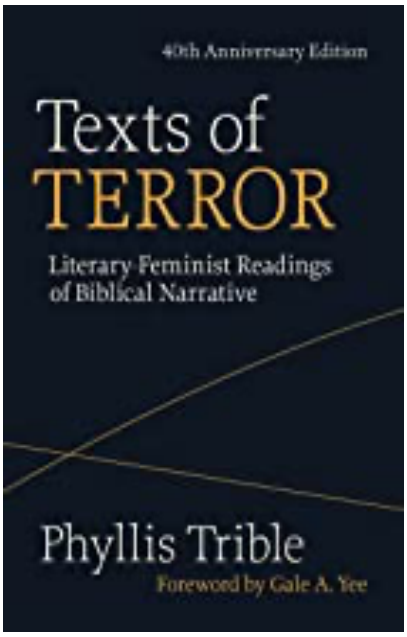
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Phyllis Trible

Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives

40th anniversary edition

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The Bible contains stories of terror for women. The Israelite god commands an enslaved woman to return to her abusive mistress and submit to her (Gen 16:9). The revered King David, who grieves when one of his sons is killed by another, allows his daughter to be raped and cast aside by his son (2 Sam 13:31). A Levite priest subjects his concubine to gang rape by a crowd of Benjaminites and then dismembers her, claiming that he is the one who has been wronged (Judg 19:22–30). The young daughter of a mighty warrior is offered up as a burnt offering to Yhwh in fulfillment of her father's rash and ill-considered vow (Judg 11).

These four stories are the focus of Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, first published in 1984. With the publication of the fortieth-anniversary edition of *Texts of Terror* (Fortress, 2022), Trible's trenchant readings of these four stories remain relevant and continue to speak powerfully. Trible insisted that none of these horrific tales be consigned to a "distant, primitive, and inferior past," because they continue to speak to frightening, even lethal realities for women in the present day. She cast judgment on the history of interpretation of these tales, which was marked too often by mistranslations, silences, and explanations that came off as excuses.

It is difficult to express the degree to which the 1984 publication of *Texts of Terror* was theologically and academically disruptive. Many of the central assertions that Trible had to argue

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for and defend in this book, are now, thanks in no small part to Trible's work, taken for granted as legitimate. For example, Trible insisted that biblical stories of women were worthy sites of serious exegetical inquiry and theological interpretation and judgment. Trible demanded that readers not look away from the horrific violence of these stories, where any form of redemptive reading would be a further injustice to the women portrayed in the stories. Instead, she guided readers through the literary artistry of each text, showing how a close and critical reading deepens the horror, suggests even greater forms of violence, and exposes the moral silence and complicity of the biblical god. At the same time, as Gale Yee notes in the foreword to the fortieth anniversary edition, Trible refused to give up on the Bible or her Christian faith, insisting that feminist exegesis could be a part of one's faith journey (xiii).

Trible's methodology combined feminist biblical criticism with literary criticism as she invited readers to join her on a feminist journey that she likened to Jacob's wrestling with demons in the night (4). While Trible indicated that she would employ "feminist biblical criticism" as part of her methodology, she was, in fact, shaping the contours of what would become feminist biblical criticism. Trible was also an early pioneer of a literary-critical approach to the Bible. Trible's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978), which employed a similar literary-critical method, came out three years before Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), and *Texts of Terror* preceded Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (1985) and Alter and Kermode's *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987).

Her literary exegetical work continues to serve as a model for how to read biblical texts and how to value and provide a compelling and nuanced interpretation of the biblical stories of women. In each of the four stories, Trible shows how attention to word order, wordplay, literary circularity, repetition, ambiguity, shifts in pronouns, translations choices, direct and indirect speech, silences, and redundancy yields a richer understanding of the artistry of the text and its layered meanings.

Trible's first text of terror is the story of Hagar, "the slave girl of Sarai," narrated across Gen 16 and 21. In neither chapter is Hagar the focus of the narrative; instead, Trible notes, her story comes to us in "bits and pieces," leaving the reader to fill in the gaps (9). Beginning with Gen 16:1, Trible describes the introduction to this story as a "circle of bondage" where Hebrew syntax sets Sarai in opposition to Hagar as both encircle Abram (10–11). She then shows how Hagar's flight from Sarai is described in a way that repeats the vocabulary from the exodus narrative. Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sarai, "flees" from the "affliction" of Sarai and is met by a "messenger of Yhwh" and told to "return" to her "mistress" and "suffer affliction under her hand" (Gen 16:6–9). Moses is met by a "messenger of Yhwh" and told to "return" to Egypt because Yhwh had "seen" the "affliction" of his people and sought to deliver them "out of the hand" of the Egyptians (Exod 3:7–8). The vocabulary that connects these two stories serves to highlight their differences: the god who delivered his own chosen people from the affliction of

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slavery commanded a slave girl of his chosen matriarch to return and submit to affliction under her hand (13–16).

