

A Biblical Reconstruction of the Prophetess Deborah in Judges 4

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By analyzing Judges 4 in its historical and literary setting, this article presents a biblical reconstruction of the prophetic identity and message of the prophetess Deborah. The study concludes that 1) Deborah, as a prophetess, seems to show great similarity to the āpiltum observed in early Mari, 2) Deborah is not portrayed as a primitive necromancer, and 3) in the narrative she opposes Barak's desire for personal honor and presents Yahweh as Israel's sole deliverer from oppression.

KEYWORDS: *Deborah, prophetess, early Israelite prophecy, Mari*

INTRODUCTION

The days of biographies are over. That is, with regard to the biblical prophets at least. The current trend among biblical scholarship is to present the portrayals of the biblical prophets as the legends and hagiography of later writers and redactors. The result is that nothing can or should be biographically asserted about a person mentioned in the Bible. John J. Schmitt accurately assesses the situation when he states: “Many scholars today are far more reluctant than those of a generation or two ago to write a biography or even a personality assessment of a given prophet.”¹ In his article, “Prophetic Books and the Problem of Historical Reconstruction,” Roy Melugin represents an ever-broadening constituency of modern scholarship when he argues for a more reader-oriented hermeneutic. He concludes: “I believe that historical criticism should play a more modest role in the study of historical books than most

1. John J. Schmitt, “Preexilic Hebrew Prophecy,” *ABD*, 5:487.

of us were taught in graduate school.”² Melugin’s approach has been carried out with fervor when looking at the prophetess Deborah in Judg 4. Fewer texts have attracted more reader-response interpretations, largely represented by gender studies, Marxist, feminist and other, more marginalized readings.³ Is the discussion over? Are we forever cut off from the world of the text?

THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

To answer the above questions in the affirmative—as many in the scholarly world have begun to do—is an unfortunate overreaction. While the compositional history of Judges is doubted by many biblical scholars, some have recognized the early nature of the traditions preserved in the book of Judges. Roland de Vaux, in his *Histoire Ancienne D’Israël: La Période des Juges*, acknowledges that there are historical uncertainties about the book, yet he writes: “The book has considerable historical value. The Deuteronomistic redaction and the final edition with appendices have preserved authentic traditions of the period when Israel became a nation and for which the book of Judges is our only source of information.”⁴ More recently, Mark Boda has emphasized the importance of separating the compositional historical context from the referential

2. Roy F. Melugin, “Prophetic Books and the Problem of Historical Reconstruction,” in *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (ed. Stephen Breck Reid; JSOTSup 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 78.

3. See Tyler Mayfield’s extensive survey of the relevant literature, “The Accounts of Deborah 4–5 in Recent Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 7 (2009): 306–35. And for an outstanding survey of the history of interpretation, see David M. Gunn, *Judges Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 53–92. However, two noteworthy synchronic studies of the text at hand are John H. Stek, “The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4,” in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer: Essays on the Old Testament* (ed. Walter C. Kaiser and Ronald F. Youngblood; Chicago: Moody, 1986), 53–86, and Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges* (JSOTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

4. “[L]e livre a une valeur historique considérable. La rédaction deutéronomiste puis l’édition finale avec les appendices ont conservé des traditions authentiques sur cette époque où s’est formé le peuple d’Israël et pour laquelle le livre de *Juges* est notre seule source d’information.” See Roland de Vaux, *Histoire Ancienne D’Israël: La Période des Juges* (EBib; Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1973), 17. See also, S. Ackerman, “Digging Up Deborah: Recent Hebrew Bible Scholarship on Gender and the Contribution of Archaeology,” *NEA* 66 (2003): 172–97; Trent Butler, *Judges* (WBC 8; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), lxxi.

historical context when dealing with Judges.⁵ Given phrases like “until this day” (1:21; 6:24; 10:4) and “time of the captivity of the land” (18:30–31), some distance between the events and the composition of the book must be recognized. However, as Provan, Long, and Longman have argued, this need not holistically discredit the biblical text as witness to the pre-monarchic events recorded in Judges.⁶ Consequently, a biography of Deborah need not be out of the question, and perhaps is even in order.

