

The Battle Against Hazor and Jael's Deadly Hospitality (Judges 4–5)

Magdel le Roux

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0770-7303>

University of South Africa

Lrouxm1@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The story of the fourth judge (Judges 4–5) is full of surprises, just like the previous stories (Judges 1–3). In the *dominant body ideology* related to good order, an Israelite man without any blemish was the epitome of a pure, ideal, or whole body. Contrary to the “expected literary depiction”, it is again the “unwhole, different-functioning bodies” which are depicted as “producing survival for the corporate body” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009). Deborah, an Israelite lawgiver and prophetess, and Jael, a Kenite woman, are used in an unexpected way. The juxtaposition of different-functioning bodies serves as a counterculture rhetoric in the form of a hidden polemic. Much attention has been paid to the roles of Deborah and Barak in the battle against Hazor, but Jael's role has elicited limited reflection by scholars and has been overshadowed by her “questionable” hospitality. A socio-rhetorical approach will make it possible to identify rhetorical techniques that the writer uses to highlight social relations, regulations and ideologies in the text (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 678). Archaeological excavations at Hazor from the last 25 years provide valuable background information to this battle.

Keywords: Hazor; Jael; hospitality; Debora

Introduction

Women play a very important role in the battle against Hazor (in Judges 4–5). In fact, it is regarded as a binding factor throughout the book of Judges¹ (cf. the accounts of Achsah in 1:11–15; that of Abimelech in Chapter 9; the mother of Samson in Chapter 13; and that of Micah’s mother in 17:1–6c). Deborah was a gifted woman whose role as judge, prophetess, and inquisitor (Judg 4–5)² can be compared to that of Moses (Deut 31:7, cf. I Sam 15:2–3). The other major role player, Jael, is not only a woman, but also a non-Israelite (Kenite) who had the opportunity to kill the formidable Canaanite military leader (Sisera) with an unconventional weapon. Two women, the one a non-Israelite and the other an Israelite prophetess, develop as the heroines of the story who save the proto-Israelites from the oppression of the Canaanites (Sivan 2004, 157; cf. Day 1989, 43–57).

It is furthermore remarkable that women and a non-Israelite (non-ideal bodies) were able to play leadership roles in a society where the ideology of the dominant culture believes that a strong Israelite male (warrior) is the ideal body which should be honoured, and which produces survival. How was this possible? Yee (1993, 111–112) believes the lack of distinction between the domestic and public spheres during the pre-monarchic period made it possible for warfare not to be exclusively regarded as men’s work. The loose social and political organisation of early Israel, together with the demands of a subsistence economy, was probably one of the reasons why women could play such important roles (especially in Judges 4 and 5) during the pre-monarchic period (McCann 2002, 56). Is that the only reason? Or is there something hidden in the narrative that the author/editor wants to highlight? If so, why is it not mentioned explicitly? I am greatly indebted to the work done by Amit (2000) and Van der Merwe (2009), which provides an excellent theoretical framework to apply to the narratives in the book of Judges (cf. Le Roux 2015; 2016).

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- 1 The approach to the book of Judges taken in this article is that the book has been developed over a long period and was edited or compiled by a variety of author(s)/editor(s) who represent different ideological perspectives.
 - 2 Chapter 4:1–24 is narrative material, which deals mainly with Debora and Barak’s battle against Sisera (head of the Canaanite army) and how Jael managed to kill Sisera. In contrast to the other judges’ stories, the narrative is followed by a song of praise (Chapter 5)—the so-called “Song of Deborah”—which attributes the miraculous victory to Yahweh and gives Him the honour (Harris, Brown and Moore 2000, 171). Chapters 4 and 5 form a unique unit in the book but are two separate parts that were probably written by two different people (Brettler 2002, 61; Mayes 1985, 21). The consensus is that Chapter 5 is older than Chapter 4 and that it is, in fact, one of the oldest sections of the Old Testament (McCann 2002, 49). This is inferred from the level of difficulty of the Hebrew, the lyrical style and the ancient patterns of repetition (cf. also Ps 83:10–11 and 1 Sam 12:9–11, which is celebrated in Chapter 5; McCann 2002, 49).

The storyline involving Deborah and Barak is interrupted in Judges 4:11–16 by information that will become relevant only later—similar to the interruption of the storyline in Judges 1 by that of Achsah (cf. Le Roux 2015). What was the narrator’s motive for using this technique of interrupting the story in this way?³

Jael is depicted in 5:4 as a heroine, “blessed among women”, but she is often criticised by some scholars for violating the “sacred” custom of hospitality of the ancient Near East by, for example, inviting Sisera into her tent (4:18).⁴ If Jael oversteps the laws of hospitality or the socially accepted boundaries within which the society functioned, why is she honoured and held in such high esteem for what she did (5:24)?

The focus of this article is the battle against Sisera, with some emphasis on Deborah’s role, but more specifically on Jael’s role, as well as her “questionable” hospitality. Van der Merwe and Coetzee (2009, 678) emphasise that a socio-rhetorical approach makes it possible to identify rhetorical techniques in the book of Judges that the writer uses to highlight but also to challenge social relations, regulations, and ideologies in the text. They relate them to ideal and non-ideal bodies and their prescribed functions and boundaries in society (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 678; cf. LaCocque 1990, 23, 28). This approach offers new possibilities for interpreting Jael’s story and will reveal certain literary techniques that are used by the writers of Judges as *countercultural rhetoric*, thus forming the basis for a discussion of the countercultural rhetoric as hidden polemic.

This technique is implemented by the author/editor to criticise and displace the dominant ideology and social prescriptions relating to difference and different-functioning bodies. This displacement creates ambiguity and irony as the non-ideal females continually produce survival for the proto-Israelites, while the ideal male produces threat resulting in shame.

Background to the Account in Judges 4–5

The proto-Israelites found themselves, through their own fault, once again in a situation of oppression (cf. 2:14; 3:8; 10:7)—this time by Jabin: “The Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin, the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor” (Judges 4:2). In practical

3 Why is a piece of the jigsaw placed on the table now when it will fit in only later, not just becoming clear but also justifying the story?

4 There are many ancient Near Eastern parallels to the role of Jael and these will be mentioned below. The maintenance of social boundaries is extremely important in any culture and, if these are threatened, it can hold the danger of disrupting the stability of the community (Berquist 2002, 42). A body that trespasses on boundaries is impure and everything that it touches likewise becomes part of the impurity (cf. Lev 15:13–18; Berquist 2002, 42).

terms, being under someone's power meant that they had to pay tax and that they probably suffered all sorts of persecution and had to undertake forced labour.⁵

The story of the fourth judge is full of surprises, just like the previous stories. In the Israelite worldview, an Israelite male warrior without any blemish was the epitome of a pure, ideal, or whole body (Berquist 2002, 40, 41). This time, Yahweh does not use a man (Ehud; Judges 3) who is “handicapped” in his right hand⁶ (thus non-ideal), or one (Othniel; Judges 1) who was a Kenite, therefore also regarded as impure or non-ideal. Worse – he uses women!⁷ What is the purpose of challenging the existing perception or ideology once again (cf. Le Roux 2015; 2016)?

