

Do men restore vulnerable women's dignity and sanctity by mutilating their bodies? A paradox of gender-based violence and femicide in Judges 19–21



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Dates:

Received: 10 Mar. 2025
Accepted: 02 June 2025
Published: 05 Sept. 2025

How to cite this article:
Banda, Z., 2025, 'Do men restore vulnerable women's dignity and sanctity by mutilating their bodies? A paradox of gender-based violence and femicide in Judges 19–21', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10646. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10646>

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The objective of this article is to probe gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) by appealing to a biblical text, viz., Judges 19–21, that depicts one of the most gruesome acts of violation of women in the Bible. It then attempts to extract sense, purpose and resolution in a South African society that is replete and affected with broken and hopeless women and girl children who are victims of rape, murder and dehumanisation by asking pertinent questions of 'agency', namely, who is fighting their wars against the perpetrators, and what is the punishment against the perpetrators which might serve as a deterrent to this scourge. It argues that women in South Africa continue to be victims of seemingly unabated, vicious acts of gender-based violence (GBV). The search for a lasting solution remains a serious but illusive mirage. In search for a lasting solution, the article juxtaposes the biblical text with the ongoing war by the Israeli Defence Forces against Hamas' obstinate resistance. The findings are premised on the exegesis of the biblical text using Contextual Bible Study and missiological praxis cycles.

Contribution: The article concludes with concise proposals aimed at achieving a lasting solution to GBVF.

Keywords: gender-based violence and femicide; agency; retribution; women's bodies; obscene publicity; combating abuse; South Africa; Israel.

Introduction

The following poem was written by the author of this article:

Awesome, Women's Bodies!

Human bodies, everywhere I see human bodies, clothed dignified

Women's bodies, all over, everywhere, I am fascinated by women's bodies

Beautiful, colourful, all in their splendour, plain, decorated, tattooed, 'En orals, ai so mooi'¹ (Afrikaans: And everywhere, oh, so beautiful!)

Women's bodies, here, ... and there, in their different sizes, curvaceous shapes, pervasive perfumes, imposing silhouettes and there, salivating men watch in awe, and cannot resist!

Enticing, yes, they are, hence on to the front-page of car magazine they go, onto posters of famous events, they dawn, up the huge billboards they are splashed! Even when there is no relevance, yes up they go! Powerful, isn't it? Undeniably attractive, centres of fixations, indeed ...

Women's bodies, paragons of beauty, all over, everywhere, women's bodies! (Banda 2024a)

On 07 October 2023, the military wing of Hamas, the governing junta of Palestine, the western coastal strip of Gaza, launched concerted attacks on Israeli communities and isolated targets, in which they killed about 1175 people, some of whom were 313 women, 36 children and 25 elderly persons around the age of 80. Hamas then took some 247 hostages, among whom were women (Library Specialists of UK Parliament 2024).² In response to this attack, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and security cluster responded with such venom, intensity and unrelenting vigour that has

1.The phrase that expresses a pervasive beauty, is inspired by the poem, 'Oktobermaand' by C. Louis Leipoldt, viewed 04 September 2024, from https://www.dbln.org/tekst/leip001vers01_01/leip001vers01_01_0004.php.

2.Library Specialists of UK Parliament, Israel-Hamas conflict: UK response October 2023 to July 2024, viewed 16 November 2024, from <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9874/CBP-9874.pdf>.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Mission and Vulnerability', under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Lukwili Mangayi and Prof. Lygunda Fohle.

since left the international communities and the United Nations (UN) in great shock and anger (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024).³ The UN initially was deeply divided in condemning the actions of Israel. On the one hand, those sympathetic to Israel argued that Israel is justified in its reaction to what they regarded as legitimate defence against Hamas' unprovoked aggression against its citizens. On the other hand, invariably, there are those who regard Hamas' attack on the Israelis as being inspired by Israel's prolonged oppression of the Palestinians to what some term 'an apartheid styled' continued systemic subjugation, indignity and dehumanisation. Others, including South Africa, while not sparing Hamas, feel that while Israel's response is justified to some extent, it is a grossly disproportionate retribution to the 'evil' Hamas has committed (Wintour 2024). South Africa has even successfully filed a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing it of acts of genocide in accordance with the Genocide Convention of 1948. A case which has been applauded as a call for justice by many and has had several other countries jump onto the bandwagon in vilifying Israel and demanding the UN and the United Nations' Security Council to take decisive action against Israel, and certainly against Hamas too.

The purpose and relevance of the background aforementioned with reference to the question of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF)⁴ in South Africa is to highlight, in the first place, the extent of Israel's responsiveness and aggression towards what they regard as Hamas' provocation and killings of its people. Secondly, the disproportionate heavy-handed bombardment of the Gaza enclave by Israel as a reprisal for Hamas' actions.

