



Subverting Sexuality: Manly Women; Womanly Men in Judges 4–5

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Abstract

Judges chapters 4 and 5 feature first a narrative account, and then a poetic depiction of a 12th century BCE battle and its aftermath. The conflict is between the forces of Israel and those of a Canaanite commander. In these chapters traditional sexual roles are overturned and subverted. Women are manly, and men are womanly. That these gender-based stereotypes are so clearly upended is integral to the message of the received text.

Key words: Judges, Deborah, Jael, Baraq, Sisera, Role Reversal

Contrary to the general patriarchal and male-gender-power tenor of the Bible, and certainly of the book of Judges, the depiction of Deborah and Jael in Judges 4 and 5 stand out as exceptions to the rule. These chapters present an alternative view of what roles women can undertake, how they can be fearsome warriors. These stories “undermine patriarchal assumptions and temper patriarch biases, often challenging the very patriarchal structures that dominate the narrative landscape” (Exum 1985b: 74). The male military leadership, that of Baraq of the tribe of Naphtali, and Sisera, the commander of the forces of the Canaanite King Jabin of Hazor, is seen as submissive to the direction of women, respectively Deborah and Jael. Both stories are about the power of women. “Far from being a story about male power and its improper exercise, this is a story about *female* power directed against patriarchal oppression” (Hanselman: 105; italics in original). Both women, Deborah and Jael perform masculine roles.

The story appears twice, once in narrative form (chapter 4), then as a poem (chapter 5). “Virtually every element of the prose account stems directly, or by a dialectical process, indirectly from” the poetic version (Halpern: 95). Despite this

order, it is likely that the prose version was composed in the 7th century, while the poetic version appears to have been composed much earlier, perhaps in the late 12th century, which in fact is much closer in time to the actual events (Exum 1985a: 214; see Cross & Freedman: 3). The two versions recount the same basic story, each with its respective emphasis and predominant themes. Both deal with women as warrior-leaders

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who bring death to their enemies and yet metaphorically are described as mother figures. Both versions also suggest erotic metaphors. “The poem ironically . . . show[s] how Jael wittingly exploits Sisera’s erotic expectations” (Cur-Klein).

A common role for women in the Bible is as wife, daughter, or mother. While both Deborah’s and Jael’s husbands are mentioned by name (wife of Lappidot; wife of Heber) neither man appears in the narrative. Their contribution seems to be their absence. There is no indication that either woman bears children. The theme of chapter four (although it applies to chapter five as well) is “*a celebration of the subversion of patriarchal (literally, father-based) order at the behest and hands of a woman*” (Hanselman: 98; italics in original). In terms of the female-male encounters, the “significant other” for Deborah is not her husband, but rather Baraq, the leader of the Israelite coalition forces, and for Jael, it is not her husband, but rather Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite forces.

The Book of Judges

The book of Judges follows a repetitive pattern in describing the transition years following the leadership of Joshua and preceding the period of Samuel and the early monarchy. In approximate terms, this is about 1200–1020 BCE. The term “Judges” is somewhat misleading. These people are less judges in a judicial sense, than charismatic, inspired leaders who lead an individual tribe or more often several tribes in military battles to free Israel from foreign domination. (Exceptions include Deborah, who is a judge, prophet, and a military leader, and Samuel, who is a judge, priest, and prophet.) Their rule was impermanent. No one Judge held the allegiance of all of the tribes. “The picture that emerges from the book shows an Israelite confederation of twelve tribes still struggling to find unity among themselves while at the same time fighting for footholds in different parts of the Canaanite territory. It was a time of small local wars and defensive fighting against desert nomads. The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 reveals that often one or more of the tribes would not come to the aid of others” (Boadt: 168; see Matthews 2004: 3–6; Niditch: 1–6).

There are twelve judges, six major figures, and six minor ones. The book of Judges presents a regular pattern of cyclical behavior: apostasy leads to oppression; which leads to relief/rebellion against the oppression; which leads to periods of righteousness; which in turn are followed by recurring periods of apostasy. The book explains that the Israelites turn

from God. They worship idols. Consequently, God is angry with them. After a time, God is moved by their cries of oppression and persecution. God then inspires certain leaders who rally the tribes and allow them, for a time to regain their independence. The tribes eventually return to apostasy. This predictably brings oppression. “Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. . . . But whenever the judge died, they would relapse . . . following other gods, worshipping them and bowing down to them. . . . So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel” (Judg 2:16, 19–20; cf. 10:5–7; 12:15–13:1).

