

Judges

Judges 19-21: When There Was No King In Israel

'Texts of Terror' in Judges

The story of Jephthah's daughter sets a darker tone for the remainder of the book of Judges. From chapter 11 onward, women are treated as disposable with increasingly excessive violence. These texts are part of a biblical corpus that the preeminent feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible dubbed "texts of terror."

Comparing Judges 19 and Genesis 19

Judges 19 shares a similar plot to that of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, but there are significant and disturbing differences between the two narratives. Parallels between these two texts are most obvious in Genesis 19:4-11 and Judges 19:22-24. Lot protects two male visitors/angels from a salacious hoard of murderous Sodomites in Genesis, while an unnamed old man protects his male Levite guest from a similar group of Benjaminites in Judges. In both cases, the host then willingly offers their daughter(s) to "do whatever [they] would like" in the men's place.

It is possible that these hosts' willingness to sacrifice the women in their home for the sake of their male guests represents an exaggerated example of the value placed on hospitality in ancient Israel. Perhaps these characters are intended to demonstrate an extreme commitment to the protection of those who have come under their care — so much so that they would give up even their most precious thing (their daughters, in this case). They may not be "happy" to do so, Dr. Collins suggests, but they fulfill the law of hospitality nonetheless [02:03].

The Concubine from Judah

The story in Judges takes an even more terrifying turn when no angels come to the women's rescue as they do in Genesis. No harm befalls Lot's daughters. By contrast, the Judean concubine is pushed out the door and into the crowd where she is beaten, raped, and ultimately murdered. There is no indication in the text that her Levite master/husband objected or attempted to intervene.

This story is one of the most dehumanizing and grotesque narratives in the Hebrew Bible. Identified only as a nameless concubine, this woman's personhood is undermined from the start. The scenes that follow her murder are no less chilling. Finding her motionless on the doorstep the next morning, the Levite says only "get up, we are going." Upon realizing she is dead, he simply "put her on his donkey and set out for home" (Judg. 19:28). Once home, the Levite proceeds to cut up and use her body to deliver a message to the tribes of Israel. By the end of this chapter, she has become an instrument for political ends; a message, not a human being.

Call to Arms

Evidently there was a practice of sending flesh in ancient Israel in order to notify people that their counsel was required. In a way, this act in chapter 19 is a physicalization of Deborah's call for allyship in chapters 4-5. It was intended to energize and unite disparate tribes against a common enemy. In this case, their common enemy was the tribe of Benjamin and a war ensues.

After the Benjaminites are defeated, the women of Israel are once again instrumentalized to political ends. Each tribe pledges never to give their daughters to a Benjaminite. What they realize next, however, is that upholding this vow could mean extinction for the whole tribe of Benjamin. Unwilling to accept this inevitability, the tribal leaders' solution is to look the other way as Benjaminite men kidnap young women from Shiloh and take them back to their land as wives. The desire to preserve *all* of the tribes of Israel expressed in this text may indicate that these tribes were beginning to move toward a more unified notion of Israel's identity as "one nation."

When There Was No King In Israel

The book ends on a somewhat ambiguous note, which may be intentional. "In those days there was no king in Israel," Judges concludes, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). Is there an underlying sense of moral judgment in these final lines, or is the narrator expressing nostalgia for the "good old days"? Readers are left to interpret the narrator's meaning for themselves.

It is tempting to read biblical texts in the Deuteronomistic History *exclusively* as chronological history, but these stories can also be understood as sustained literary reflections on what makes a successful society. The Deuteronomistic Historian's answer is relatively straightforward. Obedience to God is what makes for a successful society. Yet these texts are full of conflicting messages about whether monarchy is good or bad. On the one hand, the kingless world of Judges was violent and lawless. On the other hand, 1 Samuel opens with a divine warning against the inevitable perils of monarchy.

The book of Judges strikes a tenuous balance between constant failure, disappointment, and loss alongside YHWH's continued intervention on Israel's behalf. Perhaps there is a sense of

celebration embedded in this text because, in spite of everything, Israel *survived*. This was clearly not the result of Israel's own virtue, so God must still be looking out for his chosen people. In the end, life will go on.