FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 08
ISSN: 2468-4414

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Feminism, Bible, Texts and Terror – A Feminist Reflection

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Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Forty years on from the publication of Phyllis Trible's pivotal book *Texts of Terror* (1984), two feminist-identifying Hebrew Bible scholars review feminist commentary on biblical texts of sexual violence arguing first, that the field remains vibrant, diverse, interdisciplinary, and dynamic and second, that reading with empathy is a critical part of the feminist project. Two tribute books echoing Trible's title have appeared in quick succession. One, *Terror in the Bible* (2021), is a collection of essays edited by M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker; the other, *Texts After Terror* (2021), is a monograph by R. Graybill. Examining both books functions as a strategy to demonstrate first, the ongoing polyvocality of feminist biblical criticism and second, the need for ongoing resistance to the Bible's toxic content in a world where sexual violence remains a potent source of trauma, harm, and injustice. In the light of considerable acclaim for Graybill's 2021 book, the article offers critical assessment that cautions against some of its claims to radical transformation. The article calls for feminists to combine critical thinking with critical empathy in their reading of violent texts.

Keywords: feminism, Bible, critical empathy, sexual violence, rape culture

INTRODUCTION

In his groundbreaking exploration of masculine ideals in the Hebrew Bible[1] (1995), David Clines points out that biblical exegetes have typically presented violent male biblical characters as objects of 'gender-based hero worship' while bypassing and normalising sexual violence against women (1995: 235). Clines focuses on depictions of the character of David, who dominates significant portions of biblical narrative (notably, the books 1 and 2 Samuel). David rises to become Israel's foremost king and he continues to be mentioned long after his death and the end of the monarchy he inaugurates. For Clines, David represents the quintessential example of admired masculinity. The main feature of this masculinity is warrior prowess. As Clines points out, the legacy of admiration, even hero worship, of David, including among biblical commentators, plays down or elides the extent of David's violence, including his sexualised violence. While David may be the archetype of the admired Israelite masculine man, elision of violence, including violence perpetrated against women, is evident also in the depiction of other biblical heroes.[2]

'Though most literary critics agree that the biblical narrative is androcentric,' writes Esther Fuchs, 'they rarely allow this fact to interfere with their analytical procedures' (2000: 34). In 1984, Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* provided a clarion call for change. Trible explored four biblical texts (three of these featuring sexual/ised violence)

[1] 'Hebrew Bible' refers to a collection of texts held sacred in common by both Jewish and Christian communities. This body of text is arranged differently in both communities. It is routinely called 'Tanakh' in Jewish and 'Old Testament' in Christian settings.

[2] Another example is the revered prophet, Moses. Moses commands the Israelite army to kill all women, excepting virgins (Numbers 31:14–18). The implication is that female virgins are spoils of war (cf. Judges 5:30). This is yet another example of a powerful man using his power in ways that harm women – but without the text (and often without commentators of the text, too) negatively critiquing this violence, thereby normalising it. Military leadership and prowess appear to be emblematic of many masculine men of the Bible. This applies to Joshua, the leaders called judges (whose stories are recounted in the book of Judges), and several kings of Israel (including kings Saul and Josiah). Many commit brutal acts of violence that are accepted, even valourised.

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and the misogyny they reveal.[3] She argued for reading 'on behalf' of victims, including female biblical characters. 'As a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny,' she wrote, 'feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment, and calling for repentance' (1984: 3).

In the four decades since, feminist scholars have researched, explored, and protested sexual violence in the Bible. Reading on behalf of the characters and resisting misogyny remains, for Trible, for us, and many other feminist biblical scholars, an act of both empathy and resistance. Other feminist biblical scholars, however, have recently professed some exhaustion and even tedium with such approaches. Hence, during the 2022 Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) session on Rhiannon Graybill's *Texts After Terror* (2021), panellists discussed how Graybill's work addresses a shared experience: feeling 'bored' with feminist encounters with rape texts. Graybill herself describes the topic of biblical sexual violence as 'exhausting, dissatisfying, or simply sad' (2021: 1).[4]

Two tribute works to Trible's *Texts of Terror,* both published in 2021, reveal important fault lines in today's feminist biblical scholarship. Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon and Robyn J. Whitaker's edited collection of essays *Terror in the Bible* draws inspiration from Trible and revisits the language and gendered violence of biblical texts, with prominent focus on race and ethnicity. Contributors to the collection advocate for acknowledging the pain of victims in the Bible as a moral obligation, given the social, cultural, and political implications and reverberations of texts considered both authoritative and sacred across the globe. Melanchthon and Whitaker argue that feminist theory can serve as a vital tool in addressing how Bible narratives 'validate and sanctify violence' against the vulnerable (2021: 2).

Graybill, on the other hand, expresses feeling 'locked in a pattern of what feminist criticism beginning in the 1980's had already done' (2021: 1) and finding it 'exhausted, dated, and even unfeminist' (2021: 2).[5] Relying on the work of Eve Sedgwick, who argues that a position of 'paranoia' leads to anticipating 'bad news' which, in turn, produces reflexive analysis and strong theories of negative affect (2003: 130), Graybill argues that feminist readers' anticipatory paranoia 'flattens' texts of sexual violence and limits 'appropriate responses to sadness and grief' (2021: 7).[6] As an example, she faults feminist scholars for 'simply' compiling lists of rape, describing such lists as evidence of paranoia (2021: 23).[7] Is biblical feminist criticism on sexual violence locked in a wearying spiral of repetition and sadness with little left to say? Is Graybill's book an—even *the*—antidote? We explore these questions and, while doing so, make the case for the importance of critical empathy.

