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**Overbearing Mothers and Childhood Regression:
A Feminist Psychoanalytic Reading of Judges 4-5**

ABSTRACT: Judges 4-5 is a text that can easily produce a wealth of interpretation and readings through such approaches as historical traditional criticism, redaction criticism, new literary criticism, and new historicism. As the story features two women who rise as leaders of a patriarchal society to deliver the nation in a time of war and oppression, a feminist critical approach is appropriate for interpretation of the passage. What is rather strange is the lack of feminist critics interpreting the text through a psychoanalytic lens. This paper will, therefore, read Judges 4-5 in its canonical form through a feminist psychoanalytic view with the aim of answering what such a reading can offer the current field of feminist biblical critique on this passage, in particular how two women in ancient Israelite society yielded great power over two military commanders. This text is an example of female subversion of patriarchal culture but the main concern is with how this subversion takes place: through Deborah's and Jael's roles as mothers and Barak's and Sisera's regression to childhood behaviors and mentality.

In Judges 4-5, Deborah and Jael are indeed women who step outside of patriarchal bounds and seize the moment to deliver ancient Israel. The possibility for their powerful actions is opened by way of the main male characters of the story. Barak and Sisera regress to a childhood state and become dependent upon Deborah and Jael, who act as mothers towards both men. A feminist psychoanalytic approach to this text offers a reading that gives reason and opportunity for Deborah and Jael to assert themselves in a patriarchal society.

A history of research of Judges 4-5 reveals varied readings on the text. Some take a historical critical approach and delve into textual, redactional, transmission historical, and tradition historical critiques.¹ Others focus on the differences between the actual story of the characters in Judges 4 and the retelling in song in Judges 4-5. One particular author, Arie van der Kooij, has even gone as far as to delineate one chapter as feminine and another as masculine.² This text has produced a multitude of feminist literary readings as

two women step outside of what is considered expected boundaries to save the Israelite nation, especially when it seems that the two male characters fail to act as the warriors they are. Jane Shaw explores the constructions of “woman” by other readings of the story and calls upon Gadamer, Althusser, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Fish, and Derrida to do so.³

What is surprisingly missing is a feminist psychoanalytic reading. The text is rife with seductive overtones and mother imagery and most scholars pick up on this subtext. Few feminist critics will deny that the infamous tent peg that brings about the death of Sisera is a phallic symbol and that Jael is the picture of an overbearing mother. The same critics that touch on these psychoanalytic overtones, however, fail to extend a Freudian reading throughout the two chapters. This paper will, therefore, read Judges 4-5 in its canonical form through a feminist psychoanalytic lens with the aim of answering what such a reading can offer the current field of feminist biblical critique on this passage.

In particular, this paper will respond to a specific issue brought up by Stephen W. Hanselman. Hanselman writes that this text is “a celebration of the subversion of patriarchal (literally, father based) order at the behest and hands of a woman. . . .this theme is diametrically opposed to the predominate supposition in the history of biblical exegesis of this text: that this story is about how the God of the Fathers could use *even a woman*, or would do so *only* if God’s men proved to be spineless” (italics original).⁴ He particularly chooses to focus not on the portrayal of the story in terms of male power and actions but reads it as about the power of women and their actions. While I do not argue with the statement that the text is a subversion of the patriarchal culture of the time, this paper will offer, through a feminist psychoanalytic critique, that Deborah’s and Jael’s subversive actions are a result of their roles as mothers and Barak’s and Sisera’s regression to childhood behaviors and mentality. To do so, this paper will examine the characters as their story is told. Because Judges 5 is a retelling of Judges 4 through song, I will incorporate the portrayals of the character from both chapters as I address their characters. Because of the intertwining nature of the stories, Deborah and Barak will be discussed together as will Jael and Sisera. Sisera’s mother, who is unnamed in the text, will be considered last as she has no interaction with the other characters.

Deborah and Barak: A Dictating Mother Sends Warriors to their Death

The story of Judges 4-5 begins with the conventionalized covenantal overview for the decline and rise of judges that is prevalent through the entire book. After the death of Ehud, the people (“the sons of Israel”) return to their wicked ways, a faithfulness or disloyalty standard in the story of the individual judges. The insinuation in the text is that because of their actions, Yhwh sold them “into the hand”⁵ of Jabin, king of Canaan (4:2). The narrator then notes that Jabin’s commander is Sisera, who will come into play later. The Israelites that are in the possession of Jabin cry out to Yhwh as they had been cruelly oppressed for twenty years (4:3). At this time, a woman named Deborah was judging the people of Israel.⁶ Judges 5:7 insinuates that Deborah arose as a judge in response to the debasing actions of the Israelites, which does not reference Jabin. In Judg 4:4, she is described as a prophetess and אִשָּׁת לַפִּי־דָוִת. The interpretations of this phrase vary as the nouns carry multivalent nuances and can mean, “woman of Lappidoth (a location),”

“wife of Lappidoth (a man),” or “woman/wife of fire.”⁷ Judges 5:7 adds the description of her as “a mother in Israel.”

