

THEMES IN THE DEBORAH NARRATIVE (JUDGES 4-5)

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The stage is set; the players are all in place. The text recounts how Barak ben Avinoam assembles the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, ten thousand in number, and together with Deborah the prophetess, they ascend Mount Tabor, in the Lower Galilee. Sisera, the Canaanite general, gets word of this and gathers his powerful army, with their 900 chariots of iron, to the wadi of Kishon, below. *'Up,'* declares Deborah, for *'this is the day on which the Lord will deliver Sisera into your hands,'* (Jud. 4:14) and Barak descends the mountain, his men following close behind. But just at this point of greatest tension, when the reader eagerly awaits a vivid account of the battle scene, the text, which had offered such precise details regarding the disposition of the forces before the battle, suddenly becomes frustratingly laconic. One sentence, *And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic* (4:15), serves to depict the entire battle. How exactly this band of foot soldiers (presumably not well armed, see Judges 5:8) succeeded in routing such an overwhelming cavalry force is not made clear in the text. What specific form of divine intervention brought about the unlikely, yet utterly thorough, Israelite victory? Even the single verb used, *va-yahom* [and He threw into a panic], is uncommon and rather general.

Unspecific as the word *va-yahom* is, however, it is one of several clues to interpretation provided by the text. The verb *va-yahom* is used more familiarly in the story of the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 14:24), and this is not the only similarity between the two stories. In both narratives the Israelites are a fearful, demoralized people confronting militarily superior adversaries confident of success. The Egyptians, a highly civilized nation with a history of sophisticated culture and advanced technology, have cornered the former Hebrew slaves, and a mighty force of chariots seems certain to crush the helpless runaways. Much later, in the period of the Judges, an oppressed Jewish people once again confronts a vastly superior power equipped with chariots of iron, representing the supreme achievement of that era, and defeat seems immi-

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ment. Of course, in both episodes God intervenes, and the enemies are utterly destroyed, *not one of them remained*; the words of Exodus (14:28) repeated in Judges (4:16). The Israelites respond to their victory with joyous song led, in Exodus, by Moses and Miriam the prophetess, and in Judges by Barak and the prophetess Deborah.¹

While these and other similarities serve to link the two stories, one major difference calls for closer examination. In the Exodus chapters, the events preceding the song are presented in clear detail. The affliction the Hebrew slaves suffered at the hands of Pharaoh, how he *made life bitter for them with harsh labor* (Ex. 1:14), is vividly narrated. The evil decree of Pharaoh to cast all male born children into the Nile, the beating of the Hebrew slave by the Egyptian taskmaster, the Israelites' desperate cries to the Lord, are all faithfully recorded in the text, and well remembered by every reader of the Bible. What is lacking in the narrative portion of Judges is precisely such a clear depiction not only of the actual battle scene but also of the prior suffering of the Israelites. Being part of the cycle of transgression- oppression- salvation, which serves as the framework for much of the Book of Judges, the Deborah story begins, like the accounts of many other leaders during the period, with the statement, *The Israelites again did what was offensive to the Lord* (4:1). As in the other accounts in Judges, God sends an enemy, this time the Canaanites, to punish them for their transgression. What form this punishment took, however, is nowhere expanded upon in the chapter. Once again, one vague sentence, *and he had oppressed Israel ruthlessly* (4:3), is the only glimpse we are given of the entire twenty years of subjugation which led up to the decisive clash between the two nations. Interestingly, the particular word for oppression used here, *lahatz*, is yet another term which appears in the Exodus narrative (Ex. 3:9), further extending the parallel between the two episodes.

It would certainly seem that the reader is being directed to the earlier, more exhaustive story of the Exodus as an aid to understanding the less graphic events in Judges, and is expected to see points of comparison both in the scenarios leading up to the confrontations, and also in the manner in which the subsequent victories were achieved. In the Exodus story, the narrative section is quite expansive, painted in bold strokes; the Song which follows amplifies poetically what the prose has already clearly recounted. In the Judges chapters the sequence is reversed. Superficially, Deborah's Song may seem merely

an exuberant expression of triumph, containing only minor bits of previously unknown material, such as a thorough catalogue of the tribes participating in the battle.² But when we train our ears to hear the more subtle strains of the Song, when we focus on the imagery and metaphors which resonate in the poem, it becomes evident that in an understated fashion Deborah's Song supplies much of the detail that was missing from the terse narrative version, revealing, to the careful reader, both the exact nature of the oppression as well as the form and essence of the Israelite victory.

