

The Theme of Women in the Book of Judges and the Portrayal of Deborah as Leader

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Last modified: September 16, 2018

The Portrayal of Deborah as Judge¹

Background: The role of judges in Deuteronomy 16:18 – 20

- Arbitrator and dispenser of justice and righteousness, not perverting justice by accepting bribes.
- Only with Deborah does the narrator say that ‘the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment’ (Judg.4:4 – 5); others are said to be simply ‘judging Israel’ without further elaboration.
- Deborah judged under the palm tree of Deborah (Judg.4:4 – 5), and the tree was a motif of the garden of Eden (e.g. Gen.18:1, 4, 8; 21:33).
- The phrase ‘sat to judge’ was used of Moses (Ex.18:13 – 16) who settled disputes among the Israelites. This suggests that Deborah was ‘sitting in the seat of Moses’ (cf. Mt.23:2) to interpret the Law and adjudicate conflicts.
- Judging involves deliverance from external oppression (Judg.2:16, 18), which Deborah does.
- Judging ensures the true worship of YHWH and service of Him (2:19), which Deborah does.
- Twelve judges named in total in the Book of Judges, and most of them had some negative quality
 - Shamgar son of Anat may have been a Canaanite who came out from the worship of the Canaanite warrior goddess Anat. Ehud was an assassin; Gideon lacked faith and confidence; Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and made a foolish vow; Samson was proud and impetuous, had immoral relationships with women.
 - *‘Deborah is different. She is the only one the narrator cast in an unequivocally positive light.’²*

The Portrayal of Deborah as Prophet³

Background: The role of prophets in Deuteronomy 18:15 – 22, which speaks of a ‘prophet like Moses’

- Deborah helps win a victory over oppressors (Judg.4), like Moses did (Ex.14)
- Deborah composes a song of victory (Judg.5), like Moses did (Ex.15). This is the only example of a victory song in Judges. Jewish commentators noted that Deborah is being described as a leader like Moses, starting in the 1st century AD with Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*.⁴ Moses and Deborah led Israel as warrior, judge, prophet, and worship leader.
- Deborah gave a prophetic word which came true (Judg.4:14), which was a requirement of a true ‘prophet like Moses’ (Dt.18:22)

Reflection on Deborah by the Book of Samuel

- Deborah was the only judge who was also a prophet in Judges; Samuel was also judge and prophet, and the final judge before the monarchy was established (1 Sam.3:19 – 21; 7:15 – 17).
- Samuel ministered from a circuit through four locations: Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah, and Ramah; Deborah was stationed in one place in Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah (Judg.4:5). ‘In 1 Samuel, Samuel was obviously presented as a ‘judge’ after the order of Deborah.’

¹ Rebecca G.S. Idestrom, ‘A Role Model for Christian Public Ministry,’ edited by Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen, *Women, Ministry, and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007)

² Daniel Block, ‘Deborah Among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historian,’ edited by A.R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker, *Faith, Tradition and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), p.236

³ Rebecca G.S. Idestrom, above

⁴ See Cheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women, Gender, and the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p.40

- Samuel commissioned Saul into battle and held him accountable (1 Sam.10 – 15); as Deborah did Barak (Judg.4 – 5).
- Samuel embodied the presence of God, like Deborah did. ‘Like Samuel in 1 Sam.7:10 – 11, Deborah clearly functioned as the alter ego of Yahweh. Her presence alone was enough to guarantee victory over the enemy.’⁵

Deborah as a High Point in Israel’s Treatment of Women: Women as a Literary Theme in Judges