Both tribute books address the position of the feminist scholar. Melanchthon and Whitaker argue *with* Trible for resisting misogyny to effect change. They point out that,

> many broken and bruised bodies of victims in biblical narratives speak into the material contexts of varied tyrannies, validating and sanctifying racism, sexism, colorism, caste oppression, classism, colonialism, and heteronormativity. (2021: 2)

Graybill, on the other hand, is wary of 'strong theories' that place great faith on assuming that if violence and misogyny are exposed, they can be transformed (2021: 51). For Graybill, 'the work of feminist criticism is about finding ways to read and live with biblical rape stories' (2021: 175).

Scholars should ask whether past judgments and calls for change have had impact on misogyny and sexual violence. At the same time, scholars dismissing the need to expose sexual violence and misogyny in biblical literature have downplayed, overlooked, and excused sexual violence in the Bible for centuries (Thiede, 2024b). Consequently, we question the notion that feminists should 'live with' violent biblical texts. If feminists do not continue to challenge misogyny, what resistance can they offer either to the misuse of power in biblical texts themselves or to those who wield such texts for violent purposes? In our view, feminist scholarship on the Bible must combine critical thinking with critical empathy.

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[3] The first story Trible examines is the story of Hagar (Genesis 16:1–16; 21:9–21) who is oppressed on account of her Egyptian nationality, her class (she is enslaved to Sarah and Abraham, on whom the story is primarily centred) and her sex (she is a female in a patriarchal story world). The second is the narrative of the rape of King David's daughter Tamar by her brother Amnon, David's firstborn son (2 Samuel 13). The third is the story of the gang rape of the unnamed wife of a Levite (that is, a man of priestly descent) (Judges 19). The fourth is the story of Jephthah, an Israelite warrior, who sacrifices his unnamed daughter to fulfil a vow he made to God (Judges 11). With the exception of the fourth story, all explicitly recount sexual violence inflicted on female characters.

[4] There are multiple rape texts in the Bible. Alongside the three rape texts discussed by Trible (see note 3), Graybill focuses also on the rapes of Dinah (Genesis 34) and of personified Daughter Zion (book of Lamentations). There are other, more cursory, mentions of rape in the Bible, too.

[5] *How* feminist scholarship is 'unfeminist' is not elaborated.

[6] Ruth Leys notes, however, that affect theory's 'anti-intentionalism' and the resultant 'radical separation between affect and reason' has made ideological dispute and judgment irrelevant to cultural analysis (2011: 472).

[7] Yet, Graybill herself provides just such a list (2021: 18).

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Empathy, as such, is not unproblematic. While some have argued that empathy can redress the ruthlessness of the globalised neoliberal order, it is equally clear that empathy can undergird and reinforce existing power structures. Gendered assumptions that women are especially skilled at 'doing empathy' and should demonstrate that skill have caused personal and professional harm (Gentry *et al.,* 2015). Such expectations reinforce hegemonic masculine codes as well as stereotypes of femininity. The expression of empathy can be (and has been) encouraged in all manner of institutional settings—governmental, educational, medical, business, and so on—precisely to bypass the need to address injustice. Employing empathy as a satisfactory response to inequality and inequity does nothing to mitigate harm. Such empathy reproduces power structures; it does not challenge them.

But *critical* empathy, as Andrea Lobb points out:

> is not just a process of feeling one's way into suffering or identifying with suffering in general, but of identifying with a morally specific variety of suffering that arises from social pathology and injustice. (2017: 597)

Scholars engaging in critical empathy are motivated by a moral imperative to acknowledge that such suffering is itself wrong. Critical empathy is especially essential in conditions where sufferers cannot articulate their pain or advocate for themselves. Here, critical empathy aids in establishing ethical standards as well as communicating pain and harm for which the sufferer has no words (Lobb, 2017: 596–597).

Critical empathy can also establish language for suffering that has been actively hidden by discourses of power (Lobb, 2017: 602). Feminists who identified sexual violence and its harm and created terms for brutal injustices that once had no name, terms like 'sexual harassment,' 'coercive control,' and 'rape culture,' were motivated by critical empathy. They focused on identifying the tropes and mythologies hegemonic masculinity relies on to normalise sexual violence. They extracted what had gone unsaid and unnamed, and they identified that suffering is a moral wrong. Critical empathy is a tool for contesting and resisting power. Amidst the prevalence of sexual violence up to our own time, feminists gave us names and language for identifying where such violence comes from and what must be done to effect real change.

Feminist biblical scholars have been engaged in just such work where the Bible is concerned. When biblical authors depict sexual violence with language that obscures and normalises it, this is precisely *because* of the hegemonic masculine ideology that generated their literary products. Feminist scholars have resisted the dominant ideology of reconstructing rather than interrogating such ideologies; hence, they have resisted the erasure of biblical sexual violence by articulating the suffering the texts describe and by identifying it as immoral, unjust, and pathological. Feminist readings do not aim to reproduce biblical ideology and excuse its toxic elements as 'just the way things were back then,' but hold it to account. Critical empathy is essential to that aim. In reflecting on the current state of feminist investigation, with focus on the tribute books, we advocate that critical empathy is essential if feminist scholars wish to reject normalising or downplaying the Bible's painful depictions of sexual violence.

