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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation of Israel's Conflicts and Wars with Benjamin in Judges 20 in African Context

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ABSTRACT

In Judges 20, Israel overacts, revenges against injustices of Gibeah's crime (Judges 19). Doing so, plunges Israel into civil-religious war and conflicts with Benjamin, indicating the tragedy of confederacy without visionary leaders, who fear the Lord. This phenomenon of war is common, outside the bible and world over today, especially in Africa. Past exegetes and commentators of non-African origins have interpreted Judges 19–20 historically, using diverse approaches or interpretative models. This work newly examines Judges 20 contextually for Africa which is plagued today with wars and violence. It adapts a postcolonial biblical interpretative (PCBI) approach within the overall context of the theology and ethics of Deuteronomistic History (Joshua- Kings). It argues for dialogue and against incessant tragic phenomena of civil wars, conflicts, and domestic violence in African faith communities.

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1. Introduction

In Judges, we find a cycle of disobedience, infidelity, leading to punishment, repentance and deliverance (3:7–16:31). Chapters 17–21, in particular, represent very old tradition which sheds light on the social and religious history of Israel. It describes the cultic and moral anarchy of the era "when there was no king in Israel (Judges 17:6; 19:1) and a time when people did whatever was right in their own eyes" (21:25). This refrain encapsulates this study, and serves as a connecting bridge to the book of Samuel where Saul and David are introduced as kings with a theocratic implication of God as King of Israel (1 Sam 8:23).

Chapters 19–21, broadly present a terrible story of violence and Gibeah's crime (Judges 19), leading to Israel's bloody tribal war, with the fellow tribe of Benjamine (Judge 20), and to kidnapping of the innocent dancing maidens at Shiloh (Judges 21). In this story, a Levite from Ephraim went to Bethlehem of Judah searching for his concubine/wife (*philegesh*) who left him with anger (*ōrgisthē* in *LXX*) or, on the ground of unfaithfulness/prostitution (*zānāh* in the *MT*), and went back to her parents in the southern Israel. Returning home late, they passed through Jebus (a pre-Israelite name for Jerusalem, about 5 miles, or 7 kilometers north of Bethlehem), and passed a night in Gibeah a city in the territory of Benjamin (vv.11–15), in the home of an elderly and hospitable old man (*zāqen*) from Ephraim (vv.16–21). At night, some sons of worthlessness (*bənê-bəliyya'l*) surrounded the old's man's compound with an attempt to gang-rape the Levite (v.22). He hands-over his concubine to these worthless men., who raped her all night to death (vv.23–28). On reaching home, the Levites cutes up her body and distributes parts to all the tribes of Israel, demanding judgment (vv.29–30).

Outraged by the incident, Israel avenges the injustices of Gibeah's crime (Judges 19). The people took oaths never to give their daughters to the Benjamites in marriage, and plunged into civil war against Benjamin.This war nearly wiped out the entire tribe, leaving only 600 men as survivors (Judge 20:21–48). Israel overreactions and revenges are overcome by remorse. They destroyed the city of Jabesh Gilead, none of whose residents took part in the war nor in the oath, or went to Mizpah (Judges

21 1–15). Israel tragically captured their 400 maidens as wives for the Benjamites (v.12), while their remaining 200 men were allowed to abduct the maidens dancing at Shiloh (vv.16–24).

This tragedy of lawless confederacy without visionary leaders who neither fear the Lord, nor promote common good, justice, hardwork, sacrifice and selflessness (v.25), is a phenomenon common in today's African tribalistic and ethnocentric society. Like ancient Israel of the time of the Judges, African societies today are daily confronted with all forms of conflicts and violence, including tribal and ethnic wars, religious extremism, greed, corruption, kidnappings, killings, arm robberies, and general disorder. disorderliness (Crary, 1986; Isabirye & Mahmoudi, 1999; Najimdeen, 2023; Udoekpo, 2020a, pp. 24–38). In the 20th century alone, Africa has experienced costly wars and conflicts in Somalia (1991), Nigeria (1967) and Uganda (1987), as well as the Rwandan and Burundi Genocide (1994), and during the Eritrean-Ethiopian War of 1998. This is not to mention several other bloody conflicts and the recent threats of war in the Republic of Niger (Norwich University, 2017).

