

Jewish Theological Seminary-University of Jewish Studies, Hungary

PhD. Thesis

“By the Hand of a Woman-YHWH”

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שָׁאוּ שְׁעָרֵימָהוּ | רָאשֵׁיכֶם וְהַנְּשָׂאוּ פָתְחֵי עוֹלָם וַיָּבֹאוּ מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד:

O gates, lift up your heads!
Up high, you everlasting doors,
so the King of glory may come in!

מִי זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד יְהוָה עֲזָרָו וְגִבּוֹר יְהוָה גִּבּוֹר מִלְחָמָה:

Who is the King of glory?
the LORD, mighty and valiant,
the LORD, valiant in battle. (Psalm 24:7-8)

1.Introduction

Background and significance of the study

The contextualization of this thesis is essential for elucidating the cultural, historical, historiographical, theological, and geopolitical frameworks that inform its focus.

This study examines the characters in Judges 4 and 5, with particular attention to female prototypes as paradigmatic figures that illuminate the Deuteronomistic tradition's development toward an emergent monolatrist biblical theology. The Israelite experience, situated within a polytheistic milieu, progresses from iconoclasm to monolatry, and ultimately to monotheism. This trajectory serves as a central axis of the present analysis, as reflected in these two chapters

of the book of Judges, where two female figures lead the reader through a pivotal transformation in Israel's theological relationship with YHWH¹.

These chapters exemplify this transformation not only through their narrative structure and Deuteronomistic perspective, but also through their portrayal of female figures as central agents of Divine purpose. In particular, the elevation of Deborah and Jael underscores the text's ideological agenda: demonstrating YHWH's supremacy over the Canaanite pantheon, embodied in the defeat of El.

The god El, leader of the Canaanite pantheon, emerges in Judges 4 and 5 as the ultimate adversary, decisively overcome by YHWH. These chapters depict not merely a military conflict between the Israelites and the forces of Sisera, commander of the Canaanite army, but also elevate the roles of two women: Deborah and Jael. Deborah — leader, prophetess, judge, and singer — and Jael, “the hand of a woman,” serve as instruments of YHWH's triumph over the archenemy.

This thesis argues that beyond the battlefield dynamics — between Israelites and Canaanites, Barak and Sisera, Sisera and Jael — under the leadership of the prophetess and judge Deborah, a nascent biblical-theological agenda unfolds, surpassing the actions of the human protagonists. Ultimately, it is YHWH who defeats El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon through the hand of a woman.

Within this theological framework, the figure of Jael becomes the decisive instrument through whom YHWH's supremacy is enacted. Her seemingly marginal position, operating outside the formal structures of Israelite leadership and beyond the battlefield itself, is precisely what sharpens the polemical force of the narrative: YHWH employs an unexpected, liminal agent to accomplish the symbolic overthrow of El. By locating the moment of divine victory in Jael's deliberate act within the confines of her tent, the text transforms her intervention into a theological drama in which YHWH asserts dominion over the highest Canaanite deity. Thus,

¹ Spelling according to JPS, 1985.

Jael's agency is not merely a narrative device for Sisera's demise but the medium through which the defeat of El is realized and YHWH's unrivaled sovereignty proclaimed.

Judges 4 and 5, Deuteronomistic texts², reaffirms YHWH's supremacy, later echoed in the priestly tradition of Exodus 6:2–4:

“God spoke to Moses and said to him: I am יהוה. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name יהוה. I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners.”

The distinction between *El Shaddai*, associated with the Patriarchal covenant³, and *YHWH*, enthroned as the deity of Israel and Judah, continues to captivate biblical scholarship⁴. This thesis explores how, through the actions of Deborah and Jael, the text of Judges 4 and 5 reflects and advances the theological transition from the patriarchal depiction of the deity as *El Shaddai* toward the establishment of the Tetragrammaton — the exclusive, singular God who tolerates no rival authority.

The roles of Deborah and Jael reveal a biblical narrative shaped by the multicultural influences of ancient Semitic civilizations, whose evolving religious traditions contribute to the emergence and establishment of the zealous God of the Hebrews.

In the preface to his book, Frank Moore Cross⁵ wrote:

² Deuteronomistic History edited with a common theological approach during or after the Babylonian exile (VI century BCE), emphasizing the concept of theological covenant where obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings punishment; it also addresses the cyclical view of history centered on sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance; the land of Israel plays a central role as a theological space.

³ Genesis 17:1-2, 28:3-4, 35:11-12, 43:14, Exodus 6:3.

⁴ Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 35–40, 121–22, suggests that there is a progressive revelation or regional preference in the divine names used in different books—i.e., the P source uses *El Shaddai* before Exodus 6, while J and E introduce YHWH. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 6–11, 141–48, 156–60, proposes that Israelite religion was henotheistic, with El as the supreme god, and that over time YHWH evolved from El. Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 69–83, 109–12, analyzes how different divine names function within distinct narrative theologies, suggesting a progressive covenantal revelation. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

“The empirical historian must describe novel configurations in Israel’s religion as having their origin in an ordered set of relationships which follow the usual typological sequences of historical change. One scholar’s insistence that Israelite religion was different from anything the pagan world ever knew violates fundamental postulates of scientific historical record.” As Cross aptly reminds us, the biblical text in general is far from entirely original; it bears the imprint of contemporaneous cultures such as the Ugaritic epics, Akkadian chronicles, Phoenician traditions, Egyptian records, and Mesopotamian literature. This thesis will reference such ancient parallels to illuminate the process by which YHWH emerges as the singular, victorious deity in the Hebrew Bible. In Judges 4 and 5, specifically, this God not only triumphs over rival deities but does so by choosing women as the agents of divine judgment and deliverance.

The motif of a younger god contending with and ultimately supplanting the older generation of a divine pantheon is familiar from numerous myths of the Ancient Near East and Greece. In these narratives, the younger deity asserts his or her advent by confronting, and often castrating or killing, the elder god, i.e., theomachy, thereby making space for a new order. Victorious, the younger god is acclaimed as sovereign by the divine assembly. A biblical parallel to this motif appears in Deuteronomy 33:26–29, where the Blessings of Moses depict YHWH defeating the gods of Canaan, securing Israel’s safety as a consequence of YHWH’s deliverance. In this text, the divine assembly is recast as the assembly of the tribes of Israel, which collectively proclaims YHWH’s supremacy.

Female characters and rival deities are intricately intertwined in the biblical narrative. This thesis will demonstrate the centrality of women and their active roles in a story that marks a pivotal transition between eras — a shift from a context of pan-culturalism, assimilation into surrounding peoples, and immersion in neighboring civilizations, toward the establishment of a singular, zealous deity capable of overthrowing the prevailing and diverse pantheon. Within the Deuteronomistic framework, this transition reflects the theological insistence on exclusive loyalty to YHWH. In Judges 4 and 5, Deborah and Jael embody this ideological agenda: their actions not only secure Israel’s deliverance but also symbolize the triumph of YHWH over competing gods, reinforcing the Deuteronomistic vision of covenantal fidelity and divine supremacy.

Why does the text select women as its central agents? What hidden and explicit powers do these female characters embody and manifest? These are among the guiding questions this thesis seeks to address in order to illuminate the theological and ideological dimensions of Judges 4 and 5.

These two chapters, one presented as poetry (chapter 5) and the other as prose narrative (chapter 4), together form a complex literary unit. Likely a post-exilic composition⁶, the text introduces pragmatic⁷ geographical and political perspectives on the Southern and Northern kingdoms, their displacements, and the evolving conception of YHWH as the God of the Israelites, Judahites, and Hebrews.

Two women⁸ lead the narrative of Judges 4 and 5 — women who never meet, never speak to one another, and never coordinate any explicit strategy. Yet their actions, which gravitate at the heart of the text, are profoundly interconnected. The first is Deborah, the only woman in the Book of Judges explicitly identified as a judge; the second is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who fulfills a decisive role as YHWH's agent of deliverance. These women, and the distinct spatial domains⁹ in which they carry out their respective tasks, form critical links in the theological transition toward the affirmation of *YHWH echad*, the one and only God, within a Deuteronomistic framework. YHWH, the divine warrior, selects and empowers earthly actors — in this case, these two women — to accomplish the divine mission.

Jael's killing of the intimidating Canaanite general Sisera transcends the trope of the *femme fatale*; it constitutes a sanctioned act within the collective Israelite narrative. Her deed surpasses the confines of the earthly battlefield, elevating the account to a cosmic dimension in which two deities contend for supremacy. This theomachy struggle determines not only the immediate course of events but also the trajectory of the future and the ultimate authority of the deity who emerges victorious.

⁶ Will be explained in chapters 6, 7, and 8.

⁷ These chapters reflect regional power struggle throughout tribal participation in the battlefield. Deborah is localized in the North (Hazor, Mount Tabor, Kishon River, Megiddo, Kedesh), with no influence outside her area, failing to unify the North and the South. Judah and Shimon are completely absent. The text might reflect a Northern myth of tribal alliance, excluding several tribes. These texts are conveying a non-centralized tribal landscape.

⁸ These characters are going to be explored in detail in the following chapters.

⁹ See appendix.

Ultimately, the battle of Jael vs. Sisera, is a war between the Israelite God YHWH vs. the Canaanite head of the pantheon deity, god “El”. In this battle YHWH triumphs, a victory brought “by the hand of a woman”.

A crucial dimension of this study is the recognition that the text does not merely depict YHWH’s supremacy over El in abstract theological terms but dramatizes this supremacy through a deliberate inversion of expected channels of power. By choosing “the hand of a woman” as the operative vehicle of divine victory, the narrative underscores YHWH’s capacity to overturn conventional hierarchies—military, social, and cosmic alike. Jael’s act, executed within the ostensibly marginal and domestic space of her tent, becomes the locus through which YHWH asserts dominion over the highest deity of the Canaanite pantheon. This deliberate literary strategy reveals a polemical theological agenda: the God of Israel does not merely defeat El on the battlefield of gods but does so by employing an agent whom the surrounding cultures would have deemed peripheral to the arena of political or martial authority. Thus, Jael’s embodied action marks the moment in which YHWH’s ascendancy is enacted through an unexpected human instrument whose agency affirms the deity’s unparalleled sovereignty.

Research questions and objectives

A broader optic of this thesis will deep into the transitional times in which the events are related to as well as when the text was redacted¹⁰. As far as research and objectives are concern, intertextuality, historical-critical events, reception history, and canonical shape, will clarify the many texts and contexts of the dissertation.

The reader will be exposed to qualified sources that will link the historical and cultural context of the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age and its transitional historical and geographical components.

¹⁰ See footnote 49.

The thesis will explore the role of *Shasu* in the geopolitical setting of the region and how that influenced the genesis of the monolithic worship of YHWH and the covenantal pact between this deity and the Israelites. This deity-people contract, the agreement between the YHWH and the Israelites will have theological implications in both chapters of Judges 4 and 5. Following this path of thinking other questions on Jael's agency would appeal as a tool utilized by YHWH reinforcing an understanding of power to defeat the highest deity in the Canaanite pantheon, the god El.

Other questions will arise from the comparison with Biblical and extra Biblical texts. Biblical comparative texts will focus on Exodus 14 -15¹¹, Deuteronomy 33, Habakkuk 3, and Psalm 68. Extrabiblical texts, and empirical discoveries will include Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions, Accadian Tablets of Mari, Egyptian topographical list of Karnak and Medinet Habu, the Amarna Letters, the Berlin Pedestal, the Battle of Kadesh, the Shishak Inscriptions Kuntilet Aj'ud, Mesha Stele, and facts provided by archeological discoveries in Timna, Paran, Edom, and Hatzor.

This dissertation's objective will pursue the understanding of the "hand of a woman", and through it will reach the topic of "the hand of YHWH", following the origins of YHWH as an entity that surges either from nature, i.e., mountains, volcanoes, storms or from the metalsmiths' characterized labor.

The Kenite-Midianite theory and its influence on YHWH and the proto-Israelites relationship will be disclosed with the purpose of exploring the ethos of a nomadic group of people who ambulated carrying with them an aniconic existence of worship.

¹¹ The J and P account picture two different scenarios of the event of the opening of the Sea of Reeds. In J, while the Egyptians pursue the Israelites, God pushes back the sea with a wind. Then God throws the Egyptians camp into tumult, and when the Egyptians try to flee, they run right into the dried seabed as God releases the seawaters which return to swallow the fleeing Egyptians. In P meanwhile, the sea splits with a path of dry ground between walls of water, and the Israelites cross through this path. The Egyptians try to cross through the path as well, but the waters close over them. Both J and P accounts read as complete stories when the two are separated. The P story repeats details of locations and of the Egyptian forces. P also includes the repeated notation of God strengthening Pharaoh's heart. My gratitude to Dr. Tamás Biró for pointing out the emphases between the origin different stories (J. E, D.P) throughout this thesis.

This nomadic clan, especially addresses the dwelling of two women on chapters 4 and 5, requiring the attention of the reader as I address the spatial domains in which Deborah and Jael exercise their dominance.¹²

Finally, YHWH's intervention would happen through these two women.

¹² A more extensive description of spatial domains will be incorporated in the Appendix of this thesis.

2.Methodology

The revision of the theological considerations in Biblical premises outlined through the historical unfolding of the deity revelation and participation with attention to the distinct voices of different biblical authors and schools, compose a tapestry of methodologies to contemplate as this thesis digs into the text.

This dissertation situates itself within the field of Biblical Theology, adopting an interdisciplinary and methodologically eclectic approach to the study of Scripture. The analysis will be conducted through a variety of critical lenses, including the significance of precise translation, literary structure and genre, the tension among competing regional narratives, geopolitical interventions, and historiographical developments informed by comparative studies of multicultural synchronism within other Semitic civilizations. Particular attention will also be devoted to the socio-political implications of metallurgical control, the role of women, and the theological significance of their spatial and societal domains. Collectively, these dimensions serve to illuminate the text's theological trajectory, culminating in the climactic assertion of YHWH's supremacy over, and ultimate victory against, the Canaanite deity El.

Methodologically, this study will interrogate each of the aforementioned dimensions in order to demonstrate the causal logic of a narrative that eschews historical reportage in favor of a theologically articulated vision. This approach will undertake a close reading of both the poetic and prose strata of the text, underscoring how these literary forms converge to foreground the centrality of a woman as the pivotal agent in manifesting and affirming the sovereignty of YHWH.

I will employ both constructive and deconstructive methodologies, enabling a multidimensional analysis of the biblical scene that moves from the individual to the collective. The constructive approach will examine the categorical framework of Jael as the wife of an individual embedded within a broader community, elucidating the motivations underlying her actions. In parallel, the deconstructive analysis will interrogate the battlefield encounter between Sisera and Barak as more than a mere historical skirmish, reading it instead as an earthly manifestation of a cosmic conflict between El, the chief deity of the Canaanite pantheon, and YHWH, asserting self-

sovereignty. This methodological framework invites the reader to situate the narrative within the transitional context of the late Bronze and early Iron Ages, as attested by archaeological evidence, highlighting the cultural and theological shift from an iconographic cult to the emerging monolatry of ancient Israel.

Given the complexity of these texts—both prose and poetry—a plurality of methodological approaches is required. Accordingly, this research will integrate diverse perspectives, including literary, theological, historical-critical, and comparative analyses, in order to illuminate the richness and depth of the narrative tradition.

This interdisciplinary and multifaceted methodology is designed to address the central research questions of this dissertation: how the narrative constructs and subverts gendered leadership roles, how it reflects and reshapes Israel's theological identity, and how the interplay between prose and poetry encodes a polemic against Canaanite religious paradigms.

Compositional Research

This dissertation undertakes a compositional analysis of Judges 4 and 5 through several interrelated lines of inquiry.

- **Comparative Literary Inquiry:**

I will conduct a comparative examination of Judges 4 (prose) and Judges 5 (poetry) in order to identify and analyze differences in language, topography, domains, theological emphasis, geographical detail, and historical perspective. This comparison will elucidate how the distinct literary forms shape the narrative and theological message.

- **Foundations in Biblical Criticism:**

The study will assess whether these chapters reflect distinct traditions, rooted in a multicultural milieu, or whether they represent editorially stratified compositions influenced by Deuteronomistic redaction. This line of inquiry will engage source-critical, redaction-critical, and compositional theories to explore the textual history and ideological shaping of the narratives.

- **Oral Tradition and Composition:**

I will explore the extent to which oral traditions surrounding Deborah, Barak, and Jael—particularly as attested in Talmudic and Midrashic literature¹³—may have influenced the formation and transmission of these texts prior to their final literary crystallization.

Theological Analysis

- **The Origin and Sovereignty of YHWH:**

The ubiquitous presence of YHWH in both chapters points to an overarching theological aim: to establish YHWH as the sole deity worthy of Israel’s allegiance. This analysis will pay particular attention to the phrase “YHWH by the hand of a woman” (*Judg.* 4:9) as a theological motif, exploring its implications for divine agency, gender roles, and power dynamics in Israelite theology.

- **YHWH versus the Canaanite Pantheon:**

This study will examine how YHWH’s role in the narrative contrasts with Canaanite deities such as El and Baal. Specifically, it will consider whether Jael’s killing of Sisera functions as an implicit theological polemic against Canaanite conceptions of divine protection or as a legitimization of Israel’s ideology of a justified war. Special attention will be given to the theological significance of divine intervention through women—Deborah as prophet and Jael as executor—within Israel’s broader ideology of war and deliverance.

- **Canaanite Rituals and Ugaritic Parallels:**

Canaanite religious practices and Ugaritic textual evidence will provide a comparative framework for understanding how Jabin’s rule may reflect historical Canaanite political-religious structures and the centrality of the god El.

- **Kenite Identity and Religious Affiliation:**

Jael’s marriage to a Kenite and her ambiguous religious and political loyalties will also be explored. This analysis will consider whether the Kenites were worshipers of YHWH,

¹³ It’s not my intention to rely on Talmudic and Midrashic anachronism but to incorporate references throughout the lenses of reception history, generating meaning from the texts.

a syncretistic group, or politically neutral, and what these affiliations suggest about Jael's motivations and actions.

- **Archaeological Insights:**

Finally, the research will draw on archaeological findings from Hazor, Timna, and Edom to situate the narrative within its broader historical context. Particular attention will be paid to the destruction of Hazor, the first extra-biblical reference to ancient Israel in the Merneptah Stele, the battle of Kadesh, and the Amarna Letters. These data will be marshaled to clarify and contextualize the origins of the covenantal theology associated with the Sinai theophany and its relevance to the narrative under study.

Feminist and Gender in Biblical Studies Approaches¹⁴

This dissertation engages feminist and gender-critical perspectives in order to interrogate the prominent participation of women in Judges 4 and 5 as decisive agents of Israel's deliverance.

- The analysis foregrounds the centrality of women as active executors of the narrative's theological and military objectives. Rather than occupying peripheral or ancillary roles, Deborah and Jael emerge as primary actors whose agency drives the resolution of the crisis.
- The use of patronymics in identifying women in the text invites a reconsideration of their autonomy and agency. Although they are positioned within patriarchal frameworks, their actions transcend dependence on male figures, suggesting independent initiative and authority.

¹⁴ Susan Ackerman articulates that "The Hebrew Bible is a book that was primarily written by men, for men, and about men, and thus the biblical text is not particularly forthcoming when it comes to the lives and experiences of women. These features include comprehensive pictures of women's lives as wives and child bearers within Israel's patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system and of women's work within the economy of a typical household." See Ackerman Susan, *Women in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible*, (Oxford University Press, online Publication, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.45>.

- The portrayal of women as instruments of divine purpose constitutes a critical theological motif. Both Deborah and Jael represent atypical figures of power and mediation, challenging conventional expectations of gender roles in ancient Israelite society and raising important questions about the social and religious space women occupied.
- The interplay of violence and sexuality in the narrative underscores a deliberate reversal of traditional gendered power dynamics. Jael's killing of Sisera in the intimate setting of her tent—frequently interpreted as carrying sexual overtones—subverts the expected constructs of gendered power and exemplifies an antithesis to normative male-centered models of warfare and domination.
- More broadly, the Hebrew Bible does not hesitate to depict women in prominent roles within Israel's historical and historiographical memory. Wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, queens, harlots, prophetesses, counselors, and warriors populate the narratives across the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Female leadership, while often exceptional, is by no means unprecedented. Within this broader tradition, the intertwined story and song of Deborah and Jael in Judges 4 and 5 stand as a striking example of women assuming full control of the narrative and its theological message. This dissertation, accordingly, undertakes to trace and interpret the literary and theological significance of Jael's agency within this broader context.

This gender-focused analysis seeks to elucidate how the narrative construction of Deborah and Jael not only challenges normative assumptions about women's roles in ancient Israelite society but also serves as a theological statement about divine sovereignty enacted through unexpected agents, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the text's literary, historical, and theological dimensions.

Hermeneutical Approach

• Jael's Identity and Reception History

Jael's character occupies an ambiguous space within biblical interpretation, often understood either as a foreigner or as an Israelite. Reception history reveals a rich diversity of perspectives, with some midrashic traditions positioning her alongside the Hebrew

matriarchs¹⁵, thus affirming that YHWH is neither a stranger nor a distant deity in her life. Jael functions as an intermediary figure, mediating between two peoples and embodying a role that transcends ethnic boundaries.

- **The Significance of Jael's Name and the Motif of the Divine Mountain**

The name יַעֲל (Yael) refers to the male mountain goat, or ibex, whereas its feminine counterpart is יַעֲלָה (Ya'alah). The biblical narrative's portrayal of YHWH's instrument of Canaanite subjugation as a woman named after a male mountain goat introduces a compelling symbolic layer. Moses's divine encounter at Horeb—the “Mountain of God”—while tending his father-in-law's flocks (Exodus 3:1) parallels Jael's nomadic tent dwelling in unfamiliar territory, following her husband's estrangement from the Kenite tribe (Judges 4:11). Both narratives are situated within borderlands, likely near biblical Kadesh (modern-day Petra), inhabited by semi-nomadic peoples such as the Qurrayah, who were metallurgists living near Edom¹⁶. This geographic and cultural context enhances the interpretive dialogue between Moses and Jael's stories. This echoes Moses's own connection to the nomadic Midianite culture through his marriage to Zipporah. Jael, likewise, is linked to the Midianites through her husband, Heber the Kenite..

- **Gender Fluidity in Divine Hermeneutics**

The biblical portrayal of God exhibits notable gender fluidity. Although primarily anthropomorphized as male, the divine is also represented through feminine imagery, including a compassionate mother (Isaiah 42:14; 66:13), a nurturing and birthing woman (Isaiah 66:9; Numbers 11:12; Isaiah 49:15), and a midwife (Job 3:12; Psalms 22:9-10; 71:6). This gynomorphic semantic strand—though marginal—challenges the dominant masculine narrative, positioning the God of Israel as transcending the typical gender binaries of ancient Near Eastern divinities, who were often either fertility goddesses or warrior gods.

- **Feminist Hermeneutics, Reception History, and Gender Dynamics**

Feminist readings of Deborah and Jael reveal how women's exercise of power in the biblical text has been variously emphasized and suppressed. Despite Deborah's authoritative role as judge and prophetess in Judges 4–5, subsequent texts diminish her prominence, transferring

¹⁵ Genesis Rabbah 48:15, TB Nazir 23 b.

¹⁶ קנהול, ישראל, יהוה המשמעות המקורית של הם בערבית. דצמבר 2021

authority to Barak, who appears as a judge in 1 Samuel, 12:11¹⁷ and the Epistle to the Hebrews, 11:32.

In a patriarchal society, women's participation in domains such as warfare and violence is frequently marginalized. The symbolic order privileges men as bearers of strength and heroism, casting women as peripheral or "outsiders" to heroic narratives. However, Judges 4 and 5 subvert these conventions by centering women in leadership and martial victory, thereby revitalizing traditional interpretive frameworks. Deborah's inspiring leadership and her victory song serve to unify many of Israel's tribes, underscoring the centrality of female agency in Israel's collective memory.

Literary and Historical Settings and Analysis

Judges 4 and 5 present significant challenges from both historical and historiographical perspectives. Strikingly, the narrative heroes are in fact heroines—women, not men. This unexpected emphasis on female figures has long captured the attention of readers and scholars. As feminist historians have observed, women are often conspicuously absent from recorded history, largely due to its traditional framing as the story of sociopolitical change shaped by male actors. In the case of Judges 4–5, the topographical setting of Deborah's leadership can be identified with some certainty, yet the narrative resists precise chronological placement.

This ambiguity is further compounded by three interpretive tensions—ethnocentrism, androcentrism, and Theocentrism—that these chapters foreground:

- **Ethnocentrism:** The central heroine, Jael, associated with the Israelite, nevertheless not married into the Israelite population.
- **Androcentrism:** The traditional war hero, a powerful male conqueror, is replaced by the skilled *gyno-hembra* (female warrior), who not only humiliates the Canaanites but also subverts the predictable pattern of heroism in Judges by overshadowing the Israelite commander, Barak.

¹⁷ ERV version. Syriac version includes Barak.

- **Theocentrism:** Ultimately, God accomplishes Israel's deliverance through a woman, underscoring the theological claim that the victory belongs to YHWH alone.

In the canonical order, the Book of Judges follows Joshua and precedes Samuel and Kings, recounting the conflicts through which the Israelite tribes established themselves in Canaan. The judges function not as juridical authorities but rather as military and political leaders. Judges is part of the Deuteronomistic History—a unified historical work (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) thought to have been composed during the late First Temple period, ca. 600 BCE. This hypothesis, first articulated by Martin Noth in 1943, continues to inform much scholarly discussion. Various geographical references and internal chronological clues in the text suggest that the narrative was written retrospectively, as a literary account of earlier events. Later, other scholars such as R. G. Boling argues that “Judges” are essentially charismatic tribal leaders, primarily military delivers, not court officials, operating regionally and not nationally.¹⁸ In more recent years Susan Niditch emphasizes that judges are narrative constructs with each story tailored to its local setting and tribal tradition where the leaders are charismatic war heroes. She highlights that there is an ideological storytelling rather than a historical official figure that layers the narrative oral memory as theology overrides chronology.¹⁹

Chapter 5, the Song of Deborah, stands out as an independent poetic composition. It is sung by a woman—a judge, a prophetess, and a “mother in Israel”—whose authority transcends mere biological motherhood. The prose narrative of Judges 4 and its poetic “synoptic parallel” in Judges 5 present an important case study of the interplay between biblical prose and poetry. The stylistic and thematic differences between the two invites both synchronic and diachronic analysis²⁰. William F. Albright²¹ famously argued that the Song of Deborah represents the oldest extant biblical text, based on its archaic language and style. Most scholars agree that the Song is among the earliest preserved biblical compositions.

¹⁸ Robert G. Bolding, "Judges: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary," Anchor Bible 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 21–38, 93–125.

¹⁹ Niditch Susan, *Judges: A Commentary. Old Testament Library*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 1-9, 62-84.

²⁰ Robert Kawashima, *From Song to Story: The Genesis of Narrative in Judges 4 and 5*, in *Biblical Narrative and the Death of Rhapsody*, (Indiana University Press, 2004), 17-34.

²¹ William Albright, “The Song of Deborah in the Light of Archeology”, *BASOR* 62, (1936): 26-31.

Baruch Halpern²² has highlighted the value of comparing the prose and poetic accounts to investigate how biblical historians engaged with inherited traditions. He contends that the later prose writer of Judges 4 shaped his narrative under the influence of the earlier Song. From a historiographical standpoint, the Song does not purport to offer a full or literal description of events. Rather, it celebrates Israel's triumph, with poetic license privileging commemoration over factual precision. This quality also suggests its origin as oral tradition—a heroic myth passed down for generations and thus accruing cultural authority. Together, Judges 4 and 5 exemplify the distinctive poetics of biblical historiography, which integrates both narrative and song.

Several other historical-critical observations merit attention²³. The absence of the southern tribe of Judah from the list of participating tribes in chapter 5, as well as the omission of Gad and Manasseh (alluded to through “Machir” and “Gilead”), signals the poem's pre-monarchic, northern provenance.

Daniel Block²⁴ attributes authorship of the Song to Deborah herself. Philippe Guillaume²⁵ argues that Judges 4 was produced later, around 720 BCE, by editors of the “Book of Saviors” in the Northern Kingdom, drawing on the earlier Song preserved in chapter 5. Neef²⁶ dates the Song as early as ca. 1025 BCE based on its stylistic and rhetorical features.

Michael Sweeney²⁷ situates the Deborah narrative within the Ephraimite hill country and interprets it as part of a broader Judean-Davidic polemic against the northern tribes, emphasizing the narrative's failure to depict Israelite unity and its implicit call for a centralized monarchy. Judges 3–21, according to Sweeney, form a literary unit documenting Israel's social and spiritual

²² Baruch Halpern, “The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and the Israelite Historiography” *HTR* 76:4, (1983): 380.

²³ According to Knhol, in Judges 3, where Shamgar ben Anat is first mentioned, it is a reference is to a figure in the wars against the Philistines. This is difficult, since at the time of the war against the Canaanites, described in Deborah's song, no Philistine force was fighting the Israelites, so why would Shamgar be Anat be mentioned here? the recognition of ‘chronological simultaneity of Jael's and Shamgar's times.’

²⁴ Daniel Block, “Judges, Ruth: An Exegetical Theological Exposition of the Holy Scriptures,” in *The New American Commentary*, ed. K. Mathews and D. Dockery (Nashville: Holman, 1999), 143–81.

²⁵ Phillipe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 385.

²⁶ H. D. Neef, “The Style of Deborah,” *ZAH* 8 (1995): 275–95.

²⁷ Marvin Sweeney, “Davidic Polemics in the Book of Judges,” *Vetus Testamentum* 47, no. 4 (1997): 517–29.

decline and prefiguring the need for Davidic kingship²⁸. The tribal framework reflected in the Song of Deborah corresponds to the northern league of tribes, and its archaic lexicon evokes the earliest attestations of the ethnonym “Israel” in Canaan, attested on the Berlin Stele (ca. 1250 BCE) and the Merneptah Stele (1208–1209 BCE).

Despite unresolved questions regarding the specific roles of certain tribes, the literary and historical settings of these chapters offer a coherent framework that foregrounds the decisive agency of two women and the overarching presence of YHWH.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the Song of Deborah as an early, independent northern poem whose comparison with the prose of Judges 4 reveals how biblical historiography blends ancient oral tradition, tribal memory, theological emphasis, and diverse scholarly views—including its archaic dating, northern provenance, possible authorship by Deborah, later prose shaping, and ideological framing—to underscore YHWH’s deliverance through the agency of women.

A methodical analysis of Judges 4 and 5—drawing on theological, hermeneutical, literary, and historical approaches—enables a more expansive understanding of the narrative, transcending reductionist readings. This interdisciplinary method sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the female figures and YHWH’s intervention, culminating in the striking theological affirmation that Israel’s deliverance comes “by the hand of a woman.”

²⁸ Serge Frolov, *Judges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 148, the omission is on purpose: the text neither could place Judah under the northern leadership nor could let it impassible in a matter of joined war like the inactive tribes.

3. Purpose and Intention

The Hebrew Bible offers readers a rich and complex opportunity to question, accept, conform to, and even condone narratives that have inspired generations. It instills in communities of faith a sense of belonging, cultural continuity, and a profound quest for the Divine. Traditionally, scholars have approached these Scriptures linearly, interpreting Israelite religion as progressing from polytheism to monotheism—a movement from a pantheon of gods to the exclusive worship of one²⁹. Yet a non-linear reading is equally plausible, recognizing the editorial shaping of the final biblical canon and suggesting that transitions between iconoclasm, anti-iconoclasm, henotheism, monolatry, and monotheism reflect not a straightforward progression of theological choices but rather distinct historical moments shaped by external and internal factors.³⁰ For example, Benjamin Sommers argues that there are simultaneous and competing theological voices within ancient Israel that were preserve side by side in the Biblical canon. In Sommer's words: "The Hebrew Bible does not speak in one voice about God's body. Rather, it contains numerous and conflicting conceptions..."³¹.

The narratives of Judges 4 and 5 exemplify this complexity. These chapters engage with ancient texts embedded in a convoluted multicultural milieu of interdependent civilizations and intra-dependent theological paradigms. Notably, two women stand at the narrative's center: Deborah, portrayed as an inspired visionary, and Jael, who consummates the divine plan. Together they embody a higher purpose; with determination and decisiveness, they enthrone YHWH as the sole deity within a still henotheistic cultural context. Their agency, interwoven with the elevation of YHWH's worship, propels these chapters into a decisive moment of theological transformation

²⁹ Israel Knohl, "The Rise, Decline and Renewal of Biblical Religion," in *Yehezkel Kaufmann and the Reinvention of Jewish Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Job Y. Jindo, Benjamin D. Sommer, and Thomas Staubli, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 283 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 167–80.

³⁰ External factors such as Assyrian and Babylonian imperial theology and Persian religious ideas during the exile and post-exilic periods; and internal factors such as centralized ideology, prophetic critiques of other types of worshipping. These factors have influenced the Israelites throughout different periods of time, in the different areas, and have contributed to the understanding of a nonlinear development of a monotheist approach.

³¹ Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

within the biblical narrative. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to elucidate the intricate dynamics of these texts as part of the Deuteronomistic effort to exalt YHWH in his full theological glory.

Rituals

Clifford Geertz's³² seminal framework defines religion as “a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations... by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Religious material thus serves as the tangible embodiment of abstract ideas, encoding communal attitudes, judgments, and longings³³. In this sense the impulse to worship YHWH is central to the plot of Judges 4 and 5, which dramatize YHWH's intervention on the battlefield and Sisera's death. This battle, however, is more than a clash of nations; it represents a cosmic contest between deities—YHWH of Israel and El of the Canaanite pantheon.

Understanding YHWH's role requires examining his origins, geographic associations, and the sociocultural contexts of his worshipers—often nomadic or semi-nomadic clans practicing iconoclasm and monolatry. The question of who YHWH is and how he became the exclusive deity of Israel remains contested. Some scholars³⁴ trace his origins to the Canaanite El, suggesting that YHWH emerged as a manifestation or aspect of this supreme god before assuming centrality in Israelite religion. Early extrabiblical evidence for YHWH appears in Egyptian inscriptions of the 14th century BCE, referencing the “Shasu of Yhw”³⁵—indicating worship among nomadic groups in Edom or Midian.

³² Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 90.

³³ Ibid. 91.

³⁴ Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11.

³⁵ “Shasu of YHW” being contested by some Egyptologists. The Berlin Hypothesis, especially the opinions of Henrick Pfeiffer and Reinhard Müller, roots YHWH in the Northern Canaanite religious context. My gratitude to Prof. Tamás Biró, for highlighting this comment.

Inscriptions from the temple of Soleb built by Amenhotep III³⁶ (r. 1386–1353 BCE) already attest to the worship of YHWH among non-Israelite peoples, the Shasu of Yhw, long before the biblical narratives' setting. The Shasu—Semitic nomads often labeled outlaws by Egyptians—appear again in records from the reign of Ramesses II (r. 1279–1213 BCE) as enemies at Kadesh.

Nissim Amzallag³⁷ and Daniel Fleming³⁸ challenges claim of YHWH's obscure origins, proposing instead that YHWH was originally a Bronze Age (c.3500-1200 BCE) deity of metallurgy and patron of smiths, citing the copper mines at Timna³⁹, parallels with other forge gods, and both biblical and extrabiblical evidence.⁴⁰

Theologically, then, the worship of YHWH cannot be reduced to a singular or isolated phenomenon. It reflects a constellation of interwoven sociopolitical, geographic, and symbolic factors, as understood by the communities who adhered to him. Judges 5:4 situates YHWH explicitly in the southeast: "*O Lord, when You came forth from Se'ir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water.*" This precise geographic reference underscores the rootedness of YHWH's origin in Edom or Se'ir, firmly linking the deity to a specific regional and cultural context.⁴¹

Gender and Role Inversion

Deborah emerges in Judges 4–5 as a leader, prophetess, singer, and community organizer, gathering the tribes to render judgment. The narrative sustains suspense by prompting the reader to ask whose hand will ultimately triumph, with the natural expectation that it will be

³⁶ The discovery of Amenhotep III's mention of the Shasu of YHWH placed this deity much earlier in history that had been accepted previously.

³⁷ Nissim Amzallag, *La Forge de Dieu: Aux Origines de la Bible* (Paris: CERF, 2020).

³⁸ Daniel E. Fleming, "The Name of Yahweh," in *Yahweh before Israel: Glimpses of History in a Divine Name* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). I acknowledge Prof. Tamás Biró's hesitation on Yahwistic theophoric names appearing in the early Amorite (Amurru) sources.

³⁹ Nissim Amzallag, "The Metallurgical Fundament of the Near Eastern Religions—A Bronze Age Perspective," *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 58 (2021): 287–319.

⁴⁰ I will refer to this evidence on chapter 7.

⁴¹ I will extensively refer to these concepts on chapters 7 and 8.

Deborah's⁴². As Deborah warns Barak: "*I will go with you. However, there will be no glory for you on the road you are taking, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman*" (Judg. 4:9).

Yet the text subverts this expectation, revealing that it is Jael, not Deborah, who becomes the "hand of the woman." The chapters thus probe what it means for Jael—unknown to the biblical narrative until this point, married into the Kenite clan—to choose sides in the Israelite-Canaanite conflict and to deliver the decisive blow to Israel's archenemy. This raises critical questions: why does Jael choose to kill Sisera? What transpires inside the tent? Why does she offer hospitality, only to betray and murder him? How does her behavior—welcoming Sisera and Barak into the intimate space of her tent while her husband is absent—align with or defy expectations of a "properly" married woman? The text invites us to consider how Jael wields the tools of the tent, subverting the conventional binary of women as domestic and men as warriors. Indeed, it inverts typical gender roles: men are rendered vulnerable, and a woman exercises deadly power⁴³.

Anomalies within a society are both compelling and unsettling; they fascinate, provoke, and disturb in equal measure. The woman warrior stands as one such anomaly—occupying the margins yet exerting potent creative force from that periphery. The narrative intensifies this tension through the verb *vatetze* (וַתֵּצֵא, "she went out") in 4:18: "*And Jael came out to meet Sisera.*"

This evokes the story of Dinah in Genesis 34:1, who "went out" (וַתֵּצֵא) only to be violated. The audience might anticipate Jael's exposure to sexual violence; Sisera, having lost his army and his masculine honor on the battlefield, may attempt to assert power by intimating with her. Alone, without her husband's protection, Jael appears vulnerable. As Phyllis Trible⁴⁴ notes,

⁴² Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 112–31. Bal makes the case for the female authorship of the Song of Deborah, Judges 5, which would be qualitatively distinct from the male authorship of Judges 4.

⁴³ Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 99–132.

⁴⁴ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

reading with and through horror can illuminate such “texts of terror,” enabling us to confront their disquieting implications.

Judges 4:14–22 describes the battle, but only briefly (vv. 14–15). The narrative dwells at length on Jael’s act of killing Sisera (vv. 17–22). She opens and closes the climactic scene: first addressing Sisera, then leading Barak to witness his lifeless body. Jael welcomes Sisera, offers him comfort, and slakes his thirst—her actions often interpreted as an inversion of female vulnerability into agency. The very body often seen as passive, violated, and penetrated becomes an instrument of resistance and death. Her knowledge of tent work, perhaps inherited through her Kenite husband’s craft traditions, is re-purposed into a deadly skill. Selecting a tent peg, a piercing-penetrating instrument—she embodies a “manly woman” overpowering a “womanly man,” enacting a profound gender reversal.

The prose and poetry versions of the story differ in tone: while the prose narrates the act soberly (*Judg.* 4:21) the poetic version exults in Sisera’s destruction (*Judg.* 5:26–27):

וַתִּקַּח יַעֲלַל אִשְׁת־חֶבֶר אֶת־יָמֶד הָאֵהָל וַתִּשֹׁם אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֵאט וַתִּתְקַע אֶת־הַיָּמֶל בְּרַקְתּוֹ וַתַּצְנַח בְּאַרְץ
וְהוּא־נִרְדָּם גִּיעַף וַיָּמָת:

Then Jael wife of Heber took a tent pin and grasped the mallet. When he was fast asleep from exhaustion, she approached him stealthily and drove the pin through his temple till it went down to the ground. Thus, he died. (4:21)

וַתִּקַּח יַעֲלַל אִשְׁת־חֶבֶר אֶת־יָמֶד הָאֵהָל וַתִּשֹׁם אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֵאט וַתִּתְקַע אֶת־הַיָּמֶל בְּרַקְתּוֹ וַתַּצְנַח בְּאַרְץ
וְהוּא־נִרְדָּם גִּיעַף וַיָּמָת:

Her hand reached for the tent pin, Her right for the workmen’s hammer. She struck Sisera, crushed his head, Smashed and pierced his temple. At her feet he sank, lay outstretched, At her feet he sank, lay still; Where he sank, there he lay—destroyed. (5:26-27))

These verses collapse and invert traditional gender norms⁴⁵: women as victims and men as violators. Violence breaches these boundaries, and Jael—as an astonishing *femme fatale*—dares

⁴⁵ Deborah’s norms will be extensively developed in the topic, “Reception and Influence”.

to transgress them. As Amy Cottrill⁴⁶ argues, Judges constructs an escalating narrative of violence: the intimate violence of Ehud's story in chapter 3 prepares the reader for Jael's solitary and shocking act. Alone in her tent, exposed yet poised, Jael navigates the tension of vulnerability and power. Cottrill observes:

"As a woman alone in her tent, opening her door to a man on the run, Jael's body is exposed, sexually and politically. Though the narrator does not provide direct access to Jael's fear or sense of vulnerability, it may be implied in the way she attempts to please and placate her visitor. Jael assures this military commander, twice inviting him to 'come in' to her home to feel secure in her invitation. The fact that she tells Sisera not to be afraid is not so much an indication of her lack of fear as it is her recognition of the anxiety of the moment."

Judges 4–5 thus subvert conventional categories of gender and violence, dramatizing how agency and power may emerge precisely where they are least expected.

⁴⁶ Amy C. Cottrill, "A Reading of Ehud and Jael through the Lens of Affect Theory," *Biblical Interpretation* 22 (2014): 430–49.

4. Configuration of Chapters

Overview of Chapter 4 and 5.

