrew words here represent a different translation of the same phrase that is translated elsewhere as the key theme of the Book "*did what was right in their own eyes*" (17:7; 21:25). We are given a glimpse into a culture in which no man or woman was safe from harm. It should be noted that women were understood to be legal extensions of their husbands under God's covenant Law and thus would come under the same legal protections guaranteed to their husbands. Even according to the ethical traditions of that culture outside of God's law the concubine should have been protected by the customs of hospitality to the same degree. So not only had the degeneration of Israel resulted in them not keeping God's law, it kept them even from living up to their own cultural traditions. The lesson for the people of God is clear. That apart from a thriving relationship with God, human beings will become more and more wicked until they seemingly will have no limits to what they are willing to do.

In verse twenty-five we read, "*But the men would not heed him. So the man took his concubine and brought her out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until morning; and when the day began to break, they let her go.*" The men of Gibeah simply ignore the old man's offer. There is a sense of urgency in the text, brought on by a lack of reasoning in the actions of the mob. In response to the immediate threat, the Levite thrusts his concubine out the door and into the hands of the mob. Even though the language is ambiguous, the Levite is indicated as the one who threw the concubine out of the house, because if it had been the old man it would be difficult to explain why he chose to throw out the concubine of his guest, rather than his daughter, in light of his own concern with hospitality. It turns out that what was "*right in the sight*" of the sexually aroused men in the mob was to

know her (rape her), abused her (to treat with brutality and cruelty) and to do it all night until morning; and when day came, they discarded her (as in leaving something behind that had been used and no longer serves a purpose).

In verses twenty-six and twenty-seven we read, *“Then the woman came as the day was dawning, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, till it was light. When her master arose in the morning, and opened the doors of the house and went out to go his way, there was his concubine, fallen at the door of the house with her hands on the threshold.”* The woman, who had been beaten and brutalized, dragged herself to the threshold of the house from which she was flung, and collapsed. There was no one waiting for her or apparently concerned about her fate. The tone of the narrative is cold and calculating. It reflects the Levite's attitude and is meant to cause the reader to see the event from the perspective of the victim. When the Levite finally emerges from the dwelling, the only thing on his mind seems to be continuing on with his journey home. The series of verbs that follow reflect his indifference to the woman's fate:

- arose in the morning
- opened the doors of the house
- went out to go his way

These verbs convey a nonchalance, which is intended to be shocking. Instead of having come out earlier to search for his secondary wife, he didn't go out until he was ready to depart the town, and when he went outside, he did so without giving her a thought. It would seem that the fact he almost stumbled over her at the threshold was the first time he had given any thought to her. The fact that it is noted that her hands were on the threshold gives the pathetic view that she was reaching out for help or entrance and did not have the strength to even knock.

In verses twenty-eight through thirty we read, *“And he said to her, ‘Get up and let us be going.’ But there was no answer. So the man lifted her onto the donkey; and the man got up and went to his place. When he entered his house he took a knife, laid hold of his concubine, and divided her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. And so it was that all who saw it said, ‘No such deed has been done or seen from the day that the children of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day. Consider it, confer, and speak up!’”* Rather than being moved with sympathy or any semblance of concern or affection, the Levite simply commanded her to get off the ground. The narrator, rather than telling the reader that she had died during the night, allows the reader to discover this by the lack of any response from the woman as she is unceremoniously hoisted onto a donkey to be taken back to the Levite's home.

The Levite next performed an almost unbelievable act of gruesome brutality and disregard for the dignity of a woman who had been his secondary wife. He hacked her body apart into twelve parts (literally, *“according to her bones”*, like a priest preparing a sacrifice, and thus we might say limb from limb) and then sent each of the twelve pieces of her body to the twelve tribes of Israel. From the standpoint of that culture, the Levite would have seen himself as seeking to arouse the nation to action by calling for a national judicial hearing. Perhaps he was charging the

twelve tribes with the responsibility of removing the guilt for the heinous act committed in Gibeah. In receiving this macabre message, the people were appalled and bewildered as to what to do. But clearly all would know this was the Levite's call to arms, a call to make war on the inhabitants of Gibeah for the atrocity that was committed there.

But the truth was, as with everything else in the story, that this was actually a self-serving call for vengeance rather than an expression of moral/spiritual outrage that such evil had taken place in Israel.

There is a second point for the reader (demonstrated by the fact that the call at the end of the verse is not specifically answered). A call to recognize how tragically the nation had degenerated during that period. It would serve as a wake-up call to the generation living in the time of Samuel to recognize the need to truly return to God lest this history begin to repeat itself.

III. Israel's War with the Tribe of Benjamin: (20:1-48)

This chapter records the events that were set in motion by the sinful episode recorded in the previous chapter.

In verse one we read, "*So all the children of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, as well as from the land of Gilead, and the congregation gathered together as one man before the Lord at Mizpah.*" The expression "*from Dan to Beersheba*" was the traditional geographic range given in the Old Testament for the north-south political limits of Israel. It represented a distance of approximately 160 miles. In this case, the phrase reflects the perspective of the author's own time, when Dan was well established as the northern most major town that was in the possession of the Israelites.

In addition to highlighting the unanimity and comprehensiveness of the Israelites' response to the outrage in Israel, the narrator heightens the reader's expectations of what good might happen because of this gathering. The narrator does this by drawing attention to the spiritual nature of this gathering. First, he refers to the "*assembling*" of the people. The Hebrew verb that is translated as "*assembling*" comes from a root word that was often used to identify the nation of Israel as a people united together to worship and serve Yahweh. Another key term used is "*congregation*" a term that is used elsewhere to highlight that Israel was a vassal community who were committed to Yahweh by their shared Covenant. So, the Hebrew reader was initially given the impression that positive things were about to follow.

