"Most Blessed of Women": An Exegetical Study of the Roles of Women Under Patriarchy in Judges 5:24-31

Tamara Dixon
St. John Fisher College, tdixon_no@sjfc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, and the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol8/iss1/4 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
"Most Blessed of Women": An Exegetical Study of the Roles of Women Under Patriarchy in Judges 5:24-31

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

The Old Testament book of Judges is often cited for its violent and destructive depictions, since the textual episodes relate to the aggressive nature of war, the erosion of interpersonal relationships from deception, and the immorality of the Israelites. The integrity of Yahweh's chosen people steadily degenerates until the climatic conclusion of Judges wherein the Israelites act out belligerent aggression upon each other in tribal civil warfare. Despite the collective disregard for the covenant's provision of monotheistic faithfulness as established between the people and Yahweh, the deity remains loyal. The tribes' pleas for victory over oppressive neighboring peoples are repeatedly answered by their God as Yahweh continually delivers the Israelites from the hands of enemies.

This article is available in The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vo18/iss1/4
**Introduction**

The Old Testament book of Judges is often cited for its violent and destructive depictions, since the textual episodes relate to the aggressive nature of war, the erosion of interpersonal relationships from deception, and the immorality of the Israelites. The integrity of Yahweh’s chosen people steadily degenerates until the climactic conclusion of Judges wherein the Israelites act out belligerent aggression upon each other in tribal civil warfare. Despite the collective disregard for the covenant’s provision of monothestic faithfulness as established between the people and Yahweh, the deity remains loyal. The tribes’ pleas for victory over oppressive neighboring peoples are repeatedly answered by their God as Yahweh continually delivers the Israelites from the hands of enemies.

The constant vacillation between victory and defeat, morality and impiety, yields periods of peace and times of trouble in Judges. However, one subset within the book never acquires a sense of independence from oppression: the women. I acknowledge that this viewpoint can be — and has been — contested, for counterarguments contend that the women in Judges are an exception to the patriarchal rule persistent in the Old Testament. Each woman displays an innate possession of individual power, fortitude, and strength uncharacteristic of opposing portrayals of women. Yet, the inner possession of resolve never fully manifests outward, for the women ultimately befall victimization. At the end of chapter 12 in Judges, we witness the courageous death of Jepthah’s daughter, a young woman who is unduly sacrificed solely on account of her father’s deficient faith in Yahweh. In turn, Delilah is rendered as a clever and resourceful woman, but these attributes further detain her in female subjugation; she merely plays the role of pawn for the Philistine leaders who desire to ensnare the Nazirite hero, Samson, in Judges 16. By the culmination of the book, the cruelty and debasement of woman thrives in practice and ideology as the Levite’s concubine is systematically beaten and raped by men in the Benjamin tribe (Judg. 19). Even the women who conquer and seize victory from the hands of men, Deborah and Jael, are confined to and dangerously condone the limitations of patriarchy (Judg. 4-5). This exegesis paper will explicate the mutual relationship between patriarchal control and gender reversal portrayed in the military-hero Deborah and the assassin Jael by utilizing the passage Judges 5:24-31 as a foundation.

By employing biblical commentaries, biblical annotations, and credible scholarly sources, the examination of Judges 5:24-31 will begin by establishing the historical context of the book. Once the background is determined, a delineation of the biblical passage and a verse-by-verse analysis will be undertaken to closely observe the dynamics in the relationship between the people and events depicted. To conclude, the passage will be examined in relation to the overall narrative of the Old Testament.

**Historical Context**

To understand the incidents which occur in Judges, it is critical that the book is placed within a historical framework. The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, jointly known as the Former Prophets in Judaism, are “traditionally thought to have been written by prophets, but also (and more importantly) because they are prophetic in their styles and interests” (Wenham et al. 261). Under a recent conceptual theory originated by M. Noth and widely accepted by biblical scholars, these six books now compose what is known as the Deuteronomistic History (DH), meaning that the ideological basis pervading the books stems from the theology recounted in the Book of Deuteronomy (Freedman et al. 161). The books comprise a comprehensive and historical chronology of events, which begin at the death of the patriarchal leader Moses and extend to the downfall of the kingdom of Judah to Babylon (New Oxford Annotated Bible 310).