Substantial number of past exegetes, scholars, commentators, and theologians, on this text, especially non-have often adopted the diachronic, or historical, feminist, rabbinical approaches, and theoretically and historically read this episode of Israel's war with Benjamin in Judges 19–21 (Arnold, 2009; Fokkelman, 1999, pp. 110–111; Szpek, 2007). Szpek (2007) exceptionally sees it not only as ahistorical, but as "a metaphor of dire, not gentle, admonition, pieced together by allusions, of what Israel's destiny might become" (pp. 5–9). Boling sees the story, as merely representing "the confederacy as utterly leaderless" (Boling, 2008, p. 178). It is "a rich mine of data on Israel's pre-monarchial organization as well as dramatic ironies or a tragicomic" (Boling, 2008, p. 178; Currie, 1971, p. 14).

Martin Noth saw it as a reflection of military expedition of the twelve-tribes organization against one of its members in the pre-Davidic era (Noth, 1960, pp. 104–106). Wellhausen read it as an addition or late imitation of the story of Lot in Genesis 19 and dismissed it as having no positive value (Wellhausen, 1957, pp. 235–237). While others, such as Yairah Amit understood it as a supplement to Micah's story (Judges 17–18), appointing at what happened in Israel, when there was no King (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), as well as a post-exilic political narrative to demonstrate the unfading unity of Israel (Amit, 1999). As noted in my earlier studies, these earlier, western and European-minded-studies, "were devoid of African concerns, stories, examples, customs, culture, or worldview, particularly those cherished by African Biblical Hermeneutics" (Udoekpo, 2023a, pp. 12–15).

2. Method

Methodologically, this study uses common "African historical and cultural experiences as an exegetical point of departure" (Udoekpo, 2023a, p. 13). Basic terms such as "postcolonialism" and "Third World," used in the study are defined and analyzed. This is followed by a general overview or survey of the book of Judges. Particular attenton is given to the text, moral and the structure of Judges 20. Postcolonial biblical interpretation is contextually and religiously used for the detailed analysis and exegesis of the text. In doing this, attention is also devoted to highlighting the antecedent responsible factors of the conflicts and wars between ancient Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. Some of these highlighted factors which include, greed, lack of responsible leaders and corruption, are also found in today's African society. These factors, the study argues, were instigated by the colonial masters. In Nigeria for instance, the newly arrived British colonial masters, in the 1960s, gave power to the less-educated northern Muslims, without proper education on democracy and peaceful co-existence. Even among the presumably better educated Christians in the south, there were those who abuse power. This has contributed to ot the current lack of unity, incessant threats of wars, religious violence and conflicts in Nigeria.

This study also points out additional factors responsible for conflicts and wars in Ngiera. These include unwise, and irreligious behavior of the priests and elders, who were supposed to be role models to others. Their behavior contradicts the true African values, of a deep sense of community living, respect to elders, the custodian of peace, dialogue, justice, unityubuntu, family life, sense of the sacred or profound religious sense. These are all stressed in this study. Above all, these analyses are theologically done within the overall contexts of Deuteronomistic History (Josh-2 Kings), particularly of the book of Judges 19–21. It is believed that the fruit of this postcolonial essay will not only transform African readers, but will benefit them within their faith context, since in Christ, all peoples and their cultures are drawn to dialogue and peacefully co-exist in God.

3. Defining Postcolonialism

Borrowing from R. S. Sugirtharajah's insight, "postcolonialism" as used in this study is an amalgam of different methods and contextual approaches that are not restricted to the familiar form, source,

historical or literary criticisms (Sugirtharajah, 2002, pp. 6–7). But embraces other hermeneutical approaches that promotes African stories, cultures, experiences, inculturation, values, customs and beliefs (Adamo, 2015, p. 1; Udoekpo, 2022, pp. 16–23; Ukpong, 2002, pp. 17–32, esp. 18).

Postcolonial criticism is promoted by scholars from "third world countries." This concept "Third Word," of course, was coined "in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred, Sauvy, who saw similarity between the nations moving toward independence from colonial powers and the third estate in France demanding freedom and equality during the French Revolution" (Ruiz, 2003, p. 123; Udoekpo, 2005, p. 18). The expression, as noted extensively elsewhere, continues to be used "as self-designation of people who have been excluded from power and the authority to shape their own lives and destiny" (Fabella & Sugirtharajah, 2002, p. 202). Being the work and measures of "Third World" (which Africa and Nigeria in particular is part), Sugirtharajah further describe postcolonial criticism as:

> A textual and praxiological practice initially undertaken by people who were once part of the British, European and American Empires, but now have some sort of territorial freedom while continuing to live with burdens from the past and enduing newer forms of economic and cultural neocolonialism. It was also undertaken by ethnic minorities who lived in diaspora, namely British blacks and British Asians in England, and racial minorities in the United States and Canada-African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans-who had been victims of old imperialism, who are now current victims of globalization and who have been continually kept away from and represented by dominant First World elements. (Sugirtharajah, 2001, p. 247; Udoekpo, 2005, p. ß18).

