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Motherhood, Machismo, and the Purpose of Yahweh in Judges 4-5

JOHN GOLDINGAY

How is God's purpose achieved in the world? How is oppression (sometimes) brought under control and justice (sometimes) done? How do men and women play a part in the achieving of such ends? And how are they affected by their involvement in these affairs? I have been struck by the way a story in Judges 4-5 suggests perspectives on these questions.

In her very suggestive study of the Book of Judges, *Death and Dissymmetry*,[1] Mieke Bal notes that (male) study of Judges has focused on an attempt to trace the history of the book's composition and to establish the chronology of the period to which it refers. The assumption that this focus will open up the key concerns of the book has tended to make such study ignore another potential 'coherence' of the book. 'The Book of Judges is about death', Bal says in her opening sentence. It focuses on the violence exercised by men on men corporately, by individual men on individual women, and by individual women on individual men.

The historical 'reading' of the book has purported to be *the* reading. In truth it is *a* reading, one which emerges from the concerns of the readers with matters such as chronological history and the assumption that that is where the theological significance of the book lies. Bal points us to another approach to the text which may do justice to other aspects of it, aspects of far-reaching significance for a violent world and Church. Hers, of course, is a feminist reading. Mine, which has profited much from hers, may rather be a masculist one. It is a reading aware of issuing from the interaction of Scripture and a man's experience, and wanting to allow each to illumine the other. Perhaps such a reading can access aspects of the richness of this text which was given by inspiration of God to be profitable for the upbuilding of the man or woman of God which have been inaccessible to a traditional historical approach.

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1 University of Chicago, Chicago/London 1988. Among other works from which I am aware of having profited are A. G. Auld, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1984); M. Bal (ed.), *Anti-Covenant* (Almond Press, Sheffield 1989); J. C. Exum, 'The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp 410-31; J. Hercus, *God is God* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1971); L. R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Almond Press, Sheffield 1989); J. A. Soggin, *Judges* (SCM Press, London 1981); M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1987); B. G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (JSOT Press, Sheffield 1987); J. G. Williams, *Women Recounted* (Almond Press, Sheffield 1982).

The judges: a series of unlikely heroes

In Israel's world as in ours a significant role was fulfilled by officially-recognized leaders of church and world with their institutional positions, by kings such as David, Solomon, and Josiah. When there were no kings in Israel (and, indeed, sometimes when there were), the role had to be played by people who had no institutional position, people who were the ancient equivalent to Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Bob Geldof. They are usually referred to as 'judges,' though administering the legal system is not prominent in the stories told about them. In the Bible's way of speaking, being a 'judge' is a matter of seeing that God's 'just and gentle government' of the world becomes a reality. That involves bringing people the gift of freedom, so that judging people is not so different from bringing them salvation and they can as easily be called 'saviours' as 'judges'.

By definition the judges were people who had no place in an institutional or constitutional structure. Neither were they people who would have had such a place if there had been such a structure, as is apparent when one considers who they were. The first was Othniel, who brought about a famous victory over an Aramaean king with a name long enough to mirror the threat he signified to Israel; and Othniel was merely Caleb's younger brother. A theme of these stories is announced: we know very well already from Scripture that younger brothers are despised by human reckoning but/and favoured by God. The second judge is a man called Ehud, who indulged in an assassination worthy of a place in a late-night horror movie. He had to do his stabbing with his left hand, because he was disabled (not merely left-handed, as the translations say).[2] He was not the sort of person who could have been a king (for kings such as Saul and David are emphatically handsome blue-eyed boys) or a priest (for priests had to be physically without blemish, like the sacrifices they offered). The third judge was an obscure man called Shamgar son of Anat, who killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. 'He too delivered Israel', the story comments; but his name marks him as Canaanite (and Anat is the name of a Canaanite goddess) who presumably acted on his own people's behalf and benefited Israel only accidentally.

