

## THE LEVITE'S CONCUBINE BASED ON JUDGES 19: Constructing a Hermeneutics of Meaning for Victim/Survivors of Sexual Violence

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### Abstract

This paper offers a hermeneutics of meaning developed for victim/survivors of sexual violence in the parish context, focused primarily on Judges 19 and its ramifications in Judges 20-21. I construct this hermeneutic through an exegesis of Judges 19, based in feminist commentaries that tease out entry points for discussion with victim survivors. Using an imagined community Bible study, i construct a hermeneutic of meaning based in reconciliation and action using the work of pastoral theologians Carrie Doehring, Al Miles, and Monica A. Coleman. By reading Judges 19 from this hermeneutic it becomes an entryway into discussing ways in which the parish community can stand together against sexual violence and its theological ramifications.

**Keywords:** sexual violence, sexual violence, recovery, book of judges, judges 19, levite's concubine

### INTRODUCTION

At its foundation, Judges 19-21 is the story of a young woman's gang rape and dismemberment, which leads to the rape of hundreds of women. This young woman, known colloquially as the Levite's concubine, and her story, is the focus of this article. When i first came across this text, i was profoundly disturbed and so, as a scholar and religious educator, I turned to research. John L. Thompson<sup>1</sup> wrote a survey of commentaries from Philo to the Reformation that addressed Judges 19 and revealed that very little was said about this narrative until the twelfth century. Prior to the twelfth century the only mentions were to blame the woman for having "prostituted herself," and to affirm that the gang rape was punishment for her misconduct. In the twelfth century focus on this text included a consideration of the motives of the host and the husband; both were condemned for choosing sin against the woman over sin done to the Levite. At the close of Thompson's work, he concludes that Reformation thinkers

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<sup>1</sup> John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs, Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

believed that while the woman should have been punished for her sins the men should have died protecting her; G-d would have punished her in his own time.<sup>2</sup>

With the advent of feminist theological writing commentaries research into and commentaries on Judges 19 expanded. Phyllis Trible, writing in the 1980s, conceived of the text as an example of patriarchy in its worst form. Her work has been critiqued and built upon by other feminist scholars who have named the violence done to the voiceless woman and re-told from her perspective. Other feminists have explored the additional power dynamics present in the text, though, in my opinion, the male-female and male-male dynamics are most central for framing the text. The work of Susanne Scholz was key to understanding that this narrative is only one in a series of rape texts present in the Hebrew Bible. One of her goals in writing a survey of these texts was to uplift rape as a theological issue and to bring these narratives into contemporary discourse on rape. When I looked to see how these texts had already been incorporated in Christian church and denominational responses to sexual violence, i found that they were not used. Even in Monica Coleman's groundbreaking text for congregational use, *The Dinah Project*, rape texts were relegated to an appendix in favor of Scriptural texts that promote positive images of body and sexuality. Marie M. Fortune's work, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*, did slightly better in using the text as an example to explain why sexual violence was inherently sinful.

In *Sacred Witness*, Susanne Scholz wrote that Biblical rape texts are "a "sacred witness" the ongoing pervasiveness, existence and harm of rape in the world then and now."<sup>3</sup> In taking up the words of Dorothee Soelle, Scholz suggests approaching these texts with a "hermeneutics of meaning," which "deconstructs and constructs biblical meaning beyond the literalist-historical sense," in essence, asking what is to be done with these texts outside of the academic setting.<sup>4</sup> As a religious educator working in a parish context I believe that Biblical rape literature is "a pedagogical tool that strengthens our ability to confront sexual violence."<sup>5</sup> Therefore this paper will offer a hermeneutics of meaning developed for victim/survivors of sexual violence in the parish

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<sup>2</sup> These commentators were the first to make mention of G-d's presence in the text and depict G-d not as condoning this particular act of violence. However, this means that G-d nonetheless would have sanctioned violence against this woman, only that he should have been the driving force behind it.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 209.