Good biographies, both ancient and modern, are extremely helpful in placing an important individual within their cultural context, and thereby improving present-day interpretations of that individual. Provided that scholars are still striving to understand the “riddle wrapped in a mystery”⁷ that is early Israelite prophecy, the Deborah account should not be overlooked in this regard. It is also unfortunate that while much work has been done on Deborah, few have allowed the text to speak to the reality of early prophecy in Israel. Many studies follow the approach of Joseph Blenkinsopp (who follows the approach of William F. Albright⁸) when he states: “In the Deuteronomic scheme of things, prophecy in the strict sense begins with Samuel,”⁹ and quickly move past Deborah and the book of Judges, if addressing either of them at all.¹⁰

5. Mark Boda, “Judges,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 2:1050.

6. Ian Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

7. Robert R. Wilson, “Early Israelite Prophecy,” in *Interpreting the Prophets* (ed. James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1.

8. William F. Albright, “Samuel and the Beginnings of the Prophetic Movement,” in *Interpreting the Prophetic Tradition* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky; New York: Ktav, 1969), 151–76.

9. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (rev. and enl. ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 52.

10. E.g., no reference to the book of Judges is given in Victor H. Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) or Menahem Haran, “From Early to Classical Prophecy: Continuity and Change,” in *Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible: Selected Studies from *Vetus Testamentum** (ed. David E. Orton; Brill’s Readers in Biblical Studies 5; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 102–14. Rolf Rendtorff ignores the role of Deborah in his “Samuel the Prophet: A Link between Moses and the King,” in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (ed. C. A. Evans and S. Talmon; Biblical Interpretation Series 28; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 27–36. More detailed studies such as: Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*; Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962); and Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious*

Evangelicals have long fought for the historicity of the biblical text for the sake of apologetics and defending the divine nature of the Bible, and this is undoubtedly a worthy endeavor. However, if history is relegated to the field of apologetics, the church will soon find that it has inherited a deficient hermeneutic in which to approach the Bible. Barry Webb is correct when he writes: “the traditional emphasis on historical background as the necessary foundation for sound exegesis is still with us, and has much to offer.”¹¹ Consequently, this paper seeks to go against the current trends by studying the person of Deborah in Judg 4 and presenting a *biblical biographical* reconstruction that tries to be sensitive to both the history and the literary movement of the text.

BIBLICAL RECONSTRUCTION: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Hans Barstad has rightly noted that when seeking to reconstruct ancient understandings of biblical prophecy, “It is essential that all comparisons start from the literary level. Only when this has been done is it possible to proceed and, eventually, to reconstruct prophecy as a historical phenomenon.”¹² That is to say, the only access to early Israelite prophecy during the period of the judges is the scant literary evidence which remains in text. Therefore, heeding Barstad’s advice, the present study will seek to reconstruct the historical and literary portrait of Deborah in early Israel by focusing on the “internal reality” presented in the text.¹³

David Peterson raises a second point of consideration. He unites history with text by articulating two methodological streams often used in studying the biblical prophets: “prophetic identity” and “prophetic

Specialists in Ancient Israel (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1995) briefly mention Deborah. Two exceptions are the more substantial treatments provided in Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, The Hebrew University, 1999), 206–34 and Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 143–46.

11. Barry B. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 49.

12. Hans M. Barstad, “*Comparare necesse est?* Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy in a Comparative Perspective,” in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives* (ed. Martti Nissinen; SBLSymS 13; Atlanta: Scholars, 2000), 11.

13. While the author accepts Judg 5 as an accurate representation of the *ipsissima verba* of the prophetess, given the limited nature of this article along with the massive bibliography accompanying “Deborah’s Song,” the scope of the study will be limited to Judg 4, except in a few cases.

literature.”¹⁴ These two categories are helpful in summarizing the major schools of prophetic interpretation—the first drawing upon historical, sociological, and anthropological comparisons, and the second focusing on the prophetic message utilizing literary approaches. David Baker presents a modified version of Petersen’s approach, but refers to these same basic categories as prophetic “Precomposition” and “Composition.”¹⁵ However, this presentation will utilize Peterson’s original categories using the terms “prophetic identity” and “prophetic message” in reconstructing the prophetess Deborah in Judg 4.¹⁶

DEBORAH’S PROPHETIC IDENTITY

Deborah, the prophetess-judge, has provided scholarship with something of a conundrum.¹⁷ Since the text describes her as both a prophetess

14. David L. Peterson, “Introduction: Ways of Thinking About Israel’s Prophets,” in *Prophecy in Israel: Search for an Identity* (ed. David L. Peterson; IRT 10; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 2. See David W. Baker’s use and amendment of this approach in his “Israelite Prophets and Prophecy,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 266–7.

