

***But Is There Balm In Gilead?* A biblical study guide for a group learning more about transgenerational trauma.**

by Ted Lewis

(Note: the study guide is designed for a leader to take this material and adapt it for a group. It is recommended that participants have the chance to spend time in some or all of the texts listed below, since the study is enriched by a sense of historical progression that also suggests the presence of transgenerational trauma. A leader would also find ways to link this biblical example with contemporary situations.)

One way for church groups to explore the topic of transgenerational trauma is to read through the thread of biblical narratives dealing with the land of Gilead east of the Jordan River. Themes of violence, especially gender violence against women, seem to move through this set of passages. Yet in the midst of wounding disempowerment are also texts of re-empowerment.



1. Complete takeover of Amorite towns by the Israelites (Numbers 21:21f) Deut. 2,3 - no survivors left
2. Vengeance on the Midianites and the capture of virgin women (Numbers 31)
3. The inheritance of Zelophehad's five daughters (Numbers 36)
4. The Jordan altar controversy and near violence (Joshua 22)
5. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter and the Lament Retreat (Judges 11)
6. The massacre of Jabesh Gilead and the capture of virgin women (Judges 21)
7. Ammonite threat to Jabesh Gilead and Saul's rescue (1 Samuel 11)
8. The secret rescue of Saul's dead body by Jabesh townsfolk (1 Samuel 31)
9. David's flight to Gilead and Absalom's tragic death (2 Samuel 16,17)
10. Ammonite violence against pregnant women of Gilead (Amos 1:13)

Perhaps one of the saddest ironies is that Gilead was internationally known for its healing balm (which was also carried in the caravan that took Joseph to Egypt), while being a land that was repeatedly abused by invading and plundering groups. It is likely that this irony was not lost on Jeremiah who even wove in a gender reference:

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? (Jeremiah 8:22)

Study Questions for Group Discussion:

1. We often think more about the tragedy of people killed in Bible stories and forget about the survivors who are left behind. What might it have been like to survive a burning of the village you lived in?
2. How and why might have the trauma to Gilead townspeople been passed on to future generations?
3. What is the significance of the "empowerment narratives" that are part of the Gilead thread?
4. Considering how biblical revelation involves a trajectory from old to new traditions, how do themes of healing and salvation relate to these texts of violence and trauma?

Read a comprehensive [online article](#) about the spiritual song, **There Is a Balm in Gilead**.