

THE SONG OF DEBORAH:
POETRY IN DIALECT

INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Although the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), like the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), is recognized as one of “the oldest substantial compositions preserved in the Hebrew Bible” and offers “valid historical data for a reconstruction of the initial phases of Israelite history” (Freedman 1975: 19), paradoxically no scholarly consensus exists at present as to the poem’s structure and meaning. Many of the best studies of Judges 5 are characterized by extensive emendation of the text, restoring a presumably corrupt text to read as the particular scholar would imagine a hymn of victory should read in classical Judean Hebrew. The translation of Cheyne (1904: 453–455), who was preoccupied with Jerahmeel, is given in the Appendix as an example of how a critic could take extreme liberties with the MT. Critical “restorations,” common in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, are summarized in the studies of Moore (1900a, 1900b) and Burney (1918). They were modified and improved upon by some of the twentieth century’s best scholars, including Albright (1922, 1936, 1968a, 1968b), Richter (1963, 1964), and Boling (1975).

Of the poem’s 1,485 letters in the MT (5:1–31a), Burney (1918: 160–165) deemed it necessary to delete 158 letters as secondary additions or scribal errors and emended an additional 33 letters (for a 12.9 percent rate of error). Albright’s first study (1922) resulted in his deleting 204 letters and emending 12 others (for a 14.5 percent rate of error). Richter (1963: 69–81; 1964: 400–402) isolated 202 letters as additions to the original poem and altered the reading of 10 other letters (for a 14.3 percent rate of error).

In addition to these changes, Burney added 17 consonants and 10 vowel letters, Albright added 12 consonants and 10 vowel letters, and Richter added 6 consonants. The total number of changes to the MT by additions, emendations, and deletions according to Burney, Albright, and Richter are 218 (14.7 percent), 238 (16.0 percent), and 218 letters (14.7 percent), respectively. These figures reflect a very high level of presumed errors, glosses, and editorial accretions and omissions for this poem. These revisions do not exhaust the corrections needed to make the poem fairly intelligible. Words and verses were also transposed. Richter transposed two verses and eleven words, Burney transposed one verse and four words, and Albright transposed four words.

Building on the contributions of Albright's earlier studies, Cross (1950) made significant methodological progress in the study of early Hebrew poetry. Although the Song of Deborah received only limited attention in his work on metrical structure, Cross's use of orthographic and linguistic analysis based upon epigraphic evidence introduced critical controls absent in earlier studies of Judges 5. Though dealing only with a reconstructed unvocalized text of the less problematic sections of the poem (5:2–3 and 17–30), Cross made numerous emendations, frequently for metrical reasons. He added 24 letters, deleted 34 and emended 3. In addition, he considered five tribal names and the יהודה ברכו repeated in 5:2 and 5:9 to be extra-metrical.

Other scholars had already produced alternative solutions to resolve the enigmata of the poem. I. W. Slotki (1932) advanced a theory of "repetition, antiphony and blanks." For him the difficulties of the meter and meaning were removed by the recognition of repetitive antiphonal responses which had been written only once. The repetitions were originally indicated in the text by blank spaces serving as the equivalent of our ditto marks. Sometime during the process of transmission, the blank spaces were removed and thus the clues for the responses were lost, resulting in confusion about the poem's meter and meaning.

Slotki reasoned that once the antiphonal responses are re-inserted into our apocopated version of the poem, the meter and sense can be satisfactorily restored. He did not deal with the entire poem, nor with its most difficult sections. However, in the eight verses which he developed (5:6, 21, 22–24, 27–30), 232 letters (making up 44 words of antiphonal responses) were presumed to have been lost. This method, like that of extensive emendation, won only limited acceptance because, as Barr (1968: 301) noted with reference to textual emendation, "the impression given was that the interpreter in many cases was rewriting the text rather than explaining what was written."