---

1 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (2001) is the principal source used in referencing biblical passages, unless otherwise noted.
Naturally, the DH does not attempt to establish an accurate and impartial record of events. The Book of Judges seemingly encompasses a 400 year period, which conflicts with modern archaeological data indicating that the DH narrative in total only occurred in approximately 200 years (The Jewish Study Bible 510). Instead, the DH served as a tool to teach and preserve particular theological traditions (New Oxford Annotated Bible 310). The main religious tenet infused throughout the DH involves the importance of devotional adherence to the divine covenant. This distinctive theological framework was originally credited by Noth to the Deuteronomist, “a single, exilic author/compiler” (Freedman et al. 161), but scholars speculate the DH may have been written by more than one editor working under Deuteronomic influence (Wenham et al. 263).

The covenant discussed in the Deuteronomistic History originates in the Book of Exodus, following Yahweh’s liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 13-14). Yahweh promises to make this group of people a “treasured possession” who “shall be...a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6). The Israelites’ favored position in the eyes of God is not without conditions, for the people are bound to a covenant exemplified by the Ten Commandments presented through Moses at Mt. Sinai / Horeb (Exod. 19-20). By vowing unconditional loyalty to the divine ruler and pledging to live a moral lifestyle, the Israelites are assured of protection and prosperity through divine intervention. Following the death of Moses, leadership is passed on to Joshua, who acted as Moses’ assistant before his death (Josh. 1:1). The Book of Joshua then provides the beginning of the conquest narrative, focusing on the successful war for and subsequent possession of parts of Canaan, the promised land.

Once in Canaan, Joshua establishes a second covenant between God and the Israelites to reinforce the initial covenant as mediated by Moses: “The people said to Joshua, ‘The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.’ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem” (Josh. 24:24-25). The covenant, though, is stipulated by a warning from Joshua. He cautions against worshipping other deities and intermarrying with non-Hebrews, for each will “be a snare and a trap...a scourge” until Yahweh “bring[s] upon you [the Israelites] all the bad things, until he has destroyed you from this good land that the Lord God has given you” (Josh. 23:15).

In the Book of Judges, the Israelites have not heeded Joshua’s earlier warning and the stories indicate the consequences of breaking the covenant vow. With the death of Joshua (Judg. 1:1 and Judg. 2:8), various tribes of Israelites have forsaken the covenant with Yahweh by living among the native Canaanites and, most importantly, worshipping the foreign gods, Baal and Astartes (Judg. 2:11-13). In the era of the Old Testament, nomadic peoples often honored local gods. These people often subscribed to the belief that certain deities exclusively controlled particular geographic areas. Since the Canaanites’ success in farming was conferred to their gods, it is a natural extension that the Israelites’ divide spiritual worship between Yahweh and the local gods (Wenham et al. 262). The Israelites’ subsequent henotheistic practice thus merely reflects the period of transition from nomadic wandering to permanent settlements. However, the Deuteronomist frames this perceived breach of loyalty as theological contempt. Yahweh is “provoked...to anger” (Judg. 2:12) and abandons the Israelites in the unfamiliar land for, “Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them to bring misfortune, as the Lord had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress” (Judg. 2:15).

The compilation of the DH is thought to have assumed two separate redactions. The first substantial editing began under the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E. (Wenham et al. 263). During Josiah’s reign of power, the Temple in Jerusalem was undergoing an extensive renovation and a significant portion of Deuteronomy was found in the process (Harris 154-155). At this time, the Book of Law as depicted in Deuteronomy most likely began to “enter the consciousness of some of Israel’s leading religious personalities, including the prophet Jeremiah” (Harris 155). Since Josiah immediately enacted reforms as accorded by the law, including the centralization of spiritual worship in Jerusalem, the resulting “high praise...in language that explicitly echoes the Book of Deuteronomy, suggests a direct connection.
between the reformist agenda of the Josianic monarchy and the composition of the DH as its virtual manifesto” (Harris 163).

Around 721 B.C.E., the Assyrians seized the northern kingdom of Israel, driving those Hebrews in the north to the southern kingdom of Judah; this migration likely exposed other traditions relating to covenant practices and merged with the newly discovered laws in the Jerusalem Temple (Harris 155). The redaction pioneered under King Josiah continued into the sixth century during the Babylonian exile, when the Deuteronomist framed the exilic crisis in Deuteronomic terms “to explain why this disaster happened” (Wenham et al. 263). This component of theological interpretation of the exile comprises the second redaction. Throughout the DH, the Deuteronomist provides rationalization for the fall of Israel, which assumes a cyclical pattern outlining the benefits of adhering to Deuteronomic law and the definitive consequences of defying the covenant. In Judges, specifically, the pattern is organized by recurrent facets: the practice of worshipping gods other than Yahweh, the resultant consequence of suppression by Canaanite neighbors, the Israelites’ plea for divine relief and the imparting of a judge to deliver the Israelites, a period of covenant compliance during the life of the judge, and a return to defiance with the death of the judge (Martin 2).

