

Excerpt from the book, “Subversive Sequels in the Bible”

In this excerpt from her book, Judy Klitsner presents the narrative of Deborah and Jael, which in many ways acts as a “subversive sequel” to the fertility-centered stories of the early matriarchs of Genesis:

Even after our best efforts to decode the Bible’s sometimes difficult language and familiarize ourselves with its style, we may find ourselves distanced and at times offended by its ethos. For instance, how is a modern sensibility to relate to a text that has God proclaiming to woman, “to your husband is your desire and he shall rule over you?” How are we to understand man’s naming woman “the mother of all the living,” a label given in the wake of humanity’s disobedience—and of man’s resulting dominion over woman—and that seems to limit her definition to childbearing alone?

I propose a particular method of reading, which I refer to as the Bible’s “subversive sequels.” As if aware of its own problematics, the Bible engages in a lively interaction between its passages that allows for a widening of perspective and a sense of dynamic development throughout the canon. If certain gnawing theological or philosophical questions remain after studying one narrative, a later passage may revisit those questions, subjecting them to a complex process of inquiry, revision, and examination of alternative possibilities. Like all sequels, the subversive sequel continues and completes earlier stories. But it does so in ways that often undermine the very assumptions upon which the earlier stories were built as well as the conclusions these stories have reached.

To return to the example of the Bible’s women: the tent-dwelling matriarchs of Genesis seem to follow in Eve’s footsteps. They are almost exclusively focused on childbearing, and they are dependent on their husbands—their only conduits to God—for redemption. When they are unable to conceive, the matriarchs question their very worth as human beings, as in Rachel’s anguished cry to her husband, “Give me children or I shall die.”

In a radical revisiting of these narratives—a “subversive sequel”—the book of Judges presents a story of two women, in which there is no mention at all of infertility, childbirth, or spousal relations. Instead, we meet Deborah, religious and martial leader of Israel and Jael, political assassin.

Deborah is introduced as a woman of Lappidoth – literally, of torches. Barak, her general, has a name that means lightning. Their combined luminescence would extinguish the mighty Sisera, who had “oppressed Israel ruthlessly for twenty years” (Judg. 4:3). But sparks of irony find their way into the story as one of the flames is reluctant to shine: after Deborah conveys God’s wishes for Barak to go to battle, he agrees only on condition that Deborah will go with him. In this tale of reversals, not only are the spiritual positions of man and woman completely transposed (woman is now

man's conduit to God); man will not even take steps toward fulfilling God's word without a reassuring feminine buffer.

After the battle is won, with the enemy Sisera still at large, a new heroine ascends the stage: Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite.

Jael's story takes place in the tent, formerly the protected, interior space of the biblical matriarch. The Book of Judges, in its continued efforts to overhaul our assumptions about biblical woman, now takes aim at the primary symbol of woman's narrow definition, the tent. Jael, like Sarah, is in her tent. But in a brazen rejection of earlier role delineations, Jael grabs hold of the tent's very foundation, the tent pin. By using it as a weapon, she strikes not only at Sisera's temple, but at the very notion of matriarchal limitation to the confines of the tent. With her action, Jael delivers a crushing blow both to the mighty general and to our stereotypes regarding biblical woman.

Together, Deborah and Jael expose a new and seemingly limitless gamut of women's capabilities, which rings out in Deborah's song of triumph:

"In the days of Jael pathways ceased; And wayfarers went by roundabout paths. Deliverance ceased...Till I Deborah arose...a mother in Israel!" (Judg. 5:6-7)

An oblique reference to Sarah, the woman of the tent, infuses Deborah's poem with ironically seditious intent. The Hebrew words *h-d-l orah*, which literally mean a pathway that ceases, occur in only two verses in the Bible: in Deborah's poem and in reference to Sarah's infertility. When Sarah overheard the prediction of her pregnancy, the text informs us that "Abraham and Sarah were old... Sarah had ceased the menstrual periods, literally 'the pathway,' of women, *hadal lihyot le-Sarah orah ka-nashim* (Gen. 18:11). As a result, Sarah had scoffed at her own value (Gen. 18:12). Deborah uses the language of Sarah's hopeless infertility, *h-d-l orah*, in an ironic manner, to refer to the Israelites, for whom traditional avenues of salvation have ceased. With her choice of words Deborah strongly hints that even when traditional "pathways" are closed off to both the Israelites and to women, there are new paths – unorthodox, unexpected, and previously unimagined – to pursue.

In the story of Deborah and Jael, the female protagonists do not merely speak of new paths; they embark on them as well. Despite the absence of children in the biblical record of her life, Deborah calls herself a "mother in Israel" (Judg. 5:7). She nurtures her people by prophesying, judging, and leading them to military victory. Jael, too, is a mother of sorts, using her tent to tend to the physical needs of others. But, like Deborah, she breaks all maternal molds, as Jael kills a man in order to save many others.

In this satirically subversive sequel to the early matriarchal stories, with their focus on tents and on childbearing, Deborah and Jael define motherhood in radically new ways. Different as they are from the tent-dwelling mothers, they too are blessed. Moreover, in the words of Deborah the prophetess:

Most blessed of women be Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, more blessed than women in tents. (Judg. 5:24)

The story of Deborah and Jael provides an ironic, and extreme, counterweight to the narratives of the matriarchs of Genesis. When viewed as opposite poles of a very broad spectrum, these stories hint at a multitude of possibilities of feminine potential that lies between.

What emerges from a study of the Bible's subversive sequels is that as the Bible repeatedly sets up its paradigms and then takes artful aim at them, woman's story is constantly under review. In fact, no biblical woman may be labeled the definitive "biblical woman." In the expansive gamut of her occupations and preoccupations, biblical woman is righteous and she is wicked; she is martial leader and she is chattel; she is a victim of rape and violence and she is a perpetrator of sexual harassment and violence. Woman is prophet and prostitute; midwife and murderer; maidservant and monarch. And when she so chooses and when she is able, she is, blessedly, the mother of all the living.