

Joshua 18 Benjamin

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Background

The People

Ancestor: Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob, Gen 35:18. He and Joseph are the only two borne by Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife.

Descendants: two of note

- 1 Sam 9:1-2 identifies Saul as the individual from this tribe.
- Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5, Saul (later Paul) the apostle

Jeremiah, though from a priestly family and thus a Levite, lived in Benjamin and owned property there, 1:1, 32:8.

Benjamin's Location

18:11, between Judah and the sons of Joseph, and the boundary list reuses those of the adjacent tribes. Key border cities are Bethel (just outside) and Jerusalem (goes both ways).

Benjamin's Character

Once again, from the blessing of Jacob on his children. His opinion seems to have changed since he named Benjamin "son of my right hand."

Gen 49:27, "Benjamin shall ravin [tear] [as] a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil."

Suggests

- military skill; cf. Judg 20:15,16 for their skill with the sling (and largely left-handed to boot! Cf 3:15)
- ruthless and unprincipled

Two biblical episodes illustrate their *character* and the consequences of their *location*.

Character: The Rape of the Levite's Concubine, Judg 19-20

19:1-9, The Levite retrieves his concubine

A concubine is not a mistress, but a slave wife. Cf. Abraham's concubines, Bilhah (handmaid of Rachel) and Zilpah (handmaid of Leah). The relation was not thought of as fornicacious. However, the Levite is lacking in piety—he should have judged his wife for fornication (v.2), not sought her return.

10-28, The Sin of Gibeah

This is the city of Saul (1 Sam. 10:26; 11:4), and indeed the story is not without political overtones. 19:16 emphasizes tribal association of the inhabitants of Gibeah.

This section emphasizes two great moral failings of the people of Gibeah.

- 10-21 show the shocking lack of hospitality on the part of the citizens of Gibeah. Only an expatriate from Mount Ephraim would offer the required hospitality to the Levite.
- 22-30 show their deep impurity, a reflection of the sin of Sodom in Gen 19. Homosexual desire, fornication with the concubine, and eventually murder.

At the same time, our doubts deepen about the Levite, who seems callous to the fate of his wife.

19:29-20:15, The Complicity of Benjamin

The other tribes ask Benjamin to support punitive action against the people of Gibeah, but Benjamin's response follows Jacob's prophecy—warlike and brutal, with no respect for the requirements of the law.

20:16-48, The War against Benjamin

In spite of overwhelming odds, 400,000 against 26,700, Benjamin's military skill prevails in the first two days of fighting; they kill 22K (v.21) + 18K (v.25) Israelites with minimal losses.

Application: Why does the Lord send Israel into battle and then destroy so many of them, even though they have consulted him on the operation? It may be that in their overwhelming numerical superiority, their appeal to him was only perfunctory, and he needs to bring their hearts to trust fully in him.

Finally, on the third day Israel employs an ambush strategy similar to that used at Ai by Joshua, and wipes out all but 600 of Benjamin's warriors (43-48).

21, Repopulating Benjamin

Through a series of dubious actions, the other tribes procure wives for the surviving Benjamites so that the tribe will not be completely obliterated. Still, it must have been very small from this point on; Saul (1 Sam 9:21) refers to Benjamin as being "the smallest of the tribes of Israel."

Lessons

The main moral, 21:25, is the general corruption of the nation before the institution of the Monarchy.

- The Levite is corrupt; he does not obey the Mosaic law about fornication, and in fact delivers his wife over to the men of Gibeah.
- Israel trusts in force to accomplish its purposes against Benjamin.
- The men of Gibeah are hopelessly polluted; the story implicitly invites comparison with the men of Sodom. Note the implications for Israel's later political history: this is the city of King Saul! By contrast, the only person against whom one can level no criticism is the concubine's father, from Bethlehem, the city of David!

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- Benjamin behaves true to Jacob's prophecy, like a ravining wolf, regulating its affairs by force and cunning rather than by following the law of the Lord.

Location: Association with Southern Kingdom

1 Kings 11:29-36, Prophecy of the Twelve Tribes

- Jeroboam gets ten
- David gets one, which apparently is Judah (1 Kings 12:20)

What happened to the twelfth? Apparently, it is Benjamin, perhaps not counted explicitly because after the slaughter in Judges 19-20, it was miniscule. (NB: It is NOT Simeon, which sides with the north, even though its territory is embedded in Judah!)

- 1 Kings 12:21, 23, they armed with Rehoboam against the northern tribes. The sequel shows that this is not just a political decision, but a spiritual one as well.
- 2 Chr 11:23, staffed by Rehoboam with his sons
- 1 Kings 15:22, fortified by Asa, king of Judah, against Israel
- 2 Chr 14:8, armed with Asa; cf. 15:2, 8, 9. Notice distinction in this last verse with northern kingdom.
- Still associated with Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion, acc. to references in Jeremiah.17:26; 32:44; 33:13

Thus the tribe that in Judg 20 would not submit to the judgment of the other tribes, here joins itself with the dynasty of David, the man after God's own heart.

Application: Past failures and even a father's curse do not lock one up to permanent condemnation. In spite of its shameful past history, Benjamin made the right choice in siding with the house of David, and eventually one of its sons, Saul of Tarsus, became the most eloquent interpreter of the life and work of David's greatest Son, the Lord Jesus.