

THE SONG OF DEBORAH:
POETRY IN DIALECT

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I. Summary

Like an ancient tell waiting for the archaeologist to uncover its secrets, the war ballad buried beneath the enigmata of Judges 5 has long waited for someone to recover its story-line and confirm the integrity of its text. In this study, I have participated in a literary “excavation” to facilitate the recovery process, sometimes reading the poem independently of exegetical tradition as though it had just been excavated. Coogan’s hypothesis (1978: 144), which appeared about a decade after I started working on the poem, has proven to be helpful:

The unprovable hypothesis on which this study rests is that at some point in the history of the transmission of the Song of Deborah someone made sense of it as a poem. Copyists, redactors and translators may have altered what struck them as obscure or theologically dangerous, but even after three millennia, Judges 5:2–30 exhibits a carefully constructed unity.

My hypothesis differed from his only by including the assumption that someone would again make sense out of the poem. Hopefully, the translation and interpretations offered in this study, supplemented by the work of others who have argued for the literary integrity of the Song of Deborah, have demonstrated the viability of Coogan’s hypothesis and my assumption.

The prevailing critical views, stated by Dentan in a note in the RSV (1965: 298) that, “The Hebrew text is, unfortunately, so corrupt in some places as to be almost unintelligible,” and by Hoppe in a note in the NRSV (1991: 306), “The Song of Deborah may be the oldest part of the Hebrew Bible; it is also one of the most obscure,” can no longer be sustained.

Actually, the consonantal MT is, in one sense of the word, almost without textual corruption. It is fully intelligible once the reader (a) is sensitive to the use of dialect and loanwords and, consequently, (b) employs a larger lexicon than the classical Hebrew one traditionally used, (c) is alert to the misdivision of words, (d) recognizes an inconsistent use of vowel letters by the scribes, and (e) is prepared to transpose several words and verses.

My reconstruction and translation requires only five emendations (כ to נ twice, and once each for נ to כ, ט to ת, and ט to ה or כ), the interchange of ו and ו four times, the addition of a ו and a final ׀, and the deletion of one final ׀ and a ו conjunction. Normative spelling required the addition of but fifteen vowel letters and the deletion of only four. These changes in the 1,485 letters of 5:1–31 demonstrate the need for only minimal emendation. Although the lack of a space between some words, like the absence of anticipated vowel letters, could be labeled “textual corruption,” such omissions do not impugn the integrity of the consonantal MT, even though they created problems for readers over the years. The redivision of twenty words was required. Deciding where the words had been misdivided in this battle ballad proved to be the major task.

Appeal to the versions, traditional exegesis, and current lexica of Biblical Hebrew provided only limited help in understanding the more enigmatic lines. Contrary to the opinion of Globe (1974b: 496) that “the vocabulary of Judges 5 is simpler” than that of the Song of Miriam or of the Lamentation of David, the poet had a rich vocabulary, larger than many previous translators have recognized. Indeed, Burney’s observation (1918: 171) remains pertinent:

In considering the language of the Song [of Deborah], one broad general principle has first to be laid down; viz., that, since Hebrew literature, as known to us from the O. T., is extremely exiguous, the Hebrew vocabulary which we possess doubtless represents only a somewhat limited part of the vocabulary which must have been in regular, if not in common, use in the written and spoken language.

I have not emended the MT to accommodate the lexica. Once it was realized that the poet had used a variety of dialectal options, the lexicon for the song was enlarged in an effort to match that of the poet (see below the “Supplemental Lexicon for The Song of Deborah”).

The proposals of other scholars have been weighed carefully. Translations or exegetical solutions inappropriate for a war ballad turned out to be surprisingly unnecessary. Some of them appeared meaningful in an isolated colon, but for understanding the poem as a complete and coherent literary unit they were less than helpful or persuasive.

