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# Tough Texts: Reading the parts we'd rather not

**Some parts of the Old Testament make difficult reading, especially for evangelicals committed to the authority of Scripture, and if they make difficult reading, then they make difficult preaching. In this article Jenni Williams focuses on the revolting story of Judges 19-21 and looks at ways we might read it (and some other tough texts) using what Elijah found in the desert: the sound of silence.**

Using the Old Testament in church is by no means as easy as it looks. I realised this one day when I was covering an interregnum. One of the choir members flounced in just as I was doing the vestry prayer and announced that, although she was the reader that day, she wasn't going to read the Old Testament passage because 'it's completely oppressive and misogynistic'. The passage in question – Genesis 29 – told of the marriages of Leah and Rachel. It isn't hard to see what she meant. It occurred to me how badly we need to address this issue. People come into our churches now who feel no debt of loyalty to the Bible, who have no deference to it as the revealed word of God and who couldn't care less whether it's everything the pastoral epistles say it is. Instead, they weigh it in the balance, and they find it wanting. This is particularly true of those, women and men, who have been brought up in, or embraced, a feminist or at the very least egalitarian worldview. What are we to say to them about women in the Bible?

## Walking the tightrope

'Patriarchal' has become a word of common currency in our society. It is generally not used in its technical sense any longer,<sup>1</sup> but as a damning term for everything that oppresses and misuses women. Traditional evangelical apologetics don't stand up against a wave of feminist criticism, because they argue from the defensive. They are, in the end, reduced to arguing that we are not able to impose our worldview on that of another culture. But liberation theology in its broader context has taught us that structural sin must be confronted wherever it is found, and that to treat a woman as a good or a chattel is a structural, societal sin. Any text which has the authority of God behind it should therefore somehow express this. If we cannot relate our concerns to the text, we have reduced it to a mere essay in the history of religions. If this is the word of God, it has something to say to us, now, in the times of feminism and post-feminism.

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1 'Patriarchal' simply means any way of organising society such that authority (not power) is held by a male figure. It doesn't carry any kind of value judgment.

The woman who didn't want to read Gen. 29 had no qualms about just ignoring an irredeemable passage, dismissing it as just another sexist text in the Old Testament. She did not have any doctrine of Scripture particularly and did not feel the lack of such a doctrine. So the question I want to ask here is this: are we evangelical women and men to be torn (as Phyllis Trible puts it) 'between the God of the fathers and the God of sisterhood'<sup>2</sup>? Or is there a way to hold in tension our beliefs about the Bible and our concerns about ourselves and the women and men we minister to? I believe that – on three grounds – the answer to this last question is 'yes, we can walk this tightrope'.

Firstly, I want to say 'yes' *theologically*. Christianity insists that this liminality, this place between places, is where truth lives. We hold in tension judgment and mercy, anger and love, faith and the life of faith lived out, and in that narrow place between pairs, we take our stand. We believe in a God who is neither an over-indulgent grandparent, smiling as we misbehave, nor a vengeful deity waiting to seize on our every weakness. And, of course, trying always to be on that tightrope is the more difficult option. But the times the church has jumped onto one side or the other have always been its weakest times. If what we believe about God is to be found in this more difficult place, on this tightrope, then so also is what we can believe about his word to us.

So, what are the two theological sides in this particular debate? Both the positions I've outlined below are held as 'true' by one group or another, although here we've moved from the 'both...and' of the pairs above to being asked to embrace an 'either...or'. One is the side that insists that there isn't – cannot – be a problem. This is because, if Scripture is the revealed word of God, we are not to bring our criticisms to it but rather accept it simply as it is. If once we say that texts portray God, or the treatment of various groups, in a way we hold to be distorted, then our whole doctrine of Scripture is lost. The other side is to dismiss varying degrees of the Bible as patriarchal, oppressive. This then starts a hunt for a Christianity that will affirm women by finding it where we can, in odd bits of the gospel or not at all. The first side fails to recognize the contemporary problem and is reduced to browbeating or passive acceptance. The second puts us in a place we should not want to be because if we are to decide what can and cannot be accepted as Scripture, we become our own little gods. I want to plead for the tightrope. It's harder, much harder. We run the risk of accusations of heterodoxy from a particular type of Christian (especially if you're a woman arguing this case), and the risk of selling out from secular feminists. But I want to argue that theologically this is where evangelicals must stand.

