Introduction

The book of Judges laments the spiritual rebellion of Israel in the generation after Joshua. The cyclical framework characterizes the “deliverers” or “judges” as the primary agents through whom God vindicated his people during the period of conquest. Despite the hope that each new cycle brings, the reader quickly learns that she should not expect much from Israel’s judges; in fact, the judge who appears with the most promising description—a birth narrative, conception by a barren woman, a Nazarite vow—turns out to do the least in terms of delivering God’s people (cf. Jdgs 16–18).

While the rest of the judges are faithful to varying degrees, only one other named figure seems to receive positive attention: Deborah. While Deborah “judges” (שֹׁפְטָה) Israel after Ehud’s death, God raises up Barak, not Deborah, as the leader of the Israelite army (4:10, 12). In fact, Deborah’s title is not “judge,” but “prophet”—an אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה (“a prophet[ess] woman”). In his own consideration of her textual characterization, Daniel I. Block has provided the most thorough argument for the primacy of Deborah’s prophetic designation.¹ While Block’s primary focus has been to discern what evidence the text

provides to suggest that Deborah was a prophet[ess],\(^2\) this paper will explore the literary

\textit{effect} of emphasizing Deborah’s role as prophet in Judges 4–5.

To that end, the study begins with a careful analysis of Deborah’s characterization in
Judges 4, with special attention given to grammatical and syntactical issues, as well as
narrative development. Having established that Deborah’s primary narrative role is prophetic,
the next section will explore the literary effect of such a designation, specifically in light of
the expectation raised for a “prophet like Moses” in Deut 18:9–22. The thesis of this paper is
that Deborah’s prophetic role in the book of Judges is key to understanding the Deborah-
Barak cycle and properly discerning its literary role in the unfolding narrative.

\textbf{The Literary Primacy of Deborah’s Prophetic Role}

After the cycles of Othniel and Ehud, in which the narrator clearly and succinctly
presents the roles of the various participants, the account of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4
confuses interpreters with its proliferation of important characters. Cuthbert Simpson
summarizes well the assumptions of his contemporaries regarding the text’s characterization
when he says that Judges 4 is “generally recognized ... [as] a conflation of two stories
regarding Barak.”\(^3\) Indeed, Deborah’s initial primacy in the narrative raises the expectation
that she will save Israel, as is the narrative pattern. Instead, the narrator introduces Barak as
Israel’s military leader. This plot-level oddity shirks tidy categories and leaves scholars at

\(^2\) While Deborah’s role should not be distinguished from that of a male prophet, the
text uses the feminine form of the noun, namely, \(נביאה\) (as does the title of this paper). For
the purpose of highlighting the continuity of her activity with other prophets in the Hebrew
Bible, most frequently this paper will refer to her as a prophet and will deviate from that
pattern only for emphasis.

\(^3\) Cuthbert Aikman Simpson, \textit{Composition of the Book of Judges} (Oxford: Blackwell,
1958), 12.
odds about how best to describe the ʾēšet lappîdôt. To highlight Deborah’s prophetic ministry as the focus of the text departs from the impulse of most scholars, who tend to treat Deborah’s judicial responsibilities primarily and her prophetic status as auxiliary. In an attempt to address this subject, the following section will discuss Deborah’s literary portrait on two levels: (1) the circumstantial clauses used to introduce Deborah in 4:4–5a; and (2) Deborah’s actions in the entire battle narrative.

The Narrator’s Introduction of Deborah

Deborah’s narrative introduction in 4:4–5a consists of three circumstantial clauses. In two discrete semantic units, the first verbless clause provides Deborah’s classification and identity: Deborah is a (female) prophet (אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה) and the wife of Lappidot (אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת).

In regard to the first description (אִשָּׁה), many scholars appropriately identify the phrase as crucial for understanding her characterization, though a tendency to highlight the noun אִשָּׁה as separate from (and more important than) נְבִיאָה prevails. For example, Elie Assis observes that the “unique protagonist” Deborah is characterized first as a woman, then a prophetess, and finally a judge. Regarding the first description (that is, אִשָּׁה), he argues that

4 Commentators with this tendency include, but are not limited to Robert G. Boling, Judges, AB 6A (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 94–95; Trent C. Butler, Judges, WBC 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 90–91. Shimon Bakon goes so far as to call the prophetic title “honorable” to dignify her actions as “divinely inspired.” See “Deborah: Judge, Prophetess and Poet,” JBQ 34 (2006): 118.

“the emphasis on Deborah’s womanhood is conspicuous in the exposition.”

He is not alone; Trent Butler also emphasizes these three characteristics, concluding that Deborah’s role as prophet is more important than her role as judge, but second to her role as a woman, which is “first and foremost in the narrative.” Masoretic accentuation and a lack of conjunction reduce the probability that “a woman” should be considered an independent identifier instead of a part of a larger syntactical unit (literally, “prophet woman”). Similar constructions in the Hebrew Bible include אִשָּׁה מֵינֶקֶת (“nurse”; Ex 2:7) and אִשָּׁה אַלְמָנָה (“widow”; 1 Kings 11:26; 17:9–10). The Hebrew construction per se does not emphasize gender—indeed, those constructions listed above occur in contexts not chiefly interested in gender roles.

While Deborah’s later prophecy will bring to the fore the importance of gender in the narrative, her initial introduction only hints at the theme by choosing a gendered (and thus, thematically appropriate) professional title.

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7 Butler, Judges, 90, 94.

