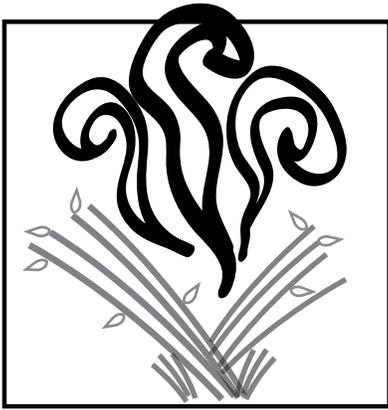


GOING POSTAL IN JUDGES 19

Elizabeth A. Goodine

The writer of Judges 19 begins by introducing his primary characters: a Levite who “took a concubine” and the concubine herself. The reader quickly becomes aware that this is not a happy tale. The union is not a joyful one, for already by verse two the woman leaves the man and returns to her father’s house. Finally, after four months, her husband comes looking for her, whereupon her father welcomes him with open arms and the two men join in drunken revelry for several days before the couple heads back to Ephraim. Unable to travel the entire way before nightfall, they stop in Gibeah, where an old man takes them in for the night. Unfortunately, wicked men also live in Gibeah and, reminiscent of the inhabitants of Sodom, these men surround the house at nightfall and demand that the old man turn over his guest so that they may “know him.” The old man, an exemplary host, protects his guest and refuses to comply. Instead, he offers up his own virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine. The virgin daughter somehow escapes being tossed to the mob. But the Levite, evidently wishing to be a helpful guest, “seized his concubine and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her and abused her all through the night... In the morning... [the Levite] cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel... Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.”¹

“Consider it!” Of all of the graphic stories in the Old Testament, this is one of the most difficult to make sense of in our day. Inevitably, when my undergraduate students read this account of the unnamed, raped, and butchered concubine, they react with expressions of horror—shake their heads, sigh, express dismay that something so “gross” is actually in the Bible. But those expressions of horror quickly give way to indifference. After all, it’s an ancient story. It has nothing to do with us. These days we’re more *civilized!* We have the occasional psycho, but we lock those people up in psychiatric wards or prisons. Surely this disgusting tale was relevant in its day—but not in ours. No surprise, then, that this account of the Levite and his concubine is rarely mentioned on a Sunday morning. Such is a pity, though, because a close reading of the text reveals rich meaning for Christians today.

The ugly stories in the book of Judges are often interpreted in a twofold manner: first, they underscore Israel’s unfaithfulness to God Who is their king; and second, they point to the need for an earthly king who might bring order out of chaos and unity to the tribes.² It is certainly true that as this people grew in terms of both population and territory, they did regularly reject Yahweh in favor of other gods. It is equally true that the tribal confederacy had become an inadequate system. Yet while the political situation of ancient Israel does serve as a backdrop to the tale told in Judges 19, it cannot account entirely for the inclusion of such a passionate and personal story in the biblical text. Indeed, the narrative suggests that the ancient author intended to convey a message far less timebound than that of Israel’s need for a king.³

In the past thirty years there has been renewed scholarly interest in exploring that message. Feminist interpretations in particular have highlighted this text, generally giving it prominent status among the “texts of terror,”⁴ so named because they reveal the nature of Israel’s patriarchal system and its far-reaching consequences for women, particularly during the time of the judges. Our feminist colleagues are to be credited for retrieving this and other horrific, distasteful, and easily ignored texts from the dustbins of history and once again bringing them into the light of day. Still, while there can be no denying that the text *is* about the abuse of a woman under a patriarchal system, the narrative as well as its context suggests that the message was and is broader in scope. Actually, Judges 19 presents a strong critique of the devaluation of women—and by extension, of the devaluation of any person by those in authority.⁵

In order to grasp the critique embedded in the narrative, however, we must address several questions throughout the reading. First, what is the nature of the relationship between this man and this woman? If she is a “concubine,” what exactly does that mean? Second, since she is bound to the Levite, why does she leave him, and what factor(s) allow her to do so? Third, what informs the relationship between the woman’s husband and her father? And the relationship between the old man and the Levite as well? And finally, why does the Levite dismember the woman and send the

pieces of her body throughout Israel?

In answer to the first question regarding the nature of the relationship between the man and the woman, there can be little doubt that the two were bound by a marital agreement of some type. The woman's father is referred to three times as the Levite's "father-in-law,"⁶ while the woman herself is referred to several times by the word פְּלוֹנֶשֶׁת, generally translated as "concubine."⁷ In 19:1 and 19:27, the nature of the relationship is emphasized by adding the word אִשָּׁה—a woman or wife⁸—to the term פְּלוֹנֶשֶׁת. Thus in 19:1, the man is said to take for himself a "wife, a concubine," and in 19:27, it is his "concubine, his wife," whom he finds lying on the doorstep.