Traditionally, men were expected to be soldiers, to fight, and to be brave. Contra to the dominant ideology, Othniel (the Kenite; a non-ideal body) is depicted as the “model” judge in 3:7–11, setting the example for what other judges should be like. Male leaders or generals were supposed to call on their troops to fight, to defeat the enemy, and to wipe them out (4:16). In Judges 4 and 5, Barak and Sisera do not, however, fulfil these requirements. Barak is hesitant and does not want to fight without Deborah.⁸ Sisera also acts cowardly and runs away from the scene of the battle.

Hazor (Tell el-Kedah, north of the Sea of Galilee) was one of the most important and strategic Canaanite city states. Like the other city-states, it had its own prince and army and was subjected to the Egyptian Pharaoh (Cundall 1968, 81). The site is divided into two main parts; to the south is the “acropolis” or the “Upper City” (about 15 acres in size), and to the north lies the “Lower City” (about 125 acres in size) (Ben-Tor 2016, 9). During the Bronze Age, both the Upper and Lower Cities were populated with an estimated population of 15 000 people (Ben-Tor 2016, 9, 15). After the destruction of the Bronze Age, the “Lower City was abandoned—never to be populated again” (Ben-Tor 2016, 9).

Hazor is situated at a point where various trade routes converged, so that the main routes from Damascus to the Syrian harbours could be successfully controlled by the inhabitants of Hazor (Grant 1984, 17). Various texts with correspondence between the

5 The story of Deborah, Barak, Jael, and Sisera (in Judges 4 and 5) is presented within the same framework as the previous stories in the book of Judges, differing only in terms of the names, places, and duration of the oppression. The judge dies and the people again do “evil in the eyes of the Lord” (4:1; cf. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1)—which leads to them being delivered into the hands of the enemy (4:2; cf. 2:14; 3:8; 10:7), consequently crying or calling upon Yahweh who is again ready to bring about their rescue by means of a judge (4:3; cf. 3:9, 15; 6:6; Lindars 1995, 164).

6 Left-handedness was perceived as “unwhole” (Berquist 2002, 33–35).

7 As mentioned earlier, in the dominant ideology these are again impure, non-ideal bodies (unwhole bodies) that are being used for the liberation.

8 His reluctance is punished when Deborah announces that she will go with him, but that he will not receive the honour of the victory (Exum 1995, 71).

different cities on these trade routes as well as with the Egyptian Pharaohs (Amarna Letters) were found at Hazor during Yadin's excavations in the 1950s and 1960s, but also during Ben-Tor's renewed excavations from 1990 onwards (Ben-Tor 2016, 13).

The name of the king of Hazor is also mentioned in the twenty plus documents on clay uncovered at Hazor, such as a law collection, an economic document, a multiplication table, a liver model,⁹ and a letter to a king (Ben-Tor 2016, 67–74).

Ben-Tor (2016, 71) argues that the name Ibni-Abbu mentioned in the latter letter means “The god Hadad built”. The first letter of the name of the king of Hazor is *aleph*, corresponding to the Akkadian form of the name, rather than *yod*, which would correspond with the West-Semitic form and would have been expected at Hazor (Yibni-Addu, rather than Ibni-Addu; and sometimes referred to as Abni-Abbu). It is possible that the Mari scribes gave the name of the king of Hazor its Akkadian form (also see Malamet 1969). These documents were found in different places in the site – mostly in the Upper City—even on the surface.

Numerous bronze figurines, of deities and leaders, were uncovered both in Yadin's excavations and in Ben-Tor's (Ben-Tor 2016, 109).

Grant (1984, 17) also mentions that the Mari texts (18th and 17th century) describe Hazor as an important trading centre and the capital city of the Hyksos (cf. Ben-Tor 2016, 10-12, 65-75). Fertile soil, water sources, and the control of the international trade route were decisive factors for the exceptional prosperity of the city (Ben-Tor 2016, 10).

The Amarna letters of the 14th century mention that Hazor was, at the time, busy freeing itself from Egyptian domination (Grant 1984, 17). It is therefore not strange that the Bible describes Jabin as “a king of Canaan” (cf. also 4:23). Since the 1990s, archaeologists—including groups from Unisa—have been looking for an archive (with especially the correspondence between the Canaanite city-states and the Pharaohs); hopefully it will be found in our lifetime in the administrative palace which since 2010 has been in the process of being uncovered.

Palmer (1988, 456) states that Sisera's name (cf. Ps 83:9) was not Semitic in origin (it is probably Illyric—possibly one of the Sea Peoples) and that he came from Dor. According to Judges 4, Haróseth-Haggoyim was the home of Sisera, the captain of the army of Jabin the King of Canaan (see 4:13 below) (Matthews 1991, 64). The village was near the Kishon River in northern Palestine (modern Tell Amr in the Mount Carmel-Kishon area). According to Judges 5, Sisera was the king of Hazor, not Jabin (cf. Alt 1944, 1–19; Albright 1963, 39). Grant (1984, 57) maintains that this battle was probably

9 Cf. Ezekiel 21:21; this practice was only found at Hattusa, Hazor, and Megiddo.

the first time that the proto-Israelites defeated the Canaanites in “regular” battle (in other words, an “arranged” battle).

According to Joshua 11, Joshua and the proto-Israelites burnt down the city of Hazor and killed Jabin. Joshua 11 recounts the formation of the coalition on the initiative of Jabin of Hazor. In Joshua 11:8, 10, 11, and 14, the phrase “no survivors” is used.¹⁰ Joshua (11:10) also (like the Mari texts) refers to Hazor as the “head of all those kingdoms” (cf. Ben-Tor 2016, 190). Ben-Tor (2016, 20, 113–117) found a destruction layer dated circa 1250 in the Upper City including the northern slope (Area M). He describes it as the “mother of all destructions” because of its intensity: “the fire devastated the Ceremonial Palace, melting the bricks in the walls of the hall”; “... to melt bricks and clay vessels” the heat required was 1000 degrees C (cf. the reasons for this intensity). Ben-Tor is convinced that Joshua (cf. 11:13) was responsible but warns that “this is still under debate” (Ben-Tor 2016, 113–117).

According to the biblical accounts, this was the last time that the judges came up against the Canaanites (Judges 4–5). Because the Israelites were unable to drive the Canaanites out of the land (cf. Judges 1), the Canaanites probably managed to regroup (after the battle in Joshua 11) and, in so doing, once more became a threat to the tribes.

In Judges 4–5, Jabin still reigns in Hazor which, according to Joshua, was the only city that was burnt down. Judges 4:16 does not report that the city was burned during this battle—it only says that “not a man was left”. The decimation of Sisera’s army (in 4:16) is therefore not linked to the burning of the city. But in the current verse, the inhabitants of the city Harósheth Haggoyim¹¹ (Sisera’s hometown) are exterminated. Whether there was a tradition connected to Jabin and Hazor that is being used here in another way, or whether there were two Jabins, is not quite certain.

Harósheth Haggoyim was apparently one of the few cities that were burned. Perhaps this was done because of its strategic importance (Palmer 1988, 456). Excavations show that Harósheth Haggoyim was indeed destroyed in the 13th century (Level 13). A part of the devastated city contains the remains of a Canaanite temple. Palmer notes that, afterwards, only the upper section of the city was occupied again by Canaanites and that occupation by the poor Israelite tribes probably followed (Dothan 1984, 37). This

10 The Joshua story is, however, linked to the idea of a curse/ban, which does not appear to be the case here (in Judges 4:16).

