Judges 19: Interpreting with the Dead, the Critical and the Postmodern

by

Gabriel Oluwatobiloba Alalade

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael's College and the Biblical Department of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology awarded by University of St. Michael's College and the University of Toronto.

© Copyright by Gabriel Oluwatobiloba Alalade 2012
Judges 19: Interpreting with the Dead, the Critical and the Postmodern

Gabriel Oluwatobiloba Alalade

Master of Theology

University of St. Michael’s College

2012

Abstract

Judges 19 is a difficult passage that poses several ethical and hermeneutical dilemmas, and usually makes any reader uncomfortable with the treatment of the Levite’s concubine. More often than not, interpreters and commentators avoid commenting on the passage. However, this paper argues for a reading with both pre-critical and critical commentators, insisting on lessons that can be learnt from past interpreters. As John Lee Thompson argues, “we don’t fully know what the Bible means until we know something about what the Bible has meant.”
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Marion Taylor, my research supervisor for her patience, guidance and constructive criticisms during the course of writing this research work. Also, I am grateful to my research committee members, Professors Mclaughlin and Kolarcik, for their invaluable feedback. Special thanks goes to Professor William Morrow for his support, encouragement and excellent feedbacks.

There are numerous others whose behind the scenes guidance and support made the completion of this research work a reality. Staff members at St. Mike’s whose help enabled me, Mohra Taylor, Emil Iruthayahas, Kala Gnanapandithen, Cecile Tang, thank you all for your help. Members of the Wednesday bible study group, Ken Pedlar, Al Bain, Gord Fairbank and others, thanks for your spiritual support. My ‘family’ in Kingston Jessie, Fran, and Ron Wong, John and Brigitte Kennedy, thank you. Fraser Sutherland, CJ Mortimer, you guys are the best. My Russian twin, Alexei Perepelkine, thank you. My friends Basil Coward, Grace Ogunyankin, and Galvin Clancey, you guys are the best.

Finally, I could not have finished this work without the constant support and prayers of my family members, my parents and sisters. Tope, Tayo, Nike, Deola, Kenny, you guys are the best family anyone could ever ask for. My final appreciation goes to my precious wife, Omotumnu, the best is yet to come.

God, please receive all the glory in my life.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... iii

## CHAPTER ONE .............................................................................................................. 1
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1
Problem Statement ............................................................................................................ 2
Thesis Statement .............................................................................................................. 7
Methodology .................................................................................................................... 9
Problems of Judg 19 ........................................................................................................ 10
Reception History ......................................................................................................... 17
  Interpretations ........................................................................................................... 18

## CHAPTER TWO ............................................................................................................. 29
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 29
Background .................................................................................................................... 30
Early Life and Influences ............................................................................................... 32
Gender Issues ................................................................................................................ 39
Fallen Women and Victorian England .......................................................................... 42
Her Theology .................................................................................................................. 45
Interpretation of Judges 19 .......................................................................................... 47
Limitations ...................................................................................................................... 62
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 64

## CHAPTER THREE ....................................................................................................... 68
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 68
Early Life and Religious Influences ............................................................................. 70
Cultural Influence – Second Wave Feminism ............................................................ 72
Influence of James Muilenburg and Rhetorical Criticism .......................................... 75
Trible’s Methodology .................................................................................................... 77
Interpretation of Judges 19 .......................................................................................... 79
Limitations ...................................................................................................................... 91
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 93

## CHAPTER FOUR ......................................................................................................... 94
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 94
The Postmodern Context ............................................................................................... 94
Need for the Past .......................................................................................................... 98
Lessons From the Past .................................................................................................. 100
Interpreting with the Postmodern .............................................................................. 105
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 112

## Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 115
Books ............................................................................................................................. 115
Articles ............................................................................................................................ 117
Electronic Resources .................................................................................................. 120
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Sexual violence in the Hebrew Scriptures is common (e.g., Gen 19; 34; Judg19; II Sam 13). I believe that like the endless stories of human failure and redemption in Scripture, these stories deserve more notice as well. The presence of what could be considered pornography and therefore profane\(^1\) within sacred Scriptures is a tension worth exploring. However, more often than not this tension is relegated to the archives of our spiritual pursuits. While there are several stories of violence in the Hebrew Scriptures, and some stories of sexual violence in particular, there is no other story within Scripture that speaks to this tension more than the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judg 19. To interpret and apply the truth or lack thereof of this story to communities of faith, who hold the Bible as their sacred Scripture, has been a dilemma for several centuries.

Interestingly enough, in a society and era where such violent acts are predominant and common knowledge, from sexual trafficking to sexual assault, both domestic and otherwise, this passage is not prominent in our corporate spiritual and public discourses. Of course the reason for this might be the fact that in a society also deeply secularized, there is a certain misrepresentation of Christian values as well as the source of authority for living. It is no wonder then that in a meeting of some biblical scholars, what was

considered paramount for biblical studies in our generation for the group was the revaluing of Scripture.\(^2\)

However, more than a new appreciation of the Bible, there is a need for us to have an understanding of how to interpret some of these difficult texts within Scripture, so they do not get subsumed under the rubric of “old” and therefore irrelevant for our time. More importantly, for a society that is increasingly becoming disenchanted with Christianity and the understanding of the role of Scripture in contemporary society, these stories may show a perspective that Scripture also may be used to give voice to the silenced voices in our society. Furthermore, it is our responsibility as custodians of these ancient stories and the subsequent interpretations over the centuries, to make the story come to life for audiences today. To do this, we would be well served to read the story with our forebears.

**Problem Statement**

In the history of biblical scholarship, no other period seems to have laid claim to success in developing consistent methodologies and approaches to biblical texts than the critical period. With this achievement, there is an illusion about pre-critical interpretations as “uncritical” probably due to the assumption that pre-critical interpreters did not employ the historical-critical methods developed and favoured by modern interpreters.

In recent times, as early as the 70s, biblical interpreters sought to tackle the illusion of absolute knowledge and subsequent hegemony of the critical period in biblical

hermeneutics, and some have argued for a rereading of pre-critical authors. Like any period, new hermeneutical approaches are constantly challenging the predominant ways of interpreting biblical texts.

As Brueggemann pointed out, “There can be little doubt that we are in a wholly new interpretive situation.” He further contends, “It is my judgment that church interpretation (especially where historical criticism has been taken with excessive seriousness) has tended to trim and domesticate the text not only to accommodate regnant modes of knowledge, but also to enhance regnant modes of power.” This argument is sustainable, as can be seen in the present dispensation’s concentration on the perspectives of the proverbial underdogs throughout history.

In examining feminists’ approaches to scriptural texts, one will find a new paradigm in reading not only from the perspective of the oft ignored females in certain stories, but also revisionist attempts to reclaim lost voices of female characters in certain stories within Scriptures, mostly considered difficult texts. Discussing features of feminist criticism of scriptural texts, Cheryl Exum argues that it is “remarkably pluralistic

---


4 By modern times, I refer to the age of reason and scientific approaches. It is also the period in biblical studies where critical methods were employed in the interpretation of Scripture. As Walter Brueggemann points out in the preface to his book, Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. vii, “historical criticism, as conventionally understood, is our particular practice of modernity. This is evident, in my judgment, in the fact that those interpreters who most fear the authoritarianism of the church are most passionate about the positive use of historical criticism, for such criticism was devised precisely as a response against such authoritarianism.” See also, Biblical Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, p. 55 for a description of the understanding of the age in nineteenth-century Europe. The entry records this, “In the modern age of nineteenth-century Europe, beyond the imagination of the classical age, the substance of persons, events, ideas and things became further grounded in the specificity of their time and place and a deeper assessment of circumstance.”

5 Brueggemann, Texts Under Negotiation, p. vii.

6 Ibid.
and diverse. It not only recognizes the gains to be had from a variety of approaches; because it is suspicious of the notion that there is a “proper way” to read a text as an expression of male control of texts and male control of reading, it also encourages multiple, even contradictory, readings of the same text.” She rightly contends, “Reading is not disinterested. Our interpretation of a text is the result of the kinds of questions we ask, and those questions are determined by our interests (acknowledged or not).” This same principle applies to difficult texts as well, even though more often than not, we are not sure what questions we want to ask of the texts.

Difficult texts are by nature and nomenclature, problematic. Some of these difficult texts are stories within the Bible that receive scant, if any, attention from readers. Some of these stories have become obscure due to infrequent use and/or intentional neglect. While some of these stories do not have significant or immediate relevance to contemporary situations, there are others, which are still relevant today, and are often neglected by preachers. John Lee Thompson points out, “Every preacher knows, as do most serious readers of the Bible, that there are lots and lots of stories in the Bible that people would just as soon avoid.” Barbara Brown Taylor also comments on these stories, “The commentaries do not say much about them.” I believe the problems with these stories are often translational as well as exegetical dilemmas born either out of a clash in cultures or religious sensibilities.

---

8 Ibid.
Some of the problems stem from what Origen of Alexandria referred to as “unedifying texts” in the word of God. At other times they are neglected because they are “stories of divinely sanctioned violence, stories of abuse or marginalization.” Most of these stories of violence “and just plain obscure texts are perennially troublesome to readers – and, consequently, widely avoided.”

Due to recent scholarship on “history from below” mostly from the global south, some of these obscure texts have received significant attention. Retrospective history from the perspectives of the oppressed within narratives and/or lesser voices in written history has become a staple within academic halls. Such scholarly pursuit engages and critiques previous interpretations and narrated accounts of past events, which are usually from the victor’s perspective. However, it would be a disservice to past interpreters of scriptural events and/or narratives to assume all were blind to the plight of the proverbial underdogs in history.

Following such arguments, this thesis hopes to address the assumption that past or pre-critical interpretations of Scripture have nothing to offer new generations of Bible readers and interpreters. In the case of difficult texts such as Judg 19, one is able to contest this particular opinion, as more often than not these texts still face an uneven amount of neglect compared to other texts within Scripture. As such, a wholesale dismissal of past interpretations of biblical texts does not augur well for contemporary interpreters.

---

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
It would be untrue to assume pre-critical interpreters, as well as critical ones (our generation is becoming far removed from that period), did not address some of the issues in some of these stories. I also believe that without reference to past interpretations we are in danger of not only denying the theological and biblical complexities of our Christian heritage, but also the gains of previous interpreters. In a postmodern era, the importance of reading from the past is of necessity, as there is a need for a consistent way of addressing these age-old questions in light of the embrace of ambiguity of experience in this era.

As this thesis will show, we not only benefit from the wisdom and complexities introduced into texts by past generations, we also have the retrospective advantage to see the influencing forces at play in their actions of deciphering scriptural texts. While the gains of the critical era in biblical interpretation cannot be dismissed, and in fact needs to be continually used and appropriated, there are certain limitations associated with such academia-bound methodologies.

In Brueggemann’s *Texts Under Negotiation*, an attempt was made to give a programmatic approach to interpreting and preaching difficult texts for a postmodern era. While his approach might be said to work for some passages within the Scriptures, it is limited in that, only those who are able systematically to dissect and understand what he proposed would be able to offer any tangible interpretation. Even after such analysis, one is still left with a sour taste from reading passages like Judg 19, wondering where to go from the understanding gained from the technical analysis of the passage, without

---

15 I do not refer to a rigid methodology, but the undergirding motive/s for the methodology employed in the different eras.
recourse to a personal connection to the lived realities of the audience and the victim/s in the story and among the audience.

Barbara Brown Taylor also suggests we have the opportunity to sound fresh when we encounter these passages, because ‘no one’ has really addressed the issues in the passages. In her words, “When we engage these lesser-known stories, we are not protected from them by layers of interpretation, ... it is often up to us to wrestle with them on our own.”\textsuperscript{16} Taken at face value, Taylor’s assertion might be said to be true, because more often than not, one finds commentaries skipping over such difficult passages as Judg 19. However, it is not always the case that one will sound fresh.

Underlying Barbara Brown Taylor’s argument is some form of “chronological snobbery,” a term coined by C.S. Lewis to describe “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”\textsuperscript{17} To say, “The only voices we have heard addressing them out loud are our own,” is to assume that others have not already done so. The fallout of such presumption is to repeat the mistakes others might have made in addressing the passage in the past. Contesting such an approach to reading these passages, Thompson argues, “Taylor’s suggestion is plausible, but ultimately worrisome.”\textsuperscript{18}

**Thesis Statement**

It is my contention, then, that the currency for re-valuing Scripture in the postmodern world is not necessarily the creation of new methods of interpretation, but for

\textsuperscript{16} Barbara Brown Taylor, “Hard Words,” p. 24
\textsuperscript{18} Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, p. 7.
us to find glimpses of sustained approaches in our collective past, in both pre-critical and critical interpretations of Scripture. Recent studies in the history of interpretation have uncovered works from both the nineteenth and twentieth century that offer fresh lenses for reading biblical stories, giving us “new” and refreshing (borrowing Barbara Brown Taylor’s words)\(^1^9\) ways of understanding these difficult texts.

As Thompson points out, “there is something counterintuitive in suggesting that we don’t fully know what the Bible means until we know something about what the Bible has meant.”\(^2^0\) It is important then not only for preachers, but for contemporary readers as well to reclaim and recover some of the interpretive approaches and issues that were used and struggled with in both eras of biblical hermeneutics mentioned above, with all their attending uncertainties.

We need to revive some of the lost meanings that gave life to the texts, and also rejoice and celebrate the achievements as well as certainties that helped shape the way we understand these stories. Ignorance of the past does not bode well for us, for not only are we in danger of committing the same mistakes, but also of losing the gains of the previous generations of interpreters. Equally important, I believe, is for a generation that has become numb to images of violence both in print and electronic media, to be reminded of the existence of texts within sacred Scripture that speak to such violence. Rather than reading the Bible the way we watch television, through censorship, we can take cues from past interpreters on how they wrestled with the problems in the texts and found ways of living within their struggles.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 11.
With the help of previous interpreters, we might be able to see some obscure issues that otherwise might have remained unimportant to our generation, as they do not apply to our social milieu and often times do not function in our moral turpitude.

It is to this end that this paper wishes to explore the importance of the reception history of Judg 19. With the help of two past interpreters, Josephine Butler and Phyllis Trible, a case will be made that we cannot afford to lose past interpretations. I will argue that these two interpreters worked not only from the predominant issues (feminist concerns) in their eras, and took cues from the debates in understanding the underlying problems of this passage, but they also remained faithful to the text and its application to their own times. As well, the theses of their interpretations transcend their own periods, and are still relevant to us today, not only because they spoke to needs within their societies, but also because their interpretations emanated from a deep place within them, an ideological well of compassion. This ideological compassion translated to ideological criticism of the predominant ideology in their different times, which makes their work sustainable and relevant, even today.

Methodology

Using Jacquelyn Grant’s suggested method of contextualization,21 the approach for this paper will be to understand the two commentators within their own contexts. The cultural eras in which these two women wrote their pieces will be explored. Besides the influence of the socio-cultural milieu, a look at the theology and Christology of the two women will be explored in each of the chapters devoted to them, to see any correlations

---

between their interpretations, their theological convictions and their approach to
Scripture. With the aim of finding a sustainable approach from one generation to another,
their eras, issues, and interpretations will be compared and contrasted.

The remaining part of this chapter will be devoted to previous interpretations of
the passage. The works of both John Lee Thompson and David Gunn will be extensively
drawn upon in accessing the predominant male interpretations of this passage in past
centuries. Both scholars have treated the reception history of the passage and pointed out
some of the critical discourses around the issues in the passage.

While chapter two will focus on Josephine Butler, her background and her
interpretation of Judg 19, Chapter Three will be dedicated to exploring Trible, her
upbringing and her interpretation of Judg 19. Chapter Four will conclude with a
summation of the approach both writers used, their gains and some of their limitations. A
discourse will then be offered on how a problematic text like Judges 19 can be used in a
postmodern setting, while emphasizing the importance of the contributions of these past
interpreters.

**Problems of Judg 19**

A quintessentially difficult text, Judg 19 is a passage fraught with moral dilemmas
even for a postmodern age that espouses relativity and argues for ambiguity of
experience. From the mystery surrounding the reason the concubine left the Levite in the
second verse of the chapter, to the question raised by the Levite at the end of the chapter,
exegetical problems abound for the biblical scholar, and even more so, applicability of
the text to a contemporary audience, for the preacher.
It has been argued that there are no redeeming virtues in the story.\textsuperscript{22} As such, its presence in biblical canon is not only puzzling, but also intimidating for anyone to tackle not only on a Sunday morning, but also within the walls of academia, as well as the larger communities of faith. Such stories as this engender a certain uneasiness within people. Thompson expresses this sentiment this way, “In general, we aren’t in the habit of reading stories that upset us, and we certainly don’t hear them preached. Sometimes such stories are avoided simply because they are so gruesome, or so violent, or because the “moral” of the story seems so elusive.”\textsuperscript{23}

Poignant is Thompson’s observation that “although Phyllis Trible’s pioneering study of Old Testament women appeared over twenty years ago as lectures carrying the subtitle, “Unpreached Stories of Faith,” these texts remain today mostly as she found them: unpreached.”\textsuperscript{24} This fact remains and is illustrated in a recent conversation with a Salvation Army officer on whether he would ever preach on such stories.\textsuperscript{25}

One of such stories that rightly upsets us is the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19. The story’s gruesome details not only create a certain uneasiness within the reader, but also shock our sensibilities. In addition, there is a feeling of helplessness and sometimes anger in the face of such violent crimes committed against the nameless

---

\textsuperscript{22} Professor William Morrow, Hebrew Scriptures professor at Queen’s University has noted several times during class and private discussions, the lack of redemptive moral in the story.

\textsuperscript{23} Thompson, \textit{Reading the Bible with the Dead}, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} I had asked if this officer had ever preached on Judg 19, thinking perhaps, because the Salvation Army deals with lots of domestic abuse issues, this might be a passage that might have been used to speak to such situations. His response however is reflective of the sentiments of most of the ministers and people I have engaged in talking about the chapter. He replied with a look of incredulity on his face, saying “O, goodness no! I can’t preach on that passage.” “Mind you,” he continued, “I can interpret the passage, but I don’t know what to say to people about the nature of the excessive violence in the story. It will probably upset a lot of people.” Such response might seem a bit odd, but his response merely accentuates a general feeling of inadequacy in the presence of such violent text in Scripture. It reaffirms the inadequacy of our sensibilities to deal with such ‘profane’ acts within sacred texts (With the exception of violent acts that are considered the results of God’s wrath), as Thompson described above.
woman in the story. Readers are also invited into the discussions of the ethical dilemmas present within the entire narrative. It is not surprising then that preachers often avoid the story. I believe there is a reason for the presence of this story in the Bible. As such, there is a necessity placed upon us by the mere presence of the story to engage and explore the intended or unintended lessons for us within the narrative.

For the sake of this thesis however, it is essential to highlight some of the major exegetical problems and moral dilemmas present in the narrative, to appreciate better the reluctance in dealing with the text. This will introduce the reader to most of the problems associated with the passage. While not comprehensive, the discussion of the problems will expose the reader to new problems and remind the reader of old and familiar ones. In all, the aim is to get a summary of the challenges this particular chapter poses for any interpreter. Following this, I intend to look at some of the reception history of the story, to appreciate better the thesis of this paper.

Some of the major problems that face any interpreter or reader of the passage include, but are not limited to the violent images present in the story. As Thompson points out, “no story of violence to an individual in Scripture can be more grisly and horrifying than the gang rape, murder, and subsequent butchery of the Levite’s wife in Judg 19.” Besides the inordinate amount of violence present in the latter part of the narrative, one is faced with a lot of ambiguity in motives, both of the characters and that of the author. Authorial intent is elusive in this particular narrative, therefore inviting lots of speculation as to the function of certain scenes within the context of the narrative and the biblical canon as a whole.

26 Ibid., p. 193.
First, the proper role of the woman, the subject/object of the narrative within the Levite’s house, is unclear. Verse one reveals that the Levite “took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.”