In order to clarify the thematic and narrative focus of these chapters, it is essential to provide a detailed account of the characters, settings, central figures, historical context, and the sequence of events depicted in chapters 4 and 5.

A close analysis of the literary portrayal of judge Deborah, examined through the distinct yet complementary accounts in chapters 4 and 5, reveals how the ideas are interconnected and how the author arranges the narrative material. Moreover, an attentive reading of the characters and their roles in the text offers insight into the patterns of relationships and dynamics that shape the narrative.

Chapter 4: Prose Narrative and Key Elements

- **Introduction of main figures:**
 - *Deborah*: a woman, prophetess, and judge over Israel. (4:4)
 - *Barak*: Israelite general, hesitant and dependent on Deborah's leadership. (4:6)
 - *Sisera*: commander of King Jabin's formidable Canaanite army. (4:7,12, 13)
 - *YHWH*: divine agent of Israel's deliverance. (4:6, 9, 14)
 - *Jael*: a woman, tent dweller, takes agency. (4:18, 19, 21)
- **Geographical and historical setting:**
 - Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim. (4:5)
 - Specific temporal marker: *ba'et hahi'* ("at that time"). (4:4)
- **Call to battle:**
 - Deborah, speaking for YHWH, commands Barak to gather troops from Naphtali and Zebulun. (4:6)

- Barak requests Deborah's presence, signaling his lack of confidence. (4:8)
- Prophetic assurance that Sisera will fall "into the hand of a woman." (4:9)
- **Battle at Wadi Kishon:**
 - Barak assembles 10,000 men in Kedesh; Sisera mobilizes his chariots. (4:10)
 - YHWH confounds Sisera's forces, granting victory to Israel. (4:15)
 - Sisera flees on foot while his army is annihilated. (4:15)
- **Jael's decisive act:**
 - Sisera seeks refuge in Jael's tent, receives milk and shelter. (4:18, 19)
 - While he sleeps, Jael drives a tent peg through his temple, killing him. (4:21)
 - Barak arrives; Jael shows him Sisera's corpse. (4:22)
- **Conclusion:**
 - Victory attributed to YHWH, who subdues King Jabin of Canaan. (4:23)

Chapter 5: Poetic Song

- **Opening of the song:**
 - Deborah and Barak sing praise to YHWH for Israel's deliverance. (5:2-3)
 - Celebration of YHWH's intervention and the courage of Israel's leaders. (5:3)
 - YHWH's starting point. (5:4)
- **Deborah's role:**
 - Described as "a mother in Israel," arising in a time of national disarray. (5:7)
 - Heart aligned with the leaders and people who volunteered for battle. (5:9)
- **Participation and absence of tribes:**
 - Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (half-tribe of Manasseh), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali praised for participation. (5:14-15)
 - Reuben, Gilead, Dan, and Asher criticized for inaction or absence. (5:16-17)
- **Divine intervention in battle:**
 - Natural forces, particularly the Kishon River, contribute to the defeat of Sisera's army. (5:20-21)
 - Curse pronounced on Meroz for failing to aid Israel. (5:23)

- **Jael's praise:**
 - Lauded as “most blessed of women” for her decisive and courageous act. (5:24-25)
 - Vivid poetic depiction of Sisera's death. (5:26-27)
- **Aftermath:**
 - Sisera's mother anxiously awaits his return, unaware of his fate. (5:28-30)
 - Final invocation: may YHWH's enemies perish, and his people enjoy peace. (5:31)
 - Land rests for forty years. (5:31)

Chapter 4 places the figure of Deborah as a central character, which might surprise the reader who is expecting (based on previous chapters, Otniel, Ehud and Shamgar ben Anat) a male protagonist as a co-leader, a virile hero who guides and saves the Israelites. The text then introduces us to a physical scene; with a precise location (hill country of Ephraim) and a description of nature (under the Palm of Deborah). We also read that the leader was ruling on a precise time *VaEt HaHeeh* (בעת ההיא).

Chapter 5 constitutes a variance of the usual tripartite structure that characterizes the rest of Judges. This tripartite structure can be described as follows:

- Characters and geopolitical setting
- Body of the text describing the centrality of YHWH
- Conclusion, victory, and temporary peace

The juxtaposition of the prose narrative in Judges 4 with the poetic song in Judges 5 offers a multifaceted portrayal of Israel's deliverance under Deborah's leadership. Chapter 4 presents a linear, detailed account of events, emphasizing the roles of Deborah, Barak, Jael, and YHWH within a concrete historical and geographical framework. In contrast, chapter 5 transforms the same story into an epic song of victory, highlighting theological themes, communal memory, and the moral evaluation of participants and nonparticipants. Together, these complementary

accounts underscore the centrality of divine agency, the unexpected prominence of female figures, and the complex dynamics of Israelite society during the period of the judges.

The narrative invites the reader to reflect on the commander's resolve and leadership. Does Barak fully apprehend the threat posed by the Canaanite invasion? Summoned by the leader and prophetess Deborah, does he doubt his own ability to confront the enemy effectively? Or does he already recognize that victory is attainable only through Deborah's prophetic authority? Such questions emerge from Barak's evident hesitation to engage in battle (4:8). His lack of confidence costs him the "heroic, glorious trophy," as Sisera is ultimately delivered not into his hands (4:7) but into the hands of a woman (4:9). Nevertheless, the narrative portrays Barak as an active and assertive military commander (4:10, 4:12–16). He ascends Mount Tabor at Deborah's direction (4:6), descends to engage the enemy (4:14), assembles the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, and leads them to victory—slaying all but the Canaanite commander Sisera⁴⁷. The climactic act of the narrative, however, is reserved for a woman. Although Barak comes close to achieving full recognition for Israel's deliverance, he is not the one chosen to complete the task.

The text's narrative structure leads the reader to the promised resolution—Sisera falling "into the hands of a woman" (4:9). This woman, Jael, is portrayed as both enigmatic and compelling. She is at once an outsider and a participant: a dependent wife of Heber the Kenite and an independent agent acting alone in her tent, emerging twice to meet Sisera. The scene's configuration emphasizes her ambiguity and piques the reader's curiosity. Her identity remains uncertain: is she fully a Kenite, and if so, how does her connection to Moses' father-in-law Hobab inform her actions? The text does not resolve these questions. Jael remains an elusive figure, yet one who displays mastery of her environment—handling the tent peg with skill and decisively controlling both Sisera's and Barak's movements. The narrative thus draws the reader into its intrigue, sustaining interest through its unexpected turns.

The configuration of chapters 4 and 5 continually engages the reader by subverting conventional expectations. The text captivates with its unpredictable portrayal of a male hero who defies the typical ancient Near Eastern stereotype of the victorious warrior bringing home the spoils of war. Instead, the narrative disrupts the cyclical pattern of the Judges stories with prose, poetry, female

⁴⁷ Although the text 4:16 pronounces "not one was left".

leadership, the interplay between majority (Israelites, Canaanites) and minority (Kenites) groups, and the redefinition of traditional gendered roles—women who wield metal tools with precision and decisiveness. Together, these chapters invite readers into a literary and theological *avant-garde* within the Book of Judges, challenging established norms and offering a complex, dynamic vision of deliverance.

Conclusion

The organization of Judges chapters 4 and 5 reveals a carefully constructed narrative progression that not only recounts Israel's deliverance but also reconfigures traditional gender, theological, and literary roles. Chapter 4 builds tension and anticipation through its prose account of events, while chapter 5 elevates the story into an epic, poetic celebration of divine power, communal participation, and individual heroism. The poetic composition underscores Deborah's unique position as "mother of Israel," contrasting her national, selfless maternal role with the anxious, personal longing of Sisera's mother, thereby framing the narrative within a distinctly feminine edge. This dual structure also enriches the theological dimension of the story, portraying YHWH's supremacy over Israel's enemies and subtly evoking the confrontation between the God of Israel and the Canaanite pantheon. The literary design of these chapters thus serves both to engage the reader and to convey a deeper theological message that transcends the immediate historical setting.

5. Structural Analysis

The juxtaposition of narrative and hymn in Judges 4 and 5 invites a comparative theological and literary analysis, revealing how the two genres collaborate to construct a vivid portrait of divine intervention, human agency, and covenantal identity in early Israelite tradition.

Chapter 4 renders a sequence of events that correlate consequential incidents on calling for war, participants, enemies, defeat, and victory. The story, with a few exceptions that I will detail below, generates a narrative that flows through its verses. The prose in chapter 4 familiarizes the reader with time and space (4:1–2), describes the enemy (4:7), provides adjacent information on a peace treaty (4:17), reminds the reader about tribal relationships (4:10–11), portrays the main characters (4:1, 6, 11, 17), and constructs a coherent story situated within the margins of a bellicose chronicle.

Chapter 5, a poem that depicts participation, praise, rejection, blessings and curses, does not present a smooth movement between topics.

This chapter offers a convoluted display of subjects that I will explain throughout this segment as if it were a neighborhood with different landscaping.

Presented with two distinct accounts of the same biblical episode—Judges 4 (prose) and Judges 5 (Song)—the reader encounters a rich historiographical tapestry that demands thoughtful, critical, and nuanced analysis. These two versions, representing different editions and incorporating diverse data, narrators, redactors, and sources, converge in a text that is as intricate as it is compelling.

As an introduction to the discrepancies between these narratives, it is important to note that the prose account of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4 appears to be an attempt to convey the story preserved in the Song of Judges 5, as has long been assumed in biblical scholarship⁴⁸. Yet both

⁴⁸ Zakovitch, Yair, in his work *Judges: Introduction and Commentary in the Mikraot Gedolot* Hebrew version, 2012, compares the narratives and demonstrates how the author of Judges 4 seems to respond and reinterpreting the material in Judges 5, filling in the narrative gaps, clarifying ambiguous statements and providing more accessible and linear account of events. Barry Webb in his commentary *The Book of Judges*, 1998, 1-72, 165, also supports the

texts contain motifs and emphases that invite deeper examination. Several key questions emerge from their points of convergence and divergence: Why does Judges 4 make no mention of Megiddo, Taanach, or “the kings of Canaan” (5:19)? Why does it report a markedly different assemblage of tribes (two in 4:6 versus six in 5:14–15)? Why does the Song emphasize Israel’s lack of weaponry (5:8), whereas the prose depicts Barak commanding a force of 10,000 troops?

Scholarly opinions⁴⁹ on the relationship between the two accounts vary highlight significantly, as will be detailed in subsequent chapters. Some argue that the Song is one of the oldest extant biblical compositions⁵⁰, based on its archaic language, the battle between the Israelites and Canaanites in the Late Bronze-early Iron Age, while others contend that it represents a later poetic exegesis of the prose narrative. The Song does not contain important elements present in Judges 4, such as the centrality of Mount Tabor, the force of Barak’s 10,000 soldiers, and Sisera’s 900 iron chariots, further complicating the question of priority and dependence.

Structurally, the juxtaposition of chapters 4 and 5 raises numerous critical considerations: topographical inconsistencies, differing portrayals of Sisera and Jael, possible linguistic

view that Judges 4 is a prose adaptation of Judges 5, emphasizing the theological and literal function of the prose account, and featuring the fact that the author of Judges 4 was trying to provide a more structured and coherent narrative for the events described in the Song, addressing a specific and clear emphasis on the roles of the characters.

⁴⁹ Scholarly opinion on the dating of the *Song of Deborah* (Judg. 5) remains divided, reflecting broader methodological debates about the reliability of linguistic and thematic criteria for establishing relative chronology. Many scholars have long regarded the Song as one of the oldest, if not the oldest, biblical composition. Albrecht Alt (1953) argued that its archaic language, focus on tribal coalitions, and lack of reference to monarchy point to a pre-monarchic setting, possibly in the 12th–11th century BCE. Frank Moore Cross (1973) similarly situated the Song in the early Iron Age, identifying parallels with Ugaritic poetic forms and Canaanite mythic motifs as evidence of its antiquity. Yehezkel Kaufmann (1960s) saw in the Song a rare and invaluable witness to early Israelite religion before the centralization of cult and power. More recently, Mark Smith and Michael Coogan have continued to read the Song as a deeply archaic text, preserving Israel’s early memory of its tribal confederacy and local deities. By contrast, an increasing number of scholars have challenged the assumption of its great antiquity, arguing instead that the Song may reflect later literary and theological concerns while preserving some archaic elements. Susan Niditch (2008) cautions against equating archaic style with early date, noting the possibility of deliberate literary archaism. Robert Polzin (1980) argues that the Song may serve as a Deuteronomistic poetic exegesis of the prose narrative rather than an independent, earlier account. Similarly, Marc Zvi Brettler (2002) emphasizes the theological and ideological affinities between the Song and later biblical literature, warning against over-reliance on linguistic archaisms as indicators of date. J. Alberto Soggin (1993) also regards the Song as preserving older traditions but shaped into its present form perhaps as late as the monarchic or even exilic periods. These divergent views highlight the complex nature of the Song’s composition and transmission. Whether understood as an early Iron Age composition preserving authentic pre-monarchic memory, or as a later literary reflection on earlier traditions, the Song’s distinctive poetic style, theological vision, and emphasis on YHWH’s intervention make it an indispensable text for understanding Israelite identity and historiography. See bibliography for individual approaches. See J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ This argument is supported by Cross, Frank Moore and Friedman, David Noel.

anachronisms, variations in tribal participation, intertextual resonances with other biblical traditions, and the canonical placement of prose and song as mutually illuminating yet distinct accounts. Together, these layers of complexity underscore the need for a rigorous philological, literary, and theological exploration of this dual narrative.

The Structure of Chapter 4. Narrative

a) Macrostructure:

- Verses 1-3: Background information of the Judges period.
- Verses 4-11: Protagonism of Deborah and Barak through declarations and actions.
- Verses 12-16 : Sisera's performance.
- Verses 17-22 : Jael's intervention

Verses 17-22: The Jael episode merges with the gender-bending destabilization of monarchic manliness presented throughout the narrative of the nation's formation. Jael perform in vindication of the nation by first seducing its adversary into her tent ("Turn aside to me, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear!" 4:18) and then simulating maternal safeguard – covering him, feeding him milk (4:19), and listening to the commander's indication to stand by the door and lie to those who hunted his life (4:20).

- Verses 23-24: Conclusion.

b) Microstructure:

The prose is filled with verbs, actions, characters, behaviors, and strategic roles, that the narrator and redactor use to link situational interventions in the text. These different categories will be analyzed bellow, accordingly throughout the explanations of the verses.

VERSE 1

–ויוסיפו-VaYosifu,⁵¹ (the Israelites) continue (4:1 a) to do wrongness, links the text to the cyclical narrative of the Book of Judges, i.e., iniquity/sin/transgression-pray to God-God’s merciful response-judge’s rules- quiet time-erroneous.

VERSE 2

וַיִּמְכְּרוּם-VaYimkerem,⁵² (Yhwh) surrounded/sold them (4:2a). This action plays an important role as part of the cyclical development of the narrative in the Book of Judges. YHWH encased the Israelites to the enemy, a motif that repeats itself when the people of Israel go astray and abandon YHWH.

VERSE 3

וַיִּצְעֲקוּ-VaYitzahaku⁵³ (the Israelites) cried out.

This action represents the recurring behavior of the Israelites, from the conquest of the Land in Joshua’s narrative to the demand of a monarchical order. They encompass the introduction to the new Judge and prophetess, Deborah.

The actions will diverge from narrator to protagonists, when the Israelites, Deborah, Barak, Jael, and Sisera emerge in the text.

⁵¹ Many scholars note that the verb יָסִיף (“to continue, to add”) functions as a formal trigger for the Deuteronomistic cycle of apostasy. Its iterative nuance (“they once again did evil”) reinforces Judges’ rhetorical view of history as patterned decline following each judge’s death. See Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, Anchor Bible 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975); Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, trans. Jonathan Chipman, Biblical Interpretation Series 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁵² The conjugation of מָכַר (“to sell”) appears prominently in Deuteronomistic theology (e.g., Judges 2:14; 3:8; 10:7). Scholars such as Niditch and Blenkinsopp highlight its juridical and covenantal force: Israel’s breach of fidelity triggers YHWH’s “handing over” to enemies, a motif shaped by ancient Near Eastern suzerainty language, exercising dominance over the vassal subordinate.

⁵³ The verb צָעַק (“to cry out”) in Judges carries not only emotional distress but the technical meaning of covenantal supplication (Soggin; Exum). The cry often lacks explicit repentance, a point made forcefully by O’Connor and Block, who argue that it reflects desperation rather than moral transformation.

VERSES 4 & 5

וַיַּעֲלוּ-VaYaalu⁵⁴ (the Israelites) went up, to Deborah for advice (4:5b). The text shows the centralization of Deborah's authority. The text hints the name Jael-יַעֲלַי, "to go up" according to the root of the verb.

VERSE 6

וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא-VaTishlach VaTikrah⁵⁵ (she), Deborah, sent out and summoned. Eloquently, the script models the female power (4:6a), who tells Barak, the chief in command whom to beckon, in order to reinforce the army.

VERSE 7

The place and the name of the enemy are mentioned to assure Barak that YHWH will support the cause.

VERSE 8

וַיֹּאמֶר-VaYomer (4:8a) He says. Barak establishes conditions. His participation on the battlefield is susceptible to Deborah's presence.

VERSE 9

וַתֹּאמֶר-VaTomer (4:9a), Deborah said, elaborated out loud that this battle would be delivered and won by the hand of a woman. Since Jael has not entered the scene yet, the reader might think that the woman the text is referring to is Deborah herself.

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּקּוֹם-VaTakom VaTelech (4:9 b-c), Deborah stood up and went.

⁵⁴ The root עָלָה ("to ascend") is frequently used to express approaching cultic or judicial authority. In several narrative contexts (Gen 45:25; Exod 19:20), "going up" signals movement toward a higher social or spiritual position.

⁵⁵ The combination of verbs "to send" and "to summon" is characteristic of authoritative speech acts in Biblical Hebrew. See Cynthia Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

The action presented on verse 10, is a cry for war. Barak calls the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, with a bellicose scream.

VERSE 10⁵⁶

וַיִּזְעַק -VaYizak (4:10 a), cried out, a call in need of help.

The text presents a call of desperation, claiming for social responsibility, trustworthiness, unity, against a national threat. The verb helps understand the action of the cry for help, since it is the same verb mentioned in Exodus 5:15, in time of desperation and Pharaonic threat.

וַיַּעַל -Vaya'al (4:10b) and (Barak) went up, with a cluster of men ready to fight the war, Barak executes. Where does he ascend? At this point in the story the text does not specify, verse 12b will give us the answer.

וַתַּעַל -Va'Ta'al (4:10c), Deborah went up with Barak as she has promised that she will not leave him alone in this endeavor. Verses 4:5 b, 4:10 b, and 4:10 c, use the root y.a.l, to go up, to ascend. In the case of 4:5 b, the reason is clear, the location of Deborah as a consultant and judge was higher than the location of those who approached her for guidance. Strategically Barak also ascends. Har Tabor, the height of a mountain supplies a better perspective over the battlefield and the course of the enemy.

VERSE 11

וַיִּבֶן אֹהֶל—V'Heber HaKeini...V'Yet aholoh⁵⁷. And Heber HaKeini...Now, Heber the Kenite...has pitched his tent.

The text introduces a detail about a character, that seems like a side note, not related to the previous narrative neither to the following verse 12. This specification will provide information

⁵⁶ Although used for military mustering the root זעק also retains associations of lament and supplication (I Samuel 15:11, Esther 4:1, Jonah 3:7).

⁵⁷ Aharoni points out its association with nomadic and Kenite identities, reinforcing Jael's social setting. See Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 185, 198, 259, 298.

about Jael's intervention in the fate of Sisera's. The statement about Jael's husband Heber in verse 11 stands isolated in its context; a scribe apparently found this transitional point to be a suitable place to insert an explanation of why Sisera later trusts Jael.

At first sight, this verse portrays a deviation of the reader's attention, with an emphasis on family associations, both tribal and geographical. These particularities will add sagacity to verses 17-21. Geographically he establishes his dwelling in Elon b'Tzaananim, near Kedesh, and important marker, since Sisera will flee on foot over there.

In addition to the introduction of Heber the Kenite and his family affairs, the verse mentions an action, v'yet (4:11b), he pitched his tent. This detail will become an important consideration later in the text since Jael will dwell in this tent, and the action of invitation-execution, will happen in this particular space. The weaponization of Jael's tool is the peg that physically secures the tent. Uprooting the peg that sustains the tent portrays an unsafe image that might have suggest that Jael was ready to demolish her safety for a greater purpose, unknown yet to the reader. The Hebrew word *keni* fundamental significance, Kenite, means "to furnace" or "to work metal," and thus it is appropriate that later Jael will use a hammer as a slaying bludgeon⁵⁸.

VERSE 12

וַיִּגִּידוּ V'Yaguidu ⁵⁹(4:12a), it was informed (to Sisera). The text is not clear who talks to the general in command. It might be his own army, spies or people who are in the area. Certainly, we experience in this narrative that there are more players at stake that participate in the scene. The text does emphasize that Barak, once again, ascends, goes up, to Mount Tabor, to the location he feels safe, since Deborah the prophetess resides there.

Sisera and Barak are the protagonists of verse 12. The reader sees two commanders-in-chief, reading themselves for battle. The structure of the text presents a familiarity of two powerful men, equipped to fight. The gestalt of the scene is even more compelling when we scrutinize the

⁵⁸ NaamaYahalom Mack, "The History of Iron in Ancient Israel," TheTorah.com, 2021, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-history-of-iron-in-ancient-israel>.

⁵⁹ The *hiphil* conjugation of דָּבַר ("to report, announce") is a standard verb for relaying military intelligence (1 Sam 4:13).

direction of Barak, as he goes up to Har Tabor, Mount Tabor suggests a higher location, which gives an advantage of the battlefield with a holistic optic of the frontline arena seen from above. This scene, Barak ascending, will contrast with Sisera descending to the Wadi of Kishon.

VERSE 13

וַיִּזְעַק סִסְרָא V'Yazek Sisera⁶⁰ (4:13a), Sisera called up his chariots and the troops. The reader might interpret this action as a source of empowerment. The readiness of the chief-in-command denotes strength, force and vigor. Nevertheless, the root of the action selected for this preparation reminds the reader that throughout other biblical sources this source has been used as a cry, a scream, and a weep in desperation for help (a few examples: Genesis 18:20; Exodus 2:23; Joshua 8:16; Judges 3:9,15; Judges 6:6,7,34,35; Judges 10:10,14). The author that chose this particular action might have had in mind the outcome of the story. Instead of an empowered yell, there is a cry.

This verse, 13b, indicates a geographical move that will be crucial in the encounter among the three parties participating in the war zone, Barak, Jael and Sisera. Interestingly, the moves of the two generals go in two different directions, while Barak goes up the mountain, Sisera descends to the *nahal*, the Wadi of Kishon. From the strategic point of view, the higher areas in ancient wars had a better chance to succeed than the lower ones.

VERSE 14

וְתוֹמֵר דְּבוֹרָה V'Tomer Deborah⁶¹ (4:14a), the prophetess and judge reappears in the scene after a parenthetical narrative, and she gives orders. She takes control on the next act and commands Barak, *kum*-קוּם, stand up. Based on her own prophesy, she knows this day is the exact day when

⁶⁰ Hebrew narrative occasionally employs ironic reuse of lexemes; here the same root used for Israel's cry is used for Sisera's mobilization. Niditch highlights this as intentional dramatic reversal: Sisera's "summoning" foreshadows his eventual helplessness. See Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

⁶¹ The resumption of Deborah's voice after a long narrative gap is a case of *repetitio ad auctoritatem*: her speech marks a turning point.

YHWH will deliver the enemy in his (Barak's) hand. This statement differs from verse 9, which stated that YHWH will deliver in the hands of a woman.

YHWH portrays an active role in verse 14. An important protagonism in the delivery of the war that's about to happen. Not only does YHWH deliver the word in "your hands" *b'yadecha*, but also YHWH *yatza lefanecha*- יצא לפניך is marching before Barak. Immediately after this action taken by YHWH, Barak descends, *vayered* – וירד, from Mount Tabor (4:14c). The text implies that a sense of confidence was given to Barak after YHWH marches before the Israelite general in command. Although he is able to descend, this verse does not identify the destination. The verse does say that Barak leads ten thousand combatants. YHWH is ahead of him, and ten thousand warriors are behind, supporting his task.

VERSE 15

וַיִּהְיוּ - *VaYaom*, [God] threw [Sisera] in panic.

The implementation of this particular word, which shares its roots with the noun *תהום* - *tehom*, abyss, reminds the reader of Genesis 1:2, God's creation and separation between earth and firmament, light and darkness, order and chaos.

Verse 15 employs an interesting word which denotes YHWH in control of the chaotic situation once Sisera appears before Barak's encounter.

וַיִּהְיוּ - *VaYaom*, (YHWH) discomfit, confuses, destroys, vexes Sisera and his entourage. There is no room for Barak's face to face battle since YHWH has already taken care of Sisera. This verb is used in other contextual episodes of the Scriptures (Exodus 14:24; Joshua 10:10), where YHWH is in charge of destroying the enemy before the arrival of the Israelite-Hebrew leader.

Verse 15b shifts the protagonism to Sisera. As Barak strategically did before when he descended from Mount Tabor, now Sisera, fearing death also descends, *v'yered*- וירד, from his chariot and flees on foot.

VERSE 16

ברק רדף -Barak *radaph*,⁶² the Israelite general pursued [the chariots]. The verse fluctuates from YHWH's action into Barak's agency. On verse 16 Barak emerges as a war leader following the geographical course of the course of *Haroshet HaGoim*, a place mentioned only once in the entire Bible. The text in this specific verse, continues saying that all Sisera's soldiers fell, it does not identify neither individualizes who defeated them. The verse states indeed that "nobody was left", a statement that alerts the reader about the fate of Sisera. If Sisera fell by sword, along with his members of the encampment, we assume that this statement means that there are no survivors. Nevertheless, Sisera continues on his journey. Astonishingly Sisera's survival guides us to the introduction of the woman who will seal the words of Deborah. By the hand of the woman refers to the so far unknown Jael. The redactor of the narrative might have reconsidered the possibility of a later addition⁶³ to the text as a justification of the Deborah's prophesy. Now Sisera descends from his chariot and flees on foot, this is a phrase repeated and reinforced on verse 17a when Jael emerges.

VERSE 17

וְסִסְרָא נָס בְּרִגְלָיו- *V'Sisera nas beraglav*-,and Sisera fled on foot.

When we look at this text as readers, we recognize the repetition of an action. On verse 14, Sisera has already fled on foot, escaping persecution from Barak. At that phase the story ends on verse 15 when nobody survived the battle, assuming Sisera did not survive. The words of Sisera's action are repeated on this verse as if a different author, narrator or editor was not aware of those verses beforehand. The difference in this verse is that Sisera has a direction, a connection, and a plan. The direction is Jael's tent, the connection is the relationship with Jael's husband who kept a peaceful affiliation with Jabin, King of Hazor, Sisera's boss, the plan is to hide and to survive.

⁶² Soggin highlights its function here as a transition from divine combat (v. 15) to human operations, marking Barak's reentry into the narrative agency. See J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1987).

⁶³ Jacob Wright, "Yael and the Subversion of Male Leaders in Judges," TheTorah.com, 2018, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/yael-and-the-subversion-of-male-leaders-in-judges>.

While we have possibly diverged information about Heber ⁶⁴ the Kenite, we have very modest evidence about Jael at all. Is she the wife of Heber the Kenite as many translations suggest or is she simply a woman in the clan of Heber the Kenite? If just a woman, what is her role? If she is a wife, why is she alone in her tent when Sisera arrives? In contrast to Heber the Kenite, who is known to the reader, applying the information given on verse 11, Jael is enveloped in mystery when she is first introduced, and the reader may be uncertain how to respond to her actions in Judges 4, since it is only in the following chapter that Jael is celebrated for her actions as a champion of Israel.

VERSE 18

וַתֵּצֵא-*VaTetze* Yael, Jael's character denotes agency.

She goes out. She leaves her comfort zone, her tent, and reaches out to the Sisera. The text does not mention if she has known Sisera beforehand. The text does not reveal if they have already met or if she acts out of compassion for a wounded soldier. The text is ambiguous regarding her intentions. The reader might perceive that she is not afraid. She initiates the encounter, she opens the entrance of the tent, she provides shelter. She also gives orders to the chief in command *Sura Adoni Sura Elai, Al Tirah*-סורה אדוני סורה עלי אל תירא, "Come in my lord, come in to me, do not be afraid."

The reader perceives the inversion of roles. Jael is not afraid, but she interprets that Sisera is afraid. From the root of the verb סר, to deviate, Sisera detours towards Jael, *VaYaser*-וַיֵּסֶר, he finds shelter in her tent, and she covers him. Until now the structure shows her as a sympathetic host, a concern and considerate woman ready to protect Jabin's command in chief.

VERSE 19

Sisera, the wounded general gives commands. *V'Yomer*-וַיֹּאמֶר, and he said, *Hashkini nah*-אִשְׁכֵּנִי נָא, please let me have some water.

⁶⁴ The word Heber in Hebrew, is rooted in the word Haber, an acquainting friend, related to someone.

He describes himself as a thirsty man. Water would have hydrated him, giving him strength, so Jael acts with wisdom, focusing on her aim, unknown to the reader. Her goal is not clear, to the audience. She gives him milk instead, *vatiphtach et neod hahalev*—ותפתח את נוד החלב, she opens a skin of milk⁶⁵. Milk provokes drowsiness and slumber. The text is guiding the reader to a sense of treatment with compassion and kindness, allowing him to rest, satisfied with his high protein intake, and she covers him, *batechasehu*⁶⁶—ותכסהו (this action is repeated from the previous verse, as if he got uncovered in the process of drinking).

VERSE 20

—*Amod Petach HaOhel*, עמוד פתח האוהל—Stand at the entrance of the tent.

The conjugation that Sisera is using is the 2nd person singular masculine. The text does not explain if Sisera is confused, disoriented, or drowsy after drinking milk instead of water, exhausted from war, or tired from fleeing the enemy. Certainly, there is a confusion in the conjugation of the feminine form *imdi*- עמדי⁶⁷.

Sisera continues to give orders in this verse, telling Jael how to proceed in case of any threat from his enemies. He is lying, covered with a blanket, he is in a lower position, and he tells Jael to stand up, *amod petach haohel*- עמוד פתח האוהל—stand at the entrance of the tent. Sisera continues with his demands and ask Jael to lie: “if anybody comes and ask you if any man is here, say No”, showing trust in Jael’s actions.

VERSE 21

On verse 21, the text presents Jael in full action. The text does not specify why Jael swerves from her compassionate hospitality to murder. Many verbs are detailed in this section, *Vatikach*-took

⁶⁵ Traditional commentators, Rashi-Kimchi, already noticed the ironic contrast between Sisera’s demand for water and Jael’s strategic substitution of milk.

⁶⁶ Psalm 91:4.

⁶⁷ In my personal opinion, another possibility is to interpret this disparity in the change of gender conjugation is that from *imdi* to *amod*, עמדי—עמד, there is only one letter difference, and it might be a simple mistake of the scribe.

(a tent pin), *vatsem*- grasp (the mallet), *vataboh*-she approached (Sisera), *vatitkah*-drove (the pin through his temple). Jael takes these actions *b'yada*-in her hands, circling back Deborah's predicament.

Verse 21b depicts Sisera's reception while he was fast asleep from exhaustion and the lethargic effect of the milk he had received from his hostess. *Vatitznach*, *Vayamot*, and impaled into the ground and he died.

It's worth noticing that the structure brings Jael back to her husband patronymic. The house bond through Heber the Kenite reminds the reader that Jael is in a legal relationship to another man, not the one that is sleeping in her tent.

VERSE 22

וְהִנֵּה בָרָק רוֹדֵף - *V'Hineh Barak rodef*, Now Barak persecutes [Sisera].

On verse 22 Barak reappears in the scene of the battlefield. The reader does not have any antecedents about the relationship between Barak and Jael. There is not known background regarding any previous encounter. How does Jael know that Barak is the general in command who was persecuting Sisera? That's not acknowledged in the Scriptures. As it is pointed out on verse 16, Barak *rodef*-persecutes Sisera. According to verse 16, nobody was left, including Sisera, but the text reiterates a scene of persecution on verse 22.

Jael, once again, takes agency, she goes out *VaTetze*-וַתֵּצֵא, as she proceeded on verse 18 towards Sisera, she repeats the action towards Barak. She engages in a conversation with Barak, *VaTomer*-וַתֹּמַר she said to him, she commands him, *lech v'erekha*-לֵךְ וְאַרְאֶךָ come and I will show you. She proceeds to reveal the trophy of her victory. Barak, verse 22b, comes to her, *VaYavo* Eleah. וַיָּבוֹא אֵלֶיהָ penetrates the intimate setting of the tent, and finds the triumphant outcome. Sisera lays dead.

VERSE 23

Verse 23 presents a shift of paradigm from a previous mention deity YHWH to Elohim. Although both in Syriac and in the Septuagint is translated as YHWH, in Hebrew it presents an alteration of the names.

The verse also shows that Jabin who has been defined as the king of Hatzor on verse 17, is now referred as king of Canaan. Hatzor refers to a specific geographical location, that from the archeological point of view has been destroyed before this narrative. Canaan, on the other hand, encompasses a nation, a people who worships among other deities, the god El.

VERSE 24

Verse 24 depicts the action of the Israelites, *VaTelech yad* ותלך יד the hand [of Israel]⁶⁸ went-bore-prevailed over Jabin king of Canaan. The hands of God, of a woman and of Israel illustrate strength and victory.

Structure Chapter 5. The Song of Deborah.

The Song of Deborah is one of the of the seven outstanding poems in the Story of Ancient Israel (Genesis – 2 Kings), all which function as a role towards the ultimate goal of the Exodus: the entrance to of the Promised Land and the establishment of a recognized nationhood under a chosen king, David.

These songs are:

- The Song sung at the Reed Sea in Exodus 15.

⁶⁸ Cross sees this as a theological structuring device linking divine action with human agency. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 105.

- The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32.
- The Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33.
- The Song of Deborah in Judges 5.
- The Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2.
- The Song of David in 2 Samuel 22.
- The Last Words of David to conclude the story of the establishment of David's kingdom in 2 Samuel 23:1-7.

There are different ways⁶⁹ of approaching the structure of the Song of Deborah.

J. P. Fokkelman⁷⁰ approaches the structure of Judges 5 through a detailed prosodic analysis that emphasizes its multilayered composition and intricate symmetry. He identifies this poem as a highpoint of the early Hebrew poetry built on a carefully balanced system of strophes and sub-strophes exhibiting complex parallelism, chiasm, and rhetorical artistry. The multiple prosodic levels of the Song reflect poetic skills and enhance the dynamic portrayal of the characters and events. Fokkelman suggests dividing the poem in 7 stanzas.

I will refer to those stanzas and add my observations as far as the structure based on them is concern.

Stanza 1:5:2-5, the Divine awakening and invocation, including a chiastic structure between Divine appearance and human response. The invocation to YHWH frames the theophany with the emphasis on the Divine nomadic movement, and cosmic trembling. The repletion of the Divine name (6 times YHWH is repeated in these verses) accentuates the theological grandeur.

⁶⁹ I will refer to Fokkelman and Knohl's views, as well as conveying my personal views. I will dissect the text verse by verse after the introductory explanation.

⁷⁰ J. P. Fokkelman, "The Song of Deborah and Barak: Its Prosodic Levels and Structure," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David N. Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 595–628.

Stanza 2: 6-8⁷¹, reflect social and political chaos, a perfect context for the rise of Deborah, emphasizing her role as the “mother of Israel”. A clear contrast is drawn between chaos and emerging leadership.

Stanza 3: 9-13⁷², a recollection of YHWH’s saving deeds, reinforces the public memory and praise as acts of theological importance.

Stanza 4: 14-18, tribe participation and tribal absence reflect internal disunity and valorizes those to contribute to the victorious outcome.

Stanza 5: 19-22, portrays a battle image and the cosmic forces that stresses that YHWH through nature is the true victor.

Stanza 6: 23-27, depicts divine justice, reinforcing that participation in YHWH’s cause leads to honor, and neutrality invites wrath.

Stanza 7: 28-31, the mother lament turns into a final note of justice⁷³.

Each stanza forms a unit of meaning and follows a larger narrative composition that links divine call, social crisis, leadership, bellicose intervention, cosmic involvement, military victory, and reflective justice.

Israel Knohl embraces most⁷⁴ of Fokkelman’s approach adding the importance of numerical slant in the text. He expresses; “The division of the Song in seven stanzas highlights the importance of number seven which was seen as a holy number by the author. A further example of the importance of number seven in the Song is apparent in the number of times the Tetragrammaton appears in the Song. It appears fourteen times or 7x2. Moreover, there is a significance to how these names are concentrated in the Song. The biggest concentration, ten iterations, is found in

⁷¹ Knohl, Israel disagrees with this definition as a stanza, expressing that this is a later addition to the text. See Israel Knohl, "The Original Version of Deborah's Song, and Its Numerical Structure," *Vetus Testamentum* 66, no. 1 (2016): 45–65.

⁷² Knohl divides it into 2 stanzas (5:9-11 and 12-13) p.47, describing that 9-11 is a depiction of thanksgiving after the victory, and 11-13 refers to the times before the battle begins.

⁷³ Fokkelman treats this ending as an ironic and tragic closure.

⁷⁴ Israel Knohl, "The Original Version of Deborah's Song, and Its Numerical Structure," *Vetus Testamentum* 66, no. 1 (2016): 57–58.

the first three stanzas of the poem...on the other hand the Tetragrammaton does not appear in the fourth and sixth stanzas. In these stanzas the focus is on human bravery.”⁷⁵

Based on Fokkelman and Knohl’s structures, my understanding is that the Song demands more attention than this divisions and the speculation of the author’s preference for the number seven. In this spirit I would rather analyze in detail each verse individually, highlighting certain words and their significances.

In the reading of Judges 5, it is unclear who sings the Song. The text starts in singular, indicating it was Deborah who authors the Song, and performs it, but immediately after her name, Barak’s name emerges, joining the judge in singing together. It was purposely composed along with the story about the battle of Barak and Deborah against Sisera as a poetical high point celebrating their victory. The prose text and the poetic text are different in method and appearance, but they are manifestly complementary to each other.

The poem opens (Judges 5:2) with an exhortation to the Israelite assembly to offer praise to the Lord. In contrast, the subsequent verse (5:3) shifts its focus to a distinct audience—foreign monarchs and rulers. Here, the narrator personally assumes the role of exalting God. These non-Israelite sovereigns are not invited to join in the act of praise; rather, they are positioned as passive observers, summoned to bear witness to the poetic tribute of an Israelite bard who glorifies his deity.

VERSE 1

וַתִּשָּׂא - *VaTashar*, is the conjugation of the verb in feminine singular⁷⁶, which means that Deborah sings the Song by herself but Barak joins as tailgate in the introduction to the Song.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Robert Alter observes that Hebrew narrative often signals hierarchical prominence by grammar; the feminine singular verb followed by “וַיִּבְרַךְ” presents Barak as a secondary or joining voice. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 50–52.

VERSE 2⁷⁷

The ode initiates with an appeal to the Israelite assembly to bless the YHWH. The description of Israel with their locks going untrimmed, it's an expression of allegiance and dedication to God (Exodus 32:25).

VERSE 3

In contrast to verse 2 the following verse engages a different audience, a non-Israelite spectators, foreign kings and sovereigns⁷⁸. In this address the narrator himself takes on the task of blessing God. The foreign leaders are not called upon to bless the Lord, merely to be part of the audience and bear witness to the song of an Israelite composer who praises his God.

VERSE 4

YHWH marches from Seir and Edom, that means that YHWH is a God that exercises motility and comes from the Southeast. God's passing through the path from the South to the North, where Deborah resides brings natural changes, ecological alterations⁷⁹. The earth trembled, the heavens dripped, the clouds dripped water. YHWH does not go unnoticed.

VERSE 5

This verse reminds the reader about the theophany occurred at Sinai⁸⁰, and God's power in nature.

⁷⁷ Cultic symbolism – Baruch Levine links unkempt hair to Nazirite-like behavior expressing total allegiance to YHWH, Num 6:5; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁷⁸ The sudden “אֶנְכִי לַיהוָה אֲשִׁירָה” has been interpreted by Susan Niditch as a deliberate narrator-poet intrusion—common in archaic Hebrew war poetry. See Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 75–78.

⁷⁹ John Day notes that the verb נָזַל *nazal* “to drip” often accompanies divine approach in psalmist theophanies (Ps 18:8–16;). See John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 118–20.

⁸⁰ “סִינַי” is the only self-standing Sinai reference in Judges.

VERSE 6

Shamgar ben Anat is mentioned in Judge 3:31 as a champion of Israel, a hero that slew six hundred Philistines with an ox goad. The reference to Shamgar combined with Jael suggests that the unexpected might happen, the weak can overthrow the powerful army, and the woman can defeat the dominant General. It's worth noting that at the time of the war against the Canaanites, to which Deborah refers to, there is no war against the Philistines. Since at this time no Philistines were fighting the Israelites, we might conclude that the author/narrator/ redactor of this text could have composed a poem to encompass diverse wars in which the weaker defeated the stronger.

Professor Israel Knohl proposes that the appearance of Shamgar ben Anat who fights against the Philistines does not accord with the time of Barak and Deborah's war, and it is probable that Shamgar's name is an editorial addition, and is not original to Judges 3:31, is an editorial insertion as well⁸¹.

VERSE 7

The word פִּרְזוֹן-*prazon*, arouses scholarly debate regarding its meaning. It is not clear how should be translated. JPS translates it as "deliverance", as if deliverance has seized towards Israel.

The reason for this deliverance to be removed from Israel is explained on verse 8, which mentions the election of Israel to choose other gods, and swerve from YHWH.

The word פִּרְזוֹן is also translated as unwall [settlements] or referring to the inhabitants of these unwall settlements, reminiscent of the places where Israel was not feeling safe anymore. חָדְלוּ פִּרְזוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חָדְלוּ, *hadlu prazon b'Israel*, the unwall settlements ceased because the Israelite feared to be exposed to the enemy, the Canaanites. When they saw themselves powerless, without weapons, caravans, and men-power, they felt unsafe in open areas, so the Israelites

⁸¹ Israel Knohl, "The Original Version of Deborah's Song and Its Numerical Structure," *Vetus Testamentum* 66, no. 1 (2016): 45–65.

relocated in walled areas where they could stay safer, until, as the verse continues, Deborah's rise as the mother-protector of Israel.

