

Serpent Slayer: Jael's Story

John Pople

*Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still;
between her feet he sank, he fell;
where he sank, there he fell—dead. (Judges 5:27)*

I've always been intrigued by Jael's story, because she achieves so much and yet so little is written about her, leaving so many questions unanswered. Jael is loyal to Israel's God, yet somehow she is living (traveling?) with a traitorous group – we are never told how or why. She executes a military general, which essentially wins a battle, yet there's only a handful of verses about her. I live for detecting hidden mysteries in the text, and Jael's story contains a captivating one. The description of her killing Sisera in Deborah's Song doesn't match the narrative prose. Was Sisera lying down, or standing/falling, when he was killed? He was asleep, so logic insists he was lying down; in which case why does the Song describe a completely different choreography? I wanted to know more.

In all history, destiny has arguably never thrust itself upon a person as it did on Jael. Divinely coordinated it may have been, but Jael had no warning whatever concerning the iconic moment that would, very suddenly, be hers. Most importantly of all, her decision to seize the day, and history with it, qualifies her for the tiny pantheon of those who explicitly foreshadowed Messiah, and this is the core achievement of her Story. Jael enacts a prefiguring fulfilment of the ancient Eden covenant: the triangulated promise between God, Eve and humanity's mortal enemy, the serpent.

God says to the serpent:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen 3:15)*

As Jael's Story unfolds, we'll see how she fulfils this.

Carpe Diem

Jael enters the text as the *[woman] of Heber the Kenite (Judg 4:17)*. This sounds like an innocuous introduction of a woman with a husband called Heber, but is probably saying something more meaningful. We saw that Deborah's introduction as "woman of Lappidoth" might be better rendered "firebrand woman," rather than "wife of a man called Burning Torch." Similarly, in Jael's case, "heber" means "group", thus Hebraists propose Jael is introduced as a "woman from the group of Kenites," (rather than "wife of a Kenite man called Group"). I feel this is likely, because these Kenites are no arbitrary group of people; they're highly relevant to the story and warrant introduction. They are a splinter from Moses' family, and they're traitors. As Levites, they should be distributed throughout the land to perform godly ministrations to all Israel. But these Levites have gone rogue, and formed an alliance with the enemy Canaanite king: Jabin of Hazor. Jael is a woman among their group, but she is no traitor.

Indeed, Jael's loyalty to Jahweh, Israel's God, is so central to her character and her Story that it may even form the basis for the name by which she is known. Her name, Yā'ēl, is merely 'Mountain Goat' if taken as a single syllable, but if read as a compound word is rendered 'Jah is God,' which is strikingly relevant for her lone fidelity amidst the unfaithful Kenites.

Jael's Story is set in the heat of battle. God commands Israel to assemble a military force to repel the invading Canaanites led by General Sisera. Israel's commander is Barak, although his timidity results in him requesting Deborah, Israel's Judge, to accompany him to the battlefield. She boldly does so, but Barak's request belies a wavering faith which displeases God. God chooses to give the glory associated with killing Sisera *into the hand of a woman (Judg 4:9)*, which is culturally humiliating for Barak. Jael, however, is blissfully unaware of these Heavenly machinations.

These stories are female led, and the battle is called by Deborah. She, not Barak, issues the command to attack from the front lines on Mt Tabor, and Barak and the army charge downhill to engage the formidable force of Sisera and 900 iron chariots. God directly intervenes to create panic in the Canaanite ranks and, while Barak drives the Canaanite army west to their ultimate destruction, General Sisera flees north-east on foot. He knows of the traitorous Kenites and is deliberately heading towards them to find sanctuary.

Jael spies Sisera approaching and, seemingly in an instant, acts faithfully and decisively. It's worth dwelling on this point. We, who are reading the Biblical text, are well aware that Sisera and Jael are about to meet, and fatefully so. But Jael had no idea Sisera was coming. Let's contemplate this from her perspective. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she recognises Canaan's general in the camp and is forced to make a split-second decision. To act or not to act? Take on a military commander single-handed, or let him find solace and escape among the tents of her treacherous group?

She seizes the moment like few ever have. She approaches Sisera – again notice the female-forward action – and beckons him into her tent, promising him a safety he will not receive. Sisera accepts and is drawn in.¹ Exhausted, Sisera requests water. Jael, seemingly going the extra mile in motherliness, provides milk, and blankets, and feigns to stand guard at the tent door, in further guise of protective parent. Sisera falls asleep, both through exhaustion and because of the milk Jael supplied when he asked for water.² Once Sisera is asleep, she swiftly improvises weapons from household items within reach and, with mallet and tent-peg in hand, summarily executes him. She hammers a tent-peg through Sisera's temple with such force that it is driven through his entire head and bites into the ground.