I. SUPPLEMENTARY LEXICON FOR
THE SONG OF DEBORAH

(5:8)	“moreover”	אם
(5:29)	“soothsayer”	אמר
(5:23)	“to panic”	ארר
(5:1)	“to march”	אשר
(3:31)	“plowshare”	את
(5:27)	“motionless”	באש
(3:31)	“to oversee”	בקר
(5:17)	“to attack” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	גור
(5:4)	“abundantly” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	גם
(5:4)	“noisily” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	גם
(5:12)	“to pursue”	דבר
(5:22)	“a chariot”	דהרות
(5:21)	“to overtake” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	דרך
(5:6)	“caravaneers”	הלכי נתיבות
(5:22)	“to retreat, to overflow”	הלם/המל
(5:3)	“to fight”	זמר
(5:24)	“guild” (BDB, <i>sub voce</i>)	חבר
(5:6)	“to flee from battle, to refuse to assist”	חדל
(5:8)	“a recruit”	חדש
(5:29)	“a clairvoyant”	חכמה
(5:11)	“to hurry”	הצין
(5:12)	“to make ready”	ישר
(5:10)	“a mule”	כדין
(5:15)	“to conceal”	כון
(5:27)	“to drink”	כרע
(5:27)	“to be powerless”	כרע
(5:23)	“to overpower”	לאה
(5:9)	“to respond”	לבה
(5:13)	“to accompany” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	לוה
(5:16)	“to encircle”	למה
(5:17)	“behold, indeed”	למה
(5:11)	“a mountain pass”	משאב
(5:16)	“a ravine”	משפתים
(5:2, 9)	“to summon” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	נדב

(5:21)	“to overflow”	נפש
(5:16)	“a straggler” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	עדר
(5:21)	“to seek refuge” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	עוז
(5:6)	“to slay covertly”	עול
(5:18)	“to swim (underwater)”	עום
(5:12)	“an army, numerous people”	עור
(5:12)	“to rout”	עור
(5:23)	“a warrior”	עזרת
(5:29)	“to divine” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	ענן
(5:22)	“embankment” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	עקב
(3:31)	“marauders” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	פלשת
(5:7,11)	“a warrior” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	פרזון
(5:2)	“to call for heroism”	פרע
(5:2)	“heroine”	פרעת
(5:30)	“to ford a stream”	צאי
(5:10)	“small, young”	צחר
(5:21)	“to surge forward”	קדם
(5:24)	“song”	קין
(5:23)	“doomed (to die)”	רזא
(5:23)	“cloudburst” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	רים
(5:11)	“a storm” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	שער
(5:16)	“to look intently”	שרק
(5:17)	“to shatter” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	שבב
(5:18)	“to attack” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	שדד
(5:12)	“to proceed”	שור
(5:10)	“to hasten” (Klein, <i>sub voce</i>)	שיח
(5:3)	“to attack” (BDB, <i>sub voce</i> II)	שור / שיר
(5:15)	“to defeat”	שכר
(5:5)	“to strengthen” (BDB, <i>sub voce</i>)	שרר
(5:5)	“to soak (with rain)”	שרר
(5:14)	“to hasten”	שרש
(3:31)	“to despoil”	שש / שש
(5:28)	“emptiness”	תיבב

Out of the 384 total words in the ballad as reconstructed above, 69 words were found which previously went unrecognized as part of this poet's lexical repertoire, and some of these have different definitions than traditionally understood, though Klein (1987, *sub voce*) cited 17 of the 69.

Although the defeat of Sisera occurred along the Wadi Kishon, words associated with נחל went unrecognized: משפתים "ravine," משאב "mountain pass, עקב "bank," and צא "to ford a stream." Tradition knew that a *flooded* wadi was involved, but the language of flooding was lost: דרך "to overtake," המל "to overflow," נפש "to overflow," and קדם "to surge forward." Storm rains were involved but translators failed to recognize גם "abundant (water)," רים "cloudbursts," שער "storm," and שרר "to soak (with rain)." The ballad was about fighting charioteers, but most critics missed דהרות "chariots," and the language of war, including: ארר "to panic," גור "to attack," דבר "to pursue," הלם "to retreat," חדל "to flee from battle, to refuse to assist," כון "to conceal," לאה "to overpower," למה "to encircle," עדר "a straggler," עוז "to seek refuge," עור "an army, troops," עור "to rout," פרוון "warrior," שכר "to defeat" and שש/שש "to plunder." Especially noteworthy are זמר II "to fight" and שיר II "to attack," which were consistently misread as זמר I "to make music" and שיר I "to sing."

Since זמר and שיר in Judges 5 are *not* musical terms but words of combat, it appears that Deborah never *sang*, either as soloist or in a duet with Barak. Instead, in what is now a poetic exhortation, she summoned Barak to fight against Sisera. Her exhortation begins and ends with the imperative ברכו יהוה and contains some language of the cult. But this does not require a *cultic* interpretation of Sisera's assassination or of the battle.

The absence of glosses on the poem's archaic and rare words suggests that the Song of Deborah was not subjected to repeated pre-Masoretic editorial activity like the prose account in Judges 4. Nevertheless, evidence of Deuteronomic editorial activity is reflected in the bifurcation of the three-verse Shamgar tradition. Recognition of this editorial reworking permits the reconstruction of the poem into eight balanced sections (see page 240, "The Structure of the Song of Deborah"). The natural divisions of the poem correspond to the transitions and chronological sequence typical of an ancient war ballad.

