

Workshop: Deborah, Jael and Delilah: Biblical heroines and their reception in literature, arts, music and film in the 19th-21th century

Please note: The papers should be 20-25 min, allowing 5min for questions

Session I: Delilah in the arts from the 19th-21th century

Chair: Guadalupe Seijas de los Ríos-Zarzosa, Complutensian University of Madrid
(gseijas@filol.ucm.es)

Introduction: Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, Catholic Private University Linz 15 min

Klaas Spronk, 25min
Protestant Theological University Amsterdam

Images of Delilah

Once you have heard the aria "Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix" by Saint-Saëns your image of Delilah will never be the same. What does this say about the biblical story, about Saint-Saëns and about you? Attention will also be paid to the provocative staging of Saint-Saëns' opera in 2009 in which the Philistines were presented as Israeli soldiers and Samson as a Palestine suicide killer.

Yairah Amit 25min
Tel Aviv University

Delilah and Vladimir Jabotinsky

Vladimir (in Hebrew Ze'ev) Jabotinsky was born in Russia in 1880 and died in 1940 in New York. He was not only an author, poet, orator, translator, and journalist, but also a soldier, and the founder of the Jewish self-defence organization in Odessa and co-founder of the Jewish Legion in the British army in the World War I. Moreover, he was a Revisionist Zionist leader, who was active in Europe, Palestine and the United States. His influence on Israeli politics was profound. In 1927 he wrote a historical novel, *Samson Nazorei*, in Russian, and needless to say, Delilah is one of the main characters in this novel. Indeed, the story takes place in biblical times, but after the pogroms in Eastern Europe it reflects Jabotinsky's ideal and his aspiration for an active daring, militant style of Jewish life. The novel was a success and was translated into English three years later (*Samson the Nazirite*, 1930). In 1949, the American filmmaker, Cecil B. DeMille, directed and produced his film *Samson and Delilah*, using Jabotinsky's novel as his script. My paper will focus on the artistic portrait of Delilah in the novel, which reflects the Jewish situation at the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, and what happened to her when she became the heroine of an American romantic drama.

Break

30min

Talia Sutskov
Tel Aviv University

25min

Biblical Heroines Given Voice in Modern Hebrew Poetry: The Case Studies of Delilah and Jael

Women in the Hebrew Bible often play critical roles with regard to plot development and divine plan, yet the text abstains from expounding their personal motives and emotions. In the rare instances where women's motives are finally touched upon, it is done in a technical and non-personal manner. For example, one of the most intimate scenes depicted in the Hebrew Bible includes Delilah's continual pestering of Samson, in her effort to reveal his point of frailty (Judg 16). Apparently, Samson is deeply disturbed by Delilah's consistent inquiry, and so he discloses his secret, immediately after which he is seized by the lurking Philistine troops. According to the biblical story, Delilah was motivated by a large amount of money offered to her by the Philistines (Judg 16:5). Medieval and modern commentators usually suffice in labelling Delilah as a materialistic femme fatale, and rather choose to investigate Samson's odd surrender to Delilah. In this paper I intend to further explore Delilah's character through modern Hebrew poetry. Three poems will be analysed: 'Delilah' by Samuel Bass (1899-1949), 'Delilah' by Aaron Meirovitch (1910-2006), and 'Delilah's Curl' by Nava Semel (1954-2017). In addition, the poems of Samuel Bass and Ora Athariah (1930-2002) will be shown to shed new light on Jael's objectives at the time of Sisera's murder. Since poetry is not timid to delve into human emotions, it entails new perspectives on emotions of biblical characters, which are often annulled by the Bible itself.

Dolores Kamrada
Pázmány Péter Catholic

25min

Resting in Peace

The presentations of Yael's murder and Delilah's shaving of Samson's hair show remarkable similarity: both types of depictions seem to represent the motif "sleeping with head laid in wife's lap as a sign of tenderness" (T 299.1 in Thompson's Motif-index of folk-literature, Bloomington 1955-1958). The paper focuses on the paintings from the 19th to the 21st centuries. Not only do the pictorial presentations of the two scenes resemble each other greatly, but the biblical narratives also display several similar or even identical elements. This approach and the analysis of parallel type scenes in art and folklore can facilitate the interpretation of the paintings. This investigation can also highlight the possible meaning and significance of any deviations from the usual pattern.

Discussion of all papers

30min

All presenters of the session are kindly asked to participate in this discussion. There will be some time at the beginning for questions and remarks from the speakers, before we open the discussion for the audience.

