

OSCILLATING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN BINARIES:  
NARRATIVE TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING  
JUDGES 4 & 19

A Senior Honors Thesis

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will show that dichotomies in Judges are used as narrative tools to express anxiety about the ever-changing world of Ancient Israel. In the Deborah narrative of Judges 4, the binaries of masculine/feminine and male/female criss-cross, and in the concubine's narrative, the binaries of out/in and public/domestic become confused as the narrative—along with the events themselves—crumble out of control and lead to civil war, rape, and pandemonium on a grand scale. The narrators of Judges oscillate between these binaries in order to convey the sense of moral upheaval and social confusion wrought from the changing political landscape of Ancient Israel. A deeper understanding of the text is gained from this reading, such that the commonly-made presumption that these tales are simply reflections of a misogynist society is replaced with a proto-feminist reading; rather, these stories display the danger of a world where too much unchecked power is left in the wrong hands. The finite message of these stories is this: a civilized society needs a centralized government, or the types of heinous acts described in the book of Judges will never end.

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## INTRODUCTION

“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 21: 25).

Scholars conjecture that the events in the books of Judges occurred between 1400 and 1050 B.C.. The dates that the books were written and/or compiled is disputed, however, for the episodes were not arranged chronologically and were sometimes written decades and possibly centuries apart (Boling)<sup>1</sup>. At the time when the events themselves occurred, the current tribal system of governance was in a state of alteration, riddling Ancient Israel with political chaos and vast cultural and religious shifts. Thus, since the authors emphasize the necessity of having a king and seem to push for a monarchic government, it is most likely that the narratives were written retrospectively, after the monarchies of Saul and David were already established. They are thereby representative of a time of political turmoil and social rearrangement as the tribal formations fought their way toward a more centralized government. Thus, the narratives reflect the type of disorder borne from these great changes in Ancient Israelite society (Bal *Murder* 1).

Even after the events in Judges occurred, it may have been hundreds of years before Ancient Israel saw any coherent form of monarchic rule, beginning with the King Saul and King David eras around 1000 B.C. (Bal *Murder* 1). In the preceding centuries, the Israelites were introduced to new cultures and religion. As Mieke Bal explains in her introduction to *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*: “During this period of transition, the tribes were assimilated by urban and agrarian peoples who spoke other languages, had other customs, and venerated other gods” (1). Thus, the problems surrounding the Ancient

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<sup>1</sup> As Mieke Bal makes clear in *Murder and Difference*, the dates are not agreed upon: “The text of [Judges] chapter five is so ancient that in at least seventy percent of the verses, translators are unsure of the meaning of important words” (1), but this problem is not found in more recent texts. It is difficult to properly date these texts because they were not compiled chronologically and some are much older or younger than others.

Israelite society were not just political; their religion, culture, and economy were challenged, leaving the Israelites morally confused and longing for a strong leader to show them the way. I suppose this should make one less surprised to find that the books of Judges are riddled with heinous practices, such as gang-rape, child sacrifice, and dismemberment. Clearly, these atrocities seem out of place in what is revered as a holy book used for moral and spiritual guidance.

Understanding how this book fits into the context of the Old Testament lies in the analysis of the texts' literary elements. A barrage of dichotomies has been placed in the text, used strategically by the narrators to uncover national anxiety about the social and economic changes sweeping through Ancient Israel. I argue that the narrators of Judges often confuse and oscillate the lines between these dichotomies in order to convey the sense of moral upheaval wrought from the clash of cultures and a changing political landscape. In each of the stories, the authors set up a number of binaries—for example, between masculine/feminine, public/domestic, out/in, safety/danger—which they strategically tear down as the narrative unfolds, thereby successfully allowing the reader to vicariously experience the confusion and chaos taking place at the time that the events occurred. This essay will demonstrate that the narrators purposefully confuse the binaries in the texts in order to communicate the chaos and pandemonium of a world upside down with change.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT: WOMEN IN THE TIME OF THE JUDGES

“**T**o the woman He said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’” (Gen 3:16).

### Women in Biblical Law

One of the most discussed topics in contemporary biblical scholarship is the place of women in the Bible and in Ancient Israel<sup>2</sup>. Since my essay is particularly focused on gender, historical contextualization is necessary. As Phyllis Bird and numerous other feminist biblical scholars have noted, the lives of Ancient Israelite women revolved around the domestic sphere and were often contained there. Bird writes, “Since women’s place in society is determined by their place within the family, women are not normally free to operate for extended periods outside this sphere. The well-known exceptions are the widow, the prostitute, and the hierodule<sup>3</sup>” (“The Place of Women” 10). The issue surrounding women’s mobility (or lack thereof) was viewed as a concern for women’s safety; an unmarried, virgin daughter alone outside of her father’s house, for example, was in great danger of losing what made her valuable—her virginity, and thus her father’s patrilinear line (Bal *Death* 175).

This helps to explain why the Old Testament laws put such strict limitations on women’s mobility. For example, Exodus 21:7 says, “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do.” Here, not only is it made clear that fathers had the legal (and God-sanctioned) right to sell their daughters as slaves, but their mobility as a female was limited in ways that male slaves’ mobility was not; she was confined to the indoors unless chaperoned,

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<sup>2</sup> For these are not always the same; see Carol Meyers.

<sup>3</sup> Defined by the Encarta dictionary as: “slave in temple: in ancient Greece, an enslaved person kept in or associated with a temple, especially a prostitute.”

but he was allowed to travel freely. Laws specifically dealing with rape sometimes place blame on women due to their location at the time of the attack; if a woman is raped in a city, she must be stoned to death with her attacker because the assumption is that if no one heard her cry out for help then the sex must have been consensual (Deut 22:23-4). Likewise, a woman raped in the country is absolved for no one would have been around to hear her scream (Deut 22:25-7). Even though these laws may have been created to keep women safe, they were still based on andocentric values; women were not believed to be safe outside of the home because they were prey to the men who may “ravage” them, and yet the laws often chose to restrict women’s movement rather than focus on proper conduct toward women.

The Old Testament’s laws also testify to women’s legal dependence on men. For example, Numbers 30 reveals that a woman’s legally-binding oral contract could be overruled by either her father or her husband. Only one verse describes the protocol for a man taking an oath: “When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word: he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth” (Num 30:1). In contrast, there are fifteen verses describing the process for females: when a woman is young, the power of veto belongs to her father, and when she is married, the privilege to nullify her oath falls to her husband (Num 30:2-16). A woman’s word was never final without the approval or disapproval of the man in control of her and so she was legally invisible without him in her life. Some scholars argue that since the notion of individuality may have been different in Ancient Israel than it is in modern, Westernized societies, one must not read women’s dependence as derogatory. However, the laws do seem to represent men as autonomous and individual decision-makers while reducing the women’s agency and potential.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Meyers: “Although it is normal for us to think of persons as autonomous human beings and to differentiate ourselves as individuals from social relationships and family ties, it would have been rare for the ancient Israelite to

Women's subordinate legal status is shown in additional ways. Men could easily obtain a divorce for almost any reason, whereas women did not have the option of divorce at all. A man could simply give his wife a statement of divorce and cast her out, leaving her bereft of economic means and legal standing (Deut 24:1). As for ownership, women could only inherit if there were no men to precede her: "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it" (Num 27:8-11). This was viewed as a progressive law in its time, for it established that women could inherit if there were no sons, whereas before, daughters could not inherit (Num 27:1-11). Yet, true to the patriarchal form, there is no mention of wives; the money and land was passed between sons and brothers, and only a daughter, if she was lucky enough to have no brothers, but there were no laws allowing women to inherit from their husbands. In fact, wives were often passed down as part of the inheritance.

A wife may be passed as property to her husband's brother if she is widowed; the brother may refuse her, but she must marry him if he wants to marry her (Deut 25:5-10). Desirable wives of conquered enemies may be taken as property according to Deuteronomy 21:10-13: "Suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, and so you bring her home to your house...you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife." These laws do not give women the right to refuse a husband, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, rape, or slavery. Biblical laws treat wives as property to be passed between men. In fact, the census often counted only males (Num 1:2-3; Num 3:15),

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have done so in quite the same way. People experienced themselves relationally rather than through individuation and separation. ..This communal orientation means that one cannot really consider the exploitation of individuals in the same way that we do in the modern world" (36).

indicating that women were legally (and perhaps politically) invisible and no more human than donkeys or cattle

In contrast, many scholars stress the verses which suggest equal legal standing for men and women. For example, Exodus 21:15-17 says that the punishment for murdering or cursing either parent should be executed, thus suggesting that both mother and father deserve equal respect from children. Another example indirectly suggests that women can own oxen and that injuring either a male or female requires punishment; anyone who owned an ox, whether male or female, would receive the same punishment if they injured another man or woman (Ex 21:28-31). In addition, slave owners are equally punished for injuring a male or female slave, and should a slave be gored by an ox, the owner is compensated equally for male or female slaves (Ex 21:20-21). However, these verses do not necessarily denote that “free” Israelite men and women were always treated equally under the law; the laws mostly discuss management of the slave class, with the exception of the rule about mothers, which more closely adheres to the cultural respect for parents more than demonstrating equality between men and women.