From the historical viewpoint this interpretation, contradicts the fact that during the period of the Judges, Iron I Era, most of the Israelite residents lived in un-walled settlements⁸². This situation changed during the monarchic period, Iron II Era, many walled cities were developed in the South, Judah and the North, Israel, and the agricultural dwellers did gather inside the walls at times of war. The fact that verse 7 mentions un-walled cities might suggest that this verse belongs to the monarchic period rather than the period of the Judges.

VERSE 8

This verse explains why the residents absconded to walled areas. They were paying the consequences of abandoning God, YHWH⁸³. Even an army of forty thousand, which indicates a mighty group of people escaped the persecution of the enemy because their deity support has seized from them.

VERSE 9

Verses 9-11 bracket a literary unit of euphoria after the combat, assertive in the conviction that thanks to the action of volunteers and the execution of YHWH, the Israelites defeated the enemies.

Verse 9 depicts a radical change in the tone of the Song. It's a call to bless and thank YHWH after the victory. The verse is not clear whose heart is pounding towards the leaders of Israel, neither does it explain who those leaders are. It might be Deborah or Barak who show appreciation for those who volunteer *הַמִּתְנַדְּבִים*-*hamitnadvim*⁸⁴ among the people.

⁸² Finkelstein proposes that these terms likely reflect a monarchic-era redaction reflecting Iron II realities. See Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 39–40.

⁸³ Echoes Dt. 32:15, Hos 8:8.

⁸⁴ Is associated with militia self-mobilization, Ps 110:3.

VERSE 10

A peculiar description occurs in this structural verse, portraying those who will praise YHWH on the next verse. Who are the ones who ride on she-asses, sit on saddle rugs and walk on regular paths? The depiction seems to be about humble, ordinary people. These are the ones who will declare the glory and victory of YHWH. Exegetical ⁸⁵ rendering explains who these people are:

רוכבי אתונות צחורות אלו תלמידי חכמים שמהלכין מעיר לעיר ומדינה למדינה ועוסקין בתורה: ישבי על מדין ' שיושבין ודנין דין אמת לאמתו: הולכי אלו בעלי מקרא

“The riders of the she-asses are the scholars, that perambulate from town to town, from country to country and devote themselves to the study of Torah; those who sit of saddled rugs are the judges who judge with the truth, these are experts in Bible.”

The midrash contextualizes the verse framing the participant that will chant YHWH's victory, exemplifying their actions and their objective, i.e., those who study and spread the words of Torah, followers of YHWH will prevail and sing words of triumph.

VERSE 11

This verse demarks the excitement of war and conquest. The watering places define a location surrounding by the Kishon River⁸⁶. The gates which are mentioned in this verse, are the entrances of the Canaanite cities, and the descent to the gates is the advance of Israelite soldiers from their cities on the mountains to make war upon the Canaanite cities, in the plain valley. In this way the final words of verse 5:11 are an appropriate transition into the third stanza which describes going out to war.

The text concludes:

אֲזַיִרְדּוּ לִישָׁעִים עַם־יְהוָה:

⁸⁵ TB Guittin 56b, Mechitah de Rabbi Ishmael B'Shalach Masechtah D'VAYehi B'Shalach Paroh- Parasha 1.

⁸⁶ Archaeological studies of the Kishon basin confirm watering stations as key control points demonstrates a topographic accuracy. See Nadav Na'aman, "Literary and Topographical Notes on the Battle of Kishon (Judges IV-V)," *Vetus Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (1990): 423–36.

“Then did GOD’s people, March down to the gates!”

עַם־יְהוָה – *Am YHWH* or *Im YHWH* could be read either way. Either the text is referring to the “people-*am* of YHWH” or that that they marched “with-*im* YHWH”. The text describing “people of YHWH” shows exclusivity, the reading “*im*”, marching with YHWH shows guidance. Either way the verse shows the centrality of YHWH deity in the battle, mutual election, “people-God” or guidance, “with-God”, indicates a necessary relationship to acquire victory.

VERSE 12

The heroic epic of a realistic scene of two leaders, Deborah and Barak, emerges in this verse. In the former verse, YHWH gets the credit for the victory but verse 12 shows a more human and genuine fighters in the battlefield vis à vis the theologian involvement. Deborah and Barak are singing a hymn, first singular person on 5:1, that addresses themselves as second singular person on 5:12.

Interesting choices of actions have been selected for this verse. “Awake- awake [Deborah]” could be contrasted with Sisera’s drowsiness and falling asleep (4:21), “Arise [Barak]” might be juxtaposed with Sisera falling at Jael’s feet (5:27)

The verse shows a self-centered heroic human recognition on. The battlefield that will alter, once again, on the following verse.⁸⁷

VERSE 13

This verse refers to those who march down to the battlefield. This theme begins already in verse 11b: “Then down to the gates marched the people of YHWH.” If the reader skips verse 12, which precipitously rotates from narrative to second-person address, there is a correlation of continuity between verses 11 and 13. The people of YHWH march down to the battlefield,

⁸⁷ The verse likely contains a Deuteronomistic gloss, highlighting YHWH’s empowerment of the weak, e.g., Deut. 7:7.

recentralizes the action on the people chosen by YHWH. The editor's intentions were predominantly theological.

If the Israelites were weak, scared and lacked the ability to fight, then it must have been God's dominant intervention and not human endurance that led to success. But a blend of forces between human-Godlike enhances the force of triumph. This verse reminds the reader of this combined strength by mentioning "Then was the remnant made victor over the mighty, God's people won my victory over the warriors", referring to Ehud (Judges 3:26-30).

VERSE 14

This verse starts with the enumeration of the tribes which participated in the fighting and the ones who were absent as well as allusions to the Israelites' bravery⁸⁸. The readers are exposed to the tribal catalogue. In 14-15 and 18, six tribes are praised for their loyalty and valor: in geographical order from South to North: Benjamin, Ephraim, Machir, Issachar, Zebulun, and Naftali.⁸⁹

It is as important to mention and highlight the tribes who participate as much as the absence of the tribes who are not stated. The focus on heroism on the battlefield is redirected to human bravery, the Tetragrammaton is not mentioned until verse 23.

Verse 14 marks the beginning of a tribal unity, an amphictyony, assembled to the unifying role of the divinity, merging individuals, communities, military ranks, diversity, gender differences, men and women, in a collective narrative, homologated identity, followers of the same deity, being the children of "the mother of Israel".

Starting with the tribe of Ephraim, settled around the area of the Amalekites, the verse describes the loyal participation of the tribes who will defeat the enemy. All the tribes, the ones who participate and the ones who don't, belong to the Northern kingdom of Israel. The tribe of Judah does not perform a role in the Song. Benjamin is the smallest tribe, indicating that its

⁸⁸ Most scholars such as Albright, Cross and Lemche, consider the tribal schema in Judg 5 more archaic than that of Num 1 or Josh 13-22 .

⁸⁹ I will explain in depth this involvement under the subtitle "Tribal Participation".

participation encompasses from the largest to the smallest. Machir represents the tribe of Menashe, as the only son its namesake. Both Ephraim and Menashe represent Joseph, son of Jacob. Zebulun, who is also mentioned in the two tribes participating in chapter 4, is mentioned twice on chapter 5 (verses 14 & 18).

The song refers to four units, depicting four geographical designations. The author refers to three directions: to the South, tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin; to the East, Transjordanian tribe of Menashe-Machir; and to North, tribe of Zebulun. This periphery represents the territory of the Northern kingdom at the time of king Saul.

VERSE 15

A transition between the loyal tribes who did participate and the ones who detached themselves from the collective responsibility is found on verse 15, when the author transitions from Issachar to Reuben.

VERSE 16

The tribe of Reuben is criticized for staying in the sidelines instead of participating. This episode is a reminiscence of Numbers 32:1-5. As the people of Israel prepared themselves to finally enter the Promised Land, two and a half tribes expressed their desire to dissent. Loaded with more animals than their comrades, the lineages of Gad and Reuben and half of the tribe of Menashe wished to remain outside of Israel's ancient borders. "The land that YHWH has conquered for the community of Israel-is cattle country, and your servants have cattle" (Numbers 32:4). The descendants of Reuben and Gad had more livestock than the rest of the nation. They were more efficient warriors and had collected more spoils of war.

The land of the Amorites, from the Arnon River until Mount Hermon, was mountainous and fertile. After the Israelites conquered that area, the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half of the tribe of Menashe preferred its vast pastures to the urban and dry Israel.

VERSE 17

Gilead dwelt beyond the Jordan and did not come to the war. Machir is praised for his participation, as the son of Menashe. Machir was the father of Gilead. Gilead can be interpreted as a character or as a region⁹⁰. So, the Gilead region went to the House of Machir, as it stated in Numbers 32:40.

Dan's reference about lingering by the ships alerts the reader's attention.

Dan's portion of the land is not by the sea⁹¹ (Zebulun's portion is by the sea, Genesis 49:13), rather, the body of water that this verse is referring to is the Jordan river. Dan's vessel is a river boat. Dan, according to Radak's medieval commentary, took a river boat and fled out of fear from the enemy and took his possessions to the other side of the Jordan river. That will explain his lack of participation.

VERSE 18

In the catalogue of the participatory and non-participatory tribes Zebulun plays a prominent role. Verse 18 mentions his participation for the second time in the Song (verse 14 & 18). The peculiarity expressed on verse 18 is that this tribe is a people who mocked death. They were ready to fight until the end for the purpose of defeating the enemy. As Rashi explains "They were contemptuous of their lives and subjected themselves to death in battle with Barak." Naphtali's participation is geographically important. Naphtali's fight in the open heights demarks strategical encampment. Naphtali is on the upper areas and open terrain, while Zebulun is at sea level. This verse structures a gestalt of vast dominance. From the heights to the lows, from the mountains and hills to the sea level.

⁹⁰ Na'aman explicate that Gilead functions metonymically for the Transjordan tribes. See Nadav Na'aman, "Literary and Topographical Notes on the Battle of Kishon (Judges IV-V)," *Vetus Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (1990): 423–36.

⁹¹ See "Tribal Participation". In Egyptian texts from the 12th–11th centuries BCE, especially from the reigns of Ramesses II, Merneptah, and Ramesses III, there appear references to a people called Denyen (Dnn / Dnjn) — one of the so-called Sea Peoples who attacked Egypt and settled along the Levantine coast.

VERSE 19

This verse reveals the appearance of enemy kings of significant cities who were defeated.

From the reference of Taanach and Megiddo in Judges 5, we can determine that they were two Canaanite monopolies in the region at the time of the battle. Excavations by Paul W. Lapp⁹² at Taanach have established that Canaanite Taanach was destroyed at almost the same time as Canaanite Megiddo. There was no period when Megiddo had lost its prevailing locus in the area to its neighbor Taanach. The waters of Megiddo remain as a memorial to the city of Megiddo, once a powerful city.

This verse situates the core of the battle as a serious confrontation of two peoples.

VERSE 20

In virtue of a cosmological description, verse 20 provides an interesting image of heavenly intervention. The text expresses: “מִן שָׁמַיִם נִלְחָמוּ” -from Heavens has fought⁹³ (literal translation), and it does not provide any more information. It could be a poetic license regarding an astrophysical intervention in the battle necessary to defeat Sisera, who is mentioned in the verse. Another possibility is that Heavens have provided with an intense rain which provoked a flood that swiped the Wadi of Kishon, damaged Sisera’s chariot and as a consequence of this meteorological climatic devastation Sisera fled by foot (merging verse 20 and 21).

VERSE 21

The Wadi of Kishon plays a crucial strategic role in the battlefield. This verse reflects a flash-flood event in the Jezreel Valley.⁹⁴ The Kishon, normally shallow, becomes destructive only during sudden storm runoff from Mount Carmel. While Mount Tabor, where the Israelite troops

⁹² Lapp, Paul, archeological excavations at Tel Taanach in 1963 and 1966. See Paul Lapp, "Taanach by the Waters of Megiddo," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 30, no. 1 (1967): 2–27.

⁹³ Block argues that “stars fought” alludes to a devastating rainstorm, consistent with the Kishon flood in verse 21 as a meteorological effect. See Daniel I. Block, "Deborah among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historian," in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 229–53.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

assembled according to Judg. 4: 6, 4:10-14, is located east of Wadi Kishon and its outgrowths, the Wadi is located in-between Megiddo and Sarid, obstructing the way for both assault and withdrawal for the Canaanites. The deployment of the Israelite army at Sarid, on the southern border of Zebulun, centralizes the Wadi of Kishon as a tactical location for the entrapment of the Canaanites.

VERSE 22

The mention of the horses in this verse prompts the reader into a reminiscence of Sisera and the Canaanite power, a recollection of authority and dominance. The enemies are the owners of horses and chariots. As we read in this verse the scene overturns from supremacy to weakness. Their horses' hooves were severed and damaged. The heat of the star (stated on verse 20) brought the mud to a boil, amputating the hooves, as when legs are scalded in boiling water able to detach the hooves. Once the hooves were severed, the legs were battered.

VERSE 23

The curse on Meroz is an intricate aspect of this Song. The geographical location of Meroz is unknown. Meroz is only mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible. Meroz could either refer to a spatial location or to a group of people. The lack of information about these aspects in the Hebrew Bible is unsettling. Israel expected Meroz to cut off the enemy when the latter retreated, but Meroz did not do so and was therefore harshly cursed. Another explanation, Meroz was in alliance with Israel but joined the Canaanites during this battle. An additional possibility is that Meroz is referring to any of the three tribes that are not mentioned as a unified cluster of Israel against the enemy, i.e., Simon, Levy and Judah.

Abarbanel gives an odd explanation: Meroz was Sisera's zodiac star. Contrasting with the following verse, verse 23 depicts a curse (verse 24, a blessing) that amplifies those who refuse to join the war, who did not come to support YHWH, who failed to respond to YHWH's call. This last statement astonishes why YHWH needs help from humans. The image of the "angel of God" cursing Meroz acts as a buffer in this theological-anthropomorphic relationship. It is the angel who declares that need, not YHWH-self.

VERSE 24

Jael's figure appears for the first time in the last third of the Song. She is blessed (contrasting Meroz), she represents the action of the loyal ally. This verse introduces the realistic scene that occurs inside the tent. Jael owns the tent, she is in charge, she knows how to manipulate the situational scheme. She is alone, as the reader knows from the previous chapter. The text in the Song reminds the audience that she belongs to her husband, Heber the Kenite, showing prudence and modesty. The text cautiously indicates that she has an agenda remote from seduction, her intention is to defeat YHWH's enemy, and thus she is rewarded with a blessing. Jael being the "most blessed"⁹⁵ of the women in tents situates her in a high category, elevated in the hierarchical ladder. She is compared with the matriarchs⁹⁶ who dwelled in tents, and among them, she is the most blessed.

VERSE 25

The verse indicates Jael's shrewdness. Her perception of reality and her understanding of her final aim, the killing of Sisera, starts with a nurturing motherhood style: milk instead of water, preparing the curds in a princely bowl, in a cup of the mighty, used for drinking water, for waters are described as "mighty", as it is said, "in mighty waters."

VERSE 26

The hand of Jael appears to execute the final act⁹⁷. Jael is represented here as a strong woman, personified as the ultimate agent capable of defeating Sisera. She is not acting like she does in chapter 4, covering Sisera with a mantle as he falls asleep from drowsiness. She is violent, determined, strongminded. The choice of actions reflects an inversion of strength gender wise. *מחקה בראשו mekhkah b'rosho*, penetrated his head, denotes a sexual connotation as far as the penetration is concern and a wise intervention as far as the head-brain is concern. *מחצה וחלפה*

⁹⁵ Resonates with Judith 13:26.

⁹⁶ Genesis Rabbah 60:16, TB Nazir 23b.

⁹⁷ The repetition "יָדָהּ ... יָמִינָהּ" foregrounds Jael's physical power, echoing the recurring "hand" motif throughout Judges. See Mark S. Smith, *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 234–64.

מַחַצְזָה בְּחַלְפָה בְּרַקָּתוֹ - *machatzah b'halfah b'rakato*, smashed and pierced his temple, symbolizes a reassurance of her actions. Once again, the piercing implies penetration.

VERSE 27

Compared to chapter 4, chapter 5:27 shows a General Sisera that is standing and falls between Jael's feet. He is not sheltered under the warmth of a blanket. Sisera is erect when he is lethally struck by Jael; he then lapses to the ground between her feet, a collapsed combatant. This positioning, the location between her feet, בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ – *bein ragleiah*, denotes sexuality⁹⁸, even if we do not read literally sexual intercourse between Jael and Sisera. Additionally, Sisera is described as lying despoiled שָׁדוּד - *shadud* or destroyed a word used in the Hebrew Bible to speak about a woman being defiled, sexually violated. This verse bridges by contrast with 5:28-30, as Sisera's mother's expectations are the opposite of the current situation.

VERSE 28

A new unexpected character, not mentioned in chapter 4 participates in this verse. From the pseudo-maternal and non-nurturing figure of Jael, Sisera's mother presents herself. Interestingly she is the only biological mother mentioned in both chapters, whereas Deborah is the mother of Israel (5:7), the term is generic without individualizing her personal biological offspring. The children of Deborah, the Israelites, survive while the child of this mother, Sisera, perishes. In contrast with this motherhood aspect, or lack of it, Deborah and Jael carry a personal name that identifies them, while this woman does not carry a name, she is linked to be "the mother of" Sisera. Contrasting with the open area where Deborah resides or the humble tent where Jael dwells, Sisera's mother inhabits in a structure that denotes an established edifice that at least has a window and a lattice. Sisera's mother knows of her son's possessions. The chariots and their wheels are assets that denote power, and resources of strength. Sisera's mother posing at the window enables the reader to speculate on her longing for her son, vengeance against the enemy, greed for the battlefield spoil, or simply said, she is a woman who waits for the unknown.

⁹⁸ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 79–81.

VERSE 29

A group of wise women emerge in this scene. The text does not give any clue of who they are. Remarkably they are described as wise, but the text does not allow them to speak, although they “give answer”⁹⁹, the audience is not aware of which kind of answers, since it is Sisera’s mother who overturns the dialogue and finds an explanation for her son’s delay. Sisera’s mother tells herself, as if she is trying to convince herself of a reality, a liminal setting between life and death, taking place on the threshold of the lattice, playing between the unknown, and the anticipation of an unspecified outcome.

VERSE 30

The loot of the battlefield in the imagination of Sisera’s mother are a womb or two for each man. The word “womb” should not be taken lightly. Womb refers to offspring, creation, motherhood, nurture. Womb in Hebrew, –רחם *rechem*, comes from its root of compassion, –רחמים *rachamim*, *r.ch.m*. This game of words seems awkward as a woman, a mother, is speaking about the spoil of a war.

The women taken as prisoners of war are set in the same level of hierarchy as the embroidered clothes, both are assets, properties of the warriors, degrading the humanity of the female prisoners’ characters.

VERSE 31

The Song has not mentioned the name of YHWH since verse 23. As a colophon of the poetic composition, the Song ends with a reminder of how everything started, Deborah, as a judge and a prophetess central figure, eloquently praises those who joined YHWH in the deity’s endeavor to defeat the Canaanites. YHWH will make all the enemies perish. YHWH represents the mighty power of nature, the sun rising in the night.

⁹⁹ Ackerman identify layered female laments as common in ANE victory-parodies; Judges 5 uses this to mock the defeated enemy. Susan Ackerman, "Women in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.45>.

The typographical number of a quiet time, 40 years encompasses the story, embodying the cyclical description of unobtrusive and peaceful times of the Book of Judges.

Intratextuality and Intertextuality. The Songs.

The transition from prose to song in Judges 4–5 evokes the structure of Exodus 14 and 15¹⁰⁰, where narrative and hymn complement each other to celebrate divine deliverance. In both cases, leaders assume agency against a formidable enemy, risking their lives on the battlefield, supported by YHWH, who ensures their triumph. The subsequent hymn then glorifies YHWH's role in the victory. Both episodes share striking thematic elements: the involvement of waters, the use of chariots, human and divine power, women's leadership, and communal joy.

The Song of Deborah depicts a decisive battle between Israel and Canaan at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo. David Noel Freedman¹⁰¹ argues that the poem recounts “a decisive episode in the struggle for control of the central and northern areas of Palestine.” The Canaanite forces outnumber the Israelites, and their superior chariots and military technology underscore the improbability of Israel's victory without divine intervention.

The Song of Deborah thus functions as a victory hymn to YHWH, the God who delivered Deborah and the responsive tribes from Sisera's army and his allied kings. As in Exodus 15, YHWH is portrayed as a storm-warrior, marching into battle and unleashing the elements to vanquish Israel's foes. Patrick D. Miller¹⁰² observes that “the Song of Deborah belongs to a context of covenant, tribal league, and holy war set against the mythos-theological concept of the Divine warrior fighting with and for Israel.” Much of the imagery in the Song is deeply archaic, drawing directly on Canaanite poetic and religious traditions. Here, divine power manifests in

¹⁰⁰ In traditional modern exegesis, assigned to J, P, and E, i.e., J, P and E sources according to the order of this particular text in Exodus.

¹⁰¹ David N. Freedman, “Early Israelite History in the Light of Early Israelite Poetry,” in *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, ed. H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 12.

¹⁰² Patrick D. Miller Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 87.

the sudden flooding of the Kishon River, disabling the Canaanite chariots and sealing their defeat. YHWH emerges as warrior, storm god, and deliverer of His people.

Just as YHWH throws the Egyptians into confusion and drowns them in the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 15), so too does the deity bewilder Sisera, his army, and his chariots, ensuring their destruction.

The covenant—ברית (brit)—evoked in Judges 4 and in the ancient poem of chapter 5 reflects the central biblical conception of covenant as a sacred bond between YHWH and the Israelites. This contrasts markedly with the conventions of other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations¹⁰³, where treaties between warring parties were formalized through written agreements inscribed on steles or obelisks to mark the end of hostilities. By contrast, the Israelite covenant is not simply a cessation of conflict but a renewal of their enduring relationship with YHWH, a reconsecration of the ברית-*brit*.

From this approach, the combined prose and poetic accounts of Deborah's victory not only recount a historical moment of deliverance but also reaffirm Israel's distinctive understanding of covenant—as a dynamic, ongoing relationship with YHWH, renewed and embodied even in the crucible of war.

¹⁰³ This characteristic will be described on chapter 8 and 9.

6. Genre and Literary Setting

Narrative and Poetry in Judges 4 and 5's Literature

A multifaceted figure enters the narrative of chapters 4 and 5. Deborah is a woman—perhaps the wife of Lappidot, or, as I prefer to reflect on the meaning of the Hebrew word *lappidot*, she is a “woman of torches,” לפידות (*lappidot*). She is a prophetess and judges her people. Her office is under the Palm Tree, תומר דבורה (*Tomer Deborah*), her namesake.

The textual description makes it entirely clear that only two tribes participated in the battle against Sisera: Naphtali and Zebulun (4:6, 11), as pictured in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, the Song presents a different reality. There is a “call to action” or a roster of six tribes—Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, and Issachar—who joined Naphtali and Zebulun (5:14–18). Other tribes (Reuben, Gilead, Dan, and Asher) are also mentioned in the Song but not in the narrative. Meroz is singled out for censure and cursed in verse 23.

The prose contributes an organized series of events that make sense from a narrative perspective. The flow of the text is sometimes interrupted by details such as: who is Heber the Kenite, what is his relationship to Moses’ father-in-law, who is he married to, and what is the foundation of his friendship with Jabin, ruler of Canaan, depicted?

Chapter 4:1–24 is narrative material, which deals mainly with Deborah and Barak’s battle against Sisera, head of the Canaanite army, and how Jael managed to kill Sisera. In contrast to the other judges’ stories, the narrative is uniquely followed by a song of praise (chapter 5)—“Song of Deborah”—which attributes the miraculous victory to Yahweh and gives honor to the deity¹⁰⁴. Chapters 4 and 5 form a unique unit in the book but are two separate parts that were probably written by two different people¹⁰⁵. The consensus is that chapter 5 is older than chapter 4 and also represents one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible¹⁰⁶. This is inferred from the

¹⁰⁴ J. Gordon Harris, Cheryl A. Brown, and Michael S. Moore, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 171.

¹⁰⁵ Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 2002), 61.

¹⁰⁶ J. Clinton McCann, *Judges, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 49.

difficulty of the Hebrew, the lyrical style, and the ancient patterns of repetition, as seen in Psalm 83:10–11 and 1 Samuel 12:9–11, celebrated in chapter 5.

Regardless of which chapter was written, created, or orally transmitted first, we might assume that without the story of chapter 4 and the frame it provides—which stands quite well on its own—the song of chapter 5 is not a genuine narrative but rather a gathering of lyrical evocations of a set of heroic events.

In chapter five, Deborah is the poet/singer and the mother of Israel.

Of the twelve judges in the entire book, only one transcends the violent paradigm of the other heroes—the only woman who doesn’t kill but knows how to summon men to battle: Deborah. Deborah dominates the art of discourse, both in prose and in song. She knows how to give orders and how to orchestrate God’s will. Deborah is sent by God to deliver Israel from its oppressor, Jabin, the king of Hazor¹⁰⁷, and consequently, his commander Sisera.

Her name hints: דְּבוֹרָה–דְּבוֹרָה–דְּבוֹרָה (*divur–devora–divra*), all rooted in the word for “speech.”¹⁰⁸ Deborah’s predecessors, the first three judges of the book, are portrayed as warriors: Otniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. But Deborah — a woman, a female leader rather than a man — is presented as an inspired leader, a prophetess through whom God gives instructions to Barak, the general of the Israelite forces. The narrative, though written in prose like the earlier chapters (1–3), surprises the reader with the unexpected: a woman who is enshrined in the book of Judges in two different literary genres — a prose narrative (Chapter 4) and a poem (Chapter 5), which she presumably sings (5:1). Both prose and song, two distinct genres, can be interpreted on different layers of meaning, which converge at a higher level of theological understanding.

¹⁰⁷ Hazor (Tell el-Kedah, north of the Sea of Galilee) was one of the most important and strategic Canaanite city states. Like the other city-states, it had its own prince and army and according to Cundall (1968, p.81) was subjected to the Egyptian Pharaoh. The site is divided into two main parts; to the south is the “acropolis” or the “Upper City” (about 15 acres in size), and to the north lies the “Lower City” (about 125 acres in size), according to the excavations of Ben-Tor. During the Bronze Age, both the Upper and Lower Cities were populated with an estimated population of 15,000 people (Ben-Tor 2016, vol.9, p.15). After the destruction of the Bronze Age, the “Lower City was abandoned—never to be populated again”. These texts show that the city of Hazor has been destroyed by the time of these stories are depicted. See Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 81. See Amnon Ben-Tor, ed., *Hazor: The 1990–2009 Excavations; The Bronze Age*, vol. 9 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2016), 15.

¹⁰⁸ TB Makkot 11a.

The two chapters, each employing a different genre, present two distinct accounts of Deborah's story. Together, they offer both an opportunity and a challenge: to read them diachronically and/or synchronically. The story in Chapter 4 takes place at a precise time (4:1), and the prose genre allows for the inclusion of details that contextualize the narrative. The song in Chapter 5, though considered older than the prose account (see historical setting), provides a poetic closure to the story. Here, the reader already possesses a certain amount of knowledge and is drawn into the theological and literary depth of the account.

Chapter 5 lacks detailed dialogues and background information. If the text had only been told through Chapter 5, the reader might have been confused and feel trapped around convoluted ideas and chaotic texts referring to the tribes and God, women and men leaders, life and murder, decorative bowls with food and battlefields. Chapter 5 is the climax of victory whose foundation is posted on Chapter 4. The narrative of prose has an entertaining sequential story with historical and cultural basis while the Song has the bombastic and dramatic expression of heroism, and theological statement of a God that prevails.

Mieke Bal,¹⁰⁹ approaches these two genres as follows: "The structure proposed on the basis of the literary code opens up the possibilities of interpretations progressively more capable of differentiating the narrative from the song...The literary code which tends to favor the concepts of ambiguity, density, and irony thus upholds the results of the narratological analysis...the content of the message would concern only men and their masculine qualities: Sisera ceased being a man from the moment he enters the tent...The event was predicted by Deborah in verse 9, in an equally ambiguous sentence, where the woman in question is not named. If Jabin escaped the confrontation by transferring his power to Sisera, Barak did the same in demanding the support of Deborah. At the end of the narrative there are no men left... In the same way, it becomes clear that the song has a profoundly different structure...describes the murder conforms to the rhythm of ascending progression...the accent at the end rather than the center...toward the cruel image of Sisera's agony...Deborah celebrates the murder in song."

¹⁰⁹ Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*, trans. Matthew Gumpert, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 92–93.

Other scholars such as T. J. Schneider¹¹⁰ argues that the two chapters complement each other. The placement of the poem after the prose, suggests that the prose must have been written “to accentuate and accommodate the poem”. I do agree that from the perspective of the reader, the narrative genre contextualizes the scene in space and time, and the song embellishes the story with an impactful sense of heroism. I hesitate to agree with the statement “to accommodate the poem”, I sustain that chapter 4 focuses on the development of the plot, conveying the gestalt of the events.

The Song of Deborah lies within the realm of heroic hymns, it’s a long poem of sophistication divided in three parts, a thanksgiving hymn (5:2-11), the gathering of the tribes (5:11-18) and the war where God prevails (5:19-31). Its genre is elevated in an “in crescendo” style culminating at the momentum of final victory and restoration of calmness to the land.

The two different genres expose the readers to distinctive approaches of the characters. Whether Deborah was the leader of the time with the power to rule (Chapter 4) or the mother of Israel with the compassionate-gender essentialist power to embrace her people as a singer (Chapter 5) or whether Jael was delivering hospitality or deliberating on murder, depict women’s roles in these two singular genera.

As a final thought on chapter five’s genre, the Song of Deborah encompasses a linguistic complexity, archeological and historical significance, and poetic grandeur.

Literary Situation

The Book of Judges can be viewed as a helicoidal composition, structurally designed to depict Israel’s decline, situated between the periods of Joshua and the monarchy. The literary structure employed by the narrator(s) guides the reader toward the perceived need for a monarchical system to unify the tribes and establish a nation. The narrator emphasizes a progressive portrait of Israel’s apostasy during the settlement in the Land. The text of Judges follows a predictable, cyclical pattern: the people’s errant behavior provokes God’s anger; God ceases to drive out Israel’s enemies; the people moan under oppression; God raises a judge to ameliorate the

¹¹⁰ Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 86.

situation; the judge protects the people; there is relative calm; and then the people go astray once again, typically practicing idolatry, which restarts the cycle¹¹¹.

Judges Chapters 4 and 5 capture the audience's attention by presenting women in power. Here, authority shifts from male to female: the "all-encompassing" leader is a woman who transcends the gendered expectation of motherhood. A woman associated with the Kenites is in control; she owns the tent, knows its tools, executes the task, and is praised by another woman.

The story is complemented by a song. The author(s) seems intent on ensuring the story's memorability, as songs are easier to remember and thus more effectively transmitted orally. The prose narrative of Chapter 4 and its poetic expression in the Song of Deborah suggest the involvement of two distinct artistic sensibilities: one narrative, one poetic. Creativity and suspense permeate both accounts, engaging the reader with questions: Who will win the battle? Who is the hero? Who is the heroine? Which tribes will participate? Why does Jael—the outsider, the transgressor of the tent's threshold—become a central figure alongside Deborah?

Deborah and Jael, according to the literal text, never meet personally. Yet Jael becomes the physical fulfillment of Deborah's prophecy: "the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9). The text artfully misdirects the reader: one expects Barak to be the hero, but the narrative delivers an unexpected twist, transferring honor from the commanding male to the hand of a woman. Sisera is killed; Barak is humiliated. Thus, Chapter 4 concludes with Barak's demoralized view of Sisera's death (4:22)—a trophy he had expected for himself—while Jael emerges as the executor of God's victory and Barak fades from view.

The rhetorical virtuosity of 4:9 lies in its invitation to speculation: whose hand will bring deliverance? The predictable answer—Deborah—is subverted as God enlists not one, but two women to achieve victory.

Geographically, these stories are oriented to the north; the southern tribes are absent. The battlefield and the armies' locations are situated in the northern regions. The resolution is achieved through the heroic actions of a woman who kills the enemy with an unconventional,

¹¹¹ Lee Roy Martin, "Yahweh Conflicted: Unresolved Theological Tension in the Cycle of Judges," *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 2 (2009): 356–72.

domestic tool—a tent peg (4:21, 5:23). The blend of prose and song provides structural coherence while facilitating memorization and oral transmission. The voice of God resounds throughout, underscoring that God is the ultimate deliverer.

Although Barak should have been the military hero, he forfeits the opportunity.

Inspired by Mieke Bal's approach to the differing codes of analysis in these chapters, one may distinguish between the lyrical code of Chapter 5 and the narratological code of Chapter 4. The song erupts as an emotional, victorious chant, a convoluted and dramatic retelling of events. Deborah sings the song, along with Barak ben Avinoam¹¹² (5:1), yet the text subtly distinguishes Deborah's independent stance. New characters and motifs embellish the poetic narrative: Shamgar son of Anat (5:6), Sisera's mother (5:28), the "wise ladies" (5:29), and the vivid description of Jael's right hand wielding the tent peg (5:26). The rhythm of Sisera's fall is emphasized through redundancy and poetic cadence: "he sank, he fell, he lay still; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead" (5:27). Barak is conspicuously absent. Jael is celebrated: "Most blessed of women be Jael, most blessed of women in the tent" (5:24). Ultimately, the lyrical-epic code reaffirms that God prevails.

Chapter 4, by contrast, exemplifies the narratological code, "a logical relationship between the pearls strung together"¹¹³—a logical chain of events, presented chronologically, forming a coherent, easily conveyed story, possibly based on an earlier oral tradition encapsulated in Chapter 5. Although certain poetic elements are absent from the narrative—such as Sisera's mother, the wise women, and the full gathering of northern tribes—the text enriches its story through connections to well-known traditions (e.g., the Kenites and Moses' father-in-law in 4:11), anchoring it within Israel's collective memory. Jael's actions, combining hospitality with violence and humiliating two generals (Sisera and, by implication, Barak), create an iconic figure. Her husband, though named, is absent. Two men are thus humiliated—while two women execute deliverance.

¹¹² Barak "ben Avinoam", he belongs to his father, as if he needs the support of an authority.

¹¹³ Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 37.

The narratological coherence of Chapter 4 also extends to its more limited portrayal of tribal participation, focusing exclusively on Naphtali and Zebulun as the active agents in the battle. This streamlined account aligns with the chapter's chronological and logical narrative, emphasizing a clear and concise plot. In contrast, Chapter 5's poetic code expands the scope, naming additional northern tribes—Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, and Issachar—as participants, while also censuring others for their absence. This disparity underscores how the narrative and the song each construct a distinct communal memory: Chapter 4 narrates a localized, strategic victory through two tribes and two women, whereas Chapter 5 amplifies the event into a broader, more theological and moral reflection on national unity and tribal responsibility.

Tribal Participation

The standard of twelve tribes is not presented in Judges 4 and 5. Especially delving in Judges 5 in which ten tribes are mentioned, the fact that Gilad and Machir, both belonging to Manasseh's clan are presented as tribes through names that were not familiar to us from the Book of Genesis, Numbers or Deuteronomy, presents an inquiry, questioning who are the tribes of Israel, how many tribes exist, and what are their names.

Andrew Tobolowsky states *“Until the 1980s, most scholars assumed that the descriptions of this twelve-tribe system were historically accurate, and detailed scholarly reconstructions of this tribal league and its institutions were a fixture of scholarly histories of ancient Israel. Over the last few decades, however, against the backdrop of growing skepticism about recreating the early history of Israel based on biblical sources, many scholars now doubt the veracity of the twelve-tribe system, and even whether the earliest version of this tradition assumes the existence of twelve tribes.”*

Part of the recent skepticism derives from scholars questioning when and how Judah, in the South, and Israel, in the North, began to see themselves as related. In fact, several scholars have suggested that the biblical vision of ‘Israelite identity’ was invented in Judah after the exile of

the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722, and likely as a way of claiming an Israelite identity that was not really theirs."¹¹⁴

Tobolowsky points out an interesting statement as far as the presentation of tribes are concern. There is a modified account of the tribal clans.

These are the enumeration of tribes' participation or refusal to get involved:

1. Ephraim (Judges 5:14) – "From Ephraim they came...following you, Benjamin, with your people."
2. Benjamin (Judges 5:14) – Mentioned alongside Ephraim.
3. Machir (part of Manasseh) (Judges 5:14) – "From Machir, commanders marched down."
4. Zebulun (Judges 5:14, 18) – "From Zebulun, those who bear the marshal's staff...Zebulun risked their lives to the point of death."
5. Issachar (Judges 5:15) – "The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; Issachar was with Barak."
6. Naphtali (Judges 5:18) – "Naphtali too, on the heights of the field," referring to their participation in battle.

Absentees and Condemned Tribes:

¹¹⁴Andrew Tobolowsky, "Did Israel Always Have Twelve Tribes?," TheTorah.com, 2020, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/did-israel-always-have-twelve-tribes>. See Nadav Na'aman, "The Jacob Story and the Formation of Biblical Israel," *Tel Aviv* 41, no. 1 (2014): 95–125; Daniel Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah's Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5, 80; Lauren A. S. Monroe and Daniel Fleming, "Earliest Israel in Highland Company," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82, no. 1 (2019): 16–23; Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom*, Ancient Near East Monographs 5 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 153.

- Reuben¹¹⁵ (Judges 5:15-16) – Indecisive, staying with their flocks.
- Gilead¹¹⁶ (Gad) (Judges 5:17) – Stayed beyond the Jordan.
- Dan¹¹⁷ (Judges 5:17) – Stayed with their ships
- Asher (Judges 5:17) – Remained on the coast.

The poem puzzles the reader by mentioning only a few tribes. Some of them participated in the battlefield and others are cursed because of their lack of participation or of their absence. The tribes of Judah, Simeon are omitted. The tribes that fought were primarily from the Northern Israel, located near Mount Tabor.

Considering that the tribal system adjusts to a territorial plight, each tribe defending their piece of land, Schloen¹¹⁸ stipulates an historical outcome as a background for the song and the tribes who partook in the event, explaining that since the Midianite and Israelite caravans had to pay high taxes while transiting in the Jezreel Valley that created an upheaval crisis that affected certain tribes and those are the ones who engaged in combat against the Canaanites.

Other scholar such as Guillaume¹¹⁹ argues for a list of seven tribes at an early stage of composition with the tribes of Issachar, Asher, and Naphtali as a secondary and later addition.

¹¹⁵ The imagery of Reuben remaining "seated between the two saddlebags" appears to be inspired by Jacob's words to Issachar in Genesis 49:14. However, unlike Issachar, Reuben is not likened to a donkey. Instead, the tribe's members are portrayed as passive sheep. Among all the tribes, Reuben receives the most attention in this song. This aligns with its characterization: due to excessive deliberation, the tribe ultimately fails to take action.

¹¹⁶ The reference to Gilead is unexpected because Gilead is not a tribe, but a region east of the Jordan River.

¹¹⁷ I appreciate Prof. Dr. Miklós Kőszeghy comment who pointed out the reference to the tribe of Dan. Dan stayed with the ships, according to Judges 5:17. As mentioned on footnote 76 in Egyptian texts from the 12th–11th centuries BCE, especially from the reigns of Ramesses II, Merneptah, and Ramesses III, there appear references to a people called Denyen (Dnn / Dnjn) — one of the so-called Sea Peoples who attacked Egypt and settled along the Levantine coast. It's worth noticing the phonetic similarity between:

Dnn / Denyen / Danuna / Danaoi (Greek) and Dan (דָּן) in the Hebrew Bible. The idea that the tribe of Dan descended from or was influenced by the Sea Peoples known as Denyen (Dnn) is supported by Yigael Yadin, Trude & Moshe Dothan, Shmuel Ahituv, and Frank Moore Cross (in varying degrees).

This theory is rejected by Israel Finkelstein, Nadav Na'aman, and Lawrence Stager, who see Dan as a purely Israelite group with later migration or mythic etiology.

¹¹⁸ J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and Casus Belli: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1993): 18–38.

¹¹⁹ Philippe Guillaume, "Deborah and the Seven Tribes," *Biblische Notizen* 101 (2000): 18–27.

He also suggests that the poem celebrates Saul's son, Ishbaal's¹²⁰, expansion into the Jezreel (II Sam. 2.9-10), arguing that king Saul, a Northern authority, represents an essential influence in this area.

Schneider¹²¹ reports that the tribe's participation throughout the Book of Judges creates an incremented involvement, building up to the momentum in Judges 5. Judges 1:3¹²² starts with a two-tribe endeavor against the Canaanites, which continues in Judge 4:10¹²³.

Conclusion

Judges 5¹²⁴, the Song, already denotes a collective tribal fight, either inspired by a shared destiny against the Canaanites, or by showing a unity highlighted by the Deuteronomistic author that proves who is and who isn't under YHWH's directives. Erecting a centralized identity¹²⁵ is primordial to the establishment of the centrality of one deity, YHWH.

¹²⁰ Note that in monarchic times the name of the son of the king contains a pagan deity.

¹²¹ Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 90.

¹²² וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְשִׁמְעוֹן אָחִיו עֲלֵה אִתִּי בְּגֵרְלִי וְנִלְחָמָה בְּכַנְעָנִי וְהִלַּכְתִּי גַם־אִנִּי אִתְּךָ בְּגוֹרְלֶךָ וְנִלְחָמָה שָׁמָּה: Judah then said to their brother-tribe Simeon, "Come up with us to our allotted territory and let us attack the Canaanites, and then we will go with you to your allotted territory." So, Simeon joined them.

¹²³ וַיִּזְעַק בָּרָק אֶת־זְבוּלֹן וְאֶת־נַפְתָּלִי לְקֹדֶשׁה נִיַּעַל בְּרַגְלָיו עֲשָׂרַת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ וַתַּעַל עִמּוֹ דְּבוֹרָה: Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh; ten thousand men marched up after him; and Deborah also went up with him.

