

“Multiplying Division”:

*A Figural Reading of the Story of the Levite’s
Concubine (Judges 19-21)*

The 2008 Winifred E. Weter Faculty Award Lecture
Seattle Pacific University
April 10, 2008

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[Proposal for the 2008 Weter Lecture]

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In this lecture I intend to execute a "close reading" of arguably one of the most obscure and horrifying biblical stories: The Levite's Concubine (Judges 19-21). This passage is included in no standard lectionaries, is almost never used as a text for a sermon, and for all practical purposes is virtually ignored in the Church. This is a text whose obscurity may be considered a blessing! The Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible famously included this three-chapter complex as one of her "texts of terror."

However, my purpose for treating this story is not to rescue it from obscurity, even though I believe that is a sufficiently laudable goal given the story's poignant theological thrust and its crucial role in the section of the Old Testament which in its Hebrew Bible format is referred to as "the Former Prophets." Rather, I suggest that this story be considered as part of a crucial pan-biblical emphasis dealing with the sinful impulse toward division in the singular community--Israel, then the Church--which God elected as the goal and instrument of God's reconciliation, redemption, and final restoration of the whole created order. Far from being a narrative that can be kept "out of sight and mind," it addresses a key element in a biblical understanding of God's community. While the text's subject matter provides ample justification for its explication, it is also the case that approaching the story in this manner informs a number of conversations currently taking place in the context of Seattle Pacific University's intellectual and educational vision. These are as follows:

One involves reading this story *as Scripture*. From a standard historical-critical perspective, in which a reading *as Scripture* is actually eschewed, Judges 19-21 has been adequately "explained" once it has been shown why it was appended to the larger framework of the Book of Judges, when and possibly by whom the story was written, including any discernible editorial processes, what ideological purposes the author(s) had in mind (e.g., pro-David, pro-Judah, anti-Saul, anti-Benjamin propaganda), and what was its cultural or historical import for ancient Israel in its Near Eastern setting. Conversely, reading this text *as Scripture*, indeed as *Christian Scripture*--for Judges 19-21 is part of the Christian Old Testament and no longer simply part of the Jewish Scriptures or the Hebrew Bible--requires asking a completely different set of questions (including but not limited to those asked from a historical-critical standpoint). For example, what are we to make of Israel as *God's elect people* in this story? Or, how should we understand God's seeming aloofness in the narrative (*deus absconditus*)? Again, given the story's formulaic framing--"In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (19:1; 21:25; cf. 18:1)--what does this story say about the nature of kingship, not simply in terms of *Realpolitik* but in terms of the relationship of the king to ideas about Israel's messiah/anointed one? Equally, reading this text *as Scripture* compels us to ask about the nature of divine judgment on God's very own community, the "holy nation" that is completely a function of God's election and God's missional objective. If a standard historical-critical reading has the effect of locking any ascertainable meaning of the story in the past, a reading in the context of Scripture will finally be a *figural* reading in that the story in its immediate and canonical context addresses the contemporary, living community in whose Holy Bible the story resides.

A second conversation has to do with the very nature of the Church. A number of pre-critical interpreters have viewed the Old Testament's portrayal of divided Israel--typically *after* the division into Israel and Judah instigated by YHWH and prompted by Solomon's idolatrous behavior (see 1 Kings 11-12)--in *figural* terms as a way of understanding the divided Church. Theologians (e.g., Radner, Lindbeck) who have appealed to this feature in the history of interpretation as a way of addressing current ecumenical discussions as well as the modern church's continuing proclivity toward schismatic behavior have found a rich vein for theological reflection. While I believe many of the pre-critical commentators incorrectly saw the Israelite schism mostly in terms that justified their own stance while condemning that of their detractors (e.g., the "true" Church was Judah, the "apostate" Church Israel), there is no question that Israel as the one, singular, indivisible and elect community of God or as tragically rent asunder provides an important figural analog for the Church as the Body of Christ, which is, simultaneously, "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic," and now seemingly hopelessly divided. The story of the Levite's concubine--as well as texts leading up to that story--will show that there are schismatic pressures in Israel before the rise of the monarchy. In point of fact, Israel was never divided any worse than that story describes. In this light, how might we reflect on one of Seattle Pacific's four descriptors, namely, that we are in addition to being "evangelical, orthodox, and Wesleyan," also "ecumenical." What precisely do we mean by that term, and what are its possibilities, drawbacks, or limits?