Regardless of what the Old Testament law may say, scholars and archeologists alike have uncovered evidence to suggest that the biblical laws and society did not always agree with one another. One scholar writes, “Biblical texts alone are not sufficient nor reliable for the reconstruction of gender roles in early Israel. The potential for reaching the Israelite woman lies in the use of extra-biblical materials provided by archeology as well as in the examination of biblical texts; and it also involves the application of social scientific analytical perspectives” (Meyers 36). Others agree. Peggy L. Day describes it another way: “The text may claim to speak for the culture, but it is neither coextensive with nor equivalent to the culture” (5). Another scholar offers a different explanation:

“The Bible’s view of gender sets up a dramatic clash between theory and reality. On one hand, women occupied a socially subordinate position. On the other hand, the Bible did not label them as inferior. This gap between ideology and social structure has a major disadvantage: it did not explain people’s lives, did not give people a way to understand why women had no access to public decision making...the Bible’s vision of a gender-neutral humanity ultimately gave way in the face of ongoing patriarchy” (Frymer-Kensky xvi).

What Frymer-Kensky is discussing is the advent of patriarchy before biblical law. A patriarchy, a system where the family line begins with the father, often ends up favoring males in the society because of their greater importance to the structure of the family. The Old Testament laws were built to accommodate a patriarchy rather than to challenge it, and as expected, the result was that women evolved into powerless, subordinate helpers rather than leaders. The *intention* of these laws was not to push women to inferior statuses, but this was sometimes the case because of the nature of a system where one sex, men in this case, is favored over the other. Women were considered lesser subjects than men—not necessarily because society or the Old Testament was misogynistic—but because Ancient Israelite society had become dependent on the way the patriarchal system had gendered society; a gender-role specific system was necessary to maintain the economy and the patriarchal structure of families. Women were confined to the domestic sphere and family realm because that is where the patriarchal system dictated they should be; rather than challenging this system and allowing a more equalized distribution of power between men and women, biblical law built itself around the existing structure. Thus, biblical law reflects the subordinate status of women.

## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

For multiple reasons, the economy was heavily reliant on women. Archeological evidence suggests that women were producers of handmade goods, such as tools and clothing, for the usually self-sustaining family. The labor intensive nature of an agricultural lifestyle meant that women were expected to help at the busiest times of the year, especially in small families where there were not as many children to help (Meyers 38). When the men were called to war, women had to assume the primary responsibilities of the farm, thus charging women with the task of organizing the work force and caring for the crops while the men were gone (38). Since households were mostly autonomous, the success of the crops weighed heavily on the shoulders of each family, and sometimes heavily on the shoulders of women in particular.

Archeological evidence from the Iron Age, the period during which the events which inspired Judges are believed to have occurred, shows that there may have even been clusters of houses in the highlands, all working together as a unit to maintain themselves (Meyers 38). This type of structure probably allowed for female leadership among families (38). Of women's economic role in this type of society, Carol Meyers writes: "The economic role of the female was, as we have already suggested, crucial. Women were undoubtedly involved in all aspects of economic life: in producing, transforming, and allocating resources. Much of what they did required considerable technological skill" (38). In addition, women gained authority within the home as they aged: "In their managerial roles, senior females gained authority—the recognized right to control" (39). Meyers explains that the social emphasis on parental respect contributed to this: "Filial obedience to mother as well as father was imperative for maintaining order and accomplishing subsistence activities, and was no doubt sanctioned in customary and then in Pentateuchal law" (39). Women may not have been respected for their participation in

the same way that men were as public figures, but their involvement was inextricable to the economic wellbeing.

The second major component of women's participation in the economy involved the production of the patriarchal line: women nurtured and gave care to the sons and daughters of the next generation of Israelites, to carry on both their father's name and the heritage of Israel (Frymer-Kensky ii). "Parenting," Meyers writes, "The socialization and education of the young—was inextricably linked to maternity and was interwoven with the technological specialties of the females. Transmission of many aspects of culture was thus part of the female's role; children of both genders absorbed modes of behavior, cultural forms, and social values from the direct or indirect instructions of the mother" (39). In other words, women were solely responsible for the moral and cultural future of Israel, and were thus compelled to encourage morally healthy development. Additionally, women were expected to produce many children who could help with the agricultural work and sustain the family unit. Producing many sons also gave opportunities to increase the family status, by being able to marry off more daughters and marry more sons to rich women to increase the wealth of the family.

It is not surprising then, that there were strict rules about women's sexuality to protect the ascension of the patriarchal line. A woman must be found to be a virgin on the night of her wedding or she would be stoned to death, but there is no care as to whether or not men are virgins when they marry (Deut 22:13-21). After marriage, a husband could even take his wife to a priest if he suspects her to have been unfaithful. The priest would carry out a complicated ritual which included drinking "the water of bitterness" (Num 23:24). The idea is that "if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop, and the

woman shall become an execration among her people” (Num 5:27). In other words, whatever may be growing in her womb will be aborted and she will be unable to have children for the rest of her life. The patriarchal line was so valuable that abortion was sanctioned by priests and God as a precaution to protect it (Num 5:11-30). As with the rules regarding women’s imprisonment in the home, justified as rules of protection, the laws strictly limiting women’s sexuality could have limited men’s sexuality as well to ensure that the family lines stayed intact. The fact that the law focuses on women only reflects the andocentric and patriarchal thinking which yields victim-blaming.

On the other end of the spectrum, many narratives in the Bible focus on the importance of a woman’s inability to reproduce after marriage, thus expressing both the pressure and necessity of bearing a child: in Genesis, Sarah asks Abraham to sleep with Hagar, her slave, out of desperation because she cannot give him children; later in Genesis, Rachel follows suit and becomes increasingly jealous as she watches her maid and her sister bear children; First Samuel first introduces Samuel’s mother at the altar of the Lord, begging for a male child who, she promises, will be a priest for life if only God would grant her one. Children were necessary to the welfare of the family; to have children meant to have help supporting the family, descendants to pass on the patriarchal line, and culturally knowledgeable heralds to carry on the traditions of Israel. To produce children and to raise them was a woman’s primary opportunity for participation in the Israelite political, social, and economical structure, and thus the Old Testament reflects the anxiety and anticipation women felt regarding this, particularly because women’s influence extended only so far as to their families and minimally extended into the public spheres of religion, politics, or war (Frymer-Kensky i).

## **WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE ISRAELITE RELIGION**

The Old Testament's laws may not have been representative of women's actual place, role, and importance in society, but the laws regarding religion permeated the culture and were strictly observed. In many ways, women were directly excluded from religion. For example, in a cyclical religious ceremony, "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God," thus singling out the men, but there is no mention of women standing before the deity in an equal or similar way (Lev 23:17). In addition, the normal functioning of women's bodies ostracized them from religious functions. Although women were socially important for bearing children, the Ancient world saw the menstruation process as unclean (as are semen emissions from men) and thus required a ritual cleansing. But while men are unclean until the evening after a semen emission, women were unclean for days or weeks at a time. Being ceremonially unclean meant that one was not allowed to "touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary" (Lev 12:4). So while bodily discharge left a man unclean for only one day, the cyclical uncleanliness resulting from menstruation and childbirth would ostracize women from holy spaces of worship much more often and for longer periods of time. Women were not consistently allowed to be a part of the religious scene; their presence was constantly interrupted by their bodily cycles.

Leviticus lays down several laws which forbid women from coming into contact with anyone during their periods (Lev 15:19-32) and specific rules regarding childbirth (Lev 12:1-8). Strangely, the period of ritual uncleanliness was longer if a woman gave birth to a girl than if she gave birth to a boy: "If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days...Her blood purification shall be thirty-three days...If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks...her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days"

(Lev 12:2-5). In other words, giving birth to a female somehow required a longer cleansing time, as if female children were more unclean than male children. However, there is no indication that this denotes female inferiority; this may be a sign of reverence for the womb or the female babies who will someday produce Israel's next generation, for our definition of "uncleanness" could be negatively marked in a way that it was not for the Ancient Israelites. In the same way, if someone were to study modern society's depiction of women thousands of years from now, one might think that the billboards and magazine covers are celebrating female sexuality and beauty rather than objectifying and demeaning women; thus, we may be looking back and wrongly judging the practices of ancient Israel.

Phyllis Bird explains that women were often confined to secondary roles when they were allowed to participate in formal activities, while men were the leaders and organizers of rituals ("The Place of Women" 10). Archeological evidence suggests that women were probably behind the creation of goods for cultic ceremonies, such as the sewing and weaving of religious clothes and decorations, preparing the food used for sacrifice or ceremonies, and the cleaning and preparation of the areas where service was being held (10). Evidence suggests that there may have been a class of women unto themselves who were the designated singers or dancers for ceremonies, and those who worked in the sanctuary, although the roles of these women were not clearly defined and the Old Testament offers little evidence (10). In the private realm, however, women sometimes had the opportunity for religious leadership on a small scale. As scholars have noted, control over the informal or formal religious ceremonies or rituals which occurred in village-wide events or within the domestic sphere may have been female-headed (Meyers 39; Ackerman "Digging Up" 175). In the public, women were routinely ostracized from the larger religious roles, leadership positions, and participation in

activities, and even the domestic front offered only limited access to positions for female leadership.