15. David W. Baker, “Israelite Prophets and Prophecy,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 266–67.

16. These three areas are similar to what Baker calls “precomposition,” composition,” and “transmission.” See his “Israelite Prophets and Prophecy,” 266–67.

17. James S. Ackerman, “Prophecy and Warfare in Early Israel: A Study of the Deborah-Barak Story,” *BASOR* 220 (1975): 5–13; Yaakov S. Kupitz, “Deborah and the Delphic Pythia: A New Interpretation of Judges 4:4–5,” in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter; FRLANT; Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 95–124; Klaas Spronk, “Deborah , A Prophetess: The Meaning and Background of Judges 4:4–5,” in *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as a Historical Person, Literary Character and Anonymous Artist* (ed. Johannes c. de Moor; OTS 45; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 232–42; D. F. Murray, “Narrative and Structure Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story, Judges iv 4–22,” in *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 30; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 155–89; Bernard A. Asen, “Deborah, Barak and Bees: Apis Mellifera, Apiculture and Judges 4 and 5,” *ZAW* 109 (1997): 514–33; Ellen J. van Wolde, “Deborah and Ya’el in Judges 4,” in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes* (ed. Bod Beeking and Meindert Dijkstra; Biblical Interpretation Series 18; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 283–95; Judy Taubes Serman, “Themes in the Deborah Narrative (Judges 4–5),” *JBQ* 39 (2011): 15–24; Johanna W. H. Bos, “Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17–22; Ruth 3,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 37–67; Shimon Bakon, “Deborah: Judge, Prophetess and Poet,” *JBQ* 34 (2006): 110–18; Daniel Vainstub, “Some Points of Contact Between the Biblical Deborah War Traditions and

(נביאה) and a judge (היא שפטה), many have struggled over how these two divergent positions converge upon this briefly mentioned woman. Such tension has proved too much for scholars such as James S. Ackerman, who argues the title of “prophetess” was likely a later insertion¹⁸ and that it is not completely evident that Deborah, the judge, “held an ‘office’ whose authority was recognized throughout the tribes.”¹⁹ However, if one begins with the internal reality of the text, the picture is perhaps not quite so disconcerting. Instead of presenting two separate “offices” editorially foisted upon a fictitious character, the text portrays a unified picture of prophet and national leader—two roles that would characterize Israel’s leadership until the death of Solomon.²⁰

Deborah’s Identity as a Prophetess

In Judg 4:4–5 the biblical text provides a brief biography of Deborah. The Masoretic Text reads:

ודבורה אשה נביאה אשת לפידות היא שפטה את־ישראל בעת ההיא: והיא
 יושבת תחת־תמר דבורה בין הרמה ובין בית־אל בהר אפרים ויעלו אליה בני
 ישראל למשפט:

“And now a woman Deborah, a prophetess and wife of Lappidoth,²¹ was judging Israel in that time. While she was sitting under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the sons of Israel went up to her to for the judgment.”

Some Greek Mythologies,” *VT* 61 (2011): 324–34; Gale A. Yee, “By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4,” *Semeia* 61 (1993): 93–132. For a more detailed bibliography see Trent Bulter, *Judges: A Commentary* (WBC 8; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 75–79.

18. See also, A. Graham Auld, “Prophets through the Looking Glass: Between Writing and Moses,” *JSOT* 27 (1983): 3–23.

19. Ackerman, “Prophecy and Warfare in Early Israel,” 13.

20. References to prophetesses such as Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14-20; 2 Chr 34:22-28) and Isaiah’s wife (Isa 8:3) seem to indicate that Israel was open to women functioning in significant prophetic roles in both the second and first millennia B.C.

21. Susan Niditch’s translation here “a woman of fire was she,” seems agenda-driven and much less likely given the similarities in meaning to “Barak”. See Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 60. Cf. Spronk, “Deborah, A Prophetess,” 240.

