Deborah, a Prophetess: the Meaning and Background of Judges 4:4-5

© Klaas Spronk

4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. (NRSV)

This at first sight simple text calls forth a number of questions. Who was Deborah? Was she really a prophetess, as she is called in Judg. 4:4? Or is this title anachronism, as suggested by many scholars? Was she married to a man called Lapidoth or should this word be taken literary: was she a ‘woman of torches’, or, more freely translated: ‘a spirited woman’? Was she a judge like the male judges of this book or is she rightly left out of the list of judges in 1 Sam. 12:11 and Heb. 11:32? Is the palm tree under which she is said to reside named after her or after another woman?

The person of Deborah has attracted much less attention than the song named after her. On the one hand this is due to the scarce biographical information given in Judg. 4:4-5, part of which is usually regarded as secondary; on the other hand there does not seem to be a problem with regard to the historical reliability of the tradition of this woman in this function. In most commentaries she is compared to the female prophetesses of Mari and Emar or related to female seers among ancient, pre-Islamic Arabs. In this paper I want to present a new theory about the person of Deborah and the place given to her as a prophetess within the story of Israel as recounted in the books Judges, Samuel and Kings. I will tentatively suggest some new answers to the questions formulated above. The basis for this is a new interpretation of Judg. 4:5. In my opinion this verse should not be regarded as a disturbing editorial expansion,

but rather as an original part of the story about the deliverance of Israel from Sisera and his mighty army.

Most commentators agree with the literary critical analysis of Judg. 4:4-5 by Wolfgang Richter, which can be summarized as follows. Verse 4a, ‘And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth’, belongs together with vv. 6-9 about her conversation with Barak to the oldest redactional layer introducing the story of the battle. The second part of v. 4 and v. 5 can be left out without breaking the story line; on the contrary, the information given in vv. 4b-5 seems to make things unnecessarily complicated. Verse 4b, ‘she judged Israel at that time’, looks like a later addition relating Deborah in a stereotypical manner (according to the way the judges are described in 2:16, 18) to the judges installed by Yhwh to rescue Israel. The secondary character is underlined by the use of the unnecessary personal pronoun אָיִן at the beginning functioning as a connecting element and by the use of the expression אָיִן at the end, which appears to be typical of editorial passages (cf. 3:29; 12:6; 14:4 and ‘on that day’ in 4:23 which is part of the clearly editorial framework). The information given about Deborah in v. 5 is ascribed to a later editor who wished to explain what was said about Deborah in v. 4b using a similar form: just like v. 4b the next verse begins with אָיִן, followed by an active participle. The location of Deborah’s activities on a place between Ramah and Bethel, in the tribal area of Benjamin, does not accord well with the fact that the events described in the rest of this chapter take place in a region near the northern border of Israel. To this can be added that the remark about the Israelites coming to Deborah for judgement seems to indicate a different use of the verb ‘to judge’: not the political meaning as in v. 4b and the rest of the book of Judges but in the forensic sense of administering justice. As the reason for the assumed expansion of the text it is usually assumed that a later editor related the Deborah of Judg. 4-5 with the woman bearing the same name who was the nurse of Rebecca and who was, as can be read in Gen. 35:8, buried under an oak below Bethel. According to Lindars ‘the later editor, knowing the place, has decided that it was the right place for Deborah simply because the name was the same. This was not necessarily due to simple-minded confusion, but was the result of an hermeneutical principle, whereby one passage of scripture is elucidated by reference to another. In this case it furnished the location of Deborah, which was not given in the text.’


4. Lindars, op. cit., 183.
This explanation of v. 5 is not in all aspects convincing. If Lindars is right in assuming that a later editor used Gen. 35:8 to fill the gap of information left in Judg. 4, then why did he not cite it properly? In Gen. 35:8 we hear of Rebecca’s nurse Deborah being buried ‘under the oak below Bethel’ and that this oak received on this occasion the name ‘oak of weeping’ (אֲלָלָה הַבָּשָׁם). Why does the assumed editor not speak in Judg. 4:5 of an oak, but instead of a palm tree or, to be more precise, of עֵץ הַבָּשָׁם, using an uncommon vocalization? A commonly accepted bridge between these names was constructed by Richter. He relates both trees to ‘the oak of Tabor’ (אֲלָלָה הַבָּשָׁם) mentioned in 1 Sam. 10:3, which is also located in the vicinity of Bethel. This would be according to an old suggestion a corruption of אֲלָלָה דָבְרָה, ‘the oak of Deborah’. This does not explain, however, the use of the word עֵץ instead of the expected אֲלָלָה. According to Lindars the unusual vocalization might indicate ‘a different tree from the various kinds of palm (...) it might denote any tree.’ Why did the editor not use then, one could ask, the normal word in Hebrew for tree? More to the point seems to be here the explanation of this word by Penna as polemically vocalized with the vowels of ובש, ‘shame’, indicating that we are dealing here with a pagan cult object. Lindars reports but not accepts this suggestion. In my opinion, however, this could very well be a first clue to a better understanding of this verse.

