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# Our Own Complicity

## *The Unnamed Woman in Judges 19 and MMIWG*

SINGULAR BRUTALITY MARKS THE UNNAMED WOMAN'S STORY in Judges 19—perhaps the most disturbing and upsetting story in the Hebrew Bible, in which a group of men rape and then murder her. Our religious discussions therefore usually ignore this story, preferring to focus on tales that are not as difficult to deal with. However, ignoring the woman's story does a disservice to her life and death, and to ourselves. If we believe the content in the Bible is divinely inspired, then we have a duty to search for the divine in this story. Perhaps the most important path comes in applying this story to our lives today and asking ourselves what it teaches us about our world. When I considered the unnamed woman's story from this perspective, I noticed similarities between her life and the lives of hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) as an epidemic has risen to national attention in the United States and Canada in the last several years, but many Indigenous leaders continue to criticize institutions for their lack of action in solving the problem. Violence against Indigenous women has been an issue in America since settlers landed on the continent's shores. As soon as the two groups interacted, European settlers began to brutalize Indigenous women because they generally viewed violence against Indigenous women as unremarkable (Rindfleisch 347). Many scholars, especially Indigenous scholars, posit that this violence resulted from the connection between Indigenous women and the land; that is, because European settlers saw the land as exploitable and free to take, they viewed Indigenous women the same way. Additionally, because Indigenous culture often regarded their women as sacred, brutalizing and kidnapping Indigenous women was an effective way for European settlers to demonstrate dominance over Indigenous peoples. Despite the overwhelming evidence that violence against Indigenous women and girls has been a problem since this time, our society forgot it was an issue until Indigenous activists forced the nation to pay attention once again. As Mary A. Eberts argues, we knew violence against Indigenous

women and girls was a serious problem, and then we “unknew” it to ignore our own complicity and avoid uncomfortable change (72). I would like to note here that I am writing this paper as a white settler woman descended mostly from white Europeans. I do not presume to speak to or for an Indigenous audience. Instead, I wish to address this paper to my fellow white settlers to encourage us to “re-know” the problem of violence against Indigenous women, examine our own complicity, and implement changes that may help alleviate this rampant epidemic.

In a way eerily similar to our “un-knowing” of violence against Indigenous women, we have forgotten the story of the unnamed woman in Judges 19 to avoid discomfort and recognition of the darkest parts of our society as they are reflected in its obsidian mirror. However, telling the unnamed woman’s story forces us to recognize how that story is reenacted, brutal as it is, all the time. We must consider people who might be in her position: those who are marginalized and vulnerable without protection. Today, I see the unnamed woman’s reflection most clearly in the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls that we allow to slip away into the ether without so much as a whisper of their names. Examining the story of the unnamed woman in Judges 19 provides us with a guide to interact with the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and it warns us of what may happen if we do not.

The unnamed woman in Judges 19 is not a biblical character who many American Christians are familiar with. The story starts with the unnamed woman leaving her husband for an unknown reason and going to her father’s house—and it is at this point, at the very first piece of her story, that she begins to reflect missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The text tells us that the unnamed woman left her husband because she was unfaithful to him. The King James Version translates this as, “played the whore against him” (19:2), but the actual Hebrew root, *znh*, can be translated to mean many things, not just sexual infidelity (Frymer-Kensky 120). Most scholarly attention focuses on the question of her unfaithfulness. Some scholars have argued that the original text actually said that the woman was angry with her husband or that they had been in a fight, and it was mistranslated to “unfaithfulness.” Jason Bembry argues that this mistranslation occurred so that the editors could frame the woman as complicit in her own murder. Similarly, when an Indigenous woman goes missing or is discovered murdered, authorities and the media often blame her behavior—or their stereotypical understanding of Indigenous people’s behavior—for her fate. For example, when eighteen-year-old Kaysera Stops Pretty Places’s family tried to report her missing, the police told them she was probably out partying and she would be back in a few days.

