A Reexamination of Deborah as Prophet and Judge

Brandy Scritchfield

Calvin Theological Seminary

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to set aside gender concerns related to Deborah and the interpretation of Judges 4–5 in order to determine if a clearer portrait emerges of Deborah as a prophet, a judge, or both without gender issues obscuring the picture. Chapter 1 provides a representative summary of Deborah’s interpretive history, which establishes how gender has been historically and incorrectly used as the primary interpretive key for understanding Deborah and other key parts of Judg 4–5. Chapter 2 discusses Deborah’s role as a judge and determines the text supports identifying her with this title, and chapter 3 does the same for Deborah’s role as a prophet. As a result of chapters 2–3, Deborah’s role as a prophet is seen solving many of the interpretive challenges of the text in Judges 4–5. In conclusion, this study claims while Deborah was certainly a woman, the preoccupation with her gender often obfuscates her roles as judge and prophet since interpreters use gender as the primary interpretive key for understanding both her character and the narrative. Rather than gender, Deborah’s prophetic role provides the best interpretive key for understanding Deborah’s unique presentation and activities as one of the judges.
INTRODUCTION

Historically, interpreters have focused on one aspect of Deborah’s character to the exclusion of almost all others: her gender. Joy Schroeder claims the existence of a character like Deborah—“a female judge, prophet, and war-leader”—has historically “disturbed cultural assumptions and expectations about women’s roles through the centuries.”¹ Deborah’s apparent defiance of assumed gender norms, Schroeder notes, has left her particularly prone to misinterpretation. Some domesticate her, trying to diminish the potential for female leadership and empowerment. Others elevate her in order to give hope and power to women seeking roles beyond the patriarchal structures holding them back. Almost all fixate on her gender whether positively or negatively.

In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, I begin in chapter 1 by providing a representative summary of Deborah’s interpretive history. This establishes how gender has been historically used as the primary interpretive key for understanding Deborah, her relationship to and interactions with Barak, and the entire purpose of Deborah’s account in Judges 4–5. In addition, I show how interpreters have ignored, diminished, elevated, and even added to the text in order to support their own agendas related to gender norms and women’s roles in society and the church. Therefore, I will attempt to set aside gender issues and concerns for the remainder of the study so I can examine what the text says about Deborah without gender obscuring the picture. In doing so, I aim to see if a clearer portrait of Deborah emerges or whether gender remains the best interpretive key for understanding the character of Deborah and the narrative in which she is embedded.

In chapter 2, I move on to discussing Deborah’s role as a judge. This involves examining the term šōpēṭîm (commonly translated judges), how the term is used throughout Judges, and the best options for translating the term into English. After establishing this key terminology, I discuss formulaic patterns and elements common to the various judge accounts. Then I discuss these elements in relation to Deborah and how the presence or absence of common characteristics and behaviors often associated with judges potentially diminish or solidify Deborah’s place among the judges.

In chapter 3, I switch to discussing Deborah’s role as a prophet. After discussing common questions and concerns regarding her status as a prophet, I examine the text for signs of characteristics and behaviors commonly associated with prophets in the ancient Near East (ANE). This reveals enough similarities to easily conclude Deborah exhibited the behaviors and characteristics expected of a prophet in the ANE broadly and likely within ancient Israel as well. As a result, I also demonstrate how Deborah’s role as a prophet sheds light on many of the interpretive challenges interpreters have struggled with related to both Deborah and entire account in Judg 4–5.

In conclusion, I argue while Deborah was certainly a woman, the preoccupation with her gender often obfuscates her roles as judge and prophet since interpreters use gender as the primary interpretive key for understanding both her character and the narrative. Rather than using gender, I assert Deborah’s prophetic role provides the best interpretive key to use for understanding Deborah’s unique presentation and activities as one of the šōpēṭîm.
CHAPTER 1

DEBORAH IN THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The vast amount of literature concerning Deborah makes it impossible to provide an exhaustive review in such a short study. Therefore, I will summarize key periods in interpretive history and then highlight the major debates that have historically surrounded Deborah. In both the summary and the key debates, I demonstrate how interpreters throughout the centuries have fixated on her gender more than any other characteristic or feature in the narrative and how interpreters have failed to reach a consensus on any aspect of Deborah’s character.

Summary of Interpretive History

Most early Jewish sources acknowledge Deborah’s public activities, her authoritative speech, and commanding presence. However, they use these to criticize her pridefulness and assertiveness, especially in her interactions with Barak and her praise of herself during her victory song. This criticism results from Deborah’s characteristics not aligning with interpreters’ notions of proper behavior for women. There are, however, a few early rabbinic sources, such as the Babylonian Talmud, that praise Deborah for her modesty. This praise, unfortunately, grounds itself in speculation regarding Deborah’s motivations rather than solid textual evidence.

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2 I am heavily indebted to Schroeder for her exemplary and exhaustive survey of interpretations of Deborah throughout history in Deborah’s Daughters. Her work exposed me to many of the interpreters mentioned in this section and provided access to many sources I was unable to find available in print or in English.

