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A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5

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When reading Judges 4 and 5 the different characters of these texts are striking—one, a prose text in its style very much like a lot of the Old Testament literature; the other, a song poetically and at times ambiguously worded. Because they are describing the same event in two different ways, these texts have kept many a scholar busy. The characters of Deborah, Jael, Barak and Sisera seem, although the information is sparse, to awaken the curiosity and creativity of those interpreting these texts both in ancient and present times. My main focus in this article is the four characters at the center of the story. How do they relate to each other? How have their characters been understood and how do I understand them? What role does gender and power serve in this story? Some have made them into complex characters, others into cardboard cutouts. Still some see Jael and Deborah as prominent pious women, or raging feminists, and mothers as military leaders while others focus on murderers, victims or harlots. I will dwell in the topsy-turvy world where men will turn into women and women turn into men. I ask myself what roles women and men had in the context of war, and how Judges 4 and 5 relate to this picture. Perhaps the texts describe a symmetry of switching, where the designated characteristics of men, women and children in the ancient world are turned upside down?

I will begin with an exegesis of the, for this article, important verses of the biblical text.¹ With the help of contemporary interpreters I will highlight a few of the salient motives. After this I will present my own way of

¹ My aim in this article is to highlight the ideological and power-related dimensions of the text, and not to present an all-encompassing exegetical study.

interpreting and filling gaps. With the help of relevant subtexts from the ANE, I will discuss both ideology and power in relation to the ancient world.

Deborah—the “Prophetess-woman”

The texts of Judges 4 and 5 are quite different. Judges 4 is a prose text, telling the story from a narrator’s perspective, while Judges 5 is a poetic song with ambiguous meanings. When reading Judges 4 and 5 the plot is dramatic and includes features which tend to catch the reader’s attention. The unexpected death of a strong man by the hand of a woman puts gender issues at the front and center of the story. But how does the text handle these issues of gender and power? I will, for the purpose of this study, treat the texts of Judges 4 and 5 as one text telling the same story from two different perspectives.² Although my main focus is the narrative of Judges 4, a few verses from Judges 5 will be included.

We begin with Judges 4. Alter reflects on the clumsiness of the verse where Deborah is introduced (4:4). 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” (נביאה אשה). This is followed by another “woman” connected to Lappidoth. And then again in the next clause, “she (היא) was judging Israel,” the feminine pronoun is unnecessarily repeated in the beginning of the next verse.³ Gender is indeed an important issue here, so important that the author took pains to make sure no one missed it.

In 4:6 the question 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. This query relates to the question of authorial intent. Although notoriously hard to conjecture, the intent of Judges 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 others, had the freedom to occupy prominent roles. Or, the women are a tool used to illustrate the state of society—to what

² This was also the way that interpreters read the text until the scholarly discussions of redaction-criticism of the 20th century.

³ Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 41.

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

Regarding the influence and or interest of women in the book of Judges Brettler has quite a 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.⁵

This might seem unnecessarily pessimistic, but hoping for a matriarchy on the basis of a few texts is not realistic. It is easy to fall into the trap of further sanctioning the patriarchal system by emphasizing male constructs of women as “free” without problematizing. And in that way I agree with Brettler, because we should always be suspicious readers, especially when women are either sexualized or sanctified. This could mean that the author is writing a dystopia where the only reason that Deborah and Jael were included in the book was 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. 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.”⁶

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

⁵ Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (London: Routledge, 2002), 108.

⁶ LXXa: ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὴν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ εὐδοῖ κύριος τὸν ἄγγελον μετ’ ἐμοῦ. There are, as Frymer-Kensky points out, parallels from Mari and Assyria where prophets give advice

Barak and Deborah stand out as quite unpredictable. 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.⁷ The male judges, much like the patriarchs, are at the same time successful (at least in becoming a judge) and failures.⁸ 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.

Jael—the Death-mother

In 4:18 Jael goes out to greet Sisera, as to actively invite him into his tent.⁹ Many have reacted to that Jael's behavior as a hostess was a transgression of the ancient Near Eastern hospitality rules: you do not attack a person whom you have invited into your home.¹⁰ 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

on, and urge, kings to go into battle. The prophets Elijah and Elisha are so important in this aspect that they are called "Israel's chariot and cavalry." See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 48.

⁷ For example, Samson is addicted to danger and because of this he ends up in difficult and unexpected situations. See Caroline Blythe and Teguh Wijaya Mulya, "The Delilah Monologues," in *Sexuality, Ideology and the Bible: Antipodean Engagements*, ed. R. J. Myles and C. Blyth (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 146–64, esp. 152.

⁸ 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. T. L. Thompson and P. Wajdenbaum (London: Routledge, 2014), 146–64, esp. 159.

⁹ 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 ἔκκλινον meaning "turn away" while LXXa has ἔκνευσον meaning "withdraw." See William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 254–55; Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 78.

¹⁰ J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 77.

