

Reading the Story of the Levite's Concubine Through the Lens of Modern-day Sex Trafficking

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The story of the gang rape and mutilation of a Levite's concubine wife in Judges 19 is a difficult text to read; it is indeed a "text of terror," as Phyllis Trible has argued.¹ This text of terror constitutes for some the quintessential narrative for elucidating oppression and violence perpetrated against women and their victimization. Texts both reflect and critique everyday life. Texts of terror contain vivid and mundane images of women's oppression and brutality. They reflect and critique our ignorance, complicity, and culpability in the brutality and victimization of women and others. We resist the idea that the perpetrators of heinous acts could be one of us, anyone like us, or anyone familiar to us.

Our text is fraught with and reeks of images and language of familiarity. Familiarity can and often does render risk and danger invisible. What is familiar and therefore often normal requires little caution or critique. Ideas of personal or communal safety and minimization of risk are often based on familiarity. Normally expected behavior, particularly normalcy practiced by authoritative or dominant persons or institutions, can camouflage or render invisible oppression and violence. In contexts of perceived familiarity and/or normalcy, oppression and brutality against women and children can more easily occur with little or no interference. We warn our children, and rightly so, to beware of strangers. But traffickers in human flesh are often not strangers. Every year thousands of women and children, drawn from every corner of the world, are recruited or drafted into modern-day sex slavery in the United States.² "In story after story, a trafficker, often a known member of the community, a friend of the family, or sometimes a relative, offers a better life in America."³

This paper offers an analysis and reading of the story of the unnamed Levite's concubine (secondary or slave) wife⁴ both through the lens of and in tandem with the phenomenon of modern-day sex slavery or human sex trafficking. The concept of familiarity, as manifested in language and relationships weaved throughout the text, will serve as a dominant theme for analyzing this story. Among the ancients, the most vulnerable in society (conquered and subjugated men, women and children) could be enslaved. In modern-day sex slavery the most vulnerable in society are preyed upon. As in ancient slavery, modern-day slave owners enjoy free access to enslaved bodies for labor, profit, and sexual satisfaction. Since slavery is now illegal in the U.S.,⁵ enslavers utilize cunning and deceptive means to acquire slave bodies. Slave holders employ the pretence and the situation of familiarity to lure women

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and children into sex slavery. The story of the Levite's concubine wife contains language and representations of familiarity that invite dialogue between the text and the phenomena of modern-day human sex trafficking.

Familiarity has to do with proximity.⁶ By proximity I mean nearness in terms of ethnicity, culture, geography, social status, religious affiliation, and/or gender. People who we consider proximate to us are those most like us. Ideas of in-group homogeneity are linked to perceptions of familiarity.⁷ We believe that those most like us and most known to us are less likely to hurt us. Familiarity can be employed as both a deterrent against violence and the ideal pretext or context for the perpetration of violence. We seldom expect what is familiar to us to be ominous toward us. We trust and choose to form relationships with others based on proximity. We select our neighbors, friends, associates, religious practitioners, employees, significant others, and marriage partners based on our perceived knowledge of them and their similarity or proximity to us; that is, what and how much we have, or think we have, in common.

The problem is that proximity does not necessarily guarantee knowledge or safety. Persons can control how much and what they want to reveal about themselves to other people. Proximity is unreliable as a safety gauge since both the self and those proximate to us are capable of unimaginable and unspeakable crimes, as the concubine's story demonstrates. Many crimes against the most vulnerable in a society are committed by people who are familiar or proximate to their victims. Modern-day enslavers or slave owners employ what is familiar or proximate to lure young girls into sex slavery. In Florida a 16 year old girl was ensnared into selling her body by a girl of the same age whom the victim met in high school – someone she presumed to be her peer and schoolmate. A man posing as the schoolmate's father met the victim's parent under the ruse of taking the two girls to the shopping mall. Instead the 16 year old victim was held captive in a house and repeatedly gang raped. U.S. authorities were incredulous when they questioned witnesses and members of the *Zambian Acapella Boys Choir* to find that Rev. Grimes, "a man of God," and his daughter had enslaved the boys. Grimes had presented himself to the boys and their parents as well-dressed, polite and the bearer of promises of a better life in America.⁸

The story of the concubine from Bethlehem of Judea relates a raw display of violence and brutality against a young woman whose social position and familial relationships afford her no protectors and who eventually is the victim of men governed solely by their own insatiable lusts. The socio-historical context is broadly described, *in nuce*, by six, previously spoken, words: "there was no king in Israel" (19:1; 17:6; 18:1, NRSV).⁹ The concubine's story (and the book of Judges) concludes with the addendum, "In those days there was no

king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes,” (21:25, NRSV).¹⁰ These words reflect both the absence of social order or anarchy and the absence of personal critical reflection and ethical responsibility. But prior to the double Levirate priest narratives (17-18 and 19-21), the aphorism reads differently: “the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord,” NRSV (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1; cp. 17:6; 21:25).¹¹ The two phrases (“right in their own eyes” and “evil in the sight of the Lord,” NRSV) are parallel; two sides of the same coin. That which is right in the eyes of Levite priests proves to be evil in the sight of the Lord. The prevalence of such moral individualism in a patriarchal, class conscious and/or xenophobic society can become the recipe for the oppression and victimization of women, children, the poor, and the stranger within.

