



# The World of the Judges in the Modern Context

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**P**olitical and religious leadership vacuums, problems with clergy, debates about women in positions of power, concerns about immigrant groups, an uptick in violence, and questions about the presence of God in a chaotic world—these issues are undoubtedly familiar. Surprisingly, they mirror issues discussed and narrated in the book of Judges, a compilation of tales about ancient Israelite heroines and heroes in the period before the rise of the Israelite monarchy. This may surprise some readers who are accustomed to viewing the biblical text as a set of dry, ancient—that is, irrelevant—narratives on which pedagogical lessons or sermon are based and drawn. As a result, many are unfamiliar with the sometimes delightful and sometimes disturbing tales about Israelite champions that are found in this book.

For others, especially those who have tried at some point to read the book of Judges, the congruency between modern issues and the stories in Judges is precisely the problem. The thorny and complex issues, listed above, are narrated, talked about, and portrayed, but rarely fully resolved in this book. As a result, it is difficult to draw any lessons from Judges and even more challenging to figure out how to utilize this text in any practical manner. Indeed, these tales also do not sound like stories that ought to be in the Bible. Many of them are disturbing, vio-

*The world of the book of Judges was chaotic and divisive—in some ways a time not completely unlike our own. Though a very different time, there are ways in which looking at this ancient Biblical world could provide modern readers with insights into our present realities.*

lent, and sexual. Many lack a satisfying resolution; and a pedagogical and applicatory lesson is difficult and at points impossible to discern. In short, it is unclear how the reader, especially one who has a faith commitment, is to read these tales, and equally nebulous as to what they are supposed to do with them.

Yet it is because these stories are enigmatic and complex, and precisely because they resemble current concerns, that the narratives in the book of Judges should be read, discussed, thought about, and interrogated. The difficulty of Judges, in other words, bespeaks its significance. And in reflecting modern conundrums, the text of Judges acts as a mirror through which we can gaze at and ponder our current issues and problems anew.

### THE WOMEN IN JUDGES

One of the key issues in Judges and the reason why it has attracted much attention from feminist and gender studies scholars is because of its rich and complicated portrayals of women. As an ancient, patriarchal text, women characters are frequently rendered nameless or generally ignored, envisioned as part of the scenery, or reduced to the role of sidekick. Judges, however, is unusual for its numerous tales featuring leading female characters. Not only are stories about women numerous, but the portrayals of the feminine in this book are varied and multifold. They are depicted as victims and warriors; seductresses and mothers; leaders and aggressors; victors and victimizers; heroes and enemies. Indeed, not only are the portrayals of women complex, but in their complexity, these stories elucidate the elusiveness, fragility, and constructedness of gender.<sup>1</sup> The narratives, in essence, show how gender is fluid; and in so doing, they offer a more nuanced, nonbinary vision of society.

Two chapters in which varied visions of the feminine (and relatedly, the masculine) are the densest are Judges 4 and 5. Following the narrative cycle so prevalent in Judges, chapters 4 and 5 begins with the oppression of Israel by a neighboring enemy nation, a consequence of the nation's wickedness and disobedience. When the Israelites cry out to God for help, God raises up a judge, Deborah, a prophetess. Like many judges, Deborah, as a woman, is a marginalized figure—an unexpected leader for a topsy-turvy time.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Jo Ann Hackett argues that the complex portrayals of women in Judges might accurately reflect Israelite society in the transitional period before the rise of the Israelite monarchy. She notes that women might have been able to rise to power and engage in a variety of roles that were usually prohibited to women during this period of flux as the monarchy and the various systems of power that accompanied it were not yet firmly es-

<sup>1</sup>On the issue of gender in Judges, see Ken Stone, "Gender Criticism: The Un-Manning of Abimelech," in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 183–201.