In response to the enslavement to Jabin, Deborah calls Barak to her and states that Yhwh has ordered Barak to take ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and Zebulun and position them at Mount Tabor (4:6). There, Yhwh will deliver Sisera into Barak’s hand. Barak agrees but with one condition—that Deborah go with him. She agrees but prophesies that the victory will not go to Barak but instead to a woman (4:9). Barak gathers the required men and Deborah accompanies him into battle (4:10; 5:15). Here, the text turns to Jael’s and Sisera’s story. Deborah, however, does not disappear as she commands Barak to respond to Sisera’s advances at Tabor. After Jabin is defeated and “destroyed,” Deborah and Barak sing a victory song, which is Judges 5.

Deborah: A Mother in Israel

Deborah is described as “a mother in Israel” in Judg 5:7, so a rereading of Judges 4 with this characterization in mind would not be unwarranted. Few modern scholars would argue that this statement necessitates Deborah as a biological mother, although it is possible. Most critics consider it a part of her actions as a judge. Danna Nolan Fewell writes: “Her relationship to Israel has public dimensions, both religious and judicial, but it is not without its familial dimensions as well.”⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky states that the phrase may indicate “her arbitration powers as judge were parental, even maternal.”⁹ She adds that the title can be honorific for an authority figure of the community (see also 1 Sam 24:1 and Isa 22:21) or that she is a “matriarch” in administering Yhwh’s plan for the Israelites, similar to the matriarchs and patriarchs of Genesis.¹⁰

Others treat the appellation as a reflection of actions rather than an honorific title. Susan Ackerman writes it is in regards to Deborah being passionately committed to Israel’s well-being.¹¹ The setting of this passage in Judges 4 describes the military superiority of Jabin, a Canaanite king, demonstrated by his iron chariotry, and the enslavement of the Israelites to him, and Judges 5 shows a terrorized and oppressed people living in the hills; anarchy and oppression abound.¹² This is the situation to which Deborah arises and calls for battle. Even Judg 4:1 calls the people literally the “sons” of Israel, who have returned to their wicked ways, juxtaposing the imagery of sons with the mother in Israel, Deborah. J. Cheryl Exum states that she rises to deliver her children “from danger and makes their lives secure. She is the life-giving mother.”¹³ She is the good mother, a desire that all young girls have, according to Freud, a characterization that is important for the patriarchal society in which Deborah lives.

Deborah as mother also has a deadly side to the description. The soldiers that are gathered to fight are specifically referred to as “sons” of Naphtali and Zebulun. She sends these sons off to war where many of them will die.¹⁴ Even though the call for battle is made as the leader of the Israelites, the characterization of Deborah as a mother and the soldiers as sons cannot be ignored. She also orders them to war as a mother, which has two dimensions. As a mother, she is concerned for the well-being of the ancient nation and, for their deliverance, they must engage in the costly act of war. However, as a mother, she is also willfully and consciously sending these men, these “sons,” to their death.

Barak's Necessity for a Mother's Presence

By placing Deborah in the symbolic position of mother, the men are placed in the symbolic position of sons and even little boys.¹⁵ We have already seen how she considers the soldiers that Barak calls sons but Barak also withdraws from his status as warrior when he is first commanded to go into battle; he will not go without Deborah, without the mother.¹⁶ Ailish Ferguson Eves writes: “Deborah is not the unexpected instrument but Barak, who triggers the emergency situation by his childlike overdependence on Deborah and implied lack of trust in God.”¹⁷ It would not be a stretch to state that, in the face of this great order that could lead to his death, he regresses to his childhood where his mother is his enabler, his sustainer. He does not argue with her thereafter for she is with him. When the Israelite army marches to Mount Tabor, Sisera amasses his army and, in response, Deborah orders Barak to advance on Sisera. He obeys this command without any complaint. Exum calls him “childlike” in his dependence on Deborah and states that he “is the little boy who still needs his mother—Deborah, the ‘mother in Israel’ (5:7).”¹⁸ Without Deborah/his mother, he will not go and must have her physically with him in order to carry out Yhwh’s wishes. Judges 4:10 and 5:15 specifically state that she is “with him.”