It is an interpretative method which liberates or breaks away from that which is exclusively associated with Europeans or American expansionism, culture, values, customs, power, domination and imperialism (Fiorenza, 1999, p. 36; Mbuvi, 2023, p. 7; Said, 1993, p. 9). Notably, liberationist readings, "which began in the 1970s with the work of Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, differ from postcolonialist reading in that while postcolonial criticism adapted in this study, shares the emancipatory ideals that liberationist hermeneutics embraces" (Udoekpo, 2005, pp. 18–19). In fact, it is deeply suspicious of the liberationist tendency to give the Bible the unquestionable benefits of the doubt, to regard the Bible itself as a place where the message of peace, dialogue and justice are found (Segovia, 1999, pp. 285–286; Udoekpo, 2005, pp. 18–19). Postcolonial critics would invite liberationist hermeneutics to recall that the Bible, including Judges 20 "arrived in the hands of the colonizers, who saw it as the indispensable means with which the colonized were to be civilized" (Sugirtharajah, 2001, p. 242; Udoekpo, 2005, p. 19). Although postcolonialism goes beyond the emancipatory values of liberationist interpretation, and of the homogenization of the poor, both share a common interpretative commitment to "others" from the "Third World," of which Africa is part of the whole (Sugirtharajah, 2001, p. 244, 2002, p. 11).

Therefore, postcolonialism is "a condition that exists within, and thus, contests and resists the colonial moment itself with its ideology of domination" (Lionnet, 1995, p. 4; Udoekpo, 2005, p. 17). It must be understood as "contracoloniality" (Fiorenza, 1999, p. 37; Udoekpo, 2005, p. 17). In what follows, it is a set of measure or contextual approach adopted by biblical scholars from non-European of American countries. This is important as each age and culture continues to seek to understand, translate, inculturate, appropriate, actualize and contextualize the word of God (John 1:14) of which Judges 19–20 forms apart. It is a testimony to a great shift in methods of biblical interpretation in different contexts, and African context in particular (Brown & Schneiders, 1990, pp. 1146–1165; Fitzmyer, 1995; McKenzie & Haynes, 1999; Udoekpo, 2017, pp. xxxix–xxx).

Although, Robert Schreiter has affirmed the importance of contextualizing and appropriating of biblical exegesis and theology, he advises that even though we embrace postcolonial method, "theology must not be reduced to context in a crude contextualism, for then it is likely to lose its critical edge as it becomes simply a product of its surroundings" (Schreiter, 1997, pp. 1–27). Reading ancient Old Testament texts like the Book of Judges in "our African times—that is, using postcolonial method of biblical interpretation—can be challenging" (Udoekpo, 2024, p. 12). But "this becomes easier when we keep in mind, that the Word of God, that became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14; (Isa 40:8; 1 Pet 1:23–25), is both timeless and without continental boundaries" (Udoekpo, 2024, pp. 12–13).

In other words, the narrative in Judges 19–20 is capable of "entering into and finding expression in various cultures and languages, yet that same word overcomes the limits of individual cultures to create fellowship between different people" (Benedict, 2010, p. 116). Postcolonial biblical method of interpretation (PCBI) in this case "must be distinctively communal, existential and reflective, African and comparative, evaluative in using Africa and African culture to interpret the Bible for dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts" (Adamo, 2015, pp. 30–34; Mbuvi, 2023, pp. 3–11). Again, this

"must not be done in isolation from other interpretative approaches, in an attempt to decolonize the interpretation of the Bible and the Word of God in light of African culture and tradition (Adamo, 2015, pp. 4–10; Mbuvi, 2023, pp. 3, 11–12, 57, 100–111). The above and brief clarifications or definitions, though not exhaustive, lead us to a brief overview of the story in Judges, including information about who the judges were, the text, the setting, moral, structure, working-compositional structure that provides an outline for the rest of the exegesis and analysis.