After a brief, somewhat conventional introduction, Deborah opens her song with a stirring depiction of a majestic entry of God into the world: *O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, Advanced from the country of Edom, The earth trembled; The heavens dripped, Yea, the clouds dripped water, The mountains quaked - Before the Lord, Him of Sinai, Before the Lord, God of Israel (5:4-5)*. Commentators have interpreted this as a reference to the revelation at Sinai or to the wars against Sihon and Og, though neither seems particularly pertinent.³

The poem continues by portraying the wretched days before the Israelite triumph. In those days, the prophetess laments, *caravans ceased, and wayfarers went by roundabout paths (5:6)*. Four verses later, Deborah urges her people to speak God's praise after their success and refers to them as *you riders on tawny she-asses, you who sit on saddle rugs, and you wayfarers (5:10)*.

These seemingly disparate and somewhat puzzling descriptions call for closer analysis. That they occur in proximity to each other implies some relationship, but what connection is there between God going out of Seir and roundabout paths or riders on tawny she-asses? What exactly do these cryptic verses convey?

The descriptions are in fact thematically connected; they are united by a shared suggestion of movement. God comes out, and marches, the earth trembles, mountains quake, travelers ride and walk. Everyone and everything seems to be moving. The oppression exercised by the Canaanites took the form of denial of movement. The Israelites were prevented from using the highways, presumably through fear of the brutality of Sisera's occupation forces, and when travel was unavoidable they had no choice but to go off the beaten track, on to the more dangerous "*roundabout paths*." With normal

freedom of movement curtailed or halted, the intimidated Israelites were effectively confined, unable to communicate freely or unite. This demoralizing situation changes when God intervenes. Like the beloved in the Song of Songs, who leaps upon the mountains and skips upon the hills, God comes out from Seir and boldly marches out of Edom to save His people, moving mightily and with total freedom across mountains and plains, majestic and irresistible. All of nature responds to this emanation as the mighty earth trembles and the solid, unmovable mountains become fluid, flowing like water.

The results of divine intervention are revealed in verse 10. Although the poem has not yet related Israel's victory, verse 10 proleptically describes the condition of the people after their successful battle. Freedom of movement is restored, wealthy merchants can again ride on their donkeys unhindered along the open highways, and no traveler has to resort to out-of-the-way paths or remote, crooked byways.

The beginning of Deborah's song, however, reverberates with the powerful sensation of motion not only in order to provide an insight into the suffering and subsequent rejoicing of the Israelites. The poem reiterates the language of movement because it was precisely on the ability or lack of ability to move that the entire fate of the battle turned. The text sets up a contrast between the Canaanite soldiers, equipped with their awesome chariots, and the Israelites, presumably volunteers who answered Barak's call to war, who come to the battle only on foot, and perhaps even without proper weapons: according to the Song, *no shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel* (5:8). The enemy, with the capability to move rapidly and forcefully, has every advantage and seems unassailable in a battle with slow moving infantry.

But chariots are useful only when they can move freely. Josephus cites an ancient tradition, borne out by the verses of the Song, that the battle was accompanied by 'a great storm with powerful rain and hail, and the wind blew the rain into the faces of the Canaanites . . .'⁴ Not only Barak (whose Hebrew name means lightning) fought in this battle, but also *the stars fought from heaven, From their courses they fought against Sisera* (5:20). When God came out to deliver His people, He caused the heavens to drop water, and with thunder, lightning, and torrential rains the military situation is radically reversed. The once fearsome machines of motion are now rendered immo-

bile, wheels fatally lodged in mud, while the Israelites who are on foot now have the advantage and can move swiftly down the mountain to finish off their foe. *The torrent Kishon swept them away*, Deborah exults, *the raging torrent, the torrent Kishon* (5:21). Rapidly moving flash floods, faster than any chariot, have defeated the apparently invincible adversary.

