

• *An ugly story*

We are introduced to what is perhaps the ugliest story to be found anywhere in the Bible. Judges 17–18 was bad enough. Judges 19 is worse!

• *The basic problem – no king to impose order*

The opening line of Judges 19 reminds us of the basic problem of Israel. They were without a king ^{☞1}. Amongst other things some kind of king could impose order. Yet Israel had neither an earthly king who would impose the will of God, nor did they have much respect for God Himself.

• *The story of a Levite from Ephraim who took a Judahite concubine*

A Levite who lived in Ephraim took a Judahite concubine ^{☞1}. She was a loose-living girl who ‘played the harlot against him’ (as the Hebrew says) and eventually went back home to Judah ^{☞2}. Four months later the Levite travelled to Judah seeking to get her back ^{☞3}. Israelite hospitality was such that the Judean father-in-law persuaded the son-in-law to stay for a fourth and a fifth night ^{☞4}, but on the fifth night the man insisted on leaving ^{☞5}. They were travelling late at night, came near to Jerusalem (at that time occupied by non-Israelites) but thought they should not stay in an alien town and so went on to Gibeah, an Israelite town ^{☞6}. There they were given no hospitality and were planning to stay the night in the open square in the centre of town ^{☞7}. An old man – not a Benjamite but an Ephraimite – discovered them there and asked how they came to be there ^{☞8}. The Levite explained. He was on his way home with his wife ^{☞9}. He did not need provisions but he did need some shelter. He was on his way home.¹ Since the elder man was from Ephraim himself he was happy to give the younger man hospitality ^{☞10}.

• *A ghastly story of sexual abuse and its sequel*

Then a ghastly story follows. The men of the city were disgustingly obscene men and wanted to homosexually abuse the visiting stranger ^{☞1}. So appallingly sordid was the culture of the day, two girls were offered instead ^{☞2}. The townsmen refused but the Levite pushed the girl out and the townsmen abused her violently and then left her to the cold of the night. Soon she died ^{☞3}. The Levite from Ephraim went home with the body ^{☞4}, dismembered the corpse and sent pieces to twelve districts of the land, presumably the areas of the twelve tribes ^{☞5}. There must have gone out too some kind of explanation as to why the woman’s body was being treated in this way. The chapter concludes by telling us of how shocked the nation was. The general opinion was: it was the worst event that had ever taken place since the beginning of the nation ^{☞6}.

1. It is a picture of total ethical collapse

• *A failure to impose the law – God’s means of restraining*

1. It is a picture of total ethical collapse. Some time ago Israel had been redeemed by the blood of the lamb and given a law by God which, although it was not perfect, should have maintained morality in the land. But now the situation is one of total moral collapse. The nation is without anyone to impose law ^{☞2}. A Levite who is never meant to marry an immoral girl is taking an unstable loose-living girl as a concubine. Hospitality in Gibeah is nil, and the city of Gibeah turns out to be more dangerous than the Jebusite town which the travellers feared ^{☞2}. The men of Gibeah are homosexual, violent, uncompassionate and murderous. The Levite treats his slave-wife as a nonentity whom he virtually owns. Although she is said to be immoral he does not handle her immorality in accordance with the Mosaic law. ^{☞3}

☞1 19:1a

☞1 19:1

☞2 19:2

☞3 19:3-4

☞4 19:5-9

☞5 19:10

☞6 19:11-14

☞7 19:15

☞8 19:16-17

☞9 19:18-19

☞10 19:20-21

☞1 19:22

☞2 19:23-24

☞3 19:25-28a

☞4 19:28b

☞5 19:29

☞6 19:30

☞1 19:1a

☞2 19:11-14

☞3 see Deuteronomy 22:21

• *An immoral woman and hideously cruel men – an Israelite Sodom*

He wants her back as a sexual partner and a housekeeper and yet ignores her and treats her despicably. The woman's father takes no action to deal with her immorality. The two men of the story disregard the slave- concubine while they are enjoying their festivities. The woman is immoral and disloyal to her husband, but the men of the story have no concern for the women whatsoever and the story is hideously cruel to the women involved. The treatment of the woman by the townsmen was punishable by death according to the Mosaic law. Although the nation was shocked and thought it was the worst event that had ever taken place since the beginning of the nation ¹, yet the truth was that that was what they had come to. That is what they really were! The story reminds us – and is intended to do so – of the story of Sodom in Genesis 19. A town in northern Israel has become an Israelite Sodom!

¹ 19:30

2. Lack of kingship is the reason given for collapse of righteousness

2. Lack of kingship is the reason given for collapse of righteousness. Several times the book of Judges has pointed to the absence of a king. The reason why everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes was because there was no king to uphold righteousness.

3. The Levite and his wife were without help or hope

3. The Levite and his wife were without help or hope. There were no angels to deliver the Levite and his concubine that night, as there had been for Lot in a similar situation. Abraham had been praying for Lot, and Lot was (more or less) a righteous man. But there is no intercessor watching over the Levite and his wife, and there is nothing specially righteous about their lifestyle. A town in Israel has become a Sodom, but the people in trouble and distress are not in a position to look to God for deliverance.

• *The end of Judges – dark and ugly times of trouble – a nation in desperate need*

We are getting near the end of Judges. What a long way we are – spiritually as well as in the number of pages! – from Abraham and Joseph and Moses and Joshua. What dark ugly stories can be told of this time in Israel's history. A nation that has no king, no Saviour, no guide, no rescuer in times of trouble – what depths of desperate need they can fall into. There are parts of our world that are not so different.

Note

¹ The Hebrew has 'to the house of Yahweh'. The Greek has 'to my home'. This suggests that at some stage bty ('my house') was mistakenly read as an abbreviation for bt Yhwh ('house of Yahweh').

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