And when they did find her body, they insinuated that her death was the result of alcohol poisoning—even though her blood alcohol content was only 0.149, which most experts agree is not high enough to cause death (Cavallier). With Indigenous women, like with the unnamed woman in Judges, people insist on making the women's deaths their own fault, somehow, so that they do not have to confront harsh truths and ugly behavior.

The scholarly fascination with the Judges 19 woman's supposed unfaithfulness, like police and media attention on Indigenous women and girls' behavior, is mistaken. Engaging with the idea that the unnamed woman (or Indigenous women and girls) deserved to be assaulted and murdered because of her behavior, by explaining that her behavior was not transgressive, implicitly says that if her behavior were transgressive, she would have deserved to have been raped and murdered. Pamela Reis, however, says that the unnamed woman may have "played the whore" in a unique way that avoids blaming her for her own rape and murder. She suggests that the unnamed woman "played the whore" for the Levite instead of against him; that is, that the unnamed woman's husband prostituted her for money, which is why she left him and went to her father's house. Reis sees this reading as consistent with other uses of the Hebrew root *znh* in the Hebrew Bible, while also being consistent with the biblical narrator's purpose of demonstrating the complete breakdown of Israelite society in Judges: the woman's husband degraded her, and then her father failed to protect her by sending her away from his home with the Levite. This reading also reflects many missing and murdered Indigenous women's circumstances. When institutions like the law enforcement system and the media—as well as individual people—find an opportunity to blame Indigenous women and girls for their own deaths and disappearances, they jump on it. However, sex work and drug use do not happen in a vacuum. When Indigenous women are trafficked, they are often trafficked by someone they know, and it can appear voluntary (Pachelli). Additionally, sex work and drug use are often tied to intergenerational trauma directly resulting from the American government's treatment of Indigenous people (Chactaby 127). But despite the evidence that something bigger is going on, we continue to stereotype Indigenous women as sexually available addicts, just as people stereotype the unnamed woman, the victim of a sex crime, as sexually promiscuous.

Tragically, the similarities between the unnamed woman and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls does not end with our cultural fascination with imposing a sexualized identity upon marginalized women who go missing or who are murdered. After the unnamed woman leaves her father's house, she and her husband stop for the night in an Israelite town in

Benjaminite territory. A group of Benjaminite men come to the house where they are staying and demand that their host send out the Levite so they may rape him. Instead, the host offers them his virgin daughter and the unnamed woman—his guest’s wife. The men accept the offer of the woman, and the host and Levite cast her outside, where the men rape the woman all night. The narrator is ambiguous about when the woman dies. She may have died during the night as she attempted to reach safety while the host and the Levite slept inside the house. She alternatively may have died from wounds sustained during the assault as the Levite carried her home on his donkey, or the Levite may have actually murdered his wife when he dismembered her body once they reached home. It seems unlikely that the narrator would not tell us if the Levite murdered his own wife, since that would demonstrate the extreme decay of Israelite society, so it is likely that the woman died of her wounds either during the night or on the way back to the Levite’s house. As Ryan Kuja points out, people worldwide unconsciously reenact often the unsettling details of this part of this story. He cites examples of men who gang rape and murder women in Sudan and India (89), but it would be a mistake for us to assume that people in the United States do not also reenact this story. Indigenous women and girls are frequently murdered in an extremely similar manner: a group of men take them, rape them, and murder them. There are no statistics on whether Indigenous women are more likely to be gang raped and/or murdered by groups of men, but stories of that type seem to be much more common among Indigenous women than American women of other ethnicities or races. In fact, one of the earliest settler murders of an Indigenous woman that settlers found worth recording was a case where a Muscogee woman was kidnapped, gang raped, and murdered (Rindfleisch 348).

