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*The Bible Workbench*

**Response to “Otherness and Motherness:  
Psychological Forays into the Hebrew Scriptures”**

*Monday, November 23, 2009*

The three papers today fall under the loose rubric of “Psychological Forays into the Hebrew Scriptures.” There are interlocking issues among the three—analysis of biblical characters and their behavior in all three, exploration of the self-revelatory qualities of texts in Barbara Leung Lai’s treatment of Isaiah and Adrien Bledstein’s approach to David and his relationship to his mother, and the images of motherhood in Bledstein’s portrayal of David’s mother and Ginny Brewer-Boydston’s analysis of Deborah, Jael, and Sisera’s mother in Judges 4 and 5.

Before offering my specific comments on these three papers, I want to revisit for a moment the challenges of using psychological approaches to biblical characters. As I have written elsewhere,

. . . regarding the psychological analysis of biblical personalities it is essential to recognize the limitations of the biblical text with regard to psychological contents. The authors and compilers of the text did not use psychological language, nor did they intend to write case histories or personal journals. Although certain aspects of biblical terminology can be translated into psychological terms by analogy, the ‘psychological human’ is a distinctly modern phenomenon.

Despite the vividness of biblical personalities such as the prophets, patriarchs, and matriarchs, and the almost irresistible urge to psychoanalyze them, one must keep in mind that layers of transmission, tradition, and literary development have placed us at a great distance from the living persons (if, indeed, some of them even were historical persons). What we know of the biblical world is only a small piece of the totality of the cultures, and what we find in the Bible is a smaller sample yet. Few contemporary therapists would venture a diagnosis of a patient from such partial and modified evidence.

“Historical psychoanalysis” of Bible characters has been a popular and highly abused psychological approach in the past, rightfully deserving the scorn it has received. Wayne Rollins’ assertion that such efforts still offer significant potential requires a caveat. Recognizing that true psychoanalysis is impossible is essential, given that the analysand is not present and that literary composition, convention, and transmission have shaped biblical personages beyond mere personality factors. On the other hand, psychological literary critics have long appreciated that literary characters do indeed have a “life of their own.” Part of the power of literature depends on constructed characters that accurately reflect human experience and behavior. Exercised with great caution to avoid the historical and literary naiveté of earlier efforts, psychological criticism can clarify and highlight psychodynamic factors exhibited by and through biblical figures.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential, when using a psychological lens, to remain clear about just what one is examining. A common and serious pitfall is to confuse the historical world *behind* the text with the vivid and engaging world *of* the text. Are we indeed tracing the evidence of a living, breathing human being, or are we describing the verisimilitude of a vivid literary character? The boundaries are not always clear, and without a careful sensitivity to the context, culture, and literary reshaping of the biblical text, it can be tempting to fill in the blanks with pieces that may not even be parts of the puzzle, assumptions that range far beyond what can be supported in the text, and reliance on assertions of what “surely must have been the case,” or “could easily be imagined.”

### **Ginny Brewer-Boydston**

I’d like to begin my response with the middle of our three essays, Ginny Brewer-Boydston’s “Overbearing Mothers and Childhood Regression.” She summarizes her intentions in this way:

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.

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<sup>1</sup> (*Psychological Biblical Criticism*, pp. 14-15)

Brewer-Boydston is clear throughout that she is looking at characters and characterization in the narrative and the poem of Judges 4 and 5 and not at historical accounts. While noting that there are issues of historical fact and interpretation that are significant in historical readings of the story, these are not relevant to psychoanalytic interpretation of the characters and how they are portrayed.

When she speaks of “mothers”—whether it is Deborah, the “mother in Israel,” or Jael, the “deadly mother” of Sisera, “the fleeing child,” it is clear that we are dealing with metaphorical language that evokes some of the deepest attachments and dreads of human experience. The question here is not what kind of mothers these women may have been historically, but of how the (capital “M”) Mother role that they play brings powerful psychological dynamics into the story of women who triumph over the men who would ordinarily be expected to be the main characters of the tale.

Although she conflates the prose narrative of chapter 4 and the poetic narrative of chapter 5, it is clear that there is justification for doing so—the close proximity and specificity of the two expressions of the story make it plainly evident that they are based upon the same core story, and thus can be seen as complementary to each other.

