

The Tent, the Field, and the Battlefield: How Stories of Biblical Women Mine and Undermine Each Other

1. Genesis 12

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ: וְאָעֲשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מִבְּרַכְיָה וּמִקֵּלְלָהּ אֶאֱרָא וְנִבְרַכְוּ בָרָךְ...

The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing...

2. Genesis 15

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה מַה תֵּתֶנּוּ לִי וְאֶנְכִי הוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִי וּבֶן מִשְׁקָה בֵּיתִי הוּא דֹמֶשֶׁק אֶלְיָעֶזֶר... וְהִנֵּה דָבָר יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר
לֹא יִרְשֶׁךָ זֶה כִּי אִם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ הוּא יִרְשֶׁךָ:

But Abram said, "...what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless..." The word of the Lord came..."none but your very own issue shall be your heir."

3. Genesis 16

וְשָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלֵה שָׂפְחָה מִצְרִית וְשָׂמָהּ הָגָר: וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל אַבְרָם הִנֵּה נָא עֲצֹרְנִי יְהוָה מִלְּדֹת בָּא נָא
אֶל שָׂפְחָתִי אוֹלִי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי:

Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children...And Sarai said to Abram... "Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall be built up through her."

4. Genesis 17

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם... וּבִרְכָתִי אֶתְּהָ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָךְ בֶּן... וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחָק... וַיֹּאמֶר
אַבְרָהָם... לוֹ יִשְׁמַעֵאל יְחִיָּה לְפָנָי: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶבְל שָׂרָה אֵשֶׁתְךָ יִלְדֶּת לָךְ בֶּן...

God said to Abraham... I will bless her (Sarah) and give you a son from her... And Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said... "If only Ishmael would live before you!" God said, "But Sarah your wife will bear you a child..."

5. Genesis 18

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֵי מִמְרָא וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם... וַיֵּשֶׁב עִינָיו וַיִּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים... וַיֵּרָץ
לְקִרְאָתָם... וַיִּמְהַר אַבְרָהָם הָאֵהָלָה אֶל שָׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר מַהֲרִי... וַעֲשִׂי עִגּוֹת... וְאֵל הַבֶּקֶר רֵץ אַבְרָהָם... וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אֵיךְ שָׂרָה
אֵשֶׁתְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֵהָל... וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב שׁוּב אֵלָיךְ כָּעֵת חַיָּה וְהִנֵּה בֶן לְשָׂרָה אֵשֶׁתְךָ וְשָׂרָה שְׂמַעַת פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל...
וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זָקֵנִים בָּאִים בְּיָמֵם חָדָל לְהָיוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֶרֶץ כְּנָעִי: וַתִּצְחָק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי בְלִתִּי הִזְתָּה לִּי עֲדָנָה
וְאֲדֹנִי זָקֵן:

The Lord appeared to him ...he was sitting at the entrance of the tent... he ran from the entrance to the tent to greet them... Quickly, Abraham went into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick... knead and make cakes!" ... and Abraham ran to the cattle...They said to him, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah will have a son!" Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent... And Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. Sarah had ceased having the periods (lit. "the paths") of women. And Sarah laughed... "Now that I am withered am I to have enjoyment..."

6. Genesis 24

הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל עֵין הַמַּיִם וְהִיא הָעֹלָמָה הַיֹּצֵאת לְשָׂאֵב וְאָמַרְתִּי אֵלֶיהָ הֲשִׁקִּינִי נָא מֵעַט מַיִם מִכַּדְּךָ:

As I stand by the spring of water, let the young woman who comes out to draw and to whom I say, 'Please, let me drink a little water from your jar...'

וְתֹאמַר שְׂתֵה אֲדֹנִי וְתִמְהַר וְתִרְדֵּךְ כִּדְּךָ עַל יָדָהּ וְתִשְׁקָהּ: וְתִמְהַר ... וְתִרְץ עוֹד... לְשָׂאֵב וְתִשְׁאֵב לְכָל גְּמֻלִּי:

"Drink, my lord," and she quickly lowered her jar and let him drink... Quickly emptying her jar... she ran back to the well...and she drew for all his camels.

וַיִּקְרְאוּ לְרִבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶיהָ הִתְלַכִּי עִם הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְתֹאמַר אֵלָיו:

And they called to Rebecca... "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go."

וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת רִבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ אַחֲתָנֹךְ אֵת הָיִי לְאַלְפֵי רִבְּרָה וַיִּירֶשׁ זֶרְעֶךָ אֶת שַׁעַר שָׁנָאיו

And they blessed Rebecca saying, "O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the gates of their foes."

