

A Tale of Cross-dressers, Mothers and Murderers

Deborah and Jael in Ancient and Contemporary thought

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ABSTRACT

This study of the characters of Deborah and Jael entails not only reading the Biblical text, but also reading both ancient and contemporary interpreters who in one way or another elaborate on the otherwise sparsely described characters. In other words: How they fill the gaps. The obvious problem for both ancient and contemporary interpreters is questions of gender, what does it mean that the story revolves around two women? They have different ways of dealing with this issue: Either they flaunt the characters' gender front and centre, making it the key to understanding the story, or they try to ignore the issue by downplaying the role of the women. A third option, which can be used as a supplement to the options above, is sexualizing. Both modern and ancient interpreters have found sexual euphemisms to be the key to understanding these texts. I will, in my own attempt of filling gaps, focus on the issues of gender(s) finding the text a boundary-crossing gender-reversing tale of women turned into men and men turned into women/children. The text does not question the prevailing androcentric norm-system but uses it as an effective way of shaming men.

Keywords: Deborah, Jael, Gender, Sisera, Barak, Judges 4 and 5, Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, Talmud.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the Biblical literature the story of Deborah and Jael is salient for many reasons. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is that two women are featured as warriors and leaders. This is also what many ancient interpreters viewed as a problem needing to be solved. My study will, for this reason, revolve around questions related to gender. The ancient Near Eastern (henceforth ANE) view of women emerges from between the lines as the ancient and contemporary interpreters sometimes clash, but sometimes are in agreement to a surprising extent.

Deborah is said to be a mother in Israel and a judge, but what does the text say about her character apart from this? Concerning Jael, the motif which lies at the front of the text is the *femme fatale*. A woman both deadly and seductive at the same time. A motif of a story told a million times. But does Jael correspond to this motif or is she forced into a familiar mould?

In this study we will encounter complex characters as well as cardboard cutouts. See prominent pious women, raging feminists, mothers as military leaders as well as murderers, victims, harlots and cross-dressers. We will dwell in the topsy-turvy world where men will turn into women and women turn into men.

1.1 Framing the Question

My main interest in this study is the characterizations of Jael and Deborah in both the Biblical literature and the literature commenting on it. The interpreters have written their accounts of Judg 4 and 5 at different points in history. I will touch upon the similarities and dissimilarities between the ancient and modern way of thinking about gender, leadership, ethnicity, and honour. But mostly I am interested in how commentators handle the lack of information given in the text. The question around which my thesis will revolve is thus:

What can be said about the characters of Jael and Deborah in the Biblical narrative, and how do interpreters, ancient and contemporary, pursue the task of gap-filling?

My thesis will contain four different parts to help answer the question. Firstly I will dissect the text to try and discern where the holes are: What we don't learn when reading the text. I will continue to discuss the characters in particular and how they are portrayed. This will be important further on when I will look for the different ways to fill these gaps. Secondly, I will read ancient commentators such as Pseudo-Philo, Josephus and some of the Rabbis. Thirdly, I will continue with a few different contemporary interpretations. I will end with my own version of gap-filling to be understood as one of many possible interpretations, based on the Biblical texts and what I call *subtexts*.

1.2 The Scholarly Discussion Concerning Jael and Deborah

The scholarly discussion of the 20th century was often preoccupied with the dating and composition of the texts, something notoriously hard to ascertain. There is an impressive lack of consensus in the abundance of publications.¹ The compositional history of Judges could begin, according to some, as early as the 12th century B.C.E., thus making the Song of Deborah the oldest text in the Hebrew Bible (henceforth HB). If we fast-forward about a thousand years ahead in time, we have a few researchers who believe that the Song of Deborah was written in an archaic way to seem old and set the date of composition to the 3rd or 2nd century B.C.E. Name a time in between those two and there's a scholar with the opinion that at least part of Judges originates from this time.²

The placement of Judg 4 and 5 and its coherence to the rest of the book of Judges was, and still is, a popular subject. How do the women of Judg 4 and 5 fit into Judges as a coherent narrative? Bal suggests that the book of Judges is a book about death, men murdering women and women murdering men. But it is also a text about power-relations, the men who are victims at the hands of women are powerful while the women who fall victim to men are innocent daughters murdered by powerful men.³

The intention of Judg 4 and 5 is discussed by many. What does the author want to convey? Either the texts show society as it was, meaning that these women, and presumably also others, had the freedom to occupy prominent roles. Or, the women are a tool used to illustrate the state of society—to what had the world come to if women had to be leaders. Lindars relays the first mentioned opinion in his commentary on Judges:

In general, the characterization of both Deborah and Jael shows an absence of stereotypes and presupposes a freedom of action which suggests a greater degree of social equality of women and men in old Israel than obtained after the rise of the monarchy.⁴

¹ For an overview of the recent scholarship on Deborah, see: Tyler Mayfield, "The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4-5) in Recent Research," *Currents in Biblical Research* 7:3 (2009): 306-335.

² Concerning Judg 5: For 12th or 11th century see: Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting For Josiah: The Judges* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 36-37. For 5th to 4th century see: Serge Frolov, "How Old Is the Song of Deborah?" *JOT* 36:2 (2011): 163-184. For 3rd or 2nd century dating see: B.-J. Diebner "Wann sang Deborah ihr Lied? Überlegungen zu zwei der ältesten Texte des TNK (Ri 4 und 5)," *ACEBT* 1:14 (1995): 106-130. For 5th or 3rd century see: Michael Waltisberg, "Zum Alter der Sprache des Deborahliedes Ri 5," *ZAH* 12 (1999), 218-32. For a discussion on the authoring of Judg 4 and the composition of Judges as a whole see: Guillaume, *Waiting For Josiah* and Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (trans. M. Gumpert; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1.

³ Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1.

⁴ Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 172.

Sommers, however is of the opposite opinion and he describes the portrayal of women in Judges as a kind of dystopia:

Not only has Israel's cycle of idolatrous disobedience continued and not only has Israel once again been the victim of foreign oppression, but there is a lack of male leadership in this society, forcing a woman, Deborah, to fulfill the role of prophet and judge.⁵

I will now move towards the many synchronic readings of Judg 4 and 5. Bledstein argues that it is a satirical text mocking men who play God. The story is told from a woman's perspective who have had it with men who do not listen to her, or YHWH for that matter. Both Barak's insecurity and the tribes that failed to show up to battle are mocked.⁶ She sees the scene in the tent as a reversed rape, playing on the themes of women and war where the victim changes place with the perpetrator. The mighty man who we would expect to be violent becomes a victim under Jael's phallic shaped weapon.⁷ We will have reason to return to this theory of reversal.

One of the great contributors in the field of narrative criticism and the HB is Mieke Bal. She writes a number of books and essays on the subject and I will refer to them continually throughout my thesis. She argues, in an article about Judith, that the story is too familiar, we know the motif so well that we fill the gaps ourselves with what we expect to happen.⁸ The *femme fatale* is a recurring motif in both myth and folktale: It is as intriguing and terrifying as the woman herself—expected to be nurturing but proves to be fatal. Niditch's name for this motif, "the iron fist in the velvet glove,"⁹ indicates the element of surprise fundamental in stories using this motif. We have come across this story countless times, whether it's in ancient literature or contemporary media. And that is perhaps why we have trouble disregarding the usual pattern of the motif when we come across a story that seems fit into it.

1.2.1 Chapters 4 and 5: How should they be read?

Judg 4 and 5 are two texts of different genres describing the same event. The prose text of ch. 4 precedes the poetic song of ch. 5, but the scholars have long asked themselves if this order is the order in which they should be read. Indeed, the

⁵ L. Javed Sommers, "A World in Which Things Are Not as They Should Be: How the Deuteronomistic Ideology is Reinforced in the Book of Judges by the Portrayal of Women and Domestic Space," (Thesis, McGill University, 2011), 60, see also: Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, ed. David W. Cotter, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 53.

⁶ Adrienne Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire on Men who Play God" in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 34-55 esp. 47.

⁷ Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire," 34.

⁸ Mieke Bal "Head Hunting: On the Cutting Edge of Knowledge" in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Ruth* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 253-285 esp. 253.

⁹ Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 81.

compositional connection between Judg 4 and 5 is a long discussed subject of scholars interested in the book of Judges. As I have already touched on, there is no consensus regarding the timeframes of the composition(s) of Judges. Similarly there is no consensus on the texts dependences (or non-existing dependences) on each other.

Looking at the internal evidence Guillaume, in his dissertation "Waiting for Josiah," argues that Judg 5 predates Judg 4, and that Judg 4 was written to explain and elaborate on the already existing but somewhat obscure text of Judg 5. The text in Judg 4, Guillaume continues, could have ended with Barak and his men defeating Sisera in v. 16, but because the audience was already familiar with the tent scene in ch. 5 the author(s) included the ending in ch. 5 as well. The mythological elements of YHWH's performance present in ch. 5 are excluded in ch. 4 because of the different genre.¹⁰

Unlike Guillaume, Webb argues that the song refers to the narrative, and that the song presupposes that the audience was already familiar with the narrative in ch. 4.¹¹ Lindars agrees with Webb saying that the song breaks the continuity between 4:24 and 5:31b, and therefore the song was the latest addition to the book. With this said, he argues that neither of the stories depend on the other: They are independent, different literary presentations originating from the same tradition.¹² This because he feels that the author of Judg 4 would have expressed himself differently if he was relying on the song as the only source.¹³

Fewell and Gunn choose to read Judg 4 and 5 as one continuing narrative. The first one from a by-standing narrator's perspective, followed by a song composed after the victory to celebrate the defeat of the oppressing power told (or sung) from Barak's and Deborah's point of view.¹⁴

Their arguments¹⁵ have one thing in common: The fact that there are two texts describing more or less the same story shows that the story was important, popular, or perhaps strange enough to require either an explanation or a poetic version when one of them was already in existence. The purpose of this study is to deal with the texts as literature and as such the compositional history will not be taken into consideration. I will treat the texts as one continuing story, because this was probably the way that the texts were perceived by interpreters up until the scholarly discussions on redaction-criticism of the 20th century. I will analyze the texts separately, but view the characters as the same persons described in both Judg 4 and 5.

¹⁰ Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 32.

¹¹ Barry G. Webb, *The book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 139.

¹² Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 164.

¹³ Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 165.

¹⁴ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judg 4 & 5," *JAAR* 58:3 (1990): 389-411, esp. 390

¹⁵ With the exception of Lindars.

1.3 Method

Anyone who has ever read anything has engaged him or herself in the art of filling gaps. I believe we are all familiar with the disappointment upon watching a movie based on a book we have previously read, finding the main character to look nothing like the person we imagined when reading the book. This of course applies not only to appearance, but to every aspect of a text. It is sometimes hard to see yourself what the text or book says and what is part of your own imagination and interpretation of it. The quote below illustrates that the art of filling gaps is an inevitable part of reading:

Nothing is simpler than to create for oneself the idea of a human being, a figure and a character, from a series of glimpses and anecdotes. Creation of this kind we practice every day; we are continually piecing together our fragmentary evidence about the people around us and moulding their images in thought. It is the way in which we make our world; partially, imperfectly, very much at haphazard, but still perpetually, everybody deals with this experience like an artist.¹⁶

I will focus this thesis on the filling of the gaps that interpreters have done while reading the story of Debora and Jael. Now, this might seem impossible, because I am not an exception to mankind's need to make the story whole. I am, as I pointed out above, very much familiar with this art of gap-filling. However, I will try to focus the first part of my thesis on what the text leaves out, when the text invites to gap-filling. I will then move on to analyzing the ancient interpreters, and see how they approach this task, and from then move on to contemporary thoughts. Despite this task I am not in any way *opposed* to filling gaps (if you can be such a thing), I am simply interested in the "hows" and "whys" regarding this. I should also stress that the gaps can differ depending on the reader/interpreter. If you see a text as a work of art then you would probably—as an artist—want the observer to make the painting their own. Not to hijack the object and make it into something that it is not, but to make the observer feel that the painting is speaking to them. One of the interesting things about interpretation is what aspects the reader chooses to focalize, consciously or subconsciously.

For my thesis I will be needing different methods and perspectives for the different purposes of each part. Firstly I will analyze the texts in which the characters of Deborah and Jael figure. This will be done with the help of a close reading of the Biblical text, with special attention to textual problems in the realm of linguistics. I will then use a few tools given by narrative criticism to further examine the characters. As I move on I will read ancient and contemporary interpreters, and then

¹⁶ Quote by Percy Lubbock not seen found in: Danna Nolan Fewell and David M Gunn, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47.

the perspectives of reader-response criticism as well as deconstruction will be helpful. At the end of this thesis I will offer my own interpretation, based on the previous conclusions as well as my own thoughts. Theory of metaphor and euphemisms will be helpful but also perspectives from the feminist critical field. This segment about method will feature the above mentioned theories. After this discussion of the hermeneutical difficulties I will encounter while dealing with my question, I will now continue to discuss the main question which must be dealt with before continuing. To identify a gap that has been filled do you have to, in some way, know what the text *really* says?

1.3.1 Finding the Gaps: Or, What Does the Text *Really* Say?

Can we break down a text to just its words or its letters to find the true meaning or the basic meaning, without “yielding to” any interpretation? I think not. No one can look at a painting and reveal its true meaning, one can however analyze the composition of said painting and the different characteristics of salient features. That is why I will try to do just that. To be able to find the filled gaps of the interpreter I must have some idea of what the text does say and what is a gap that has been filled. However, this is in itself a paradox since interpretation and reading are connected, and even more so—translating and interpreting. In postmodern theory the interpretation begins as soon as we encounter a text, contrary to the positivistic view.

Everything that I am doing is in one way or another interpretation and as such this segment’s heading should be viewed with suspicion. However, the heading is there to illustrate that these problems are ever so present when engaging in interpretation, and that is why the title remains. In this thesis, at least, there will be no *true* reading. There will be a few discussions on probability and ideology, but I will not provide any answers to an intrinsic meaning. Following Bal, meaning is a product of the reader, although based on possibilities offered in the text.¹⁷ I will highlight a few of the difficulties which are relevant to the interpretations of the texts. The lack of information is a salient factor of these texts, and that I find interesting in itself. Just as, when I was a child, I liked the holes in the cheese best. The characters are not just holes in the cheese though, they are active agents throughout the story and I will now move on to the perspectives which will be helpful when analyzing them.

1.3.2 Narrative Perspectives

One of the methods referred to here is narrative criticism. These perspectives will be useful when analyzing the characters who are my chief concern in this study, Deborah and Jael. To begin an interpretation together with this method means

¹⁷ Bal, “Introduction,” in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women’s Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Mieke Bal; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 11-24 esp. 17.

asking three questions when reading a text. The first one being: *Who is speaking?* Who is the narrator of the story? Unlike the characters, the narrator can often be presumed to be reliable. The narrator's job is to provide the reader with sufficient information for the story to make sense.¹⁸ In most cases, as I stated above, this is the voice of a man, but as we shall see when discussing Judges not necessarily. This following question is: *Who sees?* Whose views are delineated by the narrator? Even if the text is said to be told from a woman's perspective, is that really the case? The way in which it is told is also important, is it through actions, internal speech, or by the narrator himself/herself? This leads us to the characters of the story and the last question to ask: *Who acts?* To answer this we will identify the agents in the story and their positions as agents.¹⁹

To sum up, here are the questions I will be asking about the characters:

1. Who speaks?
2. Who sees?
3. Who acts?

My main interest is the characters of the texts and asking in what way they are portrayed. Trying to understand the characters of a text has not always been approved by biblical scholars since the nature of looking at characters invites the interpreter to psychologize. To avoid this alleged trap of over-analyzing characters the trend moved in the opposite direction. The structuralists viewed characters as props that helped the more important plot to move forward. In this way the characters of myths and folk-tales were simplified and removed of all uniqueness. When painting with such broad strokes the structuralists were able to say that every myth and folk-tale is basically the same story with a few variations, told over and over again. The characters are heroes, helpers or villains and the purpose of the story dictates their actions, not the character's emotions or personality.²⁰ I will use language close to that of structuralistic generalization, not in my analysis of the biblical narrative but when I read the interpretations of others. Sometimes the way of simplifying, or making them fit into expectations, is one way of filling gaps along with the structuralist thought. There is a small gap between over-analyzing and over-simplification, and the way that the interpreters that I read handle this balance is of great interest to me. Do they try to make the characters into complicated, living persons or are they portrayed as cardboard cutouts only there to act out the plot? While on the subject of reading others I will now conveniently move towards the task of interpreting an interpreter.