Manly Women

After setting the scene that the Israelites again turned from God, and have known oppression for twenty years, the text introduces Deborah. She arguably has the most important political and religious role of any woman in the Bible, the Apocrypha, or the Pseudepigrapha (Esther has power but it is as a Queen, her power comes from her husband the King. In the Apocrypha, Judith’s power is due to her beauty and that a foreign ruler desires her). “Deborah, the diviner, was a first rate military leader, the ideal judge” (Boling: 98). The NRSV translation explains, “At that time Deborah, a prophetess . . . was judging Israel” (Judg 4:4. Compare “Deborah, a prophetess . . . was leading [traditionally judging] Israel”—NIV). The literal Hebrew words, however, stress Deborah’s gender: *uDevorah ’ishah n’viah . . . hi*—“Now Deborah, a woman, a prophetess” was judging Israel. We learn immediately that this is a unique situation, for this figure is a manly woman: a judge, and a prophet. She also will be a successful warrior. She is the one female judge among the twelve names highlighted in the book of Judges. Indeed, she is the only female judge in the Bible, and with the rare exceptions of Miriam (Exod 15:20), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22); Noadiah (Neh 6:14); and the unnamed prophetess (Isa 8:3) she is the only woman named as a prophet in the Bible, and certainly the only prophet/judge. Further, more is written about her than her sister-prophets. As a prophet she is an intermediary between the people and God. Years later the Targum Jonathan, one of the Aramaic translations of the Bible will emphasize her prophecy numerous times in chapter 5 (vv 3, 7, 9) as well as her judgeship concerning the law (vv 4, 10) (Harrington & Saladrini: 67). Many of her actions are prophetic. She sends for and then commissions Baraq, tell-

ing him that God has appointed him. She volunteers that she herself will draw out Sisera with his chariots and troops, but that the enemy will be delivered into Baraq's hands (vv 6–7, 14). When Baraq demurs (see the section below, "Womanly Men") Deborah taunts him, prophesying that the battle will be successful, but he shall gain no glory; rather God "will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (v 9). Indeed, Sisera is twice sold into the hand of a woman. Deborah draws out Sisera so that he meets defeat at the Wadi Kishon. He then literally has to run for his life. When he seeks refuge at the tent of Heber the Kenite, Jael is there to complete his downfall. It is unclear whether Jael is or is not a Hebrew/Israelite woman. Her name means mountain goat, which has affinities to Jacob's wives Leah ("cow"), Rachel ("ewe"), and Zilpah ("short-nosed animal"). While there are no biblical or postbiblical claims that Jael is a prophet, according to the pseudepigraphic work *Pseudo-Philo*, she prays to the God of Israel and seeks both divine sanction and a divine sign, one which will confirm her plan to dispatch Sisera (*Pseudo-Philo*: 31.5–7).

The biblical text itself attests that Deborah supersedes Baraq in importance and in historical memory. In chapter five, at each of the three times Baraq's name is mentioned he is second to Deborah (Judg 5:1,12,15). Baraq's name is missing in 5:7, for only Deborah is noted as leading the people. In both Judg 5:7 and 5:15 Deborah is clearly the primary leader. Although in chapter four Baraq finally makes an appearance in the pursuit of Sisera, he arrives after Jael's courageous and deadly deed is done. In chapter five, Baraq is conspicuously missing from the Jael section. Verse after verse praises Jael, and describes her defeat of the enemy, but no words are devoted to the Israelite commander. In chapter five, Deborah and Jael's names are linked together in concurrent verses (6–7). As Deborah is praised as a "mother in Israel," so is Jael praised as "blessed of women . . . of tent-dwelling women most blessed" (vv 7, 24). Tents have often been associated with/symbolized as women's bodies (Babylonian Talmud *Moed Katan* 7b; in contemporary popular literature, see A. Diamant, *The Red Tent*). It is important to note that "Jael's blessed status . . . indicates that the actions Jael is about to take . . . are condoned" (Schneider: 92). Jael's gutsy and grisly assignation and assassination is detailed in both the prose narrative of chapter four and the poetic verses of chapter five. Jael "struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple" (Judg 5:6).

