

DEBORAH: JUDGE, PROPHETESS AND POET

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Unlike his great predecessor Moses, Joshua failed to appoint a national leader upon his death. This failure contributed greatly to the centrifugal forces that kept the various tribes apart, left to themselves to deal with the serious challenge of settling in a rather hostile environment. Joshua did not succeed in conquering all of Canaan. In fact, the lowlands, such as the Valley of Jezreel, with their fortified cities, had remained in the hands of the Canaanites, while the Israelite tribes had to content themselves with occupying the mountainous regions. Furthermore, invading nomadic tribes posed a serious threat to individual tribes, who on some occasions pulled together and, with the help of a charismatic leader, regained their freedom. Thus, Ehud fought the Moabites, Gideon the Midianites, Jephthah the Ammonites, and Samson the Philistines.

While Shiloh had been established as the national religious shrine, the pagan beliefs and practices in remaining Canaanite enclaves exerted a powerful influence upon the Israelite tribes, posing an additional strain on their survival. It is of interest to note that the religious awakening initiated by the "Judges" brought about national stirrings and fervor that motivated the tribes to fight the invading hordes as well as the still extant Canaanites. These episodes are described in the Book of Judges: *and they cried to the Lord, and He sent them a savior* (Jud. 2:9, 15; 4:3; 6:7; 10:10).

According to the chronology in the Book of Judges, Deborah was the fourth judge, after Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, approximately 160 years after the death of Joshua. There are two accounts of the dramatic events that led to a decisive victory over Sisera, warlord of the Canaanite city kings, in the Valley of Jezreel, where Deborah played a pivotal role. One account is narrative (Ch. 4), while the second (Ch. 5) is song. There are some differences between the two accounts, which will be detailed later on, but essentially they are alike.

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DEBORAH: THE NARRATION

The Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord . . . And the Lord surrendered them to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. His army commander was Sisera whose base was Haroshet-goim. The Israelites cried out to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots and he had oppressed Israel ruthlessly for twenty years (4:1-4).

Deborah, prophetess and judge, summoned Barak to muster 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and bring them to Mount Tabor. This is what she says in the name of the Lord: *And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you to Wadi Kishon, and I will deliver him into your hands (v. 6).* In response, Sisera ordered 900 iron chariots and all his troops to Wadi Kishon to meet Barak's forces. However, *the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic before Barak's onslaught (v. 15).* Sisera, fleeing on foot, came to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, from a family friendly toward the Canaanite King Jabin. After inviting the fleeing Sisera into her tent, Jael killed him. The narration ends: *The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin until they destroyed him (v. 25).*

THE SONG OF DEBORAH

In the judgment of critics, this triumphal ode belongs among the finest in world literature. Bewer's short presentation on the poetic excellence of the Song of Deborah is unsatisfactory in that it does not present the elements that turned this ode into a superb poetic masterpiece.¹ Pfeiffer is somewhat more specific:

The consummate literary art manifested therein is spontaneous and unconscious, and the genuine inspiration of the poet is evident. Her burning passion, patriotic as well as religious, fired her thoughts to white heat, while an instinctive literary sense simultaneously molded them into patterns of arresting beauty.²

But wherein lies the special charm and beauty of this song? Dan Vogel offers the following analysis of its poetic structure:³

Deborah laced her song with poetic techniques that enhanced the exultation of victory and gratitude to the Lord. She announced

poetic inspiration early: in the very third verse she pays tribute to Moses the poet of *Haazinu*, not only by recalling the first word of his poem but also by imagery and prosody. She, too, wishes to aggrandize the occasion of the poem by choice of images and by parallelism. She, too, invokes heaven and earth and indeed nature as witnesses (vv. 4-5). The victory she is immortalizing is no local affair, but a universe-shaking event.

Deborah employs parallelism throughout the song, incremental and chiasmatic. Parallelism is a powerful poetic tool for her, because it involves symmetry and control. Symmetry and control are images of certitude and confidence, reminding us of the role of the Lord in battle. As Moses had said in the *Song of the Sea*, God is also the God of war. She pushes this technique to its limit, embellishing it with repetition of word and sound. Throughout the song, one feels the exultant beat of the drum of repetition, sometimes within the hemistich of the parallelism, sometimes in the balancing phrase that follows (read aloud, from among many, vv. 5, 12, et cetera).

