



Judges

Judges 4-5: Jael and Deborah

Female Protagonists in a Patriarchal Book

The Book of Judges may be a patriarchal book, but chapters 4-5 remind us that it is not so patriarchal that you cannot have exceptions. The story of Deborah and Jael is striking because there are two female protagonists. Not only is it rare to feature two women so prominently in the biblical tradition, but these women also assume roles that would typically be filled by men. Deborah is both a prophet and a judge who it seems the people are not willing to go to war without, while Jael is the one who ultimately delivers the death-blow to their enemy.

The presentation of gender in this text is nuanced. There is an underlying implication that being defeated by a woman ought to be humiliating and the text shows no obvious interest in advancing women's liberation. Yet the centrality of Deborah and Jael in this story can be empowering, even if the text is not exactly "proto-feminist." The storyteller's choice to have women fulfill the powerful roles of hero and victor is significant.

The Song of Deborah

Chapter 5 presents a poetic version of essentially the same story told in chapter 4. The song of Deborah, as it is called, is considered by many to be one of the oldest texts in the biblical canon. This is in part because the song of Deborah includes references to tribes that we know did not survive in later periods, as well as unique descriptions of the ways in which those different tribes ally with each other. The text appears to be pre-monarchical and could have originated as early as the 11th c. BCE. The prose narrative found in chapter 4 may have been a later attempt to reconstruct history based on the song of Deborah's poetic account.

United Against a Common Enemy

This story uniquely captures the social and political dynamics at play during this time. According to the song of Deborah, Israel's peasantry "grew fat on plunder" in the days of Jael (Judg. 5:6-7). These lines indicate that tribes living in the hills during this period would often attack and plunder traveling caravans. Plunder was a means of survival for the people of Israel, so when

Canaan's kings tried to put a stop to these robberies, the tribes were called upon to "come to the aid of the Lord."

Coming to the aid of the Lord here is equated with coming to the aid of your own people because it was assumed that whatever was good for your own people must also be good for YHWH. What we find is that tribes that were otherwise independent were willing and able to cooperate when faced with a shared external threat.

Resisting Kingship

There is conflict throughout the Hebrew Bible about whether monarchy is good or bad. Many of the stories in Judges contain a thread of resistance to the idea of having a king. Even in early debates about the pros and cons of kingship, however, it is important to remember that an imperial-style kingdom was not on the table. People were accustomed to the existence of smaller city-states during this time (Philistines, Phoenicians, Canaanites, etc.) rather than large nation-states. Yet the king of a small village was still considered a king nonetheless.

It is difficult to know if this thread of distrust in Judges is evidence of an ongoing debate in Israel or if it is a reaction to the monarchy's fall re-inscribed later by the Deuteronomist. It makes sense that the tribes living in the mountains would have been generally suspicious of any kind of centralized authority. If these collected stories already existed prior to the Deuteronomistic Historian's intervention, they were probably read as stories about "the good old days" before there was a king in Israel.

Disobedient Heroes

After obedience leads to the success of Israel's conquest in Joshua, a new era of disobedience begins in Israel with the Book of Judges. Yet it is Israel's disobedience that allows for fascinating hero figures like Deborah to rise up in these stories. The stories in Judges are compelling in part *because* of the disobedience that makes them possible.