Another problem concerning the view that Judg. 4:5 is the work of a later editor has to do with the use of the expression לֵוֵת לֵוֵת מִלָּה. Most commentators agree that it is used in a different way than the verb לֵוֵת in v. 4b. It is usually interpreted in the sense of administering justice, but this would be the only place in the book of Judges where it would have this meaning. There are no other examples of people called ‘judge’ in this book being described as acting in this way. The closest parallel for this would be 1 Sam. 7:15-17, which is usually interpreted as an editorial expansion clarifying Samuel’s role as one of the judges. Here we read how Samuel worked as a judge in Israel, but in these verses only the verb לֵוֵת is used and not the expression לֵוֵת מִלָּה and it is not necessary to think here of other activities than political or sacred.

---

5. Richter, op. cit., 40; cf. also HAL, 1617.
7. Cf. also B. Halpern, The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History, San Francisco 1988, 91: ‘the substitution of the palm for an oak is not an error that a historian stealing a literary tradition makes. Are trees the same or are they not? (…) the logical explanation for the tradition is that the prose narrator (or a source) knew of a tree named for Deborah; oblivious to the etiology in Genesis 35:8, he assumed the tree commemorated the activity of a major historical figure. In other words, Deborah’s location arose from (possibly older) deduction’.
8. A. Penna, Giudici e Rut, Turin 1963; cited by Lindars and also by J.A. Soggin, Judges (OTL), London 1981, 64.
Becker speaks of the ‘altertümlich wirkende Inhalt’ of v. 5. It appears this is caused by the two elements mentioned above: the location and the use of לְמַעַ参考资料，在 that cannot be simply explained as editorial. His conclusion, however, is: ‘ob v. 5 (...) alte Überlieferung enthält, ist kaum zu entscheiden, aber eher unwahrscheinlich: Der Vers erklärt sich gut als Interpretation und Konkretisierung des vorgegebenen, von DtrH formulierten v. 4’. There are, however, too many difficulties in seeing v. 5 simply as a later added clarification of some elements in v. 4 and there is enough reason to consider more seriously the possibility of v. 5 containing the oldest tradition to which v. 4a and v. 4b have been added. It was already suggested by Smend, that contrary to the common scholarly opinion Judg. 4:4b-5 could have been based on a historically reliable tradition. The authority of the prophetess and the place where she resided would explain why according to the song of Deborah the battle against the Canaanites was not restricted to the northern tribes but concerned all tribes of Israel.

Let us look again, in the first place, at the use of לְמַעַ参考资料, in v. 5b. Boling suggests that ‘it stands for her decision in response to a particular inquiry’ and should be compared to the use of לְמַעַ参考资料 in Judg. 13:12 (‘What will be the judgment of the boy?’). It is interesting to note that this inquiry comes from a human, Manoah, and is adressed to a divine messenger. The action described in Judg. 4:5 can be interpreted in the same way: the people of Israel come to Deborah to receive with her help a divine oracle. לְמַעַ参考资料 would have been used here then in a way comparable to the expression לְמַעַ参考资料, ‘the breast-piece of judgement’ in Exod. 28:15 denoting the place where the priest kept the Urim and Thummim, the means by which an oracle of God could be asked. This use of לְמַעַ参考资料 can also be related to Ugaritic mtp in the mantic text KTU 1.124. In this text the deified ancestor of the royal family seems to give an answer to a scrocerer, called ‘the lord of the great gods’, on a question about the fate of an apparently sick boy child. This answer is indicated as his ‘judgement’ (mtp). We are dealing here with a form of necromancy. Could this also be the background of the situation