Our research question here is 'Can Israel's action depicted above be regarded as consistent with its history of dealing with crime towards its citizens, namely: (1) Is it quick to respond to it? and (2) Does it respond in a manner that is significant, regardless of the cost? Subsequently, we allude (correlate) these questions to South Africa as a state,⁵ with respect to GBVF: (1) Is it quick to respond to GBVF? (2) Does it respond significantly and resourcefully to the plight of GBVF? The following problem statements are premises for these questions.

Brodie (2019:iii) writes:

South Africa has a femicide rate that is six times the world average. Over 2500 women aged 14 years or older are murdered every year, the majority of these women killed by an intimate partner. Despite the prevalence of femicide, less than 20% of these murders are ever reported in South African news media. (cf. also Banda 2020)

In an admission, Mr Ramaphosa (2020), the President of South Africa, declared in a speech that, 'another pandemic

3. For more information visit <https://www.britannica.com/event/Israel-Hamas-War>.

4. It is noteworthy that in previous media reports reference was to gender-based violence (GBV) but current reports now refer to GBVF which shows an important shift that points to the increase in femicide as factor that demands attention.

5. The use of South Africa in this article should be understood as a political state, government or authority with powers and right to act or protect with respect to its citizens.

that is raging in our country [is] the killing of women and children by the men of our country'. Others, like Dlamini (2020), have even labelled it a 'twin-pandemic to COVID-19'. The comparison of femicide to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) paints a gloomy picture if we were to recall the devastation COVID-19 caused humankind all over the world.

To build a plausible case regarding GBVF in South Africa, I propose the following hypotheses: (1) South Africa's failure to respond adequately and with requisite urgency and (2) South Africa's failure to respond to the plight of women with the necessary force and ample resources to address the issues of GBVF has allowed the situation of women's suffering to deteriorate immeasurably and to the point of hopelessness. In probing this case of South Africa's apathy to GBVF, I have invoked the reading of one of the most horrific Bible stories on GBVF, namely, Chapters 19 to 21 of the Book of Judges. This text will also help us answer the primary questions asked earlier on Israel's disposition to crimes committed against its citizens. This will then provide a resource by which we seek to answer South Africa's attitude to crimes committed against its citizens, especially its women.

In my approach towards resolving our research problem, I have considered the use of relevant research methodologies.

Research techniques and methodology

The research methodologies we are considering – namely, the Praxis Cycle and Contextual Bible Study – are widely used in the field of Missiology. These methodologies engage multiple disciplines, making them suitable for multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, which are currently encouraged in tertiary education. Looking ahead, this proposed study on GBVF has the potential to incorporate not only Missiology but also Biblical studies, Gender studies, Police studies and Military studies, at the very least. Let us briefly define the methods as aforementioned.

The Praxis Cycle

Kritzinger (2009) has presented several models of the Praxis Cycle in several of his works among which is what I call, the 'flower matrix', which is a 'seven-petals-praxis-cycle' (Banda 2010:130) with the following 'stages': (1) agency, (2) context analysis, (3) 'ecclesial analysis', (4) theological reflection, (5) spirituality, (6) practical projects and (7) reflexivity (Kritzinger 2009). Kritzinger's use of this 'analytical tool' in several of his works focuses on the church, missions, missiology and academia. It also defines 'agency' to mean 'the "who" or "we," and their "power relations" to others' (Kritzinger 2009:771). I surmise, therefore, that 'agency' may include accounting institutions, principalities and authorities, and the power they have in relation to 'the other'. In this article, I will pay special attention to 'agency' as the pinnacle of my argument, because I argue that, without agency, all theorisation about action or lack of it, with respect to GBVF, stands or falls by the agencies that should rise to combat it.

Subject to the first part of my research question, I will pay attention to 'reflexivity'. Kritzinger (2009:786) posits that reflexivity helps us to relate to others 'more sensitively and purposefully, with greater integrity and depth'. In our context, I will interrogate this kind of attitude in the actions of Israel and ultimately that of South Africa, on the question of GBVF. Finally, as I have resolved to use a biblical text to interrogate GBVF, we will glean from this praxis cycle another petal, namely, 'theological analysis'. I will, during the discussion, merge other petals of the Praxis Cycle.

Contextual Bible study

Because we have identified 'theological reflection' as one of our focus areas of this study, I have elected to use 'contextual Bible study' (CBS) as a tool to reflect on Judges 19–21. The concept of CBS is the works of Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research (West 2005:1). West argues that there are two readers of the biblical text, namely 'the socially engaged biblical scholars, [on the one hand], and ordinary Christian 'readers' (whether literate or not) of the Bible, [on the other hand]' (West 2005:2). This exercise is termed a 'process' by West. He 'insists that the voice and role of the "ordinary readers", the poor and oppressed (including women) of South Africa should not be sidelined or suppressed' (Akper 2005:3). While it is the objective of the CBS to engage the 'ordinary reader', this article would want to place that as an endgame to allow enough space and depth to the text for the purposes of 'theological reflection'. And therefore, the process is staged out according to a 'See-Judge-Act' precept (West 2005:2). For our story, we will put our pulse finger first on the 'See', then lastly, on the 'Judge'. However, we will delve extensively into investigating the nature and the extent of the 'Act' of this triangle. This 'Act', in fact, is a set of actions which should be able to tell us more about 'agency' and its determination to deal with the question of GBVF.