¹²⁴ The enumeration of the tribes ends with Zebulun and Naphtali, the only tribes mentioned in Judges 4 that responded to Barak's call.

¹²⁵ Miller, James C, suggests that the idea of a singular version ethnic identity endures all of historical challenges is called the "primordialist" view of identity and few people subscribe to it anymore, which suggests that Israelite identity in biblical literature is, regardless, not precisely early Israelite identity. See James C. Miller, "Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible: Problems and Prospects," *Currents in Biblical Research* 6, no. 2 (2008): 170–213.

7. Jael: Character Studies and Thematic Analysis

A nuanced literary and theological analysis of Jael's biblical character explores the role of a previously unknown female figure who participates in a crucial battle that transcends the battlefield and evokes a belligerent competition between powerful deities. Her character is essential in carrying out these actions.

Jael: A foreigner or an Israelite?¹²⁶

Several questions emerge from the text. The reader should wonder why Jael would risk herself to save the Israelites. Why would she invite Sisera while alone in the tent? Why did she remain alone, surrounded by battle, without male company or any form of protection? Why would YHWH choose this woman to claim triumph? Should the victory be attributed to Jael, to YHWH, or is it a shared effort?

The figure of Jael, though prominent in Judges 4 and 5, does not appear beyond these chapters in the canonical section of the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. The socio-ethnological origins of Jael are significant. She emerges as a surprising figure who accomplishes the ultimate act of defeating the enemy, transcending traditional roles assigned to female characters.

I will use a deconstructive methodology, examining the overall picture of the chapters, focusing primarily on where her actions occur—namely, chapter 4—while dissecting the many nuances of her deeds. This perspective allows for the integration of Jael and her behavioral interactions as instruments of YHWH's victory in battle.

The purpose of this chapter is to connect the loose ends of the Kenites' participation in the crucial battle between the Canaanites and the Israelites. It necessitates associating a woman's seemingly "neutral" position with the fury of the battlefield. The "hand of the woman" gives

¹²⁶ Klein believes that Jael was an Israelite who married a Kenite and acted in favor of her people's interests and not in the interests of her husband. See Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, Bible and Literature Series 14 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 43. However, there is no indication that Jael was not a Kenite. Others have disputed this opinion, see Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 37-67.

purpose to the story, and YHWH's humble appearance in such a dramatic episode is embodied through Jael's figure.

This study explores the narrative rationale for Jael's emergence as the decisive agent of deliverance. It interrogates the grounds upon which she becomes the chosen instrument of YHWH's victory, and why the focus shifts from the established authority of the prophetess and judge, Deborah, to an ostensibly peripheral woman. The analysis considers the extent to which Jael—though ethnically and politically aligned with non-Israelite groups—functions not as a true outsider but as a liminal figure whose position enables her unique intervention. By tracing the diverse interpretive trajectories surrounding Jael across cultures, periods, and communities, this section examines how her portrayal has been shaped through the processes of textual transmission, translation, reception, and reconfiguration within the evolving landscape of biblical interpretation.

There are many interpretations of Jael as a foreign character¹²⁷. In my opinion, Jael was not a foreigner. She is mentioned in the midrash alongside the Hebrew matriarchs. This is learned from the Song of Deborah (Jud. 5:24): “*Most blessed of women be Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of women in tents.*” The midrash understands “women in tents” to refer to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, each associated with tents like Jael. Jael's deed is seen as even more blessed than those of the four matriarchs (BT Nazir 23b).

Regarding Jael's strategic presence, she connects and mediates between peoples—the Canaanites and the Israelites—who worship different deities, El and YHWH. Jael's immersion in Kenite culture does not alienate her from YHWH, nor does it distance her from this deity.

Chapter 4 reminds us that the Israelites again did what was offensive to YHWH. This opening verse allows for the insertion of the idea that the Israelites' attitude needed correction, as they deviated from what was right in YHWH's eyes. The Israelites were worshiping El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon. In this context, Jael—not a foreigner—fights the battle between the two deities, and by prevailing, reassures the Israelites that YHWH alone is to be worshiped. The

¹²⁷ Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 67–68; Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 95–96; Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, Anchor Bible 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 105–6.

worshippers' relationship with YHWH must be exclusive, for His name, according to Exodus 34:14, is *El Kana*—a “Jealous God” who demands exclusivity and inscribes this demand in the name.

The argumentation of this chapter will also include the evolution from the Edomite god Qoz to the adoption of YHWH¹²⁸, as part of the Nabataean-Midianite milieu and the adaptation by the nomadic group known as Ya'qub'ilu (Jacob-el)¹²⁹, with their northward migrations. Jael, who also migrates with her husband northward (judges 4:11, 17) emerges as a key character in this narrative, serving as an intermediary between the southern Israelites/Jacob-el nomads, who migrated north, and the northern power of Canaan—King Jabin of Hazor and his general Sisera, worshippers of El.

As part of the migrations of peoples, tribes, and individuals, the Bible conveys stories of assimilation, acculturation, social integration, and the incorporation of communal, educational, iconoclastic, monolatrist, or polytheistic elements, all of which shape the ethos of the inhabitants. This chapter will explain the development of these adaptations to geographical and topographical realities and to iconoclastic cultures, showing how Jael, as the heroine of the story, embodies many familiar elements she carries as an immersed character, adopting aspects of different cultures—all while ensuring YHWH's triumph.

¹²⁸ In the interrelationship between Qoz and YHWH, scholars are divided: Some suggest that Qoz, Yahweh, and Baal reflect local variants or manifestations of a broader Syrian storm deity (Hadad/Adad). See Mark S. Smith, *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014). Others maintain that Yahweh and Qoz remained distinct deities, and that biblical omission of Qoz may reflect political or theological distancing, not theological identity. Tebes, for example asserts that “it is clear that YHWH and Qoz were, from the beginning, different deities” despite sharing a similar cultural and geographic context. See Juan Manuel Tebes, “The Mesha Inscription and Relations with Moab and Edom,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 286–92.

¹²⁹ In the 2017 article “Jacob-el in the Land of Esau and the Roots of Biblical Religion” Israel Knohl proposes that “Jacob-el” appears in a Ramesses II topographical list from the 13th century BCE. Unlike previous assumptions that such a site was in the north, Knohl argues it's located in Mount Seir/Edom, among toponyms prefixed with “Qoz”, which are associated with the worship of the Edomite deity Qoz. He suggests this indicates that a clan bearing the name Jacob-el settled in that region, potentially illuminating how YHWH worship could have transmitted from Seir-Edom into early Israelite religion. See Israel Knohl, “Jacob-El in the Land of Esau and the Roots of Biblical Religion,” *Vetus Testamentum* 67, no. 3 (2017): 481–84.

Jael, who follows and fears God-YHWH, married to Heber the Kenite, inclines her behavior as an Israelite, by choosing to execute the enemy of the Israelites, openly or in disguise, bridging many cultural and ethnic divides, including those of the Kenites, Israelites, Midianites, and Canaanites. These groups function at times as families, tribal entities, descendants of Abraham, and occasionally as enemies—a tension between conquerors and conquered civilizations.

Locations, nomadic displacements, natural resources, familial connections, historical contexts, collective narratives, tribal distributions, inheritance, belligerent power, argumentative discourse, gender dominance, hierarchies, spatial domains, social contracts, agency, and execution in the name of YHWH all play significant roles in the text. Here we encounter the enigmatic, independent, and powerful character of Jael—a woman previously unknown—who plays an outstanding role against one of the archenemies of the Israelites, the Canaanites.

The Many “Hands” in Judges 4¹³⁰

Whereas the heroes of the Book of Judges are martial leaders who save Israel from its enemies, one of the protagonists of Judges 4 carries the title of Judge with certitude. Deborah—the judge, the prophetess, and the leader—is a woman who does not take part in the battle against the Canaanites, but her call, her skills, and her powerful presence elevate the virtue of the army to fight against a stronger and better-equipped enemy. All the protectors in the book are called Judges (2:16–19), meaning leaders; they do not actually judge. They might be warriors, saviors, and robust spearheads, but still, they do not judge. Judges 4 and 5 mark the awakening of a new prototype in the engendering of the text. Deborah is the only character who is explicitly called a Judge, and indeed she judges in the judicial sense vis à vis the previous judges, who were warriors. Deborah transcends her gender role, while Jael does not—she reverses it, showing that she can overpower the male warrior role.

Deborah, in the narrative, demonstrates the notoriety of her personal governance as a prophetess of God and not merely as a human heroine. She describes eloquently in the text that YHWH will

¹³⁰ I will amplify this concept through inter and intratextuality on Chapter 12.

guide the victory into the hands of a woman. It is not just about manpower in the battlefield. The text conveys the idea that God alone is responsible for the victory. The reader is exposed to the many actions that drive the plot, especially in chapter 4, which states that God has delivered the Israelites *בִּיד (b'yad)*, “into the hand” of Jabin, king of the Canaanites. The ‘hand’ becomes an important term in this narrative, as the many hands involved in the unfolding of the story help the reader understand the plot and conceptualize who ultimately controls the victory. The concatenation of events occurs in such a way that hands become the stratagem of visualization as the story develops in Judges 4.

These 5 verses illustrate the connections of occurrences.

וַיִּמָּכְרֵם יְהוָה בְּיַד יָבִין מֶלֶךְ-כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר מֶלֶךְ בְּחָצוֹר וְשָׂר-צָבָאוֹ סִיסְרָא וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּחַרְשֵׁת הַגּוֹיִם:

And GOD surrendered them to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. His army commander was Sisera, whose base was Harosheth-goiim.(4:2)

וּמִשְׁכָּתַי אֵלַי אֶל־גִּחְל קִישׁוֹן אֶת-סִיסְרָא שָׂר-צָבָא יָבִין וְאֶת-רֶכְבּוֹ וְאֶת-הַמּוֹנֶה וְנָתַתִּיהוּ בְּיָדְךָ:

And I will draw Sisera, Jabin’s army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands. (4:7)

וַתֹּאמֶר הִלֹךְ אֵלַי עַמִּי אָפֶס כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תַפְאֲרָתְךָ עַל-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲתָה הוֹלֵךְ כִּי בְיַד-אִשָּׁה יִמָּכֶר יְהוָה אֶת-סִיסְרָא וְתִקָּם דְּבוּרָה וְתִלָּךְ עִם-בָּרַק קְדֵשָׁה:

“Very well, I will go with you,” she answered. “However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then GOD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. (4:9)

וַתֹּאמֶר דְּבוּרָה אֶל-בָּרַק לְיוֹם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה אֶת-סִיסְרָא בְּיָדְךָ הֲלֹא יְהוָה יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיךָ בְּגֵרָד בָּרַק מִמֶּנָּה תִּבּוֹר וַעֲשֹׂרֶת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ אֶתְּרִיו:

Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! This is the day on which GOD will deliver Sisera into your hands: GOD is marching before you.” Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men (4:14)

וַתֵּלֶךְ גַּד בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלֹּחֶם וְקִשָּׁה עַל יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־כְּנָעַן עַד אֲשֶׁר הִכְרִיתוּ אֶת יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־כְּנָעַן: {פ}

The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan. (4:24)

The plot of the story unfolds like a pendulum, swinging from hand to hand, showing the power and control of the victorious subjects, whose hands dominate the situational plight. YHWH controls the design of the story, providing a platform for Deborah’s intervention, choosing Barak’s hand twice (vv. 7 and 14) to empower the triumph, and later shifting the execution back to a woman (the text in verse 9 does not specify who is that the woman), ultimately resolving the action at the core of the scene with Jael as the heroine (verse 21). Jael’s performance crystallizes Deborah’s prophetic image, reaffirming her vision of YHWH defeating the enemy through the hand of a woman. Verse 24 crowns the accomplishment in the hands of the Israelites, with YHWH’s support, dominating the territory: YHWH has prevailed against the Canaanites, ruled by King Jabin, and YHWH has triumphed over their chief deity, a god named El.

Elie Assis¹³¹ suggests that Jael becomes Deborah’s hand. He suggests that Jael is deliberately portrayed as Deborah’s hand, the active executor of Deborah’s prophetic word. From Assis’ article¹³² we learn that “Jael is Deborah’s hand- an extension who carries out her prophecy”. He emphasizes that the prophecy’s fulfillment has a dual meaning, identifying the woman and showcasing the *modus operandi*. Jael’s lethal act is not a random plot twist but the culmination of Deborah’s prophetic vision.

I respectfully disagree with this statement. I consider that Deborah, plays the role of a strategist inspired by her prophecy. Jael is YHWH’s hand, not merely an extension of Deborah’s hand.

¹³¹ Elie Assis, "The Hand of a Woman: Deborah and Yael (Judges 4), " *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 5 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2005.v5.a19>.

¹³² Ibid., 7.

Jael, a wife, a Kenite, a leader in her own right?

Jael is mentioned in the Bible with a name that is associated with her husband, Heber HaKeini—an ancient version of marital surname acquisition. However, within the richness of the Hebrew language, based on the etymological roots of words, this same expression can be pronounced and translated as *חבר* (*heber*), which in Hebrew forms the foundation for the concept of *חבר* (*haber*)—friend, *חבורה* (*havura*)—group of close people, or *חיבור* (*hibur*)—connection. These outcomes, as variations of the same root, portray Jael as an ally to the group of the Kenites and not necessarily as married to a specific individual. In this sense, an accurate translation of *על ידי חֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי אִשֶּׁת חֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי* (*Jael Eshet Heber HaKeini*) could be: **“Jael, a woman connected to the Kenites.”**

The reference of Heber HaKeini is a recapitulation of what’s written on Judges 1:16:

וּבְנֵי קֵינִי חָתָן מֹשֶׁה עָלוּ מֵעִיר הַתְּמָרִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה מִדְבָּר יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר בְּגִבֹּב עָרֹד נִילָךְ וַיָּשֻׁב אֶת־הָעָם:

The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up with the Judahites from the City of Palms to the wilderness of Judah; and they went and settled among the people in the Negev of Arad.

This text denotes a social and geographical connotation that relates miscellaneous groups such as the Kenites–Midianites (Moses’ father-in-law) and the Southern Judaeans. They migrate from the City of the Palms and established themselves in the Southeastern area of the land.

The subsequent mention of the Kenites occurs in Judges 4:11:

וַחֲבֵר הַקֵּינִי נִפְרָד מֵלֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי חָבֵב חָתָן מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּט אֹהֶלֹו עַד־אֵילָן (בַּצְעָנִים) אֲשֶׁר אֶת־קֶדֶשׁ:

Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, descendants of Hobab, father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent at Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.

The Scriptures speak about Heber as an individual, a man that appears in Judges through his name but doesn’t perform any actions. The text is contextualizing the different movements of migration of a nomadic group of people related to Moses’ father-in-law, Hobab, known as well as Jethro, and Re’uel. Heber is the one who separates himself from his tribal clan, roams North,

detaches from his social environment, has peace with Jabin the king of Hatzor, the Canaanites and leaves his wife, Jael, alone in her tent. The reader knows of the man but not the man himself.

There is a different approach to Heber as a character found in the documents and excavations of Mari¹³³. Heber is mentioned in the Mari archives not as an individual but rather as a gesture, and an action. Heber is the migrant, he is simply a man, the epitome of the migrant, any personification, who has left home, whether from the view of his departure, emigration, or from the outlook of his arrival, immigration. From this point of view, based on this Upper Mesopotamian documentation, we might consider that יעל אשת חבר הקיני *Jael Eshet Heber HaKeini*, is an independent woman from a migrant kinfolk of the Kenite group.

Irrespective of her marital affiliation or any putative connection with the Kenite people, Jael emerges as a protagonist in her own right. She serves as the decisive agent in the conclusive phase of the conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanites. This narrative invites the reader to interrogate the motivations underlying her intervention in the hostilities. The stakes are considerable: she is alone within the confines of her tent and assumes a substantial risk by extending hospitality to the Canaanite general Sisera. His arrival on foot, rather than in his chariot, may signal the prior loss of the battle and his consequent status as a defeated man; yet, despite this, Jael exposes herself to an uncertain and potentially perilous outcome in engaging with him.

There are some archaeological and para-historical resources, which I will explain below, that help elucidate the enigmatic figure of this female biblical character. These different disciplines will provide tools for understanding Judges 4 and 5 and will enlighten the reader regarding “the most blessed of women in tents” (Judges 5:24), who changes the course and destiny of the Israelites in the time of the Judges.

¹³³1999, ירושלים, משה, ענבר, מוסד ביאליק, מארי, מוסד ביאליק, ענבר, משה, ירושלים, 1999. According to Moshe Inbar mentioned in this footnote, the Akkadian *Habiru/apiru* in Mari denotes mobile, nomadic man that moves from place to place without settling.

Jael, the *femme fatale*

Among the many explanations for the story of the meeting between Jael and Sisera, the interpretation that sees the story as an expression of a cross-cultural literary genre reveals a narrative of seduction, deceit, violence, and death. Jael's is depicted as one of the types of the model of "seductive woman". These stories, e.g., Delilah, Judith, Jael, show different versions and portrayals, but what they have in common is a female character who first intentionally seduces the enemy and causes his death with the help of assorted means such as food, drink, and banquets. The man being seduced cannot resist the temptation and falls prey of the seducer.

The interpretation of the meeting between Jael and Sisera as a story of sexual temptation is stated in the Talmud (T.B. Yevamot 103 a., Nezikim 23 b.). The reader might concur with these Talmudic discourses, claiming that a man's entry into a woman's tent always indicate sexual intent. From another point of view, it might be interpreted that although the words Jael uses to call Sisera, and the way she advances into Sisera can be deciphered as a sexual invitation, she immediately places herself, in the face of the tired warrior, in the role of mother, of a host, covers him like a nurturing mother covers her child and gives him milk instead of the water he has asked for. The *femme fatale* in disguise crafts her talented skills bearing in mind her ultimate target. The woman who would execute the task is an intermediary between the prophetess-judge, the Israelite army, and God's objective. In her position as a mediator, between the Israelites and the Canaanites, she plays several roles, and thus she gets out to meet the general, invites him to her sheltering tent, seductively opens her refuge, fosters him, protects him with a blanket, nurtures him with milk, and kills him. These many actions configure a holistic gestalt of the capabilities of Jael to complete the task.

The narrative introduces the power of both armies, their soldiers, their chariots, the battlefields, and warriors defeated and fleeing on foot are described in the prose-text, nevertheless the centrality of the action and the victory takes place in a tent, and it's a woman, Jael, that achieves the goal, the killing of Sisera, reversing man's power, overpowering the traditional male dominance.

Many reversed circumstances take place in the text, regarding who is in control, who has the most powerful army, who owns sophisticated chariots and what's the outcome of the war. These reversed circumstances can be appreciated through these series of verses:

וַיִּזְעַק בָּרָק אֶת־זְבוּלֹן וְאֶת־נַפְתָּלִי קְדֵשׁה בִּיעַל בְּרִגְלָיו עֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ וַתַּעַל עִמּוֹ דְּבוֹרָה:

Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh; ten thousand men marched up after him; and Deborah also went up with him. (4:10)

וַיִּזְעַק סִיסְרָא אֶת־כָּל־רֶכֶבּוֹ תַשַּׁע מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב בְּרִזָּל וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ מִחֲרֹשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם אֶל־נַחַל קִישׁוֹן:

So Sisera ordered all his chariots—nine hundred iron chariots—and all the troops he had to move from Harosheth-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. (4:13)

וַתֹּאמֶר דְּבוֹרָה אֶל־בָּרָק לְיוֹם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה אֶת־סִיסְרָא בְּיָדְךָ הֲלֹא יְהוָה יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיךָ וַיִּרֶד בָּרָק מִהָר תַּבּוֹר וַעֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ אַחֲרָיו:

Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! This is the day on which GOD will deliver Sisera into your hands: GOD is marching before you.” Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men, (4:14)

וַיִּהְיֶה יְהוָה אֶת־סִיסְרָא וְאֶת־כָּל־הָרֶכֶב וְאֶת־כָּל־הַמִּחֲנֶה לְפָנֶיךָ לְפָנֵי בָרָק וַיִּרֶד סִיסְרָא מֵעַל הַמָּרְפֶּכֶה וַיָּנֶס בְּרִגְלָיו:

and GOD threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic before the onslaught of Barak. Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled on foot (4:15)

וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלִי לִקְרֹאת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֵדָנִי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא וַיָּסֶר אֵלָיָהּ הָאֵהָלָה וַתִּכְסֶּהּ בַּשֹּׁמִיכָה:

Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, “Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.” So, he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. (4:18)

וַהֲגִיה בָּרָק רִדְף אֶת־סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלִי לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָךְ וְאֶרְאֶךָ אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מִבְּקָשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיָהּ וַהֲגִיה סִיסְרָא נָפַל מֵת וַהֲיָתֵד בְּרַקְתּוֹ:

Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, “Come, I will show you the man you are looking for.” He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple (4:22)

The text is designed in an extraordinary way to show the reversed expected outcome. The mighty becomes weak, the stronger becomes feeble, the riders escape on foot, the fierce panics, and the pusillanimous is the persecutor. Both generals, collide with the same woman, an unpretentious tent dweller, and she prevails. Jael manipulates many tools in order to achieve her goals with Sisera and Barak. First, she engages with Sisera operating through implicit familiarity of peace between the Kenites and the Canaanites, afterwards she plays a nurturing and seductive feminine role that entices and gives trust and comfort to the warrior, then she handles the tent peg, and without hesitation kills the powerful now demoted army general, and lastly, she shows the pricey trophy to the opposed army general. Jael’s greeting and invitation parallels the unpretentious woman who seduces and invites men to her place in the book of Proverbs: “calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way, ‘You who are simple, turn- יסור in here!’” (Prov 9:15-16). Nevertheless, Jael does not use her seductive skills to engage in prostitution, neither adultery, nor sexual involvement, she does aim to materialize Deborah’s prediction and becomes “the hand of YHWH”.

How does a homemaker become a killer?

Barbara Creed¹³⁴ verbalizes the deviation from the sociocultural assigned goal of maternity as “monstrosity”:

“All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject...The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his

¹³⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 67–76.

audience...When woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions.”

Although motherhood might be considered the ultimate female biblical goal, the Scripture presents alternatives. The biblical text is imbedded in the patriarchal-male signature. Nevertheless, there are certain female characters that stand out on their own rights, independent of male ties. Women such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21), Pharaoh’s daughter (Exodus 2:5), Shifra & Puah (Exodus 1:15-21), and Hulda (2 Kings 22:1), are a few of prominent examples of women that throughout their leadership the reader might learn historiography, sociocultural relationships of a particular era, intrinsic bonds. Many of these women escape the objectification of the stereotypical woman’s function. From the biological point of view, we are not aware of their descendants. Jael is not seen as biological mother according to the text, nevertheless she shows many compassionate characteristics as she invites a wounded army general to her tent.

At first glance, the reader might perceive Jael as an embodiment of generosity and hospitality. She is introduced as an appendage, a mere asset, defined through her association with Heber — “the woman of a man.” While the narrative clearly underscores her patronymic affiliation, the scene situates her alone in her tent, enveloped by the fraught and perilous atmosphere of a war zone. Despite the precariousness of her circumstances, she exercises agency and initiative by extending an invitation to the Canaanite general, Sisera.

וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלִי לְקִרְיַת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סִיסְרָא אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא וַיָּסֶר אֵלֶיהָ הָאֵהָלָה וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ בַּשֹּׁמֶרֶת:

Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, “Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.” So, he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. (4:18)

The scene shows a combination of nurturing figures, protection, warmth, and kindness. The text also hints intimacy, affection, closeness, and seclusion. The sheltering tent becomes a private shelter for healing, a place to rest from exhaustion, as well as a suggestive and sensual erotic connection. Her movements—offering him milk and covering him with a blanket—depicts her inclination to satiate Sisera with the entirety of her femininity, her womanliness becomes a tool for Sisera’s satisfaction. This iconic sight aligns with a legendary pattern of ancient allegorical imaginings, as well as throughout the history of literature, woman, water, and milk have been

tied together. A man is usually the one who exercises power, and the invalidation of the female character mistakenly assumes that a sexual act or carnal advance bequeaths him with control overpowering the woman, while in reality he becomes a prey in the hands of the woman.

The image of Jael, who knows how to welcome the general into her own space, how to offer a warm and comfortable restoring setting, and how to nurture him with milk—a motherly compassionate image—contrasts with the aggressive lady who knows how to manipulate the iron peg. The iron peg is much more than a tool that builds a tent, it could be interpreted as a weapon that perforates, pierces and punctures the adversary. Its shape represents a phallic figure as well. Jael is knowledgeable about the iron tool.

The origins of metallurgy in the Bible are associated with Midianites, specifically with the Kenite branch of this proto-Semitic civilization. The Scripture singularizes the Kenite Tubal-Cain as the originator of metallurgy:

וַצִּלָּה גַם־הִוא יִלְדָה אֶת־תּוֹבֵל לָנֹן לְטָשׁ כָּל־חֶרֶשׁ נְחָשֶׁת וּבְרָזָל וְאַתּוֹת תּוֹבֵל־קַיִן וְעַמָּה:

As for Zillah, she bore Tubal-cain, who forged all implements of copper and iron. And the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. (Genesis 4:22)

In addition to the abovementioned reference that links metallurgical knowledge with access to metal, the geographical area where this metal could be found was the region of Arad and Timna in the Negev, where the Kenite nomads had settled. Naama Yahalom-Mack¹³⁵ explains: “*Iron was more readily mined and available in territories that came under the control of the Israelites and Judahites, such as the Negev in the south and the Ajlun in the northeast. Its alloying component — carbon — was naturally present in the furnace and just needed to be controlled.*”

Jael resides among the Kenites; she might herself belong to the Kenite community. She has learned the art of working metals, especially iron and copper. As an independent woman and a spearhead, Jael dwells in a tent — an exposed structure. She operates in the delicate space

¹³⁵ Naama Yahalom-Mack, "The History of Iron in Ancient Israel," TheTorah.com, 2021, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-history-of-iron-in-ancient-israel>.

between hospitality and hostility, and as a means of self-defense, she understands the necessity of handling manual weapons that can protect her.

Jael confronts Sisera: she goes out to seek him, and she speaks for the first time. She gives an order to the commander (Judges 4:18), who had begun the battle armed with powerful equipment and riding chariots, but now, defeated, flees on foot for his life.

According to the literal meaning of the text, Sisera was killed in the battle. The text explicitly states that he did not survive — no one survived.

וּבָרַק רָדַף אַחֲרֵי הָרֶכֶב וְאַחֲרֵי הַמַּחֲנֶה עַד חַרְשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם וַיַּלֵּל כָּל־מַחֲנֶה סִיסְרָא לְפִי־חֶרֶב לֹא נִשְׁאַר עַד־אַחֲד:

as Barak pursued the chariots and the soldiers as far as Harosheth-goiim. All Sisera's soldiers fell by the sword; not one was left. (4:16)

According to this text, no one subsisted; Sisera was defeated and killed in battle along with his army, which contradicts the subsequent events materialized in the encounter between Sisera and Jael — a text that grants Jael the opportunity to become the female hero of the story. Reporting the total annihilation of the entire army should have been the culmination of the story, but the narrative continues with the escape of General Sisera, who apparently did not die¹³⁶ as stated in verse 16 along with his army, thus allowing for the participation of the heroine, Jael. The text weaves characters who are introduced as needed in order to crystallize the prophetic vision of Deborah that God would deliver the enemy into the hands of a woman (Judges 4:9) — a statement that contradicts the earlier proclamation that God intended to deliver Sisera and his army into Barak's hands (Judges 4:7).

Sisera's flight hints at a stratagem of inconsistency. While Sisera, who commanded an army equipped with chariots, escapes on foot, Barak chases after Sisera's terrified troops, hurrying back home to Haroshet-hagoyim (4:16), as described above. According to the location and its

¹³⁶ Jacob L. Wright, "Deborah's War Memorial: The Composition of Judges 4–5 and the Politics of War Commemoration," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 123, no. 4 (2011): 516–34.

description, Barak is situated in a different zone, and yet, after Jael murders Sisera in his slumber, Barak appears at her tent.

וְהָיָה בָּרָק רֹדֵף אֶת־סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלִי לִקְרָאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָךְ וְאַתָּה אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וְהָיָה סִיסְרָא נָפֵל מִתּוֹ וְהִיתָד בְּרַקְתּוֹ:

Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, “Come, I will show you the man you are looking for.” He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple. (4:22)

Barak who makes his agreement conditioned upon the inclusion of a woman in battle (v.7), will lose the aura of victory to a woman (v.9). At this stage the reader may think that the woman is Deborah herself, but at the end of the story it becomes apparent that the narrator is referring to Jael.

Jael’s intervention as the executer of the essential plot of the story, is in a justifying mode that elucidates who is “the woman” whose hands the enemy will be delivered to. Both Heber HaKeini and Jael interrupt the flow of the story. Heber appears while the text speaks about Barak’s summoning his people, and Jael, who has not been introduced before, emerges out of a tent by herself, and suddenly becomes the main character of the story.

According to Jacob Wright¹³⁷, there are two versions of the story. The first version is an older narrative where Sisera is killed alongside with his army, mentioned in Judges 4:16, defeated by Barak and his army, as revealed in Judges 4:6 and assured to the Israelite general on Judges 4:14, when God will deliver Sisera into Barak’s hands. The second version is the book’s editing postexilic introduction of Jael.

“The core of the book of Judges, namely chapters 3-16, are built upon brief and disparate pre-exilic accounts of Israelite local heroes. These heroes are primarily Northern in origin, and the

¹³⁷ Jacob L. Wright, "Yael and the Subversion of Male Leaders in Judges," TheTorah.com, 2018, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/yael-and-the-subversion-of-male-leaders-in-judges>.

oldest versions of their tales likely come from this region, although the tales of their heroism made their way to Judah and became part of Judean lore. These stories were eventually recast by the editors of the book of Judges to cover the period between Joshua's conquest and the monarchy, and to tell the stories of Israel's leaders during this period. As part of the editing process, elements were added to the stories to make them fit with the overall project of the editors. For example, the editors wanted to present the hero of each story as a judge or chieftain over all Israel. Thus, in the original Sisera narrative, Deborah was likely a local prophetess who is sent by YHWH to deliver a message and appoint Barak as leader; a similar role is played by Ahijah the Shilonite (1 Kings 11:29), Elijah (1 Kings 18:46, 19:15, 21:17), and Elisha (2 Kings 5:8, 6:10, 9:1)."

Either as a postexilic edited addition or as an original biblical text, Jael overpowers the male legitimization of both generals, Barak and Sisera, emasculating these male warriors'-controlled dominance on the battlefield.

Jael and Barak: The Power of an Intimate Battlefield

Jael has not had any previous contact with the Israelite war leader Barak. Why does Jael choose to help him and facilitate the killing of his enemy? Yair Zakovitch¹³⁸ thinks that this story, along with the story of Rahab, belongs to a type of narrative which he calls "A woman who rescues a man." Jael is associated with a people who have good relationships with both sides of the battlefield—enemies that fight against each other, the Canaanites and the Israelites.

Jael's association with the Kenites indicates a display of neutrality as far as the war is concerned. Regarding the location, Jael's tent is situated in a very strategic area, as the text shows. Heber the Kenite had separated from the closest family who stayed in the southeast area of the Negev while he emigrated northbound (Judges 4:11). This Kenite-Hobab-Midianite-Israelite association is counterbalanced by the Kenites' peaceful relationship with Jabin, king of Hazor, the Canaanites,

¹³⁸ Yair Zakovitch, "Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary-Folkloric Approach to Joshua 2," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 75–98.

and Sisera, their army general (Judges 4:17). While Sisera chooses Jael to find shelter, Jael chooses Barak to deliver victory; the trophy is Sisera's death. The text doesn't give any indication of the reason Jael chooses this path instead of aligning with Sisera, as could be expected based on the relationship between her husband and king Jabin of Hatzor. It is unclear what her motives are in assisting Barak, and why she is not persuaded to favor the Canaanites. The concealment of Jael's motives is even more astonishing when we consider that, according to the text, Jael and Deborah never meet. Deborah is the prophetess who visualizes a future that Jael accomplishes. Deborah, who dwells outside under the palm tree, does not go out to war; Jael, who dwells inside her tent, brings war to her intimacy and triumphantly shows the heroic act of defeating the foe.

Jael initially plays nurturing roles. She controls the room of her tent, attending to the wounded with milk and covering him with a blanket—שמיכה. She, in fact, covers him twice, which leaves room for speculation as to why he needed to be covered a second time. What happened after the first covering?

Two verses describe the scene.

וַתֵּצֵא יַעֲלֵל לְקִרְיַת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֲדֹנָי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא וַיָּסֵר אֵלֶיהָ הָאֵהָלָה וַתִּכְסֶהוּ בַשְּׂמִיכָה:

Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, “Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.” So, he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. (4:18)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ הַשְׁקִינִי־גָּא מֵעֵט־מַיִם כִּי צָמָאתִי וַתִּפְתָּח אֶת־זָאוּד הַחֶלֶב וַתִּשְׁקָהוּ וַתִּכְסֶהוּ:

He said to her, “Please let me have some water; I am thirsty.” She opened a skin of milk and gave him some to drink; and she covered him again. (4:19)

The text might hint that something happened between the first and second times that Jael covers him. It is not clear what occurred—perhaps Sisera tried to reposition himself in order to drink the beverage, or possibly he attempted to get closer to Jael. The uncertainty of the scene invites several speculations, but Jael's actions are clear and firm. She is in control.

Was Jael an Israelite?¹³⁹

The Hebrew Bible does not explicitly identify Jael as either a Kenite or an Israelite. The text only mentions her connection to Heber, her husband, who was a Kenite. She is introduced without patronymics or any clear indication of her own lineage or tribal affiliation, aside from her association with her Kenite husband.

Because the text provides no specific information about her ancestral background, both interpretations—that Jael was either a Kenite or an Israelite—are plausible. A third possibility is that she belonged to a different group entirely, which remains undisclosed in the narrative. Regardless of her origins, Jael acts as an agent of YHWH's will, embodying the cyclical theme central to the Book of Judges.

One key theme in the book of Joshua and Judges concerns the role of women, the connection between women and violence, and the fact that many of the prominent women are non-Israelite, such as Rahav or Sisera's mother. This is closely linked to the metaphor of lack of safety inside the dwelling, which represents the insecurity faced by women and, symbolically, the nation of Israel itself. The overarching message portrays Israel as a community in a state of disorder and vulnerability, longing for the stability and order that a monarchy would provide. I argue that the primary theme of this Deuteronomistic text is the cyclical pattern of Israel's abandonment of YHWH and the rise of leaders who bring the people back to exclusive worship of the one God. The text highlights a pressing need for order, achievable only if the tribes renounce idolatry and move from henotheism toward monolatry.

The figure who embodies this restoration of divine order is Deborah, a woman who resolutely embodies YHWH's presence. She appoints another woman, Jael, to carry out the deliverance by defeating Israel's enemy. The scripture invites readers to focus on who drives the action. The narrative juxtaposes traditional symbols of power—men, chariots, weapons, and battlefields—with intimate domestic scenes where women take center stage. Yet, throughout, God remains the

¹³⁹ Lillian Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 38. Klein suggests that Jael is an Israelite because of her actions. Furthermore, she suggests that 'Jael has used her feminine wiles to entice and seduce Sisera in order to put him to sleep' In contrast to Deborah, Jael works independently to save her people.

ultimate force in the story. Deborah, as a prophetess, speaks with divine authority: “Does not YHWH, God of Israel, command you?... I will draw out Sisera... and I will give him into your hand... for into the hand of a woman YHWH will sell Sisera” (Judges 4:6–9). “This is the day that YHWH has given Sisera into your hand. Does YHWH go out before you?” (Judges 4:14).

The reader recognizes the cyclical pattern that defines the Deuteronomistic history in Judges: military defeat is linked to theological causes. When Israel does evil in YHWH’s eyes—worshipping other gods and provoking divine wrath—YHWH delivers them into the hands of their enemies, whether geographically or tribally related. Yet, moved by compassion, YHWH raises judges who rescue the people. This cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance repeats throughout Israel’s history.

וַיָּקָם יְהוָה שְׁפָטִים וַיּוֹשִׁיעוּם מִיַּד שְׂסִיקָם:

Then GOD raised up chieftains who delivered them from those who plundered them.

וְגַם אֶל־שְׁפָטֵיהֶם לֹא שָׁמְעוּ כִּי זָנוּ אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָיִם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהֶם סָרוּ מִהָרַח אֲשֶׁר הָלְכוּ אֲבוֹתָם לִשְׁמֹעַ מִצֻּוֹת־יְהוָה לֹא־עָשׂוּ כֵן:

But they did not heed their chieftains either; they went astray after other gods and bowed down to them. They were quick to turn aside from the way their ancestors had followed in obedience to GOD’s commandments; they did not do right.

וְכִי־הָקִים יְהוָה | לָהֶם שְׁפָטִים וְהָיָה יְהוָה עִם־הַשּׁוֹפֵט וְהוֹשִׁיעֵם מִיַּד אֹיְבֵיהֶם כֹּל יְמֵי הַשּׁוֹפֵט כִּי־יִנָּחֵם יְהוָה מִנֶּאֱקָתָם מִפְּנֵי לַחֲצִיָּהֶם וְדַחֲקֵיהֶם:

When GOD raised up chieftains for them, GOD would be with that chieftain—and would save them from their enemies during that chieftain’s lifetime; for GOD would be moved to pity by their moanings because of those who oppressed and crushed them.

וְהָיָה | בְּמֹת הַשּׁוֹפֵט יִשְׁכְּבוּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ מֵאֲבוֹתָם לְלֶכֶת אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָיִם לַעֲבֹדָם וְלִהְשָׁתַחֲנוּת לָהֶם לֹא הָפִילוּ מִמַּעַלְלֵיהֶם וּמִדֶּרֶכָם הַקָּשָׁה:

But when the chieftain died, they would again act basely, even more than the preceding generation—following other gods, worshipping them, and bowing down to them; they omitted none of their practices and stubborn ways. (Judges 2:16-19)

As the reader navigates the cyclical framework of “sin-claim to YHWH- redeemer”¹⁴⁰, the emphasis of the text guides the audience into the need, without alternative, of following one and only unique YHWH.

Considering these deliberations, the question of Jael’s ethnic or tribal identity ultimately proves secondary to the theological and literary purposes of the narrative. The ambiguity surrounding her origins—whether Israelite, Kenite, or otherwise—serves to underscore the broader Deuteronomistic assertion that YHWH’s sovereignty transcends human boundaries of lineage, geography, and social classification. Jael’s decisive act demonstrates that divine agency can operate through any individual whom YHWH chooses, irrespective of communal affiliation. Her role therefore reinforces the central theological motif that runs throughout Judges: deliverance is not secured by conventional structures of power, nor by the predictability of tribal loyalty, but by YHWH’s initiative in raising up instruments capable of restoring covenantal order. In this sense, Jael stands as a paradigmatic figure whose actions affirm the primacy of YHWH’s authority and the urgent call for Israel to return to exclusive devotion to the one God.

¹⁴⁰ In this recurring helicoidal configuration of ups and downs of the Israelites, we encounter Shamgar ben Anat who does not necessary participate in this kind of structure and nevertheless is singularized by Deborah in her song (5:6). There is there no Deuteronomistic outline for Shamgar’s character, nevertheless he is acknowledged by the prophetess as a character that stands for itself and plays the role of redeemer. The appearance of the phrase “after Ehud died” in the Deborah story (4:1) calls attention to the “interruption” of the cycle with Shamgar. Shamgar ben Anat comes abruptly to the narrative, without any cry for redemption to YHWH, disconnected from the traditional introduction of the redeemer, “And after him was Shamgar, son of Anath, who smote of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad; and he also saved Israel” (3:31). What makes his participation even more bewildering is the fact that he is the only one mentioned by Deborah in her song, along with Jael. They are both located in the Northern area of Kadesh, the land of the tribe of Naphtali. The patronymic “Anat” according to current research and interpretation, refers to a Canaanite goddess of war, Shamgar, a warrior, participates in the song alongside with Jael, both are warriors, one is the ambassador of Anat, the other is the hand of the woman in which YHWH relies to prevail against the Canaanite general Sisera, loyal to king Jabin, and ultimately to YHWH.

8. Historical, Theological, and Geopolitical Contexts

Since the biblical scripts did not materialize in a vacuum, considering the realm behind the text is critical for obtaining the theological message of the Scriptures.

Theological Component and its Origins

YHWH's intervention in Judges 4 and 5 is crucial to the understanding of the prose and the song as a reflection of God's involvement on the battlefield and the killing of Sisera¹⁴¹. Research on YHWH's involvement through "the hand of a woman", the wife of Heber the Kenite-Jael, is essential in the understanding of the war between the Israelites and the Canaanites as a confrontational rivalry between two deities, i.e., YHWH and the EL of the Canaanite pantheon.

The "hand of a woman" is the ultimate tool presented by the Scripture as the decisive success of YHWH actions to claim sovereignty. The hand is the anatomical link between the peg utilized to kill Sisera, and YHWH's engagement against the enemy.

To understand YHWH's participation in these chapters it is necessary to explore why does YHWH choose (4:6, 9, 14) to get involved in the battlefield. The territorial dominance in this area, the siding with the Israelites, and the predilection to act through the prophesy and judgment of a woman-Deborah, and the execution of woman-Jael are imperative aspects in the development of the story.

¹⁴¹ Lukasz Tobola, "Judges 4–5 and Ramesside Topographical Lists," *Poznanskie Studia Teologiczne* 27 (2013): 7–11. From the historical point of view, Lukasz Tobola proposes that based on the Egyptian topographical list of Karnak and Medinet Habu communicates that in the times of Ramses II, certain Jabin controlled the region of Mount Tabor. However, in the times of Ramses III the name of Jabin was replaced on the topographical list by "the band from Daberath" / "the band of Deborah". It is very risky to reconstruct historical events from such limited and ambiguous evidence, but the same political change seems to be also reflected in the biblical tradition concerning the presence of Israelite troops on the slopes of the Mount Tabor (Judg 4:6,12,14) and their conflict with Sisera, a mercenary in service of king Jabin (Judg 4:2-3). The replacement of "Jabin's alliance" by the "the band from Daberath" // "the band of Deborah" on the Egyptian topographical lists seems to confirm the order of events which can be deduced from the Book of Judges. Even if the further details of biblical account about the struggle of Israelites with Sisera are fictional or highly exaggerated, the appearance of the "the band from Daberath / the band of Deborah" on the list of Ramses III seems to deliver the additional chronological frame for dating events, which finally become an inspiration for the biblical tradition concerning the battle at Wadi Kishon.