4. Judges: An Overview

Judges were charismatic leaders raised up by the impulses of God's spirit to deliver Israelites from their enemies. They were not Judges like in the modern courts in our judiciary systems today. Rather, through divine assistance they vindicated the justices of God. Oppression comes to Israel as a result of their infidelity to God. Salvation comes to Israel in their obedience to the Lord (Deut 28:15–68; Judg 2:11–18). They were the Lord's salvific fidelity to his word. The book of Judges is a continuation of Israel's history in the promised land beginning from the death of Joshua to just the time or before the birth of Samuel, the last Judge of Israel (1 Sam 7:15). Its setting covers the time between the conquest of Canaan under Joshua until the rise of the monarchy under the first King of Israel, Saul. In modern scholarship, the book of Judges is treated as an important historical source for the time between the Exodus from Egypt and the beginning of the United Monarchy (Schneider, 2000, p. xii; Udoekpo, 2020b, pp. 1–18).

The text itself has come to us in different versions such as (a) the Hebrew text, (b) the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek characters, (c) Aquila, (d) Symmachus, (e) Origen's LXX and (f) Theodotion (Boling, 2008, p. 43; Udoekpo, 2020b, pp. 1–18). As Boling would observe the principle of textual criticism has not changed, but throughout this study, we shall be indicating where necessary the relationship between different version (Boling, 2008, p. 46). Judges, generally are stories of God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness including their Judges, Leaders and the citizens (Branick, 2011, p. 31).

They are cyclical stories of extended laments about idolatry, tribal and defensive wars, violent and corruption of families, tribes and religious and political leaders that took place in Israel when there was no king in Israel and everyone, as mention earlier "did what was good in his or her eyes" (2:10—19; 17:6; 18:1;19:1 21:25). Its moral revolves around the fact that oppression of the Israelites is the punishment of impiety, disobedience and that victory, restoration, salvation comes as a result of repentance, conversion, renewal, and making a "U-turn" from violence and war (*milchamah*) to God and peace (*shalom*).

Based on content, many scholars usually attribute three major parts to the 21 chapters of Judges: (a) Introduction (1:1–3:6), (b) stories about individual Judges (3:7–16:31) and (c) the concluding stories (17–21). Currid (2021) whom I would like to borrow, for instance, arranges his division of the book of Judges into:

(1) Israel's unfaithfulness (1:1–3:6)
   a) Ongoing conquest (1:1–3:6)
   b) Failure to fulfil the conquest (1:27–36)
   c) Israel's disobedience (2:1–3:6)
(2) The downhill cycle of the 12 Judges (3:7–16:31)
   a) Othniel (3:7–11)
   b) Ehud (3:12–30)
   c) Shamgar (3:31) Deborah (4:1–5:310
   d) Gideon (6:1–8:32)
   e) Abimelech (8:33–9:57)
   f) Tola and Jair (10:1–5)
   g) Jephthah (10:6–12:7)
   h) Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8–15)
   i) Samson (13:1–16:31)
(3) The sinful abyss (17:1–21:25)
   a) Micah, the Levite, and the Tribe of Dan (17:1–18:31)
   b) Sin of the Benjaminites (19:1–21:25).

In other words, there are as many structures and outlines as there are authors and commentators. Our focus remains on the last section of any of these structures. That is, Israel's domestic war in the territory of Benjamins (Judges 20) in the proximate context of the antecedent crimes (Judges 19–21) and Judges as a whole.

5. Analysis of Israel's War with Benjamine (Judges 20)

There is no better place to begin the analysis of the story of Israel's war with Benjamin in Judges 20, than with a brief highlight on antecedent responsible factors, such as, disobedience to God's commands, idolatry, tribalism, relativism, selfishness, greed, unfaithfulness, anger, corruption, lack of thoughtful leaders, male dominated world and tribal conflicts.

