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T Job's Text of TERROR

By Michael S. Moore

Phyllis Trible, in an oft-quoted study, identifies four texts in the Old Testament as “texts of terror.”¹ Each text narrates a tragic story about an innocent woman suffering terribly at the hands of insensitive, oppressive, even violent men. Each interpretation she assigns to these texts deliberately uses messianic, incarnational language in order to bridge the historical and hermeneutical gap between the suffering of ancient women and that of contemporary women.

Thus Trible portrays Hagar’s rejection by Abraham as something profoundly evil, yet paradoxically redemptive: “*she* was wounded for our transgressions; *she* was bruised for our iniquities.” Tamar’s rape by Amnon is something terribly violent, yet strangely transformative; she becomes “a *woman* of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” The unnamed concubine of Judges 19, brutally murdered by licentious Benjaminites, then gruesomely dismembered by her husband (to arouse Israel to vengeance), becomes a living resource of eucharistic nourishment: “*her* body was broken and given to many.” The suffering of Jephthah’s daughter is something vicarious enough to justify retranslating the words of the 22nd Psalm quite differently from what the Psalmist, not to mention Jesus of Nazareth, probably ever intended: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken *her*?”²

Now, the intention of this short essay is not to disparage Professor Trible or the exegetical tradition she so ably represents.³ Nor, I would think, would anyone in his right pastoral mind deny that there is a very real sense in which

texts like these need to be reclaimed and re-applied to the contemporary world, particularly to the lives of suffering women. Indeed, any incarnational theology worth its salt is *obligated* to work with texts like these, texts that identify *their* suffering with *His* suffering, and, by universal extension, *our* suffering. Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, and Choan-Seng Song have been pointing this out for decades.⁴ Trible’s work stands firmly in this tradition, a biblical wake-up call to scholars often too stuck in their own lexicons to hear the cries for help just beyond their office doors.⁵

Nevertheless, there are at least two fundamental problems with her overall conception of “terror.” The first falls into the category of philosophical critique; the second, into that of exegetical critique. Philosophically, Trible’s view of terror suffers from the same problem that plagues all anti-supernaturalist views of reality; namely, the fact that she unquestioningly accepts the unprovable, yet widely-held presumption among Western scholarship that the terror we see in the material world—including, but not limited to, that perpetrated by men against women—is the only kind of terror imaginable. One can only respond by pointing out that this is a secular, modernist view of reality, which, though popular and widespread today, makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to the peoples of the ancient Near East, including Israel.⁶

The second problem is that, since for Trible there can be no other terror in the cosmos more fearsome than that

engendered by or suffered by human beings, the biblical and extra-biblical texts which speak of nonhuman terror must be interpreted (when read at all) in such a way that one carefully avoids offending the sensibilities of modern readers, many of whom are so myopically fixated on their own problems they can no longer hear these texts in their socio-theological contexts. Rudolf Bultmann rather famously attempted to do this for twentieth-century Europeans by means of his elaborately conceived, yet now widely rejected, program of *Entmythologisierung*.⁷ Tribble's version is more akin to an exegetical sleight of hand; that is, she simply ignores those texts about nonhuman terror altogether, then elevates disproportionately those texts that speak of *feminine* terror into their place.

I want to challenge this view of "terror" in three stages. *First*, I want to present some actual textual evidence for the existence of ancient Syro-Palestinian—including Israelite—demonic activity. *Second*, I want to reinterpret Job 19:23–29 in light of this evidence.⁸ *Third*, I want to suggest that a holistic comparative reading of the biblical evidence in its socio-historical context, while not the *only* way to read the Bible, is still the *first* way to read it, and, in the end, should be given precedence over all other approaches. Ultimately, my concern is pastoral. I freely admit my belief in the Bible as a living Word from God. I further confess my belief, hammered out on the anvil of pastoral experience, that contemporary fascination with humanistic ideologies limited *only* to discussions of human terror and human suffering renders the Church absolutely powerless to deal with real evil in the real world. It has been my unfortunate experience to witness too many Christians, even those I have personally baptized, feed on such modernist dogma to the point where they have become both biblically uninformed and spiritually naive, not only about the power of Evil, but also about the power of Good to overcome it.

