CONGO INITIATIVE

Rape As An Instrument Of War
Judges 19:1-28; 21:25; Ruth 2:8-9, 14-18

Caution: The story depicted in Judges 19 recounts a horrific story of sexual violence that may be traumatic for some readers. It is included in this study because it is a biblical "narrative of trauma," as one scholar has called it, that directly confronts the unspeakable reality of rape as an instrument of war, a war crime that has been committed with frequency in Congo's long civil war. The passage from Ruth presents the mirror-opposite behavior, the communal protection and support of women who are potential targets of violence. The comments below provide a brief summary of the Judges story, without as much detail as the story itself provides and without the Levite's actions that immediately follow. It may be advisable, depending on the class, to skip the reading of the Judges story and rely exclusively on the summary provided below or your own summary, before you take a more in-depth look at the Ruth passage. Questions are dispersed throughout the commentary below.

Open with a prayer of your own choosing or with the following:

Gracious God,
gather us into the safety of your presence.
Open our hearts to new insights
as we hear today's scriptures
and share our discernments.
Guide us as we reflect together on difficult things.
Help us understand and cope with the pain
we bring from our own lives
and the pain we feel
as we ponder the harsh realities of violence and inhumanity.
Help us find
the defiant hope
we need
to survive
and flourish this day.
In the name of the crucified and risen Christ,
Amen

Judges 19:1-28: summary

The story is introduced with the narrator's observation: "It so happened that in those days, there was no king in Israel" (cf. 21:25). The unnamed "secondary wife" (*pilegesh*, often translated as "concubine") of an unnamed Levite from the Northern hill-country, "acts like a harlot" (v 2) by fleeing her husband and returning to her birth family in Bethlehem, a village just outside Jerusalem in the South. After awhile, the Levite goes to Bethlehem to get her. Her father is very happy to see the Levite and provides an elaborate show of hospitality, urging him repeatedly to extend his stay in Bethlehem. When the Levite finally leaves with his secondary wife and a male servant, he decides to avoid the nearby city of Jerusalem — because the inhabitants there are not Israelites. They press on to an Israelite village Gibeah in the region of Benjamin. They seek shelter in the home of a resident alien there. In the middle of the night, the men of Gibeah surround the house and demand that the householder hand over the Levite for gang rape by the mob. The man offers to give them his own young daughter and the wife of the Levite instead. They insist on raping the Levite. "The man" — the Hebrew text is not entirely clear whether it means the host or the Levite here — then grabs "his secondary wife" and brings her outside to them (v 25). They brutalize her through the night and leave her for dead. In the morning, the Levite puts her motionless body on a donkey and rides away.

Congolese Christians gather in the spirit of Micah 4:4: "everyone will sit under their own vine and fig-tree, and no one will make them afraid."

Questions

Where is the story set?

Who are the characters? Do we know any of their names?

Who speaks? What do they talk about?

Which characters don't speak?

Any significance to who speaks and who doesn't? to what is said and what is not said?

What difference does it make (if any) that the chief male character is a "Levite"? What do levites do? How does the "Levite's" social status and function affect how you evaluate his actions (or non-actions)? the actions (or non-actions) of the other characters in the story?

What motivated the mob? Who do they initially plan to assault? Why do they give up that plan after "he" grabs "his concubine" and pushes her outside to the mob? Whom do they want to humiliate?

How would you describe the moral character of the Levite? the resident alien who offered him hospitality?

Why does the storyteller start with the observation that "in those days, there was no king (government) in Israel"? What does that have to do with the story?

Comments:

The great biblical scholar Phyllis Trible[1] identifies this story as a "text of terror." More recently, Janelle Stanley, reading the story through the lens of psychology, has called it a "text of trauma,"[2] containing many of the distinctive patterns therapists have discerned when survivors tell stories of their own traumatic experiences. In the overall structure of Judges, this horrific story of violence illustrates the moral and political unraveling of a people elsewhere depicted as a chosen nation on a divine mission. The story stands in the biblical tradition as a painful witness to the devastating reality of rape and, specifically, of rape as an instrument of war.