3 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 24.

Many early Christian interpreters reference Deborah, but none extensively or thoroughly examine the text itself. Even though they unanimously praise Deborah, they employ brief references or heavily allegorized interpretations to support their own agendas. Some interpreters ignore elements of the biblical text so they can make claims about what Deborah did not do while others add elements to make claims about what Deborah—and consequently all women—should do. Such blatant use of Deborah to further extra-biblical agendas leads Schroeder to say the following about early Christian interpretations:

There is nothing but praise for the biblical prophetess, a model for wives, mothers, widows, and deaconesses. As the men praised her—perhaps especially as they praised here—they reinforced their own beliefs about women’s proper sphere. Thus women in Christian history were enjoined to avoid behavior that might resemble the literal Deborah who appears in the scriptures, and, rather, to emulate the gentle submissive Deborah found in their rhetoric.

So while Deborah was a model in this era, the textual evidence about her words and actions was often ignored in favor of social and religious agendas related to her gender.

In the medieval period, Christian and Jewish literature contains numerous references to Deborah but few sources substantively engage the biblical text. While

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5 Interpreters who reference Deborah include the following: Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 CE), Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–253 CE), Dydomus of Alexandria (ca. 313–398 CE), Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–397 CE), Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–387 CE), Jerome (ca. 345–420 CE), John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407 CE), Augustine of Hippo (ca. 354–430 CE), and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (ca. 393–458 CE). See Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, for a thorough summary of each of their references to Deborah.


7 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 28 (emphasis original).

8 An astute reader will notice no references to female mystics and renown nuns of this period—including Hildegard of Bingen (ca. 1098–1179 CE), Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1260–1282 CE), Birgitta of Sweden (ca. 1303–1373 CE)—during this study. These women did not model themselves after Deborah and did not appeal to her example, preferring instead to compare themselves male prophets and biblical figures. Therefore, this study will follow their lead. That said, it was common for male supporters of these women to cite Deborah in reference and support of their female contemporaries (Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 41). For example, Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1530 CE) praises Deborah’s manly strength, and Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554? CE) notes Deborah was a judge. However, in the words of Schroeder,
allegorical interpretations continued to flourish,⁹ the Middle Ages also gave rise to a few literal-historical readings of the text.¹⁰ In most cases, interpreters continued to emphasize, diminish, or ignore parts of the text in service of their own agendas.¹¹

Despite setting aside thoroughly allegorical interpretations, reformation interpreters often used the same methods for interpreting Deborah as their forebears. Most reference Deborah quickly as an example, but they employ only small parts of the story.¹² They often acknowledge Deborah functioning in prominent roles only so they can limit or redefine the roles according to their own standards of what women should do.¹³ The majority claim Deborah could not serve as a precedent for women taking on leadership positions because Deborah serving in such roles was a miraculous and divine exception. They frequently point to her prophetic gift as what enabled her to function as a leader despite her feminine inferiority. They also emphasize the uniqueness of God commissioning a women, which they use as evidence of the derelict nature of Barak, the

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⁹ For example, Peter Damian (1007–1072 CE), Rupert of Deutz (1075–1129/30 CE), Peter Riga (d. ca. 1209 CE), and Hugh of St. Cher (ca. 1200–1263 CE) devote significant attention to Deborah, but most of their interpretations rely heavily on allegory.

¹⁰ The two most prominent developments related to literal-historical readings in this era are (1) the inclusion of the “woman of lamps/flames” Jewish translation of ʿēset lappidōt into Christian discourse about Deborah and (2) the spreading opinion that Deborah was married to Barak.

¹¹ Peter Damian, for example, actually changes his interpretation to match the circumstance he is addressing—sometimes viewing Deborah and Barak’s partnership negatively and sometimes positively.

¹² For example, Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1530 CE) praises Deborah’s manly strength, and Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554? CE) recounts sparse details about Deborah as a seer and judge in a poem written to threaten arrogant men with shamefully being defeated by a woman (Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 74).

¹³ Martin Luther and John Knox represent two of the many interpreters who took this approach. For examples, see Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 76–79, 88–92.
Israelites, and the Canaanites. So once again, Deborah’s gender takes primary stage as interpreters wrestle with how her actions in the text impact women’s roles in society.

Beginning in the 1600’s, women began commenting on Deborah in significant numbers, using her as a precedent for their own endeavors and as support for women possessing equal “intellect, wisdom, and leadership skills” with men. Many argue against the idea of Deborah being a divine, miraculous exception and insist all women are equal to men and, consequently, capable of studying, teaching, and writing. Even men began acknowledging the clearly public role of Deborah as a prophetess. Of course, there were dissidents to these claims, and those arguing Deborah is not a precedent for all women belittled her with patronizing descriptions and references to her femininity. In all this discourse, gender was the primary lens through which Deborah was interpreted as her character was employed in early modern gender debates. References to her were often brief and rarely engaged the text on a substantive level. Rather, they approached the text with their own questions and conclusions and manipulated it to support their viewpoint.

