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**ELIE ASSIS, "THE HAND OF A WOMAN":  
DEBORAH AND Yael (JUDGES 4)**



# **“THE HAND OF A WOMAN”: DEBORAH AND YAEL (JUDGES 4)**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Deborah Narrative is unique in the Book of Judges. While the heroes of the Book are military leaders who save Israel from its enemies, the protagonist of Judges 4 is a woman who is not active in the battle against the Canaanites. All the saviours in the Book are called Judges (2:16-19), with the meaning of leader. Deborah is the only character who is called a Judge, but in the judicial sense.<sup>1</sup> I have dealt elsewhere with the function of Deborah in the narrative, demonstrating the prominence of Deborah's leadership as a

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<sup>1</sup> On the two meanings of the root **שפ**, in the sense of 'to rule', and 'to judge' see: T. Ishida, "The Leaders of the Tribal Leagues 'Israel' in the Pre-Monarchic Period", *RB* 80 (1973), 514-530.

prophetess of God and not as a human heroine.<sup>2</sup> This is meant to clearly convey the idea that God alone is responsible for victory. Being a woman, she did not take part in the military campaign, and thus she was not a powerful charismatic saviour. In this short paper I wish to focus on the role of another woman in the story – that of Yael.

Verses 14-22 describe the battle, but only verses 14-15 depict the actual campaign between the two forces; the remainder of the narrative provides a detailed and vivid description of Yael killing Sisera (vv. 17-22). Yael is the heroine of the last scene of the narrative, vv. 17-22.<sup>3</sup> Her words open (v. 18) and end the scene (v. 22).<sup>4</sup> In her first sentence she approaches Sisera and in her last she approaches Barak; in both instances the men respond positively. The depiction of the assassination of Sisera is detailed and extensive in comparison with the brief and generalized description of the war itself (vv. 14-15). Why does Yael occupy such a central position in the narrative?

## 2. YAEL – DEBORAH’S HAND

I wish to propose that Yael’s function in the story is actually meant to shed light on Deborah’s prophetic image. Yael’s actions take the

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<sup>2</sup>E. Assis, “Man, Woman and God in Judg 4”, *SJOT* (Forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup>On the meaning of the name Yael see: E. van Wolde, “Yael in Judges 4,” *ZAW* 107 (1995), 240-246; S. C. Layton, “Yael in Judges 4: An Onomastic Rejoinder,” *ZAW* 109 (1997), 93-94.

<sup>4</sup>J. W. H. Bos, “Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3,” *Semeia* 42 (1988), 53.

reader back to Deborah’s response to Barak’s request that she should accompany him: “I will go with you. However, there will be no glory for you on the road on which you are going, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9).

Some think that Deborah is referring to herself in these words, and that she is making a logical deduction in light of Barak’s request.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation is improbable. Firstly, in asking Deborah to accompany him to the battlefield Barak consciously subordinated himself to Deborah; thus if Deborah’s intention was to point out that the honour of victory would not be attributed to him, her words are absolutely superfluous. Secondly, the purpose of the operation is to overpower the enemy and bring glory to the Lord. It is thus not in the prophetess’s character to be concerned with human glory when Barak pronounced a humble statement.

A more likely interpretation is that Deborah uttered a prophecy which was realized by Yael’s actions against Sisera in the last part of the narrative.<sup>6</sup> The advantage of this understanding is that Deborah’s words correspond perfectly to her character in the story. It is also possible that initially the intention of Deborah’s

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<sup>5</sup> Kimhi, Kera, Y. Kaufman, *The Book of Judges* (Jerusalem 1978), 124 (Hebrew); B. Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, Edinburgh 1995, 190.

<sup>6</sup> G. F. Moore, *Judges* (ICC), Edinburgh 1895, 116-117; C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*, London 1918, 89.

words is ambiguous,<sup>7</sup> and this is resolved in the last scene when Deborah’s prediction is fulfilled by Yael.<sup>8</sup>

Yael is thus Deborah’s “hand” – an extension of Deborah who carries out her prophecy: “for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9).<sup>9</sup> This being the case, Rasmussen’s observation that Deborah disappears from the story after v. 14, is inaccurate.<sup>10</sup> Amit, too, claims that because Deborah is not apparent throughout the story she may not be considered as its main heroine.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, because Yael’s actions are predicted by Deborah, Schneider’s opinion that Yael is the heroine of the story

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<sup>7</sup> See also: L. Alonso-Schökel, “Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter”, *Biblica* 42 (1961), 159; D. F. Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story, Judges iv 4-22”, J. A. Emerton (ed.), *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament* (VTsup, 30), Leiden 1979, 177-178). Against this interpretation see: H.D. Neef, “Der Sieg Deborahs und Baraks über Sisra: Exegetische Beobachtungen zum Aufbau und Werden von Jdc 4,1-24”, *ZAW* 101 (1989), 34 n. 46.