In verse two we read, "*And the leaders of all the people, all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand foot soldiers who drew the sword.*" Though the verse says all the tribes gathered there is one missing; Benjamin, who though they had received the summons did not assemble with the other tribes. This hints at the hostile and isolationist posture this tribe had taken in regard to the other tribes. Of course, the reader is to understand that since the episode recorded in this chapter presents the Benjamites as the antagonists, the collective "*all*" refers to the other eleven tribes. As

mentioned above; up to this point the terminology and the emphasis on unity would suggest a positive situation; however, the people are not gathered to worship or seek out Yahweh, they are gathered together in one accord to make war on a part of their own family, the tribe of Benjamin.

There is a debate among historians regarding the numbers given in relation to the size of the armies assembled in this and other historical books of the Old Testament. Part of the interpretive problem is the difficulty of ascertaining with certainty whether the Hebrew word translated as “*thousands*” actually means that specific number, or if might be more accurately translated as “*divisions*”. Population estimates by secular historians for this period of history suggest that there were between 200,000 to 250,000 people in Israel at this time. This estimate is not based on documents from the period but are based on the number of settlements known to exist, the size of the settlements, and the average number of inhabitants per acre of city space. A number of historians favor the conclusion that the Hebrew word “*elep*h” refers to military units, rather than to a specific number like one thousand. If that is true, and if the number of soldiers were 100 per unit (which is the estimate of other secular historians), then that would mean there were 40,000 men in the Israelite army. However, if the traditional translation is correct (and linguistic evidence indicates that it is), and there were literally 400,000 soldiers that were assembled for the army, this would suggest that the overall population of the Israelites at this time was a little over two million. If this number is compared with the census figures of Numbers 1 and 26; then it indicates that there had been a reduction of the total population by approximately one third since the time of Moses.

The swords that are mentioned are probably bronze swords, since archeological evidence suggests that Israel did not develop iron technology until the period of the monarchy.

In verse three we read, “(Now the children of Benjamin heard that the children of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) Then the children of Israel said, ‘Tell us, how did this wicked deed happen?’” This site in the tribal territory of Benjamin was a common assembly point in pre-monarchic Israel (Josh.18:26; I Sam.7:16). The name means “*to watch*”, and the site may have been a military outpost or border fortress, and thus a likely spot for the type of encampment described in this verse. It was about six miles north of Jerusalem. Therefore, this is not the Mizpah in Gilead that is the setting of part of the story of Jephthah (chapter 11), because that was on the other side of the Jordan River.

In this verse we read that some aspects of Israelite judicial procedure are followed in this episode. The elders of the tribes are assembled to hear testimony. Once this has been given, a verdict is rendered. One major variation on this process is the fact that only the word of the Levite is given. According to God’s Law, two witnesses were required for a verdict to be rendered (Num.35:30; Deut.19:15). The judgment of the tribes in this case included taking an oath to stay in the field until punishment has been administered. Such a united front was unprecedented during the judges period, since it was common for the tribes to fight among themselves

(12:1-6) or to refuse to join a combined military effort (5:15-17). The idea that honor had been violated or that a great affront was committed that requires military action may be compared to David's vow after being rebuffed by Nabal (I Sam.25:21-22). The Benjamites were not officially represented at Mizpah since the men who raped the concubine were from Gibeah in Benjamin. Apparently, however, the tribe of Benjamin received 1 of the 12 parts of the concubine (19:29; 20:6).

In verse four we read, "*So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, 'My concubine and I went into Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin, to spend the night.'*" In light of the calloused way the Levite treated the body of the concubine it seems unlikely that the author was trying to convey that this man was emotionally grieving. Instead, based on his testimony, it is better to conclude that his outrage was over the insult to his honor. The choice of the Levite to use the word that normally meant premeditated murder is interesting as this would seem to be the result of the actions of the men who raped her and not the intent. Some interpreters have wondered if perhaps this word was included by the author to cause the reader to understand that the concubine was not actually dead when the Levite found her, and that in fact he was her murderer. This latter conclusion seems very unlikely however, as that would be an overly subtle and thus a very unclear way of making that point.

In verse five we read, "*And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me, but instead they ravished my concubine so that she died.*" There are a variety of translations regarding the reference to those in Gibeah. Here in the NKJV, it reads "*the men of Gibeah*", in the ESV it reads "*the leaders of Gibeah*", in the CSB it reads "*the citizens of Gibeah*", and in the NRSV it reads "*the lords of Gibeah*". The Hebrew word that is in the text is "*ba'al*", which means lord, husband, owner, or possessor, (& the title of a Canaanite deity). This word can be used denote rulers and leaders. Commonly, it refers to legally owning something such as an ox or bull (Ex 21:28); house (Ex 22:8); or land (Job 31:38). The word can also describe possessing a quality, attribute, or characteristic like anger. Not surprising, since the earlier account said nothing to indicate that the mob represented the leaders of the town, there are a number of opinions as to how to interpret the Levite's testimony here. Some say that the testimony is accurate, others that it is an intentional lie, and still others say it is impossible to say. The translation "*leaders*" or "*lords*" fits the meaning of the Hebrew word far better than "*citizens*" or "*men*", it is pretty certain that the Levite was saying at the very least that the leaders of the community were involved. As to the truthfulness of the testimony, the best answer is found in a parallel use of the term earlier in the Book. This was most likely a sarcastic reference to those who acted as if they were the leaders of the town (which would also be a thinly veiled insult toward those who were the leaders) similar to Abimelech's identification of the aristocracy of Shechem (9:2).

In verse six we read, "*So I took hold of my concubine, cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of the inheritance of Israel, because they committed*

lewdness and outrage in Israel.” The Hebrew word translated here as “*lewdness*” is a term that refers to shameful behavior, especially fornication, incest, and murder.