Most Blessed Among Women

Jael features more than anyone in Deborah's Victory Song, reaping the most glory of all, just as God had promised. *In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael...* (Judg 5:6) is her Song entrance, and no small one; Jael is equated with Shamgar, a saviour of Israel (Judg 3:31). From this introduction Jael's status is raised still higher.

*Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.” (Judg 5:24)*

Jael is *most blessed among women*. That's a phrase every Bible student will find familiar, especially those with Catholic roots. It's the Holy Spirit blessing bestowed on Jesus' mother Mary

¹ Interestingly, there is no man called Heber within this tent, supporting the translation we suggested above. Like Rahab and Delilah, Jael appears in possession of a home as a single female, which may suggest independent wealth, or some authority.

² The age-old belief that milk has soporific qualities has scientific backing and I believe Jael exploits this in cunning subterfuge, as others note.

and, very much in the theme of Leading Ladies, the blessing was not only granted to a female recipient, but also delivered via a female messenger, Elizabeth.

*Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb! (Lk 1:42)*

It may be surprising to see this blessing we so commonly attribute only to Mary was actually first given to Jael! And in the same manner: by inspired utterance of a female messenger, Deborah. We're invited to rethink. This blessing is Jael's, which Mary later inherited. Considering how revered Mary is, this makes the elevation of Jael all the greater as Mary's predecessor. More importantly, this tie created between Jael and Mary enables us to discover even greater treasures.

Slaying the Serpent

Mary is the mother of Messiah. In that sense she is mother of *all the living*, because Christ is the first-fruits of all those who will live forever (1 Cor 15:20-23). This well-known doctrine echoes the promise to the precedential Mother – Eve, the original *mother of all the living* (Gen 3:20), and for the same reason. Ultimately, Eve would birth the Saviour of mankind, the only one who can destroy humanity's Principal Enemy. This now establishes a link between Jael and Eve and, though this may sound odd, I believe this explains why we're told the grisly details of how Jael killed Sisera. Let's see how that works.

God says to the serpent:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen 3:15)*

The serpent, the iconic figure representing the principal enemy of God's people, bruises the heel of Messiah, a euphemism for a small, non-permanent, victory. In return, Messiah delivers a head-wound to the serpent: a permanent, fatal strike.

Enter Jael.

Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. (Judg 4:21)

What's the spiritual value in recording for posterity the unusually gruesome way Jael kills Sisera? Why do we need to know that she crept up on him while he was sleeping and slammed a tent peg through his skull, stapling him to the planet? Isn't this just superfluous gore?

By no means. It's the pinnacle of Jael's glory, which God gave her. It's Jael fulfilling the Eden prophecy! Israel are God's people. They have been invaded and wounded by a fierce enemy: the Canaanite army. Sisera is their commander, making him the Principal Enemy, espousing the serpent role. Jael has, very literally, struck a fatal head-wound to the Principal Enemy of God's people, after he had bruised them.

Jael is Messiah's forerunner! She enacts Messiah's role in precursor cameo. An amazing blessing! And this blessing was reserved for Barak (who was well set to receive it, since his name means 'blessing') until he flinched. But where Barak shrank back, Jael strode forward and struck.

Deborah's Song: Contrasting Mothers

We return to Deborah's Song. Previously we heard her sing of a comparison between herself and Sisera's mother, advocating that the children of God live and the children of the godless die. But Deborah is not finished with this mothering metaphor, and I believe she employs it once more in a way which elegantly explain why Sisera's execution in the Song is described in a choreography that wasn't physically real.

In physical reality, Sisera was asleep, lying prone, when Jael fatally hammered the tent-peg through his head. But the Song memorializes a very different dynamic.

*She sent her hand to the tent peg
and her right hand to the workmen's mallet;
she struck Sisera;
she crushed his head;
she shattered and pierced his temple.
Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still;
between her feet he sank, he fell;
where he sank, there he fell—dead.” (Judg 5:26-27)*

Academics misread the encounter between Jael and Sisera as sexual. Susan Niditch mistakes Jael's trickery of Sisera as a “seduction,” and some even go so far as to claim the tent

peg is phallic, a jarring picture devoid of evidential basis. Robert Alter likewise stumbles by believing the phrase “she came to him softly” (Judg 4:21) necessarily describes the approach of a lover, when in reality ‘approaching softly’ is a reasonable action for either a lover or a killer.

The seduction model fails. So how shall this scene be understood?