Genesis 22

כִּי בָרַךְ אֲבְרָהָם וְהִרְבָּה אַרְבָּה אֶת זֶרְעוֹ כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְכֹחֵל אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׁפַת הַיָּם וַיִּירֶשׁ זֶרְעוֹ אֶת שַׁעַר אֲבִיבּוֹ

"I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven...and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes."

7. Genesis 24

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׁוּחַ בְּשָׂדֵה לִפְנוֹת עָרֶב וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה גְמֻלִים בָּאִים וְתִשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא אֶת יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל: וְתֹאמַר אֵל הָעֶבֶד מִי הָאִישׁ הַלֹּזֵה הַלֵּךְ בְּשָׂדֵה לִקְרָאתִנִּי וַיֹּאמֶר הָעֶבֶד הוּא אֲדֹנִי וַתִּקַּח הַצְעִיף וַתִּתְּכֶם: וַיִּבְּאֶה יִצְחָק הָאֵהֱלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאֱהָבֶהּ וַיִּנָּחֶם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ:

And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening, and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebecca saw Isaac. She fell from the camel and said to the

servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.

8. Genesis 25

וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנֶכֶח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הוּא וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתְּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Isaac pleaded with the Lord in the presence of his wife...and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

9. Genesis 25, 27

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אָנֹכִי

But the children struggled in her womb. She said, "If this is so, why do I exist?"

וַתֹּאמֶר רִבְקָה...קִצְתִּי בְחַיִּי מִפְּנֵי בָנוֹת חַת אִם לֵקַח יַעֲקֹב אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת חַת כְּאֵלֶּה הָאָרֶץ לָמָּה לִּי חַיִּים:

And Rebecca said... "If Jacob marries a Hittite woman... what good is my life?

וְתֵרָחַל כִּי לֹא יִלְדָה לִיעֲקֹב... וַתֹּאמֶר... הִבֵּה לִּי בָנִים וְאִם אֵין מִתָּה אֲנֹכִי

Rachel saw that she did not bear a child to Jacob... she said, "Give me children and if not I shall die."

10. Akedat Yitzhak (Isaac Arama):

The two names "*Ishah*" and "*Havvah*" indicate two purposes. The first teaches that woman was taken from man, emphasizing that, like him, she was capable of understanding and advancing intellectually and morally... The second alludes to the power of childbearing and rearing children, as is indicated by the name *Havvah*, the mother of all the living. A woman deprived of the power of childbearing will be deprived of the *secondary* purpose and be left with the ability to do evil or good, like the man who is sterile... Jacob was therefore angry with Rachel when she said, "give me children or if not I shall die." [By exhibiting anger he sought to] ...reprimand her and make her understand this all-important principle: her childlessness did not render her a dead person as far as their joint purpose in life was concerned, just the same as it would be had he been childless.

11. Judges 4

וַדְּבֹרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אֲשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת הָיָא שְׂפָטָה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵת הַהִיא: וְהָיָא יוֹשֶׁבֶת תַּחַת תְּמָר דְּבֹרָה... וַיַּעֲלֵוּ אֵלֶיהָ בָּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפָּט: וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לְבָרְק בֶּן אֲבִינֵעַם ... וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲלֹא צָוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ וּמִשְׁכַּת בְּהֵר תְּבֹרָה... וּמִשְׁכַּתִּי אֵלָיךְ... אֶת סִיסְרָא... וַתַּתִּיחֵהוּ בַיָּד: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָּרַק אִם תִּלְכִּי עִמִּי וְהִלַּכְתִּי וְאִם לֹא תִלְכִּי עִמִּי לֹא אֵלָיךְ: וַתֹּאמֶר הֲלֹךְ אֵלָיךְ עִמָּךְ אִפְסָ כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תִפְאָרְתְּךָ עַל הַדֶּדֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ כִּי בְיַד אִשָּׁה יִמְכַר יְהוָה אֶת סִיסְרָא ...

Deborah, woman of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel in that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah...and the Israelites would come to her for judgment. She summoned Barak...and said to him, "The LORD...has commanded: Go up to Mount Tabor...and I will draw Sisera toward you... and I will deliver him into your hands." But Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go." "I will go with you," she answered. "However, there will be no glory for you... for then the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."