Gerleman (1951: 168–180) denied that difficulties existed in the text of Judges 5 and rejected the use of textual emendation. He asserted that the MT was not as corrupt as critics "eager to make brilliant conjectures" claimed. For him ". . . most of the textual emendations which have been made seem to fit ill the characteristic style of the Deborah Song" (168, 180). He defended the Masoretic tradition with his own brilliant conjecture that the poem belongs to a genre of early poetic impressionism which manifested neither the characteristics of logical reflection

and intelligibility, nor even syntactically disciplined logical form. “The impressionism of the Deborah Song is of a primitive unconscious type, a naive spontaneous art” (180). The song has a certain unity for Gerleman which “lies more in the emotional coloring than in the outline.” This impressionism reflects, in his opinion, the natural unconscious style of the original poet who, with an “atomizing technique” (177), “reproduces merely his [*sic*] own momentary impressions (173).¹ Therefore, argued Gerleman, the perspective of the poet was not fixed but movable, and consequently the poem lacks logical progression and reflection.

Unfortunately, Gerleman did not deal with the most enigmatic passages of the poem. His study treated only 5:2–6a, 7a, 11, 17b, 19a, 20, 22, 24, 28, 30. The weakness in his thesis is that, since most scholars find much in the poem to be incomprehensible, the impressionistic creativity may reflect no more than the talent of the exasperated translator, rather than the style of the original poet. The absence of other early “impressionistic” poetry in the Hebrew literary corpus cautions one against calling *illogical* in the original wording what scholars currently find *incomprehensible* in their current texts. It can only be said that impressionistic translations have been created from the enigmata in the Song of Deborah. Until these cruxes are resolved, it will be impossible to determine whether the impressionism comes from the poet or from the poet’s translators.

Gerleman’s denial of any real literary unity in the poem has been reinforced by Blenkinsopp (1961: 65), who stated

The unity of the poem is theological rather than literary, and we can be certain in any case that whoever gave the Book of Judges its final form as we have it was less concerned with producing an integrated work of art than with preserving what was of value in the traditions of the past for the purpose of edification, and that just as the victory song of Moses and Miriam underwent transformation into what can be called a liturgical canticle, so it is not unlikely, a priori, that something of the same took place here.

Blenkinsopp (1961: 67–76) isolated verses 5:2–5 and 31a as psalmic elements which were added to an original war ballad to

¹ Compare Ackroyd 1952: 160–162, who argued that elements of the poem, like the curse on Meroz, may be “quotations” from older traditions utilized by the poet who composed the poem about a hundred years after the event.

produce a liturgical piece celebrating “the great liberating act of God both in society and in the individual soul.” Removal of these psalmic elements “leaves us with a clear-cut ballad [*sic*] in five moments or ‘fits’ interlaced with short lyric, choral elements.” But, according to Blenkinsopp, even if the poem does not demonstrate a literary unity or appear to be an integrated work of art, it “is not a hotch-potch or a witch’s brew of ill-assorted literary herbs” (76). Blenkinsopp’s adoption of Slotki’s reconstruction of 5:27 and his identifying 5:15b–16 as a “perfect little taunt-song” that had had an independent existence outside the Song of Deborah reflect his eclectic approach. His most significant contribution may well be his insistence that much of the poem is a war ballad. His identifying several passages as psalmic elements, in conformity with exegetical tradition, precluded his identifying the entire work as such.

Lindars (1995: 212–213) supported the “emotional unity” of Gerleman and the “thematic unity” of Blenkinsopp, asserting

The poem is not merely descriptive, but conveys the emotions of the participants Thus the hearers of the poem are left sharing the experience of those who were actually involved, and can feel that this is their own victory. All this can be felt by the modern reader without the aid of critical analysis. Moreover, the progress of the poem is logical in relation to its subject matter, and there is no *prima facie* reason for drastic rearrangements.

A theological and cultic unity for Judges 5 was proposed by Weiser (1959: 67–97). His suggestion differs from the “emotional unity” proffered by Gerleman and the “thematic unity” of Blenkinsopp in that Weiser predicated a uniform composition for the poem derived from diverse literary elements, including (a) verses 2–18, which form Deborah’s recitation of the war and the victory and the tribes’ participation (or non-participation) in the cultic festival of covenant renewal, and (b) verses 19–30, which, in a cultic celebration of Yahweh’s recent victory, deal with the conflict between Barak and Sisera.

