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Deborah and Barak: An example of complementarian leadership?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the respective roles of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4 and 5. Traditionally Deborah has been counted as one of Israel's 'judges' (i.e., divinely-appointed leaders who emancipated Israel from foreign oppression). Following Block, this discussion argues that a close reading of Judges suggests otherwise. Comparison between Deborah and other judges in the book demonstrates that Deborah's role in the book of Judges was quite distinct; Deborah had a prophetic role as the person through whom God's remedy to the current crisis was revealed. Barak functioned in the typical role of judge (military deliverer), but together he and Deborah provide an early biblical example of complementary leadership.

KEY WORDS: Deborah; Barak; Judge(s); Prophet(ess); Leadership

Leadership is Male. David Pawson's controversial title is certainly provocative,² if not a little overstated in relation to the OT at least. It's quite true, of course, that when we think of leadership in the Old Testament, we generally think of males. Israel's priesthood was exclusively a male office. So too was Israel's monarchy — with the sole exception of Jezebel's murderous daughter, Athaliah (2 Kgs 11). Prophecy, likewise, was a male-dominated office. However, this was a role in which females could legitimately function. And it is a notable example of such that we are focusing on in this article, as we consider the respective roles of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4 and 5.

As we do so, we should also consider the possible ramifications this may have for leadership among God's people today. It's surely fitting that we do so. After all, this is one of the few examples where a male and a female exercise some form of joint leadership in Israelite society. Some time back a friend suggested that Ahab and Jezebel might be another example of such complementarian leadership, but I suspect that that was more along the lines of an egalitarian

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² David Pawson, *Leadership is Male: What does the Bible Say?* (Anchor Recordings, 2014; first published by Highland, 1988).

model. In any case, I doubt if any would want to hold up Jezebel as a biblical role model or precedent that we should follow. As most will be aware, a complementarian view of leadership holds that while males and females are equal in status, there are significant differences between the roles they should exercise in the home and in the church. Egalitarians, on the other hand, argue not only for equality in status, but also equal opportunity insofar as life and ministry are concerned. Putting it simply, anything a male can do, a woman can and indeed should be allowed to do: no role or position should be fenced off as gender-specific or gender exclusive. Now that may be a gross oversimplification, but hopefully it's not inaccurate or misleading. So, on this vexed question of male and female leadership roles, how might the account of Deborah and Barak help us out? Presumably it has something to contribute to biblical-theological reflection on the respective roles of men and women among the people of God. So let's begin by having a look at the relevant biblical text.

Judges 4–5 bring before us Deborah and Barak. Deborah is traditionally understood as the only female judge we meet in this recurring cycle of apostasy, repentance and salvation. To cite Arthur Cundall, “At this point we are introduced to Deborah, the savior of her people and the only woman in the distinguished company of the judges.”³ The “judges” (שֹׁפְטִים/*šōp̄ṭîm*) described in this book are not, of course, judicial officials in the modern sense; rather, they were charismatic leaders; leaders through whom God delivered Israel from a series of spiritual and political crises. God raised up and equipped these “judges” or “deliverers” to emancipate the Israelites from foreign oppression, and to secure an extended period of peace during their leadership. The latter, in some cases at least, was apparently tribal or local, rather than ethnic and national. But however extensive their leadership, during it the Israelites enjoyed a measure of peace and stability, rather than hostility and chaos.

Altogether there are twelve such leaders mentioned in the book.⁴ These leaders are often sub-divided into major and minor judges on the basis of how much (or how little) we're told about them. Of the so-called minor judges, we know almost nothing — usually just a verse or two is allocated to each, typically

³ Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, TOTC (Leicester: IVP, 1968), 82. While a more nuanced understanding of Deborah's leadership is reflected in more recent commentaries, Cundall is by no means alone in thinking of Deborah as a judge in the customary sense of this book.