Jael's behavior is maternal, tucking the general in and bringing him milk to drink—like a child.¹¹

Sisera is now ordering Jael to stand at the entrance of the tent, telling the people who ask for a man that there is no man inside.¹² 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 uses the male imperative-form (יָמַד) when asking her, perhaps by mistake, but it could also be an intentional coloring of the text. Either, as Schneider argues, he is in such a relaxed state of mind that he is careless with the grammar.¹³ Or this implies the gender-reversal mentioned above: if Jael is male—then what is Sisera?

The act of killing is described similarly in both Judges 4 and 5. The tent peg and the hammer occur in both narratives as well as the action of driving the peg through his temple.¹⁴ Niditch finds the phallic shape of the tent peg important. In her interpretation Jael is performing a reversed rape, overthrowing the usual conventions of war where women would sometimes fall victims to rape.¹⁵

In Judges 4 Sisera is lying down, asleep—in the song he is standing up and falling down as she pierces his 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 is the word for "feet" or "legs" which points to the sexual implication. Frymer-Kensky and Bal argue that "between her legs" is not 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 in the song, where we meet Sisera's birth-mother

¹¹ Judg 4:18–19; 5:25.

¹² Judg 4:20.

¹³ Schneider, *Judges*, 80.

¹⁴ The word for temple can, according to Fewell and Gunn, be understood as "mouth," interpreting רַקְתּוֹ as related to רַקַּק meaning "spit." See Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 347. Cf. Song 4:3; 6:7. The sliced pomegranate suggests a metaphor for the lips rather than the temple. See Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judg 4 & 5," *JAAR* 58 (1990): 389–411, esp. 393. This seems to be the way that LXXa and Josephus interpret it (ἐν τῇ γνάθῳ αὐτοῦ), thus making both the euphemism and reversed rape motif even more potent.

¹⁵ Susan Niditch, "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (London: Routledge, 2013), 305–17, esp. 307.

as opposed to his death-mother Jael.¹⁶ Stedenbach evaluates that most of the symbolic uses of the word רגל (“foot” or “leg”) have to do with sovereignty and subjection.¹⁷ The enemy falls under the feet of the victors.¹⁸

Sisera’s death is the climax of the narratives of both chapters 4 and 5. Although the song continues by introducing Sisera’s mother this is only to highlight the fact that he has been killed. 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. Now that we have reached the end of the biblical rendering, let us look closer at the descriptions of the characters.

The *femme fatale* and the *femme forte*

The salient features of this narrative, 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, as the emphasis on Deborah’s gender is followed by Sisera asking Jael using the male imperative form.

Concerning Deborah, would we even know that she was female if we changed the name and grammar to describe her as a man? I think we would not. 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 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 Judges 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!”¹⁹

¹⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 52; Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 228.

¹⁷ Cf. Gen 49:10 and Judg 1:6–7 where the king losing his thumbs and big toes symbolizes the loss of power according to F. J. Stedenbach, “רגל, *regel*,” *TDOT* 13: 309–24, esp. 319.

¹⁸ See Ps 18:39(38); 2 Sam 22:39; Ps 47:4(3); cf. also Isa 26:6; Mal 4:3; Dan 7:7, 19.

¹⁹ Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 400.

Jael is a round character,²⁰ even though the information given about 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 appear to live in peace with the Canaanites,²¹ but still she transgresses this relationship by supporting the people of Israel. A reason for this could be that 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 by 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. The *femme fatale* designation has been a popular theme when interpreting the character of Jael. Pseudo-Philo describes her as very beautiful Judith-like figure,²² strewing rose-petals on the bed, and seducing Sisera in order to lull him into a false sense of security.²³ In many of the rabbinic texts as well, this theme seems to prevail. One alludes to the milk that she offers Sisera, saying that it is in fact milk from her breast.²⁴ However, in the commentaries of Pseudo-Philo and in many of the rabbinic sources Jael is not condemned; although she is the archetypal *femme fatale* she is praised for her courage and piety. Deborah is, however, at least

²⁰ As opposed to the simple card-board cutout which is only there to move the plot along, Jael has a personality and appears to act on her own will.

²¹ Judg 4:17.

²² Pseudo-Philo is not alone in mixing Judith and Jael. In fact, I believe Judith can be viewed as a correctional narrative of Judges 4 and 5. 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.

²³ Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 147; cf. also Jdt 11:23.

²⁴ b. Nid. 55b, quoted from Leila Leah Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 75–98, esp. 90.

by some rabbinic sources, considered as haughty and difficult.²⁵ This could be because of Jael's origin; she is not a Jew but a helpful stranger. Deborah, however, is a role model for the women of Israel and so the judgement on her is much harder. Or, it could be because Deborah's job was more threatening to the interpreters than Jael's. A woman could use her sexuality to lure men (on the condition that they do it to help Israel, cf. the Book of Judith), but not be a military leader.