In referring to these atrocities taking place within “*the inheritance of Israel*”, the Levite sounds as if he was defending the sanctity of the Promised Land. However, if one takes a closer look at the speech, one finds certain things that are extremely troubling:

1. The entire speech revolves around the Levite himself
2. There is no genuine compassion expressed for the real victim in this crime, the concubine
3. There is no mention of his mistaken assumptions about both Gibeah and Jebus
4. He blatantly twists the facts by claiming he was the primary target of the mob, and that they had surrounded the house to murder him. This took the focus away from what actually happened to the concubine and instead puts the focus on something that was not even threatened. In addition, this statement makes it unclear why she ended up being killed, if he was the intended target. This is not to say this in any way diminishes the wickedness done to the Levite in threatening to homosexually rape him, but it does indicate that conveying the facts so that the real victim could receive justice was not his primary motivation.
5. He makes no mention of his own role in the death of the concubine
6. There is no reference to Yahweh, which is not what one should expect from an individual whose role it was to be a spiritual leader among his people

In verse seven and eight we read, “*Look! All of you are children of Israel; give your advice and counsel here and now!*” *So all the people arose as one man, saying, ‘None of us will go to his tent, nor will any turn back to his house’*”. The reader needs to remember that throughout this book there have been depictions of Israel as existing in chaotic disorganization in terms of tribal relations. The reminders that there had yet to be a king in Israel implies that with the monarchy had come a greater degree of unity in Israel, distinguishing the earlier period of the judges as a particularly divisive time. Here alone, the tribes are pictured as unified, with one exception; the tribe of Benjamin. But the irony is that the eleven tribes are united in their intent to engage in civil war; a war that would lead to the greatest bloodshed in Israel for the entire period. Therefore, though there was unprecedented unity in this event, it was not one rooted in the values of the Covenant with God.

In verse nine we read, “*but now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah: We will go up against it by lot.*” The use of lots was common in Israelite tradition in situations of land distribution (Josh.14:2; 19) and judicial procedure (Josh.7:14-21; I Sam.14:41-42). It was a form of seeking God to show His will, with the done under the assumption that God chose to providentially direct the lots.

In verse ten we read, “*We will take ten men out of every hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, a hundred out of every thousand, and a thousand out of every ten thousand, to make provisions for the people, that when they come to Gibeah in*

Benjamin, they may repay all the vileness that they have done in Israel.” In this case, the casting of lots here was to determine who would care for the food supplies for the army. Those charged with this responsibility would be involved in maintaining the supply lines to those in combat and foraging for food in the countryside of Benjamin. This would suggest that they expected at least the possibility of a protracted engagement.

In verses eleven through thirteen we read, *“So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united together as one man. Then the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, ‘What is this wickedness that has occurred among you? Now therefore, deliver up the men, the perverted men who are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and remove the evil from Israel!’ But the children of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brethren, the children of Israel.”* The verdict of the tribes was unanimous: All the people rose as one man against the town of Gibeah to give them what they deserve by launching an attack. However, due to the moral insensitivity of the men of Benjamin, rather than turning the guilty men over for punishment, they chose to protect them. The Hebrew phrase translated as *“would not listen”* is the same expression used to describe what the wicked men of Gibeah said in response to the old man’s attempts to reason with them during the incident that set all this in motion. In effect the men of Benjamin were identifying themselves with the rapists rather than as the people of Yahweh with their fellow Israelites. Because the men of Benjamin would not surrender the guilty, Israel took the final step and attacked Gibeah.

In verses fourteen through sixteen we read, *“Instead, the children of Benjamin gathered together from their cities to Gibeah, to go to battle against the children of Israel. And from their cities at that time the children of Benjamin numbered twenty-six thousand men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who numbered seven hundred select men. Among all this people were seven hundred select men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair’s breadth and not miss.”* The Benjamites mobilized 26,000 swordsmen plus 700 left-handed men from Gibeah, all experts with slings. The reference inserted here seems perhaps to explain part of the reason that the Benjamites were so successful in the upcoming battles despite being so seriously outnumbered. Alone, a left-handed person was considered a liability among a troop of right-handed soldiers. But if enough left-handed men could be assembled to form an entire unit, this would represent a distinct physical and psychological advantage. In addition to this we are told that these left-handed Benjamites were extraordinary marksmen, who never missed with their sling shots, even when aiming at the smallest of targets. The sling was a common weapon in Ancient Palestine, often used in the hill country. Most of these were slightly more than two inches in diameter.

In verses seventeen and eighteen we read, *“Now besides Benjamin, the men of Israel numbered four hundred thousand men who drew the sword; all of these were men of war. Then the children of Israel arose and went up to the house of God to inquire of God. They said, ‘Which of us shall go up first to battle against the children of Benjamin?’ The LORD said, ‘Judah first!’”* We read that the Israelites

inquired of God using the generic title “*elohim*”, and not His covenant name Yahweh. That this is to be noted as important is demonstrated by the narrator invoking the name Yahweh in referring to His answer. For Judah to go first was appropriate in that the victim was from Bethlehem of Judah. That Judah was to go first was also reminiscent of 1:1-10 where Judah led the battle of the nation’s holy war against the Canaanites in conquering the Promised Land. But this time it is a holy war against one of their own tribes. A tribe that was defending individuals who were guilty of profound evil. We are told that the Israelites went up to Bethel (misleadingly rendered above as “*house of God*”) to inquire of God (probably through the high priest’s Urim and Thummim – Lev.8:8; Num.27:21; Deut.33:8) concerning which tribe should lead the attack against the Benjamites.

In verses nineteen through twenty-one we read, “*So the children of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. And the men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel put themselves in battle array to fight against them at Gibeah. Then the children of Benjamin came out of Gibeah, and on that day cut down to the ground twenty-two thousand men of the Israelites.*” Nothing is said about the loss of life on the side of Benjamin or how they won the battle; the only important matter for the story was the terrible defeat that the eleven tribes suffered. We do know however that the location and topography of Gibeah made it easy to defend. The Benjamites came out of Gibeah, attacked the Israelite battle positions, and slayed 22,000 Israelites.