¹⁸ Fewell and Gunn, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 52.

¹⁹ Bal, "Introduction," 17.

²⁰ Fewell and Gunn, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 48.

1.3.3 Postmodernism: Deconstruction, Metacommentary, and Reader-response Criticism

As the biblical scholars moved away from the structuralistic thoughts in the 1980s, the post-structuralist and postmodern perspectives emerged. With postmodernism, the urge to deconstruct texts grew. Deconstruction is questioning the sometimes taken for granted values and alleged facts given in the text, and moving away from thoughts of a “master narrative” or claims of universal meaning.²¹ Metacommentary is an attempt to deconstruct commentators way of taking for granted, or to use my own favourite phrase—their way of filling gaps.

Continuing these thoughts, reader-response criticism expresses the importance of the reader when faced with the task of reading.²² In a way, reader-response criticism is a more complicated way of saying reading, because, as I have pointed out several times, reading is interpretation. At least this is the case if we can all agree that there is no way of reading objectively, and that we bring our lives and cultural context into our reading. This is not the same as saying that the author has no impact over the text’s reception, but I think that the Judges-texts that I am examining in this thesis are good examples of texts that do not convey many emotions. However, when looking at interpretations of these texts the need to react and construe an intention or meaning is ever-present. Using reader-response criticism is saying that there are many different “readings,” meaning is not *discovered* in the text but it is *attributed* by readers. The text contains indicators, or as Barton puts it, “stars” leading the way of the plot. But while these indicators makes it possible for the reader to grasp the plot of the text, there are always gaps in between the stars.²³

Sontag argues that interpretation involves displacing the text, and this displacement comes from a dissatisfaction with it, making the reader want to replace its content.²⁴ The commentators work as plastic surgeons who want to change the text’s appearance to make it fit better with the society in which the commentator lives, but without admitting it to the world.²⁵ The interpreter’s own troubles with the text do often reveal themselves while reading their commentaries. They can be seen when looking at the amount of space given to a certain character or action in the plot, or their ways of replacing content.

Reading others reading Judges involves finding this displacement and the stratagems of solving problems. In my reading of ancient interpreters I will, as said previously,

²¹ John Barton, “The Legacy of the Literary-critical School and the Growing Opposition to Historico-critical Bible Studies. The Concept of ‘History’ Revisited — *Wirkungsgeschichte* and Reception History” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, III/2: The Twentieth Century* (ed. Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 96-124 esp. 113.

²² Barton, “The Legacy of the Literary-critical School,” 115.

²³ Barton, “The Legacy of the Literary-critical School,” 117.

²⁴ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), part 3.

²⁵ Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea’s Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 36.

try to discern ideologies. This is an attempt to deconstruct the then prevailing, and in some ways still prevailing, interpretations and their way of replacing the content and solving problems. The ideological criticism will mostly comprise of feminist critical perspectives, as the problem of the text has much to do with gender.

1.3.4 Feminist Perspectives

Why then are these texts so suitable for filling gaps? In the case of ancient interpreters there is a unanimous feeling of a problem needing to be solved. This problem is often related to gender issues. Both female and male gender roles are potentially problematic according to ancient patriarchal society, especially in antiquity.

A recurrent theme in just about all the texts I am reading is that they describe women seen through the male gaze. This might seem obvious to point out since texts written by women, that we know of, are extremely rare. It is nevertheless relevant because I will discuss the way that the female characters are portrayed, and even though I don't make any claims of their actual existence, they become real through the narratives. It is therefore important to point out that the women described are products of men and their imagination/interpretation. Their texts are in turn read by me, a woman, which will also impact the re-reading.

I will frequently refer to *the Other* as a way of discerning the existing power-relations of the story. This is an important part of liberation criticism at large, particularly feminist and postcolonial criticisms. *The Other* emerges when one views the biblical text as a symbolic universe. In this universe the one in the centre is the one who makes the rules, *the Other* exists outside of this centre and suffers the consequences of not fitting into the prevailing norm-, gender-, or class-system. *The Other* is not necessarily a fixed state attributed to all people of a certain ethnicity, gender, or class: Rather the power-relations can change depending on the different narratives. But in the HB the general assumption is that the centre is comprised of the sons of Israel. Again, Bal has an interesting observation: The monotheistic thought revolves around the faithfulness towards the "self," the people of Israel, and *the Other* is constantly separated from the self.²⁶ This is the kernel of monotheism, visible mainly in the post-exilic Biblical literature like the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The cycle of faithlessness and salvation persistently repeated in the HB relates also to the interpersonal relations and specifically endogamy (idolatry and intermarriage is closely connected in the HB, e.g. the marriage metaphors of Hosea and Ezekiel). This is of course an important tool when constructing any community. However, the otherness of *the Other* is almost tangible when, apart from being an outsider in the symbolic universe, *the Other* is also viewed as outside the covenant and because of that beyond salvation. During the antiquity these ideas gained in popularity and would also inspire the Rabbis, Josephus and Pseudo-Philo whom we shall turn to in part three.

²⁶ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 29.

How a text is interpreted by someone can perhaps shed some light both on the interpreters ideology and the ideology of the narrative in itself. What aspects the interpreters choose to emphasize or downplay can give us a clue to how the interpreter perceived the text.²⁷ Following Sherwood, I use the word *ideology* in the non-pejorative sense. Ideology is not a misconception that the interpreter “suffers” from, but a filter through which the interpreter views a text, and indeed the world in which he lives.²⁸ The ancient interpreters read through the feminist perspective can often result in a conclusion of either a “good” or a “bad” interpretation. The bad one being more common since they were authored in an androcentric environment. This dichotomizing into “good” and “bad” is often unnecessarily simplistic. Blyth and Mulya complicates the matter of good and bad in their article writing as Delilah:

I [Delilah] evade easy definition, embodying instead a ‘myriad individual fragmented selves, performing gender across a full spectrum of possibilities’; and in these ‘selves’—or cross-dressings, as I prefer to call them—I show just how artificial socially constructed polarities of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ really are. I am warrior, whore, lover, enemy, male, female; I am whatever you want me to be and more—a master-mistress of disguise.²⁹

Of course some interpretations may stand out as misogynistic (which translates to “bad” when using feminist interpretation) and they need to be problematized and deconstructed. However, no ancient or contemporary interpretation can, to my knowledge, be said to be solely “bad.” Just as the biblical narrative cannot be said to be “bad,” this anachronism oversimplifies women’s lives so that it seems that they could either be in a good or a bad situation, and nothing in between.

I will use these feminist perspectives as a tool when looking at the texts in question. This does not mean that I will try to liberate the women of the text, but rather that I will examine the ideas of gender(s) that both the text and the commentators present.

1.3.4 Metaphor and Euphemism

When ancient society is regarded in the abstract form of a symbolic universe, that perspective invites to a metaphoric interpretation of the texts authored in this context. While dealing with both the biblical text and the interpretations I will

²⁷ J. Cheryl Exum, “Toward a Genuine Dialogue Between the Bible and Art,” in *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010* (ed. Martti Nissinen; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 473-505, esp. 476.

²⁸ Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 25.

²⁹ Caroline Blyth and Teguh Wijaya Mulya “The Delilah Monologues,” 10. Unpublished seminar material, 2014-11-26, Lund University.

discuss metaphor theory in general, and related to this I will also discuss the use of euphemisms.

According to Grünfeld, Kittay has contributed to the technical language used in *metaphor criticism*. Following her suggestion we can speak of a *linguistically articulated domain*, which is used to gain knowledge of an *experiential* or *conceptual domain*. The *linguistically articulated domain* is the thing to which the more abstract or unknown *experiential* or *conceptual domain* is compared.³⁰ The simplest way to illustrate is to bear in mind the phrase “A is (like) B,” here B is the well known *linguistically articulated domain* used to clarify something about the *experiential* or *conceptual domain*, A. When a sexual euphemism is used, the *linguistically articulated domain* is a taboo needing to be censored. For the metaphor or euphemism to be understood both concepts used need to be understood by the receiver—the receiver and author/speaker need to share an *associated commonplace*. The commonplace is the cultural expectations which are implied in the comparison between the two concepts.³¹ For example, when using the phrase “he is a wolf in sheep’s clothing” the receiver needs to know something about wolves as well as sheep to fully understand the character of the *experiential* or *conceptual domain* (“he”).

As a subcategory of metaphor we will also discuss possible occurrences of euphemisms. With euphemisms and dysphemisms Fernandez gives three different examples, firstly: A *lexicalized* euphemism (or dysphemism) is a paraphrase which is synonymous with the literal meaning. Secondly we have the *semi-lexicalized* euphemisms in which the domains are not synonymous, but they belong to the same domain since the substitute is often used to describe this taboo. Lastly, the *creative* euphemism is not a well-known substitute and the meaning is only understood in the context of where it is told.³²

The euphemism’s meaning depends on the receiver, it requires for he or she to go beyond the literal meaning of the statement. The ideal receiver arrives at the intended meaning of the author/speaker, applying a novel meaning to a forbidden concept, but this intended meaning is not spelled out since euphemisms are ambiguous by nature.³³ This makes euphemisms and dysphemisms an unsure way of communicating, especially when the time-gap between the author and the receiver is wide, as the associated commonplaces changes with the cultural and linguistic context.

Now, as we saw above the narrator of a story is reliable, we can trust him or her to give us sufficient information to understand the story. I will now amend this

³⁰ Joseph Grünfeld, “Kittay’s Theory of Metaphor,” *Science et Esprit* 44 (1992): 83-89, esp. 84.

³¹ Max Black, *Models and Metaphors; Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 39-41.

³² Eliecer Crespo Fernández, “Sex-related Euphemism and Dysphemism: An Analysis in Terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory,” *Atlantis* 30:2 (2008): 95-110, esp. 103.

³³ Fernández, “Sex-related Euphemism and Dysphemism,” 105.

statement because when the author is using euphemism, irony or metaphor we might be given “false” information by the narrator. Especially when the nuances, perhaps obvious to the intended audience, gets lost in time. The nature of euphemism is saying one thing and meaning another, add to this an ancient language with its own cultural conventions not always accessible today. Irony is another example of this where, originally, perhaps the absurdity of a statement gave it away.

With the help of these perspectives the task of analyzing the text and its interpreters begin. First, let us prepare for the subsequent reading of ancient interpreters by reading Judg 4 and 5 and finding the gaps.

2. DISSECTING THE TEXTS

I will now move on to the Biblical texts which are the subject of my investigation. When reading these texts I will use a linguistic approach as the main problem at this stage concerns the, at least in part, ambiguous language. I will use different sources to display the various alternative understandings of different verses. Sometimes the NRSV is featured alone, and in those cases there are no variations which affect the understanding of the verse.³⁴ Other times I will add a few modern commentators and the Masoretic text (as rendered in BHS), and a few times I will include the interpretational “translation” of Targum Jonathan.

The characters of Deborah and Jael figure in two different texts. First we have Judg 4, a prose text. Judg 5 is a poetic song considered by many to be the oldest text within the HB.³⁵ The song is filled with linguistic as well as interpretational difficulties, about seventy percent of the keywords and phrases in the text are of ambiguous meaning.³⁶

2.1 Judges 4: “A Fiery Woman Was She”

The prose-styled text in Judg 4 tells the same story as the one in Judg 5, but in quite a different way. Starting from the beginning of the ch. 4 text we see one of the returning traits of the book of Judges, and traditionally also what many call the Deuteronomistic school. The Israelites again did evil “in the sight of the Lord,” and they were punished by YHWH by being oppressed under Jabin, the king of Canaan. His commander was Sisera, and to break free of the oppressors the people of Israel had to win back the trust, or pity, of the God with whom they had entered a covenant. So they cried out to YHWH because of Sisera’s army’s supremacy. The cry

³⁴ There can be marginal variations, but I have then made the interpretative decision that they do not affect the understanding of the text.

³⁵ Schneider, *Judges*, 85, J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. J. S. Bowden; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 80, Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 1.

³⁶ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 1.

for help³⁷ from the people to YHWH is also a recurring theme in the book of Judges.³⁸ YHWH's answer to this cry is usually to send a judge who is a man, but in this case the savior is Deborah, a woman. She is introduced in verse 4 and 5:

4 דבורה אשה נביאה אשת לפידות היא שפטה את־ישראל בעת
חחיא 5 והיא יושבת תחת־תמר דבורה בין הרמה ובין בית־אל
בהר אפרים ויעלו אליה בני ישראל למשפט:

4. At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.³⁹

The point on which interpreters disagree here is whether or not Deborah was married. The word לפידות could be a geographical location “woman of Lappidoth” (Vat.), or taken as the literal meaning of לפיד: “Torch” or “lightning” in this case used as an adjective: “A fiery woman,”⁴⁰ or as in the NRSV, the husband's name (following OL). Deborah's alleged charismatic qualities⁴¹ makes the translation of “a fiery woman” appealing, although more than one of the options above are possible—the people hearing/reading the text could at the same time understand where she came from and link the basic meaning of the noun to a personal trait of hers. Frymer-Kensky points to the fact that Lappidoth is a strange-sounding name for a man, she also finds it strange that the usual “son of” patronymic is left out. The “wife of”-translation does however indicate that a woman could be married and be a prophet at the same time.⁴² Alter reflects on the clumsiness of the verse where Deborah is introduced. Her female gender is emphasized four times in the first verse. The Hebrew noun נביאה (“prophet”) already expresses that she is female, then adding “woman” to that which results in the cumbersome “prophetess-woman” (אשה נביאה). This is followed by another אשת (“woman”) connected to Lappidoth. And then again in the next clause “she”

³⁷ Perhaps derived from an old custom where the weak could cry (צעק/זעק) to YHWH or the king who would be obliged to help (cf. Exod 22:21-22). See G. Hasel, “זעק” TDOT IV:112-122.

³⁸ The initial formula is recurring throughout the hero-stories in the Book of Judges. There is a clear pattern: The people of Israel is doing evil in the sight of YHWH (cf. 2:11; 3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 8:33; 10:6; 13:1), which leads to the punishment where YHWH sells them to an oppressor. This leads to the people's cry to YHWH and his answer to this is to send a judge (cf. 2:16 — in this instance without the cry; 3:9; 3:15; 4:3; 6:6-7; 10:10). In most cases the land prospered for as long as the judge was alive, but when he/she dies—the cycle is repeated.

³⁹ NRSV.

⁴⁰ Cf. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 38, Niditch, *Judges*, 62, Daniel Skidmore-Hess and Cathy Skidmore-Hess, “Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah,” *Shofar* 31:1 (2012): 1-17, esp. 2, and Mayfield, “The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4-5) in Recent Research,” 316.

⁴¹ Based in the fact that she was a judge and a woman. The argument's premiss is that she was given this opportunity because of her outstanding character.

⁴² She also points to Mesopotamian mythology where the storm god's herald's are torch (*šullat*) and lightning (*haniš*). If we take Deborah to mean “torch” or “fiery” and Barak's name which means “lightning,” together with the mythological nature-elements ascribed to YHWH, found in Judg 5 we have quite a convincing parallel. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 46.

אִיָּהּ was judging Israel, the feminine pronoun is unnecessarily repeated in the beginning of the next verse.⁴³ Gender is indeed an important issue here, so important that the author took pains to make sure no one missed it.