The structure of the poem is characterized by

- (1) a chiasmic pattern with reference to the number of cola in paired sections I–II and VII–VIII;
- (2) a balanced number of syllables in sections I and VIII;
- (3) a near balance of accent units and/or words in the paired sections I–II, III–IV, V–VI, and VII–VIII.

This analysis of the structure differs from those proposed by Boling (1975: 101–105), Stuart (1976: 121–127), and Coogan (1978: 157–158). Stuart, for example, omitted verses 5:1 and 31, deleted 102 consonants plus all MT vowel letters, and added 19 consonants. (The analyses offered by these three scholars are summarized in the chart on page 241, “Alternative Structures.”)

Coogan’s analysis is impressive with its chiasmic balance in the number of cola and syllables in the five sections of the poem (as he divided it). Webb (1987: 139–144), with slight modification, adopted Coogan’s analysis. But by following exegetical tradition, neither Coogan nor Webb saw that Deborah’s exhortation was delineated by the *incipit* and *inclusio* ברכו יהוה. Thus, 5:9 should be part of stanza I, which changes the neat chiasmic pattern of the cola from 22–13–16–13–22 to an irregular 25–10–16–13–22.

One would expect a battle ballad to be as coherent in content as it is cohesive in structure. But Coogan’s cohesive structure is not balanced by a logically coherent narrative. His translation of the poem (see the Appendix) is marked by abrupt transitions from stanza to stanza, and a number of traditional but awkward translations survive even within his stanzas.

Similarly, the translations of Boling and Stuart (also in the Appendix) can be faulted on two accounts unrelated to the issue of textual emendation. First, from 5:2–5:18, the poem’s narrative is illogical and incoherent in contrast to 5:19–5:30, where the story flows logically and easily. Second, the poem’s structure, in spite of efforts to bring it into conformity with acceptable metrical patterns, is imbalanced and incohesive in terms of syllable count and/or word count.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SONG OF DEBORAH

S T A N Z A	V E R S E S	C O N T E N T	C O L A	W O R D S	A C C E N T S	S Y L L A B L E S
I	3:31 5:6-7 5:1-2B	DESPAIR AMONG THE ISRAELITES	9	55	49	135
II	5:2C-5	<i>DEBORAH'S INVITATION TO ISRAEL</i>	8	56 + 4	55 + 4	148
III	5:10-13	HUMAN RESPONSE & MUSTER	6	48	44	112
IV	5:14-16	STRATEGY & DEPLOYMENT	7	45	41	118
V	5:17-29	ATTACK & COUNTER- ATTACK	5	39	34	89
VI	5:20-23	DIVINE RESPONSE & VICTORY	6	42	40	102
VII	5:24-27	<i>Yael's INVITATION TO SISERA</i>	8	44	44	112
VIII	5:28-31	DESPAIR AMONG THE CANAANITES	10	51	46	134

ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES*

BOLING 1975			COOGAN 1978			
P A R T	V E R S E S	S Y L L A B L E S	S T A N Z A	V E R S E S	C O L A	S Y L L A B L E S
EXCLUDE 5:1			EXCLUDE 5:1			
I	2-9	233	I	2-8	22	209
II	10-13	107	II	9-13	13	128
III	14-16	114	III	14-18	16	168
IV	17-20	118	IV	19-23	13	124
V	21-22	37				
VI	23	36				
VII	24-27	108	V	24-30	22	211

*STUART (1976) DIVIDE THE POEM INTO FOUR PARTS WITH THE WORD COUNT FOR THE PARTS BEING 131, 59, 54, AND 40, RESPECTIVELY.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In surveying the many complex issues in traditio-historical and form-critical studies on holy war, Jones (1975: 651–653) outlined the formal features of the holy-war schematization imposed more or less by the pre-Deuteronomic or the Deuteronomic editors on earlier holy-war traditions. The eight features included

- (1) a statement about oppression and distress in Israel;
- (2) the rise of a savior figure to deliver Israel;
- (3) the immediate summons of the Israelites to war;
- (4) the subsequent enthusiastic response of the people;
- (5) the muster and deployment of the troops for battle;
- (6) a brief account of the battle;
- (7) the enemy's panic, attributed to Yahweh;
- (8) a victory statement, accrediting Yahweh's intervention as the primary reason for victory.