Taken together, the narrative "concedes that [these] Isra-

elite women have man-like qualities" and further that "these are attributes much to be appreciated in a crisis" (Miller: 123, 125). Ironically, when at the close of chapter five the scene turns to Sisera's mother waiting back at Hazor, she too is a manly woman. She evinces no sympathy for the women who face rape and pillage (Bal 1998a: 207). She anticipates that Sisera's delay is due to the fact that he is collecting the spoils of war. "Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—A girl for every man; spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera" (Judg 5:30).

Womanly Men

As the principal women of Judges chapters four and five display traditional manly virtues (strength, courage, leadership) so the principal men of those chapters, Baraq and Sisera, reflect traditional womanly characteristics (fear, subservience, need of protection, frailty). "Sisera's flight . . . from the battle parallels Baraq's reluctance. . . . In both instances the men abandon the stereotypical image of the strong and courageous leader and thereby make themselves vulnerable to be superseded, or in Sisera's case, eliminated entirely" (Matthews 2004: 68).

Matthews goes on to write that the plot, and specifically the Jael-Sisera encounter, "fits into the world-turned-upside-down theme found in many of the stories in Judges and provides the reader with a black comedy or even a farce in which the violations of custom are so exaggerated that they become both transparent and funny." Neither of these men is portrayed with sympathy. Baraq, the military leader agrees to lead his troops and fight against Sisera the Canaanite leader, but only if Deborah accompanies him. Of "the two leaders, it is he who plays the woman; and having been summoned to do a man's job, he refuses to act unless the woman who delegated it to him comes along to give him moral courage" (Sternberg: 274; but another view suggests this is not cowardice on Baraq's part, but rather "he is wise to know that victory comes with the presence of God's favourite" Niditch: 65). At the close of chapter four, Baraq is pursuing Sisera. It would be to his credit if he were to capture him (cf. Josh 10:16–26), but he has been too slow, and once again the glory—here of capturing and dispatching the enemy—goes to a woman. As Chisholm notes, "in the case of Barak [Baraq] . . . he has been, as it were, emasculated literarily. He has 'gone into' [*vayavo' eleha* – Judg 4:22] a woman, but not to express his manhood. On the contrary, he finds that a woman has accomplished what he, a man, should have done" (Chisholm: 218).

Sisera, initially the successful warrior who arrived at the battle with nine hundred chariots of iron and a vast array of troops, now is on the run. His army has been decimated, and he is chariotless, literally on foot fleeing for his life. Sisera gets as far as the encampment of Heber the Kenite, although Heber is nowhere in sight. Sisera has “fled the battle and abandoned his men, and was now relying on a woman to protect him, thereby emasculating himself. Furthermore, . . . he tells her to say that no man is present” (Matthews 2004: 73). No doubt he meant this literally, i.e. pretend that I, Sisera, am not here to anyone who asks. There is a double irony in his statement. He soon will not be there—*alive*—but meanwhile the man who is there is neither strong, brave, nor powerful, but rather someone cowering, fearful, and figuratively and perhaps literally, hiding behind a woman’s skirts. Sisera’s naiveté, his passive behavior, is extraordinary. Although formerly a successful warrior, he throws caution to the wind and relies on what he mistakenly assumes will be a pliant and submissive woman. Instead of hiding out in the field, he attempts to secret himself in an established community. He fully understands that the enemy is giving chase. He instructs Jael to perjure herself. Thereby he puts her into mortal danger should his presence become known. If found she could be accused of protecting, or literally sleeping with the enemy. He expects that she will willingly follow his request. When Jael kills him he succumbs passively, seemingly without a struggle. The poem describes a weakened victim, unable to defend himself. In celebrating Sisera’s utter destruction, three times the Hebrew interlaces the verbs *ḵara* (sank) and *nafal* (fell): “He sank, he fell . . . he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead” (Judg 5:27). At the close of chapter five the scene shifts to those awaiting Sisera’s return. The focus is on, not his wife, but his mother. Subtly the text is suggesting that this may be outwardly a successful general, but down deep he really is a Mama’s boy. In the pseudepigraphic work, *Pseudo-Philo*, also known as *Biblical Antiquities*, Sisera self-describes in feminine terms. He says in his dying moments, “Behold pain has taken hold of me, Jael, and I die like a woman.” Jael retorts, “Go, boast before your father in hell and tell him that you have fallen into the hands of a woman” (*Pseudo-Philo*: 31.7).