POLYVOCALITY, DIVERSITY, AND ARGUMENT: BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP'S FEMINIST PROJECT

Feminist biblical scholarship on sexual violence in the Bible is demonstrably wide-ranging and polyvocal. Feminist scholars have not, as Graybill suggests, collectively reduced Hagar and 'her range of relationships to a single traumatic experience' (2021: 94), or bypassed Sarah's use of power (2021: 91), [8] or overlooked intersectionality, or ignored the 'fuzzy, icky, messy terrain of relationships between women' (2021: 88). Multiple commentators have explored each of these topics (e.g., Dube, 2017; Reaves, 2018; Stiebert, 2016: 114–132; Weems, 1988). Reductive claims, such as the statement that texts of sexual violence have only been read three ways—historical enquiry, lament over female suffering, and postures of witnessing (Graybill, 2021: 29)—do not do justice to the wide-ranging nature of feminist biblical scholarship.

Trible herself notes 'changes alongside continuities' in the field, including the emergent prominence of such categories as cisgender, ethnicity, gender fluidity, intersectionality, postcoloniality, queering, and trauma (2021: x–xi). Scholars have also applied their knowledge of rape culture and its features to biblical texts (Shiloh Project: Resources). Nomenclature has been debated as well; hence, Deryn Guest makes a strong case for favouring 'gender criticism' over 'feminist criticism' (2012), and Musa Dube sometimes (2000) chooses the term 'feminist' over 'womanist.'

The feminist project is neither static nor monolithic: it encompasses, for instance, lesbian lenses (e.g., Guest 2005), gender-critical approaches (e.g., Guest, 2012), womanist (e.g., Weems, 1995) and mujerista (e.g., Isasi-Díaz and Tarango, 1988) feminisms, among others. Powerful contributions are made by all genders, including by white

[8] See note 3.

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male scholars, such David J. A. Clines (1995), Ken Stone (1996), and Harold Washington (1997). Feminist biblical scholars disagree over the measure of agency or voice given to female characters; they offer differing interpretations of the language and the terminology of sexual violence; they apply, among others, anthropological, archaeological, sociological, and literary-critical approaches to biblical literature. Scholars have read biblical texts in the light of survivor testimony (Blyth, 2010), noted how the objectification of women goes hand-in-hand with racialised sexual violence (Dunbar, 2022; Rey, 2016), and explored the use of sexual violence against men and characters whose gender performance does not fall clearly into binaries (Greenough, 2021; Thiede, 2022, 2024a; Tombs, 2022). Diverse perspectives and conclusions abound, as Susanne Scholz's three edited volumes *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect* (2013, 2014, 2016) and Yvonne Sherwood's *The Bible and Feminism* (2017) make abundantly clear.

Feminist biblical scholarship, like the feminist movement itself, has been dominated by white, privileged, cisgender, and heterosexual voices, however. Biblical scholars with Indigenous histories and Black biblical scholars, especially womanist scholars, have exposed ways in which privileged feminist biblical scholarship ignores or simply fails to recognise issues of class, caste, race, and ethnicity (e.g., Weems, 1988). Later waves of #MeToo (from 2017) and Black Lives Matter (especially from 2020) have received more attention and voice within white spaces (e.g., see Reaves, 2018), but significant challenges remain. A guild dominated by white, cisgender, heterosexual men and women is served by a publication industry that is skewed to advantage those who are already privileged. Perhaps because feminist biblical scholarship remains dominated by and nurtures voices that are—like our own—white, Global North, cisgender, and heterosexual, Graybill's *Texts After Terror* has received more attention and publicity than *Terror in the Bible*.[9]

Well-intentioned white feminist biblical scholars can still display a lack of intersectional awareness—we ourselves need to stay attuned to this (see Dube, 2017 critiquing Stiebert, 2013: 50–59). To give one example, Amy C. Cottrill in her recent book *Uncovering Violence* (2021) juxtaposes an exploration of the biblical character Abigail, wife of Nabal (1 Samuel 25),[10] with an excerpt from a semiautobiographical novel by Hannah Crafts, a formerly enslaved woman (2021: 120–121). Cottrill describes how:

> the immediacy with which Crafts perceived threat (…) gave me insight into the immediacy with which Abigail shifts into actions that will protect herself and her household. (2021: 122)

Abigail, Cottrill claims, had to demonstrate a 'sensitivity to coercive power similar to that of Crafts' (2021: 123).

But gender and racial subjugation are *not* the same thing, and decades ago Black women called on white feminists to cease placing middle-class white women's subordination on the same level as Black women's daily struggles with systemic oppression (hooks, 2000 [1984]; Morrison, 1971). Here, a white feminist scholar compares Abigail, a wealthy biblical farmer's wife, to an enslaved Black woman. Abigail is an Israelite; in the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites have privilege (cf. Reaves, 2018). Their story and their success, which often rely on brutal acts of violence against other peoples, is told in its pages. Cottrill (2021) may intend the connection she sees as a fillip prompting reflection and insight, but appropriating the experiences of persons of colour who have been historically subjugated, colonised, and oppressed (and still are) to explain the challenges faced by wealthy Israelite women of the Hebrew Bible holds potential to harm. Here, exercising critical empathy would help focus attention on the different power structures at work.

