

A Typology of Judges 4-5 and its Relationship to Other Prominent Biblical Women Sydney Beckmann, Valdosta State University, US

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Judges 4-5 and the relationship between Deborah, Jael, and the Mother of Sisera as a lens through which to better understand the constructed relationship between Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary. In viewing these characters typologically, one sees a pattern develop in which the women are presented on a spectrum of passivity, activity, and sexuality. Each story depicts three women in which one character is totally passive, the other totally active and sexual, and the third is the intermediary character. While the narrative of Judges 4-5 exists as a single biblical account, the narrative of Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene was constructed by many people over hundreds of years. This paper argues that, in constructing the Eve, Mary Magdalene, and The Virgin Mary figures, the early Church, specifically the Early Church Fathers, constructed a similar spectrum of women found in Judges 4-5. However, unlike in Judges where the value is assigned to the active/sexual heroine, the construction was inverted so that the value was assigned to passivity and the suppression of female sexuality. This paper does not argue that the Early Church Fathers specifically referenced Judges 4-5 when constructing their narrative. Rather, it is likely that this portrayal of women was common, and they drew from these popular depictions, though inverting them to suit their specific agenda. The interpretation of Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary has been and continues to be influential to the role of women in Western society. Therefore, using Judges 4-5 and understanding more completely the history and deliberate construction of these depictions has implications not only in scholarship for the interpretation of other female biblical characters but also more practically for society and the place of women within it.

INTRODUCTION

As comparatively minor figures to men, there are certain women in the Bible who feature prominently. With few examples of outstanding women, it becomes important when similar portrayals and patterns develop between them. This paper will examine Judges 4-5 and the relationship between the three female figures as a lens through which to better understand the constructed relationship between Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary. In viewing the characters typologically, one can better understand the role played by these prominent female biblical figures as well as the lasting effect of their interpretation on the role of women in Western society.

SET ONE: EVE, MARY MAGDALENE, AND THE VIRGIN MARY

Much of recent feminist biblical scholarship has been devoted to Mary Magdalene. Though perhaps not yet as pervasive in Western society as a whole, within academia it has been well-

established that the view of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute is entirely unfounded. Nowhere in the New Testament is Mary Magdalene ever described as a prostitute or as being sexually promiscuous. This view comes from a long history of interpretation and the subsequent development of the “composite Magdalene,” which describes the conflation of multiple female characters into one composite image of Mary Magdalene.¹ By reading the four gospels together and through specific interpretation, Mary Magdalene became synonymous with the woman who anoints Jesus and Mary, the sister of Martha. One of the most important developments from this conflation resulted in assigning the character traits of the anointing woman to Mary Magdalene. Through this connection, Mary Magdalene becomes the sinful woman who repents and, out of deep love for Jesus, anoints him. As De Boer notes, this interpretation of Mary Magdalene leads to a more positive depiction of her that emerged in the Middle Ages, that of Saint Mary Magdalene.² Though this more positive view of Mary Magdalene eventually emerges, her image remains tarnished as a sexually promiscuous sinner. While later interpretations may have emphasized her repentance, implicitly her sin and sexuality were also emphasized in that she had to repent for something. In this way, she was never disassociated from this negative imagery, which was not connected to her originally.

The Virgin Mary, in contrast, traditionally was interpreted positively and used by the church as the optimum female figure whom all women should emulate. The Church Fathers focused on her virginity as a way of emphasizing her purity. According to Haskins, the significance of the Virgin Mary resulted from the growing asceticism at the time.³ As a virgin, Mary did not have the same level of connection to sexuality as other women. Especially because she kept her virginity throughout the pregnancy and birth of Jesus, the Church Fathers regarded her as the purest of all women.⁴ The Early Church Fathers maintained power through asserting female passivity. Therefore, the Virgin Mary was esteemed for her virginity and also for her passive nature. She was seen as the ideal woman who kept her virginity and purity by acting only in the ways deemed appropriate by the Early Church Fathers. As Young summarizes, “She was the asexual woman

¹ Esther De Boer, *The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 80.

⁴ Marina Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 52.

whose body was simply a vessel for the birth of Jesus and who remained forever a virgin.”⁵ In establishing the Virgin Mary as the example for all women, the Early Church Fathers doomed all other women to failure as the qualities of the Virgin Mary are unachievable. Even her title, the Virgin Mother, is an oxymoron and inapplicable to women. This is a quality unique to the Virgin Mary, and yet women were expected to achieve this standard.