Secondly, I want to say 'yes' *pastorally*. We have a duty of care for the women and men in our churches in our handling of the Bible so that we do not perpetuate oppression by either side. Those who are committed to resisting oppression wherever it occurs, as one hopes the church is (although that may be the triumph of hope over experience), have a duty not to perpetuate it in their approach to literature, sacred or otherwise.

I've often heard the peculiar phrase 'we are under Scripture', which suggest to my mind being pinned under a large, unmovable piece of furniture (as well as

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2 Trible 1973.

inadequate understandings of the nature of the Bible and where authority lies). What if the weight is more than we can bear? Are we to say 'that's just too bad'? Or do we jump to the other side and say that, if what the Bible says seems difficult for the pastoral task, we should abandon it or ignore it for the sake of those whom we seek to help? We have to find that place where men and women are affirmed in what they are by Scripture: creatures made equally in the image of God. To be an evangelical is to be committed to the belief that there is such a place, because God can be trusted, and this is his word.

Thirdly, I want to say 'yes' from a literary place, in other words by looking at the text itself for a reading that allows us to say 'yes'. I am convinced there are other answers than the ones both sides offer because there are other ways of reading these texts, and it's this aspect I'm going to look at specifically below. I want to look briefly at how feminist criticism has traditionally looked at the Bible, examine one particular text and one writer's approach to it, and then offer another possibility for walking the tightrope.

### Reading strategies in feminist interpretation

There is no such thing as *the* 'feminist critique' of the Bible. Feminist criticism of the Bible exists along a spectrum. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, author of the *Woman's Bible* (1895), held that pretty much the whole of Scripture was in and of itself patriarchal (in the broad sense used above) and oppressive to women. Plenty of feminists have followed her down that path of *rejection*. Evangelicals, however, will want to answer that it is through the revelation of Scripture, as the Holy Spirit enlightens it for us, that we know who is this God we worship.

Others have argued that varying amounts of Scripture can be *retrieved* from skewed interpretation or being passed over, to be read as a message that affirms and liberates women. In some ways, the most obvious solution to anxieties about how women are portrayed in the Bible is a part of this retrieval strategy: to concentrate on places where women are affirmed and highlight them when they may have been lost or overshadowed. We can find many such places in the Bible, and it is important to recognise and celebrate these places before we turn to other, darker episodes.

But despite its appeal, in the end, retrieval as a strategy still begs the question: who says what is to be retained, who says what is the word of God? On the one hand, if I only allow what I like to remain, what benefit is it going to bring to my spiritual health to be unchallenged, to remain comfortable? 'A book will never draw me out of myself if I only accept as belonging to it what I have already decreed should be there.'<sup>3</sup>

Then there is the *remembrance strategy* which concerns itself with the stories of the oppressed.<sup>4</sup> That we remember and acknowledge the ugliness is surely part of our integrity. Storytelling has always been the way we remember who we are and where we came from. Frequently the Bible commands the remembering of a story so that we do not lose sight of what God has done. We do not only tell the 'nice' stories. Of course the remembrance strategy can be of great help, but it still

3 Josipovici 1988.

4 Some major authors in these two strategies of retrieval and remembrance are Phyllis Trible, Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether.

leaves us grappling with the ugly stories, and the problem is we lack confidence in what to do with them.

At the other end of the spectrum, and it's here you tend to find evangelical women and men, it's argued that the Bible itself is not oppressive but that oppressive interpretive strategies can make it a tool for oppression. This is often called the '*loyalist*' position and it tries to work with the insights of feminist interpretation.<sup>5</sup> It's worth saying here that sometimes evangelicals can be extremely suspicious of feminist criticism, but *good* feminist criticism, whether hostile to the Bible or not, cannot fail to shed light on the text and help address the pastoral issues the Bible may raise in our congregations even if not in us.