Later in Judges we will read of the liberating, judging activity of a further line of unlikely heroes, unlikely in their case not because of their position in society but because of their personal and moral qualities. There will be the disbelieving, fearful, sign-seeking, vengeful Gideon, who ends up leading Israel into the idolatry from which the judges were supposed to deliver people. There will be his son Abimelech, who was so stupid he wanted to be king (a post no-one in their senses ever covets). There will be the outcast Jephthah, who was willing to kill his daughter rather than reconsider his relationship with Yahweh. There will be Samson with his fateful addiction to sex and violence.

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2 He was *'itter yad-ye mino*, 'bound/lame as to his right hand'.

Deborah: judge, prophet, leader, poet

Amidst such a line, Deborah has the right to hold her head rather high, even if it will not be surprising if she too turns out to have her blind spots. Let it not be said that a woman cannot hold her head high as a leader. The encouragement her portrait offers scarcely prepares us for the horror of the way a woman is treated in the last story of the Book of Judges, though the violence even of her story perhaps does.

The stories of younger brother Othniel, handicapped Ehud, and Canaanite Shamgar have put question marks by eldest-ism, able-ism, and racism; Deborah's story will undermine sexism. They have all been marginal people, such as everyone knows God does not use — the young, the disabled, and the foreign. Now there appears a woman. Everyone knows they have no place in the structure of responsibility and power. Their job is to follow the men's lead.

When Deborah is introduced, the story places great emphasis on her being a woman. She is 'Deborah' (a woman's name, of course), 'a prophetess' (Hebrew has a feminine noun for that like English), and 'woman' or 'wife' of Lappidot. Even this word 'lappidot', meaning torches, flames, or flashes, is a feminine word, a strange usage if it is the name of a man. Perhaps 'woman of flashes' is a description of Deborah herself, not the name of her husband. This would then fit with the fact that her husband is not otherwise mentioned — a married woman tends to be described as 'the wife of so-and-so' more often than Deborah is. She is not even identified by her father. She operates as an independent person: she is just 'Deborah'.

Many of the names in this story do seem to be significant. Deborah's name means 'bee'. That other characterization as 'woman of torches' hints at her being a woman of fire, a woman who flames and flashes, as indeed she is. She is a woman with the gift of prophecy, with a sting in her tail and a flash in her eye. With the help of Yahweh her story will subvert the patriarchal presuppositions of Israel's social order (or ours). She is a woman who takes the lead, and does so in national life; there is no hint that a woman's role is confined to the home. The story we are about to consider begins with the Israelites as thralls and chattels and ends with them once again free to control their own destiny; the change comes about because of the initiative of a woman.

She is almost the first person to be called a prophet in Israel's story. Abraham was once called a prophet because he was a person whose prayer God heard (Gen. 20:7). Miriam was called a prophet because she was someone who led Israelite women in praise (Exod. 15:20). Bee is the first named prophet who brings a word from God that shapes history in the way the word of God will do in the Books of Kings. She will not be the last woman in the prophetic line; it continues in the persons of figures such as Isaiah's wife and Huldah. It is perhaps also as a prophet that she leads the singing preserved in Judges 5, like Miriam after the Israelites' escape from the Red Sea. To judge from Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2, and 1 Cor. 14, she stands as a promise regarding the way God can use a woman, a promise open to being newly fulfilled once the Holy Spirit is at work in the church of Jesus.

She was also active as a judge in Israel. In general, judgment in the sense of deciding legal cases was the business of the senior men in the community, who would gather in the square inside the city gate to decide on legal matters. But on some occasions of contention people might have recourse to a person who was known to have special insight and who would be asked to decide between their conflicting claims. In a famous story two mothers went to Solomon to get him to resolve a dispute over who was the true mother of a child, and he has the God-given wisdom to be able to do so in a way which makes absolutely clear which of them is the pretender (1 Kings 3). Bee was that kind of wise woman. Her wisdom, too, came from God. She sat under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, available for consultation. That in itself hints at God's involvement. This was no ordinary palm tree. Palm trees do not grow on the ridge of the mountains of Ephraim a thousand metres above sea level, and the word the story uses is not the ordinary word for a palm tree but one also used for a pole or column, a religious object which reminded people of the presence of God, like the pillar Jacob set up at Bethel. Bee sat there in the presence of God and sought God's wisdom for people. So as well as being Israel's first proper prophet, this woman is Israel's first proper judge (in the sense of someone who sorts out disputes). Her woman's insight is given by God, given back to God, and used by God.

