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Abstract

Changing times have produced different depictions of biblical characters in the arts. Changing art forms and media have as well. This article addresses the reception of the biblical character Jael (Judges 4–5) in the changed times of the 21st century and in the changed medium of the podcast. Who is Jael, according to these shows? Where do we see the influence of the time, and where the impact of the medium? And is there an effect from biblical story to listener? The article first introduces podcasts, and Bible podcasts more specifically, as a yet to be defined and described art form. For the further analysis, I turn to concepts of Text World Theory, a cognitive-stylistic framework, that offers tools to study any type of human discourse by means of notions such as, discourse worlds and text-worlds and their interaction. Consequently, the depiction of Jael is examined in two different podcasts, *Two Feminists Annotate the Bible* and *Sean and Eliot Read the Bible*. The analysis demonstrates how both shows create their Jael as a result of stylistic choices as well as of discourse world influences, all of which color the interpretation of the text-world of the Jael and Sisera account. Compared to the earlier reception of the story and female character Jael, the podcasts foreground the issue of violence. In addition, the shows display features of mixed genre. Finally, the split discourse world of the original author(s) of the Bible text and the podcast hosts plays an important, and even artful, role in the outlook of the shows.

Biblical heroines feature in various domains of Western culture, from poetry and prose over plays and paintings. Their depiction and reception are as varied as the different art forms in which they appear. This is no different for the figure of Jael, the woman who kills Sisera with a tent peg in Judges 4–5. In her 2016 study *Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael*, Colleen Conway discusses the rich afterlife of this biblical character, stressing the importance of the concerns of the culture in which these artistic artefacts are produced. “Jael is split two ways during periods of cultural gendered moralizing, reflects psychological tensions when the exploration of interiority becomes fashionable, bears the anger of twentieth-century feminists, and becomes a queer subject for twenty-first-century queer theorists.”¹

Relying on the insights of Conway’s study as well as other work done on Jael’s story, I will focus in this article on the depiction of Jael in a more recent cultural product, the podcast. A selection of relevant podcast episodes will serve as a case

¹ Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 168.

study to formulate preliminary answers on the influence of modern-day contexts on the understanding of a biblical woman and vice versa, on the ways in which Jael assists in making sense of the current world.

1. The Listening Mode

Podcasts are a fairly recent phenomenon, first appearing in 2004, shortly after Apple had launched its first portable music device, the iPod. Following its very name ‘podcast,’ a podcast is a broadcasting people can download on a (mobile) device of their choice, to consequently listen to it at any time and in any place. It goes without saying that this timeless and spaceless medium created a major shift in the landscape of radio and television, where shows had a particular time and place to air, left aside the limited number of broadcasts that could be recorded and viewed or listened to at a later point in time.² Initially podcasts were produced by amateurs, but soon enough the mainstream media picked up on them as well (think BBC, NBC, or major newspapers).³

Given the relatively young age of the phenomenon, the research on podcasts is yet to begin. Few studies exist on the origin of podcasts, their users and motivations. Most research is oriented toward educational benefits of podcasts.⁴ A second group of studies consists of market research interested in developing more profitable shows.⁵ As far as genre or language use goes, there is virtually no work done.⁶ One is not even at terms with “what sort of cultural artefact a ‘podcast’ actually is.”⁷ In what follows I will address a few features of podcasts that are characteristic as far as their stylistic appearance goes, that is, the linguistic form they typically take.

What does typify podcasts? First and foremost, they are an aural medium. People listen to them. This affects the pace of narration and processing of content. It means that, in addition to conventional linguistic features one also finds in written texts (think of metaphors, flashbacks, wordplay, word order, and deixis), podcasts can also explore intonation, pace and pauses. They can add noises, laughter and, if more than one speaker is present, have concurrent talking. They can do voices

² Menduni, *Four Steps*, 1 15; Bottomley, *Podcasting*, 164–166.

³ McClung and Johnson, *Examining*, 83. I mention English media here, because the evolution started there and up until today, Anglo-American productions still form the main players worldwide in the podcast field. Using the lingua franca of the worldwide web, these podcasts have a global market, contrary to those in languages such as Dutch or Italian. In addition, companies which played a role in the birth of podcasts, such as Apple, are American.

⁴ E.g., Harris / Park, *Educational Usages*; Fernández et al., *Past, Present, and Future*; Drew, *Educational Podcasts*.

⁵ E.g., Pérez, *Podcasting in Spain*; Rojas-Torrijos et al., *Emergence*.

⁶ One of the very few exceptions is a paper given by Martine Van Driel in 2019 on genre expectations and gender evaluations in listener reviews of a true crime/comedy podcast (*Stay Sexy*).