It is important to note that the story of the woman in Judges 19 and the stories of many Indigenous women include both rape and murder. The connection between rape and murder may seem odd, but it is actually perfectly logical. Rape is about exercising power and control over another human being’s body. It can be about sexual power and access to someone else’s body for pleasure, as in cases of marital rape or intimate partner rape; but ultimately it is always about entitlement and domination. This focus on power explains why the Benjaminite men initially wanted to rape the Levite; it does not imply homosexuality but rather demonstrates their desire to subjugate, humiliate, and dominate the “other,” as represented by the Levite (Kuja 93). Murder is simply the conclusion to which that desire to dominate the “other” ultimately comes, particularly because the ways in which groups of men rape women tend to be especially violent. In other words, their disregard for the woman’s humanity

and their desire to dominate and humiliate her leads them to brutalize her so terribly that she dies. This fear of the “other” is clearly present in the unnamed woman’s story; the Benjaminite men first want to brutalize the Levite but accept his wife as substitute, leaving their host’s virgin daughter, who is not “other,” untouched. Similarly, violence against Indigenous women and girls is rooted in fear of the “Other.” According to a 2016 Department of Justice report, roughly 96 percent of Indigenous women report experiencing sexual violence at the hands of a non-Native perpetrator. We can trace the beginnings of violence against Indigenous women to settlers’ colonial efforts to obliterate the Indigenous “other.”

The unnamed woman’s story continues to mirror missing and murdered Indigenous women’s stories because they both symbolize the land where they live. After the Benjaminite men rape the unnamed woman, the Levite puts her (potentially still alive) body onto his donkey and takes her back to the home they had shared. He cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends one piece to each tribe of Israel so that they can see the visceral horror that the Benjaminite men (and the Levite, although he conveniently leaves himself out of the narrative) inflicted upon the unnamed woman’s body. This incites a civil war among the Israelites because the Benjaminites refuse to surrender the men who raped the unnamed woman. The other tribes go to war against them and almost entirely destroy the tribe. The woman’s body therefore symbolizes the nation of Israel and even the physical land of Israel since the Levite tears it apart at the same time that Israel’s people and possibly even the physical landscape become war-torn. Similarly, Indigenous women, particularly missing and murdered Indigenous women, reflect their land as colonizers invade it and invade them. Indigenous cultures and religions themselves often connect women to the land because they view women and the earth as life-giving forces (Joseph 1). Indigenous scholars in particular have connected resource extraction to higher rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women because people who view the earth as inherently violable also see Indigenous women as inherently violable (Joseph 2). And indeed, as A. Skylar Joseph’s work demonstrates, “hotspots” for missing and murdered Indigenous women tend to be central sites for resource extraction. These “man-camps” are dangerous for women in general, but they increase the danger for Indigenous women specifically because of stereotypes that portray Indigenous women as sexually available (Joseph 2). We see, therefore, that Indigenous women symbolize the land in a way similar to the unnamed woman: as they are violated and torn apart, so is the land where they live.

Because the connections between the unnamed woman's story and missing and murdered Indigenous women are clear, we can extrapolate from the woman's story some lessons about how we as white settlers can work to alleviate the MMIWG epidemic. To do this, I first asked myself which characters in the woman's story image us, if the woman images Indigenous women. I determined that we see white settlers reflected in the characters of the Benjaminites, the Levite, the man from Gibeah, and the aggregate tribes of Israel. This comparison is uncomfortable because none of these people are good actors, but there are not any good actors in this story. However, like these characters, we have directly created the circumstances that result in missing and murdered Indigenous women, but we insist on erasing and being ignorant to our own role—we insist on unknowing it completely. Beyond this broad connection, however, we can learn something specific from each of these characters.

