

## How does our reading of Judges 1:14-15 influence the “practice” of ecclesiology in Ciudad Juárez?

by

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The link between the way scholars translate Judges 1:14-15 and violence against women in México may seem strange and perhaps even unlikely. However, I will demonstrate how the bias in translation obscures an authoritative word this text offers about women’s agency and appropriate gender relations. As a Ph.D. student in practical and pastoral theology, I am concerned with how violence against women is reinforced by the inaccurate translation and interpretation of the biblical text, which in turn conceals the biblical imperative to participate in emancipatory practices of faith. It is my belief that when women’s lives are in danger, the community’s life is in danger. A Latina feminist and literary critique of Judges 1:14-15 reveals the “image of the ideal Yahwist community”<sup>1</sup> and challenges the church to confess its negligence, violence and complicit actions that continue to place women’s lives in jeopardy. Despite the insufficient responses to the problem of violence by the church and society, the mothers of the femicide victims are creating rituals at the intersection of religion, spirituality and politics that do resemble the image of the ideal Yahwist community depicted in Judges 1:14-15.

### The Judges Passage

Judges chapter one recounts the capture of Kiriath-Safer (1:12) and the relocation of Caleb’s daughter, Achsah, to the house of his nephew Othniel (1:13). When Achsah arrives to the house of Othniel she settles in the dry and arid Negev land, which lacks a viable water source. Judges 1:14-15 narrates the actions taken to address the life threatening conditions of settling in this location. The translation and interpretation of verse 14 is complicated by the ambiguous use of the verb בוא (boʾ, come in, come, go in, go). The two verbs in verse 14 are the subject of debate among biblical scholars. The Hebrew text reads:

וַיְהִי בְּבוֹאָהּ וַתְּסִיתָהּ לְשֹׂאֵל מֵאֵת־אָבִיהָ הַשָּׂדֶה וַתַּצְנַח מֵעַל הַחֲמוֹר וַיֹּאמֶר־לָהּ כָּלֹב מִה־לָּךְ

The suggested translation by the Septuagint and the Vulgate reads, “And it came to pass as she went in, that Othniel urged her to ask a field of her father.”<sup>2</sup> This translation dismisses the plausible interpretation of וַתְּסִיתָהּ (*wa tesit hu*, to incite, mislead) to be

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1. I am using the phrase to challenge Lillian R. Klein’s description of Achsah as personifying “ideal Yahwist womanhood” in *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Decatur, Georgia: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 26. Furthermore, Schnieder points out the presence of only two women in the book of Judges that are depicted as mothers. The vast majority of the women in Judges are not said to be mothers and there is no indication of their desire to be mothers. Even if Klein’s imposed assumptions regarding motherhood are correct, she underestimates the immediate concern for life. Reproduction is a privilege. Drought is hardly the ideal condition to posit requests for children. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 16.

2. Judges 1:14 LXX-B

understood as Achsah urging Othniel. This is evidenced by the change of pronoun from female to male as the subject of the verb. Both sources opt for a translation that renders the meaning of בָּוֹ (bo<sup>v</sup>) as indicative of Achsah's "coming" to her husband in order to consult him.

The first problem with the translation suggested by the Septuagint and the Vulgate is that it rejects the most common use of בָּוֹ (bo<sup>v</sup>) in the Hebrew Bible. Brown, Driver and Briggs (BDB) state that "women are rarely the subjects" of the verb בָּוֹ (bo<sup>v</sup>).<sup>3</sup> In addition Koehler, Ludwig, Baumgartner and Richardson list this text under an entry in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT), which states that in this context the verb is indicating sexual intercourse and the consummation of a marriage.<sup>4</sup> The Septuagint and Vulgate's translation of this verse does not accurately reflect the agreed upon definition provided by both BDB and HALOT. Instead these translations diverge from the generally expected action of marital intercourse, in favor of Achsah approaching her husband in order to explain the complication of the following verb (וַתִּסֵּי תְהוֹרָה, *wa tesit hu*).