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer writes that 'a starting point of feminist interpretation of the Bible is not [only] the biblical text in its own right but rather the concerns of feminism' (2008: 206). Postcolonial feminist Musa Dube makes clear the wide-ranging nature of these concerns:

> Like most feminists in the guild, I am motivated in my reading by an attempt to understand how texts expound ideologies of oppression; how they have legitimized the oppression of the Other; and whether

[9] The 2022 Annual SBL meeting featured both books. Despite a call for papers for a panel dedicated to *Terror in the Bible*, the session titled 'Terror in the Bible' makes no other mention of the volume. Two speakers presented: one on Numbers 21:4–9 and the other on Jonah. No keyword related to sexual violence appears. A panel devoted to Graybill's monograph billed it as a 'groundbreaking examination of sexual violence within the Hebrew Bible [that] raises new questions and provides innovative approaches.' (For both, see Society of Biblical Literature, 'Program Book: 2022 Annual Meeting'). A Google search using author/editors and title demonstrates that Graybill's book, with its striking cover, is far better marketed and circulated, even though it is Melanchthon and Whitaker's book that is open access. Graybill (2022) has reviewed Melanchthon and Whitaker's book.

[10] In this biblical chapter, David, before becoming king, is living as a fugitive with his followers. He requests provisions from Nabal, a wealthy landowner, who is described in the text as foolish. After Nabal refuses David, David resolves to go into battle against him. But at this point, Nabal's wife, who is described as intelligent and beautiful, goes to meet David, taking with her abundant amounts of food and drink. Abigail manages to avert David's anger and wins his favour. Shortly after, Nabal dies, and Abigail becomes David's wife.

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> they can be reread for liberating interdependence. I subscribe to the assumption that biblical texts were written in patriarchal cultures, reflecting the views and interests of patriarchal authors, interpreters, translators, scholars, and institutions that have guarded how they are interpreted and used in cultures where biblical texts are read. Together with the feminist guild, I subscribe to the paradigm that recognizes that gender oppression is always in tandem with other categories of oppression and domination such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, and religion, among others. (2017: 46–47)

How, then, do the two tribute books responding to Trible's call respond to feminist agendas? Do they reinforce Trible's premise, that the duty of a feminist scholar is to read 'on behalf' of victims? Do they employ critical empathy to uncover new knowledge about sexual violence biblical hegemonic masculinity obscures? Do they promote new ways of reading biblical texts of sexual violence? Next, we address the premises of both works. We compare how the volumes respond to two well-known rape texts of the Hebrew Bible, both of which are explored in Trible's book of 1984: the rape of Tamar and the gang rape of the Levite's *pilegesh* (translated 'concubine' or 'wife').[11] We summarise what our comparison reveals about the feminist study of sexual violence in the Bible.

TERROR IN THE BIBLE AND *TEXTS AFTER TERROR*: PREMISES, THEORY, AND NOMENCLATURE

Terror in the Bible features diverse voices. These comprise thirteen scholars representing five continents and deploying a range of hermeneutical lenses in their essays, including feminist, queer, and Pasifika lenses. Melanchthon and Whitaker state that:

> [f]eminist theory helps us understand traumatic stress on individuals as microcosmic—namely, as manifestations of larger societal and cultural forms involving power, domination, and victimization. (2021: 2)

They argue that violent texts of the Bible have played a role in 'prescribing, producing, enabling, and triggering' individual and collective harm and trauma (2021: 3) and note that such texts continue to be ignored or bypassed in faith communities. The editors openly situate their book alongside past scholarly attempts to recognise suffering (2021: 4). The contributors read, with Trible, on behalf of victims both literary and real; their essays 'seek to address how violence or injustice against women and marginalized communities is depicted, shared, listened to, and responded to' (2021: 4).

For her part, Graybill proposes 'a feminist theorization of biblical sexual violence that starts from the fuzzy, the messy, and the icky' (2021: 11). She writes of these terms: 'I am interested in the ways that sexual violence, including rape, is talked about and experienced in ordinary life' (2021: 11). Graybill suggests that victims' memories may be 'fuzzy,' the way their experience is understood and defined by others may be 'fuzzy,' even the experience itself may aptly be described as 'fuzzy' (2021: 12). When women 'consent' to sex to escape being even more brutally treated by an assailant, their experience may be labelled 'fuzzy' (2021: 13). Graybill's second term, 'messy,' is meant to demonstrate that an experience of sexual violence is not neatly categorised by using either the term 'victim' or 'survivor.' Combining the terms ('victim/survivor'), Graybill argues, offers 'disruption to the stability of either category' (2021: 15). Lastly, 'icky' is the domain of creeps and weird things: '*Icky* names bad sex, uncomfortable sex, regrettable sex' (2021: 16).

Graybill's interest in affect theory may be behind the search for 'everyday' terms, but she provides no evidence for the claim that *fuzzy*, *messy*, or *icky* reflect 'ordinary' experience, or that these terms are regularly used by victims/survivors of sexual violence. Graybill's use of these terms can also be emotionally unsettling. Graybill's definition of 'icky,' for example, extends well beyond the question of bad sex. Yhwh's killing of David's infant is labelled 'icky' (2021: 63) and, as we shall see, so is a gang rape, dismemberment, genocide, and mass abduction.

