

## The Song of Deborah (Judges 5): Between the Weakness of Israel and the Strength of Divine Intervention

**Abstract:** This article analyses the song of Deborah (Judges 5), one of the oldest examples of Hebrew poetry. Together with an even older form of prayer of praise, the Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-18), it represents the beginnings of the psalm-prayer genre. It focuses on the analysis of the thematic-motivic and rhetorical elements of the song of Deborah, which reveal the weakness of the tribes of Israel in comparison with the militarily organised Canaanite kingdoms and the strength of Jewish women in war. We are interested in how the women dealt with weakness, how they demonstrated strength and how they relied on the strength of God. The paper shows how only Deborah, a remarkable female figure of the Old Testament, prophetess, judge and military leader, dared to stand up to the destructive strategy of the Canaanites. By defeating the mighty Canaanite warlord Sisera, she demonstrated her extraordinary power in an area that is actually the domain of men, not women. Jael and Sisera's mother are also portrayed with irony and other rhetorical figures. In the context of Scripture, Deborah's original prayer of praise, thanking God for her triumph in war, is only justified by the knowledge that the tribes of Israel had to fight for their survival. A comparative analysis of the song of Deborah shows that the tradition of praise as prayer in connection with various female characters was enriched in the later Old Testament period.

**Keywords:** Deborah, Jael, Sisera's mother, prayer of praise, irony, weakness and strength, the prophet Miriam, Judith

### Pieśń Debory (Sdz 5) - między słabością Izraela a siłą Bożej interwencji

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł analizuje pieśń Debory (Sędziów 5), jednego z najstarszych przykładów poezji hebrajskiej. Wraz z jeszcze starszą formą modlitwy pochwalnej, Pieśnią Mojżesza (Księga Wyjścia 15:1-18), stanowi ona początki gatunku psalmu-modlitwy. Artykuł skupia się na analizie elementów tematyczno-motywicznych i retorycznych pieśni Debory, które ujawniają słabość plemion Izraela w porównaniu z militarnie zorganizowanymi królestwami Kanaanu oraz siłą kobiet żydowskich na wojnie. Interesuje nas, jak kobiety radziły sobie ze słabością, jak demonstrowały siłę i jak polegały na sile Boga. Artykuł pokazuje, jak Debora, niezwykła postać kobieca ze Starego Testamentu, prorokini, sędzia i przywódczyni wojskowa, odważyła się przeciwstawić destrukcyjnej strategii Kanaanitów. Pokonując potężnego wodza

wojennego Kanaanitów, Sisereę, zademonstrowała swoją niezwykłą moc w obszarze, który jest właściwie domeną mężczyzn, a nie kobiet. Jael i matka Sisery są również przedstawiane z ironią i innymi figurami retorycznymi. W kontekście Pisma Świętego oryginalna modlitwa pochwalna Debory, wyrażająca dziękczynienie Bogu za jej triumf na wojnie, jest usprawiedliwiona tylko wiedzą, że plemiona Izraela musiały walczyć o przetrwanie. Porównawcza analiza pieśni Debory pokazuje, że tradycja chwały jako modlitwy w związku z różnymi postaciami kobiecymi została wzbogacona w późniejszym okresie Starego Testamentu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Debora, Jael, matka Sisery, modlitwa pochwalna, ironia, słabość i siła, prorokini Miriam, Judyta

## Introduction

Jeremy Penner, at the beginning of his book *Patterns of Daily Prayer in Second Temple Period Judaism*, states that there are two different types of prayer in Judaism, according to their origin and influence: spontaneous personal prayer and intentional prayer designed for communal purposes (Penner 2012, 1).<sup>1</sup> In more recent times, Jewish and Christian scholars of the Bible and post-biblical sources have explored prayers attributed to female persons from antiquity to the present (Johnson 1948; Greenberg 1983; Brown 1992; Bronner 1994, 1999; Livneh 2017; Bar-Ilan 2018; Krajnc 2022; Platovnjak and Svetelj 2022). Thus, it is possible to see how little such prayers have been studied both in the context of the literary types and genres in which they appear, and in their social setting. Meir Bar-Ilan points out that these prayers are very common, saying, among others:

In Judaism, as in other religions, women as well as men pray to God; in the Jewish tradition from biblical times to the present day, however, women's prayers have never attained definitive status. This chapter deals with the status of women's prayers in antiquity, working with a loose definition of what constitutes a prayer. The purpose of the discussion is to address the wealth of information on this subject in the Bible, in apocrypha and in Talmudic literature. Following a survey of the prayers, their feminine nature will be analyzed – insofar as such can be said to exist – as well as their role in daily life. It will become clear that a close study of women's prayers in the social context can illumine the women's relationship with God and the relationships in the community of women. The purpose of the textual analysis of women's prayers is to lead to an historical understanding which may help establish the status of women in antiquity in Judaism. (Bar-Ilan 2020, 78)

<sup>1</sup> This article was written in the framework of the research programme P6-0262 (“Values in Judeo-Christian Sources and Tradition and the Possibilities of Dialogue”) and the research project J6-50212 (“The Power of Emotions and the Status of Female Characters in Different Literary Genres of the Old Testament”), which are co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

Several prayers of women are known from the ancient period: the prayer of Moses's and Aaron's sister Miriam in the final part of the song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-21; the song of Deborah in Judges 5:1-31; and the two prayers of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2.<sup>2</sup> From a later period, Judith's song of praise after her victory in the book of Judith (16:1-17) is particularly famous. Similarly, the song of Deborah is sung after the victory of the Israelites, namely, their triumph over the tribes of the Canaanites. It is set in the time before the establishment of the kingdom, before the period of Saul and David, and its setting is the area of Canaan, which was then the Promised Land for the Israelites.

Esther Fuchs in her book *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative* (2000) highlights the subordinate position of female characters in the Bible in relation to men. The author outlines her basic thesis at the very beginning of the introduction:

No amount of trotting out exceptional female figures, such as Deborah the judge and Miriam the prophet, should blind us to the overwhelming presentation of women as male-dependent and male-related ciphers, who appear as secondary characters in a male drama. No amount of searching for prebiblical or extrabiblical sources and traditions can mitigate the fact that in its final presentation the biblical text reduces women to auxiliary roles, suppresses their voices and minimizes their national and religious significance. The argument of this book is that the Hebrew Bible not only presents women as marginal, it also advocates their marginality. It is not merely a text authored by men—it also forgers a politics of male domination. (Fuchs 2000, 1)

Esther Fuchs notes that the Bible expresses admiration for God as the central character, and women are supposed to support God's purposes (Fuchs 2000, 14). We note her assessment of the reasons for the occasional positive portrayal of female characters: "The question is not how often we find positive female characters, but for what purpose are these characters portrayed as positive, and what does their valorization mean in the context of biblical sexual politics." (Fuchs 2000, 33) An analysis of Judges 4-5 and some other women's prayers of praise will show what the biblical authors' attitudes towards women are in particular examples of Old Testament texts and to what extent Esther Fuchs' findings correspond to the presentation of the character of Deborah as a judge and prophetess.

## 1. The Tribes of Israel in a Position of Weakness after the Exodus from Egypt and the Power of Judge Deborah

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites settled in the Promised Land and coexisted with the Canaanites. The Canaanites had strong fortified outposts and several kingdoms, while

---

<sup>2</sup> I will deal with the prayer of Hannah, Samuel's mother, for her child (1 Sam 1:10-11) and her prayer of thanksgiving (1 Sam 2:1-10) in a separate article.

the Israelites, as newcomers, were in a subordinate position. There were armed conflicts between the Israelites and the Canaanites, but none as significant as the one described in Judges 4, which describes how the Israelites, threatened by the Canaanites, who ruled under the leadership of the Canaanite king Jabin and his warlord Sisera, struggled to survive in the face of the threat of destruction.

At this critical moment, Deborah, the judge and prophetess, stood up. Despite the social weakness of women at that time, she became a symbol of strength. Her determination, wisdom and faith in God led her to take leadership over the tribes and to encourage the Israelites to fight.<sup>3</sup> In her song (Judg 5), she celebrates God's help and victory and expresses her gratitude.