This trend continued in the nineteenth century as many debated gender expectations and the nature of womanhood. As the century advanced, the differences in roles and the separation of spheres evolved as women gained more legal and economic

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14 See section titled “Indictment and Shaming of Barak, Israel, and Canaanites,” for examples.
15 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 106–107, 137–138.
16 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 106–107, 137–138.
17 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 106–107, 137–138.
18 At the beginning of the century, ideal women were pious, pure, domestic, and submissive, and they exercised authority only in their private, household spheres, which were separated from men’s public spheres (Marion Ann Taylor and Christiana De Groot, eds., Women of War, Women of Woe [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016], 6–7). Schroeder recalls the classic article by Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” that claims women should be judged by “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” (as quoted in Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 141).
Consequently, many looked to Scripture to either support or denounce the shifts taking place. Deborah, in particular, received attention as a woman operating in both public and private spheres. According to Schroeder, nineteenth century woman used Deborah from “the pulpit and the speaker’s podium,” when they argued for “their right to preach, lecture publicly, vote in elections, petition congress, hold political office, and enter the political sphere as men’s equals.”

Near the same time, critical biblical scholars began examining the text of Judges 4–5. They came to the text with questions related to historicity, sources, and redactional layers. In deciding on textual traditions and historical reliability, interpreters ruled out certain interpretations often based on their assessments regarding historical gender norms. Many accepted the work of Wolfgang Ritcher who eliminated her role as a judge entirely by claiming the references to her judging in Judg 4:4b–5 were added by a later editor to make Deborah appear to function as the rest of the judges. Debates also abounded concerning whether her official title as a prophetess should be eliminated as well due to being anachronistic and lacking sufficient support in the narrative. In such discussions, Deborah’s gender seems to be the primary factor preventing interpreters

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19 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 139–140; Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 7.

20 Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 76.

21 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 139.


from acknowledging textual evidence of her operating as a prophet.\textsuperscript{24} Even when interpreters began looking at the literary qualities of the narrative, most overlooked or undervalued her role as either prophet or judge. One commentator remarked that “in the present form of the narrative” her offices did not “seem to have… a very important function.”\textsuperscript{25} Others went to the opposite extreme, assigning every possible role and office to Deborah imaginable.\textsuperscript{26} Many literary treatments of the text used gender as an interpretive key for the narrative. Assuming the prevalence of feminine endings meant the narrator was making a statement related to gender dynamics, they picked up on earlier traditions contrasting the subversive feminine and masculine qualities of Deborah and Barak.\textsuperscript{27} This surfeit of scholarship prompted Michelle Knight to make the following statement about the current state of scholarship related to Deborah: “As a prominent female leader in Israel, Deborah has been the subject of extensive study. Some of this writing has been more groundbreaking than the rest, but the most significant result of the renewed attention to the story is an emphasis on Deborah’s gender.”\textsuperscript{28}

In summary, interpreters have historically focused on one aspect of Deborah’s character to the exclusion of almost all others: her gender. Her gender took center stage when discussing her as a prophet, judge, military leader, wife, and historical figure.

\textsuperscript{24} For example, James Kugel is only willing to call her a “prophet of sorts,” (Skidmore-Hess and Skidmore-Hess, “Dousing the Fiery Woman,” 12).


\textsuperscript{26} Schroeder claims “the twentieth-century and first decade of the twenty-first century ‘produced the widest variety of depictions of Deborah’ (Deborah’s Daughters, 246).

\textsuperscript{27} See Michelle Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might: The Literary and Theological Function of Judges 5 in the Book of Judges” (Ph.D. diss., Wheaton College, 2018), 109–110, for a refutation of this tendency.

\textsuperscript{28} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 108.
Sometimes this resulted in positive interpretations of her when interpreters elevated her role to provide hope and empowerment to women. More often though, interpreters diminished and domesticated her in order to also diminish the potential for female leadership and empowerment.

**Key Debates and Themes**

**Gender Specific Roles and Characteristics**

**Wife of Lappidoth or Woman of Flames**

One of the earlier yet still enduring debates is how to translate the phrase ‘ēšet lappidōt in vs. 4. The LXX translates the phrase as γυνὴ Λαφιδωθ, leaving it open to mean either “woman of Lappidoth” or “wife of Lappidoth.” In Jewish tradition, rabbis believed the phrase meant “woman of flames,” and rabbinic tradition regarded Deborah as a “wickmaker for the tabernacle’s sanctuary lamps.”

30 Pseudo-Philo seemed to favor this translation due to his wordplay of Deborah giving the people light.31 However, another rabbinic tradition relied on the translation “wife of Lappidoth” and claimed Lappidoth and Barak were the same man since both names mean something akin to lightning. At some point, the two traditions seem to have intermingled, with Deborah being known both as the wife of Barak/Lappidoth and a wickmaker for the tabernacle. The choice to translate the phrase as “wife of Lappidoth” won out in early Christian circles as

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29 As stated previously, this will not be an exhaustive treatment since the literature surrounding Deborah is extensive. I have tried to identify key themes that emerged in how interpreters have historically viewed Deborah, but I only provide select examples of these themes and do not attempt to cite or reference every interpreter who has contributed to the discussion of any of these debates. Rather, I selected representative examples for the various viewpoints.


