

## **The story of a gang rape as a means of liberation: a contextual reading of Judges 19**

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In the preface of his recently published big commentary on the book of Judges Walter Groß remarks that he enjoyed the work on this book, but he makes an exception for the last three chapters: 'In siebenjährigem Bemühen ist mir das Richterbuch, abgesehen von seinen letzten drei Kapiteln, ans Herz gewachsen' (Groß 2009, 13). He is not the only who has problems with this dreadful story in Judges 19-21 about the cruel murder on a defenseless and forsaken woman and its devastating consequences in an Israelite civil war. The story is especially shocking for readers who expect to find guidance or comfort in the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity. Of course, the extreme violation of hospitality is condemned, but that does not take away the horrifying offering up of a woman to a bloodthirsty mob and the disrespectful treatment of her dead body by her husband. The story teller appears to be so much focused on the role of the bad inhabitants of Gibeah that what happens to the woman seems only instrumental in making his case. From the modern feministic perspective (Exum 2007) this is unacceptable: 'as a woman reader, I see the story of the gang rape of the Levite's wife in Judges 19 as the most violent of biblical texts. For me, its effect on bible readers is potentially devastating' (Klopper 2008, 182). Does that mean that when it comes to gender issues this story is only to be criticized? Or does also this part of the, in the eyes of many readers authoritative, sacred scriptures have transformative power? Is it possible to take advantage of the fact that the Bible at least is realistic in these matters, not evading the harsh reality as it is experienced by so many women in the past and in the present? In this contribution I will present a combination of contextual readings as an attempt to try to let the story speak for itself, but also to let it function as a mirror offering a better view on gender issues. The challenge is to apply the ancient biblical text to a modern situation without merely using it to illustrate or underscore our own convictions. The interpretation and application shall be based on an analysis of the narrative structure of the text as part of the larger context. Special attention shall be given to some aspects of the texts that can be regarded as characteristic of the text, for instance, the remarkable function of the topography. Precisely on this point it appears to be fruitful to combine the exegesis with some diachronic considerations.

### **The literary context**

Within the present canonical context the story of Judges 19 takes up a theme which the reader of the Bible first encountered in Genesis 19. A couple of travelers is harassed by a hostile crowd in a city where only one of the inhabitants obeys the law of hospitality. In both cases the host tries to save his guests by offering the attackers women who are in the house; in Genesis 19 the two daughters, in Judges 19 one daughter and the concubine of the guest. Whereas in Genesis 19 the women can stay inside the house, the concubine of Judges 19 is sent outside, not by the host but by her husband, is raped and killed. So compared to the situation described in Genesis 19 things have got worse.

The same tendency can be observed within the book of Judges, when looking at the position of women. In the first part of the book women play an active role. Judges 1:12-15 tells of Achsah who is given in marriage as a reward for a military victory, but who also proves to be an assertive woman. Judges 4 is the story of Deborah, the woman who has to lead the leader of Israel into battle, and of Jael, who kills the leader of Israel's enemy. According to Judges 9 the bad king of Israel Abimelech is killed by a woman. She is given no name. This is a first indication that women are becoming less prominent in the book. The only one who is still called by name is Delilah, who clearly plays a negative role in the story of Samson. Samson's mother is also no more than the wife of Manoah,

although she is the one who is visited by the messenger of YHWH and although she reacts more accurately to his message than her husband. After the story of Samson the nameless women in the book of Judges are primarily victims: of theft (17:2), of rape and murder, and of being carried off into a forced marriage (21:23).

The final chapters of the book of Judges are placed within a significant framework: 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit' (17:6; 21:25). The remark about the missing king is repeated twice in between (18:1; 19:1). It indicates that these stories should be read as an introduction to the book of Samuel telling the story of the rise of kingship in Israel. Without a king things are getting more and more chaotic in Israel. In a more subtle way there is also a foreshadowing of the coming controversy between the first two kings, Saul and David, by the reference to places associated with them. The first town mentioned is Bethlehem. It is the hometown of the concubine and she returns there after she left her husband. It is also the place where her husband coming after her is well received. Anyone familiar with the stories of the kings will associate Bethlehem with the later king David (1 Samuel 16). The story of Judges 19 describes it as a good place to stay with friendly inhabitants. Having left Bethlehem the travelers have to choose their next stop on the way back to Ephraim. It is decided that they shall not spend the night at Jebus. The story teller adds that this is another name of Jerusalem. They do not think it wise to go there, because it is inhabited by non-Israelites. This is another reference to David, because in the book of Samuel we read that he is the one who conquered the city of Jebus and made it the capital of his kingdom. So this illustrates the repeated remark about the absence of a king: only after David has taken the throne it will be safe to go to Jebus/Jerusalem. Instead, they have to go now to Gibeon and they get into big trouble there. It is certainly no coincidence that Gibeon returns in the book of Samuel as the home town of the later king Saul. Next to this topographical association with Saul there is a clear correspondence between the extraordinary behavior of a man cutting his dead wife into twelve pieces sending them to all the tribes of Israel and Saul's way of convoking the Israelites by sending them the twelve pieces in which he had cut his oxen (1 Samuel 11:7).