It is unclear from the text whether the woman was someone else’s concubine before the Levite took her as a concubine. One commentator attempts to clarify this detail by translating that sentence as “Better: ‘he took to him a woman as concubine.’” Another author has this particular emphasis in his footnote, “He took to himself a concubine, a woman from Bethlehem in Judah.”

Apparently for both commentators, the meaning of the sentence was obscure, and rather than leave room for misinterpretation, they decided clarifying the sentence was necessary. This particular problem is further complicated by the position/role of the woman in the Levite’s house, and the proper translation of `ʾiššâ (wife/woman/female) and `ṭîgeš (concubine) in the same verse. Cheryl Exum points out that “The precise nature of the relationship between a man and his `ṭîgeš is not always clear from the biblical texts.”

The second problem the interpreter faces is the reason the woman left the Levite. Regardless of her status in his house, it seems totally out of place in ancient Israel for a woman to leave her husband voluntarily. There are definitely no precedents within Scripture of a woman leaving her husband. This is not to argue this was not a common practice in ancient times. However, in this particular case, it would seem rather strange...

---

31 One could argue that both Hagar (Gen 21:14) and Michal (I Sam 25:44) did leave their husbands, but on both occasions they were forced to leave by the men in charge of their lives.
for a contemporary Western reader to read of a woman leaving her husband in biblical
times given the assumption and sometimes scholarly emphasis on the patriarchal nature
of the Bible, and thus a reading that suggests women’s subservient and often silent roles
in ancient Israelite societies.\footnote{For studies of depictions of biblical women in their afterlife (a term employed by Carol Meyers to
describe “the way they appear in postbiblical cultural productions”), See the preface to Women in
Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the
also, Athalya Brenner, Israelite Women: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative, (Sheffield: Sheffield
Academic Press, 1985).}

The history of the interpretation of this text in regards to the reason why the
concubine left seems rooted in two different translations of the narrative. The NRSV
translates the first part of the second verse as “But his concubine became angry with
him.” The Greek Septuagint translates this particular part as “But his concubine
prostituted herself against him.” The Greek lexicon describes this verse thus, “καὶ
ὡργίσθη and she became angry - with him. Or - ἡτζήνα and she felt repugnance, for

the MT\footnote{Masoretic Text} ἡτζήνα and she prostituted herself\footnote{Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel and Katrin Hauspie, A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint: Revised
Electronic Edition (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart, 2003).} The differences in translation will be
discussed later as we discuss the patristic approach to the statement.

However, whatever might have transpired between the couple seems not to have
warranted any hostility between the two. The reception given to the Levite by the woman
and her father suggests the reason for the brief split might either have been something
inconsequential, or all parties involved were very forgiving and magnanimous. I suspect
the latter is not truly the case.

This particular hospitality offered by the concubine’s father brings us to the next
problem, one that begs the question of the necessity of the exceptional hospitality shown
by the concubine’s father. Feminist scholars like Trible see a power tussle between the father and the husband over the ownership and control of the woman as the reason for the ‘excessive’ hospitality.\footnote{See Phyllis Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives}, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 67-8.}

Subsequent problems are the voice of the servant unheeded by the Levite (Judg 19:11), the inhospitality of the people of Gibeah as no one took the party in (Judg 19:15), the eventual attack on the old man’s house by the men of the city. The true identity of “the men of the city” is also at stake. The Levite suggested the perpetrators of the evil were the “Lords of Gibeah” (Judg 20:5), even though the narrative in the preceding chapter does not suggest such. Important as well is the attempted homosexual rape of the Levite (Judg 19:22) and the real motive/s behind this particular clamouring for “knowledge” of the Levite.

Furthermore, the suggestion of the old man in trading the Levite for his daughter and the Levite’s concubine (Judg 19:24) is also problematic for the contemporary mindset. The dastardly acts that followed still remain the most vivid and violent acts against an individual in all of Scripture. As such, there are no parallels or precedents for comparison, which offer an interpretation of the story from Scripture. The Levite pushing out his own concubine (verse 25),\footnote{The suggestion of the Levite here is this writer’s interpretation, as the text does not explicitly state who actually pushed the woman out, the old man or the Levite (Judg 19:25). In either case, the Levite did not seem fazed by the fact that his wife was pushed out, which led me to conclude that the man who pushed out the concubine was the Levite himself.} the serial gang raping of the concubine (verse 25), the non-challant attitude of the Levite in the morning, and the eventual ‘butchering’ of the concubine (verse 29), all add to the problems of this particular passage.
Critical as well is the state of the woman before she was hacked into twelve pieces by the Levite. The question of who was responsible for the death of the woman is also important. The author was silent as to whether she was dead, sleeping, or just unconscious when the Levite found her. This may seem a moot point considering the pain she must have gone through during the night, but it is important for a better grip on the narrative for a crime-conscious contemporary audience to know the identity of the person ultimately responsible for the ‘murder’ of the concubine. The ambiguity is obvious and therefore subjective to the opinion of each reader, as we see from the comments of one writer, “it was her death at the hand of the Levite that caused the civil war between Israel and Benjamin.” While this may seem a bold and presumptuous thing to say in light of the fact that the narrator did not explicitly say this, it suggests the interpretive twists that come into play, due to the unknown time of death.

Finally, the Levite’s anger suggests a certain claim of innocence in the whole ordeal, which creates an interpretive dilemma. The question the interpreter should struggle with is the reason for the Levite to think this way, if truly a sense of innocence is felt from reading the Levite’s character. This could suggest one of two things, either the Levite did not see anything wrong in abandoning his concubine/wife, or it was an acceptable practice to give female relatives over to men (as the old man and Lot’s suggestion implies) to satiate their lusts. Also important for interpreters is the issue of

---

38 See Judg 19:24 and Gen 19:8. There are several other verses in the Hebrew Scripture that suggests something similar. In Judg 21:6 we see this happening. Also in the story of both Abraham (Gen 20:1-7) and Isaac (Gen 26:6-11), the beauty of the wife is not only the issue, but also the satiation of the admirers’ desires is also suggested. Though not documented, some tribes in certain African countries do practice such a form of hospitality of giving their wives or daughters to their guests.
the silence of the woman throughout the narrative, a problem that will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

**Reception History**

Given the plethora of problems highlighted above, it is interesting that the few pre-critical interpreters who commented on the chapter addressed only a few of these problems, or focused principally on one or two of the issues, to the exclusion of others. It is important to note that most commentators from church history who were not shy about commenting on difficult passages were silent about the narrative of the Levite’s concubine. As Thompson points out, “The tale’s repugnance may be argued from the reluctance with which it is mentioned by commentators. Among the church fathers, only Ambrose, Jerome, and Sulpicius said anything at all. Even Augustine fell mute.”

Thompson argued Augustine’s silence, “may well have paralyzed many medieval commentators, who habitually borrowed wholesale from the Latin father.”

David Gunn confirms this particular reluctance when he said, “While these chapters are not widely discussed by ancient and medieval writers, they clearly raised problems from early on.”

The problems inherent in the narrative are not reduced to the lack of edifying material in the narrative alone, but also exegetical problems, especially moral dilemmas for any reader. David Gunn pointed out three problems past or pre-critical commentators have focused on, “first, the men of Gibeah desire to rape the male guest; second, the householder offers his daughter and the woman to be raped instead; third, the

39 Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, p. 193.
40 Ibid., p. 194.
42 The use of the word ‘pre-critical’ is merely to suggest time frame rather than the actual engagement of the text by ancient writers, because I do believe some of the writers did tackle these problems critically.
Levite (or the householder) actually puts the woman out for the men.”43 Because of the problems faced in tackling these issues, some of the writers sanitized the story to make it less ‘abominable’ and in that way, were able to reduce the moral ambiguities; at least it would seem, for their readers.

To look at the problems writers have concentrated on in dealing with this passage, I will examine examples of interpretation across the different eras of interpretation. To show that in every generation the same interpretive issues arose despite different influencing factors in reading and interpreting scriptural passages.

**Interpretations**

Both Pseudo-Philo and Flavius Josephus (c. 37 – c. 100)44 wrote about the narrative of the Levite’s concubine. For both authors, the problem of the story is the initiators of the violent rape of the woman. They were not too concerned with the attendant suggestions of the old man, nor were they too concerned with the concubine being dismembered by the Levite. Both seem to agree that the fault of the violence should lie at the feet of the wicked men of Gibeah, but not entirely. Josephus’ account depicted the beauty of the woman as the source of the violent acts. “Now certain young men of the inhabitants of Gibeah, having seen the woman in the market place, and admiring her beauty, when they understood that she lodged with the old man, came to the doors as condemning the weakness and fewness of the old man’s family.”45

Josephus seemed to have rewritten the narrative. Following his reading there is a suggestion that this narration was considered a more ‘appropriate’ interpretation of the

---

43 Ibid., p. 245.
45 Ibid.
events. This is why Thompson accuses Josephus of sanitizing the tale. He contends, “Josephus sanitized the tale, recasting it as a patched-up lovers’ quarrel that met a tragic end when the men of Gibeah seized the husband’s beautiful wife. After a night of abuse, she died, less from bodily injury than from her grief and shame.” He continues, “The story remains tragic, but Josephus has removed the reference to same-sex rape and endowed the Levite’s wife with the classic female virtues of modesty and shame.”

Josephus’ sanitizing of the story suggests that perhaps the narrative might not have fit his understanding of the necessity of a disturbing story within sacred texts. His spin on the story, according to Thompson, did influence other writers, as seen among the church fathers. It is possible that Josephus saw the narrative as a type of beautiful-wife-dangerous-ruler narrative, reminiscent of the patriarchal stories of both Abraham and Isaac. Both men asked their wives to lie so they would not be killed (Gen 20:1ff; 26:6ff). Interestingly enough, both Abraham and his grandson would have been contented with their wives sleeping with the monarchs if it would lead to their lives being spared. Josephus might have sanitized the story because he felt justified in thinking that the writers did make a mistake in documenting the story. Whatever his reason may have been, we are still left with the story in its original state, the unsanitized version.

Pseudo-Philo “deals with the problems more radically. He simply has the men entering the house by force and dragging out both Levite and concubine but then ‘casting off’ him before abusing her.” This particular translation or interpretation again deflects any blame from the Levite. Suggested here is the fact that the Levite might have been physically removed from the scene, which therefore exonerates him from any

---

46 Thompson, Reading the Bible with the Dead, p. 194.
47 Ibid.
48 Gunn, Judges Through the Centuries, p. 245.
wrongdoing of pushing out his wife. What is not clear in reading these two writers is the reason why they deflected all blames from the Levite. Thompson offered a reason for Josephus’ reading of the story. He argues, “Josephus’s intention was to cast the history of his people in a favorable light.” Needless, it seems both Josephus and Pseudo-Philo were content with blaming the wicked men of Gibeah for the wrongdoings in the story, and fully exonerating the Levite.\(^{50}\)

While the examples of Abraham and Isaac forsaking their wives (Gen 12; 20:1ff and Gen 26:6ff) to protect themselves from the rulers may suggest precedents or a common practice in the ancient Near Eastern culture they inhabited, one can still assume from the actions of Jacob in preparing for the protection of his wives, concubines and children (Gen 33:1-3), that there might have been an equal practice of protecting one’s family.\(^{51}\)

Thompson contends that among early Christian writers, “Josephus’ influence is clearest in Ambrose, who digressed deeply into the story of the Levite’s wife in the course of two letters written around 380, advocating virginity and defending a Christian virgin named Indicia from an accusation of unchastity.”\(^{52}\) Like Josephus, Ambrose did not mention the intended homosexual rape of the Levite; rather he talked about the intended violence by wicked men. This is his version of the violent events:

And when they were satisfied and the tables were removed, vile men rushed up


\(^{50}\) As a future research project, an exploration of the motives for writing in ancient times and the predominant culture at the time will probably reveal the reason for such deflection of blame from the Levite.

\(^{51}\) It is unclear whether Jacob’s motive for protecting his wives and children stems from chivalry or self-preservation, one can conclude however from the arrangement of the wives and their children that he did care for some, more than the others.

\(^{52}\) Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, p. 194.
and surrounded the house. Then the old man offered these wicked men his
daughter, a virgin, and the concubine with whom she shared her bed, only that
violence might not be inflicted on his guest. But when reason did no good and
violence prevailed, the Levite parted from his wife, and they knew her and abused
her all that night. Overcome by this cruelty or by grief at her wrong, she fell at the
door of their host where her husband had entered, and gave up the ghost, with the
last effort of her life guarding the feelings of a good wife so as to preserve for her
husband at least her mortal remains.⁵³

Ambrose’s depiction of the Levite as ‘parting with his wife’ echoes Josephus’
understanding of the event. He seems to suggest that the wife was perhaps seized by the
‘wicked’ mob, and not pushed out by the Levite as the NRSV translation suggests.⁵⁴
Ambrose argues that “the Levite does not expel his wife; she was rather seized by the
mob, only to die of humiliation the next morning.”⁵⁵ This rendition of the story further
highlights the probable uneasiness commentators had with the Levite not protecting his
concubine. Ambrose also seemed uncomfortable with the homosexual reference in the
story.

Another church father, Severus Sulpicius (Sulpitius) also commented on the
narrative. His commentary did acknowledge the intended rape of the Levite, even though
his choice of words did not explicitly suggest rape. His narration simply said “the young
men of the town surrounded the guest, with the view of subjecting him to improper
treatment.”⁵⁶ It is also interesting that he chose the words ‘young men’ as opposed to “the
men of the city, a perverse lot” (Judg 19:22) or “The lords of Gibeah” (Judg 20:5) as
suggested by the Levite. Sulpicius too was most likely influenced by Josephus’ account
and also a probable understanding that elders of the town and Lords of the town could not

Systems, 1997), ECF 3.10.1.3.19.
⁵⁴Most of the church fathers used either the Latin Vulgate or the Septuagint. See Thompson, Reading the
Bible with the Dead, p. 194.
⁵⁵Ibid.
have done such a dastardly act.

What is also interesting about Sulpicius’ commentary however is his narration and interpretation of the events, which even the authors of the volume that holds his work commented on as “A clear mistake of memory in our author. The whole narrative is confused.”57 This was mentioned when Sulpitius suggested that the concubine died on seeing her husband. Even though in the same sentence he conceded the ambiguity of the cause of death, “But she (whether from the injury their vile conduct had inflicted on her, or from shame, I do not venture to assert) died on again seeing her husband.”58 This seems to indicate that the death of the concubine is brought about by the humiliation of the night and the attendant shame and trauma, thus echoing the conclusions of Ambrose.

The second verse of the narrative provides an alternate explanation to why the text is silent over the treatment of the woman. Thompson points this out when he said “What is easily missed, however, is that all these patristic and medieval writers were blinded, even when they were silent, by a special kind of ignorance.”59 What Thompson describes as “a special kind of ignorance” is reference to the reason why the concubine left the Levite, in verse two.

Thompson points out, “all of them were working from either the Latin Vulgate or the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) – neither of which reports what the Hebrew Bible says of the Levite’s wife in Judg 19:2.”60 He continues, “Where the Vulgate and Septuagint say that the Levite’s wife “became angry” with her husband and

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Thompson, Reading the Bible with the Dead, p. 194.
60 Ibid.
left him, the Hebrew version states, instead, that “she played the harlot” and left.”\textsuperscript{61}

Thompson further comments that this is “highly prejudicial to the Levite’s wife.”\textsuperscript{62}

Though he did not elucidate, one can conclude that such information clearly sets up the story in such a way to blame the concubine for whatever happened to her later on.

In contrast, the Levite’s initiative in pursuing her, even though she had played the harlot, sets up the Levite in good light, and could possibly also set him up as the offended party all through the story. Either way, this particular verse has been problematic, and as Thompson points out, the Hebrew version provides “an inflammatory bit of information.”\textsuperscript{63}

Another church father who did not come to terms with the Hebrew version of the narrative was Jerome (ca. 370-420). Thompson comments on his interpretation, “it is a mystery beyond explanation that Jerome, who translated the Vulgate from what he liked to call the “Hebrew Truth,” seems to have preferred the Greek reading here.”\textsuperscript{64} Jerome’s preference for the Greek reading should not be a mystery, like others before him, the translation “she became angry” is an easier read, and easier to reconcile to the rest of the story, than the alternative of her playing the harlot.

Overall, the blame for the subsequent events in the story seemed to have been at stake for the church fathers. Perhaps, associating with the status of the Levite as a ‘servant of God’ makes it difficult for these church fathers to condemn his actions of giving the concubine to the men of the city, they were also careful however not to blame the concubine. Thompson points this out when he said, “no one blames the Levite’s wife

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., pp. 194-5.
for all the disasters that followed.”65 As we shall see in the following paragraphs, the medieval writers and reformers were also uncomfortable with the story, but did not actively interact with the dilemmas present within the story, nor offer many solutions to the problems. However, some actually engaged rather critically some of the issues at stake within the story.

Of all medieval writers, it seems Nicolas of Lyra (1270-1349) was the only one to actively comment in-depth on the story of the Levite’s concubine. Nicolas addressed some of the ethical issues within the story, “one of these is the shocking offer made by the host in Gibeah to give his daughter to the mob at his door, an offer fulfilled by the Levite when he pushed his wife outside.”66 Nicolas condemned this action as a “mortal sin.”67

This reading actually runs counter to what Augustine had concluded centuries earlier, when he excused Lot’s similar gesture (Gen 19:8) as compensatory evil. This is the “idea that a lesser sin (the rape of a woman) may be permitted to avoid a greater sin (the “unnatural” rape of a man).”68 Thompson explained, “Augustine left a precedent for thinking that the bodies of men are of greater value than the bodies of women.”69 He continues,

But Lyra countered Augustine’s interpretation with a sober and sophisticated analysis of the situation, for the angry men of Gibeah may well have “abused” the Levite’s wife by subjecting her to “unnatural” intercourse – what we usually call sodomy. So the Levite would not necessarily have avoided any greater evil by abandoning his wife.70

65 Ibid., p. 233.
66 Ibid., p. 195.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
But like the church fathers, Nicolas of Lyra’s lack of rebuke of the concubine - if indeed she had played the harlot, according to the Hebrew version – seems rather surprising. Thompson noted that “Lyra was well aware, then, that the Levite’s wife wasn’t just angry. Rather, as the Hebrew Bible says, she was an adulteress, so she probably left her husband either because he threw her out or because she ran off with a lover.”71 So it is a little bit confusing that one would find Nicolas’ interpretation to ignore his knowledge of the “Hebrew truth.”72

Most scholars in the sixteenth century were of a uniform opinion as to the nature of what really happened between the couple. It seems they “all agreed that Judges 19 told not of a marital spat, but of adultery – and someone was to blame.”73 For these men, “Pellican, Brenz, Bucer and Vermigli, the adultery of the Levite’s wife introduced a volatile issue. Several wondered for example, why she hadn’t already been put to death.”74 Sensitive to contemporary bias against such judgment, Thompson commented, “That may seem harsh, but were they really out to get her? No, they were merely trying to be good commentators;”75 he concluded.

Furthermore, given the context of their own time, Thompson argued, “These Protestants, moreover, knew what anarchy was. For them, the Reformation had brought not only the glorious restoration of the gospel, but also civil strife, persecution and bloodshed – and accusations that telling people they were saved by “faith alone” would lead to loose morals.”76 Thompson’s attempt here to locate the interpretation is worth

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., p. 196.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
noting, because it relates to the interpretive space in which this thesis aims to speak. Also important is Thompson’s observation that “it would be wrong to infer from their determination to see the Levite’s wife punished that Bucer and his colleagues were specially hostile to women.”\textsuperscript{77} Thompson concludes, “By and large, they agreed with Augustine that homosexual rape is a greater crime than heterosexual rape. But the consciences of these commentators are clearly uneasy.”\textsuperscript{78} Thompson also offers a similar commentary about other authors’ understanding of compensatory evil:

> Were we to compare the parallel story of Lot, similar results would be obtained: Luther, Calvin, Musculus, and Vermigli reject any appeal to compensatory evil. They find Lot’s endangerment of his daughters disloyal and execrable, vicious, detestable, unlawful and unfaithful. Like Vermigli, Musculus insists that no father has the authority to make such an offer, and no daughter is bound to obey.\textsuperscript{79} Overall, there was a definite unease around the interpretation of the story for these writers mentioned above. Like so many contemporary interpreters, they hesitated in commenting fully on the passage. No connection to their own milieu was really made, which makes it difficult to translate their efforts into worthwhile interpretations for our time. However, it is wrong to assume that all pre-critical commentators ignored some of the salient points within the story. As we have seen above, there is a corrective for contemporary interpreters and readers. Ours is not the only generation that struggled with some of the issues in the passage, and while their conclusions might be hard to swallow for some of us today, the fact remains; they worked within their own time, interpreting a text that has troubled many.