Sharing a connection with the two Marys is a third female character. Eve is particularly associated with negative imagery. Traditional interpretation views her as the person responsible for all sin in the world. In this way, she is the exact contrast to the Virgin Mary, who brings Christ into the world. The Virgin Mary is often described as the “Second Eve” and is thought to be the corrected and bettered version of the first Eve.⁶ The Virgin Mary brings about the salvation of all humanity by birthing Christ, whereas Eve brings about the Fall of humanity and introduces sin. Eve is specifically connected to sexuality, in part, through Augustine’s influential interpretation of the creation narrative in Genesis. According to Augustine’s interpretation, before their banishment, Adam and Eve refrained from sexual intercourse, and lust was the result of their banishment.⁷ The significance of this interpretation on the idea of sexuality, and eventually, Mary Magdalene is that it connects the sin of sexual desire specifically to Eve and, therefore, all women.

These three women, then, can be viewed on a spectrum of passivity, activity, and sexuality in which Eve is the active/sexual character, the Virgin Mary is the passive character, and Mary Magdalene then takes the middle ground. She is connected to Eve because she is considered sexual, sinful, and unable to emulate the Virgin Mother’s standards, but she resembles the goodness of the Virgin Mary in that she eventually repents and, by becoming more like the Virgin Mary, she performs a profound act of love for Jesus in anointing him. In this capacity, Mary Magdalene, as the middle character, works to reinforce the dichotomy in which women are either “good” (passive/non-sexual) or “bad” (active/sexual).

These three women and the traditional interpretation of their characters throughout history have contributed significantly to the role of women in Western society. There are certainly other

⁵ Pamela Dickey Young, *Women in Christianity*, ed. Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173.

⁶ Riane Eisler. *Sacred Pleasure* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 266; Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1993), 80.

⁷ Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage, *Sexual Practices & the Medieval Church* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1982), 11.

elements to these women as well as varying interpretations in scholarship, but a large part of the interpretation of their identities has been in relation to their passivity, activity, and sexuality. Using this typological understanding, it is possible to more thoroughly understand them by examining the similar portrayal of women in Judges 4-5.

SET TWO: Jael, Deborah, and the Mother of Sisera

The story of Deborah occurs in both prose and poetic form. The two accounts differ not only in form and style but also in narrative detail. The two accounts share a unique relationship found in only one other story of the Bible. Judges 4-5 and Exodus 15, the Song of Moses, are the only two narratives that occur sequentially in both prose and poetic form.⁸ These two poetic accounts considered together point to an Ancient Israelite tradition of composing victory songs.⁹ The difference, however, between the Exodus narrative and the one in Judges is in the level of human participation. The narrative in Judges depicts humans participating more directly in their own victory.¹⁰ This detail of human participation is important because, in Judges, human participation and subsequent victory is fought by unlikely heroes, namely women.

Determining the authorship of both Judges 4 and 5 is a difficult and debated matter. The authorship of chapter 4 is simply unknown. It is clear that there are later editions to the narrative. The best way of understanding the authorship is to look at these editions, especially in relation to the poetic form in chapter 5. The relationship between 4 and 5 will be discussed below. The first verse of chapter 5 indicates that Deborah and Barak are the ones who sing the song that is to follow. However, there is speculation as to whether or not the inclusion of Barak is a later addition. As Soggin notes, the verb used is in the feminine singular, implying that the subject is really Deborah and that Barak is a later addition.¹¹ It seems clear from the rest of the poem and its references to Deborah that the poem was intended to be attributed to her. Additionally, this type of authorship parallels Exodus 15 in which Moses is thought to be the intended speaker along with the children of Israel.¹² Most scholars, however, agree that verse one of Judges 4 is an editorial heading and is

⁸ Baruch Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography," *The Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 4 (1983): 379-380.

⁹ Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 215.

¹⁰ Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 76.

¹¹ Alberto J. Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1981), 84.