Furthermore, in the mould of CBS, West (2005) recommends a three-dimensional reading of the biblical text, namely:

[B]ehind the text (focusing on the socio-historical world that produced the text), *on the text* (focusing on the text itself as a literary composition), and *in front of the text* (focusing on the possible worlds the text projects beyond itself towards the active reader). (p. 6 [Author's own emphasis])

We will start with the '*on the text*' reading to try capture the unadulterated view of the story of Judges 19–21. The choice of this text is to address the issue of violence caused by Hamas, with its analysis on South African GBVF.

The story of the Levite's Concubine in Judges 19–21

On the text itself, reading of Judges 19–21

This story, in my view, is very sensitive, evocative and loathsome to say the least. It has many readers, who are diverse and have different opinions. Many commentaries find

the story repulsive (Paynter 2020:1). Trible (in Paynter 2020:27), 'a feminist' reader, critiques some of these multiple readers and adjudges them according to their perspectives of culture, tradition and stereotypes of the eras and histories that have produced them. What comes up as the most controversial among readers is the central character, the Levite's 'concubine' (Jdg 19:1ff). Many Bible translations maintain 'concubine' (for the Hebrew word, *is·sāh pilegesh*, which literally means, 'a woman, a concubine'). Alternatively, other translations have 'a woman, a concubine' (Aramaic Bible in Plain English), or 'a wife, a concubine' (Young's Literal Translation) or 'a secondary woman' (New Heart English Bible), 'a wife' (Douay-Rheims Bible) or simply 'a woman' (Christian Standard Bible) (Bible Hub n.d.a). Trible (in Paynter 2020) refuses to use any of these translations and prefers to call her, *pilegesh*.⁶

To get a 'full view' of the story, we will re-read the story from the Bible. I have taken my reading from the New International Version. In the next paragraph, however, we will only present an overview of the story, especially the critical moments in the story.

A summary of the Judges 19–21

The Levite went after his 'concubine' who had left him and returned to her home. After a few days of the delay caused by the concubine's father, he finally left with her, though very late in the day. Consequently, after travelling a distance, they, together with their helper, a young man, were forced to find an overnight accommodation on their way to home in Ephraim. The Levite avoided sleeping over at the nearest place, the city of the Jebusites, and insisted they travel to the next city, Gibeah, because it belonged to Israelites, he reasoned. After settling in the city square, an old man, an Ephraimite invited them to sleep at his place. Later, a group of 'wicked men of the city' surrounded the house and demanded to have sexual intercourse with the Levite.

The old man tried to talk them out of their evil intentions, but that was in vain. As a compromise, he offered them his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine, but ultimately, the concubine was sacrificed. At dawn, the Levite found his concubine dead in the doorway of the old man's house. He immediately put her on his donkey and left for home. On arrival, he dissected her into 12 parts and sent them to the 12 tribes of Israel. Then all Israel, except for the tribe of Benjamin and the city of Jabesh Gilead, met at Mizpah at the call of the leaders. This meeting, then, decided to send a delegation to Gibeah to hand over the culprits. They reject the demand. Thereupon, Israel decides to attack the city. A gruesome battle ensued, which could only be completed after three encounters, claiming a total of 66 130 casualties. The result was a complete annihilation of the city of Gibeah, leaving 600 men who fled to the caves. Hereafter, the leaders decide to punish the city of Jabesh Gilead for betraying the cause of retribution. The whole

⁶See these translations in <https://biblehub.com/judges/19-1.htm> (Biblehub n.d.a).

town of an unknown number, except 400 young women, dies by the sword. In the end, Israel regretted the routing of one of the 12 tribes and corrected that by offering women to the 600 fugitives.

After reading the story, West suggests that to understand a biblical passage, the reader must, as part of the process, try to note: 'who are the main characters or groups of characters, what do we know about them, and what are the relationships between them?' (West p. 12). At this directive, we propose that we highlight the key characters as follows: The priest's concubine, the priest, the old man (owner of the house), the rapists and murderers (the wicked men of the city), the leaders of the tribes and their 'armies', the men of Jabesh-Geliad, the women and children of Gibeah and Jabesh-Geliad. At the naming of these characters, we have decided to focus on agency by isolating primarily the priest, the old man, the leaders of Israel, and secondarily, the women of Gibeah and Jabesh-Geliad.

