Twitter Thread by James Bejon



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THREAD: Numbers and Multiple Sources in Scripture.

Consider Judges 20’s battle narrative:

400,000 gathered Israelites,

700 Gibeahites defended by 26,000 Benjaminites,

22,000 Israelite casualties,

25,000 Benjaminite casualties, etc., etc.

Why all the numbers, Samuel?



In what follows, I'll try to offer some suggestions.

(Image from deseret-dot-com.)

Judges 19's narrative about a Levite and his concubine culminates in one of the bleakest and most horrific scenes in all of Scripture.

@DrPJWilliams has a thread on it (linked below), which is bigly recommended.

https://t.co/WY7wl60Beh

> THREAD: The Bible\u2019s most gory story
>
> It\u2019s the disturbing account of the rape & dissection of the Levite\u2019s concubine (Judges 19-21)
>
> With lessons about male violence against women #vawg
>
> — Peter J. Williams (@DrPJWilliams) August 19, 2019

At the outset of ch. 20, ch. 19's fallen Levite provides Israel with a highly one-sided version of events—one which says nothing at all about his betrayal/abandonment of his concubine,

and instead lays the blame for her death squarely at the feet of the men of Gibeah.

In response, the Israelites go to war against the Gibeahites, who are defended by their tribesmen, the Benjaminites.

To our surprise, however, the Israelites don't fare very well.

In the first two days of battle, the Israelites incur heavy losses, while the Benjaminites go unpunished.

Only in the third day's battle do the Israelites finally gain the upper hand.

Why? Isn't their war against Benjamin a just one—one they can reasonably expect God to bless?

And, as we've already wondered, why is it narrated in such a flurry of numbers?

400,000 gathered Israelites,

700 Gibeahites defended by 26,000 Benjaminites,

22,000 Israelite casualties on the first day's battle,

a further 18,000 the next day,

and 25,100 Benjaminite casualties on the third day,

broken down into groups of (roughly) 18k, 5k, and 2k (with 600 left over):

What are we to make of all these numbers?

As odd as the idea may seem, the answer to our two questions are connected:

the numbers involved in ch. 20's battle-scenes (together with a few other details) help us to understand why the Israelites don't fare very well against the Benjaminites.

Note, for a start, how many Israelites fall in the first two days' battles.

The Benjaminites slay 40,000 out of the Israelites' 400,000 men (20.17–26), which is a significant proportion.

The Levites' presence in Israel is supposed to cost Israel a tenth of their *produce*, not a tenth of their *men*.

Something seems amiss in terms of ch. 19's Levite and his effect on Israel.

Meanwhile, the Israelites' battle in ch. 20 brings to mind their ancestors' battle at Ai (e.g., the defeat, the feigned retreat, the ambush, the column of smoke: cp. Josh. 7–8),

which creates an uncomfortable literary connection between the Levite and the guilty party at Ai (Achan).

Other connections also tie the battles at Gibeah and Ai together.

At Ai, despite their numerical advantage, the Israelites were defeated and returned to the ark of the covenant, distraught.

And, here in Judges 20, the Israelites return to the same place in the same circumstances.

Do they have another Achan in their midst—a man with a secret to hide?

It seems so, as we'll now see.

At the outset of Israel's war with the Benjaminites, the Benjaminites' army is said to consist of 26,000 'swordsmen' (■■■ ■■■ ■■■),

who I'll refer to as 'standard soldiers',

and 700 'select warriors' (■■■ ■■■■) from Gibeah,

who I'll refer to as 'elite soldiers' (20.15).

In the third day's battle, when the Israelites turn the tables on the Benjaminites, they're said to slay a total of 25,100 (standard) Benjaminite soldiers (20.26–35),

which leaves 900 standard soldiers unaccounted for.

What's happened to these 900 men?

We're not told.

Instead, in 20.36–48, our author provides us with a second account of the same incident (or, more precisely, a zoom-in on the third day of 20.26–35's narrative).

In this second account, the Benjaminites' defeat is set out in three separate stages.

When the Benjaminites go forth to battle, the Israelites slay 18,000 of their standard soldiers;

as the Benjaminites flee, the Israelites slay a further 5,000 'in the highways';

and, in a place named 'Gidom', the Israelites slay 2,000 more.

These details raise further questions.

Why are 25,100 men slain in the first account but only 25,000 in the second?

And why are only 600 Benjaminites left at the end of the second account rather than the expected 1,700? (26,700 less 25,000 makes 1,700, right?)

What has happened to the other 1,100?

We thus have a number of issues to address, which we'll tackle in reverse order.

First, the issue of the unaccounted-for Benjaminites.

The 1,100 Benjaminites most likely fell on the first and second days of battle.

Our death tolls of 25,000 and 25,100 only tell us how many people fell on the third day,

and the Benjaminites are unlikely to have incurred zero losses on the first two days.

If so, 900 out of the 1,100 must have been standard soldiers (in order to explain the figure of 25,100 in 20.35),

while the other 200 must have been elite soldiers.

The presence of unaccounted-for Benjaminites in our accounts isn't, therefore, too hard to explain.

Next, the difference in death tolls.

The easiest way to explain the difference between the figures of 25,100 and 25,000 is to assume they involve different methods of approximation.

Suppose the exact numbers of Benjaminites who fell on the third day of battle were as follows:

18,020 on the battlefield, 5,020 on the highways, and 2,020 at Gidom.

Totalled up and rounded to the nearest hundred, these figures would yield a death toll of 25,100,

while, rounded to the nearest hundred and then totalled up, they would yield 25,000 (given subtotals of 18,000, 5,000 and 2,000).

