Judges 19 as a Paradigm for Understanding and Responding to Human Trafficking

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Judges 19 contains a seldom read, let alone studied or discussed, story of misogyny, subjugation, rape, murder, and dismemberment. Determining how to handle such atrocities in the Bible makes texts such as these difficult to address. More than thirty years ago, Phyllis Trible labeled Judges 19 as one of the "texts of terror" in the Hebrew Bible (along with the stories of Hagar, Tamar, and the daughter of Jephthah).[1] Texts of terror tend to be avoided unless the reader can clearly separate the perpetrators of evil in the text from themselves. David Garber and Daniel Stallings have argued that the church must stop ignoring sexually explicit texts "because the story of the Levite's concubine and the brutality contained therein speak vividly to issues of sexual violence that persist to this day. The silencing of sexually explicit biblical texts in American churches mirrors the silencing of issues of sexual violence in contemporary society."[2] This article will begin with a look at various approaches to exegesis of this text and then seek to show that we cannot exempt ourselves from this text of terror in light of its application to the twenty-first century problem of human trafficking, especially sex trafficking.

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The Biblical Story

First, here is the story. A Levite (hence, an apparently important man) from the hill country of Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem. A concubine was a woman used for a man's pleasure without the legal protection of a primary wife;[3] indeed, some would argue that the concubine in Judges 19 is not a "wife" at all, but is part of a "mistress-type relationship."[4] The primary wife is not mentioned in this narrative, which lends a bit of irony to the story. The concubine left the Levite and returned to her father's house in Bethlehem, either because she committed adultery or because of some type of mistreatment of or by the Levite. The Hebrew text uses the verb *zanah*, which is normally translated "prostitute" or "fornicate," to describe her behavior. However, the Septuagint Greek version uses the verb *orgizō*, meaning "to be angry" (followed by RSV and NRSV). This could suggest that she became angry or disgruntled and left him. The reason for the Masoretic Text's reference to sexual infidelity is unknown, although suggestions have been made. Several interpreters have suggested a metaphorical meaning for "prostitution" or "sexual sin," much like Jeremiah and Hosea use the concept of sexual infidelity as a metaphor for Israel and Judah's relationship with God. Thus, the act of leaving her husband was an act of unfaithfulness.[5] Since neither the Levite, the woman's father, nor the narrator ever mentions any act of unfaithfulness, the metaphorical reading seems justified, perhaps as an act of autonomy, as Ackerman suggests.[6] However, the reader soon learns that the woman had no autonomy.

Four months after she left him, the Levite went after his concubine. He took with him two donkeys and a male attendant. After several days of hospitality and negotiation between the Levite and her father—with no input from the woman herself—the Levite left to return to Ephraim with his concubine. The journey began late in the day, so night was approaching before they reached their final destination. The male servant suggested that they stop in non-Israelite Jebus (later to become Jerusalem), but the Levite refused, preferring instead to proceed into the familiar territory of the tribe of Benjamin. One was better off with "brothers" than "strangers," after all. A bit farther up the road, they entered the Benjaminite town of Gibeah. After no local resident offered hospitality, an Ephraimite who was living in Gibeah offered them the safety of his home (relative safety, as it turned out). After they had settled in for the evening, some men of Gibeah came to the door demanding sexual pleasures from the stranger who had entered the house. The Ephraimite defended the rights of his guest, the Levite, by offering the men his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine for their pleasure, since it was an "outrageous thing" to abuse a visitor (a male visitor, that is). Cheryl Exum points out that male rape by another male would have been a "de-gendering" of the man.[7] The Levite threw his concubine to the men, who ravaged her. After being gang raped throughout the night, the woman dragged herself to the threshold of the house, and there the Levite found her the next morning. He could not rouse her from her unconscious state, so he placed her on the donkey and made the trip home.