11 Zertal suggests that the site of El Ahwat, situated between Katzir-Harish and Nahal Iron, is the fortified base of Harósheth Haggoyim. He found that the architecture, walls, and circular huts were different from Canaanite cities. He is therefore convinced that the site may have been a Shardana city. The Shardans were one of the Sea Peoples who infiltrated the land during the last part of the Bronze Age (in Siegel-Itzkovich 2010). He also found a metal fragment, the linchpin of a war chariot possibly used by Sisera, at El-Ahwat.

simple occupation would suggest that the proto-Israelites were a nomadic society at that stage.

However, Jabin, the king of Hazor (4:2), plays no further part in this story and is not mentioned in Chapter 5. It is generally accepted that the references to Jabin in 4:2, 17, 23, and 24 do not belong to this tradition, but were added by the history writer(s) from other sources to heighten the meaning (cf. Mayes 1985, 21). Mayes (1985, 22) reckons that two traditions, that of the destruction of Hazor by Joshua (Joshua 11) and that of the defeat of Sisera (Judges 4), are being confused here.¹²

Spies were sometimes sent out to collect information on the area in which the attack was to take place, or, if it was a home-grown attack, knowledge of the local geography was used to maximum benefit.¹³

The ten thousand Israelite foot soldiers (4:10) had no chance against the “nine hundred iron chariots” (mainly the influence of the Hittites) and horses of the Canaanites. Some of the iron chariots had sharp knives sticking out from the wheels and were specially designed in this way to slaughter foot soldiers. The Israelites were powerless against the enemy. That was why “they cried to the Lord for help”—(they cry merely because they are suffering) and the Lord reacted, but it was also only after “the Israelites had been cruelly oppressed for twenty years” that they again began to think about the Lord, or call on him (4:3).

Deborah gave the order to attack (4:10), probably because she saw the storm coming and knew that heavy rain in those geographical conditions would neutralise the sheer weight of numbers and the effectiveness of the Canaanites’ chariots. Sisera was down below next to the Kishon River and here, against the mountainside, thousands of men descended on them and his courage failed him.

The repeated oppression of the Israelites is depicted here and is theologically concerned with the relationship with Yahweh the God of the covenant, which is described in terms of a living relationship of obedience/disobedience and punishment/grace.

12 There may be several reasons for this. Both traditions developed around “Tabor”, a mountain sanctuary that is central to Chapter 4 (Judges 4:6, 12) and which lies on the border of “Zebulun and Naphtali”. In both cases, both tribes were involved and both events were of importance for the proto-Israelites’ occupation of the country: in the one case, the mountainous region and in the other the bordering plains. Jabin, who appears again in Judges 4:17b and 23–24, can, according to Mayes (1985, 22), be seen as a second expansion of the tradition in Chapter 4.

13 War was not formally declared, which meant that the enemy was often caught unawares. The very fact that the Israelite tribes were so poorly armed meant that they constantly had to make use of the element of surprise against their enemies (Matthews 1991, 62).

An Alternative Ideology Relating Difference as a Hidden Polemic in Judges 4–5¹⁴

The counterculture rhetoric is developed to displace the dominant ideology of the whole body throughout the book of Judges by depicting the unwhole body favourably in order to ensure survival (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 679). The various literary techniques “produce irony and ambiguity” as far as the dominant ideology is concerned, “which can be identified as counterculture rhetoric advocating an alternative ideology” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 679). The latter accentuates that the book of Judges reflects “confrontational, polemical rhetoric” that “criticises the dominant ideology of whole-bodied-ness and the perception that difference is threatening” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 679; cf. Frymer-Kensky 1996; Williams 1982).

Amit (2000, 3) identifies three types of polemic found in the text, namely explicit, implicit, and hidden polemic.¹⁵ The hidden polemic can easily be overlooked, but the author/editor uses narrative techniques to draw the implied reader’s attention to the polemic without explicitly mentioning it. Van der Merwe and Coetzee (2009, 681–682) mention two reasons why an author/editor would hide a polemic in a text: The first is a “persuasive technique” to prepare “the reader to become open-minded enough to change his/her view”. The second reason is to voice a “critical opinion concerning a specific dominant culture in a society”—“the more concealed a polemic, the more controversial it probably was.”

Amit (2000, 96) provides four criteria for testing whether there is a hidden polemic in the biblical text:

- there is no explicit mention of the polemic in the text, which the author/editor is trying to condemn or criticise;
- the author/editor uses literary techniques as landmarks to guide the reader towards the hidden polemic;
- there are other biblical texts that possibly deal with the same polemic; and
- references to this hidden polemic do exist in exegetical and extra-Biblical texts.

14 See the article by Van der Merwe and Coetzee (2009) with a very similar title from which this heading is derived.

15 The counterculture rhetoric, as well as the literary “techniques used to produce this kind of rhetoric in Judges 4–5 reflect the nature of a hidden polemic” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 679).

The Role of Deborah and Barak

As mentioned earlier, there are four main role-players depicted in Judges 4–5, namely Deborah (a woman, therefore a non-ideal body), Barak (an Israelite male, an ideal body), Sisera (a man, but foreign, therefore non-ideal), and Jael (a foreign woman, therefore non-ideal). These four bodies are juxtaposed, Deborah with Barak, and Jael with Sisera, Barak, and to a certain extent Heber, but for some reason the focus here is on Deborah and her special role in the life of pre-monarchical Israel. The juxtaposition of a “different-functioning body” (Deborah, an Israelite woman) with a “normal functioning body” (Barak, an Israelite man) within the dominant ideology is unconventional, but the juxtaposition of a “different-functioning body” (Jael, a Kenite, who turns out to be the hero of the story) with another non-ideal body (Sisera, a Kenite) goes against all cultural ideological expectations (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 686; see Le Roux 2015; 2016).

There are no explicit mentions of a counterculture ideology relating to “difference and different-functioning bodies” in this narrative, but there are many implicit literary techniques to guide the implied readers towards the hidden polemic (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 682).

In the expectation that the Lord would “beget” a judge (the third element of the framework; cf. 3:9, 15; 6:6; etc.), the focus shifts to the country and mountains of Ephraim,¹⁶ where a woman (“Deborah, a prophetess”) is sitting under a palm tree.¹⁷ Without explanation and against the dominant ideology the author/redactor states that the Lord sends the Israelite tribes a woman judge (non-ideal body) who has already dedicated herself to the Lord as a prophetess and inquisitor. It is mentioned in the text that from this point onwards, she led the Israelites and they “came to her to have their disputes settled” (4:5),¹⁸ also without explanation as would be expected within the dominant ideology.

But, typical of this ideology in which the story plays out, Deborah¹⁹ (the first body) is called “the wife of Lapidoth” (4:4). Ostensibly, she exists by the grace of her husband. No further information is given about him. There are, however, differences of opinion about the translation and interpretation of the word, because “lapidoth” can also be read as a noun and translated as “torch” or “bolt of lightning”, introducing her not as “the wife of Lapidoth” but as “woman of fire” (cf. 5:7), which would not be inappropriate

16 Which is often on the agenda in the book of Judges, cf. chs. 17–21.

17 Cf. Miriam in Exod 15:20 and Hulda in 2 Kgs 22:14–20, who also acted as prophets.

18 This creates the image of a believer who sought daily help from the Lord and therefore saw herself as able to do what others shrank from.