There was one exception. The strongest position of power a woman could have acquired in the Israelite cultus was that of a prophet. Bird writes: “Whatever the role of the prophet within the cultus, it was clearly not a priestly office. Since recruitment was by divine designation (charismatic gift) and not dependent upon family or status, it was the one religious office with broad power that was not mediated or directly controlled by the cultic or civil hierarchy and the one religious office open to women.” (“The Place of Women” 11). As a prophet, a woman could have a religious, public voice, but this office was accompanied by constraints as well. Bird continues, “The lack of formal restrictions to women’s assumption of the office does not mean, however, that women were equally free to exercise it... Women were confronted by a dual vocation, which was normally—and perhaps always—resolved in favor of the domestic obligation. Women prophets probably exercised their charismatic vocation alongside their family responsibilities or after their child-rearing duties were past” (“The Place of Women” 11). Much like the modern world, women who dared to take on the responsibility of a career outside the home are often weighed down and kept back from advancement due to the lingering obligations of family.

Regardless of the pages upon pages of laws listed in the Old Testament which suggest women’s inferior legal and religious status, women were essential to the economy and society of Ancient Israel. Women were legally—and perhaps religiously—dependent upon their fathers, husbands, and brothers, but as scholars also point out, the agrarian society recognized the importance of both men and women’s contributions to the economy and society, for “the Bible’s own image of women enabled its thinkers to accept this powerlessness without

translating it into a sense of inferiority or worthlessness” (Frymer-Kensky xvii). In other words, people reading the original texts were able to understand that just as women could not operate without men, men could not operate without women.

Somehow, despite all of the barriers preventing women from climbing the social ladder to entrance into the public sphere, women in Old Testament narratives occasionally surface from the pages as public figures in positions typically reserved for men: as heroes, generals, queens, and leaders. Many times, the women’s full histories are not included in the narrative, and thus readers can never be sure of how some women were able to achieve such a high leadership status in the public sphere. For modern readers, this mystery can only be solved using the tools of theory and analysis. Among these powerful female figures is Israel’s fourth judge, Deborah. In many ways, Deborah is “outside” and “othered”: she sits physically outside under a palm tree and functions outside society’s domestically oriented expectations of women, as a military leader and religious figure. Deborah is Israel’s center; she counsels, leads, and is textually described as “the mother of Israel.” Another example is Deborah’s counterpart, Jael, the woman who lulls an enemy leader into her tent and assassinates him with a tent peg. Lastly, we have the Levite’s concubine whose private-made-public, chopped-up body becomes the catalyst for civil war among Israelite tribes.

These women, who somehow cross the line from private to public, become the central figures in helping to understand the dichotomies of male and female, out and in, private and public and the narrative use of these dichotomies to express the anxieties of an unknown political, economic, and religious future for Israel. As the narratives progress, the lines between the binaries become even more ambiguous and complicated, culminating in the final act of barbarism in Judges 19-21 which ends with the brutal gang-rape and dismemberment of an

innocent woman, near-destruction of one of Israel's twelve tribes, mass kidnapping, and mass rape.

## DEBORAH

“**A**t that time, Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel...She sent and summoned Barak...and said to him, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand... I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon...’ Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, I will go, but if you do not go with me, I will not go.’ And she said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman’” (Judg 4:4-10).

When Deborah’s story begins, readers are fully aware of the mess she has been placed in charge of. The three preceding stories of Judges describe the previous rulers and the vast amounts of shenanigans which accompanied them. Once Joshua died, the Israelites began to disobey God’s command. Israel became unfaithful to their Lord and started worshipping Baal and other lesser gods until they “provoked the Lord to anger” (Judg 2:11-13). The text says that “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” (2:15). So the Lord appointed judges, and “whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, worshipping them and bowing down to them” (2:19). At the time of the judges, Israel seems to have consistently taken one step forward and then multiple steps back.

Othniel came to power as a judge, starts a war, and was delivered to the enemies for his wickedness (2:7-11). Ehud followed as the second judge. He killed the king of Moab while in the bathroom and Ehud was praised for his success. Following Ehud is the third judge Shamgar. His reign is textually summed up as the one who “killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad” and also “delivered Israel” (3:1-31). However, the Israelites relapsed and had to be brought back to the Lord in-between each of these judges. Just before Deborah is introduced as the fourth judge, the text says, “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor...Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years” (4:1-3). Thus, Deborah has been appointed to help fight the enemies with the help of the Lord and keep the Israelites from relapsing back into worshipping other gods. She enters the scene as the ruler of a cruelly oppressed people who seem to have a difficult time maintaining positive change.

Deborah’s contradictory positioning as an insider and outsider is important. The Book of Judges depicts a time of chaos; there is no monarchic leader and the text repeatedly mentions that “At that time there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (17:6; 18:1; 21:25). Ultimately, this not-so-subtle hinting at pandemonium reflects the aforementioned changing socio-political landscape as tribal confederations attempted to materialize into a single nation. The moral ambiguity of Israel’s anarchy is reflected in the Book of Judges’ narrative themes of chaos: worship of multiple gods, moral perversion, and gender-crossing<sup>5</sup>. Deborah may have had the most unifying effect over Israel among the other

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “gender-crossing” to define the act of a person of one gender taking on qualities of the opposite gender; i.e. a male taking on feminine characteristics or a female taking on masculine characteristics. While this is a natural thing which occurs in everyday life without necessarily signifying the “chaos” which I argue it implies, to

judges (Frymer-Kensky 56), but her narrative is laced with gender-crossings to reveal the building sense of disorder in pre-monarchic Israel which grew even under her rule.

Superficially, it is easy to see why Deborah is unique among the judges: she is the only female judge found among the dominating men in the text and is singled out as the only one to also be a prophet (Bledstein 30). Some argue that as a prophet, she is situated as a feminine medium for male speech and action (of the male God of the Israelites) while being robbed of agency, but it is interesting that the same argument is not made for male prophets (Klein 25). Deborah's empowered position as God's messenger should not be overlooked, for the ability to influence political decisions with prophetic insight gives her authority usually reserved for men (Bird *Missing* 34). Moreover, her insight is greatly respected and sought after, for the text explains that "the people of Israel came to her for judgment" (Judges 4:4).

Along the same lines, Deborah inhabits a public position contrary to the domestic role one expects her to assume. The narrator explains that she "used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim" (4:4-5). A tree as her namesake suggests both the great honor her people regarded her with and also her widespread publicity, but the narrative placement outside is also unique. Early rabbis attributed this to a narrative desire to *preserve* Deborah's femininity, for being confined indoors with other male leaders would not be proper for a woman (Bronner 85). Her placement under a tree is also typical because ancient mythos assumes women as fundamentally tied to nature and may suggest the narrator's desire to associate her with cultic practice (Niditch 62). Most importantly, however, Deborah's sphere of influence is out-of-doors and is therefore very

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the readers in the Ancient world, gender-crossing would have seemed radical and strange and would have been noted as such to those hearing the story.

public. Her physical positioning outside is a narrative signal of her unwillingness to inhabit the domestic sphere, thereby masculinizing Deborah's character.

One of the major arguments against Deborah as a masculinized character is her introduction as the "wife of Lappidoth" (4:4). However, numerous scholars draw attention to alternative translations of "lappidoth." The claim is that the word is nonsensical as a proper noun, and as the ancient rabbis have pointed out, a married woman's husband would not have allowed his wife to hold a position of greater authority and status than himself (Bronner 78-9). Since "lappidoth" is a common noun meaning "torch," the alternative translations for "wife of Lappidoth" are "spirited woman" (Kahn 93), "fiery woman (Ackerman *Warrior* 38), "woman of flames" (Bronner 78), and "lady of the torch" (Frymer-Kensky 46). Likewise, some favor the idea that Deborah may actually be married to Barak, for "lappidoth" is a masculine noun and Barak's name means "lightning" (Boling 95)<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, some argue that Lappidoth is simply Deborah's place of origin, thus translating "woman of Lappidoth" rather than "wife" (Niditch 62). Akin to this, the narrator omits mention of Deborah's chastity and any children she may or may not have (Ackerman *Warrior* 38). Thus, the state of her sexuality is of no concern, as is often the case in narratives discussing men's lives, and so the text identifies her as a masculine character.

As the story goes, the leader of the enemy king's army, Sisera, has been controlling part of Israel's territory for many years with his nine hundred, high-tech chariots of iron. Deborah summons her general, Barak, and relays the God-sent information regarding Sisera's impending

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<sup>6</sup> This translation is also consistent with my reading of the gender-crossing found in the text, for if they are married, then Barak is still the feminized character and Deborah is the masculinized character; I argue that Deborah plays the husband's role while Barak plays the wife's role. Gender-crossing is indeed occurring as a way to measure the level of chaos taking place. This is still more supported by what the ancient rabbis point out, which is that a husband most likely would not have wanted his wife to hold a higher position than he. Thus, Barak would be further emasculated by his inability to "control" his wife.

defeat. The text is ambiguous as to whether God is being quoted verbatim by Deborah. This becomes more and more obvious as the story progresses. Deborah tells Barak, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulum’” (4:6). This is pretty clear: God is telling Barak and/or Deborah to go to Mount Tabor with ten thousand from a specific tribe. She continues, “I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops” (4:7). This is clear again: God will isolate Sisera’s troops at the Wadi Kishon so that Sisera may be defeated. Deborah then tells Barak, “The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (4:9).