Since this schematization is now evident in Judges 5, the origin of this framework needs to be reviewed. Since the Deuteronomic editors reworked only the Shamgar component of the original ballad, the Song of Deborah may have been the immediate, if not the ultimate, source of the schematization of the holy-war story. Since this schematization is evidenced long before the Deuteronomic redactors appeared on the scene, their alleged role in imposing this framework on other war narratives is now open to question. The eightfold framework could have been introduced prior to the Deuteronomic redactors, since it was available from the time of the original composition of the Song of Deborah.

The historical accuracy of most events depicted in the poem has been called into question in several studies. For example, Ackroyd (1952: 160–162) appealed to Carrington's study on King Alfred the Great to demonstrate how fact and fiction are easily mixed in popular traditions. Ackroyd suggested that the Song of Deborah was a popular piece of poetry and included details transferred from other traditions. Similarly, Coogan (1978: 143–144) and Soggin (1981c: 99) appealed to Bowra's study (1930) of heroic poetry, illustrated by *The Song of Roland*, to demonstrate that heroic poetry is a poor substitute for history. Halpern (1988: 96), addressing the issue of historical accuracy of the prose stories of Ehud and Deborah (Ju 3–4), stated,

However substantial the difference between the sources in Judges 3 and Judges 4, there is one important point of similarity. In neither case is the chief source historiography. Neither is archival. Yet in each case the written version is a historical one. . . . The accuracy of the historian's representations can with profit be questioned. So can his interpretation of his source. The gists of the reports, however, their logic, their structural coherence, are molded by a concern to reconstruct the past, by antiquarian interest.

While it is true that the author of the Song of Deborah, like the "historian" of Judges 4, was not an eyewitness to the events in Sisera's court or Yael's tent—unless the poet was Yael herself—the author seemed knowledgeable about an Israelite defeat of a Canaanite coalition. The poet's use of formulaic material makes for only tenuous conclusions on historical details, but the poem provides more historical information than has been recognized to date because only "impressionistic" translations were available.

The Israelite attack against Sisera's coalition apparently commenced with the destruction of Abu Hawam during the first decade of the twelfth century B.C.E. Although this destruction has been commonly attributed to the Philistines, it was more likely a work of Israelites whose strategy was to force the Canaanites to counterattack along the Wadi Kishon. The defeat of Sisera seems to have prompted Ramesses III to return to Galilee where he subdued the *q(⊖)štbrt*, which can be interpreted as "the troops of Teborah/Deborah."

The poet's frequent appeal to various aspects of caravaneering is of historical socio-political significance. Conjecture on Israel's settlement in Canaan needs to address the caravan elements in the poem. Debate limited to conquest versus nomadic infiltration or a peasants' rebellion can be faulted for overlooking a very reliable tradition about early Israel's caravaneering activities.²⁶²

²⁶² Note Gottwald's (1979: 506) assertion that "The generations of biblical interpreters who have believed they saw Israelite caravans in Judges 5:6 were unaccountably oblivious of the cagoric premonarchic Israelite rejection of economics and ideology of state-monopolized trade or commercial speculation by professional merchants." He insisted that the caravaneers mentioned were Canaanite caravaneers who were raided by the Israelites. See Nicholson's (1986: 16–18, 32) and Schloen's (1993:23) brief critiques of Gottwald's use of the Song of Deborah. Note Stager's study (1988) on the ecology and the social history of early Israel in light of the Song of Deborah. He did not even mention caravaneering, though on the basis of one word, יָנַר, there is extended discussion on Dan's alleged maritime activity, and on the basis of עֲדָרִים there is a

Only Schloen (1993) has given serious attention to this evidence and has developed a rather convincing “caravan hypothesis” with reference to early Israel.

Another historically significant element, relevant to the issue of the Israelite amphictyony²⁶³ and the debate over dating “holy-war theory,” is the way in which Deborah’s call for a militia was expressed in cultic language. Her summons included

- (a) the formulaic use of בָּרַכְנוּ יְהוָה as the introduction and conclusion to the summons (which may reflect an already established cultic tradition which prompted the poet to use this formula as an *incipit* and *inclusio*), like the הִלְלוּ יְהוָה in Psalms 146–150;
- (b) an affirmation of allegiance to Yahweh, not to the tribes of Israel;
- (c) the declaration that she would fight for Yahweh, rather than an affirmation that she would fight for Israel;
- (d) a recital of Yahweh’s earlier action on behalf of Israel in Trans-Jordan, expressed in the language of theophany;
- (e) a promise of Yahweh’s intervention and support for the militia;
- (f) the use of עַם יְהוָה “the militia of Yahweh” rather than עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל “the militia of Israel.”