Deborah is “sitting” and judging, just as Moses (Exod 18:13). She is the only one after Moses who does this, until Samuel.⁴⁴ The tree which she is sitting under is named after her. We will now move to the translation of Tg. J. who expands on Deborah’s situation:

4. And the woman Deborah, the prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel in that time. And she was living in her city, in Ataroth-Deborah, supporting herself out of her own means. She possessed palm trees in Jericho, gardens in Ramah, oil yielding olive trees in the Valley, irrigated soil in Beth-El, and white soil in the King’s Highlands. And the Israelites went up [regularly] to her for judgement.⁴⁵

There are a few conclusions made here which requires some explanation. There are four interpretations of the place where Deborah sits (תמר) which is rendered as a “city” in general, then specified as Ataroth-Deborah, then the common interpretation of the palm tree which leads to the tradition of Jericho as the City of Palms (Deut 34:3). The emphasis on her supporting herself is linked to a rabbinic tradition of her as an honest judge not susceptible to any bribes.⁴⁶

As we have now seen, in this narrative Deborah is both a judge and a prophet. As an oracle she sends for Barak, the man who she (and YHWH) believes will help her execute the plan of freeing Israel from their subjugators.

6. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. 7. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’” 8. Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” 9. 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

⁴³ Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 41.

⁴⁴ Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire,” 39.

⁴⁵ Willem F. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 380.

⁴⁶ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 383.

Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh.⁴⁷

The question here is whether Barak is acting in a shameful way, not wanting to go to war without a woman by his hand, or if he is simply realizing that this woman is in contact with the great warrior God YHWH and that it would be foolish to leave her behind. Some interpreters, mentioned above, wonder whether the author is writing a dystopia and the only reason that Deborah and Jael are included in the book is to show the hearers/readers what a despicable time it was: A time when the women were obliged to lead armies and do violent acts because of the cowardice of men. There is at least one reason which could point to this, namely the woman of Thebez in Judg 9:53-54. She tries to kill Abimelech by throwing a millstone on his head, however, this does not kill him. To avoid the shame of being murdered by a woman he asks his servant to stab him with his sword. Soggin is of the opinion that Barak is acting precocious out of care towards his army, whilst Deborah is unaware of all things concerning warfare and acts out of excitement.⁴⁸ However, as already stated, Deborah was sent by YHWH, and according to her conversation with Barak she was obviously in contact with the deity, this would not be a disadvantage in battle, quite the opposite. LXXa seems to be of this opinion, since it adds the following line to Barak’s statement: ”Because I do not know on what day the Lord will send his angel to my side.”⁴⁹

The narrative goes on to say that Barak assembles the tribes, and they, together with Deborah, ascend Mount Tabor. Then Heber, the Kenite, perhaps the husband of Jael,⁵⁰ enters the story. The Kenites are said to live in peace with the Canaanites, and Heber’s origin is linked to the father-in-law of Moses, Hobab.⁵¹ According to Schneider there is irony in this verse, because Jael is clearly affiliated with both Israel and Canaan. But what every Israelite knows is that the kinship with Moses trumps all other connections, and we already get a clue to where Jael’s loyalties will lay.⁵²

Now Deborah tells Barak to get started. So he and the troops descended the mountain and YHWH helps Barak by throwing Sisera and his army into a panic. When this happens Sisera flees on foot to the tent of Jael. The tent is described as Jael’s rather than her husband’s, and this has been a problem for some contemporary

⁴⁷ NRSV.

⁴⁸ Besides the sexist implications of this view, he connects his thoughts to the worldly balance between listening to God and being rational. Not only an insult towards Deborah, but also he is calling her, and belief in general, irrational. Soggin, *Judges*, 73.

⁴⁹ LXXa: ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὴν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ ἐύδοι κύριος τὸν ἄγγελον μετ’ ἐμοῦ, *Septuaginta*, 420. There are, as Frymer-Kensky points out, parallels from Mari and Assyria where prophets give advice on, and urge, kings to go into battle. The prophets Elia and Elisha are so important in this aspect that they are called “Israel’s chariot and cavalry,” Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 48.

⁵⁰ The Hebrew word for “Heber” could also mean “group,” we will return to this discussion below.

⁵¹ The Kenites can, according to tradition, be traced back to a descendant of Cain, Tubal-cain the founder of metallurgy (Cf. Gen 4:22), Schneider, *Judges*, 72.

⁵² Schneider, *Judges*, 73.

interpreters.⁵³ What kind of a woman is Jael if she has her own tent? The go-to answer for some is that she was a prostitute, or an old wife of Heber who had been discarded. There are a few things indicating that Jael, just as Deborah, was unmarried. In this case she would have her own tent, and even if she was married, the women's tents could have been separated from the men's.⁵⁴ There is, following Bal, another option: She could have been aware of the political situation and acted with that in mind.⁵⁵ Perhaps she made sure to have the tent to herself. This does not make her a victim of a man's intrusion but an active instigator of the events which we will now explore:

18 ותצא יעל לקראת סיסרא ותאמר אליו סורה אדני סורה אלי
אל־תירא ויסר אליה האהלה ותכסהו בשמיכה 19 ויאמר אליה
השקיני־נא מאת־מים כי צמאתי ותפתח את־נאוד החלב
ותשקהו ותכסהו:

18. Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. 19. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.⁵⁶

In this version Jael goes out to greet him, as to actively invite him into his tent.⁵⁷ Many have reacted that Jael's behavior as a hostess was a transgression of the ancient Near Eastern hospitality rules: You don't attack a person whom you have invited into your home.⁵⁸ But I think the ancient hearer/reader would also react to Jael's active invitation. Because of this verse her character has been understood much like the *femme fatale*. However, this is only briefly because as soon as Sisera enters the tent Jael's behavior is maternal, tucking the general in and bringing him milk to drink—like a child.

Tamarkin Reis reacts to Jael's reckless behavior, inviting a man into her tent. She writes that in the HB whenever a man and a woman, who are not married to each other, are alone in a room it is always to do with sex. There are no innocent meetings

⁵³ Bal critiques Gray as an example of this opinion. At first he sees Jael as an independent member of the Kenite group but he then is preoccupied with why she has her own tent. See: Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 212 citing Gray.

⁵⁴ Cf. Gen 18:6, Gen 24:67 and Gen 31:33. For further discussion see: Schneider, *Judges*, 78.

⁵⁵ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 212.

⁵⁶ NRSV.

⁵⁷ She asks him using the root סור. The root is also used in Prov 9:16 by the foolish woman, and when used as a noun (in the feminine form it looks the same as the imperative form used in Judg 4:18) it means “disloyal” or “faithless.” This shows the sometimes negative implications of abandoning the righteous path or to fall away. But it also means to “take shelter” and in that sense avoiding the enemy, which is probably the way to understand its usage in this case. LXXb similarly has ἐκκλινον meaning “turn away” while LXXa has ἔκνευσον meaning “withdraw.” William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 254-255, Schneider, *Judges*, 78, *Septuagint*, 421.

⁵⁸ Soggin, *Judges*, 77.

between a man and a woman in the HB.⁵⁹ I could argue that this is not always the case, there are at least a few times when a man and a woman in the Biblical literature could meet for other purposes than sexual ones.⁶⁰ That said, this alone does not prevent such an interpretation of Judg 4-5. But if we understand Jael as a mother, luring him into a false sense of security, the invitation can be understood as Jael seeing Sisera's distress and reacting with care (with or without ulterior motives). And if we do not want to get Freud involved, and that is perhaps best to avoid at this point, understanding this verse as a sexual euphemism is not necessary.

As we shall soon see also in the Judg 5, Sisera asks Jael for water but she gives him milk. This seems to be an important detail, since it occurs in both the song and in the narrative. This even though it can be seen as inessential information, because it does not affect the outcome of the story. The Hebrew word שמיכה rendered as "rug" in NRSV is a *hapax legomenon*. This word means, according to Tamarkin Reis that she covered him with his body, a euphemistic expression meaning sex.⁶¹ OL could be of the same opinion, rendering this word as the ambiguous "skin covering."⁶² LXXb has περιέβαλεν αὐτὸν ἐπιβολαίῳ meaning to "clothe" or "adorn" someone in a covering. LXXa renders it συνεκάλυψεν αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ δέρρει which is probably to be understood as to "veil" or to "conceal" someone with the curtain covering the entrance of the tent, made out of animal skin.⁶³ So the "skin," if we choose to render it this way, could be understood both as a human body and the skin rug of an animal.

Sisera is now ordering Jael to stand in the entrance of the tent, telling the people who ask for a man that there is no man inside. In a way, he is questioning his own masculinity as Jael is instructed to answer no to the question. As if he knew that his masculinity would suffer a bit of a blow, about to be killed by the woman who took him in. He also, perhaps by mistake, uses the male imperative-form when asking her (עמד), but it could also be an intentional colouring of the text. Either, as Schneider argues, that he is in such a relaxed state of mind that he is careless with the grammar.⁶⁴ Or, this implies the gender-reversal mentioned above, if Jael is male—then what is Sisera? In that case, the irony cannot be mistaken. In the following verse the killing of Sisera takes place:

21 ותקח יעל אשת־הבר את־יתד האהל ותשם את־המקבת
 בידה ותבוא אליו באלאט ותתקע את־היתד ברקתו ותצנח בארץ
 והוא־נרדם ויעף וימת:

⁵⁹ Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading," *SJOT* 19:1 (2005): 24-47 esp. 26-27.

⁶⁰ E.g. 1 Sam 1:9-18 Hannah and Eli, 1 Sam 28:7-25 Saul and the medium, 2 Sam 14:2-20 David and the wise woman of Tekoa, and others.

⁶¹ Tamarkin-Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera," 27.

⁶² Niditch, *Judges*, 63.

⁶³ *Spetuagint*, 421, Soggin, *Judges*, 67.

⁶⁴ Schneider, *Judges*, 80.

21. But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died.⁶⁵

The act of killing is described similarly in Judg 5. The tent peg and the hammer occurs in both narratives as well as the action of driving the peg through his temple. The word for temple can, according to Fewell and Gunn, be understood as “mouth,” interpreting רַקְתּוֹ as related to רַקַק meaning “spit.”⁶⁶ This seems to be the way that LXXa interprets it (ἐν τῇ γνάθῳ αὐτοῦ, see also Josephus in section 3.2 below), thus making both the euphemism and reversed rape motif even more potent.⁶⁷

After the killing Jael goes out to meet Barak and invites him into her tent to see the dead body of Sisera, the story ends here. Sisera’s mother, who we will meet in the song, is omitted and the text tells us how YHWH subdued the king of Canaan on behalf of the Israelites.

Now that we have dissected the text of Judg 4 we will move on to the song in Judg 5. As said, the song is written poetically which brings its own interpretational difficulties to the reading.

2.2 Judges 5: “Until I, Deborah, Arose As a Mother in Israel”

The song is sung by Deborah, and perhaps joined in by Barak in song or in speech. Deborah sings a song of praise to YHWH, the deity responsible for their success in the defeat of the Canaan army. Already in the second verse we are meeting difficulties in translating, the main question is whether it should be understood in the context of hair or the oppressed letting loose/casting of restraint.

2 בפרע פרעות בישראל בהתנדב עם ברכו יהוה:

2. When locks are long in Israel, when the people offer themselves willingly—bless the Lord!⁶⁸

The big difficulty here is the Hebrew word פָּרַע which can be translated as “let loose” or “let s.one go out of control/run wild.”⁶⁹ It is often used in the context of hair, hence the “long locks” of the NRSV translation above. There are many alternative

⁶⁵ NRSV.

⁶⁶ Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 347. Cf. Song of Songs 4:3 and 6:7. The sliced pomegranate suggest a metaphor for the lips rather than the temple, Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 393.

⁶⁷ *Septuagint*, 422, Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 394.

⁶⁸ NRSV.

⁶⁹ Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 297.

translations of the songs opening words, which might set the scene quite differently. But first a word on the long locks, which might be a reference to Deborah, since long hair and women is a natural reference. In that case it might have something to do with her role as a judge and a prophet (two titles which are not usually attributed to women in the HB). It might then be either a critique of, or a simple statement that this was a time when women, or at least a woman, had the freedom and opportunity to occupy this role. But it could as well be a reference to the heroes of whom the book of Judges writes. Samson was a long-haired hero whose strength and power was situated in his hair.

The alternative translations of this verse has to do with the oppression of the people of Israel under Sisera. Janzen prefers a meaning where the “letting loose” has to do with revolting against oppressive and constraining structures:

2a. When the rebels cast off restraint in Israel, when the people offered themselves freely.⁷⁰

I will now move on to v. 7 where the song first mentions Deborah (aside from the first verse where she is said to be the singer). First the BHS version:

7 חדלו פרזון בישראל חדלו עד שקמתי דבורה שקמתי אם
בישראל:

7. The peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder, because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.⁷¹

The NRSV has a positive judgement on Deborah. She is, at least in part, responsible for the freeing of Israel and because of that she acted as a mother of the people as a whole. Her strength is contained in a typically feminine mothering role, and the more eyebrow-raising titles given to her in Judg 4, judge and prophet, are nowhere to be found. Bledstein translates this verse in quite a different manner:

7. The warriors grew plump in Israel, In Israel they grew plump again, until I, Deborah, arose, I arose as a mother in Israel.⁷²

⁷⁰ G.J. Janzen, “The Root *pr*’ in Judges V 2 and Deuteronomy XXXII 42,” *VT* 39 (1989): 393-406, esp. 393. Soggin similarly writes: “Because in Israel the people have regained liberty.” While the Tg. J. has a similar wording but with a different implication: “When the house of Israel rebelled against the law.” As we can see the meaning of Janzen’s and Soggin’s translations cited above brings to mind a revolution of an oppressed people while the Tg. J. says that the rebelling was against the law, which make the rebelling negative. In Janzen’s view the verb means to disregard the true order, to break down creation’s order through death or through infidelity. Soggin, *Judges*, 81, Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 392, Janzen, “The Root *pr*’ in Judges V 2 and Deuteronomy XXXII 42,” 406.

⁷¹ NRSV.

⁷² Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire,” 35.

This translation indicates a humorous intent. The warrior-men are too fat to fight and so the woman, Deborah, has to step up and get things done. According to Bledstein Judg 5 is authored by a woman as a satire mocking men who behave like they are gods, as already noted. In this verse the root for “growing plump” or “prosper” כדל can also mean “come to a stop” or “discontinue” which also makes the wording quite different, Niditch writes:

7a. Ways of life in the unwalled towns came to a halt. In Israel they came to a halt until I arose.⁷³

The second word in this verse (פרזון) is hard to understand, as we can see from the different renderings. Niditch chooses to correct the word so that it means “unwalled towns” (as found in Ezek 38:11 and Zech 2:8) also following Tg. J. and Syr. which renders “villages” with the last consonant changed from ן to ת.⁷⁴ Tg. J. expands this thought:

7. The unwalled cities which had [previously] been inhabited in the land of Israel were waste and desolate, and their inhabitants were exiled until I was sent, I Deborah, I was sent to prophesy within the House of Israel.⁷⁵

In this version Deborah is no longer a mother in Israel, she is now a prophet. And she is “sent” in stead of “arising.” The Midrash on Ps 3:3 states that the towns were destroyed but when Deborah arose the towns became mother-cities in Israel.⁷⁶ Soggin has yet another version:

7. The leading class was inactive in Israel, it was inactive in Israel until you arose Deborah, you arose, O mother in Israel!⁷⁷

“Leading class” or “warrior” is another common interpretation of the word פרזון following Vat. and OL. We may also notice the differences in either first, second or third person singular of the root קום, “to rise.” The suffix in the MT-version is either the first person singular⁷⁸ (ית-) or second person singular in an archaic form. This last form is attested as late as in Jeremiah. Some have chosen to follow LXX, Vulg., Vat. and OL in which we find the third person form.⁷⁹ This is often thought to be right because of the first verse where you then think of Barak as the speaker, although the beginning verse clearly states that Deborah is the one singing (with the

⁷³ Niditch, *Judges*, 67-68.

⁷⁴ Niditch, *Judges*, 72.