<sup>2</sup>On how the topsy-turvy world of Judges upends gender norms, see Amy Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible: The Ways the Bible Challenges Its Gender Norms* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 49; Stuart Lasine, "Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot's Hospitality in an Inverted World," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (1984) 37–59.

tablished.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps indicative of this freer, more open period, the text nowhere remarks on Deborah's gender. That she was a woman leader seems to have aroused little suspicion or alarm.

Descriptions of Deborah add to her characterization. Deborah, whose name means "bee," is described as a prophet and also as a wife or woman of Lappidoth (Judg 4:4). Though the statement of her marital status might appear to belie Deborah's authority, there are different ways to translate this line. Depending on whether the translation should be "wife" or "woman," Judg 4:4 might simply indicate Deborah's geographic location—that she is from Lappidoth. Adding to her characterization, scholars have noted that "lappidoth," while it can constitute a personal name, can also mean torches and has connotations of fire or fieriness.<sup>4</sup> Niditch thus translates Judg 4:4 as "a woman of fire was she."<sup>5</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn call Deborah a "woman of fire" or a "spirited woman,"<sup>6</sup> and Mieke Bal argues that Deborah is an "inflamed and inflaming woman whose prophecy is crucial for the story."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Niditch wonders whether this description indicates that Deborah was a Joan of Arc or a domesticated woman warrior<sup>8</sup> type of a figure.<sup>9</sup>

Deborah is not only a prophetess but also a judge (Judg 4:4). In ancient Israel, judges had a variety of functions and roles. The role of judging entailed not just judging, but also "conducting foreign diplomacy, leading in battle, and ruling domestically."<sup>10</sup> Susan Niditch describes judges as "swash-buckling, charismatic military leaders" who made decisions that were military, political, and religious in nature. In short, they were temporary community leaders or chieftains during the pre-monarchic period.<sup>11</sup> As such, Deborah in her capacity as a judge fulfills a variety of functions: she calls forth an army, mediates between God and the people, and serves the community in a religious and political capacity.

As a judge and prophet, Deborah appears to have been recognized and respected. Judges 4:5 states that the Israelites went to her to find a resolution or judgement for their problems. Indeed, bespeaking her fame, her location seems to be well-known: under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel. Her place-

<sup>3</sup>Jo Ann Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 144.

<sup>4</sup>Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4–5," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58/3 (1990) 389–411.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Knoxville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 60.

<sup>6</sup>Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 391.

<sup>7</sup>Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 209.

<sup>8</sup>On woman warriors, see Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 (1993) 99–132.

<sup>9</sup>Niditch, *Judges*, 62.

<sup>10</sup>Judith E. Sanderson, "Judge," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) 3:445.

<sup>11</sup>Niditch, *Judges*, 1–2.

ment between Ramah and Bethel is noteworthy as both appear to be cultic sites (Judg 4:5). Ramah means “the high place” and Bethel means “the house of God.” Not dissimilar to the oracle at Delphi, Deborah seems to have been a prophetess and a cultic figure of some renown, associated with a hallowed tree in a recognized numinal locale.

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Deborah’s name, “bee,” is also appropriate considering her actions. Like a queen bee, she, following the directives of YHWH, rallies the Israelites to war by calling on Barak to gather men and go to battle. Indeed, later in the poetic version of this story in Judg 5, Deborah’s designation as a “mother of Israel” emphasizes her queenly leadership role: “The peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder, because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel” (Judg 5:7). As an oracle, mediating between Barak and God, Deborah assures Barak that YHWH will give him military success. Despite Deborah’s reassurances of YHWH’s presence and victory, however, Barak is hesitant and states that he is unwilling to go to battle without the prophetess, again bespeaking Deborah’s importance. Though Barak’s name means, “lightning,” it appears that this lightning will not strike without the presence of the fiery lady or the lady of torches! As evident, it is Deborah, not Barak, who is the central figure of this tale. Indeed, for his need for accompaniment Deborah prophesies that another woman will emerge as the heroine of this affair: “And she said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman’” (Judg 4:9). Though the reader assumes that Deborah’s prophesy refers to herself—that Deborah is the woman into whose hands God will sell Sisera—the narrative takes an unexpected turn, transitioning swiftly from the battlefield to a warm and welcoming tent, from escape and illusions of safety to death and murder, and from one vision of the feminine to another.