19 Which means “bee”.

(Harris et al 2000, 172; McCann 2002, 52).²⁰ In the light of her social role and function in this narrative, the latter interpretation makes good sense.

Usually, the description as “the wife of Lapidoth” would describe her social status and function within the society. As a woman, she is a non-ideal body and as a wife, her status in society depends on her reproduction abilities (Sivan 2004, 98; cf. Judges 13). It is not mentioned whether she has children or not, but she is “unannounced”, described as prophetess, judge, and lawgiver. These roles are unconventional compared with what is normally expected of a woman and wife. Sternberg explains that the displacement of conventional patterns is used to bring the implied reader’s viewpoint in line with the narrator’s own viewpoint.²¹ Surprisingly, this is accepted, but this “unconventional role creates ambiguity” which is “a counterculture rhetoric to advocate an alternative body ideology” (Sternberg 1985, 478–482).

As in Judges 1, the text (in 4:4) deviates again from the normal Hebraic syntax (verb, subject, object) by placing the subject first in the sentence: “And Deborah” (instead of the verb) in order to draw the attention to Deborah (non-ideal body) (Harris et al. 2000, 171). The narrator uses this alternative narrative technique to focus the reader’s attention on the hidden polemic (Amit 2000, 96).²²

While Deborah is busy with her activities as prophetess and inquisitor, the Lord moves her to act against the Canaanites, together with Barak (4:6). Deborah—from the south, under her tree between Bethel and Ramah—“sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali”, north of Hazor. Through her dedication to the Lord, she becomes convinced of the assignment that he has tasked her with. Barak, however, just does not see his way clear to taking on the Canaanites unless Deborah accompanies him.

Robbins (1996, 80) shows how the *challenge-response communication* (between Deborah and Barak) brings shame to Barak and honours Deborah. Sternberg (1985, 44) points out that Deborah’s announcement in 4:6, “has not the Lord [Yahweh, the God of the Covenant], the God of Israel commanded you” (my insertion) is used by the narrator to legitimise her role as judge, while she questions Barak’s disobedience to God’s

20 Because the names “Lapidoth” and “Barak” (which means “lightning”, perhaps just not as fast, brave, or brilliant) mean more or less the same, some scholars believe that the two men could possibly have been the same person (Harris et al. 2000, 172; McCann 2002, 52). The reader might be taken by surprise because Deborah has no children and she judges Israel instead. If Deborah was married, it would appear that she functioned on a social as well as a spiritual level as prophet and combined both functions (as wife and judge) in her official position as judge (possibly between the two poles of “light” or “fire”; Klein 1988, 41). She had to literally light a fire under Barak. However, if Barak were her husband, it would be strange that she had to “send” for him (cf. 4:6; Gunn 2005, 55).

21 The narrator displaces the conventional patterns without explanation, argumentation, or excuses.

22 Amit describes hidden polemic as “confrontation”. He/she seeks to emphasise an alternative ideology with regard to “others” and “different-functioning bodies” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 686).

command. Sternberg adds that the introduction of God into the argument is another literary technique of the narrator “to lend authority” to Deborah’s “unconventional social status (according to dominant body ideology)” as prophetess (Sternberg 1985, 44). By mentioning this unconventional role, the author is again introducing a “counterculture rhetoric to advocate an alternative body ideology” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 683).

Deborah’s status as a judge is further established by the assignment that she gives to the military leader, Barak.²³ The implied readers are being persuaded that an unwhole body is, in fact, beneficial to the survival of the Israelite tribes, contrary to the expected ideal male body (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 684).

Provoking Sisera to march on to the “Kishon River” proves to be a good battle strategy because the iron chariots cannot function effectively in the sandy soil (cf. 4:7).²⁴

Barak answers, “If you [Deborah] go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go” (my insertion; 4:8). It would seem that he doubts the godly words that Deborah conveys. She confirms that “the Lord” will be with him, but this is not enough for him (cf. also in this regard Moses in Exodus 4:13; Gideon in Judges 6:15; Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:6; 2 Corinthians 3:5, 6).²⁵ According to Van der Kooij (1996, 139), their conversation is in line with the theme that appears throughout the story: male characters are put to shame by the initiative of the women and are replaced by them (cf. Exum 1995, 71–72).²⁶

Through his answer in verse 8, Barak first tries to restore his honour, but actually places honour upon Deborah and shame upon himself (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 686). The reader is again, in this way, informed about why a different-functioning

23 He was probably one of the leaders who lived in a symbiotic relationship with the Canaanites (see 4:10).

24 The Kishon River had its source in the hills to the south of the Esdraelon valley. Deborah confirms that The Lord promises the victory to Barak. Is he afraid, or could it be that he has such a high regard for her “as God’s representative” that he does not dare to act against the enemies without her (cf. Exodus 17:8–13; Numbers 16 and 2 Kings 3:11–20)?

25 Is he afraid, or could it be that he has such a high regard for her “as God’s representative” that he does not dare to act against the enemies without her (cf. Exodus 17:8–13; Numbers 16 and 2 Kings 3:11–20)?

26 Exum (1995, 71–72) refers to Barak’s dependence on Deborah as being almost childlike (4:8; cf. 5:7) and to Sisera as sounding like a scared little boy running to his mother (Jael) for protection. According to Exum, men fought for the honour and the glory that accompanied it and their bravery was recorded and their victories celebrated. However, because Barak acted like a woman, according to the dominant ideology, by showing signs of uncertainty, a woman received the honour (4:9). The same applies to Sisera. He was cowardly and ran away from the scene of the battle and this was (according to Exum) an unmanly way to act.

female body would be beneficial for the survival of the group (in contrast to the expected ideal male warrior).

It is as if Deborah expects Barak's answer (4:8) and immediately responds with a condition (4:9).²⁷ When Deborah announces that "the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman", it might initially sound as if she is referring to herself: but it is not clear which woman she means here.²⁸ The emphasis here is in any case on the fact that it would be a woman—whichever woman—and that it would be Barak's great shame that he did not simply trust.²⁹ The theme of honour/shame plays an important role here.

Deborah went "with Barak to Kedesh" in Naphtali. Kedesh, the home of Barak (cf. 4:9), was a fortified Canaanite city state (Joshua 12:22) that later became one of the main towns of Naphtali (Joshua 19:37). Barak would be given no honour for the offensive (cf. 4:16). Deborah later gives all the honour to Yahweh, acknowledges Barak and Jael's contribution to the victory (5:1; 5:12), but never takes any credit for the victory herself.³⁰ When Deborah says "Go," Barak reacts immediately and very effectively (cf. 4:10).

Three times in the story it is mentioned that "Deborah went with him" (twice in verse 9 and once in verse 10). This narrative technique is used once again as counterculture rhetoric to draw the attention of the implied readers to an alternative ideology relating to different-functioning bodies.

Jael to the Rescue

Typical of the Hebrew art of storytelling, the story line is interrupted here (4:11–16) by information that will become relevant only later (cf. the story of Achsah [also a Kenite] in the middle of Judges 1).