8 The conjunctive mûnah serving the disjunctive zaqef qaṭôn sets off the descriptive phrase as a meaningful unit.

9 Chisholm (A Commentary on Judges and Ruth, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 223, n. 47) also makes note of these collocations in a footnote amidst a thorough discussion of how Deborah’s gender is highlighted in the text. He admits that these examples “[raise] the possibility that [the collocation] is simply idiomatic.”

10 Most importantly, the figure introduced in the next narrative cycle is described with the same Hebrew construction; his gender does not appear to be central to the narrative. That being said, the possibility remains that the person(s) responsible for the present form of Judges 4 selected this construction intentionally (due to its use of the thematic noun אִשָּׁה), considering that נְבִיאָה more frequently occurs independently (e.g., Ex 15:20; 2 Kings 22:14 = 2 Chron 34:22; Isa 8:3). While the noun אִשָּׁה may serve thematic purpose, it should not be considered an independent semantic unit.
A second tendency among interpreters of 4:4a is to accentuate the historical plausibility of Deborah’s prophetic activities. Due to the rarity of female prophets in the Hebrew Bible or the supposed absence of official “prophets” during the time of the tribal league, a scholarly consensus arose that the title “prophet” in this text is anachronistic. To combat such a claim, many commentators emphasize inner-biblical (e.g., Huldah and Miriam) and extra-biblical (e.g., prophets at Mari) examples of such female prophetic activity.11 Further, Klaas Spronk is one of many scholars who have turned to ancient-Near Eastern descriptions of prophecy and divination to explain the historical background of Deborah’s textual designations.12 Contemporary interpreters are indebted to these who have reassured us of the text’s reliability, but the discussion has waylaid readers from what are arguably the primary concerns of the text. When not burdened by the unexpected (but not unprecedented) noun אִשָּׁה or the fact that a female was prophesying during this period, 4:4a consists of a remarkably straight-forward classification: Deborah was a prophet.


12 Based on his analysis, Spronk claims that Deborah is a necromancer in “Deborah, a Prophetess,” 232–42. Spronk’s analysis is creative and plausible in terms of Israel’s religious decline; however, his exegesis depends on a certain redactional reconstruction that departs significantly from the preserved text.
The narrator next identifies Deborah as אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת, traditionally translated, “wife of Lappidot.” The argument that the title is symbolic is popular, though descriptions of prophets with similar familial descriptions elsewhere suggest otherwise. Just as Huldah was the “prophetess נְבִיאָה, wife of אֵשֶׁת Shallum the son of Tikvah, son of Harhas,” so Deborah’s description seems straightforward: she was Lappidot’s wife.

Like the first circumstantial clause addressed Deborah’s classification and identity, the following two clauses use participles to describe her activities. By invoking the root שׁפט—“she was judging נְבִיאָה Israel at that time”—the narrator notes that Deborah is participating in a kind of activity that is related to the normal office of judge. Eight other individuals in the book of Judges are explicitly said to “judge,” namely, Othniel, Tola, Jair, Jepthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. In contrast to these individuals (with the exception of Samson), Deborah’s official leadership is part of the story’s background information rather than part of the narrative mainline. The issue of literary emphasis introduces a distinction

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13 Many (e.g., Susan Niditch, Judges: A Commentary, OTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 65; Sasson, Judges 1–12, 255–56) assume the title is symbolic or vocational, and thereby disregard the way Jael’s identical designation functions in v. 17. Jael’s marriage to Heber the Kenite establishes her political allegiance; Deborah’s marital affiliation may do the same.

14 See, e.g., 2 Kings 19:2 (Isaiah); 22:14 (Huldah); cf. Jer 28:1; Zech 1:1, 7 in which the order is reversed and the patronymic precedes the designation נבִיאָה.

15 Note Andersen’s (Andersen, The Hebrew Verbless Clause in the Pentateuch, 34) observation that “[c]lauses with participles, with normal sequence S–P, are a category distinct from clauses of classification, with normal sequence P–S. As such they may be called verbal.”

16 With the exception of Samson שֹׁפְט and Deborah, each of these verbal forms is a wayyiqtol שֹׁפְט. In the case of Deborah, that she was operating like a judge שֹׁפְט is offset as background information. In a similar way, the note in 16:32 that Samson judged is formally offset for rhetorical effect. That Samson “judged” Israel at all is hardly recognizable.
between the historical question of whether Deborah governed in a judge-like capacity and an overarching literary one: To what extent is Deborah’s role in the narrative related to judging, and to what extent is it related to prophesying? When encountering this narrative detail, might one argue that the narrator is accentuating Deborah’s status as “judge”? Many scholars answer in the affirmative; however, though Deborah fulfilled the normal operations of a judge, the narrator seems to mention that role as subservient to her primary designation (prophet) on the one hand, and another character whose role seems strikingly like that of other judges (Barak) on the other.

The last circumstantial clause (4:5a) geographically situates Deborah’s activities in Israel. Its significance for the unfolding narrative is most clear when compared to the introduction of Sisera in 4:2:

17 Much like Samuel after her and Moses before her, Deborah’s duties as prophet seem to overlap in some ways with the duties of the judge. By suggesting that Deborah likely functioned as a judge historically, if not narratively, I depart from the argument of Block, “Why Deborah’s Different,” 40, 49.

18 For a similar observation, see Block, “Deborah Among the Judges,” 234 and K. Lawson Younger, Judges, Ruth, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 136.
Israel. Deborah was carrying out her judicial responsibilities under the Palm of Deborah just as Sisera was leading from harōšet haggōyim.