The debate over which came first, “holy-war theory” or “the practice of Yahweh war,” may never be satisfactorily resolved since the Song of Deborah, the oldest full account of such a Yahweh war, has them already inseparably bound. Contrary to Crenshaw’s statement (1986: 122), “The poem is therefore an important witness to the absence of any strong sense of a tribal league that required concerted action by all members of the coalition,” the fact that the call to arms was restricted to cultic

discussion about nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists. J. Gray (1988: 427, 445, and 453) gave three one-sentence statements on Zebulun’s and Issachar’s being porters and hirelings in the (*habiru*) transport business (and Machir got one sentence on page 443), but he bases this point on Deut 33:19, rather than on the multiple caravan motifs in Judges 4–5 (which he used primarily to provide the tribal names of the sacral community). See above, note 210.

²⁶³ See Chambers (1983: 39–59).

motifs *adds* support to the hypothesis that an amphictyonic type of relationship was operative at the time among the *eleven* participants: Asher, Benjamin, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Gilead (on alert), Issachar, Machir, Naphtali, Reuben, and Zebulon, with Judah, Levi, and Simeon being conspicuous by their absence—unless de Moor is correct in his reading of 5:13a, where he recovered *Yôdah* (= Judah) and Levi (see pages 162–163).

Since *ten tribes* were mentioned as *combatants* (plus Gilead's being "on alert"), Ishida's (1973: 523–524) proposal to make Israel just a six-tribe league is unlikely. The Midrashic account in Ju 4:10, that only Zebulon and Naphtali were combatants, cannot be regarded as a historically more accurate account than that of Judges 5. In Judges 4, which gives evidence of editorial reworking, the multi-tribe campaign against Sisera was seemingly reduced by Judean editors to a two-tribe campaign to minimize Judah's non-participation.²⁶⁴ (Even if Judah [*Yôdah*] and Levi were in the original poem, as de Moor proposed, they were not recognized by the early Judean editors.) The brevity of the battle account in Ju 4:10, 13–15, in contrast to the multifront campaign depicted in Ju 5:14–23, reflects a similar reduction in the scope of a battle which did not enhance Judah's reputation.²⁶⁵

Although appearing to be a prose parallel account to the Song of Deborah, Ju 4:1–22 is only a *midrash* on the poem. Since it is haggadic²⁶⁶ and it reflects, according to Na'aman (1990: 426–434), the limitations of an author or redactor who was not acquainted with the geography of northern Israel, the poem in

²⁶⁴ Note Kaufmann's opinion (1960: 257), "Judah is not mentioned in the song, presumably, because by then it had become subject to the Philistines." This requires a late date for the battle, conflicting with Joshua 11. Compare Na'aman 1990: 426–434. A textual base for selecting Zebulon and Naphtali could have come from a misplaced and misread modifying clause after *הר* *תבור* in 4:6b, giving the location of Tabor as *ומבין זבולון* (*scriptio defectiva*). Instead of reading this as *ומבין זבולון*, the scribes read the words as *ומבני נפתלי ובני זבולון* and transposed them to 4:6c (and then later added them to 4:10 as *ואת זבולון ואת נפתלי*).

²⁶⁵ See note 104, where the *Midrash* about Lappidoth makes Deborah the light of *Judah* and *Jerusalem* at the expense of the twelve [*sic*] tribes of Israel.

²⁶⁶ See Sandmel (1961: 105–122) for a discussion on the way haggadic material was added to older traditions in the development of biblical texts.

Judges 5 remains the primary source for details about Israel's defeat of Sisera's Canaanite coalition.

Critical opinion that the poem is a composite of independent epic and psalmic units is now no longer compelling. Ackroyd (1952: 160–162) argued that eyewitness accounts of the battle were modified by “poetic glorification of the victors” and these accounts were later modified when the events could no longer be reconstructed. The end result is a poem “which gives no detailed account of the battle but impressions of the circumstances and events which . . . had come to appear significant.”²⁶⁷

To the contrary, the poet could have been a participant in the battle against Sisera (circa 1190 B.C.E.) since the poem may have been composed sometime between the demise of Egyptian hegemony in Palestine after the death of Ramesses III and Gideon's defeat of the Amalekites, who had so gained control of the hill country of Ephraim that the poet referred to that area by the name Amalek. (If so, the poet was probably not an Ephraimite.)