Barak’s success in defeating and killing all of Sisera’s troops (4:16) is contingent upon the mother’s presence and possibly even upon her own physical actions in battle. Ackerman writes that when Deborah “arises” to lead her people in Judg 5:7, she is actually leading the soldiers into military combat. She writes: “To be sure, the poem makes no explicit mention of Deborah carrying weapons of war or fighting. But the poem also makes no mention of Barak doing these things, although both ancient Israelite tradition (Judges 4) and modern commentators assume that he did. Could not this same assumption hold for Deborah?”¹⁹

Even though Deborah agrees to go into battle with Barak, she places a condition upon the outcome and prophesies that the victory will go to a woman: the Canaanite commander will be delivered into the hand of a female. Deborah’s disclaimer indicates that this is already not a proper situation. We know historically that women did not lead soldiers in a military context.²⁰ Frymer-Kensky writes: “it conveys the notion that being killed by a woman shames both the dead general and the live Israelite general, who had not slain him himself.”²¹ Because Barak regresses to childhood in the face of battle and cannot separate himself from a mother figure, he suffers a sort of destruction, that of his honor. He is shamed by losing what should be his victory to a woman, which is presumably Deborah at this stage in the narrative, possibly a double shaming. If Barak requires the presence of his mother, who then tells him she will accompany him and that a woman shall win this battle, a connection is made that the woman uttering this prophecy is this woman, his mother. He is shamed by requiring his mother and his mother stealing his victory. His regression allows for the prophecy to be uttered that will set up Jael’s mothering murder of Sisera. Upon hearing Deborah’s condition, however, Barak does not reconsider what is at stake. Instead, he remains in his childlike state, which then allows Deborah to place herself in the midst of the battle by his side.

Jael and Sisera: Seductive, Deadly Mothering of a Fleeing Child

Jael and Sisera are introduced by way of Jael's husband, Heber of the Kenites, descendants of Moses' father-in-law. Judges 4:11 states that he pitched his tent away from the rest of the tribe. When Sisera learns of Barak's encampment at Mount Tabor, he moves against them and Barak, at Deborah's urging, responds. When Sisera sees the advancement, Yhwh strikes fear into him and he retreats from the battle on foot, leaving his chariot behind. He flees to Jael's tent because he is aware of a peace between Heber and Jabin (4:17).²²

Jael greets him and beckons him inside, telling him to not be afraid. After he enters, she covers him with a blanket. He asks for water and she brings him milk, once again covering him. According to Judg 5:25, she also brings him curds in a "majestic" bowl. He then requests that she stand at the doorway and turn away anybody that asks if anyone is there (4:20). Sisera then sleeps and Jael steals upon him and drives a tent peg through his mouth and into the ground behind his head (4:21).²³ The Judges 5 account does not acknowledge whether he is asleep or not when she reaches for the tent peg and drives it through his head (5:26). Whatever his state, he sinks between her legs and lays there (5:27).

Barak then appears, searching for Sisera, and Jael calls him inside her tent and shows him the dead man. Judges 4 ends with the declaration that Yhwh subdued Jabin and the Israelites pressed harder and harder upon Jabin until he was destroyed (4:23-24). Judges 5 ends Sisera's and Jael's portion of the story by abruptly switching from his death to his mother watching at her window.

Jael the Portrait of a Good (and Bad) Mother

Just as Deborah and Barak are portrayed as a mother and child, so are Jael and Sisera. When Sisera is face with insurmountable death on the battlefield, he runs away and seeks security. In this context, it is the security of a mother, and Jael, "for all appearances, is a nurturing mother, but who turns out to be a cunning assassin."²⁴ Sisera would not suspect Jael of turning on him as the text makes two notes of Jael's husband, Heber the Kenite (4:11, 17). First, he is camped away from the other Kenites and near the Canaanites. Second, it is noted that there was an alliance between the clan of the smith, who may have worked on the Canaanite iron chariotry,²⁵ and King Jabin of Hazor. This alliance would prove reason for Sisera seeking asylum with Jael.

Jael presents herself as a good mother at first. She offers him security by beckoning him into her tent to hide and then assures him by telling him to not be afraid. Once inside, she covers him with a blanket, possibly to shield him from the Israelite army or to offer him comfort, both actions of protection and comfort belonging to a mother. Sisera then requests water to drink but Jael does more than that and brings him milk and, in the Judges 5 account, also ghee, a yogurt-like dairy product.²⁶ The milk is evocative of mother's milk as if she is sustaining him with her own body's production. In a way, Jael is nursing Sisera at her breast. Mieke Bal states that it is another way to reassure Sisera further.²⁷ Once he has drank, she covers him again. He has had his milk before bedtime and she is now tucking him in to sleep. When he asks that she tell anyone that no one is

in her tent if asked, she is agreeing to watch over him like a good mother while he sleeps. Sisera has, in effect, regressed to his childhood, who needs his mother to survive. When faced with defeat and death on the battlefield, he flees to a woman's tent, who treats him like a child. But in fleeing from death on the battlefield, he enters a tent of death.