Graybill's 'fuzzy' and 'messy' sometimes echo language that legal or institutional representatives use to cast doubt on victims/survivors' descriptions of sexual violence. Graybill's use of Chanel Miller's *Know My Name*, which records the aftermath of Miller's rape by Brock Turner, is a case in point. Here, Graybill suggests that Miller describes a 'fuzzy' experience in regard to her memory of the assault (2021: 12). Miller is *not*, however, describing her memory, but condemning the ways in which the *legal system* and its representatives weaponised it against her:

> I was told that because I could not remember, I technically could not prove it was unwanted. And that distorted me, damaged, me, almost broke me. (…) I had no power, I had no voice, I was defenseless. My memory loss would be used against me. (Miller, 2019: 340, see also 341–342)

[11] See note 3.

Graybill refers to what happened to Miller as 'clearly rape,' yet she also uses it as an example of a case where sexual violence and rape are ambiguous, hence 'fuzzy' (2021: 12). Here, Graybill deploys terminology that not only obscures sexual violence but unintentionally accords with language and tactics used to silence rape victims. Applying critical empathy, in contrast, would clarify and name the devastating consequences of Miller's rape, contesting and resisting the power structures that worked to deny her the right to her voice and experience.

Relying on the work of Sedgwick, Graybill repeatedly points to the danger of 'strong theories' which seek to explain everything. And yet, her own 'strong theory' regularly pushes biblical texts into a paradigm that minimises and downplays sexual violence. Graybill's treatment of the rape of Nineveh (a text not addressed in *Texts of Terror* or *Terror in the Bible*) offers one example. Graybill brings Nahum 3:4–7, a biblical text of troubling violence, into conversation with Kristen Roupenian's short story 'Cat Person' (2017). The biblical text personifies the city of Nineveh as a sexually deviant woman and graphically details how the Israelite deity will publicly strip and expose, throw filth at, and disgrace her. 'Cat Person' is the story of Margot, a young woman who has sex she would rather have avoided with an older man named Rob. 'Cat Person' closes with Rob repeatedly texting Margot, finally calling her 'whore.'

Graybill suggests that we consider Yhwh (that is, the Israelite deity) as a version of Rob, 'a nice guy, sort of,' 'a little dorky,' 'a little melodramatic,' someone who 'had really done nothing wrong, except like her, and be bad in bed, and maybe lie about having cats' (2021: 28). The biblical text is no longer a painful example of divine violence, exercised through sexually humiliating and abusing a female. 'Instead,' Graybill writes, 'we have something more everyday: familiar, exhausting, prickly, irreducible to the category of tragedy. And also: fuzzy, messy, icky' (2021: 29).

Here Graybill's own strong theory functions to downplay the violence of the text, because the Israelite deity is *not* some awkward older man looking for a sexual encounter. In the Hebrew Bible, Yhwh has all power; he strips, humiliates, and arranges the stoning of Israel, personified as female (see Jeremiah 13:20–27; Isaiah 47:3; Ezekiel 16:27–41, 23; Hosea 2:3; Nahum 3:5). He arranges the gang rape of his own cities and his own people and metaphorically engages in rape himself (Lamentations 1:9–10, 23; Hosea 2:12–13). The Israelite deity determines the fate of humanity (Genesis 6–8); he controls the future of peoples, ordering or using his Israelite henchmen to enslave and destroy (e.g., Numbers 31, 1 Samuel 15, 2 Samuel 8). Yhwh of Nahum 3 is not 'a nice guy, sort of,' 'a little dorky,' 'a little melodramatic' (2021: 28). Critical empathy is pertinent here to identify and resist the power exercised by Yhwh and the violence he perpetrates. Instead, Graybill makes no real attempt to challenge the misogyny of the biblical text. We celebrate multivocality in feminist scholarship, but not when it minimises or renders risible brutality and violence.

2 SAMUEL 13

In *Texts of Terror*, Trible acknowledges that readers are wounded by violent texts. Still, she argues for 'seeking a blessing' (1984: 4). Feminist scholarship since has, as Graybill notes, sought redemptive readings. Feminists have also, however, questioned that effort. Hence, in her contribution to *Terror in the Bible*, Rachelle Gilmour asks if Trible's attempt to find a blessing in 2 Samuel 13 leads to misreading it.

The narrative opens with Tamar's half-brother, the royal firstborn Amnon, conspiring with his cousin, Jonadab, to trap Princess Tamar in his rooms. Tamar is first put on display for a company of men (13:8–9) before Amnon expels his male guests and begins his assault on her. Tamar desperately tries to forestall him, appealing to the damage he will do to his reputation (13:9–12). At one point, she suggests that Amnon speak to their father, King David, presumably to ask for her hand in marriage (13:13). Amnon rapes her instead and afterwards orders his servant to throw 'this' (i.e., her) out (13:14–17). Tamar does not go quietly. She rends her clothing and screams in despair (13:19). She then meets her brother Absalom. After receiving confirmation that Amnon has raped her, Absalom instructs Tamar to be silent, for Amnon is her brother (13:20). Two years later, Absalom arranges for Amnon's execution by his men (13:28–29).