⁷ McHugh, *How Podcasting Is Changing*, 66.

and add background music.⁸ Second, podcasts are episodic; they come in series, short or longer, as such being part of a larger narrative the producers want to tell.⁹ In fiction podcasts, these episodes may equal chapters in a book, whereas in a science podcast, the episodes are connected through a theme. Third, as far as narrative audio storytelling goes, podcasts create a certain level of intimacy “that comes with knowing your listeners have deliberately chosen your show.”¹⁰ In addition, intimacy plays an even more important role in the listeners’ experience: “Podcast listeners seem to want a relationship with a presenter/host/storyteller rather than immerse themselves in a sea of story/sound/visceral experience.”¹¹ The whole experience is further enhanced by the fact that most podcast users listen to episodes by themselves, more often than not with headphones on. This adds to the creation of a personal bubble which listener and speaker share. Fourth, podcasts seem to be produced for particular genres. Or rather, the popularity of podcasts of a certain genre largely affects the kind of podcasts that are produced and consumed afterwards. This force explains the rise of true crime podcasts after the success of *Serial* in 2014, for example.¹² Another element that plays into the genre preferences is the marketability of the shows, especially in the US which takes a leading position in podcast production. Their pole position is partially the result of a lack of public funding for shows, compared to the UK and European scene where traditional broadcast companies are paid to produce high quality shows, including more and more podcasts.¹³ In addition to true crime, the field of education is a big producer and a consumer of podcasts designed for the classroom as well as for home study. Other popular genres include science podcasts and comedy.

As far as Bible podcasts go, if such a term can be coined, most of them are found under the label ‘religion and spirituality.’ This categorization is, obviously, prompted by the corpus on which they rely, the Bible, often Old and New Testa-

⁸ Jillian DeMair has shown that precisely these auditory elements gave the podcast *Serial* its perceived authenticity (Sounds Authentic, 24–38).

⁹ Literary scholars have interpreted this seriality in light of serialized narratives and their storytelling strategies. They have found that one of the main effects of serial storytelling is “the considerable power of a desiring, anxious, and invested audience in stories that continually defer closure” (Haugtvedt, Ethics, 9). Whereas previous research focuses on narrative podcasts, I argue that seriality is key to podcasts in general. What is more, the effect (of hooking up people to your show) can be found in all of them as well.

¹⁰ McHugh, How Podcasting Is Changing, 72 (quoting Biewen).

¹¹ McHugh, How Podcasting Is Changing, 72 (quoting Hall).

¹² Boling / Hull, Undisclosed Information, 92–93; Hancock / McMurtry, I Know, 81–105. Hancock and McMurtry argue that *Serial* has created a genre of its own. “The post-*Serial*, we posit, is not just a genre of spin off copycat fictions, but rather an exploratory, and highly fruitful, creative cycle which develops a new form of audio fiction based consciously within the podcast media form” (100).

¹³ McHugh, How Podcasting Is Changing, 76.

ment together, but also by the fact that many of them take an explicit confessional stance, with an overrepresentation of Christian productions. In general, one can distinguish between Bible podcasts that present the listener Bible texts in daily, weekly or monthly episodes; podcasts that are recorded sermons (thus confessional); and podcasts that read the text and comment on it along the lines. As far as more artistic examples go, these appear in the last category, with some of them providing new translations with a particular flavor, such as the humorous *OMGWTF*Bible* (a Jewish ironic rereading of the Hebrew Bible) or those in which the comments become more of a retelling, such as the feminist podcast *TwoFAB* (a Christian show with many intertextual links, discussed below). This last category will form the focus of attention of this article. Linger on the border between digital commentary, radio show and artwork, these Bible podcasts offer a unique perspective on the current-day afterlife of biblical stories and their heroines.

2. Building Text Worlds while Listening

Before having a closer look at some of these podcasts and their casting of Jael (pun intended), I would like to introduce two terms from Text World Theory, that will facilitate the further analysis of the shows and their reciprocal relationship with the biblical text. Text World Theory, originally developed in the late 1990s by Paul Werth and expanded by Joanna Gavins in the last two decades, is a theory used to model how people process human discourse.¹⁴ As both Werth and Gavins argue its applications are not limited to novels, but include, among others, advertisements, poetry, and multi-modal texts.¹⁵ Text World Theory distinguishes between a *discourse world*, in which person A produces discourse that person B interacts with (by reading, listening, viewing or a combination), and a *text-world*, in which the characters in the text (or audio telling, or video) experience things.¹⁶

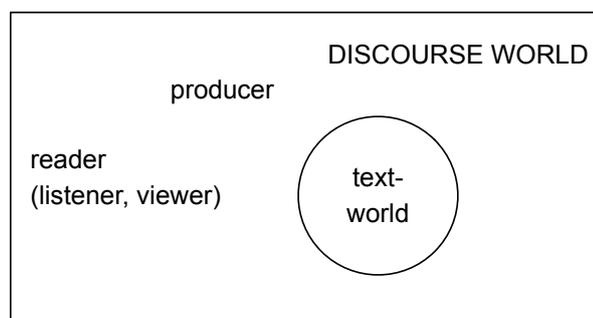


Fig. 1: Discourse world and text-world

¹⁴ Werth, *Text Worlds*; Gavins, *Text World Theory*.