⁷⁵ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 432.

⁷⁶ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 433.

⁷⁷ Soggin, *Judges*, 82.

⁷⁸ Niditch, *Judges*, 72.

⁷⁹ Soggin, *Judges*, 86. LXXb v. 7b: ἕως οὗ ἀνεστῆ Δεββώρα, ἕως οὗ ἀνεστῆ μητιρ ἐν Ἰσραηλ. *Septuagint*, 423.

word for sing in the third person feminine). The next verse mentioning Deborah is pretty straight forward, the NRSV has:

12. Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song!
Arise Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam.⁸⁰

Niditch writes: “Capture your captives” otherwise the wording is quite similar.⁸¹ The repetition of words gives the song a structure. The call to awake is probably a call to arms (cf. Isa 51:9).⁸²

We move on now to the second female lead in this story: Jael. She is introduced by name only in v.6 which states that this happened during “the days of Jael” (as well as the “days of Shamgar ben-Anath”). In v. 24 she enters the song as the blessed one of tent-dwellers:

24 תברך מנשים יעל אשת חבר הקיני מנשים באהל תברך:

24. Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.⁸³

The tent that is an obstacle in ch. 4 is now simply there, there are no traces of the trespassing of hospitality rules in this version. Jael is one of many women residing in tents, but she is more blessed than all of them. Soggin excludes Heber from his translation which makes it:

24. Blessed among all women is Jael, a woman of the Kenite group, blessed among all tent-dwelling women.⁸⁴

Instead of Jael belonging to a man called Heber, Soggin prefers Jael to have a collective belonging to an indeterminate group of Kenite origin (חבר could also mean “group”).⁸⁵ MT suggests the husband-part to be an addition based on Judg 4:17. If we choose to leave out Heber we may have two women without husbands. Tg. J., although making Heber the husband, has another way of crediting Jael:

24. Let Jael, the wife of Heber the Shalmaite, be blessed with the blessing of the good women! Let she be blessed like one of the women who serve in the houses of study!⁸⁶

⁸⁰ NRSV.

⁸¹ Niditch, *Judges*, 68.

⁸² Niditch, *Judges*, 73.

⁸³ NRSV.

⁸⁴ Soggin, *Judges*, 83.

⁸⁵ Soggin, *Judges*, 74. For further discussion see: Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 211.

⁸⁶ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 471.

The initial phrase could be understood as above *be blessed with the blessings of women* or as the previous *blessed among women is Jael*. There is a small difference in meaning which Frymer-Kensky points out, either she is the most blessed out of all women or she is blessed by women—someone to praise, like a role model or a heroine.⁸⁷ In the beginning of the Rabbinic Judaism and the ideal of studying the tent-dwelling Jael is changed to a more contemporary role model, creating a pedigree for the novel institution.⁸⁸

We are now approaching the climax of the story, as we have seen in the analysis of Judges 4 the part where Sisera comes in to the tent of Jael is the most dramatic one. In verse 25 he has entered her tent and asked for water:

25. He asked for water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.⁸⁹

The problem with this verse is located in the second part. Is it a bowl or a bottle, and is it milk, curds, cream or butter? We shall see further on in this thesis how some of the Rabbis are a bit obsessed with the milk, and it is indeed interesting because milk is what a mother serves her child. The point for now being, he asked for simple water, she gave him the best she had—served in a “lordly bowl” (or as Soggin puts it: “In a cup from a noble banquet”⁹⁰). Tg. J. makes a little addition to clarify what most believe to be implied:

25. He asked her for water, she gave him milk to drink so as to learn whether he had any lust. In a champions’ bowl she brought creamed milk to him.⁹¹

As we move on in the story the following verses are also commonly interpreted as euphemisms, the next verse describes the killing of Sisera:

26. She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet; she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple.⁹²

There is a movement from the previous verse where Jael is the motherly caretaker to this one where she is the perpetrator. Niditch calls this motif “the iron fist in the velvet glove.”⁹³ She also finds the phallic shape of the tent peg important. In her interpretation Jael is performing a reversed rape, overthrowing the usual conventions

⁸⁷ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 52.

⁸⁸ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 472.

⁸⁹ NRSV.

⁹⁰ Soggin, *Judges*, 83.

⁹¹ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 473.

⁹² NRSV.

⁹³ Niditch, *Judges*, 81.

of war where women would sometimes fall victims to rape.⁹⁴ This kind of violence is not what you would expect from a woman, at least not without condemnation from the author of the text. There is a strand of researchers who have found her Kenite origin to be the reason to her success. She is not an Israelite, subsequently she is not a role model for the women of Israel (as Deborah). Put plainly: Her actions are accepted because of her status as a heathen helping Israel, although she was not obliged to. Later on we will see the differences of how Deborah and Jael were judged by interpreters, perhaps because of their different origins. Interestingly, in the Tosefta Targum Jael is praised for knowing the “law of Moses”:

Mercy to Jael the wife of Heber the Shalmaite, who fulfilled what is written in the law of Moses: “A man’s weaponry will not be worn by a woman and a man will not adorn himself with a woman’s equipment.” But she reached out for the tent-peg and so forth.⁹⁵

She is praised for committing a crime of passion rather than a premeditated one. Because she did not bring or bear the weapon she cannot be accused of breaking the law of Moses. As we move on in the story we will now see the sentence that makes most believe this is a euphemism with sexual implications:

27 בין רגליה כרע נפל שכב בין רגליה כרע נפל באשר כרע אם
נפל שדוד:

27. He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead.⁹⁶

If we remember the narrative of Judg 4 we now see that the song differs a bit in its description of Sisera’s death from the narrative. In Judg 4 Sisera is lying down, asleep—here he is standing up and falling down as she pierces her temple. Aside from the practical difficulties in hammering a tent peg through a man’s temple while he is standing up, the song seems to want to stress that Sisera is falling between her feet. It’s the word for “feet” which points to the sexual implication, and according to Niditch it could be between her legs or feet which is clearer her own translation:

27. Between her legs, he knelt, he fell, he lay. Between her legs, he knelt, he fell. Where he knelt, there he fell, despoiled.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Susan Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; London: Routledge, 2013), 305-317 esp. 307.

⁹⁵ A reference to Deut 22:5, Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 475.

⁹⁶ NRSV.

⁹⁷ Niditch, *Judges*, 69.

Niditch gives a few examples of places where the word for feet (רגל) is used as a euphemism.⁹⁸ The same is true of kneeling,⁹⁹ but kneeling can also be used about victims in war.¹⁰⁰ The same duality is also true of the term for “lay” which is used both of dying¹⁰¹ and of illicit sex.¹⁰² And also with “despoiled” which occurs in the context of warfare¹⁰³ and erotic imagery.¹⁰⁴ The feet can be considered unclean, because of their contact with dust and unclean environments. For women, afterbirth or other bodily fluids can be a reason why both the feet and legs can be considered unclean.¹⁰⁵ But the feet are also mentioned in cleansing rituals specifically when ordaining priests¹⁰⁶ and when curing leprosy.¹⁰⁷ OL reads the second part of the verse: “He slept under her feet. Trembling, the miserable one fell.” Frymer-Kensky and Bal argues that “between her legs” isn’t a sexual euphemism but a rather grotesque reference to childbirth, hence stressing the nurturing and mothering attributes of Jael. It also makes a connection to the following verses, where we meet Sisera’s birth-mother as opposed to his death-mother Jael.¹⁰⁸ Stedenbach evaluates that most of the symbolic uses of the word רגל has to do with sovereignty and subjection.¹⁰⁹ The enemy falls under the feet of the victors.¹¹⁰ A warrior can also surrender by embracing someones feet,¹¹¹ a typical feminine action, according to Stedenbach.¹¹²

As we move on the story changes its focus from the scene in the tent to the palace where Sisera’s mother is waiting and wondering why he hasn’t come home.

28 בעד החלונ נשקפה ותיבב אם סיסרא בעד האשנב מדוע
 בשש רכבו לבוא מדוא אחרו פעמי מרכבותיו 29 חכמות שרתיה
 תענינה אף־היא תשיב אמריה לה 30 הלא ימצאו יחלקו שלל
 רחם רחמתים לראש גבר שלל צבעים לסיסרא שלל צבעים
 רקמה צבע רקמתים לצוארי שלל:

28. Out of the window she peered, the mother of Sisera
 gazed through the lattice: “Why is his chariot so long in

⁹⁸ For example Deut 28:57; Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3(4); Isa 7:20; and Ezek 16:25.

⁹⁹ Cf. Job 31:10.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Ps 20:9(8).

¹⁰¹ Cf. 1 Kgs 1:21; 2 Kgs 14:22; and Ezek 32:21, 29.

¹⁰² Cf. Gen 19:32, 34, 35; Gen 34:2, 7; 2 Sam 13:11, 14.

¹⁰³ Cf. Isa 15:17; 23:1; Jer 47:4.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Jer 4:30, Niditch, *Judges*, 81.

¹⁰⁵ Stedenbach, “רגל, *regel*,” *TDOT* Vol.XIII: 309-324, esp. 315.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Exod 29:20; Lev 8:23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Lev 14:14, 17, 25, 28. Stedenbach “רגל, *regel*,” 316.

¹⁰⁸ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 52, and Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 228.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Gen. 49:10 and Judg 1:6-7 where the king looses his thumbs and big toes symbolizes the loss of power according to: Stedenbach, “רגל, *regel*,” 319.

¹¹⁰ See Ps 18:39(38); 2 Sam 22:39; 1 Kgs 5:17(3) and Ps 47:4(3), cf. also Isa 26:6; Mal 3:21; Ps 28:64 and Dan 7:7, 19.

¹¹¹ As seen in 1 Sam.25:24; 2 Kgs 4:27,37; and Esth 8:3.

¹¹² Stedenbach, “רגל, *regel*,” 320.

coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?” 29. Her wisest ladies make answer, indeed, she answers the question herself: 30. “Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?— A girl or two for every man; spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera, spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil?”¹¹³

Sisera’s mother is perhaps portrayed as naïve and shallow as she awaits her son. In that case it is hardly out of compassion for the family of Sisera that this last segment is included. As Frymer-Kensky points out Deborah and Sisera’s mother are juxtaposed, one is the mother of Israel the other is the mother of Canaan.¹¹⁴ They are juxtaposed for the purpose of entertainment. Bal, however, connects the colourful spoil to a reversal of what the mother would have said if she had known the fate that struck her son. The appropriate garments then would be a sackcloth of ashes.¹¹⁵ Fewell and Gunn sees this end-note as a justification of the violence that has just been rendered by Barak and Deborah. Sisera’s mother is mocking the tradition of taking spoil (“a girl or two for every man”), this is the reality that would have awaited the women of Israel if they had lost the battle to Sisera. So, the antipathy against Sisera’s mother and her nonchalant referral to the women justifies the violent act of both Jael and the army.¹¹⁶

Instead of “a girl or two” Niditch has “a wench or two,” the literal translation is “a womb or two” (רחם רחמתיים).¹¹⁷ Bledstein writes: “A cunt or two for each man,” which maybe tells of the offensive tone mediated through the statement.¹¹⁸ As we can see this language turned out to be too offensive for the translators working with Tg. J. who renders it: “[Are they not] distributing a man and his household to each and everyone [of them].”¹¹⁹ This is also true in LXXa who adjusts the offensive language: “A kissing/loving friend [φιλιάζων φίλοις] for every man.” And LXXb: “A compassionate one showing compassion [οἰκτιρῶν οἰκτιρήσει] to every man.”¹²⁰

2.3 Summary

I will now summarize the gaps and stars found in Judg 4 and 5. I will deal with the texts together, to the extent that is possible, but sometimes a division will be needed. Starting with Deborah, the first gap, found only in Judg 4, is her marital status. How are we to understand “Lappidoth?” Is it her husband, origin or epithet?

¹¹³ NRSV.

¹¹⁴ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 50.

¹¹⁵ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 207.

¹¹⁶ Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 409.

¹¹⁷ רחמתיים as well as רקמתיים (“two embroideries”) are rare dual forms sometimes used as an argument for the texts antiquity or an archaic imitation influenced by Aramaic rather than the older Ugarit language. For further discussion see: Serge Frolov, “How Old Is the Song of Deborah?” 169.

¹¹⁸ Niditch, *Judges*, 76, Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire,” 41.

¹¹⁹ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 479.

¹²⁰ *Septuagint*, 427.

We do however find that she is described both as a prophet and a judge. The next ambiguous statement is that Barak asks her to go with him into battle, why is this? Does he know that she will help or is this a way for him to avoid responsibility? Read together with the story of the woman of Thebez in Judg 9, Barak's request makes way for the shameful death about to smite Sisera.

In Judg 5 Deborah is portrayed as, or she calls herself, a mother in Israel, a title which could be connected to her role as a prophet. The question is why she does arise. Is it because of lazy warriors/leading class not fulfilling their duties, or is it an explanation of what happened after she arose: "The peasantry prospered because you arose?"

There is not much information given in the texts about Deborah, but Jael is more thoroughly rendered. The same unclear marital status as with Deborah is present with Jael, "Heber" could be a husband but it can also be a reference to the group. Jael is praised even though she committed a violent crime, she is blessed among the "tent-dwelling women" in ch. 5. But why does she have her own tent? Is she a woman with a plan and thus makes sure to invite Sisera into a tent where they can be alone? And how come she invites him at all? Is it a sexual invitation or an urge to help a man in need? Where are her loyalties, with the Israelites or the Canaanites? These gaps are related to the lack of information concerning her background.

In both texts when Sisera asks for water she gives him milk served in a "lordly bowl." In the otherwise quite plain text of ch. 4 this sudden attention to detail is salient. In the same way Jael's act of covering Sisera is confusing. Either she is, again, simply being hospitable or this is a euphemism describing intercourse. She is at first nurturing and motherly, but she soon turns and becomes a killer. Reaching for the tent peg, she strikes him with the hammer and the peg so that he falls and lies between her feet. The narrator of ch. 5 emphasizes that it is between her feet, this could be either a sexual euphemism, an image of childbirth or it could be a metaphor for the military defeat that he suffered. Or two of them, a double entendre connecting the spheres of both war and sex/childbirth.

The salient features of this text, or "stars" moving the plot along, are related to gender. The gender of Deborah seems to be important initially but it soon moves into gender confusion. The grammar of the narrative plays an interesting part in the reversal, the emphasis on Deborah's gender is followed by Sisera asking Jael using the male imperative form.

We also have a few details which seems to be important enough to be pointed out in both narratives, mainly the milk that Jael serves Sisera instead of water and the weapon used by her when killing him.

The song ends with Sisera's mother waiting in vain for her son, who in her mind must be dividing the spoil after a great triumph on the battle field. The mother is not

sentimental but rather pragmatic, hoping Sisera will return with both women and clothes. Her material focus makes her seem shallow, since the reader knows that her son is dead. The different endings of Judg 4 and 5 makes this description of the waiting mother salient.

I have tried to identify the gaps of the texts as well as the salient features. These will come in hand later on when reading the ancient interpreters and discerning their different stratagems for handling these gaps. But before doing this, I will examine the way that the characters are portrayed in Judg 4 and 5.

2.4 The Characters of Judges 4 and 5

The characters of Jael and Deborah are the main interest for this study, so most of this segment will revolve around them. This exercise also involves choosing among the different interpretations rendered above. I will, as far as possible, deal with both Judg 4 and 5 as one continuing story but a few times I will have to differentiate the portrayal of the characters in the different chapters.

The characters of YHWH and the narrator of ch. 4 are one-dimensional, static characters. We get no clues to how they are feeling. We don't know why YHWH does what he does but he tends to act in a way that is expected of him.

Barak and Deborah stand out as quite unpredictable. We can perhaps read in some reluctance to go in to war from Barak, but he lets himself be persuaded by the forceful female judge. Deborah does perhaps not act as one would expect women of the ancient world in general to do. Deborah is both humble and forceful, but not as complicated as the male characters in the Book of Judges as it continues.¹²¹ The male judges, much like the patriarchs, are at the same time successful (at least for becoming a judge) and failures.¹²² Deborah is in a way successful, but she herself attributes every success to YHWH. Barak can be understood as the hero of the story because he follows in the footsteps of the other male judges by being both a winner and a loser.

