Woman of Fire: An Exegesis of Judges 4:1-16

Introduction
Few readers deny that the character of Deborah as depicted in Judges 4 and 5 is one of the most remarkable women in the Bible. Her roles as a judge, prophetess, and military commander do not always garner glowing remarks, but the surprising appearance of a female leader resists attitudes of nonchalance. As one scholar notes, Deborah has frequently inspired “praise tinged with discomfort (what was God thinking of?).” Yet does the text itself reflect this interest in her gender and leadership? I studied Judges 4:1-16 with this question in mind, and found that the biblical writer recounts this anomalous history boldly: the text seems to emphasize, not downplay, both Deborah’s gender and her dominance of Barak, who in turn leads 10,000 men. Deborah’s identification as a fiery female leader is muted, however, by translations and later interpretations of the story.

Literary and Historical Contexts
The book of Judges, which narrates the transitional period between the “conquest” of the promised land and the establishment of a monarchy, is often divided into three text units: Judg 1:1-2:5 serves as a “preface” to help ease the transition from Joshua; Judg 2:6-16:31, the original and central unit, contains an editorial introduction followed by a sequence of hero stories framed by the covenantally oriented Deuteronomistic (Dtr) lens; and Judg 17:1-21:25 functions to reveal profound religious compromise and social barbarism, framed by the observation “in those days there were no kings in Israel.”

The narrative story of Judges 4 falls toward the beginning of the second text unit, after the stories of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. Together Deborah and Barak might be considered the fourth in a series of thirteen major “judges” who function primarily as the heroic and charismatic individuals who surface in a repeating cycle of apostasy, oppression, and heroic deliverance.
Like most of the hero stories, the passage is prefaced both by the general editorial introduction (Judg 2:6-3:6) that describes the cyclical pattern or framework and a short formulaic passage (Judg 4:1-3) that indicates to the reader yet another round of the cycle has begun. This particular hero-narrative is unique to Judges, however, in that a version of the story appears in both prose and verse. Chapter 5 is the “Song of Deborah,” which also relates the military victory of Israel over Sisera’s army. This Judg 4-5 victory is referred to in Ps 83:10-11 and 1 Sam 12:9-11, and Barak is praised in Hebrews 11:32.

Deborah is one of three women in Judges who plays a key role in military conflicts: Jael and the woman of Thebez both kill an enemy of Israel via head trauma and thus bring an end to a period of war.iv We also see echoes of Deborah elsewhere in the Bible, as with Judith, portrayed as the military mastermind whose “strategies lead to the defeats of both Holofernes and his Assyrian army.”v Other images associating women with war are present in the Song of Songs and the second half of Isaiah; Susan Ackerman and others partially attribute these biblical traditions of militaristic women to the influence of Canaanite myths concerning the warrior goddess Anat, described in mythological texts at Ugarit (c. 1550-1200 BCE).vi

Such Canaanite mythological influence is certainly possible given that most scholars believe Judges is set during the transition between Bronze Age city-states to national entities, around 1200-1000 BCE. In speculating on the date of the battle referred to in Judg 4, suggested dates range almost as broadly, from 1190-1050 BCE.vii Although there is generally a consensus that the arrangement of the stories into a sequence—to create the effect of a continuous history—is “entirely artificial,” there is similar agreement that Judg 4 contains the “memory of an [actual] episode of decisive importance in the early history of Israel, even if accounts are legendary.”viii
Dating Judges’ composition requires attention to multiple voices and possible points of redaction. Traditionally, scholars claim the central text unit of Judges (including Judg 4) was written as part of the Dtr history around the reform of Josiah (seventh century BCE) and then revised or updated by an exilic author. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Dtr editor was working with genuinely ancient sources and traditions, and the editing was rather light. The Song of Deborah is dated as early as the twelfth century, and in looking at Judg 4, Lindars claims the Dtr editor must have used an existing prose version as his source. Boling dates this older source text to the tenth century. It seems the story or tradition taken up in Judg 4-5 is one of the oldest in the book of Judges and the Hebrew Bible.