In this historical context, the term “judge” is a misnomer, for the people depicted as such in the Book of Judges functioned as military leaders, not judicial figures (The New Oxford Annotated Bible 357). Typically the judges acted as localized leaders for a certain tribe or set of tribes and was responsible for any necessary military action such as defending the territory claimed by his clan or tribe against similar claims by rival nomadic or semi-nomadic groups” (Martin 12-13). In the book, major judges—Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson—are depicted as effective, triumphant military-deliverers, whom were possibly celebrated as hero-warriors in oral or written tribal histories (Wenham et al. 262). The continual reference to the judges’ repeated liberation of “all Israel” appears to be contradictory, primarily because the entirety of “Judges provides us with a contrasting (and perhaps more historically reliable) account of Israel’s often chaotic emergence as a nation from its tribal origins” (Harris 181). In redacting Judges during the period of Babylonian exile, the inclusive language of “all Israel” may indicate the larger Israelite audience the Deuteronomist was attempting to reach in the exilic period. Although theological history within the DH is frequently framed by Israel’s repeated apostasy and the resultant consequences of covenant betrayal, the Deuteronomist editor(s) still included “assurances that YHWH would someday overthrow Israel’s oppressors, restore their prosperity, and reaffirm the covenant partnership” (Harris 212).

Delineation of the Passage
As previously noted, the DH outlines the sequence of events leading to the dire punishment of exile the Israelites endured for their continued infidelity to Yahweh. The Book of Judges is the first book in the DH to chronicle this pattern of apostasy and divine rebuke. At the microcosmic level, Judges represents the overall pattern in the DH and functions as a forewarning for the eventual failure of the nation under the Davidic house.

In the Book of Judges, the narratives depicted can be dissected into three distinct sections:
- Judg. 1:1-3.6 Double Introductions
- Judg. 3:7-16:31 The Cycles Section
- Judg. 17:1-21:25 Double Conclusions

The first introduction (Judg. 1:1-2:5) recounts the Israelites entrance into Canaan through military conquest. Unlike the total victory described in Joshua (Josh. 10:40-42), only the tribes of Judah and Joseph successfully overtake the foe (Judg. 1:1-26). The remaining tribes are forced to settle in Canaan among the native inhabitants (Judg. 1:27-36). In chapter two, verses one through five operate as a transition between the two introductions. Yahweh explicitly illustrates the reason for the Israelites’ frustration: “...you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! So now I say, I will not drive them [the Canaanites] out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you” (Judg. 2:2-3). This directly precedes the second introduction (Judg. 2:11-3:6) which commences the cyclical pattern through the phrase, “then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” Repetition of this phrase is a critical literary component to the Book of Judges because it emphasizes the beginning of another
cycle of spiritual erosion (Judg. 2:11).

Logically, the judges’ narratives account for the majority of the book and subsequently follow the Deuteronomist’s explanation of their inclusion as presented in the second introduction (Judg. 2:16). Since “the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them [Israelites] out of the power of those who plundered them,” the story of the third judge, Deborah, expectantly details a successful military campaign through the defeat of Sisera and the Canaanite army (Judg. 4). The passage of Judges 5:24-31 falls within the confines of Deborah’s story as expressed via the poetic lyrics of the Song of Deborah (and Barak). Appropriately, Deborah, Israel’s female warrior, lauds the murderess Jael in this passage, who ultimately executes the Canaanite commander. Judges 5:24-31 is contained within the context of the cycles section, performing as the first narrative to explicitly link Israel’s failure to honor the covenant promises with enemy oppression. Following the story of Deborah and Jael, the exploits of other major and minor judges are recounted as the cycle of disobedience continues succeeding the death of each judge.

Following the cyclical narratives, the double conclusions in the epilogue of Judges moves from the microcosmic level to the broad history of Israel where the period of judges ends when, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). Again, the literary practice of repetition of this line—it occurs in both concluding stories of Micah and the Levite and his concubine (Judg. 17:6 & 21:25)—“show[s] that Israel was even more endangered by its own internal decay, morally and spiritually, than by any external attack” (Wenham et al. 265).

