Deborah and Female Leadership in the Context of Deuteronomistic Theology

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Abstract
Why did God place Deborah, who was a woman, in a leadership position in ancient patriarchal Israel? The biblical record of Deborah’s account had puzzled readers throughout centuries as it reflected an unconventional gender role. This study will show that Deborah was presented as an ideal leader according to Deuteronomistic theology. She was an agent used by Yahweh to fulfill five Deuteronomistic theological themes (DtrTh), showing that Deborah was a fitting judge and prophetess in ancient patriarchal Israel.

Keywords
Deborah, Judges, Deuteronomistic history, Deuteronomistic theology, female leadership

Judges 4 in Current Scholarship

A brief review of the scholarship shows that the use of historical criticism could explain the historical plausibility of Deborah’s leadership position in her era, but it failed to discuss how the narrative fits into the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH). Gender criticism resulted either in conclusions that rejected Deborah’s role because of her gender, or


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in conclusions that justified the role and status of women at all costs.³ Both of these views, conservative and feminist, might be based on the readers’ subjective assumptions. Thus, reading the text in light of DtrTh would provide an objective framework for evaluation. Other scholars used canonical methods to compare Deborah with Moses and other women prophetesses in the Bible.⁴ Although this method did present the reading of Jgs 4 within a bigger canonical framework, it failed to discover specific theological insights within Jgs 4 that the writers of DtrH might have been highlighting.

Another modern approach used was the reader-response criticism through reception history. The downside of this method was that the study often showed more about the interpreter than it did about the text.⁵ Redaction criticism was also used to explain that the Deborah character

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⁵ D. M. Gunn, Judges through the Centuries, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Joy A. Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Christiana de Groot,
was a creation of Deuteronomic redactors. 6 This argument led to my proposed method in using the DtrTh as a framework against which to evaluate the narrative account of Deborah. Lastly, narrative criticism was often used in the analysis of Deborah in Jgs 4 as this is a narrative account.7 This was a helpful though still sometimes subjective method depending on how each scholar decided to dissect the text. Thus, I would argue that the results of narrative criticism should still be evaluated against the larger DtrTh framework.

From the brief survey above, it was observed that Jgs 4 had not been studied adequately within the context of DtrTh. Therefore, in this article I will undertake a narrative criticism of Jgs 4 and evaluate the text in the light of five DtrTh: (1) possession of land as covenant faithfulness, (2) observance of divine law as loyalty to Yahweh, (3) coexistence of retribution and mercy, (4) leadership through submission to Yahweh, and (5) prophets as Yahweh’s messenger.8 I will then show that Deborah was an agent used by Yahweh to fulfill all five themes, thus showing that Deborah is fitting as both judge and prophetess in ancient patriarchal Israel.

NARRATIVE CRITICISM OF JUDGES 4

Since Jgs 4 is a narrative account, using narrative criticism to evaluate it not only accentuates the “grammar” of the story but also allows the study of characters, narration, and the chiastic structure of the entire narrative. A close analysis of the text shows an overall chiasm in this standalone narrative, as shown below, with E as the center, signifying that Yahweh was the active agent in bringing victory to the Israelites.

A - v2-3 Yahweh ("yahweh") sold sons of Israel ("bene yisrael"); into the hand ("beyad") of Jabin; oppressed by Jabin ("yabin")

B - v9 Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman ("beyad issah")

C - v10 ten thousand men went up to Barak at his feet ("beraglav") to Mt Tabor, Deborah went up with him

D - V14 Barak went down ("wayyered") from Mt Tabor with ten thousand men

E – V15a Yahweh ("yahweh") threw into confusion Sisera’s chariots and armies by the edge of the sword ("lefi herev") before Barak.

