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Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination

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The ‘Mothers’ Who Were Not: Motherhood Imagery and Childless Women Warriors in Early Jewish Literature

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MOTHERHOOD is a major focus of women’s identities in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Jewish literature. If female characters are not defined by their status as biological mothers, their stories focus on their barrenness and pining for children.¹ However, the woman warrior characters of early Jewish literature—Deborah, Jael, and Judith—are not portrayed as mothers, nor do their tales deal with their childlessness as a plot point.² These characters serve their people not by bearing and raising children, but by their bravery in combat: Deborah leads Israelite troops against Canaan, Jael offers the fleeing general Sisera hospitality and then drives a tent peg through his head, and Judith beguiles the general Holofernes into letting his guard down, and then beheads him.

All three stories nevertheless invoke maternal language and imagery, casting these characters as figurative rather than literal mothers. Late antique or rabbinic accounts of these stories often develop this theme of motherhood further. In this essay, I employ queer theory in order to investigate these uses of maternal language and imagery. Specifically, I engage with the work of Judith Butler on gender performance and Lee Edelman on reproductive futurism. Using Butler’s theory, which proposes that gender is an artificial construct, I show how Deborah, Jael, and Judith ‘perform’ womanhood by invoking maternal language and imagery. Using Edelman’s framework of reproductive futurism, I claim that Deborah, Jael, and Judith’s apparent childlessness is transgressive in its original context. The biblical texts focus on reproduction and the linear development of the Israelite nation, but there are episodes in the Bible that disrupt this focus. Edelman’s theories provide a framework for exploring what it means for a biblical woman not to be a mother.

At the same time, by circling back to Butler’s work on gender performance I explore the reasons for the use of maternal language and imagery in connection with childless characters in these texts. I address the question of how the patriar-

chal character of the societies in which these texts were written contributed to their construction of motherhood and childlessness, and why maternal language appears even in the stories of women who are not portrayed as mothers. What is the nature and power of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and early Jewish literature? What were the authors of the books of Judges and Judith, and later writings about Deborah, Jael, and Judith aiming to convey by using maternal imagery?

Finally, I conclude by addressing the ethical and political questions raised by the use of maternal language to describe the character or achievements of childless women. Is it helpful to the cause of feminism that these texts extend their highest honour, the status of mother, to childless heroines? Or is it harmful to frame all female accomplishments, even decidedly non-maternal ones, in the language of reproductive futurism? The works of Butler and Edelman are rarely (if ever) discussed together in the context of ancient literature. I contend that putting these two theorists in conversation with one another, and with the Bible and early Jewish literature, permits constructive and enlightening new readings of these texts.

I begin with a discussion of methodology, including a brief explanation of queer theory and its use in biblical studies. I focus particularly on Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1990) and on Edelman's influential *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). I then examine each of the three female warrior characters, focusing on the ways in which they relate to maternity. I begin with an analysis of Deborah and Jael, first examining their portrayal in Judges 4–5, and subsequently considering the connections to maternity brought out by early interpreters of the text, in particular, the early rabbis and Pseudo-Philo (the first-century CE author of *Biblical Antiquities*). Finally, I turn to the book of Judith. Since it was never included in the Jewish canon, it inspired very few post-biblical commentaries. I therefore deal primarily with the text itself.³

Methodology: Queer Theory and Reproductive Futurism

In this essay I apply methods and tools that originate in the interdisciplinary field of queer theory. Queer theory aims to deconstruct and expose the social constructs that shape our conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Queer biblical criticism, which builds to some extent on feminist criticism of the Bible, emerged in the mid-1990s, following the rise of queer theory more generally. While feminist scholars aim to recover female voices and experiences from biblical texts and explore how these texts produce and reinforce female subordination, those using the techniques of queer theory start by questioning how these texts produce categories such as 'male' and 'female' in the first place. Queer biblical criticism also asks how these categories may be undermined by the same texts that produce

them. Ken Stone, one of the pioneers of queer biblical criticism, has produced a succinct list of questions through which Bible critics can approach the text:

What norms or conventions of gender seem to be presupposed by this text? How might attention to the interdisciplinary study of gender allow readers of the Bible to tease out such presuppositions? How are assumptions about gender used in the structure of a particular plot, or manipulated for purposes of characterization? . . . Might a character's success or failure at embodying gender norms result from a strategy to cast that character in a particular light, whether positive or negative? Is the text itself always successful at manipulating gender assumptions? Do biblical texts, like persons, sometimes fail to 'cite' gender conventions in expected ways or according to dominant norms? How does our attention to these and other questions contribute to our understanding of both gender and the Bible? (Stone 2007: 192)

I shall use some of Stone's questions to assess how the biblical and post-biblical texts which feature women warriors both construct and subvert gendered expectations regarding the characters' relationships to motherhood. To paraphrase Stone: Do the texts presuppose that female characters must be mothers? Are these presuppositions undermined by the same texts that produce them? How are presuppositions about maternity used in the plots of these texts? Do the texts sometimes fail to have their characters perform the relationships to motherhood that we might expect? How do these questions and their answers contribute to our understanding of gender and motherhood in the Bible and early Jewish literature?

Beatrice Lawrence characterizes queer theory as 'not a method but a lens', meaning that Bible critics who employ queer theory may use historical-critical, literary, or any other method of analysis to arrive at any interpretation of the text (Lawrence 2009: 333). While this is technically true because of the postmodern roots and allegiances of the majority of scholars using a queer-theoretical lens, in practice, most queer criticism of the Bible is not historical-critical. Rather, queer analysis tends to focus on the texts *as texts*; it tends to reject the prospect of determining a single meaning for a text. This essay, like most queer biblical readings, is not historical-critical. I do not seek to uncover the historical 'truth' behind the texts I examine here, but rather to read them as pieces of literature. I read Deborah, Jael, and Judith as literary characters. I analyse them not in the context of their purported historical settings in the Late Bronze Age or the early post-exilic period, but in the context of the imagined worlds they inhabit.

A frequently cited scholar in queer biblical criticism is Judith Butler, who argues that gender is a performance, a series of repeated acts which together present a picture to the world. Butler's paradigmatic example of gender performance is drag; she argues that the parody involved when an individual 'puts on' a gender through drag lays bare the artificiality of *all* gender. Gender, in her view, has no inherent substance; rather, it is produced through the 'stylized repetition of acts'. Even when the gender being performed 'matches' the individual's genital

configuration, chromosomal sex, or both, it still remains a performance (Butler 1990; 1993).