In a final ironical act, Sisera, the great commander of these mighty vehicles, is now forced to flee the battlefield *be-raglav* [on foot], the only efficient means of escape left to him, as is emphasized in 4:15 and again, in 4:17. The situation, of course, parallels the Exodus story, as the verb *va-yahom* [and He threw into a panic] reminds us. There too the confounding took the form of immobilizing and eventually engulfing the chariots *horse and driver He has hurled into the sea* (Ex. 15:1), and by the same means, the overwhelming power of flowing, churning waters.

This method of destruction seems particularly appropriate for the Canaanites, who, like their Egyptian predecessors, held themselves and their technological accomplishments in the highest regard. The Canaanites in our narrative come from the city of Harosheth-goiim, which, as the early commentators suggest, was a flourishing metropolis where metal, iron, and textile works thrived.⁵ That they placed a great deal of confidence in their weapons is demonstrated to the reader by the frequent repetition of the phrase *900 iron chariots*. The Israelites, who cannot bear the oppression any longer, cry out to God for salvation specifically because of (*ki*) the 900 chariots of iron (4:3). It is explicitly the sound of his massive chariots rolling along that Sisera's mother, as envisioned by Deborah at the end of the Song, awaits as a sure indication that her son is returning victorious. 'Why is his chariot so long in coming'? she sobs, 'why so late the clatter of his wheels?' (5:28). For this nation, which so valued and relied on its technology, the mode of retribution is deliberately brought about by the forces of nature. God causes the clouds to burst with rain, dramatically overturning the previous mobility/immobility relationship, as if to show that utter reliance on human technology is inevitably misplaced. The forces of nature can, and frequently will, trump any man-made machinery.

The repeated allusion to motion, then, which echoes throughout the Song, serves to fill in the gaps in the narrative, rounding out the picture, and giving us a much more comprehensive impression of exactly what went on before,

during and after the fateful battle of Sisera, Deborah and Barak. The children of Israel, whose freedom of movement was severely curtailed, gain the upper hand when God recruits the heavens, stirring up the clouds and stars above, till the chariots of Sisera are unable to move, bogged down in the mud. But the fact is that the seeds of this theme of motion are actually planted earlier, in chapter 4, the narrative section which precedes the Song, where we see that once again the text delicately hints that a great deal of the story revolves around movement or lack thereof.

Deborah has the unique distinction of being not only the one female judge in the book, nor the only judge referred to as a prophet(ess) (4:4), but also the only leader in the entire Book of Judges whom we actually see judging the people. The text paints a picturesque scene of the children of Israel coming up to her for judgment as she *used to sit under the Palm tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim* (4:5). The fact that when we first meet her Deborah is described as sitting is both deliberate and important. Sitting gives the impression of being static, unmoving, and passive. While the Israelites come up to her to receive judgment, she remains as firmly planted in the same spot as the palm tree behind her, which bears her name. When the time comes for her to summon Barak, the verse bothers to tell us that she *sent and called* (4:6) for him to come to her, as if to underline that at this point she remains immobile and inactive, leaving the movement, the action, to others.⁶ How unexpected it is, then, when instead of dutifully obeying her command to round up the troops and get them to the battlefield so that God can deliver the enemy into his hands, Barak responds somewhat reluctantly that he will only go -literally, *walk-* if she goes, but *if not, I will not go* (4:8).

Here, the sensitive reader can detect an abrupt shift in the "stage directions" referring to Deborah, corresponding to the shift in her role as leader of the children of Israel. No longer is she portrayed as "sitting" and "sending" and waiting for people to come to her; once she agrees to go with Barak (with the caveat that the honor of victory will no longer be his, but will now be *in the hands of a woman*, 4:9), the verbs associated with her change significantly. *Va-takom Devorah va-telekh*, now she "rises up" and "walks"; *va-ta'al imo Devorah*, she "goes up" with Barak to the mountain (4:9), and in doing so transforms herself from immobile to mobile, from passivity to activity. Ironi-

