



Which Bethlehem? A Tale of Two Cities

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Bethlehem, as most are aware, means “house of bread”—a fitting subject, then, for this issue of *Word & World* on “Bread.” No doubt, the shepherds in the biblical Christmas story would have been happy to find even a crust in that “house of bread,” but the angels enticed them to Bethlehem by singing of something even better: peace on earth (Luke 2:15). Alas, the city has rarely lived up to this promise. In fact, the birthplace of the biblical “Prince of Peace” has more often been a town of terror.

Mitri Raheb, pastor of The Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in present-day Bethlehem, writes this on the church’s website:

Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus was a besieged city. Today Bethlehem is again a besieged city surrounded from three sides by a 25 foot high concrete wall. So what if Jesus were to be born today in Bethlehem? If Jesus were to be born this year, he would not be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph would not be allowed to enter from the Israeli checkpoint, and so too the Magi. The shepherds would be stuck inside the walls, unable to leave their little town. Jesus might

¹Mitri Raheb, “Bethlehem: Then and Now,” January 3, 2013, at <http://www.bethlehemchristaslutheran>

Two stories of Bethlehem (the “house of bread”), back to back in our present Bibles, contrast the ugly consequences of hospitality denied (the Outrage at Gibeah) and the delightful consequences of hospitality given (Ruth). The hospitality granted Ruth leads even to the messianic line of Jesus—a remarkable promise to us and a lesson for our own behavior.

have been born at the checkpoint like so many Palestinian children while having the Magi and shepherds on both sides of the wall.¹

But Bethlehem's unpleasant history did not begin only in the first century. The first extended biblical narrative involving Bethlehem is the almost unbelievably grotesque account of the Outrage at Gibeah in the period of the judges, that ugly story of rape and murder that begins quietly, almost with promise, when "a certain Levite...took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah" (Judg 19:1). Intriguingly (or deliberately?), this story of the awful consequences of inhospitality is followed in our present Bibles with the lovely story of Ruth, which begins when "a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab" (Ruth 1:1). As we know, Ruth becomes a story of the blessed consequences of hospitality. The city is the same in the two stories, but the events and attitudes could not be more disparate. Bethlehem of the unnamed concubine, Bethlehem of the welcomed stranger—a tale of two cities.

BETHLEHEM AND THE UNNAMED CONCUBINE

We cannot say we were not warned. The story begins, "In those days, when there was no king in Israel..." (Judg 19:1), and the reader will remember how that observation was followed in Judg 17:6 with, "...all the people did what was right in their own eyes." The same words conclude our story, providing a literary inclusio around it and an editorial conclusion to the book of Judges as a whole: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 22:25). Make no mistake, this turning over of judgment and authority to "all the people" is no early practice of democracy. On the contrary, it recognizes with Proverbs that without leadership, law, and revelation, all is lost: "Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he" (Prov 29:18 KJV). In the view of Judges, people, left to their own devices, will deconstruct creation and descend again into chaos. Our story is a prime example of that.

The story in summary

In summary, "a certain Levite" takes a concubine (or second wife) from Bethlehem. But discord arises, and the concubine runs back to her home. Eventually, the Levite goes after her, and after spending some days enjoying (or unable to escape?) the hospitality of the girl's father, they depart for his home. Ironically, after avoiding the "city of foreigners" (Jerusalem) as a potentially dangerous place to spend the night, they stop in Gibeah, a Benjaminite city, where they are given shelter by a resident alien there. But the house is attacked by "the men of the city, a perverse lot" who seek to rape the visiting Levite. Instead, the resident offers them his virgin daughter and the concubine. The men "wantonly" rape the concubine all night long (while her master goes to bed!), and she ends up the next morning dead

.org/ (accessed July 20, 2013). See also Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

or near death on the doorstep of the house. The man takes her home and, in “a dark parody of the function of a judge,”² that is, cutting up an ox and distributing it to the tribes to gather them for battle (1 Sam 11:7), the man does the same with the body of his concubine (worse, the Hebrew text does not make clear that she is already dead when this dismemberment occurs). The tribes do gather and wage a

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terribly costly civil war against the Benjaminites, eventually decimating the tribe to a mere 600 warriors, men without women. Can this story get worse? Yes! Since the tribe of Jabesh-gilead had sent no troops to the battle, the rest of the tribes force them to turn over 400 young virgins and give them to the Benjaminites, so that tribe will not be lost to Israel. But 400 is not enough, so the Benjaminites are instructed to ambush the participants in the yearly festival at Shiloh and forcibly to abduct 200 of the young virgin dancers—which seems apparently fine to the narrator, who concludes the story with what seems like a “happily ever after” ending: “Then they [the Benjaminites] went and returned to their territory, and rebuilt the towns, and lived in them” (Judg 21:23).