### Judges 19-21: silence and complicity

As a worked example let's take the story of Judges 19-21. This is worth re-reading before we explore it and it's a revolting story – an account of the gang rape of a concubine and war against the Benjaminites – any way you look at it. The question is, does the implied author<sup>6</sup> (and, by implication, the divine author) encourage or approve the idea of violence against women, or merely record it, or even subvert it?

We'll look particularly at Phyllis Trible's work on this narrative because it's so useful, and highlights the struggle for us. She has many valuable things to say<sup>7</sup> but we are going to concentrate here on her reading about silence, where not-speaking has meaning. Trible turns her attention first to the story itself. She highlights the fact that the Levite's journey which was begun in order to woo his concubine back into relationship, 'to speak to her heart' (19:3), ends without the Levite speaking to her throughout all of the intended wooing. He spends his time drinking with his father-in-law (vv 4-6) and this theme of attention to other men continues as he only speaks in the whole episode to his father-in-law, his servant and his host until one curt command to the woman: 'Get up, let's go' (v 28). The Hebrew has only two words. That's all he ever says to her. Trible draws our attention to the fact that the women in the story are silent throughout. They have no say in what is inflicted on them by the very men who are supposed to be their protection.

So far, so good. We can follow Trible here. The Levite is a callous brute, the old man panders to his neighbours, the men of the town are sexual psychopaths. All this is simply descriptive of social reality as portrayed in the narrative. We know that Ancient Near Eastern societies, including that of ancient Israel, don't value women

5 A useful summary is in Vanhoozer et al. 2005:228-30, the entry on feminist interpretation.

6 'Implied author' means the author's character as we can discern it from how it is projected into the text, as different from the 'empirical author', who is the actual human being who wrote it down.

7 Trible 1984, chapter 3 makes several observations: (1) The old man calls rape of a man *hln* 'a vile thing'. But when he offers the virgin (ie pre-pubescent) daughter and

the concubine as a sort of sexual menu, he tells the men they can do 'the good in your eyes'. An action done to a man is a 'vile thing'; the same action done to women is 'the good' in the eyes of men. (2) Even more damningly, she notes that men are always to have their way, even wicked ones, and that can be achieved by sacrificing women. (3) Ancient Near Eastern hospitality only extends to men. (4) The ultimate resolution of this story is a further 600 rapes, this time sanctioned by the men of Israel (Judges 21:21).

very much. Very few people these days would want to argue that ancient Israel was a completely just, equal society (although we might say that of its time it was both those things to a surprising degree). Most evangelicals would, however, argue that it *should have been*, or, put another way, that its God-inspired aspirational literature, the Hebrew Bible, should function as a critique of the oppressive society around it. Yes, its human authors were a product of their society but we demand of them what we demand of ourselves: that they aspire *beyond* their current fallen context to God's intended society. If their society never managed to achieve it, and I think it's quite clear they only ever did in patches of space and patches of time, at least they as authors must aim for it. And, we believe, God's intended society is one in which women are treated with respect as 'heirs together' with the men.

At this point the issues raised by the story get a bit more complicated, as Tribble resumes her critique. She makes several points, here no longer about the characters but about the text itself. She notes that the Masoretic Text doesn't make it clear (ie is silent about) whether the woman is already dead. It is possible that the Levite kills her (and there are resonances of the 'binding' of Isaac, the Akedah) before distributing her body across Israel. Here, Tribble argues, the narrator protects his protagonist through the ambiguity of silence while neither the other characters *nor the narrator* recognise the woman's humanity. Furthermore, whereas in the Akedah God speaks to save Isaac when his father 'takes up the knife', God here does not intervene to save the woman: God too is silent.

We are here on more threatening ground. Now we are judging the conduct of the narrator, and implicitly therefore, that of the implied author, and of God, since he is the one who inspires the empirical author, even as through the implied author, the empirical author gives speech or silence to the narrator. Tribble's accusation against them is that the author (co-author in the Word of God) does not value women and – a point made by implication – that God would intervene for a man (the young man Isaac) but not for a woman.