Just as the mother and death are intertwined, Jael “mothers Sisera to death.”²⁸ The text does not make the reader or listener aware of why Jael kills Sisera. Because of the peace between her clan and Jabin, it is a surprise that she would turn on the commander. Is it out of loyalty to Yhwh and/or Israel or in fear of what the commander could do to her? For a psychoanalytic reading, the answer is negligent. What is most important for her reasoning is that she embodies the fear of a child and turns into a deadly mother.²⁹ Exum writes: “But the nurturing, protective mother can suddenly, unexpectedly turn deadly. The bad mother is cold and blood-thirsty. She may attack her son in his sleep, when he is utterly defenseless (4:21). Or she may turn on him in the essential motherly act of feeding him (5:25-27).”³⁰ She who gives life—through birth and nourishment—is also the one who takes it.

Sisera's Death: Rape and Incest

Sisera's death is highly sexual in many ways. First, Judg 4:21 states that Jael comes to him secretly. Among its many meanings, בָּוֹא is also used often to describe a man coming unto a woman for sexual relations and the addition of לְאִשָׁ evokes mystery and even romance.³¹ Second, Jael places a tent peg between his parted lips before hammering it in Judg 4:21. The tent peg is easily a phallic symbol and his parted lips conjure the image of a woman's genitalia. The insertion of the tent peg is equivalent to sexual intercourse. To kill him, one blow may have been required or she may have needed to pound the peg repeated, evoking the repeated thrusts of intercourse. The insertion of the tent stake is also reminiscent of fellatio as the phallic symbol is literally placed in the mouth. The peg in the mouth may also conjure images of the oral stage as a child takes pleasure in the act of sucking, independent of the function of sustenance, compounding the sexual connotations of the use of the tent stake.

Third, in the Judges 5 account, Sisera is portrayed in a sexual posture between Jael's legs, as a would-be lover, as he falls in death.³² Judges 5:27 states that he “bowed down/sank” (פָּרַעַ) and “lay” (שָׁכַב) between her legs. פָּרַעַ has multiple meanings, including relaxation and rest, but it can also denote submission, weakness, and subjection. Bal writes that a man “can bend down over a woman to subject her to sexual acts, with or without her consent.”³³ שָׁכַב is used vastly in a sexual manner and refers often to illegitimate relations such as rape, incest, ritual impurity, adultery. According to Susan Niditch, it is also associated with death and defeat.³⁴ The three verbs used to describe Sisera's death in Judg 5:27—“sank,” “fell,” and “lay down”—is evocative of the successive phases of orgasm, according to Bal: “the first signifies the orgasm itself, while the moment immediately afterwards is expressed by “to fall”; the third verb, “to lie down,” would then express the post-orgasmic rest here equivalent to death.”³⁵

In addition, Sisera is described as “destroyed” (שָׁדָד). This term connotes being despoiled and the destruction of various enemies and cities, which are often portrayed as women in a sexual manner and are raped when destroyed.³⁶ Niditch writes:

Double meanings of violent death and sexuality emerge in every line. He is at her feet in a pose of defeat and humiliation; he kneels between her legs in a sexual pose. He falls and lies, a dead warrior assassinated by a warrior better than he; he is a supplicant and a would-be lover. This one verse holds an entire story. The final twist and nuance of tale awaits the last line, which nevertheless retains the doubleness of meaning. He is despoiled/destroyed. The woman Jael becomes not the object of sexual advances, with the improper nuances of [שָׁדָד], and not the complacent responder to requests for mercy, but herself is the aggressor, the despoiler.³⁷

In effect, Jael rapes Sisera by way of involuntary intercourse in regards to the tent stake and by the nature of words used to describe his despoiled and destroyed state.³⁸

Sex is “a visceral means of asserting power(, h)ence the origins of the image of the defeated warrior as a seduced or raped woman. Having a woman do the womanizing, the man despoiled just as he is in a position of sexual seducer himself, makes for an especially powerful portrait of the victor.”³⁹ It is a reverse rape. He is penetrated by the tent peg, to the point that it penetrates the ground (4:21). Rape destroys “a subject from within and without at the same time, a specific way of destroying the victim as a woman.”⁴⁰ The expectation of a reader or hearer would have been fear for Jael as a commander in war, the vehicle for rape and destruction, enters her tent; but when this war comes into her domain, she takes the opportunity to turn the tables on a man who could be her rapist.⁴¹