Despite the tendency of many researchers to recognize two to four levels of redaction within these two short verses,²² Yairah Amit, among others, has helpfully demonstrated how Judg 4:4–5 functions as a literary whole and serves the larger literary unit of chapter 4.²³ That being said, a careful study of the text as it stands reveals that there is nothing explicit within Judg 4:4–5 that gives rise to concerns regarding the historical veracity of the prophetess Deborah. In fact there is much evidence to the contrary. The following three comparative studies help demonstrate that while there are undeniable and significant theological and sociological differences,²⁴ the biblical reference to Deborah fits within the larger socio-political context of the ancient Near East. First, Abraham Malamat has observed significant similarities between married prophetesses at Mari and Deborah, and writes:

Among the “accredited” prophets, too—as we have seen—there were many women, as there were in the Bible. The outstanding of these were Deborah, wife of Lapidoth (Judg 4:4) and Huldah, wife of Shallum (2 Kgs 22:14). In both instances the Bible specifically notes that they were married women, probably to stress their stability and reliability—as in the case of the “wife of a man,” one of the Mari prophetesses (*ARMT XIII* 114:8).²⁵

Next, looking outside the scope of verses 4–5, Deborah’s mustering the people of Israel for battle in verses 6–10 is also comparable with what has been observed in later Neo-Assyrian texts as well. Ackerman writes:

22. Spronk, “Deborah, A Prophetess,” 232–42; Klaas Spronk, “History and Prophecy in the Book of Judges,” in *Between Evidence and Ideology: Essays on the History of Ancient Israel read at the Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and the Oud Testamentisch Werkgezelschap Lincoln, July 2009* (ed. Bob Becking and Lester L. Grabbe; OTS 59; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 185–98; Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 182.

23. Yairah Amit, “Judges 4: Its Content and Form,” *JSOT* 39 (1987): 89–111. See also, Barry G. Webb, *An Integrated Reading*; David M. Gunn, “Joshua and Judges,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 102–21.

24. See John H. Walton (*Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006], 248–50) for a helpful comparative study of Israelite prophecy and other ANE prophets.

25. Abraham Malamat, “Prophecy at Mari,” in *“The Place Is Too Small for Us”: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship* (ed. Robert P. Gordon; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 63–64.

The Assyrian inscriptions show us the role oracular guidance played in military preparations, and they sometimes name the personnel and means by which the oracles were received. The oracles of assurance, called *šīr takilti* by the Assyrians, would (a) urge the king to take action and (b) promise him the presence and protection of the gods.²⁶

Lastly, in the most thorough study of female prophecy in the ancient Near East to date, Jonathan Stökl argues that at Mari there were two distinct groups of female prophets, the *muhḥūtum* and the *āpiltum*.²⁷ According to Stökl, the *āpiltum* could send correspondence directly to the king without going through a member of the royal palace or court official. Thus, the *āpiltum* was a “higher-level” prophetess than the more ecstatic *muhḥūtum*. He writes: “The *āpiltum* was a kind of ‘special agent in prophecy’ who seems to have occupied a relatively high status in Mariote society.”²⁸ Consequently, it is quite possible that Deborah functioned in the prophetic capacity set forward in the biblical text, and it is unnecessary to conclude that neither her status as a prophetess nor her own existence serves as a later literary creation.²⁹

Deborah’s Identity as a Judge

Daniel Block has argued that Deborah’s status as an official judge of Israel is unlikely.³⁰ He asserts that the use of the term שפטה in verse 5 should be understood as an example of “special usage,” and then asks the

26. Ackerman, “Prophecy and Warfare,” 6. See, “Akkadian Oracles and Prophecies: Oracles Concerning Esarhaddon,” (trans. Robert H. Pfeiffer; *ANET*, 449–50).

27. Jonathan Stökl, “Female Prophets in the Ancient Near East,” in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (ed. John Day; LHBOTS 531; London: T & T Clark, 2010), 47–61.

28. *Ibid.*, 53.

29. See also Robert G. Boling (*Judges* [AB 6A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 99), who writes: “In view of the political involvements of female prophets as far back as eighteenth century Mari the title ‘prophetess’ can no longer be assumed to be anachronistic in reference to Deborah.”

30. Daniel I. Block, “Deborah among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historian,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. Alan R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 238.

question, “Furthermore, one wonders why the narrator would have made this passing reference to the settlement of relatively petty civil disputes when the issue in the chapter is a national crisis.”³¹ However, an equally valid question could be asked of Block: why would the “sons of the Israel” be seeking out a so-called lay-prophetess with relatively no authoritative posture among the people? It is true that the Hebrew pronoun-plus-participle construction highlights what Deborah was doing (durative aspect), while de-emphasizing her title.³² However, whether or not Deborah is first a judge and second a prophetess, or vice-versa, the focus of the text is that she was *indeed* judging Israel, and this seems to provide the necessary justification for the people coming to her at a time of crisis to receive “*the judgment*” (לְמִשְׁפָּט).