Raising hell

The bare summary is bad enough, and we understand immediately why Phyllis Trible included this account in her “Texts of Terror.”³ But closer examination makes things even worse. Truly, the devil is in the details, indeed, quite literally, since the “perverse” men of Gibeah are, in Hebrew, “men of the sons of Belial,” a term that eventually becomes associated with the realm of the dead (Ps 18:4–5). Thus, in Robert Boling’s telling translation, they are “hell-raisers.”⁴ As already noted, we must remember that the redactor knows this to be the case. With “no king in Israel” the human condition is “hell.” This helps us read the story not as a biblical model of acceptable behavior, but as behavior contrary to the will of God and to the best traditions of Israel. Still, the treatment of women in the story remains terribly typical: nameless, silent, abused, slaves of the system and of their masters. As Danna Fewell has observed, stories like this one “show the darkest side of patriarchy yet—the torture and murder of the most vulnerable and innocent for the sake of male honor and pompous religiosity.”⁵

Such behavior, alas, is hardly limited to the days of the Bible. It remains in

²Mark Throntveit, in the “Passages” section of his *Enter the Bible* commentary on Judges, at <https://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=27> (accessed June 20, 2013).

³Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 65–91. Hers is a very helpful commentary on this text.

⁴Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 276.

⁵Danna Nolan Fewell, “Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance, and Transformation,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987) 84.

many cultures today and is often attested to in literature. Today—literally, as I write this—a global review of violence against women by the World Health Organization “found that about a third of women have been physically or sexually abused by a former or current partner.”⁶ For a literary example, in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov’s younger sister Dounia is willing to give herself as “concubine” (Raskolnikov’s term) to a wealthy older man she does not love and who was looking for a girl “who had experienced poverty, because, as he explained, a man ought not to be indebted to his wife, but that it is better for a wife to look upon her husband as her benefactor.” Dounia will sacrifice herself to this man for the sake of the well-being of her family.⁷ Dounia, at least, does this out of unwilling “choice” (from which she later extracts herself), unlike the biblical women who were given no choice whatsoever. Thus, we must be ever wary of a naive (or tendentious) attempt to return to the “good old days” of the Bible in patterning present behavior, defining present issues of sexuality, or shaping present law.

Case in point: this story has no bearing on contemporary debates about homosexuality. Contrary to Daniel Block and others, it simply reads against the text itself to see the perverse men of Gibeah as having a “homosexual orientation.”⁸ What, the entire city is made up of such men? We see here, as in the parallel story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19),⁹ the use of gang rape by heterosexual males (satisfied with the offer of a woman, after all) to intimidate the outsider or the newbie, to show him his place—as still occurs, for example, in prison populations.

all abuse of others is indicted here, all of it consigned to the world of the “hell-raisers”—a world in which, alas, we all live and to which we all contribute

Unhappily, the apparent pro-monarchy theme of the redactor turns out in the long run to be overly optimistic. While the chaotic actions of this Gibeah story are horrendous, so will be many of the actions of the coming kings who, it was to be hoped, would bring peace, justice, and the rule of God to Israel. True, while the ideal king “delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper” (Ps 72:12), most actual kings failed miserably to fulfill this role. And so do we, of course. We will misuse both this story and biblical law in general if we see it applied to “those kind of people.” All abuse of others is indicted here, all of it consigned to the world of the “hell-raisers”—a world in which, alas, we all live and to which we all contribute. Observing this, however, does not remove the moral im-

⁶Maria Cheng, “1 in 3 women worldwide has suffered from abuse,” *Minneapolis-St. Paul StarTribune*, June 21, 2013, A1.

⁷Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 37, 44. This novel shows up here out of the blue, as it were, simply because I happen to be rereading it as I write this essay.

⁸Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999) 536.

⁹The many parallels are carefully charted by Block, *ibid.*, 532–534.

perative. We are called to work against violence and violent impulses—especially in relation to human sexuality—both within us and around us, engaging in prayer and concerted action toward that end. To wait, with Judges, for a “kingdom” in which violence will be overcome will be to wait for the kingdom to come. There is certainly hope in that, but there is also a vision for work to be done in the meantime.

Finally, while my title question asks, “Which Bethlehem?” the outrage in our story actually happens in Gibeah. Bethlehem is not the culprit here. Still, the biblical narrator has chosen to have the story begin in Bethlehem, thus deliberately connecting it to other biblical tales of Bethlehem. Even here, of course, it assumes that, in this Bethlehem, it is perfectly normal for the virgin girl to be taken as concubine by an unknown man (“to himself”) and to be given for such by her father, she having no voice in the matter.