Though Butler's work has found adherents in biblical studies, surprisingly few biblical scholars engage with the work of another major queer theorist, Lee Edelman. In *No Future* (2004), which has become influential outside biblical studies, Edelman critiques what he calls 'reproductive futurism'. He argues that society is relentlessly focused on 'the child', a symbolic figure who 'remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention' (Edelman 2004: 3). Edelman here responds to those who advocate against gay rights because 'the child' must be protected at all costs from the 'otherness' of queer lives and desires (Edelman 2004: 19–22). He also refutes the association of homosexuality, and its purported disregard for reproduction, with the Freudian concept of a 'death drive'. Against reproductive futurism, Edelman asks—what would it look like *not* to take the side of the child? His answer is queerness, which, to Edelman, is a resistance not just to an exaggerated focus on the child, but also to the widespread conception of history as a linear narrative (Edelman 2004: 3–4). Edelman also argues that the cult of the child, with its narcissistic focus on the replication of the self, is the real death drive, and that queerness represents a creative release from that drive. I use Edelman's and Butler's theories on reproductive futurism and gender performance to explore Deborah's, Jael's, and Judith's lack of engagement with maternity, and consider why and how the texts use the language and imagery of motherhood to describe these characters.

I do not mean to suggest that the authors of these early Jewish texts had any notion of queer theory; nor do I imply that they consciously created characters that would be read as childless in order to challenge the prevailing reproductive futurism of the day. Obviously, these are postmodern ideas, and it would be anachronistic to presume that ancient authors could be aware of such considerations. However, the purpose of theory is to help us gain a sharper understanding of the world, human nature, and even the production of literature. It is therefore legitimate to use postmodern theories to explain not just our own world and its literature, but also those of days long past. In the case of Deborah, Jael, and Judith, I find that queer theory helps to uncover new meanings for these very old texts.

Deborah and Her Textual Afterlives

Deborah is one of fifteen 'judges' named in the book of Judges, and the only woman among them. She is also described as a *neviah*, '[female] prophet' or 'prophethess'. According to biblical chronology, the judges led Israel between the conquest of the land and the creation of the monarchy. Most of them are portrayed as military leaders rather than judicial authorities (see Judg. 2: 18, 3: 10, 3: 15–22, and 11: 1–12: 7), but Deborah stands out as an exception to that rule: she 'sat

under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the mountainous region of Ephraim, and the Israelites would ask her for judgment' (Judg. 4: 5). She also acts as a military commander, like the other judges, ordering an attack on the Canaanites (Judg. 4: 6–7) and accompanying the troops to Kadesh (Judg. 4: 9–10, 5: 15). Though Deborah is not portrayed as actually wielding weapons, Susan Ackerman points out that her colleague Barak is not shown handling weapons either, but that tradition uniformly assumes that he does so (Ackerman 1998: 31–2).

Deborah is described in Judges 4: 4 as *eshet lapidot*. Since *ishah* can mean either 'woman' or 'wife', it is unclear how best to translate this phrase. Is Deborah the 'wife of Lapidoth', a man's name otherwise unattested in the Hebrew Bible and, oddly, marked with the feminine *-ot* ending? Or is she a 'woman of torches' or 'woman of flames', the feminine plural form of the otherwise masculine noun *lapid*? Some have circumvented the idea that Deborah had an otherwise unknown husband by arguing that 'Lapidoth' is nothing more than a nickname for Barak—whose name means 'lightning'. Deborah and Barak are not as much co-generals, therefore, but also spouses (Boling 1975: 95). This suggestion strikes me as misplaced, given that the text betrays no hint of a marital relationship between Deborah and Barak.

Although most Bible translations marry Deborah off, there are a number of scholars who suggest that the text is in fact stressing her fiery disposition (Bal 1988a: 30, 209; 1988b: 58; Fewell and Gunn 1990: 391; Guest 2005: 152–3; van Wolde 1995: 244). Jack M. Sasson is more literal, connecting Deborah with pyromancy, a form of prophecy involving fire (Sasson 2014: 256). As Mieke Bal writes, 'being "of torches" is the essence of Deborah: an inflamed and inflaming woman whose prophecy is crucial for the story. Her status as wife of an unknown and obscure husband is clearly irrelevant, and hence, would not be mentioned' (Bal 1988a: 209). Although the text is ambiguous, I side with the scholars who depict Deborah as a 'woman of torches', rather than as the 'wife of Lapidoth'.

Deborah's reproductive status is also ambiguous. The reader is never told whether or not she has children. If the biblical writers did intend to portray her as a mother, one wonders whether Deborah would bring her children with her when she sat under her palm tree, meting out justice. What about when she led the troops into battle? In a world in which women were responsible for the care of their children, I would argue that it is best to picture Deborah as a childless woman (Meyers 1991: 149). From a literary point of view, she certainly is a childless character because the biblical texts—the only sources we have about her—contain no hint of any offspring. The Bible is not a historical document, particularly when dealing with the pre-monarchic era, and its characters are not flesh-and-blood individuals for whom we can imagine full lives outside the text. They are literary creations, and if the text does not tell us that Deborah has children, then she is for all intents and purposes childless.

In spite of this, Deborah is described as 'a mother in Israel' in Judges 5: 7.

Scholars generally do not see her as a literal mother. Deborah F. Sawyer notes that, while motherhood in the Bible is generally conceived of in biological terms, that of Deborah is intended metaphorically: '[T]his description, for once, is not related to actual motherhood, but to her charge of God's people' (Sawyer 2002: 93). The entire verse in which the phrase appears gives us better context. It reads, 'Peasants ceased | In Israel they ceased, | Until I, Deborah, arose, | I, a mother in Israel, arose.'⁴ Here, 'mother' is clearly not used to describe a woman who births and rears children, but one who plays a leadership role for her people. J. Cheryl Exum argues, 'Her accomplishments described in Judges 4–5 include counsel, inspiration, and leadership. A mother in Israel is one who brings liberation from oppression, provides protection, and ensures the well-being and security of her people' (Exum 1985: 85). As Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn note, this is a 'harder' side of motherhood than what we usually see in the Bible (Fewell and Gunn 1990: 402). Deborah is not a 'mother' in terms of biological reproduction or tender nurturance, but by virtue of acting as a divinely inspired leader. The description of Deborah as a 'mother' can be compared to the use of 'father' to describe a leader among the prophets (Hackett 1985: 28).