---

15. R.G. Boling, Judges (AB), Garden City 1975, 95; this suggestion is rejected by Soggin, op. cit., 64.
described in Judg. 4:5? The given location can be interpreted as an indication pointing in this direction. The ‘palm tree of Deborah’, between Ramah and Bethel, can be related to the place south of Bethel where according to Gen. 35:8 Deborah, the nurse of Rebecca, was buried. One can imagine that the tomb of a person honoured as a helper in lifetime could have become a place for consulting the dead. Halpern makes the interesting observation that ‘nurse of Deborah’ can be interpreted as a subjective genitive: not the woman who nursed Rebecca, but the woman who helped Rebecca by nursing her son, namely Jakob. This suggestion, supported by the timing of her death, would offer an even more likely candidate for this function of postmortal adviser to ‘the sons of Israel’. As was remarked earlier, it is not clear how the oak of Gen. 35 turned into a palm tree, if indeed has to be translated this way. Maybe we should not look, as suggested by Richter, at ‘the oak of Tabor’ of 1 Sam. 10:3, but at Judg. 20:33 referring to a place in the same neighbourhood, north of Gibeon and south of Bethel, called Baaltamar (בתמר). Its precise location is not known, but it seems to be not too farfetched to assume a relation with . It would offer the solution to the problem of the uncommon vocalization. As was noted by Penna the vowels are probably taken from (‘shame’). This pejorative reference is usually connected with elements of the rejected Baal cult, as can be seen in the names Ishboshet and Mephiboshet replacing the original Ishbaal and Mephibaal. The name of the pagan god Molech, who can be regarded as the chthonic aspect of Baal, representing this god of fertility during his stay in the netherworld, can be explained as a similar distortion of the original melek. All this makes it likely that the of Judg. 4:5 refers to a place originally connected with some kind of Baal cult like the cult of Baal Peor, which could very well have included necromancy. The name Tomer Deborah can be interpreted then as a combination of an indication of this kind of cult practised there and the name of the venerated ancestor, Deborah, who acted as a spokeswoman of the divine world.

---

19. Halpern, op. cit., 102, n. 27.
20. See n. 9 above.
25. Because of this location and its probable meaning we can not agree with Block, art. cit., 241-247, that Deborah is presented here as a positive alternative to a degenerate priesthood. His suggestion is based of the interpretation of 1 Sam. 2:12-13 as indicating that the sons of Eli ‘did not know Yhwh or the oracles of the priests’ (242). Deborah would have been a legitimate alternative to this degenerate priesthood. It is more likely, however, that has the same meaning here as in Deut. 18:3, namely the ‘due portion’of the offering; cf. Kyle McCarter, op. cit., 78.
Originally the story of Judges 4 seems to have told of Israelites who suffered under the yoke of a Canaanite king and went to a woman performing necromancy to get advise. The situation would be the same then as in 1 Sam. 28, where Saul, threatened by a Philistine army, seeks help from the woman of Endor. She is called ‘mistress of a spirit of the dead’ (כְּלָלָה אָוֶּה, 1 Sam. 28:7). This probably indicates that she had contact with one special person from the realm of the dead acting as an intermediary between her and other spirits of the dead. This is a common feature in ancient and modern spiritistic literature. As in the Ugaritic text referred to above this venerated ancestor is mentioned by name. In KTU 1.124 we hear of Ditanu, in Judg. 4:5 the name is Deborah. Originally the human person performing the necromancy probably remained anonymous, just as the woman of Endor.

As this old story became part of the history of Israel as one nation with one God who leaves no room for any other divine authority this now dubious context of necromancy had to be changed. For this reason the anonymous scorceress and the venerated spirit of a dead person called Deborah were taken together and reformed to Deborah the prophetess. She was introduced in a manner similar to the presentation of Ehud in Judg. 3:15: ‘Ehud, son of Gera, a Benjaminite, a mancripled in his right hand’, and of Jephthah in Judg. 11:1: ‘And Jephthah, the Gileadite, was a mighty warrior and he was the son of a prostitute and Gilead had sired Jephthah’. So first comes the name and this is followed by some personal information. In the case of Deborah we hear relatively little about her family. Another peculiarity is the reference to her profession. This has no parallel in the otherwise related introductions and thus attracts extra attention. can be regarded as the counterpart of the of 1 Sam. 28:7, the woman Saul went to because God did not speak any more through the prophets (1 Sam. 28:6, 15). As was already suggested by Jepsen, the title has been given to Deborah in a later stadium to mark. We can add now that this done to secure the distinction between the correct and the more dubious ways of making contact with the world of the divine. It is also in line with the observation of Graeme Auld and others about the title as added to the stories of early Israel in a later stage.