⁴ I.e., Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson. Deborah's role is the subject of this paper. Abimelech is not actually a “judge” at all — indeed, he is more an “antijudge,” an addendum to the Gideon cycle.

telling us who they were and (in most cases) how long they exercised leadership and where they were buried. We're informed that Shamgar used an ox goad to strike down six hundred Philistines (3:31). But no further information is supplied, other than the fact that he "delivered/saved" (Hiphil **יָשַׁע**) Israel.⁵ We know that Tola "led/judged" (**שָׁפַט**/šp̄ṭ) Israel for twenty-three years, but we hear nothing of how he went about "saving" (**הוֹשִׁיעַ**) Israel (10:1–2). Slightly more information is supplied concerning his successor: Jair led for twenty-two years, controlling thirty towns in Gilead by means of his thirty donkey-riding sons (10:3–5). Ibzan led seven years, and apparently the most significant thing about him was that he married off his thirty sons and thirty daughters outside his clan (12:8–10). Elon led for ten years, but that's about all we're told about his exploits (12:11–12). Abdon led eight years, but again, other than his forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys, we know precious little about him (12:13–15). It's not altogether clear what we're meant to infer from all this donkey-riding: does it symbolize a time of peace and stability; or does it reflect aspirations to kingship and royal status? In any case, insufficient information is given about any of these minor judges to help us determine the roles occupied by Deborah and Barak. For this, we must consider those whose exploits are described in a bit more detail.

The first of these characters is Othniel, who emancipated the Israelites from the evil hands of Cushan-Rishathaim (i.e., Cushan the doubly wicked).⁶ Israel had been subject to this king for eight years (3:7–11). We're not told how Othniel set about his work, but what we are told is quite significant: in response to Israel's penitent cry for help, God raised up for them this savior/deliverer (**מוֹשִׁיעַ**); and having been divinely equipped for the task by God's Spirit coming on him, Othniel went to war and overwhelmed Cushan-Rishathaim; thus peace was secured until Othniel's death, some forty years later. In many respects Othniel, the first of Israel's judges, was the role-model; the paradigm against which the others can be measured. Certainly, unlike most of those mentioned subsequently, no undesirable character traits or spiritual flaws are drawn to the readers' attention. We'll return to this a little later.

The next deliverer, Ehud, is something of an enigma for any who would wish to take a moralistic approach to the OT. This ancient 'double-O-seven' initiates Israel's deliverance by strapping on a concealed weapon, deceptively gaining a

⁵ Hiphil **יָשַׁע** ("to save").

⁶ "Rishathaim" literally means "doubly wicked," probably a pejorative corruption of this tyrant's true name.

private audience with the Moabite king, and then using the element of surprise to sink his sword deep into Eglon's enormously fat waistline. But however suspect his morality, this left-handed assassin was God's answer to Israel's penitent cry for help; and with God's help, he secured peace in the land for eighty years (3:12–30).

After the Deborah/Barak cycle — which we'll skip over for the present — we encounter Gideon, who somewhat reluctantly facilitates Israel's liberation from the ravaging Midianites. Once persuaded to lead this campaign, however, Gideon's faith is put to the test by some radical troop reductions. But eventually the victory is secured through a clever ploy, ably assisted by divinely-induced panic within the Midianite camp. The story, however, does not have a happy ending. Despite his own refusal to embrace kingship, Gideon names the son of his Shechemite mistress *Abimelech* (i.e., "my father is king"), and this renegade son and his Shechemite pals soon become a major threat to the very peace and security that Gideon had won.

The next major judge we meet is Jephthah, who delivers the Israelites from yet another foreign threat — this time it's the Ammonites who are the chief antagonists. Jephthah's parentage — being the son of a prostitute — had previously made him a *persona non grata* among his Gileadite clan. However, his reputation as a seasoned warrior led them to appoint him as their leader, now that they were in a bit of a pickle. And so in William Wallace fashion,⁷ Jephthah picked a fight with the Ammonites, but made a somewhat rash vow to God in the process — one that would lead to tragedy and regret. Nevertheless, with God's help Jephthah was successful, so much so that he later had to face the tall poppy syndrome,⁸ which he promptly cut off in the bud.

The last of the major judges in the book is of course Samson, arguably the most tragic figure of them all. Despite a promising start and initial successes, Samson's personal and spiritual shortcomings increasingly become a threat to both himself and his people. For all the various attempts to rescue the Israelites from their Philistine overlords, emancipation is never fully achieved. Finally the secret of his supernatural strength is disclosed, Samson is subdued, and his life ends in one final act of vengeance.

