

“God of the Nations”
Judges 4:1-24
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Just about everything in Judges 4 is offensive to enlightened sensibilities.

We learn already at the outset that God has “sold” the children of Israel into twenty years of oppression because of some vague and unnamed sin on their part.

Does God really impose military defeat as a punishment for immorality? What a stern and easily offended deity! Yes, it’s true, in the rest of the chapter God goes on to deliver Israel from the oppression of Jabin, King of Canaan, and Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army. But God does so by having Deborah summon up the Israelites tribes to engage Sisera on the field of battle. The resulting slaughter is brutal and total. “All the army of Sisera fell by the sword,” we’re told by the narrator. To make sure we’ve gotten the point, he adds “No one was left.” Punishment, warfare, annihilation—is this really the way of the Lord? Even aside from our moral reservations, God’s course of action hardly seems to hold much promise as a long-term solution to the problem of how it can live securely in the land.

Something, in fact, that *we* know well after the events of the past several years is that even the most decisive military victories never fully resolve political dilemmas. And so it is here—for it turns out that the biblical narrator has been teasing us. Yes, all of

Sisera's *army* is killed—but not, it seems, Sisera himself. General Sisera has escaped and has made his way on foot to the nearby encampment of some Kenites, non-Israelites who were nevertheless distant relations of a sort, since they were descendants of Moses' father-in-law. Fleeing through the camp, Sisera is met by Jael, wife of the Kenite chief. She invites him into her tent rather suggestively, tells him not to worry, maybe...engages in some hanky-panky (the text implies much on this score but tells little), she promises not to reveal his whereabouts, she gives him milk to drink and a coverlet, and then—when Sisera has fallen asleep—Jael creeps softly up to him and drives a tent-peg through his skull.

This is all so wrong! First God apparently sanctions killing on an appalling scale; now Jael violates the ancient Near East's most cherished first principle, the practice of hospitality, by deceitfully murdering Sisera in his sleep. The subsequent song in Judges 5 even celebrates both of these troubling aspects of the story: "So perish all your enemies, O LORD!," it reads. "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed." No wonder there aren't a lot of sermons on this passage—how can Christians see God at work in the hand of an assassin? In fact, no wonder that many Christians down through the ages have had serious difficulty with the entire Old Testament. Such stories of battles and barbarism—what have they to do with Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

One widespread response to this difficulty is to identify certain portions of the Old Testament as exemplifying a sub-Christian morality. These portions, it's said, can no longer function authoritatively as Christian Scripture and are therefore better rejected or just ignored. There is integrity in such a conclusion; on the whole, it's probably better to

perceive the offensiveness of texts like Judges 4, and reject them, than not to reject them only because their offensiveness never registers. Yet the move to reject sub-Christian portions of the Old Testament carries with it two fatal dangers. In the first place, how do we decide what exactly is “sub-Christian” and what is not? How much of the Old Testament is ultimately to be put on the shelf? And as we attempt make such decisions, is there not the likelihood the we will identify what is “Christian” with our own cultural assumptions, and thereby construct an Old Testament in our own image? Even further, in this Christian notion of the “sub-Christian” is there not the odious taint of an old reflex toward anti-Semitism? Better then, to keep offensive passages close at hand and to interrogate them constantly for the possibility of their offering a particularly needed contemporary witness—the texts that seem so obviously wrong are precisely the texts that might illuminate those blind spots we don’t realize we have.

The second fatal danger in the identification of morally deficient Old Testament passages is that it reinforces a tendency to view such passages in isolation, pulled apart from their wider literary, canonical function. In other words, there can be a larger literary and theological purpose to the presence of ethically-vexing content in Scripture. It’s surprisingly often overlooked that some Old Testament stories are not intended for ethical emulation; to be blunt, some are presented, occasionally explicitly but more often implicitly, as bad examples rather than good examples—or at least partly bad examples. The Old Testament is intensely realistic in this way. For example, the entire book of Judges could be characterized as a succession of bad examples. The book makes this point through the larger literary framework into which the individual stories have been set: through explicit narrative judgments and the implicit logic of the sequence of events,

episodes of faithfulness are repeatedly followed by acts of disobedience, so that nothing ever gets better for good. The larger purpose for this bleak portrayal is to prepare the ground for the later establishment of the monarchy in Israel. At this level the quite numerous and varied people and events within Judges, whether praise-worthy or morally dubious in and of themselves, all combine to illustrate how chaotic things became without a king—in other words, why a king was needed. “In those days,” Judges sadly concludes, “there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Jud 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1). This unity of purpose within the book is further reinforced by parallel stories of two mighty men, Sisera toward the beginning and Samson toward the end, both of whom are tricked and defeated by women, women whose weapons are hospitality, sex appeal and sleep. But where Jael defeated an Israelite enemy, Delilah defeated an Israelite hero. Here again we see how things get worse in the course of the book, and this overarching plot of decline suggests the need for, and the possibility of, a more canonical appraisal of Judges 4, and a more skeptical reaction to its ostensible triumphalism.