As shall be seen in this paper, not all pre-critical interpreters concluded with Augustine’s idea of \textit{compensatory evil}. Josephine Butler, a pre-critical interpreter, did not

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 197.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
hesitate in tackling some of the major issues within the passage and applied it favourably to her time. Though not formally trained, she was astute in linking the passage to contemporary situations. Even though at the time there were biblical scholars who advocated silence over such issues as portrayed in the passage, Butler, did not have a problem in using the story as a call to action, neither did she hesitate in using the ‘good news’ within the story.

Trible, a prodigy of Muilenburg, also found within the text, a “call to speak.” While one can safely say that Trible belongs to the critical era of biblical interpretation, she did not allow the restrictions of the predominant methodologies to deter her from seeing within the story, a call to repentance and a necessity to preach the stories. It has been more than two decades since she wrote her book, and her articulation of the story still remains relevant.

While two different eras and countries separate Butler and Trible, there is one connecting factor that cannot be dismissed. Both writers read the story as Christians with a focus on the female victims in the story. Though Butler’s reading cannot be considered feminist, her cutting-edge reading of Judg 19 stems from her notion of the equality of men and women, which would earn her the feminist label today. Trible’s feminist concerns also helped shape her reading of Scripture.

As shall be seen in the subsequent chapters, it is a worthwhile enterprise to read some of the difficult stories of the Bible with past interpreters, especially the story of the Levite’s concubine. The wealth of knowledge gained from reading these past interpretations offers refreshing viewpoints that otherwise might remain obscure due to the notion of the superiority of one period over another. It will be seen that in reading

---

80 Trible, Texts of Terror, p. 86.
Judges 19 with these past interpreters, we can find ways of reading the passage and making the lessons come alive for our generation as well as they did for their generations.
CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

Works on the life of Josephine Butler reveal the various facets of the life of a woman whose voice was heard within the halls of government in a time when public space was strictly men’s domain. The period and location was Victorian England. Significant in this particular century for most English women were the battles fought publicly for women’s rights. While there were many women activists, who in our time would be judged as feminists (e.g., Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale, Catherine Booth, and Elizabeth Fry), none addressed the issue of the rights of the fallen woman like Josephine Butler did. Such was her impact on society, that Josephine Butler was regarded as “the most distinguished woman of the Nineteenth-century.”

Though Butler’s actions and speeches warranted such acclaim, the focus of this chapter is on her biblical interpretation skills, as well as the factors that influenced how she appropriated biblical texts in her fights against injustice. Of importance are the socio-political influences of her father, the daily practices of her mother in reading Scriptures with her family, as well as the theological and religious background that shaped her. Equally important are her own religious convictions and encounters as she interacted with the social debates of her time, culminating in a distinguished career in the fight against inequality and social oppression. All these I believe are reflected in her approach to and the use of Scripture. Of importance in that usage and to us in this paper is her understanding and appropriation of the story of the Levite’s concubine. From her

---

interpretation of this story, we will find a sustaining approach and conclusion relevant and useful for our time.

Though critical approaches to Scripture were beginning to surface in the works of Jowett and others during Butler’s time, she was not formally trained nor engaged in such enterprise. However, as shall be seen in the course of this chapter, her approach to Judges 19 characterizes her as an erudite Bible reader. Equally important is the fact that even the notorious Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s published *The Woman’s Bible*\(^2\) commentary, had no such entry as analytical as Butler’s interpretation on the narrative of the Levite’s wife.

However, Butler’s exposé of the chapter’s inequalities was very telling of her social era. An era filled with gender struggles, the points Butler made in her speech and commentary on Judg 19 not only address the story itself, but also reflect the social struggles of her time. As will be argued later in the chapter, her interpretation of the chapter was not only relevant for her social milieu, in addition to the lessons, they transcend her time.

Butler’s interpretation and application of the passage to her social context is not only different, but also rather unorthodox for the period in question. It behooves us then first to explore her background, the period she lived in, and the forces that molded her, to appreciate better how she arrived at her interpretation of the text.

**Background**

Butler’s interpretation and application of Judg 19 are not well known.\(^3\) However, in nineteenth-century England she was well known for her crusade for women’s right,

---


\(^3\) Most of the books cited in this chapter did not acknowledge her use of scriptural narratives as rhetorical devices in her crusade to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act.
specifically the fight against the Contagious Diseases Acts. From different accounts\textsuperscript{84} of her life in relation to her family, father, and husband, one finds a life devoted to justice most especially for women, and in particular, women who were social outcasts – \textit{fallen women}.\textsuperscript{85} As will be shown in this chapter, the Bible was a principal tool Butler used effectively in her arguments for the rights of women and those oppressed. Her grasp of biblical narratives and their subsequent interpretations showcases someone not only familiar with biblical texts, but also engaged in what could be classified as a mixture of approaches to the Bible, including typological\textsuperscript{86} and literary readings. Borrowing from traditional approaches to interpreting Scriptures as well as appealing to public opinion, Butler’s interpretation of Judg 19 is not only refreshing but also ahead of its time.

To understand Butler’s interpretation of Judg 19, it is important to grasp certain background materials, including the culture, both religious and secular, in which she grew up. Important as well to this understanding are the prevailing gender roles of the time. The role of women within the church and the wider society in nineteenth-century England needs to be understood as well. These will testify to Butler’s powerful presence of mind and faithful witness to her beliefs and truths of biblical texts in her crusade. Her theology and Christology also play huge roles in her interpretation of biblical passages, especially Judg 19.


\textsuperscript{85} This terminology was used to describe prostitutes in Victorian England. It speaks to the ideology of a woman fallen from her ‘proper’ position in society. There will be more discussion about this usage later on in the chapter.

\textsuperscript{86} Typological readings of biblical passages are mostly done by connecting different passages and sometimes figures between the Old and New Testaments. These readings usually suggest prophecies and individuals from the Old Testament as prefiguring Jesus Christ or other individuals in the New Testament.
Early Life and Influences

Butler was born Josephine Elizabeth Grey on the 13th of April 1828, the seventh of ten children born to John and Hannah Grey of Milfield. “The Greys had long been a prominent border family, with three branches, the most notable of which were the Earl Grey of Horwick, of whom Charles, the second Earl Grey was the Whig Prime Minister (1831-1834). The other branches were the Greys of Falloden and the Greys of Milfield.”

Though born prematurely, Butler grew up to be a strong woman, mostly of will, rather than of health, as her later years were filled with failing health.

Born to a parliamentarian father, and a mother who took on most of the duties of raising the children (but was not restricted to the household space expected by most of society in Victorian England), Butler had access to a lifestyle many within the cities did not have. The major influences in her life while she was growing up were her parents. She talked about her parents glowingly and the influence they had on her.

She described her early life thus, “My early home was far from cities, with parents who taught by their lives what true men and women should be.” Though she attended the St. Andrew’s Anglican Church in Corbridge, her major influence was the Methodist church she attended as a young girl with her nanny. Without access to much spiritual training in the form of Sunday school and such influence by priests/pastors that was common to the time, her major theological influences were her parents.

---

88 Butler was quoted as saying “I came into the world prematurely, and was a weak, wretched infant, hard to rear at all” in ibid.
89 The first of the “normative behaviours and traits associated with the Victorian Lady” is the private domain she inhabits. See Nolland, *A Victorian Feminist*, p. 65.
Of importance in Butler’s formation was the nature of the women who influenced her. According to historian Jane Jordan’s account of her, “Josephine was born into a family of strong-minded women. Her father had been greatly influenced by his mother, Mary Grey, who had brought up John, his brother and his two surviving sisters, after his father died when he was just six years old.”91 The nature and personalities of these “strong-minded women,” - which includes her own mother, and paternal grandmother - and their perspectives, were the second most important factor in Butler’s upbringing, as they provided the foundation for the life she later led. Sensitivity to social justice issues as well as a strong sense of self-worth was instilled in Butler by her parents. These eventually played lead roles in her crusades for the rights of fallen women, and the way in which she interpreted Scriptures.

As the daughter of John Grey and eventual wife of George Butler, Butler’s immediate family life seemed to have been filled with men who were ultimately adored and respected by their female family members, not just because of their affable personalities, but also because of their respect and support of and for women.

It should not be surprising that Butler fully imbibed her father’s noble qualities, as well as his hatred of injustice. Butler declared in a letter that she sent to some friends in Switzerland in 1905, “My father was a man with a deeply rooted, fiery hatred of all injustice. The love of justice was a passion with him. Probably I have inherited from him this passion.”92 Not only did she inherit his passion for social justice issues, she also followed his lifestyle and activism. Butler claimed, “Our father’s connection with great public movements of the day – the first Reform Bill, the Abolition of the Slave Trade and

91 Jordan, Josephine Butler, p. 6.
Slavery, and the Free Trade movement – gave us very early an interest in public questions and in the history of our country.” ⁹³

This particular passion for social justice is well reflected in Butler’s interpretive approach to the Bible, especially her interpretation of the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judg 19. Speaking from a position of compassion for the fate of the woman (the concubine) and especially for the fate of all women in Victorian England, this passion and hatred of injustice reflects an interpretive style that sees sensus plenior⁹⁴ in the narrated events of the Bible, for her own time.

One would be wrong to assume that all of Butler’s later lifestyle and call were influenced solely by her father. Though John Grey was the breadwinner and provider for the family, Butler’s mother had the oversight of the children’s education. As such, the influence of Hannah Grey over her children should not be thought to be secondary to that of her husband. Butler described mutuality between her parents, which she described thus, “My dear mother felt with him, and seconded all his efforts.” ⁹⁵

It is important to understand that in Butler’s times, the women of the households, mainly the mistresses of the house, not only had oversight over the children’s education, but also over their spiritual development. As historian Mark Eason points out, “Pious Christian mothers, ... were expected to play the central role in the religious education of

⁹³ Ibid., p. 13.
⁹⁴ Sensus plenior simply means “fuller sense” of the meaning of the words revealed to the human author of the divinely inspired text. While it was originally used in association with the meaning of prophecies, the usage has evolved over the years to include the new meaning that arises from reading the inspired word of God and not some object or person described in the text. For a history of the coinage and usage of the term see Raymond Brown’s bibliographical article “The History and Development of the Theory of A Sensus Plenior,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly 15.2 (1953), pp. 141-62. See also William Sanford LaSor, “The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation,” in Donald K. McKim’s A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 47-64.
⁹⁵ Ibid.
their sons and daughters. In large measure, this gender-specific undertaking grew out of the feminization of religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”

—Easton explains further, “Liberal and conservative Christianity, influenced by the subjective emphases of European pietism and romanticism, began to associate the sacred and moral with the traditionally feminine areas of the feelings and the heart. This close correlation between women and religion made women appear to be the natural candidates for instructing children in religious and moral matters.”

—It is not surprising then that the daily practice of Hannah Grey reading with her children included reading the Scriptures aloud, thus imbibing in Butler a strong practice of Bible reading.

As Butler describes her upbringing one notices her affection and appreciation of her mother’s teachings and influence:

“Living in the country, far from any town, and if I may say so, in the pre-educational era (for women at least), we had none of the advantages which girls of the present day have. But we owed much to our dear mother, who was very firm in requiring from us that whatever we did should be thoroughly done, and that in taking up any study we should aim at becoming as perfect as we could in it without external aid. This was a moral discipline which perhaps compensated in value for the lack of a great store of knowledge. She would assemble us daily for the reading aloud of some solid book, and by a kind of examination following the reading assured herself that we had mastered the subject. She urged us to aim at excellence, if not perfection, in at least one thing.”

—Butler devotes to her call this same moral discipline espoused by her mother. As will be argued, her critical use and interpretation of the narrative of the Levite’s concubine owes its origin to the mastering of the subject of the fallen woman.

---

97 Ibid.
Another strong influence in Butler’s life was her husband, George Butler. A major decision that changed her life and suggested the path to take was during her marriage to George Butler and her eventual sojourn at Oxford. Butler’s marriage was filled with a mutual respect. As one writer observed, “No record of Josephine Butler’s life would be at all true or complete which did not include some account of her husband. His strong and gentle spirit greatly influenced and aided her in all her public work, not only with whole-hearted sympathy, but with active co-operation whenever he had leisure from his other duties.”

Butler was an evangelical. Helen Mathers for example argues, “On the evidence of Josephine’s biography of her father, the Greys were clearly Evangelical.” She further opines, “Josephine Butler was an Evangelical ... She described, in her ‘Spiritual Diaries’, several experiences which would be regarded by Evangelicals as ‘conversion’, took the Bible as her guide to conduct and belief and prioritized a daily discipline of prayerful meditation and Bible reading.”

These daily practices of prayerful meditation and Bible reading were strongly reflected in her writings. As we will see further on in the chapter, not only was she well versed in scriptural narratives and texts, she was also fully engaged with the texts as they impinging upon her personal life. Mathers further contends, “Above all, she was an

100 Simply stated, an evangelical is someone who takes the biblical authority seriously and understands a need for individual conversion experience, as well as the need to share the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. For a detailed understanding of the word evangelical see, George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).
102 Ibid., p. 127.
individualist, at all times relying for personal guidance on her study of the Bible and her understanding and experience of God.”103

She was probably also influenced indirectly by the Moravian church. According to Jane Jordan, Butler’s mother Hannah, “was brought up in the Moravian Church, a Protestant sect which influenced many aspects of Methodist worship, including the practice of lay preaching.”104 This might have been the reason why Butler was comfortable with the use of Scripture as a woman in an era when women’s silence in the pulpit was predominant.

Even though the Greys attended the St. Andrew’s Anglican Church in Corbridge, and Butler and her sisters were married at the church,105 Butler did not subscribe to the Anglican Church. In response to friends’ belief that she had been raised up in the Church of England she declared:

I thought everyone knew that I am not of the Church of England and never was. I go to Church once a Sunday out of a feeling of loyalty to my husband – that is all. I was brought up a Wesleyan ... I imbibed from childhood the widest ideas of vital Christianity, only it was Christianity. I have not much sympathy with the Church.106

Such strong sentiments emanated from her father and mother as well. Her father had such sympathies for Methodism that he erected a chapel for his tenants, to which the children’s governess was allowed to take them.107 He was also a man of “wide religious tolerance, and had campaigned publicly in favour of the Catholic Emancipation (Relief)

103 Ibid.
105 Ibid., p. 16.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
Act of 1829.” As mentioned earlier, Butler herself was an individualist, and her reliance on Scripture and her theology were not very different from that of her father’s.

Butler talks about the lack of formal spiritual education thus, “Few ‘priests or pastors’ ever came our way. Two miles from our home was the parish church, to which we trudged dutifully every Sunday, and where an honest man in the pulpit taught us loyally all that he probably himself knew about God, but whose words did not even touch the fringe of my soul’s deep discontent.”

This particular summation draws attention to what might be considered as one of Butler’s source of authority, the character of the speaker. This particular sensitivity to the nature of the person speaking is crucial for Butler in appropriating biblical truths and injunctions. In describing her father’s convictions, Butler talked about his character. She said, “I believe that his political principles and public actions were alike the direct fruit of that which held true within his soul – I mean his large benevolence, his tender compassionateness, and his respect for the rights and liberties of the individual man. His life was a sustained effort for the good of others, flowing from these affections.”

Butler’s upbringing and strong focus on biblical authority and personal relationship with God would later influence in her a life of commitment to things she considered to be at the heart of God. Her strong knowledge and understanding of Scriptures went beyond what she was taught at the St. Andrew’s Church, or at the Methodist chapel she attended with the governess. One of her grandchildren illustrates this knowledge in the following excerpt:

---

108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
I cannot remember her ever, at ordinary times, bringing pious or even uplifting thoughts into the talk. She would become very quiet at times, contemplating deeply. But not for an instant was she tiresomely holy. We realized she knew all about those things; and there was one occasion when she was invited to speak to a drawing-room meeting. This so pleased and surprised the St. Andrews ladies that the husband of one of them asked my father at the club if his mother ‘really knew all that’ and was told, ‘Oh yes, far more than all the parsons put together’.  

**Gender Issues**

Growing up egalitarian in the Grey household sheltered Butler from the harsh realities of the society at the time. A member of the upper middle class society, Butler’s status within society and her eventual marriage to George Butler protected her from some of the struggles other women faced. However, as she later began to realize some of these issues, she struggled with her understanding of Scriptures and the lived realities of patriarchal Christianity. Not content with the social status of women, especially those known as *fallen women*, Butler’s critique of the double standard in dealing with women in society began to create a niche for her within the patriarchal social milieu.

It was during her sojourn at Oxford that Butler became fully aware of the gender bias of Victorian men and their interpretation of certain situations within the society. Knowing the lack of exposure of the scholars to the world, she seemed to exonerate them thus, “A one-sidedness of judgment is apt to be fostered by such circumstances – an exaggeration of the purely masculine judgment on same topics, and a conventual mode of looking at things.”  

This appraisal, which we later find reflected in her interpretation of the story of the Levite’s concubine, was solidified in her mind during personal encounters with the men of the college.

---

112 Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, p. 36.
The Butlers entertained other scholars in their drawing room, during which time several topics were discussed, ranging from the mundane to the weighty. She observed, “It was then that I sat silent, the only woman in the company, and listened sometimes with a sore heart; for these men would speak of things which I had already resolved deeply in my own mind, things of which I was convinced, which I knew, though I had no dialectics at command with which to defend their truth.”

One particular incident, which one writer describes as part of a series of events that led her to the course of her life’s work is the discussion surrounding a novel written by Mrs. Gaskell, *Ruth*. According to Butler, this book “led to expressions of judgment which seemed to me false – fatally false. A moral lapse in a woman was spoken of as an immensely worse thing than in a man.” It was the argument of the men present, according to Butler that “A pure woman, it was reiterated, should be absolutely ignorant of a certain class of evils in the world, albeit those evils bore with murderous cruelty on other women.” Such was the opinion of the men on such issues, that, are suggestive of sexual promiscuity and even more.

A prevailing attitude at the time, and I am almost certain we will find even in our own time, is the conspiracy of silence around such issues. According to Butler, “Silence was thought to be the great duty of all on such subjects.” This conspiracy of silence is what we find in the story of the Levite’s concubine, and the subsequent responses to it over the centuries. Butler described an occasion when she was distressed by an injustice inflicted upon a girl. She had gone on behalf of the girl to “one of the wisest men – so

---

113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., p. 31.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
esteemed – in the university, in the hope that he would suggest some means, not of helping her, but of bringing to a sense of his crime the man who had wronged her.”

She was surprised at the response of the sage, because silence and inaction were advocated.

In addition to this incident, Butler’s own position as a woman in this particular men’s world became troubling to her. Petrie’s observations about Butler’s struggle with societal perceptions when she ventured into the public space are worth noting here to buttress this point:

Hitherto, it had scarcely occurred to her that there was a ‘condition of women’ question. Her father, like her husband, had shared with her his interests, his knowledge, his perplexities. Her own family respected not merely her intelligence but also her intellect, as did the Butler family. It came as something of a shock to her when she realized that permission for her to work in the Taylorian Institute and Bodleian Library was a matter of controversy, and only grudgingly conceded.

The argument that Butler and her interpretation of Judges 19 are both products of her time and upbringing cannot be sustained without further exploration of some of the “crises” of nineteenth-century England. Different issues and problems ranging from poverty to class and racial tensions abounded in this era. However, rather than discuss these complex issues, I will focus on one issue in the era that reflects directly on this paper, fallen woman in Victorian England’s public discourse.