⁷ Sir William Wallace is the Scottish warrior played by Mel Gibson in the Hollywood epic, *Braveheart*.

⁸ I.e., the criticism or disparagement of successful people.

At least three things stand out about these major judges: (i) Yahweh is usually said to raise them up as saviours for Israel; (3:9, 15; 6:14; 10:14–15; 13:5; cf. 2:16–19); (ii) the key to their success is Yahweh’s action and/or the endowment of Yahweh’s spirit (3:10, 28; 6:16, 34; [cf. 7:2, 7]; 7:22; 8:3; 11:29, 32; 13:25; 14:19; 15:14; 16:20); (iii) almost all of them have some kind of flaw that makes them less than the ideal saviour or deliverer.

So then, how do the exploits of Deborah and Barak fit in with all this? Let’s look at our text in a little more detail — Judges 4 in particular. After the brief mention of Ehud and his demise,⁹ we’re told that “again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (4:1 NIV 2011). Consequently, the Lord sold them into the hands of yet another foreign oppressor — this is a constant refrain in the book and it is obviously one of the main lessons the author intends his readers to learn. Apostasy from the Lord leads to punishment instead of blessing. On this occasion the Israelites found themselves in the hands of Jabin and Sisera his army commander — possibly constituting the greatest threat to the nation so far.¹⁰ But once again, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help, and in response, God raised up a judge or deliverer. But who is this deliverer? Is it Deborah, as traditionally understood? Or is it Barak who, as we’ll see, can legitimately claim the role of judge on this particular occasion?

As Block observes,¹¹ the following arguments may be used to support the traditional understanding of Deborah as Israel’s judge or deliverer: (i) Deborah is introduced at the stereotypical point where we expect to be introduced to the next judge; (ii) Deborah is actively involved in the ensuing deliverance (indeed, there are several parallels with Ehud); (iii) Deborah is given priority (always named first alongside Barak) and is explicitly linked in ch. 5 with the restoration of peace and security (5:6–8); (iv) Deborah’s “sitting” (4:5) matches Sisera (4:2) to some degree, so one might reasonably infer that they are counterparts; (v) Deborah is explicitly described as *judging* Israel (4:4), the same lexeme (שפט) that is used to describe the successive *judges* in this book.

⁹ For a concise summary of suggested explanations for the reintroduction of Ehud after the passing mention of Shamgar, see Trent Butler, *Judges*, WBC (Texas: Nelson, 1999), 87.

¹⁰ Six Israelite tribes are involved in the battle. Five other tribes are mentioned as not participating. Only Judah is not mentioned. The Canaanite coalition with Jabin at its head seems to have been quite extensive, hence the scale of this particular threat for Israel.

¹¹ 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: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 232–34.

However, as Block goes on to point out,¹² the traditional interpretation also raises numerous questions, most of which will be considered in the following discussion.

Of course, if Deborah were solely involved in this military affair, her role as deliverer would not be questioned — however odd or anomalous it may be. But she is not the only such figure in this episode — and that fact certainly raises at least some reasonable doubt over the traditional interpretation, and prompts us to consider carefully the precise nature of her role in this narrative.

The author begins the deliverance account by introducing Deborah, ostensibly the only female ‘judge’ in the book. Given the patriarchal setting, this is most unusual in itself. In a patriarchal society such as ancient Israel women normally took a back seat or subordinate position, with leadership roles generally being confined to males. However, as already acknowledged, there are some notable exceptions to this, such as Miriam (Exod 15:2), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14),¹³ and obviously Deborah herself is a case in point. This being so, we must take care not to exclude Deborah from office simply on account of her gender. Some years ago an Irish acquaintance of mine took umbrage because that’s what he thought I was doing; his wife was a senior minister in a local church, so that probably didn’t help. But while Deborah’s gender is certainly a factor in my argument, I hope to show you that it’s not simply a matter of gender. That alone would arguably be insufficient grounds for challenging the traditional interpretation.