The second problem with the translation of the Septuagint and the Vulgate is that the man's proper name, Othniel, is added to the text in order to clarify what the translators find to be a puzzling text. There is no question that the literal translation of the text is, "and she urged him." However perplexing the translators of the Septuagint and the Vulgate may find this text to be, it is clear that the Hebrew text contains a female subject and male personal pronominal suffix (וַתִּסֵּי תְהוֹרָה, *wa tesit hu*). It is thus surprising to encounter a change of subject from female to male in their translation of this same verb, "Othniel urged her." By their editorial decisions, both these sources silence the voice of Achsah. The implications are that silencing Achsah from being the protagonist in her own story results in her being a passive woman who is acted upon.

The gravity of the silencing of women's voices by biblical scholars begins with the Septuagint and the Vulgate and it extends beyond these two authoritative sources, which are used to construct an androcentric theology. Several arguments, which follow the logic of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, defend their translations on the basis that the text is alerting the reader to a sequence of military events in the story. They also insist the Hebrew text needs to be revised in order to clarify the proceeding speech made by Achsah to Caleb (וַתֹּמַר, *wa tomer*, and she said).

For example, George Foot Moore explains that Achsah was kept safe in Hebron while the capture of Debir was taking place. William F. Albright acknowledges Moore's translation as a helpful clarification to this ambiguous verb and elaborates on the following verb. Albright argues that the Hebrew text must be edited (וַתִּסֵּי תְהוֹרָה, *wa tesit*

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3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Abridged)*. Accordance electronic edition, version 3.5. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906.

4. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, eds. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Accordance electronic edition, version 3.1. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

hu) in order to clarify the meaning of וַתֹּאמֶר (*wa tomer*).<sup>5</sup> Since Achsah is the character that makes the request, Albright concludes Othniel gave her special dispensation to make the request. The Hebrew text is most vigorously contested by J. Alberto Soggin's commentary on this verse that states, "the reading is obviously wrong, seeing that the 'father' who follows can only be her father and she is the subject here in the following verse."<sup>6</sup> Like Albright, both Robert G. Boling and Barnabas Lindars resist fidelity to the Hebrew text and favor the reading of both the Septuagint and the Vulgate.

This preference for the Septuagint and Vulgate seems to protect patriarchal power, a concern that does not appear to be present in the Hebrew text. For example, Boling is concerned with the "damage to the image of the first 'savior judge' (3:7-10)" and suggests the text "be taken as a tendentious development."<sup>7</sup> Lindars reasons that his editorial decision is based on the implication "that Othniel will act on her advice."<sup>8</sup>

My proposed translation for verse 14 is as follows: "And it came to pass, he came to her (sexually) and she urged him to ask from her father the field and she went down from upon the donkey and Caleb said to her, 'What to you?'"

וַיְהִי בַּבֹּאֶה וַתְּסִיתָהוּ לְשִׂאֵל מֵאֵת אָבִיהָ הַשָּׂדֶה וַתִּצְנַח מֵעַל הַחֲמֹר וַיֹּאמֶר-לָהּ כָּלֵב מִה-לָּךְ

Based on my translation and interpretation of the text, the ideal Yahwist community provides for the empowerment of Achsah to be the moral agent for her own liberation. When Othniel is unresponsive to her request and her life is in danger, Achsah can seek life-giving options from her father. She embarks on a journey on her own and when she arrives at her father's house, her request does not fall on deaf ears. Caleb listens and responds by acknowledging her cries for life and his ability to prevent catastrophe. Granting her land with water source averts the crisis. The relationship between women and men facilitates the action of protecting mutually beneficial interests.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the biblical text does not ignore the patriarchal structure in which it is situated; it simply lifts up the active women who destabilize the organization.

We Adventists respect the authority of the biblical text and I am suggesting that errors and bias in translation conceal an authoritative word this text offers about women's agency and appropriate gender relations. When women and men fail to live in the ideal community this text depicts, violence increases. Just as the book of Judges concludes with the mass murder of women, so is the tragedy of femicide in Ciudad Juárez.

5. C. F. Burney. Prolegomenon by William F. Albright, *The Book of Judges, with Introduction and Notes, and Notes On the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings, with an Introduction and Appendix*, (New York: KTAV Pub. House, 1970), 13.

6. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges, a Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1981), 22.

7. Robert G. Boling. *The Anchor Bible*. Vol. 6A, *Judges*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1974) 57.

8. Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 1994), 29.

9. In subsequent chapters, several women in the book of Judges act as moral agents and leaders because the men who ought to be acting and leading are not (i.e. Jael and Deborah in Judges chapter 4-5).