¹⁵ Gavins, *Text World Theory*, 7, 175. For examples, see Gavins, *Text World Theory* (for ads), Lahey, *(Re)thinking* and Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics* (for poetry), and Gibbons, *Multimodality* (for multimodal texts).

¹⁶ Fig. 1 shows how TWT distinguishes between the world of text in which the characters exist and the world of discourse in which both the producer and the reader live, though not necessarily at the same time or place. Both the producer and the reader form a text-world based on information of the text and influenced by their respective worlds of discourse.

What is more, researchers speak of a split discourse world to account for the difference between the discourse world of a text at the time of its production and immediate use and any later discourse worlds in which the same text is read. The theory furthermore assumes a mutual influence between the discourse world and the text-world(s), meaning that readers bring their own background (knowledge, experiences, feelings and dreams) to the text when engaging with a text but also that the way in which a text is written (its word choice, use of grammar, deixis, etc.) affects a reader's understanding of that text. Precisely this two-way process is of interest in this article, and in reception history at large.

Applying this to the current study, the discourse world of Bible podcasts consists of a very recent time, in which a podcast host or hosts engage with listeners anywhere around the globe and from various cultural, educational and social backgrounds. The focus in this piece will be on the discourse world of the podcast producers because I am interested in how their shows reflect their reception of Jael. The text-world is the one of the biblical text with characters acting and feeling in a remote past at locations named as well as unnamed. Whereas the substantial gap in space and especially in time between the discourse world of the podcast listener and the original discourse world of the Bible text has often been considered a problem for interpreting biblical texts, the podcasts under study will show that the makers have little difficulty in juggling the split discourse world and that they, maybe especially with stories as outspoken and thought-provoking as the Jael and Sisera account, are perfectly able to construe a meaning for the biblical text as well as for the world in which they read the text.

3. Podcasting Jael

In what follows I will discuss two podcasts with a very different approach: *Two Feminists Annotate the Bible*, in short *TwoFAB*, and *Sean and Eliot Read the Bible*. Both can be identified as so-called chumcasts, "in which two or more hosts riff of each other, chatting in a casual or rambunctious manner around a theme, making the listener feel included in a private no-holds-barred conversation."¹⁷ For each podcast, I will analyze the episode on the story of Jael and Sisera as it appears in Judges 4 and 5 in the Hebrew Bible.

3.1. TwoFAB

TwoFAB is a podcast run by two Christian feminists: Luci, a high school religion teacher with an MA in Theology, and Jordan, an Anglican priest with an MA in Divinity.¹⁸ The podcast is produced in North America, airing a new episode about

¹⁷ McHugh, *How Podcasting is Changing*, 12.

¹⁸ <https://twofeministsblog.com/2fab-bible-about-the-feminists>, seen 4.6.2020.

every week adding up to 193 episodes from its start on August 1, 2016 until its latest episode on June 30, 2019.¹⁹ The podcast is tagged under ‘christianity’ on both Podbean and Apple podcasts. On their personal website, the hosts introduce their show as “a look at some of the ways our culture has perverted Scripture to its own ends,” among others.²⁰ On February 19, 2017 episode 32 focused on Judges 4–5. Right from the beginning of the episode, Luci and Jordan side with the heroines of Judges 4 and 5. This is what Jordan says about her favorite story:

I love the ... agency of women in this story and that women are protagonists, they're driving the story forward and ... even though it is still really really violent, even though euh I am not sure I would use these characters as like my moral exemplars, I just, I think they are amazing in the story. (starting time 01:00)

In this quote, Jael, and for that matter also Deborah, are identified by Jordan as main characters as well as narratological catalysts of the story in Judges 4 and 5. Moreover, the term ‘love’ suggests a positive evaluation of the women in the story.²¹ At the same time though, Jordan counters her ‘love’ for Jael and Deborah with a concern that reflects influence of the discourse world: “What about the violence?” Note that when she talks about the female characters in a positive way, she places them in the story, thus in the text-world (“agency *in this story*”; “protagonists”, “driving *the story* forward”, “amazing *in the story*”). On the contrary, when she mentions violence, she first speaks of the story in general (“it”) and consequently of “characters as moral exemplars.” Both phrases evaluate the text-world from a discourse-world perspective, that is, the story is “really really violent” according to Jordan’s standards and that of the culture she lives in. Similarly, the reference to “moral exemplars” implies exemplars for current-day real-life, not that of the text-world, as in, examples for other characters in the story.²²

¹⁹ As of September 2019, they switched from the Bible to other Bible related writings, such as the Apocrypha. This series called *Two Feminists Annotate the Beautified* is still ongoing.