YHWH is related by the Biblical writers to the Kenites-Midianites, inhabitants of the wilderness. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, is described as a Midianite priest who performs sacrificial rituals and ceremonies to YHWH (Exodus 18:12) amid the theophanic presentation at Mount Sinai. In Judges 1:16, Jethro is depicted as the father of the Kenites.

The participation of YHWH appeals to the knowledge of its origin and its topographical source, the uniqueness of a people or peoples who worship this deity, and the intrinsically associated relationship between the groups of nomadic populaces, who dwelled in tents, applied iconoclastic practices, and were henotheistic.

There are many approaches to identify the origins of the presence of YHWH deity, and its involvement in the Biblical text.¹⁴²

YHWH's connections to the Israelites as well as other people such as Edom, Se'ir, Midianites, and Kenites are a fundamental endeavor to understand historiographical aspects of a God that has been described as a warrior (Exodus 15:3, Isaiah 42:13, Psalm 24:8)¹⁴³, metallurgic (Malachi 3:2-3, Isaiah 1:25, Zechariah 13: 9)¹⁴⁴, stormy (Psalm 18:10-14, Psalm 29:3-10, Nahum 1:3, Job 38:1)¹⁴⁵, a god of the volcanos who produces lava (Exodus 19:18, Deuteronomy 4:11-12, Judges

¹⁴² Amzallag, Nissim disagrees with the claim that Yahweh's origins are obscure and argues that the deity was originally a god of the forge and patron of metallurgists during the *Bronze Age* (c. 3500-1200 BCE). Amzallag specifically cites the ancient copper mines of the Timna Valley (in southern Israel), biblical and extra-biblical passages, and similarities of Yahweh to gods of metallurgy in other cultures for support. An essential link between Yahweh and copper is suggested in the Book of Zechariah where the dwelling of the God of Israel is symbolized by two mountains of copper (Zech. 6:1-6). In his prophecies, Ezekiel describes a divine being as 'a man was there, whose appearance shone like copper' (Ezek. 40:3), and in another part of this book, Yahweh is even explicitly mentioned as being a smelter (Ezek. 22:20). In Isaiah 54:16, Yahweh is unambiguously mentioned as the creator of both the copperworker and his work...Such an involvement of Yahweh is never mentioned elsewhere for other crafts or human activities. The god of metallurgy generally appears as an outstanding deity. He is generally involved in the creation of the world and/or the creation of humans. The overwhelming importance of the god of metallurgy reflects the central role played by the copper smelters in the emergence of civilizations throughout the ancient world.

¹⁴³ Psalm 46:8.

¹⁴⁴ Nissim Amzallag, "A Metallurgical Perspective on the Birth of Ancient Israel," *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.8742>. Beno Rothenberg, *The Egyptian Mining Temple at Timna*, vol. 1, *Research in the Arabah 1959-1984* (London: Institute for Archaeo-Metallurgical Studies, University College London, 1988). YHWH is originally a storm god." See Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

¹⁴⁵ Song of the Sea, the reference to YHWH opening the sea by blasting a powerful wind through his "nostrils" ('apeka, in Exodus 15:8a) Karel van der Toorn writes: "The interpretation of the name Yahweh is not entirely devoid of meaning, then, when it comes to establishing his character. YHWH does indeed mean 'He blows'.

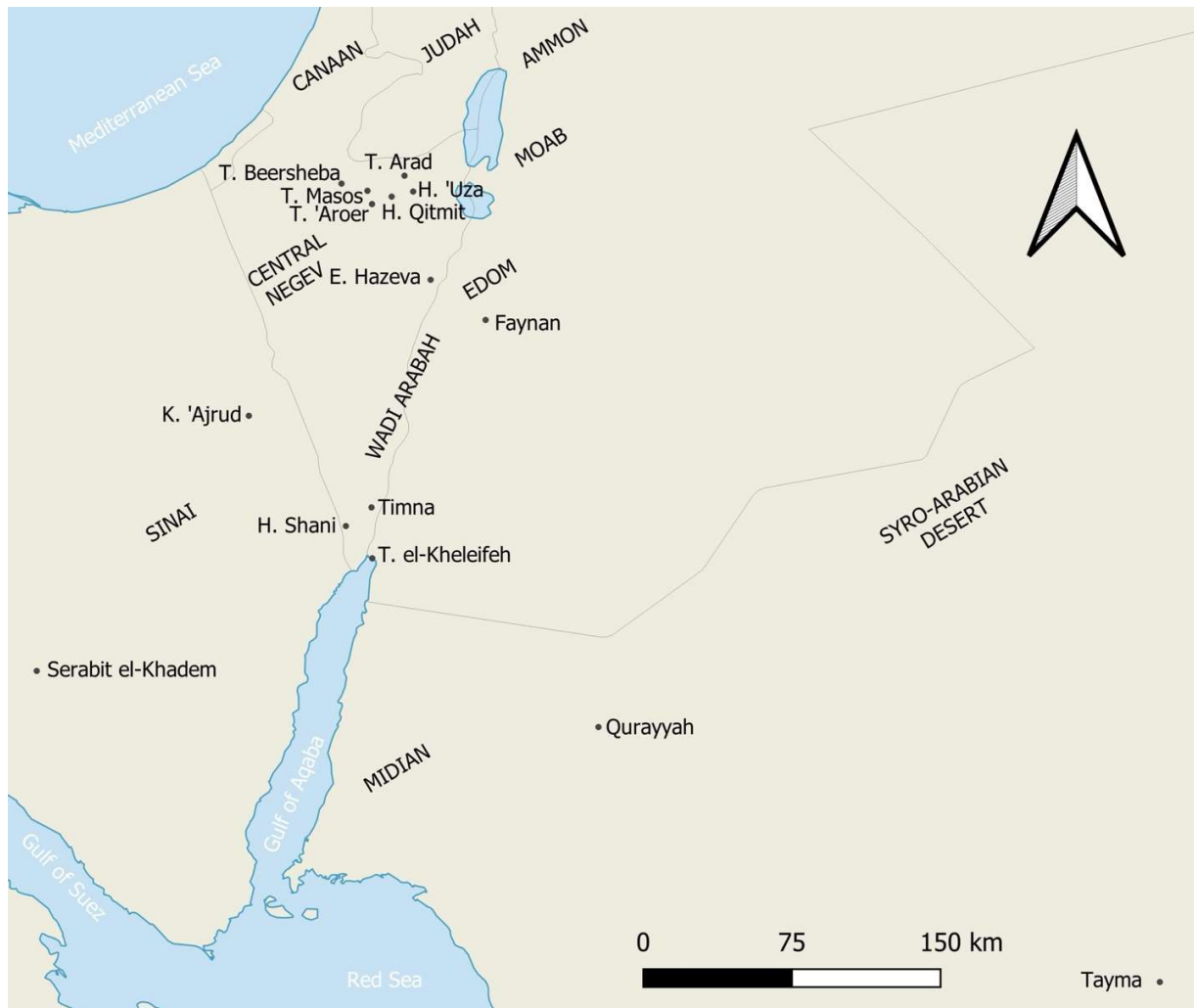
5:4-5, Psalm 97:2-5)¹⁴⁶, a loving (Exodus 34:6, Deuteronomy 7:7-8, Psalm 136: refrain of *ki leolam hasdo*, Jeremiah 31:3) ¹⁴⁷ and jealous (Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 4:24, Deuteronomy 6:15, Nahum 1:2)¹⁴⁸ God.

The earliest evidence of cultic practices in the southern peripheries of the Levant, which may be linked to the origins of the worship of YHWH, emerges during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age, roughly spanning the late second millennium to the early first millennium BCE. This period marks significant religious and cultural developments in the region, reflecting shifts in population, political structures, and religious identity that likely contributed to the formation and spread of early YHWH worship. Archaeological findings from this era provide important insights into the evolving religious landscape that set the stage for later Israelite monotheism.

¹⁴⁶ Jacob E. Dunn, "A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 4 (2014): 387–424.

¹⁴⁷ Israel Knohl, "YHWH: The Original Arabic Meaning of the Name," TheTorah.com, 2019, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/yhwh-the-original-arabic-meaning-of-the-name>.

¹⁴⁸ אֵל קַנָּז, according to Exodus (20:4, 34:14) Deuteronomy (4:24, 5:8, 6:15), Joshua (24:19), and the prophet Nahum (1:2), YHWH has the characteristic of a jealous deity.



Late Bronze and Iron Age sites.

Shasu¹⁴⁹

The initial epigraphic indications that refer to the name Yahweh, are two extrabiblical topographical lists depicting Shasu people living in the arid lands east of the Sinai Peninsula.

The Shasu were a Semitic, wandering people described as fugitives or brigands by the Egyptians and they are named on the column of the temple at Soleb among Egypt's other adversaries. They

¹⁴⁹ See footnote 35.

appeared subsequently, in an engraving from the reign of Ramesses II (r. 1279-1213 BCE), as among the pharaoh's opponents at the Battle of Kadesh.

The inscriptions date to the reigns of Amenhotep III (approx. 1380 BCE) and Ramses II (approx. 1270/1250 BCE) and appear in the temples of Soleb and Amara West, respectively¹⁵⁰.



Toponym of YHW from the Egyptian list of the Temple of Soleb (National Museum of Nubia, Sudan)

Extrabiblical references to YHWH appear in Egyptian inscriptions from the 14th century BCE. These inscriptions mention a group called the “*Shasu of Yhw*,” suggesting that YHWH may have been worshipped by early nomadic tribes in the region of Edom or Midian.

The temple was built by Amenhotep III (1386-1353 BCE) and the reference to Yahweh established that this god was worshipped by another people long before the time when the events of the biblical narratives are thought to have taken place. Amenhotep III's reference of the

¹⁵⁰ Daniel E. Fleming, *Yahweh before Israel: Glimpses of History in a Divine Name* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 162–84.

“*Shasu of YHW*” placed the name of this deity much earlier in the historical timeline than has been accepted previously.¹⁵¹

The nomadic clan of *Shasu* mingled with other nomadic or settlers, creates an intrinsic syncretism of cultural and cultic resemblance. The oldest extra-biblical source demonstrating the cult of YHWH as the national god of Israel comes from the ninth-century BCE, portrayed in the Moabite stele of king Mesha¹⁵², and therefore the ascendancy to pre-eminence of YHWH cannot be dated later than the tenth century BCE.

The Hebrew engravings and representations of Kuntilat 'Ajrud, an Iron Age II (late 9th/early 8th century BCE), religious shrine at the Sinai border, situates YHWH in this southern border.

The chiasmatic area congregates diverse commerce from the desert and the sea which became an attractive zone of cultural multiplicity and cultic diversity.¹⁵³ The site's setting requires unambiguous consideration. Kuntilat 'Ajrud is erected on the top of an isolated hill in northeast Sinai, 50 km south of Qadesh Barne'a. The junction between the road of the Sea of Reeds, the main spices road towards the South of Sinai and the road that crosses East-West. This strategical chiasmatic ubication was an attractive area that merged settlements and nomadic groups, generating multiculturalization.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Martin Leuenberger, "Yahweh Province from the South," in *The Origin of Yahwism*, ed. Jürgen van Oorschot (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 157–80.

¹⁵² Juan Manuel Tebes, "The Mesha Inscription and Relations with Moab and Edom," in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 286–92.

¹⁵³ Spencer L. Allen, *The Splintered Divine: A Study of Ištar, Baal, and Yahweh Divine Names and Divine Multiplicity in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 264, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512363>.

¹⁵⁴ Ze'ev Meshel, ed., *Kuntilet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012).



Sherd showing a horse harnessed to a chariot. The inscription reads: "May you be blessed [by the Lord]." Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

There is recurrence of the name YHWH in the inscriptions: three times associated with Teman, once with Shomron (the capital of the northern kingdom) and twice with no geographic association. Other gods are mentioned too: Asherah, four times (with YHWH), El, twice, and Ba'al, once.¹⁵⁵

In addition to the above mentioned, YHWH is predominantly stated in situations of victories and defeats, where kingdoms take possessions and loot the enemies, and engrave in stelas their triumph.

¹⁵⁵ Shmuel Ahituv, Esther Eshel, and Ze'ev Meshel, "The Inscriptions," in *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border*, ed. Ze'ev Meshel (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), 73–142.

An example of this occurrence is when the name YHWH was long held to be inscribed on the Moabite Stone (also known as the Mesha Stele) erected by King Mesha of Moab to celebrate his victory over Israel in c. 840 BCE. The inscription mentions how Mesha, after defeating the Israelites, “took the vessels of Yahweh to Kemosh” (the chief god of Moab):



The Mesha Stele is an ancient tablet dating to around 850 BCE, written by Mesha, the king of Moab (Louvre Museum, Paris)

The origins of YHWH are deeply rooted in the cultural and geographical contexts of Edom, Seir, and the Shasu nomadic groups. The evidence points to a complex interplay of religious traditions that contributed to the development of YHWH as a central figure in Israelite worship, reflecting a broader narrative of cultural exchange and adaptation in the ancient Near East.

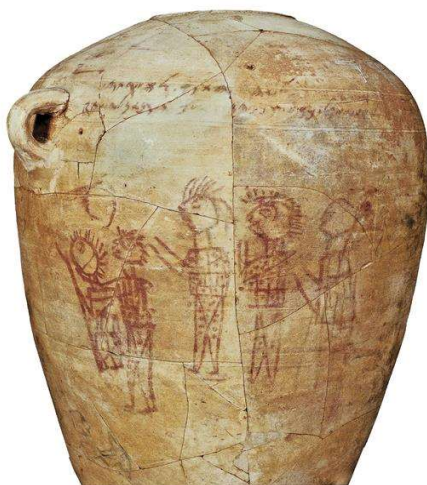


PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. ZE 'EV MESHEL/TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The Kenite-Midianite Theory

It is important to address the original Kenite Theory¹⁵⁶. This concept was based on the biblical narrative about the family connection between Moses and Jethro. Modern scholarship¹⁵⁷ doubts the historicity of this narrative, has suggested other possible mediators who brought the cult of YHWH to early Israel¹⁵⁸. Karel van der Toorn¹⁵⁹ claimed that the mediators were Midianite merchants who cooperated with the Israelites in the Iron Age I period.

¹⁵⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 2 (2008): 131–53.

¹⁵⁷ J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and Casus Belli: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1993): 18–38; John Van Seters, *The Origin of Yahwism in Ancient Israel: Moses and the Midianites* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 128–49; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 44–66, 90–110; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 215–34; Megan E. Mondriaan, "Yahweh and the Origin of Yahwism: A Critical Evaluation," *Old Testament Essays* 17, no. 4 (2004): 580–94.

¹⁵⁸ J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and Casus Belli: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1993): 21.

¹⁵⁹ Karel van der Toorn, "Yahweh," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 910–19.

Several biblical texts deal with Moses' stay in the land of Midian and his relationship with his father-in-law, Jethro the priest of Midian (Exod 2:16–22, J¹⁶⁰). It was in the wilderness of Midian that the angel of YHWH appeared to him in “Horeb, the mountain of God,” and where the divine name was revealed for the first time (Exodus 3:1–6, J-E). Although Jethro “blessed YHWH” and offered sacrifices to him (Exodus 18:10–12, E), nothing is said of Jethro as priest of YHWH and YHWH as the god of Midian. The matter is further complicated because Jethro is elsewhere identified as Kenite (Judges 1:16; 4:11), another southern group loosely related to the Midianites and Amalekites (Judges 6:3; 1 Sam 15:5–6) that seem to have settled in the northern Negev.

The Kenites-Midianites resided in the Southeast area of modern Israel's territory, adjacent to the Edom-Seir region. It seems that the God-YHWH was worshiped in Mount Seir-Edom by a Kenite-Midianite tribe preceding the genesis of the people of Israel.¹⁶¹ If the transmission of the cult of YHWH came from Se'ir, rouses a thought-provoking peculiarity, since Se'ir is Edom, and Edom is Esau, brother of the patriarch Jacob, who separated from Esau in an earlier stage according to the Biblical narrative, depicts the Scriptural rivalry between the brothers, Esau and Jacob. Esau/Edom/Se'ir are viewed negatively already in later biblical texts and throughout

¹⁶⁰ My gratitude to Prof. Tamás Biró for suggesting the addition of J, E, D, P sources to maintain the academic rigor of this thesis.

¹⁶¹ Juan Manuel Tebes, "The Archaeology of Cult of Ancient Israel's Southern Neighbors and the Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis," in *The Desert Origins of God: Yahweh's Emergence and Early History in the Southern Levant and Northern Arabia*, ed. Juan Manuel Tebes and Christian Frevel, special issue, *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 2 (Bochum: Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 2021), 23–24.

rabbinic literature, becoming a symbol of Israel's oppressors¹⁶². Nevertheless, the deity YHWH has come, nomadically, from Se'ir, advancing from Edom.¹⁶³

¹⁶² For example, Psalm 137, which describes itself as a dirge set in the Babylonian exile, accuses the Edomites of relishing Judah's destruction:

תהלים קלז: זכר יְהוָה לְבָנֵי אֲדָוָם אֶת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הַיְסוֹד בָּהּ.

Ps 137:7 Remember, O YHWH, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"

The prophet Obadiah left only twenty-one verses of prophecy, all directed to Esau/Edom, dripping with hatred and enmity:

עובדיה א"ח: יְהוָה בֵּית יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לְהִבָּהּ וּבֵית עֵשָׂו לְקֶשׁ וְדָלְקוּ בָהֶם וְאֶכְלוּם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה שְׂרִיד לְבֵית עֵשָׂו כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר.

Obad 1:18 The house of Jacob shall be a fire, the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble; they shall burn them and consume them, and there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau; for YHWH has spoken. The prophet Malachi, writing in the early Second Temple period, is equally forthright in his enmity and antagonism towards Esau:

מלאכי א"ב: אֶהְבֵּתִי אֶתְכֶם אָמַר יְהוָה וְאֶמְרַתְּם בְּמִן אֶהְבֵּתֵנוּ הֲלוֹא אֵחַ עָשָׂו לִיעֲקֹב נָאִם יְהוָה וְאֶהָב אֶת יַעֲקֹב. אֲ: וְאֵת עֵשָׂו שְׂנֵאתִי וְאֲשִׁים אֶת הָרִיז שְׂמֵמָה וְאֵת נַחֲלָתוֹ לְתִנּוֹת מִדְבָּר. א"ד: כִּי תֹאמַר אֲדָוָם רְשָׁעֵנוּ וְנָשׁוּב וְנִבְנֶה חֲרֻבוֹת כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הֵמָּה יִבְנוּ וְאֲנִי אֶהְרֹס וְקִרְאוּ לָהֶם גְּבוּל רְשָׁעָה וְהָעָם אֲשֶׁר זָעַם יְהוָה עַד עוֹלָם.

Mal 1:2 I have loved you, says YHWH. But you say, "How have you loved us?" Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says YHWH. Yet I have loved Jacob. ^{1:3} But I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals. ^{1:4} If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," YHWH of hosts says: "They may build, but I will tear down, until they are called the wicked country, the people with whom YHWH is angry forever."

These negative prophecies reflect the shift in the historical relationship between Edom and Israel/Judah that took place as a result of the destruction of the First Temple. Another shift, which takes place in the Roman period, is better understood as typological.

In the Roman period, Edom and Esau come to represent Rome. While many factors led to this identification, one major factor was the position of Herod, who was appointed by Rome as the king of Judea, and who was from a family of Edomite/Idumean converts to Judaism. He and his descendants were hated by many Judeans, and their acting as Roman proxies helped solidify the Edom = Rome equation.

The rabbis were heirs to the disdain for Herod, and the midrash and Talmud take the equation of Edom and Rome for granted. Living in the time after the destruction of the temple and the quashing of the Bar-Kokhba uprising, Rome, in the guise of Edom, was despised.

According to Gerson Cohen in his classic article on the topic, the earliest reflection of this attitude is the statement attributed to R. Aqiva in Genesis Rabbah (65:21), commenting on Gen 27:22 "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau":

אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹדָה בַּר אֱלֵעִי ר' הֵיךְ דּוֹרֵשׁ הַקּוֹל קוֹלוֹ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב מִצְנַחַת מִמָּה שֶׁעָשׂוּ לוֹ הַיָּדִים יְדֵי עֵשָׂו.

R. Judah ben Illai said: Rabbi [i.e., my teacher R. Aqiva] said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob"; the voice of Jacob cries out at what the hands, "the hands of Esau" did to him. See Gerson D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," in *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 19–48.

This is clearly a lament for what the Romans did to the Jews in the Great Revolt (66–73 C.E.) and the Bar-Kokhba uprising (132–136 C.E.).

The typology of Edom = Rome took another step after the 4th century and the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity. With Christianity becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire, Edom/Esau = Rome becomes Edom/Esau = Christianity/the Church. This develops into a major theme in rabbinic midrash and in medieval Jewish exegesis and makes itself felt especially strongly in Rashi's commentary on Genesis.

Rashi maintains a consistent denigration of Esau. Rashi on the Jacob-Esau narrative is single-mindedly consistent in his negative portrayal of Esau. Rashi has almost nothing good or even neutral to say about Esau. Conversely, Jacob is portrayed as a righteous soul without a blemish on his character. Contrary to the opinion that Rashi only made use of midrashic sources when they help solve an exegetical problem, or fill an important gap in the narrative, it seems

clear, at least in this case, that he reads verses against their plain meaning in order to impress upon the reader the utter wickedness and depravity of Esau.

To demonstrate this point, we will look at how Rashi deals with Esau in the narrative of Jacob and Esau's birth and youth.

Idol Worship from the Womb (Gen 25:22)—Rebekah is suffering because the boys are struggling in her womb: ויתרוצצו. ע"כ המקרא הזה אומר דרשני, שסתם מה היא רציצה זו וכתב אם כן למה זה אנכי? רבותינו דרשוהו לשון ריצה; כשהיתה עוברת על פתחי תורה של שם ועבר יעקב רץ ומפרנס לצאת, עוברת על פתח עבודת אלילים, עשו מפרנס לצאת.

And [the boys] struggled — You must admit that this verse calls for a midrashic interpretation since it leaves unexplained what this struggling was about, and it states [that she exclaimed] “If so, why am I [suffering]?” Our Rabbis explain that the word *va-yitrotsu* has the meaning of running [moving quickly]: whenever she passed by the doors of Torah [i.e., the study-houses of Shem and Eber], Jacob moved convulsively trying to come out, but whenever she passed by the gate of a pagan temple Esau moved convulsively trying to come out [*Ber. Rab* 63:6]. The midrash (*Breshit Rabbah*) on this verse contains other interpretations that are neutral, speaking about the brothers in equal terms. Rashi ignores these and picks the midrash that puts Esau in a bad light. Jacob already in utero desired to study Torah, while Esau wished to worship idols.

Wicked by Nature (Gen 25:23)—Glossing the prophetic oracle about the future of Rebekah's two sons:

ממעיד יפרדו. מן המעים הם נפרדים זה לרשעו וזה לתמו.

Shall be parted from your belly —From the belly they are separated, [each taking a different course] — one to his wickedness, the other to his [life of] integrity.

The statement in the text is totally neutral. Both boys will separate themselves from their mother's body. Rashi gratuitously adds that one goes on his wicked way, the other follows a righteous path. Perhaps here he is focusing on the idea of separation, imagining a separation in worldviews between the two brothers that begins immediately after birth. Even if there is an exegetical need for a comment here, focusing on the “separation,” the good/evil dichotomy is certainly not called for.

A Defective Twin (Gen 25:24)— Rashi, following the midrash, takes note of the unusual defective spelling of the word תומם, “twins”:

והנה תומם. חסר, וכתמר תאומים מלא. לפי ששניהם צדיקים; אבל כאן אחד צדיק ואחד רשע.

Behold, there were twins — The word for twins is written defective [without *alef* and *yod*] while in the case of Tamar [it is written] תאומים [with *alef* and *yod*; Gen 38:27]; because in the latter case both children proved righteous while here one was righteous and the other wicked (cf. *Ber. Rab* 63:8).

This statement is obviously tendentious. It would have been just as legitimate to say that this indicates that both of the brothers were morally deficient (Jacob was certainly not devoid of faults), but the intention is to stress the virtue of Jacob and the wickedness of Esau.

Ruddy is Bloody (Gen 25:25)—Commenting on the physical description of Esau:

אדמוני. סימן הוא שיהא שופך דמים.

Ruddy—This is a sign that he would be a blood-shedder (cf. *Ber. Rab* 63:8).

Again, Rashi uses a neutral statement, that Esau was a redhead or had a ruddy complexion to accuse him of being born a murderer or with a murderous inclination.

Growing into Idol Worship (Gen 25:27)—glossing a totally neutral comment about the boys growing older, Rashi writes:

ויגדלו הנערים ויהי עשו. כל זמן שהיו קטנים, לא היו נפרים במעשיהם, ואין אדם מדקדק בהם מה טיבם; פיון שנעשו בני שלש עשרה שנה, זה פרש לבתי מדרשות וזה פרש לע"ן [לעבודה זרה].

And the boys grew up; and Esau was — As long as they were young they could not be distinguished by their deeds and no one paid close attention to their natures, but when they reached the age of thirteen, this one went his way to the houses of study and the other went his way to idol worship (cf. *Ber. Rab* 63:10).

¹⁶³ John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) This research has suggested that the Israelite conception of YHWH may have developed in dialogue and tension with the religious practices in neighboring regions, including Edom. The Edomites though often depicted as rivals, are also portrayed as sharing some religious and cultural traits with the Israelites, particularly in the worship of YHWH. The book of the Prophet Obadiah, dedicated to discourse against Edom, emphasizes judgment against Edom for its treatment of Israel. However, there are also moments of reconciliation and blessing in other texts, i.e., Numbers 20:17-21 and Judges 11:18 where **Edom** is approached for passage through its land but refused. YHWH sovereignty over both Israel and Edom is presented in a way that highlights both their shared history and their divergent destinies.

The figure of Esau, the toponym of Se'ir and Edom, from where YHWH departs according to Judges 5:4 allows the reader to reconsider the negative aspect of the brotherly relationship. As the biblical text shows, there is a reconciliation between Jacob and Esau¹⁶⁴. Jacob and Esau's reconciliation is not mutual. This is because Esau is fundamentally blameless; his anger at his brother, like God's anger at the Israelites, is in fact justified, and this is clearly why Jacob tried to appease Esau with gifts and compared his face to God's.¹⁶⁵

The image of Se'ir and Edom transmute according to the variations in the relationship with other cultures and civilizations. In addition to locations and cultural aspects of the local Edomites, the presence of their deity Qos is an imperative aspect to highlight. Numerous scholars¹⁶⁶ have suggested that the veneration of YHWH and Qos offered comparable characters or that, even, both share a common foundation. Both gods are first attested in Egyptian inscriptions dating to the late second millennium B.C.E., when the Egyptians encountered clans or tribes in the southern arid belt of the Levant (Negev, Edom) bearing those names.

The Biblical text presents Edomites worshipping YHWH. In the book of Samuel, Doeg the Edomite¹⁶⁷, one of Saul's servants, encounters David when the latter is seeking refuge in the priestly city of Nob:

שמואל א כא:ח וַיֵּשֶׁם אִישׁ מֵעֲבָדֵי שָׁאוּל בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נֶעְצָר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֵהוּ דָּאָג הָעֲדֹמִי אֲבִיר הָרָעִים אֲשֶׁר לְשָׁאוּל:

Now one of Saul's officials was there that day, detained before the YHWH-his name was Doeg the Edomite, Saul's chief herdsman (1 Sam 21:8).

¹⁶⁴ Genesis 33:10, in which Jacob compares seeing the face of Esau as seeing the face of God. The core of the story of Jacob and Esau comes from the northern Israelite source, E, that can be tentatively dated to the eighth century B.C.E. Jacob is a northern Israelite patriarch, associated primarily with northern Israelite sites: Shechem – the ancient capital of the north (Gen 33:18-20, 34). Beth El – a northern shrine (Gen 28:10-22). The Transjordanian Cities of Peniel (Gen 32:31-32), Sukkot (Gen 33:17), and Mahanaim (Gen 32:3), all important administrative centers of Northern Israel.

¹⁶⁵ Rashi understands this image differently, insisting that Jacob's line about Esau's face being like God's is a veiled threat: Jacob is telling Esau that he has seen Esau's guardian angel and fought him to a draw.

¹⁶⁶ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001); John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 73–75.

¹⁶⁷ Jack M. Sasson, "Doeg's Job," *Scriptura* 87 (2004): 317–22.

The negative connotation towards Edom reflects a deleterious reference against Jacob's brother. Esau and Jacob also characterize the future peoples of Edom and Israel, which had a complex relationship than their eponymous brothers. Edom existed as a weak nation just Southeast of Judah for most of the First Temple period, often coming under Israelite rule¹⁶⁸. Later on, during the destruction of the Northern kingdom of Israel (722 BCE), and the Southern kingdom of Judah (586 BCE) the Edomites established themselves in the vacant areas.

Cited in Judges 5:4, YHWH certainly wanders from the southeast. The text states: O Lord, when You came forth from Se'ir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water". The location is described in a precise manner without leaving any doubt about the origin of YHWH.

Biblical readers are familiar with the Exodus from Egypt in the book of Exodus and YHWH's relationship throughout this journey. YHWH has taken the Hebrews out of Egypt with a strong hand and an extended arm (Exodus 6:1, E; Deuteronomy 4:34, ; 5:14; 26:8, D; Psalms 136:12). The topographical encounters between YHWH and the Israelites though occur in the desert, the wilderness. YHWH-self ambulates from the desert.¹⁶⁹

The relationship between YHWH and the Israelites should also be reviewed through the lenses of the ethnogenesis of the Israelites as a people. The Biblical texts may suggest that Israel was created by neophytes, who either seized Canaan militarily, as described in the book of Joshua, or took it over through a tribal and nonviolent settlement progression, as suggested from the book of Judges.

¹⁶⁸ Erhard Blum, "The Jacob Tradition," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 152 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 181–211.

¹⁶⁹ Martin Leuenberger, "YHWH's Provenance from the South: A New Evaluation of the Arguments Pro and Contra," in *The Origins of Yahwism*, ed. Jürgen van Oorschot and Markus Witte (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 157–79.

Another theory sustains by some scholars¹⁷⁰ is that the ethnogenesis emerged from within the people of Canaan, who separated themselves from the cultic worship to follow the henotheistic path.¹⁷¹

Exodus 12, P, commences the collective narrative of the Israelites, and verse 38, E, mentions the term עַרְבֵי רֶב, a “mixed multitude”, that gave way for another interpretation of the Israelite’s ethnogenesis. At a time of the decline of the Egyptian domination of Canaan in the 12th century BCE, Israel was generated throughout an extensive ethnogenesis progression from an assortment of groups that assembled from different regions: ‘Apirw/Habirw, Hitites, Canaanites, Amorites, Hurites, desert tribes, and *goyei hayam*- Sea People (often referred to Phoenicians)¹⁷²

Intrinsically tribal connection is seen in the names that participate in and outside of the Israelite framework. According to the biblical writers’ viewpoint, the Israelite tribes had close affiliation with the desert tribes and kinfolks, as reflected from genealogical lists such as Genesis 36, P, and 1 Chronicles 1-9. Several Edomite and Amalekites relatives, such as Kenaz, Zerah, and Korah, were also clans in the tribes of Judah, Shimon, and Benjamin (Genesis 36:5, 12, 18; 1 Chronicles 1:35-6, 2:43, 4:15, 25). Kaleb, Yerahmiel, Kenaz, Rechab, and Otniel were in-groups affiliated, inhabitants of the desert, with Keni and Edom, who joined the tribe of Judah (Judges 1:16, 4:11-12, 1 Chronicles 2:25-50). Midian was the son of Abraham and Keturah (Genesis 25:2, E), whose connections with Moses are well known (Exodus 2-4, 18, J-E), who also had familial bonds with the Keni, a tribe of the Amalek federation (Judges 1:16, 4:11).

Battlefields and wars contributed to the mingling of different kinfolks. Numbers 31:9,18, 35,P, shows how the Israelites took a booty from the war against Midian, among the looting, 32000 women were taken for wives, generating a new era of genealogy, a new lineage among the

¹⁷⁰Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

¹⁷¹ According to some scholars, the biblical narrative of the creation of Israel (the Patriarchs, the Exodus, and the conquest) was just a legend, written in the seventh century BCE or later, and has no historical background. See Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

¹⁷² Avraham Faust and Shlomo Bunimovitz, "The Four Room House: Embodying Iron Age Israelite Society," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66, no. 1 (2003): 22–31. Amihai Mazar, "The Israelite Settlement," in *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 85–98.

Israelite that creates a question (for the purpose of this dissertation) regarding the Israelite origin of Jael who marries (back to his tribe), Heber HaKenite.

Conclusion

Immersed in a compelling framework influenced by tribal, nomadic, and settled South-Eastern cultures and rituals, especially the region of Midian and Edom, YHWH and the worshiping of this deity experienced a substantial theological progression. The interaction between different cultural and religious groups exercised an impact in the genesis of monotheism, transitioning from henotheism until the creation of a particularized identity. YHWH worship emerged within the matrix of Se'ir, Edom, Kenites, Midianites. In this tapestry woven by multicultural influences, YHWH prevailed as the only God to be worshipped.

9. The Origins of the Covenant between YHWH and the Israelites

How does YHWH become the God of the Israelites?¹⁷³

As Thomas Römer¹⁷⁴ enunciated YHWH did not belong originally to the Levantine pantheon of gods and attempts to locate the cult of YHWH in the Semitic epigraphy have proved to be unsuccessful.

The beginnings of YHWH, the fundamental deity to primordial Israelite religion, are multifaceted and interwoven with assorted cultural and geographical impacts, predominantly from territories such as Seir, Edom, Sinai, and the nomadic Shasu¹⁷⁵, who ambulated in those areas, playing a significant impact in ritual, cult and religious observances.

As I mentioned before and will develop in this chapter the Shasu, a crowd of wandering pastoralists cited in Egyptian engravings, are often cited as crucial to understanding the origins of YHWH, suggesting an acculturation between different nomadic groups and the absorption of their deities.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ I decide based on an historical aspect to apply the term “proto-Israelites,” would be more appropriate. The term “Israel” prior to the tenth century BCE does not address an organized people. However, an ethnic group named Israel did exist in the thirteenth century BCE.

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 35–50.

¹⁷⁵ Egyptian meaning: *ššw*, “those who move on foot”.

¹⁷⁶ Several scholars have suggested different locations for the “Shasu land Yhw,” where the God was probably worshiped: in the Edomite Mountains, in northern or northwestern Sinai, the southern Negev and eastern Sinai, and the Arabah Valley. See Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 273. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 2 (2008): 131–53; Shmuel Ahituv, *Canaanite Toponyms in Ancient Egyptian Documents* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 121–22. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 24–28; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, “The Veto on Images and the Aniconic God in Ancient Israel,” in *Religious Symbols and Their Functions*, ed. Haralds Biezais (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 408. James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 242; Martin Leuenberger, “YHWH's Provenance from the South: A New Evaluation of the Arguments Pro and Contra,” in *The Origins of Yahwism*, ed. Jürgen van Oorschot and Markus Witte (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 177.

Although Albright¹⁷⁷ Wright¹⁷⁸ and Yadin¹⁷⁹ sustain that the proto-Israelites formed as a people in the desert either conquered Canaan as described in the Book of Joshua or settled peacefully, portrayed by the Book of Judges, there are other scholars such as Faust¹⁸⁰ that considers that the proto-Israelites emerges as an internal group among the Canaanites. An additional aspect of this principle, I would suggest, highlights the importance of separation from the Canaanites as a consequence of following only one God.

A supplementary theory¹⁸¹ also suggests that the patriarchal narrative of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a creation of the seventh century BCE or even later, during the post-monarchic period without any foundation of historical facts.

Ethnogenesis of proto-Israelites

I would like to approach the “mixed multitude” theory, the one that suggests that the ethnogenesis of proto-Israel emerges from the multiculturalization of a variety of peoples such as the Canaanites, Apiru/Habiru¹⁸², Hittites, Hurites, Amorites, tribes of the wilderness, the Exodus people, Sea People, and others.

The “mixed multitude” created from different background, adoring diverse deities, expressing a variety of ways of communication is what the Hebrew Bible alludes to ערב-רב *Erev Rav* (Exodus 12: 38,E), which the Bible refers to as those who joint the Israelites who left Egypt. A

¹⁷⁷ William F. Albright, "The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 74 (1939): 11–23.

¹⁷⁸ G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (London: Duckworth, 1957), 95–97.

¹⁷⁹ Yigael Yadin, "Is the Biblical Account of the Israelite Conquest of Canaan Historically Reliable?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8, no. 2 (1982): 16–23.

¹⁸⁰ Avraham Faust, "The Emergence of Iron Age Israel: On Origins and Habitus," in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, ed. Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp (Cham: Springer, 2015), 467–82.

¹⁸¹ Nadav Na'aman, "No Anthropomorphic Graven Image: Notes on the Assumed Anthropomorphic Cult Statues in the Temples of YHWH in the Pre-Exilic Period," in *Ancient Israel's History and Historiography: The First Temple Period, Collected Essays*, vol. 3 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 311–38.

¹⁸² Apiru/Habiru of the Akkadian and Egyptian sources, as people lacking real estate, who were present and active in Canaan (and beyond) mainly during the Late Bronze Age. See Michael C. Astour, "Yahweh in Egyptian Topographic Lists," *Ägypten und Altes Testament* 1 (1979): 17–34.

different view may be applied to balance the ethnicity emerging in the desert and those inhabitants of the Canaanite territory into a group that morphed into the proto-Israelites.

As seen in different theories it is hard to establish with unique determination the genesis of the Israelites and their Yahwistic following, a radical ethnicity.

A prevalent suggestion about the origins of the proto-Israelites and their relationship with deity worship is suggested by Knohl.

Knohl¹⁸³ endorses the essence of the Jacob-El people by articulating the origins of the name Jacob-El found in the thirteenth century BCE, on the topographical list of Ramesses II, alluding to a placename connected to the civilization that worships the god Qos, e.g., the Edomites¹⁸⁴. The eponym Jacob-EL, known to the people who settled in the southeast area of the Negev around the area of Se'ir, might explain the nomadic group of people who got culturalized by the environment and merge their ritual with the locals, and who also transmitted the cult of YHWH from Seir to Israel. In the words of Israel Knohl:

“It seems that now we can suggest another candidate for this mediation: the clan of Jacob-el. Since they lived in Mount Seir in the 13th century BC, they could hear from their Kenite-Midianite neighbors, about YHWH, the God who comes from Seir. Later on, the clans of Jacob-el, joined other clans and they formed together the early national entity “Israel” who is mentioned in the late 13th century by Merneptah. In this way they could serve as the mediators who brought the name and the cult of YHWH from Seir-Edom to early Israel. This

¹⁸³ Israel Knohl, "Jacob-El in the Land of Esau and the Roots of Biblical Religion," *Vetus Testamentum* 67, no. 3 (2017): 481–84.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 483.

process might be seen as the birth of biblical Religion."¹⁸⁵

In the Deuteronomy, Moses's farewell discourse the reader finds an outstanding connection between YHWH and the people residing in the wilderness, a clan called Jacob, worshippers of YHWH's deity.

Deuteronomy 32: 9-10:

כִּי חֶלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב חֶלֶק נַחֲלָתוֹ:

For יהוה's portion is this people;
Jacob, God's own allotment.

יִמְצְאֵהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְבָּר וּבְתֵהוּ יִלֵּל יִשְׁמְךָ יִסְבְּכֶנָּהוּ יְבוֹנֶנָּהוּ
יִצְרֶנָּהוּ כְּאִישׁוֹן עֵינָיו:

[God] found them in a desert region,
In an empty howling waste.
[God] engirded them, watched over them,
Guarded them as the pupil of God's eye.

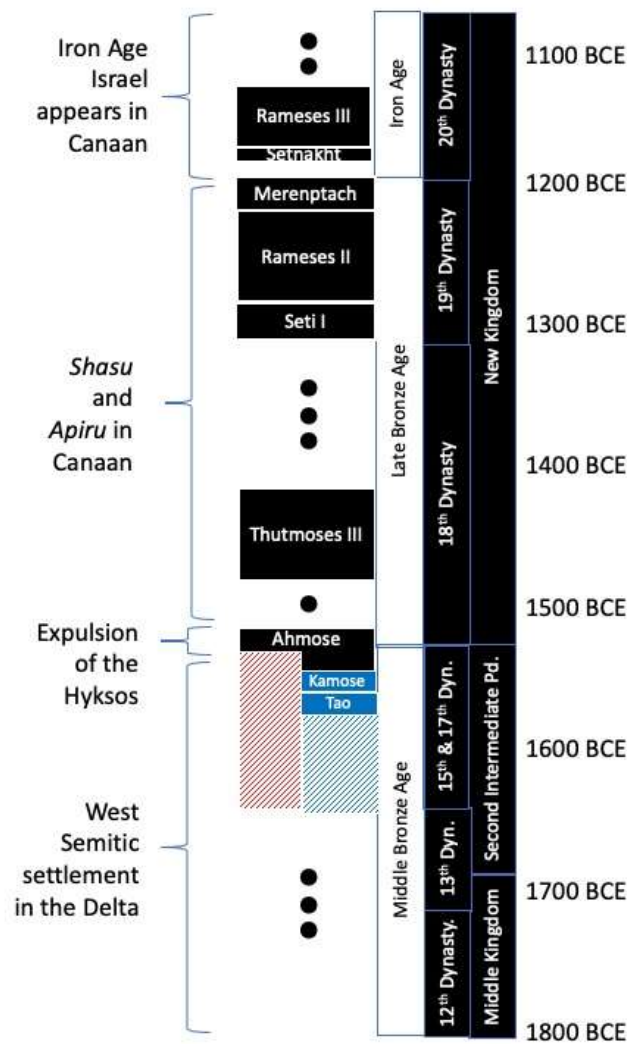
¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 484.