D’ - V15b Sisera went down ("wayyered") from chariot and fled

C’ - v17 Sisera fled at his feet ("beraglav") to the tent of Jael

B’ - v21 the peg of the tent and the hammer in her hand ("beyadah")

A’ - v23-24 God ("elohim") subdued Jabin before the sons of Israel ("bene yisrael"); the hand ("yad") of the sons of Israel went harder on Jabin; exterminated Jabin ("yabin")

A-A’ : God’s action through the hands of human

B-B’ : Deborah’s prophecy fulfilled through the hand of a woman

C-C’ : Barak’s fight with a woman versus Sisera’s flight to a woman

D-D’ : Barak’s charge with his men versus Sisera’s flight from his chariot

E : Deborah’s prophecy fulfilled through Yahweh’s faithful intervention

From the narrative criticism of Jgs 4 above, we see, first, that the chiastic outline of the narrative in Jgs 4 focuses on Yahweh’s faithfulness

in delivering the Israelites despite Barak’s mistrust of the promises delivered by Deborah. The fulfillment of Deborah’s words (4:7; 4:15a) also further authenticate Deborah as Yahweh’s chosen prophetess-judge. In addition, the entire chiastic structure is packed with the involvement of women in prophesying, on the battlefield, and in defeating the enemy. This seems to indicate that despite the patriarchal background, Yahweh’s choice of human leaders was without respect to gender.

**ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF DEUTERONOMISTIC THEOLOGICAL THEMES**

The narrative criticism outline and results above will be analyzed against five DtrTh below.

1. Possession of Land as Covenant Faithfulness

The theme of possession of land as covenant faithfulness plays out perfectly in Jgs 4. In Deuteronomic theology, the land was a gift from Yahweh that came with benefits. The full possession of the land and obedient living according to the divine law within the land would bring about “shalom” living, which was a peaceful, harmonious, and satisfactory life in the land,\(^{10}\) while the failure to occupy the land fully was a failure of faith and obedience.\(^{11}\) In the book of Judges, it is observed that the Israelites failed to fully possess the Promised Land (1:27-36). As a result of the Israelites’ unfaithfulness in fully driving out the cohabitants of the land, they now faced threats from the Canaanites, who were still living in the land.

Judges 4 began with the notion that the land was already endangered (4:2), as Jabin the king of Canaan was reigning in Hazor, a place located within Israel.\(^{12}\) Hazor was an important city, recorded in Jo 11:10 as “the head of all those kingdoms.” Hazor was probably the second most important Canaanite city in the whole region after Jericho, before Israel took over the land. It seemed that the Hazor dynasty had escaped the

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\(^{11}\) McConville, *Grace in the End*, 123-140.

destruction of Joshua, and now the Israelites had to bear the consequence of being unfaithful to the covenant.  

Though Yahweh sold his chosen people into the hands of the king of Canaan, as shown in section A of chiasm, Yahweh in his mercy still sent Deborah to rally the Israelites to remain faithful to the land covenant. As shown in sections B and C, by delivering Yahweh’s messages and accompanying the army to Mount Tabor, Deborah managed to rally the Israelites into fighting off these cohabitants of the land (4:14). In the end, by chasing off their enemies, the Israelites managed to possess the land even further. As a result, section A’ shows that the Canaanite king was subdued, and Israel received the Yahwistic blessing of rest (Jo 1:13, 15; 21:42; 22:4; 23:1; 2 Sm 7:1). In short, Yahweh used Deborah’s faithful actions to bring about Israel’s faithfulness to the land covenant.

2. Observance of the Divine Law as Loyalty to Yahweh

Observance of divine law was necessary to ensure monotheistic Yahwistic worship and “shalom” living in the land, while disobedience to the law would lead to war, catastrophe, loss of land, and even death (Dt 4:25-26). Jgs 4 started with the Deuteronomistic phraseology of disobedience and disloyalty when the Israelites did “that which was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (4:1). The warning in Dt 4:25-26 came true in section A of the chiasm, where Yahweh sold the Israelites into the hand of a Canaanite king who cruelly oppressed them for twenty years due to their assimilation into the Canaanite culture and failure to observe the divine law.