Sexuality and the mother are interwoven themes in psychoanalytic critique as the mother’s body is a source of desire, along with fear. The sexuality of Sisera’s death cannot be extricated from the previous image of Jael, which is that of mother. The passage is bookended with sexual and maternal images. At the beginning, Jael’s invitation for Sisera to enter her tent is latent with sexuality as her beckon has a secondary meaning beyond “enter.” What follows in Judges is the picture of a good mother taking care of her young son. In the end, Sisera dies in a sexual manner indicated by terminology and his posture between her legs. That position in death is also one of life, of childbirth. פָּרַע not only carries the meaning of a man bending over a woman to subject her to sex, but a woman can also bend down to give birth (see 1 Sam 4:19).⁴² One can assume that if Jael drives a tent stake through his mouth and shatters his head, a bloody mess is left before her. The blood is the waters of childbirth and he lies between her legs, a euphemism for sexual organs,⁴³ as if he was birthed.⁴⁴

Not only has Jael committed rape, she has also committed incest in two manners. One is the metaphorically sexual imagery as described above. Second, Bal suggests that the reason for Sisera offering no resistance to Jael in both passages is because they have had sex: “he was sleeping because he had just made love and because he was drunk; he

was drunk because he was gorged with soporific goat's milk or even wine, given by Jael..."⁴⁵ The mother and the son have united in the son's desire for her body. She is his comfort and pleasure as a child. That is what makes this murder so surprising and horrendous. Eves writes: "This sadistic murder of a defenseless man is heightened in effect by the incongruity of a woman, a mother figure, acting with such savagery."⁴⁶ Yes, for those who are well-adjusted and make the proper transitions to adulthood, repressing their forbidden desires, this image in an incongruous one. However, the regression of an adult man brings the result of what he fears most, his mother and death, for unchecked desires of the mother lead to disaster and punishment.

The question must be asked if Sisera's regression to childhood is forced on the part of Jael. Death on the battlefield is the trigger for the regression as he flees in search of the protection, security, and comfort of a mother. It is not Sisera who asks for milk but it is Jael who brings it to him. She is the one who covers him with the blanket. It is also she who performs the rape and incest and Sisera is an unwilling participant as he is asleep. Rather than Sisera taking on the role of child, it appears that it is Jael who takes on the role of the mother, pressing Sisera into the regressed state. I would argue, however, that Sisera allows for her take on the role of mother. He has already begun regressing when he seeks out Jael for protection but then he asks her for water, which is sustenance in itself. When she brings him more than that, he does not refuse but partakes of it. When she covers him with the blanket, he is accepting of that comfort. The logical outcome of remaining in this regressed state is uniting with his mother, which he has allowed for in the sexual connotations of Jael's actions towards him, albeit they are ones of death. His regressed state may be compounded by Jael taking on a mother role but he himself has already made the step towards his childhood and, rather than repressing this return, he embraces it, which allows for Jael to mother him to death.

Jael: More than Penis Envy

The multivalent meanings of Sisera's death do not stop with the sexual and maternal as a further layer can be teased out of the projection of Jael as acting in a masculine manner. She has metaphorically castrated him as well. Although she is a woman, her name is a third person singular masculine form of יעל.⁴⁷ She has already been portrayed as acting in a masculine manner by the act of rape and destruction, but here she is also given a masculine nuance through her name. As such, she takes on the role of male in the time of war by acting as a soldier in battle with the assassination of Sisera.⁴⁸ She also acts as a male in war time by raping the "loser," the victim, here Sisera. She also assumes the role of the male in the sex act performed in his death. She compels intercourse with him by forcing the phallic tent peg between his lips, which also, in effect, compels him to perform fellatio on her "phallus." Jael has made Sisera a woman by placing him in the submissive role, the one who accepts the domination of the phallus; she has castrated him. He has been punished through castration and death for his desire for his mother, for regression to his childhood.

One could also posit that Jael has forced homosexuality on Sisera. According to Freud, homosexuality is one result of the inability of a boy to separate himself from his mother and transition into adulthood. Here, the result of Sisera's regression could be

considered a homosexual death. Jael has become a man through name, rape, and assassination, and also by the way in which she institutes sex acts upon Sisera. Sisera, as a man, performs fellatio upon a phallus, thereby making him a homosexual.

Jael castrating Sisera has obviously made him less of a man by removing his manhood. Her actions may be the result of Sisera's order that she stand in the door of the tent and tell anyone who asks that no "man" is there. Bal calls his order a riddle. First, he does not have the authority to be giving such orders under his present circumstances. Bal writes:

At first sight a question of presence, its ambiguity allows it to be interpreted as a question of identity that assimilates the order to the riddle. The question is not...*who* the man will be, but *what* he is: a man or not a man. ...For Sisera, the answer was obviously meant to deny his presence; it was an order to lie. For Yael, the speech-act was a riddle, and riddles have perfect truth-value. Hence, the answer meant for her: no man. The riddle consists, then, of finding out how a man can be no man. (italics original)⁴⁹

Bal states that the answer is then that Sisera is a dead man and Jael proceeds to make that truth.⁵⁰ In calling it a reverse rape, Bal hints that the sexual acts destroy him as a man and treat him as a woman,⁵¹ but a psychoanalytic reading would add a further dimension and say that the answer is to make him no-man, to make him a woman, for even a dead *man* is still a *man*. Jael does as such by forcing him into a submissive position through sex and by castrating him. She also does this by simulating a homosexual act. In the patriarchal society of this day, homosexuality was condemned mostly because it placed a man in the submissive position of woman by being penetrated. Jael plays the dominant masculine role through the various actions described above, which forces Sisera into that of a woman, taking in the penis through the lips of the genitalia and the mouth. She has rendered him a no-man and, therefore, presents the truth of who is really in her tent.