The Narrated Actions of Deborah

After the circumstantial clauses of v. 4–5a, the narrative’s sequence of wayyiqtols resumes in 5b. Despite the way English translations tend to construe the syntax of vv. 4–5, the ascent of the people for “judgment” is not background information (i.e., a disjunctive circumstantial clause), but the first action (wayyiqtol) after that introduction. Likely, the literary function of the note in v. 4b that Deborah was “judging” (שֹׁפְטָה) is to explain the next narrative event in which the people seek from her “judgment” (מִשְׁפָּט).

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19 E.g., NLT: “She would sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephram, and the Israelites would go to her for judgment” (emphasis mine). So also the Tanakh and NIV. The ESV is ambiguous.

20 Contra D. F. Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story, Judges 4:4–22,” in Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 156, Sue Groom, Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 154, and a variety of other commentators. See esp. Chisholm, A Commentary on Judges and Ruth, 206, where he explicitly claims the wayyiqtol “does not initiate the story” but provides no argument as to why this is the case. Though the burden of proof seems to be on him in this case (considering the standard mainline function of the wayyiqtol in the Hebrew Bible), Chisholm’s nuanced attention to syntax is to be commended.

21 On the function of circumstantial clauses as introductions to a new discourse unit, see, e.g., Groom, Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew, 149.
The nature of the “judgment” sought by the Israelites is not explicit in the text, but the verbal sequence clarifies how Deborah responded: (1) the people went up to her (וַיֵּעָל) for the judgment (לַמִּשְׁפָּט); (2) she sent (וַיָּשֶׁלֶח); and (3) she summoned (וַיָּקָר) Barak. Her summons is a crucial juncture in the plot. At this point, Deborah acts to muster a military leader in the way that God has in previous narrative cycles. In the cyclical pattern of YHWH raising up a deliver, Barak functions as the deliverer and Deborah speaks for YHWH. As Webb puts it, Deborah “is the agent by which Yahweh’s word will enter the story to summon Barak to fulfill his role as a savior.” Deborah’s calling Barak to battle—“raising up a deliverer”—seems to be the answer to the request made by the people. To the degree that her response followed naturally from their request, one can presume, with Robert Boling, that the

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22 While the nature of the question is unknown, the background for their inquiry is not. Deut 17:8 instructs Israel to “go up” (וַיֵּעָל; cf. Judg 4:5b) to the Levitical priests and the judge (שֹׁפֵט; cf. Judg 4:4b) to receive the “judgment” (מִשְׁפָּט; cf. Judg 4:5b). This was also the pattern of Moses as spokesperson for God in Ex 18:13–23.

23 While the rest of the Christian canon is outside the scope of the present discussion, that Barak is consistently identified as a judge, often in lieu of Deborah, is informative. Heb 10:32 lists Barak with the other judges separately from the prophets, as do the LXX and Peshitta versions of 1 Sam 12:11 (cf. MT, בְּדָן; for a discussion of the textual issues, see John Day, “Bedan, Abdon or Barak in 1 Samuel XII 11?,” VT 43 [1993]: 261–64). Such lists suggest that the people of God remember Barak, not Deborah, as the judge during the Battle of Kishon.

24 Barry G. Webb, The Book of Judges, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 183. Block makes similar observations in “Deborah Among the Judges,” 233, 247. Webb’s observation is even more persuasive when one considers the events of the next narrative cycle. In 6:1–8, after the people do evil, experience oppression, and cry out to YHWH, the deity sends a prophet, whose introduction is syntactically identical to Deborah’s: he is an איש נביא like she is an אישה נביאה. The unnamed prophet delivers a message from YHWH long before Gideon (the judge) enters the scene. Similarly, a “messenger of YHWH”—another divine intermediary—calls Gideon to YHWH’s service as savior of Israel, just as Deborah does for Barak.
Israelite’s cry to God (צעק) is the same as the מִשְׁפָּט they requested of Deborah; they came to YHWH’s earthly representative for help.25

After her encounter with Barak, the prophetic nature of Deborah’s ministry is the most clear. In fact, even those who argue that Deborah plays the narrative role of judge in the Battle of Kishon acknowledge the prophetic nature of her activity in vv. 6–23. For example, Alberto Soggin, who emphasizes Deborah’s unique role as a judge “in the forensic sense and the judgeship as announced in this book,” acknowledges that “in connection with Barak she clearly appears as one who brings a divine word for the one who will soon be the leader, an element which across the centuries has been characteristic of prophecy in Israel and also outside it.”26 The battle account highlights Deborah’s speech more than anything else; that her words will be fulfilled—and the interesting way in which this occurs—is the focus of the plot.27

25 Boling, Judges, 81, 95. Followed and expanded by Ackermann, “Prophecy and Warfare in Early Israel,” 11 and Block, “Deborah Among the Judges,” 239. Block highlights Ackerman’s observation that pilg (צעק) and mishpat (משׁפט) are used to designate the appeal to (צעק) and decision (משׁפט) rendered by the king. Against Block, see Chisholm, A Commentary on Judges and Ruth, 224–26, esp. n. 54, who argues (following Soggin, Judges: A Commentary, 71–72) that the lexeme’s legal (“forensic”) connotation should be retained. For our purposes, the distinction is less important when one attends carefully to the syntax; that “going up for judgment” was an action on that day, rather than what the Israelites normally did means that the verb does not necessarily define Deborah’s profession at all, but only her function in the present narrative, which is arguably God’s spokesperson (i.e., a prophet).