<sup>4</sup> Scholz, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Scholz, 7.

context focused particularly on Judges 19 and its ramifications in Judges 20-21. I will construct this hermeneutic through an exegesis of Judges 19, based in feminist commentaries, that teases out entry points for discussion with victim/survivors. This exegesis is written with an imagined community of victim/survivors and their allies gathered to study this text and derive meaning from it for their own experiences. Using this exegesis, i will further offer a constructed hermeneutics of meaning focused in reconciliation and action using the work of pastoral theologians Carrie Doehring and Al Miles and scholar Monica A. Coleman.

*Judges 19:1-3.*

## DISCUSSION

### Concubine, Levite, and Violence

The first three verses of this text need to be unpacked. First, there is the challenge of understanding what is meant by concubine, *pilegash*. Feminist scholars note that this term either refers to a concubine or a second wife, one who has “inferior status....Legally and socially, she...is virtually a slave, secured by a man for his own purposes.”<sup>6</sup>Tammi Schneider notes that there is simply too little information to determine what it meant to be a concubine in the Israelite world, rejecting the suggestion of second wife because no mention of a first wife is present in the text.<sup>7</sup> She also addresses the issue of the verb *z-n-h*, which many feminist scholars have said that the woman did not “prostitute herself” as the verb suggests but that she became angry with him and left. Tribble writes that the Hebrew allows for both readings.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of using the text with those who have been victims of sexual abuse naming which party is to blame for the concubine leaving is, as Schneider points out, irrelevant, because it does not “help her cause”.<sup>9</sup> I say it is irrelevant because regardless of what she may have done, she did not deserve what was done to her in Gibeah.

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<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Tammi J. Schneider, *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry: Judges*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 247-250.

<sup>8</sup> Tribble, 67

<sup>9</sup> Schneider, 251

There is also the challenge of how we are to understand the Levite. Being of the tribe of Levi, the tribe that received no land, he is a perpetual sojourner.<sup>10</sup> How he was perceived by the community is unclear, Tribble suggests that he would have been seen as having a high social status<sup>11</sup> but Schneider counters that by looking at the structure of Judges as a whole he would have raised “questions about his character and intentions.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever his status it does not make his actions later in the text acceptable. The ambiguity that surrounds these characters as well as the starkness of the text itself almost invites the reader to speculate. Reading through commentaries it is clear that this vagueness has frustrated scholars who want to understand why this happened. This in and of itself may be helpful for working with victim or survivors; the text gives the reader the freedom to confirm that social status on either end of the spectrum does not make sexual violence acceptable. It also invites the reader to acknowledge and wrestle with the fact that there are no easy answers as to why suffering takes place.

### ***Judges 19:4-9***<sup>13</sup>

The following verses make further frustrate one’s desire to put these characters in understandable categories. Numerous questions arise about the nature of the woman’s leaving, given that she is welcomed into her father’s home. If the couple had gotten into a fight it is easier to understand but then the question arises of why the Levite waited for four months before going to her.<sup>14</sup> Schneider suggests that the Levite waited because by that point he would have been able to determine if she was pregnant, and thereby confirm that she had committed adultery.<sup>15</sup> Koala Jones-Warsaw goes further to suggest that the concubine’s virginity was questioned, which is why she left.<sup>16</sup> What is clear is that the father is motivated to keep the Levite in his home by plying him

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<sup>10</sup> Lynn Japinga. "The Levite's Concubine When Evil Poses as Justice." in *She is Called Women of the Bible Study Vol. 2*, (Wichita, KS: Reformed Church Press, Reformed Church in America, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Tribble, 66

<sup>12</sup> Schneider, 247

<sup>13</sup> In either of these sections I believe it could be useful to bring up the work of Mieke Bal, (*Death and Dissymmetry*, University of Chicago Press: 1988) who suggests that the issue at stake is patrilocal vs. vitrilocal understandings of marriage and that the woman was merely caught in a cultural shift from the former to the latter. However, I am not sure what purpose it would serve at this point in the discussion except to further exonerate the woman, who, as I mentioned, does not need to be exonerated.