First, comparing white settlers to the Benjaminites is easy because, as stated earlier, most Indigenous women who experience violence experience it at the hands of non-Native people. But that means that we are also the larger tribe of Benjamin who refused to surrender the men who raped the unnamed woman. From this comparison, then, we can learn that our duty to Indigenous women goes beyond simply not harming them ourselves. We must also call out those who commit violence against Indigenous women, even if we know them personally or if it is difficult or painful for us to do so. The second character I compared us to, the Levite, may meet resistance from readers who want to cast him as Indigenous. However, I believe that doing so would actually play into our impulse to dismiss missing and murdered Indigenous women as an "Indian problem." In reality, Indigenous women are more likely to face violence from non-Native men. What lesson, then, does the Levite's conduct hold for us? I believe it speaks to our willingness to sacrifice others to save ourselves. The Levite was all too willing to let his wife suffer and die in his place, and he demonstrates extreme disregard for her at every turn. In the case of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, I submit that we sacrifice these women and girls to save our own sense of selves and our comfort, demonstrating that same disregard. The host in Gibeah teaches a similar lesson as he illustrates his willingness to sacrifice the female "other" (his daughter and the unnamed woman) in order to save his male guest. He says that for the men to rape the Levite would be an abomination, but it is evidently okay with him if the men rape his daughter and the woman. His actions warn us of the dangers of mistreating those who are "other" in favor of privileging our own.

Finally, the tribes of Israel and their actions after the woman's death images our actions. They warn us of the dangers of doing nothing. It is hard to



imagine an incident like the woman's death occurring in a healthy society, and we must therefore conclude that the tribes of Israel ignored the mistreatment of many unnamed women prior to this one. Inaction can be equated with violence—which we should keep in mind when we consider our own lack of action in helping missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. When the tribes of Israel finally acted, they acted violently, first against the “other” (the Benjaminites), then against the bystander town Jabesh-Gilead, and ultimately against themselves as they allowed the Benjaminites to kidnap and forcibly marry their daughters. Inaction is violence, and as this story tells us, all violence is ultimately violence against the self. The Israelites' inaction builds until violence is the only possible action, and that violence damages Israelite society almost irreparably. Similarly, our failure to take action on behalf of missing and murdered Indigenous women is violence. Should we continue to ignore it, this story warns us that course of action will lead to deep, abiding social damage—if it has not already. And we cannot react violently because even violence against what is apparently “other” leads to violence against the self.

To conclude, I would like to condense the previous character analysis into a few concrete suggestions for what changes we as white settlers should make to combat the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. I am not in a position to make policy suggestions; rather, these will be suggestions for how we may alter our individual conduct. First, we must excise our fear of the “other” and truly love one another. This is much easier said than done, but it must be done—arguably, the scriptures revolve around it. We are commanded repeatedly to love each other and treat each other well. Important components of truly loving each other include ceasing to sacrifice the “other” in the place of our own comfort and being willing to discipline people like us when they commit atrocities. We must also change our way of thinking about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. As Eberts says, we have treated this as an “Indian problem” for too long, as though it is something for Indigenous people to solve (102). But as I have demonstrated throughout this paper, this is a settler problem. We are the ones who perpetrate violence against Indigenous women and girls, and we are the ones who ignore that violence. The responsibility lies on us, and we must recognize our own complicity in the MMIWG crisis. We have “un-known” it, and now we must “re-know” it, regardless of how uncomfortable it makes us. Finally, we need to listen to Indigenous voices. This may look like following Indigenous journalists on Twitter or choosing to read Indigenous people's accounts of their own experiences. Most importantly, however, I believe we should engage in work reminiscent of what Elizabeth Tracy does in her article about the



power the unnamed woman held. Tracy refuses to define the woman by her brutal death and instead searches for the impact the unnamed woman had on the people around her. We too should refuse to define missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls by the violence other people have committed against them, and we should refuse to cast missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls only in the role of victim. Instead, we should look for ways to learn their stories and honor their lives—because, perhaps most importantly, these women and girls are people who have had their humanity ignored in the most brutal ways. Although the tribes of Israel failed to restore the unnamed woman’s humanity in their attempt to avenge her, perhaps we can restore missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls’ humanity in our attempts to remember them.

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