The motif of travel or journey provides a useful framework for analyzing the concubine’s story. Several journeys contribute to the progression of the story from its beginning to its denouement. Arrivals, departures, and transience create movement, temporally and spatially, in the story. Grammatically, travel (arrival and departure) is marked by the finite form of the Hebrew verb *hālak* (to go, come, travel, or walk) or the verb *‘ābar* (to cross over). We find the idea of transience in the Hebrew participle *gar* (sojourning), which describes both the Levite and the old man of Gibeah. At the beginning of the narrative, the unnamed Levite is introduced as one sojourning in the distant border of the hill country of Ephraim (a later metonym for the Northern Kingdom, 1Kgs 12:25) who took for himself a concubine wife (*‘iššā philegeš*) from Bethlehem of Judea (19:1). In the status transformation from a father’s unwed daughter to a Levite’s concubine wife, the young woman exchanged one master for another. While unmarried and living under her father’s roof, she was to remain sexually unavailable. But once the Levite took her as his wife, she must become sexually available. “He is subject; she, object. He controls her. How he acquired her we do not know; that he owns her is certain.”¹²

Nevertheless, it is not unusual in the Hebrew Bible for a woman, especially a concubine, to be taken (e.g., Gen 16: 3; 20:2-3).¹³ She will be taken to the tent (*‘ōhēl*) or place (*maqôm*) of her Ephraimite husband as his concubine wife (cp. Judges 8:31). What begins ostensibly as a benign and mundane domestic transaction will morph into a fatal and extraordinary spectacle. “What victims of human sex trafficking share in common is “the hope and the promise they felt at the beginning of their journey”¹⁴ -- dreams of a better and different life.

It will be from an Ephraimite sojourner’s home that her husband will discard her to be ravished some Israelite “brothers” (19:23-25). Thus, the first action in the story, also the first journey, is the implicit transportation of human property across geographical boundaries from Bethlehem to Ephraim. Modern-day sex trafficking depends on the ability of the victim’s predators to transport

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her across geographical boundaries; to remove her permanently or temporarily from her normal geographical surroundings. Christian, a former victim of sexual slavery, opines "pimps do not know state or national boundaries."¹⁵ Sometimes the border crossing is international and at other times it is local or domestic. Sex trafficking is not just an overseas problem. The primary destinations for persons trafficked across international borders include Australia, Bahrain, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, as well as the United States.¹⁶ An estimated "300,000 children in the U.S. are at risk of being sold into slavery."¹⁷ Further, the FBI estimates that "well over 100,000 children and young women are trafficked in America today. They range in age from 9 to 19, with the average age being 11."¹⁸ Many young victims come from what many would consider "good families," but are enticed or coerced by clever predators.¹⁹

Second Journey. In the second journey, the concubine wife leaves her husband's residence and returns to her father's house.²⁰ This young woman is both a runaway and a concubine; neither her status as a runaway or as a concubine should mitigate her oppression and victimization. The most at risk populations for human trafficking exploitation are the 1.3 to 2.8 million runaways and homeless youths living on America's streets.²¹ Many of the child victims of sex trafficking are runaways or children hoping to escape from unhappy home situations enticed by promises of love and a better life. These child runaways end up abused, beaten and forced into a financial indebtedness that they are compelled to repay by selling their bodies.²² Nearly three-fourths of all U.S. victims of human trafficking are women and half of the victims of modern-day slavery are children.²³ Human trafficking affects all races, nationalities, and genders. Nevertheless, over half of the cases of sex trafficking in the U.S. involved black children. Fifty-five percent of persons "under age eighteen arrested on prostitution-related charges [in the U.S.] are black children."²⁴ Every 40 seconds, a child goes missing in the U.S.A.; more than 2,000 children a day; about 500,000 disappear without being reported missing, and for most missing children their bodies are never found.²⁵

Our story does not contain the first documented case of a runaway wife who abandons her master/mistress (e.g., Hagar, Gen. 16:6).²⁶ Unlike Hagar, the Levite's wife does not voluntarily return to her master; she is retrieved. It is unusual for a young woman who has abandoned her master/husband to return to her father's house (19:2). The Levite will never relinquish his right to *take* his concubine wife. After she leaves him, he will take her from her father's house. In fact, the many references to the Levite as "son-in-law" or husband ('*is*) and to the father as "father-in-law" foreground the legal relationship that continues to exist among the parties (19:4, 5, 6, 9).

Like all characters in the story, the concubine is anonymous, even in her father's house. Cheryl Exum argues that her anonymity is a literary

“strategy for distancing the reader from the character.”²⁷ It is only when she returns to her father’s house that she is referred to as a young woman (*na’ar*) and only for the purpose of identifying the father (19: 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9). In the grammar of the text, the young woman is present either as a possessive pronoun (“her”) or as the second noun in a Hebrew construct pair (“the father of the young woman”). Her grammatical position, behind her father, serves to identify a father in relation to his daughter, rendering him present and her absent.²⁸ In the story, she is hidden and silent; yet, the reader knows she is present, in her father’s house.²⁹ Dina a former victim of sex trafficking in Cambodia testified about the necessity of remembering that victims of sexual slavery are human:

I want you to remember we are not “problems,” we are not animals, we are not viruses, we are not garbage. We are flesh, skin and bones; we have a heart, and we have feelings. We are a sister to someone, a daughter, a granddaughter. We are people we are women, and we want to be treat with respect, dignity. And we want rights like the rest of you enjoy.³⁰