Another remarkable element in the way Deborah is presented here is that we hear nothing of her father or her tribe. Instead, she is said to be . At first sight this

26. According to Lindars, op. cit., 184, the consecutive verb continues the past continuous sense of . He translates ‘they used to come up’. It is more consistent, however, to put on the same level as the wayyiqtol forms in vv. 1-3; cf. E. van Wolde, ‘Deborah and Ya’el in Judges 4’, in: B. Becking, M. Dijkstra (eds.), On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes (Biblical Interpretation Series 18). Leiden 1996, 283-295, esp. 287.
27. Cf. Spronk, op. cit., 254; cf. also the title ‘lord of the great gods’ (‘adn ’ilm rbm) in the Ugarit text KTU 1.124 mentioned above.
29. A. Jepsen, Nabi: Soziologische Studien zur alttestamentlichen Literatur und Religionsgeschichte, München 1934, 151, n. 2; cf. also Smend, op. cit., 45.
seems to be no more than the indication that Deborah was a married woman: the wife of an otherwise unknown man called Lapidoth. As with Ehud and Jephthah one would expect this information to serve a certain goal. According to Malamat we should compare it to one of the prophetesses mentioned in the Mari letters being called ‘the wife of a man’.31 He assumes that this was done here and also in the case of the prophetess Huldah, ‘the wife of Shallum’ (2 Kgs. 22:4) ‘to stress their stability and reliability’.32 Susan Ackerman sees this less positively as the attempt of a male redactor to ‘domesticate’ the female cultic functionary Deborah. In Judg. 5 she still appears without this ‘womans’ customary trapping of a husband’.33 One can also think, however, of a symbolic meaning of this name, because in the normal plural form לֵפסֶרֶת it can be used as another word for ‘lightning’, which is the meaning of the name Barak.34 Some take it as an indication of her character: ‘an inflamed and inflaming woman’.35

When we take a good look at the Hebrew text we note that the first words of v. 4 can be read as a poetic line with אַאָשֶׁת יַבָּא to hV’ai being parallel to לֵפֶסֶרֶת tv,ae. This is supported by the fact that לֵפֶסֶרֶת has a feminine ending instead of the common masculine. This may be due to the influence of the feminine ending of the parallel לֹמְסָה.36 For this reason it seems most likely that לֵפֶסֶרֶת denotes Deborah as the counterpart of Barak. On the other hand this name can be regarded as symbolic for her relation with God, as can be derived from the fact that this word is mentioned in descriptions of the theophany in Exod. 20:18 and Ezek. 1:13.

We may now even go one step further and consider the possibility that the name Deborah as used by the later editor is also meant symbolically.37 Being explicitly introduced here as a prophetess, her name recalls the fact that a prophet is automatically associated with God.38

---

31. aššat awīlim in ARM, XIII, 114, 8.
36. Cf. the remark by Van Wolde, art. cit., 287, n.5 (also in ‘Ya’el in Judges 4’, ZAW 107 [1995], 240-246, esp. 240, n. 4) that the female plural form ‘can perhaps be explained from the fact that in this text it is associated with a woman’.
Old Testament with the word רָבָדָה, he or she speaks in the name of God (cf. Deut. 18:18 and especially Jer. 18:18: ‘the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet’). Instead of the usual translation with ‘bee’ דֶּרֶךְ, could very well have been associated in the present context with רָבָדָה: ‘the woman of the word’. 38 This is also supported by the wordplay of the name Deborah with the verb דֶּרֶךְ in Judg. 5:12. The prophetess seems to have been named in this first place after the location where she was said to have worked. In this way the editor who was responsible for the careful adaptation of the old tradition described in Judg. 4:5 was able to repress any remaining idea of a relation with a spirit of the dead and necromancy: Deborah was to be regarded as a prophetess and as nothing else.

Verse 4b, ‘she judged Israel at that time’, can be ascribed to a still later redaction, in which Deborah is given her place among the judges. 39 Following the analysis of Richter many scholars assume that v. 4b and v. 5 belong to the same deuteronomistic edition with v. 5b explaining Deborah’s work as a judge. Our study may have made clear that it is more likely to see things precisely the other way. The historically more reliable but theologically hard to accept tradition of v. 5 was adapted to the later Yahwistic standards; first by turning the woman mediating divine oracles with the help of necromancy into a prophetess, a woman speaking only the word of Yhwh, secondly by placing her in the ranks of the judges. The latter was done despite the fact that she never really acted as a judge and was therefore rightly left out in the list of judges in 1 Sam. 12:11.