Hospitality denied

My major interest here is in contrasting notions of hospitality in this Judges story and in the book of Ruth. The hospitality issue in Judg 19–21 is interestingly complex. First, we see the exaggerated hospitality of the unnamed girl’s father, who detains the Levite for five days with food and drink (during which there is no mention at all of the girl herself; Judg 19:4–9). Then, the ironic twist of the avoidance of the servant’s counsel to stop in Jerusalem, the “city of foreigners” (the servants often know best in biblical narratives, as, for example, in the story of Naaman, 2 Kings 5¹⁰), only to end up in the hands of the men of Gibeah, an Israelite town. First, though, even in Gibeah, comes the hospitality of a resident alien—a “foreigner” in Gibeah—demonstrating the proper functions of a biblical host (Judg 19:16–21). But then comes the outrage, demonstrating in the most terrible fashion an unacceptable inhospitality (to put it mildly).

So, the Outrage at Gibeah: a story that tells of events it knows to be horrific, but also one that betrays a patriarchal system that even here is simply taken for granted. But other stories are coming that will show us a different world, a different Bethlehem.

BETHLEHEM AND THE STORY OF RUTH

Again, what attracted me to pursue this investigation of the role of Bethlehem in early biblical narrative is the apparent deliberate juxtaposition of the “certain Levite” who took a concubine from Bethlehem (Judg 19:1) and the “certain man of Bethlehem” who fled to Moab (Ruth 1:1)—because there was no bread in the “house of bread”!

Might this contrast be one reason the Greek canon (unlike the Hebrew canon) inserts the book of Ruth at this point? The connections and the contrasts

¹⁰See my account of the Naaman story as an “Upstairs, Downstairs” narrative in Frederick J. Gaiser, *Healing in the Bible: Theological Insight for Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) esp. 65.

are evident, so, even if not originally an immediate literary move (at least in the Hebrew text), we can assert a tradition-history association.¹¹ Of particular interest is the fact that the Ruth story, too, takes place “in the days when the judges judged” (Ruth 1:1). It seems to want to give us an alternative narrative to the chaotic scenes just preceding, perhaps redeeming for the reader something of the reputation of the Israel of that period.

Reviewing the story

Undoubtedly, we will know the Ruth story better than the Gibeah story, for it is the very opposite of a “text of terror.” Here we find the Bethlehem we want, the kind of characters we want, the hospitality we want, and even the kind of God we want.

To begin with, the characters have names, not least the women. These are people about whom the narrator cares, as do God and we. Within the first five verses, we meet Elimelech and Naomi, Mahlon and Chilion, and Orpah and Ruth (the most important saved for last). The excursion into Moab had resulted from famine, but, hearing that God has “considered his people and given them food [*lehem*],” Naomi resolves to return to Bethlehem. Upon Naomi’s urging, Orpah turns back to her own people in Moab, but from Ruth we hear the famous “where you go, I will go” pledge (Ruth 1:15–17)—a statement of human fidelity and solidarity like few others in the Bible or in literature more broadly (and all of it said to a mother-in-law!).

***Name upon name upon name! Names matter here. People matter.
How far we have come from the unnamed concubine of Gibeah.***

Portentously, the women return to Bethlehem “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (1:22), which will set up Ruth’s fortuitous meeting with Boaz. Unlike the men in our earlier story—even the good ones bound to and obviously accepting an abusive system—Boaz treats Ruth generously, leaving food in the field for her to glean. More, at mealtime, he exhibits both hospitality and word play, offering Ruth bread (again, *lehem*) and wine until “she was satisfied, and she had some left over” (2:14)—not unlike a favorite hymn, “Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more.”¹²

The encounter with Boaz results eventually in the risky midnight meeting at the threshing floor, where Ruth uncovers Boaz’s “feet” (let the reader understand)

¹¹This is noted, for example, by Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “The Book of Ruth: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 900. Interestingly, the Hebrew canon makes its own contrast with the Gibeah story by following it with the Hannah narrative (1 Sam 1:1–2:10), in which a village woman is given a name and a significant role in the early history of Israel. On these canonical moves, see Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 84–85.