The translation and interpretation offered in this study calls for the rehabilitation of Shamgar ben-Anat as a true Israelite hero, unencumbered by doubts about his patronym or his alleged loyalties to the goddess Anat. In like manner, Dan and Asher, who have been charged in exegetical tradition with cowardice for not participating in the fight against Sisera, have been rehabilitated. The poet of Judges 5, in fact, praised these two tribes for daring assaults which forced Sisera's coalition to fight at a time and place of Israelite choosing.

In contrast to Shamgar, Dan, and Asher, “husband” Lappidoth has not fared well in the interpretation presented above. He simply ceased to be, having been transformed into an honorific epithet for Deborah, “the woman of light.” Barak fared better, but he was demoted, so to speak. He is now recognized as having been just a caravan leader—not a military figure—who only reluctantly agreed to become a commanding officer, and apparently only for this single campaign.

Although Deborah and Yael have not suffered in tradition the same marginalization as did Asher, Dan, and Shamgar, their prestige and power as celebrated in the Song of Deborah have not

²⁶⁷ Lindars (1995: 215) followed this same line of reasoning and argued that the poem was composed sometime in the early monarchy.

been fully appreciated. Although they received recognition as the “Mother in Israel” and the “most blessed of tent-women, the “Lady Governor” and the “Pre-eminent One” have frequently been denied equal recognition with Barak (see Feldman 1986: 122–126). In Heb 11:32, Barak is praised along with Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah, but Deborah and Yael go unmentioned. Unlike the Talmud, which lists Deborah among the judges, the *Machsor Vitry* (a prayer-book compiled in the eleventh century C.E. by Simḥah ben Samuel) lists Barak as a judge along with Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Gideon, and Abimelek (see Hurwitz, 1923: 463), thus displacing Deborah and discounting Ju 4:4, **היא שפטה את ישראל בעת ההיא** “she judged Israel at that time.”

Although some commentators have assumed the poet was a male (Buber [1950: 8] wrote of the **משורר שירת דבורה**, using the masculine noun for the poet and a feminine noun for the poem), either Deborah or Yael could have been the poetess who penned Judges 5. G. A. Smith’s (1912: 30) statement is still relevant when considering either woman to be the poet.

First, in Arabia before the times of Islam, women as well as men were poets Women were frequently spectators of the tribal battles, and since they were more free than the fighters to see the whole action and more able to award praise and blame, it does not surprise us to find from women some of the most vivid ballads of war. This also appears in the early poetry of Israel.

Deborah’s being the author has the support of tradition. Aside from the commentators who have argued for composite sources or a late date, tradition has generally taken for granted that Deborah composed the song that tells her story. This tradition is based on two widely held assumptions: first, that **שיר** and **זמר** used in the poem mean “to sing” (and in my opinion this assumption is now out of tune with the text); and second, that Deborah composed what she sang, as Yee (1993: 111) typically noted, “Judges 5 is Deborah’s own victory song over the Canaanites.” It certainly remains possible that she composed the poem, even if she did not sing it above the battle din. One who was esteemed as the “Mother in Israel,” a prophetess, and a judge could well have had the language skills to compose fine poetry.

But a case can be made for a Kenite origin and possibly Yael’s being the poet. 1 Chron 2:55 traces the **משפחות ספרים** “families of scribes” through the Rechabites to the Kenites of Hammath in Naphtali (Josh 19:32–38). These literate Kenites

worked with words rather than with weapons, with metaphors instead of metals. Surely, some were poets. As a Kenite, Yael could have been as gifted with pen and parchment as she was with peg and hammer.

In establishing the meaning of many of the problematic lines in Ju 3:31 and 4:23–5:31, appeal has been made to Arabic cognates —much as did the rabbis who learned the meaning of rare words from Arabs and servant women (see note 15). The large number of words with an “Arabic” tenor favor a Kenite connection. Yael would have spoken a dialect of the desert. If it was “Hebrew,” it would have been a dialect clearly different from the Hebrew spoken in Ephraim or in Judah. The author’s “Kenite” dialect,²⁶⁸ unrecognized up to this time, could well account for the problems in understanding the Song of Deborah over the last three millennia. Hebrew which did not conform to the Judean and Samaritan dialects was assumed to be corrupt and/or illogical, requiring all kinds of scribal reconstructions (as evidenced in the myriad of variants in the LXX and the versions) and by the endless scholarly emendations of the MT (as surveyed in this and other studies). The reluctance of some Hebraists “to fish” in the Arabic lexicon (see note 126) has kept many from catching the text’s meaning.