The character of Jael, a simple Bedouin woman in whose tent the defeated Canaanite warlord Sisera has taken refuge while on the run, also plays an important role in the poem. She too became a symbol of strength, able to outwit the warlord with her hospitality, and when he fell asleep, she drove a wedge into his temples with a hammer.

On the Canaanite side, the song also highlights the mother figure of the mighty Canaanite warlord Sisera. It describes how Sisera's mother expects her son to return from battle victorious, with a rich booty. The text depicts the tense mood of the mother's anticipation of her son's triumph, while the reader already knows that her son is defeated and dead.

The song of Deborah (Judg 5) is a triumphal hymn celebrating Israel's triumph over the hostile Canaanites with the Lord's help. The song glorifies God, and includes hymns of praise to Deborah and Jael. The God of Israel is the God of power, before whom the very heavens tremble. His care for His people from Egypt to Sinai and from Sinai to the land of Canaan is significant. He is ready to support and help His worshippers. He is the God of all nature and of all mankind. In keeping with this belief, from beginning to end of both versions, the narrative in Judges 4 and the song of Deborah in Judges 5, the credit for the victory over Israel's enemies is given to Yahweh. It is his power that triumphed.

The song of Deborah shows Israel in a time of great vulnerability. The community of the tribes of Israel faces internal conflicts and external threats, which put it in a weak position. It lacks unity and strong, persistent leaders, leading to a weakened state that is easy prey for enemies. The whole book of Judges is based on the belief that it is precisely in a state of weakness that God calls strong and courageous personalities to respond to the threat to the community of Israel as saviours. The peculiarity of the song of Deborah is that the person called is not a man, but a woman. She takes on a role that is otherwise mostly played by men. At the centre of the song in Judges 5 is Deborah, the prophetess and judge, who represents

---

<sup>3</sup> In the period of the Judges, the tribes played a key role and function, although the available historical data reveal little about their internal structure. The most important function of the tribe at this time was military. Each tribe was expected to defend its territory not only against attacks from other tribes, but also from all non-Israelite invaders, whether Canaanite or Transjordanian. In the earliest periods of Israel's history, the number of tribes was not constant. The song of Deborah, which is often cited as a convincing testimony to tribal cohesiveness, tells us that of all the tribes summoned by Deborah, only seven actually united to ward off the enemy. Cf. Warner 1976.

great power and wisdom. Her ability to motivate and direct Barak against the Canaanite forces, together with her faith and determination, reveal the secret of her influence on the outcome of the battle. In addition to Deborah, there is Jael, whose courage and cunning kill Sisera, the leader of the Canaanite army. Their actions bring victory and deliverance for Israel for forty years.

In the following, we will analyse the song of Deborah from the point of view of its structure, which is described in Judges 4. Our analysis will focus on the literary expressions that show the strength of Deborah's faith in God. The special added value of the song of Deborah is that it is prayed by a female figure in the role of a warrior who has miraculously defeated the mighty Canaanite warlord Sisera.

## 2. Literary and Rhetorical Forms of Prayer in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5)

The defeat of the Canaanite confederacy by Deborah and Barak is the subject of two texts: a prose text in Judges 4 and a poetic text in Judges 5. Although the two texts are different in literary style - one is composed in prose, the other in poetry - they both follow the same general plan: they describe the same event, and they both tell of the victory of the Israelites over the Canaanites under the leadership of Deborah and Barak. The prose version (Judg 4) describes in detail how Deborah, the prophetess and leader of Israel in her role as judge, summoned Barak to gather an army of 10,000 men and attack the army of Jabin, the Canaanite king, under the captain Sisera. Barak agreed to this mission on the condition that Deborah would go with him. After the battle, Sisera fled and hid in the tent of Heber's wife Jael, who tricked him into her arms and killed him.