It is evident that the narrator uses a *proscopic announcement technique*. The information means nothing here but is already planted in the listener so that he or she can grasp more easily why Sisera fled on foot to Jael's tent.

27 Or it could be that the Lord (Yahweh) has already made Barak's answer known to her in a vision.

28 The fact that the indefinite article is not used in Hebrew makes it risky to deduce something substantial from the indefinite article in the translation ("a" or "one"). In Hebrew the *maqfef* link (*beyad- 'iššāh*) is used, which is difficult to translate in terms of "the" or "a".

29 But rather, like Balak, he wanted to drag Balaam along with him to do the incantation (Numbers 22–24).

30 Deborah's role and function as prophetess, law-giver, and judge are described outside her social boundaries and culture-bound functions as they pertain to the dominant ideology (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 686).

Hobab³¹ is described as “the Kenite”. The Kenites were also Yahweh worshippers, and are generally believed to be a subgroup of the Midianites. Since the Kenites were a nomadic group (associated with the tribe of Judah; cf. Judges 1), it explains why that family had moved so far north (cf. Le Roux 2015). It is not clear why Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, and “pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh”. Heber the Kenite is probably mentioned here to serve as an introduction to the family group to which Jael (verse 17) belonged (Cundall 1986, 86).

The district of Zaananim (Judg 4:11) is mentioned in Joshua 19:33, but little is known about the place’s location except that it lay on Sisera’s escape route (Cundall 1986, 86). Some scholars believe that the turpentine tree was a sort of landmark in the area and possibly served as a cultic centre.³²

Just as Deborah and Barak hoped, the news of their actions spread quickly to Sisera (cf. 4:12).³³ Sisera and all his chariots and horses marched straight into the trap. If it were to rain, the chariots would become trapped in the sand of the Kishon River (which rises in the Carmel Mountains) and so it is unlikely that Sisera would have taken this chance with his chariots in the rainy season.

Initially, the Israelites did not have many weapons at their disposal and had to defend themselves mainly with slingshots and farming implements. However, they very quickly took over the Philistines’ and the Canaanites’ iron-based military technology (Matthews 1991, 62; Fritz 1994, 144–145).

The emphasis in this narration is on Yahweh who delivered the enemy into the hands of the Israelites and put fear into them. Rational explanations for the chariots becoming stuck and so forth may possibly exist, but in this theological communication, the emphasis is on the primary role of Yahweh and his use of nature and human fear.

Judges 5:4, 5, 20, and 21 suggest a rare thunderstorm that sometimes occurs after the normal rainy season in April and May. Yahweh, the “God of storms”, did not disappoint

31 We do not know how many fathers-in-law Moses had, but Hobab was most probably the same person as Jethro or Reuel. According to Numbers 10:29–32, Hobab was asked by Moses to lead the people through the desert.

32 Similar to the idols in 3:19, 26, the Deborah palm in 4:5, and the “soothsayers’ tree” in 9:37 (Hamlin 1990, 67; Soggin 1981, 67; Halpern 1988, 85). This possibly plays the same role as a spatial turning point in the events where the fortunes are reversed (Piet Venter, private communication).

33 Some believe that it may have been Heber who told Sisera about the Israelites presence at Mount Tabor (Cundall 1968, 86), but of course Sisera had spies everywhere who could have told him about Barak and his approaching army. Sisera, as the head of the Canaanite coalition, must have been aware of this. In order to counter the threat, Sisera gathered together all his men and his “nine hundred iron chariots” and marched to the Kishon River (cf. 4:13).

them (Josh 10:11; 1 Sam 7:10; Ps 18:9–15) – this is also implied by the words of Deborah: “Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?” (4:14)

The undaunted leader of the Canaanite army, Sisera, “abandoned his chariot and fled on foot” (*b’raglâw*) (cf. 4:15).³⁴ The “captain” was the first to leave the sinking ship. The readers are now further persuaded that a different-functioning body is, in fact, beneficial to the survival of the group.³⁵ Barak and the “ten thousand” lightly armed and highly mobile Israelites would easily have been able to attack and chase the drivers of the chariots who had been stuck in the mud (cf. 4:16). The story reports that “not a man was left” (almost identical to Exodus 14:28; Lindars 1995, 196).

Jael’s Hospitality— To Die For? (4:17–22)

In Judges 4:17–22 the scene shifts immediately to Sisera again. Heber, the Kenite also probably had a sort of symbiotic coexistence with the Canaanites (King Jabin) of Hazor (see footnote 13).³⁶ Sisera did not flee back to Harósheth Haggoyim. Perhaps the entire army was based where Sisera lived, in Haróseth Hagojim. He probably knew that the rest of his army and the horses would flee there, with the enemy on their heels. Therefore, he went directly to Heber’s camp in Kedesh, at the “cultic centre or sanctuary” (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 87).

The depiction of Jael in 4:17 seems even more conventional than the depiction of Deborah. She is also referred to as “the wife of” Heber (a Kenite and therefore a foreigner). Once again, the readers would expect her to be a wife and a nurturing mother (see Deborah). But, once again, there is no mention of children, her husband does not play a role in the event, and her hospitality toward Sisera is (according to some scholars) in compliance with her social role as wife (Malina 2001, 43). She also stays within her prescribed boundaries, unlike Deborah and Achsah (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 684). To my mind, Judges 1 (Achsah), 13 (the wife of Manoah), Exodus 15 (Miriam), and 2 Kings 22:14–20 (the prophetess Hulda) all entail the same kind of polemic. These women all act contrary to the normal male figures expected in that capacity.

34 Sisera’s “escape” has a parallel in Barak’s hesitation regarding entering the battle without Deborah. In both cases the men do not fit the stereotypical image of strong, brave leaders (ideal bodies) and accordingly expose themselves to being replaced or destroyed by non-ideal bodies (Exum 1995, 72). The only alternative for Sisera was to try to escape from the precarious situation on foot: to the south were the central highlands, to the north the highlands of Galilee lay behind the full river; the Israelites attacked from a north-westerly direction.

35 Harósheth Haggoyim, from where Sisera came, was probably in the vicinity of Beit She’an in the Jezreel Valley (not far from Megiddo).

36 This means that they bartered in one way or another, or other services were possibly delivered when necessary.

Sisera not only flees “on foot” but is also “on a good footing” (4:16) (“there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite”, 4:17) with the Kenite and his wife. This type of word play—a literary technique used by the narrator—also appears in many other places in the text (Harris et al. 2000, 174).

If Sisera had merely expected protection, he would have gone to Heber’s tent and not to Jael’s. Sisera, however, does not flee to Heber, but directly to the “tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite” (4:17). The fact that Jael had her own tent implies that Heber probably had more than one wife. A man with more than one wife had to provide a tent for each of his wives (Ahmed 1973, 79).

If Jael and her husband had a good relationship with King Jabin of Hazor, they probably also knew Sisera well. Apparently, Jael recognised Sisera immediately and invited him into her tent in a friendly fashion (4:18). We know by now that Deborah is not the woman the Lord had referred to when he said he would give Sisera into the hand of a woman.