In verses twenty-two through twenty-six we read, “*And the people, that is, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and again formed the battle line at the place where they had put themselves in array on the first day. Then the children of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and asked counsel of the LORD, saying, ‘Shall I again draw near for battle against the children of my brother Benjamin?’ And the LORD said, ‘Go up against him’. So the children of Israel approached the children of Benjamin on the second day. And Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah on the second day, and cut down to the ground eighteen thousand more of the children of Israel; all these drew the sword. Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD.*” The strategy and events of the previous day were repeated on the second day, and this time Israel lost 18,000 men. In response to the second defeat the narrator intensifies the references from what was said after the first defeat to express the deepening of the crisis within the Israelite camp. Those who mourned were not just “*the children of Israel*” (vs.18), but “*all the people*”. In regard to what they did, it was not just that they “*went up*” (vs.18) but they “*went up and came*” and sat and fasted along with their weeping; and finally offered a burnt offering and a peace offering before Yahweh. This all seems to reveal that they were reminding themselves of their Covenantal responsibilities. Fasting is little attested in the Ancient Near East outside of the Bible. It generally occurs in the context of mourning. In the Old Testament the religious use of fasting was often in connection with making a request before God.

The idea that motivated such fasting was that the importance of the request caused an individual to be so concerned about their spiritual condition that physical necessities faded into the background. In this sense, the act of fasting was designed as a process intended to result in purification and the humbling of oneself before God (Ps.69:10). After their second defeat by the Benjamites, the other tribes gathered to seek God's counsel, and in preparation for this query they fasted and made sacrifices in order to remove any sin or other obstacle that may have been the cause for this defeat. For similar efforts related to military action.

In verse twenty-seven we read, "*So the children of Israel inquired of the LORD (the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days)*". In this translation, we read in verse 26 that the Israelites went to "*the house of God*". This would more accurately be translated as "*Bethel*", for this is a reference to the town by that name (even though the word literally means "*house of God*"). The interpretive problem here is that elsewhere we are told that the Ark was at Shiloh during the period of the judges. The best response in light of the absence of any clarifying reference is that the Ark was temporally moved to Bethel, and was used as a religious good luck charm, much like it would be later on during one of Israel's battles with the Philistines (I Sam.4). This may be part of the explanation as to why God did not bless the earlier efforts of the eleven tribes. This is the only reference to the Ark in the book of Judges, and therefore for most of the book it is unknown where the ark was being kept or how it was being used (other than what we find in the surrounding Books of Joshua and I Samuel). It is possible that its location changed on a number of occasions during the period. Perhaps one reason that Yahweh permitted the initial defeats of the tribes was to bring them back in a spirit of repentance to the neglected sacrificial worship. This time their inquiry about whether they should continue the battle not only received a positive reply but also included a promise of victory.

In verse twenty-eight we read, "*(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 my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?' And the LORD said, 'Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.'*" Unlike the episode in Joshua 22, Phinehas plays no part in this incident but is simply mentioned in passing. The fact that Phinehas was still alive and serving as high priest means that what occurred here took place within one hundred years of the death of Joshua. The episodes in the book of Judges are not always in chronological order, and the events contained in the last five chapters of the book occurred closer to the beginning of the settlement period. This would allow for a son of Aaron to still be alive and serving as priest before the Ark at Bethel.

Again, it would seem that the ultimate reason that the other tribes were not given the ability to defeat Benjamin in the first two attempts was to bring the tribes to a place of repentance and sincerely seek out the will of God. At the beginning the tribes did not seek Yahweh in what they should do in response to the atrocity. This taught them to seek His guidance before taking action. In the beginning of the

campaign the tribes had decided to go to war and simply assumed they had Yahweh's approval.

In twenty-nine we read, "*Then Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah.*" In light of the two decisive victories that the Benjamites had enjoyed despite being so greatly outnumbered must have given them a great deal of confidence, and maybe even a sense of invulnerability. The use of decoying ambushes, such as that described in this episode, seems to have been a familiar part of Israelite military strategy. Joshua employed it in his second attack on the city of Ai (Josh.8:2-21), and Abimelech used similar tactics in his capture of the city of Shechem (9:30-45). This strategy falls into the category of indirect warfare, characterized by ambush, pretend retreats, decoys, infiltration and the like, rather than lengthy siege or pitched battle. It would have been difficult for armies to besiege walled cities without siege engines or a large enough force to completely surround the city and prevent counterattacks or the escape of the citizens. Thus, trickery was often used to fool the city into opening its gates or into sending contingents of troops outside the walls that could be cut off by ambushes.

In verses thirty and thirty-one we read, "*And the children of Israel went up against the children of Benjamin on the third day, and put themselves in battle array against Gibeah as at the other times. So, the children of Benjamin went out against the people, and were drawn away from the city. They began to strike down and kill some of the people, as at the other times, in the highways (one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah) and in the field, about thirty men of Israel.*" At the beginning of this narrative the impression is given that this battle would go the same way that the others had; but the reader is expecting that somehow things will change because in verse 28 we were told that Yahweh had promised the victory to the eleven tribes. The question for the reader is just how this would take place, and what came of the ambush mention in verse 29? In regard to these things we learn in the following verses that God's promise of victory did not lead to presumption on Israel's part, for they reviewed and improved their battle strategy by setting an ambush around Gibeah.