Moreover, it’s quite clear that Deborah did exercise some kind of leadership role within her community. Not only is she described as a prophetess, but she is also expressly said to have been “*judging* Israel at that time” (4:4, my tr.).¹⁴ The question is, in what capacity was she doing so? Are we meant to infer from this that Deborah was already established as one of Israel’s judges in the usual sense (i.e., a charismatic deliverer through whom Yahweh emancipated Israel from

¹² “Deborah among the Judges,” 235; see also Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 193–94.

¹³ Female prophets were arguably more commonplace in the ancient Near East and in Israelite society than the few OT references to such (cf. also Noadiah [Neh 6:14], the “prophetess” in Isa 8:3, and the more general references in Ezek 13:17 and Joel 2:28 [MT 3:1]) might suggest; cf. J. Stökl, “Female Prophets in the Ancient Near East,” and H. G. M. Williamson, “Prophetesses in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel*, ed. John Day (New York/London: T & T Clark 2010), 47–61, 65–80.

¹⁴ The same verbal root is used to describe the leadership exercised by several of those depicted in the book (cf. Judg 3:10; 10:2, 3; 12:7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14; 15:20; 16:31; cf. Ruth 1:1).

oppression)? Or is Deborah operating as a judge in some other capacity? And if so, in what kind of judging was she engaged?

Well, it's immediately apparent that, whatever her precise role, the judging in which Deborah was engaged was quite different from that alluded to elsewhere in the book. According to Judges 4:5, Deborah "sat" or "held court" (NIV) in some kind of official capacity "under the Palm tree of Deborah."¹⁵ Here the Israelites came to Deborah for judgment/*mišpāt* ("to have their disputes decided", according to the NIV). So at least two things stand out about this judging role of Deborah: (a) she was already exercising this role previously, prior to any *military* action; (b) it involved offering some kind of "judgment" for those who sought her out. Both these features seem to mark out Deborah's activity as quite distinct from the other judges in this book. We will return to this matter in a moment. For now, the important thing to note is the fact that Deborah does not appear to be judging Israel in the normal or typical sense reflected elsewhere in this book. Deborah is apparently not a judge in the usual sense of military or political leader — certainly not initially, at the very least.

This might well explain the fact that it is only here, in the case of Deborah, that judging is in any way defined in the book. That is to say, because Deborah is an exception to the norm, her "judging" activity warranted some sort of explanation. The leadership she exercised, however extraordinary,¹⁶ was not quite the same as that of the others mentioned in this book.

There is, of course, another key feature that distinguishes Deborah from the rest of the Israelite judges: she is explicitly introduced to us as a "prophetess" (4:4). Indeed, Deborah's initial description is identical to that of a similar figure who will be introduced in chapter 6. There, in response to Israel's cry for help because of Midian, the first thing Yahweh did was to send them a prophet prior to the introduction of the judge. In chapter 6 this person, who immediately precedes God's calling of Gideon, is literally described as: "a man, a prophet"

¹⁵ All agree that Deborah's "sitting" alludes to some kind of official function/status.

¹⁶ While female prophets are unusual in the OT (e.g., Exod 15:20; 2 Kgs 22:14–20//2 Chr 34:22–28; Isa 7:3; 8:3, 16–18; Neh 6:14), the kind of authority that Deborah seems to have been exercising is even more so — perhaps "an indication of how irregular things became in the judges' period" (Barry G. Webb, *Judges*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 189; similarly, Butler, *Judges*, 93). However, unlike later examples in Israel's history (cf. 1 Kgs 21; 2 Kgs 11), Deborah's leadership is not criticized by the narrator. Butler, however, contends that while Deborah herself is not criticized, "the text implicitly criticizes the nation of Israel for having to rely on women to deliver them from danger and to fulfill the major roles in their society" (Butler, *Judges*, 93). This is evidently so in the case of Jael, but is much less obvious in the case of Deborah.

— the male equivalent to Deborah’s description here in chapter 4 as “a woman, a prophetess.” We’ll return to the possible significance of this parallel or analogous description presently. For now, all I want us to observe is that Deborah is actually introduced to us not as a judge, but as a prophetess.