The song of Deborah in Judges 5 is one of the oldest poetic texts in the Old Testament. George F. Moore writes: "The historical value of Deborah cannot be overestimated. It is the oldest surviving monument of Hebrew history before the establishment of the kingdom." (Moore 1966, 132–133) The liveliness and vitality of the poem are noteworthy. The basic form of parallelism is present in almost every line. The mighty woman Deborah is presented as the charismatic leader of Israel in the struggle against the oppressor. The song begins with a call to praise: "Bless the Lord" (v. 2). Robert Boling comments on the significance of Deborah's title "prophetess":

In view of the political involvements of female prophets as far back as eighteenth century Mari the title "prophetess" can no longer be assumed to be anachronistic in reference to Deborah. The introductory statement represents a narrator's value judgment, to be sure, shifting focus momentarily from the office of judge to the particular qualities of Deborah. That value judgment was most likely made in the premonarchical period when the simple relationship between the functions of

diviner and field commander was a living social reality, but increasingly subject to the mounting pressures for which the arrangement was at last inadequate. (Boling 1975, 99)

Myers and Elliott, in their 1978 commentary on *The Book of Judges*, explain that for ancient peoples, war was sacred. The Israelites saw their wars as sacred because they were waged in the name of Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. Foreign kings and rulers therefore had to be cautious about Israel because the Israelites believed that Yahweh was on their side: “Since war was sacred to ancient peoples, the reference here is easily understood. It signified the consecration to Yahweh of the troops of war for His purposes. Let the kings and rulers around Israel beware! Observe the poet’s faith in the Lord, to whom victory is, and to whom the poem is dedicated in praise.” (Myers and Elliott 1978, 710–720).

In verses 2-5, Deborah focuses on showing the might and majesty of God, while at the same time emphasising His commitment to Israel. In verses 2-3, she addresses the princes who were leaders in Israel with a strong call to praise the Lord. He expresses his confidence that the people are ready to follow their leadership. The passage in verse 3 calls on kings and rulers to listen to the song of praise:

Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes;  
to the Lord I will sing (*’ānōkī layhwh ’ānōkī ’āšīrāh*),  
I will make melody to the Lord (*’āzammēr layhwh*), the God of Israel.

Deborah’s word is not only for princes, but also for kings and great men. She invites them to listen to her song, which she wants them to sing in honour of the Lord, the God of Israel. In verses 4-5, Deborah describes in graphic language the dramatic coming of the Lord, who approaches like a whirlwind. The earth trembles, the sky dewed heavily, and rain falls from the clouds accompanied by thunder. These natural phenomena symbolize God’s power and presence. Deborah points out that the mountains tremble before the Lord, showing reverence and awe of His greatness. She also mentions the connection with God’s presence at Sinai, which emphasizes the importance of God as Israel’s ally:

Lord, when you went out from Seir,  
when you marched from the region of Edom,  
the earth trembled,  
and the heavens poured,  
the clouds indeed poured water.  
The mountains quaked before the Lord of Sinai,  
before the Lord, the God of Israel.

The passage in Judges 5:4-5 is reminiscent of the passage in Ps 68:8-9, which reads:

O God, when you went out before your people,  
when you marched through the wilderness,  
the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain  
at the presence of God, the God of Sinai,  
at the presence of God, the God of Israel.

Judges 5:6-9 describes the situation in Israel. The poet contrasts Israel's lack of weapons with well-armed enemies. This situation is critical until the heroine Deborah appears as "the mother in Israel" (v. 7). The result is that "the victory over the army of Sisera was all the more phenomenal and miraculous. The God of Israel was more powerful than the chariots and horsemen of the enemy" (Myers and Elliott 1978, 711). The passage in Judges 5:9 contains a refrain of praise to the Lord for his help through Israel's leaders and volunteers:

My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel  
 Who offered themselves willingly among the people.  
 Bless the Lord.

The passage in Judges 5:10-11 contains an exhortation to the people to "repeat the triumph (*šidqôt yhwh*) of the Lord," which means the redemptive works of the Lord. The passage in Judges 5:12-18 expresses the call of the tribes to respond fervently to the difficult situation in which Israel found itself. First, there is the call to Deborah and Barak to wake up while there is still time to meet the challenge. In Judges 5:12 the poet exclaims:

Awake, awake, Deborah!  
 Awake, awake, utter a song (*dabbērî šîr*)!  
 Arise, Barak, lead away your captives,  
 O son of Abinoam.

