DEBORAH'S SONG:  
WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The Book of Judges is a collection of stories of ancient Israel, which have been worked over many times, and eventually brought together by the Deuteronomic editors of the 7th-6th centuries B.C. to form a history book with a strongly didactic aim. From the point of view of the modern study of hermeneutics it is the final form of the traditions which is most important, for that is what confronts the reader today and makes an impact upon the reader's mind. On the other hand biblical critics tend to approach a complex work like Judges in the manner of archaeologists, seeking to dig up the past and reveal the history and culture which lie below the surface. Between these two approaches there is an important middle ground, and that is the appreciation of the artefacts which are brought to the surface by literary-critical excavation. The greatest riches in the Book of Judges are artefacts of this kind. In this lecture I propose to examine the two surviving accounts of the battle instigated by Deborah from this point of view.

The battle with which we shall be concerned is most conveniently referred to as the Battle of the River Kishon, the river which runs through the broad Valley of Jezreel separating Galilee from central Palestine, and which reaches the sea at Tel Aviv. There are two accounts of it in Judges, the first in prose in chapter 4 and the second in poetry in chapter 5. The prose version belongs to the structure of the book as compiled by the Deuteronomic editors, and so the Deuteronomic layers have to be stripped off to bring the underlying narrative to light. These editors concluded this section of their work with the characteristic and conventional, but entirely incredible, comment: "And the land had rest for forty years". But this now appears at the end of 5.31. For between this narrative and its editorial conclusion another version in poetry has been inserted at a much later date. This has been done in the same

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on Wednesday, 13 October 1982.
way as the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15.1-18), which has been inserted at a suitable point in the prose account of the crossing of the Red Sea. In both cases these are very ancient poems, which have been preserved independently of the prose traditions to which they relate and where they now stand. Because the poems are ancient, and the prose accounts, at least in their present form, are comparatively late, it is tempting to suggest that the prose narratives are actually derived from the poems. But much the best solution is to see them as independent literary versions of a story long treasured in Israelite memory and retold in different ways. The link between them thus lies behind both in the oral tradition, and they have been shaped in different settings for different purposes. It will be seen that each has its own intrinsic interest, and each is a fine example of literary craftsmanship in its own right.

So our study is to be primarily a literary one, and we shall not be concerned with the history of the important victory which lies behind the story. It was certainly an important one, because it opened up Israelite control of the valley of Jezreel, which divides central Palestine from Galilee. It was also a remarkable example of tribal co-operation, if the details about the tribes in the poem can be relied on. But the date remains unknown. It is generally assigned to around 1150 B.C., but Mayes has recently argued that it should be dated nearer to the time of Saul, which would put it almost a century later.

Before we can compare the two accounts, we shall need to have the main outlines of the story in mind. This brings us to our first conundrum: it is virtually impossible to tell the story without drawing on both accounts, because each has gaps which can be supplied from the other. This will alert us to the fact that neither the prose nor the poem was ever intended to be a complete account, and the items which they include or omit are significant for the different aims of these two compositions. The one thing which they have in common, and which remains in everybody’s mind, is that after the battle the enemy leader Sisera takes refuge in the tent of a bedawin woman called Jael, who beats him to death by knocking a tent peg through his temples. Otherwise, if

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you are asked to retell the story in your own words, you will find
yourself using the prose version as your basis, just touching it up
with details drawn from the Song. And this is in fact what was
done in antiquity. Josephus gives a rather brief and typically
rationalized version of the story in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, and
only uses the Song to fill in the gaps of the prose. At around the
same time, Pseudo-Philo wrote his *Biblical Antiquities*, which is a
long and fanciful retelling of the early history of Israel. When he
reaches Deborah and Barak he really goes to town over it, making
the most of the narrative details which appeal to him from both
accounts. He then has none of the Song left for Deborah to sing,
and so introduces a lengthy substitute for it, which has a theme all
its own. The treatment is thus very different in these two works.
But both agree in finding the chief interest of the narrative in the
part that is played by a woman. So it has always been down the
centuries.

The point I want to argue in this lecture is that what one may
call the 'feminist' theme is not only prominent in the prose
narrative, but is the key to the whole composition in its original
form; but, by contrast, it is *not* the central motif of the Song,
where it has a different function, which is not always sufficiently
appreciated. We shall start with the prose, because it is much
easier to handle, and to this we now turn.

