

THE LEAST TRIBE IN ISRAEL (PART 1)

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When God instructed the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel, in 1 Samuel 9:21, “Saul answered and said, *Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel?*” This tribe from the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons had never been large. When the Israelites left Egypt, the males from the age of 20 and upward, “all that were able to go forth to war,” were numbered (Num 1:19-46). Benjamin’s number of 35,400 was the smallest of any single tribe (Manasseh numbered 32,200, but this was *half* the tribe of Joseph, with Ephraim numbering an additional 40,500). After Canaan was conquered, the area of Benjamin’s inheritance reflected her small size, even though she received the first lot (Josh 18:10-28). But soon after this, Judges 19-21 records a catastrophe which almost saw Benjamin’s complete annihilation. Her population permanently lagged behind the other tribes, and contributed greatly to Saul’s observation that Benjamin was the smallest tribe in Israel.

In the days of Phinehas

Judges 19-21 records the events pertaining to the war with the tribe of Benjamin. This happened during the days when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron served as high priest of Israel (Judg 20:27-28). In the year that Israel began the conquest of Canaan (1406 B.C.), Phinehas punished the fornicators and caused the plague to be stopped that had killed 24,000 Israelites in the matter of Baalpeor (Num 25; Psa 106:28-31), and he took part in the war against the Midianites that followed (Num 31:1-8). After the conquest of Canaan, Phinehas led a delegation from the tribes of Israel to Gilead, as Israel prepared for war against Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh for setting up an altar (Josh 22:1-20). War was averted because it was an altar to Jehovah and according to His pattern, set up as a witness to prevent the tribes of these lands east of Jordan from ever being cut off from the rest of Israel (Josh 22:21-34). Eleazar, the father of Phinehas, died around the time that Joshua died, which would be the time of Phinehas’ priesthood (Josh 24:29-33). Phinehas was very righteous, and before the climactic battle with Benjamin, “all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. And the children of Israel inquired of the Lord, (*for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, 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 Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the Lord said, Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand” (Josh 20:26-28). The fact that this took place in the days of righteous Phinehas, and the fact that all the people were seeking after Jehovah at this time, and the fact that God answered them and was with them, all indicate that these events took place sometime after the death of Joshua but before the falling away that took place in Israel. Therefore, Judges 19-21 probably fits

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chronologically within Judges 1:1-2:10, before the apostasy of 2:10-13, and, therefore, just before chapters 17-18. In other words, the war with Benjamin occurred very early in the period of the Judges.

Prelude to war

In Judges 19:1-3, “It came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehemjudah. And his concubine played the whore against him, and went away from him unto her father’s house to Bethlehemjudah, and was there four whole months. And her husband arose, and went after her, to speak friendly unto her, and to bring her again, having his servant with him, and a couple of asses: and she brought him into her father’s house: and when the father of the damsel saw him, he rejoiced to meet him.” The man’s father-in-law then kept him for five days, but he finally left with his concubine late in the day to journey from Bethlehem back to Ephraim (Judg 19:4-10). The man refused to seek lodging in Jerusalem, then called Jebusi, as it was still occupied by Jebusites (Judg 19:10-12). Jerusalem was actually part of Benjamin’s original inheritance (Josh 18:28), but “the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem; but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem unto this day” (Judg 1:21). It was King David who finally drove the Jebusites out of Jerusalem and conquered the city and made it his own (2 Sam 5:6-9; 1 Chr 11:4-8). Therefore, it was really the fault of the tribe of Benjamin that this Levite had to bypass an Israelite city and continue his journey towards sundown. This forced him to seek his lodging in Gibeah, a Benjamite city (Judg 19:13). Sadly, this Levite’s trust in his Benjamite brethren proved to be grossly misplaced. First, none of the natives of the town would take him in (Judg 19:15). The only one who showed him hospitality was a man from Ephraim who was sojourning in Gibeah (Judg 19:16-21). Next, the men of the city, “certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him” (Judg 19:22). This wicked behavior was identical to that of the Sodomites in the days of Lot (Gen 19:1-11). The host refused to turn over his guest, so they took the Levite’s concubine and abused her all night, and she died at the threshold of the house at the dawning of the next day (Judg 19:23-28). After his concubine was dead, “then the man took her up upon an ass, and the man rose up, and got him unto his place. And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel. *And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds*” (Judg 19:28-30). Israel’s first civil war was about to begin.