²⁰ <https://2feministsannotatethebible.libsyn.com>, seen 4.6.2020.

²¹ The podcasts dialogic form with two I’s voicing their opinion, works well in that respect. Research on empathy in reading fiction states that first-person narratives resemble everyday conversations. Readers identify more easily with one of the participants and their viewpoints, at least if they are represented as reliable (Kotovych et al., Textual Determinants; van Lissa et al., Difficult Empathy). In addition, a reader’s own ideas matter, as Stockwell has pointed out. What is more, professional readers, among which academics, tend to create a greater distance between themselves and characters, regardless of the narrative perspective (Stockwell, *Texture*, 143–154).

²² Jordan is not mentioning the original discourse world at this point. Whether Jael would have been a model in that context is nevertheless an interesting discussion. What is more, a lot of the interpretation history of the text shows that scholars tried to come to terms with Jael’s role. Is she a heroine because she killed the enemy and helped God’s people? Or is she a villain because she murdered someone and has acted out of her expected social and gender role? Fewell and Gunn argue that she was “a woman caught in the middle.” “Violence delivers her, gains her security and will earn her praise in patriarchal Israel” (*Controlling Perspectives*, 396). Reis’ interpretation of Jael is also positive, but she does call her an “immoral non-Israelite woman” at some point.

The opening lines of the show mirror what will be argued near the end of the episode, an argument that combines cheering for Jael on the one hand, and for all strong women for that matter, and rejecting the violence, interpreted as reversed rape, that is used to create the image of a strong woman, on the other hand.²³

(Jordan) So I think – my off-the-cuff reaction is that I don't wanna champion this idea of the tables being turned because I don't wanna champion pseudo-rape in any scenario. Right? (Luci) Sure. (Jordan) Of course. (Luci) And we need to be clear that men can be and are raped by women. (Jordan) Absolutely. (Luci) And that is a horrific crime. (Jordan) Right, absolutely. (Luci) And that is not something we want to encourage. (Jordan) Right. And so in some ways recasting it as the sexual violence being turned from the way it typically plays out in the Hebrew Bible, doesn't ... in some ways it complicates the story for me – (Luci) sure. – (Jordan) Instead of... it's ... I mean it's interesting but in some ways it complicates the story for me because I want Jael to simply be euhm this woman who is breaking the mold of the other women that we are seeing demonstrated. (Luci) I mean you want her to be a hero. (Jordan) Right. (Luci) Whereas if – (Jordan) I don't want her to be complicated by the narrative of rape. – (Luci) Exactly. [...] Americans we love to root for the underdog. (Jordan) Of course. (Luci) And so, thinking of her as this underdog, and completely underestimated by Sisera, by everybody, and then she ends up being the hero. I love that idea. (starting time 28:55)

Like in the beginning, Jordan and Luci are taking the events of the story, in this case the (pseudo-)rape of Sisera, into the broader discourse world. They reject rape in any scenario, thus in the text-world as well as in the discourse world. Halfway through the passage it becomes clear what the creators of the podcast want: “an uncomplicated story”, one that presents strong women, full stop.

In my view, this romanticizing of the Jael story is a decontextualized reading of the story, or rather a recontextualized reading.²⁴ In the Western world in which violence in general, and sexual violence in particular, is put high on the agenda,

This depiction in the story leads, according to her, to a humorous effect (Uncovering, 36). Graybill considers Jael a heroine, with similarities with the Final Girl in slasher films and rape-revenge movies. According to her, “Jael's femininity is not an accident,” but “an intentional choice that engages and engenders ideological identification by male readers” (Day of the Woman, 198).

²³ The idea that the story presents a reversed rape, that is, Jael violating Sisera, rather than the other way around, is one that is defended by many scholars (e.g., Bal, *Murder*, 213, Niditch, *Eroticism*, 43–47; Fewell / Gunn, *Controlling Perspectives*, 394, Duran, *Having Men*, 119; Reis *Uncovering*; Niditch, *Judges*, 81). In addition, the story draws on reversal of gender roles and expectations in general, but also of outcasts and Israelites (Van Wolde, *Ya'el*, 245), powerful and powerless and even urban and rural (Niditch, *Judges*, 82). More recently, Graybill has argued that gender otherness serves to obscure ethnic otherness (Day of the Woman, 203), pointing out a relationship between the different reversals in the story.