At the end of the story, Sisera *is* killed by a woman, Jael. She is a non-Israelite woman from the tribe of Heber the Kenite—a friend of Sisera’s King—who also plays a masculine role. As Sisera flees the battlefield, Jael encourages Sisera to enter her tent. She brings him milk, covers him with a blanket, and shoves a tent peg through his head, killing him and pinning him to the ground in a penetrative act of murder with a phallic object. Afterward, she goes outside and invites Barak into her tent where she shows him Sisera’s assassinated corpse. Ultimately, then, Deborah’s prophecy is correct: Sisera is killed by a woman and is delivered into Barak’s hands. The original dialogue, however, is ambiguous.

When Deborah quotes God saying, “I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops” (4:7), is Deborah quoting God verbatim, thereby implying that Deborah will be the one to meet Sisera in Wadi Kishon, where God will draw him out? Or is she indirectly quoting God, implying that God will draw Sisera out to meet Barak? When she again quotes God, saying, “I will give him into your hand” (4:7),

readers are again left wondering if God is going to give Sisera into Deborah's hand or Barak's. The text is entirely ambiguous.

As scholars have noted, there is reason to believe that Deborah has interpreted the message to mean that Sisera will be delivered unto her hand, not Barak's (Boling 96). Deborah knows that Barak cannot be the killer of Sisera, for the killer will be a woman. Therefore, when God says, "I will deliver Sisera unto your hand," Deborah must have understood God's message to mean that she was the one who was supposed to meet Sisera at the Wadi Kishon. As both a woman and the military leader, she logically reads herself as the most eligible candidate for assassinating Sisera and thinks that she has prophesied herself as Sisera's killer. This changes how the next sequence has traditionally been read by scholars.

Barak responds by saying, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (4:8)." Many theologians and scholars read this as a lack of courage or faith in God (Mayfield 307), although prophets commonly accompanied armies to battle for good luck and guidance (Frymer-Kensky 48). Alternatively, Barak's hesitance may indicate a partnership between himself and Deborah. Regardless of whether Barak was being cowardly or just a good friend, Deborah responds, "I will surely go with you," and the text tells us that she "got up and went with Barak to Kadesh" (4:9). She jumps at the excuse to get closer to the battle, believing she will surface as the God-ordained heroine who will kill Israel's oppressor, Sisera. Rather than playing the supportive role one expects a woman to play, she plays the active role; she "surely" accompanies him to make the kill she seeks.

As the story progresses, Deborah is further revealed as a masculine character. Narratively speaking, Deborah's voice controls the story. This is important, for women in the Book of Judges rarely speak at all and biblical literature as a whole usually reserves speech for

men. Moreover, a large part of Deborah's speech involves ridicule of Barak. By telling him that the glory of killing Sisera is reserved for a woman, Deborah emasculates Barak; historians note that just as being killed by a woman was considered the most unmanly way to die, having one's glory stolen by a woman on the battlefield is even more humiliating (Frymer-Kensky 10). Thus, by priming Barak with the misleading message that God will be delivering Sisera into his hands and then springing the clincher on him—that it will not be his glory, but a woman's—she is humiliating him. She does this multiple times throughout the narrative.

As the story continues, Deborah and Barak engage in dialogue as they stand on the hill and wait to fight Sisera. The text tells us, "Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you'" (4:12-14). At this point, Deborah has already told Barak that the person the LORD designated to kill Sisera is female. It is silly to assume that Barak has forgotten this painful truth. Moreover, Deborah is standing right next to him, battle-ready, most likely believing she is the woman who will make the war-ending kill. So when she says to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into *your* hand," she is making fun of him, sardonically reminding him once again that his glory will be stolen by a woman. It is further possible that telling Barak that Sisera will be delivered to him, when they already know it will be a woman, indicates that Deborah is insinuating Barak is a woman. In a speech which is believed by most scholars and theologians to be entirely motivational, she may just be goading him, challenging his manliness, and calling him a woman.

Beyond Deborah's chiding attitude toward Barak, evidence also suggests that they regard each other as equals. Women are usually the supporters—passive, subservient, and quiet, while the men are usually the heroes—active, leaders, speakers. Yet, Barak takes

Deborah's leadership seriously. Perhaps this is why he says, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (4:8). His words are not a question: "will go you with me?" but rather a statement: "I will not go without you." It is possible that this statement is made in partnership rather than out of fear or cowardice. Deborah's response to Barak, "I will surely go with you" (4:9) could also be an encouraging statement of friendship, even if her ulterior motives are involved.

The narrator also hints at equality between Deborah and Barak. The text says, "Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kadesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kadesh; and ten thousand warriors went up *behind* him; and Deborah went up *with* him" (4:9-10; italics mine). The text specifies that Deborah goes up "with" Barak as his equal rather than "behind" Barak as his men do. This puts them on equal grounds, at least in the narrator's eyes. Again, in chapter five, the text describes a partnership between the two: "Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day..." (5:1). The two recount their battle stories together, singing as partners. The text emphasizes their togetherness at numerous stages of the narrative.

From a non-Israelite perspective, however, the two were not equal. The text tells us that "when Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Haroseth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon" (4:12-13). Deborah is on the mountain with Barak, but her name is not mentioned—Sisera's reacts to hearing that *Barak* is on the mountain. Therefore, Sisera's messengers and spies do not view Deborah as a threat or as the acknowledgeable leader, so they leave her out of their military intelligence. Unlike Barak, Deborah's name is not feared by enemies. While inside the Israelite social and political circle, Deborah is important enough to receive messages from God, command the army general, and be

sought after for advice under a tree named in her honor; yet, to an outsider she is not even worth mentioning. Readers are again reminded of pre-monarchic Israel's unpredictability—even someone as revered as Deborah can be pushed outside of her own narrative. Deborah, who is the anticipated heroine at this point, is entirely ignored by enemies. More importantly, at this point in the narrative, Deborah is forgotten and replaced by Jael, the outsider, who claims heroine status as Sisera's murderer.

The Book of Judges has a wide variety of narratives which are meant to exhibit the moral upheaval in an anarchic society. In this little segment of the whole, readers are introduced to the theme of gender-crossing which is used to demonstrate the mayhem infecting Israel's rapidly changing society. The narrators purposefully confuse the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine to represent the growing pandemonium. Deborah, Israel's female leader, is in a masculinized, public position of leadership rather than playing her socially-determined role as a domestic wife and mother, while Barak, Israel's general, is in a feminized position of subservience and is denied a glorious kill. At the end of the story, neither Deborah nor Barak find the glory that they seek. Sisera *is* delivered into Barak's hands—but he is already slain, and the hyper-sexual outsider, Jael, who also emasculates her male counterpart, Sisera, is introduced as the heroine. The cycle of gender-crossing continues into the next sequence, through Jael's masculine demeanor and Sisera's passive death, as the narrators strive to demonstrate Israel's anarchic self-destruction.

## **J A E L**

**“N**ow Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to

him, ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.’ So he turned aside to her into the tent...” (Judg 4:17-18).

It is no secret that the Jael and Sisera narrative emphasizes the contrast between three binaries: in/out, male/female, and domestic/public. The narrators oscillate between them as they did in the Deborah story, constructing a confusing sequence. The result—as with the tale of Deborah and Barak—is that readers feel the uncertainty of a topsy-turvy society and recognize the weight of Israel’s catastrophic lack of government. In this story, the binaries of out/in, public/domestic, and masculine/feminine all coincide and become a complex mess where women are men, men are women, and what happens in the domestic realm becomes a public issue.

After Deborah disappears from the narrative, God delivers Sisera’s troops to Barak with phenomenal success. God throws the chariots into a flurry and Barak slaughters Sisera’s entire army. Sisera, realizing that he is all alone on the battlefield, tries to escape in his chariot, but God throws his horses into a panic. So Sisera runs on foot from the avenging Barak. He arrives at Jael’s tent, and after she beckons him, he enters. He tells her to stand guard at the entrance and to tell any passersby that she is alone. He asks her for water, and she brings him some milk. She covers him with a blanket, and after he falls asleep, she takes a tent peg and a hammer and hammers the peg through his skull. Later on, Barak comes by her tent, and she invites him in. Jael shows Barak Sisera’s body and Deborah’s prophecy comes true: Sisera is killed by a woman and is delivered into Barak’s hands (Judg 4:1-22).

The authors are obvious about the dichotomy between in/out in this narrative. The text specifically says that “Jael came *out* to meet Sisera” (4:18; italics mine). She crosses the threshold between inside and outside—domestic and public—in order to bring Sisera inside to

the private sphere where she can assassinate him. Meanwhile, Sisera, having just fled the battlefield, “turned aside *into* her tent” (4:18; italics mine). Once again, note the emphasis on the character’s spatial positioning: he goes *inside*. Here, he thinks he will find safety “for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite” (4:17). Sisera’s king was friendly with Jael’s husband’s clan, and additionally, Jael’s husband may have even been in the area as an iron chariot supplier for Sisera’s army, for the clan of Heber was a clan of iron workers (Kahn 93; Frymer-Kensky 53). Nevertheless, Sisera thought he had stumbled upon an ally (Ackerman *Warrior* 92; Kahn 92; Frymer-Kensky 53).<sup>7</sup> Look closely at the sequence: Jael enters the men’s sphere (outside the tent) in order to entrap Sisera in the domestic sphere (inside her tent). She, a domestic figure, enters the public realm to “capture” a public figure and bring him into the domestic space.

