

Judges 19: The Story of the Unnamed Woman

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²² While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, who were corrupt, surrounded the house and beat on the door. They said to the old man whose house it was, "Bring out your guest, that we may abuse him." ²³ The owner of the house went out to them and said, "No, my brothers; do not be so wicked. Since this man is my guest, do not commit this crime. ²⁴ Rather let me bring out my maiden daughter or his concubine. Ravish them, or do whatever you want with them; but against the man you must not commit this wanton crime." ²⁵ When the men would not listen to his host, the husband seized his concubine and thrust her outside to them. They had relations with her and abused her all night until the following dawn, when they let her go. ²⁶ Then at daybreak the woman came and collapsed at the entrance of the house in which her husband was a guest, where she lay until the morning. ²⁷ When her husband rose that day and opened the door of the house to start out again on his journey, there lay the woman, his concubine, at the entrance of the house with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸ He said to her, "Come, let us go"; but there was no answer. So the man placed her on an ass and started out again for home. ²⁹ On reaching home, he took a knife to the body of his concubine, cut her into twelve pieces, and sent them throughout the territory of Israel. ³⁰ Everyone who saw this said, "Nothing like this has been done or seen from the day the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Take note of it, and state what you propose to do." Judges 19:22-30 (NAB)

Unlike most stories in the Bible in which we can find a more polite and diluted way to teach the story in Sunday School, Judges 19 has no such luck. There is no triumph for God and His people and no hero to admire. Perhaps the most unfortunate part of reading this story is that it has no happy ending to come; the story only leads to unspeakable tragedy. Readers of this story have tried to find a way to make sense of this text but the question is how? How do we explain this text and even more complicated, what do we take from this text? In my own attempt to better understand this "text of terror,"² I have reviewed numerous scholarly interpretations and perspectives on how this story can be read and the contexts these readings hold for readers. In

¹ This paper was written for RELS 2326 Women and the Bible (2013).

² The expression "text of terror" was coined by Phyllis Tribble as she sought to describe biblical stories that present violence toward women. See *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*

addition to these scholarly interpretations, I add in my own understanding of the text from my own cultural context as a Zimbabwe-American woman.

In Judges 19, we are introduced to a man from the hill country of Ephraim who is said to have taken a concubine from Bethel in Judah. To summarize Judg 19:2-10 we learn that, the concubine is unfaithful³ to him and she then leaves to return to her father's house. After four months, the man along with a servant goes to get the concubine from her father's house. Upon his arrival he sweetly talks to her and she welcomes him into her father's house. The man is greeted with great joy by his father-in-law and his father-in-law's hospitality extends for four days, until the man finally refuses to stay yet another night. The man takes his concubine and servant and set out to Jebus. In Judges 19:11-21, the man is trying to find a place to rest for the night as it has gotten dark before they reached their destination. The servant suggests stopping among the Jebusites for the night and the man refuses to stay in the city because it is a foreign land and the people are not of Israel. Instead they head toward Gibeah and unfortunately nobody welcomes them into their home, except for an old man who is also from the hill country of Ephraim. The man took them to his house and extends great hospitality by washing his guests feet, giving his guests something to drink and eat and even feeding the horses.

In Judges 19:22-30 the story takes a turn for the worse, however. A group of men who are described as being "wicked," call out to the old man so that he would bring out his guest for their own pleasure. The old man refuses and offers instead his own virgin daughter and the concubine in place of the male guest. The concubine is then given to the men to do as they please with her

³ The Hebrew and Greek translations of this passage read differently. The Greek versions read: "But his concubine became angry with him" while the Hebrew of Judges 19:2 suggests harlotry that causes the woman to leave to go to her father's house. The fact that the man seeks out his wife or concubine argues against a reading that she was unfaithful. Rather, he seems to have been in the wrong and to wish to make up with his wife.

granted with the permission of her husband. The “wicked” men continue to gang rape her until the morning when they release her. In Judges 19:26 a strange thing happens in the translation; no longer does the author refer to the man as a husband but a master.⁴ “26: At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight (NRSV)⁵.” For the remainder of the story the NRSV translation uses the word “master” in place of “husband”; this leads to the matter as to where she is a wife of lesser status or a sexual slave to this man.

In *Death and Dissymmetry*, Meike Bal suggests the translation of the Hebrew word *pileghesh* can be taken out of context because the original word used to describe the woman can be taken out of context because of different cultural ideas.⁶ The Euro-American cultural idea of a concubine often is understood to mean “slave” by Old Testament scholars but Bal refutes the notion because the texts don’t necessarily communicate this idea. She points out that, in most texts the term appears to mean a wife of lower status. She also argues this position since the man had shown emotional attachment by going to retrieve her from her father’s house. Bal then goes on to say, “her status as a wife is shown through the fact that her rape is seen as an offense against her husband, serious enough to warrant war.”

Although Bal points out the importance of the man’s affection to the woman earlier in the story, I think her analysis lacks appropriate criticism of the actual act of releasing the concubine to the men outside. How can we perceive that cruel act in a way that still allows one to posit a husband and wife relationship? A better background and explanation of what it would mean to be a concubine in this period of time is given in an analysis by Gale Yee in *Judges & Method*:

⁴ The Hebrew term to describe the man here is *adon* (“lord; master”); the Greek versions give the word *aner* (simply “man” and “husband”) or *kurios* (“lord”).