In verses thirty-two through thirty-four we read, "*And the children of Benjamin said, 'They are defeated before us, as at first'. But the children of Israel said, 'Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways.'* So all the men of Israel rose from their place and put themselves in battle array at Baal Tamar. Then Israel's men in ambush burst forth from their position in the plain of Geba. And ten thousand select men from all Israel came against Gibeah, and the battle was fierce. But the Benjamites did not know that disaster was upon them." The gist of the battle is that the eleven tribes set up a ruse, pretending to be experiencing a third defeat the army began drawing back to entice the Benjamites to pursue them. When the Benjamites did so, a force of 10,000 attacked the city of Gibeah from behind the army of Benjamin. These soldiers killed the inhabitants of that city and then set the city on fire. When the main Israelite army saw the smoke, they turned and caught the Benjamites between their forces.

In verse thirty-five we read, “*The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel. And the children of Israel destroyed that day twenty-five thousand one hundred Benjamites; all these drew the sword.*” When the conflict began, the Benjamites fielded 26,000 men, plus 700 trained warriors (vs.15). The number here is the total casualty count, which is broken down in the following verses. 25,000 were slain, including 18,000 on the battlefield (vs.44), 5,000 during flight (vs.45) and 2,000 more during the concluding portion of the battle (vs.45). Of the 700 trained warriors, 100 were killed while 600 escaped and hid (vs.47). This verse contains the theological note that it was Yahweh who won this victory.

In verses thirty-six through thirty-nine we read, “*So the children of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. The men of Israel had given ground to the Benjamites, because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. And the men in ambush quickly rushed upon Gibeah; the men in ambush spread out and struck the whole city with the edge of the sword. Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise up from the city, whereupon the men of Israel would turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty of the men of Israel. For they said, ‘Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle.’*” In these verses we are informed by the author that the Israelites had been giving ground intentionally to the Benjamites in order to draw them far away from their protective walls and at the same time causing them to leave the city unprotected. All this was prearranged to make the ambush effective. The language of this chapter has the ironic note of being reminiscent of the language and description of Joshua chapter eight and the defeat of Ai. This parallel conveys the tragic nature of this story, the Israelites had gone from defeating their pagan enemies, to killing one another as enemies in just one generation. According to the narrative, the Benjamites on the front lines were still distracted, seemingly welcoming the fact the Israelites had finally turned to face them, and thus they were not aware of what was happening behind them. Another note of irony in this account is that the Benjamites most emphatic expression of confidence in their ultimate victory was made just before they recognized that they were doomed.

In verses forty through forty-five we read, “*But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, the Benjamites looked behind them, and there was the whole city going up in smoke to heaven. And when the men of Israel turned back, the men of Benjamin panicked, for they saw that disaster had come upon them. Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness; but the battle overtook them, and whoever came out of the cities they destroyed in their midst. They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them, and easily trampled them down as far as the front of Gibeah toward the east. And eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell; all these were men of valor. Then they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon; and they cut down five thousand of them on the highways. Then they pursued them relentlessly up to Gidom, and killed two thousand of them.*” These verses supplement the previous account by detailing the ambush and the aftermath of the major battle. As the

Benjamites were drawn away from the city (vs.31-32), the Israelites who were waiting in ambush dashed into Gibeah, slaying the population and setting the city on fire. The smoke of the whole city going up into the sky was a prearranged signal for the retreating Israelites to turn on the terrified Benjamites who fled toward the desert (eastward; vs.43). Before 600 Benjamites finally escaped to the rock of Rimmon (vs. 45), they suffered a total loss of approximately 25,000 Benjamite swordsmen (the more exact figure of 25,100 is given in vs.35). The Rock of Rimmon refers to limestone cliffs around the site of Gibeah, which are pitted with small caves from which ambushing soldiers could spring or in which these six hundred survivors could hide. The Rock of Rimmon was 4 miles east of Bethel.

In verses forty-six through forty-eight we read, “*So all who fell of Benjamin that day were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword; all these were men of valor. But six hundred men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they stayed at the rock of Rimmon for four months. And the men of Israel turned back against the children of Benjamin, and struck them down with the edge of the sword — from every city, men and beasts, all who were found. They also set fire to all the cities they came to.*” What is described here was the sort of treatment that was supposed to be done to the Canaanites but rarely was rarely done during the period of the judges. But here it is done to one of the tribes of Israel; they came very close to bringing the tribe of Benjamin to extinction. The six hundred Benjamite warriors were the only survivors from the entire tribe of Benjamin, since the Israelite soldiers had destroyed and burned all the towns of the Benjamites. The destruction included the animals and everything else they found. Apparently, the Israelites had placed the Benjamite towns under the ban as in holy war (Josh.6:17-21; I Sam.15:2-3). This was an extreme form of warfare, and one that occurs only infrequently since it does not provide the conquering force with any treasure or slaves. This was originally commissioned by Yahweh in order to free the Land of Canaan of the pagan influence of the indigenous population. This was never prescribed to be done to one of the tribes of Israel. So, though God gave Israel the victory as a punishment of the sins of Benjamin, the Israelites did not use restraint but turned the victory into a different sort of evil.

IV. Wives Provided for the Tribe of Benjamin: (21:1-25)

The last chapter of the Book of Judges brings to a conclusion the story that began in chapter nineteen with marital trouble between a Levite and his concubine. This chapter also chronicles one of the most outrageous episodes recorded in this book. The focus of this portion of the story is on the aftermath of the barbaric slaying of all the women and children of the tribe of Benjamin, and the foolish oath the eleven tribes made before doing those things.