All this is admittedly no more than a hypothesis partly based on circumstantial evidence, but they are some clear advantages compared to the older historical critical interpretation. We were able to find some more or less plausible answers to the questions formulated at the beginning about the person of Deborah and her function. The theory presented here may also shed some new light on the ongoing discussion about the relation between Judg. 4 and Judg.

38. Cf. K. Deurloo, in: H. Blok et al., Geen koning in die dagen: over het boek Richteren als profetische geschiedschrijving, Baarn 1982, 37-38; F. van Dijk-Hemmes, Sporen van vrouwen teksten in de Hebreeuwse Bijbel, Utrecht 1992, 183; B.-J. Diebner, ‘Wann sang Deborah ihr Lied? Überlegungen zu zwei der ältesten Texte des TNK (Ri 4 und 5)’, AEBT 14 (1995), 106-130, esp. 114 (he translates the name Deborah as ‘Wörtn’). The least one can say about this theory is that it makes more sense than some interpretations based on the translation of the name Deborah with ‘bee’: (1) the theory by J.G. Williams, ‘The Structure of Judges 2.6-16.31’, JSOT 49 (1991), 77-85, that the book of Judges is constructed according to the cycle of the solar year, in which Deborah (‘bee’) and Barak (‘lightning’) appear as ‘signs of spring’ (83); (2) the ‘apicultural’ interpretation of Judg. 4-5 by B.A. Asen, ‘Deborah, Barak and Bees: Apis mellifera, Apiculture and Judges 4-5’, ZAW 109 (1997), 514-533, reading the story along the lines of the life cycle of a honey bee colony.
39. See next to the remarks above about the literacy critical analysis of this verse also K.-D. Schunk, ‘Falsche Richter im Richterbuch’, in: R. Liwak, S. Wagner (eds.), Prophetie und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit im alten Israel. Festschrift für Siegfried Herrmann, Stuttgart 1991, 364-370, stating that Deborah and Eli were actual persons made a judge only by the late deuteronomistic redaction.
5. It may be worthwhile to look with extra attention at the places in these chapters where Deborah is mentioned by name because of its possible secondary nature. We already noted above the wordplay with the name of Deborah in 5:12.

Awake, awake, Deborah, awake, awake, utter a song

This is not the place to go into further detail, but it is interesting to note that the syntactical structure of another verse mentioning Deborah, 5:7b, causes problems to the interpreter. The verb in the first person is followed directly by the name of Deborah. One would have expected the insertion of the personal pronoun before the name. In another verse speaking of Deborah, 5:15, there is a problem with the use of the first person as well. In 5:7 Deborah receives the title ‘mother in Israel’ (מַלְאָכָה). Within the song she is contrasted in this way to Sisera’s mother (v. 28), but it also seems to relate her to the later prophets Elijah and Elisha, who are both called ‘father, chariots and horsesmen of Israel’ (2 Kgs. 2:12; 13:14).

Within the theory of the prophetess Deborah as a secondary element one could consider the possibility that like the title ‘prophetess’ the title ‘mother’ is added to the text and derived from later traditions about the prophets in Israel.

We may conclude with a general observation about the role of prophets and prophecy in the stories in the books Judges, Samuel and Kings. The proposed interpretation and suggested background of Judg. 4:4-5 can be related to the view that the story of the שְׁלֹשַׁי in Judg. 6:7-10 sent by Yhwh to Israel, is a later addition. We seem to be dealing here with a redaction introducing Deborah as an example of all following prophets. This is apparent in the titles given to her and also in her relation to the political leader, which has clear parallels in the later stories about Samuel and Saul, Nathan and David, Elijah and Ahab. In its present form this has to be regarded as literary fiction. The historical reality, which has left its

42. Cf. Lindars, op. cit., 238.
43. Cf. Van der Kooij, art. cit., 146.
46. Cf. Auld, ZAW 96, 79; cf. also the remark by L.R. Klein, The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges, Sheffield 1988, 50, about the sending of ‘a man, a prophet’: ‘This recalls 4.4, in which Deborah is introduced as “a woman, a prophetess”. The reader is primed for high expectations. If a woman prophetess could be as effective as Deborah, what will “a man, a prophet” be able to achieve?’
47. Cf. Van der Kooij, art. cit., 141, n. 11 and 12.
traces in the literary sources, is that ancient Israelite prophecy only gradually and later than suggested in stories like Judg. 4 broke free from the common ancient Near Eastern mantic practices like necromancy.