A trace of this disobedience was also seen in the chosen army commandant himself, Barak. When Deborah summoned Barak to lead the Israelites to fight against the Canaanites, at first Barak responded reluctantly, saying that if Deborah did not go with him, he would not go (4:8). Unfortunately, Barak’s hesitation to heed Yahweh’s call showed his

16 Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 339.
lack of total obedience toward Yahweh’s command and a lack of trust in Yahweh’s leadership and assurance of victory (4:6-7).

Ironically, Barak’s reluctance to obey Yahweh was contrasted with the obedience of a foreign woman, Jael, toward Israel and her God. This was in line with the conclusions from the chiastic structure that Yahweh chose humans to lead in different capacities regardless of their gender. This Gentile woman, Jael, had led in the capacity of murdering the Canaanites’ army commandant, Sisera, with her own hands, despite the peace her household enjoyed with Jabin, the king of Canaan at that time (4:11, 17). Jael’s act of choosing to put Sisera, the Canaanites’ army commandant, to death, rather than to conceal him from Barak demonstrated her courageous loyalty to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. As a result of her loyalty toward Yahweh, this Kenite woman was given the honor of commemoration in the history of Israel in spite of her race (4:17-22; 5:24-27).

It is noteworthy that Jgs 4:23 is the only place throughout Jgs 4 in which the term “Elohim” is used rather than “Yahweh”: “God [Elohim] subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel.” A shift from “Yahweh” to “Elohim” might have been used in relation to foreigners. Other instances of this occur when Ehud addresses the Moabite king and speaks about “a word from Elohim for you” (Jgs 3:20). In Jgs 7:14, the Midianite uses “Elohim” to talk about God: “Elohim has given into his [Gideon’s] hand Midian and all the camp.” Thus, in Jgs 4:23, the term “Elohim” is used to acknowledge the fact that it was through the hands of a non-Israelite woman that God had subdued Jabin. It makes sense for this non-Israelite woman to recognize God as “Elohim” rather than “Yahweh” at her point of action (cf. 1:7; 3:20; 6:30-40; 7:14). In other words, despite being a foreigner, her husband’s alliance with the Canaanite king, and her inability to fully identify God as Yahweh, God still extends his mercy to Jael and her household when she chooses to align herself with Israel and her god.

In the previous structural analysis, it is shown that more than half of the chiasm consists of women’s involvement, and here it is shown that Jael’s

case is one of them. As seen in chiasm section B-B’, Jael’s fierce loyalty toward Yahweh brings about “shalom” living in the land that prospers not only the Israelites but her own household as well. This incident establishes that Yahweh’s concern was never about gender or race; rather, it had always been about foreign religion or, rather, loyalty to a different deity.19

Furthermore, Deborah demonstrates complete loyalty to Yahweh. Her obedience motivates others to obey Yahweh too. Deborah heeds Yahweh’s call to judge his people in accordance with his divine law (4:4). Not only does she convey Yahweh’s call to Barak, but she also agrees to go the extra mile in accompanying Barak into the battlefield (4:6-17). Her loyalty toward Yahweh pays off when Barak finally heeds Yahweh’s call to lead the Israelites to fight against the Canaanites. Moreover, every word spoken by her is fulfilled, thus proving that she was indeed acting in obedience to Yahweh’s instructions. For example, Deborah’s prophecy is fulfilled when Jael murders Sisera (section B-B’). In summary, Deborah’s observance of the divine law leads the people into similar loyalty to Yahweh and ensures forty years of peace for the land and its people (5:31b).

3. Coexistence of Retribution and Mercy

In Judges, though there was often a retributive causal connection between Israel’s disobedience and divine punishment, God’s mercy still prevailed, protecting the Israelites despite their downward spiral of immorality (2:19).20 In Jgs 4, we see that amid retribution, God sent Deborah as the agent of mercy through her prophecies and her presence to deliver the Israelites.