Form, Structure, Movement
For a focused exegetical reading, I chose to study Judges 4:1-16, the first part of the narrative of Deborah, Barak, Sisera, and Jael. Verse one of chapter four provides a natural starting place, as it begins with the language signaling yet another cycle in the book of Judges of Israel’s apostasy and deliverance through a new leader: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” In order to focus on the roles of Deborah, Barak, and the “collective” battle against Sisera, my selected passage concludes with the semi-definitive declaration “All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.” The next part of the narrative details the role of Jael in killing Sisera, moving to another geographic location and introducing a new major character (Jael). Thus, the end of verse 16 provided an appropriate “pause” in the full narrative of chapter four.

The passage begins with the Dtr historical framing (vv 1-4) and then introduces Deborah. Because the writer seems very interested in geographic names and locations, we have a sense of place and movement. Deborah, under her palm “between Ramah and Bethel,” is soon joined by
Barak from Kadesh. After Barak hears Deborah’s prophecy (a command from the Lord to take position with his troops against Sisera’s army) and says he will not go without her, both go to Kedesh and up Mount Tabor (vv 5-10). The narrative briefly moves away from these two main characters to introduce Heber the Kenite and move Sisera and his troops into position for the battle (vv 11-13) before returning to Deborah and Barak on Mount Tabor. There, Deborah tells Barak when the battle day has arrived and Barak and his army go down the mountain to claim a decisive victory with the help of the Lord (vv 14-16).

**Detailed Analysis**
Can the passage outlined above be read as a typical battle narrative in which the name of the prophet or judge involved simply happens to be feminine? Perhaps at first glance. But the text itself seems to both recognize and emphasize the gender subversion at play. From Deborah’s introduction in verse four—composed of a string of seven feminine nouns—xi—the writer highlights Deborah’s womanhood and leadership. Tammi J. Scheider points out that after Deborah’s name (the first feminine noun), the word “issa” (woman/wife/female) is used before nabi’ah (prophetess). While most translators view issa as simply modifying the noun for prophet, “[prophet] is already in the feminine form. The noun must function, at the least, as emphasizing the femaleness of Deborah ... A translation acknowledging the noun would read ‘Deborah was a woman, a prophet[ess].’” It is also notable that Deborah is first identified by her leadership role or profession (prophetess), because the first two judges (Othniel and Ehud) are initially introduced by their familial affiliations. Verse five (“She used to sit under the palm ... and the Israelites came up to her for judgment”) underscores both her role as a presiding leader ([they] came up to her) and her independence: “She used to sit,” notes Robert Boling, “not any one else. The emphasis is clear from the Hebrew word order, independent pronoun preceding the
verb for emphasis. Deborah exercises her authority by \textit{summoning} Barak and then, through her prophetic words, directing not only his movement but also the movement of 10,000 men.

While “Judges 5 is unambiguous and emphatic in its depiction of Deborah as Israel’s chief military commander,” her role in Judges 4 is more limited to prophetic advisory. Nevertheless, her authority over the military leader, Barak, is implied in ways beyond her ability to “summon” him. This dynamic is portrayed most powerfully in verses 8 and 9, in which Barak states that he will not go to battle without her, and this pathetic plea comprises the only words attributed to him in the entire passage. Deborah replies with what many scholars interpret as a caustic and pointed reprimand for his reluctance: she will “surely” go, but the military “glory” will go not to him but to “a woman.” The reader’s ignorance of Jael at this point in the narrative gives the generic term “woman” a double meaning, as the victory ultimately sheds glory on both Jael and Deborah. More subtly, we see Deborah’s authority underscored in her two prophetic utterances, which both include a rhetorical question not typically reflected in the English translations. Susan Niditch translates these openings as “Has Yahweh, God of Israel, not commanded ...?” (v 6) and “Is Yahweh not going before you?” (v 14). While it is tempting to read these questions as scolding reminders, most scholars indicate this would be a stretch. More conservatively, however, they are still understood as a device for adding power to a command. Finally, while ten thousand men “went up \textit{behind}” Barak, Deborah “went up \textit{with}” him, and once they get to Mt. Tabor it is Deborah who tells Barak when to take action and commands him to do so. While Barak does his duty and follows the commands given, the text leaves no question as to who is sub-ordinate to whom.