In verse one we read, “*Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, ‘None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife.’*” From the perspective of the Israelites, the atrocity of Gibeah (19:25-26) had been punished and blood-guiltiness for their sin had been removed from Israel by the deaths of the Benjamites (20:35). The problem was there were only 600 male Benjamites alive,

and the Israelites had taken an oath at Mizpah not to give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite (cf. 21:7,18). This oath would have originally been seen as a way of strengthening tribal solidarity prior to the battles with Benjamin. But in light of the events that had transpired as a result of those battles (as recorded in chapter twenty) the Israelites found themselves in a quandary as to how save the tribe of Benjamin from extinction. It is ironic that in the rest of the book, the people of Israel show few scruples regarding whom they are willing to marry. It is ironic that the only prohibition about intermarriage that the Israelites took seriously was not one of the many given by God, but the one they established themselves; that no one would give his daughter in marriage to a man of the tribe of Benjamin. This episode was also a sign that the Canaanization of the people of Israel was already complete fairly early in the period of the judges (since they preferred intermarriage with the pagan Canaanites to intermarriage with offensive brother Israelites).

Once again, an unwise oath appears in the narrative that threatens the future of a family in Israel; this time the family of Benjamin (the other being Jephthah's oath in 11:30-31).

In verse two we read, "*Then the people came to the house of God, and remained there before God till evening. They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly*". Once again, the expression "*house of God*" is more literally translated as the city of "*Bethel*", rather than an oblique reference to the Tabernacle (which plays no part in this narrative). As we read about the grieving, it is helpful to know that in the Ancient Near East, the appropriate posture was normally sitting. The Israelites seemed to feel no compassion for their fellow tribe in the heat of battle, so it is unlikely this is grief over the fate of those killed. Instead, this was an expression of grief because of the sentimental concern for the loss of the tribe and its implications for their group identity.

In verse three we read, "*and said, 'O LORD God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that today there should be one tribe missing in Israel?'*" This pious sounding question could be interpreted in a couple of different ways. If it is interpreted in a positive way, then it is a request for information, specifically, Yahweh's perspective on what had led to their current crisis. But if this were truly a heartfelt, genuine seeking for truth, they should have been able to answer this question for themselves. Examined simply on the level of human experience, the chain of events leading up to this catastrophe began with the rape and murder of a young woman. A better question that would have yielded what these people really needed to understand would have been, "*how did we get to this point?*" However, based on what the narrator has told us about these people, it is unlikely they would have listened to God's answer even if they had asked and He had responded. The other option is that this question be interpreted negatively. In light of what is written in the rest of the chapter, it is far more likely that this is the preferable way to understand the narrative. For this question is actually more of a cry of protest than a request for information. Indeed, the tone of the question is accusatory. The Israelites were blaming God, as if Yahweh had failed in His role as the Divine protector of His people. The Israelites seem to never have recognized that

everything that had happened was a consequence of the ongoing sin of apostasy, of which they were all guilty. It is also helpful to keep in mind that as they rue their excesses before Yahweh and wonder how such a fate could befall them, they would soon be contemplating atrocities that they would commit against Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh.

In verse four we read, *“So it was, on the next morning, that the people rose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.”* The tribes engaged in the proper form of worship, but this does not stem from the desire to please God or to submit to His ways, but simply to manipulate a response from Yahweh using the same logic that was used by the pagans (i.e. that the right response is gained if one engages in the proper method). If there was a true seeking after God there would have been repentance, and confession of sin. Yahweh never obligated Himself to respond to ritual; rather He responds to a humble and contrite spirit. This explains why there was no response from God here. In reference to building the altar, since Bethel was only an assembly point for this episode and not the permanent cultic site for the Ark, it is to be expected that a new altar for Yahweh would have to be constructed for the use of the Israelites. It is also possible that a new altar would have been built in an open area or on a high place to accommodate the large numbers of Israelites assembled.

In verse five we read, *“The children of Israel said, ‘Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up with the assembly to the LORD?’ For they had made a great oath concerning anyone who had not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, ‘He shall surely be put to death.’”* The reader of the narrative portions of the Bible must always remember that the author of the material provides what is necessary to understand his point. Therefore, anything that is added to the text can never reveal the main point, or the flow of thought. In this case, the author does not record a response from God because there wasn't one, and thus what unfolds next, must be understood as what the Israelites decide to do on their own in light of getting no response from Yahweh.

In verse six we read, *“And the children of Israel grieved for Benjamin their brother, and said, ‘One tribe is cut off from Israel today’”*. The Hebrew verb translated as *“cut off”*, literally means to hack something off and is a graphically violent term employed elsewhere in the OT to refer to the hacking off of tree limbs (Isa.10:33), arms of human beings (I Sam.2:31); and horns of animals (Lam.2:3). The use of this verb in the passive form leaves open the question of whom it was that the Israelites believed was accountable for this action. This verse is made up of a circumstantial clause that functions as an episode marker. Thus, at the conclusion of this episode the author makes clear whom Israel held as responsible for the loss of Benjamin, Yahweh (vs.15). In the absence of a king or other dominant leader, the tribes had to rely on the collective assembly of the tribal elders. They administered justice in the village culture (Deut.19:12; 21:2-6; 22:15) and served as representatives for the people at major gatherings (Josh 8:10; 1 Sam 4:3).

In verse seven we read, “*What shall we do for wives for those who remain, seeing we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them our daughters as wives?*” Rather than seek from Yahweh what they should do in response to their crisis, the assembly of Israel devised their own strategy for solving their problem.

In verse eight we read “*And they said, ‘What one is there from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to Mizpah to the LORD?’ And, in fact, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh Gilead to the assembly.*” This is the first reference to Jabesh Gilead in the Bible. Jabesh Gilead was most likely located on the Yabis River in the northern Gileadite hill country, just east of the Jordan River. It was a strategic site, commanding the well-traveled wadi immediately below the city. As such it controlled much of the merchant traffic in that area (I Sam.11).

In verse nine we read, “*For when the people were counted, indeed, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead was there.*” Unlike the Benjamites the people of Jabesh Gilead were not given an opportunity to explain their absence. This suggests that the decision to destroy the people of Jabesh Gilead was not simply a matter of justice but was seen as a convenient opportunity to correct the mistake they had made in their war against Benjamin.