On the text (a focus on the text as a literary composition), applying the Praxis Cycle

'Agency' in Judges 19–21, and on the text perspective: An interrogation

Firstly, let us remark on the apparent disturbing lacuna in this ancient Israeli society of the Judges' time. Four verses, namely, Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1 and 21:25, sort of open a can of worms, in my view. It is especially Judges 17:6 and 21:25, which fall inside our pericope, that are even telling and cast a gloomy shadow on our story. It seems suggestive for the author to include these verses, especially ahead of and after the troubling story of the rape and the killing of the Levite's 'concubine'. At a superficial level, we can conclude that it is only where there is 'no king' that the anarchy of the proportion evident in Judges 19–21 is possible.

Secondly, let us turn to the priest and the old man. The story presents both characters, at the onset, as 'victims' of an unfolding tragedy. They are under the threat of sexual molestation or 'mob rape'. But when they 'pass the bug' by proposing to the perpetrators 'the concubine' and the host's 'virgin daughter', I surmise, they cross the line from being victims to being secondary perpetrators. Somehow, the host's daughter is mysteriously spared the ordeal, and the 'concubine' is proverbially 'thrown to the wolves' by both men. In all these, women are objects in the minds and hands of men.

The rapists of Gibeah

How best can we describe the men of Gibeah? Rapists, wicked, atrocious, depraved, immoral, malevolent, psychopaths, sociopaths, demonic, devilish... no ink may be spared in scribing any evil word that tries to describe or label the men of Gibeah. These are agents of the dark world of shamefulness and wickedness. The presence of these

men can only mean fear and trauma to both innocent men and women. Against these, a counteractive agency of good, justice and retribution is what any society cannot do without for the sake of peace, sanity and goodwill among its members. But as the author of Judges insinuates, 'there was no king'.

The heinous act: The rape of the Levite's concubine

In this text, we notice the objectification and abusive status of women in Israel. We notice how men bargain for their freedom from harm using women as fodder to growling brutes salivating at the sight of their preys. Two women are sacrificed in order to appease the wicked appetite of Gebianite rapists. There are two women on the offer, the one being the old man's daughter, a virgin, suggesting she might have been very young and powerless, but subsequently, she is spared the ordeal when the Levite appears in the doorway thrusting the other woman, his concubine, to the men arguing with the old man.

Let us simulate this act with a game of chess. On the chessboard, pieces are ranked according to degrees of importance and value. Lesser pieces like pawns are often 'sacrificed' to 'buy' the freedom of more important or powerful pieces on the board. After pawns, follow knights and bishops, then rooks, then the Queen; ultimately, it is the King without which the game cannot proceed. On this chessboard, perhaps like in all Israel, women occupy the lowest rank and are at the mercy of their male counterparts, as Judges 19–21 clearly demonstrates.

In this saga, the nature and the extent of the abuse of the Levite's concubine is captured in two 'action' words in Hebrew, 'Yada' and 'Alal', in Judges 19:25:

*Yada*⁷ and *Alal* (Hebrew for, 'to know', 'to have sexual intercourse' [Yada], *added to* [Alal] 'to abuse' or 'to deal harshly with' [Biblehub]), demonstrate that it was not a pleasurable act, in fact, The Sesotho Bible translates 'alal' as 'senya' which translates to 'demolish', 'ravage' or 'destroy'.⁸ It is an act whose outcomes left the woman in extreme pain, wobbling on, until she collapsed. It shows that after wanton act by these sexual perverts, she gathered just enough strength to reach the doorstep of the house of the old man and there, abuse achieved its feared full cycle, she died, another femicide.

The Levite seeks retribution by gruesome means

The Levite mounted the body (corpse) of her concubine on the donkey and proceeded further north-west to the hillside of Ephraim, about a 30 km distance, which could be

7. For more information see Bible Hub (n.d.b).

8. For the Online Sesotho Bible visit YouVersion available at: <https://www.bible.com/bible/273/JDG.19.SSO61-SO>

10 h – 17 h walk.⁹ On arrival the man wasted no time but dissected the woman's body into 12 parts. Let us pause and reflect by means of the following elegy:

Gruesome, Women's Bodies!¹⁰

Human bodies, everywhere, I see human bodies, Alas, I see women's bodies!

Mielie fields, bushes, gorges, forlorn, dodgy hideous alleys, shallow graves, embedded in marshes and muddy riverbanks, in pigs feeder troughs, everywhere, all strewn with women's bodies, Charred, defaced, dismembered, mauled, haunting disfigured women's bodies; wrapped in plastics, bundled in suitcases, crammed in boots of cars, hanging on the trees,

Hanging in the air are the screams, the shrieks, the helpless cries, the fading groans of women, never to be heard again, because maybe someone heard-but someone ignored, the last gasp for help, perhaps someone heard, but someone shrugged and said to 'himself', 'I mind my own business',

Women's bodies, so awful, so melancholic, so eery! (Banda 2024b)

As we talk about the tragedy of 'women's bodies' in our modern-day histories and herstories, Kobo (2018:2) reminds us in stern words that, we should not forget women whose bodies were trapped and trampled in the dungeons of Elmina Castle in Ghana, as they endured pain and violation of all sorts before they were shipped as slaves in the transatlantic human trafficking. Even today, their bodies still cast invisible ghastly shadows on the creepy walls and chilly floors of those dungeons.