Perhaps in narrative retaliation for his need for Deborah’s accompaniment, Barak quickly vanishes as the scene shifts to another male character who just as quickly, but with more drama and violence, will also be ushered off the stage soon thereafter. Sisera, the general of the enemy Canaanite forces, is routed and flees during his battle with the Israelites. He arrives at the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber, and due to a political alliance between the Canaanites and the clan of Jael’s husband (4:17), Sisera decides to seek shelter in her tent. Jael, however, has a mind of her own, and as the reader shortly discovers, her alliances are not those of her husband. As scholars have noted, the maternal theme that we saw with

Deborah—“who arose as a mother in Israel”—continues in the initial description of Jael in Judg 4:18–20. She beckons the fleeing general to her tent, offering him comfort, rest, and sustenance. After he enters, Jael, like a mother comforting a child, puts a blankie on the tired general, gives him some milk, and assures him that she will act as his guard. Jael is the perfect vision of a protective, doting mother.<sup>12</sup>

This vision of safety and respite swiftly and dramatically mutates, however, as the mother morphs into murderer. In images reminiscent of rape, Jael takes a tent peg and drives it into the head of Sisera while he is asleep (Judg 4:21). Depending on the translation, the poem in Judg 5 heightens the sexuality and violence undergirding this scene: “Her hand she sent for the tent stake, her right hand for the workman’s hammer, and she hammered Sisera. She destroyed his head. She shattered, she pierced his temple. Between her legs, he knelt, he fell, he lay. Between her legs, he knelt, he fell. Where he knelt, there he fell, despoiled” (Judg 5:26–27).<sup>13</sup> The phallic imagery and visions of sexual violation and reverse rape are undeniably evident. Thus, the portrayal of Jael morphs and shifts—moving swiftly from one vision of the feminine to another: she is an enemy’s ally, a comforting mother, a seductress, a murderer-rapist, and finally, a woman warrior and a hero of Israel.

The complex portrayals of women do not end with Jael’s dramatic murder-rape. Rather, the poem in Judg 5 continues to present a kaleidoscope of images of the feminine. At the end of Judg 5, the scene once again quickly turns from the triumphant murder of Sisera by Jael, the murderous mother/seductress, to the fretting of Sisera’s actual mother who is depicted as worriedly awaiting her son’s return. The narrator illuminates her anxiety by portraying Sisera’s mother as peering out her window, wondering aloud as to his tardiness (5:28). She is comforted by “the wisest of her ladies” who offer excuses as to why her son is late. They state that Sisera is taking his time because of the largeness of the spoils he is dividing among his fellow soldiers (5:30). While his mother is pacing, the reader is keenly aware that the intuitive apprehension of Sisera’s mother is real—that her son is dead, murdered by the hands of a false maternal figure. In bringing the reader into the room of Sisera’s anxious mother, we are brought into the drama; and as a result, our stances and viewpoints are forcibly altered. We go from siding with Deborah and the oppressed Israelites, to aligning with the brave and triumphant Jael, to finally empathizing and pitying the mother of Sisera who nervously waits for a son who we know will never return.

This shifting of scenery and points of view is disturbing and odd. By focusing on the feelings of Sisera’s mother at the end of the narrative, Judg 5 ends not with Israel’s triumph over its enemy, but with an empathetic reimagining—a humanization—of the antagonist. The portrayal of Sisera’s worrying mother cannot but illuminate Sisera’s humanity. Sisera’s mother’s anxiety mirrors the anxiety felt by

<sup>12</sup>Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 48–49; Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 213; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 393.