She is 'a mother in Israel' (5:7). The Book of Proverbs shows how parents in Israel shared with each other the responsibility and authority to provide for their children and to teach them the ways of godly wisdom. The story tells us of no family of her own that Bee had, but as a metaphorical mother she exercised a parent's responsibility and authority over Israel. As someone who combined the role of judge, prophet, leader, and poet, there is no doubt that she is the greatest figure in the book. It is certainly striking that the only person in scripture who combines all these roles is a woman, but then it is often the case in our culture, too, that women have to learn to live with a more bewildering and demanding combination of roles than men do!

The crisis Deborah confronts

The situation in which Deborah initiates the action is the one which recurs through the Book of Judges. Israel had turned its back on Yahweh, who had responded by casting it off for a while and allowing it to come under the control of 'King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor'. The second phrase helps to make sense of the first. The Canaanites were the indigenous population of Palestine, in possession of the land before the Israelites. They were not one political entity, however, but a series of independent city-states, and in this sense there was no such thing as a king of Canaan as a whole. But Hazor was much the biggest Canaanite city, and we know that its king was viewed as *the* king in Canaan by the far away power in Iraq.

The city of Hazor stands in a commanding position fifteen kilometres north of Lake Galilee, controlling the highways north to Lebanon, north-east to Syria and Iraq, south to Palestine and Egypt, west to the Mediterranean. It is an imposing site, a kilometre square, not much by modern standards, but

gigantic by those of ancient Palestine; no other city comes near it. The story of Joshua conquering this huge city (without a miracle) in Joshua 11 is a far more astounding one than the story of his conquering little Jericho. But Israelite possession of it evidently did not last, for it is again a centre of Canaanite authority, ruled by a different Jabin (presumably) from the Jabin of Joshua's day. His name may also be significant, in an ironic way. It means 'discerning.'

Jabin's army commander is a man called Sisera. His name is significant for a different reason. It is not an Israelite or Canaanite one; the best guess is that it is Philistine. The Philistines migrated into Canaan from the Greek islands, just after the Israelites from the opposite direction. It was they who gave the country the name 'Palestine'; we do not know the location of Sisera's city, though it is significant that its name was 'Haroshet of the Gentiles'. The Canaanites, Philistines, and Israelites lived in uneasy coexistence in the country, sometimes two of them in alliance against the third. We have noted the hint that the Israelites could at least recognize Canaanite Shamgar as someone with whom they shared the Philistines as a common enemy. More often, perhaps, it was the Canaanites and Philistines who were in alliance, and this is one of those moments. These two peoples have combined forces and they hold the Israelites in a pincer.

Some awareness of Palestinian geography helps to clarify one way in which they did that. To oversimplify, the main part of the country (west of the Jordan) divides into four blocks. The northernmost is the mountains of Galilee. The southernmost two blocks comprise the mountain ridge north and south of Jerusalem, which among the Israelites was allocated to the tribe of Ephraim and the tribe of Judah. Between these mountain areas is a sizeable plain.

Either side of the plain and controlling communications in both directions lie Hazor and a number of other cities such as Bet Shean, Taanach, and Megiddo, which were in Philistine or Canaanite hands. The Israelites live in the mountains either side of this plain and have difficulty reaching each other because of these powers in between, like Palestinians trying to get between different parts of Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza today. Caravans cease and travellers have to avoid the main roads and travel by sidetracks that will bring their own hazards (5:6).