Faced with such challenges evangelicals often speak of the importance of the whole counsel of Scripture, and rightly so as it's a sound methodology. For example, the canonical shapers can offer healing as the next narratives are those of Hannah (in the MT) and Ruth (in the LXX). But Tribble will not let us off so lightly. The editor of Judges uses the story as one more illustration of what happens in a society without a king but looking at the record of the monarchy on sexual violence this counsel cannot offer the concubine any promises that it will never happen again. Turning to the prophets there are two references to the episode in Hosea (9:9, 10:9) and Tribble considers this is hardly enough considering the egregious nature of the offence. The rest of Scripture, including the New Testament, makes no further reference.

The problem here is therefore two-fold. Firstly, the whole counsel of Scripture is not silent about this kind of abuse but it is silent about this episode specifically. Secondly, if this text can be proved to show an implied author complicit in the crimes s/he records, we are then condemned to pick and choose which bits of Scripture we accept. We have, it seems, been forced off the tightrope onto one side. What it comes down to is this: the awful offence and the actions of the

characters and of the society of the time are easy to confront and to distance ourselves from but what happens when the human author (implied or empirical) and/or God is accused of complicity?

The first problem highlights the assumptions we make about silence. This episode is not explicitly widely recorded and remembered, but it is implied in the law about victims of rape (however inadequate that law may seem to us now<sup>8</sup>) and in more general ideas about respect of persons and the body in the New Testament. But is some thing that is not-said and not-silent good enough?

The second problem underlines the difference between those who are committed to Scripture as the word of God and those who work from a retrieval/remembrance position. That difference becomes paramount. When Phyllis Trible wrote *Texts of Terror* she did so in order that the Church could recognise the ingrained oppression of women in itself and in its Scripture and repent. The loyalist position looks at it differently. This is because we say that the Bible, although a product of imperfect human authors, is somehow redeemed by its divine author to the point that, although we are not compelled to say it is inerrant, it is *reliable*.<sup>9</sup> It may, in other words, record the oppression of women but it does not support it.

## Staying on the tightrope

The question for loyalist feminists is what their title describes. It is a relational question, concerned not with trying to defend the Bible, but concerned with finding out whether we can be *loyal* to it. One way of being loyal has already been noted. This way holds that Scripture is as it is and we cannot bring our own interests to it, that we cannot make our concerns a condition of our commitment. But not only has that then forced us to the other side and off the tightrope by refusing to acknowledge the difficulties, but also, although it sounds all very honourable, in our postmodern world no one will settle for that. Everyone who reads is an 'interested' (ie having a vested interest) reader, evangelicals no less (and no more) than anyone else. We read the Bible to find out more about God and his ways, and how he wants our way to be. And so we should, but that's an 'interested position' as is that of those who read it in order to identify this weakness or that. The Levite was supposed to speak to his concubine's heart, and it's one of our tasks to show people that the word of God can speak to their hearts, as they are. If it cannot, if we are to be reduced to being a mere eavesdropper in a conversation between God and ancient Israel rather than one of its participants, if we cannot bring ourselves and our concerns into the conversation, in what sense is it to be God's word for us? Nevertheless, we cannot jump off our tightrope on the other side either, for if there is no truth to be found here in the text with which we may engage, what becomes of the word of God?

I want to suggest a strategy of trying to *re-read* texts, not against the grain (which is, after all, just another form of power misuse, even if it is done by feminists) but by asking the text different questions.

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8 Deut. 22:28-29 says that if a girl is raped, compensation is paid to her father and the rapist is forced to marry her without possibility of divorce. Small comfort in either particular for the victim! If the girl is

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engaged (Deut. 22:23-27), if she is understood not to have been complicit, she is not punished but the rapist is executed.

