

5-1-2018

## The Trouble with Trible: The Limitation of a Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Linda MacCammon  
*St. John Fisher University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

MacCammon, Linda (2018) "The Trouble with Trible: The Limitation of a Feminist Biblical Interpretation," *Verbum*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol15/iss1/4>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol15/iss1/4> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjf.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjf.edu).

---

## The Trouble with Tribble: The Limitation of a Feminist Biblical Interpretation

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

In her book, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Phyllis Tribble describes the story of the unnamed concubine in the Book of Judges as depicting “the horrors of male power, brutality, and triumphalism, of female helplessness, abuse, and annihilation” (65). While I understand and fully accept that there are patriarchal and misogynistic elements in the text, I find Tribble’s feminist interpretation and assessment of the story problematic because it loses sight of one of the Bible’s central revelatory messages; namely, that power, brutality, helplessness and abuse are not gender-specific; rather, they are the result of human selfishness and sin. From an ethics perspective, Judges 19-20 dramatically illustrates the random, chaotic nature of evil in the abuse of power and the damage to the victims regardless of sex. The distinction lies in how individuals deal with the threat and what their response tells us about their character.

Gogh, the inner man, who painted what he saw with his heart. I will miss those inspiring tutorials on art, music, and literature.

During the past few weeks I have been reading a book called *The Power of Silence*. As I thought about its deeper message, it struck me that it was Fr. Mike's gift. The power of his gentle silence allowed me and others to speak of our joys and our struggles. He was silent so he could listen with his heart. He often spoke of living alone so he could read, listen to music, and pray in the silence of his house. This prepared him, I believe, to listen better to those who sought out his advice and his company. We felt "listened to."

As a Scripture scholar, Fr. Mike knew well the Book of Proverbs. This collection of wisdom speaks of friends and friendship. A true friend, in time, becomes a brother or sister; a relationship forged in sweat and tears rooted in a willingness to love without condition or judgment. The one who finds such a friend has found a treasure.

Fr. Mike was such a treasure to so many: family, staff, faculty, students, parish members, friends! We will miss his gentle smile and listening heart.

*Rev. Dr. William Graf*  
*Chair, Department of Religious Studies*

\*\*\*

## **Faculty Essays**

### *The Trouble with Tribble: The Limitation of a Feminist Biblical Interpretation*

In her book, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Phyllis Tribble describes the story of the unnamed concubine in the Book of Judges as depicting "the horrors of male power, brutality, and triumphalism, of female helplessness, abuse, and annihilation" (65). While I understand and fully accept that there are patriarchal and misogynistic elements in the text, I find Tribble's feminist interpretation and assessment of the story problematic because it loses sight of one of the Bible's central revelatory messages; namely, that power, brutality, helplessness and abuse are not gender-specific; rather, they are the result of human selfishness and sin. From an ethics perspective, Judges 19-20 dramatically illustrates the random, chaotic nature of evil in the abuse of power and the damage to the victims regardless of sex. The distinction lies in how individuals deal with the threat and what their response tells us about their character.

The stage is set in the first verse of Chapter 19: "In those days, when there was no king in Israel..." Mulling over these few words, the imagination suddenly pictures what they could literally mean. Central authority is non-existent in Israel. The social order is crumbling, and, consequently, anything goes. Reflecting on our own time, that's a pretty scary thought. After setting the atmosphere, the narrative introduces the central characters: a Levite from the hill country of Ephraim and his concubine from Bethlehem in Judah (Judg. 19:1). The social status of the pair is significant. In ancient Israel, Levites served as priests and teachers at local shrines, indicating a superior rank and piety from ordinary Israelites. A concubine was a woman who lived with a man but had a lower social status than a wife; however, in the story the Levite is referred to as "the husband" of the concubine (19:3) and the "son-in-law" of the woman's father (19:5). Later in the story the Levite is also referred to as the woman's "master" (19:26), all of which confirm her inferior, subservient status to the man.