The fact that the Israelites lived in the mountains reflects the fact that they were the technologically less sophisticated people of their day (again, like contemporary Palestinians in the West Bank). Jabin and Sisera had a vast fleet of iron-reinforced chariots, but the iron age has not dawned on the Israelites, who lack even sword or spear (5:8). As ever, the technologically more sophisticated nation can use its expertise to control the destiny of the less sophisticated.

Only when they saw the trouble they were in through turning away from Yahweh did the Israelites turn back and cry for help from Yahweh. Their 'crying for help' deserves noting. It is one of a number of ways in which a story such as this one reminds us of the Israelites' rescue from Egypt and their

receiving their new home in Canaan. During their oppression in Egypt and during the generation they spent as nomads in Sinai they had often 'cried out for help' to Yahweh, and received it. Their experience of oppression in Canaan, deprived of true enjoyment of the homeland promised them there, is like a continuation of that earlier experience. After all, the name of the villain, Jabin, is the same. The technological problem is the same; it was the Canaanites' possession of superior equipment that had hindered the Israelites' making a more complete job of occupying the land in Joshua's day (Joshua 17:16; Judges 1:19). The Israelites therefore respond to the crisis in the appropriate way. Their experience in Egypt and in Sinai proved that Yahweh was the kind of God who hears the cry of the oppressed, even when their oppression is their own fault. They know they have to live with the exodus-Sinai God as exodus-Sinai people. They set their hope on the exodus-Sinai God honouring that.

Barak the reluctant general

Apart from crying out to Yahweh, as far as the story tells us, the Israelites do nothing — until Bee makes them. She sends for a man called Barak ben Abinoam, Barak son of Abinoam (adding a man's father's name or a woman's husband's name being the equivalent of adding their surname in English). Barak belonged to the tribe of Naphtali and lived in a town in northern Galilee called Kedesh, well beyond Hazor. Bee herself lived near the southern end of the area of the tribe of Ephraim. They come almost from two extremes of the area of the tribes most affected by the constraints imposed by Jabin and Sisera. The tribes Barak summons are the major Galilean tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali; the other tribes who also take part are from the mountains on the south side of the plain, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Machir (Manasseh), along with Issachar, who shared the plain itself (in theory) with Zebulun. Other tribes a little further away are chided for not taking part; those of the far south are not mentioned (see 5:14-18).

Something else links but distances Deborah and Barak. Barak's name is again significant. Bee was the woman of 'flashes'; 'Barak' itself means 'lightning'. They are very similar people, but very different.

So Bee summons Lightning. 'Yahweh the God of Israel commands you, "Go, take up position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Qishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand."' Mount Tabor and the River Qishon stand on the northern and the southern sides of that plain which the Canaanites and the Philistines control; the main road which the Israelites cannot use runs past these places on its way from Damascus and the east to the sea coast and Egypt.

The pattern of Israel's original victories over the Jabins of Joshua's day is being repeated: once again Israel is being challenged to take on the Canaanites against all the odds. God gives Lightning a command and a promise. If he will do what God says, he will see God act. The Israelites will not really have

to fight; all they will have to do is provoke Sisera to action and then receive the victory Yahweh simply gives them. Yet they do have to muster, march, and provoke. What God does could not come about without God acting; but it could not come about without the human army acting, too. Victory involves people and commanders offering themselves willingly and marching down from the mountains to the plain prepared to do battle, yet even their self-offering is a reason for praise of God (5:2, 9), presumably because even it reflects God's providence or inspiration.

Why summon Lightning in particular? I have this fantasy that this was exactly the question he asked. 'Why me?' Certainly his response is all of a piece with the way people like Moses, Gideon and Jeremiah responded when God summoned them. The last thing Lightning wants to do is take on a Canaanite army with 900 chariots which distinctly tip the balance of forces the Canaanites' way. Lightning does not wish to be cast into the macho role of the great military hero, especially when he can weigh up the odds. 'Why me? Why wasn't I fishing in the River Jordan when Bee's message arrived? Why wasn't the phone off the hook?'