I. THE PROSE NARRATIVE

The story in Judges 4 begins with a threat to the security of
Israel, which is posed by Jabin, king of the great Canaanite city of
Hazor in upper Galilee. But all scholars are agreed that this
element is not original, but has been introduced by the
Deuteronomic editor, who wrongly identified our battle story, set
in a northerly part of Israel, and involving the use of chariots, with
the Jabin traditions which have survived in the conquest narrative
of Joshua 11.1-15. As the compilation of Joshua and Judges was
undertaken at roughly the same time (7th to 6th century B.C.), it is

4 Josephus, *Ant.*, v. 198-209. Josephus was writing about A.D. 90.
5 A Jewish work by an unknown author, wrongly attributed to Philo of
Alexandria. It was probably written in Hebrew shortly after the fall of Jerusalem
(so M. R. James, G. Kisch), and embodies many haggadic elaborations.
6 Ps.-Philo, 30-31.
7 Ibid., 32. On the theme of the song see further below.
likely that the compiler did not lift it out of Joshua, where it appears in an entirely different context, but used it independently. It is thus one of several old traditions which were available to the Deuteronomic compilers and found their way into both works. So all the references to Jabin in Judges 4 can be removed, and with them, I am glad to say, some of the difficult problems which attach to the geographical names in the narrative. This leaves us with an unknown enemy, commanded by a man called Sisera, and this information holds good for both prose and Song. Because Sisera is not a Semitic name, it is now widely held that he and his people should not be identified with Canaanites at all, but with one of the Sea Peoples, like the Philistines, who were becoming more and more of a threat along the coastal region at the time when the old Canaanite city-states were in decline.  

Without this complicating factor of Jabin, the story has three clearly defined scenes. First Deborah, a prophetess, inspires Barak the son of Abinoam to raise a fighting force to meet Sisera in the open field beside the river Kishon, but for some reason directs Barak to gather his troops to the commanding heights of Mount Tabor some fifteen miles away. Barak is afraid, and says he cannot go without Deborah, and she replies that in that case, though the Lord will give him victory, "nevertheless ... the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman". In the second scene the battle takes place, Sisera having arrived at the Kishon, and Barak swooping down from Mount Tabor. This is the point where all the later story-tellers fill in the narrative from the Song, for the battle is not described. According to the Song, "From heaven fought the stars, from their courses they fought against Sisera, The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon" (5.20 f). So Pseudo-Philo supposes that the stars became much brighter than usual and thereby burnt all Sisera's men to death, leaving only Sisera, because the Lord had commanded them not to touch him, so that he should be available for Jael to kill. 9 Josephus more plausibly supposes that the stars control the rain (which is what the poem probably means) so that a terrific storm burst over the armies. As the rain was driving in the face of

8 Cf. Soggin, op. cit., p. 63.
9 Divine action by the agency of the stars is the theme of Deborah's song in Ps.-Philo 32, and a parallel is drawn with the divine action by the agency of the waters in the exodus narrative. Jael's deed, though it is the main motive of the narrative in 30-31, is not fully integrated into this theological presentation.
Sisera’s men, but the Israelites were back to it, the Israelites had the advantage. But what neither Pseudo-Philo nor Josephus realize is that the poem probably means that the storm caused the Kishon to rise and the whole low-lying area became so boggy that chariot warfare became impossible. However, none of this is mentioned in the prose, though the fact that Sisera gets out of his chariot and runs off on foot (4.15) may well suggest that this is what the narrator supposed had happened when he said that “Yahweh routed Sisera and all his chariots” (4.15). Thus at this point the poem supplies an essential detail for making sense of the prose. Finally the third scene is Jael’s murder of Sisera in the tent, and it concludes with the arrival of Barak, who then sees at last how Sisera was indeed sold into the hand of a woman.

This is the outline of the story and it is already clear that, even in the existing version as edited by the Deuteronomic compiler, the real point is the connection between Deborah’s taunt to Barak and the fulfilment of her prophecy in Jael’s deed. This is so obvious that it comes as a surprise to discover that the most influential modern study of Judges by W. Richter tears the scenes apart, so that the story of Deborah and Barak is regarded as a compilation designed to provide a setting for the originally independent story of Jael. Richter’s main argument is that the story lacks integrity, for it begins with Deborah, but ends with Jael. He claims that Deborah’s taunt to Barak means that she herself will have the honour of annihilating Sisera, but the compiler has suppressed the original conclusion for the sake of the Jael episode. He also claims that the compiler has worked up a very local affair into a typical example of the holy war, as if this were somehow different from the sort of local engagement which might be behind Sisera’s flight to the tent of Jael. It must be objected that “holy war” terminology can be applied to any battle in the thought of old Israel, and that if this element is additional to the story, it becomes even more difficult to see why the account of the battle itself has been virtually suppressed. Moreover it is a gratuitous assumption that Deborah and Barak on the one hand and Jael on the other do not originally belong together, because the connection between them is confirmed by the Song.