After he arrived home, the Levite took a knife and dismembered her body. Interestingly, the Hebrew text gives no clue whether the concubine was already dead when he cut up her body.[8] The Septuagint apparently assumes her death, and the Levite claims that she was dead in his explanation in the next chapter, to which we will soon turn. The Levite cut his concubine into twelve pieces to broadcast the sin of the Gibeahites to his own tribal relations. All the people who saw it (apparently those receiving the body parts) said, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt" (Judg. 19:30 NIV). We will return to this statement later in this article; however, a brief summary of the events of Judges 20–21 is first necessary, since as Jan Fokkelmann has pointed out, Judges 19 cannot be read apart from Judges 20–21.[9]

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In Judges 20, the Levite meets with the representatives of the recipients of the body parts for an explanation. The people of Israel gather at Mizpah to hear from the Levite, asking him "How did this evil thing happen?" The Levite's answer is important and is thus quoted here in its entirety:

> To Gibeah of Benjamin I came, I and my concubine, to spend the night. And the leaders [lit. "lords"] of Gibeah surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me, and my concubine they humiliated and she died. So I grabbed my concubine. I cut her into pieces, and I sent her to all the land of the inheritance of Israel. For they committed a shameful act—a foolish act—in Israel. Look here, you children of Israel, give your word—give counsel here. (Judg. 19:24–27, author's translation)

This brief account given by the Levite warrants comment. First, the Levite leaves out several events found in the earlier narrative. He neglects to say that the men of Gibeah first tried to "humiliate" him and only took the concubine as a last resort. In fact, the same Hebrew word that the Levite uses—*nĕbalah*, translated "foolish act" here—was used by the host in Judges 19 concerning the planned act against the Levite. Gale Yee comments,

> The Levite manipulates the *real* outrage against his wife (which he himself caused) to exact retribution for the *attempted* outrage against himself. He could not reveal to the tribes that he was almost raped by dissolute men. He would have incurred dishonor and loss of prestige. Instead, he manipulates his relationship with a woman in order to maneuver his male relations to accomplish his personal vendetta against Gibeah.[10]

More importantly, he neglects to tell his fellow Israelites that he himself had sent the concubine out to the men of Gibeah, choosing to have her humiliated rather than himself.

Second, the Levite adds elements to the earlier narrative account. He calls the men of Gibeah "lords" or "leaders" (Hebrew *ba'ale*). This could have the effect of making the attack an official act of the city, rather than of a rabble as suggested by the original narrative account. He also states that the men "planned to kill" him, while the narrative states that they wanted sexual relations with him. Also, he adds in this report that his concubine "died" as a result of the attack. However, the previous narrative does not include her death (except in the LXX translation, probably a later addition to remove the possibility that the Levite actually killed the ravaged woman himself). The results of the Levite's report were both immediate and severe. The Israelites immediately began plans to punish the men of Gibeah. However, when the tribe of Benjamin refused to surrender the guilty men to the other Israelites, a civil war erupted and virtually all the men of Benjamin were killed in the ensuing battles.

If the story ended with the rape of the concubine and subsequent destruction of the men of Benjamin, the results would be tragic. However, the actual end of the story is even worse. The Israelites were remorseful that an entire tribe was destroyed and decided they needed women to repopulate Benjamin. Their solution to the loss of Benjamin's men was to conquer the town of Jabesh-Gilead—killing everyone except four hundred young virgins—and taking their virgins to repopulate Benjamin. Unfortunately, there were not enough virgins in Jabesh-Gilead for all the men of Benjamin, so virgins participating in a ritual celebration at Shiloh were kidnapped and given to the men of Benjamin. Thus, the punishment of Gibeah for the rape of the Levite's concubine was more rape! As Alice Keefe concludes, "there is an element of dark absurdity in both the horror of the woman's fate at the hands of the Levite and the horror of a war among the tribes which is to no purpose except mass death and more rape."[11] The tragic irony of this reality is an appropriate point of departure to discuss interpretive approaches to Judges 19–21.