26 Ibid., 72. For a similar description, see Niditch, Judges, 65.

27 Contra Lawson G. Stone, “Judges, Book of,” in Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove: InteVarsity Press, 2005), 599, who claims that “Judges displays no sustained interest in prophecy on the model of Deuteronomy. An unknown prophet speaks in Judges 6:7–10, and Deborah is said simply to be a prophet, but otherwise we miss the correlation of prophecy with fulfillment that is urged by Deuteronomy and is so characteristic of 1–2 Kings” (emphasis mine).
(1) The circumstances of the battle unfold exactly as Deborah declared; the text uses explicit syntactical equivalence to highlight the uniformity of prophecy and fulfillment. First, Deborah accompanies Barak (twice the text emphasizes her movements “with Barak”; v. 9–10, cf. her word at the start of v. 9). Second, Barak successfully musters ten-thousand men from Zebulun and Naphtali (v. 6, 10). Third, Barak amasses his troops at Mount Tabor (v. 6, 12).

(2) God’s assurance (through Deborah) that he would deliver Sisera is realized; Sisera headed toward the Kishon exactly as Deborah said he would (v. 7, 13). Not only did Barak eventually heed Deborah’s words, but God was faithful to his word; despite the alteration made to her declaration in response to Barak’s initial hesitancy, Deborah interpreted Sisera’s arrival at the Kishon as God giving Sisera “into [Barak’s] hand” (v. 14).

(3) To clarify that the alternate version of the prophecy was also fulfilled, the narrator describes how Jael slew Sisera to accentuate that the hammer in Jael’s hand (יהָמַקֶּבֶת בְּיָדָהּ; v. 21) is the instrument of defeat. The violent encounter between Jael and Sisera occupies vv. 17–23 and thus constitutes most of the “battle.” In the account of Judges 4, that Sisera is delivered into Jael’s hands, rather than Deborah’s, is a surprising plot twist. Whether Deborah was aware of YHWH’s intentions initially is not clear from the text, but by

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28 Sasson, Judges 1–12, 263.


30 Many set the question aside and suggest that the ambiguity of the prophetic
introducing such an unexpected twist, the narrative effectively foregrounds the element of prophetic fulfillment and, consequently, the measure of Deborah’s legitimacy.

**The Effect of Deborah’s Prophetic Characterization**

Attending to the text of Judges 4, I have argued that Deborah’s *narrative* role in the Battle of Kishon is primarily prophetic. While the text mentions that she is in some way “governing” or “judging” (שׁפט), the narrative is framed in terms of Deborah’s speaking for YHWH to raise up Barak as the military leader and savior of Israel (i.e., the judge). This distinction does not minimize Deborah’s importance; to the contrary, her historical authority and literary prominence are only heightened by this characterization.\(^{31}\) With this characterization in view, the task of determining the literary *effect* of this designation remains.

**The Promise of a Prophet in Deuteronomy**

According to the overarching narrative of the Hebrew Bible, Deborah is the first prophet to emerge since the time of Moses; no נביא or נביאה is mentioned between Deut 34:10 and Judg 4:4. Even Joshua, who is generally considered Moses’ successor, is never called a prophet. Thus, the most significant effect of invoking the lexeme נביאה to describe alteration draws gender to the focus of the narrative. See, e.g., Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 183 and Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 1995), 168.

\(^{31}\) Contra Bruce Herzberg, “Deborah and Moses,” *JSOT* 38 (2013): 32, who suggests that to deemphasize Deborah’s role as judge is to join those who question the legitimacy of a female leader in the patriarchal system of ancient Israel. Herzberg’s study (with the studies of his interlocutors) demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the *historical* and *literary* function of a figure in ancient Israel.
Deborah is an intertextual one: the narrative of Judges 4 accentuates that YHWH has provided a Deuteronomic “prophet like Moses.”

The text by which Deuteronomy raises the expectation for a “prophet like Moses” is 18:9–22. The pericope is situated within a larger unit that describes civil and religious authorities that will aid in maintaining the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel (16:18–18:22).\(^{32}\) In these verses, Moses describes the fourth and most important figure through whom God will guide the people when they enter the land he is giving to them: the נָבִיא.\(^{33}\)

The polemical style of the opening section reveals that, like the rest of Deuteronomy, this text is most concerned with the choice that will be presented to Israel in the land of her inheritance. Upon their arrival, the Israelites will be faced with a host of practices that will fein divine authority (v. 9, 12). Not only are these practices off-limits for Israel, but they are not to be found in their midst (v. 10: לֹא־יִמָּצֵא בְּקִרְבּוֹ).\(^{34}\) Verse 12 explains that this is the reason the Canaanites must be dispossessed; such practices cannot exist among God’s holy people. To rely on these powers, or even permit the acknowledgement of any power beyond that of Israel’s God, is to reject the whole-hearted (תָּמִים; v. 13) devotion to YHWH demanded repeatedly by Deuteronomy.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{33}\) For a discussion of the prophet’s unique status, see ibid., 172.

\(^{34}\) This will be especially problematic when Israel eventually fails to possess the land completely and allows Canaanites to live “in its midst” (בְּקֶרֶב; Judg 1:29–30).