So his fax back to Bee was, 'I'll only go if you come with me. You're the one who's thirsting for a battle, itching to indulge your reckless enthusiasm, at a moment when a bit of rational thought points in a quite different direction. I'm quite willing to keep my head down and wait till the Canaanites go away. I would really rather settle for a quiet life. But if I am to go, you must come too.' Barak wants to hide behind the skirts of the woman through whom God speaks; he is unsure whether God will be there if God's representative is not. God wants him to stand on his own, humanly speaking — to stand on his own with God, in this sense to be a man. Lightning has God's skirt to hide behind; he does not need a woman's, even a woman who is the most remarkable leader/judge/prophet/poet he will ever see.

For of course it was not merely the message of a stinging, flashing woman. It was the message of Yahweh, who was capable of being somewhat macho from time to time, and who proposed to be the military strategist in the planned confrontation between Lightning and Sisera. 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go,' Lightning had said. Moses had once said something along those lines, but he had been talking to God, the God who had of course promised to be with him (Exod. 3:12; 33:1-3, 12-16). It is Yahweh who is summoning Lightning. At least, Bee claims it is, though it must be said that we are not told that she was right. We are not told that Yahweh had spoken to Bee; this might be a macho woman's manipulating a peaceable man with her theology. If so, however, God strings along with Bee rather than siding with peaceable Lightning. Lightning wants to avoid becoming involved, but Bee will not let him, and God plays it Bee's way.

'I will certainly go with you,' she says. But she also has another word from Yahweh about the matter. His response was surely not peaceable but feeble. 'The path you are treading will not lead to your honour, because Yahweh is going to sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.' If Lightning insists on taking Bee with him as his lucky charm, it will be the lucky charm that gets the credit.

At first sight that is all she seems to be saying. The reality will be more complicatedly humiliating.

The battle at the Wadi Qishon

When Barak musters troops at Mount Tabor, Sisera is drawn by the bait. He and his forces with their 900 chariots gather on the other side of the plain. Bee urges Lightning to attack, promising that Yahweh has gone on in advance of Lightning and has, in effect, already given Sisera into his power. If we are to take Bee's later poem literally, the way Yahweh does that is through a tumultuous storm which comes at just the right moment to even out the odds between the two armies (see 5:19-22).

There is a piece of theological poetic justice about this. The Philistine gods were gods who manifested themselves in weather phenomena. Dagon, for instance, who will explicitly appear in the Samson story and in the account of the covenant chest's adventures in 1 Sam. 5, was a god of lightning, which adds a further piquancy to that being the meaning of Lappidot and Barak. The implication is that the real God of lightning is Yahweh, who now manifests that by acting through such natural elements and enabling agents such as flashing Bee and Lightning himself to represent on earth the energy to which Dagon and his representatives can only pretend. The Canaanite goddess Anat was also associated with the stars and rain (which was believed to come from the stars); further, she was a warrior goddess. Yahweh of course was neither male nor female, but/and had characteristics which other peoples would ascribe to their gods or goddesses, certainly including control of stars and rain. Here the power which the Canaanites attributed to their warrior goddess is attributed to Yahweh and to Yahweh's warrior prophetess.

Sisera had mustered his forces by the Qishon Wadi. A wadi is a river which flows only when it has rained, especially in the desert where it will be just a dry cleft for most of the year. But when there is a storm (maybe a distance away in the mountains), for a few hours it can become a raging torrent. The Qishon does flow all year round as a harmless brook, but the storm evidently turned it into a flood. One of its effects was perhaps to make the Canaanite chariots undriveable. One way or another the result was not merely to even out the odds between the two armies but to put them in favour of the one which was not used to relying on such technology. The Canaanite chariot forces panicked and took unsuccessful flight for home; Lightning (who was evidently learning to overcome any reluctance to play the macho hero) led his forces in slaughtering them.

