Interpretations of Gendered Violence and Sexual Assault in Judges 19-21

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Most people will never hear a sermon preached on the disturbing and graphic depictions of gendered violence, sexual assault, rape, and the mutilation of female bodies in Judges 19-21. In this biblical story, a mob of men from the tribe of Benjamin threaten to rape a traveling Levite staying in the home of an old man in Gibeah, but two women are offered to the mob instead. These women include the daughter of the host, who somehow escapes this terrible fate, and the Levite's nameless concubine, who is brutally gang raped in the place of her master. The concubine's husband later cuts her body cut into twelve pieces and sends them throughout Israel. In our current political moment, recent interpretations of this story have profound implications for how violence against women and sexual assault in biblical texts are analyzed and addressed in religious and academic communities. In putting various religious and academic perspectives in conversation with each other, I have found that interpreters approach this story differently based on their positionality in their religious communities or academic fields, as well as their intended audiences. The works I examine include a survey of women's study bibles with a selected commentary, a poem written by a professor at Cornell University, and a sermon preached in a non-denominational Christian church. These examples reveal how modern interpretations of biblical texts like Judges 19-21 continue to either silence or give voice to the experiences of women and marginalized communities today.

“The discarded woman of Judges 19”: A Women’s Study Bible Grapples with Power

The biblical account of violence against women, sexual assault, and rape in Judges 19-21 does not often get highlighted in religious communities. Because of this, I took a trip to local bookstores to sift through study bibles marketed toward Christian women and girls in order to see how commentators might explain and interpret this story for women. Only one out of the eight study bibles I examined included any substantial commentary or information about Judges 19-21. While this text has profound implications for women within religious communities, especially those who are survivors of violence and/or assault, the silence and lack of attention to this biblical story in the women’s study bibles I read speaks to the Christian community’s hesitancy to openly discuss the Bible’s most violent, unsettling stories about the mistreatment of women and harm done to female bodies.

However, *The Study Bible for Women,* a Holman Christian Standard Bible published in 2015 and edited by two female theology scholars, Dorothy Kelley Patterson and Rhonda Harrington Kelley, takes up the issue of violence against women in Judges 19-21. When the host offers his virgin daughter and the concubine to the mob of men so they can “ravish [the women]” in Judges 19:23-24, Patterson and Kelley describe the event as horrific and “in direct violation of God’s law” (317). They read the Levite and the owner of the house as being equally responsible for the raping of the concubine because they knew what her fate would be when she was offered to the mob in Judges 19:25. For these editors, the concubine’s reaching of her hands toward the doorway as she lay outside the house after being gang raped in Judges 19:27 becomes an image of women “reaching for safety” but finding none because the men in Israel had turned to wickedness (317). In a “Character Profile” of the Levite’s concubine, the editors categorize her

as “a powerless woman” who was deeply harmed by an immoral culture where the men do not “follow the Lord’s ways” (317).

While the editors find it easy to condemn unrighteous men, Patterson and Kelley also struggle to reconcile both feminist and religious concerns. In a section called “Hard Questions” the editors ask: “Does male leadership lead to women’s abuse?” (317). Here, the authors attempt to deal with a significant tension in this story rooted in patriarchal oppression – the tension between the injustice perpetrated by men and the Christian ideal of male leadership. The editors argue that many feminist interpretations of the text are flawed because Judges 19 does not necessarily reflect the Bible’s deeply rooted patriarchal history and devaluation of women. Rather, they assert that these graphic stories are part of the Bible “*because* God values women,” arguing that “the degree to which a nation regards its women is a direct indication of that nation’s degree of obedience to the Lord” (317). Patterson and Kelley’s interpretation of the story leaves out many other instances in the Bible where women become victims of male violence and abuse in the name of being faithful to God, such as the story of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11. The authors also ignore the driving metaphor of a husband’s violence toward his unfaithful wife, symbolizing the relationship between God and Israel, in the books of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. While their analysis provides an interesting historical context and a condemnation of violence against women, it also makes the concubine, who they call the “discarded woman of Judges 19,” a symbol that ultimately reinforces patriarchal ideologies of male dominance (317). In this process, they continue to silence and erase the murdered concubine and, potentially, the painful experiences of today’s women who might read about her. This reveals a lack of nuanced understanding from within some religious communities about how to go about discussing gendered violence in biblical texts, as these authors do not

adequately examine the painful experiences of today's women who might read about the violation and rape of the unnamed concubine.