Building on the idea of God's community as gloriously one or tragically divided, what impact (if any) should a story such as the Levite's Concubine have upon how we think of the Church and its denominational expressions at a place like Seattle Pacific University? Surely, if pressed to think about it, we would doubtless collectively agree that biblical Israel is completely a function of God's election and purpose. Likewise, we would hold that this is no less true for the Church, especially as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles and variously explicated in the Epistles. In this light, then, are we rather too blithe about our celebrated denominational diversity? We would without question reject and even be repulsed by the notion that God favors one denomination over another. But what is the theological grounding for such an attitude? What does such a stance say about what we believe about the nature of the Church, the very Body of Christ? Does the Church thereby become *invisible* as opposed to *visible*, let alone "militant?" Is the elect community a "remnant" embedded among all the denominations and known only to God? And, if so, does that not make the Church dangerously close to being a "docetic" Church? Conversely, are all the diverse entities equally under divine judgment? How can it be claimed that the Holy Spirit is the generator and sustainer of every part of a now divided community when the articulation of what it means to be Israel/the Church is in so many cases so radically different? Is God thereby rendered incoherent--or the Spirit? Surely not, we would answer. Notwithstanding our initial protest, how does one God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--lead the respective "parts" of Israel/the Church into different, sometimes radically different, "truths?" Does "truth" then have any meaning? Do not all these questions ultimately require serious deliberation when we think about the University's relationship to the Church catholic, its denominational affiliation, its denominational make-up, and even issues of academic freedom?

Perhaps one final "conversation" that this study potentially informs is the idea of Scripture as *canon*. This has been a growing emphasis of an increasing number of Theology faculty at Seattle Pacific for some time. To the extent that these faculty members will be involved in the recently felt need of providing on-going theological/biblical education for the whole University community, *canon* with its various implications will almost surely become a familiar idea in this intellectual community. The benefits of a canonical reading come to the fore in a story like the Levite's Concubine. Nowhere is this more evident than the manner in which the story is framed: "In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (see references above). Typically, these allusions to a community without a king have been understood as a "law and order" appeal for the necessity of a centralized monarchy,

especially in contrast to the decentralized “judges” of the previous complex of stories (Judges 2:11--16:31). More particularly, scholars have seen the story as a brief for a Davidic or Judaeon king. It probably cannot be gainsaid that the story had such import when it circulated independently in certain circles. But everything changes when the story is given another context in the biblical canon. Once that happens, one has to deal with the king not primarily in socio-political terms but in terms of a pan-biblical (i.e., canonical) approach. According to Torah, Israel’s king was not to be “like all the other nations”; indeed, its king would have as his primary task reading and teaching Torah (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Moreover, Israel’s king had to be thought of in terms of Israel’s “messiah” or “anointed one.” Remarkably, in the canonical ordering, the first person to connect these two ideas was Hannah, who acted as a prophet and who gave Israel its first formal prophetic ministry in the form of Samuel (1 Samuel 1-3; see especially 2:10). Eventually, messiah would come to be identified with the ideal David (see 2 Samuel 21-24). Still later, the “messianic age” would have as one of its features a “new David.” The New Testament sees this “new David” in the form of Jesus, whose most prominent title is “Christ,” the very Greek word that translates Hebrew “messiah.” If anything can rescue Judges 19-21 from its current obscurity, this canonical emphasis can! Indeed, a canonical approach will expose the fact that our current discussion about the level of biblical illiteracy in even our present church cultures is rather more pronounced than we have previously supposed.

My study will not suggest that Judges 19-21 “answers” the daunting questions I have posed above. But I will argue that a story like this one requires a radical, even potentially uncomfortable rethinking of the nature of the one elect people of God, whether in its guise as “Israel”--elected to be a “light to the nations” and the instrument for blessing “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12:1-3) or in its guise as the Church, the very Body of Christ, about which our Lord Himself prayed “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). None of these matters are secondary to the way we envision our educational task at Seattle Pacific University.

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