It is arguably in Deborah’s capacity as a prophetess (i.e., as a divine spokesperson; cf. Exod 4:15–16; 7:1–2) that the Israelites “went up to her for judgment” (4:5 my tr.).¹⁷ Given this possibility, some English translations (e.g., NIV; NET) may be quite misleading when they suggest that Deborah was operating in a forensic capacity. The idea that Deborah “held court” and that the Israelites came to her in order to settle their “disputes” may be reading too much into two Hebrew words,¹⁸ we’re simply told that she “sat” (in some official capacity) and that they came to her “for judgment.”¹⁹ What the latter entailed is not spelt out — or is it? Following Ackerman,²⁰ Block concludes that Israel’s *crying out* (v.3) and a royal or divine pronouncement (Hebrew: מִשְׁפָּט/*mišpāt*) are conceptually related: “When subjects appealed (*šā’aq*) to a king for help in a matter, his pronouncement in response was designated his *mišpāt*.”²¹ Thus

¹⁷ It is unclear whether the verb (עלה) is used here in its normal (i.e., topographical) sense (cf. Judg 1:1), or has a more technical sense of “going up to inquire of God” (cf. Judg 20:18, 23). While Block (“Deborah among the Judges,” 241) is inclined toward the latter, the fact that Deborah is explicitly located in the hill country cannot be ignored. Block’s conjecture (“Deborah among the Judges,” 241) that Deborah set herself up as an alternative to the official channel of divine communication nearby (i.e., the priests at Bethel) is somewhat speculative.

¹⁸ Cf. Stek, for whom the narrator presents Deborah as “the source of justice where the wronged in Israel can secure redress and the oppressed relief” (John H. Stek, “The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4,” in W.C. Kaiser and R.F. Youngblood [eds], *A Tribute to Gleason Archer* [Chicago: Moody, 1986], 62). However, while such judicial “sitting” is clearly evident elsewhere in the OT (e.g., Exod 18:13–16; cf. 1 Sam 7:15–17), no judicial rulings are explicitly mentioned here in Judges 4 (or in 1 Sam 7 either). Moreover, as Block (“Deborah among the Judges,” 237, 239) observes, “in the present context it is difficult to see a connection between such a judicial function and her role in the rest of the narrative.... 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.” Even so, this has not prevented recent commentators from continuing to adopt the traditional understanding of Deborah’s judging in a forensic sense (e.g., Butler *Judges*, 983–984; Webb, *Judges*, 188–89).

¹⁹ Lit. “For *the* judgment,” although the articular form may not necessarily indicate a particular judgment (*pace* Block, “Deborah among the Judges,” 239).

²⁰ James S. Ackerman, “Prophecy and Warfare in Early Israel: A Study of the Deborah-Barak Story,” *BASOR* 220 (1975): 5–13 (11).

²¹ “Deborah among the Judges,” 239. In particular, see 1 Kgs 20:39–40; 2 Kgs 6:26; Job 19:7; cf. 2 Sam 15:1–6; 1 Kgs 3:16–28. Block further notes that such “cries” in Judges were always directed to Yahweh, as is illustrated in Yahweh’s sarcastic retort of Judg 10:14. Thus understood, Deborah is presented here as Yahweh’s representative, to whom the Israelites come for Yahweh’s answer (or *mišpāt*) to their cries.

understood, the Israelites simply sought Deborah out to hear what God had to say; that is, to receive a divine oracle of some kind (i.e., a word/directive from the Lord).²² That *mišpāṭ* can denote such is clear from Exodus 28:30, where the pouch containing the Urim and Thummim is described as “the pouch [יִצְחָן/*hōšēn*] of judgment [*mišpāṭ*].” These stones were the only legitimate means of divination in ancient Israel (cf. Num 27:21). And such is precisely what these Israelites got from the mouth of Deborah: “Her commissioning of Barak represented the divine *mišpāṭ*” (cf. 4:6–7).²³ Accordingly, it is doubtful that we are to understand Deborah as a *judge* either in the usual sense, or even in a forensic sense. Rather, Deborah was a prophetess, through whom Yahweh’s response to the current crisis was made known.