<sup>14</sup> David Z. Moster. "The Levite of Judges 19–21." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no.4 (2015): 721–730. <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1344.2015.2909>.

<sup>15</sup> Schneider, 253

<sup>16</sup> Koala Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21," in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible 4: Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 174.

with food and drink. Tribble writes that what is witnessed in this section is a “power struggle between the two men,” wherein a “journey to “speak to her heart” ‘ has become a visit to engage male hearts, with no speech to her at all.”<sup>17</sup> In terms of meaning making this passage may be an entry point to discuss familial betrayal in cases wherein a family member may have sided with the perpetrator over the victim. It may also be the moment to address with those reading the text that the woman has not yet spoken (nor will she in this text) and discuss times when those who have suffered violence have been silenced by those around them.

### ***Judges 19:10-21***<sup>18</sup>

And so the Levite, his concubine, his servant and their animals leave the house of her father and choose to stay in Gibeah. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if they had chosen to stay in Ramah instead (19:13). This sort of speculation is common of victims of trauma, if only I had not done x and had done y instead then z would not have happened. Monica Coleman expressed this same sort of thinking after her own rape.<sup>19</sup> However, if the Levite and the concubine had gone on to Ramah instead they may have encountered the same treatment. In the last verse of the section the couple and the servant are left out in the cold of the town square. Having expected to find hospitality among their own Israelite kinsman, compared to the assumed hostility they would have found if they had stayed in a city of foreigners, one can imagine the concern the whole company must have felt. To be a sojourner is to be vulnerable and dependent upon the community for protection. The Levite was hopeful that he would find a safe place in someone’s home because he was among other Israelites. This hope, in many cases, is extinguished for victims of sexual violence; the world becomes a threatening place and considering that the majority of victims/survivors knew and trusted their attackers, those things that were once familiar and safe have become dangerous.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tribble, 69

<sup>18</sup> The relationship between Gibeah and Saul, though often cited in commentaries, is not of use for this context and so does not bear discussing here.

<sup>19</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), xx.

<sup>20</sup> Coleman, 12-13

When no one takes the travelers in, both the dread about the town itself<sup>21</sup> and the belief that one's own kin will provide safety are reinforced. The Benjamites offer no respite for the travelers but an old man, who serendipitously also happens to be from the hill country of Ephraim, offers them a place to stay. From the conversation between the old man and the Levite one can sense the relief of the Levite, knowing that he, the concubine and the servant, do not have to spend the night outside. Outside is dangerous, inside is safe; but once again the question arises of what would have happened if a Benjamite as opposed to a sojourner had taken in the travelers. Furthermore, Tribble points out, in Hebrew the old man takes the Levite into his house and makes no mention of the concubine or the servant, "the master is safe in the house, the woman is not."<sup>22</sup> This selection of verses may be the entry point to affirm that expectations of safety in one's life and community are not wrong and to dissuade feelings of self-blame.

### ***Judges 19:22-25***

These verses are the apex of the crisis that has been impending since the travelers came into the town of Gibeah. They were not given shelter by the natives but by a foreigner and not only were the natives inhospitable, but a group of them demands the right to rape the Levite. But the Levite, the man who, according to commentators, should have died<sup>23</sup> (as cited in Thompson, 2003) rather than allow this to happen, forces the concubine outside to a gang of worthless men.<sup>24</sup> The host, the old man, the owner of the house, who should have protected his guests and his own child, had only moments before offered not only the concubine but also his own virgin daughter. As in all cases of sexual violence the power dynamic is palpable. Two sojourning men protected by the walls of a house bow to the pressure of worthless native men outside the house. In Judges 19:25 we see a glimpse of the concubine trying to save herself. The verb that is typically translated as "seize" is *chazaq*, which means to become strong; the Levite strong-armed his concubine and forced her outside the relative safety of the home. I imagine that a struggle took place that the concubine did not go quietly into the night; he

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<sup>21</sup> Tribble, 71

<sup>22</sup> Tribble, 73

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, 209.

