



Women in the Bible

Hebrew Bible: Women Warriors

Judges 4–5, Judith

There may be a temptation, even based on the few stories we have read so far, to see only two types of feminine power in the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, characters like Hagar and the Tamar who appears in 2 Samuel have largely had their power stripped of them, even to the point of rape. In contrast, a character like Isaac's wife Jacob or the Tamar who appears in Genesis gains power only through trickery or apparently dishonest means. Dr. Vayntrub wants to challenge that binary by looking at examples of women warriors in the ancient Near East.

Song of Deborah (Judges 5)

There are three women in this story, all holding different roles and types of power: Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's mother. It is told first in prose in chapter 4 and then recounted again, with some important differences, in poetry in chapter 5. That latter chapter is often called "the Song of Deborah" and may be the earliest surviving sample of Hebrew poetry. It is written in first person and "sung" by Deborah and Barak, the commander of the Israelite army.

Deborah is a prophetess and the only female judge recorded in the Bible (Judg 4–5). When the Israelites have been oppressed by King Jabin of Canaan for twenty years, Deborah summons Barak to instruct him about how to take down Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army. Curiously, Barak agrees to her plan but only with a caveat: "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (Judg 4:8). He seems to trust in the power she has from her connection to God as a prophetess. Deborah says she will go but warns him: "The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judg 4:9). Toward the end of the Song of Deborah, we find out the identity of that prophesied warrior woman: Jael.

Jael is an unlikely warrior for Barak's army. She is not an Israelite; Deborah's song says she is married to a Kenite. This means she lives in close proximity to the Israelites, and the text designates her as being "of tent-dwelling women most blessed" (Judg 5:24). Jael's name is another metaphor from the natural world. Jael means ibex, which is the large mountain goat that has horns curved toward its back. In Deborah's song, Jael fulfills the prophecy Deborah made in the previous chapter. She impales Sisera, the commander of the enemy army, on a tent peg. After his violent and immediate death, Sisera sinks to

Jael's feet (Judg 5:27). This may be a sexual allusion because "feet" in the Bible is often a euphemistic reference to the genitals.

For Sisera to be killed by a woman is the ultimate humiliation at this time. Jael's power, therefore, is both a physical overpowering of an enemy warrior *and* an exercise of her power to take his dignity in his final moments. In both cases, this is about as far from the domestic sphere as we can get. There is also an element of sexual power in Jael's story. She is able to lure him into her tent when he asks her for water. Deborah's prophecy was that Sisera would die by a woman's hand, and it came to pass that his lust for Jael was part of his downfall.

The third woman in this story is Sisera's mother. The Song of Deborah pivots to Sisera's mother immediately after his death. "Why is his chariot so long in coming?" she wonders (Judg 5:28). She and her maidservants agree that Sisera must not be home yet because he is dividing the spoils of war with his men. "A girl or two for every man," they imagine (Judg 5:30). The irony, of course, is that Sisera has not gotten his girl; indeed, she has gotten him.

Ancient Near Eastern Context

Dr. Vayntrub points out that the Israelite "thought world" emerged from its context of the ancient Near East. Israelite ideas about gender were intermixed with those of their neighbors, for example: the Canaanites.

The Canaanites had goddesses (and demonesses) woven through their mythology. Anath, for example, was a beautiful goddess famous for her brutality on the battlefield. It is possible that Jael's story would have evoked images of Anath in an ancient Israelite's mind.

Another character from the ancient Near East "thought world" is Lilith. Although originally a goddess from Sumerian mythology, she appears in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in later Jewish folklore. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet predicts a day of vengeance in which the world will be a wasteland. "They shall name it No Kingdom There, and all its princes shall be nothing. Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses" (Isa 34:12-13). It is in this wasteland that the night demoness Lilith finds her place to rest, along with the owls and the buzzards (Isa 34:14). Her comfort in that place should indicate that this is not a place that we would find particularly comfortable. Dr. Vayntrub mentions that the myth surrounding Lilith has her wandering the earth, stealing other women's husbands and children because she has none of her own.

This example, along with that of Anath, shows some of the thoughts about women's power that existed in the wider mythology surrounding the authors of the Hebrew Bible.

After the Hebrew Bible

One other famous woman warrior from the Bible is Judith. Depending on your version of the Bible, it may appear between the Old and New Testaments in a section called Apocrypha, or it may not be there at all. The apocryphal books are not part of the Hebrew canon, nor are they part of the version of the Bible that most Protestant denominations uses. The apocryphal books appear in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testaments, and readings from the Apocrypha are included in Anglican, Episcopal, and Lutheran Churches' lectionaries.

Judith is a rich and attractive widow living in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. “She was beautiful in appearance and was very lovely to behold. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields” (Jdt 8:7). She is also known by all to be fiercely devoted to God.

When her fellow Israelites speak against God for not delivering them from the Assyrians who were oppressing them, she takes on the problem as her own. “The Lord will deliver Israel by my hand,” the young widow promises Israel’s leaders (Jdt 8:33).

After a lengthy prayer to God (Jdt 9), Judith adorns herself with her finest jewelry and clothing and walks out of her town, straight into the custody of the Assyrians. She uses her beauty to convince the patrolmen to take her to the commander of their army, Holofernes. She pledges herself to him as a slave. Once she finds herself alone with him in his tent, she waits until he gets drunk and falls asleep before cutting off his head, giving it to her maid, and fleeing back to her own people with it!

Her story is reminiscent of Jael’s: an attractive woman takes advantage of a powerful man’s desire for her in order to get him alone and kill him brutally. As the story explains it, Judith’s power comes from her great faith in God. Each time she accomplishes a daring feat, it is only after a prayer to God for guidance. Her widowhood allows her to be remarkably independent, and she never remarries. The book ends with a proclamation: “No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death” (Jdt 16:25). The power of her actions long outlives her.

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