Human trafficking flourishes as its victims remain “invisible” (a term often used to describe modern-day slavery) to others.³¹ Children stay enslaved for extended periods of time since no one identifies them as slaves. Their enslavement is invisible to their communities, but this is the paradox. According to David Batstone, “slaves toil in the public eye.”³² The concubine’s victimization remains invisible to us because what we see, or don’t see, we declare as normal – her victimization is concealed behind ideas of patriarchal normalcy. If what is visible or invisible is also familiar and we have predetermined the familiar to be safe and non-threatening, then the familiar, or familiarity, can be used to as a pretext or context to commit the unthinkable. The concubine ceases to exist, in the story, until the Levite reclaims her from her father’s (his father-in-law’s) house (19:9). In her father’s house, she lives in a state of liminality; she is unclaimed property. Sex traffickers or slave owners confiscate the identification and/or passports of their victims in order to further complicate the possibility of escape. Foreign victims trafficked into the U.S. found without passports are often either jailed or repatriated or both. Maria’s story is a story of confiscated and unclaimed property. She was enticed with her father’s permission and taken from Albania to France and the Netherlands where she was trafficked. She shares the following:

There are many Marias like I am, and that is the reason to bring this story to daylight—to stop “Maria’s Story” from happening again, I come from a little village in Albania where my parents and my sisters still live. They probably think I am dead, and I hope so. It is easier than the truth—I have done things they never can imagine. I shall never see them

again....It was only four years ago when a young man from Skopje came into my father's shop. He was very polite and well dressed and he asked about life in our town. When I said there was little to do, my father asked if he was there to talk or to buy something. My father is very old-fashioned and he was always protecting me from boys, which I did not like. I was almost seventeen years old and did not need my father's protection. The smile the young man gave me said he understood. But he talked to my father politely, paid for some times, and I saw him going away in a Mercedes-Benz car...Perhaps two weeks after, the young man arrived again. This time my father was away in a café and we talked (later, I wonder if he watched the shop to see my father going out). His name was Damir and he spoke of the famous cities he often visited...Damir said that he worked for a modeling agency that looks for petty girls like I was...If I wanted to do it, he would arrange for a colleague to speak with my parents. I was very excited and said yes. Some days passed and a woman entered the shop. She was Damir's colleague. Her jewels and expensive clothes made me embarrassed of my own. She spoke to my parents and showed them a contract. I will earn a certain amount of money, so much to me for living and the rest to my parents. When my father asked about safety, Vanja said that young models live together and always with chaperones. I begged them to allow me, and finally my father signed. I remember he was very sad about me going away. Vanja took me to a photo shop for passport photos and said Damir hoped to see me soon. ...I kissed my parents good-bye. It was the last time I saw them...We drove some hours to Durres on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Damir was waiting for us...He had our new passports but told us he must keep them...He paid for our passports and documents. They belong to him and to be without them in a foreign country means, going to prison if the police find us. If we try to escape, he and his friends will kill us and no one will ever know. If we succeed and go to police, bad things will happen to our families and everyone will hear we are prostitutes.³³

The reason why the concubine wife leaves her husband is either because she played the harlot (*znch*) (according to the MT [Masoretic Text]) or she became angry (*ōrgisthē* in Greek text or LXX; [*znh* in the Hebrew]) with

him (19:2).³⁴ According to Tribble, “The story itself allows either reading.”³⁵ Pamela Reis has argued that the woman was unfaithful for him; “[t]he Levite was prostituting his wife.”³⁶ Perhaps the Greek text invites dialogue between its translation of the MT and the MT’s rendering of the text. If the Levite was prostituting his wife, as Reis argues, and the concubine expected to possess the status of wife, under such an arrangement the concubine would have reason to become angry. Or perhaps the concubine has been falsely accused of fornication by her husband and thus her anger and departure (see Deut. 22:15-21). This might explain why her husband waited four months to go and “speak tenderly to her heart.” Of course, if the wife was culpable, the husband may have determined after four months that he would forgive her and/or he simply wanted his property back. But as Tribble has observed, “the narrative censures no one for the concubine’s departure,”³⁷ but the story hints at the Levite’s guilt.

The Levite’s concubine wife exercised agency when she left her master’s home and traveled to her father’s house. Her abandonment of her master/husband can be perceived as an act of survival.³⁸ The cost of staying outweighed the potential consequences of flight. Her father does not send her back; maybe he knows something we don’t know. Or maybe the fact that he does not send his daughter back confirms that he does not consider her actions unreasonable or unjustified. It is clear that even if the concubine’s flight was justified, her master could (and did) forcefully reclaim her³⁹ from her father’s house. Her agency is circumscribed. If the concubine’s master had abused her in any way, her victimization did not compel her father to transgress social rules regarding men and their concubines. The same agency the concubine exercised to leave her husband would not allow her to stay indefinitely in her father’s home. Modern-day sex traffickers gain control over their victims through physical violence (forced starvation, beatings and gang rape, etc.) and threat of further violence. Traffickers use the victim’s physical and mental confusion, limited communication skills (in the case of foreign-born victims), and fear of the external world to convince them of the absolute subjugation of their bodies and lives. The message communicated to the victim is that any attempt to reassume control will be punished.⁴⁰

The relationship between agency and victimization is a hotly debated issue among advocates of human sex trafficking victims. The question is whether victimization and agency should be seen as contradicting terms. Some believe that if one can exercise agency, then one cannot be a victim. Liz Kelly notes that when women exercise agency in the context of domestic violence we do not deny their victimization, even though they may return to their abusers, but different logic is applied to trafficked women. If trafficked women exercise any agency, they are not considered victims.⁴¹ But Kelly argues “[a]gency is exercised in context, and contexts are always more or less constrained by material and other factors.”⁴² In a patriarchal society where women’s bodies are

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subject to male authority and male authority is ultimate authority, women (and other subordinates) have no places of refuge; thus, agency is circumscribed and complex.