Whilst on the subject of Deborah, would we even know that she was female if we changed the name and grammar to describe her as a man?¹²³ I think we wouldn't. Her gender is stressed almost disproportionately at the beginning of ch. 4, and she describes herself as a mother in ch. 5. But what other characteristics make her female according to the androcentric society's designation of what is female? She is

¹²¹ For example: Samson is addicted to danger and because of this he ends up in difficult and unexpected situations, Blythe and Mulya, "The Delilah Monologues," 6. Unpublished.

¹²² Philippe Guillaume, "Hesiod's Heroic Age and the biblical Period of the Judges," in *The Bible and Hellenism: Greek Influence on Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (ed. Thomas L. Thompson and Philippe Wajdenbaum; London: Routledge, 2014) 146-164, esp. 159.

¹²³ The narrator introduces Deborah in 4:4, though he does not convey any emotion regarding her. There is no doubt that she is a woman in fact it is stressed in the choice of vocabulary, but there is also no indication that there is anything strange about this.

not the *caring* mother, rather a mother who is a military commander. She is a prophet, judge and a leader, all of which are traditional male traits. In Judg 5 the gender does not seem to matter at all, Fewell and Gunn writes:

As victors, the voices seem not to distinguish between male or female values. It is as though gender is of no concern. Even when the song alludes to specific characters, poetic parallelism balances male and female: “In the days of Shamgar. . . , in the days of Jael;” “Awake, Deborah! . . . ; Arise, Barak!”¹²⁴

Jael is a round character, even though the information given of her is sparse. She too is unpredictable and has the qualities of both a mother and a fearless assassin. The intention of her crime is not given in the narrative which gives room for speculation. Her people appears to live in peace with the Canaanites, but still she transgresses this relationship by supporting the people of Israel. A reason for this could be because she is aware of the political situation and the unjust treatment of the Israelites. But it could also be that she acts out of self-preservation which happens to coincide with the interests of the people of Israel. Aside from her intentions she does welcome Sisera into her tent, either from choice or not, and then her actions contradicts the hospitality shown at first. Her appearance is never described nor her age. She could be understood as a seductress based on the invitation into her tent, but this is based on the assumption that there are euphemisms hidden in the text. She does lull him into a false sense of security, taking care of him until he feels safe enough to fall asleep. The Jael-character at first coincides with one way of describing a female in a patriarchal world.

I mentioned in the beginning that there are three questions you can ask when using narrative criticism: Who speaks? Who sees? Who acts? I have already answered most of these questions, but let me summarize them. The people speaking are mostly the narrator(s). There is dialogue: Deborah and Barak, as well as Sisera and Jael speak to each other. Also, Sisera’s mother speaks to her wise ladies, but the dialogue is always told through the narrator’s point of view.

The second question is “who sees.” The answer depends on our view of the narrator of Judg 5. If we agree that Deborah tells the story by singing, then the story is told from her point of view. In Judg 4 the narrator tells the story in an attempt to fit the story into the larger narrative of the book of Judges, and the even larger history of the people of Israel. In Judg 5 the main interest is retelling the victorious defeat of the oppressors, a victory that owes its success both to YHWH and the women involved.

¹²⁴ Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 400.

Who acts? Firstly YHWH acts by sending Deborah as a judge, but he soon delegates to Deborah who sends for Barak. She then seems to be the instigator of the battle, and Barak follows her command. Sisera acts by fleeing during the battle, and Jael acts by inviting him and finally by killing him. Seen from this perspective the women act more than the men and without their actions the result of the story would be different.

We have now circled the important characters of the narratives as well as the gaps of the stories. The conclusions made so far will be useful when analyzing the way that the ancient interpreters handle both characters and gaps in the texts. We will soon see that the problems encountered above are in no way isolated to our own time, but will return whilst reading these ancient texts. The main interest is now to ask how they handle this lack of information.

3. ANCIENT INTERPRETERS

I have chosen three different ancient commentators who have read and written of Judg 4 and 5. First we will have a look at Pseudo-Philo, then Josephus and then the Rabbis (not to be seen as one person, or for that matter one opinion). After this I will read the book of Judith through the lens of Jael. Because as we shall see, Judith can be understood as a correctional narrative of the way that Judges 4 and 5 portray Jael. This might have been the way that for example Pseudo-Philo used Judith—as an explanation of some of the gaps found in the Jael-narrative.

3.1 Pseudo-Philo Fills the Gaps: “An Enlightened Woman”

The Latin version of Pseudo-Philo’s¹²⁵ work is called *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (henceforth *L.A.B.*). Pseudo-Philo portrays the time of the judges in detail which could be that he considered the society to be in need of good, charismatic leaders.¹²⁶

The author has what Christensen calls a deuteronomic view of history, meaning the cyclic view of sin—punishment—salvation. His aim is not to write only a historic account but rather an edifying, admonitory, and encouraging work aimed at the people of Israel.¹²⁷ Christensen suggests that Pseudo-Philo is characterized by his

¹²⁵ Pseudo-Philo bears this name because it often occurred together with the writings of Philo of Alexandria and he was also believed to be the author. When the differences in content made clear that this was not the case, the “pseudo” was added to the unknown authors name. The Latin manuscript probably dates to the 12th century C.E. But many scholars believe there to be a Hebrew and a Greek version predating the Latin one and the date is then pushed back to sometime around the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., Jens Christensen, *Pseudo-Filon: Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum en bog om den bibliske fortid* (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2000), 9.

¹²⁶ Christensen, *Pseudo-Filon*, 10 and 15-16.

¹²⁷ Christensen, *Pseudo-Filon*, 11.

interest in the women of the canonical stories, he writes of Miriam, Deborah, Jael, Jephtha's daughter (whom he calls Seila), Hannah, and Samuel's mother.¹²⁸

In Pseudo-Philo's rendering of the story of Deborah and Jael the first part match the plot in Judg 4, although with some elaborations. He renders how Jabin is incited, by YHWH, against the people of Israel, and Sisera and his army overpowers the Israelites in battle because of their failure to follow the righteous path. The people of Israel meet and begin a fast lasting seven days, on the seventh day YHWH sends them Deborah, a woman who shall "rule over them and enlighten them for forty years."¹²⁹

In the following chapter Deborah sends for Barak and tells him to stand up and be a man ("Rise and gird your loins like a man," cf. Job 38:3). The reason for this being Sisera's boasting, Pseudo-Philo here adds a quote by Sisera saying:

"I will go down to attack Israel with my mighty arm, and I will divide their spoils among my servants, and I will take for myself beautiful women as concubines." On account of this the Lord said about him that the arm of a weak woman would overcome him and girls would take his spoils and he himself would fall at the hands of a woman.¹³⁰

The female presence is there to shame Sisera. He emphasizes the woman's weakness and his use of "girls" instead of "women" further points to the dichotomy between male strength and female weakness. There are a few modern commentators, who I have already mentioned, with a similar interpretation related to shame as *L.A.B.* The motif of a reversed rape, being what the winning army would be doing to the losing side's women, in this case Jael is the perpetrator and Sisera is the victim. Jael does not actually rape Sisera, but this custom of humiliating the losing army would be well known. By implying this but in a reversed way, the audience would understand the shame in dying that way.¹³¹ Probably working as a creative dysphemism, understood only within the context of the text.

While Sisera is fleeing in an attempt to save his life, Jael is putting on jewelry (cf. Jdt 10:4) before going out to meet Sisera. *L.A.B.* describes her as "very beautiful," and she invites him into her tent. And when he enters the following happens:

[A]nd when he saw roses scattered on the bed, he said: "If I will be saved, I will go to my mother, and Jael will be my wife."¹³²

¹²⁸ Christensen, *Pseudo-Filon*, 12.

¹²⁹ Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation. Vol I.* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 145.

¹³⁰ Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 147.

¹³¹ Bledstein, "Is Judges a Womans Satire," 34, Niditch, "Eroticism and death," 307, Fewell and Gunn "Controlling Perspectives," 394.

¹³² Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 147, cf also: Jdt 11:23.

Now, what we have already discussed as an underlaying, but yet obscure, motif in Judges 4 and 5 is the question of whether there is a sexual theme. *L.A.B.* doesn't prevaricate on this matter, rose petals on the bed must surely be a universal sign and its meaning would not have been misinterpreted.

The story continues with Sisera asking for water, as in the Biblical texts. Jael tells him to rest and she then goes outside to milk her flock and whilst milking she asks YHWH for signs to let her know that she should kill Sisera. She then links the sheep she is milking to the people of Israel, and to Sisera's attempt of killing "the flock of the Lord." Ironically she then gives him the milk from the sheep to drink so that he will become weary. So, the sign she asked for happened (Sisera became weary). Before killing him she asks for another sign, Jael says:

Behold I will now throw him on the ground from the bed
on which he sleeps; if he does not sense this, I know that
he has been handed over.¹³³

The rolling of the body is also found in Judith but there it happens after the death of Holofernes. Also the prayer uttered before the killing is probably inspired by a similar one in Judith. Compare *L.A.B.*: "Strengthen in me today, Lord, my arm..."¹³⁴ and Jdt 9:7b: "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" Now Jael pierces Siseras temple with a hammer and a tent stake, but before dying Sisera says:

"Behold pain has seized me, Jael, and I die like a woman."
Jael said to him: "Go, boast before your father in the
underworld and tell him that you have fallen at the hands
of a woman."¹³⁵

We once again see the humiliating consequences of being killed by a woman, this is probably even worse a shame in the first century C.E. than when the texts of chs. 4-5 was written if one considers the misogynistic tendencies present in antiquity.

As we move on the scene changes to Sisera's mother whom *L.A.B.* names Themech. She sends word to her friend and asks her to go out with her to meet Sisera so that they will see "the daughters of the Hebrews whom my son will bring here for himself as concubines."¹³⁶

This chapter ends with Barak chopping of Sisera's head and sending it to his mother with a note saying: "Receive your son, whom you hoped would come with spoils."¹³⁷

¹³³ Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 148, cf. Jdt 13:9.

¹³⁴ Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 148.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

The head removal is also found in the book of Judith, there Judith herself chops of Holofernes head.¹³⁸ The main focus of *L.A.B.* is clearly the shaming of Sisera, not only the defeat of him but he embellishes the parts where he is humiliated as to make sure everyone understands that Sisera's boasting came to a degrading finish.

As we move on to the next chapter, Pseudo-Philo recounts the song of Deborah in his own way. The song starts with the singers (in this case: Deborah, Barak and all the people) recounting the story of the patriarchs all the way from Abraham to Joshua. After Joshua he moves straight onto the battlefield and the defeat of Sisera, Pseudo-Philo focuses on YHWH commanding the stars to fight for him. Just like in Judg 5:20. Jael is praised for her courage: “[A]nd so Jael is proud among women, because she alone has been successful, killing Sisera with her own hands.”¹³⁹

The text goes on telling Deborah to praise YHWH, the maker of the earth and the heavens and the commander of the stars. There is another addition to Pseudo-Philo's story, the last chapter about Deborah is about her death. This is an astonishing version where Deborah speaks in front of the people after ruling them for 40 years saying:

“Listen now, my people. Behold I admonish you as a woman of God and enlighten you as a member of the female sex. Heed me like your mother and attend to my words as people who will also die.”¹⁴⁰

She goes on to edify the people in a speech, telling the people to repent during their lifetime because when they die it is too late. And she finishes by saying:

“Now therefore, my children, obey my voice while you have the time of life, and direct your ways according to the light of the Law.” When Deborah said these words, all the people raised up their voice together and wept and said, “Behold now, mother, you die, and when you leave your children to whom do you entrust them? Pray therefore for us, and after your death your soul shall be mindful of us forever.”¹⁴¹

This is a remarkable endorsement for the character of Deborah. And the keen observer might now notice that all the titles that she is using about herself, the people repeat. She is affirmed as a mother, a holy one and a true leader:

¹³⁸ See: Jdt 13:8.

¹³⁹ Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 150.

¹⁴⁰ Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 152.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Deborah died and laid with her fathers and was buried in the city of her fathers, the people mourned her seventy days. And when they mourned her, they said these words as a dirge: “Behold, a mother has perished from Israel, and a holy one who exercised leadership in the house of Jacob. She strengthened the fence about her people, and her people will long for her.” And after her death the land was quiet seven years.¹⁴²

The art of filling gaps is something that Pseudo-Philo clearly enjoys, or at least it’s something that keeps him busy. Deborah is portrayed as a mother, as in Judg 5, and especially in the last chapter as a true leader whose death is described on par with patriarchs such as Abraham and Moses. Jael’s character is more elaborated, the obscure references in the biblical account are clarified in *L.A.B.* She is seductive but also humble, she goes out of her way to ask for signs from YHWH to make sure that this is what he wants. As we saw part of Pseudo-Philo’s portrayal of Jael is clearly influenced by the story of Judith. Perhaps Judith is seen as a modernized Hellenistic version of the story of Deborah and Jael and therefore interchangeable in the eyes of the interpreter. The part where Sisera is humiliated is also in focus, and the text lets Sisera express just how shameful it is being killed by a woman. The part in the beginning where Sisera is boasting about his plans after his expected victory makes the humiliation even worse. Pseudo-Philo reinforces the antipathy against the character of Sisera and at the same time the empathy towards Deborah and Jael.

Pseudo-Philo makes the otherwise quite obscure character of Deborah into a character with both authority and wisdom. She is sent by YHWH but she seems to act on her own accord throughout the story, she is not relying on a man to tell her what to do. The people also play a big part in communicating how beloved Deborah was. She describes herself as a “woman of God” and a mother. But this is not simply boasting, the people repeat her words when describing her after her death.

Marc Zvi Brettler comments on the Biblical account of Deborah and questions her role. She is not a full-fledged judge, says Brettler, because there is no proper commissioning story and no death notice.¹⁴³ It is interesting that these are some of the parts that Pseudo-Philo elaborates on. If she wasn’t a proper judge before, she certainly is in *L.A.B.*

Jael asks for signs from YHWH to assure herself that what she is doing comprehends with the will of YHWH. Pseudo-Phil’s *L.A.B.* makes her act out his will in an obvious way. This is not spelled out in the Biblical text other than in the beginning when Deborah says that Sisera will die by the hand of a woman. Jael’s loyalty need not be questioned. She is described as very beautiful and the sexualizing is supplemented by her humble approach towards killing Sisera. Thus she is not perceived as evil,

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 112.

although she is clearly dangerous. She is described as weak in the beginning to emphasize the shame and punishment awaiting Sisera because of his boasting.

Over all, Pseudo-Philo's interpretation of the characters of Jael and Deborah portrays them in a positive manner. Barak is barely mentioned, the women steal the show. It seems that his way of handling the precarious gender-issues by making them the centre of attention. He literally goes all in and emphasizes the importance of not only their characters but also the fact that they are women. This is fascinating compared to, and quite different from, the following account by Josephus.

3.2 Josephus Fills the Gaps: “A Certain Prophetess”

Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian writing during the 1st century C.E. Scholars disagree on whether Josephus was critical of Deborah or whether he is describing her in a good way. Feldman argues that Josephus is critical and that he is in fact a misogynist. During the period before Deborah was sent as a judge, YHWH tried to tame the ingratitude (ἀγνωμοσύνην) and insolence (ὑβρίν) of the people of Israel.¹⁴⁴ Josephus continues to describe how God wanted them to change their ways, but their contempt of the laws brought them to:

[A] certain prophetess named Dabora—the name in the Hebrew tongue means “bee” [μέλισσαν]—to pray God to take pity on them and not to suffer them to be destroyed by the Canaanites.¹⁴⁵

Josephus's interest in the etymology of Deborah's name is something that indicates his negative attitude towards Deborah, writes Feldman. Josephus does the same with Barak's name but out of opposite reasons, Barak's name, meaning lightning has a positive meaning whilst the name Deborah, meaning hornet or bee, is a pejorative attribute.¹⁴⁶ Even though bees make honey and Israel is said to be the land of milk and honey, the honey comes, according to Rabbinic tradition, from dates.¹⁴⁷ It can be said that Josephus' view of women corresponds with the view of women held by most men in antiquity, which is a misogynistic one.¹⁴⁸ The closest parallel to Deborah in Josephus' writings is queen Salome Alexandra and of her he writes that she was: “Unduly influenced by the Pharisees and who showed no consideration for either decency or justice.”¹⁴⁹ In another passage Josephus equates women with children, saying that they are easily deceived and that they undermine the courage of

¹⁴⁴ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:200 [Thackeray, LCL].