5.1. Antecedent and Responsible Factors

As rightly summarized in Boling (2008, p. 173), Judges 19: 1 introduces a man, a Levite and a resident alien (*'îsh, lēwî, gār*), who lived in the remotest part of the hill country of Ephraim (*bəyarəkkê har-'ephrayîm*). This was "in those days when there was no king in Israel" (*wayəhî bayyāmîm hāham ûmelek 'ên bəyisrā'êl*). He took for himself a woman, a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah (*wayyiqqḥ-lô 'sshāh phîlegesh mibbêt leḥem yəhûdāh*). Obviously, this would indicate relativism and lack of a central human leadership as well as the disobedience to God. In the holiness code, an obedient Levite was supposed to marry a virgin, and not concubines (Lev 21:10–5), although the concubine may have had the status of a legal mistress, like in the case of Abraham (Gen 25:6), Jacob (35:22), Caleb (1Chr 2:46), Saul (2 Samuel 3:7), David (2 Samuel 5:13), Solomon (1 Kings 11:3) and Rehoboam (2 Chro 11:21), but not exactly as that of a legal wife. This disobedient Levite is from the north while the concubine (*phîlegesh*) is from the south, setting the stage, for tribal sentiments and other forms of lawlessness that would foreground the conflicts in Judges 20, and by extension, wars and conflicts in different parts of Africa. Boling sees this north-south element not only as a "conscious contrast (narrative inversion) to the preceding story of "a young Levite" (18:3), but as "a partial antithesis of Micah's "priest" (17:7–12).

In verses 1–4, the Levite's concubine became "angry with him" (*orgisthe auto, LXX*). Other version say she was unfaithful to him, or got into harlotry or prostitution (*wattizneh 'ālâw, MT*). As a result, she went away to her father's house in Bethlehem for some months. A situation of this nature is common in Africa or familiar to an African reader of Judges 20. At such time of conflict, a loving African husband, with time, could seek reconciliation and reach out to the father-in-law of "an angry" or "unfaithful" wife, for reconciliation. According to Ekanem (2002, pp. 66–68), sons-in-law, like grand children in Africa are 'sacred' and often would have maintained a mutual-loving relationship with the entire household of the father-in-law during such visits as narrated here in the book of Judges. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The Levite in Judges, spent most of the four days with his hospitable father-in-law and spoke to the concubine only after her death, or after she became unconscious (vv. 27–28). According to Boling "It was a man's world. There is no mention of the interest of the girl in rejoining her husband, nor of what womenfolk did while the two men celebrated most of the week" (Boling, 2008, p. 174). This episode must be challenging as well to women readers today in Africa, especially in Annang land of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. In this culture and as rightly noted by Ekanem, an African social anthropologist, "women have their special in the house. They are mothers of the various houses. The generative potency of the houses comes to nothing without the woman. Women are regarded as the garden in which is planted the seeds of the house" (2002, p. 65). Based on their experiences, values and customs, African mothers, wives and postcolonial readers today, would question vehemently the treatment given to this woman in the book of Judges, since women are generally and respectfully regarded not only as mothers to their children and wives to their husbands, but to the entire lineage and the community (Ekanem, 2002, pp. 65–66).

In reading and appropriating this text from a postcolonial perspective, or in the context of African cultural values, exchange of wine, kola, blessings, and other forms of prayer-rituals are expected to occur in the presence or assembly of the entire household, including the daughter/concubine, extended relatives and elders of the family, for effective reconciliation of the kind orchestrated by the Levite before the father-in-law.

In verses 5–10, the father-in-law extended his hospitality to the Levite, who, finally, succeeded in departing Bethlehem in the afternoon, on the fifth day, instead of in the morning. Ironically, by seeking to avoid potential inhospitality and risk of spending the night in Jebus a foreign (Canaanite) city, the Levite and his entourage suffer that very fate in Gibeah, an Israelite city in northern Jerusalem (vv.11–15), but only to be given hospitality by an old man, a fellow Ephraimite, whom he shared the same tribal region with (vv.16–21). Some sons of worthlessness (*bənê-bəliyya'l*) surrounded them at night with an attempt to gang-rape the Levite (v.22), who rather sadly surrendered his concubine to them. She was raped all night to death, or to the point of unconsciousness (vv.23–28). On reaching home with the home with the body, which he discovered at the threshold of the house, the following morning, the Levite cuts and distributed her parts to all the tribes of Israel, demanding for judgment (vv.29–30). This terrible action, among many other factors listed above, generated Israel's war with Benjamin in Judges 20.

TABLE I: Working and Introductory Text of Judges 20

MT	Working translation/NRSV
1. *wayyētsə'û kôl- bənê-yisrāē'l wattiqqāhēl hā'ēdāh, kə'îsh 'eḥād, ləmiddān wə'ad-bəē'r sheba', wə'eretz haggilā'd, 'el-ăḏônay hammitzppāh.*	"Then all the Israelites came forth. The assembly gathered, as one man, around the Lord at Mizpah- from Dan to Beersheba including the land of Gilead"
2. *wayyityatztzəbû pinnôt kôl-hā'ām kol shibətê yisrāē'l biqəhal 'am hā'ĕlohîm 'arəbba' mē'ōth 'eleph 'îsh ragəlî shōlēph ḥārebh.*	"The leaders of all the people (all the Israelites tribes) stationed themselves in the assembly of God's people, four hundred contingents of sword-bearing foot soldiers"
3. *wayyîshmə'û bənê- binyāmin kî-'ālû bənê-yisrāē'l hammitzppāh, wayyomərû bənê-yisrāē'l dabbərû 'êkāh nihəyətāh hārā'āh hazzo'th*	"The Benjaminites heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah. The Israelites said, "speak out. How did this vile thing happen"?