The initial conflict of the story is introduced when the concubine becomes angry with the Levite and returns to her father's house, where she stays for four months (19:2). Why the woman was angry and why she took such a drastic step is unknown. What is clear is that despite her social status, the concubine is hardly a weak-willed or passive female. On the contrary, this is a woman of decision and action. Perhaps she had suffered physical abuse (not an unlikely scenario) and wanted to escape the violence. Whatever the case, the fact that she stayed for such an extended period of time suggests that she intended to remain with her father. The time lapse is also significant for the Levite. If violence had been the cause of the concubine's flight, it would explain why it took four months for the man to go to Bethlehem. He may have wanted to delay a potentially difficult conversation with his father-in-law. Interestingly, the Oxford Annotated Bible points to a Hebrew translation which states that the woman ran away because she had "played the harlot" (319). If that were the case, it's doubtful the Levite would have waited four months to settle the score. Instead, he "arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back" (Judg. 19:3). These are hardly the actions of a wronged husband, but rather those of a man who had greatly wronged his wife.

The next scene (Judg. 19:3-9) introduces the girl's father, who upon seeing his son-in-law, "came with joy to meet him" (3)—a strange reaction given the circumstances. Through clever persuasion, the father detains the Levite for five days. Trible asserts this was an exercise in male bonding, a competitive power struggle between the men which totally excludes the woman (68). Instead of the husband "speaking kindly to her" and making up with his wife, he ignores her (a timeless female complaint) and enjoys the company of another man. Trible laments that the woman suffers from neglect (69), but once again her interpretation limits the human drama. This is a story about victims and not all of them were female. A more sympathetic reading of the scene witnesses a father's futile attempt to protect his daughter the only way he can—through feigned and over exaggerated hospitality:

His father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days; so they ate and drank, and he stayed there. On the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, "Fortify yourself with a bit of food, and after that you may go." "So the two men sat and ate and drank together; and the girl's father said to the man, "Why not spend the night and enjoy yourself?" When the man got up to go, his father-in-law kept urging him until he spent the night there again. On the fifth day he got up early in the morning to leave; and the girl's father said, "Fortify yourself." So they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate and drank. When the man with his concubine and his servant got up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, "Look, the day has worn on until it is almost evening. Spend the night. See, the day has drawn to a close. Spend the night here and enjoy yourself. Tomorrow you can get up early in the morning for your journey, and go home" (Judg. 19:4-9).

Hospitality was a central value in tribal societies, but the father's generosity and gaiety have a desperate edge to them while the Levite seems to half-heartedly participate in the festivities—all he wants to do is leave. In this light, Trible's competitive power struggle reads more like a calculated charade. The father knows he's sending her back to a dark existence. Perhaps by killing the Levite with kindness he can lessen any reprisals against his daughter. Although the father loses "the competition," he fights valiantly to appease the Levite, using every angle to delay the departure; however, when the end comes it is instantaneous with no time for goodbyes: "But the man would not spend the night; he rose up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem)" (19:10). Father and daughter are severed forever, wounded by a system that regarded human beings as property.

The Levite's haste requires that they stay somewhere for the night. Gibeah, a town which belongs to the tribe of Benjamin, appears to be a safe harbor but the Levite, his concubine and servant are forced to camp in the open square of the city "for no man took them into his house to spend the night" (19:15). The lack of hospitality is ominous, but the narrative immediately heralds a rescuer in the guise of

an old man returning from the fields. Following the customs of hospitality, he opens his home to the travelers, joyfully taking care of all their needs. Suddenly events speed up and in a shocking and unexpected way. The men of the city, described as a “perverse lot,” surround the old man’s house, demanding that he “Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him” (23). The old man bravely confronts the group pleading for the life of the Levite, but in a moment his truer nature is unmasked. He tells them, “Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing” (24). His reversal is chilling, heightening the terror. Evil lurks behind every kindness, every generous face. No one, not even a kinsman—or a father—can be trusted. A terrible sense of dread creeps into the scene. When the old man’s offer is rejected by the men, the Levite completes the betrayal by seizing the concubine and throwing her out of the house to the waiting mob (25).

The cold-blooded acts of these men demonstrate how the abuse of power destroys both the victims and the perpetrators. The old man and the Levite have become enmeshed in a patriarchal value system and power structure that conditions and dehumanizes them to the point where they are capable of committing such crimes. Rather than fight the brutality pounding at the door, their actions fuel and perpetuate it.