Within the present literary context the story of the gang rape has a clear message. It indicates that Israel needed a good king. Not every king would do. Some will prove to be not fit for the job. Between the lines it is suggested that David shall prove to be a better king than Saul, although the book of Samuel will show that also David turned out to be far from perfect. The story also seems to indicate that one should not only be critical with regard to the political leaders, but also the religious elite (Yee 2007). This can be derived from the fact that a prominent part in Judges 17-21 is played by Levites. In chapter 17-18 a Levite becomes a priest in Dan. In the later history of the kings this is known as one of the rivals of the only legitimate place of worship, Jerusalem. In chapter 19 it is again a Levite who shows a questionable behavior as the man who cannot protect his concubine and does not respect her corpse.

#### The context of the first readers

The historical critical research analysis of the text, especially redaction criticism, indicates that there are good reasons to assume that the book of Judges in its present form is a late construct, forming a bridge between the books of Joshua and Samuel (Spronk 2009). It probably contains old stories about local heroes and their victories over foreign enemies, but these are put in a new framework. This presents them according to a consistent theological view about the relation between human sin and divine judgment. For this purpose also some parts of the book of Joshua are repeated, especially those which refer to the fact that in the time of Joshua not the whole land was conquered. By taking up these elements and emphasizing them, for instance in the first two chapters, the book of Judges can be seen as a specific reaction to the book of Joshua. As was indicated above, something similar can be observed with regard to the relation with the books of Samuel. The book of Judges appears to function as an introduction to the stories of kings like Saul and David.

Next to this relative late dating of the book it can be noted that there are many clear relations with themes we also encounter in ancient Greek literature, from cutting off the prisoner's

thumbs and big toes (Judges 1:6), to the three hundred soldiers of Gideon, the sacrifice of the daughter (of Jephthah), the Herakles-like Samson, and the stealing of the virgins (Judges 21:19-23). This makes it likely that the book of Judges in its present form stems from the Hellenistic period (third or second century BCE). It was based on older stories from different parts of the country. These stories were united into one coherent framework as part of the overall story of Israel from its early beginnings until the restoration after the Babylonian exile. It can be compared to similar literary operations in this region after the victory of Alexander the Great. The growing influence of the Greek culture threatened to wipe out the memory of the previous civilizations. This may have been one of the reasons of the remarkable increase of production of national historiography (Van der Toorn 2007, 259). In Babylonia Berossos wrote his history of Mesopotamia in the third century BCE, Manetho did the same with regard to Egypt one century later.

Redaction criticism can be of help to find a plausible picture of the context of the intended, first readers of the text. We can think of people living in the small state of Yehud. After the Babylonian victory of Judah, with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the ruling elite, and under the following Persian rule it never regained any political or economic power. At the end of the Persian period and also in the early Hellenistic period the most important local leaders were the priests of the rebuilt temple. The retelling of the national history may have functioned as a way to keep up and strengthen the identity of the people. Stories about Joshua conquering the land, of David enlarging it to the borders of Egypt and Assyria, and of Solomon as the wisest and wealthiest of the whole known world were something of a legendary past. The name of David was also connected to promises of a future ruler, sent by God as the Messiah. We know of some more or less successful messianic movements around men claiming to be the Messiah in the last centuries BCE and first centuries CE.

Read within this context the story of the gang rape in Judges 19 tells us of skepticism towards the present religious leaders. The only person with some kind of authority in this chapter is the Levite. From the books of Chronicles we know that they occupied important places in the temple and thus in the society of Yehud. In Judges 19 he does not answer the expectations one would have from such a person. This strengthens the wish for a good leader like king David, someone who 'will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help; who will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death, and who will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight' (Psalm 72:12-14). The first readers of the story will probably have had no existing person in mind. They may have related it to the hope for a coming God given Messiah.