<sup>13</sup>Translation from Niditch, *Judges*, 69.

the mothers of the Israelite troops. No matter the ethnicity or identity, both groups share fretting and fearful mothers and families.

Before we side with Sisera and his mother too long and too much, however, the narrator has one more trick. Before the reader gets too comfortable aligning with Israel's enemy, the narrator reminds us that Sisera is not merely a victim of but also a victimizer of women. Indeed, the writer slyly hints that his poor, anxious mother might also be complicit in the crimes of her son. The maids of Sisera's mother comfort her by telling her that his lateness is due to the large amount of spoils being divided. The spoils are not just material goods, but conquered people, namely women who will be raped, sold, and victimized: "Her wisest ladies make answer, indeed, she answers the question herself: 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—a girl or two for every man'" (Judg 5:29–30). And with this last image, the message seems to be that Sisera had it coming to him—that his rape/murder at the hands of the woman warrior, Jael, is indeed poetic justice.

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As the poem in Judg 5 begins with a mother, that is, Deborah who arose as a mother in Israel, so it ends with another mother, the mother of Sisera who assuages her fears with the thought that her son is dividing up women as spoils of war. The brave, prophetic and warrior-like mother of Israel, Deborah, is thus compared to the fretting mother of Sisera, the enemy, the antagonist, who finds comfort in the conquest, rape, and selling of Israelite women and girls.<sup>14</sup> Here then is the final vision of women that Judg 4–5 offers. That of the women as victims of war and violence. Victims of raping armies and soldiers. And as slaves and spoils of battle.

## CONCLUSION

As evident, in the span of just two chapters, the text of Judges offers multiple and assorted visions of women and the feminine. And in so doing, in presenting this cornucopia of feminine images, the significance of the book of Judges becomes perceptible. Judges, especially Judg 4–5, compels the reader to embody a shifting array of roles. It forces the reader to empathize and side with a multitude of characters. And in so doing, it causes the reader to see the world through a multiplicity of viewpoints. To take on the garb of a brave female leader, a seductive and powerful

<sup>14</sup>On this comparison of mothers, and how Jael might function as a mediating role, see: Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 206–211; Athalya Brenner, "A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges IV and V," *Vetus Testamentum* 40/2 (1990) 133; Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, "Mothers and a Mediator in the Song of Deborah," in *The Feminist Companion to the Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 110–114.

heroine, an anxious and worrying mother, and finally, an unfortunate victim of violence and war. To play the role of the protagonist and hero, and also at times the antagonist and enemy. The text thus lures the reader to consider the lives and viewpoints of those whom we normally consider as the Other—the not-us.

Considering the politically, theologically, and socially divided times we live in, the text of Judges, especially Judg 4 and 5, thus compels us, the reader, to put on the garb of those who are different from us. It pushes us to imagine ourselves outside of our various constituencies and identities—outside of our bubble. It compels us to go beyond our notions of in-group and out-group, friends and enemies, allies and opponents. It shows us that people, like the characters in Judges, run a gamut of roles. And it shows that boundaries and designations that differentiate us into easy, binary categories are constructed and artificial. This text thus reminds us of the necessity of thinking beyond our own limited experiences and viewpoints—as least, momentarily—and it encourages us to at least consider and view the world through the eyes of those whom we so easily deem as the alien and the enemy. Or as Eric Christianson puts it, reading Judg 4 and 5 “is to engage with ambiguity borne not of ‘sloppy thinking,’ but of rigor, tolerance of multivocality, and a willingness to question conventions and norms. They stand as invitations *to deal responsibly with issues of great complexity*, such as gender, violence, censorship, and human fate.”<sup>15</sup> ⊕

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<sup>15</sup>Eric Christianson, “The Big Sleep: Strategic Ambiguity in Judges 45 and in Classic ‘Film Noir,’” *Biblical Interpretations* 15/4 (2007) 543.