31 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 8.
evidenced in the Latin Vulgate. Jerome translates the phrase as *uxor Lappidoth* (wife of Lappidoth) (Judices 4:4, Vulg.), which also ruled out the possibility that Lappidoth was a location rather than a person. While not used exclusively, this translation choice carries on through the Middle Ages and into the modern era with almost every major translation translating the phrase “wife of Lappidoth.”

In the middle ages, Rupert Deutz (1075–1129/30 CE) devotes much attention to the relationship of Barak and Deborah as husband and wife. However, this association did not go unchallenged. According to Schroeder, Nicholas of Lyra’s (ca. 1270–1349 CE) literal commentary *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam* contains “the first recorded Christian encounter with the rabbinic teaching that Deborah’s designation ‘ēšet lappidōt means ‘woman of lamps.’” In accepting this translation, Lyra also repeated the Rabbinic tradition from the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Meg.* 14a that associated Deborah with the tabernacle as a wickmaker. Lyra uses these traditions as evidence for Barak and Deborah not being husband and wife, as Schroeder asserts was commonly accepted during the medieval era. Since he did not regard Lappidoth as a person, he ruled out the possibility that Lappidoth was Barak. Furthermore, he argues since Barak and Deborah clearly resided at different locations and in different tribes, they could not have dwelt together as husband and wife. According to Schroeder, Lyra’s commentary

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32 Judices 4:4 (Vulg.).

33 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 33–35. Many other interpreters at this time purported Deborah and Barak were married and that Lappidoth was another name for Barak, including the following: Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1142), Peter Comestor (d. ca. 1179 CE), and Hugh of St. Cher (ca. 1200–1263).

34 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 39.

35 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 39.

36 Nicholas of Lyra, as quoted in *Deborah’s Daughters*, 39.
was so widely distributed that the rabbinic traditions about Deborah became widely accepted by subsequent interpreters. However, his argument did not sway everyone. Denis the Carthusian (1402–1471 CE) cites Lyra’s commentary but “seems to lean toward the typical Christian medieval identification of Barak with Lappidoth.”

Likewise, Thomas de Vio (1469–1534 CE) insisted ēšet lappīdôt should be translated as “wife of Lappidoth” and warns readers not to be deceived by the translation “woman of lights” that followed rabbinic traditions. Others, such as Conrad Pellican, allowed for either translation, but most interpreters came to favor the translation “wife of Lappidoth” even if they did not associate Barak with Lappidoth. This trend appears in most Christian writings since the middle ages, and most interpreters in the reformation era and early modern period continued to regard Deborah as a wife.

In the modern era, the same options for translating ēšet lappīdôt exist in biblical scholarship. For example, Robert G. Boling presents Deborah as the wife of Barak, relying on the tradition associating Lappidoth and Barak due to similar name meanings. He claims the narrator did not need to explain this since the original audience would have already been aware of it, and the audience would have appreciated the word play on the

37 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 39.
38 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 39.
39 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 78–79.
40 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 84.
41 For example, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) believed Deborah was, in indeed, married to a man named Lappidoth, but he did not believe Lappidoth was the same man as Barak. He also rejected the association with Deborah as a wickmaker in the tabernacle (Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 97–98).
name of “the great military” leader Barak. J. Alberto Soggin, Daniel Block, Mary Evans, Trent Butler, and Michelle Knight accept the translation “wife of Lappidoth,” but reject the association between Barak and Lappidoth. Susan Niditch, Danna Nolan Fewell, and David M. Gunn argue for the rabbinic translation “woman of fire,” thus eliminating Deborah’s status as a wife but emphasizing her charisma and spirit. Tammi J. Schneider and Carolyn Pressler do not strictly argue for one translation over the other. Schneider leans toward translating the phrase as “fiery woman” in the tradition of the rabbinic translation “women of flames.” However, she emphatically asserts the title of prophet takes precedence over the wife or fiery description regardless of the translation choice. Pressler translates the phrase “wife of Lappidoth,” but she acknowledges the original audience would have heard and recognized both meanings.

Perfect and Modest

A major trend in interpretations of Deborah has been to ignore, diminish, or reframe the words and actions of Deborah in order to present her as a model of proper femininity and

43 Boling, *Judges*, 95. Interestingly, he claims the reason Barak was not with Deborah at the time and needed to be called was because he was already away on a military campaign.