At the same time, Jael inhabits the active position and so is masculinized in the same way that Deborah was, while Sisera, in the passive position, is feminized as was Barak. In a moment between out and in, Sisera orders Jael to “stand at the entrance of the tent” (4:17). He does not tell her to stand outside or inside, but just “at the entrance.” This is important. If he were to tell her to stand outside, he would be telling her to play the masculine role, a soldier’s role. Thus, treating her more like a woman than like a soldier, he tells her to stand at the threshold between out and in, guarded by the lingering presence of the inside while still being able to see outside. In addition, the masculine verb form of the word “stand” is used (Boling

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<sup>7</sup> See Susan Ackerman’s *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*; Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s *Reading the Women of the Bible*. Ackerman offers that the text treats Jael as a “religious functionary,” suggesting that her tent may have appeared as a religious sanctuary (92). Ackerman draws attention to Judges chapter 5, where the text makes a reference to her as “most blessed,” indicating a religious association. Ackerman also argues that chapter 5’s reference to her as a “tent-dwelling woman” signifies an association with religion; because women were not allowed opportunities for religious expression within the Yahwehistic cult, she argues, “women seek opportunities for religious expression elsewhere,” oftentimes in tents (93). Frymer-Kensky argues that “Heber is part of the family of Moses’ father-in-law, a priest, and a Kenite’s tent would represent sanctuary. There are also indications that Kenite women, like Midianite women, had a cultic role, and Sisera could have seen Yael as a priestly functionary” (53).

98), perhaps as a narrative cue that Jael is about to take on the active, masculine role despite Sisera's attempt to treat her more like a woman than a soldier.

The inside of the tent has vastly different meanings for these two characters. Although Jael is married to Heber the Kenite, the text specifies that it is *her* tent which Sisera enters: "Now Sisera had fled away on foot to *the tent of Jael*" (4:17; italics mine). This means that Sisera has not only entered a female-dominated place, but that he is entirely within the confines of Jael's owned space once he enters her tent. In contrast, the tent offers secrecy, protection, and power to allow Jael to assassinate this enemy of Israel. Jael's plan may be premeditated. Firstly, her husband probably asked that she set the tent up "not too far from the battle in order to service the weaponry" (Frymer-Kensky 53). Second, it is commonly believed that Sisera is fleeing to a safe-zone in the Kishon, for his path from the battlefield leads away from his army and away from his home (Boling 97; Niditch 66). Thus, since Sisera's direction could not have been predicted, Jael may have been watching the battle from a distance, waiting to set her tent up in the direction that any enemies would be running so that she could draw them into her tent and finish them off. Jael purposefully uses her domestic space as a trap. She trusts the privacy of the domestic sphere as the perfect place for carrying out her premeditated plan, but for Sisera, the seclusion of the domestic only means powerlessness, emasculation, and death.

Sisera's emasculation begins before he even leaves the battlefield. In two places, the text repeats the same phrase, describing Sisera's spinelessness: "Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, while Barak pursued the chariots and the army" (4:15). Seeing his army annihilated by Barak, Sisera tries to flee, but his chariot does not work because "the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak" (4:15). So the cowardly Sisera must run away on foot, appearing frantic and desperate to survive. And the

phrase is repeated again: “All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left. Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael...” (4:17). Everyone in Sisera’s army is killed. No one, except for Sisera, runs from their death. There is no need to repeat the line the second time except to emphasize that he has only survived by running away. The narrative revolves around Sisera’s cowardly sprint from the battlefield and subsequent abandonment of his soldiers, for it is through his shameful retreat to the tent of a woman that Deborah’s prophecy is proved true.

Indeed, it is no accident that Sisera runs from the most masculinized position, a battlefield, to the most feminized position, asleep inside a woman’s tent, seeking protection from a woman. Coming from the bloody battlefield, the tent appears to be a domestic space of comfort and safety, and Jael allows Sisera to believe this assumption. In reality, however, he has entered a space filled with violence—ironically, the very thing he flees from—but also something associated with masculinity and the public sphere (Ackerman *Warrior* 91). The narrators purposefully emasculate Sisera by placing him in the passive role and allow Jael to be masculinized by giving her the position of power and action. This becomes obvious when Jael first speaks. She says, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me” (4:18). This gentle invitation is really a direct order; she is telling him to come into her tent. He passively obeys her and enters the tent. This narrative continues to strategically use gender-crossing and to oscillate the boundaries between public/domestic.

This narrative strategy becomes more apparent once Sisera is inside the tent. Firstly, his words are impotent. Notice that Sisera specifically asks for water, but Jael brings him milk: he says, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty” (4:19). Her response: “So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him (4:19). She subtly disobeys him, as if to show him that his words are meaningless to her. Jael cunningly reduces her

disobedience to small, subtle acts, such as giving him milk instead of water. She does not directly disobey him until he is dead, for she would know that Sisera, as the leader of an army, would be used to giving orders and having them blindly obeyed.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Jael opts to *subtly* disobey him, enough to disarm his power, but not enough to alarm him. In addition, she chooses milk. The milk she gives him to drink is most likely goat milk, given the time and place, and this is known to have the effect of a sleep-aid (Boling 97-8). Jael not only uses this opportunity to subtly disobey Sisera, but she also manages to literally drug him into a deep sleep.

We see Sisera's words ignored a second time. Sisera orders Jael to stand at the entrance of the tent and protect him: "He said to her, 'Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here,' say, 'No'' (4:19). He tells Jael to lie for him and protect him from any curious passersby or soldiers who may try to track him down (as Barak actually does). Yet, she does quite the opposite. Instead of protecting him, she murders him. The text says, "But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died" (4:20-21).

Next, instead of lying to passersby, she admits Barak into the tent and shows him Sisera's tent-pegged cadaver. The text reads, "Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, 'Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.' So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple" (4:22). Lastly, we see Jael "go out" of her tent, when Sisera specifically told her to stay

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<sup>8</sup> Evidenced perhaps by when he asks Jael to stand guard at the tent entrance; he falls asleep easily, resting assured that his orders will be obeyed. He does not stop to pause and wonder if his orders will be obeyed for he believes that they will. The use of the word "please" in his first demand for water is also interesting, for it turns his demand into a request. His second demand, however, is not preceded by "please," maybe because he noticed that his first order was not exactly followed.

at the “entrance.” This act of disobedience is threefold. She does not protect him, she does not lie for him, and she does not stay in the entrance of the tent. By disobeying his orders, she illuminates his descent: from the cruel, powerful oppressor of Israel, Sisera falls to the level of the scared coward who deserts his men to save his own life. He then develops into an inert, weakened child under the protection of a woman, and lastly, he morphs into the dead, emasculated corpse whose words and demands are void.

Jael’s masculine power to disregard a man’s orders is paired with Sisera’s feminine passivity. He does not complain when he gets milk instead of water. He does not argue with her when Jael covers him so he can go to sleep, even though he did not ask her to do so. He passively sleeps through his death, and so does not resist being killed. And he is killed by a woman—one of the most humiliating ways to die.<sup>9</sup> In his death, it is Jael that does the penetrating and Sisera who is penetrated, lying against the ground, pinned by the phallic symbol of the tent peg. Moreover, the words “peg” or “stake” carry a dual meaning; they can mean “peg,” as in “tent peg,” but they can also mean “male member” (Niditch 63). Certain readings then, could literally interpret his death as rape. After his death, Sisera is offered to the gaze of a man, for Barak enters the tent to view his tent-peg-pierced body.

When looking at gender-crossing in this narrative, characters’ speech is meaningful. Jael speaks only when she is outside. Sisera only speaks when he is inside. It is usually the other way around; the men usually speak and are obeyed in both spheres, and the women are typically free to speak only when in the domestic sphere. Jael’s public sphere orders are obeyed; Sisera’s domestic sphere orders are indirectly and directly disobeyed. Inside the tent, Sisera plays the passive role, speaking but not doing, and Jael plays the active role, pretending

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<sup>9</sup> See Judges 9:53-4 In the story, Abimelech is hit with a rock thrown by a woman; rather than die and go into the history books as being killed by a woman, he asks the assistant who carries his armor to kill him, and so he dies without having actually been killed by a woman.

to be subservient but plotting to destroy him. Inside the tent, Jael's speech is replaced with direct action while Sisera's demands go unheeded. Ultimately, within the female-dominated space of the indoors, Sisera's public-sphere power as a general is useless. Meanwhile, Jael does not act in a private, feminized way. She plays the masculine role of action, power, and penetration. Most importantly, unlike most of the private sphere decisions made by women, Jael's influence has great consequences in the public sphere. She assassinates the "cruel oppressor" of Israel, and her action changes political affairs.