What has Brewer-Boydston’s feminist-psychoanalytic reading contributed to our understanding of this text? It is evident that it is a story about women (Deborah and Jael) triumphing where men (Barak and Sisera) have failed. But her interpretation has highlighted both the psychological dynamic of strong mothers and regressive sons that makes this inversion not only possible, but perhaps inevitable, and likewise hammers home (if you will excuse the pun) the reversal of images of sexual conquest and domination that usually keep women “in their place.”

[T]he 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.

One small critique I would make concerns the homosexual overtones of Sisera’s death. Brewer-Boydston cites Freud’s opinion that “homosexuality is one result of the inability of a boy to separate himself from his mother and transition into adulthood.” While this is an accurate description of Freud’s belief, that idea holds little traction today. It seems to me that the implied “homosexuality” in Jael’s treatment of Sisera is rather an expression of the humiliation of the defeated enemy; an extension of the “rape” by Jael who has taken on the male role in killing Sisera.

### **Barbara Leung Lai**

As you might anticipate from my opening comments, I consider Barbara Leung-Lai’s “Psycho-Dramatic Reading of Isaiah 6,” “Total Otherness, Self-Condensation, and ‘Mission Impossible,’” a valuable model for mining a text for the traces of a historical person behind it. She is careful to identify which “world” of the text she is examining, and brings to bear the appropriate tools for

identifying that personality. She acknowledges the history of interpretation of the text, and the areas of disagreement about the form and purpose of the text.

Isaiah 6 presents several elements that make it promising for the kind of psychological excavation that Leung Lai undertakes. It is a first person expression; it can be linked clearly to a historical context; it evokes in readers a strong sense of being addressed by a vivid personality.

I greatly appreciated the video presentation, which invited us to approach the text in another way than our usual rational/interpretive mode. My one suggestion would be to make the video more reflective of Lai's own recognition that the scene is not focused on the prophet, but on the image of God on the throne—as it currently is formulated, it leads us more into a third-person observer role than as a first person participant.

Leung-Lai uses a multi-faceted perspective to track Isaiah in this text- the relationship of the "I voice" to self-consciousness and authenticity in the text; a determination of the genre of the text to identify what the conventions might be and how the responses of the prophet might be expected or surprising; intertextuality—examining other uses of language and expression, again to highlight the expected or unexpected, and analysis of the different voices in the text following the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin.

All of this serves not simply to describe the text, but to enable an appropriation and deeper understanding of the prophet's own relationship to this "call." Leung Lai's three "readerly questions"—how are we to understand each of Isaiah's two responses to this vision? and what are the implications for our overall understanding of the chapter?— lead us to an appreciation of Isaiah's experience, which may well find significant points of connection with our own.

### **Adrien Bledstein**

A number of difficulties present themselves when we turn to Adrien Bledstein's paper on "David's Mother." The first, and most obvious, is that she is not here with us. However earnestly Hal Ellens may seek to represent her, his thoughts are not her thoughts and his ways are not her ways. Many of us know Adrien and are familiar with her previous work, but that may or may not be useful in our approach to this paper. Due to our concern for her well-being we might find ourselves being more defensive of her work than she herself might be about it, or we might completely misconstrue a key point in her approach. In some ways, that fact may serve to remind us of how difficult it is to reconstruct the mind and attitudes of someone who not only is not currently present, but has not been so for some three thousand years.

The second difficulty is that this essay is part of a much larger project, "What Was David Thinking? The Voice of David and the Voice of Tamar," which integrates the Psalms tradition attributes to David with the narrative about him in 1 Samuel 16 through 1 Kings 2. Much of the work of that overall study is assumed as background for this presentation, and the absence of the arguments for associating a given text in the Psalms with an episode in the life of David is a significant weakness.

Bledstein appears to be seeking, as Leung Lai did, an historical personality behind the text. But I fear her choice of texts is nowhere near as promising as Isaiah. I am not an expert in the Psalms or in the Royal Narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel and Kings, but I do know that there are huge questions that have bearing on whether one can identify a personality for David at all, and, I would suggest, nearly impossible to get a handle on David's mother.

Bledstein rightfully states, "Little is known about David's mother." We might venture to say that, like all human beings, David had a mother. But what do we do with the serious contention raised by that wing of biblical scholars known as "minimalists" that argue that the entire David cycle is a pious construction of a much later era, containing at best only tiny bits of historical memory, unsupported by archaeological evidence? Does a fictional character necessarily have a relationship to a fictional mother?