Jael is often criticised by interpreters (cf. Bal 1988; Klein 1988) because, according to them, she transgressed the “sacred” custom of hospitality of the ancient Near East by inviting him into her tent. It was indeed not the custom in the dominant ideology for a woman to invite a man into her tent. The reader expects that Sisera would have a friend in both Heber and his wife (cf. 4:11). Clearly not!

The immediate context of the book of Judges honours Jael as a heroine (5:24–27; McCann 2002, 53) and suggests that her actions were no more than the work of God (4:23). In contrast to this description, Bal (1988, 2) is of the opinion that Jael is “depicted as a temptress, sly in approach and a murderer in disguise”. Why would she be described as blessed if she was a temptress, sly, a murderer, and did not respect the laws of hospitality?

Matthews and Benjamin (1993, 87) are convinced that Jael did not act as a “hostess” who transgressed the laws of hospitality, but as a heroine who protected her house from an intruder (cf. in contrast to Bal’s (1988, 62) and others’ views). They argue that the one who overstepped the laws of hospitality in the situation was Sisera. It is not explicitly said in the text, but Sisera violated the socially accepted boundaries within which the society functioned. In the first place, he was supposed to go directly to Heber, not to Heber’s wife’s tent (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 87). Accordingly, Sisera’s actions would insult Heber and dishonour Jael. The fact that he went directly to her should have immediately given Jael the idea that something strange was happening. Jael did indeed overstep the principle of hospitality in the sense that she invited Sisera inside and not her husband. Even so, Sisera should not have accepted Jael’s offer of hospitality (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 87). The fact that he did should also have given Jael the

idea that something was wrong (Matthews 1991, 62), and it did. For both it was clearly an unnatural situation.

Furthermore, Matthews and Benjamin argue that Sisera approached Jael's tent without the rest of her household being aware of it (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 87, 88). The expression *beraglāw* in 4:17, which is translated "on foot", can also be translated "silently" (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 87, 88). As expected of a good wife within the dominant ideology, Jael did not transgress her social boundaries by leaving the safety of the camp when she went outside to meet him. On the contrary, Jael confronted an intruder who "crept silently" into the camp without the guards being aware of it. He did not threaten Jael physically, but nevertheless placed Heber's rights in danger (Van Nieuwenhuijze 1971, 701). He intruded slyly into their household and, in order to get a handhold on Heber's household (now that he no longer had his own house), he had to have sexual intercourse with Jael (cf. David, in 2 Samuel 11:1–17; Amnon, in 2 Samuel 13:1–22; Absalom, in 2 Samuel 16:15–22).

Sexuality was the binding factor that kept households together, but according to Berquist (2002, 80), it was also the way to intrude violently into a household. Zakovitch (1981, 370–371) is convinced that every action and reaction in the story of Jael suggests that Sisera was planning to rape Jael. The suspense in the story increases and the reader is no longer sure who the main player is, Deborah or Jael (Amit 1987, 89). Her words to Sisera are not an invitation on behalf of Heber, or part of a political act against her husband, or a blatant lie, or even an ironic statement. Matthews and Benjamin (1993, 90–91) are also convinced that there was no misunderstanding in her words, but that they represent a protest against Sisera, who was planning to rape her and, in so doing, would be able to lay claim to the house of Heber. He had lost everything: he was defeated, all his people were dead, his hometown had been destroyed, and he might just as well start to look for a new household. Jael's words and gesture are a warning to or protest against Sisera to change his plan or to take the consequences.³⁷

According to this view, Jael's friendly invitation "warns" Sisera to leave her alone (cf. Lamentations 4:15), to give up his plans to infiltrate Heber's household (cf. 2 Kings 10:29; Proverbs 13:14; Isaiah 11:13) and to disappear before he is discovered by the guards. One surely wonders where Heber was at this stage. As he was not there to protect his household, did Jael perhaps have to act in self-defence? Jael is also being juxtaposed against Heber in this regard—she acts to be beneficial to the survival and protection of her family and the Israelites (when Heber fails to do so).

The rest of the account also makes it clear that Sisera is not treated as her guest, but just the opposite. The fact that he forced his way into her tent (and not that of Heber) means

37 Matthews and Benjamin (1993, 91) state that this carries the same meaning as Tamar's words to Amnon (2 Sam 13:12–13).

that he does not qualify as a guest. In the dominant ideology, he brings shame on Heber by entering Jael's tent uninvited and against her subtle warnings. Nevertheless, she maintains the Semitic hospitality protocol by covering him, offering him something to drink and covering him again (cf. Gen 18:1–8; Harris et al. 2000, 174).

Jael does put a covering over him, but there is once again no indication of any hospitality ritual in that gesture (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 91). The translation of “put a covering over him” is debatable, according to Matthews and Benjamin (1993, 92; cf. also Soggin 1981, 67; Bal 1988, 122). They opine that she closed the curtain of the tent (*ba'semîchâ*) behind him so that others could not see him. This means that she could easily move closer to him without him being aware of it (Lindars 1995, 198). She does not call for help but confronts the potential threat to her household alone.

Still another indication that Sisera does not enjoy guest status in Jael's tent is that she did not wash his feet (Gen 18:4). The ritual of foot washing made a guest out of a stranger (Pilch and Malina 1993, 104).

Sisera is not impressed by her bravery, but apparently believes that he is safe and that he has Heber's household in his power. Unaware of any danger, he gives Jael instructions in her own tent (4:19). Therefore, Sisera does not treat Jael either as if she is his host. In fact, he oversteps the rules of hospitality once again by giving her orders (such as asking for water). As a guest in her house, he may not actually ask for anything—it would mean that he was treating her with contempt (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 92; Pilch and Malina 1993, 104–105; Matthews 2002, 73)—but he gives her instructions as if he were already head of the household. This instruction, however, gave her the opportunity to move around without raising his suspicions. It is at this moment that the experienced soldier falls under the power of a woman (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 92)—the fulfilment of Deborah's prophecy.³⁸

Another hospitable gesture would be to give only what was requested (cf. Gen 18:6–8, 91; Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 92; Bal 1988, 62–63), but Matthews and Benjamin suggest that Jael's “upgrade” (to milk) had nothing to do with hospitality. On the contrary, if she had wanted to conform to the correct hospitality codes, she would first have given him a little water and then only offered him milk.³⁹ When Jael gives Sisera milk, she confirms the challenge that she accepted when she closed the curtain and takes another step towards eliminating the enemy in their household. Matthews and Benjamin

38 According to the story, he was probably cold and wet because of the thunderstorm near the Kishon River. Harris et al. (2000, 174) are convinced that Jael's actions (such as giving him milk and treating him like a child) were calculated to give Sisera a false sense of security.

39 Some scholars attach a sexual connotation to “she opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink” instead of giving him water (4:19). Perhaps he had come to drink milk from this source on previous occasions. Jael closes the “curtain”, gives him milk and eventually covers him again.

(1993, 93) point out that Sisera could have been under the impression that he was drinking the milk in order to prepare himself for sex, while Jael served him the milk to prepare him for his death.