As we continue with the Levite's concubine tragedy, the Levite sends 12 pieces, one to each tribe of Israel. This suggests that one piece even went to the tribe of the perpetrators, the tribe of Benjamin. This act sent a shock wave throughout the entire nation of Israel, and prompted the dismay, 'Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine! We must do something! So, speak up!' (Jdg 19:30).

Chapter 20 is predominantly about Israel's response to the display of the ravaged woman's body, which I wish to entitle, 'The Retribution'.

The retribution

The Text itself: What does the text Judges 19–21 tell us about Israel's action towards the punishment of perpetrators of sexual violence? We will try to capture the highlights of the process the leaders of the tribes undertook to bring the culprits to book.

The Israelites assembled at Mizpah with 400 000 men armed for war. The Levite was then asked to give an account of the atrocious rape and the death of the concubine. The meeting

9. Estimates on Gebiah (modern Tell el-Ful) to Hillside of Ephraim (modern et-Taybeh) can be found at Google Maps (n.d.).

10. Most, if not all, of the descriptions in this poem are based on media reports of the state in which murdered women's bodies were found.

then resolved in unison to confront the Gibeonites and ask them to hand over the culprits. But they refused to release the culprits, instead resolved to mobilise the whole Benjaminite tribe to defend the perpetrators, entrenching even further the objectification of women. At this point, the Israelites consulted God whether it was proper to attack their kinsmen. They got the go-ahead. A bloody war ensued and could not be concluded at a go, resulting in three successive battles, each time consulting God for approval. In the first two battles, the Israelites suffered heavy casualties to the extent that they cried to the Lord. However, in the third and final encounter, they routed the Benjaminites and burned down to ashes the city of Gibeon. Only 600 men of Benjamin escaped and hid in the caves. Soon thereafter, they attacked the city of Jabesh-Gilead for refusing to join the battle against the Benjaminites. They destroyed the city, killing its men, women, children and livestock except their virgin girls.

A Statistical overview of Judges 19–21 civil war

In this story, we have identified only one victim of GBVF, but this victim led to colossal consequences: (1) A whole nation was affected, including the elders of the 11 tribes; (2) It took just a few days to disseminate the message nationwide; based on Google Maps estimations, distribution occurred in approximately 3 days from the Hillsides of Ephraim to the farthest parts of the then Israeli cities; (3) The reporting format was straightforward – verbal, yet vivid – featuring a brief account that accompanied the dismembered pieces of the concubine's body; (4) Four hundred thousand soldiers were mobilised, of which 10% or 40 000 were assigned to gather food for the combatants; (5) On the other hand, 26 000 Benjaminites, along with 700 men from Gibeon, offered resistance; (6) In the pursuit of justice, 22 000 Israelites died in the first battle, followed by 18 000 in the second battle, and then 30 in the third and final battle. All Benjaminites, except for 600, were killed, along with an undisclosed number of Jabesh-Gilead inhabitants, leaving only 400 virgins alive. We can therefore conclude that this was a very costly war in terms of casualties and resources expended to punish the Gibeonites and their protectors. Businesses had to close, and food and water supplies were redirected to the war zone (cf. David taking food to his brothers, David and Nabal, etc.).

Theological analysis of Judges 19–21

Political – A nation without a king in dire straits

Our entry verse (Jdg 19:1) exposes the political setup, which we may construe as 'disclaimer', namely, 'No King, enter at your risk'. The significance of kings in these ancient cities cannot be overemphasised. This can be noticed from Israel's desire to have a king, even when the prophet Samuel tried to discourage them (1 Sm 8:10–18). We may as well treat the verse a caution that 'the following story may contain horrendous episodes, therefore sensitive readers' discretion is advised'. In brief, gory terms, we can describe the running of Jabesh-Gilead as a city under anarchy.

Religious – The religious identity of Israel and the presence of God

At this point in time, Israel depended on the Judges to run its affairs. Religious life was ordered around the office of the Levites, who were scattered among all other tribes to offer religious services. It would seem, though, they were relatively few and in demand (cf. Jdg 17:12).¹¹ We can presume that as a sacred tribe, the Levites deserved respect and protection of everyone in the nation. We may ask, though, did not the Gibeonites know they were about to sexually abuse the holy man of God, probably by the garments they wore (cf. Exodus 28), when they wanted to sodomise the Levite? The will of God remains central despite the wanton behaviour of some of the tribes. This is evident in succession of Phinehas in the priesthood, and the continued seeking of his guidance in crucial decisions such as in the war against other nations, and even more crucially against their fellow Israelites (Jdg 20:28). Whether this was direct 'oracle' from God or 'by means of the Urim and Thummim' (as was also a common practice), it suffices to say that God was presented in these verses as still in charge, despite the exasperation by the beaten and demoralised 11 tribes at the defeat of the first and second battles.