In the end, it is also important to note the narrative focus on "out" versus "in," both in characters' positioning and in their place in society. It is a mystery why Jael, of a non-Israelite status, has any interest in killing Sisera. What motivation did she have, and what were the risks for her? Would she get into trouble with her husband now, since her husband's clan is possibly economically supported by Sisera's king? And what happened to Deborah, the one who believed herself to be the chosen one? A military leader born in the hill country of Ephraim, Deborah seems like the best candidate to deliver Israel from her enemies. And yet, it is not the Israelite from the hill country of Ephraim, but is instead the outsider, the promiscuous Kenite, Jael, who assassinates the military leader who is not even *her* enemy. The text manipulates the binaries between out/in to signify the general chaos and moral upheaval caused by Israel being an anarchic society, just as the text confuses the lines between masculine/feminine and public/domestic. Everything is out of order because there is no king. And it only gets worse from here.

## THE CONCUBINE

**I**n the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ‘Get up,’ he said to her, ‘we are going.’ But there was no answer” (Judg 19:27).

There is no doubt that the story of the brutal rape and dismemberment of the Levite’s concubine found in Judges 19 is one of the most troubling chapters in the Bible. The story begins without being too startling; after a quarrel occurs between a husband, the Levite, and his wife, the concubine, she leaves him and flees to her father’s house. Months later, the Levite goes to his concubine’s father’s house “to speak tenderly to her and bring her back” (19:3). On the way back from her father’s house, his traveling party finds shelter from the night in the home of a stranger. Here, the story becomes frightening. Men surround the house and demand to rape the husband. In order to protect himself, the Levite mercilessly shoves his concubine through the doorway to the men outside, who rape her throughout the night. In the morning, the Levite unconcernedly wanders outside to see his concubine at the threshold of the house; he then takes her home and proceeds to cut her into twelve pieces and sends her dismembered parts to the twelve Israelite tribes to demand war against the Benjaminites, the offending tribe. By the end of the story, the tribe of the Benjaminites is almost wiped out and many more women have been raped and taken as wives. One of the ways in which this story can be understood is by continuing to look at the use of dichotomy as a narrative tool to identify severe moral upheaval.

Viewed with the help of the gender-specific domains of public/domestic, the dichotomy becomes an even easier tool for clearly marking the moral upheaval the story represents.

From the beginning of the narrative, readers are cautioned. It begins, as do many of the narratives in Judges: “In these days, when there was no king in Israel...” (19:1). Already, the narrator establishes a reason—perhaps an excuse—for the story he is about to tell. The narrator goes on to introduce the two main characters. “A certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah,” the text reads (19:2). So this unnamed Levite, hailing from the hill country of Ephraim, takes for his bride and unnamed woman from a different tribe. Although neither are given names, there are many pieces of information that can be drawn from what we *are* given. Firstly, Levites are “God’s ‘shock troops’: zealous, even violent defenders of what they perceived to be correct behavior...the Levites were itinerant religious experts” (Frymer-Kensky 119). In other words, they were revered as wielders of knowledge of religion and perhaps dangerous defenders of morality. Additionally, the Levites “had no fixed place in the tribal system of pre-monarchic Israel” and had no independent means of supporting themselves (119).<sup>10</sup> Thus, we can conjecture that this man was dependent upon others for income and perhaps even shelter, and had no place of origin to go back to seek help from his kin (119). More importantly, this man was an insider to no nation in Israel—and therefore is, by definition, an outsider (119).

Likewise, the definition of “concubine” had many meanings in biblical times. Described as such, this woman could be a member of the Levite’s harem, thus leaving her removed from full wife status; or it may mean that she is a secondary wife (Ackerman *Warrior* 236). As many

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<sup>10</sup> Although in some parts of the Bible the Levites are referred to as having their own tribe; see Numbers 3:6; Numbers 18:2; Deuteronomy 18:1. In other parts, the text sounds as though they Levites do not have their own tribe but live among the Israelites; see Numbers 8:5. Numbers 35 discusses lands designated to be given to the Levites by Moses.

scholars have noted, the concubine's father later describes the Levite as his son-in-law and verse 3 calls the Levite "her husband" (236). Thus, one must assume that the concubine is the Levite's wife through legitimate marriage, even though she is probably a secondary wife—giving her less-than-full privileges as a wife, but still given marriage status. Because of the concubine's secondary status, "the power dissymmetry between husband and wife is even more pronounced than in the average patriarchal household" (119). The man's ability to control and wield his authority over his second wife is greater than it would be over a primary, full-status wife. Regardless, the primary wife never appears or is mentioned in the narrative (Exum 177). Ultimately, however, we have two characters without specific identities, which may mean that they are not meant to signify individual people so much as caricatured symbols of humanity. One is a priest, one is his secondary wife, and between them lays a large gulf of power.

From this point in the narrative, we learn that the concubine has left her husband's house and fled to her father's. The text describes her departure as a product of a disagreement, for she "became angry with him" and was there for four months (19:2). The narrator then explains that the Levite responded—apparently four months later—by going after her, with a servant and some donkeys, "to speak tenderly to her and bring her back" (19:3). At this point in the narrative, it seems like something you would see in a modern day movie: the couple has an argument, she leaves and goes to her parent's house, and he shows up some time later—to face both her and her parents—and work things out. Except in this scenario, the father-in-law greets his son-in-law with "joy" rather than unhappiness, and instead of the narrative showing any "tender" words between the couple about the argument, the concubine never speaks. Moreover, most modern films show a moment, usually at the end, where the couple has made up and everyone is happy and the parents gladly escort their newly-in-love couple to the door. In this

case, however, the father-in-law tries his hardest to keep his son-in-law there—and there is no resolution of the original conflict which made her flee in the first place, for the reason for her leaving is never addressed or discussed. So what does all of this mean?

Regardless of the answer, the father certainly does not want the Levite to leave. The text says: “The girl’s father saw him and came with joy to meet him. His father-in-law *made him stay*, and he remained with him three days” (19:3-4; italics mine). Notice that the text implies that the Levite was forced to stay. As the narrative continues, the father’s insistence becomes even more obvious. On the fourth day, after getting up early to try to go home, “The girl’s father said to the man, ‘Why not spend the night and enjoy yourself?’ When the man got up to go, his father-in-law kept urging him until he spent the night there again. So they lingered” (19:7).

This continues on until the fifth day. Again, they try to leave in the morning, but stay and eat, and then: “When the man with his concubine and servant to up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl’s father, said to him, ‘Look, the day has worn on until it is almost evening. Spend the night. See, the day has drawn to a close. Spend the night here and enjoy yourself’” (19:9). It seems obvious that the father is trying to keep the Levite at his house. Even though the text repeatedly mentions “the two” of them eating and drinking, the daughter/wife is never included in the socializing. Either the text forgot to mention her presence, or specifically left her out because she was not part of the party partaking in food, wine, and talk. For this reason, it can be assumed that the father is not trying to get them to stay so much to enjoy her company; either he likes talking to the Levite or knows enough about the Levite to think that he does not want his daughter leaving with him.

Regardless, the Levite, his concubine, his servant, and the donkeys all leave on the fifth day, in the evening. They end up in a town “opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem)” (19:10). The servant asks the Levite, whom he addresses as “master,” if they should go into the city and spend the night. His response is, “We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah” (19:12). It is unclear why the Levite perceives the non-Israelites as foreigners when he, by definition, does not belong to any specific Israelite tribe. When the Levite is introduced, he is defined as someone “residing” in the hill country of Ephraim, but “residing” and being “of” or “from” a place are different, and as someone who resides in Israel but is not himself an Israelite (as discussed previously, Levites are independent priests without a place of origin as a people) it is strange that he should consider the people of Jerusalem to be foreigners when he—as a rule—is always a foreigner everywhere he goes. At any rate, the city of Jerusalem becomes the capital city of Israel—so it is quite strange that the narrator mentions that the Levite considers the people of Jerusalem to be outsiders. By choosing to define the center of Israel’s future as a city of outsiders, the Levite actually reaffirms his outsider status.

They go on to Gibeah, and find themselves in the open square of the city. We see the distinction between out and in when the old man first meets the Levite, for the conversation is directed to suggest that being outside is unsafe. The text says, “When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city,” the first thing he said was, “Where are you going and where do you come from?” (19:17). The old man rushes to the Levite as soon as he sees him and his traveling party exposed on the open square, and his interrogation is hurried rather than conversational. The urgency suggests that the old man is more concerned for their

safety than with being polite. Thus, motivated by fear rather than hospitality, he responds by quickly inviting the Levite and his crowd back to his house.

Next, we discover that both men originate from the hill country of Ephraim. Therefore, the old man and the Levite are “outsiders” as compared to the natives, the Benjaminites, who reside there and are therefore “insiders.” Since “out” has already been associated with danger and these people are outsiders, this foreshadows the danger they face later on in the story. Next, the Levite tells the old man, “Nobody has offered to take me *in*,” acknowledging that he understands the danger of being outside and suggesting that he wants to be inside (19:18; italics mine). Moreover, the Levite begs to be taken home with the old man: “We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more” (19:18-19). He pleads for a place to stay, taking care to point out that he has food for everyone in his party and asks for nothing more than a place inside.

The old man assures the Levite that he will provide for him, saying, “Only do not spend the night in the square,” which continues the deep, resounding feeling of fear about being outside in the square (19:20). The text continues: “So he brought him into his house,” once again laying emphasis on being brought “in” (19:21). There, the donkeys are fed, their feet are washed, they eat, and they drink. Outside, there is danger, but inside the house, there is merry feet-washing, eating, and drinking. Thus, the association is made; outside is dangerous and inside is safe.