¹² Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 222.

not indicative of authorship.¹³ Scholars also note that vs. 7, which uses the first-person form of the verb, is questionable, and scholars like Lindars suggest that it should be translated in the second person.¹⁴ This translation would be consistent with the rest of the poem in which Deborah is referred to in the second and third person.¹⁵ These reasons lead the majority of scholars to conclude that Deborah is not the original author of Judges 5. However, there are scholars like Adrien Bledstein who suggest that one should read the book of Judges as a satire composed by a female author and specifically understanding Deborah to be the author of chapter 5.¹⁶

Dating both chapters is also a debated issue. Zucker and Reiss date chapter 4 to the 7th century and chapter 5 to the 12th century.¹⁷ There is a general consensus among scholars establishing Judges 5 as one of the oldest writings in the Bible. Thus, chapter 5 is given an early date before the rise of the monarchy, and it is typically thought to be contemporaneous with the events that it depicts. However, just as with the authorship, there is no certainty regarding the dating of the material. As Niditch points out, most of the Book of Judges shows an influence of later editing, which makes discerning both the date and authorship difficult.¹⁸ One particular issue involves the listing of the tribes which do not correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel. Based on this discrepancy, Lindars suggests dating Judges 5 to sometime in the early monarchy.¹⁹

Given the debate over the authorship and dating, it should be no surprise that there is disagreement regarding the relationship between the two chapters. Generally, however, the prose version in chapter 4 is considered to be dependent on the older poetic form of chapter 5. Many scholars attribute the discrepancies between the two versions to be the result of mistakes made by the editor of chapter 4. Halpern suggests that the editor of chapter 4 was interested in giving a historical account of the poem and, therefore, interpreted simplistically while remaining faithful to the poem and its meaning.²⁰ Soggin suggests the possibility that even in antiquity, the poetic

¹³ James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 62.

¹⁴ Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 213.

¹⁵ Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 62.

¹⁶ Adrien Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men Who Play God?" in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Melksham, Wiltshire: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 34.

¹⁷ David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, "Subverting Sexuality: Manly Women; Womanly Men in Judges 4-5," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (2015): 32.

¹⁸ Niditch, *Judges*, 9-10.

¹⁹ Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 215.

²⁰ Halpern, "Resourceful Israelite," 395-396.

version was difficult to understand, so a narrative version was created in order to elucidate the complexities of the poetic version.²¹ Coogan also suggests that the redactors of Judges attempted to compensate for later audiences' lack of familiarity with the events and characters of the story and so created a narrative version.²²

These theories are based on the concept of total dependence. However, Kawashima, while not disagreeing with the idea of dependence, draws attention to the ways in which the redactors deliberately made changes. He argues that this aspect of redaction should not be forgotten or de-emphasized and, specifically speaking against Halpern, considers it far too simplistic to suggest that the redactor misunderstood the poetic version.²³ Kawashima suggests that, while the narrative version is dependent on the poetic version in the sense that it was created later and with reference to the poem, there is a critical element that must be considered, namely the move from song to story. He suggests that, in this way, the poem is dependent on the narrative in regard to meaning. Without the narrative, the meaning of the poem is difficult to understand; whereas the narrative version can stand alone. In this way, Kawashima does not deny the dependence of chapter 4 on chapter 5. Rather, he suggests that there is an important relationship between the two accounts that deserves equal attention.

Finally, scholars like Lindars note that recent scholarship, especially, in the field of narratology, suggests that the two versions are independent and describe a common tradition.²⁴ Therefore, he points out that, if this is the case and the two are read independently, neither can be used over the other in ascertaining the historicity of the story. Both must be considered equally.

Regardless of these varying theories on the precise relationship between the two accounts, what is important is the fact that there is a strong relationship between the two chapters, and how they both agree and disagree will be considered throughout the paper concerning the depictions of the three women and the relationship between them.

In looking at Judges 4-5, what is most significant about both accounts is the clear inversion

²¹ Soggin, *Judges*, 92.

²² Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1978): 144.

²³ Robert S. Kawashima, "From Song to Story: The Genesis of Narrative in Judges 4 and 5," *Indiana University Press* 21, no. 2 (2001): 153.