Third Journey. Four months after the concubine leaves her husband, he travels to Bethlehem of Judah to retrieve her from her father's house. In her father's house, the young woman remains eerily silent amidst the fellowship that occurs among the two men. Her silence is not her story, but it is an important part of her story. For her to speak would defy her status as human property. Her silence is part of her poverty and her predicament.⁴³ Women and children (and some men) who are not permitted to tell their own stories and to speak about their own oppressions and victimization without censure suffer in silence and sometimes indefinitely.

Fraternity as familiarity among men allows for male enjoyment and self-gratification to the exclusion of female well-being. Enjoyment is the privilege of males in this story. We would not know the concubine was in her father's home, if the narrator had not told us so. She is never included in the eating-drinking-and-spending-the-night scenes. "Neither food nor drink nor companionship attends the female, but the males enjoy it all."⁴⁴ Fraternity as familiarity among men finds expression in the language of eating, drinking and spending the night -- the son-in-law under the father-in-law's roof.⁴⁵ Reis notes that a literal translation of the Hebrew would render verse 19:6 as "And they sat and they ate, two of them together, *and they drank*," (emphasis not mine), "so that the reader suspects drinking to excess."⁴⁶ This collocation of phrases does not necessarily indicate inebriation among men. The emphasis could be upon the camaraderie and conversation that takes place when two men share food to the intentional exclusion of all others in the household. This phrase, "the two of them together," it should be noted, also appears in the MT when no drinking is mentioned (19:8). Also, later in the story when the Levite and the old man eat together, it is explicitly stated that they are sharing wine, but the phrase "the two of them together" is absent from the MT (19:19-21).

In the midst of male fraternity we find the language of the heart. The Levite travelled to his father-in-law's house to speak to the heart of his concubine wife (19:3). Similarly, Shechem spoke to Dinah's heart after he raped her (Gen 34:3) and Hosea will allure his wife by speaking tenderly to her (Hos 2:14-15). Erik Eynikel has noted that if the concubine had committed adultery, her sin would have been punishable by death rather than by "speaking to her heart."⁴⁷ Modern-day sex traffickers place themselves or others in relationship with the intended victims by pretending to be in love with the victim and sometimes are able to use longtime acquaintances to lure them into desperate and fatal situations.⁴⁸

While the Levite attempts to speak to his concubine's heart, the father endeavors to influence the Levite's heart. After the Levite has spent three days in his father-in-law's home, the father prevails upon his son-in-law to stay another *day*, "to refresh your heart with a piece of bread" (my translation) (19:5). On the fourth day, the two men share a meal and some drink. And once their appetites are satisfied, the father encourages the son-in-law to stay another *night* because "it will be good for your heart" (19:6). This day/night pattern is repeated in verses 8 and 9. The language of the day time requests ("refresh your heart") differs from the language the father employs when he wants his son-in-law to stay the night ("it will be good for your heart"). Perhaps, this night language ("it will be good for your heart") is an indirect reference to the danger that lurks in the night, which the Levite (and by extension the young woman) will avoid if he spends the night. Maybe it is a veiled appeal to the son-in-law to be good to his wife, which goodness is predicated upon the Levite's avoidance of night travel or even a reconsideration of his plans to take the daughter back. The father's hospitable treatment of the son-in-law may be perceived as an attempt to ensure her safety.⁴⁹ Perhaps the sharing of meals was more an attempt to advocate for his daughter than to fraternize with his son-in-law.

While the young man (*na'ar*) traveling with the Levite is absent from the story until the Levite travels to retrieve his wife and rendered silent in the father-in-law's house, the young man does eventually speak. Thus, every male in the story, even the male servant, speaks for himself. When the travelers arrive at Jebus (later Jerusalem), the young man attempts to convince the Levite to stay the night in Jebus so as not to risk a late night arrival in Gibeah.⁵⁰ In fact, when they arrive in Jebus, the narrator notes that the Levite has a pair of saddled donkeys and his concubine; the young man is not mentioned as among the Levite's property as previously noted (19:10; cp. 19:3). The young man once silent is now rendered vocal. But, unequivocally, the young man is servant and the Levite is his master (*'adōni*). Vocal intellectual agency is connected with maleness in the story. Of course, the Levite rejects his young male servant's admonition and insists on crossing over (*'ābar*) into Gibeah or Ramah because the Jebusites are not children of Israel (19:12-14).

Perceived familiarity contributes to ideas of group homogeneity in matters of moral behavior allowing for blindness to intra-group danger and to stereotypical notions about the dangerous foreigner/outsider. The story of the concubine is replete with language of familiarity or proximity, such as: "her father," "her husband," "father of the young woman," "father-in-law," "son-in-law," "wife," "brothers," "Bethlehem, Judah," "Ephraim," "Benjaminites," "Gibeah" and "children of Israel." Reis has aptly noted that "the six repetitions of the phrase 'father of the woman' hammer the woman's vulnerability and the father's familial relationship into one's consciousness and prompt the reader to contrast the man's bond with his behavior. He is her father, father, father,... but

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he does not act like a father.”⁵¹ While many horror stories of human trafficking can be told, most sex trafficking is “mundane, involving everyday, routine power and control relationships” similar to domestic violence and child sexual abuse.⁵²

Fourth Journey. The fourth journey occurs when the Levite leaves his father-in-law's house with this concubine in tow returning to Ephraim. The narrative gives the impression that the Levite's actions are routine and void of critical reflection – in spite of the father's attempts to appeal to his son-in-law's heart. Just like he got up (*qūm*) to retrieve his concubine after she had been gone for four months, he got up (*qūm*) and left his father-in-law's home. And after the brutal sexual assault on his concubine, the Levite will get up (*qūm*) and leave there too.