\(^{35}\) Especially emphasized by ibid., 174.
Verse 13 serves as the conclusion of the proscriptions and the introduction to the prescriptions; devotion to YHWH is definitive for what is and is not permitted. The two ways established by this central truth are illustrated by the explicit contrast in the verses that follow (vv. 14–15): while the Canaanites “listen” (יה¶ח) to a variety of supposed diviners and sooth sayers, the Israelites are to “listen” (י¶ח) only to the prophet whom YHWH will raise up (18:15). Verses 15–16 name three characteristics of this prophet “like Moses.”

1. By clarifying that the prophet will be “from among you, from among your brothers” (מִקִּרְבְּךָ; v. 15), Moses accentuates his concern that the people remain “blameless before YHWH” by rejecting the false word of officials associated with the Canaanite religion (cf. 18:9–14). A prophet in the Mosaic succession will be an Israelite, rather than a Canaanite.

2. The prophet will be raised up (קום) by YHWH. While the syntax highlights the object of the verb—אֵלָיו is fronted for emphasis—the agency of YHWH is still explicitly mentioned.

3. The prophet will mediate between YHWH and the people in the way that Moses did at Horeb (v. 16). Moses reminds the people that he “stood between YHWH and [Israel] at

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36 Literally the people are to be “perfect with YHWH,” i.e., their relationship with YHWH should be marked by integrity. See J. Gordon McConville, Deuteronomy, AOTC 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 302. For similar sentiments but a different translation (“undivided commitment”), see Gerhard Von Rad, Deuteronomy: A Commentary, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 123.

37 The verbal object (“to him”; אֵלָיו) is fronted in v. 15 to highlight this contrast.

38 Contra Dennis T. Olson, Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 85, who suggests the phrase emphasizes solidarity with the people and the “humanness of Moses.” That “brothers” (אחיו) emphasizes a national/ethnic boundary is especially clear in texts such as Deut 3:18, in which “your brothers” (בני ישראל) is in apposition to the “people of Israel” (בני ישראל), and 17:15, where “your brother” (אחיך) is contrasted with “foreigner” (נער).
that time, to declare to [them] the word of YHWH” (5:5). Moses interprets his mediatory role here as the authorized mouthpiece of God. In repeating for them the fear they felt on that day, Moses also draws to mind the promise they made: “Speak to us all that YHWH our God will speak to you, and we will listen (שָׁמַע) and do it” (5:27).39 By emphasizing that Israel must listen (שָׁמַע) to this prophet like Moses, Deuteronomy 18 reminds the people that they have already promised to do so. The allegiance that they pledged to God’s mediator at Sinai/Horeb extends to the prophet God will raise up, whose words are to be treated as “coterminous with God’s words.”40

In vv. 17–18, Moses recounts his conversation with YHWH regarding the events at Sinai/Horeb (cf. 5:28–33). He continues to describe the primary function of the mediating prophet when he says “I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (18:18). Speech is undoubtedly the emphasis of the section; the keywords דִּבֵּר and דָּבָר are used 16 times in vv. 17–22.41 Thus, the most important feature of the expected prophet is that he or she will speak for YHWH, and thereby function as a mediator of the relationship between YHWH and Israel. Just as Moses’ primary legacy for the people of Israel was the “words” with which he entrusted them (“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness”; Deut 1:1), so too should future

39 Despite the fact that this generation was not actually at Sinai/Horeb, Moses’ recapitulation of the events consistently treats them as if they were present. For a discussion of the Deuteronomic “description and prescription” of the “reenactment of Horeb,” see Michael H. Kibbe, “Godly Fear or Ungoldly Failure?: Hebrews 12:18–29 and the Sinai Theophanies” (Ph.D. Diss., Wheaton College, 2014), 77–80.


41 Noted also by Christensen, Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9, 406.
generations expect Moses’ words to be supplemented by new revelation from YHWH by means of an individual like him.42

Verse 19 highlights once more that the pericope is concerned primarily with Israel’s proper relationship to YHWH (by means of the authorized mediator), not with bolstering the reputation of Israel’s prophets. Here, YHWH describes disobedience to the prophet as disobedience toward him (“to my words that he spoke in my name”). Functioning as the corollary to v. 15 (“to him you will listen”), YHWH’s promise regarding those who fail to listen (שומע) to his words is alarmingly succinct. Introduced with the independent pronoun (אָנֹכִי), the statement is best translated as “I will call him to account” (cf. Deut 23:22).43

If the people are to demonstrate their devotion to YHWH by heeding his words through the prophet alone, they must discern which prophet truly speaks for their God. According to v. 22, the primary criterion by which the people will determine the veracity of a prophet’s claim to speak in the name of YHWH is the effectiveness of his or her prophecy; when God ensures the fulfillment of his prophet’s message, he demonstrates the authority of the prophet.44

Deborah, the Prophet Like Moses

The fundamental issue of Israelite obedience programatically highlighted in the book of Deuteronomy is accented structurally in the book of Judges. Each narrative cycle

42 Tigay (Deuteronomy, 172) aptly describes the prophet as the “only legitimate channel of communication with God.”

43 My translation is indebted to ibid., 177. See also HALOT, 233.

44 This criterion is framed as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. Consider the prophet described in 13:1–3. Here, the false prophet’s words are fulfilled, but he speaks in the name of other gods.
highlights again the apostasy already predicted in Deut 31:16: “You [Moses] are about to die and join your ancestors, [with the result that] this people will begin to worship foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break my covenant with them.” With this Deuteronomistic impulse the author/editor of the book of Judges attributes the deterioration of Israel’s covenant keeping to the death of Moses’ successor.⁴⁵ As Rolf Rendtorff aptly notes, this “intermediate period” is explicitly marked by the absence of Mosaic leadership. While Israel in her youth had been guided by Moses and then later by Joshua, whose leadership is constantly characterized as Mosaic (but not prophetic),⁴⁶ the book of Judges is concerned with the character of Israel after Joshua, a generation who remembered nothing of YHWH’s saving actions to earlier generations (cf. Jdgs 2:8–10).⁴⁷ By framing the book in such terms, the issue of the adequacy of Israeliite leadership (and the memory of Moses) is brought to the fore.

