The Big Sleep: Strategic Ambiguity in Judges 4-5 and in Classic film noir

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Abstract

Ambiguity is a driving force of the narrative world of film noir. It is expressed through unconventional characterization as well as innovative and excessive visual and narrative techniques. Through all of the gaps and unanswered questions film noir poses, viewers are engaged in an intellectually demanding process. The book of Judges makes similar demands of its readers and shares a number of the concerns found in film noir, such as: anxiety over constructs of masculinity and normality, interest in ritualized violence, fetishization of women, existential deliberation over character, resignation to the fate of the individual (and by extension the nation), withering acknowledgment of the façade of material progress—all expressed with indeterminate narrative modes that frustrate attempts at making meaning. My argument in particular is that film noir and the Jael episode (Judg. 4; 5:24–31) share a remarkably similar rhetoric of ambiguity, and that examination of their correspondences, by an evidence-based comparison, can lead to fruitful hypothesis regarding the social context from which the Judges stories emerged.

Keywords

ambiguity, Jael, Sisera, Judges, film noir

The shady characters who inhabit the dark corners and wet streets of film noir are invariably troubled. As the films themselves are played in retrospectives and (probably more often than we realize) on television, their gritty people and hard-boiled dialogue become even more deeply embedded nostalgic icons, signs for coping with the uncertainty of dangers long gone and yet strangely familiar. André Bazin captured it in his eulogy to noir icon Humphrey Bogart, who was important because ‘the raison d’être of his existence was in some sense to survive’,
and because the alcoholic lines visible on his face revealed ‘the corpse on reprieve within each of us’ (quoted in Naremore 1998: 25). Through all of the gaps and unanswered questions noir poses, viewers are engaged in an intellectually demanding process. The book of Judges makes similar demands of its readers. As Cheryl Exum puts it, the book ‘exhibits an enigmatic complexity’ (1990: 410). Questions reach beyond the immediate narrative context to address issues of leadership, of access to the land, and as I have argued elsewhere, of the complexity of morality and the merits of violent justice (Christianson 2003). My argument here is that noir and the Jael episode (Judges 4; 5:24–31) share a remarkably similar rhetoric of ambiguity,1 and that examination of their correspondences can lead to fruitful hypothesis regarding the social context from which the Judges stories emerged.2

1) I take ambiguity to refer to indeterminacy of meaning at the level of semantics as well as narrative devices. This textual feature, to borrow William Empson’s classic definition, ‘gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language’ (1960: 1; cf. Ingram 2006: ch. 1, and Firth, forthcoming). Ingram draws a very useful distinction between this understanding and ‘ambivalence’, which refers to meanings that may be in opposition but that are more easily fixed/determinate than ambiguous meanings (2006: 12–13). I will argue that noir and the Jael episode share indeterminate meaning. The nuances I apply to ‘ambiguity’ should become clear as the article progresses, and will be discussed more explicitly in the concluding section.

2) I will be developing the method I am undertaking here (and undertook previously in the 2003 article) at length in a forthcoming piece, “‘Lights, Camera, Achsah!’? On Comparing the Hebrew Bible to Film’ (part of a forthcoming book, Charismatic Killers: Reading the Rhetoric of Judges on the Silver Screen [Equinox Press]). The social forces that in some way shaped film noir are not hypothetical but are at least theoretical, based on evidence (primary material such as viewing figures, rentals statistics, scripts, interviews, and a wealth of other documentary evidence, particularly as relates to censorship and the political landscape of the period). This allows for a base of comparison that can lead to hypothesis regarding the social forces that in some way shaped the Judges stories. In the forthcoming article I term this approach ‘intertextual hypothesis’, which is undertaken primarily as an exercise in intertextuality, but one in which biblical scholars may locate (and have located) a dimension of correspondence between some historical or social aspect of the Bible and that of the mainly American cinema. This is defined in distinction to the other main comparative approach to the Bible and film in recent years, which I term ‘intertextual conversation’.