Firstly, in Jgs 4, a retributive pattern of apostasy—punishment—repentance—deliverance is easily identified. The chapter starts with Deuteronomistic phraseology that alludes to the Israelites’ disloyalty: the Israelites did “that which was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (4:1).21 This disobedience leads to retributive divine punishment in section A in which “Yahweh sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan” (4:2). However, a twist of events occurs when Barak finally responds to Deborah’s

20 Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist, 155.
21 Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 339.
command from Yahweh to lead his troops to fight against their enemies. As prophesied by Deborah, Barak’s obedience brings about the enemies’ defeat and ultimately the extermination of Jabin as shown in section A’ (4:23-24). The pattern here presents a simplistic retributive formula, namely, that disobedience to Yahweh leads to consequences while obedience leads to blessings.

Secondly, retribution, defined by Plöger as “the rewarding and punishing reaction of God to the good and evil deeds of men,” take place not only among the Israelites but also among the Canaanites. The evil deeds of the Canaanites invite punishment upon themselves. The Canaanites cruelly oppress the people of Israel (4:3), and because of this evil deed, Yahweh brings upon them the ultimate defeat as prophesied by Deborah (4:7, 14), namely, Sisera’s execution and the defeat of his chariots and troops (4:15-16, 21). Though the Canaanites’ iron chariots (4:3) appear to be more powerful than the Israelite army, who only march on their feet (4:10), Yahweh turns their fate around because of their evil deeds toward the Israelites. Ultimately, King Jabin is exterminated by the hands of the Israelites themselves (4:23-24), a perfect irony to Jabin’s previous oppression with his “hand” toward the Israelites in 4:1. This was indeed ultimate retribution of evil, as shown in section ABB’A’.

Despite the straightforward retribution mentioned above, “things were not what they seemed,” as there are still many twists in the story. This is especially true when mercy is repeatedly shown through Deborah to those who had not been obedient to Yahweh, such as Barak and the Israelites. It is thanks to Deborah that Barak receives Yahweh’s mercy. Deborah’s willingness to accompany Barak moves him to compliance with Yahweh’s call. In other words, if it were not for Deborah, Barak would not have led the Israelites into battle and would not have been celebrated by Deborah in the victory song (5:1, 12, 15). This mercy toward Barak is extended beyond the narrative in Jgs 4. In fact, in 1 Sm 12:11 Barak is also mentioned as the one who was sent by God to deliver Israel from the enemy and is named in Heb 11:32 among the heroes of faith, as those who were “made strong

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out of weakness” and “became mighty in war.” Despite Barak’s initial disobedience, God’s mercy prevails through Deborah, the agent of mercy.

As for the Israelites, despite their repeated evil doings (4:1), mercy is also shown to them when Yahweh sends them the agent of mercy, Deborah (4:4). In the midst of Israel’s failure to keep Yahweh’s land covenant and to obey Yahweh’s divine law, Yahweh still sends Deborah as a judge to administer Yahweh’s divine judgment and to teach Israel about his law (4:4-5).24 She responds to Barak’s plea to enter the battlefield, and while she is there, she not only lifts their spirits but also gives them war directives that culminate in a celebration of victory (4:9, 14). Deborah’s prophecy of how Sisera will be executed is also fulfilled at the hands of Jael, marking the true victory of the battle (4:8, 21).

In a nutshell, despite the retribution, Yahweh still acts as a merciful king by sending Deborah as his agent of mercy.

4. Leadership through Submission to Yahweh

Yahweh, the ultimate king and leader of Israel, also appointed human kings and other leaders to carry out his will. These human leaders were to behave according to the ideals of an Israelite king as stated in Dt 17:14-20, which was to place Yahweh and his divine law above themselves and their own desires.

In Jgs 4, although the earthly leaders contributed to the ultimate victory, the leader above all was Yahweh. As seen in climax E of the chiasm, Yahweh was the orchestrator of victory behind the scenes.