This would also help explain the need for Barak and the role he was to play in the ensuing events. If Deborah were in fact a judge in the typical sense, Barak would surely be redundant and something of an enigma. Why involve Barak at all, if Deborah was indeed the charismatic military leader that Yahweh had raised up? Surely “Captain Courageous” could have been ignored, and with God’s help, Deborah could have ably carried out this task without him? Why include Barak, if Deborah was the judge? Now one could argue that Deborah needed a man to lead the Israelites in battle; however, this seems to undermine the premise — the suggestion that she was the judge (i.e., the military deliverer) on this occasion. As will be suggested below, it seems more reasonable to infer from this and the ensuing narrative that the typical role of judge was actually undertaken in this episode by Barak.

Moreover, Barak’s reluctance to go to battle unaccompanied by Deborah seems to reflect the kind of character flaw that marks every major judge in the book after Othniel.²⁴ We have already noted Ehud’s somewhat questionable morality.

²² For Block (“Deborah among the Judges,” 239), it is significant that it was “the sons of Israel” who came to her; this expression is used everywhere else in the book as a collective, suggesting a representative body coming with national concerns as opposed to isolated individuals coming with their personal disputes.

²³ “Deborah among the Judges,” 252.

²⁴ Barak’s insistence on Deborah’s accompaniment and her verbal response can be given two strikingly different interpretations. For the vast majority of translations and commentators, Barak’s demurring is interpreted negatively, as an indication of cowardly reluctance on his part. Consequently, Deborah’s prediction concerning the outcome of the battle is seen as implicit rebuke: Due to his less than enthusiastic response, he is to play the secondary part to the woman in this incident. Therefore, some degree of censure is intended in vv.8–9. Others have cast Barak’s request and Deborah’s reply in a more favourable light: Rather than betraying any cowardice on his part, Barak’s request is seen as giving expression to genuine faith and dependence upon Yahweh. Conscious of human inadequacy in the context of “holy war,” Barak

Gideon's need for double reassurance betrays some measure of unbelief, and the consequences of having a Shechemite concubine are even more telling.²⁵ Jephthah's rash vow and Samson's immorality likewise betray the serious shortcomings that seem to typify almost all of Israel's judges. Thus understood, Barak stands out as a typical Israelite judge (i.e., a *flawed* human leader), whereas Deborah's untarnished character would certainly make her atypical.²⁶

It is also worth noting that the dialogue between Deborah and Barak seems to suggest that, initially at least, Deborah had no intention of accompanying Barak to the battlefield; she seems to imply that the honour would have gone entirely to Barak had he not equivocated (cf. 4:7, where she speaks of Yahweh giving Sisera into "*your* hands" rather than "*my/our* hands"; i.e., the honour was not something Barak would have had to share with Deborah).²⁷ Again, it is difficult to square this with Deborah's alleged role as judge; she apparently does not see herself as one of the combatants, and certainly not the commander-in-chief of the assembled army.

Furthermore, Deborah's role at the battlefield seems to be much more in line with her responsibility as a prophetess, announcing the Lord's directive to Barak

is wisely requesting Deborah's presence in order to know when to make his move. As a recognized channel of divine communication (prophetess), Deborah's function would be similar to the later use of the Urim and Thummim — a means of knowing precisely when to raise the war cry and engage the enemy. It is observed that there is no explicit criticism of Barak's request in Deborah's response, and it is possible that this "oracle," rather than being an implicit rebuke, served to reassure Barak of total victory. Thus, for some Barak expresses genuine faith, whereas for others he betrays faithless cowardice. The words which would settle the matter are unfortunately ambiguous: v. 9b may be interpreted either negatively, "Because of the way you are going about this" (NIV 1984 cf. KJV; JB; GNB), or more neutrally (and literally), "the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for ..." (so ESV; cf. NRSV; RSV; NEB; NASB; REB).

²⁵ Abimelech seems to be a self-imposed leader, whose deeds (along with those of his Shechemite collaborators) are eventually avenged by God. Abimelech is nowhere said to judge Israel (9:22 uses a different verb [שָׁרַר], meaning "to rule"), and this episode seems to be an expanded comment on 8:35 and the disintegration into chaos that followed Gideon's lifetime.