If one defines a “judge” based upon military deliverance through battle—a frequent characteristic in the book—then Deborah, the only female judge in Scripture, certainly does not fit the mold. There is a tension here. First, three factors seem to present her as a forerunner to Samuel:³³ (1) her style of judging is similar to what is later observed with Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 8:4), (2) she appointed a military leader yet did not lead the fighting similar to Samuel’s anointing of Saul and David, and (3) the reader learns from the end of chapter 5 that there was rest in the land for forty years as in the accounts of Othniel (3:11) and Gideon (8:28). However, there is also an undeniable and striking irregularity in that Deborah’s serving as a judge over Israel was an apparent female anomaly.³⁴

Deborah’s Identity as a Necromancer?

If Deborah is a historical and prophetic figure to be located in the ancient world of the Near East, is Klaas Spronk correct in asserting that she functioned as a cultic necromancer?³⁵ Spronk argues that Deborah’s association with her named palm tree (תמר דבורה) is likened to the אלון בכות “oak of weeping” in Gen 35:8 named after the death Rebekah’s nurse Deborah, whom Spronk also connects to a Baal cult site called

31. *Ibid.*, 239.

32. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 64.

33. For the first two points, see Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 162.

34. See, n. 31 above.

35. Spronk, “Deborah, A Prophetess,” 236–37.

Baaltamar (בעל תמר) mentioned in Judg 20:33. Thus, “[T]he name Tomer Deborah can be interpreted then as a combination of an indication of [a kind of Baal cult] practiced there and the name of the venerated ancestor, Deborah, who acted as a spokeswoman of the divine world.”³⁶

Spronk’s arguments are tenuous and unconvincing. First, some scholars deeply question the relationship between the Palm of Deborah and the tree mentioned in Gen 35:8, to the extent that Roland de Vaux writes: “it is clearly a different tree from the Oak of Tears, which stood below Bethel and marked the grave of a different Deborah.”³⁷ However, if the two trees are intended to be the same (though it is highly curious how the oak became a palm), the emphasis of this geographical overlap is not to highlight Deborah’s role in facilitating spiritual access to a deceased handmaid, if that would have even been desired. Instead, Deborah’s prophetic station would have been located beneath Jacob’s historic altar at Bethel, a place of worship still being used for sacrifice in Samuel’s day (1 Sam 8:3). We also know from 1 Sam 8 that not far from Bethel Saul encountered a band of prophets and began to prophesy among them. All of this seems to indicate that Deborah was geographically and spiritually “in the middle” of cultic and prophetic worship among the tribes of Israel.³⁸

Second, while Deborah’s association with the palm tree is puzzling at one level, it seems unlikely that a cult site dedicated to a pagan deity would be known by a human appellation. Given the prevalence of theophoric names in the ancient Near East for people and places, why would an actual place of worship be associated with a human diviner and not the deity being sought out? This would go against much of what we observe of cult-worship elsewhere in the Old Testament—case in point בית־אל (“Bethel” or “house of El”).³⁹ For the same reason, it is also unlikely that this palm represents a “sacred tree” that undergirds Deborah’s oracular abilities.⁴⁰

36. *Ibid.*, 237.

37. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans., John McHugh; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961; repr., The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 279.

38. Both Bethel and Ramah mentioned here with reference to Deborah are also associated with Samuel. See Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 162.

39. E.g., Num 22:41, Josh 11:17; 13:17; 2 Sam 5:20.

40. Cf. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges*, 64.

Lastly, regardless of one's views of the composition of the book of Judges, it seems highly unlikely that a supposed final redactor would allow Israel's deliverance to be placed into the hands of a Baal prophetess when in Judg 2:13 and 3:8 the *raison d'être* for Israel's oppression was their worship of Baals and Ashteroth.