Sisera oversteps the rules of hospitality again by giving his hostess an instruction to “stand in the doorway of the tent” (cf. 4:20). On top of this he orders her to lie if someone (*ish* in the Hebrew, i.e., a man) comes by and asks about him (McCann 2002, 53–55). It is ironic that he feared a man when the danger lay with the woman who offered him shelter. He gives her the order not to answer if someone should ask about him. In this way, Sisera undermines his own masculinity and fore-spells his own death (McCann 2002, 53–55). The word “man” is used by the narrator in a subtle way to remind the implied readers of Deborah’s prophesy (cf. 4:9) and to suggest that it is on the point of being fulfilled. The mighty Sisera, with his nine hundred iron chariots, is now defenceless and alone in the power of a woman who cares for him like a child; yet he continues to give Jael orders as if she were one of his soldiers (Bal 1988, 123). As indicated above, these orders give her the opportunity to move around, however, and to get hold of the tent peg and the hammer (see verse 21; Lindars 1995, 199). The effect of the milk and the exhaustion caused by war results in him falling into a deep sleep.

The scene shifts immediately to the climax of the story (cf. 4:21). Van der Merwe and Coetzee (2009, 685) explain that Jael is “juxtaposed with both Sisera and Barak” (4:21) and the exclamation “and behold” (4:22) is another narrative technique used by the narrator to draw the attention of the implied readers to what is to follow. “Jael, Heber’s wife” does not allow grass to grow under her feet. By portraying Jael once again as the “wife of Heber”, the narrator creates, in a subtle way, the expectation of the implied readers that she will not misbehave and step outside her expected social boundaries, but perhaps also to stress the fact that she is a woman. “The implied readers’ perceptions of her are” about to be “challenged and displaced”⁴⁰ (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 685). The same hammer that she used to construct her “house” she now uses to defend it. The wordplay in the Hebrew is once again striking. Jael *wattiqqah* (takes) a tent peg and *wattitqa* (drives) the peg through his temple (4:22).

Jael’s weapon is an ordinary household tool, easily obtainable and once again (typical of the heroic tales in the book of Judges) completely unorthodox.⁴¹

40 The narrator uses the displacement of conventional patterns to bring the implied readers’ viewpoint in line with the narrator’s own viewpoint. Niditch (1989:45) believes that the adverb *ballā’t* in “went quietly to Sisera” (4:22) is often used in a sexual context (cf. *ballā’t* in Ruth 3:7), which might be deliberate.

41 Cf. Ehud’s double-edged sword in 3:16, Shamgar’s oxgoad in 3:31, and Samson’s donkey jawbone in 15:15. Ordinary, non-ideal bodies who come to the fore as unconventional heroes, without any professional weapons or equipment.

The hammer and peg are also powerful sexual symbols (according to McCann): the man who enters Jael's tent (perhaps with rape in mind) has his head impaled with a tent peg. Some commentators describe this as a reverse rape (McCann 2002, 54). Legally, according to the rules of behaviour (the dominant ideology) in the ancient Near East, Sisera was guilty of rape the moment he entered the door of her tent—especially in view of the fact that “a door” was used as a general sexual symbol in love songs in both Egypt (*Papyrus Harris 500*) and ancient Israel (the Song of Solomon 5:4; Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 94). There are, however, no direct indications in the text that a rape took place, even if 5:27 (“at her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay”) is taken into account.

Nevertheless, it is accepted that Sisera wanted to bring shame on Heber's house, but brought shame on himself (according to the dominant ideology), by dying at the hands of a woman (cf. 9:53). Matthews and Benjamin add that his death was not only unavoidable but also to be expected and justified (1993:94).

The wordplay in the Hebrew is once again significant: Jael had the tent peg and the hammer “in her hand” (*beyādāh*), which is once again reminiscent of Deborah's prophesy that the Lord would give Sisera “in the hand” (*beyād*) of a woman (Harris et al. 2000, 175; cf. 4:9, 23; 5:25–26). If there was a good relationship between Heber and his wife and the Canaanites, it is strange that Jael killed him so cruelly.⁴² Whether she was aware that she was an instrument in the hand of the Lord is doubtful.

A similar counterculture rhetoric can be identified in other biblical and extra-biblical literature (cf. the fourth criterion above). Jael's story may be compared with Samson in Delilah's lap (16:14, 19), but also Yatpan who, in an inebriated state, fell asleep with Pughat in the story of Aqhat (*CTAQ* 19:213–224)—and, of course, also Judith who sent Holofernes into eternity by beheading him (cf. Efthimiadis-Keith 2002, 64–68). The hands-of-a-woman motif also plays a central role in the song of Judith (16:5; Brenner 1999, 36). In all these stories, the hero is a woman who allows her enemy to fall asleep before she kills him (or takes him prisoner). The enemy is unaware of the impending danger (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 93). The goddess Anat was known as a “skull crusher” of note and, in the light of this story, some refer to Jael as a “skull crusher” (Bellis 1994, 119–123).⁴³

No one knows what Heber did on that day; but Jael had a busy day. With Sisera pegged to the ground, the scene shifts once again to Barak (4:22).

42 Perhaps she had a reason for doing so for a long time but had never had the courage to act on it—we will never know. Once she sees that the Canaanites are defeated, she decides to back the Israelites.

43 The temple of Anat was located in the vicinity of where these events took place (Beth-Anat). Perhaps Jael got the idea from Anat—there is no way to know. What Jael did is similar to what Ehud did (Judges 3), but he is not praised in this way (Bellis 1994, 119–123).

For the second time, Jael invites a man who is passing into her tent—in contrast to the expected dominant ideology (Matthews 2004, 74) and one experiences a feeling of *déjà vu*.⁴⁴ And just as Deborah took Barak to Sisera (4:9, 14–16), Jael now takes Barak to Sisera. This episode thus links the two stories and rounds them off. The threads of two narrations are tied together here to symbolise the subtheme (“by a woman”) and the main theme (“God saves his people”) of the story.

Barak enters and sees “Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead”.⁴⁵ Once again, the Hebrew wordplay may be intentional: *beraqqātô*, (his temple)—in Afrikaans “*sy slaap*”, has the same consonants as the name *bāraq*, “Barak” (Harris et al. 2000, 175). By using this literary technique, the narrator emphasises that the credit for the victory goes not to Barak, but to a woman with a hammer and a tent peg (Harris et al. 2000, 175). “The reference to Barak and the elaboration of the fact that he did not make it in time to slay Sisera, allow the author to remind the implied readers that Barak again is the *shamed ideal body*, while Jael is the *challenger and unconventionally* gains honour” (my italics; Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 685).⁴⁶ “The fact that Jael challenges Barak produces further shame” upon him, “since he was initially shamed by Debora, who is an Israelite woman, and now also by Jael, a foreigner” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 685).

The last comment in the story, which comes almost as an afterthought, is that “the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin ... until they destroyed him”. And this is in spite of the fact that, as mentioned earlier, Joshua had already killed Jabin (Joshua 11) and Barak had wiped out Sisera’s army (Judges 4).

In 5:24 Jael is described as “most blessed of women” and through her actions she showed that she was a “friend” of Yahweh. This honour gained by Jael is completely in contrast to the dominant ideology, “as, according to good order, she should not be a viable challenger” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 685). Moreover, a heathen, non-ideal body (such as that of Jael) is once again used by God to come to the Israelites’ rescue. In God’s eyes she was ideal and beneficial to the society. As non-ideal figure, Jael is compared here to both Sisera and Barak. Deborah’s prophesy is fulfilled (4:9): The Lord delivered Sisera into the hands of a woman.