Ya'el, and the downfall of Sisera and of Barak

The Canaanite commander showed himself made of wiser stuff than his troops (or so it seemed at first). The survivor is the person who can keep cool in a crisis and take rational action. Sisera abandons his chariot, which no doubt made him conspicuous as well as being no use when it rained, and disappears on foot in the direction of Lightning's own town, which was perhaps the last direction they would look for him. Near Kedesh, however,

was an industrial estate called Elon-bezaanannim which belonged to a tribe called the Qenites. Their name links them with Cain (Qain, as we might transliterate it), whose family 'made all kinds of bronze and iron' (Gen. 4:22). More recently they had become allies by marriage with the Israelites, through Moses's marriage to a Qenite. But a group such as the Qenites, like the modern Bedouin or Druze, survive by reading the political runes correctly and being on good terms with whoever is the power of the day, and still more recently they have become allies of Jabin. Given their expertise, they would be natural chariot suppliers and maintenance engineers. These technological experts have been the key to Sisera's success but are now in more than one sense the key to his downfall.

Among them is a woman called Ya'el, who in personality has some parallels to Bee and about whose position there are some ambiguities parallel to the ones which attach to Bee. She is 'wife of Heber the Qenite', according to the translations. So where is Heber when Sisera arrives? Perhaps the answer is that he had gone off with Sisera to run the chariot pit-stop services for his army, and is now on the run or dead like everyone else. But 'heber' is most often an ordinary word meaning 'company', and Ya'el may simply be being described as 'the woman who belongs to the Qenite group'. Whether or not she is a married woman, she resembles Bee in that she acts as an independent person.

When Sisera arrives at her home, expecting he is on friendly territory if these Qenites were his boss's chariot engineers (or at least were allies of Jabin), he has fled on foot the best part of fifty miles. Ya'el comes out to meet him and offers him an extraordinarily urbane and smooth welcome, in the circumstances. It is reminiscent of the welcome Abraham offered the three men on their way to Sodom, but that is not all. There is a wicked ambiguity about it. When an apparently unattached, certainly unaccompanied woman takes the initiative and invites a man into her bedroom, in any other context it would be the act of a seductress like the one who appears in Prov. 7. She, like Ya'el, might well be expected to offer a man refreshment and comfort, invite him to lie down and relax, reassure him that everything will be all right and that she will tell no-one of his visit — and then be the death of him, Proverbs says.

There is something else this points to. Ya'el's name, like others in this story, may be more than just a name. It means 'goat'. As well as its advice to avoid other women, elsewhere Proverbs gives a husband some positive hints about how to safeguard his marriage. He is to rejoice in his wife as a lovely deer, a graceful goat (5:19). In English comparing your wife to a goat would be an insult, and translations therefore use terms such as 'hind' or 'doe'. So it will give more the right impression if we call Ya'el 'Doe'. The term offers one or two more hints about Ya'el and her place in this story. It implies that she is an attractive woman; that is significant in the way the story unfolds. But further, 'goat' is also a title for another goddess, so in addition Ya'el reminds us of Shamgar ben Anat and his implicitly Canaanite faith.

Ya'el perhaps knows the predicament she is in. Whether she is an

independent Qenite woman with all the personal insecurity of that position at a moment like this (women in general, but independent women is particular, are often in personal peril in wartime), or the wife of a Qenite engineer whom the Israelites would have reason to view as a traitor, she belongs to a group who have backed the losing side. At this point (like Rahab in Jericho, as well as like Bee) she at least behaves like an independent woman, takes her destiny into her own hands, and acts in a way that brings Israel's victory to its completion in the death of Israel's enemy commander. Because she was a woman she won Sisera's confidence. He relaxed, and it cost him his life.

