Jabesh Gilead

Sanford Beattie

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The Bible is filled with stories that are connected to each other, but separated by so many years and chapters that unless you pay close attention it is easy to miss. In Saul's last battle, he fought with the Philistines about 50 miles north of Jerusalem. He was severely wounded, and died without the Philistines being aware of it.

(1 Sam 31:8-10 NKJV) "So it came to pass the next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. *(9)* And they cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and sent *word* throughout the land of the Philistines, to proclaim *it in* the temple of their idols and among the people. *(10)* Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan."

(1 Sam 31:11-13 NKJV) "And when the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, *(12)* all the valiant men arose and traveled all night [15-20 miles, across the Jordan River], and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth Shan; and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. *(13)* Then they took their bones and buried *them* under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted **seven** days."

(2 Sam 2:4-5 NKJV) "Then the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. And they told David, saying, "The men of Jabesh Gilead *were the ones* who buried Saul." *(5)* So David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh Gilead, and said to them, "You *are* blessed of the LORD, for you have shown this kindness to your lord, to Saul, and have buried him."

Why did the people of Jabesh Gilead react this way? This was a town in the territory of Manasseh, east of the Jordan. Were they just mourning the loss of the king? And why this city and not the whole nation? This was a risky venture:

(2 Sam 21:12 NKJV) "Then David went and took the bones of Saul, and the bones of Jonathan his son, from the men of Jabesh Gilead who had **stolen** them from the street of Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, after the Philistines had struck down Saul in Gilboa."

Today we are going to trace the history of Saul's relationship to this city and link a few of these seemingly unrelated stories together.

The most immediate reason for the reaction of this city is easily traced to an event at the beginning of Saul's reign.

(1 Sam 11:1-11 NKJV) "Then Nahash the Ammonite came up and encamped against Jabesh Gilead; and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, "Make a covenant with us, and we will serve you." *(2)* And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, "On this *condition* I will make *a covenant* with you, that I may put out all your right eyes, and bring reproach on all Israel." *(3)* Then the elders of Jabesh said to him, "Hold off for **seven** days [is it just coincidence that they fasted that long after recovering Saul's body?], that we may send messengers to all the territory of Israel. And then, if *there is* no one to save us, we will come out to you." *(4)* So the messengers came to **Gibeah** of Saul and told the news in the hearing of the people. And all the people lifted up their voices and wept. *(5)* Now there was Saul, coming behind the herd from the field; and Saul said, "What *troubles* the people, that they weep?" And they told him the words of the men of Jabesh. *(6)* Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard this news, and his anger was greatly aroused. *(7)* So he took a yoke of oxen and **cut them in pieces, and sent *them* throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of messengers**, saying, "Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen." And the fear of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out with one consent. [notice Saul cut up these creatures, sent body parts all over the land, and threatened any who did not participate in his planned battle] *(8)* When he numbered them in Bezek, the children of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand. *(9)* And they said to the messengers who came, "Thus you shall say to the men of Jabesh Gilead: 'Tomorrow, by *the time* the sun is hot, you shall have help.' " Then the messengers came and reported *it* to the men of Jabesh, and they were glad. *(10)* Therefore the men of Jabesh said, "Tomorrow we will come out to you, and you may do with us whatever seems good to you." *(11)* So it was, on the next day, that Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch, and killed Ammonites until the heat of the day. And it happened that those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together."

So when Saul was buried by the men of Jabesh Gilead, they undoubtedly remembered this time when Saul rescued them from the Ammonites.

But did the men of Jabesh Gilead go to Gibeah just because that's where the king was? Quite possibly, but he had only recently been made king, and had really done nothing, but just returned home. And notice verse 4: "So the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and told the news in the hearing of the people. And all the people lifted up their voices and wept. Now there was Saul, coming behind the herd from the field". Saul wasn't around at first and got the news later. They didn't seem to be seeking out the newly appointed king as much as the residents.

It turns out there is another story in the Bible involving these two cities that occurred about 300 years earlier. And it creates a remarkable link between them.

Beginning in Judges 19 is the story of a Levite who travels to Bethlehem to bring his runaway concubine back home. The story of what happened is summarized by the Levite himself later on: (Judg 20:4-7 NKJV) "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. *(5)* "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. *(6)* "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. *(7)* "Look! All of you *are* children of Israel; give your advice and counsel here and now!""

Notice the remarkable similarity between what the Levite did and what Saul did in drawing attention to a grievous situation.

This resulted in an odd civil war between the tribe of Benjamin and the other tribes. Continuing in verse 46:

(46) So all who fell of Benjamin that day were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword; all these *were* men of valor. *(47)* 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. *(48)* 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."

(Judg 21:1-14 NKJV) "Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife." *(2)* Then the people came to the house of God, and remained there before God till evening. They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly, *(3)* 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?" *(4)* So it was, on the next morning, that the people rose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. *(5)* 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." *(6)* And the children of Israel grieved for Benjamin their brother, and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel today. *(7)* "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?" *(8)* 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. *(9)* For when the people were counted, indeed, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead *was* there. *(10)* 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. *(11)* "And this *is* the thing that you shall do: You shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman who has known a man intimately." *(12)* 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. *(13)* Then the whole congregation sent *word* to the children of Benjamin who *were* at the rock of Rimmon, and announced peace to them. *(14)* 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."

This war with Benjamin left only 600 men of that tribe. When their anger subsided, the Israelites decided they had to find wives for these men, to keep the tribe alive. They had already vowed not to give their daughters to these wicked Benjamites. But they had also vowed to put to death any who had not supported the war. As Saul did later, they threatened any who did not participate in the battle. The solution was Jabesh Gilead. For whatever reason, no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the battle. So they wiped out the town, and kept 400 virgins alive for the Benjamites. So two-thirds of the tribe of Benjamin can trace their roots to Jabesh Gilead. Undoubtedly, many stayed in their tribal territory, resettling the town of Gibeah among others. But some probably took their wives back to their wife's homeland, to the now deserted town of Jabesh Gilead. In Saul's day, there was a very high likelihood that the people of Gibeah had relatives in Jabesh Gilead. Even Saul himself may have traced his ancestry there. So there may have been some very personal, family reasons why Jabesh Gilead sought help from Gibeah, and why the city of Gibeah reacted the way they did, and why Saul rallied the nation to support the city of Jabesh Gilead, which eventually returned the favor at Saul's death.