²⁴ Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 164.

of gender roles typical of most other stories in the Bible. This feature of the narrative is what makes it unique and is why it has gained much scholarly attention. The story is both female oriented and driven. Deborah and Jael take on masculine roles while the men become secondary and subordinate figures. As Zucker and Reiss explain, commonly, women in the Bible are connected to the role of wife, daughter, or mother.²⁵ In Judges 4-5, the women are depicted as both wives and mothers. In addressing first the portrayal of these women as wives, there is a question as to whether or not this description is warranted. At most, the portrayal of these women as wives is de-emphasized, and, at the least, it does not exist. For Deborah, the interpretation hinges on the word “Lappidoth” in chapter 4:4. Some scholars consider this term to be a person and, therefore, the husband of Deborah while others understand the meaning to be something referring to fire, perhaps “torches” or “lamps.”²⁶ Other interpretations consider it to be a specific place.²⁷ These varying interpretations create significantly different depictions of Deborah. She can be “Deborah the wife of Lappidoth,” “Deborah from Lappidoth,” or “Deborah the woman of fire.” As Bronner argues, the depiction of Deborah as a woman of fire refers to her “fervent and charismatic personality.”²⁸ This interpretation also separates her from any connection to a husband and renders her completely autonomous.

Similarly, Martin suggests that Jael should also be read as an independent figure not connected to her husband, considering the secondary nature of Heber to Barak and Sisera which thereby makes the connection between Jael and Heber secondary as well.²⁹ It is also worth noting that the mother of Sisera is not connected to a husband and is only defined by her role as the mother of Sisera. Her identity is so connected to her role as a mother that it becomes her identification in place of a name. In this story, both the poetic and narrative version, none of the women are strongly connected with husbands. While Deborah and Jael could be connected with husbands, they

²⁵ Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting Sexuality,” 33. It is also important to note that this type of designation for women is considered in terms of subordination. Rarely is this type of description used simply as a way of describing the duties of a particular woman. Rather, it is used as a way of defining the identity of a woman in relation to a man, i.e. the relationship between property and owner. This connotation is important in understanding the usual ways in which women are portrayed throughout the Bible and the way in which this portrayal differs in Judges 4-5.

²⁶ Soggin, *Judges*, 64.

²⁷ Niditch, *Judges*, 62.

²⁸ Leila Leah Bronner, “Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Melksham, Wiltshire: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 78.

²⁹ Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 57.

certainly are not defined by this connection.

Rather than being connected to their husbands, Zucker and Reiss suggest that Deborah and Jael are instead connected with Barak and Sisera, so that the true counterpart to Deborah is Barak, and the true counterpart to Jael is Sisera.³⁰ In addition, Sisera acts as the counterpart to his mother.³¹ The dynamics between these couples reflect their non-traditional nature. For example, Jael dominates Sisera, both physically by murdering him as well as in terms of their relationship. Jael is the dominating figure who, despite Sisera's ignorance of it, is the one in control of the situation.

The relationship between Deborah and Barak, however, is more complex. Lindars notes that some scholars use the meanings of their names to suggest that Barak is the husband of Deborah.³² This idea comes from the fact that the name Deborah means "bee" while Barak means "lightning" which has led some to connect Barak's name to the term "lappidoth" which, as previously discussed, means "fire" or perhaps more abstractly "flashing light."³³ Lindars himself, however, disagrees with this interpretation and considers it to be entirely speculative. He notes that animal names are common throughout the Hebrew Bible and that there is no reason to consider this case to be in any way exceptional to that norm.³⁴ While the marital connection between Barak and Deborah is speculative, it would certainly add emphasis to the role reversal and reversal of power dynamics between the two characters. Many scholars have interpreted the relationship between Barak and Deborah to be one in which Deborah is the leading, dominant figure. Barak is timid and lacking in both faith and courage to go to battle without the support and guidance from Deborah. Martin even suggests that Jud 4:9 can be read as a rebuke of Barak's timidity.³⁵ However, other scholars like Lindars comment that this specific depiction of Barak is found only in the narrative version of chapter 4, not in the poetic version, and he notes that some later traditions, including the Septuagint, depict Barak's hesitation more positively as humbly acknowledging his own need to wait for divine guidance, which he then receives through Deborah.³⁶ However, Lindars admits that these are later interpretations. In fact, he suggests that the historian editing the

³⁰ Zucker and Reiss, "Subverting Sexuality," 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 182.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

³⁵ Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 57.

³⁶ Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 189.

work placed Deborah in this leadership role precisely because of Barak's hesitation and his tendency to yield to her, so that the original leader was Barak but was changed because of his unheroic and undesirable character traits.³⁷ Considering Lindars' interpretation, however, does not change the overall significance of the story in terms of role reversal. Whether or not Deborah was originally intended to be the leading authoritative figure, she eventually emerges as the leader against Barak and his ineptitude. Perhaps certain interpretations depict Barak more positively, and perhaps an argument could be made that Barak was originally depicted as the leader. However, regardless of these factors, Deborah, as well as Jael, emerge as the dominant forces within the story.

