Jabesh-Gilead (גִּלְעָד יָבֵשׁ). A town in Gilead that had close connections with Benjamin during the time of the Judges and Saul.

!! Biblical Evidence

Jabesh-Gilead appears in the Bible primarily in Judges and 1 Samuel in relation to the tribe of Benjamin. The city features in two narratives. After the tribe of Benjamin was nearly destroyed, the people of Israel sought brides for them. They remembered that no one from Jabesh-Gilead had attacked Benjamin and sent an army to destroy the town and capture the women. They returned with 400 young virgins as brides for the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 21). The second narrative involving Jabesh-Gilead began with an attack by the Ammonite king Nahash. The people of the town agreed to surrender, but when Nahash demanded that they gouge out their right eyes, they sent messengers to Israel for help. Saul mustered an army and rescued them from Nahash (1 Samuel 11). The people of Jabesh-Gilead did not forget Saul's heroics on their behalf, and they later risked their lives to remove his dead body from the wall of Beth-Shan, and they buried him in Jabesh (1 Samuel 31). David praised them for this act as part of his attempt to reconcile with the house of Saul (2 Samuel 2:4-7). Finally, David gathered the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh-Gilead to bury them in Zela in the land of Benjamin (2 Samuel 21:12-14).

!! Geographical Identification

Jabesh-Gilead is preserved in the name of the Wadi Yabis, a wadi on the east side of the Jordan that drains into the Jordan, but the exact identification of the city is debated. Jabesh-Gilead might be identified with Abu el-Kharaz, "the mound of the father of the beads" (Glueck, /River Jordan/, 164–66), which is located in the central Jordan Valley, "just north of Wadi Yabis, about 4 km east of the Jordan River and 6 km south of Pella" (Fischer, "Abu el-Kharaz," 1840). The town was important throughout most of the Bronze and Iron Ages (see Fischer, "Abu el-Kharaz," 1840 and Fischer, / Tell Abu al-Kharaz in the Jordan Valley/ for more on the archaeology of the town).

Due to the witness of Eusebius, however, this identification is most likely not correct. He noted in his /Onomasticon/ that Jabesh-Gilead was at the sixth milestone from Pella to Gerasa (110.11–13). Based on the location of the fifth milestone at Kufr Abil (the sixth has not been found), Tell al-Maqlub is the best possibility for the site (Edelman, "Jabesh-Gilead," 594).

Ethnic Identification

Another difficult question relates to whether the people of Jabesh-Gilead were Israelites. Diana Edelman argues that the people were not Israelite subjects of Saul, but vassals (Edelman, "Saul's Rescue"). When David spoke to the people of Jabesh-Gilead in 2 Samuel 2:4-7, he employed a variety of treaty terms (e.g., "lord," "do good"), implying that Saul had made a treaty with them earlier. Since many vassals would announce their independence following the death of a king, David tried to encourage the people of Jabesh-Gilead to accept him as their new sovereign and to renew their treaty with him. According to this theory, the people of Jabesh-Gilead previously sought a treaty with Saul, supposing that serving him would be less harsh than serving the Ammonites. Although the story functions literarily in 1 Samuel 11 as the story that confirms Saul as king before his coronation (1 Samuel 10:17-27 reflects only his appointment as king-elect; 1 Samuel 11:12-15 reflects the actual coronation), this historical detail shows that Saul was already a king before this event. Further, for Saul to be able to compete against the Ammonites on the battlefield, he must have already developed a robust army and controlled a significant amount of territory. According to Edelman, Saul was most likely not seizing power in Transjordan (contra Ottosson, /Gilead/, 197), but creating an independent buffer state to protect his eastern flank. In her view, all stories that describe the people of Jabesh-Gilead as Israelites were later revisions, most likely inserted as part of an anti-Saulide tradition.

A second possibility is that the people of Jabesh-Gilead were Israelites, as implied by the tribes' attack on the town in Judges 21:8-12 because they did not attend the gathering at Mizpah (Judg 20:1). The narrative of Saul's rescue of the people of Jabesh-Gilead in 1 Samuel 11 also implies the people were Israelites. They do not call on Saul to make a treaty with them, but to save them, like the judges had saved other Israelites during times of oppression. In the narrative, Saul is not yet a king, but he proves himself worthy of kingship by rescuing his kin from the threat of Ammonite oppression. While the terminology of David's call to the people of Jabesh-Gilead might reflect a treaty situation, it could also reflect Israelite subjects relating to their sovereign. Given that the house of Saul was stronger on the east side of the Jordan, David was keen to develop links with anyone sympathetic to his cause there.

The burning of Saul's bones was unusual in a Semitic context, and might point to a non-Semitic background for the people of Jabesh-Gilead. Cremation was more common in the Greek context and has not yet been found in a purely Semitic context (see Edelman, "Jabesh-Gilead," 594), but insufficient evidence remains to make a definitive statement about the ethnicity of Jabesh-Gilead based on this one event.

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