

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.

The Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania  
December, 2000

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Robert R. Wright of the Department of Religion of Temple University, Philadelphia, invited me to teach a seminar in 1991 on Philological Studies of the Hebrew Scriptures, providing me the opportunity to use the draft of this study, which is a major revision of an earlier work, *Deborah Never Sang* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1983), now out of print. It was a good seminar, and I am appreciative of the invitation and of the contributions of the seminar participants.

My friend and colleague, Dr. James T. McDonough, Jr., for years Professor of Classics at Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, has assisted in many ways, helping with the LXX and Greek variants, providing invaluable editorial assistance, and reading the entire typescript numerous times with the keen eye of a scholar and typesetter. He introduced me to his friend Gilad J. Gevanyahu (son of the noted Israeli biblical scholar Haim M. I. Gevanyahu), who, in turn, has kindly provided me with help on much of the material cited from rabbinic sources, as well as editing the *targum* into Israeli Hebrew of my English translation of the Song of Deborah. Professor David Rabiya of Gratz College, Philadelphia, had kindly made the first draft of the *targum* a number of years earlier.

I am grateful to Chaplain (Brigadier General) Parker Thompson (U.S. Army, retired) and the Round Hill Baptist Church of Round Hill, Virginia, for providing funds for me to visit relevant sites in Israel, as well as Karnak and the Temple of Medinet Habu in Egypt. The plates are, in part, due to their generosity.

## 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>AJSJL</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 <sup>†</sup>  | 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 <sup>3</sup> | 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 of CIS</i> , 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 <sup>3</sup> | 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 <sup>a</sup> | 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.                                   |