Negative interpretations of both Deborah and Jael should also not be overlooked. As Bronner notes, there is limited commentary in early rabbinic literature on the figure of Deborah, which seems significant considering her prominence, and the commentary that does exist is mostly negative.³⁸ The early rabbis devote much of their commentary to identifying Deborah's husband, especially considering the marriage between her and Barak.³⁹ This emphasis clearly highlights a refusal to understand Deborah as an independent figure and instead only in relation to her husband. Additionally, the early rabbis regard Deborah as a figure of extreme arrogance, in part for the fact that she sent for Barak instead of going to him herself at the beginning of chapter 4.⁴⁰ Jael, however, is interpreted differently.

Interestingly, where early rabbinic commentary had many criticisms of Deborah, the commentary on Jael is surprisingly and overwhelmingly positive.⁴¹ She is considered to be a heroine and savior.⁴² Modern readers, perhaps, see more complexity in Jael's character than the early rabbis did and question the morality of her murder of Sisera. These interpretations by the early rabbis of both Jael and Deborah are important to keep in mind. However, it should be noted that these are later interpretations given by people (specifically men) in a specific environment. These interpretations should not be ignored based on these factors alone; however, these factors should also not be forgotten when considering the overall interpretation. It is clear that within the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 182-183.

³⁸ Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?" 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 79-82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?" 87.

⁴² *Ibid.*

biblical narrative itself, both prose and poem, the depiction of these women is primarily positive. As Zucker and Reiss state, “[Deborah] arguably has the most important political and religious role of any woman in the Bible...”⁴³

One question, then, that should be asked is why or how does one explain this story in which female figures are depicted so positively and distinguished with such prominence? To answer this question, it is helpful to turn to archaeology. With the archaeological evidence discovered to date, scholars have begun to understand the early Israelite culture better. Based on this evidence, scholars like Gottwald suggest that the early Israelite culture was egalitarian. Gottwald explains that this egalitarian structure developed in response to the oppression from the dominating powers such as the Egyptian Empire and the Canaanite city-states, among others.⁴⁴ In this way, these oppressed individuals of the underclass fled their oppressors and sought to build a new society in which politically and economically, everyone had equal access.⁴⁵ As Gottwald explains, one way in which political equality was ensured was through distributing leadership roles throughout the community so that there were different leaders for different functions, for example, elders, priests, military leaders, as well as the leadership ascribed to the various judges seen throughout the Book of Judges.⁴⁶

Meyers further illuminates the egalitarian structure of Ancient Israel. She explains that this political and economic equality extended to all aspects of society, bringing about social equality, especially among men and women. As she describes, the roles of men and women remained divided but were complementary.⁴⁷ She also notes that technology had not yet reached a level to require specialization, so the household remained the center of society.⁴⁸ Therefore, in a society which considers the domestic and public sphere equally, women did not experience subordination and, instead, were accorded respect for their contributions to society.⁴⁹ Ackerman, in her article, then suggests that Judges can be read within this egalitarian setting. She cautions, however, that

⁴³ Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting Sexuality,” 33.

⁴⁴ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 285.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁷ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 168.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

one should not assume that the Book of Judges accurately portrays its time period, especially drawing attention to the fact that the final redactions took place years after the initial writing; however, she explains that there seems to be a correlation between the roles of women in Judges and the roles which archaeology suggest that women played in society during this time.⁵⁰ Certainly the high proportion of women seen in the Book of Judges adds to this argument.⁵¹ Understood within this egalitarian setting, one can better understand how women are featured more prominently in the book Judges and especially in chapters 4-5.

In understanding the significance of Judges 4-5 within the Bible and the role that these women play; it is appropriate to look at the roles of these women, specifically in relation to one another. As mentioned previously, the three women, Deborah, Jael, and the Mother of Sisera, are connected through their roles as mothers. Deborah and the mother of Sisera are explicitly described as mothers. As Judges 5:7 reads, "...Deborah rose as a mother in Israel."⁵² While never explicitly described as a mother, Sterman and others note Jael's motherly actions towards Sisera, describing her as tucking Sisera into bed when she covers him with a blanket and giving him milk.⁵³ This shared role allows the reader to use this similarity to examine the differences between these women further. If all three women are portrayed as mothers in some form, what kind of mothers are they? How do they use this position of motherhood? As seen earlier with Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary, there is a spectrum on which to understand these women. Representing the passive character is the mother of Sisera; the active character is Jael; and the middle character, exhibiting both activity and passivity, is Deborah. From her introduction, Jael acts independently of her own volition.

