

Jael

The Woman Who Killed a Man While He Slept

Scripture References-Judges 4:17-22; 5:6, 24-27

Name Meaning-Jael means “wild or mountain goat” or “gazelle,” and as Dean Stanley expresses it, “a fit name for a Bedouin’s wife-especially for one whose family had come from the rocks of Engedi, the spring of the wild goat or chamois.”

Family Connections-The only association given of this woman who sprang from obscurity by a single deed which, because of its nature, hardly deserved fame, is that she was the wife of Heber, the Kenite. In those days everything connected with a tent was a woman’s job and the women became expert in all the phases of making, pitching and striking tents. This was why Jael was able to turn her skill to good account, as with a tent pin in one hand and with a maul in the other, she drove the pin home through the skull of Sisera as he slept-a deed not allotted to divine leading although the victory over Sisera was (Judges 5:10).

How can we explain or justify such an act deemed treacherous according to the morals of Jael’s own time? “Hospitality was one of the most strictly adhered to, of all desert obligations, and was a matter of honor among the Hebrews,” says Mary Hallet. “In betraying Sisera, Jael broke this code of hers; but to us that is more easily understood than the revolting cruelty of her method of murder!” “So Sisera died”- and Jael’s treachery was forgotten in the more important fact of her courage. The circumstances occasioning such an act have already been touched upon. Israel chafed under the severe rule of Jabin, king of the Canaanites, and Deborah arose and with Barak went out against the armed force of Jabin. God intervened, and unleashing the powers of nature completely disorganized Jabin’s army. Sisera, captain of the host, and Israel’s cruel oppressor escaped and fell into the hands of a woman (4:9).

Sisera fled to the tent of Heber the Kenite, whose wife Jael met Sisera and urged him not to be afraid but to turn in and rest. Seeing how worn and weary Sisera was, Jael covered him with a mantle, and when he asked for water to slake his thirst she opened a bottle of milk for him to drink. Then, assuring him that she would shield him from any searchers, she watched him as he fell asleep. Going softly to his side, Jael drove the tent nail through his head and pinned it to the ground. Shakespeare says of woman that “she can smile and smile and be a villain.” Jael was not a crude or coarse woman, or a tiger of a woman. But with a husband who had allied himself with the enemy, she was caught in the politics of Israel and felt that she had to defend herself. She resorted to trickery, for although she met Sisera with a beaming face, there was murder in her heart. Had Sisera attempted to rape Jael, and in defense of her honor she had killed him, that would have been another matter, but to kill him as an assassin kills a victim was something different. Her murder of Sisera reminds us of Judith of Behulia, who drove a sword through Olopernes' throat as he slept.

While divine judgment fell upon Sisera, Jael erred in that she did not allow God to designate the means of punishment. Perhaps she felt an irresistible impulse to slay the persistent enemy of God's people, but she remains forever censurable for the cruel way she killed Sisera, even though Deborah gloated over the act and praised it in poetic form. When Deborah said, “Blessed above women shall be Jael,” perhaps she was only praising her faith and not her treachery. Any woman killing the country's enemy must be the friend of Israel, and so the method of Sisera's death mattered little to Deborah who doubtless thought that all was fair in time of war. What atrocious crimes have been committed in the name of patriotism! Jael had no conception that she was the one person at the opportune moment to render “stern justice on an enemy of God.” Knowing that the tide of battle had turned against the Canaanites she realized that Sisera would be captured and killed, therefore she acted as the executioner herself, thereby cementing a friendship with Deborah, the conqueror, who thought Jael worthy of praise because of her love for Israel.