⁵ New Revised Standard Version

⁶ *Death and Dissymmetry*, 84.

New Approach in Biblical Studies.⁷ She focuses on kinship and marriage and how the marriage system worked in this society. She explains that “a concubine was a woman whose continued presence within the family was not dependent upon economic arrangements.”⁸ A concubine would be a secondary wife and could be used to produce more offspring or if the man already had offspring, she was used for sexual pleasure. A more unique approach that Yee brings is the economic value of the concubine. In ancient society if a man could not bear children with his wife, “a concubine may be used to obtain an heir because she does not threaten the economic basis of the marriage.”⁹ The concubine essentially was not considered an heir to any of the wealth because she did not possess the same status of her children.

Another perspective that helps clarify the misunderstood realities of this story is from Ken Stone.¹⁰ Stone examines the selection by focusing on Judges 19:2, and by asking the question how exactly the woman had been unfaithful. The Hebrew version suggests that she had “prostituted” herself which implies sexual unfaithfulness. However the Greek version states instead that the woman “became angry.” Stone analyzes how the term “prostitution” can have a different meaning by saying that “the woman’s “prostitution” does not refer to literal sexual infidelity but is a sort of metaphor for the fact that she leaves her husband. The act that she left her husband and returned home is in itself culturally considered unacceptable in this time. The author suggests this may be why such harsh language is used to address the woman. Another question readers may pose when reading this text is why the host decides to offer the women instead of his male guest. Why not offer a male servant or relative? The host was willing to

⁷ *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*: (Augsburg Fortress: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁸ *Judges & Method*, 51.

⁹ *Judges & Method*, 51.

¹⁰ *Women in Scripture: a Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

sacrifice the dignity of the two women for the protection of a male guest. Stone sheds light on why the host chooses to do this by saying, “apparently the sexual violation of women was considered less shameful than that of men, at least in the eyes of other men. Such an attitude reflects both the social subordination of women and the fact that homosexual rape was viewed as particularly severe attack on male honor.”¹¹ It saddens me to think a man would offer his own daughter before putting a male stranger into harm’s way. This is a great example of the misogynistic culture and the mistreatment of women in that particular time.

In *Judges and Method*, Gale Yee more elaborately explains the inconsistency in translation, in which the relationship between the concubine and the man changes from that of a “husband” to a “master”. As we already know concubines are associated with being secondary or lower status wives. Yee explains how this secondary status can result in a more inferior relationship to a husband than if she were a wife. Even though wives have to be in subordination to their husbands, “the *pileghesh* endures a double subordination in her position as secondary wife. The inferior status of the woman in our story is particularly foregrounded after the rape, when the text describes her husband as “master”.”¹² Yee then goes on to discuss how the concubine brought dishonor on her husband by leaving. The concubine’s decision to leave shows a lack of control from her husband that would indicate in an honor and shame society of ancient Mediterranean public humiliation. The humiliation is even greater felt because of the status of the woman as Yee notes; “moreover, the extent of a man’s disgrace correlates inversely with the status of the one who shames him: the lower the status, the greater the shame.”¹³ Having been humiliated once, the Levite would not have been humiliated again by being taken by men for

¹¹ *Women in Scripture*, 249.

¹² *Judges and Method*, 162.

¹³ *Judges and Method*, 163.

sex. The act of being raped by men would show submission a state that is associated with the feminine. Feeling “shamed and feminized by his secondary wife and her father, the Levite is in danger of becoming even more humiliated and emasculated by the degenerate men.¹⁴ This could give insight into why he does not stand up and protest the giving away of his wife to the strange men. In a selfish act he was trying to keep his own dignity.

All the scholarly perspectives that I have read have helped my understanding of the story. However, I think I have a unique perspective because a concubine is not a foreign concept to me but one that is familiar from the culture of Zimbabwe, a cultural context I know well. In the Shona culture when a woman is to be married, her husband must part take in the ritual of paying her bride price. This bride price is a way of showing both the groom’s and bride’s family that there is a union between the two and it should be honored. Without this union in my culture, a woman who lives with a man is then considered a concubine. My paternal grandmother never received her bride price from my grandfather. Although they had a family together and my grandfather had no other wife, she felt dishonored because her family could not claim that they received her bride price. On her death bed she cursed my grandfather because he had failed to provide her bride price. I can only imagine that the concubine must have felt the same anger. Her husband went all the way to her father’s house and he did not bring an offering or gratitude for her family. She may not have been a dishonor to her family but the notion that she was an unpaid bride would have brought discomfort to her family.

In conclusion, there are many questions that come with trying to understand Judges 19, however I have found the story carries more meaning when it is given cultural context. The Euro-American perspectives on Judges 19 missed the cultural context that could assist us in

¹⁴ *Judges and Method*, 164.

making sense of the story in our present time. Awareness of diverse traditions involving marriage and bride prices outside of Europe and North America allows African exegetes to make fresh contributions to biblical studies. Here cultural awareness leads to a different appreciation of the female character in Judges 19. The woman who is ravaged may not have been an adulterous; the Greek version of the text suggests that she was the party upset. The woman may only have been a wife of secondary status. Her husband's humiliation about being abandoned by a wife of a low status economically may have led him to eject the woman when his reputation was further at risk. Lack of awareness of bride price traditions and status markers lead to impoverished readings of Judges 19. Awareness of these realities allows us to return to the woman the dignity befitting her story.