GENERAL STRUCTURE

In Chapter 5, the 31 verses of the Song can be divided into five separate scenes, each ending abruptly, yet molded into a whole. Though self-contained, each moves effortlessly into the next, and we can easily envision its conclusion. Through the magic of great poetry we discover much allusion in a few words, allowing wide scope for the imagination.

SCENE 1 – VV. 3-11

3. *I will sing, sing to the Lord, the **God of Israel**.*

With this introductory ode to the Lord, Whose Name is invoked in this first scene, the stage is set for the entire Song of Deborah.

4. *O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens dripped.*

5. *The mountains quaked before the Lord . . . **God of Israel***

The poetic power of the Song is already manifest in the introductory verses. We see poetic use of parallelism: the Lord of Seir-Sinai comes forth – as in the Song of the Red Sea – as a God of War.

God, Who at Sinai had made a Covenant with Israel, now comes to the rescue of His people who are in a desperate plight. The phrase *The heavens dripped*, followed by *Yea the clouds dripped water* in verse 4, anticipate the means by which the Lord will intercede in the forthcoming battle.

6. *In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, caravans ceased, and wayfarers went by roundabout paths.*

7. *Till you arose, O Deborah, arose a mother in Israel.*

8. *When they chose new gods, was there a fighter in the **gates**.
No shield nor spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel.*

The deplorable state of affairs was caused by Israel's defection from the Lord. Deliverance began when Deborah brought about a return of the tribes to the God of Israel, and stirred them under the military leadership of Barak to shake off the oppression of the Canaanite kings.

9. *My heart is with Israel's leaders, with the dedicated of the people, bless the Lord . . .*

11. *Then did the **people of the Lord** march down to the **gates**.*

Verse 11 demonstrates the poetic power of the Song. The term *The people of the Lord*, placed opposite *The God of Israel* in verse 5, suggests that there has been reconciliation between the Lord and Israel. *Gates* that symbolize despair and defeat in verse 7 now turn into a symbol of victory in verse 11. In the cities of Israel, the gateway was, like the Roman Forum, the public place where legal and political business was conducted (see: Gen. 23:10; Deut. 4:10). Here, the song uses the device of both repetition and contrast to the greatest effect. It needs to be stated that "devices" used by Deborah are an inspired and spontaneous outpouring of inner resources, resulting in her magnificent song.

SCENE 2 – VV. 12-18

12. *Awake, awake O Deborah, awake, awake, strike up the chant.
Awake, awake, strike up the chant, arise O Barak. Take your captives, O son of Abinoam.*

The second scene begins with this intermezzo, a call to begin in earnest the process of recruiting a confederacy of tribes to shake off the dominion of the Canaanites. The repetition of *arise, arose* (v. 7) and *arise* (v. 12) not only evidence the poetic activity of Deborah, but also allude to the fact that Barak, prompted by Deborah to lead the rebellion, did so on condition: *If you [Deborah] will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go* (4:8). In addition, the separate roles of Deborah and Barak are expressed in her *striking up the chant* and in his *taking your captives*.

13. *Then was a remnant made victor over the mighty. The Lord's people won a victory over the warriors.*

The English rendering of this verse can never capture the powerful alliteration of the Hebrew: *az y'rad sarid l'adirim am, hashem y'rad li ba-giborim*.

The response of the tribes is mixed. While praising the enthusiasm of the six tribes who joined Barak, Deborah reproaches Dan, Gilead, and Asher, who refused the call, and heaps bitter sarcasm on Reuben.

15. *Among the clans of Reuben were great decisions of heart.*

16. *Why, then, did you stay among the sheepfolds and listen as they pipe for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben were great searchings of the heart!*

18. *Zebulun [is] a people that mocked at death [and] Naphtali – on the open field.*

She singles out for special praise the two tribes first recruited for the rebellion. They also served as the shock-troops to meet the enemy. The reader will note the effective use of contrast, irony and sarcasm in these verses.