(Other explanat/s are possible, but more complex.)

We thus come to the question of why our author chose to include these details in his narrative in the first place.

Couldn't our author have told chs. 19–20's story without them?

He *could*, yes. But an important point would then have gone unnoticed.

Recall the contents of ch. 20.

We have two different death tolls, which don't (neatly) cohere with one another because their details are approximations.

We have an account of a battle which leaves 900 individuals unaccounted for.

And we have a second account (of the same battle) which leaves 1,100 individuals unaccounted for.

Do any of these details ring a bell?

They should do, since they find a clear parallel in our text and its wider context.

At the start of ch. 20, we have an (approximately accurate) account of a rape in Gibeah, which doesn't easily cohere with ch. 19's record of events.

At the start of the book's epilogue, we have a story about 1,100 lost shekels, whose disappearance isn't explained.

And, soon afterwards, we have 900 unaccounted-for shekels of silver,

as shown below:

> There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, 'Those 1,100 pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears: behold, that silver is with me. I took it!'. And his mother said, 'Blessed be my son by YHWH'. So [Micah] restored the 1,100 pieces of silver to his mother, who said, 'I had dedicated the silver to YHWH…to make a carved image and a metal image. Now, therefore, let me restore it to you'. But, when [Micah] had restored the money to his mother, his mother took 200 pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image and a metal image. And it was [put] in the house of Micah.[4]

Note the similarities between the numbers involved in ch. 17 and those involved in chs. 19–20.

Just as 1,100 men disappear without trace in the second of ch. 20's accounts of Israel's war against Benjamin, so 1,100 pieces of silver have disappeared without trace some time before ch. 17's events begin to unfold.

Both narratives are thus inherently incomplete.

Moreover, just as ch. 20's first account of Israel's war leaves 900 soldiers unaccounted for, so ch. 17's narrative leaves 900 pieces of silver unaccounted for.

Micah's mother promises to give him 1,100 pieces of silver, spends 200 of them, and the 900 pieces of silver left over are never mentioned again.

The Levite's account of ch. 19's events is thus situated in the middle of a larger text which highlights: a] the problems caused by approximate/incomplete information, and b] how multiple accounts of the same events can provide us with a more complete picture.

Why? What are we supposed to infer from ch. 20's relationship to its wider context?

My suggestion is as follows.

Our author wants us to appreciate the hugely problematic nature both of the Levite's testimony and of the Israelites' failure to question it.

Note, by way of illustration, three ways in which the Levite's testimony resonates with—and can be interpreted in light of—its context.

First, just as ch. 20's death tolls don't add up, so the Levite's story doesn't add up.

If the men of Gibeah genuinely wanted to kill him (per his claim), then why *didn't* they kill him (20.5)?

Why would they have been satisfied with an act of rape?

Did they simply come to do something unpleasant to someone and not care who or what?

The Levite's story was fundamentally incoherent and should have been questioned by the Israelites.

Second, since we have multiple accounts of ch. 20's battle, we're able to corroborate its details,

which is precisely what the Israelites should have done in the case of the Levite's testimony (Deut. 19.15).

Where was the old man from Gibeah?

And where was the Levite's servant, who would have been able to confirm (or disconfirm) the Levite's version of events?

In other words, where were the 'two or three witnesses' necessary to indict the Gibeahites?

(Curiously, Judges is the first book in the Bible in which the word 'witness' doesn't occur.)

Third, just as chs. 17 and 20's narratives are incomplete at key junctures, so too is the Levite's testimony.

The Levite failed to mention his horrific act of betrayal, and was deliberately vague about the issue of when his concubine died.

Was she dead when he found her?

Or did she only die later when he failed to attend to her injuries?

For more thoughts on the latter question, see another of @DrPJWilliams' threads below:

https://t.co/wCQRDRj624

> The Bible\u2019s most gory story is probably even more gory than I realised.
>
> The chilling account of the rape & dissection of the Levite\u2019s concubine (Judges 19) contains at its heart an ambiguity: https://t.co/IFQ3hMYN4J
>
> — Peter J. Williams (@DrPJWilliams) June 16, 2020

Had the Levite told the Israelites the truth, ch. 19–21's narrative might have panned out very differently.

For a start, the Israelites wouldn't have been able to lay the blame for the concubines' death solely at the men of Gibeah's feet.

Furthermore, had the Levite been held accountable for his sin, who knows what effects it might have had?

The Benjaminites might not have felt the need to come to the defence of the Gibeahites;

the Levites as a whole might have become convicted of their fallen state (and reformed their ways);

thousands of warriors' lives might have spared on the battlefield;

and hundreds of women might have been spared from abuse in Shiloh's vineyards (21.19–23).

Yet, instead, in a cruel travesty of the cross, violence triumphed over justice.

The Israelites had another Achan in their midst (the Levite), which they should have realised,

especially when the battle inexplicably turned against them.

('How could one man have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless...YHWH had given them up?': Deut. 32.30.)

These, I believe, are the kinds of issues the Israelites should have considered.

And these are the kinds of issues our author wants *us* to consider.

Ultimately, no-one emerges well from chs. 19–20's events—neither the Gibeahites, nor the Benjaminites (who sided with them), nor the Levite, nor the Israelites as a whole—,

all of which is carefully brought out by our author's use of numbers.

Numbers aren’t therefore an esoteric code, where 6 = the beast, 7 = fulness, 8 = new starts, etc.

Rather, numbers are employed in the book of Judges in order to establish connections between particular texts...

...and hence to encourage us to read/interpret those texts in light of one another,

And our interpretation of it will be the poorer if we simply gloss over them.

THE END