²⁶ For Block, unlike the antiheroes in the rest of the book, "Deborah was different. She was the only one the narrator cast in an unequivocally positive light ... She stands out as a lonely figure indeed" ("Deborah among the Judges," 236). While this may be overstating things slightly (cf. Othniel), Deborah's flawless character is immediately striking in this downward spiral of apostasy that is reflected in the life of the nation and its leaders. Moreover, rather than betraying immodesty or personal boasting, Deborah's declaration in 5:7 may simply reflect exhilaration and amazement (so Webb, *Judges*, 209).

²⁷ While one would immediately have thought of Deborah when she predicted the honour going to a woman (4:9), it is reasonable to infer from the lack of specification in Deborah's description (not "to me" but "to a woman") that Deborah had discounted herself as a possible candidate; rather, she is alluding here to the as yet unknown Jael (4:17–22).

at the appropriate moment (Judg 4:14). Her complete absence from the description of the actual fighting (cf. Judg 4:15–17) is something of an anomaly if she was in fact a typical judge in Judges. The battle scene clearly depicts Barak in the role normally associated with the judges described elsewhere in this book. Deborah does not appear to carry out a combative role in the battle itself.²⁸ Her function seems to have been simply to reveal Yahweh’s battle-plan in advance, announce the appropriate moment to engage the enemy,²⁹ and — in typical prophetic fashion (cf. Exod 15), play a leading role in the post-victory celebrations (Judg 5:1).

Doubt over Deborah’s role as judge is further fueled by the fact that typical language describing other judges in the book is nowhere applied to her. Neither the noun “saviour” (Heb. מוֹשִׁיעַ) nor the related Hiphil verb “to save” (Heb. הוֹשִׁיעַ) is used anywhere of Deborah (cf. Judg 2:16; 3:9, 15, 31; 6:14, 15; 8:22; 10:1; 13:5). Admittedly, it is not used of Barak either; however, its absence is much more explicable in his case; after all, the text explicitly tells us that this honour would go to “a woman” (4:9). Initially we might assume that Deborah is here alluding to herself, but it’s clear from what follows that this is not the case.

But it’s not just a matter of typical language being omitted in relation to Deborah. The use of an unexpected form of the qatal verb in association with Deborah’s “rise” in Judges 5:7 (i.e., שָׁאֻקָמְתִי/šhaqqamtî, rather than simply קָמְתִי/qāmtî) may be a further indication that the omission of terminology used of other judges (i.e., “the Lord raised up ...”) is quite deliberate.³⁰ More

²⁸ On the basis of Judges 5 (vv.7, 12), Susan Ackerman (*Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 38–44) concludes that Deborah was originally portrayed as military leader, but that this has been deliberately downplayed in the chronologically later chapter 4. However, this is conjectural and neither of these verses demands greater involvement in the battle than that suggested by chapter 4, where Deborah and Barak’s roles are clearly demarcated.

²⁹ From 5:4 we learn that a thunderstorm came. The fact that Sisera deployed his full chariot force suggests that it was in the middle of the dry season, when rain was totally unexpected. Thus the Lord intervened by means of a thunderstorm to give the advantage to the Israelites. It is probable that Deborah anticipated the storm’s approach and gave the order to attack. The storm turned the advantage in favour of the Israelites. Sisera’s iron chariots got bogged down and quickly became a liability rather than an advantage.

³⁰ So Block, who tentatively takes this as a Piel dialectical variant of שָׁכַח “to rise early” (*Judges, Ruth*, 226). However, as he acknowledges, most take the additional element (שׁ + *daghes forte*) simply as the relative pronoun (cf. Judg 6:17; 7:12; 8:26), here attached to the normal qatal verb form (for similar usage with other qatal verbs, cf. Ezra 8:20; Ecc 5:15; Lam 2:16). Such usage of the relative pronoun immediately after ׃ to give the sense, “until X ...,” is not uncommon

significant, however, may be the fact that there is no reference to Deborah's empowerment by Yahweh's Spirit (cf. Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:19; 15:14). While again this is not peculiar to Deborah, it may be a further indication that she is not being portrayed as the judge figure in this account. Indeed, as Block contends (1994: 249), the presence and declaration of Yahweh's prophetic messenger (Deborah) may also help explain the non-mention of the Spirit's empowerment in the case of Barak.