With this consideration in mind, scholars have consistently noted the way Gideon’s call narrative mirrors that of Moses in Exodus 3–4.⁴⁸ However, in a recent article, Bruce

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⁴⁵ At the very least, the death of Joshua is “[t]he decisive turn for the worse.” J. Gordon McConville, God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology: Genesis—Kings, LHBOTS 454 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 118.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Josh 1:1, 5; 3:7; 4:10; 11:15.


Herzberg has challenged interpreters to consider how Deborah’s characterization is more fundamentally Mosaic than Gideon’s; without hesitation he argues that Deborah is depicted as “an avatar of Moses himself.” \(^49\) While the extent to which Deborah directly parallels Moses is questionable—Gideon’s narrative has far more in common with narrative descriptions of Moses than does Deborah’s \(^50\)—that Deborah qualifies as a “prophet like Moses” according to Deuteronomy 18 is not.

Deborah clearly meets the prerequisites for prophetic ministry in Israel: she is both a loyal Israelite (i.e., “from among you, from among your brothers,”) and a leader among the people raised up by God (ךָּוֹמֵן; cf. Deut 18:5, 18). The Kishon battle account concludes by reiterating YHWH’s divine agency (emphasized already in the grammatical choice to make YHWH the agent of deliverance in the prophetic promise of v. 7) with the statement, “on that positively; to the contrary, they accentuate the apostasy of Israel and the deterioration of Israeliite leadership in the period.


\(^50\) In my view, Herzberg’s analysis does not satisfactorily establish parallels between the two characters. Some are untenable and others are given too little attention. An example of the former is Herzberg’s claim that Moses and Deborah function as “military leaders”; both characters act in that capacity very minimally. By contrast, when Herzberg notes the narrative parallels between Moses’ handling disputes as prophet in lieu of a judge (Ex 18:13–23; on which, see n. 22 on p. 9), he fails to mention striking lexical and thematic continuities. See “Deborah and Moses,” 17–18, 20–23. The substantial account of Deborah in Biblical Antiquities (31.18) has been characterized as Mosaic in orientation; one could argue (and some have) that Pseudo-Philo’s emphasis on Moses’ law and Deborah’s having led Israel for forty years indicates early recognition and adaptation of some of the parallels listed here. For this account of Deborah’s characterization in late antiquity, see Joy A. Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6–28, and esp. 8–9 in relation to Pseudo-Philo. While no prophet would ever be entirely like Moses, these sorts of narrative parallels might serve to facilitate Deborah’s association with Deuteronomic prophetic expectation.
day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel” (v. 23). Though Deborah lacks any sort of call narrative, the control of Israel’s God over her actions and words suggests that he was also responsible for her installation as a leader. Perhaps for this reason the prophetic song of Judges 5 summarizes Deborah’s rise to prominence with the thematic clause, “until I arose [.popup] Deborah, I arose a mother in Israel” (5:7). Her leadership of God’s people clearly defined her religious (and political) allegiance. The juxtaposition in Judges 4 of Deborah’s introduction with Sisera’s preserves the polemical nature of the Deuteronomic text; the structural equivalence of the introductions accentuates the devotional divergence of the characters.

The most important parallel between the Deuteronomy texts and Judges 4—and the essential characteristic by which one is truly like Moses—is the fact that Deborah acts as a mediator between YHWH and Israel in the same way that Moses did at Horeb: “I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (18:18).  

Deborah’s opening address to Barak accentuates this crucial detail with the words, “surely YHWH, the God of Israel, has commanded [.popup] you” (v. 6).  

Even in the book of Joshua, Moses’ successor never introduces his speech with “YHWH commands”; to do so is fundamentally

51 This trend is not limited to Horeb; in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses relays the commands of YHWH (צוה) forty times.

52 See GKC §150.e, which claims that the interrogative in this text “serves merely to express the conviction that the contents of the statement are well known to the hearer, and are unconditionally admitted by him” (474). Cf. Ruth 2:9.

53 Certain texts (i.e., Josh 1:9; 4:8; 8:27; 10:40) describe instruction from YHWH to Joshua and the people (without direct quotation), but in twenty-one passages containing divine commands (in which the subject [or implied subject/pronominal suffix] is YHWH, the verb is צוה), seventeen of them accentuate explicitly Moses as the recipient of God’s commands or the covenant that is associated with Mosaic authority (4:10; 7:11; 8:31; 9:24; 11:12, 15, 20; 13:6; 14:2, 5; 17:4; 21:2, 8; 22:2, 5; 23:16). Joshua’s authority is related to Moses; he most frequently related Moses’ words, not those of YHWH directly. Perhaps this is why he is never called a prophet of YHWH, but rather, the assistant (שרת) of Moses (1:1).
Mosaic or, according to Deuteronomy 18, *prophetic*. Especially given that Judges sets the hermeneutical agenda in terms of obedience to Moses’ *torah*, the divine command relayed by way of Deborah invites attention in two ways:

(1) By calling to mind Deuteronomy 18, the narrative emphasizes Deborah’s authority as the mouthpiece of YHWH. Not only does her title situate her in the company of other great prophets, but the detail with which the narrator emphasizes the fulfillment of each of her prophecies also confirms that she serves the Most High. As with Samuel, YHWH “let none of [her] words fall to the ground” (cf. 1 Sam 3:19).