Trible argues that Absalom is Tamar's advocate who 'supports and protects' his sister with 'tenderness': '[he] stands apart from the other male characters' (1984: 52). Gilmour, on the other hand, questions whether Absalom is genuinely acting in Tamar's interests. Is he avenging *her rape* or an insult to *his own honour*? Gilmour points out that biblical hegemonic masculinity depends on contests between men: contests that frequently rely on the violent abuse of women's bodies (2021: 58–59). She notes that after the rape, Tamar goes into mourning and makes her distress publicly known (13:19), crying out loudly (*וזעקה*). Gilmour argues that the related verb (*צעק*) is used in Deuteronomy 22:24, 27 to describe what a woman *should* do to make her violation public. Nevertheless, Absalom immediately hushes his sister.

Gilmour points out that Tamar is described as 'desolate' only *after* she is placed in Absalom's house (2021: 60). She suggests Absalom is simply one more male character who suppresses or ignores Tamar and who adds to her pain. She observes multiple parallels with the treatment of David's unnamed *pilagshim*, his secondary wives (2

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Samuel 15–20) (2021: 63). Both Tamar and David's wives are effectively made available to rapists by the men who should protect them. Tamar is silenced by Absalom; David's wives are silenced by the narrator, who gives them no voice. Finally, just as Tamar is shut up in Absalom's house (13:20) so David makes sure to shut up his *pilagshim* in his own house until they die (2 Samuel 20:3).

Gilmour takes into account the broader narrative context, one in which the rape of Tamar is just one part of the deity's sentence against David (2 Samuel 12:10–11): 'Tamar is the victim not only of Amnon, but of the whole outworking of God's punishment of David' (2021: 62). Brutal sexual violence against women is not only a tool of kings and princes in their competitions for power, but God's tool to punish those he condemns. Gilmour makes clear Tamar's honour was never at stake—for David, for Absalom, or for the biblical author. Instead, Absalom is 'another oppressor' (2021: 62). She uses critical empathy as a tool to resist power and to identify another layer of harm Tamar endures.

Gilmour's essay demonstrates that feminist readings of Tamar are not 'exhausted,' 'dated,' or 'locked in a pattern of what feminist criticism beginning in the 1980's had already done' (Graybill, 2021: 1). Decades of work on biblical hegemonic masculinity have led to readings which have begun to explain sexual violence in the Bible as far more than the product of individual 'bad apples.' The systemic nature of sexual violence against female characters, against subordinate male characters, and against characters whose gender identity appears fluid has recently become an important line of feminist inquiry (e.g., Thiede, 2022).

Gilmour's treatment combines critical analysis and empathy. After demonstrating that Absalom is hardly providing Tamar with a kind and supportive response following her brutal rape, Gilmour notes:

> there is more terror, and irredeemable terror, in 2 Samuel 13 than Trible argued. Tamar has no comforter (…) [t]he story conveys no illusions that Tamar is safe or protected in either her father's or her brother's house. (2021: 62)

Gilmour closes her chapter by stating that the role of interpreters is 'to critique society then and now' (2021: 65).

Graybill's treatment of the same chapter stands in contrast with Gilmour's. The rape of Tamar, Graybill claims, is 'messy' because of its consequences for the Davidic monarchy and because of the purported messiness of what Tamar herself allegedly wants. To make the text conform to her theory and its nomenclature, Graybill makes what is in our view an unsubstantiated claim: that Tamar harbours a '*desire* to marry her rapist' (2021: 43, italics ours; cf. the toxic argument by Reis, 1997). It is true that rape victims do not react uniformly. They may freeze; many do;[12] or, they may try to talk their attackers out of assaulting them. There is, however, no textual evidence in 2 Samuel 13 supporting Graybill's claim that:

> [f]or Absalom, Tamar's desire to marry her rapist half-brother is a queer desire indeed (and here recall the affective overlap of 'queer' and 'unhappy'); his words are an attempt to force her on a less unhappy path. (2021: 53)

What indicates that Absalom suspects or knows that Tamar 'desires' to marry Amnon? Absalom encounters Tamar in a state of despair, anguish, and pain *after* being assaulted—and after, as the text makes clear, resisting assault. After the rape, too, Tamar makes no mention of any 'desire'. She makes her rape public. She puts dust on her head, tears her clothes, and screams in anguish. Also, this text is not 'queer.' It is a narrative that tells an oft-heard story: a woman is raped, and when she tries to make what has happened to her public, she is silenced.

Graybill references the work of Sara Ahmed (2014), who discusses 'the violence that converts no into yes' (2014: 56). Ahmed also asks that we consider cases where 'yes' involves force but is not experienced as force. Yet Tamar *is* depicted as experiencing what happens to her as force. As rape. She resists, she mourns, and she screams. In any case, those forced to say 'yes' to mitigate the violence they face are suffering conditions that are themselves violent. Rather than addressing the violence inherent in the biblical system, Graybill, to us, plays it down, even throws it into question. For readers of biblical texts who know what it is to be forcibly raped, Graybill's reading might be (albeit unintentionally) actively harmful.

Graybill argues that the words *fuzzy*, *messy*, and *icky* provide a nuance that has been missing from treatments of sexual violence (2021: 84). She describes, for instance, Roberta, a character in Lara Williams's novel *Supper Club* (2019), who is finally able to acknowledge that she was raped, before detailing several trauma symptoms, including fear of the dark, of a stranger lurking under the bed, and of the rapist on the other side of the door. Graybill writes, 'while Roberta experiences rape, her pain and harm cannot be limited to, or even traced to, the specific incident' (2021: 97). Here, a rape victim's post-traumatic symptoms, *which she herself describes in the context of having experienced sexual assault,* are not apparently related (only or primarily?) to the violence experienced.