The Levite's penultimate destination will be the home of a fellow Ephraimite. The sun has gone down when they are near Gibeah, Benjaminite territory. They sit in the city square in the dark, but not one of the natives offers to take the travelers in. Hospitality (at least for the Levite) will be offered by one whose background is familiar and/or similar to the Levite's; his host will be an old Ephraimite man sojourning in Gibeah—a “homeboy.” “The tribal town becomes the alien place...one from the territory of the master, will provide the hospitality that the natives do not offer.”⁵³

Geographical language indicating the familiar and unfamiliar (foreign) is significant in our story. Both the Levite and the old man are sojourners; the old man is a sojourner in Gibeah who originated from the hill country of Ephraim and the Levite is a sojourner dwelling in Ephraim traveling through Gibeah (19:1, 16). Jebus, where the Levite refused to spend the night, was considered a dangerous foreign city where the people are not Israelites (19:12). But Gibeah where the Benjaminites dwell is a place where fellow Israelites live and thus a place of familiarity and proximity; it is a safe place for spending the night. The hospitality of “brothers” is preferred to turning aside among foreigners. Ironically, the old man warns the Levite not to sleep in the public square of the Israelite town (19:20). While the old man could travel from the field and back home every evening unmolested, a traveler cannot remain safely in the public square in the night (19:16). Hedging his bets, the Levite confesses that he is traveling to the house of the Lord (19:18b).

Intra-group notions of superiority and security foster a domestic versus inter-national dichotomy regarding among whom and where danger exists. The domestic or familiar is considered safer than what is foreign and unfamiliar. In our story domestic space and place are determined to be safer than foreign space and places and the people who inhabit them. Paradoxically, domestic and familiar space proves a dangerous and fatal place for a concubine (slave) wife. In America, young women are enslaved having been enticed into homes under

the guise being hired as domestic workers. Christian Elangwe immigrated to America to “take care of kids” and instead she was enslaved:

The agreement was that I’m going to babysit and while I’m babysitting continue my education and go to school. the whole year passed and they didn’t send me to school....Days go by, years go by....When I asked her one time, the lady told me that just bringing me to America is more than good enough—they don’t have to do anything with me....I should be happy that I’m here.... It was seven days week. I did everything from five in the morning until maybe midnight or 1 A.M. ...Nobody was allowed to call me and I wasn’t allowed to call anybody. The five years I was with them I never talked to my parents. They never paid me anything while I was there. When I asked them, they said they didn’t have to.⁵⁴

Similarly, Roseline from Cameroon was only in the States a week when her employers began abusing her. She states the following:

I couldn’t go for a whole week without getting hit. I really didn’t know what to do. I was just hoping that one day it would stop. I did everything that she wanted me to do. I tried to make sure that everything was right so I wouldn’t get yelled at or beaten up, but everything I was doing wasn’t right so I still got beaten by her or her sister....When I came my bed was in the kitchen. It was actually a couch. And when I was in the kitchen sleeping, the husband, who always liked to go to bed really late at night, 2 A.M. or 3 A.M. sometimes, started approaching me, trying to sleep with me. I was fighting, and he would say, “I’m just trying to make you feel like a woman. I’m not going to get you pregnant.” It didn’t just stop there; he continuously did that until it got to the point where I started going to bed in double clothing.⁵⁵

“We” are your servants, the Levite says to the old man from Ephraim. The Levite permits the old man to have the same access to all his property that he enjoys. So the old man takes him in and by extension his property. All the Levite needs is hospitality; he has food, wine, and servants; he describes his concubine as a maid servant (*’mh*) (19:19). The old man simply provides hospitality – a safe place to eat, drink and sleep; the old Ephraimite man and the Levite from Ephraim wash their feet, share a meal, and drink wine together.

“Though the master is safe in the house, the woman is not.”⁵⁶ Just as in the father-in-law's home, hospitality occurs among men. “He” and not “they” are welcomed into the old man's house (19:21). The ubiquitous donkeys will be fed. But we are never told that the concubine and the young slave boy ate or drank. The hospitality between the men is literally described as men “being good to their heart” (19:22).

Eating and drinking among the two Israelite men is interrupted by perverse men of the city (later described as “brothers” and “lords of Gibeah”) who want to know, sexually, the old man's male guest. The men pounding at the door refer to the old man as “the master (*ba'al*) of the house” (19:22; but the Levite is *'adonî*, 19:26, 27). The old man chooses to sacrifice his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine rather than to allow the men to have sexual relations with his male guest. The men who have an appetite for men are offered a virgin daughter and a Levite's concubine; two women as surrogate for one man (19:24). Remember Lot's daughters (Gen. 19:8)! An acceptable substitute for sexually ravishing one man is the offering up of two women (a wife and a daughter) as the objects of sexual violence. It is considered a “vile thing” to ravish a man.

But the “brothers” refuse the old man's compromise. And the Levite shoves his concubine out into the dark into the hands of the (Israelite) men. Concubines are more dispensable than virgins; more worthy of sexual violence. The Levite casts his concubine to the perverted and lust driven “brothers” allowing them to do to her as is right in their own eyes just as he himself has done what was right in his own eyes. “She was a dispensable commodity, used to solve an annoyance between males.”⁵⁷ Throughout the night, the “brothers” gang raped the Levite's concubine. “No one within [the house] comes to her aid. They have all fallen away in the darkness of night.”⁵⁸

In the morning they let her go (vv.25-26). And the young woman drags her emaciated body to the threshold of the door where the men on the other side slept through the night of her terror in shalom. The men saw no need to lose sleep over her victimization, and they did not. “They were most likely fast asleep in a drunken stupor after making their hearts merry.”⁵⁹ In the light of day, the Levite gets up (*qûm*), and he speaks to his concubine for the first time in the story. She is not able to answer because she is either dead (the LXX) or she is simply too weak and exhausted to reply. But he is not in the least dissuaded from continuing the journey on which he started. The young woman's terror in the night will not interfere with the Levite's business in the day.