²⁴ Several artists and scholars have addressed the violence in the story. However, few go as far as the suggestion made here to eliminate the cruelty. On the contrary, feminist reception in the arts draws out Jael's violent acts as heroic as well as necessary (Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 120–45). Likewise, scholarship with a similar angle considers violence the way out for a trapped character (Fewell / Gunn, *Controlling Perspectives*). In addition, violence is part of the war narrative in which it appears and its accompanying rhetoric. After all, the book of Judges is not the most peaceful book of the Bible (Eder, *Gewalt*, 9; Niditch, *Judges*, 4–6).

at least formally, a story with a heroine committing a pseudo-rape is considered highly problematic, even for self-declared feminists such as Luci and Jordan. At the end of the passage, the discourse world of the makers, which is modern-day North America, clearly starts to play an important role in the understanding of Jael. She is labelled “the underdog,” but preferably without any violent characteristics.²⁵ She needs to be a clean or simple hero, almost a fairy tale figure from the good side. Note that at that point the language is no longer gendered, nor is the overall discourse. Luci and Jordan are talking about “heroes” and “underdogs,” not about female heroes or strong women. Their point about violence has clearly taken over their focus on the female.

This is all the more striking because at other times the hosts do play out that feminist position. Jael is deemed “wicked strong” to commit the murder with the tent peg (starting time 20:55). Her husband is made fun of, presenting him as a hunter-gatherer type of human with his main concern being his tools and his food.²⁶ His reaction to the murder is described as him saying, “Oh my favorite peg.” Never mind the dead man on the floor (starting time 22:12). At other times, he is cast as the perfect, understanding modern husband: “I really like the idea of this woman who is a wife, who is a mother and who is also a leader of this community, and kicking some ass ... being married and her husband being cool with her taking the lead” (starting time 6:35). First, whereas Jael is interpreted as a modern working mom and Heber her equal partner (from a modern discourse-world perspective), the quote also shows that the creators read this as exceptional in the ancient context, thus both in the text-world and original discourse world. Husbands typically were “not cool” with women of Jael’s kind, who reverse traditional gender roles.²⁷ A last example showing their feminist stance is their description of chapter 4 as “mansplaining” chapter 5 (starting time 4:06). Not only is the term itself very 21st century discourse world, but it also reveals an attitude toward the observation of scholars (scholarship they rely on frequently) that chapter 4 offers a male perspective on the story and chapter 5 a female one.²⁸ The podcast

²⁵ Biblical scholars have used similar terminology. “In addition, that a woman could tip the scales against the enemy plays into the underdog theme common in Israel’s tradition and can be compared to a theme found in the Ugaritic epic of Aqhat, in which a woman takes on the male role and slays a villain” (Matthews, Judges, 65). Note that Luci and Jordan bring up the notion of underdogs from their own discourse world whereas Matthews sees this theme present in the ancient discourse world of the biblical text itself.

²⁶ This interpretation can be considered a variant of the one found in scholarship that wonders about Heber’s role. Chisholm calls him “Heber the No-Show”, a character who “is introduced, but never appears” (What’s Wrong, 175). See also Murray, Narrative Structure, 179–180.

²⁷ Among others, Watts, Psalm and Story, 88; Fewell / Gunn, Controlling Perspectives, 391; Duran, Having Men, 123. Scholars focus especially on the subversion of the role of mother and nurturer, evoked in the story (Bal, Murder, 121; Duran, Having Men, 117–118).

²⁸ E.g., McCann, Judges, 49.

hosts adopt this general idea but consequently reinterpret it in light of their feminist stance.

All in all, *TwoFAB* presents a strong and positive Jael to its listeners. She is a woman with agency. The only drawback Jordan and Luci see is Jael's violent behavior. This is not so much a problem for the text-world, in which they seem to agree that it may be fitting, but it does form a major issue for their final evaluation of the character. As much as they want her to be a heroine, she cannot truly be in their book. This is where the values of the modern discourse world overrule those of the biblical text and listeners get stuck on the divide between them. Perhaps surprisingly, this does not have as much to do with different views on gender roles, but with a changed perspective on violence. As far as the influence of Jael on the world goes, the podcast takes a clear stance. Jordan and Luci root for strong females such as Jael, although they discourage their listeners to follow the text's violence, particularly, the sexually colored violence. The story of Jael is an excellent example to make their case. Jael is forthcoming, independent and daring. If it were not of how they make their case for her violent behavior, she could have been a role model for women in the discourse world of the podcast. And perhaps she is, because as any other discourse, Luci and Jordan's analysis of the text is up for discussion and interacts with what listeners bring to the show and to the biblical text themselves.²⁹