In post-biblical tradition, the motherhood theme is amplified.⁵ This occurs in a text called *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (LAB), or *Biblical Antiquities*, which has survived only in its Latin version. *Biblical Antiquities* was transmitted alongside the work of Philo of Alexandria, and was therefore incorrectly attributed to him; the author is now known as 'Pseudo-Philo'. The text is a retelling of the Bible from Adam to Saul, focusing heavily on the book of Judges. It is notable for the author's treatment of biblical women. Pseudo-Philo expands the roles of many female characters, including Deborah, whom he almost turns into a 'second Moses' (Brown 1992: 39–71).

Deborah's identity as a metaphorical mother is played up in *Biblical Antiquities*: 'And when the day of her death approached, she sent and assembled all the people and said to them, "Now listen, my people. See, I instruct you as a woman of God and enlighten you as one of the female sex. Obey me like your mother and turn to my words as ones who will die"' (LAB 33: 1). She also refers to the people of Israel as 'my sons' or 'my children' (LAB 33: 3). The people respond in similar terms, 'See now, mother, you are dying and leaving your sons [or: children]; to whom do you entrust them?' (LAB 33: 4). Pseudo-Philo writes that, after Deborah dies, the people mourn her by singing, 'Look, a mother perishes from Israel, and a holy one who carried the leadership in the house of Jacob' (LAB 33: 6). As in Judges, the motherhood role is not seen by commentators as biological. Cheryl Anne Brown, for example, writes that "The phrase does not signify physical motherhood, but a role and quality of character. The mother's role is to nourish, protect, admonish, teach, and guide; she is compassionate and always mindful of her children' (Brown 1992: 69).⁶

It is curious to note, however, that the subject of Deborah's 'motherhood' only

appears once in rabbinic literature, in a negative context. The rabbis seem to interpret Deborah's proclamation that she is a 'mother in Israel' as braggadocio. In a section on the punishment for haughtiness, they write:

We see that if he is a prophet his prophecy deserts him from an incident that occurred with Deborah the prophetess. For in the Song of Deborah, after she names two of Israel's earlier leaders, it is written, 'They ceased to dwell in the open cities, those of Israel ceased; until Deborah arose, until a mother arose in Israel' etc. Deborah thus haughtily praised herself while casting aspersions upon her predecessors. And shortly afterwards it is written: 'Awake, awake, Deborah; awake, awake and speak song etc.!' This teaches that the spirit of prophecy deserted Deborah and she was obliged to plead for its return. Clearly, this was caused by her haughty words. (BT *Pes.* 66b)⁷

This passage is rather opaque. As Leila Leah Bronner writes, 'How could the rabbis have faulted her for referring to herself as "a mother in Israel"? The sages do not say how she should have referred to herself and why that statement would merit the loss of prophecy. Clearly, there was more going on than meets the eye' (Bronner 1994: 173). A much later rabbinic authority, the Maharsha, Rabbi Samuel Eidels (1555–1631), comments that, in proclaiming that her own rise to power was a turning point for the people of Israel, Deborah ignores the role of Barak (Schottenstein edition, BT *Pes.* 66b n. 15). Although the rabbis are not kind to Deborah here, I would argue that their hostility underscores my point about the metaphorical value of her motherhood. The rabbis give no indication that they read Judges 5: 7 as a statement of Deborah having children of her own. Rather, they read it as an assertion of her leadership role among the people, a role so powerful that, by speaking of it herself, she is found guilty of haughtiness.

Why does the book of Judges go out of its way to portray Deborah as a mother, albeit a metaphorical one? There are multiple possibilities. Perhaps 'mother' was an honorific title given to female leaders (Bronner 2004: 82). Perhaps the label is a 'consolation prize' for a childless woman who has authority among her people: she does not bear or rear sons, but she can still be a 'mother', after a fashion. Maybe Deborah is called 'mother in Israel' because of the author(s)' lack of imagination: in a patriarchal society, what else can one call a woman who has power? Or perhaps the label 'mother in Israel' is more insidious, an attempt to reinscribe a very public woman into the domestic sphere. Judges 5: 7 has Deborah herself utter the phrase; is this powerful woman being made to diminish her own importance by describing herself as a mother?

Fewell and Gunn express discomfort with Deborah's designation as 'mother', particularly as they argue that it couches Deborah's military leadership in the cosy language of motherhood, appropriating the image of the mother for violent ends (Fewell and Gunn 1993: 126). Deryn Guest summarizes and expands upon this critique:

For Fewell and Gunn this acclamation of Deborah as Mother is problematic. It could

be seen as an assimilation of her previous unexpected behavior whereby the possibly subversive and disturbing glimpse of her as an independent, forceful military leader is accommodated into the patriarchal system as an oddity that worked for the good of Israel. . . . There may yet be a way of queering this text that overcomes the problems noted by Fewell and Gunn, but this remains to be seen. (Guest 2005: 154)

I would like to propose an understanding of Deborah-as-mother that may not solve all of these problems but does cast a new light on why the text gives Deborah the linguistic markers of motherhood.

As Edelman argues, the image of ‘the child’ is powerful, as evidenced by its use in contemporary society to justify all manner of public policy initiatives. Clearly, this holds true not only today but also in the world(s) that produced the biblical texts. There are numerous examples in the Hebrew Bible of references to children as symbols of the future and continuity (e.g. Exod. 13: 8, 14; Deut. 1: 31, 8: 5; Isa. 11: 6, 49: 15, 66: 13; Hos. 11: 1). Likewise, motherhood is frequently used in the Bible as a symbol of nurturance or the mother’s role in shaping her child’s character (e.g. Isa. 66: 13; Ezek. 16: 44–5; Ps. 131: 2). So what does it mean when a prominent female character in the Bible is not portrayed as having children of her own? I would argue that we can read the absence of children, fertility concerns, or any other child-related storyline from the tale as problematizing the reproductive futurism that prevails in most of the Bible. When a woman is hailed not for her fecundity and childrearing skills, but for her military prowess and judicial savvy, the textual focus is shifted, if only temporarily, away from the relentless attention to offspring and the linear march of history. The focus of Deborah’s story becomes instead her leadership and triumph in the here-and-now. Although I do not read Deborah as ‘refusing’ to buy into the cult of the child—unlike in the book of Judith, which I discuss below, nothing in the text of Judges 4–5 implies that Deborah actively rejects childbearing—the effect of her story is to provide the reader with an alternative to the focus on children and continuity.