Among the earthly leaders, Deborah was the first character to be mentioned in Jgs 4 as doing the work of the Lord (4:4). The presence of a woman judging Israel (4:4), summoning a male army commander (4:6-7), accompanying the army into the battlefield, and commanding them to fight (4:9-10, 14) was uncommon in ancient Israel. First, among twelve judges recorded in the Bible, Deborah was the only woman judge in Israel.25 Her gender was highlighted when the author of Judges used seven grammatically feminine words in a row to introduce Deborah into the narrative. Instead of giving Deborah the mere title of a “prophetess,”

24 Zhou Yongjian and Zhou Lianhua, Zhōngwén shēngjīng zhīshì, 63-64.
which was a sufficient title by itself, she was a “neviyah eshet” “woman-prophetess” in Jgs 4:4 (to be contrasted with the “ish navi” “man-prophet” in Jgs 6:8). Deborah’s gender was probably emphasized to convey the unusual yet superb position that she was in, a woman with leadership authority in a patriarchal society.26

On the other hand, some scholars such as Block and Mouser argued against Deborah’s judgeship and claimed that she was merely a prophetess, while Barak should be the deliverer-judge because he was listed alongside the other judges in 1 Sm 12:11 and Heb 11:32-34, and that “women were never anointed to be kings, priests, warrior judges, apostles, or elders.”27 However, according to textual evidence, the Hebrew root word “shafat” used in Jgs 4:4-5, where Deborah was recorded to be “judging” Israel and the Israelites went up to her for “judgment,” was the same as the root word used in Jgs 2:16-19:

Then the LORD raised up judges “shafat” who saved them out of the hands of these raiders … they would not listen to their judges … whenever the LORD raise up a judge … he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived, and when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt…

This same root word “judge” “shafat” was also used for Othniel, Tola, Jair, Yahweh himself, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson (3:10; 10:2; 10:3; 11:27; 12:7; 12:8-9; 12:11; 12:13-14; 15:20, 16:31). This further authenticated Deborah’s position as a judge of Israel. Next, Amit also argues that Deborah was mentioned right after the Israelites cried out to Yahweh, thus showing her to be the Yahweh-sent savior.28 Lastly, Gill’s grammatical analysis of Jgs 4:4-5 shows an abrupt shift from the narrative tense in 4:4 to the use of nouns and participles, especially the participle “yovoshevet” “used to sit” in 4:5. This implied the duration and permanence of Deborah’s office as a judge.29

26 Kenneth C. Way, Judges and Ruth, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 43.
29 Deborah Menken Gill, The Female Prophets: Gender and Leadership in the Biblical
Not only was Deborah a judge, but she was also a godly leader whose judgeship was comparable to that of Moses. There are many connections between Deborah and Moses that are rarely mentioned or developed by most scholars.30 The same Hebrew root word “shafat” is used in Ex 18:13, 26 and in Jgs 4:4, 5 to refer respectively to Moses’s judgeship and Deborah’s judgeship, each of whom judged Israel for forty years (Jgs 4:4, 5:31; Num. 14:33-34).31 Further, they were both Yahweh’s messengers to his people (Jgs 4:6, 9, 14; Ex 3:15, 4:12), had people approaching them for judgment where they sat “yashav” (Jgs 4:5; Ex 18:13, 26), ordered military leaders into action while staying behind with the armies to inspire rather than fight (Jgs 4:14; Nm 31:12), and sang victory songs (Jgs 5; Ex 15).32 There are significant parallels between Deborah, the “mother” in Israel (5:7), and Moses, the one who “conceived” and “gave birth” to Israel (Num. 11:12). As such, Herzberg and Block both suggested that Deborah could have followed in the prophetic office of Moses (Dt 18:15-18).33

A common objection from scholars who do not acknowledge Deborah as a judge is that Deborah was not listed among the other judges in 1 Sm 12:11 and Heb 11:32.34 Why was Barak mentioned, but not Deborah? After all, Barak’s eventual obedience had to be credited to Deborah’s willingness in stepping up to accompany him into the battlefield. Moreover, Deborah was still explicitly recorded as a “judge” “shafat” who demonstrated leadership, faith, and courage in all her dealings and speeches. Stanton argued that “men have always been slow to confer on women the honors which they deserve.”35 Skidmore-Hess reasoned that Deborah’s role had been diminished by traditional sources: Jewish and Christian commentators of antiquity.36 On the other hand, Hamlin explained that it was because