117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Petrie, A Singular Iniquity, p. 36.
Fallen Women and Victorian England

The social atmosphere in nineteenth-century England was fraught with different social issues, from reform laws to gender issues. Not only were women considered intellectually inferior to men, but also a particular group of women who later became Butler’s primary campaign focus were considered fallen women in society. She became a champion of justice and equality, for all women, especially for these “oppressed women” referred to as fallen women. The understanding of the populace was that for these women, life was always short. Nolland attests to this and Butler’s dedication to these women when she declared, “Josephine Butler invested years of her life working with girls and women whose experience of the lifestyle validated this statement.”

As argued earlier, one cannot divorce Butler’s passion and service from her religious beliefs. This was true for most women activists in Victorian England, as evidenced in the following quotation, “One late-conceded view has admitted that ‘religion was a central element in the lives of many Victorian feminists’, and that for many Victorian feminists involved in public life, ‘religious questions were of central importance’.” In this case, the religious questions raised by Butler not only dealt with her personal convictions, but also her understanding of the order of the world. To Butler, fallen women were not just faceless women they were her sisters. A definition of the term fallen woman is in order.

Succinctly stated, the fallen woman in Victorian England was the woman who either through choice or circumstances dropped down the social ladder from the “ideals

---

of proper femininity” to the ultimate societal opposite, a prostitute. A rather unusual term to describe the age-old profession of prostitution, fallen women were considered a problem within Victorian English society. Associated with these prostitutes is a certain notion of degeneracy and ultimately, an early grave. Citing Ralph Wardlaw, Nolland notes, “It is – the affecting and fearful consideration, - that to this lowest grade, in all its horrors, the entire system tends ... The tendency is all downwards.”

Butler’s interpretation and use of Judg 19 ties into the societal notions around these women, and a look at the ideas surrounding these women will help to understand further Butler’s effective use of Judg 19 for her social milieu. Nolland’s analysis reveals a dichotomized world where the societal ideal is contrasted with the presence of the ultimate opposite of the ideal woman. According to Nolland, “in order to understand the Victorian prostitute, we must first begin with her apparent opposite, the Victorian lady.”

Nolland outlines six points that comprise the “normative behaviours and traits associated with the Victorian lady.” They are:

a. Domain: private, not public
b. Marital and sexual status: chastely single or monogamously married, not promiscuously single or promiscuously married, a mistress or a prostitute

---

123 See chapter three of Lisa Nolland’s *Victorian Feminist Christian.*
124 Ibid., p. 61.
125 See Nolland’s aim of study in the first paragraph where she describes the process of falling from “the loss of virginity through rape, poverty, choice and seduction, and entrance into the world of prostitution ... with termination in an early grave.” Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., p. 65.
128 Ibid.
c. Involvements: genteel domesticity and maternity (if married), volunteer, inspirational icing-on-the-cake, rather than coarse, dirty or survival-driven work, or that which requires strength, proficiency or thought;
d. Social and economic class: middle and upper, not working, lower or residuum;
e. Libido levels: low to non-existent, not high
f. Nationality: English, not ‘foreign’

In addition to these traits Nolland adds, “The mental world of the lady was to be guarded by the patriarchal figures of the household. In particular, she had to remain ignorant of the minefield of knowledge and life-in-the-raw or forfeit her claim to be a lady.”\textsuperscript{129} It should be noted that while Butler can be said to have had all six traits, the addendum here disqualifies her from being the ideal lady, which is why her chosen cause for these women and her attendant challenge of patriarchal structures not only ‘defiled’ her in the eyes of the establishment, but also was not altogether popular.\textsuperscript{130}

Such was the extent of disapproval of Butler’s work that “In the Plymouth Western Daily Mercury (1870) a Dr Preston described his revulsion to Josephine’s public speaking on the CDAs at mixed-sex meetings – ‘the height of indecency to say the least’.\textsuperscript{131} Prince Leopold also “complained that Josephine had ‘done herself a great deal of harm by violently taking up a subject which had better be left alone, by ladies at any rate.’”\textsuperscript{132}

What is interesting in reading the above is the consideration that the idea of the Levite’s wife/concubine leaving her husband would have been considered unforgivable or at least improper in Victorian England. It stands to reason that interpreters in that era

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} For more on the notion of women’s ideal purity of mind and Victorian England’s dissatisfaction with women’s exposure to knowledge, read Nolland, \textit{Victorian Feminist Christian}, pp. 66ff.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., pp. 67-8.
who subscribe to the social constructs described above, would perhaps have seen the outcome of the story as a deserving end for a ‘lady’ who deserts her husband. If perchance the story had been historically situated in that particular century, it is probable that the death of the concubine would have been considered an inevitable finale to a sad story. Thus, it is more ironic that a passage that could have been used to the advantage of the established social constructs is what Butler used to counter the predominant mores of her time.

Butler was a close reader of scriptural texts, and sensitive to accuracy and the shape of the texts she dealt with. She also used intertextuality, using images and ideas from the New Testament to illuminate the Old Testament. Moreover, she read contextually, reading the text in light of the culture of nineteenth century England.

**Her Theology**

If read in the context of our own time, it would be apt to describe Butler’s theology as a theology from below, that is also influenced by a liberation theology. As seen above, Butler uses scriptural texts to support her agenda on humanitarian issues. While it is safe to say that she does appeal to a theology of love, and therefore a theology from below, one can also safely say that her use of theology of the cross in shaping her own theology is real and befitting for her subject matter.

Butler narrated how she arrived at her calling. Describing the yearnings of her childhood years she said,

It was my lot from my earliest years to be haunted by the problems which more or less present themselves to every thoughtful mind. ... A strange intuition was given to me whereby I saw in a vision, before I had seen any of them with my bodily
eyes, some of the saddest miseries of earth, the injustices, the inequalities, the cruelties practiced by man on man, by man on woman.  

Struggling with these visions, Butler attained a theology of grace that enabled her to struggle with God. “For one long year of darkness the trouble of heart and brain urged me to lay all this at the door of the God, whose name I had learned was Love.”

Drawing from her Christology, she reached into the depths of Scripture and saw within her struggles the virtue of Jesus’ midnight struggles, and she was able to declare, “Looking my Liberator in the face, can my friends wonder that I have taken my place ... by the side of her, “the woman in the city which was a sinner,” of whom He, her Liberator and mine, said, as He can also say of me, “this woman hath not ceased to kiss my feet.”

These personal experiences no doubt created within Butler a conviction of the calling to protest the injustices within society. She had learned the name of God was Love, and as such, she experienced and displayed this particular characteristic in her daily interpretation of this call to justice. Her choice of words in describing her relationship with Jesus might seem rather strange, as she described herself not only “looking” Jesus in the face, he was her Liberator as well. One would wonder what she was being liberated from. However, anyone familiar with evangelical doctrines of salvation will understand this reference as pertaining to being saved from eternal damnation.

---

133 Butler, _An Autobiographical Memoir_, p. 15.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., p. 16.
I believe Butler’s understanding of Scripture also transcends that of Jowett, a biblical scholar who was an acquaintance of Butler. Jowett was a historical critic who held that a text had just one meaning, “the meaning in the mind of the original writer of the passage.” This particular understanding restricted the application of a text to its own social milieu. For Butler however, scriptural texts still applied to her in her own social milieu. The revealed words spoke not only to the original audiences, but audiences in her generation. The texts of Scripture seemed to Butler to have been well intended for subsequent generations as well, and not just the immediate audience that received the words the first time. This particular understanding of the Bible is evident in her interpretation of the narrative of the Levite’s concubine.

**Interpretation of Judges 19**

Butler’s use of biblical narratives and scriptural texts was not unique within her society. It was a common practice to evoke in public speaking certain biblical imagery, as many within the society were familiar with the stories, even though the different speakers interpreted the truths embedded in them differently. Thus, Butler’s use of the narrative of the Levite’s concubine in her first speech during the crusade against the Contagious Diseases Act was to connect her listeners with the plight of women, using such a recognizable source of authority as the Bible. As hinted earlier on, this was risky, for the passage could be used as well to dissuade women’s independence. Aware of the

---

136 This is the same sage who had advised silence over the issue of the servant girl mistreated by a ‘gentleman’.
138 It must be noted that prior to this time, the discoveries in the field of science had begun to challenge the claims of the Bible. Though some had begun a process of consolidating the claims of the Bible and that of science to make sense of the world. A scholar, who was able to harness arguments on both sides, was Jowett, mentioned earlier on as the sage who advised silence of the issue of adultery.
nature of the passage and the fact that she herself had “never heard it commented upon by preacher or writer in any public manner;”¹³⁹ nor did she remember having seen its significance suggested.¹⁴⁰ not only did she probe this passage in public speaking, she effectively interpreted the passage for her generation and for her cause. Butler further elucidated the passage several years later in her published periodical journal, *The Storm Bell*.

As shall be seen in her interpretation of this narrative, Butler subscribed to the important role of the Bible in the lives of Christians. Butler’s clear, concise narration of the passage and her choice of words, speaks to her knowledge of not only the Bible, but also the passage and the implications for her own times, above and beyond acceptable social norms. Her narration of the events that culminated in the death of the concubine sets forth her understanding of the role of Scripture within Christian communities, and her theology. Thus she writes:

There are many tragical histories recorded in the Old Testament, that true mirror of the faith and the righteousness, but also of the depravity of man. Few are more tragical than that story in the Book of Judges of the wayfaring Levite who halted at Gibeah of Benjamin, and lodged there with the woman, his companion. We read with a shudder the ghastly details – the clamouring of the sons of Belial round the door, the suspense, the parley, till, in the cowardice of self-defence, the man brings out that helpless woman, and casts her among the hellish horrors of that awful night. “All night, until the morning,” she endured, “until the day began to spring. Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man’s house where her lord was, till it was light. And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way; and, behold the woman was fallen down at the door of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold. And he said unto her, up and let us be going. But none answered.” She was dead.¹⁴¹

---

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
What is interesting in Butler’s summation above is the fundamental difference in assessing who is to blame for the acts of the night, compared to that of the ancient writers and early church fathers. Considered a pre-critical commentator as well as these men, she acknowledged the presence of the sons of Belial and the “suspense and parley”\textsuperscript{142} of the night, but moves on directly to the Levite’s action of “cowardice of self-defence,”\textsuperscript{143} in putting out the concubine to face the “hellish horrors of that awful night.”\textsuperscript{144} While some might find Butler’s silence on the intended rape of the Levite, as well as the content of the parley between the men odd, it is not, if it is located in the context of her speech and her motive. Even years later when she wrote on this passage in her periodical,\textsuperscript{145} her focus was primarily on the injustice of the action of the Levite.

As mentioned in the first chapter of this paper, there are three issues raised by pre-critical commentators in regards to this narrative. To reiterate, “first, the men of Gibeah desire to rape the male guest; second, the householder offers his daughter and the woman to be raped instead; third, the Levite (or the householder) actually puts the woman out for the men.”\textsuperscript{146} Taken out of the context of her speech, it would seem to the reader that Butler’s interpretation of the events seemed to assume the first two problems were non-issues for her. On the contrary, I believe Butler was well aware of these problems, and even though she also did not intentionally acknowledge the presence of the virgin daughter being offered up as a substitute sexual offering in place of the Levite, her concern would have been directed towards the virgin daughter as well had she not been “protected.” I propose that for Butler, it would seem that the virgin daughter still had

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Butler, \textit{The Storm Bell} (1898).
\textsuperscript{146} Gunn, \textit{Judges Through the Centuries}, p. 245.
some protection from her father, by not being pushed out, even though she had been offered up as a substitute alongside the concubine. This observation is buttressed by the fact that Butler saw her and others who were sheltered as complicit in the situation of the women that were unprotected. However, this is not to suggest that she saw the virgin daughter as complicit in what happened to the Levite’s concubine.

I believe Butler’s primary concern in the narrative was the helpless and “unprotected” concubine. Rather than dwell on the politics of gender in the narrative, Butler saw within the narrative, a logical progression of events, due to the neglect of duty of the Levite. From being cast out, to facing the hellish horrors of the night, to the subsequent death of the concubine, Butler’s argument rests on the fact that the Levite had failed to protect his wife. This particular observation runs counter to earlier interpretations of the passage, which therefore makes Butler’s interpretation cutting-edge for her time.

In comparison to the conclusions of both Pseudo-Philo and Josephus, who argued for the innocence and helplessness of the Levite in the proceedings of the night, Butler stuck to the biblical account of the Levite pushing out the concubine. Pseudo-Philo had argued that the men had dragged out the Levite and his concubine and subsequently “cast off” the Levite before abusing the concubine.147 This however is not consistent with the biblical records of what happened that night.

Flavius Josephus’ rendering of the narrative is also different from the biblical account and even though he referred to the woman as the Levite’s wife, he argued for the beauty of the woman as the source of the desires of the young men of Gibeah. In his narration of what transpired after the old man’s counter-offer was rejected, Josephus

147 Ibid.
argued that, “they proceeded to take her away by force, and indulging still more the
violence of their inclinations, they took the woman away to their house, and when they
had satisfied their lust upon her the whole night, they let her go about daybreak.”148 We
again see here the blame placed squarely on the sons of Belial or “young men of Gibeah,”
without any reference made to the Levite’s complicity in the turn of events.

Ambrose (ca. 340-397 A.D.) also argued that, “But when reason did no good and
violence prevailed, the Levite parted from his wife, and they knew her and abused her all
that night.”149 Ambrose ultimately exonerates the Levite from any wrongdoing. His
argument that “the Levite does not expel his wife; she was rather seized by the mob, only
to die of humiliation the next morning,”150 is suspect in light of the Hebrew version of the
narrative. None of the Bible versions support this particular interpretation as well.

Sulpicius (ca. 360 – 425 A.D.) another church father, however, seems to have
been a little bit closer to the Hebrew text in his summation of the events. He commented,
“they at length received for their wanton sport the person of his concubine as a substitute
for his own; and they thus spared the stranger, but abused her through the whole night,
and only restored her on the following day.”151 Though it would seem Sulpicius’
observations were true to the text, his conclusion however still spares the Levite from any
‘embarrassment’ or responsibility for what happened to the concubine.

Closer to Butler’s time, and interpreted in almost a similar society as the days in
which Butler interpreted the passage, Matthew Henry’s commentary on the passage is

---
Logos Research Systems, 1997).
150 Ibid.
Logos Research Systems, 1997).
worth noting here as well, as it follows a definite patriarchal reading of the passage. From the first verse, Matthew Henry’s arguments rest squarely on the actions of the Levite’s concubine. A surprising departure from the early church fathers but not from the reformers, he was faithful to the Hebrew text that the concubine had whored against the Levite. He was also sure the concubine’s father was also to blame for receiving his daughter back after she had played the whore against her husband. He argued, “Perhaps she would not have violated her duty to her husband if she had not known too well where she should be kindly received.” This particular observation is followed by the following summation, which could naturally be said to derive from the text itself, “The Levite went himself to court her return. It was a sign there was no king, no judge, in Israel, else she would have been prosecuted and put to death as an adulteress.” But as one continues to read his commentary, this is not truly the case as there is a certain bias shown by Matthew Henry in reading the story.

Though his commentary has a detailed analysis of the passage, Matthew Henry’s omission of certain details of the story is however surprising, but is understandable in light of his conclusion on the passage. While he was sure the sons of Belial were the full culprits, he tried to exonerate the old man for suggesting his daughter, by mentioning that he was perhaps aware of Lot’s story and was just following the examples of a good man. Even though Henry does not think this was right, however, he omitted the fact that the old man had suggested the Levite’s concubine alongside his daughter as substitutes for the lust for the Levite himself.

153 Ibid.
Citing Josephus, Henry did not hesitate in using his suggested reason of the woman’s beauty as the source of the men’s lust. Even though he mentioned the fact that the Levite brought his concubine to the men, he managed also to shift the blame to the men of Gibeah in the same sentence when he said, “when the Levite brought them his concubine, they took her with them by force to the place appointed for their filthiness.”

To appreciate better the gravity of Henry’s conclusions, it is important to cite a large portion of his commentary as he concludes that the whole passage speaks to the punishment of the concubine by God, for being an adulteress. Here is what he said,

Though her father had countenanced her, her husband had forgiven her, and the fault was forgotten now that the quarrel was made up, yet God remembered it against her when he suffered these wicked men thus wretchedly to abuse her; how unrighteous soever they were in their treatment of her, in permitting it the Lord was righteous. Her punishment answered her sin, *Culpa libido fuit, poena libido fuit*—Lust was her sin, and lust was her punishment. By the law of Moses she was to have been put to death for her adultery. She escaped that punishment from men, yet vengeance pursued her; for, if there was no king in Israel, yet there was a God in Israel, a God that judgeth in the earth.

In contrast to the observations and interpretations of these men mentioned above, Butler’s interpretation provides a refreshing break from the undue protection of the Levite from embarrassment. It is clear from her narration of the events of the night that she did not consider the Levite to be free of any blame, in fact, she argued for a reading that indict the Levite for not protecting the woman entrusted to him as wife/concubine. This was the crux of her interpretation in the Storm-Bell. In her words, “In order to save *himself* from the degradation which he foresaw from the treatment of these Satyrs, the

---

154Ibid.
155Ibid. See Judg 19:22.
Levite took his companion, the woman, and thrust her forth to become, in his place, the victim of their diabolical passions. And he! He returned to his rest till the morning.”

It is hard to ignore Butler’s tone of indignation at the Levite’s actions. What is important for Butler is not the innocence of the woman herself, nor the obvious wickedness of the men of Gibeah. It is also not the ludicrous suggestion of the old man as well, but the social responsibility of the Levite towards his wife/concubine. What seems to have further offended Butler is the cowardice of the Levite in bringing out the woman and casting her to the “hellish horrors of that awful night.” Furthermore, there seems to be a certain fury in her commentary on the audacity of the Levite to sleep through this woman’s ordeal. No commentator before Butler, that I am aware of, dwelled on this particular point as well. For Butler, the story of the Levite and his concubine “is the story of the egotism of man and the sacrifice of womanhood to that egotism, invoking a curse which is to this day hanging like a dark cloud over the nations of the earth.”

Noteworthy also is Butler’s invocation of the silence of the concubine, rather than the Levite’s request in the last verse. Speaking for the voiceless concubine, Butler argues, “Her voice is too weak to be heard, the door is too heavily barred ... her only appeal is her heavy corpse-like fall beside the door, her silence when invoked, and her cold dead hands stretched forth.” A cutting-edge interpretation for her time, this invocation of the silence of the concubine cuts into the conspiracy of silence around different issues involved in the horrors of that night. Also for Butler, the corpse is the offensive picture and not the quartering of the corpse by the Levite.

---

156 Butler, “A Typical Tragedy,” p. 112.
157 Ibid.
In describing the Old Testament as the “true mirror of the faith and the righteousness, but also of the depravity of man,” Butler puts the reader on notice as to her understanding and interpretation of the role of the Old Testament in the Christian’s life. Unlike many interpreters of the pre-critical period, Butler appropriates this ancient story and its inherent lesson. It would seem Butler sees within the Hebrew Scripture, histories of actual events. These histories are reflections of what she herself witnessed in her own time, hence the choice of ‘true mirror’ in describing the content of the Old Testament.

In her narration of the story during her speech, Butler did not deal with the rest of the passage, but turns strictly to what she must have considered the crux of the passage. Her indictment of the “sons of Belial” and the Levite would leave no doubt in the minds of her hearers as to where her exegesis of the passage was leading, especially since it was assumed that they would be familiar with the story. Whether familiar with it or not, Butler’s re-narration was excellently done as a public speaker. Her choice of words in describing the actions or lack of action of two of the principal characters in the story also give us an idea of where she places the blame for this “tragical story.” Butler referred to the man’s action as “cowardice of self-defence” and referred to the woman as helpless. Obviously there was a power imbalance and difference in gender roles, which Butler sees within the passage, but did not really dwell on.

---

158 Butler, “A Typical Tragedy,” p. 111. I believe Butler’s use of ‘man’ in this context is more in line with describing humanity as a whole rather than just the male gender. However, it would be remiss of me not to point out the possibility that Butler’s agenda could as well have affected her use of man in this context. She could have been referring to man to represent the details of men whose accounts dominate much of Hebrew Scriptures and even the New Testament.