Connections with Sex Trafficking

Because sex trafficking is a relatively new addition to social justice discussions, no monograph on Judges makes a connection between human trafficking and the events of Judges 19. Several current studies have focused on the topic of rape in the Hebrew Bible. Alice Keefe's study, "Rapes of Women/Wars of Men," leads the way. She points out that the Hebrew word translated above as "foolish act" is also found in the narratives of the rapes of Dinah in Gen 34 and Tamar in 2 Sam 13.[12] Other emphases for interpretation include homosexuality, hospitality, and gender inequality. Although some recent interpreters continue to emphasize a condemnation of homosexuality in Judges 19, this does not seem to be the point of the text, but a side issue.[13] In fact, Michael Carden argues that a man penetrated by another man demasculinizes the man, causing the man to lose his position as a male in the male-dominated society.[14] Thus, while gender inequality is certainly a significant interpretive matter in the text, homosexuality is tangential. The role of hospitality is important to the text, since the Ephraimite host in Gibeah offers his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to maintain the honor of his guest; we will return to this topic later in the study. The studies of Trible, Exum, and Ackerman argue that the primary interpretive issue in Judges 19 (interestingly with little interest in Judges 20–21) is the subjugation of women in ancient Israelite culture. In fact, Ackerman states that the "entire plot concerns the concubine's inability to exert any control over her own fate."[15] That the inequality of gender is important in reading this text—and exegeting the ancient culture—is without debate, but these authors probably do overstate the "entire plot" of the story. The events represent the downfall of a society, the lack of *shalom* in a community, or a "Canaanization"[16] of Israel, where "there is no king and everyone does as he sees fit" (Judg. 21:25). One might argue that "everyone does as he sees fit" is an appropriate description of

modern western culture, with human trafficking as an example of this characteristic.

How do these events mirror modern human trafficking, and more explicitly, sex trafficking? First, as Mitzi Smith wrote in one of the few studies that connects Judg. 19 with human trafficking, "travel or journey provides a . . . framework for . . . the story."[17] Much of modern trafficking is predicated on the ability of traffickers to transport victims across borders or even across town, normally in circumstances where the victim's travel rights are limited. Typically, this travel begins with "dreams of a better and different life."[18] The concubine fled from her husband to her father, presumably for a better life. Smith compares the plight of the runaway wife to the one million to three million runaways on America's streets—the country's most vulnerable population. Not to mention the much larger global number! In the end, however, her travel was restricted by both her father and the Levite. Her father negotiated her back to her husband, and she again travelled. This travel, unfortunately, was completely in the control of her husband. Even as she lay at the threshold, the Levite continued her journey. As Smith has commented, "The young woman's terror in the night will not interfere with the Levite's business in the day."[19] Carried even further, her final travel incited a retributory war—even after she was dead and dismembered.

A second similarity between the Judges 19 concubine and sex trafficking victims is anonymity. Actually, all of the characters in the story are anonymous, but the concubine is anonymous, hidden, and silent. She is the only character in the story who never speaks. Keefe states, "Her narrative silence points to the eclipse of any speaking of truth in the midst of this black and bloody comedy."[20] In her silence, the concubine seems to be the only person in the narrative with no identity of her own. In comparison, a modern sex trafficking victim from Cambodia testified that:

> I want you to remember we are not "problems," we are not animals, we are not viruses, we are not garbage. We are flesh, skin and bones; we have a heart, and we have feelings. We are a sister to someone, a daughter, a granddaughter. We are people, we are women, and we want to be treat [sic] with respect, dignity. And we want rights like the rest of you enjoy.[21]

The term "invisible" is often used to describe victims of human trafficking.[22] In fact, a recent documentary on sex trafficking was entitled, "In Plain Sight," because these victims are invisible, even in plain sight.[23] The concubine—like modern sex-trafficking victims—was invisible, except when the men wanted her seen.

This brings into view the third similarity in our story to modern human trafficking—patriarchalism. As Smith points out, the concubine's "victimization is concealed behind ideas of patriarchal normalcy."[24] In the ancient Near East, as in most of the world today, men had authority, power, and often authorization to abuse and even traffic women.[25] In Judg. 19, "hospitality occurs among men."[26] Andrew Ng has suggested, in fact, that "the rape and murder of the concubine is meant . . . to indict the patriarchal system and to expose the entrenched sinfulness of the *men*—fathers and husbands who are supposed to function as guardians," but have "renounced this vital role for cowardly self-preservation."[27] Men need not be bothered with women or servants. When the "brothers" in Gibeah come for the Levite, two women are offered by the host in his place. As Smith stated, "an acceptable substitute for sexually ravishing one man is the offering up of two women."[28] The Levite subjugated and oppressed the concubine and clearly had no problem with other men doing the same—and worse. As Trible stated, the male who could have been protector becomes the procurer.[29] Stone has pointed out that the honor of the man was at least partially dependent upon his ability to control the women in his care—and under his control.[30] In the same way, modern human traffickers control and subjugate victims in this system of patriarchal normalcy. Furthermore, in many family systems (especially, though not exclusively, non-western) fathers and brothers in authority over women in the family will sell or trade women into sex-trafficking.[31]

At the end of the story in Judges 19, the concubine is literally cut into pieces, perhaps symbolizing the destruction that had already occurred in her life. As Trible points out, she has no one to mourn for her.