Returning to the mother imagery, Jael can also be viewed as the phallic mother. While Sisera himself does not fantasize about his mother's penis, she has been endowed with one in the text. Her portrayal as mother is almost impossible to deny and her wielding of a phallic symbol is almost just as hard to ignore. Sisera's regression allows for Jael to at least be viewed as a phallic mother in the story.

These sexual acts by Jael are more than just the result of penis envy. Indeed, the initial reading of the text does insinuate penis envy as she wields a fake phallus. However, she has made herself into a man through raping and castrating Sisera and through forcing him into homosexuality. While the tent stake may be a prosthetic penis, her masculinity complex advances much farther than a female fantasizing that she is really a man. She does more than hope for a penis, she takes one by making one from the stake and then by castrating Sisera, taking his penis. She has not accepted her own "castration" but has forced it on others and defiantly stands up to men by way of killing Sisera.

Has Jael regressed to the stage in her life where she was supposed to make the transition from recognizing her own castration to mature adulthood? The possibility is tantalizing. Faced with the commander of the Canaanite army who could rape and/or kill her and also with being caught harboring the enemy commander, she regresses to a childhood state as well. She acts like a mother would because she identifies with her mother but then she proceeds to refuse that identification as she becomes a man in her deadly actions towards Sisera. Her response is to lash out against that childhood state, not by moving towards mature adulthood but by acquiring a penis.

Sisera's Mother: The Anticipating Mother

Sisera's mother appears only in Deborah's song in Judges 5:28-30, juxtaposed with her son's death. She watches through her window and wonders what has delayed Sisera. The wisest of her ladies gives her an answer and she repeats this to herself. The armies must be finding more spoil and dividing it among themselves. This spoil includes two women (literally, "womb") for each man, dyed cloths for Sisera, and embroidered cloths for the neck of the commander's mother. The text then abruptly turns to the perishing of Yhwh's enemies and that the land then had forty years rest (5:31).

Sisera's mother is portrayed as "the quintessential enemy woman..."⁵² She serves as a mirror to Deborah and Jael.⁵³ This woman's motherhood is what is emphasized as she lacks a name or an affiliation with a husband and she is, therefore, juxtaposed to Deborah's and Jael's motherhood. Ackerman eloquently connects the two this way: "As (5:27) ends, Sisera lies ravaged between Jael's legs in a pose of sexual submission; in the very next line, we see Sisera's mother, the woman between whose legs Sisera as a newborn first lay. ...Sisera lies helpless at Jael's genitalia in the same way that he once lay helpless at the mouth of his mother's womb..."⁵⁴ Sex, death, and motherhood are all wrapped up together in this transition.

Just as a good mother would, she is concerned for his welfare and hopes for his success as she anxiously waits at the window for his return. Rather than entertain thoughts of his death, she instead entertains thoughts of the spoils of victory, women for the soldiers and costly cloths for her. She anticipates two women for every man. The text uses the term, **רֶחֶם**, which means womb. These two wombs are, literally in the text, for the head (**רֶשֶׁת**) of every soldier. Coupled with "womb," the head of the soldier is evocative of the penis.

So, in truth, Sisera's mother is not thinking of these women as anything other than being useful for sex and becoming mothers. These women, however, will not be brought home to Canaan as spoil to become wives or concubines for Canaanite soldiers and mothers to Canaanites children. Instead, Sisera is raped by a woman, a symbol of the women he had hoped to rape. Ackerman states: "The only women who will be a part of Sisera's entourage in the future, then, are his mother and her female courtiers as they march and mourn in his funeral procession."⁵⁵ Even here, sex, death, and motherhood are intertwined. A mother hopes for the return of her son, whom she hopes has acquired women as spoil, but he is instead dead at the hands of seductive, deadly mother; while she wishes for "women booty," he has become a woman's booty.⁵⁶

Bal paints Sisera's mother as a bad mother by setting her up as a foil to Deborah. As Deborah begins the passage, Sisera's mother ends the passage. Deborah is a respected prophetess, but Sisera's mother cannot even discern her son's fate. From the perspective of Israel, she is indeed a bad mother because she wishes for Israel's daughters to be taken captive by Canaanite soldiers.⁵⁷ The text does appear to use Sisera's mother as foil to Deborah and Jael, but she has managed inadvertently to be a prophetess when she muses two women for every soldier's head and it is two women, Deborah through the call to war and Jael through literally smashing Sisera's head, who have spoiled the head of the commander.