To reach the pre-Deuteronomic narrative in fact is a much simpler matter than has often been supposed. The exclusion of the references to Jabin must carry with it the exclusion of geographical references which presuppose a setting nearer to Galilee, and these include Mount Tabor. Apart from these excisions a characteristic of the editing of this story is the way the editor repeats the word where he has interrupted the narrative to insert further (usually misleading) information. A simple example of this comes at the end of verse 15, where "Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot". Verse 16 then tells how Barak wiped out Sisera's army. But then the original narrative is picked up in verse 17 with the words "But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael..." Applying these principles, the expurgated narrative reads:

11 4.2a, 3b, 17b, 23f. Further Deuteronomic editing can be seen in 4.1, 2b (derived from v. 13), 3a, 4b-5 (in which Deborah is conformed to the model of the ruler-judges), 11 (circumstantial detail in preparation for v. 17). Deborah's palm tree (v. 5) may be a variant of the oak tree of another Deborah in Gen. 35.8, referring to the same locality.

12 The story as it stands requires two, if not three, different places called Kedesh in order to make sense of it: (a) in v. 6 Kedesh in Naphtali can be identified with the Kedesh seven miles north of Hazor, mentioned in Jos. 19.37, and selected here as Barak's place of residence on account of the Jabin tradition; (b) in v. 10 Kedesh is apparently substituted for Mount Tabor, and so may be identified with Khirbet Qadisha a little further east, towards the Sea of Galilee; in spite of references to the River Kishon in verses 7 and 13, this seems to be the site of the battle as the Deuteronomic editor understands it, cf. v. 11; (c) on the other hand, there is another Kedesh (Tell Abu Qadis) close to the Kishon, just south of Megiddo, which is the real site of the battle, and may well be the Kedesh referred to in v. 10 in the underlying tradition. Kedesh (= sanctuary) is a very common name, so that it is not surprising that the introduction of the Jabin material has caused the editor to imagine the location wrongly.

13 V. 15 ends wsys brglyw; v. 17 begins wsysr' ns brglyw. Similarly v. 7b adds information derived from v. 10, wrongly identifying Kedesh with Mount Tabor. Here the words "Go, gather" (Ik wmsktr) are picked up in the next verse by "and I will draw" (wmskty). The English versions obscure the fact that this is repetition of the same word, which gives an awkward impression in the Hebrew. Again, in v. 10 the words "And Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh" should probably be omitted (kdšh repeated from the end of v. 9). At the end of this verse "and Deborah went up with him" is virtual repetition of v. 9, occasioned by the insertion of v. 10a, which implies that Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh before the muster, and then of course she must continue to accompany him when the two tribes arrive. But the original text means that the men were already with Barak and Deborah when they went to Kedesh, which is the scene of the battle. Finally, in v. 17 the insertion about Jabin's peaceful relations is bounded by repetition of the name Heber the Kenite.

14 In v. 13 "nine hundred chariots of iron" is to be excluded as a note derived...
4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth... 6 sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam... and said to him, ‘Surely the Lord the God of Israel commands you: ‘Go... 7 and I will draw out Sisera to meet you by the River Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand’. 8 Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go’. 9 And she said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman’. Then Deborah arose and went with Barak... 10 to Kedesh; and ten thousand men went up at his heels... 12 Sisera called out all his chariots... and all the men who were with him from Harosheth-ha-goim to the River Kishon. 14 And Deborah said to Barak ‘Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Surely the Lord goes before you!’ ... 15 And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak ... And Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite... 18 And Jael went out to meet Sisera...

The rest everybody knows, but I will remind you of the ending in verse 22: “And behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking”. So he went in to her tent; and there lay Sisera dead with the tent peg in his temple”. And so the story ends.