Session II: Deborah and Jael in the arts from the 19th-21th century

Chair: Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, Catholic Private University Linz

(s.gillmayr-bucher@ku-linz.at)

Introduction: Guadalupe Seijas de los Ríos-Zarzosa, Complutensian University of Madrid 15min

Elizabeth Hayes

25min

Fuller Theological Seminary

‘Jael and Sisera’ go to Philadelphia: Poetry, Publication, and the Biblical Text in 19th Century America

In mid-19th Century America the biblical story of Jael and Sisera made its way from the pages of scripture to the market place, when the poem ‘Jael and Sisera’ was published in the October 1844 issue of *Graham’s Magazine of Literature and Art*. The wildly entrepreneurial atmosphere of America’s east coast gave rise to various magazines, papers, and broadsheets, even as it gave rise to authors such as Henry William Herbert, abolitionists and early feminists such as the Grimke sisters and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and entertainers such as P.T. Barnum. This paper will compare and contrast the text of Judges 4 and 5 with the poem ‘*Jael and Sisera*’ by Henry William Herbert, with particular attention given to the characterization of Jael and Sisera in each instance. Priority will be given to analysing the social and cultural location of the author and his relationship to the publication in which the poem appears.

Colleen Conway

Seton Hall University

25min

From Pin-Up to Comic Strip: The Newspaper Jael of the Early 20th Century

Building on my work in *Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael*, this paper analyses illustrations of the Jael and Sisera tradition by the early 20th century illustrator Dan Smith. Born in Greenland, raised in New York City and trained in Copenhagen, Smith became a well-known illustrator for a variety of North American news publications. For several years, he produced covers for the Sunday supplement of the *New York World*, which included a full-size illustration of Jael. In his later years, from 1933 to 1935, Smith worked for King Features Syndicate creating a comic strip titled “*Told in Pictures*”. Smith’s series included illustrated versions of Old Testament stories for popular consumption, including, for example, Joseph, Samson, David, Jezebel and Jael. This paper will analyse Smith’s two renderings of Jael (the earlier pin-up Jael and the later comic strip Jael) alongside other versions of Jael that appeared in the shifting American cultural context of the 1920s and early 30s.

Karolien Vermeulen

University of Antwerp

25min

Listening to Jael – On Podcasts, Gender, and Biblical Women

Biblical heroines feature in various domains of Western culture, from poetry and prose to plays and paintings. Their depiction and reception are as varied as the art forms in which they appear. Such is also the case for the figure of Jael, the woman who kills Sisera with a tent peg in Judges 4–5. In her 2016 study, Colleen Conway discusses the rich afterlife of this biblical character (as well as of Deborah, the other leading woman in the same chapters of Judges), an afterlife that evolved more and

more into a statement about gender roles and gender conflict. Using this study as well as other work on Jael's reception as sounding board, this paper will focus on the depiction of Jael in a more recent cultural product, the podcast. Podcasts, just as the original text, return to the aural mode of the biblical text and build their world and the women therein textually. A selection of relevant podcast episodes will serve as case study to formulate preliminary answers on the influence of modern-day contexts on the understanding of a biblical woman (think gender awareness and different opinions on gender roles) and, vice versa, on the ways in which Jael assists in making sense of the current world (think #metoo). The paper will examine whether this new format, a product of the digital discourse world, shows similar/different ways of reception of the female figure Jael compared to more established art forms. It will furthermore address the role of each of the traditional influencers in reception history: when, where, by whom, and for whom the new text is made.

Break

30min

Yaffa England

25min

University of Haifa

Deborah and Jael in Jewish and Israeli Modern Visual Art.

The story of Deborah and Jael is set in the Israelites' struggle to free themselves from the twenty-year-long oppression by Jabin, king of Canaan. We are fortunate to have two versions of this account: one as prose (Judg 4) and one as poetry that predates the prose (Judg 5). Both versions offer very little information about the protagonists. All we are told is that Deborah was a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, and that she judged Israel at that time. "And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah... and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." She summoned Barak and gave him a combat plan. At Barak's request she joined him and at Mt. Tabor, gave the signal for the battle to begin. After the victory over Jabin, his captain Sisera and all their troops, she sang a song of praise to the Lord. There is no further reference to Deborah, and there is not much information about Jael either. We know that she welcomed Sisera who was fleeing on foot and who came to her tent in the hope of finding refuge with her. Jael gave him milk to quench his thirst and covered him with a rug. While he slept, she killed him by ramming a tent-peg through his temple. When Barak passed by, looking for Sisera, Jael asked him to come inside and see his dead enemy. The limited information about Deborah and Jael creates a lacuna that Jewish commentators from ancient to modern times felt the need to fill in. So did Jewish and Israeli artists. They had to shape these literary heroines into flesh-and-blood characters. While the number of art works is limited, each art work depicts Deborah and Jael in a manner that reflects the artist perception of the biblical text, as well as the time and circumstances of its creation.

Discussion of all papers

30min

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