²⁶⁸ Note Crenshaw’s (1986: 121) recognition that Ps 68, Hab 3, and Ju 5 all reflect a “dialect” of Hebrew. Young (1992: 372) noted that the language of Ju 5 was a northern Hebrew dialect, reflecting in part the view of G. A. Smith (1912: 83–84) who earlier argued the poem was in a northern dialect, “flavored with Aramaic” and with “a number of words used in the same sense as in Arabic.” On the Arabic influence, note G. R. Driver’s statement quoted above, pages 133–134. Other problematic dialectal texts which have been clarified by Arabic cognates are the “Words of Agur” in Prov 30:1–9 and the “Words of Lemuel” in Prov 31:1–9. A similar “Kenite” flavor can be detected in the fragment of the Book of the Wars of Yahweh in Num 21:14–15 with its פ"ו noun “Waheb,” the Arabic/Aramaic אָהַב “to come” and שָׂדֵה / שָׂדֵה / שָׂדֵה “to water, to moisten, to make (water) to rush forth,” and سوغ / شِيع “to enter easily.”

Whether or not the Kenite origin of the בְּלַחְמוֹת יְהוָה סֵפֶר proves to be valid, a reappraisal of the “Kenite hypothesis,” which traces the origin of Yahwism back to the Kenites, is in order. For bibliography and a summary discussion of this hypothesis, see Rowley 1950b: 149–163; 1957: 1–27; Walker 1958: 262–265; Mazar 1965: 297–303; de Vaux 1969: 28–32; Parke-Taylor 1975: 20–31; Mettinger 1990: 406–409; Halpern 1992: 20–21; and especially Schloen 1993: 30–38. Note also J. Gray’s recognition (1988: 424, 443) that the “sacral community” probably consisted of “the Rachel group and Qenite, Qenizite and Yerahmeelite confederates.”

Kenite influence, rather than Hittite, is more evident in the Song of Deborah.²⁶⁹ Aside from Deborah's name and possibly her title as "Mother," Hittite influence was quite limited. McMahon's (1991: 32) following statement is helpful in identifying it.

There is however a certain tendency in many cult texts to associate the [Hittite] Tutelary Deity with the Sun-god(dess) and the Storm-god as a special group of three, either as the first three in a longer list of deities or as a discrete group.

This grouping of the Hittite "big three" may be reflected in the appearance of three heavenly forces in Judges 5: Yahweh as the tutelary deity, the sun (= the Sun-god/Sun-goddess), and the stars (as the heavenly warriors = the storm gods).

However, Kenite influence is more apparent and the poem may contain more fact than fiction, for Yael, although not an eyewitness of the battle along the Wadi Kishon (verses 17–23), certainly knew well what transpired in her tent (which received equal attention in verses 24–30). Her clan's smithing services could have provided sufficient contact with Sisera's residence that she was knowledgeable about the inner workings of his court. Moreover, Kenite Yahwism could easily account for Yael's assassinating Sisera—she sided with fellow Yahwists!²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Crenshaw's (1986: 121) assertion that the Song of Deborah "rebuked the Kenites" is puzzling. The assertion of 4:21, *כִּי שְׁלוֹם בֵּין יִבִּין מִלֶּךְ הַצּוּר וּבֵין בֵּית הַחֶבֶר הַקִּינִי* is a neutral statement of the obvious: smiths of iron or silver (קיניי) who made/repared weapons and chariots, and/or (re)fashioned silver spoils, must have gotten along well with the military aristocracy who employed them. The Kenites, as (silver) smiths, ought not to be totally dissociated from the silver mentioned in 5:19 and the mention of the goblet in 5:25.

²⁷⁰ Bos (1988: 55) concluded, "Yael therefore makes her decision [to slay Sisera] in opposition to her clan." To the contrary, she did what any Kenite may well have done in a "Yahweh war." This point was also missed by Matthews (1991: 16, 19) who (reviving A. M. Stuart's [1887: 308–312] notion that "the true reason [for Sisera's death] is probably to be sought in Sisera's entering the tent at all") argued,

Sisera places himself at risk . . . by violating the hospitality code . . . Sisera was unknowingly a dead man from the moment he entered the area of Jael's tent and accepted her improper offer of hospitality. He had systematically violated every covenant of the code governing the actions of host and guests.

Although the Israelites may have been only distant relatives, they had become deeply united by religion, so much so that some Kenites became Israelite scribes (as noted above, page 247) and even builders of Jerusalem's gates in the post-exilic period.²⁷¹ It may well have been Kenite scribes who were responsible for incorporating their poem *from* Yael (or, at least, their poem *about* Yael) into Israel's *Retterbuch*.