The story begins on an ominous note: "It so happened that in those days, when there was no king in Israel..." (v 1). We might say today: "when there was no functioning government, no responsible civil authority." In other words, it was a situation of political anarchy. The absence of effective political authority creates a situation of lawlessness that leads to mob rule, a dangerous situation for everyone, but especially for those who are politically and socially vulnerable anyway — in ancient Israel, women and children, especially "secondary" women like the nameless *pilegesh*.

The assault depicted in our story ignites a civil war, described in the verses and chapters that follow, that leads to the ambush and slaughter of the whole city of Gibeah by a coalition of outraged Israelite clan-militias (chapter 20). Afterward, the victors feel remorse because the male survivors of Gibeah and the clan of Benjamin have lost their wives and children to the genocide. So they attack a city that had refused to participate in the war they now regret, slaughter the all the women and children there, except the unmarried girls who've reached puberty. They kidnap them, take them to the temple city Shiloh, and tell the vanquished survivors of the war to abduct the girls during a religious ceremony, to replace the wives they lost when Gibeah was destroyed (chapter 21). This absurd cascade of violence comes to an end in the last verse of the book with the storyteller's final judgment on the catastrophic consequences of social-political melt-down: "In those days, there was no king (i.e., governmental authority) in Israel, and every man[3] did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25).

There are a number of excellent analyses of the narrative techniques the storyteller uses to pass subtle but powerful judgment on the violence, indifference, and cowardice of the male characters in this

[1] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Fortress Press, 1984).
[2] Janelle Stanley, "Judges 19: text of trauma," in Athalya Brenner and Gail A. Yee eds., *Joshua and Judges* (texts@contexts; Fortress Press, 2013) 275-289.
[3] The word *'ish* literally means "man," but often is appropriately translated in a gender-neutral way. In light of the content of the stories leading up to this verse, where men make all the decisions to the horrific detriment of women, it seems more appropriate here to translate with the gender-specific "man."

story.[4] The power of the storyteller's critique is amplified by reading this story alongside the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19. The two stories at points almost seem to quote from each another. The key difference, of course, is that in Genesis the angels intervene to save Lot's two daughters from the mob. In Judges, there is no rescue for the woman. She is sacrificed to the mob to save the life of her husband.

Two things are important to know about the ancient context of these stories. The first relates to customs of hospitality. The ancient social order was built on family networks of mutual economic support. When, for whatever reason, people had to leave their support networks to travel or migrate elsewhere, they found themselves in a highly vulnerable situation. As vulnerable people on the margins of the economy they also posed a potential threat to the settled families of the regions they passed through. Scared, hungry people can become desperate. To deal with this dangerous situation, settled families in the region were expected to offer protection and support to the vulnerable traveler or migrant. If the traveler accepted the offer of hospitality, temporarily becoming a "member" of the household, they also implicitly accepted the obligations of family membership: to work for the welfare and long-term survival of the household. So the transaction of hospitality was mutually beneficial. The traveler found security and support, and the settled family neutralized a potential threat. This set of cultural assumptions about hospitality forms the backdrop of the narrative in Leviticus 19 and its counterpart, the Sodom and Gomorrah story.

The second thing to know relates to battlefield rape. In some cases in the ancient world, victorious armies engaged in acts of sexual violence against the vanquished as a form of humiliation, an extreme and brutal act of domination and shaming.

The men of Gibeah, by social convention, were responsible for the safety and support of the Levite and his wife. Rather than accept their moral responsibility to provide for the welfare of these socially and economically vulnerable travelers, they declared war on them. They treated them, not as temporary family, but as vanquished foes to be humiliated and shamed. It's shocking behavior for people said to be "chosen" by God, a status highlighted by the Levite's refusal to stop for the night in Jerusalem — "let's not turn aside to the city of the foreigner who isn't part of the Israelite people; let's pass over instead to Gibeah" (v 12). Bad call, Levite!

The melt-down of social-moral order that flows from this brutal act represents a reversal of the situation we find at the beginning of the book. The nameless, speechless woman victimized by the mob stands (and collapses) in stark contrast to the empowered women who control the action in the opening chapters of Judges — Achsah (1:13-15), Deborah, and Jael (chapters 4-5). Even Jephthah's unnamed daughter (chapter 11) and Delilah, the Philistine lover of Samson (chapter 16) show a level of independence, power, and moral agency that is infrequent elsewhere in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. A number of scholars have noted that, in Judges, the strength and weakness of the social-political-moral order in Israel directly corresponds to the social-political power of women. The empowerment or disempowerment of women is a barometer of the overall health and stability of the nation. The whole people thrive when women share power, when they have voice and physical

[4] For references, see Janelle Stanley's article above and Brad Embry, "Narrative Loss and the (Important) Role of Women, and Community in Judges 19," in the same volume. See also K. Lawson Younger's introduction to the book of Judges in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

security, when they share leadership. The nation disintegrates morally, politically, and economically when women are silenced and put in physical danger.