Economic: The cost of retribution and a grim picture of fatherless families

Socially, in this episode, we witness one of the most disruptive incidents in Israel's history. The psychosocial and emotional impact is determined by the above-quoted verses (Jdg 19:30). The shock and response of the Israelis is evident in the instantaneous reaction leading to the civil war. The departure of men to engage in war left many families fatherless and without male folk in general. In Gebiah and Jabesh-Geliad, the fate of death also fell on women, children and animals. In fact, the whole settlements were destroyed, with little left for survivors. The entire Israel's post-war social life had to be reordered, social values of families as they were known, reimagined. It is therefore evident that the economic viability of many households took a downturn, with many families having lost their male folk, especially those who were sole breadwinners.

This was physically a very costly war, in terms of headcount of the dead killed in the war, the amount of resources and the time spent in addressing this GBVF and emotionally on women and children. We have taken stock of the tragic story of the plight of women in Israel as related in Judges 19–21, and how men in this society heroically responded. It is befitting to bring the story to its full cycle by reflecting on its implications for our lived experiences in South Africa and cascading it to a set of recommendations for possible action.

Reflections, recommendations and conclusion

As we reflect on this war, let us propose some succinct, applicable thoughts to what we construe as proposals, if not

11. A certain man called Micah, installed his son to be a household priest, subsequently, when a wandering young priest came by, he paid him to be his household priest.

solutions, to South Africa's dilemma of GBVF. With the above-stated in mind, let us now analyse violence from the South African perspective, especially GBVF.

Tackling gender-based violence and femicide Israel's way

In the year 2023–2024, we have found that the attitude of Israel towards the perpetrators of violence against its own citizens is consistent with their actions 3000 years ago,¹² namely, utter anger and extreme action. The enemies of their society shall never find rest until justice is meted, if not, until they are exterminated. This has tapped into what Kritzinger (2009:786) calls 'reflexivity', that is, the 'agency' acting 'sensitively and purposefully, with greater integrity and depth'.

If South Africa claims to be tackling GBVF, then its response in comparison to that of Israel is the proverbial 'Sunday School picnic'. Politically, there seems to be not enough will by the state to employ available resources effectively. If President Ramaphosa had considered GBV the second pandemic, then it is not clear how the state is relatively responding. South Africa was lauded for its high performance in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to McHugh (2024),¹³ Israel's expenditure in fighting Hamas has been determined to be at:

\$1.8 billion [R31.5 billion, at current \$/R average of \$1≈R17.50 a month], when Hamas started the fighting by attacking Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, to around \$4.7 billion [R82.25 billion, p.m.] by the end of last year.

This accounted for 5.3% of Israel's gross domestic product (GDP). Against this scenario, a view of the cost of GBV on the South African government is determined as pitifully little. For instance, a sampling conducted by Khumalo, Msimang and Bollbach (2017) produced the following figures: Based on the prevalence rate of 30%, the estimated cost of GBVF by affected groups listed in the report, the relative cost and its percentage contribution were as follows: (1) Victims of GBVF: R37.8 billion (89.2%); (2) Government: R513.6 million (1.21%); (3) Civil Society: R37.8 billion (3.13%), Businesses: R2.7 billion (6.45%) and the total amount: R42.4 billion (100%). This modelling therefore produced a total cost by GBVF of over R42.4 billion, representing only 1.3% of South Africa's GDP (Khumalo et al. 2017:45)¹⁴. The cost to government represents a woeful 1.3% contribution, which is R513.6 million of the total of R42.4 billion. Other figures demonstrate serious losses or cost to civil society, businesses and overwhelmingly, to victims of GBV at 89%. While this is regarded as a sample, because no true accounts of GBV have been kept in South Africa, there is a sense that these costs might even have been underestimated (Khumalo et al. 2017:7, 47). In contrast, the consolidated spending on COVID-19 for 2020/21 after

12. The period of the Judges is given as between 1300 and 1000 BCE (Kingswood Learn n.d.).

13. Israel's wars are expensive. Paying the bill could force tough choices (AP News).

14. cf. Khumalo et al 2017:45 for full numerical values.

revision of the 2020 budget rose from R1.95 trillion to R2.04 trillion, which was actually a projected 15.7% of GDP in 2020/21 (Khumalo et al. 2017:20). How then should a twin-pandemic be costed so low?