30 Herzberg, “Deborah and Moses,” 17.
32 Pseudo-Philo, James, and Feldman, The Biblical Antiquities of Philo, 343-347; Herzberg, “Deborah and Moses,” 16, 27. For more parallels between Moses and Deborah, refer to Herzberg’s Table 1 in page 27.
33 Herzberg, “Deborah and Moses,” 33; Block, Judges, Ruth, 192.
36 Daniel Skidmore-Hess and Cathy Skidmore-Hess, “Dousing the Fiery Woman: The
of Deborah’s modesty in choosing to disappear from the narrative after her final inspiring words to Barak on Mount Tabor (4:14), just like what a “mother in Israel” would do, which was why later generations thought of Barak instead of Deborah when they remembered this incident.37 Unfortunately, none of the arguments above were based on the text. Rather than seeing 1 Sm 12:11 and Heb 11:32 as gender-biased texts, a close reading would give us a better understanding of Deborah’s exclusion in these verses.

Firstly, 1 Sm 12:11, "And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety” is textual-critically uncertain. The English word “Barak” is written as “Bedan” in the Masoretic text. Some versions of Hebrew manuscripts have “Debora, Barak,” others retained the original word as “Bedan,” some even changed “Samuel” to “Simson.”38 Some scholars believed “Bedan” to be an abbreviation for “son of Dan, Danite,” thus identifying this person with Samson, who was of the tribe of Dan. Some interpreted this as an early transcriptional error in the Masoretic text, in which brq was mistakenly recorded as bdn. Though these scholars had no evidence to support this transcriptional error, they still chose to read “Bedan” as “Barak” mainly to harmonize the sequence of “Jerub-Baal, Barak, Jephthah and Samuel” in 1 Sm 12:11 with that of “Gideon, Barak … Jephthah … Samuel” found in Heb 11:32.39 Since the name “Barak” is inconclusive, we shall move on to the book of Hebrews to understand better this particular listing of “heroes of faith” that omitted Deborah.

In Heb 11:32, the “heroes of faith” who were judges were Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. The commonality found in these characters was that all of them were unlikely examples of faith from the book of Judges. Gideon was timid and tested God (6:15), Barak was hesitant and

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38 Albrecht Alt et al., eds., Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, Editio Funditus Renovata, ed. 5. emendata. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 463.
requested a woman's company on the battlefield (4:8), Samson was a
reckless man who indulged more in women than in God's will (13-16),
and Jephthah was a son of a harlot who made a foolish vow that sacrificed
his daughter (11:1). The common theme seems to be that all of them were
indeed “made strong out of weakness” (Heb 11:34). In fact, the judges
who displayed fewer weaknesses were not mentioned in this list (such as
Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah). All of them as recorded in the book of
Judges were worthy of celebration, but they were unmentioned in the Heb
11 listing. On the other hand, Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah were
all examples of men with obvious flaws whom God used to accomplish
his perfect will. Barak is certainly among those who “escaped the edge of
the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war,
pun foreign armies to flight” because of Yahweh's enablement, through
Deborah’s encouragement and accompaniment. Therefore, in this case
of weakness turned into strength, Barak was a more fitting example than
Deborah.40 This interpretation agrees with the climax E in the chiastic
structure that Yahweh was the ultimate hero who empowered his men
through his personal intervention in confusing Sisera right before Barak’s
sword.