In verse ten we read, “*So the congregation sent out there twelve thousand of their most valiant men, and commanded them, saying, ‘Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead with the edge of the sword, including the women and children.’*” The Israelite tribes had taken an oath of solidarity. The assumption was that anyone who failed to assemble was taking the side of their enemy and thus deserved the same fate. Because of this reasoning, Jabesh Gilead was targeted for punishment as a fulfillment of the oath and, conveniently, as a source of brides for the six hundred remaining Benjamites.

In verse eleven we read, “*And this is the thing that you shall do: You shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman who has known a man intimately.*” The Hebrew word which is translated as “*utterly destroy*”, has not appeared in the Book of Judges since chapter one (vs.17), which described how Judah and Simeon annihilated the Canaanites of Zephath. So here the tribes were eradicating the Israelite population of this city in a way they had failed to do to their enemies. What takes place in these two verses (vs.10-11) reveals that in fact the tribes were not at all genuinely interested in the word of Yahweh, because they show in their thinking, that in no way were they in submission to the laws of the Covenant. They had declared the ban on one tribe of the nation without justification, and now they would do it again to this city, without the slightest justification except it was what they had sworn by oath to do. Then they applied the ban in an unbiblical way by excluding the virgins from the death sentence upon the city. They told themselves they were keeping their vow to Yahweh, and yet they would use an elaborate scheme and casuistry to justify the kidnapping of these daughters to provide wives for the Benjamites (reasoning that if their parents were dead, and the girls themselves were stolen, then no one would have given their consent for these women to be the wives of the cursed tribe).

In verse twelve we read, “*So they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead four hundred young virgins who had not known a man intimately; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.*” Since the only purpose of the slaying of the people of the town was to resolve their current dilemma, no reference is made to the battle itself. Instead, we merely read that 12,000 soldiers exterminated the people of Jabesh Gilead, with the exception that they spared the 400 virgins of the city as a step toward solving the problem they saw as being of primary importance; preventing Benjamite extinction. The reasoning of the Israelites was that by taking the virgins from Jabesh Gilead they could keep their oath by interpreting “*none of us*” as referring only to the people that did assemble as demanded. The decision to bring the women to Shiloh instead of Bethel or Mizpah seems to have been to gain greater success for their plan. Bethel and Mizpah had served as base camps for the Israelite army; therefore, it would have been unlikely that any of the remaining Benjamites would have wanted to venture to those towns. Additionally, Shiloh was where the Tabernacle was located and therefore it was the religious center of Israel. This would have been the place that the Benjamites would have been most inclined to believe in the promise of safe passage. It is regarded by most interpreters to be a puzzle why the author refers here to Shiloh as being in the land of Canaan, since it had been under Israelites control for some time. Biblical writers had naturally referred to the Promised Land as “*the land of Canaan*” in those contexts dealing with the preconquest and conquest periods. But this is the only place in the entire Old Testament where the designation “*land of Canaan*” is applied to the land in the post-conquest period. This strange use of the expression is best understood as an intentional rhetorical device. The narrator had already deliberately portrayed the inhabitants of Gibeah as Neo-Sodomites/Canaanites in chapter nineteen, which so closely echoed the account in Genesis Nineteen. By defending the men of Gibeah, the entire tribe of Benjamin had placed themselves in the same category. Now the narrator adds the shocking assessment that Shiloh was fundamentally a Canaanite site. Since this is the most sacred Israelite shrine, the reader is meant to see this as a generalized characteristic of the people as a whole; and this designation makes sense in light of the behavior that is observed in this chapter. Most likely some of the Benjamites settled in Jabesh Gilead with their new wives and that this might explain an action that king Saul would later take on behalf of that city (I Sam.11:1).

In verses thirteen and fourteen we read, “*Then the whole congregation sent word to the children of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and announced peace to them. So Benjamin came back at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh Gilead; and yet they had not found enough for them.*” Verse thirteen records that having gathered the virgins at Shiloh, the eleven tribes made an appeal of peace to the soldiers of Benjamin hiding in the caves at the rock of Rimmon. Having nothing to lose and everything to gain, the Benjamites accepted the offer of peace and returned with the Israelite delegation to Shiloh. It is at this time that the narrator specifically notes that not enough virgins were found for the remaining Benjamite men. But this notation

serves to introduce the next segment of the story which focuses on what the Israelites sought to do to address the problem that they did not get enough wives from the massacre at Jabesh Gilead.

In verses fifteen and sixteen we read, “*And the people grieved for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a void in the tribes of Israel. Then the elders of the congregation said, ‘What shall we do for wives for those who remain, since the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?’*” The issue of the lack of enough wives for the Benjamites is officially raised before the council of elders (who functioned as the central authority of Israel, since they did not have a monarchy). They took responsibility to solve the problem, but the absence of any acknowledgement that they were the cause of the problem, and not Yahweh (see verse 15), gives the reader a good sense of their moral bankruptcy.