An interesting solution suggests itself by remembering Deborah’s tight focus on mothers, from which subject I believe she does not stray. Deborah’s final application of the mother motif bears an insightful message revealing her perception of the afterlife. She now presents Sisera’s mother and Jael as contrasting mothers and, bizarre though it may sound, presents them both as the mother of Sisera. Evidence for Jael being presented as Sisera’s mother includes the mentions of her provision of milk for him, her provision of curds (not mentioned in the prose, and potentially added as artistic hyperbole) and, most tellingly, the repeated refrain that Sisera physically collapsed *between her feet*. This is an unusual construction linguistically; experts suggest “between her legs” is better, explaining that the phrase refers to childbirth, similar to Rachel’s usage, as she implores Jacob, “*She [Bilhah] shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*” (Gen 30:3).

Assembling this evidence allows us to perceive the subtle motherhood comparison Deborah makes as she sings of Sisera falling from between Jael’s legs. He’s not falling onto her, as in a sexual encounter, but falling from her, as one being born. It may seem grotesque, but Deborah sings of Jael birthing Sisera as a corpse. This is not revelling in the macabre, it’s a logical extension of Deborah’s motherhood model, advancing the comparison from the current life to the afterlife. God’s people are to be reborn anew in immortal resurrection (1 Cor 15:20-28), but His enemies are raised to a second death (Rev 20:11-15). They’re ‘reborn dead,’ if you will, which I believe Deborah’s song skilfully portrays. Jael has ended Sisera’s mortal life and, given that he never turned to God, she has also sealed his immortal fate. As the Song darkly portrays, she (re)births him stillborn.

We’re told how Abraham, and Job (eventually) learn of the central gospel feature of resurrection. By looking carefully into this Song, I believe we can see that such revelations – and perceptions – weren’t restricted to male disciples, but also include Deborah.

If so, Deborah’s song contains the hidden beauty of a double-parallel of mothers: the first between Deborah and Sisera’s mother, set in this life; and the second between Jael and Sisera’s mother, set in the future life. Sisera has been born of his mother in this life, and she waits in vain

at the window for his return, because he has been killed. More damningly, Jael has re-birthed Sisera dead, in prophetic mime of the eternal destiny of God's enemies. Deborah's Song artfully depicts the contrast between the Mother of the Living and the Mother of the Dead, both in this world and the world to come.

Foreshadowing Messiah: The Warrior Pair

Jael has slain the serpent Sisera to fulfil, in foreshadow, Messiah's completion of the Eden covenant. Interestingly she is not alone in this, although she is first. David will stand alongside her in this achievement when he kills Goliath (1 Sam 17). In that later incarnation, God's enemies are the invading Philistines, who will bruise Israel in battle and by oppression, just as the Canaanites did in Jael's day. Goliath will embody the serpent role, because he is not just a Philistine champion, he is explicitly presented as one representing their entire nation (1 Sam 17:9). True to the metaphor, David will kill him with a single head wound: not this time with tent-peg through the temple, but by sling-stone into the forehead.

For interest, I muse briefly on the comparison of hero and heroine's achievement between David and Jael. I observe equally faith-driven and Divinely blessed success. But not all things are equal, there is a notable disparity in preparation time and resources.

David had the chance to trial King Saul's armour, although he rejects it. He ultimately faces the Philistine with equipment tried and field-tested in killing dangerous animals, even if his weaponry is still more humble than Goliath's. By contrast, Jael finds herself deployed against Canaan's commander with whatever she can find in her tent. She does have the advantage that Sisera does not anticipate her attack, but even this lies on a knife-edge: if her first blow is not decisive, it is realistic Sisera will be able to overpower and kill her.

The relative preparation times available to David and Jael also merit reflection. It was some considerable time previously that David was anointed by Samuel as God's future King, and the Spirit of the Lord *rushed upon David* at that time (1 Sam 16:12-13). Since David is not King at the time of the duel, Samuel's word essentially promises he won't be killed by Goliath. Additionally, David spent several days going back and forth from the battle lines vocalising his offer to fight Goliath before the idea gained traction; further time to steel himself for battle. Fighting Goliath was still a monumental triumph of faith, yet the knowledge of his Divine selection for monarchy, and receipt of God's Spirit, are enormous benefits. By contrast again, Jael had only seconds,

maybe minutes, to prepare for her duel with Sisera. She did not receive any prior promises from God, any visitations from His Judge, or experience any rushing onset of His Spirit. But she acted as faithfully as David and, to be blunt, Sisera was swiftly duped, doped, and dispatched.

Both heroine and hero, Jael and David, have excelled in fulfilment of the Eden covenant, mirroring Messiah in a way no others have. But – fully acknowledging there is no competition between them – I can't help noticing that Jael completes the same feat as David with far less resources and preparation time. Jael had neither training, nor even warning, of the destiny that was so suddenly thrust upon her. For her to react in the moment as she did – equaling the deeds of the Man after God's Own Heart! – reveals a remarkable combination of audacious opportunism and steely nerve, all founded on a rock-solid faith.

This is a Leading Lady of renown, and she is truly blessed among women.