46 Tammi Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 67. She bases this on her evaluation of the previous two judges description, which each consist of two descriptors related to primary relationships and then one description of a personal characteristic. If Deborah description follows the same pattern, the third description would be related to her characteristic (i.e., fiery) rather than a familial relationship (Schneider, *Judges*, 66–67).


womanly behavior. This trend begins in the Babylonian Talmud in which Deborah’s modesty is praised because she judged under a palm tree to maintain propriety and avoid being in private with non-relative males.49 Many later interpreters harken back to this interpretive choice, and some even elaborate on it to give more significance to the palm tree setting. For example, in the nineteenth century, Julia McNair Wright saw Deborah’s judging from under her palm tree as testifying to her unwillingness to leave her home; thus, she emphasized the femininity of Deborah and her commitment to her household and wifely duties. Clara Lucas Balfour, also writing in the nineteenth century, emphasized the serene and simply setting under the palm tree, calling it a “quiet meditative shelter” where she “uttered the calm words of wisdom” and demonstrated she could retain “womanly qualities” even in public office.50 She then claims Deborah’s success in arousing the people’s enthusiasm was due to her feminine qualities contrasting Barak and the armies’ masculine qualities.51 Grace Aguilar also highlights traditionally feminine virtues by claiming the text’s silence about the end of Deborah’s life confirms her “meekness and humility.”52 Aguilar imagines Deborah returning to a quiet life and “humble station” once her “power of prophecy and foresight in military matters was no longer needed.”53 She also uses the reference to the land’s forty years of peace to prove


51 Balfour, Women of Scripture, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 88. Balfour does acknowledge Deborah possessed traditionally masculine qualities such as firmness of faith, commanding speech, and intellectual superiority, but she does not allow these to mar the portrait of Deborah as the perfect woman, choosing instead to recast them as acceptable feminine characteristics (Women of Scripture, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, 87–88).

52 Grace Aguilar, Women of Israel, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 82.

53 Aguilar, Women of Israel, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 82.
Deborah’s “virtue, holiness, and wisdom” extended “silently, and perhaps unperceived” “over space and time.”

Deborah has not only been held up as the perfect picture of femininity, but also as the perfect wife. For example, Chrysostom briefly mentions the manner of Deborah’s advice to Barak for battle to show how she modeled “appropriate wifely behavior” because she non-confrontationally points out a successful course of action for him to take. In the fifteen century, Denis the Carthusian assigns Deborah the traditional helper role of a good woman, claiming she went with Barak to battle in order to support him with “merits, prayers, counsel, and revelation.” Writing in the seventeenth century, Rivkah bat Meir argued pious women should emulate Deborah because she was able to spur her husband (Barak/Lappidoth) on to good deeds. Two centuries later, Harriet Beecher Stowe likewise draws attention to how Deborah elevated her husband’s status and memory through her actions. Stowe’s contemporary, Aguilar, also emphasizes Deborah’s role as a wife, but she did so to argue for married women taking on public roles since Deborah’s public offices did not cause her to neglect her conjugal and household duties. Aguilar also emphasizes Deborah’s humility as revealed in her song when she calls on her fellow Israelites to bless YHWH for delivering their enemies and

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55 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 17–18.

56 Denis the Carthusian, *Ennarationes in Judicum*, art. 7, as quoted in Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 41.


claims no glory for herself. Even the title she claims for herself—Mother in Israel—
testifies to the “simplicity and lowliness of the prophetess’s natural position.” The
presentation of Deborah as a perfect wife continues with some interpreters in the modern
era. For example, Trent Bulter claims the narrator employs every available device to
emphasize Deborah’s female gender and show she is a woman above all else, even above
her status as prophet and judge. Consequently, he concludes that her roles as prophet
and judge do not prevent her from “conforming to expectations as a wife.” Butler also
highlights Deborah’s modesty by noting how Deborah “points away from herself” and
thus indicates she is not the primary character in the story.

While Deborah may have been the perfect woman and wife for some, she was the
perfect widow for Ambrose. Ambrose claimed that Deborah was a widow (possibly on
account of the absence of her husband from the narrative) in order to bolster his claims
that widows should be self-sufficient. While clearly elevating Deborah, he asserts her
story was written to encourage woman to acts of valor, but the rest of his work seems to
limit those acts to supporting men. As Schroeder notes, he only acknowledges her public
activities in order “to support his argument that women should be financial
benefactors.” Martin Luther also reiterated this tradition of Deborah as a widow in
order to explain how she “could exercise authority without usurping the role belonging”

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64 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 20.
65 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 20.
to her husband. Not all viewed Deborah as the perfect wife or woman though. As will be seen in the following section, some characterized her in the opposite way, accusing her of neglecting her womanly and wifely duties.

**Haughty and Neglectful**

Another common trend in interpretive history is seeing Deborah as haughty and prideful since she did not adhere to expectations of female submissiveness and silence. For example, early Jewish sources acknowledge Deborah’s public activities as well as her authoritative and commanding speech and presence in order to criticize her pridefulness, arrogance, and assertiveness—especially in her interactions with Barak and her commendations of herself during her victory song. So even though the Babylonian Talmud does honor Deborah by listing her as a prophetess, it provides a clearly negative evaluation of her character, calling her name itself “hateful” and her actions and words “self-aggrandizing” and “haughty.” The Babylonian Talmud goes so far as to say her prophetic gifts were removed for a time due to her haughtiness—a claim that continues to be repeated in rabbinic traditions.