[12] A large-scale study demonstrates that 70% of women who have been raped report significant tonic immobility; 48% report extreme tonic immobility (Möller *et al.*, 2017: 935).

Graybill continues to apply her signature language: rape is 'itself only one detail.' We should focus on the 'fuzziness, messiness, and ickiness' (2021: 97). Where is critical empathy, empathy that rests on a moral and ethical imperative to articulate the pain of sufferers and to demonstrate that the violence they are suffering is wrong? For rape victims, articulating their pain can be a gruelling task. Readers who *have* experienced sexual trauma know full well how many diverse symptoms originate in, and persist long after, the actual assault. Questioning the connection between sexual assault and its resulting trauma downplays the effects of that violence.

JUDGES 19

Trible noted that Judges 19, perhaps the most shocking text of sexual violence in the entire Bible, was long met with 'overwhelming silence' (1984: 86). Feminist scholars have, ever since, regularly addressed the text's horrific gender-based violence. *Terror in the Bible* includes two treatments of this text; we focus here on 'Reading Crucifixion Narratives as Texts of Terror' by David Tombs.[13]

Tombs directs attention to male-on-male sexualised violence in Bible texts, a topic feminist scholarship has recently begun to address. He notes that scholars have yet to fully appreciate how rape and torture are 'intimately connected' in both Judges 19 and other literary and actual contexts (2021: 144). Sexual violence, as Tombs states, is a frequent feature of armed conflict, and ubiquitous in torture (2021: 147). Tombs offers a linguistic analysis of Judges 19:25, a verse that describes how the rapists 'knew her' (*וידעו אותה*) and 'abused her' (*ויתעללו בה*) all night long. He notes that Trible translates the second verb (a hitpael form of *alal,* עלל) as 'tortured' (1984: 77). This verb, when coupled with the preposition *bet* (ב) signifies sexual violence. Tombs also points out that the *hitpael* of *alal* is elsewhere translated with 'mock' (see, for example, the New American Standard and Jewish Study Bible translations of Exodus 10:2).

These associations lead Tombs to compare Judges 19 with the torture and mocking of Jesus depicted in Matthew 27. Noting Trible's warning against a Christological[14] reading of Judges 19, Tombs exercises particular care in identifying any parallels between the Hebrew Bible's Judges 19 and the New Testament's Matthew 27 (2021: 150, 155): the host and the crowd negotiate the fate of the Levite and his *pilegesh*, while Pilate discusses Jesus' fate with a crowd; both the unnamed woman and Jesus are subjected to mockery, brutality, and eventual death; mobs of men—in Gibeah and the cohort of five hundred Roman soldiers—play critical roles in witnessing or enacting sexual/ised violence. In both cases a person is betrayed and made subject to sexual/ised violence. Tombs is uncovering another layer of how power inflicts harm; using critical empathy, he gives voice to what the biblical hegemonic texts silence: the relationship between torture and sexual violence.

Graybill responds to the gang rape, death, and dismemberment of the Levite's *pilegesh*, as well as to the mass abductions, rapes, and killings that follow (Judges 20–21), by calling what has happened 'icky' (2021: 155). If '*icky* names bad sex, uncomfortable sex, regrettable sex, and sexual encounters' (2021: 16) then we are at a loss to explain this. The very term itself, and Graybill's definition, when, as here, applied to depictions of sexual horror and atrocities of war, trivialise.

Graybill also writes of Judges 19: '[I]t has been almost a rite of passage to wrestle with the story, to seek what new feminist truth might be extracted from its bloody and dismembered pieces' (2021: 158). Do feminist scholars *really* go through some kind of 'self-hazing'? Could we possibly derive 'much pleasure' from reading this narrative (Graybill, 2021: 175)? Graybill also writes:

> And yet, people survive rapes, even gang rapes. Not everyone does—this is essential to remember—but also, and equally importantly, some people do. (2021: 161)

Indeed, horrifyingly, we read news stories about gang rapes that result in death. Should feminists respond by noting, 'yes, this rape victim died, but it is important to remember that some survive gang rapes'? Where here is the critical empathy that gives voice to the voiceless and interrogates violence and power?

Of the gang rape, death, and dismemberment of the Levite's unnamed *pilegesh* as well as the mass abductions, rapes, and genocide that follow, Graybill also writes:

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[13] Brent Pelton's essay, 'The Fruit of Others' Labor: How Judges 19 Stands with Dehumanized Migrant Workers,' uses critical empathy to address complex uses of power; his essay argues against feminist readings which reduce victimisation in the narrative to gender alone. Doing so marginalises voices both in the Bible and in contemporary settings (2021: 173–174).

[14] Christological interpretation functions through retro-jecting Christian theological notions on to pre-Christian, Jewish sacred texts. One example of this might be to identify the suffering servant in the Hebrew Bible's Isaiah 53 as depicting the suffering of Jesus, identified by his followers as 'the Christ' (or messiah saviour), suffering which occurred centuries after this text was composed. Such retro-jective identification of Jesus Christ in much earlier texts is called Christological interpretation.