Finally, and not unrelated to the patriarchal issue, in both Judges 19 and modern human trafficking, the myth of familiarity and homogeneity hides the realities of pain, rape, abuse, and treachery. The concubine's father would not protect her. The host in Gibeah would not protect her. The Levite would not protect her. At the end of the night, she is left lying sprawled before the door of safety, behind which all the men slept, prompting one writer to state, "the Knights in Shining Armor inside the house were snoring."[32] In modern trafficking, familiarity often hides trafficking. Modern-day sex traffickers place themselves in relationships with victims, and potential victims, that appear to be caring, loving relationships. They pretend to love the victims in order to place the victims in positions of vulnerability.[33] Children are pimped by their parents. Women are sold by brothers and husbands. Behind the façade of familiarity lies a web of deceit and destruction.

At the end of the story in Judges 19, the concubine is literally cut into pieces, perhaps symbolizing the destruction that had already occurred in her life. As Trible points out, she has no one to mourn for her. "Passing her back and forth among themselves, the men of Israel have obliterated her totally. Captured, betrayed, raped, tortured, murdered, dismembered, and scattered—this woman is the most sinned against."[34] As Garber and Stallings write, "her broken body communicates far more than her words ever could have expressed: *The nation of Israel is in chaos and something must be done.*"[35] Like the concubine's broken body, the oppressed, wounded, and devastated bodies of victims of sex-trafficking in the twenty-first century cry out. Christine, a survivor who was born into sex slavery in Minnesota, writes these words:

> It is no small achievement to survive sexual slavery. Survivors are split into pieces, fragmented, broken, filled with despair, pain,

> rage, and sorrow. We have been hurt beyond belief. We are silent; we are numb. Our eyes see, our ears hear, but we do not tell. Our voices are nonexistent, but even if they did exist, who would believe what we have to say? Who would listen? Who would care? We are dirty, ruined, despised, the whores of the earth. The men who use us throw us away. We are their garbage to piss on, to pile up in the corner. We are their property, they own us. The rest of you turn your backs, avert your eyes, pretend not to see, go on your way. You leave us to the predators.[36]

We must recognize the evil as evil. What masquerades as shalom is actually evil.

How to Respond?

The above quotation from a survivor slaps us in the face with a question: what can we do? First, we can recognize that the conclusion of the Judges narrative is incorrect. The narrator said, "Such a thing has not happened or been seen" before (v. 30). This statement is simply untrue. These scenes have been repeated for millennia! In scripture, Dinah was raped. Tamar was raped. Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed. The concubine was raped and murdered. The virgins of Jabesh-Gilead and Shiloh were kidnapped and raped, even if in culturally sanctioned marriages. We must stand up for the victimized.

Second, we must recognize the evil as evil. What masquerades as *shalom* is actually evil. The men of the story saw life as *shalom*. The concubine knew better, but those in power were saying with the false prophets of Jeremiah's day, "Shalom, shalom," but as Jeremiah retorted, "There is not shalom here" (Jer 6:14). As Garber and Stallings concluded, "In a society where women and children are becoming the victims of horrible violence at an alarming rate, all is not well."[37] We must speak up for the silenced, for the oppressed, for the victimized. Our world, like that of the Levite and concubine, is broken and filled with evil. We must speak the truth into this world.

Third, to quote Trible, "We must take counsel to say 'Never again.' Yet this counsel is itself ineffectual unless we direct our hearts to that most uncompromising of all biblical commands, speaking the word not to others but to ourselves: Repent. Repent."[38] This repentance must include a confrontation of the evil. No one came to the defense of the concubine. She could get to the threshold of safety but never over that threshold. Lapsley concludes:

> The narrator [of Judges 19] gently encourages us to read this story so that we will evaluate the actions of the characters, yes, but also, and equally importantly, so that we will enter sympathetically into the experience of these characters, to sit and weep and cry out with the Israelites, because they are us.[39]

Yes, the Levite, concubine, father, Ephraimite host, and Gibeahites are us. And the experience of the concubine is the experience of millions of women in our world—even in the "enlightened west."[40] We must act! To remain ignorant and living in blissful—and sinful—ignorance cannot suffice any longer. The expectations of the biblical Creator and the Son Jesus are clear: Care for the oppressed and the captive and the helpless. Repent! And repentance must include action!