The rabbinic picture of Deborah as prideful does not appear frequently in Christian writings, but it does appear sporadically in later centuries when it serves the purpose of the interpreters. In the nineteenth century, for example, Elizabeth Baxter

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66 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 77. Schroeder is quick to point out how Luther still did not allow widows or unmarried women to publicly teach or pray based on the example of Deborah.


portrays Deborah as prideful in an attempt to dissuade women from public speaking.\textsuperscript{70} She claims the frequent references to Deborah in the poem indicate Deborah’s pride and self-aggrandization.\textsuperscript{71} She uses this apparent self-absorption to argue for the danger of female leadership, even claiming Deborah placing her name before Barak’s when calling for praises to YHWH shows Deborah reverses the natural order of God. Deborah’s prideful usurping of the natural order, Baxter speculates also led to Deborah neglecting her womanly duties. For evidence, Baxter calls to attention the lack of details related to Deborah’s homelife and domestic service. She claims, “No prophetic gift, no calling of the Spirit of God into active and public service can excuse a woman for unfaithfulness in family and domestic matters.” \textsuperscript{72} Even though she does not excuse Deborah directly of neglecting such duties, she implies it as a strong possibility.

While the prevalence of seeing Deborah in such a negative light diminishes in the modern era, some modern scholars echo similar sentiments. For example, Boling claims Deborah believed she was the woman in her own prophecy, and so he implies she was being too presumptive.\textsuperscript{73} He further describes her as “basking in the shade of her own palm” and “taunting” Barak; both descriptions imply a very negative assessment of her character even though he does not outright call her prideful or arrogant.\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{71} Mary Elizabeth Baxter, \textit{The Women in the Word}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (London: Christian Herald, 1897), as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, \textit{Women of War}, 109–110. According to Taylor and De Groot, Baxter overlooks Deborah’s praising of YHWH and acknowledgment that the victory came by the hand of YHWH and focuses instead of the use of first-person language in the poem as evidence that “Deborah was most present to her own mind” (\textit{Women of War}, 109–110).


\textsuperscript{73} Boling, \textit{Judges}, 96.

\textsuperscript{74} Boling, \textit{Judges}, 98.
Deborah’s Official Roles

Intersecting Roles of Prophet and Judge

For the majority of Deborah’s interpretive history, interpreters have acknowledged she seemed to function in multiple roles—most notably prophet and judge—that intersected with one another. For example, most early Christian fathers, taking the text at face-value, assigned Deborah the roles of prophet and judge, but they either redefined what those roles meant or only made simple references to her character. Origen, for example, refers to Deborah as both judge and prophetess, emphasizing no other male judges were also prophets. However, Origen’s homilies omit the text where she publicly judges Israel, summons and commands Barak in front of the people, and sings her victory song in order to affirm Deborah never spoke publicly to the people. In *Stromateis*, Book I, Clement lists Deborah among thirty-five prophets (five of whom he identifies as women) and notes the time she began prophesying, so he clearly viewed her as a prophet. It remains questionable whether Clement believed Deborah was a judge though. He does not call her a judge or use language of ruling, authority, or leadership to describe her, but he does claim the “people were governed by Deborah’s judgments for forty years.” Jerome, in


76 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 17. Origen ignores these elements by discussing the meaning of various names (i.e., Deborah as a honey producing bee, Ramah as heights, Bethel as the house of God) and by having Deborah represent prophecy itself rather than an actual woman (Origen, *Homilies on Judges*, Homily V.2–4). These allegorical interpretations were common among him and his contemporaries, but they will not be discussed further due the limitations of this study.


78 It should be noted Clement only calls Eli, the priest, explicitly a judge (*Stromateis*, I.111.3). With the rest of the judges, he uses language of leadership, authority, and ruling. To Deborah he only assigns the actions of prophesy, influence, and governing (*Stromateis*, I.109–111), avoiding language of leadership, authority, or rule. Clement also seems to avoid this language with Samuel—notably the other prophet among the group—for whom he phrases his position as holding sway (*Stromateis*, I.111.4).
contrast, states unequivocally that Deborah was a prophetess as well as one of the judges, but he provides no extensive discussion of what these roles included.79

Augustine, similar to many before him, conceded Deborah was both a prophet and judge, but he was much more skeptical than his contemporaries. While acknowledging she judged the Israelites, he seems apprehensive to assign any sort of ruling status to her, and so he asserts it was actually the Holy Spirit ruling through her.80 He concludes she was only able to be a judge, as a woman, because she was also a prophet empowered by the Spirit.81 In the medieval period, interpreters continued to claim Deborah’s ability to judge was only possible because of her prophetic gift. According to Schroeder, Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349 CE) concluded Deborah, as a woman, could only serve as a judge because she was first a prophet.82 He states, “the spirit of her prophecy compensated for the frailty of her sex,” and he seems to imply other judges did not need to be prophets because they were men.83 Denis the Carthusian (1407–1471 CE) followed Lyra in this belief. He claimed God compensated for the weakness of Deborah’s subordinate sex, making her “more virtuous and wiser than men,” by bestowing the prophetic gift upon her and thereby enabling her to judge.84 Denis also believed it was this the prophetic role that made it possible for the people to acknowledge and respond to the leadership of a