In contrast, the Mother of Sisera remains passive throughout her portion of the story. As Sterman notes, this passivity is due, in part, to the fact that the Mother of Sisera never undergoes

⁵⁰ Susan Ackerman, "Digging Up Deborah: Recent Hebrew Bible Scholarship on Gender and the Contribution of Archaeology," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66, no. 4 (2003): 175-176.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵² In his commentary, Martin, states that this title is most likely given to Deborah out of respect. He then draws a parallel to 2 Samuel 20:19 which is thought to be a simile for a protecting city. He suggests that this parallel and the meaning of 2 Samuel 20:19 might be intended to extend to Deborah. Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 66.

⁵³ Judy Taubes Sterman, "Themes in the Deborah Narrative (Judges 4-5)," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2011): 22.

any sort of change throughout the story.⁵⁴ She remains the nameless, static character perpetually sitting by the window waiting for her son to return home. Deborah remains the more complex character. In one way, Deborah is portrayed as being an active character by being one of the few judges described as actually fulfilling the duties of a judge. Judges 4:4 reads, “At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.” In another way, however, Deborah is portrayed as a passive, unmoving character as she sits under the tree; she does not move but calls for Barak to come to her.⁵⁵ Eventually, however, she undergoes a change in which she moves from passivity to activity when she leaves and goes to battle with Barak.⁵⁶ As Sterman notes, even the verbs of this passage indicate the move from passive to active.⁵⁷ The verbs change from “sitting” (ישב), “sending” (שלח), and “summoning” (קרא) to “drawing out” (משך), “walking” (הלך), and “rising” (קום).

Additionally, Klein describes Deborah as an active figure who “extends the ideal of womanhood” by acting in the authoritative position of mediating between God and humans while at the same time remaining somewhat passive in that she cannot carry out the will of God; she must rely on her male counterpart to fulfill her prophecies and go to battle, which can be interpreted as her accepting male authority.⁵⁸ However, it is worth mentioning the difference in the depiction of Deborah in Judges 4 and 5. In chapter 4, Deborah more passively accompanies Barak and advises him in battle.⁵⁹ Judges 4: 9-10 reads, “Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand warriors went up behind him, and Deborah went up with him.” In chapter 5, however, Deborah plays a more active role and seems to participate in leading the military, while Barak seems to become secondary to her leadership.⁶⁰ Judges 5:15 reads, “The chiefs of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak; into the valley, they rushed out at his heels.” In this way, Deborah resembles the Mother of Sisera at the beginning of the story as a passive character and later as Jael in her heroic action and leadership.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁸ Klein, “A Spectrum of Female Characters,” 25.

⁵⁹ Ackerman, “Digging Up Deborah,” 176.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Additionally, J. Cheryl Exum specifically discusses the opposing way in which Deborah and Jael represent motherhood. Deborah is depicted as maternal in the traditional, normative sense; she is nurturing and protective. Exum labels her as the “good mother.”⁶¹ Jael, however, is at first nurturing and protective when she initially encounters Sisera and invites him into her tent, but she eventually turns from this nurturing position and becomes hostile, even deadly. For this reason, Exum labels her as the “bad mother.” Despite this label, Jael, through her “bad mothering,” remains a good mother to Israel. It is through these “bad” actions that she becomes a protective force for Israel.

Just as with Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary, there is a sexual dimension of the spectrum connected to passivity and activity. In considering this dimension, the focus must naturally turn to Jael. As many scholars have noted, there are sexual overtones to the episode between Jael and Sisera. Some scholars, however, traditionally interpret this episode more in terms of hospitality. As Martin notes, Jael fulfills her obligation of hospitality by giving Sisera milk even though he asks for water; she goes above and beyond her expectations for her guest, and it is because she has fulfilled her obligation of hospitality that Sisera then asks her to conceal him.⁶² Soggin additionally notes the conflict that Jael experiences between her obligation to hospitality and her loyalty to Israel.⁶³

While these components are certainly at play within the story, Reis argues that this story “smolders with sex,” and that this component should not be ignored.⁶⁴ Reis is not alone in her interpretation, and this recognition of sexual overtones was commented on by the early rabbis. They interpret the repetition in 5:27 to indicate that Jael and Sisera had sex seven times, but, they still view Jael in a positive light by asserting that a transgression done with good intention is still better than a transgression done with bad intention or a bad deed altogether.⁶⁵ Still, however, some rabbis were concerned with the sexual nature of the narrative and insisted that no sexual act occurred; Jael simply covered Sisera with a blanket and nothing more.⁶⁶ Additionally, other

⁶¹ J. Cheryl Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests are Being Served?” In *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 72.