159 I am assuming she meant the Levite.

Short of using the word patriarchy, Butler concentrated on the assumed role of men within her own society, which she automatically superimposes on the characters of this story. This is not to suggest that patriarchy was not practiced in Biblical times, but the fact that Butler had no problem appropriating a system in practice in her time to the biblical characters speaks to how much she sees the correlation between the two eras.

What comes to mind again is her use of the words “true mirror.”

In the same speech, Butler did not dwell too much on the terrible deeds of the “sons of Belial” nor on the inaction of the old man and the Levite in protecting the concubine. Instead, using a figural reading of the passage, she concentrated on the imagery of the woman (or her corpse) at the door of the house. She connected the story of the concubine to her own milieu, and makes a clear application of the story to her struggles against the legislation, which she calls “the darkest, cruelest slavery the world has seen.”¹⁶¹ She also made a clarion call to every Christian, both male and female, to respond to the moral of the story, using what could be considered offensive and disturbing imagery in the story to appeal to her audience.

Christian friends, - there is a weak and prostrate figure lying at our door; to this door she turns for help, though it be but in her dying fall; her hands are upon the threshold – dead hands flung forward in mute and terrible appeal to the God above, who, looking down from heaven, sees not that prostrate form alone, but on the one side the powers of hell, on the other, in their safe dwelling-place, the selfish sleepers to whom the pale cold hands appeal in vain. The night is far spent; throughout the world’s long night the fate of the Levite’s concubine has been outcast woman’s fate; cast forth in answer to the clamorous cries of insatiable human lusts, and then left to perish in the outer darkness; while “her lord,” ordained her protector by nature and by the law of God, slumbers unheeding.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 2.
¹⁶² Ibid., pp. 5-6.
Butler makes a very crucial theological statement in the quote above. Not unlike Henry, God, Butler seemed to imply, was not unaware of the events of the night. While the absence of God was very clear in the narrative and the absence of a king was definitely mentioned (Judg19:1), Butler however positions God directly over the events of that night. In contrast to Matthew Henry’s theology of divine punishment, Butler sees a God who has extended grace to some and expects them to do likewise to others. Invoking an omnipresent understanding of God, Butler brings God into the event of that night. Though the text is silent about such understanding, Butler did not hesitate in using her theological understanding to make this particular obscure text make meaning by invoking God as the Judge to whom we all are accountable.

Furthermore, Butler spoke to her understanding of the role of God in the world, and her understanding of the forces at play in the universe, when she mentioned the “powers of hell” on one side, and the “selfish sleepers” on the other side of this helpless woman. Clearly in Butler’s understanding, the “selfish sleepers” whom she later identified as the woman’s Lord “ordained her protector by nature and by the law of God,”163 and later as Christians, owed it to this woman to protect her from all harm. It would seem that God was waiting for those entrusted with the care of the woman, who in Butler’s understanding represented all the women in her time who could not speak for themselves, to take responsibility.

Butler’s emphasis on the weakness and helplessness of the concubine might sound somewhat repetitive, but I believe it is her interpretive approach to ensure that the hearers understood that this woman was truly without power in that society, same as the outcast women in her own society. When she declared “the fate of the Levite’s concubine

163 Ibid., p. 6.
has been outcast woman’s fate,"\textsuperscript{164} she not only correlated the position of outcast women in the two different eras, but collapsed time to ensure that her audience were aware that this was an evil still perpetuated in her time. The reference to God, though not in the story itself, is another direct application to her own theology. By referring to the outstretched arm of the concubine on the threshold as an appeal to God, she invoked a theological consciousness of God’s activities in the world. But rather than indict God as being silent while this evil was perpetuated, she saw God as placing the responsibilities to fix this injustice into the hands of “Christian friends” who are “in their safe dwelling-place, the selfish sleepers to whom the pale cold hands appeal in vain.”\textsuperscript{165}

Connecting the past to the present and intimating of the future as well, Butler applied the lesson she found in the story to her audience. From her summation, it seems she concluded that the action and eventual silence during the night, of the Levite, and his inability or unwillingness to protect the concubine, was to blame for the tragic story. She based her clarion call to the Christian audience on the action of the Levite who slept through the entire ordeal the concubine had to go through. Connecting the inaction of the Levite to the inaction of both men and women in her era who could bring about changes to the lives of \textit{fallen women}, Butler made a direct application of the story to her own era, finding use for a dastardly story for her contemporary audience. Here is the appeal she made:

\begin{quote}
It might well make our morning slumbers uneasy, and cause us to murmur in our dreams of coming judgment, to know that there lies a corpse at our door, an outraged corpse, crushed with the heaped and pitiless weight of the sins of others and her own. But the day is at hand. We have slept long and soundly while that woman bore the hell without. Shall we sleep still? What if the Judge should come and find us scarcely risen from our torpor, our door scarcely opened, our morning
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
salutation scarcely uttered to the victim whose voice is stilled in death – should come and should require of us an account of our protectorship, and show to us such mercy as we have shown to her?\textsuperscript{166}

Though it might have been an appeal for the revoking of the legislation, however, the tone and message of the speech is akin to that of a Sunday morning sermon. Furthering her call for an indictment of those who are silent when evil is being perpetuated, Butler reminded her audience that they (Christians) would be held accountable to the Judge. An eschatological reference for sure, but Butler’s call was for action for her time. She further argued, “We are none of us guiltless, men or women. Our silent acquiescence in the crime of this murder has contributed, is contributing, to the woe which follows and is following.”\textsuperscript{167}

Not a trained theologian, Butler’s knowledge and use of Scripture is remarkable as she further connected idolatrous acts within the Hebrew Scriptures to the inactivity of Christians in her cultural milieu to attend to the plight of outcast women. She compared such inactivity to sacrificing to Molech.\textsuperscript{168}

I fear that on waking up late to our responsibilities, we must ever work with the sad and humbling memory of past centuries of injury and neglect in this matter. They who have themselves been guiltless of actual wrong towards the fallen, feel the more acutely, in the tenderness of their souls, the wrong done by their forefathers, who, since the foundation of the world till now, have dedicated, by millions, these weaker vessels to profanest service, - sacrificing them with impious rites to a \textit{so called} necessity – a Moloch to whom all the kingdoms of the earth have caused armies of their daughters to pass through the fire, generation after generation.\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{166} Butler, “The Duty of Women,” p. 6.
\textsuperscript{167} Butler, “A Typical Tragedy,” p. 113.
\textsuperscript{168} See the following verses in Scripture where sacrificing to Molech is considered a punishable crime/sin within Israelite society: Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; I Kgs 11:7; II Kgs 23:10; Isa 57:9; Jer 32:35.
Butler’s brilliance, in giving a continuance to the story of the Levite’s concubine is also seen as she combines three separate stories from both the Old and New Testaments into one, is commendable: “It may be that those cold faint hands, falling upon the threshold, groping hopelessly, have stolen in the darkness some virtue from His garment’s hem; and though the fount of weeping, which despair has dried up, may have given no more tears to ‘distill like amber on the royal feet of the Anointed’.”\(^{170}\)

What Butler does here is to connect three outcast women, who through circumstances life has dealt them, were ostracized from society. The Levite’s concubine, whose “cold faint hands, falling upon the threshold,”\(^ {171}\) started off the chain of reference, her account is followed by the woman with the issue of the blood,\(^ {172}\) who stole “some virtue from His garment’s hem,”\(^ {173}\) and whose blood, in the form of figurative tears, were “dried up.” The final reference “may have given no more tears to ‘distill like amber on the royal feet of the Anointed’,\(^ {174}\) is to the woman of the city who was a ‘sinner’.\(^ {175}\)

What these three women have in common is reflected in the development of Butler’s theology, one that sees God as caring for these outcast women as well.

Though the bias of reading the story from the perspective of the concubine might suggest to others and this writer that the concubine was innocent in everything, Butler did not see it this way. She pointed out the position of the concubine as a sinner as well, probably reading with the lens of the Pauline Christology in Rom 6:23 by saying, “there lies a corpse at our door, an outraged corpse, crushed with the heaped and pitiless weight

\(^ {170}\) Ibid. The following passages are the references Butler made to biblical stories in this quote; the woman with the issue of blood, the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary, as well as the hand of the concubine on the threshold, Mk 5:25-34; Jn 12:3 and Judg 19:26.

\(^ {171}\) Ibid.

\(^ {172}\) Read the story in Lk 8:43-8.


\(^ {174}\) Ibid.

\(^ {175}\) See Lk 7:37-8.
of the sins of others and her own.” This particular information is very important in the interpretation of the passage.

As mentioned in the first chapter, one of the problems associated with interpreting this chapter is the translation of the second verse. The Latin and the Septuagint both translated the reason for the concubine leaving the Levite as “she became angry,” while the Masoretic Text and the Syriac translate it as “she played the harlot.” The latter is closest in meaning to the Hebrew text and therefore makes more sense if one is to stay true to the Hebrew text.

There is no record suggesting Butler had knowledge of this difference, but to acknowledge the “sins of the concubine” is to stay true to the original Hebrew text. Of course it could be argued that Butler was probably using the Pauline notion of “all have sinned” (Rom 3:23) to interpret the passage as well, and that her reading has nothing to do with staying true to the text. Either way, Butler’s interpretation still insists on the same right to salvation and protection enjoyed by every member of the Christian commonwealth for this concubine and others like her in Butler’s time.

Also, while it was earlier suggested that Butler used typology in her interpretation, she definitely was clear that no one else could be like Jesus Christ. Even though the imagery used to describe the corpse of the concubine is similar to the image of Christ’s suffering on the cross bearing the sins of the world, there is a difference, as Christ was without sin whereas the concubine was a sinner. In addition to this is the fact that the concubine was not resurrected and we only have a description of her corpse from Butler. However, Butler’s use of the imagery is suggestive of a companionship shared by Jesus with all these women. Regardless of Jesus’ status as holy and without sin, these

---

outcast women were still considered part of the family of Christ. Such reading I believe is born of Butler’s understanding of the role of the risen saviour in the individual’s life, barring all societal restrictions to social interaction between the holy and the unholy.

Furthermore, her interpretation of the concubine’s role as a sacrificial lamb, alluded to several times in both treatments of the passage, in the speech and in the periodical, suggests a similarity to Jesus’ sacrifice for mankind. Her reference to the sacrifice of the concubine as symbolic of the sacrifice of womanhood to the egotism of man, suggests such reading. However, she argues that such sacrifice does not ultimately save mankind. She talked about the countless women who were sacrificed in different wars, in Greek mythology as well as in European wars, but concluded with this rhetorical question, “can peace be near where injustice triumphs, or where unrecognized and unredressed human woes and wrongs continue to fester in the heart of a nation?” Without doubt, Butler’s interpretation is an ideological reading of Judges 19, and one that definitely opens up this particular passage for our time.

Limitations

The limitations of Butler’s approach include her use of the narrative as proof-text for her agenda in annulling the legislation she was campaigning against. This particular usage was not however uncommon. In his book on Catholic morality, Catholic priest and ethicist Richard Gula observed, “The pre-critical way of using Scripture was in the form of the proof text method – a form of corroboration whereby scripture enters indirectly and largely as an afterthought to support conclusions reached through natural law

---

reasoning.”\textsuperscript{178} Of course, Butler was not a Catholic; therefore it is possible that her use of the passage as proof-text is only common sense appealing to the natural law reasoning.

Thompson also rightly noted, “Proof-texts have been found to support the conquest of colonial peoples and the subjugation of the lower classes, as well as to call for crusades, buttress the divine rights of kings, and depict slavery as apostolically endorsed.”\textsuperscript{179} Proof-texting not only renders the interpretation suspect, it also creates the illusion that the text has been tampered with. Proof-texting however is a mode of interpretation practiced not only in pre-critical times, but also in our time.

To be fair to Butler, one has to acknowledge the use of the narrative is more a rhetorical tool than anything else. Removed from the context of her campaign, her interpretation still stands up to what one might consider the standards for biblical interpretation for a Sunday morning sermon. One cannot say she has not been true to the text. In fact, the text truly supports Butler’s agenda without recourse to a selective reading of the text. As earlier on mentioned however, if advocates of patriarchy in Victorian England had used the same text, they could have summoned from the text an ending that supported their agenda as well, if in fact the narrative was a condemnation of the concubine leaving her husband as some commentators argued.\textsuperscript{180} But the power of Butler’s interpretation was in the fact that she appealed to the Christian nature of love and the fight against injustice, as everyone would agree that what was done to the woman was highly unjust.

\textsuperscript{179} Thompson, \textit{Reading the Bible with the Dead}, p. 219.
\textsuperscript{180} See the treatment of this particular interpretation in Chapter one, under the reception history section.
Another limitation to Butler’s approach is the alienation of other characters and other voices within the story. Butler’s concentration on the concubine was done to the exclusion of other voices that might have been in her audience. Though this is a limitation, it is however a justifiable one given the nature of her campaign, as well as the social milieu in which she lived. It is almost impossible to argue against the logic and brilliance of Butler’s presentation of the case of the concubine.

One other limitation is the fact that reason becomes subject to passion or emotion. In her treatments of the story, it is quite obvious that Butler ignored the first parts of the story. She started her narration from the journey into Gibeah by the Levite and his entourage. Such narration ignores the potential meaning that could be derived by those in her audience who were not familiar with the story. A certain bias is immediately introduced to the audience, wherein the Levite and his entourage were just innocent travelers who were treated badly in a city they had sought refuge in. However, this would not have been such a bad thing entirely except for the fact that Butler did not pursue the implications of such inhospitality in her milieu. Her focus was on fallen women and not on immigrants.

Conclusion

To wit, Butler’s interpretation of Judg 19, even though written more than a century ago, remains applicable for our time. It might sound almost redundant to say Butler’s theology of grace and love of God permeated her interpretation of Judges 19. Her interpretation of the passage concluded that the concubine was entitled to protection from her husband and her society. Clearly this is more an allusion to her crusade and her own milieu more than anything, but in appealing to the message of the cross and
Christian propriety, she makes a strong case for reading this particular narrative with that particular lens of seeing the plight and helplessness of the concubine and all women oppressed and helpless. Her interpretation could be considered prophetic, considering the core message of the ancient Israelite prophets.\(^{181}\)

Important as well were the ideals of equality and social justice, responsibilities introduced to her by her parents. Such strong focus on the suffering of others within society I believe is not exclusive to what she had seen her parents practice. Her protest on behalf of fallen women is one that spoke to this particular upbringing. She could have restricted her activities to just helping these women financially and in establishing new lives, but she encouraged others to do the same and invited more corporate actions from Christians alike to change the legislations and circumstances that brought about such conditions the women found themselves in.

Primarily however, I believe the major factors that influenced her interpretation were her personal theological (including Christological) understanding, ideological beliefs, individual philosophies and the prevailing gender debates at the time. All these influenced her critique of the societal structure reflected in the narrative, and also in her own immediate society. Her ideological critique of the men in the narrative, as well as the men and women in her own era who were silent about the injustices perpetrated in their society, shows a commitment to the fight against injustice and the spirit of Jesus’ message of “love your neighbour.”

Butler’s critique does not seem to separate the obligations of women from that of men. To her, both have social responsibilities in societal order. Though Butler did not grow up with a clear distinction of societal perceptions of the value of men versus that of

\(^{181}\) See Isa 58:6; Zech 7:9-10; also, Jer 34:8-22
women, her awareness of this in later years did not stop her from seeing both genders as culpable in the state of these fallen women. This gender inequality does not suggest to her that upper class women were innocent of these social injustices as well. Perhaps one of the main reasons why one might not readily consider Butler a true feminist is this ability to be able to see beyond the gender differences and restrictions within the society.

Compared to other readers in her time and definitely in our own time, Butler’s interpretation is still useful. If Jowett’s understanding of the singleness of meaning of biblical texts is considered appropriate, then it would seem this passage, and indeed most other passages in the Bible are useless to us today. Jowett has no commentary on this particular passage, but the sage referred to above in the incident where Butler sought advice for a helpless woman and the response was a caution of silence on the subject, was Jowett. Therefore, I believe Jowett’s interpretation of the passage might have been somewhat similar to majority of commentaries on Judg 19, mostly one of perplexity and uncertainty as to what to do with the passage. Even Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Women’s Bible had no resolution as to the usefulness of this passage in the Bible, but a reinforcement of her argument of the patriarchal nature of the Bible.

Butler however was able to work with the silence of the concubine. Beyond the confines of traditional expectation of silence and interpretation, Butler heard the sound of the concubine’s falling corpse, and invoked her silence as a way of reading the passage. She read with a certain perplexity at the actions of the Levite, and thus had a particular audience in mind, as well as a particular motif for the story, when she interpreted the story. Rather than shake her head at the dastardly acts performed in the text, Butler saw a call to justice within the story. Though she did not deal directly with the dismembering of
the concubine’s corpse and the intent of the Levite in doing this, like the Levite, Butler saw within the story a call to Christians to stand with the oppressed and the powerless in society. Of importance also is her understanding of the biblical text as relevant for every generation, and the necessity to apply the morals of the story to our lives.
CHAPTER THREE

“Ancient tales of terror speak all too frighteningly of the present.”

– Phyllis Trible

Introduction

The particularities of the choices we make and the resultant effects of those decisions are, more often than not, reflected times (minutes, days, weeks, months, etc.) later. Those who enter into the space of that history are “forced” to react to these decisions. In writing down the story of the Levite’s concubine, the writer or editor of the story and those who accepted it into the canon, made a deliberate choice to include within sacred Scripture a story that effected a continuous cycle of violence (Judg 19-21), giving subsequent generations of Israelites a glimpse into a world without a king.

Those who encounter the story as readers make a deliberate choice to confront or ignore the story. More often than not, the story is ignored. However, for those who consciously confront the story, the story still speaks to them. As Trible observed, this story continues to “speak all too frighteningly of the present.”¹⁸² It is to Phyllis Trible and her encounters with the story we now turn.¹⁸³

Trible’s contributions to biblical interpretation cannot be underestimated. According to one writer, “Trible charted new territory in biblical studies with her call to

¹⁸³ Ibid., pp. 1-2.
‘depatriarchalize’ interpretations of the Bible.”\textsuperscript{184} In a short biography, she was described as “a leading authority on what is now known as feminist hermeneutics, as well as literary and rhetorical methods of biblical criticism.”\textsuperscript{185} Furthermore, her first two books “are considered to be groundbreaking works in feminist biblical scholarship.”\textsuperscript{186}

Trible’s contributions to the field of biblical studies are the reason she is included in the dictionary of biblical interpreters, a publication where her work was extolled as pioneering in feminist biblical interpretation.\textsuperscript{187} The following description was made about her, “Among scholars of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Trible is known for her detailed literary analysis of biblical stories, forays into biblical theology, feminist critique of biblical interpretation and virtuosity as lecturer, teacher and writer.”\textsuperscript{188}

Trible’s retelling of the story of the Levite’s concubine and other similar stories of abuse and oppression broke new ground, employing rhetorical criticism as well as feminist hermeneutics. Such was the power of her analysis that subsequent interpretations of Judges 19 have to deal with Trible’s work. Her literary-feminist analyses of the chapter and various other difficult passages, with the help of her programmatic agenda of depatriarchalizing the Bible in her first book \textit{God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality},\textsuperscript{189} are seminal works on the subject of interpreting sexual violence stories within Scripture.

As this chapter will show, to revisit Trible’s work is of paramount importance for anyone working on Judges 19. Uncovering the gender-bias within the text, and the

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
construction of gender identity in the narrative, Trible expatiated on the oft-mentioned silence of the women in the text. An excellent analysis and a systematic breakdown of the narrative structure, Trible’s work on Judges 19 highlights the differences in the roles played by the characters in the story and the power structures embedded in the text. This in turn was used to seek the reader’s sympathy for the plight of the concubine and the voices of the oppressed within the story.