79 Jerome, Letter 54.17, as cited in Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 22.
81 Augustine, Civ. 18.15. However, he lacks a high view of her prophecy since it “is so obscure that it would take too long to prove she was speaking of Christ” (Augustine, Civ. 18.15).
82 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 39.
83 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 39.
84 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 40.
female judge. Like others before and after him, Denis’ belief that God gave a special dispensation to Deborah allowed him to affirm Deborah’s authorial roles and strong intellect without approving of other women taking on similar roles in authority or affirming the natural intellectual quality of women. In contrast to these Christian medieval interpreters, some medieval Jewish interpreters affirm Deborah’s natural God-given qualities as the reason God chose her as prophet and judge rather than claiming God’s specially endowed her with intellect through the prophetic gift.

While most medieval Jewish interpreters only recognized Deborah as a prophet (asserting Barak was the judge), Levi Gersonides (1288–1344 CE) and Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508 CE) have surprisingly positive things to say about Deborah, asserting she was chosen because of her strength of character and intellectual abilities. In his commentary on Judges, Julia Schwartzmann claims Gersonides viewed Deborah as a “a moral authority” with both “moral integrity and intellectual perfection” that enabled her to mend the Israelites’ corruption. Gersonides translates ēšet lappidōt as “woman of splendor,” believing it described her prophecy’s “exceptional power that lit up by a mighty light every place where she prophesied.” He then compares the quality of Deborah’s prophecy with Moses’ prophecy, grounding the exceptional power of each in

85 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 40.

86 Julia Schwartzmann, “The Attitude of Medieval Jewish Philosophers to the Phenomenon of Female Prophecy,” Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies 35.3 (Spring 2017): 65. These men are widely recognized as two of the most misogynistic of medieval Jewish philosophers, so their praise of Deborah is quite surprising. See Schwartzmann, “Attitude of Medieval Jewish Philosophers,” for an extensive treatment of theirs views about Deborah’s prophetic giftings.


their “total conjunction with the Active Intellect.” They Similar to Gersonides, Abravanel effuses praise for Deborah as he acknowledges her role as not only a prophet but also a judge. While he translates ēšet lappidōt more traditionally as “woman of torches,” he avers the connection to the tabernacle and claims it means “she was a woman of valor and her deeds were lively and very prompt, as if she were a torch.” From Deborah, he argues one learns “a judge and a leader should be endowed with intellectual perfection, good nature, strength of heart and promptness in order to reprove and chastise the people in an appropriate way.” However, these ideas remained uncommon from the medieval era into the reformation era.

In the reformation era, Christian interpreters follow the medieval Christian tradition of rooting Deborah’s ability to judge in her prophetic gift. De Vio argues that Deborah, a woman, was “appropriately given” the prophetic gift “so that she might judge over Israel.” Notably, he also insists Deborah composed the song in Judges 5 and was correctly listed first because the song was a product of her prophetic gift. Thus, her role as a prophet also allowed her to surpass a man in the usual hierarchy. Martin Luther, in contrast, acknowledged Deborah as prophet and judge but limited her activities to normal womanly spheres. He claimed her prophecy was privately comforting or teaching at

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90 Schwartzmann, “Attitude of Medieval Jewish Philosophers,” 64.


93 Thomas de Vio Cajetan, Iudicum, as quoted in Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 79.

94 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 79.
home and her judging was only allowed because she was a widow and couldn’t usurp her husband’s authority. However, as women began writing about Deborah in the nineteenth-century, they echo sentiments similar to those of Gersonides and Abravanel from the medieval period when begin to deviate from Christian reformation interpreters by arguing Deborah’s judging and prophesying testify to the intellectual and spiritual equality of women.

Most Christian and Jewish women writing in the nineteenth century assumed Deborah was a prophet, judge, and wife. For example, Wright not only believed Deborah functioned in each of these roles but that she did so without conflict between them. Similarly, Aguilar provides an extensive commentary on Judges 4–5 in her book *Women of Israel*, assuming throughout that Deborah is a prophet, judge, and military leader. Furthermore, she claims the Deborah’s song forcibly proves in “her conduct, both as prophetess and judge, that in Deborah, even as in Gideon, David, and the prophets of later years, God disdained not to breathe His spirit, but made woman his instrument to judge, to prophesy, to teach, and to redeem.” Barbara Kellison also acknowledges Deborah as judge and prophetess, but she links the two roles together. According to Kellison, Deborah “judged, not as a princess by any civil authority, but as a prophetess, and as a mouth of God to them.”

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95 Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 77. Schroeder is quick to point out how Luther still did not allow widows or unmarried women to publicly teach or pray based on the example of Deborah.


judging as a function of her being a prophetess—a notion reiterated by many modern interpreters.