Here, then, we have an heroic narrative. It is not a historical description of the highly important battle of the Kishon. It is directed only to one end, to present the story of the death of Sisera at the hands of a woman. The feminist theme is enunciated by the role of Deborah at the beginning. The prowess of a woman is prophesied by contrast with the cowardly reluctance of Barak. The story then shows how God does give Sisera into Barak’s hand, but only through the brave deed of the woman Jael. All the details are subordinate to this single aim. There is no reflection on morals from v. 3b. At the end of v. 14 the command to join battle is interrupted by the need to bring Barak and his army down from Mount Tabor. Here the secondary dependence of the editor on v. 10b is indicated by the change of the colourful “at his heels” (brglynw) to the conventional “after him” (hryw). In v. 15 “at the edge of the sword” is inconsistent with the main statement that “Yahweh routed” the enemy. This properly means to throw into confusion, and usually denotes divine action, cf. Ex. 14.24, where the same word is used. It is consistent with the implications of the poem, in which the victory is due to the flooding of the Kishon. The words should thus be bracketed as a gloss from the editorial v. 16. Soggin agrees that the phrase should be deleted, but, by retaining v. 16, wrongly emphasizes the contrast with the implications of 5.20 f. The fact is that the prose narrative in its original form presupposed precisely the same situation.
DEBORAH’S SONG

and feelings. We are not told why Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. An interpolated verse (17 b) tries to explain why Sisera should have sought refuge in Jael’s tent. This raises the moral question of her action. How could she be so treacherous to a man whose people were at peace with the Kenites? But the original narrative never said they were at peace. But there is no reflection on the morals of giving a man refuge and then murdering him. The moral questions are simply not raised. The story is a story, intended to entertain the hearers. And it succeeds by arousing curiosity about the part that a woman will play, and leading inevitably to the dénouement. And in the end Barak’s realization that that is the way Deborah’s words were to be fulfilled is the audience’s realization too, and nothing more needs to be said.

2. THE SONG

I have argued that the prose is a story which is aimed at retelling just one item from the treasured tradition of the great battle of the Kishon. It is suitable for telling round the camp-fire to while away the leisure hours. But the Song of Deborah is quite different. It is more like epic poetry, but it is presented in the form of a psalm, in which the hearers are called to praise the Lord for his mighty acts (5.2, 9, 10 f.). It is thus only to be expected that it should have been shaped for use in a liturgical setting. And because ancient Israel’s worship has been the object of much study and much speculation in recent scholarship, it has inevitably been caught up into discussion of the central institutions of Israel’s religion. Those who assert that there was a periodic, possibly annual covenant renewal ceremony imagine an occasion such as is described in Jos. 24.15 The tribal representatives all meet at the central shrine. Yahweh’s claim upon the people’s allegiance is solemnly rehearsed, as the people renew their pledge to remain loyal to Yahweh on their part and to observe his law. The Song of Deborah obviously makes a splendid statement of Yahweh’s claim on the people, because it describes a resounding victory in which his power was shown. So it can be regarded as intended for use in the liturgy at this point. This supposed Sitz im Leben for the Song has had its effect upon the interpretation, and indeed has been advanced as the way to solve the major difficulties of it.

The difficulties, in fact, are legion. The text is evidently to some extent in disorder, so that some verses, or parts of verses, appear to be misplaced. There are also many textual corruptions, necessitating conjectural emendation, which is always a dangerous practice. The poem contains words of uncertain meaning, so that we cannot always tell whether corruption of the text or our own ignorance of the full extent of the Hebrew language is the cause of our perplexity. Moreover there are signs of expansion and possible interpolations, just as in the prose narrative. Further, a lengthy period of oral transmission between the original composition of the poem and its first writing down is suggested by the observation that the form of the Hebrew words in the poem as it now stands cannot be older than the ninth century B.C. The contents, however, are clearly very much older.

An out-and-out liturgical interpretation was proposed in an article by Weiser in 1959. He started from the observation that the failure of the prose version to mention all the tribes (here listed in 5.14-18) is inexplicable if the poem is the victory song, composed for the common act of praise immediately after the battle itself. He therefore suggested that it was composed for a cultic ceremony at a later date, and it is participation in this renewed festival with which the list of tribes is concerned. Thus the full number of tribes never did take part in the battle, and were not even expected to. Hence chapter 4 is correct in claiming that only two tribes, Naphtali and Zebulun, were involved. The song is a liturgical piece, in which the participants are named and the tribal representatives are called out to take part in the procession. It must still be objected that, even in this situation, the naming of a list of tribes who have stayed away is extraordinary.