So, does the Palm of Deborah have religious significance? Yes, in that the will of Yahweh was revealed there through his prophetess Deborah. There is no reason to believe that this tree maintained any external spiritual significance apart from being the chosen location of the prophetess and possibly its close proximity to Bethel.⁴¹ If the Palm of Deborah is to be associated with the Oak of Weeping at the base of Bethel, it would likely be because of its nearness to the site of Jacob's historic vision, not for the sake of necromantic powers connecting Deborah the prophetess to the former handmaid. Examining the text, Deborah's prophetic identity becomes less problematic, and even likely. As a known prophetess with divinely enabled perception, it follows that people would seek her out as a judge and a source for divine instruction. Whether or not her tree was directly beneath Bethel, the closeness of her location to the high places for worship in Ephraim would have been convenient for worshipers traveling to make sacrifices who also wanted to receive a word from Yahweh through his appointed messenger Deborah. In the case of verse 5, "the judgment" desired by the people of Israel likely had to do with their current oppression, and they sought a prophetess with a message.

DEBORAH'S PROPHETIC MESSAGE

Turning to address Deborah and her message at the literary level, it must be noticed that Deborah's brief biography breaks into a narrative already begun in verse 1. The people of Israel again do what is "evil in the eyes of the Lord" (הרע בעיני יהוה), with the result that the people become slaves of King Jabin and his commander Sisera and cry out to Yahweh for help (v. 3). Earlier in chapter 3, similar events unfold before the Lord raises up Othniel and Ehud, and the sudden disjunctive introduction of Deborah cannot help but lead the reader to wonder, where is the מושיע ("deliverer") this time?⁴²

41. Cf. Gen 28:16 where Jacob was surprised at the presence of the Lord in a place that was not marked out or identified as such.

42. "We have seen that the two parts of the exposition are linked and complement each other and together form the riddle of the savior's identity. For that purpose two points proved to be of particular importance: (1) the transition from v. 3 to v. 4, which raises the

Deborah Summons Barak

Despite the absence of a formal prophetic introduction, it is evident in verse 6 that Deborah summons Barak in order to provide him with a message from the Lord. Robert Boling argues that Deborah's question, "Has not Yahweh, the God of Israel commanded [you]?" (הלא צוה יהוה (אלהי ישראל), "assumes that the audience is already generally aware of Baraq's reluctance."⁴³ While Barak will certainly prove to have his problems, it is inappropriate to indict him of reluctance here. The interrogative ך in Hebrew can frequently communicate an exclamation with imperatival force of something previously unknown, and Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka specifically cite Judges 4:6 as an example of such in their grammar.⁴⁴ The same use of the interrogative particle appears later in the chapter when Deborah calls Barak to action in verse 14. Consequently, the text seems to indicate that Deborah's prophecy proclaimed a previously unknown announcement of victory to Barak and the people of Israel.

However, the question remains: Is Barak's response to Deborah's direction a sign of reluctance or humility? James Ackerman and Alberto Soggin, following the work of W. Richter,⁴⁵ have individually argued that the exchange between Deborah and Barak in verses 6–10 parallels other "call narratives" in both the Old Testament and ancient Near East that are characterized by the following form:⁴⁶

An allusion to distress

"and the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord" (v. 3a)

A commission

"And she sent and called to Barak . . ." (v. 6a)

question through the omission of the regular pattern; and (2) v. 5 which describes Deborah as a judicial figure and highlights the question of whether a judge is also a savior" (Amit, "Judges 4," 90).

43. Boling, *Judges*, 95.

44. Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (SB 27; 2nd ed.; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical, 2009), 574. See also, Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 185.

45. W. Richter, *Die sogenannten vorprophetischen Berufungsberichte* (FRLANT 101; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 169–81.

46. Ackerman, "Prophecy and Warfare," 8–9, and Soggin, *Judges*, 72–73.

<i>Objection on the part of the recipient</i>	“If you will not go with me, I will not go” (v. 8b)
<i>Prophetic assurance</i>	“surely I will go with you” (v. 9a)
<i>A sign</i>	“for into the hand of a woman, the Lord will sell Sisera” (v. 9b)

If this analysis is correct, then Barak’s reaction to the oracle is not hesitancy or reluctance. Instead, he is merely acting in a customarily self-deferential way, characteristic of called leaders in the ancient Near East (e.g., Moses, Gideon, and Saul).⁴⁷ While Barak’s response does raise questions for the reader, it does not necessarily portray him as cowardly or reluctant.

Barak’s Self-Interest

The above pattern does not fit precisely, but the general connections are illuminating and I believe convincing. Consequently, contrary to popular interpretation, Barak’s response is neither reluctant nor humble—he is actually self-serving and searching for honor (תפארת). This is not explicit in Barak’s words, but Deborah’s response in 4:9a can leave little doubt:

ותאמר הלך אלך עמך אפס כי לא תהיה תפארתך על-הדרך אשר אתה הולך

“And she said surely I will go with you, only the road upon which you are going will not be for your honor.”