<sup>8</sup> According to Boling, she did not understand her own words: she thought about herself but her words actually referred to Yael. R. G. Boling, *Judges* (AB), New-York 1975, 96. Webb believes that the identity of the ‘woman’ is delayed until the end of the story in order to surprise the reader with the fact that God chose a foreign woman to save Israel. B. G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTsup, 46), Sheffield 1987, 138.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story,” 164-165. The generalized style of battle is not due to the lack of narrative skill as suggested by Alonso-Schökel, “Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter,” 162.

<sup>10</sup> R. C. Rasmussen, “Deborah the Woman Warrior”, M. Bal (ed.), *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women’s Lives* (JSOTsup, 81), Sheffield 1989, 70-93.

<sup>11</sup> Y. Amit, “Judges 4: Its Contents and Form”, *JSOT* 39 (1987), 89-111.

is not plausible.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to these observations, if indeed the Yael scene is meant to depict the realization of Deborah’s prophecy then this scene actually intensifies Deborah’s prophetic character.

### 3. YAEL’S UPPER HAND

Deborah’s words “for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9), mean to strike Sisera as well as Barak. Indeed, in the Yael scene Sisera and Barak are presented ironically in relation to Yael.<sup>13</sup>

The rivalry between Sisera and his army and Barak and his army is dominant in the narrative. The summation of the two forces by the two army leaders is described in a similar manner:<sup>14</sup>

“**Barak summoned** Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and **he went up by foot** with ten thousand men behind him” (4:10).

“**Sisera summoned** all his chariots, **nine hundred chariots of iron**, and all the troops who were with him” (4:13).

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<sup>12</sup> T. J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam), Collegeville 2000, 76.

<sup>13</sup> See: E. Assis, “The Choice to Serve God and Assist His People: Rahab and Yael” *Biblica* 85 (2004), 84-85.

<sup>14</sup> See also: Alonso-Schökel (“Erzäkunst im Buche der Richter,” 160-167); Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story,” 169-171.

Yet Sisera’s army is significantly stronger since it is fortified by his great defence of “nine hundred chariots of iron”, while the verse emphasizes the disadvantage of Barak’s infantry force: “and he went up by foot”.

However, the situation between the armies is soon reversed. Barak descends from Mount Tabor to victory, “**Barak went down** from Mount Tabor” (4:14), while Sisera steps down from his chariot, a symbol of his power, and flees by foot: “**Sisera went down** from his chariot and fled away **on foot**” (4:15).

Just as the reader is convinced of Barak’s victory over Sisera, Yael comes to overshadow both Sisera and Barak. She controls both men; she decides who will be defeated and who will be victor.<sup>15</sup> She comes out to greet both men, and the two encounters contain analogous terms:<sup>16</sup>

Judg 4:18	Judg 4:22
<b>Yael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him,</b> ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.’	<b>Yael came out to meet him, and said to him,</b> ‘Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.’

<sup>15</sup> A similar power is possessed by Rahab, see: Assis “The Choice to Serve God and Assist His People: Rahab and Yael” *Biblica* 85 (2004), 84-85; E. Assis, *From Moses to Joshua and from the Miraculous to the Ordinary: A Literary Analysis of the Conquest Narrative in the Book of Joshua*, Jerusalem 2005, 68-74 (Hebrew).

<sup>16</sup> Compare Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story,” 172; R. H. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (SVT, 63), Leiden 1996, 129.

<p><b>So he turned aside to her</b> (ויסר אליה) into the tent, and she covered him with a rug</p>	<p><b>So he went into her</b> [tent] (ויבוא אליה); and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple</p>
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Contrary to the reader’s expectation, Barak does not complete the victory over his enemy; it is Yael who actually defeats Sisera; he foolishly believes that her invitation is genuine and that she wishes to show him hospitality. Sisera's puerile dependence is marked by Yael's offer of a cup of milk and a blanket. Irony is created by the fact that a woman may kill an experienced warrior: he survives the battlefield yet succumbs to the hand of a woman.<sup>17</sup> Sisera trusts Yael to the extent that he asks her to guard him while he sleeps in the tent (4:20).

However, Barak’s ironic presentation, even though more subtle, is surprising and it should draw the reader's attention. Barak is presented ironically by shifts between different points of view. Verse 21 describes Sisera’s assassination by Yael from the narrator's viewpoint:

“Then Yael Heber’s wife took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer in her hand, and **went softly unto him** (ותבוא אליו), and smote **the nail into his temples**, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. **So he died**”.

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<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Abimelech (Jud 9:53-54) expresses his feeling of humiliation if he were to be killed by a woman.

The death of Sisera is mentioned again in a similar way in v. 22:

“And **he came into her** (וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ) [into the tent],  
 behold, Sisera **lay dead, and the nail *was* in his  
 temples**”.

The first report describes the assassination of Sisera by Yael from the narrator's point of view. Now there is a shift to another scene indicated by the word “behold” (וַהֲגִיחַ), and the narrative focus shifts suddenly to Barak: “And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Yael came out to meet him” (v. 21). This second report of Sisera's death is from Barak's point of view and describes Barak seeing with his own eyes that Sisera has been put to death even as Barak was pursuing him. The shift in point of view when the assassination is discussed for the second time is meant to place Barak in a foolish light— he had continued to pursue Sisera although Sisera was already dead.<sup>18</sup> This ironic presentation is part of the actual realization of Deborah's prophecy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story,” 173. Kaufman (*Judges*, 124) is mistaken in his statement that Sisera's downfall at Yael's hand is not offensive to Barak.