¹⁴⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:201 [Thackeray, LCL].

¹⁴⁶ Louis H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 611.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered*, 612.

¹⁴⁹ Josephus, *J.W.* 1.110-14, [Thackeray, LCL], *Ant.* 13:408-32 [Thackeray, LCL].

the Israelites.¹⁵⁰ Josephus, when commenting on Judg 4 and 5, continues to say that God promised them salvation and then: “[God] chose for general Barak of the tribe of Nephtali.”¹⁵¹

Josephus barely includes Deborah in the plot at this point. The people seek answers from Deborah because of their own will, but she is not sent by YHWH. Barak, on the other hand, is chosen as a leader. In another article Feldman argues that Josephus ordinarily relates the character of which he is writing to his own personal life. He was, according to Feldman, hard to live with based on the fact that he was married three times. Regardless of his many wives he mentions neither of them by name, nor his mother. He can be positive about women, but only in comparison to other women, since they are inferior to men.¹⁵² As already noted, contrary to both the HB and Pseudo-Philo who states that Deborah is chosen and later summons Barak, Josephus stresses that YHWH chose only Barak to be the savior of the people. He goes on to say:

Dabora then summoned and charged him to select ten thousand of the youth and to march against the foe: that number would, she said, suffice, God having prescribed it and betokened victory. But Barak declared that he would not take the command unless she shared it with him; whereto she indignantly replied, “Thou resignest to a woman a rank that God has bestowed on thee! Howbeit I do not decline it.”¹⁵³

Although Deborah summons Barak and then instructs him, when Barak asks Deborah to go with him Deborah answered in “violent irritation” (ἀγανακτήσασα). During the battle Josephus writes that Barak and his men were terror-stricken at the sight of the enemy army and that they retreat because of the size of Sisera’s army. Deborah, therefore, has to persuade Barak to return to the battle saying that YHWH will make sure that they will conquer the enemy. This might, as Feldman rightly states, be seen as an endorsement of Deborah and her role as a leader, but the fact that she refers to YHWH as the sole reason for success indicates that she speaks in her role as a prophet.¹⁵⁴ The battle is fought in the midst of a hail-storm, which leads the Canaanite army’s vision to be obscured by rain and hail blowing into their eyes.¹⁵⁵ As in the Biblical narrative Sisera flees and approaches the tent of Jael (with no mention of Heber, just that she was Kenite). Josephus writes:

¹⁵⁰ Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered*, 614.

¹⁵¹ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:201b [Thackeray, LCL].

¹⁵² Louis H. Feldman, “Josephus portrait of Deborah” in *Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky* (ed. A. Caquot, M. Hadas-Lebel, and J. Riaud; Leuven: Peeters, 1986): 115-128, esp. 116.

¹⁵³ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:202-203.

¹⁵⁴ Feldman, “Josephus portrait of Deborah,” 126.

¹⁵⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:205 [Thackeray, LCL].

[S]he, at his request to conceal him, took him in, and, when he asked for drink, gave him milk that had turned sour. And he, having drunk thereof immoderately, fell asleep. Then, as he slumbered, Iale [Jael] took an iron nail and drove it in with a hammer through his mouth and jaw, piercing the ground; and when Barak's company arrived soon after she showed him to them nailed to the earth. Thus did this victory redound as Dabora foretold, to a woman's glory. But Barak marching upon Asor, slew Jabin who encountered him and, the general having fallen, razed the city to the ground; he then held command of the Israelites for forty years.¹⁵⁶

Josephus is ambiguous to the women's involvement in the plot. This is clear when he goes on to state that Barak slew Jabin, the king of Canaan, on his own. Making Barak the hero of the story, the slayer of the king, while Deborah's and Jael's contributions are downplayed. Probably not wanting to build up the otherwise popular erotic theme of the Jael-narrative, Josephus focuses on her showing Sisera's dead body to Barak. It is also Barak who gets to lead the people after his success in slaying the king. Josephus then ends his account saying that Deborah and Barak died simultaneously.¹⁵⁷

Josephus does not explicitly mention the Song of Deborah, noteworthy considering the amount of space both the Rabbis and Pseudo-Philo dedicate to the song. However, he does include references to it in his narrative, the hail- and rain-storm for example, is in reference to 5:24.

Contrary to both Pseudo-Philo and the Rabbis, Josephus does not elaborate on either the characters of Deborah or Jael. Deborah answers Barak in violent irritation and she is perceived as rather unsympathetic through the writings of Josephus. Like a bee she is perceived as ill tempered and unpredictable. And Barak is shamed for asking her to come along. He is perceived as weak and unmanly and he is surpassed by Jael, who is otherwise an anonymous character in Josephus retelling. Albeit, Barak's manhood is rectified at the end when he kills the king of Canaan. The king outranks Sisera who is a general. He is, just as the other judges, both a loser and a hero. Josephus deals with the women by downplaying their role in the story. They become cardboard cutouts who are there to do their thing so that the plot moves forward. Perhaps because he is preoccupied with writing the history of Israel, and does not aim to entertain. He does not elaborate on Jael's motivations or personality at all. This is, however, an opportunity that the Rabbinic sources make the most of.

¹⁵⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:207-209 [Thackeray, LCL].

¹⁵⁷ Josephus, *Ant.* 5:210 [Thackeray, LCL].

3.3 The Rabbis Fill the Gaps: “Woe Unto the Generation Whose Leader Is a Woman”

Overall the portrayal of Jael in the Rabbinic sources is more positive than the portrayal of Deborah. Deborah is, even though she was a judge, often perceived as overbearing. In the Babylonian Talmud Deborah’s back-story is elaborated by the authors of the Gemara. It says here that she was given the epithet “of Lappidos,” in spite of no one knowing who her spouse was—which was the general reason for associating the woman with her husband. The reason for her name is rather because she worked at the Tabernacle in Shilo as a wick-maker (because the Hebrew word **לפיד** means torch, as already stated above). The Gemara also states that Deborah was sitting under a palm-tree because she did not want to transgress the prohibition of men and women (without domestic relations) secluding themselves together. By sitting under the palm-tree she is visible to all passers by, and therefore she was not alone with a man.¹⁵⁸

The Tosafists are not sure if it was really allowed for a woman to serve as a judge. Since Deborah is the only example of this, perhaps she wasn’t a real judge—she might have educated the people in the laws of the Torah, but maybe she wasn’t a judge in a judicial sense. Or, she was an exception, the people might have accepted her because they acknowledged the presence of the Divine in her.¹⁵⁹ R. Berechiah comments of her role as a leader:

Woe unto the living who needs help from the dead. Woe unto the strong who needs help from the weak. Woe unto the generation whose leader is a woman, as when *Deborah, a prophetess... judged Israel* (Judg 4:4).¹⁶⁰

Jael is mentioned in the context of righteous transgressions in the Gemara. The “women in the tent” whom Jael is said to be blessed with the same blessing as are recognized as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. And according to R’ Yochanan:

That evil man, Sisera, performed seven acts of intercourse with Yael at that time [...] as it is said: *Between her legs he bent, he fell, he lay*, etc.¹⁶¹

This because the words “bent” and “fell” occurs three times each, and “lay” occurs once—hence the total of seven. Gemara wonders whether she found the intercourse pleasurable, because if she did this might impact her righteousness. R’Yochanan

¹⁵⁸ *b. Meg.* 14a.

¹⁵⁹ The reference to *Gittin* 88b was seen in *b. Meg.* 14a.

¹⁶⁰ Psalm 22 section 20. *The Midrash on Psalms*, Vol. XIII, (trans. W. G. Braude; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

¹⁶¹ *b. Naz.* 23b see also *b. Hor.* 10b note 65 stating that it was impossible for Jael *not* to feel any pleasure but that she was so distressed that it overwhelmed the feeling of pleasure.

answers again: “Everything that wicked people consider good is nothing but bad in the eyes of the righteous.” Jael’s motives are considered pure in this interpretation.

Earlier on I promised a discussion concerning the milk that Jael gave Sisera. Some Rabbinic sources have elaborated on this in quite an unexpected way. The milk that Jael gave Sisera was in fact milk coming from her breast. She had the bottle of breast milk and had had it for a while because it had gone sour, during this process she had shaken it so that it turned into yoghurt or a buttery milk, what the song speaks of as curds.¹⁶² The reason for serving this is that she wanted to seduce him.¹⁶³

Moving on, in his multi-volumed work called *The Legend of the Jews* Ginzberg combines the myths and parables found in the midrashic literature. Here Ruth precedes Deborah as a female judge. Deborah is introduced as an ideal woman, just like Ruth, but the text also adds that she is a prophetess which Ruth is not. Deborah is YHWH’s answer to the cries of the people, for he says: “Then I will send a woman unto them, and she will shine for them as a light for forty years” (cf. *L.A.B.*). According to the legend Barak was the husband of Deborah, but he was not a bright person. Because of this Deborah had him carrying candles from their home to the sanctuary, this was also why he was called Lappidoth. YHWH was pleased with Deborah because she was making the candle-wick thicker than usual so that the candles would burn longer. And YHWH said to her: “Thou takest pains to shed light in My house, and I will let thy light, thy fame, shine abroad in the whole land.” So she became both a prophet and a judge.¹⁶⁴ So far all is well, but even though she was a judge she was still a woman and *The Legend of the Jews* states that: “She was yet subject to the frailties of her sex,” the frailty being inordinate self-consciousness. She sent for Barak to come and see her, instead of going to him, and then she sang to him a song. In the song she spoke of herself more than what was suitable for a woman. Because of this the prophetic spirit left her for a while. Luckily enough, the spirit returned and she was sent by YHWH to save the people.¹⁶⁵ In the Babylonian Talmud this is commented when discussing the names of both Deborah and another female prophet, Huldah:

Prominence is not becoming to women. For there were two prominent women, and the meanings of their names were repulsive. One’s name meant bee, and one’s name meant weasel. Concerning the “bee” (Deborah), it is written: *And she sent and called Barak.* However she did not go to him.

¹⁶² NRSV, Judg 5:25.

¹⁶³ b. *Nid.* 55b, not seen found in: Leila Leah Bronner, “Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 75-98, esp. 90.

¹⁶⁴ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legend of the Jews Vol IV Bible Times and Characters From Joshua to Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 35.

¹⁶⁵ Ginzberg, *The Legend of the Jews*, 36.

Concerning the “weasel” (Chuldah), it is written: *Tell the man*. But she did not more respectfully say: *Tell the king*.¹⁶⁶

In an explanation of this text it continues: “That they bore names of lowly and repugnant creatures should have inspired these two prominent women to attain greater levels of humility. However, they failed to do so, and even acted haughtily towards distinguished individuals such as Barak and King Yoshiah.”¹⁶⁷ As *The Legend of the Jews* continues, Sisera is described as a hero who by the age of thirty had conquered the whole world, he was so frightening that even the animals froze at the sound of his voice. He was of such mighty physique that he caught fish with his beard while diving in the river, enough fish to feed all his men. And it took nine hundred horses to draw Sisera’s chariot.¹⁶⁸

Barak and Deborah were chosen to lead the army, and with the help of fire, rain, “The fiery hosts of heaven,” and the “Angel of the Sea” Sisera’s army was defeated.¹⁶⁹ By now, Jael enters the story dressed in rich garments and jewelry. She is described as very beautiful and the possessor of the most seductive voice ever heard. Jael addresses Sisera saying:

“Enter and refresh thyself with food, and sleep until evening, and then I will send my attendants with thee to accompany thee, for I know thou wilt not forget me, and thy recompense will not fail.”¹⁷⁰

Sisera entered her tent and saw rose petals on the bed, he then decided to take her home to his mother as a wife after the battle was over. By now, Ginzberg’s legend follows the account of Pseudo-Philo.

In the context of Rabbinic interpretation we can also mention the translations of Targum Jonathan which I included in the discussion of the texts above. To them, it is important that Deborah is a self-sufficient judge, not susceptible to bribes. Because of this they emphasize her many assets.¹⁷¹ Both Deborah and Jael are perceived as righteous in Targum Jonathan.

The reason why Jael is praised while Deborah is not, Bronner argues, is that Deborah is an Israelite and as such a role-model for the women of Israel. Jael is a Kenite and she is perceived as a righteous heathen helping Israel out of generosity. And also, Deborah has official duties as a judge and a leader and for a woman to possess this kind of power is not in line with many of the Rabbis thoughts. Inside the boundaries

¹⁶⁶ *b. Meg.* 14b.

¹⁶⁷ *b. Meg.* 14b, see note 38.

¹⁶⁸ Ginzberg, *The Legend of the Jews*, 35.

¹⁶⁹ Ginzberg, *The Legend of the Jews*, 37.

¹⁷⁰ Ginzberg, *The Legend of the Jews*, 37.

¹⁷¹ Smelik, *The Targum of Judges*, 380.

of the story she might however be accepted because she acted in a situation of chaos and crisis.¹⁷² Jael is *the Other*, she is clearly exoticized to a point where she can act outrageously without being perceived as a threat, of course her breast milk is a product of this. The more exotic she becomes the less human she becomes. She is instead a jumble of exotic and erotic stereotypes which makes her seem fabricated. They can even praise her for her courage, because she is so unattainable. Sisera is not shamed in these accounts, rather the opposite—he is made into a terrifying enemy with an impressive, and by all means, manly physique.

Deborah on the other hand is inevitably an Israelite and a judge, and she is both arrogant and pious, depending on which source you read. Her marriage is emphasized, and often Barak is said to be her husband. The texts often try to explain why she had to become a leader: It was because her husband wasn't capable. Even though Deborah's role as a judge is sometimes questioned, she is always a prophet and chosen by YHWH to execute the mission. The ambivalence towards her gender is clearly a problem to all. She is acting outside the traditional gender roles and this is handled differently by different Rabbis. In the next segment I will read the book of Judith as an interpretation of the character Jael.

3.4 Jael Read Through Judith: The Making of a True Heroine

The connection between the book of Judith and Judg 4 and 5 has been noticed by many. There are a few obvious connection aside from the presumed modeling of the character Judith on Jael.¹⁷³ As we saw above Pseudo-Philo referenced occurrences recounted in the story of Judith when writing about Jael. I ask myself whether this perhaps is a contributing factor to why many insist on portraying Jael as a *femme fatale*, because of Judith's obvious characterization as one. We will return to this thought later on, but first let's take a look at Judith.

Judith is an especially intriguing character because of her company in both art and commentary, she is likened with figures as divergent as the Virgin Mary¹⁷⁴ and Medusa.¹⁷⁵ Whilst it is unclear when talking about Jael, Judith is the prototype of the

¹⁷² Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?" 94.

¹⁷³ Compare Jdt 8:33; 9:9-10; 13:14-15; with Judg 4:9, 21; 5:26 or Jdt 13:18; 14:7; and 15:10 with Judg 5:24, or Jdt 16:13 with Judg 5:3. Jan Willem van Henten, "Judith as Alternative Leader: A Rereading of Judith 7-13," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press: 1995), 224-252 esp. 224, see also: Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, "What makes men and women identify with Judith? A Jungian mythological perspective on the feminist value of *Judith* today," *HTS Theologese Studies/ Theological Studies* 68:1 (2012), 1-9 esp. 8.