Feminist critics like Karla Bohmbach take this distinction one step further by applying gender roles. Her argument is based on the idea that women are linked to the private, domestic sphere of the indoors and are free to exercise authority within that private sphere, while men, on

the other hand, are coupled with the public sphere in the world outside of the home, and are therefore free to exert authority when outside of the home. Bohmbach's theory suggests that because each party is allowed to exert authority in their gender-respective spheres, their place of refuge is correlated to their place of authority; thus, women are most secure inside, in the private sphere, and men are most secure outside in the public sphere. Moreover, Bohmbach asserts that any interaction within the sphere to which a character does not belong poses a threat to them. Applying this theory to the close reading above, one can already distinguish moral upheaval; that the men do not feel most comfortable outside in the place assigned to their gender and wish to occupy the women's place of refuge—the indoors—clearly points to something gone awry in the story.

When the travelers go back to the host's home, the distinction between out and in becomes clearer. The text says, "While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him" (19:22). The men standing outside ask the host, who is standing inside, to "bring *out* the man" so that they may gang rape him. Here, Bohmbach's theory illuminates the relationship between gender roles and the out vs. in dichotomy. The men indoors are afraid to go outside and are cut off from the space in which they can exert their authority, the public sphere. Thus, the men inside the house are emasculated, for they must stay in the place assigned to women in order to have any authority at all. Moreover, to cross over into the public sphere would indicate further feminization, for the men would be raped.

The emasculation and sequestering of men within the domestic sphere is yet another example of gender crossing; the men must stay "in" so as to not be physically harmed, but their

“place” according to gender roles is “out.” Phyllis Tribble agrees. She believes that the dichotomy points out the danger even prior to that. She mentions that when the men are “enjoying themselves” inside the house, a mob is “surrounding the house,” almost adding to the building awareness of danger as outside and safety as inside. Moreover, Tribble draws attention to the idea of the door and window as symbols to represent the entry from the safety of inside to the danger of outside, which particularly augments the argument I make later about the concubine’s positioning at the threshold of the house the morning after her brutal mistreatment by the mob (73).

Next, the old man speaks to the mob as brethren, pleading with them not to “do this vile thing” to his guest. Then he offers his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine to the mob in place of the Levite (19:23-4). The language he uses is important: “Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now” (19:24). The old man clearly states that he will bring the women *out* to the mob so that the mob may “do whatever you want to them” (19:24). He quickly puts women in the men’s place and the narrative specifically says that it must happen outside, in the place associated with danger. The concubine’s forced removal from inside to outside corresponds with Tribble’s idea of the doorway acting as the entrance into this public, outside world of torture from the inside place of refuge. The way the Levite “put her out to them” is graphic; one gets the image of him literally shoving her through the door to the dangerous mob outside. He throws her out to them in response to seeing his own safety inside threatened by this violent mob. The fact that it is a woman being thrust into the male-dominated public sphere while the men cower in the feminized space once again suggests gender crossing, thereby hinting at the generalized upheaval within the social structure.

What happens to the concubine is horrifying: “They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. As the dawn began to break, they let her go” the text tells us (19:25). This woman is “abused” and “wantonly raped” in an area doubly threatening to her physical safety; she is “outside,” which is already established as dangerous for all outsiders, and in the public sphere, the men’s domain of authority where, as a woman, she is prevented from exerting any authority of her own. Therefore, the outside world represents extra potential for danger to women for it is not their gender-specific place of belonging. The fact that she is in “out” on two counts and is abused so horrifically because of it is a use of the dichotomy to help readers identify the gender crossing and highlight the sense of chaos in this story.

Scholars agree that the concubine is failed by her man and by the assumed security of the private sphere, for she is compromised for the safety of men who have taken over and begun to dominate the domestic space. In Genesis 19, a story which directly parallels Judges 19, Lot offers his two virgin daughters to protect his male guests in the same way that the Levite’s concubine and the old man’s virgin daughter are offered. In both of these stories, women are sent in lieu of men to guarantee that the men are not raped and degraded by an angry mob outside of the house. The parallel in these stories is that the women are safe indoors until the men responsible for their safety throw them outside. Luckily for Lot’s two virgin daughters, his guests, who are angels, step in and save them from the torture the concubine is not spared. These stories show that women must depend upon masculine authority to protect them from everything outside the house, since only men can have authority in the public sphere. The concubine is failed, however, because the Levite sends her outside to be raped and beaten for the remainder of the night in order to protect himself.

A grey area is introduced in the next scene. “As morning appeared,” the narrator explains, “the woman came and fell down at the door of the man’s house where her master was, until it was light” (Judg 19:26). As Tribble has suggested, the door symbolizes the entryway between safety and danger. Therefore, since this woman is neither inside nor out, she is in an ambiguous space that represents neither safety nor danger. The text tells us that “they let her go” so she is no longer in direct threat of being beaten and raped, but nor is she inside and so is presumably still susceptible to the threat of the public sphere. When the Levite gets up to leave for home the next day, obviously unconcerned with whether she is dead or alive, he opens the door and “there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold” (19:27). This image of the woman lying stretched out, desiring to be let in, implies that she has reached a stasis that leaves her without any safety, anywhere. She is neither safe inside nor outside and so is stuck in the symbolic place of “in the middle.”

Pamela Reis has a compassion-based perspective of this passage. She feels that the hands on the threshold indicate that the concubine tried getting in the house, which could mean that the men inside were sleeping too heavily, were too drunk, or were too unconcerned to stay awake to see if she would survive the night. She believes that the reason this imagery is included in the story is so that readers feel anger at the Levite and compassion for the woman who has been locked out of her place of safety and is too battered to open the door and come in (Reis). While it is important to feel compassion for the concubine, one must not overlook the symbolism; her position literally lying on the threshold establishes her new status. She is now one who is no longer safe anywhere—in or out. Furthermore, when the man opens the door, the concubine is blocking his path. Though the Levite wishes to go outside the door, he is forced to stay inside until he moves her, forcing him onto the threshold where she lies and bringing him

into the in-between space with her (Yee 64). The two main characters inhabit an “in-between” space, which symbolically marks the cross-over from what has been established as safe and what the narrative will soon deem unsafe.

So far, it has been established in the narrative that women are only secure as long as men decide they are; that on the threshold, the concubine transforms into a being without security; and that “in” is generally regarded as safe and “out” is dangerous. However, the next scene of this story includes the total turnaround of the set dichotomy. The text tells us that after the Levite returns home, he goes inside, and then, “He took a knife, and grasping his concubine, he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb” (19:29). He cuts her up into twelve pieces to send to the other Israelite nations and start a civil war against the Benjaminites, whom he claims are responsible for her fate. But readers should be confused because the murder and defilement of her body is directly oppositional to the origin of the story, which opens with the Levite’s journey to her father’s house so he can sweet-talk her and reconcile the argument that caused her to leave him in the first place. His stoic apathy toward throwing her to the mob and now murdering her and cutting her body into twelve pieces to send as war rally tools is inconsistent with him going to reunite them in the first place. How can this behavior be explained?

The answer lies in reversal. The concubine sets new rules for what is “safe”; she used to be safe inside, as the men are, until her man decided to throw her out to the mob; then she faced the obvious dangers of being “outside” and was raped to near death; next, she underwent a transformation on the threshold in which she lost a claim to safety anywhere; lastly, her original place of safety, inside, becomes the most dangerous place of all for her—the place where she is murdered and dismembered by the man who came to make up to her after a fight. It makes one wonder: is the concubine ever safe? In this world where no one is held accountable for their

actions—no matter how heinous—by a greater government, is a woman (and especially one of second-class status) *ever* safe? Moreover, the lines between public/domestic become entirely ambiguous. The man becomes directly and absolutely in control of the domestic sphere. There is no woman to contest him for it, which allows him to completely and absolutely rid himself of the feminine from his domestic space. Moreover, the concubine's private body becomes a matter of political issue; her body parts, dismembered from within the domestic sphere, become a political tool which is passed around in the public sphere and used as a war rallying tool. The dichotomy between public and domestic is ruined as a private issue becomes a matter of the public realm.

The final turnaround occurs when the Levite then uses her dismembered body to declare war on the Benjaminites. At this point, the singular tribe of the Benjaminites are cast out and are declared enemies to the other eleven tribes of Israel. They are alienated as they are held accountable for the rape and killing of the concubine while the Levite becomes the crusader on her behalf. The Benjaminite tribe, once an “insider” group, becomes a group of outcasted outsiders and enemies to the other eleven tribes who once called them brothers as a civil war breaks out. The Levite is welcomed as an “insider” to those tribes who willingly declare war on Benjaminites, the newly cast “outsiders,” for being rapists and murderers, and no one seems to question the subtle lies the Levite uses to frame the Benjaminites for the murder of his concubine in the first place (for he claims that they killed her and says nothing of his own partaking in the matter). Everything from the beginning of the story is suddenly turned around in a sick, twisted way. The assumed-to-be certain boundaries between out/in, safety/danger, and public/domestic are muddied.

## THE VIRGINS AT SHILOH

“**A**nd they instructed the Benjaminites, saying, ‘Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; when the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. Then if their fathers come to complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Be generous and allow us to have them; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them.’” The Benjaminites did so; they took wives for each of them from the dancers whom they abducted” (Judg 21:20-23).