cally, this transformation involves abandoning the traditional portrayal of a judge, one who dispenses legal rulings, in favor of the distinctive portrayal found in the Book of Judges, a charismatic military leader. As she stands atop Mount Tabor, overlooking the battlefield, suddenly the moment is ripe for the fighting to commence. With a rousing battle call she spurs Barak and his soldiers to combat: '*Kum!*' — '*Rise up!*' she cries, the time for action is upon us! (4:14) Not coincidentally, the Song repeats this same verb, *kum*, following Deborah's description of the miserable state of affairs before she took charge: The roads were deserted, she grieves, and mobility drastically restricted, *Ad shakanti Devorah, shakanti em be-Yisra'el* [Till you⁷ arose, O Deborah, Arose, O mother, in Israel] (5:7).

The narrative portion of the story, then, by means of its deliberate choice of verbs, subtly indicates the metamorphosis which the prophetess Deborah undergoes, from immobile judge sitting under a palm tree to active leader, rising up and inspiring her people to victory in a characteristically masculine way. The epithet *mother in Israel*, in that case, seems at first glance to be somewhat out of place. That is until we remember that all three of the female characters in the story (and, as Deborah implies to Barak, this is a women's story), are characterized, albeit in radically different ways, as mothers.

While the Canaanites and their chariots are sinking deeper in the mud, Sisera, their general, abandons his troops and flees the battle on foot, running to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. *Va-tetzeh Ya'el likrat Sisera* (4:18); in contrast to Deborah, from the first moment we see Jael, she is active, taking the initiative, "going out" of her tent to greet the battle-weary Sisera before he even reaches her. In a beautifully alliterative verse the text gives us the sense not only of the words she speaks, but also of her tone and demeanor: *surah adoni, surah elai* she murmurs soothingly, beckoning him to come to her, urging him not to fear, *va-yasar eleha ha-ohelah, va-tekhassehu basemikhah* (4:18). He comes to her tent, and she covers him with a blanket. When he asks her for some water and she pours him milk instead, we cannot help but think of a mother comforting her child, giving him milk, and lulling him to sleep.⁸ What happens next takes the reader completely by surprise not only because it is the last thing we would expect from a mother figure, but also because the text cleverly relays the episode in such a way as to increase the suspense, slowly building up to the unexpected, gruesome climax.

As we have already seen, honing our sensitivity to the undercurrent of motion in the narrative enhances our appreciation of the story significantly. In this scene, it is specifically the technique of slow-motion which is utilized to great effect. Rather than blurting out the startling conclusion right away, verse 21 takes its time, giving us each detail piece by piece. First, Jael *takes the tent peg*, and our curiosity is piqued; why would she be putting up a tent right now, we wonder. Next she *places a mallet in her hand*, and we sense a gingerly, perhaps hesitant tone; a workman, used to wielding a mallet with all his might would probably not be described as "placing" the hammer in his hand. Then she *approaches him stealthily*, and with each step our trepidation grows, until finally, when she hammers the peg through his temple, crushing his skull, we are shocked not only by the act but also by the fact that a woman has done it. The text has skillfully led us along step by step, using slow motion, in order to achieve the maximum effect, much the same way as any good horror movie does, and the climax is all the more horrifying as a result.

When Barak, who has been chasing Sisera, arrives at Jael's tent, gone is the soothing, comforting tone which she had used earlier to lure Sisera to her. Once again she "goes out" of her tent to greet a soldier running from the battlefield, but this time she is all business, as she matter of factly informs Barak that she will *show him the man you are looking for* (4:22) who, of course, is lying dead with a tent peg through his head. Jael poses as a mother figure in order to gain Sisera's trust. So convincing is she that Sisera falls soundly asleep, battle fatigue, the milk, and being tucked in with a blanket all having their effect. But this mother too, like Deborah, acts in a distinctly unmotherly way, committing a cold blooded murder. Deborah's admonition to Barak that Sisera would be defeated by *the hands of a woman* (4:9) turns out to be quite literal.