The Textual Evidence

Perhaps the first thing to be said about the extant textual evidence, therefore, is that ancient Near Eastern peoples feared less the prospect of their going to hell than that of hell's coming to them. Regardless of what you or I might believe about the "unseen world," the evidence is clear that the ancients feared it. Anatolian peoples feared demons with names like "The Fear Before the Lion" and "The Terror Before the Snake"; Mesopotamians feared demons like "The

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Decayer" and "The One Who Brings Up the Void"; Syro-Palestinians feared demons with names like "The Splatterer," "The Stranglers," and "The Spoiler."⁹

And even though the Hebrew Bible staunchly de-emphasizes the existence of demonic activity generally, the situation is little different for Israel. Most scholars are convinced, for example, that the priestly instructions about the Day of Atonement in the book of Leviticus involve a demon named "Azazel," apparently a desert-dwelling entity to whom the Israelite High Priest sent a scapegoat once a year after ritualistically drenching it in Israel's sins (Lev 16:8, 10).¹⁰ Further, when one comes to the *history* of Israel proper, a number of texts faithfully testify to those dark moments in Israelite history when Israelites (not just Moabites or some other neighboring people)¹¹ actually sacrificed their own children to what the biblical historians called "demons" (*ōedîm*) in Transjordan, then continued (against sharp prophetic resistance) to sacrifice to them in Cisjordan in the Valley of Topheth, just south of Jerusalem's protective walls. According to Jeremiah, this practice went on at least until the fall of the city in the sixth century BCE.¹² The fact that such illicit activity is reported *in spite of* Yahwistic proclivities *not* to report it is further remarkable evidence for its actual existence in popular Israelite religion.¹³

Of great importance to this line of evidence is the appearance of demon-like beings in the plaster texts about Balaam discovered at Tell Deir 'Alla (probably ancient Succoth) in 1967. Like the Satan in Job 2:1, these beings (called *ōaddayin*) "take a stand" in a "divine council" in order to accuse some mortal of wrongdoing. Before this council, the *ōaddayin* then issue the following decree:

Sew up the bolts of heaven with your cloud!
Ordain darkness, not light! Gloom, not radiance!¹⁴

The reason why the *ōaddayin* want the bolts of heaven sewn shut is so that they can afflict humanity without interference from the “good gods” in the heavenly realms. The fact that the author of the biblical Job¹⁵ uses language quite similar to the language here is further remarkable evidence for demonic activity in Israel proper, evidence that needs to be heard carefully and weighed judiciously when assessing what “terror” might have meant to women like Hagar, Tamar, and Jephthah’s daughter.

Job 19:23–29

Perhaps the most important observation to be made in the present discussion is to note that the term *ōaddayin* in the Deir ‘Alla texts also appears in Job 19:29 (*ōdyn*). Though practically all English translations fail to recognize it, the word is nevertheless plainly there in the text, complete with Aramaized plural suffix. The context is Job’s famous “redeemer” speech, in which Job laments his illness, his loneliness, and the pain inflicted by his accusers Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Defensive and angry, Job demands that a “redeemer” be provided to plead his case.¹⁶ He further demands that a written record be made of his entire dispute with the deity and his “friends.” Finally, in Job 19:28–29, he concludes his lament as follows:

“If you continue to say,
‘Let’s go on persecuting him!
The root of the problem is in him!’
Then beware of the fever!¹⁷
For wrath’s punishment is fever,
that you (too) might come to know the *ōaddayin*!”¹⁸

Interpreted in light of this newer evidence, Job 19:23–29 seems not only to be pleading for a “redeemer” to protect Job from demonic caprice; Job also appears to be warning Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar that they, too, should watch their backs. Instead of looking for the “root of the problem” in him, perhaps they should beware of the day when they, too, may need a benevolent “redeemer” to protect them from the same malevolent powers that now terrify him.

Reflections

I became painfully aware of my own modernist prejudices about “terror” in a 1975 conversation with some Brazilians in Belo Horizonte. A small group of us had gathered

in Claudio’s home when one of us, a North American college student, asked our host what he thought of the film *The Exorcist*, then playing to large audiences in the United States. Immediately, all the Brazilians in the room started laughing. The North Americans asked them what was so funny. “You are,” they said. “Why?” we all asked. “Because,” they replied, “you have no idea what Evil is *really* like, do you!” The fact that so many of us had found *The Exorcist* “entertaining” seemed proof positive to the Brazilians, whose awareness of “terror” was far more acute than ours, that we had a lot of growing up to do! Are they right?