A very much better, and indeed much more sensitive, analysis of the poem was made shortly after Weiser by Blenkinsopp. He distinguished between the genuinely liturgical features (psalm-style) and the rest of the poem, which is more secular (ballad-

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17 This has been asserted by Garbini (see second note). Unfortunately I have not had access to his work.
DEBORAH'S SONG 167

style). This permits the conclusion that a kind of epic poem or ballad, celebrating the victory, has been brought into the hymnbook by the addition of a few touches to make it suitable for liturgical use. It does, then, constitute a psalm to celebrate the mighty acts of God, but only because of this later adaptation. It never was a liturgy in itself. Its place in the ceremonies of Israel need not concern us further. For this reason I shall summarily dismiss the liturgical additions in order to concentrate on the Song in what can reasonably be regarded as something like its original form. Verses 2-5, which recall the coming of Yahweh from the south in words almost identical with Ps. 68.8 f. (cf. Hab. 3.3-6) constitute the invitation to praise and conventional confession of faith.20 Verses 9-11 follow up the original opening of the Song with an invitation to rehearse the narrative that follows to all sections of the people on the liturgical occasion. Finally verse 31 a, "So perish all thine enemies, O Lord! But thy friends be like the sun as he rises in his might", forms the liturgical conclusion.

The original opening is thus to be found in verses 6-8, telling of the conditions that prevailed "In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath".21 The time referred to cannot be identified, but it is

20 Coogan has noted a number of contacts between Jud. 5. and Ps. 68. He suggests that Jud. 5 is the original, and the psalm is indebted to it. Thus Jud. 5.4 f. is fuller than Ps. 68.8 f. Other similarities are: v. 3, use of ſyr and źmr, cf. Ps. 68.5, 33; v. 12, šbh šbyk, cf. Ps. 68.19; vv. 14-18, mention of Benjamin, Zebulun and Naphtali, cf. Ps. 68.28; v. 16, hyn hmśptym, cf. Ps. 68.14; v. 26, rŠYW wmyśh, cf. Ps. 68.22, 24; v. 30, yhlqw šl. It must be pointed out that these coincidences of vocabulary are not sufficient to prove dependence on either side. If Jud. 5.4 f. is older than Ps. 68.8 f., it must still be regarded as accepted phrasing drawn from liturgical poetry about Yahweh, which has no direct relation to the story retold in Deborah's Song.

21 The specification of “the days of Jael” in parallel with Shamgar is extraordinary, for she was scarcely sufficiently prominent to characterize a whole era. Corruption is suspected on the grounds that the mention of “caravans” (rhwit) would suggest a reference to her if the original word had been rather similar. Soggin reads “in the days of the yoke” (hymy ʾl for hymy yʾl, assuming dittography of one letter), following Sellin and Grether. Shamgar is unknown, apart from the cryptic mention of him in Jud. 3.31, probably inserted at a late date into Judges because of the following mention of him in 5.6. But Shamgar is said to be the son of Anath, and Anat(h) is the name of the goddess-mother of Baal in the Ugaritic texts. Hence various scholars have sought a mythological background to the Song. Shamgar is the son of Anat in the sense that he belongs to those who worship her. But, as a warrior-goddess, she is also the model for Deborah (cf. P.C. Craigie, “Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery (Judges 5)”, ZAW, xc (1978), 374-81). Moreover, Jael can be compared to
clearly a time of oppression, and even weapons of war are scarce in Israel. The one bright spark is Deborah, who "arose as a mother in Israel". Here we can observe how different is the style of the ballad from that of the prose. The circumstances are left vague, and the function of Deborah is merely alluded to obliquely. We are not told what it is to be "a mother in Israel", but it can be presumed that it refers to Deborah as one whose act preserves the population of the nation. This allusiveness and obliqueness characterizes the whole poem.

These opening verses 6-8 constitute the first strophe of the structure of the poem. Thereafter it is possible to discern the following elements: a transitional verse (12) leads into the first main section of the poem on the tribes, which is divided into two strophes (13-15a and 15b-17); another transitional verse (18) another warrior-goddess, Athtart (= Astarte), who is sometimes mentioned alongside Anat, and whose name is invoked in curses as one who smashes the head of the enemy (e.g. CTA, 16. VI. 55-57). Taking up these possibilities J. G. Taylor ("The Song of Deborah and Two Canaanite Goddesses", JSOT, xxiii (1982), 99-108) has suggested that the Song has a deeper religious motive of showing the triumph of Yahweh through his warrior-ladies over the power of Canaan and its gods. However, this does not come to the surface in the poem as it stands, which can be much more satisfactorily interpreted within its own terms of reference.

22 Cf. I Sam. 13.19-22, which suggests that the Philistines had a monopoly of iron-working, whereas the Israelites had not yet acquired the necessary skills. But it is not necessary to assume that the poem is referring to an actual shortage of weapons. The words may simply be a vivid way of expressing the demoralization of the fighting men at this period. In the first part of v. 8 Soggin is surely right to take 'Ihym as subject, "God chose new men", as a result of the rise of Deborah (see commentaries for numerous other suggestions). The following words ('z lhm s'rym) appear to defy solution, and many emendations have been proposed, usually in connection with other ways of treating the preceding phrase. However, if Soggin's interpretation of 8 a is correct, a simple reconstruction of 8 b becomes possible, which involves only redivision of the words and addition of two vowel letters, which would not have been included when the poem was originally written, i.e. 'zhw hmśy 'rym = "the armed men of the cities came forth". The cause of the mistake was the frequent use of the particle 'z in the poem and the rarity of 'zl in Hebrew literature. For the substantival use of hmśym cf. Jud. 7.11.

