A Silver Cup in a Sack

In the 20th chapter of Judges, there is a tragic story about a civil war involving the 12 tribes of Israel. The story has its roots in the preceding chapter where a Levite’s concubine is repeatedly raped by men in the Benjamite town of Gibeah. Chapter 19 has some similarities to what happened in a prior generation in Sodom. A man saw a stranger in town and asked him to stay at his house rather than spending the night in the town square. During the night wicked men from the town came to rape the man who sent his concubine out in his stead. In the morning he discovered her dead and cut her into 12 pieces, sending the body parts to the 12 tribes asking for justice. The 11 tribes assembled and sent word to the Benjamites to turn over the men guilty of the offense. The Benjamites refused and a battle ensued where the Benjamites were defeated by the other 11 tribes with only 600 Benjamite men surviving. The story is compelling for 2 reasons. First it shows how the tribes were accountable to one another. The wickedness of the town of Gibeah had to be dealt with and the other tribes saw it as a violation of their covenant with God. Secondly, we see the anguish over the conflict and the desire to bring the Benjamites back into fellowship with the other tribes (Judges 21:3, 6). This shows the solidarity of the 12 tribes which had their start with the 12 sons of Jacob.

The last several chapters of Genesis have been dedicated almost exclusively to Joseph chronicling his spiritual growth over a 20 year period. Little is written about his brothers during this time although the 12 brothers would be the foundation for the nation of Israel. Chapter 44 provides some evidence of the spiritual growth the brothers experienced after selling Joseph into slavery. In the preceding chapter Jacob finally agreed to let Benjamin go to Egypt with his brothers to buy food. The trip appeared to be successful and they headed back to Canaan. As a test of their spiritual condition, Joseph instructed his steward to fill their sacks not just with the food they bought but their silver as well. He then had his silver cup placed in Benjamin’s sack. When confronted by the steward, the brothers had confidence that none of them would have stolen the silver and the cup offering to have the guilty party put to death with the rest becoming slaves. The steward quickly changed the terms, saying that the guilty man would become a slave and the rest would go free. When the cup was discovered in Benjamin’s sack, they all went back to Joseph. Judah made an impassioned plea for Benjamin recounting all that had occurred leading up to the confrontation with Joseph. He acknowledged that their guilt was revealed by God, perhaps referring to what they had done to Joseph years earlier. Judah went to great lengths to explain the pain Jacob would suffer with the loss of his only remaining son born to Rachel. He also accepted personal responsibility for the vow he had made to his father to bear the blame if Benjamin did not return offering to stay in Egypt in exchange for Benjamin going free. Matthew Henry observed that Judah did not try to defend the crime as it may have reflected poorly on Benjamin nor did he question the verdict as that may have questioned Joseph’s justice. Instead, he appealed to receive mercy. Henry also noted that when the norther tribes split away, only the tribe of Benjamin remained with the tribe of Judah.

This chapter reveals how much the brothers had changed in the years since their crime against Joseph. The steward pledged to take only the guilty man, releasing the others to return home but they did not abandon Benjamin and returned to Joseph with him. They had a second opportunity to go back home without Benjamin but they stayed with him. Any of the brothers could have left but they remained united in their defense of Benjamin. They had gone from considering killing their brother years earlier to offering themselves as slaves to buy the release of another brother. It is ironic that the brother who came up with the idea of selling Joseph into slavery (see 37:26) would offer himself to become a slave as a substitute for Benjamin. Some might prefer Joseph as the ancestor of Jesus rather than Judah thinking him more worthy but the birth of Jesus combines the flawless (a virgin) with the flawed (sinful man). Generations later the Lion of Judah would offer himself as a blood sacrifice for our sins.