Land of the Shasu of Yahweh” inscription at the temple of Soleb

Photo Credit : <https://flic.kr/p/dULpbp>

In order to understand the chronological participation of this nomadic clan and its immersion in the socio-cultural platform of the rulers of the times, it is essential to present this timetable which illustrates the time of the Shasu in Canaan during the Late bronze Age, as a foundation for the establishment of the proto-Israelites, worshipers of YHWH.



Egyptian toponym catalogues from Soleb, 'Amara West, and Madinat Abu, of Amenhotep III, Ramses II, and Ramses III, individually, allude to names of the Shasu territories.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ In Soleb and Amara West the inscriptions read “the Shasu Land of YHW”, while the inscription in Madinat Habu reads “The Shasu Land of YH”. There is a consensus where the YWH and YH refers to the same deity worshipped by the nomadic clan. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 2 (2008): 139–40; Martin Leuenberger, “YHWH’s Provenance from the South: A New Evaluation of the Arguments Pro and Contra,” in *The Origins of Yahwism*, ed. Jürgen van Oorschot and Markus Witte (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 172; Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 38–40.

Conclusion

The ethnogenesis of the proto-Israelites must be understood as a dynamic and heterogeneous process, rather than as the product of a single linear origin. The “mixed multitude” theory underscores the convergence of diverse populations—Canaanites, Ḥabiru/Apiru, Ḥittites, Ḥurites, Amorites, wilderness tribes, Exodus communities, and even the Sea Peoples—whose cultural expressions and religious allegiances coalesced into what became a distinct Israelite identity. The biblical reference to the *‘erev rav* (Exod. 12:38, E) provides a theological echo of this social plurality, suggesting that the Israelite collective memory preserved an awareness of its composite foundations. In parallel, Knohl’s hypothesis concerning the Jacob-El clan locates an important mediating group in Seir-Edom, who, through their proximity to Kenite-Midianite traditions, transmitted the worship of YHWH into emerging Israelite culture¹⁸⁷. The poetic rendering of YHWH’s chosen portion in Deuteronomy 32:9–10 further situates this clan within a formative theological framework. Egyptian toponymic records of Shasu groups in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age lend historical plausibility to these traditions, linking them to broader geopolitical currents. Taken together, these trajectories reveal a gradual process of cultural amalgamation, nomadic integration, and theological innovation, culminating in a radical new ethnicity whose distinctive Yahwistic devotion marked the birth of biblical Israel.

¹⁸⁷ Israel Knohl, “Jacob-el in the Land of Esau and the Roots of Biblical Religion,” *Vetus Testamentum* 67, no. 3 (2017): 481–84.

10. Intertextual Comparative Sources

Introduction

In order to investigate the landscape of the genesis of YHWH's cultic settings, the biblical text provides valuable insight into YHWH's presence across a variety of scenarios. This textual evidence is particularly relevant to this study, as it illuminates YHWH's connection to the strategic placement of Jael's tent, the dynamics of the Israelite-Canaanite battlefield, and, ultimately, the symbolic defeat of El, the deity who contests YHWH's supremacy.

As the reader traces YHWH's presence throughout the narrative, the Scriptures present several pivotal encounters. These encounters not only establish YHWH's authority and involvement in the unfolding events but also situate YHWH at the center of Israel's theological and military victories, emphasizing His role as both divine warrior and sovereign over history.

When Moses meets the deity at the burning bush and asks for the name, God tells Moses a new name, different from the one that was introduced to the patriarchs (Exodus 3:13-14, E).

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה אֲנִי בָא אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מִה־שְּׁמוֹ
מָה אֶמַּר אֲלֵהֶם:

Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers’ [house] has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is [God’s] name?’ what shall I say to them?”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,” continuing, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’”

During the negotiations with the Israelites, who don't want to hear Moses' predicaments, because their spirits were crushed with cruel bondage (Exodus 6:9, P), Moses reminds them who will save them (Exodus 6:2-3, P).

וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה:

God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am יהוה."

וְאֵלֶּיךָ אֶבְרָתָם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וְשֵׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם:

I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name יהוה.

Dubious¹⁸⁸ is this response to Moses. The name El Shaddai does appear in several reports of the ancestors in Genesis. God uses it when speaking with Abraham (17:1, P) and Jacob (35:11, P). Isaac (28:3, P) and Jacob (43:14, E, 48:3, P) enunciate it when blessing their sons. Remarkably, the name YHWH also appears in the ancestral narratives, it was not a secret revealed in Exodus exclusively to Moses. Genesis discloses this name several times. In the cohort of Enosh, the Torah claims (4:26, R), the people began to call the name of YHWH.

וַלְשֵׁת גַּם־הוּא יִלְד־בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אֶנֶשׁ אַזְ הוּשֵׁל לִקְרֹא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה:

And to Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that יהוה began to be invoked by name.

¹⁸⁸ Rashbam (1085-1158) and R. Joseph Bechor Shor (12th cent.) also believe that God is telling Moses that God revealed both names to the patriarchs, but they go about reading the verse in a very different manner. They suggest re-punctuating the verse by putting the comma after YHWH. The verse would then read: *Elohim* spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai* and by my name YHWH, (*but*) I did not make Myself known to them. "According to this reading, God tells Moses that God appeared to the Patriarchs as *El Shaddai* and YHWH. This solves the contradiction, but how is the reader to understand the final clause? Rashbam and Bechor Shor suggest that it means that even though God revealed God's names, God never fulfilled the promises; "revealed" means "fulfilled" in this reading. What God tells Moses here is that this time it will be different, Moses will not only hear God's names and God's promises but will see their fulfillment as well. (See ,מקראות גדולות הכתר, www.mgketer.org).

The patriarchs, matriarchs and those who surrounded them also revealed the name YHWH:

וַיֵּצֵאֵם מִשָּׁם הָהָרָה מִקֶּדֶם לְבֵית-אֵל וַיֵּט אֹהֶלָה בְּיַת-אֵל מִיַּם וְהָעֵי מִקֶּדֶם וַיְבָרֶךְ־שָׁם מִזְבֶּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה:

From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to יהוה and invoked יהוה by name. (Genesis 12:8, J)

Abraham, who is coming from Ur, the Mesopotamic North-Eastern land, first builds a place of worship in the mountain, in Beth El, North of his self-allocated territory in the wilderness, and later in the South, the Negev, and worships YHWH. The locations of Beth El in the North, the topography of the mountain, the lodging of a tent and the name YHWH synthesize several elements that will be repeated in other stories such as Judges 4 and 5.

The use of the divine name YHWH within the patriarchal narratives presents a notable textual and theological tension. In Genesis, Abraham repeatedly invokes the name of YHWH (Gen. 12:8, J; 13:4, J; 21:33, E), as does Isaac (Gen. 26:25, J; 27:7, J). Similarly, in the Jacob cycle, YHWH both self-identifies (Gen. 28:13, J) and is explicitly acknowledged by Jacob (Gen. 28:16, J; 28:2, E; 32:10, J; 49:18, J). Moreover, the divine name is not restricted to the patriarchs themselves but is employed by other figures, including Sarah (Gen. 16:5, J), Leah (Gen. 29:32–33, 35, J), Rachel (Gen. 30:24, J), and even Laban (Gen. 30:27, J). The prevalence of the name YHWH across these accounts stands in apparent contradiction to Exodus 6:3, P, where God declares that the patriarchs did not know the Self by the name YHWH, but rather as El Shaddai. This discrepancy raises critical questions concerning the compositional history of the Pentateuch, the theological intentions of its redactors, and the ways in which divine self-revelation was retrospectively inscribed into Israel's ancestral traditions.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Yet this widespread usage appears to stand in sharp contradiction to Exodus 6:3, where God declares that the patriarchs did not know Him by the name YHWH, but rather as El Shaddai. From a source-critical perspective, this tension has been explained by attributing the patriarchal references to YHWH primarily to the Yahwist (J) tradition, while the assertion of Exodus 6:3 reflects Priestly (P) theology, which emphasizes a progressive unfolding of divine revelation culminating in Moses. The coexistence of these traditions within the canonical text suggests a deliberate redactional strategy, one that preserves divergent theological viewpoints: on the one hand, YHWH as always known to the ancestors; on the other, YHWH as uniquely revealed in the Mosaic covenant. This contradiction thus illuminates both the composite nature of the Pentateuch and the theological negotiations underlying its final form.

Name, identity, and Credentials: Exodus 3:12-E

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה־לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֶךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה:

And [God] said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.”

Ki ehyeh imach, resonates with the name of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, the noun-verb auto description of the deity in charge of salvation from oppression. This particular choice of a name builds up the relationship with the leader, Moses, and its followers.

The centrality of the “mountain” is the point of reunion, not just with Moses but with all the Israelites rescued from the Egyptian servitude. The mountain creates a Theocentric presence for a future covenantal agreement.

According to this verse, YHWH can be found in the wilderness, as well as on the top of the mountain¹⁹⁰.

Aside from the Exodus from Egypt and the theophany of Mount Sinai, other Biblical texts connect YHWH and the Israelites through the mountain location. One of the examples refers to Ahab, king of Israel, and Ben Hadad, king of Aram. After a battle won by Ahab for Israel’s kingdom, the servants of Ben-Hadad told their king about the Israelites: “Their gods are gods of the mountains אלהי הרים therefore they were stronger than we are...” (1 Kings 20:23).

The text continues exalting the force of the “god of the mountains”:

יָגֵשׁ אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה יָעַן אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ אַרְבַּם אֱלֹהֵי הָרִים יְהוָה וְלֹא־אֱלֹהֵי עֲמָקִים
הָיָא וְנִתְתִּי אֶת־כָּל־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה בְּיָדְךָ וַיִּדְעָתָם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה:

¹⁹⁰ The evidence of the adaptation of the Mesopotamian-Canaanite concept of the relationship between god and mountain by the followers of YHWH can be found in the Demotic Aramaic Papyrus Amherst 63. In column 12, in verses 11–19, there is a request to God for help from Zaphon (v. 13). The term ‘Zaphon’ does not mean the mountain near Ugarit (Gebel al-Aqra’), the seat of the god Baal, but a mountain of gods par excellence, a mountain associated with God and sanctified by his presence. Richard C. Steiner, "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 309–27; Karel van der Toorn, "Psalm 20 in the Light of Deutero-Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 2 (2002): 244–59.

Then the agent of God approached and spoke to the king of Israel, “Thus said GOD: Because the Arameans have said, ‘GOD is a God of mountains—but not a God of lowlands,’ I will deliver that great host into your hands; and you shall know that I am GOD.” (I Kings 20:28)

The combination of gods of the mountains and the delivery of the enemy into “the hands” reminds us of Deborah and Jael’s narrative. Deborah’s location on top of *Har (mountain) Tabor*, and the Israelites going up to the mountain to seek guidance at the top is a reminder that the tribes ascended to this location. The delivery of the great host, as in this verse on I Kings 20:28, to the hands pictures the reminiscent quote from Deborah to Barak, that YHWH will deliver the enemy to the hands of a woman.

Intertextual Comparative Sources.

There are four biblical passages that provide insight into the localization of YHWH’s emerging appearance as well as the ambulatory nature of the deity’s presence. In what follows, I will present and analyze these texts in the sequence in which they appear within the canon.

1. Deuteronomy 33:2 (Dtr1)

The conclusion of Moses’ speeches throughout this hymns and tribal blessing begins with the statement of the theophany of YHWH, presenting the deity’s origin of an area without a precise location.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה מְסִינִי בָּא וְנִרְחַח מִשְׁעִיר לְמוֹ הוֹפִיעַ מִתָּר פָּאֲרָן וְאַתָּה מִרְבֶּבֶת קָדֵשׁ מִיַּמִּינֹו (אשדת) [אש דת] לְמוֹ:

He said:

יהוה came from Sinai,

And shone upon them from Seir;

[God] appeared from Mount Paran,

The accurate sites of these dwellings are difficult to identify. It is not known whether Sinai is situated in the South of the Sinai Peninsula, or in the Southeast or Southwest of the Gulf of Aqaba.¹⁹¹ Seir is the name of a mountainous territory Southeast of this peninsula¹⁹². The third place mentioned in the text is Mount Paran which location is also unknown. It can therefore be assumed that the names given in Deut 33:2 –Sinai, Seir and Paran – do not determine precise places where YHWH appeared but indicate an ample territory with which YHWH's theophany was associated.

In Deut. 33:29 YHWH, depicted in the canticle as coming from Sinai to benefit Israel, is subsequently the establishment of Israel's preeminence over other nations and its distinctiveness:

אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי כָמוֹךָ עַם נוֹשָׁע בְּיַהֲזֵה מִגֵּן עֶזְרֶךָ וְאֲשֶׁר־תִּקְרַב גְּאוֹנֶיךָ וְיִכָּחֲשׁוּ אִיְיָ לְךָ וְאַתָּה עַל־בְּמוֹתֵינוּ
תִּדְרֹךְ: {ס}

O happy Israel! Who is like you,
A people delivered by יהוה,
Your protecting Shield, your Sword triumphant!
Your enemies shall come cringing before you,
And you shall tread on their backs.

2. Judges 5:4

YHWH's involvement in this verse depicts not only the deity's starting point in Se'ir but also YHWH's mighty trudge, and the authoritative commanding and controlling dominance in nature. The question to be asked is, what's the relationship between these topographic areas and the YHWH's origin. Maybe this is the place in which YHWH dwells and leaves for a journey to accompany a group of nomadic groups.

The location of Se'ir and Edom, in the Southern eastern area of the Negev wilderness, also associated with the Northern western area of the Saudi peninsula are demarcated by a volcanic

¹⁹¹ James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115–48.

¹⁹²21 קנוהל, ישראל, מן המעיין אל ההר, הוצאת כרמל, עמוד

region¹⁹³, that emphatically might justify the shuddering of the earth, the quaking produced by geological phenomena, and as a consequence of all these environmental occurrences, YHWH advances with a strong and powerful hand. The chariots of Sisera, according to Judges 4:15, were destroyed by these ecological seeing as theophanic manifestations.¹⁹⁴

יְהוָה בָּצָאתָּ מִשֵּׁעִיר בְּצַעֲדָךְ מִשְׁגֵּה אֲדוֹם אֶרֶץ רָעָשָׁה גַם־שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַּם־עָבִים נָטְפוּ מַיִם:

O GOD, when You came forth from Seir,
Advanced from the country of Edom,
The earth trembled;
The heavens dripped,
Yea, the clouds dripped water.

Volcanism was regarded both a theophany and a mode of divine action, through the release of hot gases, ash, pyro clasts, and flowing lava from the crater. Eruptions and storms, lava and floods are manifestations of YHWH events.

Other examples of YHWH's manifestation through natural involvements are mentioned in the book of Psalms.

In Psalm 18:12-15, the eruption is even followed by a violent storm

He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
Dark water; thick clouds.
Out of the brightness before him
His thick clouds passed, hailstones and coals of fire.
YHWH thundered in the heavens,
The Most High uttered his voice,
Hailstones and coals of fire.
And he sent out his arrows and scattered them.

¹⁹³ Jacob E. Dunn, "A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 4 (2014): 387–424.

¹⁹⁴ Nissim Amzallag, "Some Implications of the Volcanic Theophany of YHWH on His Primeval Identity," *Antiguo Oriente* 12 (2014): 11–38.

He flashed forth lightning and routed them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
At your rebuke, O YHWH,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils

YHWH's portents are also shown in Isaiah 40 where a substantial

volcanic incident is anticipated to change the scenery and to unwrap YHWH and his overpowering dominances on the earth¹⁹⁵: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And יהוה כבוד-KAVOD-YHWH shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of YHWH has spoken" (Isaiah 40:4–5).

These paradigms, reminiscent of the theophany on Exodus 19-E/J, where YHWH's manifestation at the giving of the Decalogue are conveyed and solidify YHWH's authoritative control over nature. The examples add the dawn and location(s) of YHWH as the deity filled with supremacy.

Judges 5:4 merges YHWH's location and dominance. This verse reinforces YHWH's precise location on the mountain, in Sinai, and truthful covenantal relationship as the God of Israel.

הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה זֶה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

The mountains quaked because of GOD,
Yon¹⁹⁶ Sinai¹⁹⁷, because of GOD—the God of Israel.

Sinai is either the default dwelling and the place of YHWH's manifestation (Deuteronomy 33:2, D) or it is the mountain celebrated because of YHWH's façade (Judges 5:5; Psalm 68). The

¹⁹⁵ Nissim Amzallag, "The Material Nature of the Divine Radiance and Its Theological Implications," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 29, no. 1 (2015): 80–96.

¹⁹⁶ Robert D. Holmstedt, "Analyzing הָרִים Grammar and Reading הָרִים Texts of Psalm 68:9 and Judges 5:5," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 14 (2014): 2–27.

¹⁹⁷ Considering the findings in other Semitic languages, it is possible that we should explain "זֶה סִינַי" *zeh Sinai*, as a structure that describes YHWH's advent, i.e., YHWH from Sinai.

majestic appearance denoted in these Biblical poems preserved the memory of God's revelation through a fanfare exposure.

The word נזלו, *nazlu*, from its root נ.ז.ל-fluid, hints the volcanic eruption of YHWH's through the mountains.

Linking Se'ir, Edom and Sinai are crucial to the understanding of YHWH dawn and topographical setting. Sinai is located, according to the poetical texts in the area of the Edom and Se'ir, Southeast region of the Negev, where the Midianite-Kenites resided and not in the Sinai Peninsula (according to the prose texts identify Sinai's Mountain in the area of the Sinai Peninsula.)¹⁹⁸

3. Habakkuk 3:3¹⁹⁹

The description of YHWH coming from the South is reiterated in the words of the prophet Habakkuk.

אֱלֹהִים מִתִּימָן יָבוֹא וְקִדְוֹשׁ מִהַר־פָּאָרָן סֵלָה כִּסֵּה שְׁמַיִם הוֹדוּ וַתִּהְלֹתוּ מִלְּאָה הָאָרֶץ:

God is coming from Teman,

The Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah.

¹⁹⁸ Kevin Mattison, "Anchored in the Authority of Sinai," TheTorah.com, 2023, updated 2025, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/anchored-in-the-authority-of-sinai>.

¹⁹⁹ The prophet Habakkuk lived and operated at the end of the seventh century BCE which is the epoch of the composition of this hymn. Its material also contains archaic motifs and traditions. The ancient material has been researched extensively in recent years. Some scholars point to its affinity to the Babylonian creation epic. There is an affinity between Hab. 3:5–18 and the Ugaritic literature regarding content and ideas, style and vocabulary, that Canaan and Babylonia both left their imprint on this psalm. Much has been written about this canticle belonging to the rest of the composition of the entire prophetic book or an addition to it, a piece that was joined later to the other two previous chapters. Modern interpreters question whether Habakkuk 3 should be part of the book of Habakkuk because of its separate superscription, its distinct style, and the fact that the Qumran Pesher (commentary) on Habakkuk includes only Habakkuk 1–2 and not Habakkuk 3. See Nili Shupak, "The God from Teman and the Egyptian Sun God: A Reconstruction of Habakkuk 3:3–7," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 18 (2011): 97–116. Yitzhak Avishur, *Studies in Hebrew and Ugaritic Psalms* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 111–205.

God's majesty covers the skies,
Such splendor fills the earth:

The foundational of Habakkuk's theophany (vv. 3-7) portrays YHWH in the third person, resembling to antagonize the hostile enemy:

"Teman" indicates the regions south of the territory of Israel that leads to the Arabian Peninsula, and the comparable expression, Mt. Paran, is a region recognized with the voyage of the people through the Sinai wilderness in Numbers 10:12, P. Paran also appears as a parallel term with Mount Seir and Mount Sinai in Deuteronomy 33:2, D.

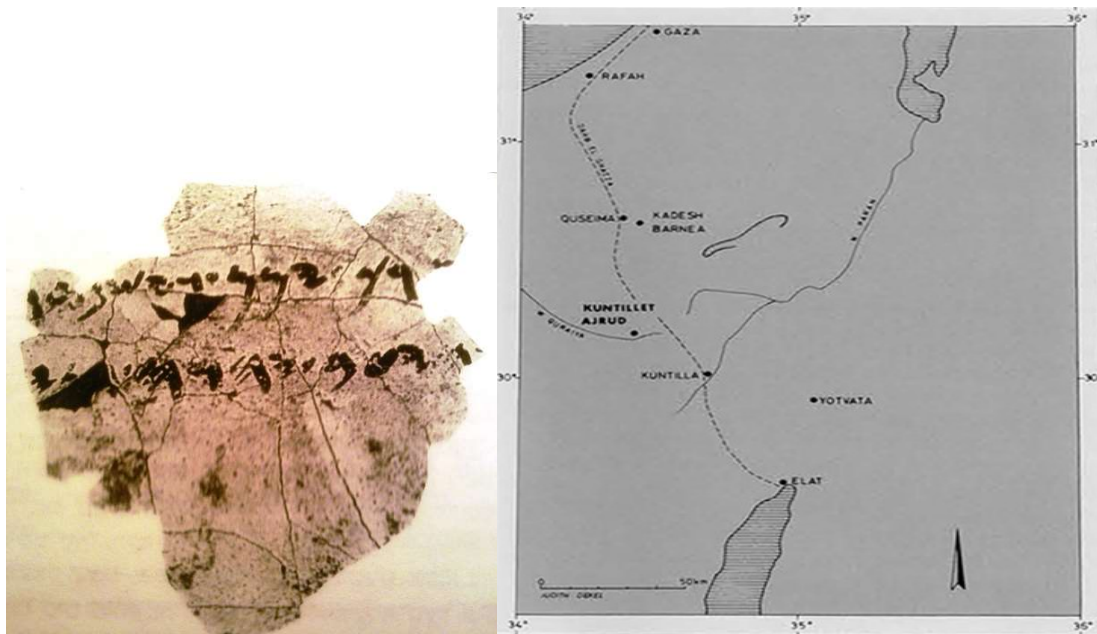
The verse in Habakkuk and the verse in Deuteronomy both state that YHWH comes from a mountain south of Israel.

As in the biblical episodes related to the theophany, the phrase *YHWH Tmn* (YHWH arriving from Teman) should also be understood here as a reference to God's arrival and not a local deity, that means that YHWH travels with the people on a dynamic basis, constating moving. The Israelites are nomadic, and YHWH accompanies them instead of settling in one specific place. The YHWH that manifests God-self in the desert ambulates with the people.

The people, escorted by a travelling God is depicted in the Kuntillet Ajrud²⁰⁰. This place is not only the location of a site, connecting an important crossroads to Eilat and southern Sinai, this is a nature-rich area where seashells from the coast of both the Mediterranean and Red Sea can be found indicating the origin or destination of the traffic that passed through it; numerous objects of cedar and sycamore wood from the North, and Hinkuk Pistacia, the latter growing only in the mountains of southern Sinai, were also found in the excavations. Nevertheless, Kuntillet 'Ajrud cannot be considered a usual wayside fortress like those in the Negev highlands, nor even an ordinary caravan path, although undoubtedly it furnished some amenities to the weary travelers who rested at the foot of the hill. Above and beyond any secular purpose, such as commerce and trading, it undoubtedly had a religious function. The references to the Almighty in the wall

²⁰⁰ Ze'ev Meshel, "Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Expedition Magazine* 20, no. 4 (1978), <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/kuntillet-ajrud/>.

inscriptions, the various deities depicted on the jars and the stone vessels brought to the site as offerings are all evidence of this role.



Kuntillat Ajrud²⁰¹ inscription, Pithos B, Meshel 3.6 “hwh tmn- hweh of Teman

4. Psalm 68²⁰²

²⁰¹ According to Tebes, Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is the site that has attracted most of the attention. It was probably established by the northern kingdom of Israel or by Judaeans as subservient of their northern neighbors, given the mixture of Israelite and Judaeon cultural traits (pottery, script) found at the site (Meshel 2012). Established between the late ninth and the mid-eighth centuries BCE on a hill 15 km from the Darb Ghazza, the road connecting the Gulf of Aqaba with Gaza, its function is still debated, as it has been identified as a fort, caravanserai, or cultic center. It is significant that Kuntillet ‘Ajrud was visited by people who carried out highly hybridized cultic practices, leaving inscriptions on pottery, stone bowls, and plaster walls with dedications and blessings in Hebrew to their preferred deities, including Yahweh, but also other Canaanite or Phoenician gods like El, Baal, and probably Asherah. Some of these texts may have even been inscribed in Phoenician script and/or language by either Phoenicians or Israelites. Most famously, inscriptions on two large storage jars mention “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah” (Pithos A) and “Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah” (Pithos B) (Ahituv, Eshel, and Meshel 2012, Inscriptions. 3.1, 87–91, 3.6, 95–7, 3.9, 98–101). See Juan Manuel Tebes, “Investigating the Painted Pottery Traditions of the First Millennium BC Northwestern Arabia and Southern Levant: Contexts of Discovery and Painted Decorative Motives,” *ARAM* 27, no. 2 (2015): 255–82.

²⁰² Psalm 68 contains several unique words and expressions, e.g. words בערבות רכב in v. 5 as a parallel to the Ugaritic title of Baal ערפת רכב—the rider of the clouds, reiterated in v.34 the description of God in v. 34: “O rider in the heavens, the ancient heavens; listen, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.” These words should be compared to the description of Baal in the opening of Amarna Letter 147 , lines (1-8) the king, my lord, my god, my Sun:

The similarities between Psalm 68 and Judges 5 are astonishing. Both are lyric compositions; both describe a personal connection with God without mentioning the Covenant of Sinai. The text highlights on verse 5 a call to bless God and the petition to the foreign kings flinging to God which links to a parallelism with the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:3).

In addition to God's original location, this Psalm portrays YHWH's powerful actions in nature and as a warrior. On verse 8 the relationship to this God becomes intimate, it is addressed on a 2nd singular manner, facing God's people.

אֱלֹהִים בָּצָאתָ לִפְנֵי עַמְּךָ בְּצַעְדֶּךָ בִּישִׁמּוֹן סֵלָה: ²⁰³

אֲרִיז רָעִישָׁה אֶת־שָׁמַיִם נִטְפָּו מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

O God, when You went at the head of Your army,
when You marched through the desert, *selah*

the earth trembled, the sky rained because of God,
yon Sinai, because of God, the God of Israel

Message of Abi-Milku, your servant. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 times and 7 times. I am the dirt under the sandals (and "shoes") of the king, my lord. My lord is the Sun who comes forth over all lands day by day,¹ according to the way (of being) of the Sun, his gracious father.(9-15) who gives life by his sweet breath and returns with his north wind; who establishes the entire land in peace, by the power of his arm: (gl-~) *ha-ap-ši*; who gives forth his cry in the sky like Baal and all the land is frightened⁴ at his cry. See William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

²⁰³ In the LXX version, יהוה instead of אֱלֹהִים. Ps 68 is part of the "Elohistic Collection" or "Elohistic Psalter" (Ps. 42–68). The name אֱלֹהִים is the dominant divine name used in this collection. Only rarely do the names יהוה or יה appear within this collection. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 228.

The role of women in this psalm, verse 12, is similar to Judges 4 and 5, i.e., females are the ones who convey the news of the battlefield, and they are the ones who act as great hospitality.

אֲדֹנָי יְתֹן-אֶמֶר הַמְבֹשְׂרוֹת צָבָא רַב:

The Lord gives a command;
the women who bring the news are a great host.

The terminology used for the spoil is the same as in Judges 5, nevertheless while on Judges 5:30, Sisera's mother speaks about יחלקו שלל -*Yehalku Shalal*, the division of the spoil, on psalm 68:13 the housewives, victorious through God's battles are the heralding women who divide the spoil. Women are not seen as looted from the battlefield, they are not the trophy of the war to be possessed by men as Sisera's mother suggests, but rather these women are the ones who will enjoy booty.

מַלְכֵי צָבָאוֹת יִדְּדוּן וְיִדְּדוּן וְנָתַתְּ-בָּיִת תַּחֲלֵק שָׁלָל:

“The kings and their armies are in headlong flight;
housewives are sharing in the spoils.”

The call of Deborah on Judges 5:3, is a call of inclusion to other kings²⁰⁴ which appears in Psalm 68:33, as an invitation to all kingdoms of earth to assent and announce His sovereignty.

מִמְּלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ שִׁירוּ לֵאלֹהִים וּמָרוּ אֲדֹנָי כְּלָה:

O kingdoms of the earth,
sing to God;
chant hymns to the Lord, *selah*

Another parallel to the chapters of Deborah is on verse 18. The chariots described in Judges 4 portraying the military strengths and dominion of Sisera are mentioned in this psalm as God's assets and powerful domain. The linear voyage of God develops from a departing point, from

²⁰⁴ Judges 5:3 שמעו מלכים, Hear O Kings.

geographical starting location in Sinai²⁰⁵, bounding North, and ascending with God's protégé to Mount Bashan (verse 16). הר האלوهים *Har ha Elohim* is Mount Bashan, not Mount Sinai, is the northern part of the territory. God comes from the South, Sinai, the original place, and travels North²⁰⁶, to Bashan, the eternal residence.²⁰⁷

הַר־אֱלֹהִים הַר־בָּשָׁן הַר גְּבֻנִים הַר־בָּשָׁן:

Mountain of Elohim²⁰⁸, Mount Bashan;

O jagged mountain, Mount Bashan;

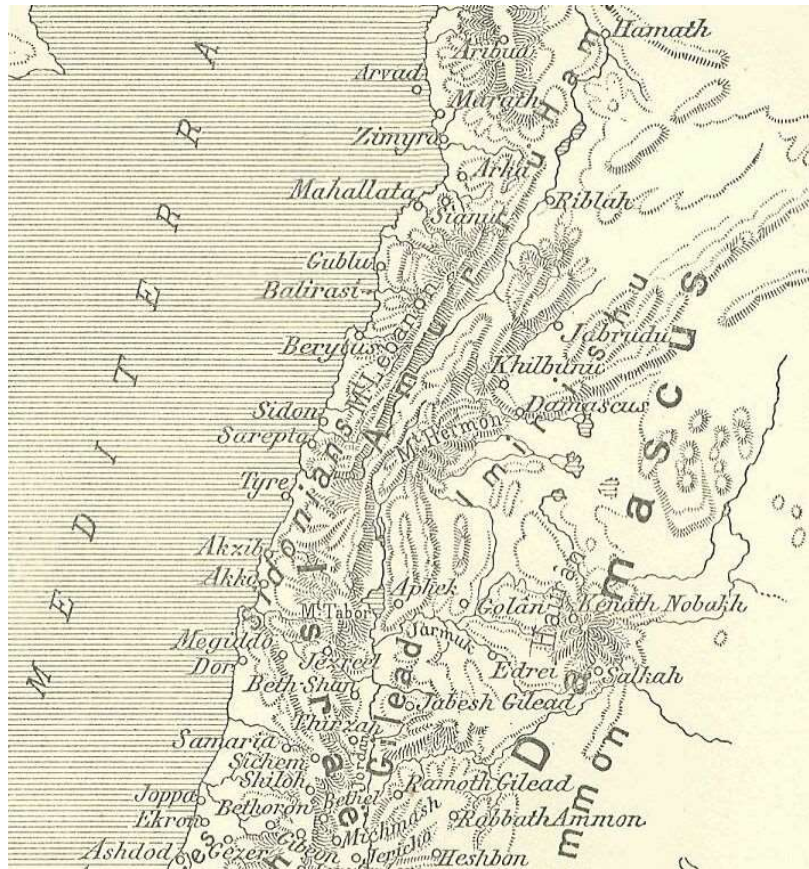
The Mountain of Elohim is also identified as a majestic mountain, which the text doesn't refer to any certain location except that it is adjacent to the name Bashan which allows the reader to stipulate a recognizable area.

²⁰⁵ Some scholars support the idea that it is possible to name God as "Sinai" in this psalm. It's a way of connecting the God of Israel and the Mesopotamian moon god, "Sin" or "Si-i-na." The god Sin was the chief god of the city of Haran, from where, according to the biblical tradition, the ancestors of the Israelite nation immigrated to Canaan. See Daniel O. McClellan, *YHWH's Divine Images: A Cognitive Approach* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022), 119.

²⁰⁶ Jael and Heber HaKeini also come from the South, separates from their tribal clan and ascend North.

²⁰⁷ The name "Bashan" emerges in the Amarna letters, 201 in the name of the city "Siri-Basani" This place was located in the region of Naveh, north of the Yarmuk River. Several biblical verses mention Mount Hermon as the northern border of the Bashan (Deuteronomy 3:1–10; 4:47–48; Josh. 12:4–5).

²⁰⁸ J. A. Emerton, "The 'Mountain of God' in Psalm 68:16," in *History and Traditions of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen*, ed. André Lemaire and Benedikt Otzen, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 50 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 24–37.



Mount Bashan, one of the many high peaks of Mount Hermon²⁰⁹

An examination of these four biblical sources reveals a consistent pattern in which YHWH is associated with specific geographical locations situated to the south of the land of Israel—namely Se‘ir, Sinai, Edom, Paran, Horeb, and Teman (often understood as the southern region corresponding to present-day northwestern Saudi Arabia). These sites function as the points of origin for YHWH’s manifestations, from which the deity is depicted as moving northward toward the territories of Bashan. Such portrayals emphasize a conception of YHWH as a mobile, even nomadic, deity whose presence is not fixed to a single cultic center but rather accompanies the people through the wilderness. This theological imagery resonates with the presentation of YHWH who may be encountered within the sacred space of the Tent of Meeting. The

²⁰⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, maintain that the battle described in the main section of psalm 68 took place in the area close to Mount Bashan, i.e., in the region of Mount Hermon. The high mountain areas allow a panoptic and strategic views as a deliberate advantage for war. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 168.

convergence of geographical, cultic, and theological traditions thus underscores the dynamic and ambulatory character of YHWH's presence, situating the deity's early worship within a broader landscape of movement, wilderness experience, and sacred encounter.

11. Reception History²¹⁰

Throughout the centuries, and across diverse historical, cultural, and theological contexts, the texts of Judges chapters 4 and 5 have been subjected to scrutiny and interpreted through a wide range of hermeneutical lenses. From ancient Jewish exegesis to medieval allegory, from historical-critical approaches to contemporary feminist and postcolonial readings, these narratives have evoked a remarkable multiplicity of perspectives. This chapter explores the rich reception history of these two chapters, tracing the evolving interpretations and the ways in which readers and communities have understood, appropriated, and reimagined the stories of Deborah, Barak, and Jael considering their own questions, concerns, and cultural horizons.

The tapestry woven between the Biblical Scriptures, archeological sites, Talmudic and Midrashic approaches, medieval commentators and modern interpretations have enriched the subjects of places, times, spatial domains (see appendix), army generals²¹¹, women's participation, and YHWH's involvement.

²¹⁰ Although I'm aware of Christian and Muslim interpretation of reception history in this topic, I will concentrate on the Jewish tradition.

²¹¹ From the geopolitical and historical background, the figure of Jabin king of Canaan and his settlement in Hazor should add an interesting foundation to this thesis. Who is Jabin? Is he the archenemy of the Israelites, i.e., the northern tribes? Does he represent the totality of Canaanites or a portion of this civilization as the king of Hazor? Tel Hazor is the largest archaeological site in Israel at 200 acres in size. Hazor was the largest and most important site in Canaan at the time the Israelites entered the land. For comparison, according to archeologist Amnon Ben Tor, Hazor was ten times the size of Jebus (Jerusalem) with a population of 15000-20000 people. It "was the head of all those kingdoms" in Canaan (Joshua 11:10) and is mentioned in both the Mari Texts (18th century B.C.) and the Amarna Letters (14th century B.C.) in addition to the Bible. Biblical reports mention Jabin king of Hazor: "Jabin, King of Hazor" is named in the conquest account in the book of Joshua (Joshua 11:1). We read of "Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor" almost 150 years later in the time of the Judges (Judges 4:2). If we consider the biblical text as a linear reading where the book of Judges is a chronological continuation of the book of Joshua, this approach will cause some readers to wonder if the two accounts are describing the same event, or if the Bible is simply mistaken in describing a king living for so long. When historical and geopolitical revisionism motivate the audience to research original events, archeological facts help us to discover the many possibilities of accurate events. A tablet was discovered in the excavations at Hazor in 1992 addressed to Jabin, the King of Hazor, which dates to the 17th-18th centuries B.C. Another tablet from the Mari Texts (18th century B.C.) had previously been discovered naming "Yabni-Adad" (Jabin-Adad) as the king of Hazor. When one adds to these archaeological discoveries the biblical references above, it becomes clear that the name Jabin was applied to the kings of Hazor over a period of almost 400 years. It is likely that this was a dynastic title, not a given name; "Jabin, King of Hazor" similar to the use of "Pharaoh, king of Egypt" (Ex. 6:11). Yigal Yadin explains, "Scholars have suggested that the form of the name of the king of Hazor mentioned in the Bible—Jabin, is indeed short for the full theophoric

Participants' Development

The women in the story

- **Deborah and Jael**

While Israelite successes are ascribed to YHWH's intervention (Judg. 4:23), the unanticipated agency of women—Deborah as a prophet-judge and Jael as an executor—destabilizes traditional patriarchal structures. Through history and multiple interpretations, different lenses have evaluated these women's participation and their behavior.

The Talmud (Nazir 23b) praises Jael's act as an executor in the killing of the enemy but disputes her moral purity, ascribing to her the attribute of a seductive woman.

Deborah, on the other hand, is sustained as a model of wisdom and leadership, focusing on her ability to congregate some tribes, despite Talmudic discussions (Megillah 14a) about whether women should hold judicial roles.

These female characters should be equated to other triumphant female figures such as **Judith**, whose apocryphal narrative echoes Jael's in striking ways: a courageous woman defeats an oppressive military general through a mixture of cunning, hospitality, and decisive violence. Like Deborah and Jael, Judith is associated with a Northern Israelite heroine, seen in her a continuation of the valorization of women as agents of Israel's deliverance. TB Sotah 11b already draws this connection by listing victorious women whose acts parallel or amplify Jael's.

From the historical and historiographical point of view Josephus in *Antiquities* 5.5.4, downplays Deborah's role as a judge, depicting her more as a prophetess than an authoritative leader, as well as a symbolic rational soul guiding the nation in times of peril. Josephus also highlights Jael's guileful act, recognizing her wisdom's triumph of passion, removing some of the violent

formula. If this is true, then Jabin may have been a royal dynastic name of the kings of Hazor for quite a time." See Yigael Yadin, *Hazor: The Rediscovery of a Great Citadel of the Bible* (New York: Random House, 1975), 250.

imagery of Judges 5. Josephus downplays the shocking nature of Jael's violence and frames it as a righteous deed. He stresses YHWH's providence working through Deborah's prophecy and Jael action.

Medieval commentators such as Rashi (1040–1105) highlights Deborah's wisdom but avoids portraying her as an authoritative judge, aligning with Talmudic concerns about female leadership. Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) argues that Deborah's authority was primarily prophetic rather than judicial, and praises Jael who acted with wisdom and cunning when she went out to meet Sisera.

In the modern era, different attitudes have emerged, analyzing these characters from distinctive perspectives. Tikva Frymer-Kensky²¹² sees Jael's action as a deliberate inversion of militaristic heroism, where violence is typically male-dominated, Jael's act reframes power as something that can emerge from the sidelines, the anonymous marginalized woman, vulnerable in a tent, crystalizes as the she-hero of the story.

David Gunn and Danna Fewell²¹³ argue that Judges 4–5 intentionally undermines the traditional notion of male warriors, demonstrating how divine victory comes through the unexpected, i.e., Jael's unconventional assassination.

As far as the traditional gender roles are concern, Phyllis Trible²¹⁴ emphasizes that both Deborah and Jael challenge these restraints acting beyond the unexpected tasks of women; Deborah as a judge and Jael as a perfect manipulator of a domestic tool such as a peg, subverting the expectations of a male-dominated warfare. The gender inversion is examined by Mieke Bal²¹⁵, presenting Deborah as a judge and Jael as a warrior, roles associated with men who controlled all the systems, the judiciary and the administrative. On the same note as Bal, Susan Niditch²¹⁶

²¹² Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 48.

²¹³ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 78.

²¹⁴ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 79–81.

²¹⁵ Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 222.

²¹⁶ Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113–17.

argues that Jael's victory deconstructs the traditional image of war heroes by portraying a woman rather than a male warrior as the extension of YHWH's hand, acting as the key agent in a theological triumph.

Cheryl Exum²¹⁷ explores how Judges 4–5 subverts patriarchal warrior ideals by making a woman the instrument of God's triumph, suggesting that the text intentionally mocks traditional militaristic masculinity.

Throughout the above-mentioned modern lenses, the Biblical text conveys the scenery of two women that subvert patriarchal norms conveying the message that the Divine deliverance is not bound the male leadership.

The Men in the Story

Barak²¹⁸

Judges 4 introduces Barak as the Israelite general, beckoned by the female Judge, Deborah. His task is not simple, and his Biblical hesitation and pusillanimous reaction will be a topic of consideration as far as his figure is concerned throughout postbiblical contemplations. Barak insistence on Deborah's authoritative role shows weakness and will be perceived as a disadvantage in many Talmudic and Midrashic texts, as well as Medieval commentators and modern lenses.

Judges 5, the "Song of Deborah," reveals Barak in a courageous setting, emphasizing his role in reassembling the tribes and leading the control against Sisera. Barak appears stronger and more determined in the Song, sang by Deborah and by himself.

²¹⁷ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, 2nd ed., T&T Clark Cornerstones (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 1–3.

²¹⁸ For a perspective in the New Testament, see Hebrews 11:32–34 “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.”

Talmud Bavli, Sotah 11a discusses Barak's partnership with Deborah but suggests his reluctance reflects a lack of full faith, criticizing his unwillingness in God's trust.

In the Midrash²¹⁹ he is perceived through different and sometimes opposite sentiments:

Midrash Tanchuma emphasizes Barak's reliance on Deborah as failing.