Read Ruth 2:8-9, 14-18

Questions

Where is the story set? What city?

Who are the characters?

Who speaks? What do they say?

As an economically secure land-holder, Boaz has a special responsibility for the support and safety of those who are vulnerable. What, if anything, do folks like Boaz get out of it? Is it in their best interest, too?

Compare Boaz and the Levite in terms of their moral character. What about their attitudes toward "the foreigner/the other"?
What are the potential points of danger for Ruth that Boaz seeks to address?
Describe the social values of the various characters in the story. How do they understand their own moral responsibility?

Comments

In the Christian Bible, the book of Ruth is placed between Judges and 1 Samuel, books that in the Jewish canon lie at the center of an unbroken multi-volume account of the Israelite people in the land of Canaan, from the time they enter the land until the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and deport all its political-religious leaders to Mesopotamia.

In the Jewish canon, the story that immediately follows the violent disintegration of Israelite society in the closing chapters of Judges takes up where Judges leaves off (21:6-24), in Shiloh, a temple city north of Jerusalem where the priest Eli served (1 Sam 1:3). 1 Samuel 1 tells the story of Hannah ("grace") and the birth of Samuel ("God has heard"), the prophet-priest-judge who serves as Israel's transitional leader as it moves from the decentralized rule of the judges to a centralized dynastic monarchy. In the Jewish canon then, the problem intimated at the beginning of the "Levite's concubine" story and stated outright at the end of Judges — "in those days, there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" — is immediately taken up in the very next story (1 Samuel 1-2). Indeed, the whole story of the two books of Samuel is the story of Israel's struggle to establish a stable, functioning monarchy, the house of David.

In the Christian canon, however, Ruth is inserted between Judges and 1 Samuel. In the end, Ruth too points toward the house of David — a surprise ending, in fact, given Ruth's Moabite ethnicity (cf. Deuteronomy 23:4). But the heart of the book tells a story of deep friendship and mutual support among socially and economically marginal women and the flourishing of the broader community that emerges from such solidarity. The focus is not so much on the institution of the monarchy as a way out of political and moral anarchy as it is on the empowerment that comes through the friendship and solidarity of women and the socially conscious, morally responsible behavior of men.

The story begins in Bethlehem — an inter-textual link with Judges 19 where Bethlehem is both the birthplace of the "concubine" and the place to which she flees when she leaves her husband. It is also the last place she finds safety. There is, ironically, a famine in Bethlehem ("house of bread") that causes the family of Naomi to migrate to "the fields of Moab." There, Naomi's sons marry Moabite women. When Naomi's husband and two sons die sometime later, she urges her daughters-in-law to return to "your mother's households." One daughter-in-law reluctantly agrees. Ruth ("companion, friend") insists on returning with Naomi to Bethlehem.

Today's episode begins with Ruth taking advantage of the ancient custom of "gleaning," an important component of the social network of mutual economic support in ancient Israel. Just as hospitality codes addressed the potential danger posed by economically insecure travelers and migrants, customs such as gleaning were intended to provide food support for poor households and individuals and thus contribute to the overall security of the region. At harvest time, vulnerable people, for example, in households without a senior male, were allowed to go through the fields and harvest the left-overs. Farmers were explicitly prohibited from harvesting "to the edge of the fields" (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22), so a portion of the harvest would be left over for the vulnerable poor. It's important to note that, in the view of biblical authors, this is not voluntary charity on the part of the wealthy. This food is the entitlement of the poor. The land belongs to YHWH. The produce of the land is the gracious blessing of YHWH. The farmer who farms the land is graciously allowed to keep most of the crop. But YHWH has reserved a portion of the crop for the vulnerable poor. A householder who doesn't leave a fair share is stealing. It's no accident that Leviticus 19:11 immediately follows the law of gleaning: "You must not steal or deal falsely with your neighbor!" The failure to set aside a portion of your income for the security and health of the vulnerable poor is the worst kind of theft.