Thus, Deborah stood out with her Moses-like leadership position as
prophetess and judge. She demonstrated the ideal leadership described
in Dt 17:14-20. Deborah had a good relationship with God (4:4-7), God-
oriented perspectives (4:14), and gave priority to public over private interests
(4:9).41 In fact, it was clear from how Deborah spoke on Yahweh’s behalf
that Yahweh had placed her there as his messenger for such a time as this
(Jgs 4:6, 9, 14).42

5. Prophets as Yahweh’s Messengers

One key Deuteronomic phrase that often appeared was “the word of
Yahweh,” which was often delivered to Israel through Yahweh’s “servants
the prophets” (2 Kgs 9:7; 17:13, 23; 21:10; 24:2).43 Yahweh’s prophets were

40 L. R. Martin, “Judging the Judges: Finding Value in These Problematic Characters,”
VE 29, no. 1 (February 3, 2008): 120.
43 Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, 350-351.
literally God’s mouthpiece, and those who did not listen to the words they spoke in Yahweh’s name would have to be accountable to God (Dt 18:15, 18). In other words, Deborah, a prophetess who was raised by Yahweh, was to be taken seriously by the Israelite community.

Moreover, as mentioned before, Deborah’s multi-gifted roles were similar to those of Moses.44 In the books of Samuel and Kings, the prophets acted as royal advisors who spoke to the king, but in the premonarchic age of Judges, Deborah spoke to Barak, the military leader and the people of Israel.45 Deborah spoke on Yahweh’s behalf when she summoned Barak and commanded him to lead the Israelite army into a war with Sisera’s troops (4:6), when she exhorted the army to go forth and fight with the assurance that Yahweh had already gone out before them (4:14), and when she accurately prophesied Sisera’s death in the hand of a woman (4:9).

Deborah was also the only judge in the book of Judges who was said to have been a prophetess (4:4).46 Her role as a prophetess was less contentious. Deborah’s speeches and dialogues in Jgs 4 showed that she was one who listened to, obeyed, and conveyed “the words of Yahweh” to the people of Israel. (4:6, 9, 14). All her recorded speeches were commands from Yahweh to his people and they each came true. Firstly, section B-B’ in the chiasm showed the fulfillment of Deborah’s prophecy of a woman getting the glory of Sisera’s death (4:9; 4:21), to which Barak himself was eyewitness (4:22). Secondly, Deborah’s charge that Yahweh had gone before the Israelites army and would deliver the enemy to Israel came true in section E and A’ of the chiasm (4:7, 14). The fulfillment of all of Deborah’s spoken speeches further authenticated her prophetic role (Deut. 18:21-22).

In contrast with Barak, Deborah did not hesitate or doubt Yahweh’s commands to go into the battlefield because she trusted in Yahweh’s promised deliverance (4:9). Furthermore, Jabin was reigning in Hazor in the land of Naphtali (4:2), and Barak was living in Kedesh in the land of

Naphtali (4:6), both in the same northern territory, but God decided to call Deborah first, who was living in the land down south in Ephraim (4:5), just to deliver his words to Barak. This to-and-fro communication from Ephraim to Naphtali and back might take several days or months, but that did not stop Yahweh from choosing to speak to Deborah first.  

Another interesting fact that further authenticated Deborah’s role as a prophetess was Barak’s reliance on her. Barak, the male army commandant, agreed to fight the war only if Deborah, the female prophetess, would accompany him to Mount Tabor. In Jgs 4:8, Barak said, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” In this particular verse of the Septuagint (LXX) version, there was an added line from Barak, “for I know not the day on which the Lord prospers his messenger with me.” The Septuagint expansion in Jgs 4:8 was meant to make a point that Barak viewed Deborah as an agent with direct access to Yahweh. Barak saw Deborah’s prophetic presence as a guarantee to his success, one that could compel divine support and victory. Such high regard demonstrated by an Israelite military leader (and the entire Israel community) toward a prophet during a time of war was not uncommon in that era. For example, Samuel the prophet-judge was present with the Israelites in the battlefield in Mizpah while he was asked to “not stop crying out to Yahweh...that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sm 7:8). Similarly, it should not be surprising for Deborah the prophetess-judge to be held in high regard by Barak the army commandant. Rare as it may be, Barak and the Israelites army acknowledged Deborah’s prophetic authority despite her gender (4:14). This is in line with the findings from narrative criticism that Yahweh chose his human leaders without regard for their gender.