When a link is created between social status and ideas of familiarity, persons who attain to levels of social status based on positions of authority held in a society are considered as safer and less dangerous than persons of lower social status. The elite and persons of authority in any society or community are

as capable of violence against women and girls as are any other members of a society. In our story of the concubine, the dissonance between the concubine's and the Levite's social status are clear. Although both the Levite and his concubine are anonymous, their social class is foregrounded. God consecrated the Levites to serve as priests (Num 1:48-54), but concubines are sex slaves used in the service of men and women (Gen 16; 25:6; 35:22; Ex 21:7-11). The foregrounding of the Levite's social position within Israel in our story is similarly achieved in the preceding story of the unnamed Levite (Judges 17-18) and the unnamed Levite in the "Good Samaritan" story at Luke 10:32. Perhaps, like the Levite in the story of the "Good Samaritan," the Levite in our story is unnamed because he might represent anyone within established religious circles and leadership. The fact that this unnamed man is identified as a Levite might prejudice some readers in favor of the Levite so that they are willing to overlook or mitigate any questionable behavior attributed to him. Or the Levite's status may motivate some readers to view the concubine as the guilty party in the marriage because she is of lower class status. The narrative and textual ambiguity as to precisely why she left her husband might contribute to such a reading.

Familiarity based on social position fosters the notion that persons holding authoritative and respected positions in a community can be trusted more so than persons of lower social position or class. According to David Batstone, "we do not expect to find [modern-day slavery] in 'respectable' settings. To learn that slave holders press children into forced labor in the cacao plantations of the Ivory Coast may not surprise us. But we regard it as unthinkable that an otherwise upstanding citizen might be a slaveholder."⁶⁰ (We believe we are far removed from the time when a country such as the U.S. or South Africa deemed it legally and morally acceptable for "respectable" citizens to own slaves.) A prime example is Kim Meston who,

wishes that she had not been so invisible to her New England community. In a rural town near Worcester, Massachusetts, the minister of the local church used her as his domestic sex slave for five years without raising the slightest suspicion in the community. At the age of sixteen, Kim began a double life in America. Everything would have appeared normal to the casual observer—she attended the local high school, ran on the track team, and attended church on Sundays. The minister even had a wife and a stepdaughter living in his home. But behind closed doors, she became the household servant, doing nearly all the cooking, housecleaning, ironing, and even tending the church grounds. Moreover, the minister sexually abused Kim frequently over a five-year period.⁶¹

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Fifth Journey. The final and fifth journey occurs when the Levite cuts up his concubine's sexually abused body into twelve pieces and has them transported, by messengers, throughout the land of Israel (19:29-30). Christine was born into sex slavery in the state of Minnesota. Her family consisted of "pimps, pornographers, and whores," men pimping women, girls and, less often, boys. Her pimps trafficked her across the country. She is not alone in her testimony or in spirit. Christine writes, "I have many friends and acquaintances who have endured the tortures, rapes, beatings, and degradations that pimps and johns hand out like candy."⁶² Christine shares her fragmentation:

It is no small achievement to survive sexual slavery, Survivors are split into pieces, fragmented, broken, filled with despair, pain, rage, and sorrow. We have been hurt beyond belief. We are silent; we are numb. Our eyes see, our ears hear, but we do not tell. Our voices are nonexistent, but even if they did exist, who would believe what we have to say? Who would listen? Who would care? We are dirty, ruined, despised, the whores of the earth. The men who use us throw us away. We are their garbage to piss on, to pile up in the corner. We are their property, they own us. The rest of you turn your backs, avert your eyes, pretend not to see, go on your way. You leave us to the predators.⁶³

The annual number of murder victims in the U.S. is likely to be less than the number of new sex trafficked victims, but few will be rescued. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 recognizes that human trafficking is both a domestic and an international crisis and it aims to protect victims of human trafficking and ensure that their enslavers are prosecuted.⁶⁴ The tiny fraction of victims who survive and "are rescued must jump through hoops to get help, rarely have a safe place to go, and encounter confusion and buck-passing from the authorities."⁶⁵

Accompanying the Levite's human cargo is a message – a retelling of the concubine's story from the perspective of the Levite. It, of course, varies from the story we have been reading; it is a metanarrative. In his metanarrative, the Levite does not admit to being the initial object of male sexual desire. Nor does he tell how an old Ephraimite man offered up his own virgin daughter or how he shoved his own concubine out into the raging mob. He does not portray himself as in any way complicit. The note addressed to the Israelites reads: "Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, taken counsel, and speak out"

(19:30, NRSV). It is not clear whether the crime itself is considered heinous or if the real problem is the ultimate loss of the Levite's property. In any event, the objectification and cruel treatment of the woman as usable and disposable property is not unambiguously condemned. Is the Levite upset because his "brothers" brutally and repeatedly raped his concubine or because she died depriving him of access to her body and her labor?

The Levite cannot tell the whole tale; he cannot bring himself to speak the words that tell the tale of men wanting men; but he has no problem repeating the brutality of the crime against his concubine. All sexual violence should be offensive and shocking. Just because a society allows men free access to the bodies of women, young girls, and boys does not make it humane, non-oppressive, or less violent. Just because women are socialized to believe their humanity and worth depends upon the degree to which they are aesthetically or physically pleasing to men does not mean this is how God meant for women and young girls to value (or devalue) themselves.