The book of Job is not a passion play about *potential* evil, but a reality check about real evil. We need to fear that which is truly fearsome. May God give us the strength to take off our modernist eyeglasses and read the Bible in its socio-historical context. Only then will we begin to see that that which is truly “terrifying” has been revealed, if only in part, to motivate us to cling with every fiber of our being to the One who can save us from it.

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Notes

¹Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). The four texts are Gen 16:1–16; 2 Sam 13:1–22; Judg 19:1–30; and Judg 11:29–40.

²Ibid., pp. 8 (Hagar), 36 (Tamar), 64 (unnamed concubine), and 92 (Jephthah’s daughter). The plaintive words of this psalm are found on the lips of Jesus in Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

³Rhetorical criticism, as contrasted with, say, form criticism, focuses on macro- rather than micro-structures in the biblical text. Methodologically, *Texts of Terror* is a brilliant contribution to the exegetical tradition perhaps most famously articulated by James Muilenberg in his 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature (“Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 [1969]: 1–18).

⁴Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991; trans. from the 1967 German ed.); Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Analysis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977), 53: “Since God’s mission in creation is that of enfleshment, that of imparting Himself, Christian mission as witness to God’s mission should be that of imparting to others one’s own self.” See also Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament*

Perspective, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁵ It must be quickly added, however, that Tribble has absolutely no intention, in her words, of “subordinat[ing] the suffering of the four women to the suffering of the cross. Their passion has its own integrity; *no comparisons diminish the terror they knew*” (*Texts of Terror*, 2, emphasis mine).

⁶ Philosophically, such views go back at least to Ernst Troeltsch’s rejection of the supernatural in his famous essay, “Rückblick auf ein halbes Jahrhundert der theologischen Wissenschaft,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1922).

⁷ See the summation by Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

⁸ Much of this is a condensation of a paper presented to the Hebrew and Cognate Literature section at the Society of Biblical Literature’s annual meeting in Kansas City, MO in November, 1991, published as “Job’s Texts of Terror” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993): 662–675.

⁹ All references to the relevant texts are found in my *CBQ* article, “Job’s Texts of Terror,” 662.

¹⁰ See David P. Wright, “Azazel,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* I:536–537, for other options.

¹¹ See 2 Kings 3:27.

¹² See Deut 32:17; Ps 106:37; Jer 7:31. See also the long list of prohibited magico-religious specializations in Deut 18:9–11, sure evidence of their problematic existence in popular Israelite religion.

¹³ Inscriptional discoveries at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, Khirbet el-Qôm, and Deir ‘Alla now reveal to us just how polytheistic and

humanistic *popular* religion really was in ancient Israel. For a discussion of this evidence, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities of Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 145–160.

¹⁴ This critical translation is based on the reconstructed text in Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla*, HSM 31 (Chico: Scholars, 1980), 25.

¹⁵ The *Testament of Job* has an extended dialogue between Job and Satan; see Russell P. Spittler, “The Testament of Job,” in James Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), chs 6–27 (841–51).

¹⁶ Norman Habel, without even referring to the Deir ‘Alla texts, argues that this probably refers to a non-Yahwistic “redeemer” (*Job*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985], 306–307).

¹⁷ Reading *hrb* in 19:29 twice as the noun *horeb*, “heat/fever”; see Job 30:30 and BDB 351. The fever of illness was widely believed to be demonic in origin; see G. Fohrer, “Krankheit im Lichte des Alten Testaments,” in *Studien zu alttestamentliche Texten und Themen, 1966–1972* (BZAW 155; Berlin: DeGruyter, 1981), 172–87.

¹⁸ Scholars have interpreted *ōdyn* here (a hapax in the MT) in at least three different ways: (a) In the Greek Bible, codex Alexandrinus apparently reads *ōdyn* as a derivative of Heb *ōdd*, “to overpower, destroy,” offering Gk *ischys* as a translation. (b) The Vg reads *iudicium*, a term many feel goes back to an original Heb relative particle *ō* + the verb *dyn*, “to judge, decide.” (c) The term *ōdyn* also appears in business lists at Ugarit; Loren Fisher proposed that it might be an ancient variant of *ōadday*, but this is highly speculative (for a discussion of these options, with references, see “Job’s Texts of Terror,” 666).