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. Deborah is, 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 was not for her self designated mother-title she could just as well have been a man. She is crossing boundaries reversing expectations of what it means to be a woman and a mother—a cross-dresser in her characteristics rather than in her clothes. 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.²⁶ In Greek thought the female sexuality was perceived as a threat to the masculine ideal, and therefore the Greek goddesses were often portrayed as virgins.²⁷ 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

²⁵ See, for example, Psalm 22 section 20 in *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. 13, trans. W. G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), which says: “Woe unto the generation whose leader is a woman, as when *Deborah, a prophetess... judged Israel* (Judg 4:4).” See also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 4: *Bible Times and Characters From Joshua to Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 36: “She was yet subject to the frailties of her sex,” the frailty being inordinate self-consciousness.

²⁶ Clytemnestra is described as a woman with a man's heart. See Paul Canz and Kalman J. Kaplan, “Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Feminine ‘Other’: Hebraism and Hellenism Redux,” *PastPsy* 62 (2013): 485–96, esp. 490.

²⁷ Canz and Kaplan, “Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Feminine ‘Other,’” 490.

only constant character through this mayhem of cross-dressers²⁸ is YHWH. I will now further explore this interpretation with the help of a few subtexts on the subject of power and gender in the context of war.

Women and War

In a patriarchal society, women's involvement in traditionally male endeavors, such as war and violence, can be rendered differently. The most common way pertains to women who are reinforcing the prevailing social order. Where there is patriarchy, man is the center of the symbolic order and the instigator of norms and values. Women are linchpins of this system since they are *the Other*, to 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 reversed, in some cases to escalate the dramatic effect and reverse expectations, and sometimes to horrify and/or scare the audience.

During wartime, 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 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. 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.²⁹ 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).³⁰ Sisera's mother

²⁸ Again I use the term cross-dresser in regard to traits rather than to actual clothing. I find the term helpful because the characters seem to be able to trade stereotypical gender-characteristics with each other, almost like costumes.

²⁹ Amélie Kurth, "Women and War," *Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* 2 (2001): 1–25, esp. 14.

³⁰ Kurth, "Women and War," 15.

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.”³¹

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 fifth-century BCE 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. 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 BCE, they were depicted in clothing from the Middle East or Asia.³² 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 is clear that they are both fascinated and appalled by them.³³ There are horrible stories of how the Amazons 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

³¹ Judg 5:30.

³² Jeannine Davis-Kimball and Mona Behan, *Warrior Women: An Archeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2003), 112–14.

³³ Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 116–17. 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.”

would aim better with a bow and arrow.³⁴ However, Plato praises them for their readiness to engage in battle and Aeschylus called them “virgins fearless in battle.”³⁵

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 is part of the associated commonplace from which the characters are composed. Sisera comes to Jael’s tent expecting a nurturing mother, Jael then reverses 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.

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 us 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. We will start in the Old Testament, with two occurrences of this phenomenon in Isaiah:

My people—children are their oppressors,
and women rule over them.

O my people, your leaders mislead you,
and confuse the course of your paths.³⁶

On that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts raises against them.³⁷

In the first one the hierarchy is made even clearer where the oppressors are likened by children, over whom women have power. The second example relates to battle where women are weak and afraid. The transformation from man to woman was sometimes used in oaths and treaties. Firstly, a Hittite example:

³⁴ In fact this was believed to be the origin of their name (*a* = without, *mazoz* = breast). But the theory has been questioned. See Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 118.

³⁵ Chastity is otherwise rarely connected with the Amazons; usually their sexual freedom and promiscuity is highlighted. See Davis-Kimball and Behan, *Warrior Women*, 116.

³⁶ Isa 3:12, NRSV.

³⁷ Isa 9:16, NRSV. See also Jer 50:37; 51:30; Nah 3:13.

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!³⁸

It seems that the weapons are what make 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).³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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 one's 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 of turning into a woman as seen in the treaties above. When we look at Jael and Deborah together with these subtexts, they do not fit straight into either category. Jael is exoticized by ancient interpreters such as Pseudo-Philo and some rabbinic texts, 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. For if we shift our focus from the female characters to the male for a minute, they are

³⁸ Quoted in Claudia Bergmann, "We Have Seen the Enemy, and He Is Only a 'She': The Portrayal of Warriors as Women," *CBQ* 69 (2007): 651–72, esp. 665.

³⁹ Bergmann, "We Have Seen the Enemy, and He Is Only a 'She,'" 665.

⁴⁰ Quoted in S. T. Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study on the Book of Ezekiel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 85.

quite passive. Barak lacks the leadership skills to go into war by himself, and Sisera is the 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 now move towards my own concluding interpretation of the characters of the text.

Conclusion

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 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, bearing in mind 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 while 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 topsyturvyness is too symmetrical to be unintentional.

From analyzing the text we learnt that Deborah at the beginning is very much a female; this 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 often exoticized like the Amazons. The women belonging to one's 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, such a reading also connects 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 is 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 to shame men, then it is certainly not the feminists' utopia being described.