(2) As Deut 18:9–22 had envisioned, God’s raising up a prophet provides an opportunity to test the response of Israel to revelation from YHWH. Fundamental for properly reading Judges 4–5 is noting the overarching concern of the Deuteronomic text it invokes: to convince the people to demonstrate their Yahwistic devotion by heeding the authorized voice of his messengers and rejecting the authority of the inhabitants of Canaan. By attending to the Deuteronomic overtones of the book of Judges in general and the cycle in particular, one notes that Deborah is not merely a prophet; rather, Deborah is the means by which God fulfills his promise to provide a voice to the people in the land of Canaan.  

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54 Judg 3:4: “[The remaining nations] were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of YHWH, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.”

55 She will not be the only one to do so; divine intermediaries are central to the book of Judges. See below, p. 23.
Israel’s Response to the Promised Prophet

When God graciously provides revelation through his prophet(s), Israel must choose to listen to them rather than the voices of the nations (ultimately: to fear YHWH rather than the nations). As the previous section argued, Deborah’s unique authority as YHWH’s spokesperson is emphasized by her command from YHWH (צוה). In v. 7, this command is augmented by divine assurance; YHWH commands Barak to amass troops at Mt. Tabor and then promises to bring Sisera to the wadi Kishon. By invoking the memory of Deuteronomy 18, Deborah’s prophetic role in the narrative brings into focus how Israel (represented by her judge Barak) will respond to YHWH’s word to a new generation once they are in the land.

Barak’s response to Deborah’s command is halting; his compliance is contingent upon her presence on the battlefield. Barak’s response to such a prophecy being conditional is troubling—if Deborah does not accompany him, he will not go (i.e., he will disobey the divine command). 56

While many scholars have argued that Barak’s request for Deborah’s presence in battle represents an acknowledgement of her prophetic status, 57 the prophet’s adaptation of

56 Worthy of note is a clause in 4:8 that appears in LXX A–B but is missing in the MT: “for I do not know the day in which the Lord will send his angel on a good journey with me.” Many scholars point to this textual variant as an early witness to a more favorable reading of Barak’s response.

57 Block, “Deborah Among the Judges,” 249; Younger, Judges, Ruth, 141. So Niditch, Judges, 65, in regard to her “prestige as woman warrior.” See also Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5,” JAAR 58 (1990): 398, in which Fewell and Gunn argue that Barak is not a coward, but does question Deborah’s authority as a woman. Jack Sasson (Judges 1–12, 273) argues that Barak needed Deborah to accompany him so that she might act like a diviner, “constantly searching the signs for the right moment to enter the fray.” By drawing on common practices in the ancient Near East, Sasson risks attributing to Israelite prophetic ministry a quality too akin to its neighbors (which Deuteronomy 18 explicitly prohibits).
the divine command in light of Barak’s response indicates that on some level the request is problematic. In v. 9 Deborah assures Barak that she will accompany him into battle, but his hesitant response is met with an alteration to YHWH’s initial promise: into the hand of a woman Sisera will be delivered, rather than into Barak’s hand (cf. v. 7). Deut 18:19 made clear that YHWH would reckon with the individual who failed to heed the word of his prophet. Though Block is right to accentuate the presence of Deborah as analogous to YHWH being “with” the judge or the Spirit being upon him, YHWH’s choice to be present in battle does not sanction the quality of the character’s response; instead, it accentuates the gracious nature of his deliverance. YHWH had promised long before that he would be with the people in battle—especially in circumstances where the enemy’s weapons were intimidating—so they need not fear (cf. Deut 20:1). Barak loses sight of that promise, even though YHWH does not.

Barak’s eventual compliance is noteworthy. He hesitates initially, but the song of chapter 5 evaluates the battle as a success because of the willing participation of certain tribes and leaders, including Barak (cf. 5:2, 9, 11, 13–15c). The moment Barak joined Deborah in singing is particularly important (5:1). Because an expression of loyalty to the prophet is ultimately indicative of loyalty to YHWH, the solidarity of the prophet and the judge reflects a mutual acknowledgement of YHWH’s power and authority, reminiscent of a similar response when the people joined Moses in song after the Exodus (cf. Ex 15:1).

58 Cf. Judg 3:10; 6:12, 16, 34; and 11:29.

59 That the song of the prophet in the next chapter emphasizes how God ensured deliverance despite the inappropriate response of his people—specifically a reticence to engage in battle—is noteworthy (cf. 5:15–17, 23).