Ruth speaks with the owner of the field, a wealthy land-holder named Boaz ("in him is strength") who urges her not to glean in other fields, but to stay in his fields and stick close to the young women in his extended family (v 8). He warns the young men not to sexually harass her and orders them to share with her the water they've drawn. At suppertime, he offers her a generous meal. He invites her to glean in the best part of the field and instructs his young men to share what they've harvested. At the end of the day, she had enough grain to feed her and her mother-in-law Naomi.

Boaz acts according to the biblical ideal, providing generous support and physical safety for a socially marginal and therefore vulnerable woman. His behavior stands in stark contrast to the horrifically violent, immoral actions of the men of Gibeah and the men in the story — the Levite and the man who gave them shelter for the night — who instantly abandoned their moral responsibility to provide support and safety for the vulnerable "concubine."

The mutual support, empowerment, and decisive action of socially marginal women in the book of Ruth -- Naomi, Ruth, the young women of Boaz's household, and eventually the women of Bethlehem who surround and support Naomi and Ruth — finally lead to the social and political stability lacking at the end of the book of Judges. It is still true in the days of Ruth and Boaz that there was no king in Israel, but the mutually empowering, compassionate, socially-conscious actions of the women and men in the story leads to new life, a redemptive birth: "and they named him Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David" (4:17).

Rape as an instrument of war in Congo and the church's response

Estimates vary, but international assessments agree that hundreds of thousands, perhaps as many as half a million women have been raped as a result of the civil war in Congo. The Congo coordinator of a US-based campaign against sexual violence said, "It is more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier here."[5] Though the circumstances and reasons for the violence vary, it is clear that rape of women and girls has been used as a method of terrorizing civilian populations. This terrorist tactic has a multiplier effect, interrupting basic economic activities such as the planting and harvesting of crops and the conduct of commerce, education, and health care. As in the book of Judges, eastern Congo has experienced a downward spiral of social-political-economic and moral order.

The Disciples Community in Congo is geographically removed from the places in Eastern Congo that have born the brunt of war, though they have at various points experienced, sometimes with tragic and fatal consequences, the spill-over. The church, however, supports a number of programs of education, health care, and small-scale economic development that resist violence — particularly violence against women and children — that promote human rights and encourage economic security for women and children and their families. They have an active HIV/AIDS prevention and care program and work to provide counseling and support for survivors of rape and abuse. In a country where sometimes, in some places,

[5] Christine Deschryver, Congo coordinator for V-Day, quoted in "Congo's shame: Rape as an instrument of war," *Washington Times*, September 8, 2009 http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/08/congos-shame-rape-used-as-tool-of-war/#ixzz2VZFGWaAj. See also "The War on Congo's Women," *Mother Jones*, September 29, 2011 http://www.motherjones.com/photoessays/2011/09/congo-rape-epidemic/congo-rape-soldiers

there is little or no functioning civil authority, these Christian brothers and sisters do the hard, daily work of building and maintaining biblical communities of mutual support and solidarity, providing, as best they can, food for the hungry, safety for the vulnerable, and a light of hope in difficult circumstances. We participate in this mission of wholeness and hope by our giving to Disciples-UCC Common Global Ministries and by our prayers for the safety, well-being, and courageous witness of our sisters and brothers in Congo.

Questions

What responsibility, if any, do we have — as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination — have for vulnerable women and children here and in Congo?

What should we do?

Close with a prayer of your own choosing or with the following:

Gather us into your strong, sure arms, O God.
Make us confident and secure
that we may go out boldly
to resist violence,
to establish justice,
to feed the hungry,
to bring shelter and safety to the vulnerable,
to stand with the beaten and abused
and to do everything in our power to rescue and support them.
Help us know what to do
and do it.
Help us and your church in Congo be
a sign of hope,
a pillar of support
for those who
lie at the threshold
and cry out for deliverance.
We pray for their comfort and healing,
for peace,
for protection,
for spiritual repair
and life-giving power.
In the name of Jesus,
the crucified and risen Christ,
Amen.

For the complete bible study series please visit
www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html.