Conclusion

Judges 4-5 is a text that can easily produce a wealth of interpretation and readings. As Judges 5 is possibly the oldest text of the Hebrew Bible,⁵⁸ it begs for a historical critical interpretation. The retelling of the story, with its minor differences from Judges 4 to Judges 5, yields a multitude of works that take a redactional approach. New literary criticism and new historicism are regularly applied to the passage. Most popular in recent articles is a feminist literary and historical approach. What is rather strange is the lack of feminist critics to interpret the text through a psychoanalytic lens. A history of research and even this paper show how scholars have noted the Freudian overtones in the passage. These same scholars, however, fail to apply a psychoanalytic approach to the whole of Judges 4-5.

Rather than simply explore the text in its canonical form through a psychoanalytic approach, this paper aimed to explain how such a critique can answer the particular concern of how two women in ancient Israelite society yielded great power over two military commanders. This text is an example of female subversion of patriarchal culture but the main concern is with how this subversion takes place: through Deborah's and Jael's roles as mothers and Barak's and Sisera's regression to childhood behaviors and mentality.

In Judges 4-5, Deborah and Jael are indeed women who step outside of patriarchal bounds and seize the moment to deliver ancient Israel. Their possibility for their powerful actions is opened by way of the main male characters of the story. Barak and Sisera regress to a childhood state and become dependent upon Deborah and Jael, who act as mothers towards both men. A feminist psychoanalytic approach to this text offers a reading that gives reason and opportunity for Deborah and Jael to assert themselves in a patriarchal society.

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NOTES

¹ Most standard commentaries take this historical critical approach.

² Arie van der Kooij, "On Male and Female Views in Judges 4 and 5," in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes* (edited by Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra; Leiden: Brill, 1996). See also Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (translated by Matthew Gumpert. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 115-134.

³ Jane Shaw, "Constructions of Woman in Readings of the Story of Deborah," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (edited by Mieke Bal; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989): 113-132.

⁴ Stephen W. Hanselman, "Narrative Theory, Ideology, and Transformation in Judges 4," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (edited by Mieke Bal; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), 98.

⁵ All translations are those of the author.

⁶ The connotation of שָׁפַט is widely debated, especially as it is used for a woman as well as the male judges in the book. According to BDB, the verb can also mean to govern and to lead as well as to judge. This definition includes the acts of giving law, deciding controversies, executing law, and includes the connotation of civil, religious, political, social actions (BDB, 1047). This paper will use "judge" and

“leader” interchangeably and will not alter the terminology because Deborah is a woman. The text does not give any indication as to why Deborah instead of a man is a judge of Israel and Eves writes: “She is not introduced as an emergency substitute for the men who have failed to come forward (as some would interpret Judg 4:4; cf. Judg 5:6-7). Her standing in society is a secure and accepted one as a prophet through whom God speaks. As such she, not her husband, is the accepted leader, a judge” (Ailish Ferguson Eves, “Judges,” in *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* [edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002], 133). This concern, however, has no bearing on a psychoanalytic reading.

⁷ As much as feminist critique would like to make of this description as other than “wife of Lappidoth (a man),” this interpretation is the likelihood for a patriarchal text. Even so, this husband makes no appearance in the text and is a moot point for Deborah’s actions. Fewell states: “It is not, however, Deborah’s relationship to her husband that will prove significant, but her relationship to Israel and to her appointed commander” (Danna Nolan Fewell, “Judges,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* [expanded edition; edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 75). Eves speculates that that it is her marriage that allows her to act as she does within a patriarchal society, especially as a matriarch and mother figure (Eves, “Judges,” 133).

Schneider, however, states that the phrase *אִשָּׁה לְפִידוֹת* is a third element of the narrator’s description of Deborah. The pattern of a third element notes a quality about character, such as birth order or being left-handed. She writes: “The concept of a fiery personality is more in keeping with that position in her introduction than is her marital status” (Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* [Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000], 67. Just as this is a pattern, so is the oft-used familial designation. By making Deborah “a fiery woman,” any familial relation, even to her father, is removed from the text.

⁸ Fewell, “Judges,” 75.

⁹ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah 2,” in *Women in Scripture* (edited by Carol Meyers; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 67.

¹⁰ Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah 2,” 67.

¹¹ Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 43.

¹² Eves, “Judges,” 133; Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 208.

¹³ J. Cheryl Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?,” in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (2nd ed.; edited by Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 71.