The passage in Judges 5:14-18 shows the war response of the tribes of Israel. Six tribes are commended for risking their lives and supporting the war effort (Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh, Zebulun, Issachar, Naphtali), while four tribes are rebuked for staying at home and withdrawing from the conflict (Reuben, Gad, Dan, Asher). Two tribes, Judah and Simeon, are not mentioned. It is clear from the poem that Israel, once united in the days of Joshua, is divided in the days of the Judges. The song, with its strong call to action, first of all encourages Deborah to wake up and start singing, which signals the time to act and lead the people in battle. Barak is also called upon to bring his captives and prepare his soldiers for battle.

The song then invites the rest of the nobles and the Lord's people to join with the heroes. This part of the song points to the call for unity and solidarity among the people of Israel in their struggle against their enemies. The song further mentions the tribes and their leaders, emphasizing their loyalty and willingness to fight. The tribes are urged not to hesitate or delay, but to join the fight for the Lord. The song then highlights the different tribes and their characteristics and locations, showing the diversity and unity of the people of Israel in the struggle for their faith and homeland. This part of the song emphasises the importance of unity and diversity among the people of Israel in their common struggle for their faith and homeland.

In verses 19-22, Deborah's poem describes in detail the battle events between the Israelites and the kings of Canaan. The kings gathered and fought at Taanah, by the waters of Megiddo, but were unable to get the spoil of silver. This part of the poem indicates their

failure to fight against the Israelites. The poem then turns to graphic language depicting the events of the battle. It describes how the stars waged war from the sky, probably referring to the natural phenomena that supported the Israelites in their struggle with the kings of Canaan. In verse 20 we read, “The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera.” In verses 23-27, the poet shows the contrast between the hesitation of Meroz and the heroic response of the country woman Jael. In Judges 5:24, Meroz is severely blamed for his inaction, while Jael is praised for her help in the battle:

Most blessed of women be Jael,  
the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.

This is an extraordinary accolade for an otherwise ordinary woman. Similar words will be spoken to the heroine Judith when she cuts off the head of Holofernes in the tabernacle (Jdt 13:18). Even more theologically significant is the crucial role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who with her Son trampled on the head of Satan’s pimp (Lk 1:42; cf. Gen 3:15). The scene of Jael “crushed” the head of Sisera is reminiscent of a similar incident in Judg. 9:53, in which a woman smashes the skull of the wicked Abimelech. The poetic description of irony shows the action of the helpless woman Jael in contrast to her nature and role as a woman: “Women do not, as a rule, seduce their lovers to kill them; mothers do not, as a rule, bring up boys to kill them.” (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 405–406)

The scene in Judges 5:28-30 is a touching but tragic portrayal of Sisera’s mother, who is worried about her son’s delayed return from battle (v. 28). Standing by the window, she looks into the distance and expresses concern that her son has not arrived at the expected time. The “wisest of her princesses” console her in verse 30 with the irony of self-deception:

re they not together and sharing the spoils?  
One or two girls after the husband’s head.  
Confiscated colourful clothes for Sisera,  
confiscated colourful clothes, embroidered headscarf,  
a colourful dress two embroidered rosettes as a prey for my neck.

The irony is presented here by means of the contrast between the expectations of the warlord’s mother, who unwittingly represents the workings of “poetic justice,” especially in relation to her son. We note the commentary:

This moving image reveals another side of Sisera’s world. Alongside violence and conquest, there is also home and family. He is the son of a mother. His mother is eagerly waiting for her son to bring his army home. But she will wait in vain for his return. This reveals the other side of the war. The desire for glory and victory leaves a vulnerable world alone, grieving and unprotected – mothers without sons, wives without husbands, children without fathers. (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 406–407)

The song ends in verse 31 with the refrain: “So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.”



Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests that the song of Deborah was first written as a description of a battle in a secular ballad or epic style, to which parts in a psalmic style were added later to allow the poem to be used in a cultic setting (Blenkinsopp 1961, 61–76). As Soggin argues, Israelite religious circles found it necessary to provide it with a liturgical and theological framework: “The song that had glorified the tribes that had come out to fight alongside their leaders now became a song that essentially glorified the God of Israel and his glorious achievements.” (Soggin 1987, 99) In contrast to these views, Alexander Globe argues for the original literary unity of the song and “the religious spirit that sustained the tribal confederacy in its earliest days in Canaan” (Globe 1974, 512). He assumes that the song was sung immediately after the victory was won. As he points out, victory songs indicate that such songs were composed by women (Exod 15:20-21; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6-8). Globe concludes:

As many scholars have pointed out, the last part of the poem has a distinctly feminine psychology. Further, Deborah, an eminent prophetess, had more than passing interest in the campaign. She appears to have mobilized her fellow tribesmen from Benjamin in the hill country of Ephraim. She would have been deeply affected by the outcome and would have possessed the necessary literary skill to compose an ode. (Globe 1974, 495)

### 3. Rejoicing of Women in Exodus 15:1-21, Judges 11:34, 1 Samuel 18:6-7 and Judith 16:1-17

Rejoicing of women in biblical texts offers valuable insights into the social, religious and cultural roles of women in ancient Israel. Several Old Testament texts, including Exodus 15:1-21; Judges 11:34; 1 Samuel 18:6-7 and Judith 16:1-17, feature moments of collective rejoicing in which women are a symbolic element in the expression of communal feelings. These acts are not merely expressions of spontaneous joy or sorrow, but reflect the deeply rooted cultural and religious practices of the time. Thus, women’s raids reveal the importance of women’s voices in ritual events.

At an important time in Israel’s history, when Moses led his people through the Red Sea, Miriam’s rejoicing in Exodus 15:1-21 emerges as a key moment in the celebration of God’s salvation. The hymn describes the first great victory of the Israelites, namely the victory over the mighty army of Pharaoh. God appears in the song as the divine warrior who lovingly redeemed his people and mightily defeated their enemies. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is described as the leader of song and dance, giving her an important spiritual and symbolic role: “Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.” (Exod 15:20) The song also expresses rejoicing in God’s future protective reign, which will enable his people to flourish.

Bar Ilan points out that women imitated the actions of men and sang praise to God separately from men: “As Moses led the men in singing, so Miriam led the women, although the women surpassed the men in praising God: the men only sang, the women accompanied their victory dance with drums.” (Bar-Ilan 2020, 79)

A comparison between the victory hymn of Moses, Aaron’s sister Miriam and “all the women” in Exodus 15, and in the song of Deborah in Judges 5 reveals the common feature that both victory hymns praise God’s glory after the war. After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and were rescued from the pursuing Egyptians, Moses sang a hymn of praise to God: (Lk 1:42; cf. Gen 3:15). *’āšîrāh layhwh ...*, “I will sing to the Lord ...” (Exod 15:1). Notice, however, that according to Exodus 15:20 “all the women” joined Miriam with drums and dances, while Deborah’s hymn of praise begins with the statement, “Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day” (Judg 5:1). In doing so, it makes no mention of any social context. It is not clear whether Deborah’s hymn was recited before men or women or before the whole people.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the structure of the narrative and the poem, a clear female perspective is at the forefront. The image of Deborah is strongly reminiscent of Aaron’s sister Miriam, who, after the victory over the Egyptians, after Moses has finished his prayer of thanksgiving, praises and glorifies God with “all the women” to the accompaniment of drums (Exod 15:20-21).

In the account of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11:34, we are confronted with a markedly different tone, where rejoicing turns to mourning. Jephthah, the judge of the people of Israel, promises to sacrifice the first creature that comes to meet him if he defeats the Ammonites. Returning home, his only daughter comes to meet him, drums beating and wailing. What starts as a joyous event quickly turns into a deep tragedy, which underlines the fragility of life and the danger of making promises without thinking them through. The essence of Judge Jephthah’s ill-considered oath is revealed in his failure to foresee the logical common circumstance that, in the event of a triumph, it is the women who first come forward to meet the triumphant warlord.