9 See Marshall 1983.

## Judges 19-21: the sound of silence

The approach I want to explore is to think about the question of speech and silence. I believe in this opposing pair may come a way of re-reading that allows us both to confront the difficulties and yet adhere to a high doctrine of Scripture. This method won't work everywhere, and I am not offering it as the complete solution for biblical feminists, merely as one small piece in the tapestry. Tribble's critique considers silence essentially as a form of not-being, of complicity. I want to argue that silence, on the contrary, is a positive, active force in this text. So let's see if we can be loyal to this text by reading its silences.

There are two different functions for silence in this narrative: dissent and withdrawal.

### What silence can say: the art of dissent

First, we are not called upon at any time to condone the actions of the Levite, the old man, the men of the city or the Israelites generally. In relation to their behaviour, the narrator is silent. But does that make him or her complicit? That's certainly the legal precedent: *qui tacet consentit* (the one who is silent consents). But is that the biblical view? Silence can imply complicity, but it can also imply refusal: it's a form of verbal disobedience in certain contexts. For example, confessing the righteousness of others is important in conversational exchanges. To refuse to admit the other person is right is as much dissent as to say they are wrong. Speech is filled with significance far beyond simple interchange of information. Think of Judah's reluctant confession that Tamar, who has prostituted herself, breaking all the laws about chastity for women, is nevertheless more righteous than he is (Gen. 38:26). Judah must be humiliated by the confession, but it must be made. What is said and what is not-said and what one is silent about carry enormous implications. Glazov (in a talk given to the Society for Old Testament Studies in January 2000) has discussed this at some length with reference to Job and argued that God's insistence on Job speaking in 40:1-6 is because God recognises Job's silence as dissent and Job must be made to confess the righteousness of God.

Second, the narrator does not actually tell us of the death of the woman, true. But in this ambiguity of 'not-saying' the behaviour of the Levite becomes yet more appalling. Did he know whether she was dead or just collapsed? Did he care? Or did he have no further interest in damaged goods? In this silence the message is reinforced: the woman found protection and compassion in none of those whose duty it was to look after her. The Akedah parallel is useful because this is a godless Akedah, never asked for by God, another example of what people are capable of when allowed to make their own morality.

Third, the very brutality of what is done is emphasised, with no attempt to mitigate the short, unbearable verbs: 'they screwed her and used her all night' (my translation). The woman is silent, but that just emphasises her hopeless position. She has had no say all the way along. She has none now. She is silent like a sheep before its shearers. Isaac in the Akedah narrative is also silent at the moment of sacrifice. But her chronicler has made her story not-silent. She is not reduced to a

walk-on part, she is centre-stage, in life and in death. We remember her today. There is no shameful silence, no unreported crime, no reducing the story to a parenthetical explanation of the war with Benjamin. What was done to her in the darkness now is told in the light. Like the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, thanks to the narrator, this hapless, silent, unnamed woman is remembered in her very silence.

Fourth, God is silent (he does not intervene) at some times and not at others. God holds his hand, and not just for women. The cry of confusion and anger about this is part of the ongoing work of theodicy, experienced not just by women, and a far greater question than can be addressed here.

In summary, although it might be said that the author had a moral obligation to speak her/his repulsion if such s/he felt, what we have argued here is that the author's repulsion is expressed in what it does not say.

This section has examined some of the silences in the passage as an active strategy of dissent towards the acts it records. The next section considers some other silences as a different strategy.

### **'Judge for yourselves?': the storyteller withdraws**

There is a deliberate ambiguity in the Levite's approach to the other Israelites and this suggests an authorial irony. 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out' (19:30). But what is this 'thing'? The gang rape? So the Levite may seek to justify himself. But it is not-said. The silence on what exactly the outrage is therefore subverts the Levite's attempts to justify himself. It becomes the direct address of the narrator to the reader, and the challenge here is to consider what is not-said and then to speak out. That is the challenge to those who hear, who read, who are charged with the remembering. 'Consider it, take counsel and speak out.' (19:30). Or, put another way, judge for yourselves.