Further evidence casting doubt on Deborah's "judgeship" is the terminology which the narrator does specifically apply to her; i.e., a "prophetess" (lit. "a woman, a prophetess," Judg 4:4; cf. "a man, a prophet," Judg 6:8) and a "mother of Israel" (Judg 5:7). In particular, the description of Deborah as a prophetess — and its striking similarity with the later description of a male prophet at the start of the Gideon account, may suggest that each exercised a similar role: in other words, one can infer from the analogy between these two passages that Deborah's role was analogous to the anonymous male prophet of Judges 6:7 (i.e., Yahweh's spokesperson), whereas Barak's role was analogous to the role played by Gideon (i.e., judge-deliverer).

Assuming this to be so, Block contends that "Deborah's prophetic status and not her judicial office led the 'sons of Israel' to come to her at the palm between Ramah and Bethel."³¹ Thus for Block, Deborah is not a judge either in the charismatic-deliverer sense or in the forensic-judicial sense. Rather, the judgment (*mišpāt*) for which the Israelites consulted her was the oracular sense of determining Yahweh's will concerning military action, a "prophetic" role also attested elsewhere in this corpus (cf. Judg 1:1–2; 20:18, 23, 27–28; 1 Sam 14:36–42; 23:1–6; 28:6).³² Moreover, the role Deborah plays here in Judges is further attested in extrabiblical material.³³ Interpreted in this light, "The call of Barak was Yahweh's answer to the crisis."³⁴ He, and not Deborah, was Yahweh's appointed deliverer for this particular situation. Deborah's commissioning of Barak represented the divine *mišpāt* in the present circumstances. This would also explain Barak's insistence that Deborah

(see Ps 123:2; Song 2:7, 17; 3:5; 4:6; 8:4; see also texts that use such a construction with a qatal verb: Exod 32:20; Deut 2:14; Josh 8:26; Judg 4:24; 1 Kgs 10:7; 2 Kgs 17:23; Ezek 34:21).

³¹ "Deborah among the Judges," 240.

³² While most of these instances presumably involved priests (using the Urim and the Thummim), it is clear from 1 Sam 28:6 that prophets were another such source of such divine revelation.

³³ For examples, see Block, "Deborah among the Judges," 244–46.

³⁴ Block, "Deborah among the Judges," 247.

accompany him to the battle-field; viz. so that he could get further divine directives as to how and when to engage the enemy.

There is one further and noteworthy piece of evidence which should probably also be considered: in the two biblical lists of Israel's judges, Barak's name is included whereas Deborah's is not, cf. 1 Sam 12:9–11 LXX;³⁵ Heb 11:32. The omission of Deborah in these lists might not be deemed odd or significant given that neither list is comprehensive. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Barak makes the absence of Deborah appear all-the-more significant. One could reasonably infer from this that Deborah was not considered one of the judges in biblical antiquity.³⁶

Therefore, though traditionally Deborah has been recognized as exercising a dual role of judge and prophetess, there is good reason to conclude that Deborah was solely the latter; a prophetess who issued Yahweh's call to Barak and passed on Yahweh's directions for the strategy he was to employ against the Canaanite war machine. Thus understood, this constitutes an OT example of what might well be described as complementarian leadership.

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³⁵ The Masoretic Text has the otherwise unknown *Bedan* (בדן), whereas Syriac includes both Deborah and Barak. While not dissimilar from Barak (ברק), and possibly even a phonetic variant (so David T. Tsumura *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 323), many see Bedan as a corruption of 'Abdon' (12:13-15) or 'ben Dan' (an allusion to Samson) rather than ברק.

³⁶ Admittedly, while Josephus (*Antiquities*) initially assumes distinctive prophetic and military roles for Deborah and Barak respectively, he subsequently portrays Deborah as assuming Barak's rank as commander-in-chief in the battle with Sisera.

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