In 1 Samuel 18:6-7, women again play an important role in the celebration of military victories. When David returns after his victory over the Philistines, his wives greet him with joyful songs and dancing, accompanied by loud drumming: “As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as the made merry, ‘Saul has killed

<sup>4</sup> Both ancient songs are characterised by their rich use of anthropomorphic imagery. In fact, as Jože Krašovec notes, most Old Testament poetic presentations of God’s unity and power are presented with a rich use of anthropomorphisms: “Already at creation, God established a dialogue with man through the Word, through visible signs and invisible designs. Anthropomorphisms are the main means of expressing God’s being in its essence and action, allowing for concrete representations with open horizons and the warmth of interpersonal relationships.” (Krašovec 2023, 127)

his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” (1 Sam 18:6-7) These examples alone show that women were more receptive than men to acknowledging the successes of their military leaders and that they surpassed men in praising human heroes.

In the account of Judith in Judges 16:1-17, Judith begins her hymn of praise after the defeat of Holofernes with exultation:

Begin a song to my God with tambourines,  
Sing to my Lord with cymbals.  
Raise to him a new psalm;  
Exalt him, and call upon his name.

The hymn of Judith is written on the model of Old Testament poetry. In the first part (Jdt 16:2-12), Judith speaks in the third person, as Deborah did (Judg 5). The second part of Judith’s poem (16:13-17) marks a new beginning. Judith announces in the first person: “I will sing to my God a new song ...” (Jdt 16:13). This is a general hymn of praise: nothing can stand against God; the foundations of the earth will be shaken, and in God’s presence the rocks will melt like wax, but to those who fear God will “show mercy” (v. 15). Every sacrifice is a very small thing to God, but “whoever fears the Lord is great forever” (v. 16). At the end of the poem, Judith proclaims that the Lord Almighty will take vengeance on all Israel’s enemies “in the day of judgment” (v. 17). Thus the poem ends with an eschatological view (cf., among others, Sir 35:18-20, a passage that precedes a prayer for Israel’s deliverance). Judith is portrayed as a heroine who, in the song, glorifies not herself but God’s action as the central source of Israel’s strength and victory.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the different contexts in which these narratives appear, what they all have in common is the strong presence of women as key bearers of collective emotional and spiritual expressions. Each of them – from Miriam’s song and dance to the tragic rejoicing of Jephthah’s daughter, from the women’s victory songs in honour of David to Judith’s song of praise – reveals layers of the culturally rooted significance of women’s participation in the spiritual, cultural, and social life of the Israelite community, and reveals the diverse roles of women in the biblical narratives.

In the context of the Old Testament hymns, the intensity of the expression of emotion, whether joy or sorrow, is key to understanding spiritual responses to events. This intensity explains why the forms of expressions of joy and sorrow in the occasional spiritual responses to significant events are so similar to those in the liturgical forms. The universality of human emotional responses reflected in different forms of religious expression is shown. In the context of Jewish worship and later Christian worship, many of the hymns, including the psalms, were used as part of liturgical rites. Through spontaneous responses to events, they gradually passed into liturgical practice and still form an important part of Christian worship today.

<sup>5</sup> Flusser believes that the Book of Judith was written in the Persian period, as was the Book of Tobit, which suggests the antiquity of these prayers (Flusser 1984, 571).

## Conclusion

The narrative in Judges 4 and the song of Deborah in Judges 5 are in the same vein in terms of content. They are based on the idea that throughout history God has shown his ongoing favour to Israel by helping his chosen people in their time of need. Deborah is the only woman with the role of judge and the only judge and prophetess, but she also excels as a military leader. Deborah acts “as a mother in Israel” (Judg 5:7). After the victory over the Canaanites, Deborah sings praises to God and to all the tribes who have responded to her call to fight against the powerful army of the Canaanite warlord Sisera. No other hymn in the Bible places such emphasis on the role of women in achieving victory over the enemy. Deborah’s letters, however, not only glorify God and Deborah’s heroism. It also highlights the character of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who has no prominent position, but who killed a mighty warlord by the simplest means (Judg 5:24-27). Deborah and Jael also represent in the poem the complete opposite of Sisera’s mother, who eagerly awaits the triumphant return of her son from the battle march with abundant booty, and of the “wisest of her princesses,” who serve her expectations and thus, according to the description of the hour of truth, appear as the most foolish of women (Judg 5:28-30).