Pesikta Rabbati 26:6 approves him as a respectable leader, showing that rabbinic viewpoints embrace nuanced opinions of his individuality.

Medieval commentators differed in their interpretations. Rashi emphasizes his leadership and faith, but at the same time acknowledges his lack of full confidence under God's command. Ibn Ezra and Rabbi David Kimhi accentuate his compliance as a way of following God's commands.

In modern analyses²²⁰ Barak is seen as a cooperative leader and follower, a team player who recognizes female power, and instead of subjugating to it, he collaborates by working together with his partner, a woman. This is not seen as an emasculating process but as a reflection of gender dynamics.

Barak is sometimes studied in the context of leadership under prophetic guidance, proposing modules on controlled structure and confidence on Divine will.

Sisera

While the Biblical account presents Sisera as a powerful army commander of Jabin's legion, the text sees the downfall of this leader, defeated ultimately by a woman, contrasting the mockery

²¹⁹See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 4, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913). The author summarizes Midrashic traditions that critique Barak's reliance on Deborah.

²²⁰Trible argues that Barak exemplifies collaborative leadership, which contrasts with the more hierarchical leadership styles of later Judges. Frymer-Kensky supports this view. Brenner sees Barak as a true hero because he chooses to follow a woman's directive. See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002). Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, Feminist Companion to the Bible 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

added in Judges 5:28 where Sisera's mother enthusiastically anticipates the coming of her son, presumptuous he is collecting prizes, and looting captive women.²²¹

The Septuagint adds rhetorical embellishments to enhance Sisera's treachery.²²² For example, in the Masoretic Text Sisera simply asks Jael for water, she gives him milk, he tells her to guard the doorway; in the Septuagint the language is enhance: he "entreated", ἠξίωσεν, Jael more strongly, he says "if anyone comes and asks you saying, 'Is there any man here?', you shall say 'There is not'. The Greek phrasing makes Sisera's request sound explicitly deceitful. He did not ask politely, he emphasized a demanding tone.

The midrash²²³ and the Talmudic texts first enhance the manpower of Sisera in order to make his downfallen more traumatic.

The Babylonian Talmud on Megillah 16b utters that Sisera had a powerful voice that could shudder city walls.

Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs 1:6, proposes that Sisera was intensely brutal to women, deserving a cruel death by the hand of a woman.

Midrash Tanchuma on Beshalach 9 states that Sisera never lost a conflict before but was overpowered due to Divine intervention.

Medieval commentators²²⁴ have added to these villain image by suggesting that his arrogance, sense of superiority, thirst for bounty and booty, attraction to women and non-trust in a superior power was the perfect combination for his derogatory defeat.

Rashi focuses on Sisera's boastful arrogance in the Song of Deborah.

²²¹ Niditch examines Sisera's death in the context of biblical war narratives. See Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²²² Emanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

²²³ Jacob Neusner, *Pesikta Rabbati: A Synoptic Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati Based upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

²²⁴ Adele Berlin, "Deborah and the 'Warrior Women' Tradition," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 63–64.

Ibn Ezra reports Sisera's military force but underscores that his chariots were incompetent against Divine power.

Rabbi David Kimhi climaxes the paradox of his death at the hands of a woman²²⁵.

Modern commentators²²⁶ observe that Sisera's narrative illustrates a reversal of gender norms, where the "weaker" party triumphs, elucidating his attitude as a symbol of military overconfidence, warning concern on the consequences of this arrogant attitude.²²⁷

Conclusion

The rabbinic sages of the Babylonian Talmud regarded Deborah as one of seven prophetesses (the others are Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther [Megillah 14a]). Of these seven, only three are explicitly named *nebiah*-נביאָה, a prophetess. They are Miriam, Huldah, and Deborah.

The Song at the Sea and the Song of Deborah are now believed to be two of the oldest textual compositions in the Bible. Huldah makes a brief appearance in the II Kings (Chapter 22) when Josiah, the king of Judah, asks this prophetess for political counsel.

Deborah and Huldah are both viewed in a negative light in the Talmud, despite their prophetic status. Rabbi Nahman claims that both women bear "hateful" names as they exhibit haughty characters in their relationships with male leaders. Deborah's name²²⁸ means "bee" and Huldah's

²²⁵ For all three commentators see: Judges 5, in *Torat Chaim: Mikraot Gedolot* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1986–1993).

²²⁶ Athalya Brenner, "Introduction," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Feminist Companion to the Bible 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 1–12.

²²⁷ Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, trans. Jonathan Chipman, Biblical Interpretation Series 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

²²⁸ An exception is mentioned in TB Makkot 11a when the Amoraim discuss the meaning of the root d.b.r-דבר: למימרא דכל דיבור לשון קשה? אין, כדכתיב: "דבר האיש אלני הארץ אתנו קשות". והתנא: "נדבריו", אין "נדבריו" אלא לשון נחת, וכן הוא אומר "ידבר עמים תחתינו"! "דבר" לחוד, "נדבר" לחוד.

The Gemara asks: **Is that to say that all instances of speaking [dibbur] indicate harsh language?** The Gemara answers: **Yes, as it is written** with regard to Joseph's brothers: **"The man, the lord of the land, spoke [dibber] harshly to us"** (Genesis 42:30). The Gemara asks: **But isn't it taught** in a *baraita* with regard to the verse: "Then they who feared the Lord spoke [nidberu] with one another" (Malachi 3:16), that the term **"they spoke" is nothing other than a term of gentleness, and likewise**, the same is true of the verse which states: **"He subdues [yadber] peoples under us"** (Psalms 47:4), meaning that God will calmly and gently conduct the nations under the influence

“badger” (Megillah 14b). According to this commentary, Huldah was a close relative of the prophet Jeremiah and was called to Josiah only because of Jeremiah’s absence, and she appears to the rabbis to be too eager to take her kinsman’s place. Deborah’s hypothetical arrogance is exhibited in the narrative of Judges by her call to Barak, “she sent and called to Barak” (Judges 4:6). In the Song, Deborah claims that Israel was downtrodden, “until I [Deborah] arose” another self-aggrandizing act which the rabbis claim caused Deborah to temporarily lose her prophetic charisma.²²⁹

Deborah’s playing a male role is a controversial characteristic in the Talmudic discourse. In traditional rabbinic law, a woman cannot give testimony in court, so she could not logically take the position of judge either. She is seen as a leader, a prophetess, and an advisor, but adjudicating to Deborah the status of judge presumably contradicts the explicit word of the Scripture. Nonetheless, one view is that Deborah was in fact not a judge at all, “but only taught the laws”²³⁰, basically, she was a teacher.

In the fourth century C.E. Saint John Chrysostom of Antioch interpreted Deborah as a prudent woman. In Chrysostom’s view, she exemplifies the power of the righteous and gives good counsel to her husband. As such she is a model for a Christian wife.²³¹

Unquestionably Deborah’s status as a prophetess and judge is unique in the Hebrew Bible²³², elevating her womanhood into a powerful role.²³³ In chapter 4 we found two dishonored men, both generals of enemy armies, both defeated by women, insecure, in the illustration of Barak,

of the Jewish people? The Gemara answers: The meaning of *dibber* is **discrete** and the meaning of *yadber* is **discrete**. There is a difference between the two conjugations of the same root.

²²⁹ Athalya Brenner, “Introduction,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Feminist Companion to the Bible 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 1–12.

²³⁰ BT, Niddah 50b.

²³¹ John R. Franke, ed., *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 114.

²³² Wolfgang Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch*, Bonner Biblische Beiträge 18 (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1963), 37.

²³³ Stanton points out Deborah’s multidimensional authority as well as the fact that her name is not on the list, as it should have been with Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. Additionally, she elucidates that men have always been slow to confer on women the honors which they deserve. While Stanton sees Deborah as heroic, by contrast to the Song of Deborah she finds Jael “revolting” and calls her actions “more like the work of a friend than a woman. See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (1895; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 18–20.

and fearful in Sisera's incident. The emphasis on the warrior codes of honor and shame decants in the women.

In the words of Cheryl Exum "not only Barak is dishonored by his reliance on Deborah, but the enemy commander won't fight either, once the odds are against him, so he runs away."²³⁴

Chapter 5 reminds us of the Song of Moses and then Miriam (Exodus 15, J), a poem of triumph and salvation, emphasizing the redemptive hymn, a genre strongly associated with biblical women, immersed in the divine presence. A transformative analysis that metamorphoses from Barak's shame (chapter 4) into Jael's praise (chapter 5).

As Frymer-Kensky points out, "neither the story nor the Song were framed as a record of Deborah's life. The biblical story is not a biography: it is a memory of Israel's defeat of Canaan, a defeat in which Deborah played an important role."²³⁵

The scriptural narrative and its surface reading demand a deeper interrogation of both the composition itself and its reception history. A critical, inquisitive approach is essential to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the text. Both Deborah and Jael act in ways that defy conventional portrayals of women in the Hebrew Bible: they dominate the narrative, astonish the reader through their decisive actions, and consistently center the Divine presence within the story.

Over the centuries, these female figures have elicited a wide range of interpretations, often oscillating between admiration and censure. This study aims to uncover how the literary structure of Judges 4 and 5, together with their intentional theological undertones, illuminate the significance of Deborah's and Jael's roles within the narrative. By analyzing their narratological function and theological resonance, readers can better appreciate the profound and often subversive contributions of these women to Israel's salvation history.

²³⁴ J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?" in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 65–90.

²³⁵ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 47.

The reception history of Judges chapters 4 and 5 demonstrates the enduring complexity and richness of these narratives across historical, cultural, and theological contexts. From ancient Jewish exegesis in the Talmud and Midrash, Greek translation, through medieval commentaries such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra, to modern feminist, literary, interpretations, the texts have been read as both reflections of divine providence and arenas participation of gender, leadership, and power. The women of the narrative—Deborah and Jael—consistently subvert patriarchal expectations, functioning as decisive agents of Israel’s deliverance, while the male figures—Barak and Sisera—illustrate contrasting models of leadership, courage, and vulnerability under divine authority. Rabbinic and modern readings alike highlight the theological centrality of YHWH, whose presence and agency are realized through these human actors, often in unexpected ways. These chapters reveal that the Scriptures preserve both the extraordinary achievements of women and the broader dynamics of Israel’s salvation history. The study of reception history not only illuminates interpretive diversity but also enriches our understanding of the complexity of narrative, gender, and their roles in the Scriptures.

12. By the Hand of a Woman-YHWH

In order to understand the core intention of this dissertation, some definitions are required. What the Israelites believed during pre-exilic times should be a topic of consideration when approaching Judges 4 and 5. Since these chapters are part of a cyclical group of episodes narrating the disengagement and re-engagement in the relationship with YHWH, I propose that a meta-message is both hidden and revealed in these chapters—a message that transcends the mere quarrel between the Israelites and the Canaanites. This transcendence elevates the text to a higher theological discussion.

When approaching an ancient text, the reader might inquire into the authenticity of the events, seek parallel synchronisms, search for archaeological remains, compare the text to similar texts from other contemporary cultures, read ancient manuscripts, associate the text with evolutionary aspects, or receive the text in its plain form and simply appreciate the version that has survived as written, without demanding further interpretation. Any of these approaches guide the reader toward different levels of engagement with the text and offer an opportunity to appreciate the story through multiple layers of understanding.

As an itinerant people, the Israelites carried the Divine presence in a portable and displaceable manner. As a pillar of fire by night or a cloud by day, the guidance of the deity accompanied a wandering people, sojourning through the desert and eventually relocating to the Promised Land. The centralization of the cult through the *Mishkan*, the tabernacle, was also marked by constant mobility—a necessary kinesis that allowed all to access it and feel included in times of worship.

A special place was designated for the encounter between the leader, Moses, and YHWH: the אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד - *Ohel Mo'ed*—the Tent of Meeting. This divine dwelling was neither exclusive to the Hebrews nor original to the Israelites. The intimacy of the tent has become an iconic paradigm for the God-human interaction. Second-millennium manuscripts from Ugarit offer “Canaanite”

parallels to the Israelite Tent of Meeting. As Umberto Cassuto²³⁶ has observed, the relationship between the Ugaritic tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting is intrinsically connected.

A new understanding of an obscure Ugaritic word describing El's dwelling, *dd*, "tent," invites us to consider the Ugaritic evidence for the tent as a dwelling place of deity and as a site for oracles and consultations. In the Hebrew Bible, the Tent of Meeting is both a model of YHWH's presence and a place of prediction and revelation. This similarity invites the reader to consider the possibility of cultural borrowing: that the Israelites may have adopted the concept of a tent as the locus of divine-human encounter from the Canaanites. In Ugaritic literature, the deity El resides in a tent at the source of the cosmic waters and, according to another text, the tent is located on a mountain.²³⁷

These traces of syncretism indicate that Israelite religion emerged within a cultural milieu dominated by Canaanite worship, alongside Edomite, Kenite, and Midianite beliefs, all of which evolved through their respective deities. The bridge between competing deities is reflected in Judges 4 and 5 through human characters on the battlefield, representing an earthly manifestation of a theological conflict.

As noted, both El and YHWH are depicted as tent-dwellers. Judges 4 and 5 further suggest that women, who dwell in vulnerable tent structures, can exemplify the dominance of a deity.

The Hebrew Bible does not hesitate to depict women in prominent roles in both the historical and historiographical narratives of the people of Israel. Wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, queens, harlots, prophetesses, counselors, and warriors—among many other female figures—occupy central places in the narratives of all three sections of the Bible. Female leadership is not uncommon in the text. The fact that women such as Deborah and Jael could excel during this pre-monarchic period was possibly due to YHWH's covenantal rule.

²³⁶ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 321–24.

²³⁷ "He went his way and betook himself to the well-spring of the Mala-River. He came to El-Kunirsha, the husband of Ashertu, and entered El-Kunirsha's tent." See Albrecht Goetze, trans., "Hittite Myths, Epics, and Legends," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 519.

Among the leaders featured in these narratives, the prose and song about Jael and Deborah in Judges 4 and 5 take center stage. Women are depicted as being in control.

Women like Jael illustrate the interaction between sacred and profane roles, showcasing how female actions can connect the divine and mortal realms. Jael bridges her seductive agency and the hand that represents YHWH. This interplay underscores the necessity of recognizing women's contributions to religious narratives and their implications for societal norms and gender roles.

In Judges 4 and 5, the hand of a woman and the hand of YHWH intermingle. The biblical motif of “the mighty hand and outstretched arm” of YHWH plays a notable role in the descriptions of the exodus and provides the foundation for the prominent emphasis on the hand and arm of YHWH throughout the Scriptures.

The “hand of God”, an anthropomorphic description of the deity, manifests both through ire, and through benevolence and compassion, always depicting power. A few examples that represent these situations are:

-
- כִּי־תָנוּס יַד־יְהוָה בְּהָר הַגָּד וְנָדוּשׁ מוֹאָב תַּחֲתֵי כְהָדוּשׁ מִתְּבֹן (בְּמִי) [בְּמִי] מִדְּמָנָה:
-

For GOD's hand shall descend

Upon this mount,

And Moab shall be trampled underfoot

As straw is threshed to bits at Madmenah.(Isaiah 25:10)

כִּי עָתֵדָה שְׁלַחְתִּי אֶת־יָדִי וְנָאֵף אוֹתָם וְאֶת־עַמָּם בַּדָּבָר וּתִכָּחֵד מִן־הָאָרֶץ:

I could have stretched forth My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth. (Exodus 4:15, E)

וַיִּתְּנֵנִי לִי הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־יָד־אֱלֹהֵי הַטּוֹבָה עָלַי:

The king gave me these, God's hand is benevolent for me. (Nehemiah 2:8b)

Thus, the hand of the deities is not an original description of YHWH. Counterparts between the Biblical depiction of the downfall of Egypt in Exodus 15, and a song of tribute written to Ramses II after his triumph in the Hittite war, the Battle of Kadesh, led to surprising conclusions.



Ostracon from the time of Ramesses III, Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, fig. 399

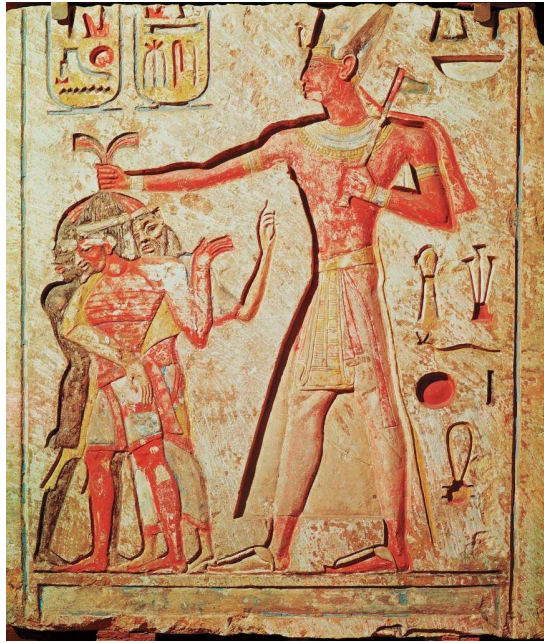
The Exodus and the opening of the Sea of Reeds stories (13:17–15:19, E-J-P-J) reveals solid resemblances with the Kadesh inscriptions of Ramesses II. One term in the Exodus account that seems to be rooted in New Kingdom royal lexicon is an expression designating YHWH's "strong" or "mighty hand." This incorporates the phrases יד חזקה, "mighty hand" (Exodus 3:19; 13:3, 14, 16; 32:11, J-E; Deuteronomy 3:14; 6:21; 9:26, D), and זרוע נטויה, "outstretched arm" (Exodus 6:6, P; Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 26:8, D).

The text also incorporates expressions found in the Song of the Sea narrative in Exodus 14–15: YHWH יד הגדלה, "great hand" (14:31), ימינך, "your right/powerful hand" (Exodus 15:6, 12), and בגדל זרועך, "with your great arm" (Exodus 15:16). Terminologies describing the conquering arm of Pharaoh first developing the Middle Kingdom (1700–1800 BCE), through the term ḥpš, which means "arm" or "power."

Both Exodus 14 and 15, J-E-P, and Judges 4 and 5 amalgam narratives and verses that mirror situations of triumph in Egypt, where YHWH on one hand, and the Pharaoh of the time on the other hand are praised for their victorious endeavors and physical power. The adulation of these rulers, YHWH and Pharaoh, is astonishingly similar according to their respective sources.

Philological characteristics associate the poem of exaltation to Ramses II after the Battle of Kadesh and the veneration of YHWH at the Song of the Sea. This association insinuates that the Biblical text was aware of the regal undertakings in ancient Egypt, and in Exodus 15 embraced

those words of acclamation to revere the triumph over the Egyptians and commend the God of Israel.



Relief of king Ramesses II smiting his enemies. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 46189



Tent of worship of Ramses II, Battle of Kadesh. Five figures bow to a tablet representing the divine Pharaoh. The tablet is flanked by two-winged protector gods, similar in concept to the cherubim. Five figures bow to a tablet representing the divine Pharaoh. Temple of Abu Simbel, Egypt. 1273 BCE.

The Israelites' liberation from Egypt, according to the Exodus recount attends a narrative of God's agency, in which YHWH's arm becomes the fundamental tool for its success. The concepts of *yad hazaka u'zroah netuyiah* -יד חזקה וזרוע נטויה, a might hand and an extended arm are visibly exposed throughout the Scriptures and known in other civilizations references to their almighty rulers.

Some examples:

Gen 49:24, J, Joseph's arms in handling a bow

2 Sam 1:10 The fallen warrior king Saul's arm

2 Sam 22:35 David's arms that bend a bow of bronze

Judg 15:14 Samson's powerful arms

Ezek 30:21 Pharaoh's *yad* is used likewise in military contexts.

Exod 6:1, E, Pharaoh's might

Ezek 30:22 Pharaoh's dominance

Judg 3:8 Cushan-*rishathaim*'s authority

Judg 6:1-2 Midian's governance

1 Sam 12:9 Sisera, Philistia and the king of Moab's supremacy.

These texts exemplify the importance of the mighty hand, the one who will prevail, and give the necessary success and supremacy where hands become the stratagem of visualization as far as the story develops in Judges 4.

וַיִּמָּכְרֵם יְהוָה **בְּיַד** יָבִין מֶלֶךְ-כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר מָלַךְ בְּחָצוֹר וְשָׂר־צָבָאוֹ סִיסְרָא וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּתַרְשֵׁת הַגּוֹיִם:

And GOD surrendered them to **hand** of king Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. His army commander was Sisera, whose base was Harosheth-goiim. (Verse 2)

וּמִשְׁכָּתִּי אֵלַי אֶל-גִּחְל קִישּׁוֹן אֶת-סִיסְרָא שָׂר־צָבָא יָבִין וְאֶת-רֶכְבּוֹ וְאֶת-הַמּוֹנֶה וְנִתְּתִיהוּ **בְּיָדִי**:

And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him **into your hands**. (Verse 7)

וַתֹּאמֶר הִלֵּךְ אֵלַי עֲמֹד אָפֶס כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תַפְאֲרָתְךָ עַל-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ **כִּי בְיַד-אִשָּׁה** יִמָּכֶר אֶת-סִיסְרָא וְתִקָּם דְּבוּרָה וַתֵּלֶךְ עִם-בָּרַק קְדֵשׁה:

Very well, I will go with you, she answered. However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then GOD will deliver Sisera **into the hands of a woman**. So, Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. (Verse 9)

וַתֹּאמֶר דְּבוּרָה אֶל-בָּרַק לְיוֹם כּוֹם כִּי זֶה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה אֶת-סִיסְרָא **בְּיָדִי** הֲלֹא יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיךָ וַיִּרְדּוּ בָרַק מִנֶּהר תְּבוֹר וַעֲשֻׁנָת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ אֶתְרֵיו:

Then Deborah said to Barak, Up! This is the day on which GOD will deliver Sisera **into your hands**: GOD is marching before you. Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men. (Verse 14)

וּמֶלֶךְ **יַד בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל** הִלּוּךְ וְקִשְׁשָׁה עַל יָבִין מֶלֶךְ-כְּנָעַן עַד אֲשֶׁר הִכְרִיתוּ אֶת יָבִין מֶלֶךְ-כְּנָעַן:

The **hand of the Israelites** bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan. (Verse 24)

13. Conclusion

The mighty hand executed by a woman, framed as a struggle between the Israelites and the Canaanites, represents a commotion of faith and culture.

This dissertation investigates the theological, literary, and historical significance of Judges chapters 4 and 5, focusing on the decisive roles of Deborah and Jael in Israel's deliverance from Canaanite harassment. By situating these narratives within the broader cultural, religious, and geopolitical contexts of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, the study demonstrates how these texts encode processes of Israelite ethnogenesis, the consolidation of YHWH worship, and the subversion of patriarchal norms through the unexpected agency of women. The overarching thesis argues that Judges 4 and 5 reflect a transitional moment in Israelite religion: from a polytheistic and henotheistic environment toward monolatry and, eventually, the theological consolidation of YHWH as the exclusive deity of Israel. The "hand of a woman," embodied in Jael's lethal act against Sisera, becomes the potent symbol of YHWH's supremacy over rival deities—particularly El, supreme divinity of the Canaanite pantheon—while simultaneously reconfiguring gender and power within the Israelites.

Understanding Judges 4 and 5 requires situating YHWH in the deity's early cultic associations and origins. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence, including Egyptian inscriptions referencing the "Shasu of Yhw" (14th–13th centuries BCE), inscriptions at the Mesha Stele (9th century BCE), and Kuntillet 'Ajrud (8th century BCE), suggest that YHWH was initially worshipped among nomadic desert groups inhabiting Edom, Seir, Sinai, and Midian. These southern traditions depict YHWH as a warrior and storm-god, associated with mountains, metallurgy, and wilderness migrations.

The Kenite-Midianite hypothesis situates the transmission of YHWH worship through nomadic kinship and intermarriage. The figure of Jethro, Moses' Midianite father-in-law, reinforces this connection, with biblical tradition presenting him as a priest of YHWH. The Kenites' metallurgical expertise, their liminal position between sedentary and nomadic cultures, and their integration into Israelite society further emphasize the porous boundaries of early Israelite

religion. Judges 5:4, which portrays YHWH as coming from Seir and Edom, anchors this southern origin within Israel's own foundations.

Theologically, YHWH's ascendancy unfolds within a henotheistic milieu, in which the Canaanite supreme god El remained a challenging rival. The Song of Deborah (Judges 5), one of the oldest poetic traditions in the Hebrew Bible, dramatizes this cosmic contest: YHWH emerges as the victorious deity who ensures Israel's survival and covenantal fidelity, displacing El as the locus of divine authority.

Judges 4 and 5 offer two distinct literary portrayals of the same historical event. Chapter 4 presents a prose narrative characterized by chronological clarity and emphasis on Deborah's prophetic authority, Barak's hesitant heroism, and Jael's decisive act of violence, executing the final aim, defeating the enemy. Chapter 5, exhibits the episode as a hymn of praise, celebrating divine intervention, tribal participation, and theological meaning.

The discrepancies between the two accounts—differences in tribal participation, geographical details, and the depiction of characters—reflect complex editorial processes and competing memories. While Judges 4 foregrounds character and causality, and a linear concatenation of events to achieve the final objective, Judges 5 amplifies the theological significance of the event, embedding it in Israel's identity, followers of an exclusive divinity, YHWH. Together, the prose and poetry form an integral unit that constructs a layered account of divine deliverance.

Central to the dissertation is the analysis of gender inversion in Judges 4 and 5. Deborah is portrayed as prophetess, judge, and military leader—roles traditionally reserved for men—while Jael, married to a Kenite, and tent-dwelling woman, a sole inhabitant of this residence, secures the ultimate victory by killing Sisera. The text subverts patriarchal expectations: the male general is portrayed as defenseless and vulnerable, while the woman wields tools of domestic labor—the tent peg and hammer—as weapons of divine warfare.

Jael embodies liminality in multiple dimensions: as associated with the Kenite linked to both Israel and Canaan, as a woman consequent with hospitality yet transformed into a warrior, and as a figure who inhabits the margins of society but becomes the decisive agent of YHWH's triumph. Her offering of milk, maternal gestures, and apparent vulnerabilities are reconfigured

into instruments of deception and violence. Through her act, the private space of the tent is transformed into the stage of warfare that consolidates victorious outcome.

Feminist hermeneutics interpret Jael not merely as an auxiliary to Deborah but as a warrior in her own right, destabilizing binary categories of gender and power. The “hand of a woman” becomes both a theological and gendered motif: YHWH delivers Israel not through the sword of Barak but through the determination of Jael’s agency, thereby dramatizing divine sovereignty through unexpected means.

The narratives of Judges 4 and 5 encapsulate a crucial stage in Israel’s theological development. Rather than a linear transition from polytheism to monotheism, the evidence suggests a complex coexistence of theological voices: El as dominant Canaanite deity, YHWH as a southern warrior-god, and Israel as a people conferring identity towards a deity that provides deliverance. Judges 5 situates Israel’s deliverance within a cosmic struggle between YHWH and El, dramatizing YHWH’s supremacy while affirming covenantal loyalty. Over time, this henotheistic devotion gave way to monolatry—the exclusive worship of YHWH without denying the existence of other gods—and eventually to monotheism, the theological claim that no deity but YHWH exists. Judges 4 and 5, therefore, are not simply war stories but theological polemics encoding this transformation.

The text expands its limits to a geopolitical status through depicted in the tribal participation. As far as tribal involvement is concern, projecting loyalty to the Israelites as a consolidated group, Judges 5 illuminates Israel’s emergent identity. Not all tribes are represented; some, such as Judah and Simeon, are absent, while others are censured for inaction.

The Song of Deborah thus functions as political theology, rallying disparate groups under the banner of YHWH’s sovereignty. The territorial environment delivers a multifaceted, multicultural lens through which the dynamics of the narrative may be more fully apprehended.

The blending of groups—Shasu nomads, Kenites, Midianites, and other groups coming from the Southeast area of the Levant—into a proto-Israelite identity is reflected in archaeological and textual sources. An analysis of biblical sources such as Deuteronomy 33:2, Habakkuk 3:3, Psalm 68:8 demonstrates a recurrent motif in which YHWH is consistently linked to a constellation of

southern locales—Se‘ir, Sinai, Edom, Paran, Horeb, and Teman, the latter often identified with the southern regions corresponding to present-day northwestern Arabia.

These sites serve as the geographical points of origin for YHWH’s journey, from which the deity is portrayed as advancing northward toward the highlands of Bashan. Such representations construct a theological vision of YHWH as a mobile, even nomadic, divinity, unbound to any single cultic center yet accompanying the people across the wilderness. This imagery resonates with the cultic conception of YHWH encountered in the Tent of Meeting, where divine presence is understood to dwell within a space of movement and impermanence.

The convergence of geographical memory, cultic practice, and theological manifestation therefore highlights the dynamic, ambulatory nature of YHWH’s appearance, locating the deity’s earliest worship within a landscape characterized by mobility, wilderness sojourn, and sacred encounter.

The motif of the “hand of a woman” crystallizes this dynamic: Jael, a woman alone in her tent, marginal yet decisive, becomes the embodiment of YHWH’s agency, her hammer and peg transformed into instruments of divine sovereignty. Deborah’s leadership and Jael’s agency converge to present women not as passive observers but as agents of theological and national transformation.

By situating YHWH within the cultural matrix of Shasu, Kenites, and Canaanites, the narratives preserve the fluid origins of Israel’s God while affirming His ultimate supremacy. Through their dual genres—narrative prose and poetic song—Judges 4 and 5 inscribe into Israel’s memory a story of deliverance that transcends gender, subverts power, and proclaims YHWH as the victorious deity.

In these chapters, the tent becomes a battlefield, domestic tools become weapons, and the “hand of a woman” suits the hand of YHWH. The mighty hand executed by a woman, framed as a struggle between the Israelites and the Canaanites, represents an upheaval of faith and culture.

Jael’s victory is simultaneously YHWH’s triumph. In this act, the Canaanite enemy—portrayed not only as a military power but also as adherents of the cult of El, the high god of the Canaanite

pantheon—is vanquished. The contest is thus staged on both political and theological planes. El, the head of the Canaanite divine assembly, is symbolically dethroned, displaced by YHWH, whose authority asserts itself as unrivaled and all-encompassing. This displacement dramatizes a critical moment in the gradual theological evolution of ancient Israelite religion, where YHWH emerges as the sole and ultimate divine power.

To understand YHWH's participation in these chapters, it is necessary to explore why YHWH chooses (4:6, 9, 14) to become involved in the battlefield. Several interconnected factors illuminate the divine motivation and method of intervention in this narrative.

First, the territorial dimension of YHWH's involvement cannot be overlooked. The oppression under Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor, and his military commander Sisera represents not merely political subjugation but a theological crisis—the land promised to Israel remains under Canaanite control. YHWH's intervention serves to reassert divine sovereignty over the contested territory and to fulfill the covenantal promise of land possession. The geographical specificity of the battle at Mount Tabor and the Kishon River suggests that YHWH's involvement is deeply connected to reclaiming sacred space within the promised land.

Second, YHWH's siding with the Israelites reflects the covenant relationship established at Sinai. Despite Israel's apostasy—the text notes they "did evil in the sight of YHWH" (4:1) after Ehud's death—the divine response to their cry demonstrates covenantal faithfulness. This pattern of sin, oppression, crying out, and divine deliverance establishes YHWH as a God who responds to the afflicted, even when they have broken faith. The twenty-year oppression under Sisera (4:3) serves as both punishment and catalyst for Israel's return to YHWH, making the battlefield victory simultaneously an act of judgment against Canaanite power and redemption for wayward Israel.

Third, and perhaps most remarkably, YHWH's predilection to act through the prophecy and judgment of a woman—Deborah—subverts conventional Ancient Near Eastern power structures. Deborah occupies multiple authoritative roles: she is a prophetess, a judge, and a military strategist who commands Barak to engage Sisera's forces. Her position "under the palm of Deborah" (4:5) establishes a fixed location for judicial authority, suggesting institutional rather

than merely charismatic leadership. YHWH's choice to communicate battle strategy through Deborah—"Has not YHWH, the God of Israel, commanded?" (4:6)—validates her prophetic authority and challenges patriarchal assumptions about divine communication. The irony that Barak, the military commander, refuses to go to battle without her (4:8) further emphasizes that YHWH has inverted expected gender roles in accomplishing divine purposes.

Fourth, the execution by a woman—Jael—completes this pattern of divine action through female agency. Deborah's prophecy that "YHWH will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9) finds its fulfillment not on the battlefield but in the domestic space of a tent, where Jael drives a tent peg through Sisera's temple as he sleeps (4:21). This detail is theologically significant: the mighty warrior with nine hundred iron chariots (4:3, 13) is defeated not by superior military technology but by a nomadic woman using household implements. The Song of Deborah celebrates Jael as "most blessed of women" (5:24), elevating her act to the status of covenant faithfulness.

From the perspective of biblical narrative, this episode reflects the transitional phase often described as henotheistic. In this stage, YHWH was revered as Israel's supreme God while the existence of other deities was not categorically denied. However, the rhetorical force of the Jael account points toward a more radical claim: that YHWH does not merely stand above other gods but actively dismantles their authority through historical and symbolic victories. The act of Jael, then, participates in a theological discourse of exclusivity, foreshadowing the later emergence of uncompromising monotheism in Israel's self-understanding.

Moreover, the prominence of a woman as the decisive agent of divine triumph disrupts normative gender expectations and imbues the theological transition with a profound irony. The patriarchal world of Judges would not have expected the "hand of a woman" to embody divine agency; yet the text insists upon it. This suggests that the development of Israelite monotheism was not only a process of divine reconfiguration but also one in which the boundaries of social power—particularly between men and women—were momentarily transgressed for the sake of demonstrating YHWH's absolute sovereignty. Jael's action destabilizes the structures of both Canaanite and Israelite culture, aligning divine deliverance with the marginal rather than the mighty.

The “hand of a woman” functions as the embodied instrument through which YHWH reveals divine supremacy, undermining El’s authority and consolidating YHWH’s claim as the singular God of Israel. The episode thus stands not merely as a tale of military victory but as a symbolic threshold in Israel’s theological development to the uncompromising affirmation of YHWH as the sole and prevailing Divinity

The “hand of a woman” functions as the embodied instrument through which YHWH reveals divine supremacy, undermining El’s authority and consolidating YHWH’s claim as the singular God of Israel. The episode thus stands not merely as a tale of military victory but as a symbolic threshold in Israel’s theological imagination: from henotheistic devotion to the uncompromising affirmation of YHWH as the sole and prevailing Divinity

Jael becomes an instrument of YHWH’s will, fighting a victorious battle against the Canaanites, worshipers of EL. YHWH’s triumphs reveals that the “hand of a woman” is indeed the “hand of YHWH”, the driving force behind the complete deliverance, where EL, the chief deity in the powerful Canaanite pantheon is defeated, and YHWH enthrones the essence of the deity to become the sole prevailing Divinity. This process of theological changes, transitions from the ancient Israelite religion during the period described in the Book of Judges, was considered to have been henotheistic or monolatrist, and develops into strictly monotheistic in the later sense.

The “Hand of a Woman” facilitated and guided this transition.

Appendix²³⁸

Spatial Domains

Introduction

Withing the chronological accounts, historical narratives, and cultural traditions conveyed from ancient Scriptures, the readers, associate political leadership as a male dominated endeavor²³⁹. This appendix intends to demonstrate how Biblical women, many of them carrying leadership roles, situated in diverse ecosystems²⁴⁰ have mobilized outcomes, sometimes unexpected in the development of the text.²⁴¹

Binaries definitions of spatial domains illustrate contrasting places in the Hebrew Bible. They depict not only topographical dimensions but also strategic positions, emotional situations, bellicose interventions, and contrasting plights. In the Scriptures, domestic dwelling areas are defined habitually by their antithesis. The 'house' (בית) contrasts the 'street' (רחוב), the 'inside' (פנים) contrasts the 'outside' (חוץ). This segment will expose contrasting situations of realms, as well as ownership of settlement that convey security and tenure, in which the female Biblical characters show sometimes strength and in other times they display fragility. This argumentation leads to the management of personal ways of belonging, and to the core of the thesis regarding Jael as an executor of God's-YHWH's action.

Susan Ackerman articulates that "The Hebrew Bible is a book that was primarily written by men, for men, and about men, and thus the biblical text is not particularly forthcoming when it comes to the lives and experiences of women. These features include comprehensive pictures of

²³⁸ The appendix directly confronts the male-dominated reading tradition by cataloging women's leadership across various "ecosystems" or spatial domains (domestic, cultic, political, military, etc.), providing empirical evidence that counters androcentric assumptions embedded in traditional biblical interpretation.

²³⁹ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature*, Gorgias Studies in the Hebrew Bible 4 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018).

²⁴⁰ These structural environments represent more than just a mechanical place, but they marshal a text underlying an essential plot of the holistic narrative.

²⁴¹ Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, "Inside-Outside: Domestic Living Space in Biblical Memory," in *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 61–78.

women's lives as wives and child bearers within Israel's patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system and of women's work within the economy of a typical Israelite household."²⁴²

Areas, Realms, Safety and Vulnerability.

a) Domestic Residence

The domestic residence functions as a social space for hospitality and protection, i.e., Abraham's story, when three men approach his internal space to announce Sarah's pregnancy (Genesis 18:1-2)²⁴³. This internal shelter is shielded from the external view, it is hidden, and therefore, as it happens in the story of Lot, could play a role of a potentially dangerous and treacherous space to enter (Genesis 19:5-6)²⁴⁴. According to the anthropologist S. Kent, "architecture creates boundaries out of otherwise unbounded space while the use of space can be seen as a means to organize that unbounded space." This means that the margins between internal and external areas create room for distinction between the personal asset and the intimate chamber which restricts the accessibility between the individual and the public zone at large.

This writing intends to show the importance of different kinds of thresholds and structures, edging the participation of Biblical women, bounded by the spatial domains.

²⁴² Susan Ackerman, "Women in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, April 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.45>.

²⁴³ וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאַלְנֵי מִמְרָא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּפֶתַח הָאֵהָל בְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:
appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא גֵרֶץ לִקְרֹאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתָּחוּ אַרְצָה:
Looking up, he saw three figures standing near him. Perceiving this, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground.

²⁴⁴ וַיִּקְרָאוּ אֶל-לוֹט וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אֵיךָ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה הֲצִיָּאָם אֵלֵינוּ וְנִדְעָה אֹתָם:
And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the ones who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them."

וַיֵּצֵא אֹתָם לֹט הַפֶּתַח וְהִדְלִית סֹגֵר אַחֲרָיו:
So, Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him.

b) Doors & Entrances

A metaphoric symbolism materializes in some of the actions that occur throughout the Biblical text as a result of terminology such as doors (דלת), and entrances/openings (פתח). Several examples transpire in crucial moments of Divine intervention²⁴⁵, and occasionally miracles, perpetuated by human actions. For example, when Noah's finishes building the ark, and loads his family, and animals, the rain starts, and it must be God, Godself, who closes the ark (Genesis 7:16).

In the Hebrew Bible spaces denote connections with God, i.e., the Tent of Meeting- אוהל מועד where God appears to Moses several times throughout the Pentateuch. Another place to encounter the Divine is in the holiness of the Tabernacle (משכן), where the sacrifices, connecting the people to YHWH-יהוה, occurred. The description of these places is extensive in the Bible and provide vast details of their construction²⁴⁶.

The word *petach*-פתח, appears 133 times in the Hebrew Bible. Most of the Pentateuchal references are related either to the entrances of the tent- אוהל of God's "Tent of Meeting" or to the extension of hospitality to strangers.²⁴⁷ Doors that open and close are signs that represent intimacy, closeness, secrecy, desirable outcome, or sometimes tragedy.

One of the many examples regarding doors that close and conclude a tragic chapter is found in the Book of II Samuel where Amnon, son of king David, half-brother of Tamar, rapes her, and dismisses her, sending her powerless, ashamed, dispossessed, stripped of dignity, as he asked his servant "Get that woman out of my presence, and bar the door behind her" (II Samuel

²⁴⁵ וְהַבָּאִים זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה מִכָּל-בָּשָׂר בָּאוּ בְּאֶשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱלֹהִים וַיִּסְגֹּר יְהוָה בַּעֲדָיו:
Thus, they that entered comprised male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him. And יהוה shut him in.

²⁴⁶ Exodus 39:42-40:32.

²⁴⁷ A few examples: Exodus 29:4,11,32,42; 33: 8, 9,10; 38:8,30; 39:38; 40:6, 12, 29; Leviticus 1:3, 5; 3:2; 4:4, 7, 18; 8:3, 4, 31; 12:6; 14:11, 23, 38; 15:14, 29; 16:7; 17:4, 5, 6, 9; 19:21; Numbers 3:25, 26; 4:25, 26; 6: 10, 13, 18; 10:3; 12:5; 16: 18, 19, 27; 17:15; 20:6; 25:6; 27:2; Deuteronomy 22:21; 31:15.

13:17). This despicable act ends with the closing of the door which enhances separation between good and evil²⁴⁸.

There are two opportunities in the Book of II Kings in which women take agency in closing doors as miracles arise to save their children from starvation²⁴⁹ as it's the case of "certain woman, the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets" who is a widow, living in poverty, and is asked to sell her children into slavery as a mode of debt repayment. The other is the incident of the Shunamite woman, wealthy, without children, who is granted a child without having asked for him and he dies at young age. The prophet performs cardiorespiratory resuscitation for this child, and he returns to life. Both incidents involved Elisha the prophet. On both occasions the doors are the luminal division between life and death. The closing of the doors depicts a sense of intimacy, a closeness towards performing acts of salvation. More than just a material tangible fence, the doors and the gates are symbols of iconic representations in which faith, agency, and action are combined to change the destiny of these women.

c) Tents

There is a brink between different structures that differentiate nomadic displacement vis à vis established settlements. Permanent houses mark territories of belonging while sporadic camps symbolize impermanence, a dynamic movement of dislocation. As an example of both permanency and transitory the book of Judges mentions that both kind of lodgings are used by the inhabitants:

וַיָּקֻמּוּ כָּל-הָעָם בְּאֵישׁ אֶחָד לְאֶמְרָה לֹא נָלֶכֶךְ אִישׁ לְאַהֲלָיו וְלֹא נָסֹר אִישׁ לְבֵיתוֹ:

Then all the people rose as one and declared, "We will not go back to our homes, we will not enter our houses! (Jud.20:8)

The tent, for instance, is the optimal dwellings in narrative settings in the ancient biblical stories, the patriarchal narratives, and during Israel's wandering in the wilderness. Several

²⁴⁸ The reason Tamar was in Amnon's room is because he pretended to be sick and needed Tamar's help. She performed a deed of lovingkindness but attending her "sick" brother, and the story ends with him raping her.