Seeing Injustice and Invisible Women: Preaching Judges 19

Another example of Judges 19 interpretation occurs in a 2018 sermon titled "When They Saw It" preached at The Stirring, a non-denominational Christian church in Redding, California, by their pastor Nathan Edwardson. Edwardson has the difficult task of creating a meaningful message out of a particularly violent text and making it palatable to an audience of mostly young adults on a Sunday morning. In the sermon, Edwardson calls Judges 19 "one of the most horrific stories in the Bible" because it represents some of Israel's worst days. The focus of the sermon is not necessarily the gang rape of the Levite's unnamed concubine, but rather Israel's reaction to seeing her body cut in twelve pieces and sent "throughout the territory of Israel" (*New American Standard Version*, Judges 19:29). Edwardson stresses that, when the injustice of the concubine's death "landed on people's doorstep" in the form of her mutilated body, people truly *saw* and understood the depravity that had taken hold of Israel.

In the age of social media, Edwardson says that our generation has the unique opportunity to *see* and hear about the injustices that take place in our global world, connecting these issues to Israel's reaction to seeing the concubine's body. Edwardson points to the problems with an apathetic, complacent Christian Church and society at large, admonishing that "women get raped all of the time and no one goes to war." He specifically connects this quote with human trafficking in foreign countries like Cambodia. Edwardson tells his congregation that injustice should bother us, and like the 400,000 soldiers who gathered for war in Judges 20:2

after seeing the concubine's body, we have a responsibility to "do justice" and act on our convictions to address human suffering in the world.

However, the speaker never explicitly mentions sexism or violence against women as an injustice to which today's church should respond. Edwardson mentions racism, orphans, refugees, and, more broadly, sexual abuse, but he never directly addresses the idea of gendered violence or hatred toward women as a primary element in the biblical text. For instance, the father who offers his virgin daughter to the mob in Judges 19:24 is never mentioned in the sermon, even though there are explicit discussions of rape in the text: "Here is my virgin daughter and his [the Levite's] concubine. Please let me bring them out that you may ravish them and do whatever you wish." Edwardson's omission of the other woman in the biblical text complicates his interpretation because violence and injustice does not just occur "out there" in other parts of the world but also occurs within families and households. In Judges 19, it is a father who instigates violence and would "complacently" allow the rape of his daughter, but Edwardson has no admonition for men or fathers to address sexism in families or our culture at large.

We are also left with a question: when we look closely at the Biblical text, can we truly say that justice was "done" in Judges 19-21? Edwardson implies that, in the story of the Levite's concubine, justice was "done" because the Israelite soldiers went to war and won the battle after being repeatedly defeated in Judges 20-21. However, after the battle in Judges 21:21-24, the tribe of Benjamin follows God's command and proceeds to take hundreds of women by force from another tribe and rape them. While Edwardson's message does some important work in advocating for people who suffer as a result of global inequality and oppression, a truly nuanced idea of justice for women does not unfold in the sermon or biblical text itself. Much like the

biblical story and other interpretations, the women in Edwardson's sermon are pushed to the periphery, and ironically, the speaker does not seem to *see* the women he excludes.

A Feminist Scholar on Judges 19: Rewriting a Patriarchal Text

Contrastingly, Lyrae van Clief-Stefanon's 2014 poem "The Daughter and the Concubine from the Nineteenth Chapter of Judges Consider and Speak Their Minds" specifically sets out to *see* the women of Judges 19. The author rewrites the text of Judges 19:1-30 from the perspective of the Levite's concubine and host's daughter. Van Clief-Stefanon is an Associate Professor of English at Cornell University, which makes her audience broader and not necessarily religious (Mroczek). Unlike other discussions of this chapter of the Bible, the author centers her interpretation on the experiences of the women in the story. While these women do not speak in the biblical text, van Clief-Stefanon's harrowing poem imagines for her readers what these women might have thought and felt. She tells an entirely different story from a modern perspective, attempting to uncover the pain, trauma, and ultimately the strength of women who have experienced sexual assault and/or gendered violence.

The author breaks down the poem into two columns, one from the perspective of the daughter and the other from the perspective of the concubine. First, the daughter laments that her father has offered her body to a mob of men in Judges 19:24 in order to save his male guest: "What thing exists too vile / for this man he's known / one half day that be / not too vile for me?" (31). After witnessing the horrific rape of the Levite's concubine, knowing that it could have been her, the daughter lists deadly substances that could kill her or cause her harm: ground glass, nightshade, pot ash, snake venom, her father, her God (34). The poem exposes the existential crisis or revelation the daughter might have experienced as she realizes that her family and her

society does not exist to protect her but will always place her under the authority and control of men. While the daughter's only mention in the biblical text occurs when her father offers "his virgin daughter" to the mob so they could "ravish" her, the daughter gains interiority in Van Clief-Stefanon's poem and the emotional effects of the Levite and her father's actions become incredibly salient (Judges 19: 24).