At the same time, Deborah nods to the power of reproduction and motherhood by using the phrase ‘a mother in Israel’. I would suggest that we can read Deborah as invoking motherhood not to diminish her own importance, but rather as a very conscious way of ‘performing’ womanhood. When Deborah calls herself ‘mother in Israel’, we can interpret this as a gesture towards what is expected of her as a woman in antiquity, perhaps even performed with a sense of camp. ‘Look’, the character of Deborah seems to be saying, ‘You know and I know that I’m not a mother. I’m far from traditional, more than a little transgressive, and I scare you a little. But fine, I’ll play the “mother” for you, if that makes you more comfortable.’ Deborah performs motherhood because that makes her powerful, independent nature easier to accept, both for her people in the story and for future generations of readers. By doing so, she mocks and subverts the social expectation that women should be biological mothers. Deborah’s story simulta-

neously presents an alternative to and a parody of the Bible's focus on women, their children, and what those children will do for the nation in the future. This could be the 'queering' interpretation that Guest seeks.

Judges merely refers to Deborah as a mother, while *Biblical Antiquities* goes even further by repeatedly using the kind of language of a sustained exchange between the people and Deborah, focusing on her specific role as a mother to them. More to the point, when Deborah is on her deathbed, the 'mother' and 'child' language is carried through an entire exchange between her and the people. It appears that, for Pseudo-Philo, calling Deborah their 'mother' is the highest compliment the people can pay her. Again, though, by calling Deborah 'mother' in terms of leadership rather than biological relationship, the text (even if unwittingly) parodies the expectation that women should be mothers. When she tells the Israelites that they are to 'obey me like your mother', she is putting female power in terms they can understand. However, she also undermines their equation of authoritative women with mothers, because she is not one.

What, then, do we make of the negative attitude the rabbis displayed towards Deborah's 'motherhood'? Why do they condemn her for touting herself as 'a mother in Israel' if women are supposed to be mothers? I would argue that the rabbis see Deborah's proclamation for what it is: an attempt to invoke the language of reproduction to make her martial nature and independence more palatable. The rabbis are not fooled. They call her on her performance and condemn her for the haughtiness of appropriating a status she has not 'earned'. I would surmise that the rabbis are disturbed by the possibility that a woman could hold military and judicial power and resent Deborah's efforts to make her authority more palatable by couching it in the language of motherhood. For a female character to earn the approval of the rabbis, she must be a 'real' mother, fully invested in the perpetuation of the nation through reproduction, and not, as Deborah, a tough female leader performing 'mommy drag'.

Jael and Her Textual Afterlives

Closely connected to Deborah is Jael, who murders the Canaanite general Sisera in Judges 4 and 5. It is to Jael and not to herself that Deborah refers in 4: 9 when she tells Barak that she will indeed go with him to attack the Canaanites, but that 'the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman'. Taken together, the prose of Judges 4 and the poem of Judges 5 (the Song of Deborah) recount that Sisera flees the battlefield towards the tent of Jael, 'wife of Hever the Kenite', because the Israelites are winning.⁸ Jael beckons Sisera into her tent, gives him sustenance, puts him to bed, and then kills him by driving a tent peg into his head.

Jael, like Deborah, is not explicitly described as childless. Yet such a situation can reasonably be deduced from the text. Just as it is difficult to imagine Deborah judging, prophesying, and leading the military with offspring in tow, so it is hard

to see the scene described in Judges 4 and 5 playing out with children under foot. Like the vast majority of religious, secular, and artistic interpreters, I see Jael as childless.

Just as Deborah is described as a metaphorical mother, so Jael is portrayed as a maternal figure when interacting with Sisera. I argue elsewhere that Jael acts in a way that is both motherly and seductive, and other scholars have noted the erotic undercurrent of this encounter (Tamber-Rosenau 2015; see also Ackerman 1998; Niditch 1989; Reis 2005; van Wolde 1995; Zakovitch 1981). Here, however, I focus on the maternal aspects of their meeting. From the moment they see one another, Jael behaves in a motherly fashion. She goes out of her tent to meet Sisera—like a mother welcoming home her child—and tells him, ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid!’ (Judg. 4: 18). The prose in chapter 4 is otherwise terse, but here Jael uses more words than she needs, repeating herself for the sake of emphasis. This reads like a mother soothing a scared child: ‘No monsters under the bed, honey, see? No monsters! Nothing to worry about!’ Of course, Sisera should definitely be afraid.⁹

When Sisera enters Jael’s tent, she covers him with a piece of fabric (Judg. 4: 18). (The word *semikhah* is a *hapax legomenon*, a word that appears only once in the Bible, so its meaning is uncertain. Most scholars translate it as ‘rug’, ‘curtain’, or ‘blanket’.) This is not an act of concealment, but an act of mothering. To assume otherwise would be to imagine that Barak and his men would think of looking for Sisera in Jael’s tent, fail to be dissuaded by Jael standing at the entrance telling them that there is no one there (Judg. 4: 20), notice a Sisera-shaped lump in the corner under a blanket, shrug, and continue their search elsewhere. Jael intuitively that this scared, tired man needs a mother, so she tucks him in. One might even interpret Jael covering Sisera as a symbolic return to the safety of the womb.¹⁰

Next, Sisera asks for water to slake his thirst. Jael gives him milk (4: 19) or milk and curds (5: 25). Nourishing the general by providing for his physical needs is another act of mothering, and the choice of beverage is symbolic (Sasson 2014: 267–8). Bal argues that, ‘By giving milk, Yael, on the one hand, reassures Sisera further; on the other hand, she prepares the scene as an ironic one of anti-mothering’ (Bal 1988a: 213). I would add that even Jael’s choice of vessel in the poetic version of events may be read as a symbol of mothering. She brings him his milk and curds in ‘a bowl fit for nobles’ (5: 25). This would be a logical choice for a woman hosting a general under ordinary circumstances, but in this scene of dishonour for the general, it carries some sardonic undertones: ‘How noble are you now, Sisera?’ The mocking is tinged with infantilization, too; I read the ‘bowl fit for nobles’ as akin to the old practice of feeding a young child using a silver bowl and spoon. According to the prose version, Jael then covers Sisera again. Sasson notes, on this point, that the two descriptions of covering may be read as a single act ‘sandwiching’ Sisera’s request for a drink (Sasson 2014: 268). If there

is a second covering, we might read it as an extra act of maternal attention: the child has thrown off his covers to demand a drink, but now he really must lie down, get under the covers, and take a nap.

When Sisera has been covered again, he tells Jael, 'Stand at the opening of the tent, and if it happens that any man comes and asks you, "Is there a man here?" say, "None"' (4: 20). Scholars sometimes read this as an ironic indication of Sisera's lack of masculinity; he is, indeed, 'no man' (Bal 1988a: 213–14). We can also see it, however, as further contributing to the text's impression of a mother-child relationship between Jael and Sisera. There is no man in Jael's tent, only a little boy under the protection of his mother.