23 The phrase occurs elsewhere only at II Sam. 20.19, where it refers to a city whose well-being maintains the population of Israel ("the heritage of Yahweh"). This is more likely to be the meaning here than the idea (accepted by Boling and Gray) that "mother" is comparable to "father" as a title of respect to a prophet (II Kings 2.12; 6.21; 13.14), and therefore actually denotes "prophetess" in the present context. As will be seen, the "mother in Israel" makes an ironical inclusion with the mother of Sisera at the end of the poem.
DEBORAH’S SONG opens up the central section on the battle, consisting of one strophe only (19-22); a third transitional verse (23) prepares for the last main section on the death of Sisera, which is once more in two strophes (24-27 and 28-30). This is an artistic scheme, in which the balance of the various parts is essential to the overall effect. Only when this is appreciated can the proper interpretation of the poem be reached.

The transitional verse 12 calls on Deborah to sing and Barak to lead the action which will restore the fortunes of Israel. Deborah’s song, of course, is not the poem itself, but the song which she sings with the women in the camp in support of the men as they go out to battle. The first main section of the two strophes then lists first the tribes who sent contingents to the battle, and then the tribes which might have sent contingents, but did not do so, and no doubt much regretted their failure afterwards. I am sure that this section must be interpreted in the traditional way, to refer to those who actually took part in the battle or failed to do so. As the list is not identical with the later lists of the twelve tribes, it is of great importance for the history of the Israelite polity in the time before the monarchy, but this subject cannot be pursued here.

What does concern us is the observation of H.-J. Zobel that the descriptive phrases are proverbial tags, such as are also found in the Blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49) and the Blessing of Moses (Dt. 33), and indeed in some cases using identical words. Thus they do not give the reasons why the various tribes came or stayed away, except by vague hints which are not intended to be taken seriously. We may well ask, then, what function this major section serves in the poem as a whole. The answer is, in fact, vitally important to the interpretation of the poem. What these verses do is to build up expectancy that there is to be a truly great battle, such as the...

24 Coogan is understandably reluctant to jettison any part of the poem, but the attempt to provide an integral interpretation suffers in consequence. The psalm-style verses (2-5, 9-11) emphasize the part played by the tribes and their leaders, and retention of these verses brings the section on the tribes (14-18) into the centre of the poem. The brief description of the battle (19-22) is thus ousted from its climactic position, which in my view is the pivot of the original composition.
25 Cf. Soggin, ad loc.
depressing conditions of the opening strophe required, and the transitional verse on Deborah's song prepared for. The audience is thus alerted to find the climax of the poem in the battle itself.

Verse 18, on Zebulun and Naphtali, forms the transition to the battle, and incidentally reveals that these are the tribes most directly concerned as in the prose account. But even this verse has its basis in tribal proverbs, thus maintaining the allusive style. The battle itself, described in a single strophe in verses 19-22, is equally indirect in its presentation. The Canaanite kings gather (perhaps implying an alliance of the Sea Peoples and certain local Canaanite cities such as Megiddo), and we are at once told that they got no change out of their outlay. The stars "fought against Sisera", and so we learn for the first time that Sisera is the leader of the enemy forces. "The torrent Kishon swept them away", and so we can conclude that this was the effect of the intervention of the stars. It is left to us to draw the further conclusions that the stars acted under the orders of Yahweh, and that their action took the form of a colossal storm. Finally there is a vivid vignette of the galloping of horses, and from this we can conclude that chariots were used, as is expressly stated in the prose, and that they were completely routed. This strophe brilliantly compresses the description of the action into a few visual moments of great emotional intensity, fulfilling the expectations built up in the preceding sections of the poem.

The rest of the poem moves at a slower pace, and is characterized by heavy irony. First the transitional verse 23 is a curse on Meroz, probably referring to the inhabitants of a place nearby who failed to give help in the mopping-up operation after the rout. This verse is so obscure that it is often regarded as an intruder into the poem—but that scarcely explains it. If I am right in giving it

28 Thus Naphtali's prowess "on the heights of the field" can scarcely be the same as the victory in the low-lying valley of the Kishon; hence Zobel refers it to Naphtali's acquisition of upper Galilee, which in my view happened later as a result of the success of the battle.

