

THE SONG OF
DEBORAH:
POETRY
IN DIALECT

A Philological Study of

JUDGES 5

with

Translation and Commentary

By

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עֵטְרַת זְקֵנִים בְּנֵי בָנִים

To Erica, Ian, Owen, and Lauren

May they always be free

to cherish and challenge

tradition

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PREFACE

With a single stroke of the pen, an ancient editor or scribe added the conjunction ו (the vowel *u*) before the name of Barak in Judges 5:1, and in so doing diminished the stature of Deborah as a judge and as a person wielding real power in early Israel. By adding the ו (*u*) to the text, the scribe forced Deborah to join Barak in singing a duet: ותשר דבורה וברק “then sang Deborah and Barak.” Without the ו, the phrase ותשר דבורה ברק would have to be read as a verb-subject-object sequence: “then Deborah made Barak sing” (or do something else), the only question being the precise meaning of the verb. Without the ו, Deborah was clearly in charge; and were the verb “to sing,” Deborah would have been the conductor who made Barak sing. But the addition of the conjunction ו placed Barak on a par with Deborah; they acted in concert.

This slim editorial note created disharmony between the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 and the prose account in Judges 4, where Deborah had the authority to summon Barak and deliver to him the command of Yahweh to go to war. The addition set the tone for the entire poem, making Deborah primarily a songstress whose major role was to encourage the troops in battle.

Folk etymology reduced Deborah’s stature even more. Her name was popularly derived from דבורה “bee,” which may have sweet overtones, but lacks the status of דִּבְרָה “leader, governor, guide.” In a similar way, popular etymology associated Yael’s name with יעל “goat,” missing the more basic meaning “the pre-eminent one” and its derivative “noble, strong.”

A clear understanding of the role of Deborah and Yael in early Israel remains hidden in the obscure lines of the Song of Deborah. Until there is some consensus on the literal meaning of the poem itself, there can be little agreement on the value of the poem for understanding the history, sacred literature, and social institutions of pre-monarchical Israel.

Exegetical tradition—provided by the scribes who added vowel letters and divided the consonant clusters into words—and the early Greek translations for Jews of the Diaspora, which provide a myriad of textual variants, have not made the task of the modern interpreter an easy one.

PREFACE

I offer here a translation of the Song of Deborah which adheres closely to the consonants of the Masoretic text, though I have re-divided many of the consonant clusters in order to restore certain poetic lines. Exegetical traditions, early and modern, have been carefully examined; but with a number of the more obscure lines there has been no compelling reason to stay with traditional translations or exegesis. At times it became necessary to step away from the guesswork reflected in the ancient variants and the speculative emendations of more recent commentators. Looking at the poem as if it were found in a newly discovered scroll provided constructive alternatives for a number of the more obscure passages. The obscurities in Judges 5 are diminished once the poem is read as dialectal Hebrew and the interpreter makes use of a larger lexicon than that traditionally used for classical canonical Judean Hebrew. This approach provided new insights, not only on the names of Deborah and Yael, but also on the meaning of many lines in the poem.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A-text	Codex Alexandrinus
AASOR	Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research, New Haven
AB	Anchor Bible, New York
<i>AbrN</i>	<i>Abr-Nahrain</i> , Melbourne
<i>AfO</i>	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i> , Berlin
<i>AHW</i>	W. von Soden, <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> , Wiesbaden
<i>AJSL</i>	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature</i> , Chicago
<i>AJT</i>	<i>American Journal of Theology</i> , Chicago
ALUOS	Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society
AnBib	Analecta Biblica, Rome
<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. by J. B. Pritchard, Princeton
AOS	American Oriental Society, New Haven
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch, Göttingen
AV	Authorized Version of the Bible, 1611 (same as KJV, 1611)
B-text	Codex Vaticanus
B [†]	Codex Vaticanus and one undesignated minuscule supporting the reading cited
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i> , New Haven
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i> , Washington, D. C.
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i> , Philadelphia
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge, Bonn
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , New York
BH ³	R. Kittel, <i>Biblica Hebraica</i> , third edition, Stuttgart, 1937
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia, Rome
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i> , Manchester, England
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament, Neukirchen-Vluyn
<i>BO</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis</i> , Leiden
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i> , Freiburg i. Br. and Paderborn
BZAW	Beihefte zur <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> , Gießen and Berlin
<i>CAD</i>	I. Gelb, L. Oppenheim, et al., eds., <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> , Washington, D. C.
CD	Cairo (Geniza text of the) Damascus (Document)
<i>CIH</i>	<i>Inscriptiones himyariticas et sabaeas Continens. Pars Quarta</i> of CIS, Paris
<i>CIS</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum</i> , Paris
<i>CTA</i>	A. Herdner, <i>Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques</i> , Paris
<i>EBib</i>	<i>Études bibliques</i> , Paris