The gang rape of the woman is described with grim simplicity: “and they knew her, and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man’s house where her master was, until it was light” (19:25-26). In Tribble’s interpretation, the concubine is a beaten woman: “Now that they have raped and discarded her outside, she has no choice but to ‘fall down at the doorway of the house.’ Her physical state embodies her servile position.” (77). But Tribble misses a significant action by the woman. She overlooks the fact that this is a woman who has been tortured, raped, and betrayed by her master and her host and yet she got up and made the long, painful trek back to the house where she clearly wasn’t welcome. She may have known she was dying and was seeking a final place to rest from her abusers, but I don’t believe that was her only motivation. It’s also possible that she crawled back to the house to confront her “protectors” with their crimes. It was a final heroic act in the face of overwhelming injustice. Her body was broken, but not the strength of her character.

There is some question as to whether the woman died on the threshold of the house. The text is ambiguous on this point: “In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ‘Get up,’ he said to her, ‘we are going.’ But there was no answer (19:27-28). Tribble views the woman’s silence as a sign of utter defeat: “Oppressed and tortured, she opens not her mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so she opens not her mouth” (79). But the woman was not silent, for she spoke her last with her hands across a doorway. Tribble sees this as a touching plea for mercy, but I believe her hands were clenched in defiance, condemning her master and forcing him—a Levitical priest and teacher—to acknowledge his crimes in the light of day. I believe that if she had been able to speak she would have.

The Levite, in a final act of barbaric ownership, takes a knife and divides the concubine’s body into twelve pieces and sends them throughout Israel as a witness to the abomination. The tribes quickly gather to hear his explanation (Judg.20:3-7).

And the Israelites said, “Tell us, how did this criminal act come about?” The Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered, “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. So now, you Israelites, all of you, give your advice and counsel here.”

A coward to the end, the Levite conveniently excludes his part in the death of his wife and, instead, points an accusing finger at the Benjaminites. The result is a civil war that breeds more violence, rape, death, destruction, and the near extinction of the tribe of Benjamin. It is no coincidence that the final verse of the book of Judges echoes the verse that began the tragedy: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25).

Judges 19-20 graphically illustrates a humanity bereft of all compassion, mercy, and love, but unlike Tribble I can't reduce the problem to patriarchy and misogyny, for they represent variations on a fundamental abuse of power established in the Fall (Gen. 2) and perfected in a “might makes right” mentality that asserts itself at all times, at all levels of society, and against all human beings. In such a world, all are victims, all are violated, all become less than human. Consequently, the Levite and the concubine suffer equally but in different ways: The woman is brutally sacrificed and the man and his kinsmen go off to war to be slaughtered for the sake of power and their pride while the status quo remains the same. Centuries later this abusive mentality and its various manifestations (e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia) are still firmly in place and the destruction continues.

Ultimately, Phyllis Tribble's attempt at literary-feminist reading goes too far. Although there is great benefit in feminist readings of biblical texts, it is a mistake to perceive and interpret the Bible as a literary champion or apologist for a particular gender or worldview. The Bible is a mirror from which we come to understand basic truths about ourselves and the human condition, truths that both indict and inspire the human heart. The Bible was, for the most part, written, compiled, and edited by men; however, in all fairness, these were men who also included women's voices and who had some understanding of the suffering of women—as well as the suffering of slaves, the poor, the sick, and the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Feminist writers like Tribble do a great disservice to the biblical writers when they overlook that fact. Tribble simply needs a lighter, more inclusive touch.

*Linda M. MacCammon, PhD*  
*Religious Studies Department*

\*\*\*

### *A History of Slavery in Central Asia:*

#### *Shī'ī Muslim Enslavement in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bukhara*

Despite more than a century of interest on the part of western scholars and historians in the region of Central Asia, in many respects our knowledge of many topics in Central Asian history remains limited. To date, when compared to the body of historical works treating the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas, or even the history of slavery within the Arab-Muslim world, the history of slavery in Islamic Central Asia has received little attention. Thus, it stands to reason that the history of the enslavement of Shī'ī Muslims in the early modern and modern eras has been likewise neglected, often being mentioned in passing or dealt with in a few pages within larger works. Considering the extent to which both Bukhara and Khiva depended upon Shī'ī slaves as agricultural workers, domestic servants, bureaucrats, and such, this history of slavery in Central Asia is a topic that demands closer scrutiny. This paper will therefore consider the history of the enslavement of Shī'ī Muslims in the Emirate of Bukhara during the nineteenth century. As an institution, slavery was ideologically rationalized and sanctified according to long-standing sectarian prejudices, in this instance those of the Sunnī Muslims towards the Shī'ī Muslims, in the Central Asian states of the nineteenth century. This can be verified by an examination of the extant sources; as a preliminary examination of