Although Gottwald (1985: 254) noted that Judges 4 and 5 "are shaped by interests very different from historical reportage . . . [and] the story cannot be trusted to throw direct light on the actual circumstances of the battle as a whole," there is no reason to insist that the poem had to be written by someone other than an eyewitness or participant along the Kishon or in Yael's quarters.

Although the poem may be non-historiographic, historical details in the poem are as abundant as are its literary motifs. But the one assured tradition—that Judges 5 was the "Song of Deborah"—could be mistaken since this "Yahweh war" ballad could just as well be the "Song of Yael" or a poem composed by some other Kenite. Either way, the poem provides us with an almost perfect text in pre-monarchic Hebrew which retains elements of a Kenite dialectic, as well as foreign words put on the lips of non-Israelites.

Now that the Song of Deborah can be clearly understood—without major emendations—as a literarily cohesive poem, the heroines and heroes come into much sharper focus. While the

To the contrary, it was because Sisera and his coalition for decades had systematically violated the עַם יְהוָה "the *people* of Yahweh" that he had to be stopped. Sisera, whom the poet calls a rapist, was hardly doomed to death for violating the canons of hospitality by entering once a woman's tent in desperation to save his life. For the עַם יְהוָה , as the *militia* of Yahweh (which obviously included Yael, as well as Deborah), the protocols of (a Yahweh) war had superseded the protocols of peacetime hospitality. Sisera was no longer just a potential enemy to be treated with discretion nor a post-battle straggler to be treated with compassion. He was a dangerous fugitive attempting to hide beneath a woman's skirt. "Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered" (Zec 13:7, Matt 26:31, Mk 14:27) was obviously the operating protocol in war.

²⁷¹ Note especially I Chron 2:55, "The families also of the *scribes* that dwelt at Jabez: the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, and the Sucathites. These are the *Kenites* who came from Hammath, the father of the house of *Rechab*"; and Neh 3:14, "Malchijah the son of *Rechab*, ruler of the district of Bethhaccherem, *repaired* the Dung Gate; he rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars." [italics mine]

poem is complimentary to Shamgar and Barak, as well as to the ten tribe militia, it really acclaims the actions and achievements of Deborah and Yael, pre-eminent women of power in Israel.²⁷²

Brenner (1990: 129–138) proposed a triangle or a rhombus as the geometric pattern for understanding Judges 5, but another pattern is required to accommodate *all* the anti-Sisera forces. The figure that comes to mind—drawn from the Kishon battle-scene itself—is the chariot wheel. Only a pattern as complex as the spoked wheel can accommodate all the Israelite combatants. Yahweh was surely the hub of the militia (as well as at the heart of the poem)²⁷³ with Shamgar, Barak, and the *ten* tribes being the spokes. Around them were the inner and outer rims—Deborah and Yael. They were the “big wheels,” so to speak, who concertedly wielded the deathblow to Israel’s oppressors by outmaneuvering Sisera—first on the battlefield and then in a tent.

Because the Song of Deborah can now be understood without major emendations, a host of Kenite, Judean and Jewish scribes can be rehabilitated. Far from carelessly transmitting or freely redacting the Song of Deborah (as Cheyne charged [1904], who retained fewer than 800 of the poems’s 1,485 letters), the scribes were almost flawless in conveying a poem which—except for some early Kenite scribes—was not in their native dialect. The accuracy of their transmission of the consonantal text makes it possible to add the Song of Deborah to the list of early Palestinian dialects available for study. The sixty-seven rare lexemes attested in “Deborah’s dialect” can now be added to the well attested lexemes in the standard lexicons of Biblical Hebrew.

²⁷² Note Yee’s (1993: 117) argument with reference to the male author of Judges 4 that:

In creating the character of Jael for his story in Judges 4, our author uses the covert activity of women in war as a strategic entitlement to reinforce negative stereotypes of women in general. Instead of a warrior’s defending her people and her household, Jael becomes at the hands of the male author a temptress, deceiver, and ultimately a castrator.

There is no hint of such stereotyping in Judges 5—since the author was a probably a woman. The reader needs to keep in mind that for the author/editors of Judges 4 and for the poet of Judges 5, the protocols of war *rewarded* deceptions. Feinting a fainting enemy was fair play and proper protocol.

²⁷³ Note Rasmussen’s (1988) conclusion that in the unredacted edition of Judges 4–5, Deborah, not Yahweh, is the real warrior leading men into battle and that her role was shaped after that of Anat in the Canaanite myths.