As will be argued later on in the chapter, Phyllis Trible’s literary approach owes a lot to her socio-cultural milieu as well as religious and educational background. It is also pertinent to note that her works owe much to the methodology developed by her mentor, James Muilenburg. More importantly, I will argue that second-wave feminism influenced Trible’s hermeneutics and consequently her interpretation of the story of the concubine.

**Early Life and Religious Influences**

Trible was born in 1932 and raised in Richmond, Virginia. She grew up in a conservative Baptist Christian home. At a young age she was taught the importance of the Bible and its authority. From being actively involved in a girls’ auxiliary group to participating in Bible drills at the church, Trible’s induction into Christianity and the reverence for the Bible as a manual for life, is not uncommon among Baptists.

Working with these descriptions of Trible, one might jump into an assumption that Trible is a stereotypical fundamentalist Christian, whose interpretation and belief in Scripture is subsumed under the assumption that the authority of Scripture is

---

unquestionable. While the inerrancy of Scripture is a fundamental Baptist belief, the nature of its inerrancy is debated. Here is a historian’s record of this debate:

For some Baptist churches and denominations, biblical inerrancy is the nonnegotiable norm for interpreting the authority and inspiration of the Bible. Others affirm the authority of the Bible but resist theories of inspiration as normative for all who would claim the Baptist name. Still others are thoroughgoing liberals who value the Bible and affirm its significance for the church but decry inerrancy and infallibility as rational categories that undermine serious biblical scholarship.¹⁹²

While her views of Scripture changed in her adult years, she continued to hold on to its power and influence. One cannot dismiss the influence of her childhood years. Trible wrote of the importance of her catechetical training as a child. In a reassessment of her programmatic book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, twenty years after it was written, she reminisces,

A missionary on furlough, whose name I do not know, taught Bible stories to a group of little girls of whom I was one. She said, “Everything that God created got better and better. What was the last thing God created?” Thoroughly indoctrinated, we replied in unison and with vigor, “Man!” She countered, “No, woman.” Hers is not the exegesis I now espouse, but nonetheless to this day I am grateful for her insight.¹⁹³

As Trible points out, the influence of the missionary’s insight was very lasting, as it helped set her agenda of a non-sexist reading of Scripture. From this brief account, one can infer certain points. First, Trible’s introduction to Bible stories at a young age is evident, because throughout her life the Bible remained very important. Second, we can infer that she was brought up in a church with a Sunday school class. Writing in 1989,

---

she described herself as a “Bible-thumping feminist, who takes the Bible and her modern female experiences on their own terms and sees what happens.”

Although the statement “bible-thumping feminist” might seem like an oxymoron to someone who sees the rise of feminism as a threat to a patriarchal book, the statement is an apt description of Trible, as shall be seen in her treatment of Judges 19. She not only teases from the texts new meanings and uncommon interpretations, she sees within the subtexts meanings that are usually reflective of the societal constructs at play during the period in question. It can be argued that her approach and method of biblical interpretation are not too far from her Christian upbringing and theological convictions, which include love for the Scriptures and an understanding of the equality of all humans. But not only did these influence her, the social atmosphere of her formative years in her chosen career dictated as well her adopted approach.

**Cultural Influence – Second Wave Feminism**

It is significant that Trible began her career as a teacher in 1963, the year of the first of the civil rights demonstrations as well as the assassination of United States’ president John F. Kennedy. This was a period rife with racial tensions and the debates about the status of women. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* was at this time more than a decade old.

Although it was published almost fifteen years later, Trible’s mention of the events of 1963 in her first book is very important in understanding the cultural

---

influences on her approach to interpreting Scriptures. She declared in the foreword to her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, “Using feminist hermeneutics, I have tried to recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith. ...This understanding has guided my vision since events symbolized by 1963 muted the proclamation of the mighty acts of God in history.” While it is not entirely clear which of the events she was referring to, one can safely assume that the nature of the equality of all humans was already being discussed.

The social debates of the 60s in North America were played out mostly in the media. According to a feminist historian, “More than one hundred years after women began organizing for equal rights, second-wave feminists caught the media’s attention with a series of spectacular actions. The year 1968 marked a coming to feminist consciousness for many women in Europe and North America.”

From demonstrations against a Miss America pageant, to protests in Toronto against a “winter bikini” contest, violent mass protests of students and workers in France, to German and Italian feminists confronting male chauvinism in radical student organizations, the Western world was in the presence of the explosion of several centuries of servitude to male hegemony. Unaware of the efforts of the first wave of feminism, Legates argued, “In most countries, this was the first time in two generations that women unapologetically declared their feminism. These same women were also

---

197 Ibid., p. xvi.
199 Ibid.
largely unaware of the enormous energies their predecessors had put into the same cause.»

In 1968, as a reaction to Simone de Beauvoir’s book, Mary Daly published her book, *The Church and the Second Sex*. This same year 1968 was the year famous feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin graduated from Bennington College where she had been arrested three years before, as part of a group of anti-war demonstrators. The 60s had ushered in a period of civil unrest with African-Americans also demanding equal rights as citizens of the free world. This era played a major role in scholarly discourse for subsequent decades. More important is the influence of social discourse around feminist issues on Trible’s articulation of a feminist perspective.

For her work on the neglected passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, according to Arblaster, Trible employed three tools, namely, “a feminist perspective, a rhetorical-critical methodology and the story of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok.” While this is true, it is important to emphasize that these three tools are reflective of Trible’s time and influencing forces at play. This is how Trible described her journey toward such interpretive method:

In the early 1970s, feminist interpretation of the Bible was a cloud no bigger than a woman’s hand. Knowing that such clouds can become mighty storms, I began to grapple with two certainties in my life: a love for the Bible and a commitment to feminism. Some friends told me that the twain shall never meet, but I sensed that they had already met within me. The challenge was to articulate the encounter.

---

200 Ibid.
Articulating the encounter was definitely accomplished in her two works *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978), as well as the *Texts of Terror* (1984). In between these two publications, Trible wrote an article in 1982 in which she surveyed the three existing feminist hermeneutical approaches, one of which she embraced as her own approach. In describing the case against patriarchy that spurned feminist readings of Scripture, she observed, “When feminists first examined the Bible, emphasis fell upon documenting the case against women. Commentators observed the plight of the female in Israel.”206 In the article, she sets forth the prevailing problem of biblical interpretation as one of patriarchy perpetuating patriarchy. She argues,

Born and bred in a land of patriarchy, the Bible abounds in male imagery and language. For centuries interpreters have explored and exploited this male language to articulate theology; to shape the contours and content of the church, synagogue and academy; and to instruct human beings – female and male – in who they are, what roles they should play, and how they should behave.207

Describing the interpretive atmosphere at the time, Trible further observed the challenge to this historical norm by feminism. She writes, “As a critique of culture in light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment and calling for repentance.”208 Summarized in such a way, Trible articulated her own stance in the debate.

**Influence of James Muilenburg and Rhetorical Criticism**

Trible’s mentor, James Muilenburg, had a lasting effect on her and her choice of interpretive method. A “true prodigy” of Muilenburg, Trible is considered one of the

---

207 Ibid., p. 116.
208 Ibid.
finest rhetorical critics of the Bible. Abounding in most of the articles read for this paper are references to Muilenburg as the originator of rhetorical criticism.\textsuperscript{209}

While Muilenburg might be said to have championed such methodology, Muilenburg himself owed much to Gunkel’s form criticism, which is the classification of classes and genres, \textit{Gattungsforschung}. Muilenburg argued for the excellence of Gunkel’s work. “It is not too much to say,” Muilenburg was reported to have said, “that Gunkel has never been excelled in his ability to portray the spirit which animated the biblical writers.”\textsuperscript{210} One of Muilenburg’s students counter-argued that this is an over-statement, “When it comes to grasping the interior, theological dimensions of Israel’s faith, James Muilenburg is unexcelled.”\textsuperscript{211} This same student, Bernhard Anderson, went on to argue that Muilenburg’s teaching at Union Theological Seminary “exploded the constricting framework of the Wellhausen view.”\textsuperscript{212}

This particular explosion, he asserted, occurred because of Muilenburg’s intuitiveness and his “penetration into the dimensions of Israel’s experience of the reality of God in her history and his ability to dramatize the scriptural story so that students were drawn into it personally.”\textsuperscript{213} Such was the influence of Muilenburg that, “Many of his own students have become distinguished scholars, including B. Anderson, W. Harrelson,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{209}] P.K. Tull, “Phyllis Trible,” \textit{Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters}, ed. Donald K. McKim (Illinois, USA; Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 989. In this entry on Trible, a notation on Muilenburg says, “As a form critic Muilenburg paved the way for literary methods of biblical study by observing the artistry and particularity of scriptural texts, studying their compositional structures and describing their fusions of traditional form and unique formulation. He later named this methodology “rhetorical criticism.”
\item[\textsuperscript{211}] Ibid., p. xi.
\item[\textsuperscript{212}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{213}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Walter Brueggemann and Phyllis Trible – all later presidents of the Society of Biblical Literature.”

**Trible’s Methodology**

Trible can be considered a biblical feminist. Jacquelyn Grant describes biblical feminists as “those who see Scripture as the primary source of theology. As such, the Bible provides a central authority which cannot be evaded.” This description fits Trible, as evident in the treatment of her background as a Baptist.

The approaches employed in her two books are, “a feminist perspective, a literary critical methodology and the subject matter of female and male in the Hebrew Scriptures.” The literary critical method Trible talked about is rhetorical criticism. Succinctly, rhetorical criticism as a method employs these three points: “the isolation of a discrete literary unit, the analysis of its structure and balance, and the attention to key words.”

Muilenburg’s understanding of the task of the rhetorical critic as outlined in his programmatic article is revealed in the following quotation:

> What I am interested in, above all, is in understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and in discerning the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole. Such an enterprise I should describe as rhetoric and the methodology as rhetorical criticism.

Muilenburg further explains, “The first concern of the rhetorical critic, it goes without saying, is to define the limits or scope of the literary unit, to recognize precisely

---

215 Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, p. 4.
where and how it ends.” This he further argues is important, “especially for a grasp of
the writer’s intent and meaning.” This particular use of literary criticism can be seen to
come alive in Trible’s interpretation of the neglected passages treated in *Texts of Terror,*
especially in her attempt to decipher the intent of the narrator of the story of the Levite’s
concubine.

While Trible’s choice of methodology can be said to include other methods like
“intertextuality or deconstruction,” her principal methodologies remained feminist-
literary approach and rhetorical criticism. As shall be seen in the examination of her
rereading of the story of the Levite’s concubine, she used both approaches to complement
each other, while pushing the reader toward an acknowledgement of the gender-hierarchy
within the story. In addition to these, Trible used her Christology to plead the case of the
concubine. A combination of all these is what Arblaster referred to in her thesis as a
“hermeneutics of compassion.”

In pursuing Trible’s methodology, it is helpful to understand Shurden’s view of
the Baptists’ four freedoms: The first is the freedom of the Soul, which understands the
competence of the soul to make decisions before God, in matters of faith, without any
undue persuasion by a religious or civil body. Second is the issue of church freedom. The
autonomy of the local church from outside interference, be it government or civilian
influences is assumed. Thirdly, religious freedom is also of paramount importance.
Lastly, Baptists believe that “the individual is free to interpret the Bible for himself or

---

220 Ibid. p. 9.
221 See above, her use of the story of the Good Samaritan in describing the plight of the concubine in the
narrative showcases her use of intertextuality. See also Tull, “Phyllis Trible,” p. 992.
222 Arblaster, *Phyllis Trible,* p. 7. It is not certain if this term is original to Arblaster.
223 Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms,* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys
herself, using the best tools of scholarship and biblical study available to the individual."\textsuperscript{224}

This last freedom is exhibited in Trible’s approach to reading Scripture. Not only did she use what she considered the best tools of biblical scholarship at the time to interpret the passage in Judges 19, she teased from the passage new questions and insights, especially in moving away from the dominant male-centered commentary on the passage.

**Interpretation of Judges 19**

Trible divided Judges 19 into three acts. In these acts she explored the effects of a patriarchal society, the dichotomy between the treatment of males and females, and also the power dynamics within the story. Reading the story in its social context, Trible delivered to us a close reading of the text, with attention to key words and, specifically, word plays in Hebrew.

Trible employed five structural elements in interpreting the gender bias present within the story. With her analysis of the narrator’s intentional use of polarities of sex, social status, geographical locations, time and space, Trible did something no one before her had done quite as thoroughly as she did with this narrative. Her attention to the details of the use of language as speech act not only accentuates the ingenuity of her approach to this difficult text, but also clarifies for the reader, specifically, the issue of gender inequality, which enabled and spurned the violent actions and also the non-actions of the main male characters.

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
Trible believed that the story of “betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman” continues to speak to readers. Trible’s understanding of the story commands every reader’s attention and participation. In describing the events in the story as “unrelenting terror that refuses to let us pass by on the other side,” she made allusion to the story of the Good Samaritan and invoked empathy for the victim(s) in the Judges 19 narrative. Active engagement in the pain of the unnamed women and especially the concubine who is the main object of the narrative, she seemed to suggest, is something required in reading this story. Furthermore, according to Trible, this is a story we are “commanded to speak.”

Working from her thesis of power imbalance, Trible pointed out the dichotomy between the male and female characters of the story. As mentioned earlier, her use of rhetorical criticism is one that utilizes literary devices to expose the silences behind the text. In her interpretation, Trible intentionally read from the perspective of the woman, and used the narrator’s silence on the thoughts and speeches of the concubine to her advantage, then forced the readers to reconsider the way they have read or are reading the story. This in turn leads to a new awareness into the inequality and power imbalance within the story as well as in the social milieu of the story.

Trible’s rereading of the story in light of the power imbalance and gender inequality present in the story is one that follows her argument that “Storytelling is sufficient unto itself.” In retelling the story, Trible also presents her findings. In her essay she engages scholarly debates, but rather subtly and sometimes overtly points out

---

225 Trible, Texts of Terror, p. 65.
226 Ibid.
227 Ibid., p. 86.
228 Ibid., p. xiii.
the entrenched societal constructs with the aid of her preferred method, rhetorical criticism. Brueggemann’s observation of how Trible used this method is noteworthy. According to Brueggemann, “The method utilized here makes very little, if any, imposition on the text.” He further opines, “The remarkable fact about Trible’s use of the method is that while she is fully conversant with literary theory, her presentation is free of every theoretical encumbrance.” Brueggemann further praises the methodology used stating, “Trible presents a ‘state of the art’ treatment of rhetorical criticism, learned from our common teacher James Muilenburg.”

Setting herself against the narrator of the story, Trible contrasts the male characters of the story with the female ones, pointing out the societal structures and constructs that gave the male characters the freedom for such acts as committed in the narrative. This is how she sets up her task in rereading the story:

The cast of characters is predominantly male: a Levite, his attendant (n’r), a father, an old man, and a group of men. Of the two females, a concubine is central; a virgin daughter receives scant attention. All these people are nameless. The men do speak, even the attendant, but the women say nothing. Though most of the characters appear only in sections of the act, each contributes to the overriding theme of turbulent life moving circuitously to violent death. The path is tortuous and torturous. Our task is to make the journey alongside the concubine: to be her companion in a literary and hermeneutical enterprise.

Trible placed societal value in the structures inherent within the story. Putting to use her knowledge of form and literary criticism, she saw the geographical movement of the story as circular. She also noticed the dissonance between the status of the Levite

---

230 Ibid.
231 Ibid.
233 Ibid., p. 65.
and that of the concubine. The Levite had an honoured place within society as opposed to the concubine’s status as an inferior female. According to Trible, “socially, she is not the equivalent of a wife but is virtually a slave, secured by a man for his own purposes.”

Trible continued in her quest to identify the imbalance in the social positions of both main characters by arguing that “the grammar and syntax of the opening sentence exploit the inequality” of the two characters. According to her, “He is subject; she is object. He controls her. How he acquired her we do not know; that he owns her is certain.” This particular mention of ownership of the concubine is used by Trible to set up her next observation in which she points out the surprise in reading that the concubine acts in verse two of the chapter.

According to the narrative, the concubine left the Levite. Trible picks up on this particular action by suggesting its plausibility in explaining the confusion about her conduct, which both the Masoretic Text and the Syriac claim as “his concubine played the harlot,” while the Greek and the Old Latin Vulgate, maintain as “his concubine became angry with him.” It would seem that the action of the concubine is strange in this socio-cultural milieu. Of importance to Trible as well is that even though “ancient manuscripts give contradictory answers; the story itself allows either reading.” Suffice it to say, whether she played the harlot (an assertion the rest of the story does not really support) or she was angry with him (the story does allow for a brief separation between the Levite and his concubine if she was only angry), the second rendition seems more plausible. This allows a smooth reading of the story from that point forward.

---

234 Ibid., p. 66.
235 Ibid.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid., p. 67.
All through her rendering of the story, Trible highlighted the differences between the Levite and the concubine, and later on between the Master (Levite) and the father, as the concubine went home. She argued, “father opposes master, with the daughter/concubine in the middle.” Even in the discussion between the master (the Levite) and his attendant, the female character is ignored, Trible pointed out. This particular observation I believe is meant to highlight further the gender power structures at play within the narrative. In retelling this story this way, one is aware of often-ignored gender nuances within this story.

Also present in her analysis is detailed attention to the use of time and space. Her focus on the inordinate amount of time the Levite spent with the concubine’s father is contrasted with the single night spent in Gibeah. Trible contends, “Such coordination of length and conflict foreshadowed the development of scene two. The time of this scene is a single night in Gibeah, and yet the length exceeds significantly the entire account of five days in Bethlehem.”

Spatial usage within the story also comes into play in Trible’s analysis. She argues that in the scene in Gibeah, “two episodes organize the action. The first moves from the public square to a house in Gibeah (19:15b-21); the second from the house to the outside and back again (19:22-28).” The significance of these observations serves to extract from the story, social constructs, of people and objects, as well as the different uses of specific spaces/locations within the narrative.


---

239 Ibid. p. 67.
240 Ibid. p. 70.
241 Ibid. p. 71.
entertained men alone, the old man also has a female guest, and no hospitality safeguards her. She is chosen as the victim of male lust.”

Furthering this argument Trible points out that “in neither of these stories does the male host offer himself in place of his guests. Constant only is the use of innocent and helpless women to guard and gratify men of all sorts.”

However similar the two stories may seem, Trible pointed out “Parallel in setting, vocabulary, and motifs, the two stories now diverge to make ours the more despicable. Nothing has prepared us for the terror to come.” What strikes Trible, as notable in the ending of the dialogue between the Benjaminites, the host, and the Levite, was the way the woman was sacrificed by the Levite to keep safety within. She compares this sacrifice to the sacrifice of Jesus for his friends. Using words from the New Testament, Trible declared, “Truly, the hour is at hand, and the woman is betrayed into the hands of sinners (cf. Mk 14:41).” Trible’s choice of words here suggests she read this particular Old Testament narrative in light of a similar suffering by Jesus Christ. Though one can argue that she probably sees the story of the concubine as part of the larger narrative of salvation history, it is however safer to say she only sees the concubine’s predicament as equal to that of Jesus Christ. An innocent sacrificed for the sake of others, and in both cases, involuntary victims, who were “seized” by the mob (cf. Judg 19:25 and Mk 14:46).

So far, we have seen Trible’s attention to male bias within the story, principally of the male characters towards the females in the story. Besides the “men of the sons of

---

Ibid. p. 75.
Ibid.
Ibid. p. 76.
Ibid.
wickedness” who were the actual perpetrators in the chapter, Trible indicted three other men.

First, she indicted the old man who was the host in Gibeah of being the procurer of women for the sexual gratification of the wicked men in the story. She argues, “No restrictions whatsoever does this lord place upon the use of the two women. Instead, he gives wicked men a license to rape them. His final words of negative command emphasize again the point of it all. ‘But to this man do not do this vile thing’.”