Even if we are not minimalists and are willing to grant that David was, in fact, a living person, what can we know about him from biblical texts? I find Bledstein's work with the stories in Samuel to be more successful (although here I believe she is working with the character of David and still not approaching the historical David). The problem becomes huge when looking for an "I" voice in the Psalms.

What reliable evidence do we have that the Psalms express David's own inmost thoughts? Tradition has attributed the Psalms to David, but only about a dozen offer any specific context, and attempts to correlate specific Psalms to specific events in the story of David have been problematic at best.<sup>2</sup> The remaining sixty Psalms connected to David are described as psalms, prayers, *michtams*, *shiggaions*, לְדָוִד which is translated as "of David," but can mean not only "composed by David," but "dedicated to David," or even "concerning David."

I suspect that the "David" of the Psalms and the "David" of the Samuel narratives are different characters—perhaps based in the same distant person, but neither expressing that personality clearly.

Let me venture a contemporary, and admittedly rough-hewn analogy. You might recognize the name of Casey Jones. He was an historical figure, a famed engineer who was involved in a major train wreck in Vaughan, Mississippi on April 30, 1900. He was trying to make up time on the route when he came upon a

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<sup>2</sup> Psalms with specific incidents include: 3 "when he fled from Absalom"; 7 "concerning Cush the Benjaminite; 30 "at the dedication of the house of David;" 34 "when he changed his behavior before Abimelech;" 51 "when Nathan the prophet came to him;" 52 "when Doeg the Edomite told Saul David was at Ahimelech's; 56 "when the Philistines took him in Gath"; 57 "when he hid from Saul in a cave;" 59 "when Saul sent and they watched the house to kill him;" 60 "when Saul sent and they watched the house to kill him;" 63 "when he was in the wilderness of Judah;" 142 "when he was in the cave;"

freight train stopped on the track ahead. His heroic efforts to remain in the cabin and slow the train before colliding enabled him to spare all the passengers on his train from all but minor injuries, although he himself was killed. This incident gave rise to more than 40 differing versions of a song. A verse in one version runs:

When he pulled up that Reno hill,  
He whistled for the crossing with an awful shrill;  
The switchman knew by the engine's moan  
That the man at the throttle was Casey Jones.  
He looked at his water and his water was low;  
He looked at his watch and his watch was slow;  
He turned to his fireman and this is what he said,  
Boy, we're going to reach Frisco, but we'll all be dead.

This is a song “for Casey Jones,” or “concerning Casey Jones.” It is related to an historical event in his life (or at least the end of it). But note that Mississippi has now become Reno, Nevada, and Jones’ destination is “Frisco.” Does anyone think that “Boy, we’re going to reach Frisco, but we’ll all be dead,” should be understood as a reliable expression of Casey Jones’ thoughts at that moment?

Bledstein compounds the difficulty by reading elements into the text which do not seem to appear there, such as in her interpretation of Psalm 22:10-11:

he draws upon his mother’s teaching that he is connected with YHWH from birth. He evokes the image of YHWH as the midwife to his mother, the One who attended the birth and made mother and child feel safe. . . “You drew me from the womb, made me secure at my mother's breast. I became Your charge at birth; from my mother's womb You have been my God” (TNK Psa 22:10-11). From the literal meaning of verse 11 “Toward you I was sent from the womb; from my mother’s belly You are my God,” David believes his mother dedicated him to YHWH from the moment he was born. David’s early nurturing encourages him to enjoy his mother’s perception that he is a gift she devotes to God’s service, as Hannah is recorded devoting Samuel and as Leah expresses gratitude in naming David’s ancestor Judah, “YaH-Be-Praised.” It is most likely his mother named David “Beloved.”

I am not sure where it is that we find reference to David’s mother’s teaching, or an indication that she perceives him as a gift, nor that there is any analogy to the stories of the dedication of Samuel or the naming of Judah.

Bledstein also suggests that certain phrases that appear in the Psalms are personal expressions by the author, rather than simply literary conventions. To give just one example, “from my mother’s womb” is a common phrase not only in the Psalms, but appearing in speeches by Sampson (Judges 16:17); Job (1:21; 3:10; 31:18), Isaiah (49:1,5), Jeremiah (20:16-17). It seems more likely that the

use of the phrase in the Psalms is more a conventional way of saying “from the beginning” than a specific reference to one’s mother.

I would welcome some clarification and further supporting arguments, but I fear that Bledstein, at least in this paper, has not made her case.