According to Dlamini (2020), South Africa was one of the first sub-Saharan countries to adopt the so-called 'Gender budgeting', whose purpose was 'use fiscal policy and administration to address gender inequality and women's advancement' (Dlamini 2020:587). Through this initiative, several instruments towards combating GBVF were created, including: The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, The Employment Equity Act of 1998 and The National Crime Prevention Strategy of 1996, which made violence against women and children a national priority (Dlamini 2020:587). However, Dlamini (2020:587) concedes, 'In spite of these initiatives, GBV and femicide remain very high in South Africa'. Are we to presume it is a matter of 'scratching where it does not itch' or in fact, 'tiptoeing around the real problem'. These programmes, in my view, are pacifiers and effectively evade the core of the GBVF, which we hope to address in the following paragraph.

Provoking a response, the Levite's way

The Levite sliced his concubine into pieces, evoking a revulsive response and extreme anger and action. However, South African media reports and news briefs on GBVF are governed by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA)'s Code of Conduct for Online Content Services for Licensed Broadcasters. What they report is highly censored and sanitised. Hence, reports about rape and femicide are often reduced to jokes, mockery and fables by consumers of social media, who derive 'fun and fair' out of the pain of women, girl children and other humans who suffer the scorn of violence and death at the hands of perpetrators. If ever we should get the kind of response obtained from the Israeli communities, I argue, we should be as graphic as possible while observing the necessary restrictions of concealing private parts of humans and with the necessary warning ahead of showing the pictures.

A survey on whether gruesome pictures evoke any response¹⁵

In an attempt to determine people's response to the sight of mutilated human bodies, I consulted a Quora question on social media, 'How do investigators of a crime deal with dismembered bodies? Do they ever feel traumatised by such a gory scene?' In addition to this question, a few additional questions were added to this conversation, including 'Are cops traumatised by crime scenes?' and 'Do homicide detectives really become desensitised to gory photos?'.¹⁶ Responses were quite varied and interesting. For the

15. This is an unconventional survey as the participants are not determined by a preset criterion.

16. For more on the questions consulted see Quora (n.d.a, b and c).

purposes of our discussion, I have reduced them to statistical information as follows, taking a sample of 20 Participants, I categorised their responses as follows: (1) Police or Law enforcement agents: 9 (including 1 soldier); (2) Forensic experts (practitioners): 3; (3) Academics in Forensic Sciences and related subjects: 3; Neutral (Non-aligned participants): 5.

Responses to the questions above were categorised as follows, (1) 'I do not have actual experience' = 2 (10%); (2) 'I am not emotionally moved' = 7 (35%); (3) 'I am initially moved, but thereafter desensitised' = 2 (10%); 'I am emotionally moved' = 11 (55%); 'My experience or the visuals have a lasting effect on me' = 6 (30%).

A closer look at these responses (Quora n.d.a, b, and c) in respective categories produced interesting and some controversial arguments. Those in *Category 1* argued mostly from an academic perspective, presenting a subjective view of why people are moved or not moved. Those in *Category 2* opined that people who get into this type of job are prepared beforehand for what they would encounter in order to fortify their nerves and to remove any 'human' sentiments when dealing with the 'mess' in front of them. One argues that part of his preconditioning included watching 'horror films' and 'gory video games' (Ivanof, Juris Doctor in Law). In fact, Thomas (a Police Officer) remarked that as a preparation, 'humour and to desensitise is healthy'. Those in *Category 3*, like Eugene Allen, a Former Soldier, admit to being initially traumatised by the horrible murder and accident scenes, some having to attend psychological counselling. But then sooner or later conditioned into a 'just have to do the work' attitude. Those in *Category 4*, who form the majority, say that it is impossible not to be moved, 'you never get used to death', claims Rodnimus Williams, a Former Police Officer. Then we have *Category 5* group, who are actually a subcategory of 4, who attest to the lasting effect of troubling sights of dismembered bodies in accidents and post-mortems. For instance, Walter Konrad, a Sergeant, complains of perpetual 'triggers' of these scenes by every 'location, a song, a tone of voice of an officer' he encounters. Of significant is that several respondents, at least 40% of the 'moved', confess to overwhelming torment they have experienced with the sight of the bodies of children.

It is our opinion, based on the preceding overview, that dismembered bodies, especially of women and girl children in respect of our research, leave terrible aftereffects in the minds of people. This presents a strong case for crime reporters and combatants of GBVF to 'reveal' the horrible pictures the murderers paint on the walls of reports and the minds of those who encounter them. To elicit response, this must be performed.

Crime and retribution

Once the Israeli leaders were convinced 'this' crime cannot be left unpunished, and that death to the perpetrators is the equivalent of wages, they then resolved that there was no

turning back until justice was served. The whole tribe of Benjamin and the two cities were utterly destroyed as a punishment. But even more serious, in our view, the 'agents of retribution' suffered immensely in the 'line of duty for justice'.