60 On which see Tigay, Deuteronomy, 172.
Prophets and Messengers in the Book of Judges

Acknowledging the primacy of Deborah’s prophetic role has a profound impact on one’s interpretation of the Deborah-Barak narrative cycle. By emphasizing the importance of the title נבון, the narrative’s Deuteronomic overtones and the gravity of Barak’s initial hesitancy manifest more clearly. Additionally, to characterize Deborah as a prophet emphasizes the unique quality of the cycle in respect to the function of divine intermediaries in the narrative strategy of the book. The unexpected shape of Deborah’s introduction breaks from the editorial norm and thereby underlines the cycle’s uniqueness: rather than highlighting the activity of the official judge, this cycle highlights the divine intermediary who raises him up.\(^6^1\)

Mentioned briefly above, only one other individual is called a prophet (נביא) in the book of Judges, namely, the individual who addresses the people in 6:8–10 in response to Midianite oppression. As our analysis of Deuteronomy 18 and Deborah’s Mosaic characterization demonstrates, the narrative element used in the Deborah-Barak cycle (and the Gideon-Abimelek cycle) to accentuate an assurance of victory in the face of hesitancy is the presence of a prophet; however, prophets are not the only spokespeople of YHWH in these cycles. Divine intermediaries called (the) “messenger(s) of YHWH” appear here (5:23;

\(^6^1\) That Deborah’s gender also makes her unique among the other important characters in the book of Judges is certain, if by no other measure than the account’s popularity among feminist interpreters. Though gender dynamics are crucial to exposing the unexpected nature of YHWH’s fulfillment of Deborah’s prophecy, they are not the point. By confounding readerly expectations using role reversal and female characters, the narrator highlights the ability of YHWH to work in the most unexpected ways and by a variety of means. This truth is subservient to the overarching concern to demonstrate that the Israelites have no reason to be hesitant when God has assured them of victory.
6:11–24) and in two other places in the book (cf. 2:1–4; 13:3–21). Their appearances may have structural significance:

The messenger of YHWH appears in the book’s introduction to the cycles section and provides the first indicting message from YHWH regarding the apostasy of Israel. In the two central cycles, prophets and messengers appear, both to indict and to inspire. Finally, a messenger interacts substantially in the birth narrative of the climactic narrative cycle.

How finely to distinguish between these characters is difficult to discern. In his discussion of Gideon’s call, Mark Boda aptly notes that the מַלְאַכָּה יְהוָה in 6:11 is “closely related” (if not identical!) to the איש נביא in terms of characterization and narrative structure.62 This narrative logic is strengthened by evidence that prophets elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible are described as messengers of YHWH;63 however, identifying the messenger in Gideon’s call narrative (according to the MT) offers the additional complication of conflating YHWH and the messenger of YHWH.64

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63 Boda (ibid., 46, n. 9) provides an annotated list: “Isa 44:26; Hag [1]:13; Mal 1:1; 3:1; 2 Chr 36:15, 16; possibly Isa 42:19; Qoh 5:5; Job 33:23. In other contexts, however, this term is used for a heavenly being (Gen 48:16; Exod 23:20; 33:2; Hos 12:5).”

64 This conflation does not exist in the LXX. The LXX consistently presents the
Whether or not the characters are identical in reality is second in significance to their narrative function. Most important to this study is the concentration of divine envoys in the central cycles of the book of Judges. God’s revelatory agency is highlighted in the two narratives whose judges display the most reluctance. In these narratives agents associated closely with YHWH (by title, “messengers of YHWH,” or Deuteronomic characterization, “prophet”) emphasize his continuing revelation to and deliverance of the nation of Israel in a way much like he did in the Exodus. Deborah’s prophetic song reassures a doubting generation that, in spite of their faithlessness, YHWH continues to act mightily in the way he had in Egypt.  

Similarly, the prophet’s speech in chapter 6 highlights that YHWH did not only deliver the people from the hand of the Egyptians, but also delivered them “from the hand of all who oppressed [עַל] them” (6:9), namely, the oppressors in the book of Judges, over whom the song in Judges 5 celebrates victory.  

For the prophet’s speech to present such a pointed interpretation of the skirmishes in Canaan, including the recent exploits of YHWH in the Battle of Kishon, highlights anew the shocking response of Gideon when the messenger of YHWH calls him to lead Israel. In the face of such a precedent, Gideon retorts, messenger (ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου) as the subject of the verb throughout the pericope, whereas the MT attributes the speech in v. 14 and v. 16 to יהוה.

65 While the Song of Deborah and Barak is distinct from Exodus 15 in a variety of ways, the exodus-like imagery and content of the song is nearly undeniable. See, e.g., Alan J. Hauser, “Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5,” in Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry, ed. Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 265–84.

66 The standard statement that God “delivered [you] from the hand of Egypt” (ﱠنزَلَ ﻋُزَى) occurs three times in the book of Exodus and does not appear again until the book of Judges, where the statement is modified to include the most recent deliverances of YHWH. Samuel will use the same augmented statement (with עַל) to summarize how God delivered Israel in the whole pre-monarchic era (1 Sam 10:18).

67 The “oppression” of Israel (לֶשֶׁת) occurs in Judg 1:34; 2:18; 4:3; and 10:12.
“And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’” (6:13). Toward the miraculous events of the Battle of Kishon, interpreted at length by one prophetic mediator and mentioned briefly by a second, Gideon has turned a blind eye.

Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that the primary narrative role of Deborah in the Battle of Kishon is that of prophet. Attending to the prophetic nature of Deborah’s leadership invokes the promise for a “prophet like Moses” from Deut 18:9–22. These Deuteronomic overtones highlight the importance of appropriate response (i.e. unconditional obedience) to divine revelation and characterize the reluctance of Israel and her leaders as emerging religious apostasy. The concentration of divine intermediaries in the book’s central narrative cycles accentuates Israel’s misplaced fear in the face of assured victory.
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