- In the garden land, Caleb gives his **daughter Achsah** to Othniel (1:1 – 3:11), which is an honorable marriage in the literary motif of Adam and Eve in Eden
- Ehud judges Israel (3:1 – 30), then Shamgar judges Israel (3:31)
- **Deborah** judges Israel (4:1 – 5:31) in the manner of a ‘new Moses’
- Gideon is brought from hiding and judges Israel (6:1 – 8:35); Abimelech usurps and declares himself king (9:1 – 57); Issachar judges Israel (10:1 – 18)
- Jephthah judges Israel, makes a rash vow and must dedicate his **daughter** to God for Tabernacle service (11:1 – 12:7); her self-sacrifice preserves him and his leadership
- Izban of Bethel judges Israel (12:8 – 10); Elon the Zebulunite judges Israel (12:11 – 12); Abdon, son of Hillel the Pirathonite, judges Israel (12:14 – 15)
- Samson, son of Manoah and his barren wife, judges Israel (13:1 – 25); Samson tries to crudely take a Philistine **wife** from Timnah but fails (14:1 – 20), takes vengeance on the Philistines (15:1 – 20). Samson meets **Delilah the harlot**, is seduced into breaking his Nazirite vow but dies triumphant (16:1 – 31).
- Micah takes his mother’s silver and makes idols, hires a Levite priest, who takes the idols back with him to the tribe of Dan (17:1 – 18:31)
- In Gibeah, another Levite takes a **concubine** from Bethlehem in Judah, who plays the harlot against him, and he and an older man later give the concubine and the old man’s daughter to be raped instead of them (19:1 – 30). This sparks a civil war among the tribes (20:1 – 48).
- The rest of Israel takes **women** from Jabesh-Gilead to give to the tribe of Benjamin, and the men of Benjamin also take the **daughters of Shiloh** (21:1 – 25), reversing the motif of ‘the good marriage’ from 1:1 – 3:11.
- *Conclusion:* In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (21:25)

The fact that Judges also uses Genesis 2:4 – 4:26 as a template in a larger literary allusion, placing Deborah in the beginning and wrapping her in the mantle of Moses, means that the narrator of Judges evaluates her very positively.

<i>Genesis 2:4 – 4:26</i>	<i>Book of Judges 1 – 21</i>
<i>Beginning:</i> Wedding of Adam and Eve (Gen.2:24 – 25), in a garden with a wellspring of four rivers (Gen.2:10 – 14)	<i>Beginning:</i> Wedding between Caleb’s daughter Achsah and the faithful, valiant Othniel in connection with springs of water (Judg.1:12 – 15).
<i>Ending:</i> Cain and family resisted God and practiced violence and polygamy.	<i>Ending:</i> Israel resisted God and practiced violence towards women.

Why Literary Motifs Matter

‘There is evidence that women served as prophets in the other ancient Near Eastern religions. Based on evidence of women prophets from Mari, Daniel Block points out that Deborah’s female gender as a prophet would not have been “surprising in the second-millennium cultural milieu.”’⁶

⁵ Block, p.249

⁶ Rebecca G.S. Idestrom, p.26 – 27, referring to Block, p.247

Given the way the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures interact with the cultures around them, this makes the literary portrayal of Deborah even more important.

- The Hebrew human authors have to appropriate language into their own literary, canonical context but had to make their theological signification different from Egypt, Canaan, etc. They did this through narrative and literary methods. For example, 'El' was the name of a Canaanite god. But when the Torah uses the name 'Elohim,' it obviously means a different entity than the Canaanite pantheon headed up by 'El.' This is how they 'redefined' and 'purified' those terms.
- Similarly, when the Hebrew author(s) of the Book of Judges intends to communicate how the raising up of a female leader in Israel is not like the same occurrence in neighboring peoples, it must position Deborah in relation to another already known human leader. The fact that Judges selects Moses as that figure is impressive. The further fact that the author(s) of the Book of Samuel portrays the prophet Samuel in the mantle of Deborah is also very impressive.

Hence, there is no reason to suggest that Deborah's leadership represented a decline in Israel because of the lack of available men, which is how some (complementarians) interpret this passage. She is portrayed as a prophetic leader akin to Moses, and clothed in his mantle.