In verses seventeen through nineteen we read, “*And they said, ‘There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe may not be destroyed from Israel. However, we cannot give them wives from our daughters, for the children of Israel have sworn an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be the one who gives a wife to Benjamin.’*” Then they said, “*In fact, there is a yearly feast of the LORD in Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.*” Verse eighteen reveals the self-enforced dilemma that led the Israelites to adopt the twisted solution that they did. Since no one could give their daughters to the remaining men of Benjamin who had no wives; they had to take those wives by force. This raises the natural question of where these men would find 200 young virgins congregating together? The reader might tend to assume that the festival is one of the three festivals that were mandated in the Law of Moses (Deut.16:1-17). However, a careful reading of this text suggests otherwise. First, the Hebrew word for “*feast*” used here is a generic term for any periodic pilgrimage festival. This vague expression (rather than a reference to the specific feast) suggests that this is not one of the particular feasts outlined in the Law. One also needs to keep in mind the earlier editorial comment by the narrator that this generation did not know Yahweh or the things Yahweh had done for Israel (2:10). Based on that reference and what we read in the book at large, it appears that the feasts outlined in the Law were neglected and perhaps inter-mingled with pagan worship traditions. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the elders of the tribes had difficulty fixing the location of the feast (the location is identified approximately rather than by the specific town or village in which it was to be held). This interpretation is further supported by the description of the festival in verse twenty-one as “*when the daughters of Shiloh come out to perform*”, which was not part of the prescribed worship of any of the feasts. In regard to the location of the festival of Shiloh, it must have been on the pilgrimage route between Bethel in the south and Shechem (about thirty miles north of Jerusalem) to the north. Lebonah was located north of Shiloh. All of these directions by the elders suggest that none of them had been to this Canaanite festival.

In verses twenty and twenty-one we read, “*Therefore they instructed the children of Benjamin, saying, ‘Go, lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; and just*

when the daughters of Shiloh come out to perform their dances, then come out from the vineyards, and every man catch a wife for himself from the daughters of Shiloh; then go to the land of Benjamin.” We read here that the reinterpretation of Israelite morality continued as the elders of the tribes of Israel instructed the men of Benjamin to kidnap the young virgins in the midst of the festival. The idea of stealing brides also occurs in early Greek and Roman traditions and probably reflects a practice that was not uncommon in the ancient world. In the end, the festival that was held was apparently a Canaanite fertility ritual associated with the harvest. There are several hints in the text that this is what is in view. First, there is the reference to where the men were hiding (among the grape vines). It was the harvest of the grapes that spawned an important Canaanite celebration. Another hint is that the dancing at these festivals was part of the revelry of the occasion that was normally associated with gross immorality among the Canaanites. Still another hint is the reference to “*the daughters of Shiloh*”. This is an unusual designation. If these were ordinary young girls accompanying their parents at one of the prescribed feasts, the elders would normally refer to them as “*daughters of Israel*”. But the title that is used is similar to what is found in pagan literature for a special class of professional female dancers associated with the fertility cult.

An aspect of the overall scenario that seems to have escaped the awareness of these elders (in their appraisal of this solution) was that these men had not just survived any war, they had survived a war in which they had fought in order to defend a gang of rapists. Yet these same men were being encouraged to abduct young Israelite women. And the ones instructing these men to do this vile thing were the elders, men whose responsibility it was to look out for the welfare of defenseless individuals like these young women.

In verse twenty-two we read, “*Then it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to us to complain, that we will say to them, 'Be kind to them for our sakes, because we did not take a wife for any of them in the war; for it is not as though you have given the women to them at this time, making yourselves guilty of your oath.'*” In this verse one would expect the tribal elders to have reassured the fathers of the victims that their daughters would not be violated; but nothing like that is said. The only justification for what had happened was the explanation that they needed to find wives for these men. The only reassurance that is given is that this act was done in a way that freed these fathers of being guilty of violating their oaths about not giving their daughters to the Benjamite men. Although what was done here violated every aspect of morality that we find in the Old Testament that spoke to the issues involved, the rationalization of the importance of their oath seems to have quieted their consciences.

In verse twenty-three we read, “*And the children of Benjamin did so; they took enough wives for their number from those who danced, whom they caught. Then they went and returned to their inheritance, and they rebuilt the cities and dwelt in them.*” The 200 Benjamites were to hide in the vineyards until the festivities were in progress, and then each was to rush from the vineyards and seize a wife and

return to the land of Benjamin. The Israelites would then explain the situation to the men of Shiloh what had happened and why. So, the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin was averted, the Benjamites rebuilt the towns and settled in them.

In verse twenty-four we read, “*So the children of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family; they went out from there, every man to his inheritance.*” The conclusion of the story is what would be expected in a story where everything had been set right. Therefore, this conclusion conveys that in the minds of the elders, despite the fact that there were gross violations of God’s law; according to their perspective, there was no matter of significance that would require them to maintain their assembly, so each tribe returned to its own allotment. The lack of any voice of protest against any of these things continues to press the point of the moral/spiritual decadence of the nation at this time.

In verse twenty-five we read, “*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*” Lest the reader fail to grasp the point of the final narrative, as well as the meaning of the Book of Judges as a whole, the narrator concludes the Book with the refrain expressed earlier in this last section of the Book (17:6), which is repeated as a commentary on both. Nothing about the foregoing events were right in Yahweh’s eyes, but it wasn’t God’s perspective that was important to the people, only their own viewpoint was important to them, they lived only to please themselves.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of the book, Israel’s moral decline is abundantly clear. It had become a society that gave lip service to hospitality and justice, while they were actually barbaric and lawless. Women, who at the beginning of the book accomplished great deeds and were seen as heroic partners in Israel’s great mission, were now raped, slaughtered, kidnapped and hacked to pieces by their own people. All of this illustrated the theme statement, that the Israelites lived according to their own values, and were not guided by the law of God.

After the death of Joshua, the political and spiritual trends in Israel changed. The tribes became more interested in material wealth and political compatibility with the Canaanites than with obedience to the Law of Yahweh. Through intermarriage and religious syncretism, the strength of Israel began to decline. The various tribes became independent of each other, and many religious shrines were built in disobedience to God’s instruction concerning centralized worship. With this background we read the Book of Judges and discover that rather than it being a story about progression and victory, it is a tragic story of decline and failure. The message of the Book of Judges therefore contains both a challenge and a warning. The challenge comes from how the individual accounts demonstrate that the true God will work on behalf of His people if they repent and submit to Him. The warning is that God will not tolerate sin but rather will punish those severely who indulge in it, and who refuse to repent.