Subverting sexuality: Victim as Victor

Earlier in this article we stated that one way to read these chapters, as Hanselman observes, is to understand them as stories “about *female* power directed against patriarchal op-

pression.” Examples of female power are rare enough in the Bible. Too often “women reading the Bible have found themselves on alien and even hostile turf.” They experience both “the silence of women and their silencing—the contempt in which they are held and the violence with which they are treated—[for they find] . . . the Bible mirror[s] the realities of many women’s lives. For them, the Bible is experienced as giving a divine stamp of approval to their suffering” (Ringe: 3). Both Deborah and Jael have been praised and condemned for their brazen behaviors; it is Jael, however, who has taken the brunt of modern censure for the deceptive and deadly hospitality she offered Sisera. Deborah and Jael have been criticized in both ancient and modern texts. “Woe to the generation whose leader is a woman as when Deborah, a prophetess . . . judged Israel” (comment on Judg 4:4, Midrash on Psalms 22.20). (For similar dismissive comments see Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* 66b, and Stewart: 128–32). A modern source posits that Jael “murdered” Sisera (Lowery: 610–11). Elsewhere Jael is described as a “treacherous woman” who “acted with callous efficiency” (Cundall: 88, 90). Another commentary suggests Jael’s “heroic deed cannot be acquitted of the sins of lying, treachery and assassination” (Keil & Delitzsch: 306). Bal describes Sisera’s death as murder, but she at times uses the less evocative term “kill” (Bal 1998a: 214). This condemnation however has been challenged, and a different interpretation for her action is offered, questioning the very assumptions of her critics (Matthews 2004: 68–73; see also Matthews 1991: 21:13–21). The charges against Jael may well reflect (an unconscious?) patriarchal bias.

Although the biblical text is not explicit, several scholars have made a convincing case that these chapters, and especially the poetic version, hint at Jael’s powerful and erotic seduction of Sisera (Reis: 24–27, Bal 1988b; Bal 1988a: 228). Some ancient sources characterized Jael’s acts as erotica (Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot* 103a–b; *Nazir* 23b; *Horayot* 10b) Elsewhere, Sisera is said to have intended to take her as a captive and bring her to his home (*Pseudo-Philo*: 31.3). Whether criticizing or defending Jael’s “hospitality/inhospitality,” or reading erotic sexuality into the interchange between Jael and Sisera within her tent, it is clear that Jael emerges as a powerful figure that takes charge of the situation in which she finds herself. Whether she was or was not a potential victim may be debated; that she emerged the victor is clear. This is the rare case of a woman taking charge, and empowering herself to do what needs to be done. “Jael’s act strikes an ironic note since it

is the male who is penetrated and it is the female who asserts her power to control the situation" (Matthews 2004: 73; see Fewell & Gunn: 393–94. Bal terms Jael's killing Sisera a reverse form of rape—Bal 1998a: 215).

Interestingly, on some level the encounter between Sisera and Jael reads as a kind of perverse role reversal of another book set at the time of the Judges: the nighttime encounter between Ruth and Boaz. In both cases the man and the woman are alone. Further in each story it is the woman who seduces the man, who directs the action that will result in what she perceives to be what is best in her interest. In the book of Ruth, the heroine goes to the man she hopes will be her redeemer. She asks him to spread his cloak over her, to serve as her protector. In Judges, Jael invites Sisera into her tent, and she covers him with a rug/blanket (Judg 4:18). As Boaz ends up submitting to Ruth's request, so does Sisera willingly follow Jael's directions.

Conclusion

Judges 4 and 5, two versions of the same story chronicle the legends surrounding two warrior women, and latterly two failed men. Deborah the prophet and the judge is an independent woman, a savior, a redeemer, and one who interprets the word of God. No other female in the Bible has these three attributes of Judge, Prophet, and Warrior. Her colleague Jael, possibly a Hebrew/Israelite, also is an independent woman, a savior, a redeemer, and one who (according to Pseudo-Philo) interprets the word of God. Both may have husbands but they are irrelevant to their public lives as featured in these tales; neither woman is noted as having any children. The two prominent men in these chapters, Baraq and Sisera are subservient to women, and are dominated by, and shown up through the actions of women. Deborah and Jael are portrayed as strong and resolute characters, they are determined and purposeful in their acts, adjectives more often associated with the deeds of men. By contrast Baraq and Sisera are unmanly men, cowardly, deferential, fearful, and shown up by Deborah and by Jael. Commonplace sexual stereotyping is turned on its head in these chapters. Women are manly, men are womanly, and potential victims end up as victors.

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