When, in the prose version of events, Jael approaches Sisera with the tent-peg and mallet, she does so *balat*, 'softly' (4: 21). This extends the motherhood imagery; she has tucked in her 'child', and now she must tiptoe around so as not to wake him. She approaches to kill him, rather than to adjust his blanket. Instead of watching out for his life, she deals death. The juxtaposition of the 'good mother' Deborah with the 'bad mother' Jael and with Sisera's mother, who parrots the patriarchal justification for war, may reflect the author's ambivalence and unease with the power of motherhood (Exum 2007: 71–2).

Also suggestive of maternity is the poetic description of how Sisera falls. While the prose version has him asleep when Jael strikes, the poem has him fall 'between her feet' (5: 27), the same phrase used in Deuteronomy 28: 57, which describes 'the afterbirth that comes out from between her feet'. Jael has metaphorically given birth to Sisera, only to kill him. The connection of Sisera's death scene to one of birth is reinforced by the description of Jael flagging down Barak and welcoming him into her tent to see what she has wrought. Biblical references to birth-giving reveal that it was a women's event at which men were not present. Combined with the motherhood imagery in Jael's treatment of Sisera, her inviting Barak to see Sisera's body reads like the father finally welcomed in after labour is complete. What he sees, however, is a grotesque parody: Sisera, dead, with a tent-peg nailed through his head.

The end of chapter 5, which brings Sisera's biological mother into the story, reinforces the portrayal of Jael as a mother-figure. Sisera's mother waits at the window for her son to come home, wondering why he has not arrived yet: "The wisest of her princesses answered her | She also repeated her words to herself | "Aren't they finding and dividing the spoil? | A womb or two for each man's head | Spoil of dyed cloth for Sisera | Spoil of dyed cloth | An embroidered cloth or two | Spoil for their necks!" (Judg. 5: 29–30). By mentioning Sisera's mother, the biblical author invites the reader to draw the parallel between her and Jael. This, we finally learn, is what Sisera was hoping for when he fled the battlefield: a mother who would await him eagerly and welcome him warmly. Presumably, Sisera's own mother would have used the same tricks of the maternal trade that Jael employs: soothing words about Sisera's safety, a place to lay his head, a warm

covering, and a drink to slake his thirst. Rather than reaching his biological mother, however, Sisera encounters Jael, who behaves in a motherly way and uses maternal comforts only for long enough to kill him.

The maternal imagery continues in the post-biblical tradition, particularly in chapter 31 of *Biblical Antiquities*. This text, like Judges 4 and 5, has Jael offering Sisera shelter, warmth, and something to drink, promising him motherly comfort to soothe his troubled soul. It also mentions Sisera's mother, here called Themech, and her eagerness to see the spoil her son will bring back from the battle. Again, this reinforces the parallel between Jael and Sisera's real mother.

There are additional indications in chapter 31 that Jael 'mothers' Sisera. For example, though he asks Jael for something to drink immediately upon entering the tent, she does not oblige right away, telling him instead to rest first, and then drink (*LAB* 31: 4). Just as a good mother does not always give her child exactly what he asks for when he asks for it, Jael in effect tells Sisera, 'Mother knows best, dear; now lie down and take a nap.' Moreover, this scene places Jael, not Sisera, in charge—because she is a mother-figure to him.

The motherhood imagery is again reinforced when Jael goes out to her flock to obtain milk (*LAB* 31: 5). While in Judges Jael simply gives Sisera milk, here the reader sees her getting it from a ewe, strengthening the milk's association with maternity because of its direct connection with a mother animal. Additionally, in *Biblical Antiquities* the milk is mixed with wine, making the beverage even more soporific. Jael wants to ensure that the childlike man whom she is mothering will sleep soundly, not because, like a good parent, she wants him to recover, but because she wants him to be too exhausted to notice that she is about to kill him. This section of the story can also be read as a mother caring for her sick child. Sisera repeatedly describes his thirst as 'burning' or 'blazing', hence reminiscent of a fever. In this light, Jael is making sure her sick child sleeps, gives him something to quash the 'burning', and then allows him to sleep again. Sisera is also repeatedly described as being 'disjointed', 'dissolved', or 'out of sorts' from the battle and the bad omens he senses in the stars; Jael gives him the impression that, like a good mother, she will put him back together.

In *Biblical Antiquities*, Jael prays before she kills Sisera, telling God that if she is able to roll him off the bed without waking him up, she will know that she can safely strike him (*LAB* 31: 7). This introduces a comic element to the text: it seems unlikely that anyone, no matter how battle-weary and inebriated, could stay asleep after being rolled off the bed to the floor. Sisera's improbably deep slumber is also divine confirmation of the legitimacy of Jael's plan: she has asked God to send her a specific sign, and God does, even though the sign she asks for is ridiculous. But Sisera staying asleep is also a sign that Jael has fulfilled her motherly role impeccably: she has tucked him in bed and lulled him to sleep so well that he does not wake up even when shoved onto the floor! This scene brings to mind those who praise a parent for his or her infant's ability to sleep through anything.

Like the mother whose child slumbers through shopping trips and aeroplane rides, Jael can be read as hyper-effective in her motherly role because her 'son' sleeps soundly in her care.

This chapter of *Biblical Antiquities* does not just mention Sisera's mother at the end of the story, but also early on. When, in *LAB* 31: 3, Sisera enters Jael's tent and sees that she has scattered rose petals on her bed, he pledges, 'If I will be safe, I will go to my mother, and Jael will be my woman.' For Sisera, home, safety, and settling down with a good woman are associated with the figure of the mother. This explains why Sisera feels at ease with Jael: she is a stand-in for his own mother. He cannot get to Themech immediately, so he will take his mothering wherever he can find it.

The rabbis, too, emphasize Jael's mothering attitude towards Sisera. For example, they suggest that the milk which Jael gives Sisera to drink comes straight from her breast (BT *Nid.* 55*b*). Of course, this complicates the assumption that Jael is childless, since only a woman with a small child would produce milk. It does indicate, however, that the rabbis viewed Jael as a 'mother' to Sisera.