## The Femicide in Ciudad Juárez

The word “femicide” is a translation of the Spanish language term “*feminicidio*” initially used by feminist activists in the Dominican Republic during a campaign in the 1980s to end violence against women.<sup>10</sup> *Femicide* is defined as the murder of young girls and women who are vulnerable to the systemic violence rooted in the social, political, economic and cultural inequalities of power structures. Femicide poses a theological challenge to Christian claims of “abundant life” (John 10:10) and subsequently is a concern to theological constructs of salvation, grace and integral life.

This year marks 21 years since the body of Alma Mireya Chavarría Fávila was found. Her body was dumped in the desert lands of Chihuahua, México after she was brutally raped (anally and vaginally), beaten, and strangled to death. Fávila was identified as the first of an estimated 740<sup>11</sup> victims.<sup>12</sup> In his essay, “A Living Call: The Theological Challenge of the Juárez-Chihuahua Femicides,” Rafael Luévano explores the social, political, and economic conditions which contribute to the increasing number of women who have gone missing or been found dead.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 12. *Femicide* expands the definition of “femicide” first used by U.S. feminist sociologist Diana Russell in the 1984 *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal*. Russell defines femicide as “the killing of females by males.” Diana E. H. Russell, ed., *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal* (East Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well, 1984), 161.

11. This estimate is reported by the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) Vienna Liaison Office and accounts for reported femicides in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 2009. It is difficult to accurately report the number of women missing and murdered in Ciudad Juárez. Rafael Luévano states there is a variance in the numbers reported by independent reports and those accounted for by the Mexican government. Luévano cites the independent studies of both Diana Washington Valdez and Rosa Linda Fregoso to support the theory that there has been a rise in violent crimes against women in the city of Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Valdez in *Mexico (Harvest of Women: Safari of Women)* [Burbank, CA: Peace at the Border, 2006], esp. 359-73, estimates 470 girls and women were the victims of violent crime between 1993 and 2005. Compare that quantity with Fregoso’s in *Mexican Encounters* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 2, who estimates 37 women who were murdered between 1985 and 1993. There is no question there has been a rise in violent crimes against women since 1993.

12. Diana Washington Valdez, *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women* (Burbank: Peace at the Border, 2006), 363; Teresa Rodriguez, Diana Montané, and Lisa Pulitzer, *Daughters of Juárez: A True Story of Serial Murder South of the Border* (New York: Atria, 2007), 38. Fávila’s age is contested by journalists and investigators who estimate she was anywhere from 5 years old to what they vaguely describe as being a “young woman.”

13. It is difficult to accurately report the number of women missing and murdered in Ciudad Juárez. Luévano states there is a variance in the numbers reported by independent reports and those accounted for by the Mexican government. However, there is no question there has been a rise in violent crimes against women since 1993. Luévano sites the independent studies of both Diana Washington Valdez and Rosa Linda Fregoso to support the theory that there has been a rise in violent crimes against women in the city of Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Valdez in *Mexico (Harvest of Women: Safari of Women)* [Burbank, CA: Peace at the Border, 2006], esp. 359-73, estimates 470 girls and women were the victims of violent crime between 1993 and 2005. Compare that quantity with Fregoso’s in *Mexican Encounters* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 2, who estimates 37 women who were murdered between 1985 and 1993.

The 1994 National American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, México and Canada facilitated the inexpensive production of goods manufactured in Juárez, México and shipped into the United States with minimal taxes charged. This increased the number of low wage jobs at the border town of Juárez and attracted many Mexican workers (twice the population of El Paso, Texas). Residents in Juárez live in poverty and at the center of a large drug trafficking operation. Drugs are shipped in from Colombia and then transported into the United States, which according to the 2012 report by the United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control is “the world’s largest consumer of illegal drugs.”<sup>14</sup>

The most interesting observation Luévano makes is his assessment of the social liability of violent crimes against women.<sup>15</sup> Many of the *maquiladoras*<sup>16</sup> in Ciudad Juárez employ women, and this presents a challenge to the *machismo* culture in México. Consider the possibility that some of these women are not only threatening the typical role of woman as wife, mother and homemaker, but these women are assuming jobs that would otherwise be available to men. Men without work are not helpful to maintaining patriarchal strongholds over women. Luévano suggests that the violent crimes against women are a “rebellion by Mexican men reasserting their machismo... [by] perverted and exaggerated male punishment of women,” in part for taking their jobs.<sup>17</sup>