Verse-By-Verse Analysis

The passage of Judges 5:24-31 essentially functions as a verse within the larger composition of the Song of Deborah, a work which composes the entirety of chapter five. In this particular verse, the audience encounters the only instance where Deborah and Jael occupy the same space in time.

Judges 5:24-25

24 Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.
25 He asked for water and she gave him milk,
she brought him curds in a lordly bowl
(New Oxford Annotated Bible).

24 The most fortunate of women is Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite—
the most fortunate of women who live in tents.
25 Sisera asked for water, but she gave him milk;
she brought him cream in a beautiful bowl.
(Good News Bible).

24 Most blessed of women be Jael,
Wife of Heber the Kenite,
Most blessed of women in tents.
25 He asked for water, she offered milk;
In a princely bowl she brought him curds.
(The Jewish Study Bible).

The opening verse to the Jael narrative within Deborah’s poem introduces a literary technique common to Hebrew poetic forms in the Bible. Parallelism, a tactic which “involves expressing similar ideas in similar verbal structures,” pervades Judges 5:24-31 and is the driving force behind verse 24 (Harris 286). In each of the three biblical translations, the striking similarity is the reiteration of Jael either as a “blessed” or “fortunate” woman, with the repetition acting as an example of synonymous parallelism for “an idea articulated in the first line is repeated in slightly different words” in a subsequent line (Harris 286). The synonymous parallelism in verse 24 is an effective literary tool to introduce such a notably motivated female biblical character since “[t]he suddenness of Jael’s introduction and the intensity of her blessing sets the audience’s mind on edge as it waits to hear the reasons for her being blessed” (Hauser 34).

However, in the following verse Jael does not exhibit a commanding presence in the scene, but
instead remains seemingly loyal to the boundaries of patriarchy. She maintains the customary subservience of women, attending to the exhausted general’s needs while also recognizing his distinct authority through the presentation of milk in a bowl fit for a “prince” or “lord.” The recognition of male supremacy is reciprocated by Sisera. He understands “the world as patriarchy: if Heber is a Canaanite ally then so must his wife be” and believes he can comfortably seek refuge in Jael’s tent (“Controlling Perspectives” 406). Jael’s action of soothing comfort is emphasized through explicit imagery that reinforces “for both Sisera and the reader the patriarchal perception that women, acting as mothers and lovers, are protectors of patriarchy” (“Controlling Perspectives” 405). The literary technique in each example exerts certainty in the social structure of male domination, since Jael is not overtly named in the passage, unlike Sisera. Unlike in verse 24, Jael is suddenly stripped of her personal identification and is simply noted through the universal pronoun “she.” Indeed, the ordinariness of Jael’s description as a wife and caregiver appears as just another patriarchal trapping. However, the audience is aware that a patriarchal title, especially one restricting a woman’s identification to her husband, has no bearing on their internal ability and adeptness. In the prose version of the story expressed in Judges 4, Deborah is also previously identified within the constraint of her gender role as the “wife of Lappidoth” (Judg. 4:4). Yet the import of the title is shortly exceeded in the narrative by Deborah’s active involvement in public life as a “prophetess” who triumphantly delivers Israel through Sisera’s military defeat (Judg. 4:12-17). Additionally, in contrast to the nameless women in Judges—Jephthah’s daughter and the Levite’s concubine—who are needlessly persecuted by the men who govern them, both Deborah and Jael are bestowed self-possessing names to indicate their individual autonomy. Therefore, both women’s identification within and independent of male control accentuates their atypical authority and intelligence, while foreshadowing their continual entrapment in the detriment of biblical patriarchy.

Judges 5: 26-27
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.

26 He sank, he fell, 
he lay still at her feet; 
at her feet he sank, he fell; 
where he sank, there he fell dead 
(New Oxford Annotated Bible).

26 She took a tent peg in one hand, 
a worker’s hammer in the 
other; 
she struck Sisera and crushed 
his skull; 
she pierced him through the 
head

27 He sank to his knees, 
fell down and lay still at her 
feet. 
At her feet he sank to his knees 
and fell; 
he fell to the ground, dead 
(Good News Bible).

26 Her [left] hand reached for the tent pin, 
Her right for the workmen’s hammer. 
She struck Sisera, crushed his head, 
Smashed and pierced his temple.

27 At her feet he sank, lay outstretched, 
At her feet he sank, lay still; 
Where he sank, there he lay—destroyed 
(The Jewish Study Bible).