5.2. Israel's War with Benjamin (Judges 20)

Respoinding to the Levite's actions, all the Israelites assembled in Mizpah, a town located about five miles or seven kilometers north of Gibeah on the border between the tribal territories of Ephraim and Bejamine (vv.1–3). The introductory text of this war drumming, and conflicts, leading to the Levites' testimony, (vv.4–7), the people responding and planning (vv.8–11), the actual three-phased-battle's execution (12–36), and subsequent violent against the city of Jabesh Gilead (21:4–15), is presented in Table I. The Hebrew text is from MT, while the translation is from NRSV with some of my modification.

The introductory text in Table I places emphasis on the unity of Israel who all came out *en masse*, as shown by the expression used for the entirety of the land, "from Dan to Beersheba" (*ləmiddān wə'ad-bəē'r sheba'*). They were united before the Lord in Mizpah, where theyall gathered as "one man" (*hā'ēdāh, kə'îsh 'eḥād*), that is, as one body, which the Levites had hoped for because of the horrible rape and murder of his concubine. Even, though the tribe of Benjamin was not part of this gathering, the very idea of oneness and communal living in this narrative, is something that resonate positively with Africans, especially post-colonial readers, who so much value solidarity and community life.

In Africa, problems are handled as a community and with a deep sense of ubuntu, "I am because you are" (Udoekpo, 2023b, pp. 1–7). In Africa, "It is unthinkable to celebrate even a feast without the participation of the whole village" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 43). This is "not simply a recognition of the core value of community in African identity formation, but, in distinct contrast to the prevalent individualism that governs the western society outlook" (Mbuvi, 2023, p. 81). Africans also respond to calamities, funerals, and other tragedies, including situations of wars based on the causes, such as tribalism, as was the case in the Israel-Benjamin story as well as external and colonial influences across Africa. That is to say, sometimes, Africans, like ancient Israel in Judges 20, can unite for a wrong reason.

Narrating causes of wars and conflicts in Africa known for communal leaving and *ubuntu* David Crary, cites the case of Uganda where guerrilla's militia who took over power with the message of national unity and were later derailed by tribal affiliation, which led to the loss of more than half a million lives during two decades of chaos. He cites the reports by Willie Musururwa, a political commentator in Zimbabwe, where the tribes of Ndebele and Shona sparred for over 150 years. He notes that "anybody who has been hanging around since Africa began to rule itself has seen tribalism butchering many people in our continent" (Crary, 1986, pp. 1–9). Additionally, before colonialism, the tribes functioned as a distinct nationality. They sometimes engaged in wars with one another, as was the case with Israel and Benjamin, but before the advent of colonialism, tribes were not locked in day-to-day friction. This began when "they were lumped together by Europeans who drew the borders of their possessions without regards for the peoples, languages and cultures within them" (Crary, 1986, p. 1).

Crary identifies tribal jealousies encouraged by colonial, powers as a divide and rule tactics which resulted in wars in different parts of Africa including, south Africa, Chad, Angola, as well as in Nigeria, during the Biafran-Nigerian civil wars in the 1960s (Crary, 1986, p. 2). Like the brutality complained by the Levite to the assembly of Israel, "Tens of thousands of people were slaughtered during the power struggles between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes of Brundi and Rwanda in the 1960s and 1990s, and the toll of violent along the unity of tribal line continues to climb across the continent (Crary, 1986, p. 2).

In verses 4–7, for instance, the Levites presented his case against his brothers in Benjamin in the best possible light. He also accused the nobles/lords/leaders or chiefs (*ba'al*) of the Gibeah of doing nothing to stop the assault. Boling notices that "nobility"/chief, leader or "the lords" (*ba'al*) is also used sarcastically in Judges 9:2 (Boling, 2008, p. 183).