²⁴⁹ II Kings 4:5.

incidents take place inside the tents. Some examples of these peculiar incidents are Noah's drunkenness which takes place 'inside his tent' - בתוך האוהל (Gen 9:21), Abraham sees his visitors from 'the tent door' פתח האוהל (Gen 18:1–2. 10), Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his late mother Sarah (Genesis 24:67), Rachel takes her father Laban's household gods, and hides them inside the camel's saddle, enters the tent, sits on these idols while Laban searched through the intimate space and does not find them. Exodus 16:16 depicts a good example of familial personal space and privacy for the gathering of the manna that God sends from Heaven. These heavenly nutrients should be retrieved according to personal necessities, each of the Israelites is required to gather enough to feed the persons he has 'in his tent.'

וְהָיָה כְּדִבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה לְקַטֹּף מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ עֹמֶר לְגִלְגֻלַּת מִסְפַּר נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם אִישׁ לְאִשָּׁר בְּאֹהֶלוֹ תִקְחוּ:

This is what יהוה has commanded: Each household shall gather as much as it requires to eat—an *omer* to a person for as many of you as there are; each household shall fetch according to those in its tent.” (Exodus 16:16)

These allusions from a nomadic lifestyle to permanent settlement resemble adequate, as the reminiscence of Israel's ancestry is portrayed as a 'wandering Aramean' who went to Egypt to become 'a great, mighty and populous nation' that was led through the desert to 'a land flowing with milk and honey'²⁵⁰

From open areas to established structures we encounter nomadic configurations mostly crystalized by tents, non-permanent constructions, easy to ensemble and pull apart according to the needs of the moment, such as looking for food in time of starvation, pursue a safer place in bellicose times, explore new destinations in search of better opportunities, and /or start a new life because of any specific need.

From the structural point of view, tents are not internally divided into individual rooms, they represent a welcoming spatial domain, not pretentious, without hierarchical allocations.

²⁵⁰ וְעַתָּה וְאַמְרָא לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲרָמִי אֲבִי נִרְדָּ מִצְרַיִמָּה נִגְדָר שָׁם בְּמִתִּי מֵעֹט גְּדוֹל עֲצוּם רַב: You shall then recite as follows before your God יהוה: “My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation (Deuteronomy 26:5).

Tents are also self-contained spatial units which provide fast and easy accessibility to the elements and tools that are needed at a hasty moment. For example, Abraham urges Sarah to hurry up and make cakes for the visitors as she is sitting in the tent (Genesis 18:6). The availability of the required products is essential for the urgency of the task. Tents provide this spatial domain as there are no obstacles of walls and divisions of the property.

Tents are also an invitation to privacy. There are no separations, rooms are inexistent. The open vast area exposes and reveals the identity of the characters. Jael represents an example of hospitality in peril times. As Sisera, commander of the Canaanite army of king Jabin is defeated, and runs for his life, Jael invites him to her tent. The text does not explain why Jael proceeds to invite a wounded general. She is alone in her place. The reader might think that it could be dangerous for an unaccompanied married woman to invite a male figure. Did she want to protect him? He does not ask for that kind of hospitality, she is the one who engages in a frantic conversation, and Sisera, agitated, accepts the welcoming invitation.

Jael's tent symbolizes her intimacy, her inner self, her womb, her femineity, her space. The tent is enclosed and has an opening, that metaphorically represents the female body. She owns this room. She is confident. She has resources. As a mother can breastfeed her child connecting with her offspring like nobody else can, so does Jael rely on milk to connect with the enemy. Her tent is, figuratively, her inner self. In the comfort of the tent with a nutritional beverage, Jael inverts the female refuge into a battlefield, defeating Sisera. Jael, interconnected to her tent, is praised in the Song of Deborah:

תְּבָרַךְ מְנַשִּׁים יְעֹל אִשָּׁת תִּזְכָּר הַקֵּינִי מְנַשִּׁים בְּאֵהֶל תְּבָרַךְ:

Most blessed of women be Jael,
Wife of Heber the Kenite,
Most blessed of women in tents. (5:24)

d) Thresholds

Thresholds not only delineate spatial demarcations but also anticipate a change in the destiny of the biblical account. Among the many biblical instances, I choose two examples that stand up as a representation of the shifting fate of the character involved.

Judges 19 portrays the story of the “Concubine of Givah” one of the most difficult and dreadful stories in the entire Hebrew Bible. The saga of a woman abused (by the tribe of Binyamin) and later dismembered (by her own husband) is used as an example of abomination, rape, and national disunity. Her last actions reside on the luminal edge of thresholds, between the outside cruel world and the sheltered walls of a house, and between death and life as well. The text (Judges 19:26-28) utters:

וּתְבֹא הָאִשָּׁה לַפְּנוֹת הַבָּקָר וַתִּפֹּל פֶּתַח בֵּית־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אָדוּגְיָה שָׁם עַד־הָאֹר:

Toward morning the woman came back; and as it was growing light, she collapsed at the entrance of the very house where her husband was.

וַיָּקָם אֲדֹנֶיהָ בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּפְתַּח דִּלְתוֹת הַבַּיִת וַיֵּצֵא לֵלְכֶת לְדֶרֶכוֹ וְהִנֵּה הָאִשָּׁה פֹלֶלֶת פֶּתַח הַבַּיִת וַיֵּדֶיהָ עַל־הַסָּף :

When her husband arose in the morning, he opened the doors of the house and went out to continue his journey; and there was the woman, his concubine, lying at the entrance of the house, with her hands on the threshold.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֶיהָ קוּמִי וְנִלְכֶה וְאִין עֲנָה וַיִּקְחֶהָ עַל־הַחֲמֹר וַיֵּקֶם הָאִישׁ וַיֵּלֶךְ לְמָקוֹמוֹ:

“Get up,” he said to her, “let us go.” But there was no reply. So, the man placed her on the donkey and set out for home.

This piercing text display, in addition to an emotional plight, a spatial domain of safety and security or the lack of, as evidence of the importance of the “if”, “how” and “where” is the character protected or not. The concubine of Givah penetrates the mind of the atrocities that might happen when a dispossessed human is abandoned. The richness of the texts illustrates

words such as opening- פתח, door- דלת, threshold- סף, indicating the many configurations that separate this woman from a complete annihilation.

The second story is the narrative of David's wrongdoing to Uriah, in II Samuel 11: 13-15, after king David is told he had impregnated Bat Sheva, and he speculates how to cover this offence by bringing Uriah back from the battlefield to the palace safety. Since he cannot achieve his purpose, king David sends Uriah back to the war's frontline so he will be killed. The text portrays spatial domains that symbolize more than just physical strategic positions:

וַיִּקְרָא־לוֹ דָּוִד וַיֹּאכַל לֶפְנָיו וַיִּשְׁתֶּה וַיִּשְׁכַּרְהוּ וַיֵּצֵא בָּעָרִב לִשְׁכַּב בְּמִשְׁכְּבוֹ עִם־עֲבָדָיו אֲדָנָיו וְאֶל־בֵּיתוֹ לֹא יָרַד:

David summoned him, and he ate and drank with him until he got him drunk; but in the evening, [Uriah] went out to sleep in the same place, with his lord's officers; he did not go down to his home.

וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וַיִּכְתֹּב דָּוִד סֵפֶר אֶל־יֹאבָב וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּיַד אֲוִרְיָה:

In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab, which he sent with Uriah.

וַיִּכְתֹּב בַּסֵּפֶר לֵאמֹר הִבּוּ אֶת־אֲוִרְיָה אֶל־מוֹל' פְּנֵי הַמִּלְחָמָה הַחֲזָקָה וְשַׁבְתֶּם מֵאַחֲרָיו וְנָפְהָ נָמָת: {ס}

He wrote in the letter as follows: "Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed."

Uria's home is a safe place but his chivalry and loyalty to king David to fight the war leaves him outside the house, exposed to the perils of combat. The trustworthy soldier does not seek the refuge of his home; the outdoor field is where he belongs as his platoon is at combat. As a chiasmatic visualization of the scene, king David penetrates the intimacy of Uria's home while Uria stays at the threshold between life and death. Once again, these examples show the setting of what spatial domains postulate as transcendental ways of physicality, adding an emotional and fateful component to the story.

e) Walls

Female biblical protagonists play a dynamic role in the movement of spatial domains. One example is Rahab, a prostitute who lived in the walls of Jericho. She hid two Israelite spies in her home and in return, the Israelites spared her and her family when they conquered Jericho. (Joshua 2:5-6).

וַיְהִי הַשָּׁעַר לִסְגֹּר בַּחֹשֶׁךְ וְהָאֲנָשִׁים יָצְאוּ לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֲנִי הָלְכוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים רֹדְפוּ מִהֵרָ אַחֲרֵיהֶם כִּי תִשְׁיֹגֹם:

And at dark, when the gate was about to be closed, the men left; and I don't know where the men went. Quick, go after them, for you can overtake them.”—

וְהִיא הֶעֱלָתָם הַגָּגָה וַתַּטְמִינֵם בְּפִשְׁתֵּי הָעֵץ הָעֲרֻכּוֹת לָהּ עַל-הַגָּג:

Now she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under some stalks of flax that she had lying on the roof.

The walls symbolize the enclosed settlement of the local people, protected by concrete stones. Rahab breaches the encapsulated lodging by allowing the spies to penetrate the forbidden area. Rahab's participation in this story demonstrates the inside-outside, contrasting pieces of the ancient world, where walls, houses, roofs, and gates open and close according to the necessities of a delivered story of conquest and fulfillment of God's promise.

Her name, Rahab, means 'wide'. She widely and broadly opens her room for hospitality to these men who are coming from Egypt, מצרים *Mitzrayim*, from the root צר, *tzar*, narrow. The spies who come to explore and scout the land come from a narrow place to be received by Rahab, the wide-open woman that embraces her.

Is biblical hospitality defined by gender demarcation? We learn from Emmanuel Levinas²⁵¹, that the feminine, is closely related to the home and to the domestic space: the dimension of femininity is “the welcome of the dwelling.”

²⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 155–66.

As a welcoming standpoint the Bible invests in the concept of hospitality. Hospitality indicates a positive action in the Scriptures, nevertheless there are some passages in the Bible that convey an ambiguous domain that might progress into safety or danger. Several examples of these situations can be found in Genesis 19:1-5, reflected in the consequences of Lot's hospitality; Genesis 43 that tells that Joseph's brothers are afraid of entering his house; in I Kings 13, the effects of accepting the prophet's hospitality turns out to be fatal for the man of God; Judges 4:17-24 Sisera approaches the tent of Jael and she 'goes out' to meet him and encourages him to 'turn aside' into her tent.

All these examples reinvigorate the public-private importance of the Biblical descriptions and embody the contexts of the stories embellishing the suspense created by their narratives. There is much to be reckoned about these structural entities.

Architectural space can be regarded as the domestic boundary, the constructed milieu that serves the purpose of domestic activities many of them associated with gender demarcation. Some household activities tend to be implemented by one gender rather than the other, these undertakings may point to areas of gendered space within the residence. These assignments do not indicate necessarily a gender in a segregated environment but rather a pattern, a configuration where women and men used common space differently and at different times. To exemplify what is mentioned above, two domestic activity areas that are especially associated with the household tasks of women are food preparation, and textile production, such as weaving, spinning, and sewing. Several archeological findings have interconnected these gender-leaning examples where textiles, baskets, seeds, pits, and tools were found.

Aside from the abovementioned models we encounter biblical women who are not necessarily associated with household activities, and through their wisdom, knowledge, and leadership skills can divert the destiny of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible.

Miriam, midwives Shifrah and Puah, Deborah, are among the many examples described by the Scriptures not necessarily involved in household activities. It should be relevant to point out that these women are not confined to habitational structures, but the open nature and extended vast

areas are their work fields. They function outside the enveloped and protected domains; they are not connected to the traditional conceptual female tasks of households' activities.

Miriam's leadership occurs in the wilderness where she leads the people of Israel in song, in an open and vast precinct (Exodus 15:20); Shifrah and Puah deliver newborns in a non-described area, there are no confined zones for these midwives (Exodus 1:15-17); and Deborah sits in an open area, under a tree in the hill country of Ephraim (Judges 4:4-5). In addition to their situational position, none of them are described as biological mothers, although their tasks are related to motherhood, i.e., Miriam as Moses' caregiver, Shifra and Puah delivering newborns and Deborah described as the mother of Israel. Their transcendence is related to leadership skills, to speak truth to power, and to their determination for the survival of the Hebrews/Israelites.

f) Hills & Trees

As far as spatial domains are concerned, hills and mountains portray a safer space since they provide an upper holistic view of lower valleys and villages from a strategic point. This panoptic vision becomes a good tool for strategical actions. Deborah's method of judging Israel describes the prophetess exposed to nature instead of being in a secluded area. She is visible, accessible, available for consultation, and for advice. Nevertheless, those who want to consult with her need to invest efforts to ascend the hill in order to receive her guidance. The Israelite men and women had to climb the hill to access her wisdom; her gifted and skillful leadership invite people to leave their comfort zone and hike to the mountaintop at a time of need.

On the top of the hill the reader visualizes the judge, the prophetess. There resides Deborah, a woman of torches *אִשֶּׁת לִפְדֹּת* – *eshet lapidot* the prophetess sits under a date palm tree, the foliage of a tree whose branches are wide open, suggests a gesture of welcoming the stranger. The tree offers sweet fruits, describing a symbiotic relationship with Deborah's name, which in the Hebrew language means bee, associated with sweetness. Sweetness at the top of the hill and under a sweet palm tree doesn't cancel her strong leadership skills, governance, authority, power, and control over the battlefield. The opposite is true. Deborah is a trustworthy forerunner. The tribes of Israel believe in her. The general of the army, Barak, seeks her advice.

The Biblical text attributes to Deborah the title *אֵם* – *Em*.

In her poetic retelling of her military victory with Barak, Deborah, who is described earlier as a judge and a prophet (4:4), is referred to as an *em*, a mother, and seemingly it is Barak who brands Deborah as “Mother in Israel (Judges 5:7).”

חֲדָלִי פִּרְצוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲדָלִי
עַד שְׁקַמְתִּי דְבוּרָה שְׁקַמְתִּי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

Deliverance ceased,
Ceased in Israel,
Till you arose, O Deborah,
Arose, O mother, in Israel!

Em is likely used as a title when it is applied to biblical Eve²⁵², Deborah, and the wise woman of Abel of Beth-Maacah²⁵³. It reflects their honored position, and not their role as child-bearing women.

The Scriptures are not the only place in which the story of Deborah is told. In addition to the Biblical text, the Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum(LAB) , describes Deborah as a maternal figure to Israel. Pseudo-Philo enhances the role of female characters and expands their positions in their Biblical accounts.

LAB 33:1 “And when the day of [Deborah’s] death approached, she sent and assembled all the people and said to them, ‘Now listen, my people. See, I instruct you as a woman of God and enlighten you as one of the female sexes. Obey me like your mother and turn to my words as ones who will die’.”

LAB 33:4 “See now, mother, you are dying and leaving your sons [or: children]; to whom do you entrust them?”

²⁵² וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חַוָּה כִּי הִיא הָיְתָה אִם כָּל־חַי:
The Human named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living.

²⁵³ תִּקְרָא אִשָּׁה חֲכָמָה מִן־הָעִיר שְׁמִעוּ שְׁמִעוּ אִמְרוּ־נָא אֶל־יֹאָב קָרֵב עַד־הִנֵּה נֹאדְבָרָה אֵלָיְךָ:
When a clever woman shouted from the city, “Listen! Listen! Tell Joab to come over here so I can talk to him.”

וַיִּקְרָב אֵלֶיהָ וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה הַאֲתָה יוֹאָב וַתֹּאמֶר אֲנִי וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ שְׁמַע דְּבָרֵי אִמְתְּךָ וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁמַע אֲנִי:
He approached her, and the woman asked, “Are you Joab?” “Yes,” he answered, and she said to him, “Listen to what your handmaid has to say.” “I’m listening,” he replied.

The anonymous author of the first or second century embellishes the maternalistic figure of the prophetess. The author shows that in addition to Deborah's skillful leadership, her dexterous agency can also be seen as a mother who takes care of her children, a nurturing figure. Two sides of the judge of Israel's Deborah's personality, are shown in these texts, on one hand as the strong leader, the warrior, and on the other hand her compassionate role in motherhood. The people respond to Deborah's use of maternal imagery by relating to her as their matriarch.

Deborah symbolizes the balance between leadership, and family dedication. Although she is not described as a biological mother she performs as the mother who takes care, who as a date palm tree, stands tall, gives the necessary shade, offers sweetness and nourishment filled with compassion, as the army prepares for another spatial domain, the battlefield.

g) Women, Wells and Waters.

Water is an essential element of survival. Many biblical women are associated with body of waters, a spatial domain that metaphorically invites the reader to link their figures with the water during pregnancy, the amniotic liquid, source of life, improvement, and growth. Although some of these depicted biblical female protagonists are not necessarily related to biological producers of amniotic liquid, i.e., they are not themselves identified as genetical or gestational mothers, being associated with waters conveys an image of life, as waters are a necessary element to live.

Rebecca is one of those characters who shows her strength and hints her destiny when she approaches the well and meets Abraham's servant. Rebecca expresses agency, a characteristic that we can see in some biblical women in the tapestry of the female Scriptural personas. When Abraham's servant is yearning to locate an appropriate wife for Isaac, he delivers the following stipulation (Genesis 24:13-14):

הִנֵּה אֲנִי נֹצֵב עַל-עֵין הַמַּיִם וּבָנוֹת אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר יֵצְאוּ לְשָׂאֵב מַיִם:

Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townspeople come out to draw water.

והיה הנער אשר אליה הטיגא כדף ואשתה ואמרה שמה וגם-גמליה אשרה אתה הלחף לעבדך ליצחק ובה אלע כִּי-
עשית חסד עם-אדני:

let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.”

The next Biblical scene is when Rebecca appears and fulfills this requirement verbatim. This is the sign that Abraham’s servant needs to recognize that she is the chosen one to counterpart with Isaac. The well, source of water-life, becomes the necessary tool to connect God’s promise, Abraham’s request, the servant delivery, and Rebecca and Isaac’s future.

In the Book of Exodus, we encounter other female characters that connect the reader with water. Miriam is an example of stout relationship with waters. She has the initiative to send her younger brother to the river, vigilantly guards and saves Moses from the fate established by Pharaoh²⁵⁴, in addition she dances, plays drums, sings, and leads women in song after crossing the Sea of Reeds-²⁵⁵ ים סוף. Miriam’s death is also related to the lack of water²⁵⁶. The Talmudic text associates Miriam with water²⁵⁷, and her well as a portable spring²⁵⁸ of waters necessary to survive the droughts of the dessert. The texts invite the reader to envelope Miriam’s life with water. Her leading role is surrounded by open bodies of water.

Another example in the second book of the Pentateuch is the figure of Zipporah, Moses’ wife, daughter of Reuel, Priest of Midian. She is associated with water²⁵⁹, and so are her sisters. The interaction between Moses and these women is brief, nevertheless, it is the well and spring

²⁵⁴ Exodus 2:3-10.

²⁵⁵ Exodus 15:20.

²⁵⁶ Numbers 20:1-2.

²⁵⁷ BT Taanit 9a.

²⁵⁸ BT Shabbat 35a, Bava Metzia 17a. Because of its similarity to Rabbi Hanina’s statement, the Gemara cites that which Rabbi Hiyya said: One who wants to see Miriam’s well, which accompanied the Jewish people throughout their sojourn in the desert, should do the following: He should climb to the top of Mount Carmel and look out, and he will see a rock that looks like a sieve in the sea, and that is Miriam’s well. Rav said: A spring that is portable, i.e., that moves from place to place, is ritually pure and is regarded as an actual spring and not as drawn water.

²⁵⁹ Exodus 2:16-22

of waters that connect them and will define the future of the leader of Israel during the forty years in the desert.

These abovementioned examples provide an ecosystem of interactions where women are sources of agency, acting around bodies of water that show implications for the near future of leaders and the continuity of the Israelites along the Hebrew Bible.

h) Battlefields

War brings about not just the violence of the battlefield but all the other furious faces of domination, submission, and victimhood, including sexual crimes and abuse of humanity so often in the form of attacks on women.

Athalya Brenner²⁶⁰ writes:

“A male fantasy of male domination is acted out by equating divine authority with male power. The male fantasy of the female submission becomes definitive. It is easily legitimized by a two-way application of the analogy: when God is imaged as a human male, human males can be viewed as Divine...metaphor creates its own ‘reality’, its own frame of reference, not to mention hierarchy. This propaganda clearly constructs a stereotype: every woman, especially every wife, is a potential deviant and should therefore be tightly controlled by males. Wife-abuse and rape should be directly linked to the worldview which makes such prophetic propaganda acceptable. Religious-political propaganda can lead to wholesale rape of women.”

Based on Brenner’s statement, we can approach an historical and sociological point of view, where women’s bodies were and still are considered part of the destruction and spoils of war, a collateral damage of cruelty throughout combat; sexual violence was and still is extensively seen as an inevitable by-product of conflict, a collateral damage of war, rather than a grave offense. Although it is not desired, neither approved but rather despicable, it is still experienced, and in some situation it’s not condemned.

²⁶⁰ Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 67.

Directly or indirectly women participate in battlefields, sometimes as victims of bellicose acts, in other instances as moral support or occasionally they have acted as executors achieving the desired goal. Some women are violated, some are violent, and some are humbly present to accompany and assist with the task.

A few examples of the prefatory representation are a) the Deuteronomistic description of the woman taken captive, b) Judge Deborah, c) the unnamed woman of Thebez, and d) queen Athaliah. These women participated in the battlefield, i.e., a spatial domain that willingly or unwillingly becomes their leitmotiv.

a) The non-Israelite captive woman in the book of Deuteronomy²⁶¹ conveys the victimhood of the battlefield. The special domain is vast and dangerous, and the vulnerable woman becomes a prey of war. Nevertheless, Deuteronomy's law of the attractive confined woman safeguards the non-Israelite woman taken in combat from rape and from being re-enslaved after conjugal possession. In addition to the period of thirty days while she mourns her family, the procedure she must endure (shaving, cutting her nails), discourages the man from marrying her as she loses the attractive semblance that motivated the warrior to take her, and possess her. As this woman trespasses spatial domains from her original home to the battlefield, to the home of her captor-now suitor, we can see her physical alteration, and although she does not speak, we can deduct her emotional transformation.

b) Deborah leaves the comfort of the shady palm tree, and the holistic panoptic view of the hill to incorporate herself in the battlefield. Although the narrative doesn't convey her warrior skills, her combatant intervention gives General Barak the confidence to fight against the most powerful army of the time, the Canaanites. Barak was meant to be the chief in command; he is sent by Deborah who empowers him to fight in the name of Adonai, "The Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded: Go, march up [...] and take [...]" (Judges 4:6). Barak lacks assertiveness, he subordinates his status, both as a General and as a male soldier by saying "If you go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go." (Judges 4:8).

²⁶¹ Deuteronomy 20:13-14.

The exegetical narrative²⁶² adds: “Deborah is asking him: Is it me that you need? “The Lord is marching before you!”—when a flesh-and-blood king’s servants and armies go forth to war, he follows behind, but God does not do so: He precedes His armies”. Another midrash²⁶³, attributes the great salvation for Israel to the merit of Deborah and Barak and the Rabbis tell of the various miracles that were performed for Israel during the war: the sun stood still, and night became day. Deborah knows how to dominate the battlefield. She does not equip herself with weapons or artillery, but her strategic military vision, based on faith, allows her to create the song of victory, a different kind of weapon, the one that elevates the moral compass of the fighters to win a war against persecution.

c) Judges 9:50-54 mentions the “unnamed woman of Thebez”. The biblical saga refers to a man who murders his brothers to auto-proclaim himself a king, his name is Abimelech. There is no nepotism or meritocracy mentioned in the Scriptures. The people of the town of Thebez manifest resistance, they fear the new auto-imposed king and hide in a tower to avoid the king’s assault. This new unconventional battlefield is met by an unnamed woman who throws a millstone and wounds the king. Abimelech worries that he would be remembered in the annals of history as the king who was killed by a woman, so he asked a servant to help him with assisted euthanasia ‘draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, a woman killed him,’ so his young man pierced him with a sword, and he died. The Book of II Samuel 11:21 reminds the readers of this story told on Judges 9. God has punished Abimelech for taking violence into his hands and for killing his brothers for the sake of power. Abimelech’s most severe punishment is that he has been killed by a woman, a symbol of emasculation:

וּתְשִׁלָּהּ אִשָּׁה אֶתֶת פֶּלֶח רֶכֶב עַל־רֹאשׁ אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וַתִּרְצֵן אֶת־גִּלְגָּלְתּוֹ:

But a woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and cracked his skull.

²⁶² Midrash Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, chapter 48.

²⁶³ Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Beha’alotcha 16.

וַיִּקְרָא מְהֵרָה אֶל־הַנָּעַר | נִשָּׂא כָלִיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ שְׁלֵף חֶרֶבְךָ וּמִוֹתֵתְנִי פָּנַי־אֶמְרוּ לִי אִשָּׁה הִרְגָתָהּ וַיִּדְקְרְהוּ נָעָרוֹ וַיָּמָת:

He immediately cried out to his attendant, his arms-bearer, “Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, ‘A woman killed him!’” So, his attendant stabbed him, and he died.

A spatial domain dances between battlefields and towering buildings and becomes an accurate strategy allowing the unnamed woman of Thebez fulfill God’s stroke against Abimelech. This unspecified woman becomes a symbol of strength, determination, and resolution. Regardless of her anonymity she knows how to control areas, either tall buildings or battlefields to fulfill her purpose, and targets the unfavorable king in the name of her town.

d) Athaliah’s palace’s throne’s aspiration²⁶⁴ becomes her battlefield. She embraces a large spatial domain that fluctuates between the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah. Princess Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, a Northern Israelite monarch, marries into the Southern kingdom of Judah bridging two geopolitical conflicting territories. After the death of her husband, king Yoram, and her son king Ahaziah, she takes the destiny in her own hands murdering the rest of the royal family, their descendants, the royal seed, and becomes the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to reign over Israel and Judah. The Scriptures²⁶⁵ describe her as a corrupted and vicious ruler, nevertheless she reigned for six years, showing that either the vassal and subjugated population feared her, and submitted to her ruling because of dreaded actions, or that she was a good ruler who lasted this considerable amount of time, with a bad public reputation for those who wrote and edited the story, but not necessarily a bad ruler for her contemporaries. The throne, the palace, and the linking between two territories become the expansive spatial domain, the personal battlefield of this female monarch.

i) Windows Lattices

Windows project an intention of belonging but not so much of involvement in the real cause. Windows ventures the sense of longing for the desired outcome, although that outcome, in many of the Biblical texts, reverts the desire.

²⁶⁴ II Kings 11:1-20.

²⁶⁵ II Chronicles 22:10-23:15.

Some examples of the biblical stories use the window design to feature the remoteness of these aristocratic women. The prophet Amos refers to the use of ivory that decorated houses and especially window frames to embellish palaces in 9th century BCE's Northern kingdom of Israel as follows:

והפיתי בית-החורף על-בית הקיץ ואבדו בתי השון וספו בתים רבים נאם-יהוה: {ס}

I will wreck the winter palace
Together with the summer palace;
The ivory palaces shall be demolished,
And the great houses shall be destroyed
—declares GOD. (3:15)

השקבים על-מטות שון וסרחים על-ערשותם ואכלים פרים מצאן ועגלים מתוד מרבק:

They lie on ivory beds,
Lolling on their couches,
Feasting on lambs from the flock
And on calves from the stalls. (6:4)

The prophet Amos brings this picture of contrasting images between wealth and poverty. Amos is specifically scorning the affluent people's use of luxurious items while the poor remain oppressed²⁶⁶.

Several of these plaques illustrate the iconographic motif of the “Woman in the Window” who is depicted as an aristocratic lady, neither a goddess nor a cultic prostitute, bedecked with a wig and jewelry, an image that is found around the eastern Mediterranean area.

²⁶⁶ The ivory products that have been uncovered in archaeological excavations in Samaria are decorative plaques with ivory inlay. These items were popular throughout the Levant during this period. The ones found in Samaria likely reflect local production. See Aaron Demsky, "The Name of the Goddess of Ekron: A New Reading," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12, no. 6 (1986): 53–58.

Through the Biblical examples that I will mention below, the women who peer at the outside world through the window are unable to fully comprehend the reality that would soon affect them directly. Windows maintain a distant involvement expressed by longing but not necessarily by acting.

To depict a few of these incidents it is worth mentioning a) Sisera's mother, b) Jezebel, and c) Michal the daughter of Saul and wife of king David.

a. The mother of Sisera. (Judges 5:28-31)

Through the window peered Sisera's mother, Behind the lattice she gazed: Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels? The wisest of her ladies give answer; she, too, replies to herself: "They must be dividing the spoil they have found! A damsel or two for each man, spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, spoil of embroidered cloths, A couple of embroidered cloths; round every neck as spoil!").

b. Jezebel, the queen mother. (2 Kings 9:30)

When Jezebel heard of it, she painted her eyes with kohl and dressed her hair, and she looked out of the window.

c. Michal, the daughter of Saul and the wife of David. (2 Samuel 6:16)

As the Ark of the Lord entered the City of David, Michal, daughter of Saul, looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the Lord; and she despised him for it.

These three episodes exemplify attentive women. They are focused on a reality that luminally gets confused with longing. The yearning of Sisera's mother's bounty victory, the anticipation of Jezebel for a good outcome, and the determination of Michal as she reorients king David's behavior shows these women as alert participants of their current reality. Their spatial domain, the window frame, is more than just a verge for longing, they express an opinion; they are not passive spectators.

j) Trespassing ranges: “Going Out”.

The conjugated verb *vatetze* ‘and she went out’, is repeated several times in the Pentateuch as well as in the Book of Judges and II Samuel. In these instances, women go out to seek experiences, fight for their rights, explore the world, or carry a sentiment of agency for the betterment of their status, the preservation of their honor or the defense of the Israelites. They change spaces, they alter dominions, they go out of their comfort zone, they search new precincts sometimes risking their lives, hierarchy, or prestige. a) Leah, b) Dinah, c) Jael, and d) Michal will exemplify these purposes.

a) Leah.

וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה בֶּלְעֶרֶב וַתֵּצֵא לָאֵה לִקְרָאתוֹ וַחֲמֹרֶלְאִי תָבוֹא בִּי שָׁכַר שְׂכָרְתִּיךָ בְּדוֹדָאִי בְּנִי וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּה בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה:

When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” And he lay with her that night. (Genesis 30:16)

Leah “goes out” to encounter her husband Jacob to entice him to engage in sexual relationships with her, and to conceive another descendant. She persuades him to do so in order to bring another child to the world. She has the initiative and plays a role between the open space of “going out” and the intimacy of their bed.

b) Dinah.

וַתֵּצֵא דִּינָה בַת־לֵאָה אִשְׁרֵי יִלְדָה לַיַּעֲקֹב לַרְאֹת בָּכְנוֹת הָאֶרֶץ:

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. (Genesis 34:1)

Dinah’s exploration, from a secure domain to an open field marks her destiny, as it is written in the following verse:

רָא אֶתְּהָ שְׁכֶם בֶּן־חָמוֹר הַחִיטִי נָשִׂיא הָאֶרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֶתְּהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיְעַנֶּהָ:

Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and disgraced her. (Genesis 34:2)

Dinah is a victim of seduction and rape, but she doesn't scream. We don't hear her cry, neither her pain. She either remains silent, or is silenced by her family, her brothers, and her father. She does not project her voice. We don't hear her suffering, her despair, her weep. She is barely mentioned in the text²⁶⁷. Her brothers avenge this evildoing and become protagonists in the saga. Dinah does not speak, her only act is her "going out", her objectification surpasses her subjectification²⁶⁸. After her brothers arrive her name is only mentioned once between verses 6 and 25, although she is a victim of rape. She will only be remembered again during the listed genealogy at the end of the Book of Genesis 46:15.

Dinah suffers the consequences of a flustered exploration of the outside world. She is raped. The Rabbinical hermeneutical²⁶⁹ considerations link Dinah's "going out" with the fact that she "went out to visit the daughters of the land. (Genesis 34:1-b)", penalizing Dina's behavior as seeing the "daughters of the land" emulating the Hivite women of the neighborhood, mimicking their dressing or appearances. The Rabbinical interpretation suggests, probably influenced by an ethnical bias, that she desires to evade her Israelite identity, by imitating the pagan Hivite women, and by doing so, she is punished, as if she deserved to be punished²⁷⁰.

Exegetical remarks have interconnected mother Leah and daughter Dinah. In Genesis Rabbah 80:1, Reish Lakish argues that a lewd mother will have a lewd daughter, and offers the following proof:

²⁶⁷ Yair Zakovitch, "Assimilation in Biblical Narratives," in *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey H. Tigay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 175–96.

²⁶⁸ Eve Levavi Feinstein, "The Rape of the Unbetrothed Virgin in Torah and Assyrian Law: A Comparative Analysis," TheTorah.com, 2013, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-rape-of-the-unbetrothed-virgin-in-torah-and-assyrian-law>.

²⁶⁹ Bereshit Rabbah 80:1.

²⁷⁰ Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 38.

אָמַר לוֹ רִישׁ לְקִישׁ עַד כְּדוֹן לֹא חֲסִלִית מִן מַפִּי־סִיָּה עַל הָדָא וְאַתָּה מִיִּתִּי לָן אוֹתָרִי, עֲקָרוּ וְשֶׁל דְּבָר הֵנָּה כָּל הַמְשַׁל מֵהוּ,
אָמַר לִיָּה לִית תּוֹרְתָא עֲנִישָׁא עַד דְּבִרְתָּה בְּעִיטָא, לִית אַתְתָּא זִנָּיָא עַד דְּבִרְתָּה זִנָּיָא. אָמְרוּ לִיָּה אִם כֵּן לֹאֲה אֲמִנּוּ זִוְנָה

וַתֵּצֵא לְקִרְאָתוֹ וְגו', יֵצֵאת מְקֻשָּׁשֶׁת כְּזוֹנָה, לְפִיכָךְ וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בֵּת לֹאֲה: (בראשית ל, טז)

[Reish Lakish said to Yosei of Maon] ‘What is the essence of: “Behold, all who cite proverbs”?’
He [Yosei of Maon] said to him: ‘There is no cow that is prone to gore that does not have a calf that kicks. There is no woman who engages in promiscuity that does not have a daughter who engages in promiscuity.’ They said to him: ‘If so, Leah our matriarch was a harlot?’ He said to them: “Leah came out to meet him...” (Genesis 30:16) – she came out adorned like a harlot.’
That is why, “Dina, daughter of Leah...went out.”

Both mother and daughter change their spatial domain, but the outcome is different, even though a Talmudic figure such as Reish Lakish associated them through a provocative and seductive behavior²⁷¹. Unfortunately, the Biblical text does not detail the boundaries and trespassing of fissures associated with severe and cruel consequences.

c) Jael.

In two different instances Jael “goes out” of her tent to greet and invite first Sisera and then Barak, two high ranked Generals. She is not afraid. The tent is her safety room, her shelter, her dominion. She owns the place and feels comfortable in it, but she is also brave, and without being asked she takes the initiative to invite these prominent male figures inside her shelter, her dominion, her tent, while she is alone in her protective lodge.

²⁷¹ Similarly, Midrash Yelamdenu (ca. 5th cent. C.E.), commenting on the Mishnah (*Shabbat* 6:1) that lists what jewelry women may not wear when going out on the Sabbath (to avoid violating the prohibition of carrying), makes a connection to the Dinah story: “Dinah daughter of Leah went out”—“A woman may not go out [on Shabbat] with a city of gold, or a choker, or nose rings” (m. *Shabbat* 6:1)—even on a weekday it is forbidden for her to go out into a public place wearing these, so as not to cause herself trouble. For Dinah the daughter of Jacob, since she would often be out by herself, caused herself this trouble. This is what is written: “And Dinah daughter of Leah... and Shechem saw her.”

וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לְקִרְיַת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֲדֹנָי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא וַיָּסֵר אֵלָיָהּ הָאֱהָלָה וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ בַשֹּׁמֶרֶת:

Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, “Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.” So, he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. (4:18)

וַהֲגִיעָה בָּרַק רִדְהָ אֶת־סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לְקִרְיַתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ הֵן וְאַרְאֶךָ אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיָהּ וַהֲגִיעָה סִיסְרָא נִפְל מִתּוֹ וַהֲיִתֵּד בְּרַקְתּוֹ:

Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, “Come, I will show you the man you are looking for.” He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple.

The first scene displays a game of motherhood, protection and caring, when Jael invites Sisera to turn and find shelter in her tent, contrasting with her own action, i.e., the killing of the man. The tent represents compassion for the wounded soldier, intimacy for the binary male-female scene alone in the structure, and belligerence in the outcome. The second scene brings Barak on stage. Barak does not have Sisera’s location, so it’s Jael who guides him. Once again, she needs to outer her tent, her haven, and chaperon Barak into her place. Jael and her tent become pivotal resources to the scene, in which victoriously she reveals Deborah’s prophesy “God will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” (Judges 4:9)

d) Michal.

וַתֵּצֵא מִיכָל בַּת־שָׁאוּל לְקִרְיַת דָּוִד וַתֹּאמֶר מִה־נִּכְבֵּד הַיּוֹם מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר נִגְלָה הַיּוֹם לְעֵינֵי אִמָּהוֹת עַבְדָּיו כַּהֲגִלּוֹת נִגְלּוֹת אֶתֶד הָרָקִים:

David went home to greet his household. And Michal, daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, “Didn’t the king of Israel do himself honor today exposing himself today in the sight of the slave-girls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might expose himself!”. (II Samuel 6:20)

When king David returns victoriously from the war zone after recovering the Ark of the Covenant, his dancing and whirling seems inappropriate for a monarch’s behavior in the eyes of his wife Michal. So, Michal intercedes with the king, her husband, reminding him of the honor

he carries as a ruler and as transporter of the Ark²⁷². Michal's bravery is attached to the next verse, perceived as a punishment, that indicates that she dies childless, without offspring. The Scripture is ambiguous, it does not indicate if she was sterile, infertile, or maybe the union between David and Michal was dismissed because of the episode of the inapt dancing. The text does not even tell us who had the initiative to terminate the marriage union. The reader might wonder if it was Michal who did not want to spend the rest of her life with a companion that did not know how to behave. Michal, daughter of a king and wife of another king bridges the tribes of Benjamin (king Saul) and Judah (king David). She links the protected settlement of the palace with 'going out' to encounter her husband in the street dancing as a commoner. She dances in the vast space of many domains.

k) Sheltering Haven: Staying in?.

The agency of *וַתֵּצֵא* - *vatetze*, going out, is contrasted with what's written in Psalm 45:14,

כָּל-כְּבוֹדָהּ בֵּית-מֶלֶךְ פְּגִימָה מִמִּשְׁבָּצוֹת זָהָב לְבוּשָׁה:

“All the dignity of the king's daughter is inside”

It is unclear what is the reason for this proclamation. The principle states that a woman sitting inside her home regards her dignity by not being exposed to the temptations of the outside world, as if socializing outside her home, her palace, would diminish her status as the daughter of the monarch.

The Jerusalem Talmud²⁷³ narrates the story of a woman whose children become important priests and all of them are praised. They attributed the fate of this lady's distinguished children to the

²⁷² She told him: “Today the honor of the house of my father Saul has been revealed. Come and see the difference between you and my father's house. All the members of my father's household were modest, and no one would see even a bit of their hand, and not even a bit the size of a thumb of their body, and all were more distinguished than you. But you stand and reveal your clothing as one of the worthless ones!” David answered her: “Did I make merry before a flesh-and-blood king? I made merry before the King of kings, who chose me from among your father and all his house. If your father had been more righteous than I, would God have chosen me and rejected your father's house? In your father's house they stood upon their own honor instead of the honor of Heaven. As for me, I do not do so—I disregard my own honor and stand upon the honor of Heaven”. JT Sukkah 5:4, 5:5; Num. Rabbah 4:20; Midrash Shmuel 25:6, ed. Buber, 119–120.

²⁷³ JT Tractate Horayot, 3:2.

fact that she is a woman whose dignity stays at home, i.e., her modesty's reward is reflected in the accolades her children receive.

Maimonides²⁷⁴ points out “It is a reproach to a woman who is always out, sometimes outside and sometimes on the streets. And the husband must prevent his wife from doing this, and he will not allow her to go out except once a month or twice a month, as needed, that there is no beauty for a woman except to sit in the corner of her house, that is how it is written for every honorable daughter of a king inside”.

As a renowned medieval commentator, Maimonides expresses another position on spatial domains for women. Contrasting with the outgoing women of the Bible, this Middle Age statement depicts perhaps an historiographical reality of protection towards women, or it might illustrate a male dominion of the time.

“Going out” or “staying in” are skims that browse social instances and women's confidence and empowerment throughout timelines.

Conclusion

In the marketplace of biblical ideas, the female characters move in an ecosystem of spatial domains that transcend the areal surface, playing an important role of territorial dominance.

In a nomadic society the dynamic movement inside and outside the tents, the vast bodies of waters, the path to access wells, the shades of trees, the protection of walls and window lattices, the unexpected battlefield of conquests, and the holistic views from the hills invite women's agency to act as protagonists. Spatial domains and the constant movement surrounding this concept play a significant role of symbolic acts, that surpass the ethos of the space inviting the bibliophile to seek between the lines of the text, guiding the reader into the world of the unpredictable and the unknown. Women change the space and so they change the course of their lives.

²⁷⁴ Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, Medieval commentator, Spain-Egypt, 1135-1204.

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