3.2. Sean and Eliot Read the Bible

Sean and Eliot Read the Bible is another podcast that offers the listeners a specific view on the Jael and Sisera story. This British show is made by comedians Sean McLoughlin and Eliot J. Fallows. The podcast is framed as Sean and Eliot, "delv[ing] into the good book so you don't have to."³⁰ It appears under the label 'comedy' on Podbay. The first episode aired on July 24, 2018 and the latest on May 31, 2020 (36 episodes in total). With one or a few episodes each month, the podcast covers the Hebrew Bible (at least up until now) by chapter, in a loose canonical order (first Torah, then Writings, Prophets and some poetry). Books such as Genesis are covered in three episodes, whereas Ruth and Samuel make up one episode together. The book of Judges was broadcast on December 23, 2018 and is called a Christmas special in between parenthesis.

Sean and Eliot cover the whole of Judges in 1 hour and 22 minutes. It goes without saying that their treatment of Jael is far shorter than that in the previous

²⁹ Note that the above analyses the discourse world of the makers, as indicated before, who present an interpretation of the Jael and Sisera story. A similar analysis could be made of listener reviews of the podcast episode in which listeners with other discourse worlds interact with the text-world created by the podcast hosts and their presentation of the embedded text-world of the biblical story of Jael and Sisera.

³⁰ <https://play.acast.com/s/seanandeliotreadthebible>, seen 4.6.2020.

podcast. In around 5 minutes, in which they also discuss Christmas dinner and play organ music, they introduce their listeners to the world of Judges 4 and 5. This goes as follows:

(Sean) Here comes Deborah. (Eliot) Deborah, who is the third major judge and the first – should we just say this? – first female protagonist who is a hero and not an idiot in the Bible? (Sean) Mmmmaybe. (starting time 36:03)

There will not be too many other pieces in the reception history of the Bible that have framed Deborah as ‘not an idiot.’ Even more telling than this is the fact that Eliot turns to Sean for approval before saying what is supposedly some kind of a joke, or at least something the audience will pause on. The interjection is the a priori evaluation by the modern discourse world’s values of what is said afterwards about the biblical text-world. For sure, Deborah is a female hero and not an idiot. However, putting it that way could be problematic in a modern world that does not appreciate this type of comments, especially not when coming from two males. Sean answers ambiguously, saying “maybe,” suggesting that he and Eliot probably should not make such a statement but could, nevertheless. Through his lengthening of the word ‘maybe,’ stuck on the opening consonant, it sounds as if he is seriously thinking it over, which gives it an overall humorous flavor.³¹ Obviously, this is not something to think over, and they did not do it either. Much of the show is most likely scripted so that the hosts did think about making it sound as if they considered the question at the very moment. These little comments, shared among the hosts, as if the audience is not there, create humorous talk. Their meta-reflection on whether it is appropriate to say something like that at all drags the character of Deborah into a modern-day discussion about gender stereotypes (can women be heroes? on the one hand, and can we joke about them being heroes if they are? on the other).³² Even though this example is about Deborah, rather than featuring Jael, I have included it because it sets the tone for Jael’s presentation and interpretation.

As the hosts are about to introduce Jael, they change their earlier statement about Deborah being a hero into “She is the only judge who is kind of mentioned

³¹ Scholars have used various theories to address humor in texts (e.g., the incongruity-resolution theory of Suls, Two-Stage Model, or the General Theory of Verbal Humor of Attardo, Linguistic Theories). More recently, they have turned to cognitive linguistics and conceptual blending to explain what causes the effect (Fauconnier and Turner, Conceptual Projection; Dynel, Blending). According to this approach, humor is the result of combining two different, and in the case of irony opposite, input spaces in a text. Thus, when Sean says ‘maybe’, he plays with the opposition between the yes and the no answer that are both embedded in the word ‘maybe’ and its intonation.

³² Biblical scholarship has paid considerable attention to explaining Deborah’s exceptional status in the patriarchal society of the Bible. Here as well, one can see a struggle to position a female leader. “Who was this person called Deborah?” (Block, Deborah, 252). According to some, she is only an agent of the real hero, God (Block, Deborah, 252), others attribute more of a role to her, calling her “the avatar of Moses” (Herzberg, Deborah, 17).

but isn't the hero" (36:45). Why they think that is the case has to do with Jael, which they explain in the following fragment.