<sup>24</sup> Gabriel Oluwatobiloba Alalade. *Judges 19: Interpreting with the Dead, the Critical and the Postmodern*. Thesis. (Toronto: University of St. Michael's College and the University of Toronto, 2012). [https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/34899/1/Alalade\\_Gabriel\\_O\\_201211\\_ThM\\_Thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/34899/1/Alalade_Gabriel_O_201211_ThM_Thesis.pdf).

had to exert force in order to bring her outside. This woman who has been silenced verbally by the text has not been silenced physically; she leaves the Levite's home of her own accord and she fights to save herself. This sort of physicality is a blow to the misconception that women are passive participants in sexual violence. These verses deserve stunned silence after their reading. These verses are the moment when it is time to invite victims to share their stories and to mourn them in community with other victim/survivors.

### ***Judges 19:26-30***

These verses detail the aftermath of the concubine's rape. She collapses at the entrance to the house and is nearly stumbled over by the Levite, on his way to continue his journey. Based on the Hebrew verbs used one assumes that while she was being abused, he slept through the night. One can only speculate on how the woman cried for help and was ignored.<sup>25</sup> We almost don't want to believe he would have been so heartless as to sleep through the night, perhaps he spent it awake and in shock, helpless. But his cold, stark response, "Get up, and let us go," leads the reader to assume otherwise. These verses give the community an opportunity to discuss the ways in which they were not helped. Monica Coleman writes that she was raped in her apartment,<sup>26</sup> and while she does not say this, as someone who lives in an apartment and who can occasionally hear her neighbors through the walls I wonder about those who may or may not have heard her, if she had been able to cry out.<sup>27</sup> The Levite heard it, the host and his daughter heard it, and the Benjamites heard it. These verses invite victims to rage, to weep, to lament at those who ignored them in their hour of direst need and those who ignored them, blamed them or otherwise failed to provide care in the aftermath.

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<sup>25</sup> Christine Mafana. "Judges 19: The Story of the Unnamed Woman." *Pangaea Journal* 5 (2014): 1-7. <https://sites.stedwards.edu/pangaea/judges-19-the-story-of-the-unnamed-woman>.

<sup>26</sup> Coleman, x

<sup>27</sup> I am reminded of a piece of knowledge given to me when I began college, that if I was being attacked I should scream fire, because it was unlikely someone would come running if they heard the word rape. J.H. Coetzee. "The 'outcry' of the dissected woman in Judges 19-21: Embodiment of a society." *Old Testament Essay* 15, no.1 (2002): 52-63. <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC85453>.

### **Judges 19:28-30**

The chilling truth for readers of Judges 19 is that we do not know when the concubine died.<sup>28</sup> At no point in the Hebrew do we find the verb m-v-t, “to die,” all we know is that she collapsed at the door and was taken back with the Levite to “his home.” She is broken and the Levite completes the violence done to her by cutting her body into pieces to be sent throughout Israel. Was there no better way to communicate his outrage? The response of the Israelites, Tribble notes, is reminiscent of what the Levite failed to do, “Direct your heart to her.”<sup>29</sup> If we end our reading at this verse we can see these words as a call to hope, that the community reading this text can act together against sexual violence. It may in this moment be challenging to direct the group’s attention to Judges 20 and 21 where this call to war becomes a call to the rape of hundreds of women. However, with a hermeneutics of meaning, this is also the opportunity to point out that we readers of the text we can choose to reject the response of the Israelite men. We do not have to use this narrative as an excuse to go to war, to bring more pain and suffering into the world. As people of inherent dignity and worth we determine our meaning making and can speak out against sexual violence in ways that promote healing for victim/survivors.