Deborah the prophetess is just as alert to the feigned customary humility of Barak as she is to the future outcome of Israel’s battle. Barak does not appear to be requesting the Lord’s presence but Deborah’s, and this is likely why, unlike what is found in other call narratives, she promises *her* presence at the battle, not Yahweh’s. The passage also betrays Barak’s less-than-ideal motives when he seeks to negotiate with the command (צוה) of Yahweh in verse 8. Barry Webb recognizes this subtlety and aptly states:

47. Note the similarities with Gideon’s “humble” refusal to be king (Judges 8:22), while later naming his son Abimelech (lit., “my father is king”).

By showing how Barak was disciplined for manipulating Deborah, Yahweh's prophet, it raises in a preliminary way an issue (negotiation versus true religion) that will assume greater significance in the confrontations between Yahweh and Israel in 6:7–10 and 10:10–16, and become the central theme of the Jephthah narrative.⁴⁸

As the chosen leader, Barak's social position appears positive, yet his subtle desire for personal glory demonstrates his spiritual condition is that of the ensuing leaders of Israel in the book of Judges. Once again in verses 8–9, a tension exists as to who would be Israel's redeemer. Barak's desire for glory from winning the battle places him in opposition to the plans of the Lord, and after Deborah makes this publically known, it becomes clear to the reader that Barak is not Israel's deliverer.

Yahweh the Deliverer

Amit rightly recognizes that “the purpose of the story is to stress that God, and God alone, is the savior of Israel.”⁴⁹ And as the prophetess of Yahweh, the words of Deborah are vindicated by the precise movements of Israel's enemies, Jael's killing of Sisera, and the deliverance of the people. Much like the classical prophets that follow, Deborah prophesied that *Yahweh* would deliver his people.

Similarly, Elie Assis has argued that in the narrative, Deborah's words not only point toward Yahweh as the true deliverer, but her sex does as well.⁵⁰ Deborah's status as an established female judge and prophetess serves to remove her from the actual battle that brought about deliverance, and continues to demonstrate that Yahweh alone is Israel's savior. Both Deborah and Jael function within the battle scene to demonstrate a reoccurring theme for the book of Judges—Yahweh works in weakness. While it is obvious from this narrative that the Lord uses human deliverers, he has no desire for Israel to confuse their human agents of deliverance with the true source.

48. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 161.

49. Amit, “Judges 4,” 102. See also, Elie Assis, “‘The Hand of Woman’: Deborah and Yael (Judges 4),” *JHS* 5 (2005), 2.

50. Elie Assis, “Man, Woman, and God in Judg 4,” *SJOT* 20 (2006): 110–24.

CONCLUSION

After examining the prophetic identity and prophetic message of Deborah, how does this biblical reconstruction inform our understanding of prophecy in early Israel? If what is argued here is the case, the often presented thesis of the history of religions school that prophecy in Israel developed from an early ecstatic and socially ostracized prophetism into a more concretized court prophetism seen in the classical prophets, needs to be modified.⁵¹ The present reconstruction of Deborah does not appear to support this proposed development of prophecy. The following observations from this case study should be noted:

- 1) Deborah, as a prophetess, seems to show great similarity to the *āpiltum* witnessed in early Mari. Deborah's central position within Israel's leadership structure presents her as anything but socially ostracized or marginalized. There is nothing in the passage that indicates Deborah participated in or was associated with ecstatic prophetism.
- 2) There is no definitive reason to interpret Deborah as a primitive necromancer associated with a pagan cultic site because of the reference to the Palm of Deborah.
- 3) Deborah opposes Barak's desire for personal honor and presents Yahweh as Israel's sole deliverer from oppression.

Contrary to Schmitt's earlier assessment, perhaps the biographical enterprise does not need to end. There is still a place for biblical reconstructions. While unable to answer every question the present-day reader may ask of the text, the present work has revealed the shortcomings a few scholarly misconceptions about Deborah, and hopefully succeeded in providing in some way a fuller contextual understanding of early Israelite prophecy and one of its prophetesses.

51. See, Gustav Hölscher, *Die Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Religionsgeschichte Israels* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1914). For a more recent English presentation, see Haran, "From Early to Classical Prophecy," 102–15.