¹⁷⁴ Ela Nutu, "Framing Judith: Whose Text, Whose Gaze, Whose Language?" in *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue*, (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 117-144 esp. 117-118.

¹⁷⁵ Bal, "Head Hunting," 257. Depicting Judith on the canvas was popular among female artists during the renaissance and onwards and although she was often portrayed as sexually alluring she was perceived as a proto-feminist and a *femme forte*. Nutu and Exum, *Between the Text and the Canvas*, 7.

femme fatale.¹⁷⁶ Even though her means of freeing Israel might have been frowned upon she is praised as a hero, but she attributes her success to YHWH.¹⁷⁷

Just as one would argue in the case of Jael, Deborah, and Esther—Judith is relying on a male figure to free her people. She is without a husband, the text tells us she is a widow, but she is in a relationship to YHWH—the same can be said of Jael and Deborah (in the case of Esther, Mordecai takes the place of YHWH). Although she is a widow and beautiful the author makes it clear that she is righteous and chaste.¹⁷⁸ Her seductive qualities is merely an act put on to serve the greater good. Without her chastity she would probably be perceived as the promiscuous women of Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or perhaps the even more apt comparisons with Delilah or Salome. But since her ultimate goal serves YHWH, she is perceived a heroine. She is the representation of the faithful Israel unlike the above mentioned women of marriage metaphors whose promiscuity is a metaphor for the unfaithful Israel. And the name Judith literarily means “Jewess.”

The book of Judith can be seen as a correctional narrative in relation to Esther, as seen in Koller’s book about the ancient reception of the book of Esther.¹⁷⁹ I believe the same to be true of Judg 4 and 5. Judith is, in relation to the other female figures mentioned, a character who fills gaps.¹⁸⁰ She is the *femme fatale*, but the narrator makes sure that we understand that she is a righteous Jew. She murders, but at the same time she frees her people from oppression in a Moses-like manner. She is described as a widow so that we do not have to wonder about her marital status. She is described as very beautiful, so beautiful in fact that the enemy cannot resist inviting her into his home whilst sending out his servants, just to be alone with her. These characters are the template-characters of many similar stories.

Nutu points out the flaws in the comparison of Jael and Judith. Mainly that Jael’s action is of minor political significance because Sisera has already been defeated, or at least his army. She also argues that the choice of weapon, in Jael’s instance a tent peg and a hammer is typically female weapons because of their close connection to the domestic environment. Judith on the other hand uses a typically male weapon, a sword, belonging to Holofernes, taken from beside his bed.¹⁸¹ In fact, the peg (טַן) that Jael uses in Judg 4 and 5 is also used by Delilah in Judg 16:14 to tighten the weaved braids of Samson, but in other cases it is used by men as a workman’s

¹⁷⁶ See: Jdt 8:7; 9:13; 10:19; 12:12; 13:16; and 16:6-9.

¹⁷⁷ See: Jdt 13:15.

¹⁷⁸ See: Jdt 8:8; 13:16; and 16:22.

¹⁷⁹ E.g.: Judith makes sure to bring kosher food when she dines with the foreign rulers whilst Esther seems to eat what is served at the palace. Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 136-137.

¹⁸⁰ Although the similarities with the already mentioned female characters are many, the book of Judith is still a story in its own right. The use of a familiar motif should not just be taken as a re-make or elaboration of another text, perceived as the original (which is hardly the case with the other Biblical characters). There are many differences, some pointed out by Nutu here, others obvious at first glance like the historical context, but the similarities are enough to use nebulous words such as “inspiration” or “loosely” based on.

¹⁸¹ Nutu, “Framing Judith,” 118.

tool.¹⁸² The tool is in itself neither masculine nor feminine, and it doesn't become more feminine because it is used by women, or because it is found in a domestic environment. The argument seems to be that Jael would only know how to handle a hammer and a peg because she was bound to stay in the domestic environment, while Judith, being a worldly woman, knew her way with swords. Remember that the Kenites were known as metal smiths,¹⁸³ and if so, Jael would constantly be exposed to both tools and weapons.

3.5 Summary

The ancient interpretations I have read have at least one thing in common: The androcentric ideology. The androcentric view of history is based on the centrism described above, where man is the centre of the symbolic universe. This makes the women appearing in history an abnormality or a problem needing to be solved. They repeat, perhaps not knowingly, the general assumptions that men are dominant while women are dominated, men cause war while women are victims of war.¹⁸⁴ Some of them displace or try to correct the characters in order to correspond with the androcentric ideology.

Not Pseudo-Philo though, he was clearly inspired by Judith when writing his elaboration on Judges 4 and 5. He does make Deborah into a self-sufficient character, beloved by the people and YHWH. Jael is, just as Judith, both pious and seductive and her relationship with YHWH is clarified: He is the one in charge and she acts on his command. The gender-issues are dealt with front and centre, they become the story's foundation rather than an obstacle.

Josephus on the other hand, has some trouble with the women of the story. Their contribution to the plot is downplayed and, in their place, Barak enters the stage ready to be vindicated as killer of the king. He keeps his version short and brusque. The static characters of his story is perhaps a consequence of his purpose—he wants to write down the history of the people of Israel, he does not want to entertain.

The Rabbis are perhaps not aiming to entertain, but the more elaborate interpretations they accomplish are still fascinating. They uphold themselves mainly on two different issues. The first is Deborah's role as a leader. As always there are different views on the matter, and some like Tg. J. seems to accept her role, others find it a testimony of a deteriorating society. Even though Jael is blessed and basically viewed in a positive way, her means are examined closely. Did she or did she not sleep with Sisera? And in that case, did she enjoy it? What about the milk?

¹⁸² Davidson also points out how this is a recurring theme in the book of Judges, the heroes always come unarmed (except Ehud) and have to improvise their weapons. E.T.A. Davidson, "The Comedy of Horrors," *Proceedings (Grand Rapids, Mich.)* 23(2003):39-54 esp. 42. The same word for "peg" is also used about Eliakim, to metaphorically secure him into the wall like a coat-hanger in Isa 22:23, and also as a digging device in Deut 23:13(14).

¹⁸³ See: Schneider, *Judges*, 72, and Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 395.

¹⁸⁴ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 14.

These questions elaborate on the *femme fatale* theme, they do all agree that Jael used her sexuality as a tool to lure Sisera. This is not seen as a bad thing, she helps Israel out of pure generosity, without being an Israelite herself. As an outsider she is exotic and non-threatening, while Deborah is not. Sometimes *the Other* does not need to be condemned because the inherent distance makes her non-threatening. *The Other* does not serve as a role-model for the women of the centre.

Judith is figuratively married to YHWH, who serves as her male guardian in this text. She is not perceived as threatening, even though her sexuality and beauty is a prominent feature of the story. Probably because of her close connection to, in this instance the not so jealous, God. She is Israel, and this time she is Israel when faithful, not the despised women of promiscuity who are used as deterrents.

Reading Jael through Judith makes Jael fit better into the androcentric environment. She comes out as both a *femme fatale* and a pious woman with the right intentions. Neither loyalty nor ethnicity is a problem with Judith, she embodies Israel without the ambiguousness so poignant in the Judges-account.

Now we have seen that these ancient interpretations can be divided neatly into the three groups described above. The problem of the female characters are solved as follows: Pseudo-Philo goes all in, Josephus downplays their role and the Rabbis eroticize. This is not an unmitigated division but a generalization of their prominent methods. As we take a look at the contemporary interpreters they can be said to follow in the same footsteps, although with some exceptions.

4. FILLING GAPS WITH CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETERS: PIOUS FEMINISTS AND FEMMES FATALES

The contemporary interpreters chosen here are some of the ones who concern themselves with the characters of Deborah and Jael. Some I have already mentioned in the analysis of the texts above.

The focus on gender is of course also prominent among contemporary interpreters. The discussion revolves around what role the genders play in the narrative. To Fuchs, Deborah is a feminist because she is not dependent on a man to make her into a heroine, like Ruth or Esther.¹⁸⁵ Skidmore-Hess and Skidmore-Hess agrees, it is unusual for a female character not to be a *sexual disruptor* (like Delilah or Bathsheba) or evil (like Jezebel or Eve—in a traditional interpretation at least). The pious women, like Deborah, don't usually get to be protagonists in a story, more often they serve as helpers or companions to the male heroes.¹⁸⁶ Marsman, on the other hand, sees Deborah's positive portrayal as a direct consequence of her relationship to a

¹⁸⁵ Esther Fuchs, "Status and Roles of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; London: Routledge, 2013), 77-84 esp. 83.

¹⁸⁶ Skidmore-Hess and Skidmore-Hess, "Dousing the Fiery Woman," 1.

man (Barak). She is accepted just as Huldah and Miriam are accepted as female prophets, because they were married (Miriam is not said to be married, but she appears together with Aaron which according to Marsman means that he was responsible for her).¹⁸⁷ Bledstein even views the author as female and she conjectures that the author is Huldah, the female prophet of 2 Kgs 22. Huldah is fed up with men who do not listen to her, and therefore she writes a satire mocking men.¹⁸⁸

Downplaying the role of the women is not done in the same way that Josephus demonstrated. Among contemporary interpreters some react to the obsession with gender that tend to follow an interpretation of Judg 4 and 5. Frymer-Kensky reacts to scholars who find Deborah's gender so astonishing that it must be a way for the author to express his dissatisfaction with the time of the judges. She draws parallels to the Assyrian custom where female prophets were more common than male.¹⁸⁹ Lindars as well, whom I quoted at the beginning of this thesis, believes that the absence of stereotypes show that women in society had the freedom to occupy these roles.¹⁹⁰ Deborah is described as a mother, which is the ultimate goal for females in the HB. A woman who strives towards motherhood is a good woman, as proven in countless stories. However, Deborah's role as a mother has nothing to do with the biological sense of the word. She is a mother to the people in a metaphorical sense. Should they want to portray Deborah as a "bad" woman, they would have made her a harlot. But she is the mother, and she is protecting her children—the people of Israel.¹⁹¹ A few commentaries ask whether Deborah even was a true leader. I have already mentioned Brettler above, missing the commissioning and death-story of Deborah. Fewell and Gunn ask themselves the same thing. Perhaps Shamgar ben Anath is the real military leader. He is mentioned in the chapter preceding Judg 4 as a deliverer of Israel and again in 5:6. The battle is said to have happened during his and Jael's days.¹⁹² Then the reluctance of Barak to go to war could be him questioning Deborah's authority. Testing if she was willing to risk her own life on her word, in that case Barak would obey.¹⁹³

According to Hackett, the time of judges was a time of instability and crisis this opened the possibility for women to be leaders. The women of Judges are both instigators and victims of violence, they have a surprisingly intimate relationship with violence.¹⁹⁴ But the prevailing paradigm is that the book of Judges is a fictional

¹⁸⁷ Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 562.

¹⁸⁸ Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire," 47.

¹⁸⁹ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 49.

¹⁹⁰ Lindars, *Judges*, 172.

¹⁹¹ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 51.

¹⁹² See Judg 3:31.

¹⁹³ Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 398.

¹⁹⁴ Jo Ann Hackett, "Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 58:4 (2004): 356-364, esp. 356-357.

tale and has no correlation to any historical time. Regarding the influence and or interest of women in the book of Judges Brettler has a quite pessimistic view:

[W]omen are useful characters in Judges, helping to propel forward the plot of various stories. Their prominence does not mean that the book reflects a real period when women were strong, that it was written by a woman, or even by an author who had a particular interest in women.¹⁹⁵

This might seem unnecessarily pessimistic, but hoping for a matriarchy on the basis of a few texts is not realistic. It's easy to fall into the trap of further sanctioning the patriarchal system by emphasizing male constructs of women as "free" without problematizing. We must take care to not let the patriarchal system blind us. And in that way I agree with Brettler, because we should always be suspicious readers, especially when women are either sexualized or sanctified.

Seeing euphemisms and sexualizing Jael is a very popular way of interpreting among contemporary interpreters. Niditch attributes the story to a man who is unsure in his sexuality. His own fear of rejection presents itself in the texts as murder. Sisera does not come to Jael as a winner collecting his spoil, but as a loser requiring aid. Jael is still the hero of the story, and according to Niditch Jael "becomes an archetype or symbol for the marginal's victory over the establishment."¹⁹⁶ Frymer-Kensky does not agree: "The song remembers Yael of Strength, the story Yael of Stealth. Neither presents a "Yael of seduction."¹⁹⁷ Fewell and Gunn see the tent as a metaphor for Jael's body, making the whole scene a euphemism: "[L]ike a child in a womb, Sisera lies sleeping in Jael's tent."¹⁹⁸ Thus making Sisera's urge even more ironic in the eyes of the reader. When he asks Jael to lie and say "no" if anyone asks if there is a man in her tent the "no" is closer to the truth than intended, for there is only a vulnerable child lying inside her womb/tent.¹⁹⁹ I will also point to the alleged euphemisms already mentioned in the analysis of the texts, such as: How and with what she covers him, the shape of her weapon and that he falls between her feet.

The question of euphemisms has now arisen again. The three different categories from the beginning of this study were lexicalized, semi-lexicalized, and creative euphemism. We can hardly argue that all of the instances where euphemisms are said to appear are lexicalized. Certainly not the tent as Jael's body or the reversed rape. The covering is ambiguous, but she did treat Sisera like a child when giving him milk and she could continue this way when she tucks him into bed. Next we have the shape of her weapon, yes it is phallic shaped: But I cannot think of a weapon that is not, which could be used in "close combat." However, in connection

¹⁹⁵ Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, 108.

¹⁹⁶ Niditch, "Eroticism and Death," 312.

¹⁹⁷ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 55.

¹⁹⁸ Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 392.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

to the next verse, it does paint a vivid picture. Lastly, he falls between her feet. This is the most probable case of a euphemism and maybe even a semi-lexicalized one. However, I do prefer the interpretation of both Bal and Frymer-Kensky: A grotesque image of childbirth,²⁰⁰ continuing the maternal motif. This would still make it a euphemism, a creative one, but not necessarily sexual. With childbirth the possibility of shaming remains. Remember how Jael is standing almost on top of Sisera, making her the victor and him subjugated between her feet.

5. FILLING GAPS WITH ME

It is now time for me to embark upon the art of filling gaps. This is to be understood as one of many probable interpretations and in no way *the* right answer. The process of filling gaps began in writing the story as I understood it and this interpretation is based on a few theories concerning women in the situation of warfare. Therefore I will discuss a few of these *subtexts* describing women and war, and subsequently present my own version. I also have the feminist-critical tools to help with the understanding of their characters, mainly how they correspond with the symbolic universe of the patriarchal world.

5.1 *Femme Fatale or Femme Forte?*

Deborah is never a *femme fatale*, only a *femme forte*. She is, perhaps because of this, never eroticized by the interpreters who gladly make Jael into a seductress. Perhaps it is her title as a mother which makes it difficult, in the patriarchal world, to connect her femininity to sexuality. She is a good mother, and in a worldview where masculinity and maleness is the norm, the good mother just as the good wife is the protection against the unknown chaos of concubines and *femme fatales*. In the well known paradox of woman as either whore or madonna, Deborah is definitely the madonna—a virtuous woman, a virgin and a necessity in the framework of patriarchy. As Moi puts it:

It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 52, and Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 228.

²⁰¹ T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 166.

Deborah is also, as we have already discussed, not very feminine at all, according to the values of the patriarchal world. Deborah is the military leader, and if it wasn't for her self-designated mother-title she could just as well have been a man. In a way, she is a cross-dresser reversing expectations of what it means to be a woman and a mother. She is the opposite of Aphrodite and Clytemnestra in the Greek myths, who are also given male traits, though in their case because they are unfaithful, deceptive and evil.²⁰² In Greek thought the female sexuality was perceived as a threat towards the masculine ideal, and therefore the Greek goddesses were often portrayed as virgins.²⁰³ Jael could be all those things: Deceptive, unfaithful and evil—but still she is portrayed and perceived as a hero. Jael is also figuratively a mothering figure when she is nurturing Sisera. If Deborah is the good mother, then Jael is both good and bad. The good part is when she tucks him in and gives him to drink, the bad part is—needless to say—the killing-part. So we have the complex female figures who are two binary extremes at the same time. Deborah is both male and female, Jael is both a mother and a murderer. In a symmetrical way the reversal works out evenly among the characters, the men seem to “borrow” some of the feminine traits from Jael and Deborah just as they borrow theirs from the men. The only constant character through this mayhem of cross-dressers is YHWH.