The narrative in Judges 4 and the song of Deborah in Judges 5 shows that there were no differences between men and women in their attitudes to God, morality and ethnicity. Deborah and Barak work in harmony. They trust in the all-powerful and all-knowing God (Judg 5:4-5). He has brought them victory and they realise that they could not have achieved it without His help. Progress and blessing are always linked to obedience to God’s will and to righteous conduct. When the Israelites cry to God for help, He sends them a deliverer in due time.

As a prophetess and judge, Deborah was a remarkable example of a woman leading the Israelites to victory. Both the song of Moses and the song of Deborah praise God for his deliverance and guidance, and the figures of Miriam in the song of Moses and in the song of Deborah reveal the important role that women have played in Israel’s history.

Similar poems and hymns in the Bible that emphasise the power and leadership of women reveal that these qualities were not unique to Deborah. The presence of strong female characters in biblical texts has important implications for understanding the history and social dynamics of ancient Israel. The significance of the role of female characters in certain crisis situations suggests that women also played an important role in shaping the spiritual orientation of the people of Israel. As leaders, prophets and heroines, women not only ameliorate moments of crisis at certain times, but visibly co-shape lasting change and influence the destiny of the nation. Their actions transcend the cultural norms of the time and reveal a deep, personal relationship to a lived spirituality. It is perhaps in their relationship to spirituality that it is perhaps most evident that this is an area that recognised the leadership power of both male and female charismatic figures in the society of the time.

The importance of a spiritual orientation for the society of the time is clearly shown in the case of Deborah by her combining the roles of judge and prophetess.

## Bibliography

- Bar-Ilan, M. 2020. *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Blenkinsopp, J. 1961. Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah. *Biblica*, 42, 61–76.
- Boling, R.G. 1975. *Judges: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Bronner, L.L. 1999. Hannah's Prayer: Rabbinic Ambivalence. *Shofar*, 17 (2), 36–48.
- Brown, C.A. 1992. *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Fewell, D.N., and Gunn, D.M. 1990. Controlling Perspectives. Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 58 (2), 389–411.
- Flusser, D. 1984. Psalms, Hymns and Prayers. In: Stone, D.M. (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*. Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 551–577.
- Fuchs, E. 2000. *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series; 310). Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Globe, A. 1974. The Literary Structure and Unity of the Song of Deborah. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 93 (4), 493–512.
- Greenberg, M. 1983. Biblical Prose Prayer. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520049933/biblical-prose-prayer> (accessed: 29/05/2024)
- Johnson, N.B. 1948. Prayer in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=830> (accessed: 29/05/2024)
- Krajnc, S. 2022. Man is a ritual-dialogical being and a being of celebration. *Theological Journal*, 82 (4), 781–798.
- Krašovec, J. 2023. Perception of the unity of God's being in older Jewish and Christian hermeneutics. *Unity and Dialogue*, 78 (2), 127–144.
- Livneh, A. 2017. Deborah's New Song. *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, 48 (2), 203–245.
- Moore, G.F. 1966. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- Myers, J.M., and Elliott, P.P. 1978. *The Book of Judges*. Abingdon: Nashville.
- Penner, J. 2012. *Patterns of Daily Prayer in Second Temple Period Judaism*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

- Platovnjak, I., and Svetelj, T. 2022. Ancient Greek and Christian Understanding of Contemplation in Terms of a Resonant Attitude Towards the World. *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 82 (3), 623–637.
- Soggin, J.A. 1987. *Judges: A Commentary*. London: SCM Press.
- Warner, S.M. 1976. The Period of the Judges within the Structure of Early Israel. *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 47, 57–79.