¹⁴ Exum, “Feminist Criticism,” 72.

¹⁵ Exum, “Feminist Criticism,” 71.

¹⁶ Fewell states of Barak’s wishy-washy answer to Deborah’s call: “It is unclear whether Barak’s response indicates cowardice, lack of self-confidence, or distrust of Deborah’s authority. . . . In Caleb’s day all the people heard God’s command to conquer the land, and Israel was assured victory (1:2)” (Fewell, “Judges,” 75). Scholars vary in stating that his refusal is cowardice or further evidence of Deborah’s high standing as a judge (Robin Gallagher Branch, “Deborah,” in *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* (edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 134).

¹⁷ Eves, “Judges,” 133.

¹⁸ Exum, “Feminist Criticism,” 71.

¹⁹ Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 31.

²⁰ Niditch states that Barak's refusal to go into battle is not cowardice but because, "within the worldview of literature, he is wise to know that victory comes with the presence of God's favorite" (Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* [The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 65). If this were the case, then Deborah would have willingly gone with him without a disclaimer. She places a condition of his request because this request is not one he should be making.

²¹ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Jael," in *Women in Scripture* (edited by Carol Meyers; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 98.

²² The reason for this peace is speculative. While this issue is important for other readings of the text, particularly historical critical, it is negligent for a psychoanalytic reading. For a strictly feminist reading, a critic could be concerned with the fact that Jael does not honor the peace when she kills Sisera as this peace has been imposed upon her as a woman in patriarchal society. According to Soggin, the clan of Heber the Kenite had dualistic loyalties and had yet to be involved in the conflict. When Sisera flees to Jael, she must make a decision in regards to whom she must align and, therefore, acted within what she felt was her real duty by assassinating Sisera (J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* [The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981], 77-78).

²³ The root of *בְּרִיקָתוֹ* is often translated as "his temple" from *בְּרִיקָה* but the word can also be translated as "his parted lips" from the root *בְּרִיקָה*. The importance of this translation for a psychoanalytic reading will be discussed in greater detail later.

²⁴ Exum, "Feminist Criticism," 71.

²⁵ Fewell and Frymer-Kensky speculate that the Kenites were metal smiths and Heber was camped near the Canaanites to repair their weapons (Fewell, "Judges," 75; Frymer-Kensky, "Jael," 97).

²⁶ Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 90.

²⁷ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 213.

²⁸ Fewell, "Judges," 76.

²⁹ Bal states that the violent nature of how Jael kills Sisera reflects extreme anger and she criticizes other scholars for not addressing this issue. However, she does not address it either (Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 215).

³⁰ Exum, "Feminist Criticism," 71.

³¹ Susan Niditch, "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (edited by Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999), 307.

³² Niditch, "Eroticism and Death," 309.

³³ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 103.

³⁴ Niditch, "Eroticism and Death," 309-310.

³⁵ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 103.

³⁶ Niditch, "Eroticism and Death," 310; Niditch, *Judges*, 81.

³⁷ Niditch, "Eroticism and Death," 310-311.

³⁸ Bal goes as far as to say that Barak is raped as well: "Sisera's death by the hand of the woman is foretold by Deborah to Barak's shame. And indeed, Barak will consume his shame at the end of the story when he is, finally, invited, like Sisera, into Yael's tent, only to find the object of his desire—the capture of the enemy leader which would bring him honor—both within and outside of his reach. The shame that

befalls Barak, the Israelite leader, is a reflection of the shame that befell Sisera, to be raped like a woman, by a woman” (Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 218).

³⁹ Niditch, “Eroticism and Death,” 313.

⁴⁰ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 215.

⁴¹ Frymer-Kensky, “Jael,” 97-98.

⁴² Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 103.

⁴³ Niditch, “Eroticism and Death,” 308.

⁴⁴ Bal calls the image one of stillbirth (Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 228).

⁴⁵ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 129. The text does not give any indication that Jael and Sisera had intercourse but it is possible to speculate the scenario given Jael’s invitation into her private tent, Sisera’s heavy sleep, and the heavy sexual imagery throughout.

⁴⁶ Eves, “Judges,” 133.

⁴⁷ Ellen Van Wolde, “Deborah and Ya’el in Judges 4,” in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes* (edited by Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra. Leiden: Brill, 1996), 292.

⁴⁸ Niditch amusingly calls her a “guerilla warrior” (Niditch, *Judges*, 67).

⁴⁹ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 144.

⁵⁰ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 144.

⁵¹ Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 215.

⁵² Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah 2,” 76.

⁵³ Eves, “Judges,” 134.

⁵⁴ Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 130.

⁵⁵ Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 131.

⁵⁶ Niditch, *Judges*, 82.

⁵⁷ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 134.

⁵⁸ Soggin, *Judges*, 80, Schneider, *Judges*, 85