In the larger narrative arc, Deborah’s prophetic competence underscores her strength and uncompromised leadership. Due to her influence, Barak goes down from Mt. Tabor when the
Lord is working toward the Israelite’s victory. This evident ability to interpret and pronounce the divine will is echoed by numerous images of ascent: though Deborah sits under the palm tree, Israelites “came up to her;” she “got up” to go with Barak, the “went up” Mt. Tabor, where she commands Barak to “Rise up!” Although Barak “went down from Mt. Tabor,” Sisera “got down from his chariot,” and the army of Sisera “fell,” Deborah never descends in the text. According to this narrative silence, one imagines that as the battle ends she is aloft and alone on the mountain top.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Deborah’s clear depiction as a woman exercising authority, later translations and interpretations of this text subtly subdue her character and role. In verse four, Deborah’s introduction, many modern translations follow the convention of identifying her as “wife of Lappidoth.” This translation is suspect for many reasons, including the unusual feminine ending on Lappidoth (which means “torch” or “flames”) and the pattern of listing a personal trait as the third characteristic such as “younger” or “left handed” when introducing leaders in Judges. In a similarly domesticating move, the Old Latin version of the text reads “under a palm” rather than “under the Palm of Deborah,” thereby reducing what Susan Niditch describes as “the more cultic image of Deborah as an oracle associated with a sacred tree or space.” The Septuagint reduces Deborah in a different manner, by adding an explanation to Barak’s refusal to go to battle without her: “because I never know the day the Lord will make me successful.” His need of her is explained in terms of, and limited to, her oracular skills. Thus he is confessing only his “lack of competence in specialized questions like oracles.” What later generations considered the “improper impression” of Barak’s cowardice is mitigated. If Deborah is read as a woman with a diviner and not as a mouthpiece of God or a powerful leader,
as this addition encourages, she is less anomalous and threatening to a male-dominated social order.

**Synthesis/Conclusion**

When the story of Israel’s victory over Sisera is mentioned in the Bible outside of the book of Judges (1 Sam 12:11, Hebrew’s 11:32), Barak is the hero, and there is no mention of Deborah. It is as if she has been erased. Ignoring her contribution to the war effort is surprising, “Given the description of Deborah’s prophetic and judicial functions ... and her role as Barak’s main source of spiritual support” in Judges 4 and her role as “chief military commander...and the people’s deliverer” in Judges 5. Her conspicuous absence is not surprising, perhaps, when one considers not the text itself but the response it has kindled: well into the 20th century, many readers and scholars have been uncomfortable with Deborah’s role and reprimand of Barak in this incident. In stark contrast to later biblical authors, however, the historian responsible for Judg 4:1-16 boldly emphasized Deborah’s gender and authority. This redactor may have also wondered “what was God thinking of?” but nevertheless preserved the ancient history of a woman in charge, fulfilling what she believes is a faithful response to the Lord.

**Notes**

v Ackerman, 51; Lindars, 169.
vi Ackerman, 29, 59; Lindars ,170.
vii Lindars, 167.
viii Ibid., 91.
Appendix A: My Translation of Judges 4:1-16 (Based on the NRSV)
The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. And the LORD delivered them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; his army commander was Sisera, who lived in Haroseth-ha-goiim. The Israelites cried out to the LORD; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites harshly for twenty years. ¶ At that time Deborah, a prophetess, a woman of fire, was judging Israel. 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. She sent and summoned Barak, son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'" 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." And she said, "Certainly, I will go with you; however, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand men went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him. ¶ Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh. When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, to move...
from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Rise up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is going out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. 15 And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic at the edge of the sword before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, 16 while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

Bibliography