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Notes

1. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, OBT (Fortress, 1984) 65–91.
2. David G. Garber Jr. and Daniel Stallings, "Awakening Desire Before It Is Season: Reading Biblical Texts in Response to the Sexual Exploitation of Children," *RevExp* 105 (Summer 2008) 454.
3. See Trent Butler, *Judges*, WBC 8 (Thomas Nelson, 2009) 419, for discussion of the meaning of "concubine."
4. See Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, ABRL (Doubleday, 1998) 236–37.
5. Jacqueline Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Westminster John Knox, 2005) 37–38. See also Butler, Judges, 407.
6. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, 237.
7. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, JSOTSup 163 (JSOT, 1993) 183. See also Ken Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 234 (JSOT, 1996) 81.
8. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 80, points out the parallel language with Abraham in Gen 22, suggesting that the text may assume that she was not dead and that, unlike Isaac, no one saved her from the knife.
9. Jan Fokkelmann, "Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19," in *"Sha'arie Talmon": Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. M. Fishbane, E. Tov, and W. W. Fields (Eisenbrauns, 1992) 42.
10. Gale Yee, "Ideological Criticism: *Judges 17–21 and the Dismembered Body," in Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale Yee (Fortress, 2007) 156.
11. Alice Keefe, "Rapes of Women/Wars of Men," *Semeia* 61 (1993) 92.
12. Keefe, "Rapes of Women," 82. See also Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Hendrickson, 2007) 521–22. See also Deirdre Brouer, "Voices of Outrage against Rape: Textual Evidence from Judges 19," *Priscilla Papers* 28, no.

1 (Winter 2014) 24–28, reprinted in this issue of *Priscilla Papers*.
13. See, for example, K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges/Ruth*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2002) 359–66; Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Broadman & Holman, 1999) 536–37, 542–45.
14. Michael Carden, "Homophobia and Rape in Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken Stone," *JSOT* 82 (1999) 86. See also Ken Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?," *JSOT* 67 (1995) 87–107.
15. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, 237.
16. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 518–19.
17. Mitzi J. Smith, "Reading the Story of the Levite's Concubine Through the Lens of Modern-day Sex Trafficking," *ATJ* 41 (2009) 17.
18. Smith, "Reading the Story," 17.
19. Smith, "Reading the Story," 26.
20. Keefe, "Rapes of Women," 92. Concerning the word "comedy," Keefe earlier says on p. 90, "And though the ludicrously callous behavior of the Levite would tempt one to read this scene as a black comedy, the stark contrast of complete insensitivity and complete suffering still has the rhetorical effect of heightening the reader's empathy for the tortured woman. If the Levite does not care, who does?"
21. Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd, eds., *To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves* (Cornell, 2008) 103, quoted in Smith, "Reading the Story," 19.
22. Smith, "Reading the Story," 19.
23. Noah Lamberth and David Trotter, *In Plain Sight: Stories of Hope and Freedom*, documentary DVD, 2014.
24. Smith, "Reading the Story," 19.
25. This statement does not reflect ignorance of the fact that many trafficked individuals are male.
26. Smith, "Reading the Story," 26.
27. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng, "Revisiting Judges 19: A Gothic Perspective," *JSOT* 32/2 (2007) 201.
28. Ng, "Revisiting Judges 19," 201.
29. Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 74.
30. Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality," 95.
31. See Smith, "Reading the Story," 19–20.
32. E. T. A. Davidson, *Intricacy, Design, & Cunning in the Book of Judges* (XLibris, 2008) 176.
33. Smith, "Reading the Story," 22–24.
34. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 81.
35. Garber and Stallings, "Awakening Desire," 454.
36. Bales and Trodd, *To Plead Our Own Cause*, 101, quoted in Smith, "Reading the Story," 28.
37. Garber and Stallings, "Awakening Desire," 466.
38. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 87.
39. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, 66.
40. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, 66.

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