<sup>19</sup> Alonso-Schökel, “Erzäkunst im Buche der Richter,” 161-166; Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story,” 178-179.

#### 4. THE POWER OF THE WEAKER SEX

Deborah’s prophecy that a woman will kill Sisera is significant. The involvement of women in wars in the Bible is rare; the unique quality of this prophecy is worthy of close examination to see just how it is fulfilled. In the course of the plot another aspect of the prophecy that a woman will kill Sisera becomes obvious. The weaker sex will overcome the stronger one by exploiting the weakness of men for women.

Deborah’s prophecy “the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9) does not refer merely to the identity of the assassin but also to the way in which the woman accomplishes her victory. Yael confronts a strong warrior, a general; physically she is inferior to him, so she uses her femininity to defeat him. Her greeting, “**Turn in, my lord, turn in to me**; fear not” is fraught with ambiguity. Does she offer shelter, or, perhaps the promise of a sexual encounter? Contrast the sexual innuendo in her invitation, with the innocence evidenced in Lot’s invitation to the angels, using nearly identical language: “And he said, Behold now, **my lords, turn in**, I pray you, **into your servant’s house**” (Gen 19:2). Lot’s words are a clear invitation into the house: “turn in...into the...house” (סורו אל בית עבדיכם). Yael, however, applies the verb to herself: “turn into me” (סורה אלי). This form resembles the oft-found sexual formula ויבא אל. Yael’s greeting and invitation parallel the call of a prostitute in the Book of Proverbs: “**calling to those who pass by**, who are going straight on their way, ‘You who are

simple, **turn (רַסַּר) in here!**” (Prov 9:15-16; see also Prov 7:5-23). The sibilance of the phrase indicates a sense of sensuality in Yael’s voice.<sup>20</sup> The multiple references to Yael covering Sisera in bed (vv. 18, 19) have a sexual connotation.<sup>21</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Yael’s seduction of Sisera lulls him into false confidence.<sup>22</sup>

As mentioned above, Yael’s encounter with Barak is parallel to her encounter with Sisera. First, she goes out to greet Barak “Yael came out to meet him”. Then she invites him into the tent to witness Sisera’s fate: “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking”. In contrast with her invitation to Sisera these words contain no sexual allusions; however, when Barak’s entrance into the tent is described, a term is used that is sexually allusive: “he came into her” (יָבֹרָא אֶלֶיהָ) connotes sexual intercourse.

Scholars have remarked on some of the sexual allusions in Yael’s actions, but they have misunderstood the intention of these allusions in the narrative as a whole. The prominence of sexuality

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<sup>20</sup> A similar observation is found in a Midrash in the Babylonian Talmud, Megilah 15a: “Rahab inspired lust by her name, Yael by her voice, Abigail by her memory, Michal...by her appearance”.

<sup>21</sup> A sexual allusion is found in the poetic form of the account, Judg 5:27. Sexual allusions are explicit in the Pseudepigraphic book Pseudo-Philo 31:3. See also Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 103a.

<sup>22</sup> On sexuality in the story see also: Y. Zakovitch, “Sisseras Tod,” *ZAW* 93 (1981), 364-374. S. Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Yael,” P. L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43-57. Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, 113-117. However, Bal sees Yael’s actions as motherly, M. Bal, et. al, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 213.

in the encounters of the Yael narrative fulfills and realizes Deborah’s prophecy that Sisera will be defeated by a woman.

Yael’s motives in assisting Israel are not apparent in the story. She belongs to the Kenite clan which maintains good relations with the Canaanites and with the Israelites, vv. 11 and 17. The neutrality of the Kenites as emphasized in the story is necessary to explain the situation in which both generals trust Yael. However, this neutrality also obscures Yael’s motives, and avoids any explanation of her actions on a political plane.<sup>23</sup> Yael’s interference in favour of Israel is not logically predictable and therefore is meant to make the main motif of the story conspicuous: the prophetic personality of Deborah that prevails over Yael’s actions.

While sexuality is a featured element of the Deborah narrative, it is so exclusively with reference to the actions of Yael. Deborah, the focus of the story, is, to be sure, a womanly figure. But her role in the story is purely that of a woman of God. It is she who reveals the hand of God in “the hand of a woman”.

In conclusion: The depiction of the assassination of Sisera by Yael is detailed and extensive in order to demonstrate the

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<sup>23</sup> Amit, “Judges 4,” 97. This is probably the problem Klein aimed to solve when she determined that Yael is an Israelite. L. R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Bible and Literature Series, 14), Sheffield 1988, 43. However, there are no real grounds for this hypothesis, indeed see: Webb, *Judges*, 137; Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 37. Bos indicates the independence of Yael and how her actions are not in accordance with regular women’s behavior, Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 52-53. See also Schneider, *Judges*, 77.

realization of Deborah’s prophecy, and to reemphasize her prophetic personality.<sup>24</sup>

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