

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

If you have come across any work by Phyllis Trible, it is likely to be her earlier work, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. There she turned her skills as a biblical scholar to examine the major stories in the Bible used to explain the role of women in society and how a close reading of these texts often turns these explanations on their head. These are the major stories of Creation, of the Fall, of Ruth, of the Song of Songs. Here women have a leading voice and determine their destiny. In *Texts of Terror*, Trible turns her attention to the stories we don't want to look at. No love songs here, no happy endings, no community celebrations. These are the stories where chaos reigns, and if women have any voice at all, it is not heard. These are the stories of "Hagar: The Desolation of Rejection"; "Tamar: The Royal Rape of Wisdom"; "An Unnamed Woman: The Extravagance of Violence"; and "The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice."

By a close reading of the text, Trible insists that we let the text speak for itself. She peels away all the things we thought the text says, but when we look at the text itself, we realize that we are remembering not the biblical passage but centuries of commentary and assumptions, much of it driven by an agenda very distant from the biblical authors. Trible insists we come to the story with new eyes and read it closely and ask of it its meaning. Why are these stories in the Bible? They are terrifying stories. We don't want to dwell on them? But we must. They are there.

We cannot dismiss these stories as tales of an ancient and primitive time. Trible says, we have only to watch the evening news to hear stories of the rejection suffered by daughters of Hagar, or encounter the bodies of raped and abused women crying out for justice, or see women sacrificed in the name of religion. We must not look away.

Trible looks at the structure of each story to see how the presence and action of women affects its meaning. For instance, the story of Abraham centers around the actions of two women, Sarah and Hagar. Though Sarah emerges as the chosen mother of Israel, still Abraham abandons her to protect his own interests, and God acts directly to restore her to Abraham. But Sarah is barren and attention falls on her Egyptian slave. As the story of Israel is a story of flight from bondage to promise, so the story of Hagar is in itself a flight from bondage. Hagar, too, flees from her harsh mistress, and like Israel, she finds refuge in the wilderness. There, God finds her and tells her to return. The first words that Hagar speaks in the story, she speaks to God in direct answer to his question: "From where have you come and where are you going?" God commands her to return and submit to her mistress, "a divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous, woman." God, who will later identify with the oppressed, seems here to identify with the oppressor, but he does not send her back without promise. To Hagar, God says "'I will so greatly multiply your descendants, that they cannot be numbered for multitude' (16:10, RSV). While all the patriarchs of Israel hear such words, Hagar is the only woman ever to receive them. And yet this promise to her lacks the covenant context that is so crucial to the founding fathers." But God continues with a second promise. He promises her a son and tells her the name of the son and his future, because "Yahweh has paid heed to your

affliction.' Hagar will not be used to build up Sarah's line; rather, the child conceived will build up her house. But first Hagar must return to affliction under Sarah's hand. Tribble says, "Suffering undercuts hope. A sword pierces Hagar's own soul. The divine promise of Ishmael means life at the boundary of consolation and desolation." But if Hagar must return and live under the hand of Sarah, "the hand of Ishmael will engage in ceaseless strife against such power. Indeed, 'against the *face* of all his brothers he will dwell' (16:12c). The word *face* builds upon his mother's action when she said, 'From the *face* of Sarai my mistress I am fleeing' (16:8). In Ishmael, Hagar's story continues."

But if Hagar first flees from Sarah, later she is sent out from Sarah's presence, she and her son, and they wander in the wilderness, apparently doomed to die until God opens Hagar's eyes to life-giving water. There, in the *wilderness* Ishmael thrives, and Hagar's last act is to find him a wife from her home country of Egypt, an act that "highlights tension in Hagar's story."

In studying Hagar's story, Tribble sees "a symbol of the oppressed." She says, "Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her": exploited maids, surrogate mothers, resident aliens, the expelled wife, the homeless woman, the welfare mother, "the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others." As in her study of all of these texts of terror, she sees in them a call to moral responsibility. Those whose use and misuse of power have caused the powerless to suffer must bear the responsibility for the consequences. She concludes her study of Hagar by saying, "All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar's story. To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith."

Reading *Texts of Terror* calls us to examine issues of power and powerlessness. The terror comes when we see the suffering that often goes unnoticed, and the terror intensifies when we see the responsibility of those who find themselves apparently favored by God.