The second person to be indicted is the narrator of the story. With what might have been seen as an excuse to absolve the old man of any wrong doing, being left no alternative, the narrator had included what Trible called a non sequitur. After the bargaining at the door had ceased, the narrator offered the statement that no one would listen to the old man. Furthermore, the brief treatment of the actions of the men against the woman seems biased to Trible. Thus she writes:

Through the distancing of narrated discourse, the tale of terror unfolds. The crime itself receives few words. If the storyteller advocates neither pornography nor sensationalism, he also cares little about the woman’s fate. The brevity of this section on female rape contrasts sharply with the lengthy reports on male carousing and male deliberations that precede it. Such elaborate attention to men intensifies the terror perpetrated upon the woman.

Finally, the sympathetic reading of the Levite’s action in the beginning as a romantic who sought the heart of the woman he loved was also upended. Accusing the Levite of betrayal, Trible argued that the concubine “is the violated property of the master who betrayed her. Once she left this man, but he reclaimed her only to deliver her

246 Ibid. p. 74.
247 Ibid. p. 75.
248 Ibid. p. 76.
into the hands of other men who beat on the door (dlt) of the house (19:22)." All through the night of her agony and pain Trible observed, “the master has remained safe within throughout the night. Morning confronts him with the atrocity that he initiated.”

Trible further pointed out “though the men of Gibeah raped the concubine all night, he will perform his despicable deed “in the morning” (19:27).”

In addition to this deed is the notion that the Levite only cared about himself. Commenting on the narrator’s perceived intention of setting up the Levite in a positive light when we were told the Levite set out to speak to the heart of the concubine, Trible argues this was not fulfilled. She contends, “Nowhere in the story has the portrayal of the master even hinted that he might fulfill the narrator’s description of his intention. Instead, he forces the woman to fit his plans.”

Furthermore, the Levite is complicit in the brutality against the woman,

“He took the knife and he seized (hzq) his concubine.” Raped, tortured, and dead or alive, this woman is still in the power of her master. Her battered body evokes escalated brutality from him. No agent, human or divine, intervenes. Instead, the knife, symbol of a terror that faith once prevented, now prevails. Earlier the master had “seized (hzq) his concubine and pushed to them outside” (19:25b); this time he himself completes the violence. “He cut her (nth), limb by limb into twelve pieces and sent her (šlh) throughout all the territory of Israel” (19:29c). Is the cowardly betrayer also the murderer? Certainly no mourning becomes the man; no burial attends the woman.

Obviously, Trible was not impressed with the Levite’s behaviour and is justified in pointing out the nonchalant attitude of the Levite towards his concubine’s death. It is not surprising that she would thus indict the Levite. One sees the intentionality of Trible’s

---

249 Ibid. p. 77.
250 Ibid.
251 Ibid.
252 Ibid. p. 78.
253 Ibid. p. 80.
reading of the passage and included in her essay are five different responses to the story, both from within Scriptures and in the early church. These responses are from (1) the editors of judges, (2) the Israelite men in subsequent chapters, (3) the prophets, (4) early church writers, and (5) subsequent commentators who ignored the story altogether.

Reacting to what she considered the response of the editors of Judges to the story, she contended, “Entrusted to Israelite men, the story of the concubine justifies the expansion of violence against women. What these men claim to abhor, they have reenacted with vengeance. They have captured, raped, and scattered four hundred virgins of Jabesh-gilead and two hundred daughters of Shiloh. ... Tribal Israel failed to direct its heart to the concubine.”254 In conclusion to this response by the Israelite men she argues, “Clearly, to counsel a political solution to the story of the concubine is ineffectual. Such a perspective does not direct its heart to her.”255

The prophets also scarcely directed their hearts to the concubine as well.256 The shapers of the canon however, responded by placing the stories of Hannah and Ruth after this story. Trible argued, “The absence of misogyny, violence and vengeance in the two stories juxtaposed to the Benjaminite traditions speaks a healing word in the days of the judges. The portrayal of the women enhances the message.”257 She further asserts, “To direct the heart of these stories to the concubine, is to counsel redemption.”258

However, similar to Butler’s observation is the response of the rest of Scripture to this story. “Overwhelming silence is the fifth response to this text. It comes from both

---

254 Ibid. p. 83.
255 Ibid. p. 84.
256 Ibid. p. 86.
257 Ibid. p. 85.
258 Ibid.
ancient Israel and the early Christian community.”  

Trible argues against this tradition by declaring, “Silence covers impotence and complicity. To keep quiet is to sin, for the story orders its listeners to “direct your heart to her, take counsel, and speak” (19:30; 20:7).”

Moving on from the male responses and indictment of the male characters, as well as narrator, in a male-dominated/patriarchal world, Trible addresses the intent and what she saw as the message of the passage. Compassion towards this helpless woman is considered an appropriate response to this particular passage. Trible’s compassion for this nameless concubine is exposed in the following description,

Of all the characters in Scripture, she is the least. Appearing at the beginning and close of a story that rapes her, she is alone in a world of men. Neither the other characters nor the narrator recognizes her humanity. She is property, object, tool, and literary device. Without name, speech, or power, she has no friends to aid her in life or mourn her in death. 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. In the end, she is no more than the oxen that Saul will later cut (n̄ḥ) in pieces and send (šāḥ) throughout all the territory of Israel as a call to war (I Sam 11:7). Her body has been broken and given to many. Lesser power has no woman than this, that her life is laid down by a man.

Again we see Trible’s understanding and use of Christological symbols in rereading the story of the concubine. The last two sentences refer specifically to the broken body of Christ as experienced in the Eucharist (cf. Lk 22:29), and the life of Christ laid down for his friends as a sign of his love (Jn 15:13). Though in the last sentence Trible changes the idea of love present in Jesus’ words to the lesser power of the

---

259 Ibid. p. 86.
260 Ibid.
261 Ibid. pp. 80-81.
woman displayed in Judges 19, anyone familiar with Scripture still understands the image being invoked.

What is significant in recapturing Trible’s interpretation is the huge departure from the conventional helplessness readers experience when confronted with the excessive violence in the story. Compared to interpretations of commentators like Soggin, whose commentary on Judges came out a mere three years before Trible’s *Text of Terror*, there is a certain sense of hope in the latter commentary. Trible managed to detach the story from being subsumed under the general overview of the last four chapters of the book of Judges, usually seen as a polemic for or against the monarchy.

Soggin on the other hand, drawing on several German scholars who commented on the book of Judges and some even on Judg 19, did not do much with the passage, besides recapping the technical observations of some of these scholars. First, as to the reason for the concubine leaving the Levite, Soggin seemed to disagree with the Hebrew text that said the concubine “whored against” the Levite. He argues that there is no way this can be interpreted as “practise prostitution” saying, “The responsibility for the matrimonial crisis, on which the text gives us no information, must have lain with the husband, at least in the view of his later behaviour; however, the cause of the quarrel cannot have been very serious, if the wife and the father-in-law are so glad to be reconciled.”

Taken out of context, this particular commentary would seem to suggest that the concubine was the focus of Soggin’s analysis. However, this is not the case. As

---


Mieke Bal argues, “The husband, whose honor this critic is determined to save, would be debased were he kind to a whore, while he is elevated by his kindness towards an angry wife.”265

Reading obviously with an academic audience in mind, Soggin’s analysis is a continuation of previous academic-bound interpretation of the passage, and an androcentric one. His commentary on the passage leaves the reader more confused. Soggin’s impositions on the text, like his conclusion that the suggestion made by the father-in-law for the Levite and his concubine to spend the night, was obviously a euphemism for resumption of matrimonial relations, seem far-fetched.266 Of course, one can argue it is implicit in the invitation, but it is definitely not the intention of the concubine’s father.

Also claiming that the “invitation is addressed to the woman and her husband,”267 is an attempt to ignore the potential power structures in the narrative. No doubt the invitation will ultimately include the woman and everything pertaining to the man. However, following Trible’s analysis of the story, one is made aware of the gender politics within the narrative. Though Soggin tried to make the narrative more inclusive, most readers would recognise that everyone and everything seemed to revolve around the person of the Levite. Trible’s interpretation did pay attention to this.

Trible did not hesitate in naming the violent acts, nor did she hesitate in condemning the culprits, which included all the men within the story, as well as the narrator of the story. Her call to direct one’s heart to that of the concubine speaks to her

267 Ibid.
agenda of depatriachalizing scripture. Her interpretation opened up the narrative to further interpreters and commentators. More importantly, her invitation to direct one’s heart to the concubine seemed to have been answered, as several works on the chapter after Trible acknowledge the person of the concubine and work mostly from her perspective.

Limitations

Trible’s reading of this story is definitely an ideological one that directs the reader to “direct our hearts to her,” the concubine. Through using rhetorical criticism to deconstruct the power and gender structures in the story and the society represented, it is obvious that Trible’s reading is one of bias for the concubine. While one might argue that this is a necessary bias, there are attending dangers to reading this way.

One of the dangers of reading in such a way is the tendency to read into the story. Trible does this four different times in her interpretation of the text. First, I believe Trible’s suggestion that the concubine was “not the equivalent of a wife but is virtually a slave” is suspect. As the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* points out, the concubine is a wife, though of secondary status. The word used in describing this nameless woman is the word *pîlegeš*, meaning concubine, found about 37 times in the Hebrew Scripture. In all the occurrences, nowhere was it suggested that the concubine was a slave. One can understand the need for Trible to use such description. Not only would it enrage our modern sensibilities that a woman one cohabits with is seen as a

---

268 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. 86.
269 Ibid., p. 66.
slave, but it also serves Trible’s rhetoric of the power imbalance in the culture, wherein
the woman’s powerlessness is emphasized through such a description.

Secondly, suggesting that there was a tension between the master and the father
over the daughter is presupposing a Freudian attachment the father might have towards
his daughter. Nowhere in all of the narrative is there a suggestion of such intimacy
between the father and the daughter. Besides the introduction of the Levite to the father,
there was no further interaction between the woman and her father. This observation,
however, does not preclude Trible’s assertion of a potential power play between the
father and the Levite. I think Trible might have read another story into this particular
story, and that will be the story of Jacob and Laban. In that particular story Laban did
indeed claim the daughters and their children as his (Gen 31:43).

Third, ignoring of the concubine’s opinion in deciding where to rest for the night
seems a bit far-fetched if social conventions were put into play. While the position of the
other male is rather a subservient one, and his suggestion could possibly mean that he is
just doing his job by being aware of any resultant fatigue from the journey, or the
apparent dangers of the night, Trible’s reading of the story in such a way is not entirely
justifiable.

Lastly, to concentrate on one character to the detriment of other characters is not
sustainable, as one does not truly have all the facts from that era and culture. This ties
into the first point about the dangers of reading into the story. Social conventions during
the time of the judges are definitely not the same as ours.
Conclusion

My contention in this chapter has been the importance of Trible’s contribution to the reading of Judges 19. Though the work itself is more than twenty years old, its importance in reading this particular story cannot be overstated. Not only do we find in her analysis such rich tools to help make a case for our own reading of the story, and in our context, but also see through another’s eyes the androcentric focus of the story. Also, I have argued for the strong influence of prevailing social struggles in Trible’s time to encourage and enable such a radical reading of the story. For in Trible’s time, books like The Second Sex by Simone De Beauvoir and Andrea Dworkin’s Woman Hating\textsuperscript{272} not only spoke to the predominant issues for the second wave of feminism, but also to the prevailing debates at the time.

While these issues helped Trible articulate for her time the struggles inherent within the story for her generation, her work is still relevant for us today in engaging some of the unaddressed issues for our generation in this story, as they relate to us. The issues of rape and domestic abuse as pointed out by Trible are not limited to just an era, they are issues that need to be engaged for each generation as long as these social malaise exist.

In reading the story with Trible, we are able to see with the lens of someone schooled in historical-critical methods, but who was able to use rhetorical criticism to open up the text to find life-changing and transformative interpretations. Her call to repentance is a product of such reading.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

Reading Judges 19 is a task that not only demystifies the sacredness of the Bible, but also assaults our Christian notion of propriety. As mentioned earlier, this might serve to explain the reluctance by many scholars and preachers to address the chapter or even interpret it for a contemporary audience. However, as we have seen in the bold and cutting-edge readings and interpretations offered by both Josephine Butler and Phyllis Trible, the chapter challenges and continually reminds us of the necessity to speak out against injustice, more so in our present situation, a world where meaning and interpretation become increasingly subjective to context. It is important then for us in this paper to define and appreciate the complexities of this era that some have called postmodern, and others have termed post-Christian, before appropriating the lessons gained from reading Judges 19 with Butler and Trible.

The Postmodern Context

For most Christians in the Western world, the crisis of the church is a result of our postmodern culture. Whereas the traditional Christian understanding has argued for a single approach to redemption and salvation, the ambiguity of individual experiences espoused by postmodernism critiques such approach. This critique is what Jean Francois Lyotard described as, “Simplifying to the extreme, an incredulity towards metanarratives.” These metanarratives are “the grand, self-legitimating interpretive frameworks according to which we modern people seek to define our world as complete

273 See John 14:6 for the proof text commonly used for this assumption.
and whole.”

William Johnson further defined metanarrative as, “the omnicOMPETENT rationale according to which all individual narratives are thought to find their larger meaning and purpose.”

Ellen Davis and Richard Hays both seem to agree that, “in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place, and citizens in a pluralistic, secular culture have trouble knowing what to make of it.” A cartoon illustrating this particular dilemma is that of a man making inquiry at the information counter of a large bookstore. The clerk, tapping on his keyboard and peering intently into the computer screen, replies, “The Bible? … That would be under self-help.”

“Put more colloquially, the age in which we are living is the age of ‘Whatever...’” “Whatever...” can be argued to mean, “Whatever works for you,” which describes the nature of the ambiguity of experience the postmodern era espouses. The problem in this new paradigm is that of subjective idealism. Everything is subjected to personal preferences, perceptions and/or backgrounds.

Brueggemann’s observation on how we arrived at this new situation describes the collapse of scientific positivism and in essence modernism. With this collapse came also the end of “our modes of theological interpretation.” Another scholar furthered the notion by saying that “the modes of certitude and domination reflected by the Enlightenment and sustained for a very long time are a spent force that no longer

275 Ibid.
278 Ibid.
279 Johnson, “Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age,” p. 121.
commands authority or allegiance.”

Brueggemann, however, cautions, “Such a statement is clearly an overstatement, because these modes of perception, articulation, and practice are very deep among us and are not easily abandoned or readily transformed.” However, he agrees with Toulmin’s analysis that “we can now see the reversal of the process of modernity, as we move from written to oral, universal to particular, general to local, and timeless to timely.”

Johnson also seemed to agree with this notion of a reversal when he suggested that, “The paradoxical result is that the more modernity sought to redescribe the whole, the more it prompted the proliferation of knowledge into multiple subdisciplines, each with its own language game, each with its own rules for the determination of meaning.” He further contends,

In a way, postmodernity is the recognition that all the many “ism’s” of modernity have only a relative validity – not that they have no validity, but that they can have no overarching and hegemonic validity. It is against this backdrop that the theological challenge to move beyond foundations and beyond totality must be interpreted. ...Moving beyond totality means rediscovering the premodern Christian tradition’s recognition that the story we are telling is multivalent and open-ended.

It is to this open-endedness of scriptural texts, past interpretations and traditions that this particular thesis appeals. Our present situation as Christians calls for a reappropriation and reexamination of the Bible as our source of authority. More importantly, however, there is a need for us to accept the whole of Scripture as our foundation, embracing the awkward with the awesome, the problematic alongside the

---

281 Ibid., p. 6.
282 Ibid.
283 Ibid.
284 Johnson, “Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age,” p. 122.
285 Ibid.
promises, and also accepting the possible multiple interpretations alongside singular truths embedded in the narratives for different communities.

There are downsides to the philosophy espoused in postmodernity. One important point is the possible eradication of so-called universal truths. To interpret for us as individuals, as reader-response approaches have suggested, is to allow other underlying constructs to creep in. Different social and societal constructs within metanarratives seem to constitute enough reason for the obfuscation of universal truths. For example, in the story of the Levite’s concubine, the metanarrative seems to be the necessity for a king. However, there are several power structures already at play within the society, between men and women, owners and slaves, hosts and guests, foreigners and citizens, tribal allegiances and geographical locations. All these dichotomies have one thing in common: constructs that help perpetuate the hegemony of one group over the other. To focus on any one of these constructs is to lose sight of the interpretive framework suggested in the grandnarrative.

However, with careful application of the philosophy of postmodernism, the passage under discussion is still applicable to a generation that supposedly eschews such violence recorded in the narrative. Though we have heard stories similar to that of the Levite’s concubine repeated in different ways in our contemporary culture,286 faith communities and the society at large have chosen to ignore the “truths” and messages of these stories. The reason for this is not far fetched and is best described by David Simon, the creator of the television series *The Wire*.

We are a culture without the will to seriously examine our own problems. We eschew that which is complex, contradictory or confusing. As a culture, we seek

---

286 There are different stories in popular culture today in some television shows/series today that address these unspoken issues in our societies.
simple solutions. We enjoy being provoked and titillated, but resist the rigorous, painstaking examination of issues that might, in the end, bring us to the point of recognizing our problems, which is the essential first step to solving any of them.  

**Need for the Past**

The description above of the societal malaise of the North American culture is not only apt, but speaks also to the problem surrounding the interpretation of the story of the Levite’s concubine. The reluctance to address such a disturbing story has been a problem for all ages, as seen all through this paper. However, others in the past have offered us ways of tackling the issues presented in the story, and using their works as a foundation, we can proceed to appropriate the lessons of the story for our generation.

Thompson argues, “The lessons of the history of exegesis, like those of other kinds of history, can be as simple as finding good examples to imitate and bad ones to avoid.” Good examples, if appropriated rightly, often make a world of difference, giving the user permission to sound fresh.

Secondly, it is the strangeness and familiarity these past commentators offer that makes it worthwhile. Thompson suggests, “It is rightly encouraging to confront a heart-rending story in Scripture, then discover that we are not the first to be stupefied by the cruelty recorded in the text. The same might be said of passages that bewilder not so

---

287 This is a response to the thematic question raised in one of the seasons of the television series *The Wire* as to “why, if there is any truth to anything presented in The Wire over the last four seasons, does that truth go unaddressed by our political culture, by most of our mass media, and by our society in general?” See the full letter at [http://www.hbo.com/thewire/finaletter/](http://www.hbo.com/thewire/finaletter/) Last accessed on March 17, 2010

288 A culture exported and adopted by a huge percentage of the world’s population.

much because they are sad stories but because they are difficult teachings – as with texts about divorce and women speaking and teaching in church.”

Thompson’s final argument acknowledges the fact that we may find something strange in traditional exegesis, but there is a familiarity in this strangeness. This strangeness may constitute surprises about the past, and offer glimpses into what he called “unlooked-for readings of Scripture” that ultimately connect us to different Christian cultural mindsets and churches. He concludes, “We may return from the past unpersuaded, but we will not return unchanged.”

Beyond Thompson’s call to preserve the past, there is an attention to the struggles of pre-critical commentators on these difficult passages within Scripture. The struggles of pre-critical commentators are the same as some of the works done recently by feminists, seems to be Thompson’s argument. One, however, finds a certain necessary bias towards feminist contentions in his work, while holding to the similarities between pre-critical commentators and feminist critics as he argues,

The history of pre-critical biblical interpretation does not disclose a univocal or monolithic entity, much less one that could possibly pretend to meet all the objections or worries registered by modern feminist critics – not that feminist critics themselves, divided among revisionists, rejectionists, radicals, and others, are free from internal disagreements. ... pre-critical commentators were not necessarily uncritical in their handling of biblical texts, nor in their consideration of narratives filled with actions and actors that are morally suspect, to say the least.

However, to move on we need to acknowledge also the importance of social debates in biblical exegesis for such stories as the one in Judges 19. The relevance of the

---

290 Ibid.
291 Ibid., p. 223.
292 Ibid.
293 Ibid., p. 223.
Scripture to the people’s lives is important, both those within the communities of faith and those outside the community. We find this concern to let the Scripture speak to all people in the works of both Trible and Butler.