In Africa nobles or "chiefs," or "elders" are meant to be wise, prudent honest, exemplary and full of experience that can serve as guidelines and yardsticks for moral conducts. Particularly, in Annang Land, of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, where the text Judges 20 is read, "the maintenance of discipline

in the houses rests on the elders. Such discipline even extends to the lineage and indeed to the village" (Ekanem, 2002, p. 64). Elders are the custodians of norms, and conduits of knowledge, wisdom, justice, peace, family ethics and values such as love, sexuality, and respect for life and children, including both sons, daughters, mothers and wives. In affirmation, John Paul II, Ecclesia in Africa, says, "it is precisely this love for life that leads them to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors and fore-fathers" (Paul, 1995, n. 43). In other words, African venerates their ancestors and fore-fathers (*'ăbhîtêkem*). They show tremendous respect for human life from conception to its natural end. In Africa, life is sacred at all stages. In fact, as a sign of great respect for their elders, they keep elderly parents and relatives within the family (Paul, 1995, n.43). Nursing homes for the elderly are not popular in Africa.

Today's postcolonial readers of this text in Africa, would think it would have made much sense if the elders and the noble men of Gibeah had wisely discouraged others in rushing into judgment or reacting violently to the Levite's presentation. Unfortunately, the whole community including the elders and the nobles agreed "as one man" (*kə'îsh 'eḥād*) in establishing a draft to fight Gibeah (Judges 20:8, 11). Benjamin's help was sought to handover the culprits, but the people refused to cooperate with Israe. In this case, Benjamin also put loyalty to tribe, first, rather than to God. They people prepared with 26,000 warriors, with 700 of them, who were left-handed warriors, for tribal war (vv12–17). The other Israelites tribes with 400,000 soldiers consulted the Lord in Bethel to decide which tribe would lead the fight against their brothers and sisters in Benjamine (v.18). Unlike some African civil wars (Norwich University, 2017) and conflicts that spanned for many years, Israelites-Benjamin war took three days (vv.19–36).

On the first day of the battle, Benjamin inflicted a stunning and resounding defeat on the Israelites because they relied on their army and in their goodness of their cause, but not in the Lord, who encouraged them, after their first consultation to return to battle a second time (vv.19–23). This consultation together with Judges 20:2, fits into De Vaux's description of the concept and rites of the Holy war in Israel. He says:

> When the people took up arms, they were called the people of Yahweh or the people of God (Jg: 5:13; 20:2), the troops of God (1 S 17:26), or the armies of Yahweh (Ex 12:41; cf. 7:4) . . . They were bound to remain continent (1 S 21:6; 2 S 11:11; (Dt 23:10–15), and this obligation of cleanliness extended to the camp, which had to be kept 'holy' if Yahweh was to encamp with his troops. (Barrete, 2019, pp. 13–74; Craigie, 1978, pp. 45–54; De Vaux, 1997, pp. 258–59; Niditch, 1993, pp. 20–25)

Israel's wars were the wars of the Lord (1 Samuel 18;17; 25:28), and the national epic was even put into music in the "Books of the Wars of Yahweh" (Numb 21:14). The enemies of Israel were Yahweh's enemies (Judge 5:31; 1 Samuel 30:26; cf. Exod 17:16). According to De Vaux (1997, 259), or as in case of the battle with Benjamin, before marching out to battle a sacrifice was not only offered to the Lord (1 Samuel 7:9; 13:9, 12), but the Lord was consulted (Judges 20:23, 28). Such consultation, is common among the Africans and postcolonial readers of Judges 20. This is true, since part of African values is their profound profound religious sense of the sacred and of the existence of God, as their creator and controller of events in both the physical and spiritual worlds (Mbiti, 1969, 1970; Udoekpo, 2010, pp. 288–290). However, this discernment seems to have taken a new meaning or different dimension today in the light of Christian ethics and values.

Interestingly, on the second day of battle, the Israelites were defeated again, as about 18,000 of their soldiers were killed. Israel repented before the Lord, in Bethel, led by Phinehas, the high priest (Numb 25:6–11), mourning, praying and fasting (vv.25–28). God might have used this defeat to remind Israel that the crime of Gibeah was not just a sin committed against God by an individual or a single tribe of Benjamin. Israel needed to recognize that the nation as a whole had a sin problem. That crime had a social and communal implications as well. This is a stark reminder to waring and corrupt nations in Africa where wars, religious extremism, and all forms of violence and brokenness have become daily routine, with communal but negative implications. Wrong decisions might have been taken by a group of few men and women, nobles, politicians, or leaders to the detriment of the entire nation, as it was for Israel, until they repented (v.28).