Fig.1 (source: <http://weavenews.org/node/1535>) Maquiladora in Juárez

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14. United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, *Reducing the U.S. Demand For Illegal Drugs*, by One Hundred and Twelfth Congress Second Session. Washington, D.C.: 2012  
[http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve/?File\\_id=81b53476-64a3-4088-9bae-254a84b95ddb](http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve/?File_id=81b53476-64a3-4088-9bae-254a84b95ddb) (accessed November 10, 2014).

15. Rafael Luévano, “A Living Call: The Theological Challenge of the Juárez-Chihuahua Femicides,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24 no 2 (Fall 2005): 67-76.

16. *Maquiladoras* are factories in Mexico that are operated by companies in the United States that profit from cheap labor and lenient regulation.

17. Luévano, 72.

## Inadequate Responses to the Problem of Violence

Given these complex social, economic, historical and political relationships, the church strives to respond to the problem of violence against women. In 2010 the murder of two members of the Zaragoza Adventist Church located in Ciudad Juárez occurred. The Adventist News Network headline read: “Case of Mistaken Identity in Border Town with Warring Drug Cartels.” The opening paragraph expresses the concerns of Seventh-day Adventist leaders for “the safety of their church members.”<sup>18</sup> The article reports that a witness stated he overheard the shooter say they “shot the wrong people.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of murdering persons associated with the drug cartel the shooter killed a brother and sister, ages 18 and 26. Is the judgment of killing the “right” or “wrong” person a matter of whether or not they are identified as members of the drug cartel?

The response from the Seventh-day Adventist North Mexican Union headquarters in Montemorelos, Nuevo Leon appears to use similar reasoning to guide their reaction to the tragic violence that took the lives of the two Zaragoza church members. Luis Arturo King, president of the church in North Mexico expressed his concern for the “safety of their members in the region” and stated that the Union office drafted a “document with recommendations for the safety of our members as they do missionary work,” which would be voted at the next committee meeting.<sup>20</sup> Safety is a concern and yet is the concern for safety only for those who ought to be kept safe?

Measuring the value of human beings based on their identity as members of the drug cartel or the Adventist church dismisses the values of a life affirming community. Focusing on identity in regard to gender or religious affiliation as the characteristic that determines the gravity of the problem is misguided and leads to more violence. It is difficult to know how to respond to such devastating catastrophes. Societal structures are also wrestling with appropriate responses. When approached by antifemicide activist groups, Chihuahua Governor Francisco Barrio “famously dismissed the brutal rapes and murders, claiming that the number of victims was not out of the ordinary or worthy of attention, that the girls and women killed were to blame for dressing provocatively and walking in poorly lit areas.”<sup>21</sup>

Neither the Adventist church nor societal structures seem to be directly addressing the problem of violence against women. The responses fail to imagine that another world is possible, here and now. We as Adventist cannot settle on restrictive response because we value the authority of scripture and the biblical imperative requires a response that is inclusive and life giving. The translation I propose above for Judges 1:14-15 gives an authoritative word relevant to the “practice” of ecclesiology.

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18. Libna Stevens, “Case of Mistaken Identity in Border Town With Warring Drug Cartels,” Adventist News Network, September 22, 2010, <http://news.adventist.org/all-news/news/go/2010-09-22/in-northern-mexico-adventists-mourn-killings-of-two-young-members/> (accessed November 10, 2014).

19. *Ibid.*

20. Libna Stevens, “Case of Mistaken Identity in Border Town With Warring Drug Cartels,” Adventist News Network, September 22, 2010, <http://news.adventist.org/all-news/news/go/2010-09-22/in-northern-mexico-adventists-mourn-killings-of-two-young-members/>

21. Pineda-Madrid, 99-100.

## The “practice” of the Ideal Yahwist Community

I wonder if we can imagine the “practice” of the church through the transnational activist work of the marginalized women in Ciudad Juárez?