Just as the interrelatedness of the parties does not prevent the sexual exploitation and violence against the young woman, neither does it prevent the escalation of violence among brothers -- the near extinction of an entire tribe because of the gang rape and murder of a Levite's concubine wife by members of that tribe. When Israel wages war against their brothers the Benjaminites, they defend the men who are both kinfolk and perpetrators of sexual violence and murder (20:13). A whole people (the Benjaminites) defend the right of a few men to do as they please. Maybe because if a few men cannot do as they please with one concubine, surely the rest of them will not be able to do as they please when it comes to their women and the strangers among them (cp. Esther 1:1-21). The remnant of males who survive the massacre is presented with virginal women to have sexually, as they please, so as to guarantee their continued presence among the tribes. And the cycle continues as proximity and familiarity again become the pretext and context for knowing women sexually.

Conclusion. If, for many women and men, the grace of God cannot be found in the story, perhaps it can be found in the act of telling and retelling of the concubine's story. The retelling of her story brings her terror into the light of day so that her victimization can confront and challenge us. Her story foregrounds how familiarity and/or proximity have been and are used as a pretext and context for the oppression, silencing, trafficking, sexual abuse, and murder of women, children, and other vulnerable members of our society and world. The language and images of the concubine's story point to the similarities between her story and the stories of modern-day victims of sex trafficking. By telling her story and the stories of our contemporary sisters and brothers, we bring them out of the darkness exposing our willful ignorance, culpability, complicity, and responsibility. "Targeting oppression and silence, the modern slave narrative has emancipatory power as a linguistic weapon of the

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violated.”⁶⁶ And it is a “linguistic weapon” of the would-be violated. The concubine’s “slave narrative” can have emancipatory power. As Yani Yoo asserts, “the story invites the reader to witness and denounce the human evil against fellow human beings, especially women.”⁶⁷

What can we do to prevent the objectification and victimization of women and children? What can we do to help stop the terrors that lurk in the night? We can read the concubine’s story as if it were our story, our daughter or son’s story, and sister or brother’s story. We can read the story through the eyes of the guilty and complicit men in the story, asking ourselves how we are guilty of or complicit in the objectification of women, men and children in the church, in our homes, in our communities, in the larger society, and in the world. We can read and preach her story in our churches and in our homes. We can educate ourselves, our families and our churches about sex trafficking. We can stop assuming that every woman and girl on a “street corner” wants to be there and that every run away deserves what waits for her on the street. In order to release the captives and set free the oppressed we have to open our eyes and shine a light on the terrors in the night. The terror that these victims experience is unimaginable. Yet, modern-day sex trafficking is not an imaginary tale. It may be happening in our favorite restaurant, in the neighborhood beauty salon, in the house next door, or in our own back yard.⁶⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

² While I am aware that human trafficking includes debt, agricultural, and domestic trafficking, etc., my emphasis in this article is on sex trafficking, although other forms of modern-slavery often overlap. A person could be held against his/her will under threat of violence initially for the purpose of working in a sweat shop or gold mine or as a domestic worker or tomato picker and later be subjected to sexual abuse.

³ Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, eds., *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 78.

⁴ A story that is similar to the story of Lot’s daughters in Genesis 19:1-11.

⁵ Congressional laws enacted in the last decade of the 18th century and the first decade of the 19th century has prohibited *de jure* the transport of slaves into America and the supply of ships to the slave trade. Those laws also permitted the confiscation of slave ships and for the U.S. Navy to seize slave ships, as well. While slavery *de jure* ended with the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment; slavery *de facto* continued and in some ways has never disappeared from America. Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, 150-151.

⁶ J. Z. Smith (“What a difference a difference makes,” in “*To See ourselves As others See Us*”: *Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S.

Frerichs [Chico: Scholars, 1985], 3-48) employs this term but noting that proximity is a basis for othering; the proximate other, the one most like us, is the one most threatening to us.

⁷ Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam, Brenda Morrison, Diana Grace, "Becoming an In-Group: Reexamining the Impact of Familiarity on Perceptions of Group Homogeneity," 58 *Social Psychology Quarterly* (1995): 52-61.

⁸ Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, 126.

⁹ The books of 1 and 2 Samuel, which narrates the selection of Israel's first and second Kings, Saul and David, follows the book of Judges in the MT; but in the LXX the book of Ruth intervenes. Perhaps, the stories in the book of Judges amount to religio-political propaganda in support of a monarchy

¹⁰ All bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ The cycle of apostasy, judgment, cry for help, and God's deliverance by a judge is present up until Chapter 17 of judges when the pattern changes and we have the double Levite priest stories.

¹² Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 66.

¹³ In the Hagar story, it is Sarah who takes her concubine, as her mistress, and gives her to Abram (Gen. 16:3).

¹⁴ Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, 78.

¹⁵ Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd, eds., *To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 102.

¹⁶ Bales and Trodd, *To Plead Our Cause*, 83.

¹⁷ "Report: Human Trafficking an Ohio Issue"; available at http://www.10tv.com/live/content/local/stories/2008/07/09/human_trafficking.html [accessed 10/17/08]. See also R. Barri Flowers, "The Sex Trade Industry's Worldwide Exploitation of Children," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575 (2001): 147-157.

¹⁸ "Teen girls' Stories of Sex Trafficking in U.S., Feb. 9, 2006; available from <http://a.abcnews.com/Primetime/story?id=1596778&page=1> [accessed 10/17/08]

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mieke Bal (*Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], 80-93) argues that the concubine lived in the father's home and not with her husband and the Levite's taking of her from her father's home represents an attempt to transform the nature of their relationship.