44 Just when one begins to feel uncomfortable about what could possibly happen to poor Barak, Jael announces that she will show him the man he is looking for.

45 These words are reminiscent of Eglon’s servants who also saw him lying dead when they entered the upper room (3:25).

46 The narrator does not mention any reaction on Barak’s part; moreover, Jael receives no acknowledgement for her victory at this time. The greatest part of the humiliation in the dominant ideology was the fact that he was killed by a woman.

Conclusion

By applying the criteria proposed by Amit (2000, 90), it becomes clear that there is a hidden polemic in Judges 4–5: it was implemented by a polemicist as counterculture rhetoric to advocate alternative body ideology (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 692–693). The narrator challenges the existing perception or ideology of the “whole body” and that of “different-functioning” bodies. The narrator is trying to persuade the implied readers that different-functioning bodies hold no threat, but are beneficial to the society, continually produce survival for Israel, while the “ideal” and non-ideal “males produces threat resulting in shame” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 679). Women are honoured, produce survival, and come to the rescue of their families and their people (Israelites).

As Van der Merwe and Coetzee (2009) have already indicated, there is no explicit reference to criticising the dominant ideology of difference as threatening. When taking other stories in Judges (Judges 1; 13) as well as other biblical texts (such as Exodus 15:20 and 2 Kings 22:14–20) into account, Judges 4–5 “exhibits a hidden polemic advocating alternative body ideology” (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 691). Therefore, the juxtaposition of different-functioning bodies, the displacement of the dominant ideology, literary techniques such as word order, wordplay, and irony found in the Book of Judges (cf. Le Roux 2015; 2016; and elsewhere) are also present in Judges 4–5. Similar polemics are advocated in extra-biblical sources (see the stories of Yatpan, Judith, Anat, and others above).

In the cases of both Deborah and Jael, the narrator contrasts their unwhole bodies with those of Barak and Sisera (and even Heber). The unconventional social honour bestowed upon childless (even foreign) wives is used by the narrator as counterculture rhetoric to displace the conventional good order and to persuade the implied readers towards an alternative body ideology (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 691). Both women are depicted in a conventional way—and explicitly as women and wives—but play unconventional roles. Surprisingly, against all cultural expectations, there is no indication of any children in their lives and the husbands of both (if Deborah was married) are absent from the scene. Both Deborah and Jael acted heroically in this narrative because men neglected to fulfil their responsibilities (Amit 1987, 93). They do more than their duty (as mothers) by putting their lives in danger in order to save their household—or the Israelites—from oppression (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 91).

Neither Barak nor Sisera fit the stereotypical image of strong, brave warriors (ideal bodies) and, consequently, they expose themselves to be replaced by non-ideal bodies.

There are many gaps in the story that elicit our curiosity, but this is discouraged by the story because the narrator wants to focus on a certain point.⁴⁷

It is furthermore important in interpreting this narrative to understand the protocol of the host and the stranger within the dominant ideology. It is evident that Jael did not violate the laws of hospitality in leading Sisera to his death; on the contrary, Sisera was the one who contravened the laws and brought shame on himself and his household (cf. Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 94; Matthews 2004, 72). This view is in sharp contrast to that of Klein (1988, 43), Bal (1988), and others who maintained that Jael contravened the laws of hospitality against the interests of her husband and took matters into her own hands by her actions (cf. Judges 4:18). According to this view, Jael's reaction was in accordance with Sisera's contravention of the hospitality code (Matthews 2004, 72). Jael's actions were carefully chosen not only to reflect the gentle care of a "mother", but also the fearless courage of a mother protecting her household (Matthews and Benjamin 1993, 94).

The perceived threatening, (foreign) non-ideal bodies are portrayed as "the most blessed of all female bodies (and implicitly of the male bodies)" (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 685). Despite the fact that both Debora and Jael are acting outside their prescribed cultural boundaries as challengers, there is no danger of disrupting the stability of the community. On the contrary.⁴⁸

The conclusion of the story makes sure that everyone knows to whom the eventual honour for the victory should go (4:23–24).⁴⁹ The idea is obviously not to reproduce the

47 The above story tells us, among other things, only where Heber settled and not where he himself was. There has to be a subtle message (or hidden polemic) behind this act. The readers are in this way informed about why a non-ideal body (a different-functioning female body) would be beneficial for the survival of the group (in contrast to the expected ideal male form). Perhaps Heber himself was involved in the war, or perhaps not. Why Heber was not at his tent when Sisera came past is not important, because the narration focuses on the role of a woman (a non-ideal body). This is once again proof that we should not read the material as history in our sense of the word, or even try to explain it historically. Use is made of historical information (by means of handing down the stories and folklore), but it is used (here) in such a way that it presents a specific proclamation about God and humanity. In other words, it offers a theological perspective on the historical events between God and human beings, with the emphasis on the quality of the proclamation. The historical information allows us to see the picture more clearly, but this is not the main focus—only the scene against which the events between God and humans take place.

48 No wonder both Deborah and Jael are described as "mothers" or "blessed" among all women of Israel (5:7; Williams 1982, 73; cf. Niditch 1989, 52–53).

49 The miraculous victory was just the beginning of a process that is now complete. Once more the emphasis is on "the hand": the hand of Jabin (4:2), the hand of Barak (4:7), the hand of a woman (4:9), the hand of Jael (4:21), and now the hand of the Israelites. And although not in the same words – it is all through the hand of the Lord (Harris et al. 2000, 176). Pre-monarchical Israel had to know that they could depend on God to bring about victory if they would only remain faithful to the promises of the

historical, factual course of the battle but rather to attribute the honour to Yahweh (cf. 4:24).

What is hidden in the text is, moreover, that non-ideal bodies (such as those of Deborah and Jael) are once again used by Yahweh to come to the Israelites' rescue. Deborah's prophesy is fulfilled (4:9): The Lord delivers Sisera into the hands of a woman. In Yahweh's eyes they were ideal, beneficial, and useful. The author(s)/editor(s) of the narratives do not justify the dominant ideology (patriarchy) nor do they try to edit it out or eradicate the inequalities of the society (cf. Frymer-Kensky 1996, 57). However, it is challenged implicitly in more than one way. Apparently, the dominant ideology was not part of what Yahweh intended for his chosen people. That is why it is being criticized in a subtle way by the author(s)/editor(s). The fact that women (such as Achsah, the wife of Manoah, Deborah, and Jael) and heathen could excel during this pre-monarchic period was possibly only due to Yahweh's covenantal rule (theocracy). There was no discrimination against bodies or cultures. "It is of vital importance for the church and biblical scholars to take notice of such hidden polemic in the Bible with reference to body ideology and the treatment of so-called unwhole bodies in society" (Van der Merwe and Coetzee 2009, 677).⁵⁰

Abbreviations

CTAQ	A. Herdner, Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques. Paris, Imprimerie National, 1963
JSem	Journal of Semitics
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
NBD	New Bible Dictionary
OTE	Old Testament Essays
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

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covenant. Deborah experienced these benefits first hand. The typical story cycle is completed: problem statement, possible solution, action, delay caused by mentioning secondary events, and final solution.

50 Yahweh does not discriminate against women or "heathen", but neither does he tolerate disobedience and idolatry.

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