The difference in status between a wife and a concubine is often unclear in the biblical text but most scholars have come to understand the term "concubine" as meaning a wife with secondary status.⁹ Regardless of status, however, it is clear that the Levite has acquired this woman and is responsible for her care. According to the custom of ancient Israel, she has left the sheltering roof of her father, the man under whose authority she has previously lived, and is now under the authority of the Levite. She is totally dependent on him both for provision and protection, a fact that makes her leave-taking all the more troublesome.

Why would this woman leave her husband and return to her father's house? This is perhaps the most important question raised by the text, and its answer is complicated by issues of translation. In the Masoretic text, the disputed phrase (19:2) reads פִּילְגָשִׁישׁוֹ (19:2) reads פִּילְגָשִׁישׁוֹ. This phrase, literally translated, is "and his concubine prostituted for/against him." The root of the verb זָנָה always refers to fornication and unfaithfulness. The problem, however, is that in Scripture the word often bears a metaphorical sense, depicting, for instance, unfaithfulness to God.¹⁰ Thus in this text, translations of the verb itself have been various, some translators retaining the sexual sense

as in "his concubine played the harlot against him," and others (following the Septuagint) taking the phrase less literally and rendering it "his concubine became angry with him."¹¹

Two problems accompany either translation. First, it does not seem likely that the woman's father would have welcomed her home and allowed her to stay for four months if she had indeed "played the harlot" or if she had simply become angry with her husband. Either way, given the patriarchal structure of marriage in Israel, it is much more likely that her father would at the very least have encouraged her to return quickly to her husband. He would not have wished to resume financial responsibility for a daughter whose future he had already secured. Second, it seems odd that a husband wronged and deserted, especially if forsaken by a cheating wife, would wait four months to make amends—and then still feel the need to "speak tenderly"¹² to her in order to bring her back. More likely, he would demand (as would have been within his legal rights) that her father return her to him.

A more reasonable explanation both for the father's initial acceptance of his daughter and the Levite's meek manner as he goes to retrieve her lies, as Pamela Tamarkin Reis has recently pointed out, in the translation not of the verb but of the preposition. Reis posits that the concubine did not play the harlot *against* her husband but rather that she played the harlot *for* her husband or *on account of* her husband.¹³ As Reis notes, the preposition עַל can carry either meaning.¹⁴ In this case, to read the preposition as "for" clarifies the concubine's reason for leaving—her husband has become her pimp—which also clarifies her anger. Furthermore, it makes understandable the fact that her father accepts her return, and it enables us to understand why this supposedly wronged husband feels the need to woo a harlot and why he should need to—after four months his wallet is empty and he needs to retrieve his source of income.

As the following verses unfold, the text continues to reveal the deep moral disintegration taking place in Israel that the author wishes to expose. We are, after all, talking about a Levite, a man of the priestly order. He is hardly worthy of the name.

Once the Levite reaches his father-in-law's house, no more is said of the woman until her husband departs several days later with her in tow. If the father knows why his daughter left the man, he does not choose to raise the issue; and if the man needs to convince the father that he cares for his daughter in spite of all that has taken place, we get no hint of it here. Instead, the men act as long-lost buddies. For five days they party, the narrator taking pains to inform the reader that they ate and drank together,¹⁵ with the result that travel was impossible. Finally, late on the fifth day, the Levite determines to start out anyway, probably still intoxicated and nursing a serious headache. And so, with no opposition from her father, the Levite fetches his concubine and sets out for Ephraim. If the woman has any say in the matter, it is not evident. Instead, she appears as little more than the donkeys that travel with them—this woman who ran to her father for protection is now turned over by him to the very man who had abused her. A pact has been made by those in authority over her. Between them it is a "good for you, good for me" situation, but neither man considers the lowly one. No one "speaks tenderly" to her.

And so the Levite, his concubine, a servant, and the donkeys leave Bethlehem. A more sober man might have known that he could not reach Ephraim before nightfall, but this fact seems to take the Levite by surprise. Even so, when the servant suggests they bed down in Jebus, a Canaanite city, he knows enough to reject that plan.¹⁶ Instead, presuming they will be safer in an Israelite town, they trek on to Gibeah of the tribe of Benjamin. There they find only one person willing to take them in, an old man also from the hill country of Ephraim.