Verses 26 and 27 are crucial to the overall Jael narrative, for these poetic lines indicate an occurring dramatic shift. Unexpectedly, verse 26 shifts from the maternal comfort of verses 24 and 25 to Jael’s vicious attack of Sisera. Fusing womanly affection with masculine aggression enhances the brutality of Sisera’s assassination at the hands of Jael because, “Women do not, as a rule, seduce their lovers in order to kill them; mothers do not, as a rule, nurture little boys in order to murder them” (“Controlling Perspectives” 405-406). In this verse, the poem once more employs synonymous parallelism to strongly convey the various disunities inherent within the
scene. The abrupt depiction of the Kenite woman’s aggressive utilization of everyday tools—the tent peg and hammer—common to her tent-dwelling nature and the immediate dissociation with her feminine role magnifies the jarring effect. Through the “use of so many words for the two acts of offering milk and seizing the weapon gives a ‘slow motion’ effect to Jael’s deeds,” an effect continued to the conclusion of verse 27 (Hauser 36). The three translations vary the verb types in the series of actions depicting the slow motion effect beginning in verse 26:

*New Oxford Annotated Bible:*  
“she struck...and crushed” and “she shattered and pierced”

*Good News Bible:*  
“she struck...and crushed” and “she pierced”

*Jewish Study Bible:*  
“She struck...crushed... / Smashed and pierced.”

Yet, each instance still maintains the natural “harsh and therefore staccato sounds of many of the consonants in these words” and “give the onomatopoetic effect of the falling hammer blows” (Hauser 37).

In verse 27, the theme of repetition continues to magnify the slow motion effect, for the lines in this verse act in a cyclical relationship. Whereas in verse 26 “the rhythmic pattern of the words gives the rapid-fire effect of the falling hammer,” in the following verse “the poet does not present a quick succession of different events” (Hauser 37). Instead, each separate line within verse 27 either directly replicates the verbal construction or heavily shadows the imagery of the preceding line. This is most evident in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*’s rendering of the verse:

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.

In all three versions, the first component of the verse in which Sisera “sank” and “fell” is repeated at the end with the explicit declaration of his death. Such deeply concentrated focus on the general’s ruin “causes the audience to revel in the slaughter and fall of Sisera who, as leader of the Canaanites, also embodies their demise and fall” (Hauser 38). Additionally, extolling a woman assassin further insults the Canaanites and their military leader because death caused by a woman was deemed shameful (*The Jewish Study Bible* 522). Thus, Deborah’s poem eternally immortalizes Sisera’s humiliation within the system of patriarchy in Hebrew religious culture.

Although Jael has murdered Sisera without any accompanying aid, this action of independence and personal strength does not free Jael from male dominion. Jael’s deadly deed may explicably have transpired from the compelling demands of the patriarchal system. In Judges 4 the audience is informed that Jael’s husband, Heber the Kenite, was politically allied with King Jabin, the ruler under whom Sisera commands the Canaanite army (Judg. 4:17). By extension, Jael’s political allegiance is also assumed to the Canaanites. Therefore, when Sisera appears at Jael’s tent in verse 25 thirsty, exhausted, and defeated, it is because the military general can trust that her tent is a place of safe harbor. Sisera’s unexpected arrival places Jael, as a woman, in an extremely difficult position since the Israelites “are unlikely to take kindly to a family that has allied itself with the enemy—especially if found to be hiding the Canaanite commander” (*Gender* 124). For women, the consequences of being an enemy partisan include inevitable capture, rape, and possible death (*Gender* 125). Though Deborah and the Israelite’s laud Jael’s courage in definitively defeating the enemy in song, the action has less to do with Jael’s affinity with the Israelites’ cause than in protecting her life.

Forcing the audience to deliberate upon Jael’s shocking actions, ironically, also stresses the Israelite’s degeneration into apostasy. Similar to Deborah in Judges 4 who is “the instigator” of violence (“Controlling Perspectives” 395), Jael assumes the role of aggressor in her narrative. Despite the parallel personas of the two women, Jael commits an act of violence more grievous than Deborah’s war rally: an unprovoked act of violence. Therefore, each woman has assumed the role of male aggressor and, more importantly, “serve[s] as an instrument of divine redemption” (Harris 183). This role reversal is a blatant sign indicating that Israel’s world is somehow askew, which, as the Deuteronomist has previously
indicated in Judges 2, is the spiritual decline of Israel.

Judges 5: 28
28 Out of the window she peered, the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice; 'Why is his chariot so long in 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?'
31 "So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might!"