Weiser’s views have gained limited acceptance, most recently in the study of J. Gray (1988: 421–455). But Mayes (1969: 356), in a convincing critique of Weiser’s conclusions, noted, “This cultic view provides a rather ‘blanket explanation’ of the Song

which is partly acceptable only for the final stage of its history.”² Mayes doubted that the original poem was a unified composition. He preferred to follow H.-P. Müller (1966), who analyzed Judges 5 as a composite of an original poetic narrative of the battle (5:12–31) coupled to a later psalmic introduction (5:2–11). Through a process of double Yahwistic editing, the poem’s elements have been transformed into the present hymn of praise.³

Lindars (1995: 218, 222–223) isolated 5:1 as an editorial introduction and identified 5:2–5 as “an assortment of introductory material, appropriate to liturgical celebration of the event, but without internal unity.” Of the remaining verses, Lindars noted that 5:6–8 “may have been the original opening stanza” and verses 9–11 “may well be a liturgical addition, inviting celebration of the victory at cultic occasions” (234, 241). Verse 31, not surprisingly, was also identified by Lindars as a liturgical addition.

Objections have been raised by Globe (1974b) both to the cultic interpretation of Weiser and to the views of Müller and Mayes which deny the literary unity of Judges 5. Although Globe admitted that this poem “could be a synthesis of ancient poems composed at different times” (like Genesis 49), he argued for its literary unity. On the basis of the poem’s content, form, and context, Globe found no reason why the poem cannot be viewed as an integrated literary unit. He asserted (1974b: 508, 511–512)

In the final analysis, the stylistic coherence of Judges 5 gives the impression of a single poetic intelligence mustering all the craft at its disposal, always varying the technique, but often returning to devices used earlier . . . the poem has a carefully composed structure employing a significant number of recurring literary forms . . . There is every reason to believe that the poem was composed, much as it has survived, shortly after the battle it commemorates.

But Globe was able only to predicate, not demonstrate, the unity of the entire poem. In two studies (1974a, 1975), he attempted to demonstrate the unity of 5:4–5 and 5:13–18. What he

² Note also Mayes 1974: 85–92.

³ Compare Soggin (1981a: 625–639 and 1981c: 94) who identified two strata in the poem: (1) a heroic poem from the early monarchy (5:2–5, 9–11, 13, 23 [“as an unclear insertion”], and 31a); and (2) a later pre-Josianic theological revision (5:6–8, 14–22, 24–30).

succeeded in demonstrating was the fact that individual strophes of the poem, as they appear in the MT, have characteristics typical of early Hebrew poetry, whatever the enigmatic Hebrew may mean. Recognition of structural balance within several strophes and the calling of attention to aural coherence, normative parallelism, and details like assonance and puns cannot demonstrate unity of the contents *per se*. Such unity may only reflect a common style found in disparate poetic fragments collected by an editor or redactor. Nevertheless, I concur with Globe's assertion (1975: 178) that "poetry of this order is rarely the product of textual corruption. Nor does the passage look like later editorial activity."

Hauser (1980: 25) concurred with Globe's arguments for the unity of the poem and rejected Blenkinsopp's proposals to divide the poem into a secular ballad and a later liturgical psalmic reworking of the ballad. His study focused on only half of the verses of the poem (the less problematic verses: 3–5, 11, 19–22, 24–30) and led him to conclude that "parataxis is best suited as a key to understanding the poet's style." He defined parataxis as the "placing side by side of words, images, clauses, or scenes without connectives that directly and immediately coordinate the parts with one another," noting that parataxis presents an incomplete picture, elements of which "at first glance do not appear to correlate well with one another." Since parataxis "tends toward disjointedness," Hauser concluded, "Judges 5 employs a variety of rhythmic techniques without presenting a consistent metrical structure." Hauser's "paratactic key," was endorsed by Gottwald (1985: 252–254) and certainly provides a means for making some sense out of the Song of Deborah as it now stands in the MT, the versions, and the varied modern translations. However, it has the same limitations as Gerleman's "poetic impressionism." Paratactic translations have emerged from the enigmata in the song, but until these enigmata are resolved it remains uncertain whether the parataxis comes from the poet or from the poet's translators or from both.

Contrary to the views of Gerleman, Mayes, Müller, and others, and in support of the arguments of Globe, my study demonstrates that the Song of Deborah is a brilliantly logical and stylistically uniform epic fragment, employing a much richer repertoire of lexical, syntactic, and grammatical elements than has been realized. While there may be some parataxis employed by the poet, there is much more syntax in the poem than has been

recognized in the past. What Globe was able to achieve for only several strophes can, in my opinion, be established for the whole poem.

