

Judges 19:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

So he brought him into his house, and gave provender unto the asses: and they washed their feet, and did eat and drink.

Analysis

Ancient Hospitality in Gibeah: This verse describes the rare act of hospitality shown to the Levite and his concubine in Gibeah, a city of Benjamin. The Hebrew phrase "vayavi'ehu el-beito" (וַיָּבִיֵּאֵהוּ אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ) literally means "and he brought him into his house," emphasizing the personal welcome extended by the old man from Ephraim (verse 16). The provision of "mispo" (מִסְפּוֹ, provender/fodder) for the donkeys demonstrates complete hospitality—caring not just for the guests but their animals as well. The foot-washing ceremony "vayirchatzu ragleihem" (וַיִּרְחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיהֶם) was a crucial Near Eastern custom signifying the transition from journey to rest, from stranger to welcomed guest.

Contrast with Sodom: This verse stands in tragic irony within the larger narrative. Like Abraham offering hospitality to angels (Genesis 18) or Lot to the men of Sodom (Genesis 19), the old man extends generous welcome. The Hebrew "vayochlu vayishtu" (וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ, "and they ate and drank") signals a covenant of protection—in ancient Near Eastern culture, sharing a meal created sacred obligations between host and guest. Yet this moment of peace precedes horror, as the men of Gibeah will soon surround the house demanding sexual abuse of the male guest (verse 22), directly paralleling Sodom's wickedness.

The Failure of Israel's Hospitality: The verse highlights a critical failure in Israel's moral fabric during the period of the Judges. Unlike the immediate hospitality shown by Abraham, Lot, or even Laban, the Levite initially found no welcome in Gibeah's city square (verse 15). Only this elderly sojourner—himself

not originally from Benjamin—offered shelter. The phrase "vayiten ballil la-chamorim" (וַיִּתֵּן בָּלִיל לַחֲמוֹרִים, "gave provender to the donkeys") shows meticulous care, yet the broader context reveals Israel's cities had become like Canaan's most wicked places. The Benjamites' subsequent refusal to surrender the perpetrators (Judges 20:13) would trigger civil war, nearly annihilating an entire tribe—all stemming from the breakdown of hospitality and justice.

Historical Context

This incident occurred during the chaotic period of the Judges (approximately 1375-1050 BC), when "there was no king in Israel" (Judges 19:1). Gibeah, later King Saul's hometown (1 Samuel 10:26), was a Benjamite city located about 3 miles north of Jerusalem in the hill country. Archaeological excavations at Tell el-Ful (ancient Gibeah) have revealed destruction layers from this period, possibly connected to the civil war described in Judges 20.

The old man who showed hospitality was himself a sojourner from Ephraim (verse 16), not a native Benjamite, highlighting how tribal loyalty had superseded covenant faithfulness. The Levite's journey from Bethlehem through Jerusalem (called Jebus at this time, verse 10-11) to Gibeah reflects the dangerous roads of the period. His decision to avoid Jerusalem because it was still a Canaanite city, preferring Israelite Gibeah, adds bitter irony—the pagan city might have been safer.

The subsequent gang rape and murder of the concubine led to Israel's first major civil war. The Benjamites mustered 26,700 warriors including 700 left-handed slingers (Judges 20:15-16), but faced the combined armies of Israel (400,000 men, Judges 20:17). After initial defeats, Israel destroyed Benjamin's cities, killing 25,000 warriors and most civilians. Only 600 Benjamite men survived by fleeing to the rock of Rimmon (Judges 20:47). The crisis nearly annihilated one of Jacob's twelve tribes, forcing the other tribes to devise controversial solutions to provide wives for the survivors (Judges 21).

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the hospitality shown in this verse contrast with the wickedness that follows, and what does this teach about the coexistence of individual righteousness and societal corruption?
2. What parallels exist between the Gibeah narrative and Sodom (Genesis 19), and what do these parallels reveal about Israel's spiritual state during the Judges period?
3. Why was hospitality considered a sacred duty in ancient Near Eastern culture, and how does the foot-washing ceremony signify covenant protection?
4. What does it reveal about Benjamite society that only a sojourner from Ephraim—not a native citizen—offered hospitality to fellow Israelites?
5. How does this narrative demonstrate the consequences of moral relativism and the absence of godly leadership ('everyone did what was right in his own eyes,' Judges 21:25)?

Interlinear Text

וַיָּבִיֵא הוּ	לְבֵית ו	וַיִּבֹּל	לְחֲמֹר יִם
So he brought	him into his house	and gave provender	unto the asses
H935	H1004	H1101	H2543
וַיְרְחֻצוּ	בְּגִלְיָהּ מ	וַיֹּאכְלוּ ו	וַיִּשְׁתּוּ:
and they washed	their feet	and did eat	and drink
H7364	H7272	H398	H8354

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 43:24 (Parallel theme): And the man brought the men into Joseph's house, and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their asses provender.

Genesis 18:4 (Parallel theme): Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree:

Luke 7:44 (Parallel theme): And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

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