Judges 4-5

וַיְהִי וַיְהִי אֶת סִיסְרָא... וַיֵּרֶד סִיסְרָא מֵעַל הַמְּרֹכָבָה וַיֵּנֶס בְּרִגְלָיו... וַיַּפֵּל כָּל מַחֲנֶה סִיסְרָא... לֹא נִשְׁאַר עַד אֶחָד:

שָׁמְעוּ מַלְכִּים הָאֲדֻמִּים רִזְנִים אֲנֹכִי לַיהוָה אֲנֹכִי אֲשִׁירָה אֲזַמֵּר לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And the Lord threw Sisera and his chariots...into a panic... and Sisera dismounted his chariot and fled on foot... All of Sisera's soldiers fell... not a man was left. ... And Deborah sang... "I will sing, will sing to the Lord..."

Exodus 15

אֲזַיְשִׁיר מִשְׁנֵה וּבְבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל... לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָאָה גָאָה סוּס וַרְכָּבָו רָמָה בַּיָּם:

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song... "I will sing to the Lord..."

12. Judges 4

וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לִקְרַאת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֲדֹנָי... וַיֵּסֶר אֵלָיו הָאֱהָלָה וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ בְשִׁמְיָכָה: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲשָׁקִינִי כָּא מַעַט מִיָּם כִּי צָמְאֹתִי וַתִּפְתַּח אֶת נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו עֲמֹד פֶּתַח הָאֱהָל וְהָיָה אִם אִישׁ יָבוֹא וַיִּשְׁאַלְךָ וַאֲמַר הִישׁ פֹּה אִישׁ וַאֲמַרְתְּ אֵין: וַתִּקַּח יָעֵל אֶשֶׁת חֶבֶר אֶת יִתְד הָאֱהָל... וַתִּתְקַע אֶת הַיִּתְד בְּרִקְתּוֹ... וַיִּעַף וַיָּמָת: וְהָיָה בָּרֶק רֹדֵף אֶת סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לִקְרַאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָךְ וְאַרְאֶךָ אֶת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה מִבְקֵשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיו וְהָיָה סִיסְרָא נָפֵל מֵת וְהַיִּתְד בְּרִקְתּוֹ:

And Sisera fled by foot to the tent of Jael...Jael ...said to him, "...come in here, do not be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. He said to her, "Please let me have some water; I am thirsty." She opened a skin of milk and gave him some to drink... He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anybody comes and asks you if there is anybody here, say 'No.' Then Jael... took a tent pin... when he was fast asleep...she drove the pin through his temple ... Thus he died. Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, "Go, I will show you the man you are looking for." ...there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple.

Deborah's song of triumph, Judges 5

בִּימֵי שִׁמְגַר בֶּן עֵנַת בִּימֵי יַעֲלֵל חֲדָלוּ אֲרוּחוֹת וְהִלְכִי נְתִיבוֹת יִלְכוּ אֲרוּחוֹת עֵקֶלְקֵלוֹת... חֲדָלוּ פְּרוֹזוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ עַד שְׁקִמְתִּי
דְּבוֹרָה שְׁקִמְתִּי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

In the days of Jael paths ceased. And wayfarers went by roundabout paths. Deliverance
ceased... till I Deborah arose... a mother in Israel!

תְּבָרַךְ מְנַשִּׁים יַעֲלֵל אִשֶּׁת חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי מְנַשִּׁים בְּאֵהֶל תְּבָרַךְ:

Most blessed of women be Jael,... more blessed than the women of the tent.

13. Manoah and his wife, Judges 13

וַיְהִי מִלֶּאֱרֹא יְהוָה אֶל הָאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ הִנֵּה נָא אֶת עֲקָרָהּ וְלֹא יִלְדֶּת וְהָרִית וְיִלְדֶּת בֶּן: וַיַּעֲתֵר מְנוּחַ אֶל יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי
אֲדֹנָי אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתָּ יְבוּאָה נָא עוֹד אֵלֵינוּ וַיִּזְכְּנוּ מִה נַּעֲשֶׂה לְנַעַר הַיּוֹלֵד: וַיִּשְׁמַע הָאֱלֹהִים בְּקוֹל מְנוּחַ וַיָּבֹא
מִלֶּאֱרֹא הָאֱלֹהִים עוֹד אֶל הָאִשָּׁה וְהִיא יוֹשֶׁבֶת בַּשָּׂדֶה וּמְנוּחַ אִישָׁהּ אֵין עִמָּה וַיְבָרְכֶהּ יְהוָה:

There was a certain man... whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren...An angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her "...you shall conceive and bear a son... Manoah pleaded with the Lord. "...please let the man of God... come to us again, and let him instruct us how to act with the child that is to be born." God heeded Manoah's plea, and the angel of God came to the woman again. She was sitting in the field and her husband Manoah was not with her.

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