Current philological studies, even with their failures and excesses, provide many clues for resolving the enigmata of early Hebrew poetry.⁴ Such studies are forcing Hebraists to recognize that ancient poets had a larger vocabulary and more syntactical options than were formerly recognized. One can concur with Hauser (1980: 28), “Rather than trying to emend the obscure sections [of Ju 5], it seems best to assume that they point more to our lack of knowledge of ancient Hebrew vocabulary than to problems of textual corruption.” As the long-standing cruxes of Judges 5 are resolved, the unity of the poem becomes more transparent.

Just as the various strophes of the poem cannot be treated in isolation from one another, Judges 5 cannot be treated in isolation from the prose story in Judges 4, which is surely the oldest “commentary” or *midrash* on the Song of Deborah.⁵ The priority of Judges 5 has been reasserted by Halpern (1988: 95) who noted, “Virtually every element of the prose account stems directly, or by a dialectical process, indirectly, from SDeb Every facet of the prose account can be derived from a reading of SDeb.” However, Judges 4 has its own problems, including what Yadin (1975: 250) has rightly called “one of the most irksome questions of biblical research,” namely, the difference in the accounts of the destruction of Hazor and the death of Jabin in Judges 4 and Joshua 11.

Archaeological studies have supported the integrity of the account of Joshua 11, leading Yadin (1975: 255) to conclude, “The narrative in the Book of Joshua is, therefore, the true historical

⁴ For bibliographic material, see Blommerde (1969); Dahood and Penar (1970); Robertson (1972); and Bal (1988a).

⁵ Amit’s study (1987: 89–111) provides a good introduction to and bibliography of issues surrounding Judges 4. Note Kaufmann’s conclusion (1962: 114), “But this opinion [that the poetry was the basis of the prose] is also not correct. We cannot see why the author of the prose reduced the number of the fighting tribes from 6 to 2. We cannot also understand how he knew all the details which are not mentioned in the song. There is no doubt that the prose and the poetry are *two independent forms* [italics mine] of the tradition about the war with Sisera.” (I thank Gilad Gevanyahu for this quotation from Kaufmann.)

nucleus, while the mention of Jabin in Judges 4 must have been a later editorial interpolation.” The present study supports the argument of Yadin for the historical value of Joshua 11, but it also offers an alternative solution to the problems related to Judges 4.

In Chapter One, the integrity of the consonantal Masoretic text is defended, followed in Chapter Two by an analysis of the literary units which make up Judges 4 and 5. In Chapter Three, it is argued that Shamgar was an *Israelite* overseer, and that Judges 3:31, which also mentions him, was originally a part of the poem of Judges 5. In Chapter Four, Deborah is identified as the (Hittite) “Mother in Israel” (alluded to in Ezekiel 16) whose name also survives in a name list of Ramesses III, providing a chronological reference point for the Israelite battle against Sisera. Chapter Five contains my reconstruction and translation of the Song of Deborah (with metrical and syllabic patterns outlined), and this is followed by a philological commentary in Chapter Six. In Chapter Seven, as part of the closing summary, the question of authorship of the poem is addressed, and a case is made for Yael or another Kenite being the author, even though tradition has credited Deborah and some scholars have argued for a composite poem of anonymous fragments.

An analysis of the meter (both accentual and syllabic) of this poem in comparison with Ugaritic poetry or with other biblical poetry will require a separate study. Only brief descriptive statements, following the “traditional school” of Ley (1875), Budde (1882), and Sievers (1901–1907), have been included in Chapter Six. The accentuation and vocalization of the MT, with its recognized limitations, has been utilized (with vocal *šewā* counting as a full vowel).

Quotations from the Septuagint have been accented according to the critical editions of Brook and McLean (1917) and Rahlfs (1935). No effort has been made to add accents and breathing marks to the variants cited from these works.

The Appendix includes eleven English translations of the Song of Deborah (nine of which are frequently referred to but are not as available as the RSV, NEB, NAB, and the like). A *targum* in Modern Hebrew of my English translation found in Chapter Five provides an abstract in Israeli Hebrew of my conclusions, as well as a text by which to compare the changes in Hebrew over the three millennia.