For like Lightning, Sisera no longer wants to be involved; he, too, has now had enough of playing the macho hero. He was physically exhausted, but when he lets himself fall very deeply asleep it is as if he also wants to contract out of life for a while, though probably not for as long as he ends up doing. Perhaps he knew that a nomadic group like the Qenites were committed to the practice of hospitality: in the desert a mutual commitment to hospitality can mean the difference between life and death. He thought he knew he could trust Ya'el. But perhaps Ya'el knew what this nomadic commitment to hospitality could mean for a woman (see the unsavoury stories in Gen. 19 and Judges 19) and is at this point, too, ready for a little role reversal.

She gets together her woman's weapons — gentleness and considerateness, cooking and hospitality, courage and unscrupulousness, a tent peg and a hammer (it was apparently a woman's job to erect the tent), and drives the tent peg through Sisera's skull as he sleeps. He must have been deeply asleep indeed; she must have used very violent force in an act which matches or even exceeds the grotesqueness of Ehud's (3:20-22). Ya'el the Qenite joins Shamgar the Canaanite (see 5:6) in the roll of honour of those who may have acted for themselves but who consciously or unconsciously also acted to free Israel. She is a deliverer, too.

Sisera's convulsions are barely over when Lightning arrives at the encampment, just too late if he now wants to play the hero and realize his destiny of being another Othniel (3:9-10). Ya'el had had no such hesitations. She now struts out boldly to tell Lightning where he can find the object of his search, and conducts him to the tent to behold the great general pathetically impaled. 'The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory,' Bee had said, 'for Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' It is doubly true, and more literally true than either of them had guessed. Even if there is no suggestion that she consciously acts for Yahweh's sake, God's work is apparently done through her, and her achievement is to be long celebrated (5:24). Sisera and Lightning have both fallen to a deceptive lone foreign assassin. Sisera's last words were, 'If anyone asks if there is a man here, say "No".' They were ironic words, with regard to himself and Lightning, who arrives just in time to view the body. Lightning reminds us of Inspector Morse's assistant (or Sherlock Holmes's), only there as foil to the great man (in this case the great woman), or even reminds us of Ehud's pathetic minders (3:24-25). Sisera's death is not Barak's victory but his defeat and humiliation.

Sisera's mother and her homely violence

May Ya'el's achievement be long celebrated, says Bee. 'So may all your enemies perish, Yahweh' (5:31). Thus, like Sisera, impaled on a tent peg and convulsed? Bee remains macho and bloodthirsty to the end. Alongside the blessing on Ya'el, member of a clan which would have been pulled both ways by this battle because of its association both with Israel and with Jabin, is the terrible curse on Meroz (5:23), apparently a Canaanite village which also had an association with Israel but supported Sisera at the crucial moment.

Did God answer those prayers, and approve them? The text is silent about that, as it was silent about whether the actual battle came about by Bee's initiative or by Yahweh's. Ya'el is in Scripture (so the prayer for her to be long celebrated is granted) but her story is not read (so it is not). It is not merely that the Church has tended to prefer men's stories in Scripture, though that is so. It is that the violence of stories such as Bee's and Ya'el's, or Ehud's and Shamgar's, makes us feel uncomfortable. It faces us with the fact of violence within ourselves, which we prefer to avoid. But it also seems at tension with the sense expressed elsewhere in scripture that the solution to violence issues from letting it be done to oneself, not doing it. Lightning is the sad figure in this story, but also an authentic one.

Perhaps the point is subconsciously made by the little vignette with which Bee's song closes. She imagines the scene back in Sisera's home town, in his villa. It is a garrison town and they are a military family. They know what it is like to psych themselves up for war, to send the men off to battle not sure how many will return or with what horrendous injuries. When they are away, everyone is jumpy and the tension builds as the time passes. No-one relaxes.