South Africa has established endless commissions and has also tightened laws on GBVF, but the scourge continues to snowball uncontrollably. What price has the law enforcement agents paid, and what measure of retribution have agents of justice meted out, what pain and anguish has the society suffered or incurred to bring the suffering of victims of GBVF to a halt?

A respondent at the conference where this article was delivered questioned whether the approach undertaken by Israel and the one this article has adopted does not encourage 'violence' as a solution to violence. His argument concurs with the saying, 'violence begets violence' (cf. Widom 1989, U.S. Department of Justice n.d.¹⁷ and Editor of Mail and Guardian [2023] against Lesufi).¹⁸ In Matt.26:52, Jesus actually said, 'those who take the sword shall die by the sword'. It would, however, seem that in South Africa the perpetrators wield the sword, but there is no counter force, and therefore the bodies of the victims of GBVF lie in the market square without any 'Levite' and 'without mobilised force' for their reprisal. Hence, the constitutional 'right to life'¹⁹ will always remain with the perpetrators. The Apostle Paul's unequivocal assertion in Rom.13:4–7 is that the onus of 'taking the sword' lies with the state. He posits that 'They [*the rulers*] are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer'. Therefore, the constitutionality of 'right to life' should be construed to be an indictment against South Africa's Bill of Rights, acclaimed to be 'one of the best, if not the best in the world'. Israel's 'Bill of Rights' of 1992, named, the Basic Law of Human Life and Dignity, has 12 clauses of which two are relevant to our discussion, namely, Clause 2, Preservation of Life, body and dignity, which states, 'There shall be no violation of the life, body or dignity of any person as such' and Clause 4, Protection of life, body and dignity: 'All persons are entitled to protection of their life, body and dignity'.²⁰ These are very close to South Africa's Bill of Rights in their formulation and might perhaps differ in interpretation and implementation. We therefore surmise that the protection of life in Israel is paramount. It appears that the Mosaic Law was followed to the letter in the case of the 'Concubine' civil war and the Israeli-Gaza war, as outlined in Exodus 21:23–26:

But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life; eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot; burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

We conclude thus, where life is wrongfully violated and/or taken, the guilty should pay heavily.

17. See U.S. Department (n.d.).

18. For the full editorial see Mail & Guardian (2023).

19. See Constitution of South Africa (n.d.).

20. For more information see UNHCR (n.d.).

Spirituality, indignity and shame

While the Judges 19–21 text bemoans the absence of the 'King' (supposedly law and order enforcement agent), while the status of a Levite (the Agent of Moral integrity and social cohesion) was next to naught, the moral conscience of the nation was not dead to the overarching tradition and culture of human dignity and morality (emphasised by the statement, 'they acted as one man').

Where are the Church, academic institutions, institutions of moral regeneration and spiritual integrity, and social cohesion? Where are the houses of traditional leaders and moral guardianship?

What does the unabated rise in GBVF say of the barometer of the nation's psychological aptitude, sanity and dignity?

In a country where religion occupies an important space in the lives of communities, it is inconceivable that the impact of 'faith and practice' lies dormant under the façade of religious holiness of the faith communities. If not, where does the shame lie?

Finally, this article argues that only through extreme and uncompromising acts of intervention – specifically, 'retribution' by a determined 'agency' – can we begin to make an impact on the problem of GBVF.

Whither, Human Bodies?

Everywhere, fields, battle fields are scattered with men's bodies,
Riddled with swords, heads chopped asunder, rivulets of blood
oozing everywhere

Dismembered bodies, gorged out eyes, cold blooded fields at
dusk, groans and pitiless murmurs as they breathe their last;
Fields of heroes fighting for justice, standing for women's dignity,
defending human integrity and the right to life and respect,

Is this not the story of Judges 19–21? Is this not the DNA in Israel's perspective of 'defending and seeking justice for your own'?

Alas, is this moral fibre found only in Israel? Is there 'no balm in South Africa'? Is there no soul, is there no heart in the South African men?

While we ask with unabated breaths, the echoes of women
crying for Justice continue to fill the forlorn fields of solitude,
and desperation ... Women survivors crying out, 'Until when,
until when, ...?' (Banda 2024c).

Acknowledgements

The original title, *Vulnerability and desecration of women's bodies in a biblical gender based violence and femicide saga: An attempt to retrieve sanctity and dignity of women even by gruesome means. A missiological inquest* was a paper read on 30 August 2024 at the International Association of Mission Studies (Africa Region) held at the Stellenbosch University, in Stellenbosch, South Africa, from 28–30 August 2024, under the theme *Mission as vulnerability in the African context, specifically within the track Gender and Mission*.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

Z.J.B. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

The negligible-risk application was reviewed by the College of Human Sciences_CREC on 05 March 2025 in compliance with the University of South Africa (Unisa) Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment. Approval was then granted for this project, which bears the Reference Number 7265 for a period of 1 year.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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