How should we interpret Jael's over-the-top mothering of Sisera, both in Judges 4–5 and in *Biblical Antiquities*? Unlike her compatriot Deborah, Jael does not use the motif of motherhood in order to make her authority more palatable to the Israelites. She is not a 'public' woman and has no need to convince the Israelites of anything. Jael adopts a maternal attitude towards Sisera simply to get him to trust her. She knows that she needs to make him pliable enough to kill him; this is not just a matter of politics, but perhaps also a matter of her own personal safety. Rape is a well-recognized weapon of war, as even Sisera's mother suggests in Judges 5: 30, and Jael probably understood the threat Sisera represented to herself and other women. (Indeed, Pseudo-Philo makes this concern more explicit by claiming that Sisera wished to capture women and intended to take Jael with him back home.) To lure the enemy into her tent, kill him, and thus keep herself safe, Jael resorts to the motif of motherhood; in some ways, this is a weapon even more powerful than seduction. While the trope of the *femme fatale* is sufficiently well known to make a wise man in a dangerous situation think twice about responding to a mysterious woman's sexual advances, would a man think to question a woman who wants to care for him with motherly tenderness? Jael expertly 'performs' womanhood in the form of outsized maternal concern, and as a result gets Sisera right where she needs him.

As is the case with Deborah, I am not arguing that Jael actively resists futurism by not having children; the text gives no indication that Jael actually rejects biological motherhood. It simply does not mention children or fertility. However, when a biblical text portrays a woman whose role is not to give birth to future (ideally male) members of the community, but instead to act with guile and prowess and assassinate a dangerous enemy, this effectively challenges traditional biblical concerns with reproductive futurism. An alternative image of biblical woman-

hood, one not tied to biology, emerges. At the same time, Jael's over-the-top performance of motherhood gives a nod and a wink to the more traditional biblical female role. But, like Deborah, Jael's conscious use of maternal language and imagery divorces the powerful symbol of the mother from actual maternity. Just as the biological man who adopts the dress, speech, and mannerisms of a stereotypical woman for a drag show exposes the artifice of all gender, as I noted above, so does Jael's performance of a stereotypical mother show that its trappings may not be quite so 'natural'.

Judith

The third 'woman warrior' I address is Judith, the heroine of the second half of the eponymous Greek-language book. In the book of Judith, the heroine's town, Bethulia, is besieged by the Assyrians, and the (male) leaders of the town want to surrender.¹¹ Judith, a pious and ascetic widow, dresses up and sashays into the enemy camp, telling the general, Holofernes, that she has defected. Judith charms Holofernes so skilfully that, eager to have sex with her, he gets drunk and passes out, which allows Judith to cut off his head with his own sword. She brings the head back to Bethulia, the Israelites are saved, and Judith is hailed as a heroine. Many men wish to marry her, but she refuses and goes back to her widow's life. The book of Judith was written in an unmistakably Jewish context, probably in the second century BCE, but for reasons that are still a source of debate among scholars, the book never made it into the Jewish canon. (Judith is considered 'deuterocanonical', or of secondary biblical status, by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches today, although it was removed from the Protestant canon around the time of the Reformation.) Judith is mentioned neither by Josephus or Philo, nor in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Mishnah, or the Talmud (Gera 2010: 28–9). The book, nonetheless, was not completely forgotten by Jewish tradition; Jewish authors in the Middle Ages produced a number of retellings of the story, often linking it with the festival of Hanukah (Gera 2010: 30).

Like Deborah and Jael, Judith is never explicitly described as childless, yet this is once again the most logical way to read her. Judith is a widow, apparently living alone (with a maidservant) in the house she inherited from her late husband. If she has a grown son, would he not have inherited the house and be obligated to care for his mother? And if she has smaller children, why, in nine chapters that tell us a considerable amount about Judith and her life, do we not hear of their existence? If there are children, why do we not hear about them in 16: 24, when Judith distributes her property before she dies? If she is meant to be read as a mother, we would expect to hear how her children are to be cared for when she—along with her maid—leave home for several days to undertake her mission. We would also expect to learn about any children of Judith's when the text provides a

lengthy genealogy for her (Judith 8: 1), but we do not. I would argue, as other scholars have, that it is best to read this literary character as a childless woman (Gera 2014: 102; Moore 1985: 180).

As is the case with Deborah and Jael, the language of metaphorical motherhood surrounds Judith in spite of the fact that she is not a biological mother. The other inhabitants of Bethulia and Israel are frequently mentioned in connection with their children, which makes Judith's childlessness even more noticeable. In the context of the Assyrian siege, for example, the men of Israel, 'their wives and their children' all put on sackcloth and ashes and prostrate themselves (Judith 4: 10–11). The people of Bethulia tell the town elders to surrender, 'For it would be better for us to become spoil for them: we will be slaves, but we will remain alive and we will not see our infants dying in front of us, or our wives' and our children's lives stopping before us' (Judith 7: 27).¹² The people of Bethulia and the rest of Israel voice concern at the real physical harm that will be inflicted upon their offspring. They frame their desire to surrender in terms of their children's welfare, giving meaning to their struggle for survival by their concern for the next generation of Israelites. In Edelman's language, the Israelites are engaged with reproductive futurism. In this case it does not serve them well, because in their zeal to protect the children, they almost surrender to the Assyrians.

Judith, on the other hand, is barely engaged with reproductive futurism. Although she is presumably childless, at no point does she show any interest in remarrying. Her speech distances her from the future-centred concerns of her Israelite brethren. On three of the four occasions in which Judith herself invokes children, she does not refer to them using the first-person possessive. Additionally, the references are clearly metaphorical, as in 'children of Israel'. In her long prayer to God before she begins her mission, for example, Judith says, 'You gave their wives for spoil and their daughters into captivity, and all their plunder to be divided among your beloved children, truly zealous for you, who abhorred the pollution of their blood and appealed to you for help' (Judith 9: 4). In the same prayer, she refers to those who plan evil against God's covenant, the Temple, Mount Zion, and 'the house of your children's possession' (Judith 9: 13). In her victory song after she has slain Holofernes, she rejoices and exclaims, 'Sons of maids have pierced them through and gravely wounded them like children of deserters; they perished in the battle of my Lord' (Judith 16: 12). The children in these verses are God's children, the Israelite people. They are the present, not the future, of Israelite society.

On the fourth occasion in which Judith refers to children, in 16: 5, she does call them 'hers': 'He said he would burn my borders and kill my young men with the sword and cast my sucklings on the ground and give my infants for plunder and my virgins for spoil.' It seems clear from the rest of the book that these children

are not Judith's by way of blood. Though Judith is not a mother, in 16: 5 she metaphorically casts herself as one (Gera 2014: 102). The young men, the virgins, and the babies are 'hers' in that she has just saved the entire people, including the youth. In so doing, she has taken responsibility for them, for their survival and well-being. As Toni Craven writes, 'Faith makes this childless woman a mother to Israel and a model of true freedom' (Craven 1983: 60).