SCENE 3 –VV. 19-22

How would Homer have treated the ensuing battle? He would have written hexameter upon hexameter to describe every detail and introduced a variety of deities siding with one or the other opponent and singled out dozens of mighty champions engaged in duels. Here, in a mere four verses, Deborah gives all the credit for the victory to the Lord. Barak, his men, and his strategy are not mentioned at all.

19. *Then the kings came, they fought. The kings of Canaan fought at Taanach, by Megiddo's waters.*

20. *The stars fought from the heavens. From their courses they fought against Sisera.*

21. *The river Kishon swept them away, the raging torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on my soul with courage!*

Biblical poetry is characterized by parallelism. That is, the second part of a verse repeats the sense of the first. But even here Deborah deviates from routine by using what Burney⁴ calls climactic parallels wherein the second part completes a thought contained in the first. Verses 19 and 20 are fine examples of this technique. Her unusual brilliance of imagery transports us to the battlefield in only a few words, and gives free rein to our imagination as to how the battle unfolds. This is rising, incremental repetition, from earthly kings to the heavenly involvement.

Also, nature is poetically involved in this war! The kings of Canaan fight valiantly but are helpless when their iron chariots are bogged down in mud and their soldiers are swept away by the Kishon overflowing its banks.

22. *Then the horses' hoofs pounded as headlong galloped the steeds.*

The wild stamping of the horses' hoofs – the onomatopoea and repetition in beat of *da-ha-rot da-ha-rot* in the Hebrew – convey the panic and confusion in the enemy camp which led to the total destruction of Sisera's proud army. In this line, Deborah's achievement in conveying the headlong flight of the enemy comes through both in the original Hebrew and in the English translation.

SCENE 4 –VV. 23-27

The parallels and rhythms of Deborah's verses lead not merely to closures of the thought, but also to resounding climaxes. An excellent example is verse 23, a statement of anger within a song of victory. The verse begins with two lines of repetitive, but incremental parallels. Then she heightens the climax of the verse by chiasmatic parallelism:

23. *'Curse ye Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord.*

'Curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof,

Because they came not to the help of the Lord,

To the help of the Lord against the mighty'[JPS 1917]

Then without transition we are introduced to Jael, who is portrayed in sharp contrast to the inhabitants of Meroz who refused to join the Israelite coalition.

24. *Most blessed of women be Jael . . . most blessed of women in tents.*

25. *He asked for water, she offered milk. In a princely bowl she brought him curds,*

We are informed that "he" is the mighty Sisera, who in flight seeks the protection of the Kenite woman. The next two verses present in detail his slaying by Jael.

26. *Her hand reached for the tent pin, her right for the workmen's hammer.*

27. *She struck Sisera, crushed his head. Smashed and pierced his temple.*

The dynamism of quick and brutal action finds expression through the use of five powerful verbs: she *reached, struck, crushed, smashed, pierced*.

SCENE 5 –VV. 28-30

Any ordinary song would end with the death of the antagonist, but not the Song of Deborah. The few additional verses reach the highest levels of poetic artistry. In the court of Sisera women await anxiously his victorious return.

28. *Through the window peered Sisera's mother. Behind the lattice she whined. 'Why is his chariot so long in waiting. Why so late the clatter of his wheels?'*

It could be rightfully asked: Why his mother? Does he not have a wife or wives who pine for his safe return? A possible answer is that in verse 7 Deborah had proclaimed herself *a mother in Israel*, who experienced the regained freedom of her people after their victory, while in contradistinction, Sisera's mother will see the death of her son and the defeat of his people.

29. *The wisest of her ladies gives answer; She, too, replies to herself.*

In contrast to the deep concern of a mother for her son, the "wisest" of her ladies-in-waiting provides her with a possible answer as to why he has not returned as yet.