¹²William Williams, “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,” in *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg et al., 1958) #520—using the more proper, more poetic, and far richer translation of the Welsh than the weaker “feed me now and evermore” of later Lutheran hymnals.

and lies down with him. Whatever happens there, Boaz does not use or abuse Ruth, but resolves to “redeem” the land of Naomi’s family and, with that, take Ruth as his bride (a process in which she herself has been a formidable agent). Despite the attempted intervention by another potential “redeemer,” Boaz gains the land and Ruth. “Name” again takes on importance: Boaz promises “to maintain the dead man’s name” [speaking of Mahlon, Ruth’s dead Israelite husband], in order that the name of the dead “may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place” (4:10). More, in blessing the couple, the people say, “May you produce children in Ephrath and bestow a name in Bethlehem” (4:11). And yet more, when Ruth bears a son, the women bless God and pray that “his name be renowned in Israel!” (4:14). Then, they “gave him [the child] a name”; they “named him Obed” (4:17). Name upon name upon name! Names matter here. People matter. How far we have come from the unnamed concubine of Gibeah.

Hospitality granted

Finally, out of this story of generosity, love, and hospitality, Obed “became the father of Jesse, the father of David” (4:17). We are given a first promise of the line of messianic kings who would surely, in the view of the biblical editors, overcome the time when “there was no king in Israel” and “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”¹³

The hospitality issues in the book of Ruth are manifold. Naomi and her sons are received graciously in Moab, despite the historic animosity between Moab and Israel (Num 21:29–30). Tellingly, Deut 23:3–4 rejects Moab because they had not met Israel with “bread [*lehem*] and water” on their journey out of Egypt. But now, there is bread in Moab for these wanderers out of Israel. Subsequently, Ruth, one of those Moabites who shall, by law, not “be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:3) is graciously received in Bethlehem. Everything is turning around here. As we have seen, Ruth is wined and dined by Boaz, and finally this foreigner becomes none other than the great-grandmother of David. Great things happen when animosities are left behind, hospitality is generously offered, and restrictive laws are broken.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Concerning the relation between our two Bethlehem stories, Phyllis Tribble notes,

The absence of misogyny, violence, and vengeance in the two stories juxtaposed to the Benjaminite traditions [that is, the stories of Hannah in the Hebrew canon and Ruth in the Greek canon, following the terrible events of Judg 19–21] speaks a healing word in the days of the judges....Alongside the concubine, the women of Benjamin, the young women of Jabesh-gilead, and the

¹³For a homiletical retelling of the Ruth story, see the sermons by Frederick J. Gaiser, Karoline M. Lewis, Dirk G. Lange, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Kathryn Schifferdecker in Mary E. Albing, “A New Look at Sermon Series: Preaching through Ruth,” *Word & World* 33/2 (2013) 166–187.

daughters of Shiloh stand Hannah, Naomi, Ruth, and the women of Bethlehem. Though the presence of the latter group cannot erase the sufferings of their sisters, it does show both the Almighty and the male establishment a more excellent way.¹⁴

Of equal or greater significance, perhaps, is the turnaround in Ps 113, which parallels in many ways Hannah's song of 1 Sam 2:1–10, but where the divine care is given not to a known character (like Hannah), but to an unnamed "barren woman . . . making her the joyous mother of children" (Ps 113:9). With such an unnamed woman, we return to the world of the unnamed concubine of Judg 19, but now the Lord has learned the lesson Tribble thought "the Almighty" needed—if indeed God did need it. Though God is indeed "high above all nations" (Ps 113:4), he now "stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth" (Ps 113:6 NIV, properly following the Hebrew). The picture of such a stooping God, who will forsake the divine throne to care for an anonymous village woman—one of the lowest in Israel's order of society—provides a fitting foretaste of the use of Hannah's song and Ps 113 as background for Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), portending that next visit to Bethlehem (the "house of bread") where the Bread of Life will be born.

Mitri Raheb sums things up for us:

So where is the Gospel in all of this [that is, in his account of a present besieged Bethlehem]? The good news is this: God came into no other than this troubled, wounded and real world. He is real and wants to enter into our real world with all its complexities and fears. Christmas is real. It is not a myth or a wonder world. The Gospel is that God became one of us, one like us. He came as a child, vulnerable, and weak. And yet through his vulnerability was able to overcome the empire. Christmas is God's promise to us that we will have life, peace, and future. For us Palestinian Christians and citizens of Bethlehem the Christmas story of then is our story today. Praise God that Jesus is the same: yesterday, today and forever.¹⁵

It is a messy gospel for a messy world. But bread baking can be messy as well (witness my kitchen!), and there, too, the yeast must give up its life, having done its work, to provide food for the hungry. Like the yeast in the dough—the least of the ingredients—Bethlehem too is known biblically as "one of the little clans," but "from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel" (Mic 5:2). More, that ruler to come will compare himself to "the least of these" (Matt 25:40)—people, no doubt, like the unnamed concubine of Judg 19, the anonymous woman of Ps 113, and all those happily named "little people" of the book of Ruth. ⊕

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¹⁴Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 85.

¹⁵Raheb, "Bethlehem: Then and Now."