Like Deborah, 'a mother in Israel', Judith is cast as leader and protector of the people through the metaphorical use of maternal language. Judith labels herself a 'mother' in 16: 5, her victory hymn, just as Deborah had in an implicit manner. I argue elsewhere that Judith spends the entire second half of the book performing different, gender-based roles: she dons and doffs her ascetic widow drag to become, at first, a sexually alluring woman, and later on, a righteous, unimpeachable national heroine (Tamber-Rosenau 2015). Her invocation of maternal imagery in the victory hymn is part of that final performance of a national heroine. In that scene, Judith takes on the role of mother to the masses. As I argued above regarding Deborah, I would contend that Judith ascribes maternal imagery to herself quite intentionally, as a way of performing acceptable womanhood. Judith is a transgressive character; after all, three chapters earlier, she beheaded an enemy general with his own sword. I disagree with scholars who claim that Judith yields to the patriarchy after returning with Holofernes' head (Gera 2014: 104; Levine 1995: 221–2). Rather, I see her references to 'my young men', 'my sucklings', 'my infants', and 'my virgins' as a canny way of establishing her new role in the community. Judith has undoubtedly been listening throughout the book as the male leaders go on about the fate of their children. She knows that what matters to the leaders is the survival of their offspring, so she plays along by stressing her role as saviour of the next generation. Ironically, while those children referred to by the town leaders will survive, Judith's own line will not.

Edelman's theory of futurism and queerness goes beyond reproduction, and calls into question the obsession with the future in general. He coins a term, *sinthomosexuality*,¹³ which involves a sense of *jouissance*¹⁴ and an appreciation of individual existence, along with a refusal to buy into the idea that the present derives its meaning from the future. Those who fail to buy into the cult of the child are viewed as suspect because they force the rest of the world 'to brood upon the abyss' (Edelman 2004: 41). It is not the homosexual who is controlled by the death drive, as a handful of public figures have claimed, but those who rely on futurism to give meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence.

Judith can be understood through Edelman's frame of the *sinthomosexual*. The male leaders of Bethulia are about to surrender to the Assyrians for the sake of the children, unless a miracle comes along. Judith, by contrast, is not willing to sell the present for the sake of the future, nor is she prepared to wait for God to intervene. She encourages the reader to adopt her point of view. She focuses relentlessly on the present, as in her entreaty to the town leaders not to give up.

She argues that the present generation is righteous enough to win the favour of God, and it is on this basis that she pleads with the leaders to reconsider their plan: 'Never in our generation nor in this day has any tribe or family or people or city worshipped hand-fashioned gods, as happened in previous days' (8: 18). In this speech, she does not invoke the potential suffering of the children during the siege, as the town leaders, the Moabites and Edomites, and the narrator all do in the preceding chapter. Instead, she warns against the potential 'slaughter of our brothers' which might occur if they capitulate (8: 22). Her speech reads like a rebuke. She seems to be saying, 'Stop planning only for the future; if you surrender, you will destroy the present.'

Through most of the book, then, Judith resists reproductive futurism. When it is time to settle down in Bethulia again, however, she obliquely embraces the role of national mother. I contend that she does so as a nod to the notion that motherhood represents the apex of acceptable roles for women, and as a way of allowing her fellow Israelites to think of her as a positive, warm, and nurturing figure, rather than a duplicitous, cold-hearted, and murderous character. By recasting herself as a mother, Judith takes control of her own legacy. Despite challenging reproductive futurism throughout the story, she is now ready to put on her 'mother drag' to smooth her way back into the hearts and lives of the Israelites.

Conclusion

In this essay I have proposed new ways of reading three stories of childless biblical women who nonetheless invoke maternal imagery. For Deborah, I suggest that her self-reference as 'a mother in Israel' is a way to make her radical leadership more acceptable. In Jael's case, I argue that her mother-act is a canny scheme to place Sisera in a vulnerable position. In the case of Judith, her invocation of motherhood reads like a shrewd nod to the concerns of the male leadership, even as she refuses to remarry and thus bear children herself.

What, then, should the modern feminist reader make of narrative accounts of these characters' performances? Following Fewell and Gunn, who are uncomfortable with the maternal language surrounding Deborah, we might try to resist the appropriation of maternal imagery for patriarchal ends. We might find it problematic that the biblical texts are so invested in women being mothers that they use maternal imagery to describe childless female characters, and that even women's non-childbearing activities are framed in the language of reproductive futurism. Yet some might see the public benefits of motherhood status when it is extended to women who are not described as having children. We might be seeing in these stories great esteem on the part of the biblical authors for women as mothers and a flexibility in extending that esteem to women who are not mothers as well.

I would argue that there is a feminist message in these three texts, if only we accord Deborah, Jael, and Judith more self-knowledge than commentators have done in the past. I contend that the biblical authors consciously embrace the mantle of the mother. These readings open up the possibility of reading these women as empowered and empowering characters who have been previously derided by some feminist scholars as poor role models and dupes of the patriarchy. Though each character's situation is different, all three are described using maternal language or imagery in a deliberate strategy of appropriating the power of motherhood. In taking up for their childless selves the 'mother' label, they parody the expectation that women should be mothers and, by extension, the reproductive futurism that motivates this expectation. Deborah, Jael, and Judith put on 'mommy drag' and, through a combination of their childlessness and the effectiveness of their performance, they subtly call into question the very strictures they act out.

Notes

- 1 For examples of women whose textual identities are primarily or exclusively those of mothers, see Gen. 3: 20, in which Eve is named for her life-giving capacity; Gen. 29: 31–30: 21, in which Leah engages in a breeding race with her sister; and Exod. 2: 1–8, which mentions Moses' mother but does not even bother to indicate her name. For examples of miserable barren women, see Gen. 16, in which Sarai is so distressed over her inability to conceive that she tells Abram to impregnate her servant Hagar, and is then so distressed over the pregnant Hagar that she mistreats her; Gen. 30: 1, in which Rachel is envious of her fertile sister and tells their husband Jacob, 'Give me children or I will die'; 1 Sam. 1–2, in which Hannah prays fervently for a child, conceives, and praises God; and in the extra-canonical work 4 Esdras 9: 41–5, in which a grieving woman (who symbolizes the history of Israel) tells the writer of her infertility and her prayers for a child. There are also instances in which childless women do not reveal any sign of distress, but in which the childlessness ends miraculously, thereby testifying to a world-view which considers the absence of children a problem that needs to be corrected. For examples, see Gen. 25: 21, in which Rebekah is barren but it is Isaac who prays, successfully, for a child; Judg. 13: 2–3, in which an angel appears to Manoah's barren wife to announce that she will conceive and have a son; and 2 Kgs 4, in which Elisha, wishing to reward the childless Shunammite woman for her hospitality, grants her a son, on the basis of his servant's advice.
- 2 Throughout this essay I use the word 'Jewish', for lack of a better term, to describe biblical, apocryphal, and extra-canonical literature. Strictly speaking, most of what we call the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) cannot be described as Jewish texts; the majority pre-date any use of the word 'Jewish'. There is also significant scholarly debate about when 'Jewish' becomes the appropriate appellation for the community of YHWH-worshippers who originated in the southern Levant. While I find it too simplistic to call these people 'Israelites' before the Babylonian exile and 'Jews' afterwards, certainly by the time of the writing of the book of Judith, which probably dates from the Hasmonean era, they deserve the label 'Jewish'.