Similarly, Van Clief-Stefanon tells the story from the concubine's perspective, highlighting the psychological trauma of rape and violence against women. Both the host's daughter and the concubine pointedly condemn the men and fathers who have abandoned them to sexual abuse and violence, including their God. The author utilizes a stream of consciousness style of writing to show the concubine's disjointed mental state caused by her oppression: "And I was Yes Lord Yes / And I was a gift once / And I was Daddy's to give / And Daddy was joy and sorrow" (32, Part 2). The section of the poem also refers to the concubine's father mentioned at the beginning of Judges 19. Her father possesses the authority to sell or give her to the Levite, but the author also makes interesting parallels to the metaphor of God as a father who does not protect his female children: "*Precious Lord*, / where is my / Lord / I am / tired" (34, Part 3). Similarly, after the concubine's rape when she "fell down at the doorway of the man's house where her master was" in the biblical text, van Clief-Stefanon imagines her longing for comfort but finding none, and the author follows her lament with a blank column with no text, symbolizing both her silence and the abrupt ending of her life (Judges 19:26).

However, the end of van Clief-Stefanon's poem offers a semblance of hope for her readers. Both the daughter and the concubine's stories become a call to action for women, urging them to remember their story and speak up about sexual assault and violence: "I have put / my story / into / my sister's / mouths" (36). According to van Clief-Stefanon's concubine, "no / man

/ will silence [her story]" (36). The biblical text depicts the outrage of the twelve tribes of Israel when they received the body parts of the concubine in Judges 19:30, as the leaders declare: "Consider it, take counsel and speak up!" Van Clief-Stefanon, on the other hand, imagines the daughter and the concubine's story as a reminder to women throughout history to "wail", "shout", and speak up in order to have their own voices heard in the midst of violent oppression (36).

Interpretations of Judges 19 and the Modern Reader

Each of these examples seeks to address injustice, although they do so in different ways based on the positionality of the author or speaker. Patterson and Kelley's interpretation contains many flaws, but their reading shows how theological scholars with more traditional religious backgrounds and ideologies struggle to reconcile patriarchal, misogynist texts with current feminist movements and contemporary developments in women's rights. While Van Clief-Steganon does not hesitate to call out the injustice perpetrated by fathers, husbands, and other men in her poem, which she writes for more academic and "secular" audiences, Patterson and Kelley encourage women to condemn men who would harm women but also seek to promote God's "design for male leadership and protection in the home and culture" (317). Edwardson's religious commitments might be less conservative than Patterson and Kelley's, but he expresses a similar hesitancy to look at the patriarchal nature of the text and instead focuses on injustices of other kinds, revealing how many different religious communities still struggle to directly examine the harmful nature of misogynistic narratives and patriarchal cultures.

These interpretations also reflect how the authors and speakers imagine the potential concerns of their intended audiences. For instance, Patterson and Kelley are addressing female

readers with the intent of reconciling the battered woman's story within a broader religious framework of God's goodness and men's positive role in the family. On the other hand, Edwardson addresses a whole congregation of people with multiple gender identities about modern day injustice in the world, thus extending his analysis beyond women and, unfortunately, omitting them from the conversation. Finally, Van Clief-Steganon does not confine herself to a religious ideology or address women in particular. Her poem aims to expose the trauma of forsaken daughters and battered women living in ancient patriarchal societies as she writes these women's untold stories, and these rewritten versions are meant to be read, felt, and understood by people of all sexes and genders. Therefore, these interpretations are all impacted by the conceptualized needs of their potential readers and listeners.

Ultimately, these examples of biblical interpretation do not come to the same conclusion about the meaning or purpose of Judges 19-21, nor do they offer viable solutions for addressing the misogynistic elements present in these texts for modern day readers. These texts were written in a patriarchal culture, and we cannot erase this fact in any interpretation or analysis. However, Renita Weems, a biblical studies scholar, asks important questions about how scholars go about interpretations of stories such as these: "Any discussion of such texts… must address the matter of the metaphor's effects on marginalized readers… In short, what does it do to those who have been raped and battered… to read sacred texts that justify rape and luxuriate obscenely in every detail of a woman's humiliation and battery?" (Weems 8). While Patterson and Kelley might try to place a positive spin on the brutality and sexual assault in the story and Edwardson overlooks this aspect of the text entirely, we cannot ignore the implications of these violent narratives for the women who read or hear the Judges 19-21 told through various religious or scholarly mediums. While Van Clief-Stefanon's poem highlights the text's inherently patriarchal nature in

a way that differs from other interpretations, she also helps her readers imagine the inescapable, devastating grief survivors of sexual violence experience. While Van Clief-Stefanon takes certainly takes creative license in her poem, it could also serve as an example of how academic and religious communities have historically overlooked the real, lived experiences of women and marginalized communities today. For Van Clief-Stefanon, the pain of women in the bible will be overlooked no longer. Women will not be silenced. The audiences of other interpreters, no matter their theological stances or religious audiences, could also benefit from more directly addressing the real grief of the daughter, the concubine, and the many women who continue to mourn their experiences of violence, rape, and sexual assault today.

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