5.2 Women and War: Discovering Subtexts

Both Jael and Deborah act in a situation surrounding the battle-scene of the narrative. The Biblical literature thus describes them as women in the context of war. This can be an important piece of the puzzle when interpreting the characters. The ancient associated commonplaces related to women and war will now be dealt with in the form of subtexts. These subtexts describe women in war-like situations, and from them we can gain insight into how women were afflicted by or involved with war and violence.²⁰⁴

In a patriarchal society women's involvement in traditionally male endeavours, such as war and violence, can be rendered differently. The most common way pertains to women who are reinforcing the prevailing social order. As already stated, where there is patriarchy, man is the centre of the symbolic order and the instigator of norms and values. Women are linchpins of this system since they are *the Other*, from which maleness is opposed. All that is strong and heroic belongs to men and all that is not must belong to females. In the narratives describing war where women are involved, they are often cast in the roles that we expect them to have. There are however a few exceptions. For instance, the gender-roles of a story are sometimes

²⁰² Clytemnestra is described as a woman with a man's heart, Paul Canz and Kalman J. Kaplan, “Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Feminine 'Other': Hebraism and Hellenism Redux,” *Pastoral Psychology* 62:4 (2013), 485-496 esp. 490.

²⁰³ Canz och Kaplan, “Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Feminine 'Other,’” 490.

²⁰⁴ My chosen subtexts do not exhaust the subject of women and war, I have chosen a few to illustrate the different attitudes I have found.

reversed, in some cases to escalate the dramatic effect and reverse expectations, and sometimes to horrify and/or scare the audience.

During wartime the women were often victims of the male warrior's defeat or the beneficiary of the warrior's victory. In the case of defeat, women were especially vulnerable to the opposing armies as they were collecting their spoil/booty. The custom of raping or abducting the women in the community of the defeated army is confirmed in many written sources in the ANE. So, even if the battle-ground was reserved for men, in most cases, the women would suffer the consequences of their endeavours.

A recurring motif in the ANE is women being victims of rape or taken as concubines/wives. The Assyrian king boasts of taking 200 nubile girls as booty, and Herodotus describes how the Persian generals, after victory in battle, take the most beautiful girls and send them to the Persian king.²⁰⁵ Another common fate for women was to be deported, together with their husband and children. When depicting the fugitives on their way to their new designated home the majority of imagery displays women and children, as to exaggerate the differences of the winning army (strong men) and the deportees (weak women and children).²⁰⁶ Sisera's mother relates to the custom of taking women as booty when she speaks of Sisera being late because he is dividing the spoil and bringing "a girl or two for every man."

The ideal man, in the ANE, was a strong man and a warrior. This was not the ideal woman though. The depiction of the woman warrior was a popular motif in visual art in 5th century B.C.E. Greece. There is a famous example of a bell-shaped object, used when carding wool, depicting women doing wool-work on the one side, and the other showing muscular women preparing for battle. To the Athenian women these motifs would probably show the ideal woman, engaged in domestic chores, and the antithesis—women in the realm of what was considered male activities.²⁰⁷ At this time the myth of the Amazons, made popular by Homer, gained in popularity. After the Greek army defeated Persia at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.E., they were depicted in clothing from the Middle-East or Asia.²⁰⁸ The Amazons were thus made to look like the enemy.

Homer wrote of the Amazons participating in the Trojan war, and in the Iliad he calls them "the equal of men," as does Lysias. Other Greek epic writers such as Arctinus of Miletus also writes of the Amazon myth. When describing these violent women it

²⁰⁵ Amélie Kurth, "Women and War," *Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* 2 (2001): 1-25, esp. 14.

²⁰⁶ Kurth, "Women and War," 15.

²⁰⁷ Jeannine Davis-Kimball and Mona Behan, *Warrior Women: An Archeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2003), 112-113.

²⁰⁸ Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 115.

is clear that they are both fascinated and appalled by them.²⁰⁹ There are horrible stories of how they would kill or otherwise get rid of their children if they were born as boys, and if it was a girl they would cut off their right breast so that they would aim better with a bow and arrow.²¹⁰ However, Plato praises them for their readiness to engage in battle and Aeschylus called them "virgins fearless in battle."²¹¹

The characters of Jael and Judith have not been perceived as victims of a war fought by men, but these stories are based on the notions conveyed above. The assumption that women are incapable of being affiliated with both war and violence are part of the associated commonplace from which the characters are composed. Sisera comes to Jael's tent expecting a nurturing mother, Jael then reverse expectations by being violent and disloyal to her people (but loyal to the people of Israel). Judith is invited to the camp of Holofernes because she is perceived as harmless. The men let their guard down and that is the dramaturgical climax, reversing the expectations of the listeners/readers. The ambiguity concerning women and war in myth is analyzed by Davis-Kimball and Behan, again referring to the Amazons:

Tales of the Amazons demonstrated what would happen if women did the unthinkable thing and threw off the tempering hand of man. Women who were athletic and strong, traveled around freely, and shunned male society became a band of bloodthirsty, headstrong, promiscuous vixens who were forever aligning themselves with enemies of the Greeks. They also were fatally flawed, for though the Amazons might enjoy a few moments of glory, these unnatural beings ultimately could never triumph over stalwart Greek men on the battlefield—myth after myth proved that this was so.²¹²

It is not unusual in the context of battle that men are compared to or even turned into women, as a way of shaming them. This we have already discussed in relation to both Barak and Sisera but let's look at some other texts describing this. The victor in battle is portrayed as a man's man while the losers are women, or prostitutes. Here used in oaths and treaties, first a Hittite one:

²⁰⁹ Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 116-117. There are sources describing them with what seems to be un-emotional objectivity, as well as dismay or appreciation. We do know a little something about women's situation in antiquity, and the general view of women does not correspond with the appreciative view of the Amazons. But here we have a few different options of how to understand the men regarding violent women in a positive manner. First of, the Amazons were most of the time regarded as foreign. As the world that they knew of grew bigger the Amazon women were said to reside further and further eastwards. Secondly, perhaps they were never viewed as real. They were a literary construction and to this day, the evidence of them existing is at best difficult to prove. As mythological creatures it is easier to accept that they transgress the social conventions. As foreign they are exotic and different from the "I."

²¹⁰ In fact this was believed to be the origin of their name, *a*=without, *mazoz*=breast. But the theory has been questioned. Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 118.

²¹¹ Chastity is otherwise rarely connected with the Amazons, usually their sexual freedom and promiscuity is highlighted. Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 116.

²¹² Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 129.

Whoever breaks these oaths . . . , let these oaths change him from a man into a woman! Let them change his troops into women, let them dress in the fashion of women and cover their heads with a length of cloth! Let them break the bows, arrows (and) clubs in their hands and [let them put] in their hands distaff and mirror!²¹³

It seems that the weapons are what makes the warriors men. Bergman associates the male genitalia to the weapons which means that the removal of them would make the men into women, metaphorically (cf. Judith taking the sword of Holofernes).²¹⁴ Another version of this is found in a treaty between Assurnerari V and the king of Arpad called Mati'-lu:

If Mati'-lu sins against this treaty with Assur-nerari, king of Assyria, may Mati'-lu become a prostitute, his soldiers women, may they receive [*a gift*] in the square of their cities like any prostitute, may one country *push* them to the next; may Mati'-lu's (sex) life be that of a mule, his wives extremely old; may Ishtar, the goddess of men, the lady of women, take away their bow, bring them to shame and make them bitterly weep.²¹⁵

As we have now seen to be a woman was essentially to be everything that a warrior was not. Two different characterizations have become salient after reading these subtexts. First, the women who belong to the own group are the ones who I referred to as linchpins above. They are objects being acted upon by male warriors in the context of war and violence. The foreign women or the enemies' women are either, as with the Amazons, exoticized when portrayed with traditionally male traits, or they are used to shame the warrior who has lost the battle (as in the case of the deported women and children above). Another aspect of this is the shame in turning into a woman as seen in the treaties above. When looking at Jael and Deborah together with these subtexts they don't fit straight into either category. Jael is exoticized by the Rabbis, but not to the extent that she is a villain. They are not victims being acted upon, rather they are more vigorous than their male counterparts. Perhaps this is where the problem lies. Because if we shift our focus from the female characters to the male for a minute, they are quite passive. Barak lacks the leadership skills to go into war by himself, and Sisera is a victim of a woman's violence. The lack of masculinity from the men can be understood as a way of shaming male warriors. We will further investigate this thought as I move towards my own interpretation of the characters of the text.

²¹³ Quoted in: Claudia Bergmann, "We Have Seen the Enemy, and He Is Only a "She": The Portrayal of Warriors as Women." *CBQ* 69:4 (2007): 651-672, esp. 665.

²¹⁴ Bergmann, "We Have Seen the Enemy, and He Is Only a "She,"" 665.

²¹⁵ Not seen, found in: S. T. Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study on the Book of Ezekiel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 85.

5.3 Filling Gaps With Me: A Symmetry of Switching

When thinking about all the different ways in which the gaps of this text has been filled by others, it inspired me to indulge myself and do the same. I started with a farce-like genre or a parody, where Barak's and Deborah's characters are stereotyped, and the topsy-turvyness of the gender-roles is enhanced.²¹⁶ The beginning of the story is, in my view, best understood as entertainment taking place in the crazy world of gender confusion, which is supplemented by a much more serious and dramatic ending. The story's setup works well within the larger context of Judges where comical figures are jumbled with dramatic events. The heroes of the Judges, are all at the same time heroes and losers which also fits well with the story (seeing Barak as the aspiring hero).

But there are also layers in the story, especially as we approach the unexpected tent-scene. There is a possibility to look at Jael as a victim of unwanted circumstances. Perhaps Sisera intrudes on her and perhaps she is defending herself. But this does not fit with the invitation of Sisera into her tent. Neither does it fit into her seemingly aware deceit, lulling Sisera into safety and then suddenly turning on him. The vivid language of Jael's act of killing is also something that invites to a metaphoric or euphemistic reading. I have already suggested that the image of childbirth is suitable and that Sisera turns into a child. But if we combine this with the phallic-shaped tent peg, remembering that the weapon can be a euphemism for the male genitalia, we again have a reversal where Jael is not only a violent killer (traditionally thought of as masculine), but she is also using his lost masculinity (the weapon) to kill him.

All of the characters seem to move into an androgynous mass with no clear distinction. The transgression of the traditionally attributed gender roles can be understood as a method of shaming the men involved. Barak turns into a woman whilst Sisera turns into a child, but the means of changing them are by turning the women into men. Deborah is the one in charge, the instigator of the battle and Jael is the murderer. At first glance, both these actions seem to fall on their lot by chance, but this topsy-turvyness is so symmetrical to be unintentional.

6. CONCLUSION

We have seen how the problem of a woman killing a man, and a successful female leader, are problems which need solving. The stratagems for solving them are different, but many of the ancient ways of dealing with those problems are in a way still prevailing today. The gender-issues concerning both Deborah and Jael were the big question then, and they still are. Perhaps not too surprising, since we have yet to

²¹⁶ Needless to say, the crazy, topsy-turvyness is not based in my opinion or values concerning gender. Rather, it is born out of the cultural context of ancient readers, or the *associated commonplace*.

find convincing proof that women were allowed the same freedom as men in the ANE. When looking at the ancient interpreters, we can discern three different ways of coping with this issue and at the same time filling out the gaps. They either go all in, solving the gender-issues by emphasizing both the influence and power of the women involved. Pseudo-Philo adds information about Deborah as a beloved leader. Barak is barely part of the plot, and Jael is both a *femme fatale* and humble. Pseudo-Philo's portrayal of Jael is similar to the Biblical portrayal of Judith. Another way to handle the problems of the narrative is to do the opposite, and downplay the women's contribution whilst reinforcing the male one. Josephus makes a hero out of Barak while Deborah is made into an arrogant character. The third way of coping is the still today the most popular one: Eroticizing. To make Jael (because Deborah is never eroticized) into the *femme fatale* doesn't make her less frightening, but it seems to make her more fascinating. The Rabbis build on this motif and elaborates on Jael's intentions. Her motives were considered pure although her means are a bit unusual. Her identity as a Kenite is perhaps the recipe for her success, as an outsider she does not serve as a role-model. This however makes the judgment of Deborah harder. Mostly she is not praised as a leader, rather her authority is questioned and she is perceived as haughty. Judith belongs in all of the above mentioned categories. She is certainly a beautiful woman, and at the same time she is a pious widow. She is however in a relationship with YHWH, which makes her both righteous and credible. But above all, Judith is the *femme fatale*. She uses her appearance as a tool to approach the enemy and he lets her in because of her beauty. The book of Judith fills a lot of the gaps left empty in Judg 4 and 5. Perhaps the ancient sexualizing interpretations together with the book of Judith created the paradigm of Jael's character as a *femme fatale* and because of this it has since prevailed.

The contemporary interpreters share some stratagems with the ancient ones. Focusing on gender, they make Deborah into a feminist and Jael into "Jael of strength." The downplaying works quite differently among the contemporary interpreters. Some believe that Deborah was not unique as a woman and a leader. If she was allowed, then there would also have been others. Again others think that this was not the case and ask whether she is to be understood as a leader at all. Even today, filling the gaps by arguing a sexual motif in the text is very popular. The tent-scene as a reversed rape which Niditch and Bledstein argue is one way of solving the gender confusion found in the text. Fewell and Gunn reads the tent as a euphemism for Jael's body, making Sisera into a child sleeping inside a womb. This brings us to the image of childbirth, an interpretation which continues the maternal motif and Sisera's childlike state.

From analyzing the texts we learnt that Deborah at the beginning is very much a female, it is emphasized by the grammar in an exaggerated way. We also see how the genders subtly switch places. First Deborah turns into the military leader that Barak fails to become, then Sisera turns into a child and Jael turns into a violent murderer. The lack of information concerning the characters backgrounds and their ambiguous

marital status is perhaps an intentional way of preparing readers/listeners for the coming reversal.

The subtexts related to the topic of women and war showed us that women who are involved in violence, contradicting the social order, are exoticized like the Amazons. The women belonging to the own group are victims of war. They risk rape, abduction, and/or death. And they are linchpins in the patriarchal society, reinforcing the notion of violence and war as belonging to the masculine domain.

Based on this, my own conclusion is that gender is an important part of this narrative, but not in a liberating way. Femininity is not important, it is the lack of masculinity which is important in regard to the men. The women, who are by nature inferior, become more masculine to emphasize the topsy-turvy social order. They can thus be understood as strong and independent women, but by doing this we also sanction the view of femininity as inferior to masculinity. And let us not forget, also connecting masculinity with violence and murder.

Again, let me describe the reversal. Deborah is a mother but also a military leader and a judge. Barak is supposed to be the military leader but he does not succeed. Sisera is the mighty man with nine hundred chariots, but as he enters the tent of Jael he becomes a child lulled to sleep by the caring mother. Jael is a nurturing mother who offers milk when he asks for water, but then suddenly turns into a murderer. She takes his masculinity represented by the phallic shaped tent peg and hits him in the head, as he dies he falls between her feet like a baby being born.

This is the associated commonplace in this story: Women are weak and they do not belong in the context of war. This is the contradiction that makes the switching and playing with traditional gender-roles work. It's what would have made it entertaining and it is what makes the ending even more dramatic. But if the ultimate goal of the seemingly uncharacteristically loose view of traditional gender-roles is shaming men, then it is certainly not the feminists' utopia being described.

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