- 3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Hebrew, Greek, and Latin are my own.
- 4 Some translations render it 'Until you, Deborah, arose | You, a mother in Israel, arose.' I prefer the first person. Mieke Bal argues that whether one uses the first or second person hardly matters in understanding who is meant to be speaking in this verse. She writes, 'If Deborah speaks in the first person, the fact remains that her discourse is embedded in that of the presumed male subject who cites it. . . . Conversely, if the verb can be translated in the second person, this in no way invalidates the hypothesis of a feminine subject. First of all, self-address in the second person is quite common. Deborah could still be the subject of the exhortation.' The issue does matter, however, if we seek to understand the text's stance on Deborah's 'motherhood'. Bal writes, 'If Deborah accords herself the title of honor, "a mother in Israel," this title has a meaning radically different from that which the voice of the people might imply, who would seek in her protection from danger—the maternal function in the narrow modern sense, a little saccharine. More is at stake in the philological discussion than at first appeared: not only does it suggest that the critic wants to eliminate the possibility of a female subject, but also it imposes upon his analysis the ideologeme [a unit of ideology] of the sweet, caring mother as a cover-up for the threatening image of the female leader' (Bal 1988b: 113–14).
- 5 Targum Jonathan is an exception; it omits the 'motherhood' part of Deborah's character.
- 6 As Betsy Halpern-Amaru (1991) points out, Pseudo-Philo is fairly obsessed with mothers in general. The amplification of Deborah's 'motherhood' in *Biblical Antiquities* must therefore be seen in the context of the author's increased interest in and attention to how the character of one's mother may shape one's actions. If the courageous, pious Deborah is Israel's 'mother', then, in Pseudo-Philo's world, this speaks well of Israel's promise.
- 7 All translations of talmudic material in this essay come from the Schottenstein edition of the Babylonian Talmud (1990–2005).
- 8 Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn's work on Judges 4 and 5 shows the value of reading the two chapters together, in their final form. Contra Mieke Bal, who advocates reading chapter 5 first and viewing chapter 4 as a later, somewhat unwelcome addition, they ask, 'Why not do the obvious thing and try reading five after four, as a single story?' (Fewell and Gunn 1990: 390). Numerous scholars have taken the opposite tack, arguing that the poetic account in Judges 5 is one of the earliest texts in the Hebrew Bible and that Judges 4 was written much later, by a different hand. They therefore analyse the chapters as separate stories. An example of this tactic can be found in the work of Bal, who in discussing Judges 4 and 5 refers not to 'Yael' but to 'Yael–4' and 'Yael–5; that is, she argues that the two chapters present two distinct depictions of her character (Bal 1988a: 211). For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the prose and poetic accounts, see Jack M. Sasson's commentary, in which he reviews seven lines of argument on how the chapters are related (Sasson 2014: 312–16). I treat the two chapters as one story for two main reasons. First, the respective dates of Judges 4 and 5 are still a matter of debate among scholars. Since we do not possess anything approaching solid dating for these texts, it would seem unreasonable to ascribe them to separate authors writing different stories at different times. Perhaps a better strategy would be that of Pamela Tamarkin Reis, who writes, 'From my perspective, the prose of chapter 4 and the poetry of chapter 5 are not the record of two different traditions about Jael and Sisera, nor are they two different versions of one tradition. They are the product of one "overarching mind" who tells the same story in two different genres' (Reis 2005: 39). Second, when one reads these texts *as texts*, dating, authorship,

and provenance become of secondary importance. What is key is that, for as long as the textual evidence indicates, Judges 5 has immediately followed Judges 4. This results in the reader encountering the stories together. For all intents and purposes for a literary analysis, these two chapters, then, are a single unit.

- 9 Sasson argues that Jael telling Sisera not to be afraid is ‘impressively cheeky! And if we had not already been prepared by encountering women of striking chutzpah and authority (Deborah), we might have become more aware of how incongruous it is for a tribal woman to say such words to a commander-in-chief of a powerful army.’ He notes that this is the only instance in the Bible of a lower-status person addressing this phrase to a higher-status person (Sasson 2014: 266).
- 10 Some scholars argue that Jael’s tent itself is symbolic of a womb (Duran 2005: 118).
- 11 Note that the name of Judith’s town, Bethulia, is, presumably and not coincidentally, similar to the Hebrew word for ‘virgin’, *betulah*. Judith may be seen as symbolically protecting virginity when she defends the city of Bethulia from the Assyrians who wish to penetrate its defences. As I argue elsewhere, the book of Judith implies that the heroine’s defence of the city also spares its women from literal rape by the marauding enemy army.
- 12 Other references to actual children and infants in the book of Judith can be found in 4: 12, 7: 14, 7: 22, 7: 23, and 7: 32.
- 13 The word is a portmanteau of Jacques Lacan’s concept of *sinthome* and the word ‘homosexuality’. The *sinthome*, an archaic form of the word ‘symptom’, is a subject which defies attempts to make meaning of it. Similarly, Edelman argues, homosexuality defies humanity’s collective fantasy of future continuity. The *sinthomosexual* denies responsibility for a better future and lives wilfully in the present (Edelman 2004: 101).
- 14 *Jouissance* is a French word for ‘enjoyment’ or ‘pleasure’ and can suggest orgasm. As used by Roland Barthes, it suggests ‘a kind of response to literary works that is different from ordinary *plaisir* (pleasure). Whereas *plaisir* is comfortable and reassuring, confirming our values and expectations, *jouissance*—usually translated as “bliss” to retain its erotic sense—is unsettling and destabilizing’ (Baldick 1990: 116).

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