Trible exposes the many contradictions contained between the twin Hagar narratives of Gen 16 and 21. In Gen 16:10, Trible hears echoes of the Abrahamic covenant when Yhwh promises to "greatly multiply" Hagar's "descendants," but the fatherhood of Abraham is stripped from that covenant in Gen 21:12 when Yhwh informs Abraham that it is through Isaac, not Ishmael, that his descendants will be named. While this could be read as a negative, Trible notes that the promise of "descendants" or "seed" to Hagar without reference to a father gives Hagar "the singular honor of being the female ancestor of a nation" (22). She also interprets Hagar's naming of Yhwh "the God of Seeing" as an action that makes her "a theologian" (18). Despite these hints at female agency, however, Trible notes that Hagar did not experience divine deliverance into a promised land but, instead, experienced a divinely supported exile to the wilderness (23). Trible concludes her coverage of this richly detailed and tragic story by turning to the present, to the current generation of readers, and shows how Hagar as a "symbol of the oppressed" has come to embody many forms of female oppression and forced servitude. She then turns to the privileged class of academic readers and biblical interpreters and calls on those of us who are "heirs of Sarah" to "answer for the terror in Hagar's story" (28–29).

The second terror-inducing tale is that of Tamar, the daughter of King David (2 Sam 13); here again Trible sees syntax and repetition as literary techniques that communicate meaning. Like the story of Hagar, Tamar's story begins with a "circular arrangement of verses," but in this case word order places Tamar in the center surrounded by her two brothers, Absalom and Amnon (2 Sam 13:1). Trible then identifies several additional literary features that serve to entrap and objectify Tamar. In the verses that narrate Tamar's preparation of food for Amnon, who is feigning an illness, Trible shows that Tamar's anonymity in comparison to the repeated naming of Amnon and Jonadab in 13:6–16 communicates her lack of power in this space (41–46). She illustrates how the account of the rape (13:14b) is structured as a chiasmus with rape at its center. Shifting pronouns also communicate the changed status of Tamar. In the beginning of the narrative, Amnon calls her "my sister" (13:6); after the rape, he uses the independent demonstrative pronoun, commanding his servants, "Send out *this* [זאת] from me" (48). Trible exposes King David's complicity as the father who chooses to protect and love his son over his daughter and as the adulterer who protects the rapist; "male has joined male to deny justice for the female" (53–54).

The third chapter, "An Unnamed Woman: The Extravagance of Violence," details the account of the Levite's concubine in Judg 19, describing her as "property, object, tool and literary device," "without name, speech, or power" (80–81). While the biblical narrator and centuries of exegesis have remained largely silent on the horror of the gang rape and ritual dismemberment of a woman, Trible begins her treatment by asserting that this is a story "about which we are

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commanded to speak" (65). Once again, Trible identifies a circular literary structure where two men, the Levite husband and the father, surround the concubine in a house (67). Trible notes the repetition of the words "house, door, and doorway" that mark the boundary between safety and hostility. Conflict among men—the wicked men surrounding the house, the Levite, and the woman's father inside the house—can be solved, Trible notes, by sacrificing a woman (74). When the Levite later "takes a knife" to dismember the concubine into twelve pieces, Trible hears echoes of the binding of Isaac, but there will be no angel to stop this sacrifice. Trible concludes with a call for a Christian theological response to the terror of this story, creatively alluding to the self-chosen sacrifice of Christ to expose the enforced sacrifice of the Levite's concubine: "Her body has been broken and given to many. Lesser power has no woman than this, that her life is laid down by a man" (81).

The final text of terror is "The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice," the story of a father who sacrifices his only daughter not as part of a divine test but as the result of masculine bravado. Trible's literary analysis of this story shows how it toggles between ambiguity and redundancy, beginning with the ambiguity of Jephthah's lineage. He is "the son of a prostitute" and an unnamed father "of Gilead." The story then shifts to redundancy when Jephthah "vows a vow" (11:30), but the wording of that vow is tragically ambiguous: "whatsoever comes from the doors of my house," Jephthah swears, he will offer as a burnt offering following his military victory over the Ammonites. (97). When it is Jephthah's daughter who emerges from the house to celebrate her father's victory, the horrific act of child sacrifice is shrouded in literary ambiguity: "He did to her his vow which he had vowed" (99). Trible closes this chapter by placing Jephthah's daughter in a "noble company of women" who celebrate warriors when they return from battle victorious (100). In Trible's theological turn, the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah, like that of the Levite's concubine, becomes a tragic inversion of Christ's sacrifice. Jephthah's daughter "breathes her last," and Trible asks, "My god, my god, why has thou forsaken her?" (106). Trible then composes the missing lament for Jephthah's daughter, freely adapting David's lament for Saul and Jonathan and elevating the daughter to a "symbol of all courageous daughters of faithless fathers" (108)

In this slim volume, Trible opened a series of doors. She opened a door for generations of women biblical scholars like me to enter the field and study the texts that we find important. She opened a door into literary criticism, showing how it could be applied to biblical stories with rich and informative results. She opened a door into the serious academic study of biblical stories that focus on women. She also opened the eyes of her readers, allowing them to see and name new things. Trible's unflinching gaze takes her readers into the horror of four biblical stories, unpacking them and naming their terror. Trible does not, however, leave her readers in terror. Instead, she opens the door to new theological approaches that include creative writing and liturgical interventions, giving voice to the voiceless and names to the nameless. She calls on readers to remember, retell, and repent, and she insists that biblical scholars hold one another to

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account when they see a dismembered corpse of a woman on the side of a road and make the exegetical choice to walk by on the other side.

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