⁶² Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 60-61.

⁶³ Soggin, *Judges*, 78.

⁶⁴ Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” *Scandinavian Journal Of the Old Testament* 19, no. 1 (2005): 24.

⁶⁵ Bronner, “Valorized or Vilified?” 89.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

scholars have suggested that there was the fear of rape involved. Soggin denies Jael's invitation and interprets Sisera as forcibly entering Jael's tent, giving her no choice but to play along until she could take matters into her own hands.⁶⁷ Bledstein also suggests that the murder of Sisera by Jael is "a parody of the warrior who rapes a woman in the tent."⁶⁸ This is an interesting interpretation given that the Mother of Sisera, at the end of chapter five, is depicted as hoping the delay of her son is due to his preoccupation with the spoils of war and the raping of women. "Are they not finding and dividing the spoil? A girl or two for every man..." (Judges 5:30). As Niditch points out, there is great irony in the story considering her son "has been made into woman booty in the tent of Jael—he has been defeated by a woman warrior."⁶⁹

Reis, however, views the Jael/Sisera episode quite differently. In her interpretation, she begins by noting the significance of Sisera's choice to flee to Jael's tent and not to the tent of her husband or the head of the household. This seems an interesting choice given that Heber, as a man, would likely have offered more protection in his tent. She agrees with Zakovitch's interpretation that this detail implies Sisera's specific intention in going to Jael. Additionally, she explains that the verb "going out" in chapter 4:18, while possibly having a neutral meaning, often in other usages in the Bible has a sexual connotation. This interpretation of the word then indicates that what is to come will also have a sexual component. Therefore, Reis interprets Jael's assurance to Sisera in vs. 18 to "have no fear" as a reassurance that her husband was not there and would not interrupt their meeting. Reis disagrees with the commentators who deny the existence of any sexual act between Sisera and Jael on the grounds that Sisera would have been too exhausted from war and travel to commit the act. Perhaps these commentators simply do not give Sisera enough credit. Reis explains that often, enemies were depicted as being sexually aggressive. As she states, "It would be unusual...for a partisan author to portray an enemy soldier as being too war-torn to engage in sex."⁷⁰ She then boldly moves on to interpret the covering of Sisera. As she explains, the meaning of the term שמיכה, which is what Jael uses to cover Sisera, is a hapax legomenon, so, going against other scholars and "[t]heir refusal to see the fire," she interprets Jael as covering

⁶⁷ Soggin, *Judges*, 78.

⁶⁸ Bledstein, Adrien Janis, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men Who Play God?" In *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Melksham, Wiltshire: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 41.

⁶⁹ Niditch, *Judges*, 82.

⁷⁰ Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera," 28.

Sisera with her body, indicating sexual intercourse.⁷¹ She interprets the passage in this way based not only on the context which she views as being sexually charged but also on the term שמיתה specifically. She notes that there is a common interchange in the Bible between the letters ש and ס. If this interchange occurred in this unknown word so that the root would then come from סמך, Reis suggests that this root would then have the meaning “to lay” or “to rest one’s weight on” which would imply that Jael took the masculine sexual position. Having then given Sisera a drink, she covers him again, and Reis suggests that a second sexual encounter occurs.

After the second encounter, Sisera then commands Jael to stand and keep guard. As Reis notes, there is a grammatical mistake in that Sisera uses the masculine form of the command instead of the feminine form when addressing Jael. She sees the irony of the situation considering Jael has twice copulated with Sisera in the male position. This irony is then extended to Sisera’s instruction to Jael not to say that there was a man in the tent. Finally, Reis interprets the murder of Sisera as Jael mounting Sisera a third time while he sleeps and striking him. She explains that, rather than the tent peg going into the ground, the verb נצב, which is used in the feminine form, refers to Jael dismounting Sisera after the strike. She notes that, while traditionally this verb has been paired with the grammatically feminine term for “tent peg,” it makes more sense to have Jael as the subject given that this verb occurs only two other times, both referring to women dismounting an ass.⁷² As Reis notes, from this interpretation, there is no longer the issue of determining where and how Jael struck Sisera in such a way that the tent peg went completely through him and into the ground, for now, Jael is the one to dismount to the ground.