(Eliot) The point of the story moves away from Deborah to a different woman, who is called – I believe it's Jaél. (Sean) Jáel (different pronunciation). (Eliot) Jáel (repeats pronunciation), and Jael finds the leader of the current bad guy army that Deborah's trying to defeat. Jael goes into the tent of the enemy leader. - (Sean interrupts) Sisera? - (Eliot) Sisera is correct! And she kind of subdues him or seduces him or something while he is then sleeping, and she drives a tent pole through his head and kills him. (Sean) And that is where we get the Christmas tradition of putting a tent pole (Eliot) in the ... (Sean) through your enemy's head which we all do every Christmas. (Eliot) Exactly every 17th of December, remember to do that. Then she comes out of the tent and says to Deborah and her army: "The guy you're looking for is in there. He's dead already" – (Sean) Argh – (Eliot) And then Jael is kind of a hero, but Deborah and army leave, blow some trumpets and they sing a song for Deborah. Deborah the hero that nobody really knows. That's all. (Sean) (laughter) (starting time 36:50)

The first thing that strikes you as a listener is the overall hesitation in this depiction of Jael. Eliot believes his main character is called Jael but needs reassurance on that matter (or at least on the pronunciation of the name). He describes her as "kind of subduing or seducing or something" and concludes that she then is "kind of a hero." Apart from the fact that Eliot may use 'kind' as a filler (even though it is not listed in the most commonly used fillers in English), he seems to use it consistently in this passage to speak about Jael. This creates the impression that he is not quite sure about Jael, whether she is a seductress or a plain hero.³³ For starters, and perhaps as a premonition, he was not even sure about how to pronounce her name.

Several explanations can be given for this hesitant picture of Jael. First, the hosts are stand-up comedians who seem to be not too familiar with the biblical text. This also shows in their flawed retelling of the story as far as details go. They have, for example, Jael going into Sisera's tent rather than the other way around (Judg 4:18) and Deborah rather than Barak coming to Jael to find Sisera dead (Judg 4:22). These changes to the text are part of the final product but may arise from a lack of knowledge rather than a certain vision that is consciously reflected by the hosts. Be that as it may, the language used to speak of Jael never takes the form of that of *TwoFAB*. The Jael in this podcast is a watered-down version of both the good and the bad Jael in the reception and interpretation history of the character. In addition, the language chosen to describe as well as characterize Jael remains very impersonal. Eliot tells a story in third person without expressing his own position, except from the doubt just mentioned above.³⁴

³³ This position sums up the entire reception history of Jael, which indeed lingers between these two opposites. For an overview, see Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*.

³⁴ For listeners of the podcast, the fact that the hosts seem to be unreliable in terms of knowing what they are talking about may add to a further distancing between listeners and the character of Jael (Van Lissa et al., *Difficult Empathy*).

The story of Jael is almost framed as a myth—that is why we put a tent pole in people’s head. This myth then is connected to the date of airing the show around Christmas. Obviously, there is nothing Christmassy about the book of Judges, let alone the story of Jael and Deborah. However, Christmas is part of the discourse world of the hosts, and probably also of many of their listeners. And Christmas tends to be a festivity around peace on earth, a day on which enemies cease fire. The violent death of Sisera forms a sharp contrast with this, producing an ironic undertone. Even though the hosts seem to condemn such violence through irony, they do not explicitly nor implicitly carry that through to Jael, the one who commits the murder.³⁵ Again, there is little to no evaluation of Jael’s character in this retelling. When Sean reacts with “argh” when Eliot mentions “he’s [i.e., Sisera] already dead”, it is unclear whether this is a male response, of Barak and army, or a female one, of Deborah and army, as they state themselves later on. Is this “argh” a sigh of disappointment because the army can no longer kill Sisera, or because the story is over, or because of another reason? What is clear is that this podcast stays far away from evaluating Jael’s role in terms of gender. What is more, through the ignorance of the hosts, or perhaps their faked ignorance, they give more agency to Jael and Deborah than the original biblical version of the story does. Jael goes out on a kill mission and Deborah plays a role until the very end of the story (even though they had stated that she disappears in the background).

To sum up, *Sean and Eliot read the Bible* picks up minimally on gender (at least for Deborah) and maximally on violence in the story of Judges 4–5. The joke about gender at the very beginning introducing Deborah is meant for the current-day audience and is about the current-day world. The hosts use the biblical story primarily as a means to say something about today’s world. As far as Jael’s story goes, they present a watered-down, impersonal version of the biblical character. Their focus is mostly on the violent death of Sisera, which they contrast, again, with the peaceful times of the discourse world in which their listeners live.