29 The repeated "to the help of Yahweh" appears to be "holy war" terminology, but is not out of line with the ballad, in spite of its generally secular character, cf. v. 13. Some editors wish to eliminate "says the angel of Yahweh" in favour of a shorter text, which would also improve the rhythm. Those who retain it assume that the messenger is a prophet giving a divine oracle. Meroz is unknown, so that it is impossible to decide whether its inhabitants, or the people so designated, were Israelites or Canaanites whose friendship could be counted on. The circumstances are parallel to 8.4-9, and it can be assumed that the curse was put into effect by punitive action.
the status of a transitional verse, like verses 12 and 18, it can be explained as providing a foil to the last main section of verses 24-30. Here the first strophe blesses, by contrast, Jael. Again the episode is told in the most allusive manner. It describes how “he asked water”, but it is not until the moment when she kills him that his identity is revealed to be Sisera. Instead of water she gives him a bowl of yoghurt, and of course that suggests a degree of friendship which goes beyond his expectation. The narrative at once goes on to describe how Jael picked up the tent-peg (or perhaps the mallet for use with tent-pegs), and if we forget about the description in chapter 4 we can assume that Sisera is standing up with his face in the bowl, and she gives him a tremendous blow with the mallet from behind, so that he falls and dies. Thus the death appears to be differently imagined from the prose version. But this does not justify the view that the prose is due to misunderstanding of the poem. Rather they are independent variations of the tradition. But what is more to the point is the skilful use of repetition: “He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead”. Thus the description at this point is expanded far beyond necessity so as to build up to its climax, the fact that Sisera is dead. This is the end of the strophe. As I see it, the whole purpose of this description is to concentrate attention on the annihilation of Sisera, and there is no reversion to the prowess of Jael, in spite of the initial blessing. And the strophe concentrates on the annihilation of Sisera, because allusively, obliquely, it is intended to represent the annihilation of the whole of his army at the River Kishon.

The concluding strophe also brings in a woman, this time with even heavier irony. It is a description of Sisera’s mother, awaiting the return of her son triumphant with the spoils, wondering why he is so slow to appear, trying to reassure herself that all is well. And so the poem ends. 30 The audience know full well that Sisera will never return, and his mother’s anxiety will never be allayed. Thus, in its different way, this strophe also represents the total annihilation of the enemies of Israel, as the concluding liturgical

30 Coogan aptly quotes the equally ironical ending of the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens:

O lang, lang may the ladies stand
Wi thair gold kems in thair hair
Waiting for thair ain deir lords
For they’ll se thame na mair.
addition (31 a) rightly suggests. But the ballad itself does not use such a pious ending. The audience, who have been put on tenterhooks in the description of the battle, are now expected to sit back with a grin and a chuckle and a great sense of satisfaction.

To appreciate the poem as a whole it is necessary to observe two things. Firstly the real plot of the poem is confined to the opening strophe, expressing the situation of oppression, and the central strophe, describing the battle. The first and last main sections, each comprising two strophes, are subordinate to these. The two strophes on the tribes delay the climax. The two final strophes on Sisera’s death draw out the climax, which has already been reached, underlining in two different ways the completeness of the victory. Thus this first observation leads to the conclusion that Jael’s murder of Sisera, in spite of being the most famous element in the poem, is not its climax nor its purpose. The second observation follows from this. There is an artistic use of the women, as in the prose, in that Deborah appears twice at the beginning of the poem, and the poem ends with two more references to women, Jael and Sisera’s mother. But unlike the prose, no connection is established between them. The poem is not concerned with the fact that Sisera will perish by the hand of a woman. The mention of Deborah at the beginning and the other women at the end does make an artistic inclusion, but the balance is not between Deborah and Jael, but between Deborah the “mother in Israel” and the mother of Sisera, whose son, and indeed whose whole nation, is ruined by the battle.

The poem achieves its effects through oblique allusion. This is possible because the bard can presuppose that his audience are thoroughly familiar with the whole story already. His situation is comparable to that of the Greek tragedians, whose dramas consist in putting a new and arresting slant on a well-known tale. Though many a story-teller would place the emphasis on what I have called the feminist theme, as has happened in the prose, this was not the purpose of the bard of Deborah’s song, though he was using the same materials.