#### The context of a modern reader

The description of a possible historic context based on a historical critical literary analysis offers a good starting point for looking at the text from a modern perspective. Not only is it helpful to see that this story is about leadership, but also that the quality of the leadership is measured along the line of the relation between the leader and a woman. This leaves open the possibility to look at the text not from the perspective of the leader but from the perspective of the woman. This is a modern perspective, because it is influenced by our present views on the relations between men and women. These differ from the way people looked at this matter in time in which our text originates. There are no clear indications that the writer had a different opinion compared to his contemporaries regarding the woman as subordinate to the man. On the contrary, he uses the common view on the status of women to criticize the heroes of his story: many of them are defeated by or inferior to women. This should not be interpreted as a form of emancipation of women. On the other hand the important role given to women in the book of Judges also opens up the possibility to elaborate on this theme. From a literary point of view one can make use of the fact that the story leaves blank spaces especially on this point. In this way the reader is invited to pay special attention to the role of the women in this story.

In verse 1 the woman is presented as a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. She has no name, but in this story no one has. All the more telling is that she is no more than a concubine. She is not the first wife of the Levite. From the stories in Genesis about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar we know that a concubine has no power at all and may have to endure the whims of her (male and female) masters. Given her status it is surprising that she is leaving the house of her husband and returns to her father. Even more surprising is that her husband comes after her to 'speak to her heart' (verse 3) to return. One would have expected him simply to claim his property from her father who in the past must have given him or perhaps sold him his daughter. There are many speculations among the exegetes about the reason for her departure. The Hebrew word used in verse 2 denotes in other texts being a prostitute or (in relation to God) being faithless. Some of the modern translations render it here accordingly; for instance in the New King James Version: 'she played the harlot against him', or in the New International Version: 'she was unfaithful to him'. Others, for instance the Revised Standard Version, follow (some of the versions of) the Septuagint translating it as: 'she became angry with him'. It is interesting to note that in his retelling of the story Josephus builds up 'a romantic background of their separation' (Feldman 2006, 673), in which he has also promoted the concubine to being the wife of the Levite. It indicates that also Josephus was aware of the fact that Judges 19 describes an uncommon situation.

There was a Levite, a man of a common family, who belonged to the tribe of Ephraim, and dwelt there. This man married a wife from Bethlehem, which is a place belonging to the tribe of Judah. Now he was very fond of his wife, and overcome with her beauty; but he was unhappy in this, because he did not meet with the like return of affection from her, for she was averse to him, which did more inflame his passion for her, so that they quarreled one with another perpetually. At last, the woman was so disgusted at these quarrels, that she left her husband, and went to her parents in the fourth month. The husband being very uneasy at her departure, and out of his fondness for her, came to his father and mother-in-law, and made up their quarrels, and was reconciled to her. (Antiquitates 5:136-137)

One could conclude that at least Judges 19:2 evokes a question about the precise relation between the Levite and his concubine. Within the book of Judges it comes as no surprise that the authority of the man is questioned. It leaves room for feminist exegesis to see her as 'a woman who asserts her sexual autonomy by leaving her husband' (Exum 2007, 83).

Having noticed this openness of the text towards the position of the concubine as a person with her own identity and rights, it is from our modern perspective disappointing to note that in the rest of the story she remains silent and powerless. When the men inside and outside the house are negotiating about a way to satisfy the aggressive mob we hear nothing about a reaction of the women involved. Apparently the story teller is not interested in the feelings of a daughter hearing her father say that he is willing to trade her for his guest. There is also nothing left of the autonomy of the concubine. It is precisely this contrast to the beginning of the story which gives extra emphasis to the remark that there was no king in these days: with a good king this would not have happened. It brings to mind stories in which king David chooses the side of abused women. He becomes very angry when he hears of Tamar being raped by Ammon (2 Samuel 13:21). One can also think of the story about Rizpah, the concubine of king Saul. In 2 Samuel 21 it is told how she defends the honor of her two executed sons. She acts against the royal decrees, but eventually David chooses her side. Apparently also this 'man after God's own heart' (1 Sam. 13:14) had to go through his own learning process. This had already become painfully clear in the way he had misused his power to win Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11).

Within our modern context the question comes up whether a good king would also have safeguarded the independence of women like the concubine of Judges 19. It is not the focus of the story, but the story is told in such a way that it at least leaves room for this question. In this way the story contains the seed of liberation.

## Conclusion

The dreadful story of the gang rape of a concubine is more than just an illustration of the fact that without a good king, especially king David, in Israel hospitality was not guaranteed. It is also a story which evokes serious questions about the subordinate place of women. As part of the authoritative scriptures it has therefore transformative power. By describing the horrible violent acts against a defenseless woman it puts the well-known but often concealed problem on the religious agenda. It also adds something to the qualifications of a good king: he should not only promote hospitality and suppress xenophobia, but he should also promote the emancipation of those set behind. With a good king – or one could say: within a just society – there would be attention for the feelings of a girl whose father is offering her to save the life of his guests; there would be someone who would ask for the name of the concubine; and it would be normal if everyone paid respect for the defenseless in life and also for their bodies after they have died.

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