Because of the Ephraimite connection, the old man takes pity on them—or perhaps he simply does not wish to refuse hospitality to a Levite, a man of the priestly order.¹⁷ At any rate, the little group's relief at having a place to stay is short-lived, for soon the "men of the city, a perverse lot," surround the house demanding that the old man turn the Levite over to them.¹⁸

Both the circumstances and the solution call to mind the story of Lot and the wicked men of Sodom.¹⁹ Taking up his own role as host to this seemingly distinguished guest, the old man begs the men not to do this evil thing. Instead, he offers up his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine—"Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do this evil thing."²⁰ Clearly, the women are expendable. They are property, less significant even than the male servant who is not offered up. They are the least of human beings, and no laws of hospitality protect them. But once again it is the concubine who fares the worst, as her own husband seizes her and throws her out to the mob.²¹ Here we come to the crux of the tale—it is either her skin or his—and he is determined to save his own skin at the cost of hers. Just as he made her to prostitute herself for him in the past, so he does now. Get out there and do your job, he seems to say. And so she does, all night long until the morning breaks and this wicked "man of God" finds her lying with her hands on the threshold in a pitiful and unheeded call for mercy.

By now the Levite's lack of compassion has become evident, yet the author forces the reader to hear still more. With nary a tear, the man tells the woman to "get up"; and when she does not, he throws her on his donkey and heads for home, where he proceeds to chop up her body and send it "throughout all the territory of Israel."²² Abused in life, so now she is also abused in death—for this man cares only for himself. In fact, concern for self has driven his every action

thus far. Now too, he is determined to save face:

I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. The lords of Gibeah rose up against me, and surrounded the house at night. They intended to kill me, and they raped my concubine until she died. Then I took my concubine and cut her into pieces, and sent her throughout the whole extent of Israel's territory; for they have committed a vile outrage in Israel.²³

The selective memory of the Levite is telling. Notice that he fails to mention that he himself threw the woman out to the men. He says only that *they* killed her, that *they* committed this "vile outrage." In his own telling of the event, he is a victim turned hero. He uses his own tragedy to ensure the honor of all Israel, if only the people will heed his call. And heed it they do. In the civil war that follows the concubine's grisly dismemberment, numerous men, women, and children die and the tribe of Benjamin is nearly extinguished. The methods used to repopulate the tribe—the extermination of an entire city except for its four hundred young virgins and the kidnapping of young girls during a festival to the Lord at Shiloh—compound rather than alleviate the horror of the tale. Where, we might ask, is grace in any of this? Is there no balm in Gilead?²⁴

In truth there is balm, for the narrator who carries the message of Yahweh sanctions none of this. The narrator illumines the self-centeredness of the Levite, of the girl's father, of the old man, and of the entire human group that elects to prey on the vulnerable. The very language of the text lays injustice bare. If the reader had any sympathy for the Levite, it quickly vanishes with the terseness of his words directed to the battered woman who lies, arms outstretched, across the threshold: "Get up." "We are going." His own words, spoken

in the bright light of day as he opens the door, expose him as the cruel and self-centered monster he is.²⁵ While she suffered an endless night of rape and torture, he slept quietly, protected inside the house, rested and ready to travel at dawn. The disgust of the narrator nearly drips from the page, but if that were not enough, the critique is clinched by the refrain that leads up to and bookends this tragic tale: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."²⁶

How did Israel fall so far from grace? How did they become so inhospitable even as they feigned hospitality? Under the guise of religious and social structures, the Levite, the girl's father, and the old man of Ephraim all betrayed vulnerable persons whom they were supposed to love. They did it because the stakes were high and the benefit to themselves outweighed their care for the other. The Levite sold his wife for money. Likewise, the father deemed the cost of caring for his daughter too high; he needed the assets she would soak up if she stayed with him, so she had to go.

The fact that the man in this text is a Levite, and that the message goes out specifically to the tribes of Israel, forces us to look at *ourselves* and not at the world. Who are the least, the most vulnerable, in our midst? Is it the middle-aged man in dirty clothes who smells of alcohol and mumbles incoherently throughout the service? Is it the well-dressed professional woman whose multiple skills are lauded in her workplace but ignored in her church? Is it the gay man whose vibrant personality and talent is appreciated so long as he doesn't actually share too much about himself? As the church, what is our calling? Surely not to sit around like drunken fools wagering away the lives of others; butchering their spirits as surely as this Levite butchered the body of his concubine—and doing it all in the name of God! This is a text that calls us to deep introspection, both as individuals and as church bodies. Such introspection requires not

only examining our official statements but also intentionally recognizing the very real people about whom we make decisions. Are their voices being heard in the decision-making process? Or, like the Levite's concubine, are they made invisible, talked *about* but never *with*? Judges 19 calls us to these questions of process; how are we to go about being the people of God?

Through this story the central theological point in Israel's understanding of God is conveyed. That is, that unlike other gods of the ancient Near East, Yahweh is one Who stands for the poor, for the oppressed, for the lowly. It foreshadows the message of the prophet Micah and later the savior, Jesus:

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?²⁷

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.²⁸ L

ELIZABETH A. GOODINE is Assistant Professor of Religion at Concordia College—New York.