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> Perhaps I should feel icky about feeling (just) icky. But this is also the point: The language of fuzzy, messy, and icky was never intended as a comprehensive description of all sexual violence, still less all sexualized or misogynistic violence. My goal has never been the wholesale replacement of one set of words for speaking and writing about sexual violence with another. (2021: 156)

Graybill excoriates prior 'strong theories' for ostensibly seeking 'to explain everything through a single master narrative' (2021: 156). Yet, while she claims to sit with 'ambiguity, ambivalence, and non-resolution' (2021: 4), we see Graybill repeatedly pressing biblical narratives into moulds prescribed by modern texts (such as 'Cat Person') and selecting 'ordinary' terms. What results is prescriptive. Texts of sexual violence may not be read with predation or culpability in mind (2021: 69). They may not be read with mourning or pity. Graybill's readings provide readers with 'sharp lessons on how (not) to memorialize trauma, lingering, instead, with fuzzy, messy, and icky' (2021: 115). Apparently, *only* by reading texts of sexual violence in those terms can we 'stay with the story and its difficulties' (2021: 156). She lauds those who take her approach:

> Against the image of a female victim/survivor Finding Her Voice to Speak Her Truth, they dwell with the fuzzy, the messy, and the icky. (2021: 116)

The use of capital letters seems mocking. And yet, victims and survivors of sexual violence may need decades to find their voices and speak their truth.

Clines has noted the troubling outcome of scholarly commentary that obscures violence in biblical texts. He writes:

> When the function of commentary on biblical texts [is] (…) to familiarize the Bible, to normalize it (…), to render it as undisturbing as possible, to press it into the service of a different worldview; [then] eventually, the effect will be to write the Bible out of existence. (1995: 244)

Writing terror out of the Bible obscures the aims and achievements that Phyllis Trible and other feminists have advanced for several decades. We are not persuaded by the presumed nuanced capacity of Graybill's terms for describing sexual assault. Instead, they diminish, even erase, biblical sexual violence. The application of critical empathy can offer the opposite outcome. Critical empathy identifies injustice and abuse that causes suffering. Critical empathy gives voice to the anguish that the sufferer is unable to express and, in some systems, is even prevented from articulating. It names the pain and harm that is silenced by discourses of power.

CONCLUSIONS

Feminist biblical scholarship exploring sexual violence in the Bible is by no means 'exhausted' or 'dated.' The conversation is a vibrant one, informed, in recent decades, by the integration of trauma studies, affect studies, queer studies, masculinity studies, and more. Collaboration and cross-fertilisation among those approaches offer new understandings of sexual violence in biblical literature. Feminist scholars have influenced gender-sensitive readings that focus on ableism and on the treatment of non-human animals in biblical literature (Olyan, 2008: 1–2). They have continued to explore feminist postcolonial and race-critical interpretations, addressing the racist and misogynistic nature of biblical narratives and laws, together with their misogynistic underpinnings (e.g., Blyth and Davidson-Ladd, 2018; Dunbar, 2022; Gafney, 2009; Rey, 2016).

The outcome of feminist conversations with affect and trauma studies has demonstrated how biblical texts present sexual trauma both for individuals and communities. Feminist scholars have asked whether ancient texts of trauma once served communal efforts to process devastation and destruction and whether they may facilitate healing for modern readers (Boase and Frechette, 2016). Such studies have also increasingly attended to the trauma male biblical characters experience from sexualised assault (Thiede, 2024a).

Queer studies have informed feminist ones. Scholars like Guest (2005, 2012), Hornsby and Stone (2011) have spanned these two fields and invited readers to see beyond binary categories in biblical literature. Doing so is an additional act of resistance both to binary presentations of gender in the Bible and to modern readings that depend on reinforcing them. Other queer readings, absorbing influence from contextual Bible study, pioneered at South Africa's Ujamaa Centre, have embraced also so-called 'ordinary readers' in interpretations of queer resistance (e.g., van Klinken *et al.*, 2021).

Feminist scholars who have engaged in productive relationship with masculinity studies (as Graybill does in in her earlier monograph of 2016) have opened up a host of new readings where sexual violence in the Bible is concerned. Their studies may have begun with identifying how systems of hegemonic masculinity function to enable and sanction sexual violence, but they hardly end there. Masculinity studies has helped feminist scholars

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address not only the performance of masculinity in the Bible but its own fluid nature. Hence, feminist scholars have addressed sexual violence against male characters, too—both by women and by men.

Finally, we note that works like *Terror in the Bible* engage feminism in conversation with a variety of fields, including economics, psychology, and sociology, deploying a range of methodological approaches. A diverse set of hermeneutical lenses is found therein, including, among others, queer, Pasifika, and caste perspectives. None of this strikes us as boring, outmoded, or resistant to ambiguity. The conversation between feminism and the Bible remains complex and fluid well beyond the confines of Graybill's monograph, yielding diverse and revelatory discoveries.

Each of these approaches rests on premises that were foundational for feminist biblical scholarship of the 1980's. Each addresses power imbalances that feature domination over subordinated populations. Each contains resistance to those power imbalances and a commitment to naming them. To us it continues to represent necessary and often vibrant resistance to hegemonic masculinity and abusive power—and while, yes, such resistance *can* be exhausting, it is far from *passé*. Biblical texts that depict women and other vulnerable communities experiencing violence need our interrogation—still—and critical empathy lies at the heart of this.

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Citation: Thiede, B. and Stiebert, J. (2025). Feminism, Bible, Texts and Terror – A Feminist Reflection. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 08. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16018

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