4. To Pod or Not to Pod

The two podcasts discussed are far apart from each other in terms of who produced them and for what purposes. The feminist North American show *TwoFAB* addresses listeners who want to hear more about the female voices in the Bible whereas the British comedy of Sean and Eliot turns to an audience that likes comedy, first and foremost. Nevertheless, the two podcasts share a discourse world, that can be defined more broadly as the 21st century western world. This results in striking similarities between the reception of Jael’s story, despite the apparent

³⁵ In the original story, irony, however, is playing a role as well. What is more, it has been connected to Jael. “Irony is created by the fact that a woman may kill an experienced warrior: he survives the battlefield yet succumbs to the hand of a woman” (Assis, *The Hand of a Woman*, 7).

differences. Both shows pick up on the gender theme, especially as related to the discourse world in which gender equality is (or should be) the norm. Thus, *TwoFAB* cheers for the strong female characters of Judges 4 and 5, while *Sean and Eliot* wonder whether they can still make fun of women finally being heroes in the biblical text.³⁶ A second, and more prominent, issue they each address is the notion of violence.

For Luci and Jordan, it is somewhat of a deal breaker. Violence places them right in front of the split discourse world of the biblical text, with modern values opposing ancient customs. It prompts them to warn the listener and to distinguish clearly between the Jael of the story who does what she has to do and the Jael one can be today, and who should not adopt the pseudo-rape in any form (including the rhetorical one). Sean and Elliot do not speak of rape at all, but address violence in terms of the brutal murder of Sisera, opposing this with the peace of the Christmas holiday. In doing so, they play out the split discourse world as a feature that can create humor or irony. In other words, what was a problem for Luci and Jordan is turned into an advantage by Sean and Elliot.³⁷

Finally, both podcasts play with genre conventions. They add stylistic features and references to other genres.³⁸ For the podcast *Sean and Eliot* this is part of the humor. Myth, Bible quiz (“Sisera is correct!”) or end of a cartoon (“That’s all [folks]”), they have it all. None of these elements though is specifically used with relation to Jael. This is in line with how they treat the character in general, with not too much personal interest. Luci and Jordan, on the contrary, use intertextual (as in ‘beyond the Bible’) and cross-genre references to further explain their view on female characters in the story. For example, Deborah is introduced as “This girl is on fire,” a pun on her name and a reference to the *Hunger Games* trilogy.³⁹ Whereas, here as well, the juxtaposition of biblical characters and modern popular literature is funny (as in *Sean and Eliot*), it also fits the hosts’ larger enterprise of reevaluating and reclaiming female biblical characters. Not by accident, Deborah

³⁶ As pointed out in the analysis, gender is far more important in *TwoFAB* than in *Sean and Eliot Read the Bible*. It is a matter of degree rather than of whether the topic is addressed or not.

³⁷ Note that the shows leave out God in their retelling. They consider the story to be one with human protagonists only. In that respect they prove Yairah Amit’s claim right that the narrative set-up is hiding the divine protagonist behind all the movements the human characters make (Judges 4, 89, 102).

³⁸ As Martine Van Driel has pointed out, podcast producers must tag their podcast with genre categories when they upload it to forums such as Apple Podcasts (*Stay Sexy*). *TwoFAB* is found under ‘religion and spirituality,’ whereas *Sean and Eliot* is tagged as ‘comedy.’ As such, listeners are primed to expect genre features conform the category. The occurrence of features that belong to different genres will be evaluated in light of the expected and primary genre.

³⁹ The name Lapidot evokes the word לִפְיֹד, “torch,” as noted by scholars (Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten*, 90–91).

is Katniss Everdeen, the dauntless protagonist of the dystopian series by Suzanne Collins.

5. Afterword

TwoFAB and *Sean and Elliot Read the Bible* are just two podcasts of the many creative retellings of the Bible that are out there. With this preliminary study I wanted to show how the biblical Jael lives on in this digitally born medium. For one, the modern discourse world of the producers (and their intended audience) is greatly influencing the reception of Jael, and thus the interpretation of the biblical text-world of the story. Jael is a cue to voice opinions about gender issues in the modern world. More importantly, she becomes a player in the current-day discussion about (sexual) violence. Despite the different nature of the two shows under study, they both foreground these topics. Second, the producers use the possibilities of their medium to create their characters and stories. Positively colored words or impersonal language, pauses, laughter, first or third-person narration, hesitation, dialogue and interruption, they all contribute to the construction of Jael as a character. Third, both shows display traits of mixed genre, identified as either a tool to build character (*TwoFAB*) or to create humor (both). In order to come to more conclusive answers as to whether the noticed tendencies are coincidental or fundamental to artistic Bible podcasts, further study of other podcasts has to be conducted. What is clear, however, is that Jael has found her way to podcast makers, and these makers, in turn, have (re)discovered Jael. Hence, listening to Jael is not only a matter of telling (or not telling) her story, but is (again) also referring to the medium of transmission and its possibilities.

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