²¹ Doug Nichols, "Human Trafficking Statistics"; available at <http://doug nichols.blogspot.com/2008/01/human-trafficking-statistics.html> [accessed 10/17/2008]

²² Jackie Jones, "Statistics Say Over Half the Cases of Sex Trafficking in the U.S. Involve Black Children" (Friday, May 25, 2007; available at <http://Black AmericaWeb.com> [accessed October 17, 2008]

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Slavery in the 21st Century"; available at <http://www.freedomcenter.org/slavery-today/?gclid=CLmViObKrpYCFQ0NDQodxUua...> [accessed 10/17/2008]

²⁶ See Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998).

²⁷ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup, 163; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 176.

²⁸ Likewise, the father only exists in relation to his daughter or his son-in-law.

²⁹ Pamela Tamarkin Reis ("The Levite's Concubine: New Light on a Dark Story," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20 [2006]: 127, 130) argues that the anonymity in Judges 19-21 "reflects the increasing dehumanization and disintegration of society." Prior to Chapter 19 a few characters are still being given names, but in Chapter 19 "decency and order have deteriorated to a nadir in which no one deserves the humanizing elevation of a name."

³⁰ Bales and Trodd, *To Plead Our Own Cause*, 103.

³¹ David Batstone, *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade -- and How we can fight it* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 268.

³² Batstone, *Not for Sale*, 7.

³³ Bales and Trodd, *To Plead Our Own Cause*, 49-51.

³⁴ The Masoretic Text (MT) says she committed fornication (*znh*), but the rest of the text implies guilt on the part of the Levite and not the woman, in my opinion. The Greek text (LXX), on which I rely, says she became angry (*ōrgisthē*) (Hebrew: *znych*).

³⁵ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 67.

³⁶ Reis, "The Levite's Concubine," 129.

³⁷ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 67.

³⁸ The concubine wife's story is not unlike the story of Samson and his first wife (Judges 14:1-15:6). In fact, it may be a mirror image of our story. In his anger Samson abandons his first wife because she betrayed his trust, and he returns to *his* father's home. After some time, Samson attempts to reclaim his wife, but because his father-in-law was certain that Samson had rejected his daughter, he gave her to another man. Both father-in-law and (ex-) wife are murdered by foreigners, the Philistines, due to Samuel's actions. Of course, in our story it is the concubine wife who is angry, returns to her father's home, and is reclaimed; Like, Samson's wife, the Levite's concubine is murdered, but by perverted "brothers" and not by foreigners.

³⁹ For a discussion about the issue of consent and trafficking in the context of negotiations leading to the 80-country signing of The Trafficking Protocol in Palermo, Italy in December 2000, see Jo Doezema, "Who Gets to Choose? Coercion, Consent and the UN Trafficking Protocol," *Gender and Development* 10 (2002): 20-27. See also K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema, eds., *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

⁴⁰ Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, 78.

⁴¹ Kelly, "The Wrong Debate," 142.

⁴² Kelly, "The Wrong Debate," 143.

⁴³ Reis ("The Levite's Concubine," 136) argues that the woman's insufferable predicament is "pitied and respected by the text."

⁴⁴ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 68.

⁴⁵ Although the term father-in law is used to describe the relation between the Levite and the young woman's father, a concubine did not have the same legal or social status as a wife; she is a secondary wife.

⁴⁶ Reis, "The Levite's Concubine," 134.

⁴⁷ Erik M. MK. Eynikel, "Judges 19-21, An 'Appendix:' Rape, Murder, War and Abduction," *Communio Viatorum* 47 (2005): 104.

⁴⁸ Batstone, 258-259. Pimps will use one of their most trusted victims, known as "bottoms" to entrap new recruits. "Bottoms" befriend intended victims gaining their trust before they make their move to kidnap and/or coerce.

⁴⁹ Koala Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 175.

⁵⁰ Both Jebus and Gibeah were allotted as inheritances to the tribe of Benjamin (Jos 18:21-28), but the Benjaminites failed to drive out the Jebusites (Judges 1:21).

⁵¹ Reis, "The Levite's Concubine," 133.

⁵² Liz Kelly, "The Wrong Debate: Reflections on Why Force Is Not the key Issue with Respect to Trafficking in Women for Sexual Exploitation," *Feminist Review* 73 (2003): 140.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁴ Bales and Trodd, *To Plead Our Cause*, 153-155.

⁵⁵ Bales and Trodd, *To Plead Our Cause*, 147-148.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁷ Yani Yoo, "Han-Laden Women: Korean 'Comfort Women' and Women in Judges 19-21," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 42.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁹ Reis, "The Levite's Concubine," 142.

⁶⁰ Batstone, *Not for Sale*, 7.

⁶¹ Batstone, *Not for Sale*, 7-8. Kim was brought to the U.S. by a church minister visiting southern India from the U.S.. Her parents were Tibetan exiles living in a refugee camp when the minister offered to bring Kim to America and provide a better life and education for her, promising to treat her like his own daughter.

⁶² Bales and Trodd, eds., *To Plead Our Own Cause*, 99.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁴ Batstone, 228, 238.

⁶⁵ Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, 106.

⁶⁶ Bales and Trodd, eds., *To Plead Our Own Cause*, 3.

⁶⁷ Yani Yoo, "Han-Laden Women," 38.

⁶⁸ See, Free the Slaves (Washington, D.C.-based NGO), "Slavery Still Exists and It Could Be in Your Backyard: A Community Member's Guide to Fighting Human Trafficking and Slavery," (available at www.freetheslaves.net).