The most alarming part of the end of the book of Judges is that despite all of the wickedness being passed around, culminating in the brutal rape and dismemberment of the Levite’s concubine—this is not the worst thing that happens. Mass rape happens at a mass scale after the tribe of the Benjaminites is very close to destroyed. After having almost killed off the Benjaminite tribe, the Israelites realize that they might have made a mistake and thus vote to let the remaining men live. In order for the tribe to survive, and because all of the Benjaminite women have been killed, the tribe’s men need wives—and since the rest of Israel vowed not to marry their daughters to that tribe for their wicked deed—they allow an even more heinous crime to occur by suggesting that the Benjaminites capture virgins from the wild as they perform their dance at Shiloh: “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; when the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh, and go to the land of

Benjamin” (21:20). They tell the Benjaminites to steal women for themselves, breaking many of God’s commandments and marauding immoral ground.

Beneath all the blood and gore of Judges 19, the literary elements surface to provide readers with a guide toward the truth in the story. As Reis says, “These texts are not manuals for how to act in an emergency, nor do they manifest Israelite rules of hospitality, or express patriarchal dominance. They exemplify monstrous behavior and breach of God’s rules” (Reis). This story is meant to make a statement about what *not* to do, and so the author uses a complex definition and re-definition of dichotomy between “out” and “in” to represent the complete backwardness of the characters’ actions. Conclusively, this is supported by the theme which pervades all of Judges, that “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes (21:25). The narrators of Judges 19 use dichotomy to communicate to readers that what this Levite saw as “good in his own eyes” caused nothing but death and destruction for hundreds of innocent women.

## **PARALLELS BETWEEN JUDGES 4 & 19**

In this last section, it is important to mention that there are parallels between Judges 4 and Judges 19. First, the verb sequences in each narrative mirror each other. Jael “took at tent peg, “the Levite “took a knife,” and so both murderers begin the verb sequence with the acquisition of a weapon. Next, each murderer takes something in their other hand: Jael “took a hammer in her hand” while the Levite “grasp[s] his concubine.” This is followed by the killing blow, where Jael “drove the peg into his temple” and the Levite “cut her into twelve pieces.” The sequence is then continued with a gory detail: Jael “drove the peg into his temple until it went into the ground” while the Levite cuts his concubine into twelve pieces, “limb by limb.” Next, the act of murder is followed by an invitation to gaze at the finished product: Jael invites

Barak into the tent to see her handiwork, and the Levite sends each of his concubine's limbs throughout territory of Israel. Lastly, there are political implications surrounding the death of each party: Sisera's death means an end to Israel's bloody oppression—the end of a war—and the concubine's death means the beginning of one.

The parallel is not perfect, but the five acts in each story do seem to mimic one another. First there is the choosing of the weapon, then the violent murder of a person of the opposite sex, followed by a gruesome detail about the murder and the exhibition of the spectacle of murder committed, and lastly, the political significance of the murder. More than just the acts themselves paralleling each other, the sequence of verbs are also alike: **took** (peg)/**took** (knife); **took** (hammer)/**grasp** (concubine); **drove** (peg)/**cut** (limb); **went** [out] (into ground/out of tent)/**sent** (body parts).

However, there are obvious differences between the two narratives. Judges 4's heroine coaxes a man into the intimacy of her tent in order to kill him; then, after killing that man, she brings another man inside to make a display of the corpse. In Judges 19, a man brings a woman against her will into the domestic space. Instead of then bringing people inside to look at her corpse, the man takes the woman's dismembered body into the public domain to make a public spectacle of it. Not only is it a woman killing a man versus a man killing a woman, but in one story the corpse is a privatized victory with public consequences and in the other it is a publicized corpse with consequences for the public sphere. In addition, consent is different in both stories; Sisera, although coerced, walked into the tent by choice, whereas the concubine, who was most likely dead and so not able to consent to entering the house, was brought in by force. In one story, one is brought in where he meets his fate; in the other, one is pushed out to meet hers.

Regardless of these differences, there is enough likeness between them to be noteworthy. The parallels between these two stories suggests a connection between them, as though they are meant to work together to demonstrate the oscillating boundaries between dichotomies as seen in each of the episodes. Both stories focus on the dichotomy of out/in, the perversion of gendered spaces, and insider/outsider status. The Deborah narrative begins with women in power—Deborah as the judge of Israel and Jael as the powerful heroine who kills Sisera—and by the end of Judges, women are so powerless that even in their death, women are demeaned and humiliated as their body parts are distributed throughout the land. Moreover, Deborah, the insider to Israel, is denied the glory of killing Sisera, and must give it instead to Jael, the outsider—but the result is still positive for Israel. Later, however, in the Judges 19-21 narrative, the outsider Levite rejects Jerusalem as an insider, Israelite city, brutally mistreats his wife, and then brings near-obliteration of the tribe of the Benjaminites, which can only be resolved by bringing ruin to Israelite’s (insider) women who must be captured and taken as wives, in the same way that enemies’ women are taken in war.

There is a reversal of a reversal; women as powerful beings is a reversal of typical Israelite society and literature, and this reversal is reversed in the end as women become powerless and men have too much power. Secondly, insiders leaving room for outsiders to partake in glory is a reversal, and by the end of Judges, even this is reversed as an outsider lies to start a civil war among insiders. The fact that gender roles are reversed so often and in so many combinations suggests the general sense of chaos and anarchy which pervades most of Judges, for as the text offers in explanation, “In those days, there was no king in Israel.”

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of whether or not women truly have any claim to power or safety in the domestic sphere in Ancient Israel, the men ultimately have the final say in both spheres. Men determine where is safe and where is not; Judges 19 teaches readers that in this system, a woman cannot depend on the shelter of the domestic sphere for safety. A man can throw his wife out in a divorce, over-rule her oaths, and most importantly, control the family—the very thing a woman seems to have a decent amount of control over—because it is *his* patriarchal line and therefore his choice to place her within the family as he chooses. In both the domestic and public spheres of Judges 19-21, men seem to have all of the power.

Perhaps, then, Judges is about this tension between men and women. In a type of proto-feminist message, Judges seems to be dialoguing about how badly things can go awry in a system where one sex has absurd amounts of power over another—especially in a world where there is no government to keep things in order. The text constantly reminds us that when there is no higher ruler overseeing people's actions and forcing people (in this case, men) to be accountable, then things go sour. A woman is brutally treated by her husband—a priest of God—and the very tattered remains of her body are used to incite a war which ends up leading to the capture and rape of hundreds of innocent women. Is this a misogynistic story? Probably not. Rather, it is a story about what *not* to do, and offers an option for people to avoid this type of mishap in the future: get a government that can hold people in line. With a king, the text is arguing, this type of mistreatment could never occur. Ironically, history teaches that kings are not the greatest choice either. But to the people of Ancient Israel, having a king was certainly preferable to allowing every man to do “what is right in his own eyes.”

Many scholars and religious leaders choose to interpret the Judges 19 story in a very Victorian way, assuming that because the concubine left her husband's house in the beginning of the story that she is essentially "asking for" her fate. In a way, they argue, she chooses to leave her husband in a disobedient show of autonomy and thus is narratively punished for her wanton act. Because she left her husband, some reason, she becomes every man's woman and thus deserves to be taken and raped by the text, narratively speaking. From this perspective, it is possible to read this scene as an act of divorce. As discussed previously, the Old Testament laws allow men to give their wives a bill of divorce and send them out of the house. Perhaps, then, the Levite's seemingly horrifying act of pushing his wife outside of the host's house is actually an act of divorce.

I feel that the narrative is too judgmental of the Levite to support the Victorian interpretation. The repetition of the line, "In those days there was no king in Israel..." and other disapproving comments made by the narrator suggests the opposite; the narrative seems not to be punishing the concubine, but suggesting that the blame falls on the system itself. It is the lack of an organized monarchy to protect women against the power imbalance of a patriarchal system which leaves women powerless and without justice. The Old Testament laws may be paternalistic, but they were constructed with women's safety in mind—even if they were ideologically flawed in some fundamental ways. Thus, the fact that the concubine and so many subsequent women were treated in such a disrespectful manner only serves to show that the narrators are pointing out the moral deterioration of Israelite society in the absence of a governmental leader.

The narrators of Judges meticulously set up dichotomies and then tear them down throughout the book to convey the sense of confusion and the exponentially growing sense of

doom that culminates in the final, most abhorrent act—civil war among the Israelites and errant, unchecked power exercised by men over their subservient wives. Contrary to most feminist literary critiques which claim that Judges is a misogynistic piece of literature—which I also originally thought—I believe that it is just the opposite. Using the symbolically powerless women as the major victims at the end of this story only draws more attention to the immorality exercised by all of the men who should know better. Laws that are meant to protect women are perverted and ignored, and the men who are meant to be protecting women are throwing them to the mob and encouraging other men to steal them as they dance in the meadow. The very heart of Israel—the women who give birth to and raise the next generation of Israelites—are being abused in horrifying ways and are exemplified as the final act of chaos which leads to a monarchy. The narrators acknowledge the power imbalance between men and women and almost seem to be saying: if this kind of thing can happen without being questioned, then we need to upset the power imbalance between the sexes, or at least put a higher power in place who can make sure this kind of thing does not happen anymore.

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