3. The place of women

The part played by the women in these superb compositions should not be over-emphasized. Inevitably the more extreme proponents of feminist theology today are likely to seize on Deborah and Jael in order to fight their own battles. However, it
does seem clear that the Deuteronomic editor has brought Deborah into line with the ruler-judges who form the basis of his chronological scheme (4.4 b, 5), though the fact that he does not record her number of years in office shows that this is not based on the same traditional information as the so-called minor Judges of 10.1-5 and 12.7-15. As he has apparently done this without a qualm, we must assume that the idea that a woman should hold such a position (at least in olden days when things were different!) was not anathema to him. But history shows that women of exceptional capacity for leadership have broken through conventional restraints again and again. Deborah has a modern counterpart from this point of view in Mrs. Golda Meir, until recently the prime minister of the traditionally male-dominated Jewish people. However the Song of Deborah does not really confirm Deborah's formal governmental position as imagined by the Deuteronomic editor, even if limited to her own tribe of Ephraim. The poem suggests no more than a prophetic charisma, which was remembered because of her intervention at a crucial moment in Israel's history. And for this she is rightly celebrated as a mother in Israel.

Jael, on the other hand, is a bedawin housewife, and acts entirely on her own initiative. There is no sense of breaking free from the conventional restraints of her social position. Her action is, as we have seen, morally ambiguous. But her courage is sufficient to silence criticism on that score. And so she goes down to history as the model of the brave woman, whose decisive action belies the commonly accepted notion that women are the weaker sex. From a realistic point of view such examples should be accepted as valuable evidence to refute the myth of the weakness of women, which seems to owe more to male chauvinism than to a rational assessment of the facts. But from the point of view of narrative the contrast is bound to exercise great appeal, for the more the weakness of women is emphasized, the greater the effectiveness of showing a splendid exception to the rule. And so it

31 According to the chronology of Judges, the period of deliverers (Retterzeit) is covered by chapters 3-8, in which periods of oppression alternate with periods of rest. Thereafter the period of judges (Richterzeit) measures the time by the length of each judge's period in office (chapters 10-16). Thus Deborah's period of office falls within the former scheme, and so cannot be specified, cf. W. Richter, Die Bearbeitungen des "Retterbuches" in der deuteronomischen Epoche (Bonn, 1964), pp. 132-41.
comes about that Jael is the model for another celebrated woman of Jewish literature, the story of Judith. In this very elaborate tale of a woman's stratagem, composed in the second century B.C., the heroine contrives to be alone in the tent with the enemy captain Holofernes, and cuts off his head while he is in a drunken stupor, and triumphantly carries it off in a bag to the Jewish camp. The details are thus not close to the story of Jael, though the theme is similar and a debt to the Jael story is generally recognized by scholars. However, Judith in her turn has influenced the retelling of the Jael episode in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*. Here Jael puts on her finery in order to lure Sisera into her tent, where the bed is rather improbably strewn with roses. She mingles wine with the milk, so that he sleeps like the drunken Holofernes. She tumbles him off the bed before driving the tent-peg through his temples, just as Judith tumbled the body of Holofernes after cutting off his head. Then when Barak arrives in pursuit, he praises Jael for her deed, and then cuts off Sisera's head (another touch from Holofernes) and sends it off to Sisera's mother (as Judith brought Holofernes' head back to the Jewish camp). But here at least Pseudo-Philo manages to produce a touch of irony worthy of the theme. For he makes Barak add the macabre message, "Receive your son whom you expected to come with the spoil".

It seems to me that the theme of the weakness of women in these later works has led straight into the trap of exploitation of sex. It is simply assumed that, if a woman is the heroine, she is bound to owe her success to her beauty and sex appeal, which puts the strong male opponent off his guard. We find a similar characteristic in the unashamedly ribald and bawdy tales of Samson. However much the story of Judith, at least, attempts to wrap it up in the most self-righteous piety on her part, the author cannot be excused from the charge of titillating his audience. We may be thankful that the fully canonical versions of the story in Judges 4 and 5 are free from such motifs, which inevitably tend to degrade women. Properly understood, these chapters are variant narrations of a celebrated victory in the remote past of Israel's history. The narrative of chapter 4 retells the well-known tale with a special ironical slant. It is the story of how, contrary to expectation, Sisera fell by the hand of a woman, and the treatment of the theme is consistent with the historic significance of the event. The song of chapter 5, on the other hand, is a ballad aimed
at producing a powerful emotional effect, referring obliquely to the well-known facts, and using the theme of the women as an ironic counterpoint to its central preoccupation with the victory in a highly artistic composition. Here, then, are two contrasted works of literature, each brilliant in its own way, and both of them precious artefacts from the more ancient levels of the archaeology of holy scripture.