As a senior military commander Sisera would have a house in a commanding position in Haroset, a position designed to catch the breeze in summer but also thus offering a vantage point over the area around. His mother paces the floor as the time goes on and they ought to be receiving some news. She peers through the wooden lattice which bridges the stone window openings, again designed to get maximum benefit from the breeze without losing privacy, and itself indicating that this is a rather fancy villa in Upper Haroset. Her son seems a long time, he and his men.. She and her household staff keep their spirits up by discussing the good reasons that may have delayed the men, but their words do not convince us, and perhaps did not convince them. Her villa is her prison as well as her home; she dare not move away from the telephone lest the call comes. As the iron chariots had stuck in the marsh and become worse than useless to their men, so the summer villa has become a prison on the way to being a backwater to its women.

Lightning has no escape from his man's role, and she has no escape from her woman's role, though like him, in the end she has entered into it enthusiastically. Behind every powerful man is a mother.... It involves her in something of a betrayal of her own sex. Why is there no sound of a returning chariot? It must be because they have won such a stupendous

battle against those pathetic, primitive Israelites that they are working overtime dividing up the plunder. Like someone looking forward to the return of her son from a business trip abroad, she wonders what he will bring her as a souvenir: some nice native embroidery? But she thinks not just of the materials but of the people and imagines his forces embarrassed by choice among the young Israelite girls. Rape and pillage is what war is about, and she is quite happy about that as long as the Canaanites are winning. Her musings are ironic, of course, and so is the description of her staff, her 'very wise' ladies-in-waiting. They are not wise enough to recognize that the power balance has changed or to guess that womanhood has been Sisera's downfall rather than vice versa. The kind of motherhood that Bee embodies and that Ya'el embodies in active ways is also the kind that Sisera's mother embodies in a more passive way, a violent motherhood that will now grieve at what other mothers have done to her son. The returning army will bring her not embroidery but sackcloth.

Issues concerning oppression and deliverance have been resolved for a while. Questions about community relationships and family happiness remain. Even Jabin is to some degree a victim. It was God who had sold Israel to him in the first place, using him to achieve the divine purpose, and now has overpowered Jabin. Perhaps Jabin now wants to avoid being involved, like Lightning and Sisera; there must have been some reason why he avoided fighting, as Lightning wanted to, and left the task to Sisera who had more taste for such activity. But for a leader in a position like his there is no escape until the Israelites have destroyed him (4:23-24). Like his commander he will find the only escape is death.

Political questions, personal questions, and the activity of Yahweh

Bee's story and Bee's song concern some political, military, and historical questions, and some personal questions about what it means to be a man or a woman. The story began (4:1-3) the way we might expect a story about Israel's adventures in the judges period to begin, but as it unfolds it changes the agenda and subverts our expectations of such a story. It comes to be about Israelite power and Canaanite oppression, but also about women's power and patriarchal oppression. It is typical of Scripture that it interweaves these concerns: historical issues are determined through people coming to terms with who they themselves are, and people discover who they themselves are through their involvement in historical events. The crucial events are as much the ones that take place in the privacy of Ya'el's home as the ones that take place on the battlefield where the business remains unfinished.

Bee's story and Bee's song affirm the significance of Israel's activity in history, Yahweh's activity with Israel which makes their victories possible, and women's activity in a men's world. But it does that in an ambiguous and ironic way.

How *is* God's purpose realized in the world? Through kings like Jabin who are involved in the fulfilment of God's purpose all unbeknown to themselves, in ways they enjoy and in ways they wish they could escape.

Through the people of God crying out to God in the midst of their suffering (even when it is deserved). Through a woman of insight who becomes a woman of violence. Through a reluctant soldier who learns the lesson from her very well. Through a woman on her own who uses her female wiles to become a traitor and an assassin. It embraces three assertive women, three women with violent intent; Deborah and Ya'el succeed because Yahweh is with them, Sisera's mother is disappointed because Yahweh is not with her. It embraces three men trying to avoid violence and failing, three male victims, Jabin because Yahweh's purpose runs a different way, Barak because Deborah has other ideas, Sisera because he relaxes in the company of Ya'el. They all play a part in Yahweh's purpose, and in the introduction of forty years' peace in the land, for the sake of which it might almost seem worthwhile to be a victim.

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