

DEGENERATION IN ISRAELITE SOCIETY

(Judges 19:1-30)

Lawson Younger

It is tempting to interpret this passage only or primarily as a commentary on the abusive violation of male power and honor. But Block rightly notes that there is much more in the story than this:

From it one might conclude simplistically that in a patriarchal system it is generally preferable for men to rape women rather than to rape men, specifically, the rape of women is acceptable if male honor is thereby served. But this is to misconstrue the broader goal of the book: to chronicle the increasing Canaanization of Israelite society.

What about this questionable host who proposes the alternative to the rape of the Levite? He is promising at first with his authentic hospitality, but when the rapists/abusers show up, he fizzles out. It becomes clear that he is dominated by the principle of expedience, not by God's ethical system. While he rightly recognizes the wrong of the rapists/abusers, his mores are culturally dictated: The concubine is not as important as his male guest, therefore, he will opt to protect him. Rather than run the risk of personal disaster, he will regrettably offer a lesser substitute (at least according to the societal dictates in Benjamin at this time, which are far away from God's standards in the first place). Fokkelman's words are important in this regard:

Many commentators write high-toned words in connection with Gen 19:8 (Lots daughters as a sexual sell-off) and Judg 19:24, in the sense that hospitality was such a valued asset in Israel, that people would even give up their women if necessary. To me, this seems to be not only a terrible cliché, but worse: it might well be incorrect. On the one hand the two chapters are exceptional (no lawgiver can foresee such situations) and on the other hand they show something that happens all over the world; under the pressures of terror and crime, good manners and morals crumble like a house of cards. We find a variant of the cliché in Tribble, *Texts of terror*, 75: Genesis 19 and Judges 19 "show the rules of hospitality protect only males." I do not believe this.

Thus, the host is doing what is right in his own eyes, what is expedient, what may be culturally conditioned (esp. in the debased period of the judges). This is the very point of the narrative: God's Word demands much higher standards of morality, but Israel has degenerated into the mire of deep depravity where lewd and base behavior dominate, and no one is doing what is right in Yahweh's eyes.

The concubine is the victim. She is a pawn of a callous husband, the rapists/abusers, and once again the callous husband. Unfortunately, as with so many victims, she remains nameless. The narrator paints her in colors that cause us to associate with her and to have compassion and pity on her. As a victim she deserves nothing less. We can easily say that in the narrator's world she fares better than in her real world.

The Levite is, in some ways, more to be despised than the wicked rapists/abusers. He is dominated by self-interest, having absolutely no concern for the welfare of others, especially his concubine (this becomes more evident in ch. 20). The morning scene in the aftermath of the night's wantonness is absolutely chilling. He is so nonchalant, matter-of-fact in his callousness that we are stunned. How can he be so indifferent? Is he really that self-absorbed? Apparently he is.