Female prophetesses were less common in the canon, but the few who were mentioned were held in high regard. In the Old Testament, Miriam the prophetess “led the other women in praising Yahweh” (Ex 15:20). In DtrH itself, Huldah the prophetess “played [a] key role in Josiah’s reforms” (2 Kgs. 22:14). In the book of Isaiah, Isaiah’s wife was a prophetess who bore children and became the signs of salvation and judgment to Zion (Is 8:3). In the New Testament, Anna the prophetess “saw the true significance of the birth of Jesus,” and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist “exercised
prophetic ministry” too (Lk 2:36-38; Acts 21:9). One of Deborah’s most memorable prophetic contributions was the victory song in Jgs 5. This was preceded by the prophetess Miriam’s singing and dancing about God’s victory (Ex 15:20-21) and the song of Moses (Dt 31:22,30; 32).

In essence, there was no doubt that Deborah was Yahweh’s “servant the prophetess,” one who delivered “the word of Yahweh” to Israel. Barak and the Israelites’ respect for her and the fulfillment of prophecy seen in the chiastic structure all pointed to the authenticity of her prophetic role and authority.

**CONCLUSION**

Through the detailed discussions of these themes, we can answer the question, “Why did God place Deborah, who was a woman, in a leadership position in ancient patriarchal Israel?” The conclusion can be made that Deborah was an agent who fulfilled the five DtrTh by (1) rallying the Israelites to remain faithful to the land covenant so that they could regain the Yahwistic blessing of rest in their land, (2) obeying Yahweh and his word to help Barak to step up, Jael to fulfill the prophecy, and Israel to regain peace, (3) being Yahweh’s agent of mercy amid retributive events, (4) leading through her submission to Yahweh, and (5) delivering Yahweh’s message as the chosen prophetess for such a time as this. These theological and spiritual aspects qualified Deborah to be God’s chosen leader, despite being a woman in an ancient patriarchal society.

The findings of this research show that God summons to leadership regardless of one’s gender. An ideal leader is one who submits to Yahweh’s ways, studies his word, follows it, and leads his people according to it. In fact, most scholars who argue against Deborah’s leadership especially her judgeship, have issues only regarding her gender and not her character.

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However, the results above show that Deborah’s gender is not a problem for God or the DtrH writer.

The lessons that we glean from this thesis could impact the way we do ministry in today’s Asian context. The Asian culture is still patriarchal in general, and that remains true in today’s church scene, especially in countries that hold to more traditional gender roles in Southeast Asian societies such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, and so on. For example, an ordained woman minister is still a rare sight for most in Singapore. As an Anglican woman ministering in the Anglican Province of Southeast Asia, ordination is not an option for me because of my gender.

If back in ancient patriarchal Israel, Yahweh could use anyone who was faithful to him to lead his people, would he not do the same in his church today? If he could use Deborah to judge his people, teach them his law, command his army, and prophesy his word, would he not also use women to do the same in the church today? Perhaps, in appointing church leaders, churches could be less focused on one’s gender and more focused on one’s willingness to lead through submission to God’s ways. The character and spiritual life of a church leader is vital, while gender is merely secondary, if a concern at all.

Furthermore, Deborah could also be a role model to Asian women in ministry. Asian women who serve in ministerial leadership positions could learn to prioritize their intimacy with God and take on an attitude of submission to him first, knowing that their obedience to God could empower others to achieve their respective calling as well. Communicating this finding in seminaries or in church settings could further enlighten believers concerning the heart of God in choosing leaders.

With proper education and emphasis on godly leadership regardless of gender, I can only imagine fewer incidents of women in ministry being oppressed or ostracized due to their gender, and healthier views of leadership in church settings. Godly leadership is one that is not based on gender or charisma or other secondary matters, but one that is first and foremost based on submission to God’s kingship. Even though the topic of female leadership in ministry involves other biblical passages that require

further discussion, this article hopes to contribute to women’s ministerial leadership in Asia in the current and future age.

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