### **Constructing a Hermeneutics of Meaning**

Even in our imagined community study of Judges 19 one can assume, depending on the number of participants, a myriad of social locations influencing how the text is read; therefore, a hermeneutics of meaning for Judges 19 focused in reconciliation and action is only one option. However, it is the option I believe would be most beneficial in working with victim/survivors of sexual violence. Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring recommends three overall steps in care giving: “(1) attending to the careseeker’s safety and building trust, (2) mourning losses and (3) reconnecting with life.”<sup>30</sup> In the imagined community step one is accomplished through a congregational commitment to victim/survivors. Based on the experiences of Reverend Al Miles, who was told by

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<sup>28</sup> Tribble, 80

<sup>29</sup> Tribble, 83

<sup>30</sup> Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 133.



numerous pastors that sexual violence was not a problem in church,<sup>31</sup> and the experiences of a social worker from the House of Ruth, who, after receiving a grant to address sexual violence in the parish context spoke to sixty-five churches and not a single one wanted to have the conversation,<sup>32</sup> creating a safe space for survivors of sexual violence is a hard won endeavor. But it is a crucial endeavor that promotes reconciliation for victim/survivors. For example, one pastor wrote in her blog that after preaching on Judges 19 from the pulpit, a woman from her congregation came to her, weeping, and said, "I can't believe my story was in the Bible."<sup>33</sup> Having a safe space to tell her/his story to a sympathetic community is vital for victim/survivors to move on to steps two and three.

Judges 19 is to be read with the community through the lens of reconciliation. Though the text is deeply troubling it provides an entry point for discussion, for solidarity among victim/survivors with those in their own tradition, and its mere presence affirms and uplifts rape as a theological issue. It is a way for allies of and victim/survivors to confront sexual violence in a theological framework. For victim/survivors who suffer in isolation, this text shows that they are not alone, that the ramifications of their experience, including post-traumatic stress disorder, feelings of dirtiness, and anger, concerns about forgiveness and questions of theodicy are worthy of naming and discussion.<sup>34</sup> Mourning losses is an inherent part of reconciliation. The victim/survivor in the parish context is confronting a variety of broken symbols: her/his body, soul, relationships; and understandings of G-d have all been damaged. Mourning makes room to reconstruct these symbols. Judges 19 invites the reader to mourn for the concubine and for her/himself. These moments invite the beginnings of reconciliation, a piecing back together of the broken self and of broken symbols. In this way Judges 19 is a functional text, while the concubine's experience left her in literal pieces, victim/survivors in the parish context can put themselves back together again and become "thrivers," those who experience "full life after assault."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Al Miles, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 50.

<sup>32</sup> SC 312 "Practical Theology and Spiritual Care" Class Notes April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Jobe, "Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Preaching Judges 19," WorkingPreacher.org, entry posted July 12, 2010, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/texts.aspx?article\\_id=366](http://www.workingpreacher.org/texts.aspx?article_id=366) (accessed May 1, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Coleman, 13-15

<sup>35</sup> Coleman, 11; Rachel Levy. "Judges 19 Reading in Context and Intertextuality." *Academia* (2005), 1-27. [https://www.academia.edu/40381605/Judges\\_19\\_Reading\\_in\\_Context\\_and\\_Intertextualit](https://www.academia.edu/40381605/Judges_19_Reading_in_Context_and_Intertextualit).

## CONCLUSION

The lens of action is evidenced clearly in the closing words of Judges 19, "Direct your heart to her, take counsel and speak out." To take action is to invite the victim/survivor to "reconnect with the ordinariness of life." Dohering writes that this reconnection is the experience of "being fully present in the immediate moment, without being overshadowed by the losses from the past or fears about the future."<sup>36</sup> These moments are life giving, inviting one to experience the "sacredness of life," to connect with the "goodness of life."<sup>37</sup> Empowering victim or survivors to find these moments is crucial in their journey towards wholeness. Because the woman is killed by the end of Judges 19 there is not possibility for her to reach even the first step, let alone this last step. But we can. We can read her story, gather a community, speak about it, speak about ourselves, mourn the concubine, mourn ourselves, and live. As meaning makers we can reject previous commentators who write that the woman deserved this punishment, we can reject the response of the Israelite men to go to war and in doing so destroy the lives of hundreds of other women, and instead we can draw from Judges 19 an invitation to reconciliation and action. By reading Judges 19 from this hermeneutic it becomes an entryway into discussing ways in which the parish community can stand together against sexual violence and its theological ramifications.

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<sup>36</sup> Dohering, 141

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

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