Indeed, if we return to our particular passage and look more closely, we find yet another hero in the story—what was his name again? It is Barak, an Israelite warrior, whom Deborah asks to lead the army of Israel against Sisera. She prophesies that Barak will be victorious. Only, she tells him, “the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (4:9). Now it is remarkable to find—not one but—two powerful women in this ancient story. We can rightly celebrate their place in Scripture; Deborah and Jael do what Barak and the other men of Israel cannot. But we only do justice to the contours of the passage when we see

that traditional gender roles are here being inverted for the sake of a theological point. Barak's efforts will meet with success, Deborah tells him, but Barak must not imagine that his success will be due to his own efforts alone. For that reason God keeps Sisera safe from Barak during and after the battle. God places Sisera instead, with a turn of events that only appears coincidental, "into the hand of a woman." That is why the narrator's comment in verse 16, that "no one was left" alive after the battle, is both a reminder and a tease. The point being made is not about the totality of the defeat but rather that one, as prophesied, survived. That is also why the episode in which Jael kills Sisera does not end with her deed but with Barak's appearance in her camp and her presentation to him of Sisera's body. In the end we see how providence unfolded entirely according to plan. Barak and his men did defeat Sisera's army, and yet a woman was the one who made the crucial difference. Her decisive action was foretold, just as Barak's inability to act. In both this action and inaction, however, it is *God's* will that is ultimately accomplished. "On that day," the narrator concludes the chapter, "*God* subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites" (4:23). So in this story God's will is accomplished by the lowly even more than by the strong, a curious reversal that conveys respect to the underprivileged and teaches humility to the powerful.

From this perspective Judges 4 neither glorifies nor advocates violence. Instead it portrays a God who is absolutely committed to Israel—not Israel as merely an idea or symbol, but Israel as a flesh-and-blood people threatened with extinction. The depth of this commitment is so profound that God consents to work within the messy ambiguities and imperfect structures of the human world *as it is* in order to secure Israel's safety and guide its future. This God, we might say, is a God for whom consequences are finally

more important than the kind of purity that could only exist in splendid isolation. This is a God who is willing to wade into the muddy stream of history, to mix things up at the streetcorner of human conflict. This is a God who sides with the weak and undermines the proud. And so throughout the book of Judges, dubious candidates—people who don't measure up to ordinary social preconceptions about who is most likely to succeed, *misfits*—are chosen to lead God's risky venture on Israel's behalf: Ehud is left-handed (Jud 3:15); Gideon is a doubter (Jud 6:36-39); Jephthah is the son of a prostitute (Jud 11:1); Abimelech murders his brothers (Jud (9:5, 24, 56); Samson is a buffoon (Jud 16:1-20).¹

Yet with these choices God not only sides with the socially-disadvantaged at the expense of the socially-advantaged, God subverts and transforms those very categories. God uses the flawed presuppositions, practices and institutions of the human world because...well, they're all that's available. The world *is* a world of wars, sexism, racism and prejudice, and so God lays hold of these things, but God does so to subvert them. God exposes their inadequacies to us from the inside out. And at the same time God patiently, steadily, cleverly turns these flawed conceptions upside down in order to gesture toward, to lend credence to, to offer a precedent on behalf of a positive vision, a new way of human flourishing—genuine community, true peace. The Bible calls this new way of human flourishing the kingdom of God. And in God's upside-down kingdom, servants rule and rulers serve. Those who are hungry and thirsty hunger and thirst no more, while those with plenty to eat and drink go about unsatisfied. The poor are rich and the rich are poor. In the upside-down kingdom of God weakness is strength; humility is

¹ With this formulation I am indebted to Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19 (2005): 46.

authority; giving is receiving; peace-making is heroism; sacrifice is love; forgiveness is success. Those who were once considered socially sub-par have an acknowledged ability lead the people of God's kingdom into greater righteousness. These leaders, like the judges of old, like Deborah and Jael, are esteemed for little in the eyes of the world but in that very lack of esteem they possess a great spiritual advantage. They bear traits and perspectives that remind us to be ever suspicious of success as the world conceives it, and they are themselves, in their brokenness even more than in their victories, signs for us of God's Son Jesus Christ, whose life is the perfect expression of God's new way, God's holy kingdom: the renunciation of worldly authority and earthly power, the futility of killing, a life truly lived for others.

We know all this. And yet all-too-often we fool ourselves into believing that God's kingdom is only some kind of pie-in-the-sky ideal and not a performable ethic for our daily lives. Or we restrict the claim of God's kingdom to the interior landscape of our hearts, to only our emotional and affective lives, and we refuse to acknowledge how God's kingdom is also a world-historical phenomenon competing for allegiance against the other principalities and powers that seek control of our planet. The irony of renouncing earthly power as Jesus did is that it requires us to take a clear and consistent stand against the principalities that presently exercise that power. God is not only the Lord of our hearts and our private decisions. God is God of the nations, too. And by comparison with God's kingdom the nations are being weighed upon the scales of justice and measured against the plumb line of God's abiding purpose. In Jesus Christ God has indeed "brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Luke

1:52), for “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10).

That claim, that demand, that pretension of the kingdom of God is what is *truly* offensive to enlightened sensibilities, but there’s no help for it. An actual counter-community, existing on earth, but with upside-down standards; a community in which jealously guarded privileges are revoked but personal limitations contribute toward the common good; a community in which sufficient resources for social harmony and lasting peace are really to be found—*that* is what the kingdom of God is. *That* is who Jesus Christ is. *That* is the word of Deborah to Barak, and *that* is God’s word to us. Amen.