In 1995, when a distinct profile of the murdered women emerged (poor, slender, brown skinned, long dark hair), the *Ocho de Marzo* (8<sup>th</sup> of March) activists began painting utility poles pink and tying black ribbons around them.<sup>22</sup> Then in 1998 the murder of María Sagrario González Flores’ seventeen-year-old daughter, Paula Flores, inspired María to organize *Voces sin Eco* (Voices without Echo). *Voces sin Eco* commenced the practice of painting large black crosses with pink backgrounds on the utility poles in the city. These pink crosses symbolized both the death of the young women murdered and the hope for justice. The public display urged the community to acknowledge the problem of violence against women.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 2 (source: <http://archive.newspapertribune.com/features/1976-making-a-killing-land-deals-and-girl-deaths-on-the-u-s-mexico-border>)  
Activists paint crosses on city poles.

In 2001 the activities of the women escalated when on Valentines Day, seventeen-year-old Lilia Alejandra García Andrade was abducted and found a week later wrapped in a blanket. Norma Andrade de García, Lilia’s mother, organized a march on International Women’s Day to the office of the “Special Prosecutor for the Investigation of the Homicide of Women” and appealed for justice. The women carried wooden crosses and photos of their daughters and other victims of the feminicides.<sup>24</sup> A year later several transnational Latina activist groups united in the *Campaña Alto a la Impunidad: Ni Una Muerte Más* (Stop the Impunity: Not One More Death Campaign). This transnational campaign organized the *Éxodo por Vida* (Exodus for Life) march from Chihuahua City to the Paseo del Norte International Bridge in Ciudad Juárez.

The 230-mile march began on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (International Women’s Day) and included “elderly women, campesinas, housewives, factory workers, students, [and] professionals”<sup>25</sup> dressed in black with pink hats. When they arrived at Ciudad Juárez, according to Diana Washington Valdez, political agitators bullied the marchers

22. Melissa W. Wright, “A Manifesto against Femicide,” *Antipode* 33/3 (2001): 556.

23. Valdez, 38.

24. Pineda-Madrid, 100.

25. Rosa Linda Fresgoso, “Toward a Planetary Civil Society,” in *Women and Migration: In the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, ed. Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 55-56.



attempting to prevent their entrance into the city. However, “several men who accompanied the women intervened. They created a physical wedge between the two groups, and that permitted the marchers to continue into Juárez without further problems.”<sup>26</sup> Despite then Chihuahua governor, Patricio Martínez’s attempts to end the procession into the city’s major streets, the procession grew to thousands of women and men who joined the procession.



Fig. 3 (source: Diario de Juárez) Community of women and men processing through the city. The inscription on the pink cross reads “God with the mothers of the youth. Missing and found without life”

When the women arrived to the Paseo del Norte Bridge, which links El Paso, Texas to Ciudad Juárez the men took out their power tools and assisted in erecting an “impressive cross” transported on the bed of a truck the women hauled to create a shrine at the busy border crossing bridge. The large wooden cross displayed a metal panel, twelve feet high, that read “Ni Una Más” (Not One More). At the foot of the cross the women placed a plastic mannequin torso and tags with the names of the femicide victims. Some tags simply read “unknown.” While installing the cross at the bridge, Mexican bridge officials threatened to tear it down because it was causing traffic congestion. Juárez radio show host, Samira Itzaguirre spoke to the crowd through a bullhorn saying, “If they take it down, we’ll be right back and put up a bigger one in its place.”<sup>27</sup>

The resistance movements in Ciudad Juárez use the rich symbolism of biblical narratives, the cross and the exodus. The cross is a symbol of Christ’s solidarity with them in their suffering and the hope of a transformative event that promises to resurrect the consciousness of the community. This resurrected consciousness also points to their exodus and liberation from oppressive and life threatening conditions. In contrast to the exclusive response of organized religion and government organizations, the mothers of the femicide victims are creating rituals at the intersection of religion, spirituality and politics that do resemble the image of the ideal Yahwist community depicted in Judges 1:14-15. The women of Ciudad Juárez challenge the church to confess its negligence, violence and complicit actions that continue to place women’s lives in jeopardy. Although traditional biblical scholarship obscures the biblical imperative to participate in emancipatory practices of faith as they are described in Judges 1:14-15, the women of Ciudad Juárez are recovering the text in practice.

26. Valdez, 74-75.

27. Valdez, 75.