The other mother in our story is Sisera's, who makes her appearance at the end of Deborah's Song. Like several other biblical characters, she is depicted as looking out the window - *be'ad ha-halon nishkefah* (5:28), and like those other characters, all of whom are also members of the noble class, she is displeased with what she sees outside.⁹ As we saw earlier, she is crying because she does not see the convoy of chariots returning home triumphantly, her son the conquering hero. Here the Song draws a direct and intentional parallel between Deborah and Sisera's mother. Although not at a window, Deborah is

also portrayed as looking out at the vacant roads below, and she too is distressed to see that her children, the children of Israel, are nowhere in sight, and that *the caravans have ceased* (5:6). But that is where the similarity ends. The "wisest of her ladies" answer Sisera's mother, and *she too replies to herself* (5:29). There is no need for worry, they all agree, her son must be late in returning because he is plundering, dividing up the spoils, and raping the women. Of course, this could not be farther from the truth, but Sisera's mother, not unlike Sisera himself at the tent of Jael, is lulled into a false sense of security by the calming voices of the women. When confronted with the possibility of bad news about her child, this mother sits back and allows herself to be mollified by untrue and crass words.

Deborah, the mother in Israel, stands between these two other mothers, sharply contrasted to the foolish, ineffectual Canaanite mother, on the one hand, and strongly resembling the heroic mother figure of Jael, on the other. Specifically, Deborah's character, like Jael's, undergoes an unexpected metamorphosis. At first, each woman is portrayed in somewhat conventional and typically feminine terms. True, Deborah is employed in an unconventional job for a woman in those days, yet she is introduced as *a woman, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth* (4:4), who sits in one place dispensing judgment to the children of Israel who come up to seek her advice. She, it seems, is not eager to abandon this role, urging Barak to lead the military campaign. Jael, who is introduced as *the wife of Heber the Kenite* (4:17), at first speaks softly and soothingly, offering Sisera a warm, safe haven in his time of need. Yet when the moment demands it, each of these mothers swiftly sheds her original identity, taking on an uncharacteristic, assertive, decidedly non-feminine one, instead. With Sisera asleep in her tent, Jael seizes the opportunity, and presumably reaching for whatever tools were handy, drives the tent peg through his skull, a violent, physically difficult action, to say the least. Deborah, reacting to Barak's refusal to accept a leadership role, abandons the shade of her palm tree and goes up to Mount Tabor along with the Israelite warriors, where she proceeds to issue orders like a military commander.

Sisera's mother undergoes no such transformation, and she remains passive, sitting at the window with the other women, believing that her son will arrive any minute laden with *spoil of dyed cloths* (5:30). Deborah does not indulge in such vain hopes. When she looks out onto the roads and sees that all is not

well with her children, she rises to the call, adapts herself to the situation, and takes charge, leading Israel to glorious victory.

After the victory, Deborah sings a song. The song, in its subtle way, tells of the miserable days of oppression when movement was curtailed by the enemy chariots, and of the great rainstorm which turned the tables, affording movement to those who could not move, immobilizing those who epitomized mobility. The enemy is completely subdued, calm is restored, the clouds part and the storm subsides. The Song, which had begun with a picture of God *coming forth* in all His splendor to deliver His nation amidst torrential rain and thunder, now concludes with a contrasting image: *So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord! But may His friends be as the sun when it comes out in its might* (5:31).

NOTES

1. The similarities between the two narratives explain why these chapters in Judges were chosen as the *haftarah* portion for the Exodus Torah reading.
2. For an interesting explanation as to why some tribes participated in the battle and others didn't, see L. Stager "The Song of Deborah-Why Some Tribes Answered The Call And Others Did Not" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 15:01 (1989).
3. See for example Rashi, Radak (Jud. 5:4).
4. Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1944) Book V, Ch. 5. My own translation.
5. See for example Ralbag, *Metzudat Zion* (Jud. 4:2).
6. See *Megillah* 14b for a criticism of Deborah in this connection.
7. According to this JPS translation the Hebrew *kanti* is an "archaic second-person singular feminine." The more common translation takes the verb as a first-person singular.
8. Aside from the maternal imagery, there are also strong sexual suggestions in this scene as well as in the Song's account of it.
9. See the relevant scenes involving Abimelekh (Gen. 26:8), Michal (II Sam. 6:16), and Jezebel (II Kg. 9:30).