30. *'They must be dividing the spoil they have found, a damsel or two for each man. Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, spoil of embroidered cloths . . . !'*

One can hear the idle chatter of the ladies around her and note the subtle irony in referring to her as the *wisest*. Unfortunately, the charm and the play on words so vivid in the original Hebrew cannot be caught in the translation. First, the derogatory "*raham* [womb]" for damsel, reminds one of the coarse term used for a cheap woman. Then the clever use and repetition of four key terms: *shallal* [spoil], *raham* [damsel], *tzeva* [dyed cloths], and *rikma* [embroidered cloths], and the astonishing alliterations such as: *yimtz'u*, *tzevaim*, *tzeva*, *l'tzavare* in verse 30 point to poetic genius.

Appropriately this great poem ends in the triumphal:

31. *So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord, but may His friends be as the sun rising in might.*

Thus ends this great poem which unites the military feats of man and women with the mysterious power of the Divine.

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHAPTERS 4 AND 5

While the Book of Judges is quite explicit in its description of the Divinely inspired strategy that Gideon used to defeat the Midianites, nothing is said about Barak's military exploits that led to the decisive victory over Sisera's mighty army. Both the narrative and poetic accounts speak of God's intervention in the battle and ascribe the victory to Him. However, there is a difference. The narration speaks of panic caused by the Lord which resulted from an *onslaught* by Barak's forces. Deborah's Song speaks of a sudden, miraculous rainfall that resulted in a torrent of water from the river Kishon which swept away Sisera's army. It is not stated but is strongly hinted that the overflowing river caused the iron chariots to be mired in mud, and thus made their soldiers easy targets. Here the victory is all ascribed to the Lord.

Yechezkel Kaufmann⁵ adopts the version of the narration, dismissing the "miracle" of heavy rain in Israel during the dry season. Yet there have been reports of such rainfalls. I myself witnessed such a rare event while in Egypt in May 1945, an American soldier on leave, waiting for a plane ride to Israel. Another difference in both versions is the number of tribes engaged in this battle. The narration mentions Naftali and Zebulun, while the Song of

Deborah adds the tribes of Manasseh, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Issachar. Kaufmann explains this discrepancy by insisting that in this particular campaign only two tribes participated, while in subsequent wars against the confederacy of Canaanite kings the additional four joined Barak's forces.

Yehuda Elitzur⁶ suggests another scenario. The two tribes of Naftali and Zebulun served as the attacking force as expressed in the Song : *Zebulun is a people that jeopardized their lives unto death, and Naftali, upon the high places of the field* (5:18). The other four tribes were given the important task of preventing the powerful kings of Megiddo, Taanach, and En-ganim (today's Jenin) from joining the battle in full force.

The opinion of James Fleming⁷ may be of relevance:

Chapter 4 gives us a narration in prose containing excellent historical material, but it is far surpassed by chapter 5, the famous Song of Deborah, which was composed to celebrate the victory of Israel over their foes. It is, therefore, a contemporary document, and the picture of the situation which it gives can be relied on absolutely!

DEBORAH: PERSONALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE

In Chapter 4 we are informed: *Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions* (4:4-5). She is thus introduced as a prophetess and judge. Now the honorific title of prophet was given to three women in the Bible: Miriam, Deborah and Hulda. This title was conferred upon them in the belief that their actions were Divinely inspired.

Indeed, we have before us a most remarkable personality: as a woman, recognized by the Israelites as a judge, sitting under a palm tree to adjudicate disputes; and as a charismatic Judge, a leader of men, stirring the Israelites to open revolt against a powerful confederation of Canaanite kings that was gaining dominance over adjacent Israelite tribes. As if that were not enough, the Tanakh preserved her immortal victory song, after the decisive defeat of Sisera, military commander of the confederation.

NOTES

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1. Julius A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) p. 8.
2. Robert Henry Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1948) p. 326.
3. Prof. Dan Vogel is the Associate Editor of the *Jewish Bible Quarterly*.
4. S.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 2nd ed, (London, 1920) pp. 164-171.
5. Yechezkel Kaufmann, *Sefer Shoftim* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1962).
6. Yehuda Elitzur, *Sefer Shoftim, Mefurash Biydei Yehuda Elitzur* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976) p. 58.
7. James Fleming, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1955) p. 8.