The repentance led to the Lord "defeating Benjamin" on behalf of Israel, on the third day of battle, exception of the 600 men who fled to the wilderness of Rimon Rock. In addition to their foolish oath never to marry their daughters to the men of Benjamin tribe (Judges 21:1), they hastily placed a cruel and harsh ban (*ḥerem*) on Gibeah and on Benjamin towns, their fellow tribe's people (vv.29–49; Judges 21:11). This is reminiscent of how we sometimes harshly and cruelly treat our fellow brothers and sisters in different parts of Africa (De Vaux, 1997, pp. 260–261). In a communique issued at the end

of its 2022 First Plenary Meeting, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN Secretariat, 2022) affirms some of the modern socio-politiclal cruelties Nigerian leaders, met out to their citizens, including (1) lack of fairness in the distribution of social amenities or in making appointment to offices despite the 'Federal Character' principle in the Constitution; (2) lack of functional, stable, qualitative and affordable educational system, which should be the bedrock of rebuilding a broken system and of development; (3) closure of public schools and universities because of strikes by unpaid civil servants, which leave many African youths on the streets; (4) gross lack of job opportunities, equity, gender balance between male and female, good moral standards, an adequate justice system, transparency and accountability by leaders and citizens. In other words, the cruelties described in Judges invites postcolonial readers including African leaders to consider a new way of appropriating the text for the betterment of the society and avoidance of violence and wars (Udoekpo, 2023c, 120–122).

As if the above cruelties were not cruel enough, the Israelite army in Judges attached an innocent city, Jabesh Gilead, which did not show up in Mizpah (vv.8–11), killing everyone, except 400 young women whom they forcefully abducted to the men of Benjamine in marriage (vv.12-15). Echoes of such is heard in the "not-too-long-ago," practice of *boko-haram* extremists in north-eastern Nigerian town of Maiduguri, where they continue to kidnap, maim, and kill innocent citizens.

In verses 16–24 a problem persisted in that there were not enough wives to go around the 600 men of Benjamin who survived Israelites war, and fled to the desertThis resulte in the kidnapping of the young women who came to dance during an annual festival in Shiloh (cf. 1 Sam 1:3). With these women, the people of Benjamin returned to their inheritance and rebuilt their cities. Again, there is no better way to end this narrative thanby pointing to the era of relativism where every person did what they thought was right in his or her own eyes (Judges 21:25; cf. 2:10–19, 17:6; 18:1; 191).

6. Conclusion

This work engaged in a postcolonial interpretation of Israel's war with Benjamin in Judges 20. It approached the narratively theologically and contextually in the light of African culture, customs, values and compared them with African experiences. In the analysis the consequences of crimes, war, anarchy, conflicts, violent of all forms with their responsible factors, be it between Israel and Benjamin (Judges 19–21), Russia and Ukraine, or among African tribes and nations cannot be over-emphasized. In Israel-Benjamin conflicts, their relationship with God was threatened as well as the extinction of a fellow kinsmen and tribes. Israel, as we saw during their war were on a revenge mission, because of anger, foolish vows, tribal sentiments. Lack of thoughtful leaders, wise elders, dialogue promoters, and noble men of integrity brought the ban to bear on their own people as well as indulged in killing thousands of innocent lives. They also indulged in kidnapping their own women and daughters who were worshiping at the tabernacle of the Lord in Shiloh.

Similarly, tribal wars, conflicts and other forms of violent all over the world, Africa, in particular, could have been avoided but not for greed, external colonial influences, lack dialogue, sense of patriotism, and fear of the Lord, recklessness, anger, inordinate pride, lack of vision. The problems that inflict Africans, retard their freedom and authentic independence include, selfishness thoughtless leadership, corruption and many more, as discussed throughout this paper. Such conflicts, especially during the twentieth century have enabled untold loss of lives and properties, the collapsed of African socio-economic systems, and the degradation of health and education services across the continent of Africa. African civil wars, conflicts and all forms of violence, as discussed have also rendered African citizens and religious communities to intense physical and phycological traumas with negative impact on development throughout African nations. Postcolonial criticism invites Africans to appropriate Judges 20 in a new way in their faith contexts and to drop radical relativism, tribalism, and greed. Africans are encouraged to search for kings, elders, leaders, and mentors who not only fear the Lord, but are committed to leading the people in the search for the common good, deep trust in God, development, justice, truthfulness and peace.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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