Certainly, not all scholars agree with her interpretation. Some scholars like Bledstein would agree that there are only sexual overtones so that Jael is presented both as a motherly figure and as a lover.⁷³ Reis’ detailed, and thorough interpretation clearly shows that there is at least a strong argument for acknowledging that there is a sexual component to the episode between Sisera and Jael. Other scholars like Lindars suggest that interpretations like those of Reis simply go too far and “[confuse] the distinction between the actual narrative and the ironical overtones.”⁷⁴ Whether or not one agrees with the interpretation of Reis, one cannot deny that there at least appear to be

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The other two uses of this verb are Joshua 15:18 and Judges 1:14

⁷³ Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire?” 40.

⁷⁴ Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, 277.

sexual overtones. What is significant about this component is that Jael, who is a woman, connected to whatever degree of sexuality, is still the hero of the story. Her sexuality, then, contributes to her heroic deed and triumph. Jael emerges as the dominant force over Sisera both sexually and in terms of power and leadership.

CONCLUSION

Having discussed the characters of Judges 4-5, it is now possible to refer back to the beginning and relate these two narratives and groups of women together. These two narratives present a group of women on a spectrum of passivity, activity, and sexuality:

<u>Passive</u>	<u>Middle</u>	<u>Active/Sexual</u>
Mother of Sisera	Deborah	Jael
Virgin Mary	Mary Magdalene	Eve

Of course, there are other ways of interpreting these women.⁷⁵ Often these characters are specifically interpreted with a single counterpart. For example, the Virgin Mary is described as the “Second Eve.” At the same time, there has been a long history of interpreting Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary in opposition to one another. Additionally, both Jael and Deborah are often interpreted together as being the heroines of their story with no mention of the Mother of Sisera. However, these narratives do present similar depictions of women, which can be interpreted typologically, in this way representing passivity, activity, and sexuality. The difference, though, is where the value is assigned in each story. In Judges 4-5, the value is given to Jael the active, sexual heroine. In the narrative with Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary, the value is given to the Virgin Mary, who is the passive, non-sexual character. It is also important to note that this narrative is one which was constructed and interpreted over centuries by many people, most notably the Early Church Fathers. Within scholarship, if not within mainstream Western society, it has been recognized that the sexualization of Mary Magdalene and the creation of the “composite Mary” is baseless. Therefore, the history of comparing the two Marys—one good, passive, and non-sexual and the other being bad, active, and sexual—is also baseless as well as damaging to the roles and treatment of women in society. Given the similar portrayals of these groups of

⁷⁵ This paper in no way intends to discredit or overlook the complexities of these female characters. Neither does it seek to ignore the work of many feminist biblical scholars and theologians who have worked to uncover the depths of each of these characters. Rather, the paper is working with the specific interpretation of these women that was developed by the early Church and presented for hundreds of years and even still today.

women, this paper does not argue that the Early Church Fathers specifically had Judges 4-5 in mind when constructing their story of Eve, Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. Rather, it is likely that this portrayal of women was common, and they drew from these popular depictions, through inverting them to suit their specific agenda. In her book, Sarah Forth describes a type-scene as "...a fixed plotline that recurs camouflaged with a different cast of characters and change of scenery."⁷⁶ She explains that ancient audiences would have been familiar with certain common motifs. While not intentionally drawing from Judges 4-5, the Early Church Fathers used this common motif of women to re-create a similar portrayal with one specific and intentional difference, valuing passivity and non-sexuality over activity and sexuality. Therefore, understanding the similarities between the women of Judges 4-5 and Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary, allows the reader to more fully appreciate the broader view of women historically.

The interpretation of Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary have been influential to the role of women in Western society, and, in fact, these interpretations continue to affect the role of women in society today. Therefore, using Judges 4-5 and understanding more completely the history and deliberate construction of these depictions has implications not only in scholarship for the interpretation of other female biblical characters but also more practically for society and the place of women within it, especially when one recognizes that these depictions were not always negative.

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⁷⁶ Sarah S. Forth, *Eve's Bible: A Woman's Guide to the Old Testament* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 64.

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