The 'said' part of the story is straightforward: a man allowed his concubine to be gang-raped, she died of her injuries, and he mutilated her and sparked off an internecine conflict. But for those who approach the story theologically this meaning is only the first stage, and significance is paramount. Significance is the part of the process that asks 'So what?'. It is at that level that we can speak of the inspired word of God. And significance can require explicit expression on the part of the narrator. What we look for, or what can be offered in such a story as this, is a preachable application from the passage, underlined by the narrator: what does this tell about God and about what he thought of these awful events? Here we want our 'plain sense': a clear significance to the passage. But where the narrator is silent as in this case and hence refuses to give us significance, we must find it for ourselves in the not-said. The narrator has withdrawn, and taken God with him/her.

Narrative asks us to enter into its world, smell the air, look at the scenery, watch the people, and, just occasionally, to fill in the gaps for ourselves or make our own judgment. The withdrawal of the narrator leaves the reader free to do this. What happens when the narrator is silent is a different dynamic. Of course, some



evangelicals immediately become nervous here because it seems as if I am arguing for any old meaning that suits me, and equally of course I am not. Silence will certainly tolerate such an abuse, but so will speech. What is driven home is the importance of reading in community and reading the whole of Scripture by the help of the Spirit to guide the interpreter through the silence. Where there are no directions, there needs at the least to be a compass.

## Conclusion

So far I have identified two possible ways in which silence can be actively part of the text. The first is that it is in itself an explicit message, the second that it is a deliberate tactic of withdrawal.

This is tricky ground, even dangerous, for the withdrawal of any character, including the narrator, can be interpreted according to one's own suspicion or candour (that is, the willingness to believe the best of someone or something), and this is exactly what has happened here. Phyllis Tribble has read this particular silence one way, and I another. For her the silence is complicity, for me it is dissent and withdrawal. Essentially the loyalist position is one of candour. We might call it the presumption of innocence.

The difference between this and a standard apologia is this: it does not say that a passage should not disgust us, or that we must try to tidy up what was done. It does not look for excuses. It does not say that our concerns cannot come to a writing of long ago. On the contrary, we say that they can and should. Instead here we look for the difference between what the characters do and what the implied author says or does not say. We ask if there is a reason for her/his silence. We actively look for the said and the not-said, and that difference, between what is said and what is not-said has been neglected for too long. The author has been judged complicit in what s/he writes about. What we need to do in our churches, in our preaching is to re-establish for her/him, not for her/his characters, a level playing field. We need to allow her/him to be heard or not heard. There will not always be a way to do this. I have spent some time with my students trying to find some kind of accommodation with Ezekiel 16 and 23 and Hosea 2 and I cannot. But there are possibilities in the said and the not-said to understand some of the narratives better, at least.

So what could be said to my friend who found the Leah/Rachel narrative oppressive and misogynistic? There are silences a-plenty in that narrative, too, for we hear neither the voices of Leah or Rachel (did she love Jacob?) during the story of the marriages, nor God. The narrator has left us free to read here too, for s/he makes no comment on the behaviour of Laban and says nothing about the feelings of the women. Of course, her/his view of Jacob is implicit: 'what goes around comes around' and Jacob the cheater has been thoroughly cheated. What did s/he think of the fate of hapless Leah and Rachel? It is not said. We could assume that s/he didn't care much, since that was women were for, and small concern for their feelings. But if we read on a bit, we find the desperately pathetic story of the hyper-fertile but unloved Leah, hoping that every new child is finally going to turn her husband's heart towards her. The narrator's careful explanation of each child's

name seems to indicate her/his sympathy for Leah, caught in a coil not of her own making. So here a silence can be read through another part of the narrative.

There are places in the Old Testament we would rather not go if we had the choice. The stories make us feel uncomfortable because we know how they sound in the mouths of readers from the lectern. But they are in our Bibles. People can and do read them. And if they can be read, they need to be addressed in our preaching, for the sake of my friend in the choir and all the others like her. And if they are to be preached on, we need to continue to find ways of understanding them that can offer a positive way of reading. A way of reading which will embrace everyone who looks to the Bible as God's word, as well as Rachel, Leah and the concubine to whom we want to offer this word of hope: 'you are the God who sees me', as another woman cast out into the night once found (Gen 16:13).

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