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EH	Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament, Münster
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , ed. E. Kautzsch, tr. A. E. Cowley, Oxford
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament, Tübingen
HJ	<i>Hibbert Journal</i> , Boston, London
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, Göttingen
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Missoula, Montana
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i> , Cambridge, Massachusetts
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> , Cincinnati
ICC	International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> , Jerusalem
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i> , Boston
JANESCU	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University</i> , New York
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i> , New Haven, Boston
JB	Jerusalem Bible, New York, 1966
JB�	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> , Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Missoula, Montana
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i> , New Haven
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i> , London
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i> , London
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> , Chicago
JPOS	<i>Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society</i> , Jerusalem
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i> , Philadelphia
JSOR	<i>Journal of the Society of Oriental Research</i> , Chicago
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> , Sheffield
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i> , Manchester
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> , Oxford
KAI	H. Donner and W. Röllig, <i>Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften</i> , Wiesbaden
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament, Leipzig and Gütersloh
KB ³	L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, <i>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros</i> , 3rd ed., Leiden
KJV	King James Version of the Bible (same as the AV, 1611)
LXX	Septuagint
LBA	Late Bronze Age
MBA	Middle Bronze Age
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible, Paterson, New Jersey, 1969, 1970
NEB	New English Bible, Oxford and Cambridge, 1961, 1970
NJV	New Jewish Version (<i>Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures</i>), New York, 1985 (5740)
NorTTS	<i>Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift</i> , Oslo
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, New York, 1992
OIP	Oriental Institute Publications, Chicago

ABBREVIATIONS

OLZ	<i>Orientalische Literaturzeitung</i> , Berlin and Leipzig
Or	<i>Orientalia</i> , Rome
OTL	Old Testament Library, Philadelphia and London
OTS	<i>Oudtestamentische Studien</i> , Leiden
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i> , London
PG	J. Migne, <i>Patrologia graeca</i> , Paris
PRU	<i>Palais Royal d'Ugarit</i> , Paris
PW	Pauly-Wissowa, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , Stuttgart
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i> , Paris and Rome
RivB	<i>Rivista biblica italiana</i> , Brescia
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible, London and New York, 1952
RR	<i>Review of Religion</i> , New York
RV	English Revised Version of the Bible, London, 1885
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology, Nashville, and London
Syria	<i>Syria. Revue d'Art Oriental et d'Archéologie</i> , Paris
TEV	Today's English Version, New York, 1979
ThLitZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i> , Berlin
ThZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i> , Basel
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i> , Münster
UT	C. H. Gordon, <i>Ugaritic Textbook</i> , Rome
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> , Leiden
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements, Leiden
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i> , Philadelphia
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i> , Leipzig and Berlin
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> , Gießen and Berlin
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i> , Leipzig and Wiesbaden
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i> , Leipzig, Stuttgart, and Wiesbaden
1QapGen	Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran Cave 1
1QIsa ^a	Isaiah Scroll A from Qumran Cave 1
1QS	Manual of Discipline from Qumran Cave 1
11QpaleoLev	Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus Scroll from Cave 11
ערוך השלם	<i>Aruch Completum sive lexicon vocabula et res, quae in libris targumicis, talmudicis et midraschicis continentur, explicans auctore Nathane filio Jechielis</i> , A. Kohut, ed., Vienna, 1878
()	Explanatory additions in English translation
[]	Editorial deletion from the Hebrew text
< >	Editorial addition to the Hebrew text
*	Denotes the original writing of the scribe when used with a manuscript symbol; when used with a Semitic word, it indicates the original (proto-Semitic) form.