Notes

1. Judges 19:25–30.
2. There are a number of commentaries that speak to this point. A good overview can be found in “Judges, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. III, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
3. Phyllis Trible points out that serious moral injustice continues to take place in Israel even after the establishment of the monarchy. See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 84. Thus, if the only purpose for this text was to point to the need for a king, it seems likely that a later editor would have removed it.
4. This phrase was first used by Phyllis Trible as the title of her 1984 book and has become commonplace in speaking of biblical texts that involve gross injustice committed against women. Trible's book treats the stories of Hagar, Tamar (II Samuel 13), the woman

of Judges 19, and the daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11.

5. Noted authors whose readings place greater emphasis on the abuse that takes place under the patriarchal system (rather than on the embedded critique of that system) include Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002) and Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993). Trible's reading suggests that while the text itself appears to devalue women, other stories of the Bible such as those of Hannah and Ruth, which are juxtaposed to this text, serve to point to the possibility of a better way of being. Shifting the focus further, Pamela Tamarkin Reis understands this text as a strong critique of Israel's system and of those in power who perpetuated moral depravity. See Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “The Levite's Concubine: New Light on a Dark Story,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 20/1 (2006): 125–146.

6. Judges 19:4, 7, 9.
7. Benjamin Davidson, *Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1981), 625.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. See Reis's discussion of the biblical use of this word in regard to the wives and concubines of the patriarchs as well as those of King David and Solomon. Reis, 126.
10. Davidson, *Analytical Lexicon*, 240. See also Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), especially chapter 10, “To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor,” 219–236.
11. The Septuagint, which is followed by the RSV and NRSV, reads that she “became angry with him.” The NKJV and NASB follow the Masoretic text and read that his concubine “played the harlot against him,” while the KJV says “his concubine played the whore against him,” and the NIV, “she was unfaithful to him.”
12. Judges 19:3.
13. Reis, 127–131.
14. Davidson, *Analytical Lexicon*, 599.
15. Judges 19:4, 6, 8.
16. Judges 19:11–12.
17. The NRSV, RSV, and NASB follow the Septuagint in regard to the Levite's words to the old man: “I am going to my home.” However, the Masoretic text, followed by the KJV and NKJV, reads, “I am going to the house of the Lord.” Thus in the Masoretic tradition, the Levite seems to mislead the old host since there is no indication elsewhere that he intends to travel anywhere but back to his home. It is possible that he uses his status as a Levite to persuade the old man into opening his house to the group.
18. Judges 19:22.
19. Genesis 19:1–11.
20. Judges 19:24.

21. Several commentators point out that the violence in this text is not rooted in homosexual urges but rather in the desire to exert authority over and dishonor the stranger. See especially Mieke Bal, *Death and Dyssymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 92–93. Ken Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject–Honor, Object–Shame?” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 67 (1995): 94–102. See also Frymer-Kensky, 125–126.

22. Judges 19:28–29. The dismemberment of the woman's body symbolizes the separation of the tribes and leads into the final chapters of the book of Judges. It should also be noted that there is ambiguity regarding whether the body parts are sent as one package to each tribe in turn or are separated with the various tribes each receiving a piece. As Reis points out (142–144), the former more adequately depicts the disintegration of tribal unity but the latter might more readily have served as a call to war. Viewed in this way, the incident has sometimes been linked to Saul's call to war in I Samuel 11:7.

23. Judges 20:4–6.
24. Jeremiah 8:22.
25. Trible astutely points out that four references to morning and daylight follow upon the single phrase “abused her all through the night.” The repetition accentuates the horror of the crime as it all comes to light. Trible, 76–77.

26. The entire phrase is found in Judges 17:6 and 21:25. Only the first portion is repeated in 18:1 and 19:1. It should also be noted that the story of the Levite and his concubine follows directly on that of another Levite from Bethlehem who was said to reside in the hill country of Ephraim. This Levite agreed to serve as a private priest to a man named Micah who set up a shrine in which he housed idols. The Levite served as Micah's priest until some Danites came along with a better offer. At that point the Levite deserted Micah, became the priest of the Danites, and assisted them in conquering Laish, a city wherein lived a peaceful group of people who were put to the sword (Judges 17–18). Not only are the circumstances of this man's birth and residence strikingly similar to the Levite of Judges 19, but so is his character. His readiness to make a commitment and his easy betrayal of that commitment closely resemble the behavior of the concubine's husband. It is no surprise, then, that the story of the Levite and his concubine follows on the story of this other wicked and false priest. The first text serves to prepare the reader for the second, which is horrendous enough then to close the book with the indictment: “In those days, there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

27. Micah 6:8.
28. Matthew 22:37–39.