Lessons From the Past

There are several risks in reading past history, as well as reading past interpretations of these histories. First of these risks is the “added guidance of one’s own taste and interests.”294 Furthermore, Thompson argues, “any reader who is subjectively engaged by a biblical narrative will almost certainly develop some hope for the story’s outcome, particularly if the tale seems devoid of obvious closure or resolution.”295 This hope in essence becomes a debilitating factor in remaining “objective” and staying true to the text without imposing beliefs on, and adding to the story’s “facts.”

The story of the Levite’s concubine is one of such stories that seem “devoid of obvious closure or resolution.” Not only does the story leave one feeling uncomfortable, the story plagues our consciousness, almost with an attending feeling of hopelessness. A feeling which might in turn lead to the interpreter’s need to resolve the story according to our preconceptions, without much regard to the details and cultural context of the story.

This story speaks to unspoken events in people’s lives even within our social milieu. Because of the uneasiness surrounding such stories, it is easier to forget or neglect stories like this, because the solution proffered in chapters 20 and 21, as Trible argued, is no solution at all but a recipe for a cycle of violence.

I find there are three lessons to be learnt from the interpretations offered by Butler and Trible. First, this ancient story is timeless. Both Butler and Trible acknowledged that

294 Thompson, Reading the Bible with the Dead, p. 222.
295 Ibid.
the story remains relevant. Butler proclaimed, “O! Christian people, I implore you to look back over the history of the world, and to realize that this tragedy has been repeated all through the centuries; that the story I have cited is the story of the egotism of man and the sacrifice of womanhood to that egotism, invoking a curse which is to this day hanging like a dark and threatening cloud over the nations of the earth.”

Reiterating this point, Trible argued, “Misogyny belongs to every age, including our own. Violence and vengeance are not just characteristics of a distant pre-Christian past; they infect the community of the elect to this day. Woman as object is still captured, betrayed, raped, tortured, murdered, dismembered, and scattered. To take to heart this ancient story, then, is to confess its present reality.”

This still holds true for our time.

The introduction to a recent report released on February 12, 2009 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes is titled, “A Knowledge crisis about a crime that shames us all.” This title seems to corroborate Trible’s argument above. In this report, it was argued, “sexual exploitation is by far the most commonly identified form of human trafficking (79%), followed by forced labour (18%).” These statistics suggest that on some issues such as sexual violence, the differences between our culture and the Old Testament world are minimal. It is important, then, for us to revisit these stories for our generation. There is a need for us to explore how the ancients and past generations dealt with such issues, and if any, what lessons can be learnt from their solutions.

---

296 Butler, “A Typical Tragedy: Dead Hands Upon the Threshold,” The Storm Bell 1898, p. 112.
299 Ibid.
Secondly, both Butler and Trible agree that for us to read the story, we must stand with and “speak to the heart” of the concubine. It is not only because they requested it, but also because the story invites such response from the readers. Both interpreters used existing debates to buttress their points on the story, and vice-versa. For both interpreters, the issue is to find a voice and presence for the women who could not speak for themselves. For Butler, this stand was principally with fallen women. She testified to the grace in serving as an ambassador for these women thus, “The happiest of all women, myself, in all the relations of life, - God has done me the great favour of allowing me, in a manner, to be, for these thirty years, the representative of the outcast – ‘of the woman of the city who was a sinner.’ It is her voice which I utter.”

Trible also believed the call was to stand with all women. In treating the response of the editors of the canon to the story Trible confirmed this, “Alongside the concubine, the women of Benjamin, the young women of Jabesh-gilead, and the daughters of Shiloh stand Hannah, Naomi, Ruth and the women of Bethlehem. Though the presence of the latter group cannot erase the sufferings of their sisters, it does show both the Almighty and the male establishment a more excellent way.”

Lastly, the call made by the story is not to perpetuate the conspiracy of silence, but to speak out (Judges 19:30). Butler’s bold usage of this story to fight the injustice of the Contagious Diseases Act and other related issues in her time is one that is commendable. She not only spoke against the injustice meted out to the concubine in the story, but used the story to speak against injustices in her time. In addition to the

---

301 Trible, Texts of Terror, p. 85.
injustices against *fallen women*, she argued that the injustice is similar to the war being perpetuated during her time. Here is what she said,

Without regarding war as a providentially appointed scourge of nations which have forsaken God, yet, surely, we can all see that the same passions which incite man to tyrannize over the weak at his own door, to grasp advantages purchased by the blood and tears of his fellowmen, even his fellow citizens, to doom to destruction hundreds of his sinful fellow men, we can all see that these passions are all but identical with those which “make for war.”

Trible as well called for attention to the cry of the story; she contends, “The story is alive, and all is not well. Beyond confession 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.”

These three lessons, I believe, attend to a tripartite approach employed by both interpreters for such a difficult text. This approach can be translated into three distinct needs for reading Scriptures for communities of faith. They are,

1. Relevance (self-explanatory)
2. Redemption/compassion (Presence of someone/something to stand with)
3. Repentance (Call to Justice)

The first lesson is the recognition that biblical stories of faith, though situated in different eras are applicable to contemporary generations, and offer lessons for different generations. Given the reluctance with which commentators have dealt with this passage over the centuries, it is easy to classify this passage as one of those that do not have any relevance for us today. However, as proven by these two authors and pointed out earlier, we can find parallels within our own social milieu to this story. Critical analysis of the

---

303 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. 87.
story opened the story up to new interpretations, and also applications. Both women were not satisfied with the status quo, and found within this disturbing story tools for a new reading of their own societal problems.

The second point is the definite agenda that Butler and Trible brought into the reading of the story. While it can be argued that their interpretations were influenced by their presuppositions and agenda for a feminist interpretation, it is quite obvious as well that they stayed true to the text. Staying primarily with the injustice meted out to the concubine, both interpreters addressed themselves to compassion for the women in the story, as well as the women in their own times.

Very important in the articulation of this compassion is an appeal to both their theology and Christology. It is evident in their work that Butler and Trible used Jesus’ message of “setting the captives free”\(^\text{304}\) to buttress their points. Butler’s passionate plea to her countrywomen described the need for this: “The emotional pity, which is easily kindled in a tender soul, is worth little unless it ripen into that Christ-like, unwearying compassion, which is able to toil, and suffer, and to live a long tedious life for the love of souls, as well as, if need be, to lead gallantly a forlorn hope, and perish suddenly in the breach.”\(^\text{305}\)

Finally, the call to repentance is that which speaks to the need for an end to such injustice. It is that call to the necessity to be able to say “NEVER AGAIN.” In the same speech given by Butler, she argued for the necessity of social reform. She contends that “The momentary flash of generous indignation against cruelty and wrong, which is common enough, is poor and in its results unless capable of expanding into the profound

\(^{304}\) See Luke 4:18-9
More important for this writer is a salient point on how both writers dealt with the body and image of the concubine in the story. Butler heard the falling of the corpse, and the cry it made to be heard outside “safety,” while Trible recognised the helplessness and weakness of the woman’s voice and body. In describing what happened to her, and by whom, both writers used the sacrificial imagery of the passion of Christ to represent the deed of the night. Ultimately, the handing over of the concubine by her husband to the mob is a sacrificial gesture that functioned as a theme in both interpretations. This will be elucidated upon later.

**Interpreting with the Postmodern**

Appropriating the lessons learnt from both Butler and Trible, we find voices that are silenced by both societal structures and constructs, and the community of faith’s conspiracy of silence to the story. In our present dispensation, I believe there is a necessity for us to read the story, if not for ourselves, for a community of others whose lives are reflected in the narrative. As Johnson rightly argues, “If the faithful reading of Scripture has traditionally required a rule of faith, together with a rule of hope, it needs also to employ a rule of love. The injunction to move beyond foundations and beyond totality must be completed in a movement towards the Other.”

Johnson describes the Other in three different ways. First is the philosophical meaning of the Other which he describes as “anything or anyone that falls outside one’s

---

306 Ibid.
own categories.”

Second is the ethical meaning of the Other, whom he described as “the poor, the oppressed, the weak, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst – a familiar usage with deep biblical resonance.” Finally, the Other as a temporal meaning pertains to “that which is to come, and specifically the liberating state of affairs that is yet to come, the future that is still awaited as a realm of justice and peace.”

The principal usage this thesis employs of the Other is the second definition. Our need to read with and for the Other is a necessity placed on us by the globalization of our societies today. Our urban areas and major cities have become global villages with different races, cultures, tribes and ethnicities occupying the same space. This particular phenomenon is likewise translated into both our local church communities as well as halls of academia, as evidenced here in North America. Besides the issue of race, many within the society today struggle with their identity, not only as humans, but also as religious persons. This is where the community of past interpreters, both pre-critical and critical can step in to assist this present generation. Some of them have struggled with interpreting in the presence of Others within their communities.

Johnson’s argument is relevant if the reader of the story is not the oppressed/weak minority in the society. However, if the reader is the Other in the society, more often than not, s/he are not given permission or space to voice their weakness. When s/he do speak, and use such passage as Judges 19, one becomes suspicious of such usage. We often hear proof-texting rather than a faithful reading of the passage, which is sometimes not necessarily the intention. For instance, a daughter who has been given over to her father’s

---

308 Ibid., p. 123.
309 Ibid.
310 Ibid. This particular temporal meaning is suggestive of the messianic yearning in the Judeo-Christian heritage.
friends as a sexual appeasement for his gambling debts might not have a voice or space to speak for herself, not unlike the virgin daughter and concubine in the story. However, if the same daughter is to use the story to explain her predicament, what one might hear is proof texting. The same feeling is awakened when reading Patrick Cheng’s article on Judges 19-21. However, compared to Yani Yoo’s article on Han-laden women used as “comfort women” for soldiers and her treatment of Judges 19, one sees a difference. Like Butler and Trible, Yoo’s interpretation is from the perspective of someone who has not been touched by this evil, and stands on behalf of the Others (those who have faced this evil) in the society, calling for repentance and a resolution.

For people who have been abused, either sexually or physically, the Other within the story is themselves. The suitable and often default response of such reader is to align him/herself with the concubine and henceforth seek for ways to make sure the abuse is not repeated. Stories abound within the criminal justice system of sexual offenders who often were victims of sexual molestations too. Hence, we see the perpetuation of a cycle of violence.

Interpreting the story of the Levite’s concubine in the postmodern context, requires a reading with the Other. While both Butler and Trible emphasized the Other as the woman, in addition to emphasis on the woman, for a contemporary context however, there would be the need to address the powerlessness of foreigners/aliens in our countries, a point Koala Jones-Warsaw made in her response to Trible’s Text of Terror.

---

313 Ibid., pp. 44-5.
The Levite, his concubine, his servant, and the Old man were all foreigners in Gibeah (Judges 19:1, 16) and thus it would appear the ‘laws’ of the place did not protect them from the aggression of the “men of the city, a perverse lot” (Judges 19:22) or the “Lords of the city” (Judges 20:5). As mentioned in Chapter one of this paper, the inhospitality of the people of Gibeah is most often the line taken in interpreting this passage by both pre-critical commentators and even critical ones. So, there is really nothing new in such interpretation, except for the fact that now, more than ever, the truth of this particular interpretation is seen readily in our communities today. This particular piece of information would speak to many immigrants in foreign countries. In our contemporary society, most of the women used for sexual exploitation are women imported from other countries.

As discussed in Chapter two, familiarity with Scripture was part of the society in Victorian England. The Bible and the stories therein were part of popular culture, and the populace was familiar with some if not most of the stories. Even the human rights movements of the sixties in the United States of America were based mostly on liberation theology, which owes its authority to the biblical story of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. This familiarity with Scripture spurred people like Martin Luther King, Jr. to do something about the injustice within his society.

However, the same cannot be said for a vast majority of our societies today. Much to the detriment of the lessons we could learn directly from reading Scriptures, some churches are becoming more seeker-friendly, and thus use the news and television series to remain relevant to their audience, rather than the Bible. I think there is a need for us to
listen to the testimonies of past interpreters as to the “truths” embedded in scriptural passages like Judges 19, to help offer ways of struggling with some of these issues.

Butler used rhetoric in her speech to convince her audience of the necessity to stand with the concubine and to see the injustice still being perpetuated in history. Trible as well used rhetorical criticism to speak to the ills of the story, as well as to indict her own generation. We as a society need to revisit the story of the rape of the Levite’s concubine, and to look for ways to read for us. From sexual trafficking and kidnapping to sexual slave trade, we are inundated with reports of these social malaises.

It is possible to read the narrative in Judges 19 as one of self-preservation, as most male interpreters have done in the past. As Trible also pointed out, one could argue for a reading of the story as one of powerlessness. Both the old man and the Levite were powerless to control the situations of the night. However, more essential is the powerlessness of the women in the story. This last point is what makes the works of the two writers treated in this paper cutting edge for their generations. As Trible rightly contended, the powerlessness of the woman in the story is what led to her demise. This is the particular imagery one finds repeated over and over again in both interpretations treated in this paper. It is one of sacrifice of the weaker and powerless “vessel.”

To appreciate further this particular point, I think it is necessary to read both Butler and Trible’s interpretation with René Girard’s understanding of the role of sacrifice in violent myths and texts.315 As mentioned earlier, Butler saw the sacrifice of the concubine that night as one that is continually perpetuated by men, and she described it thus, “the story I have cited is the story of the egotism of man and the sacrifice of

---

womanhood to that egotism.” A further description also uses the language of sacrificing arguing that, “the wrong done by their forefathers, who, since the foundation of the world till now, have dedicated, by millions, these weaker vessels to profanest service - sacrificing them with impious rites to a so called necessity – a Moloch to whom all the kingdoms of the earth have caused armies of their daughters to pass through the fire, generation after generation.”

Trible also used a description that built on Jesus’ last supper and Passion story to describe the woman’s suffering. She argues, “Her body has been broken and given to many. Lesser power has no woman than this, that her life is laid down by a man.” Similar to Butler’s comment that women and especially the concubine were “sacrificial lambs” to man’s ego and lust, Trible used the statement above to drive home the point that a man, for other men, primarily sacrificed the woman.

This sacrificial theme is better explained using Girard’s theory of Mimesis. According to Girard, “All mythical and biblical dramas, including the Passion, represent the same type of collective violence against a single victim. Myths see this victim as guilty… The Bible and Gospels see these same victims as innocent, unjustly murdered by deluded lynchers and persecutors.” Girard called these victims “scapegoats,” “innocent targets of a senseless collective transference that is mimetic and mechanical.” So far, from Girard’s point of view, we can recognise the victim in Judges 19 as the scapegoat in the whole narrative, and the contentions made by both pre-critical and critical

318 Trible, Texts of Terror, p. 80.
320 Ibid.
commentators as to whether the concubine was guilty or not are struggles readers have in understanding why the woman was subjected to such violence.

As Girard would explain, “The ritual act of sacrifice stems from the operation of the victim mechanism.”\textsuperscript{321} In trying to explain the mimetic desires that prompt our tendencies to violence, Girard suggested that our ancestors, in reaction to fear and panic when confronting trouble, sometimes converged upon the weak, or marginal person among them, and thus “gained relief from the stress of conflict and violence.”\textsuperscript{322} Though this description does not cover Girard’s theory of Mimetic Desire, I suggest that within this explanation we can find the undergirding principles of why Butler and Trible saw within this narrative the killing of the woman as a sacrifice made by men within the story.

The focal point for both Butler and Trible in the Judg 19 passage is the events that happened in verses 22-26. Whether they were Israelites or not, men came together in conflict. They were from different tribes for sure. Though not mentioned, the reason for the conflict could possibly have been the “fear of the stranger” taking over. To read with Trible’s lenses, one can safely argue that there was a power struggle present between the men. However, the resolution of the conflict was violence on a third party, a scapegoat that helped relieve the stress of conflict among the men. Notice in the chapter that the old man was no longer mentioned, and the Levite was relieved enough to sleep throughout the night. The men of Gibeah were also satisfied with the “resolution” of the conflict. But the entire narrative does not seem satisfied with this outcome. In fact, the “resolution” of the conflict seems to be the point that makes every hearer and reader of the story cringe (cf. I Cor 1:23).


\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., p. xv.
The fact that both Butler and Trible saw within this story similarities to the suffering of Christ, an innocent crucified for many, suggests that they saw the story as more than that. It is possible Jesus’ suffering might just have been invoked to invite empathy for the concubine as a type of Jesus. The imagery works, as it fits into Girard’s category of recognising the innocence of the victim by a dissenting few. Girard argued, “The Passion accounts reveal a phenomenon that unbeknownst to us generates all human cultures and still warps our human vision in favour of all sorts of exclusions and scapegoating.”\(^{323}\)

Like the Passion, I argue that the narrative in Judg 19 reveals this same phenomenon among humans, which favour all sorts of exclusions and scapegoating. As both Butler and Trible have rightly pointed out, the woman was the ultimate outsider in the narrative. As Jesus is an “unsuccessful scapegoat whose heroic willingness to die for the world will ultimately make the entire cycle of satanic violence visible to all people and therefore inoperative,”\(^{324}\) the violence perpetrated against the concubine in the narrative also reveals the unsuccessful “sacrifice.” The cycle of violence still persists in our time.

**Conclusion**

We have arrived at the conclusion that there is a necessity placed on us to read with past interpreters. More than just for the academic practice of exploring what past interpreters have said about the texts, but also what lessons we can learn from them. One of the lessons we have learnt is that we really do not know what the Bible truly says until we have read with different interpreters. The bias of the church fathers’ reading alongside

---

\(^{323}\) Ibid., p. 3.
\(^{324}\) Ibid.
the Levite is what Trible called “patriarchy perpetuating patriarchy.”325 Both Butler and Trible read the story with the concubine and were able to show us new ways of seeing the story, beyond the metanarrative suggested in Judg 19:1a, which is, society breaks down when there is no visible authority. Though from different standpoints and perspective that is what our world calls for, both types of interpretation seemed to solve the problem of the story. However, from this writer’s point of view, and scholars like J. Clinton McCann who strove to hold both in tension,326 the latter seem more appropriate in light of the history of injustice, and level of injustice perpetrated on the concubine.

A known issue for the contemporary mindset is what to do with such stories within the Hebrew Scriptures. While it may not have been the original intent of the writer of the book of Judges, the invitation to examine the events and actions of individuals within the entire narrative, then speak (Judges 19:30), I believe, is applicable to our society today. The invitation not only looks at the act(s) of the people of Gibeah, it invites an historical approach to assessing the event. Consider the implication of the story for our societies, which is what both Butler and Trible did in rereading the story. “Take counsel,” is what we need to do in appropriating faithfully the lesson/s of the story. Finally, the Levite’s suggestion, which was picked on by both Butler and Trible, is to “Speak out.”

Furthermore, awareness of issues of the powerless, which includes, but is not limited to children, women, foreigners, minority groups, and especially the disabled within our societies is seen. In the narrative, the concubine seems ultimately powerless in the scheme of things. It is possible that this unnamed woman in the narrative belonged to

all these groups. She could probably have been a young wife or even a teenager. If a jury were to be convened in the event of a trial for such “criminal act” (Judges 20:3) in our time, all these would definitely play huge roles influencing the verdict.

Sex trafficking has become a cancerous vice that spans different cultures and borders, and texts like this could be vehicles of bringing the issues at stake to the forefront of our social responsibilities. A biblical interpretation that does not translate into an application for us today is not worth its currency. While there is the danger of reading into the text, it is a risk one should be willing to take, inasmuch as the bias is on the side of the oppressed. Our goal is to find truth that liberates while staying true to the text, either through figural readings of the text, or through faithful application of intertextual readings, as well as faithful applications to our own lives. This should be done either by learning how to live from the stories we encounter, or by realizing the fragility of life from such stories. Most importantly, as Girard pointed out in his treatment of the Passion narrative, “The defense of victims is both a moral imperative and the source of our increasing power to demystify scapegoating.”

---

327 Ibid.
Bibliography

Books


Gunn, David M. *Judges through the Centuries.* Malden, USA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.


**Articles**


Muilenburg, James. “Form Criticism and Beyond.” Journal of Biblical Literature 88.1


Electronic Resources

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/img/assets/.../TribleP_FA51305PDF.pdf


(United Nation Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, February 2009)