(The Good News Bible).

28 Through the window peered Sisera’s mother, Behind the lattice she whined: “Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?”
29 The wisest of her ladies give answer; She, too, replies to herself:
30 They must be dividing the spoil they have found: A damsel or two for each man, Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, Spoil of embroidered cloths, A couple of embroidered cloths Round every neck as spoil.”
31 So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord! But may His friends be as the sun rising in might!”

(The Jewish Study Bible).

In the concluding verses of the poem, a different shift in perspective has occurred, with Deborah focusing attention on Sisera’s mother. The image of Sisera’s mother worriedly awaiting her son’s return in verse 28 seems to be Deborah’s way of sympathizing with the enemy women. Considering Deborah’s own role as a wife and a woman in a patriarchal society, she understands the nervous anticipation of a war’s conclusion: Sisera’s mother not only fears for a loved one’s life amidst the violence of warfare, she also fears the personal experience of rape and torture enacted upon enemy women. The Jewish Study Bible’s version of verse 28 highlights this fear with the emphatical “she whined,” a verbal utterance indicating her profound panic. Thus Deborah vividly depicts the negative aspect in “[t]he lust for glory and victory,” since it “leaves a vulnerable world alone, grieving and unprotected—mothers without sons, wives without husbands, children without fathers” (“Controlling Perspectives” 407).

The audience’s sympathy relegated towards the Canaanites is withdrawn as it is soon revealed that compassion is not Deborah’s intention. As Deborah sings about a disturbing discussion depicting the rape of Israelite women engaged by Sisera’s mother (v. 29-30), the audience’s empathy immediately transforms to loathing. Similar to the
expensive dyed cloths the men will collect as booty (Jewish Study Bible), the enemy women—in this instance, Israelite women—are dehumanized and depicted as “body parts, simple receptacles for male invasion” (“Controlling Perspectives” 407). As a female hero-warrior, “by attributing to Sisera’s mother such a casual approval of rape” Deborah chooses to “show her [Sisera’s mother] to be deserving of violation herself” (Gender 125). The poem’s ironic implication effectively allows the mother’s words to foreshadow and condone the violence soon to be done upon herself. By justifying the violence done to other women, Deborah encompasses the more masculine role of military victor than the feminine role of “mother in Israel” (Judg. 5:7).

The concluding line of verse 31 reinforces the triumph by proclaiming that the Israelite people are “friends” to the Lord. Like the powerful image of the rising sun included in each of the three translations, the Israelites imagine an eternal period of prosperity under Yahweh. Yet, chapter five ominously concludes with the statement, “And the land had rest for forty years” (Judg. 5:31). Unfortunately, the consequence of apostasy which rendered the Israelites oppressed under King Jabin and Sisera has not served as a warning for future generations. Once Deborah has died after the forty years peace, chapter six immediately opens with another era of subjugation: “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years” (Judg. 6:1).

Practical Application

Similar to the Deuteronomist’s intention of emphasizing the cycle of covenant disobedience to explain Israel’s Babylonian exile, modern readers of the Bible are reminded to seriously consider their religious and moral values. As people become increasingly concerned with issues of money and competitive advantage, the role of religious fidelity has been minimized for many people. Focus is frequently tuned to materialistic anxieties and many people resort to indifference regarding other people’s worries. Therefore, the world is often viewed as a callous atmosphere, where the only significant concerns are those directed at individuals themselves. Perhaps the message inherent in the narrative of Deborah and Jael, as well as in the Book of Judges as a whole, will force people to act less in accordance with personal needs, but more aligned with human decency.

Conclusion

Judges 5:24-31 introduces women who seemingly defy the patriarchal mold. Unlike other Old Testament women, Deborah and Jael are presented as strong, female figures who take control of circumstances instead of submissively waiting to be taken control of. Unfortunately, their decisions to act independent of male authority actually restricted both women to the patriarchal system. Deborah has to assume the masculine role of hero-warrior to rally the Israelites for a battle against the Canaanite forces lead by Sisera. Although her cause was indeed justified—the Israelites had been under Canaanite rule for 20 years—Deborah deplorably utilized her power as a military leader to ridicule the violence impending against other women. Despite being caught between the decisions of men, Jael appears to be the stronger of the two women; she bravely and decisively takes action to preserve her own well-being. However, neither Deborah nor Jael could ultimately save the Israelites from their sinful ways. The Israelites’ apostasy continually worsened until civil warfare erupted and “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25).

Works Cited