**Not a Judge or Not that Kind of Judge**

While Deborah’s status as a judge seems straightforward considering the description of her judging in Judg 4:4–5, interpreters frequently question the nature of her judging and some deny her status as a judge altogether. Perhaps the earliest denier of Deborah’s role as a judge was Josephus.

In Josephus’ account of Deborah, he never refers to her as a ruler—the term he uses for the other eleven judges—but only as a prophetess and a co-general. While many have claimed this is evidence of Josephus’ misogyny, devaluation of Deborah, and elevation of Barak, these accusations seem flimsy considering his elevation of Deborah in earlier parts of his narrative. He gives her the role of co-general, and she commands and rallies both Barak and the army when they are afraid and attempt retreat. At first, the judge role might seem assigned to Barak since Josephus says he commanded Israel for forty years, which is the number of years the biblical text claims Israel had peace.\(^99\)

However, Josephus does not label Barak as a ruler, so he was not trying to claim Barak was the judge and Deborah was not.\(^100\) Finally, Josephus concludes the story by stating Deborah and Barak “died at the same time.”\(^101\) This leads Mark Roncace to claim

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\(^99\) Josephus, *Ant.*, 5.5.4 [Whiston]. It seems more likely this is simply how Joseph chose to fill in the gap left in the biblical text about who was responsible for the forty years of peace since the neither the peace or deliverance are assigned specifically to Deborah or Barak. He was clearly not averse to changing details to fit his chosen narrative, so if he was trying to devalue Deborah, it seems like a more effective solution would have been to prevent her from commanding Barak and rather retaining a more submissive role in the military victory.


Josephus thought “they both had continuing influence during the forty years, Deborah presumably in the prophetic role and Barak as the general.”

Neither seem explicitly assigned the role of judge, however, since Josephus never calls either of them rulers.

After Josephus, the elimination of her status as a judge seemed driven more by the need to conform Deborah to a role appropriate for a woman. For this reason, Jewish interpreters in the rabbinic period denied she exercised any form of judgement. Some claimed she only taught Torah, which was an acceptable role for a women given the correct context. Other rabbis claimed the verb “judged” used in reference to Deborah merely means “to lead,” and still others said she only instructed the judges of Israel, but she herself did not judge. Mostly, instead of dealing directly with the text of Judges, they appealed to other texts they saw as prohibiting women from performing the tasks associated with judging in order to demonstrated Deborah could not have been a judge regardless of what the text states.

While most interpreters in the patristic era, viewed Deborah as a judge, some departed from this tradition. Rupert Deutz (1075–1129/30 CE) and Peter the Venerable (ca. 1092–1156 CE) regarded Barak, not Deborah, as the judge.

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102 Roncace, “Josephus’ (Real) Portraits of Deborah and Gideon,” 259.

103 This could be due to the ambiguity of the text. As will be discussed in section 2, many believe the narrator purposefully leaves the question of who the judge is ambiguous in order to highlight the role of YHWH as the true deliverer.


105 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 48.

106 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 48–49.

107 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 34.
reformation period, Luther argues even though Deborah engaged in judging type
activities, she was not actually serving as the official judge.

During the rise of biblical criticism, interpreters began using various forms of
criticism to eliminate Deborah’s status as a judge by completely removing rather than
ignoring the text. Wolfgang Ritcher claimed Deborah’s introduction as a judge in Judg
4:4b–5 was a textual emendation added by a later editor to make Deborah appear to
function as the rest of the judges.108 According to Klass Spronk, Ritcher’s theory gained
widespread acceptance.109 In the modern era, Barry G. Webb, Butler, Victor Matthews,
and Block all deny Deborah the status of a judge because they claim her judging activity
and introduction are vastly different than all the other official judges.110 Likewise, Soggin
labels Deborah’s judging as “forensic” in nature and believed she was an established
legal authority prior to the people coming to her with this more religious or political
inquiry.111 Amit argues the narrator shows Deborah is not the judge by avoiding the
traditional formula of YHWH raising up a deliverer, providing emphatic emphasis on
Deborah’s gender, and stressing Deborah’s role as a dispute-settling judge rather than a
delivering judge.112 Others, such as Boling, assert Deborah’s “judging” in 4a references a
recognized office of judge, but then they fail to treat her as the other judges as evidenced

detailed explanation of the evidence for 4b-5 as a unnecessary textual amendment; see Schneider, Judges,
67–68 for an alternative explanation of the extra pronoun referenced by Ritcher as evidence.

109 Spronk, “Deborah, a Prophetess,” 118.

110 Barry G. Webb, The Book of Judges (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987); Butler,
Block, Judges.

111 Soggin, Judges, 71.

by Boling referring to Deborah as an “honorary” judge without giving further explanation for why she was only “honorary.”

Many who deny Deborah the role of judge elevate Barak to that position. For example, Boling and Block both claim Barak is the judge even though the text does not explicitly state it. Boling asserts the emphasis is on YHWH doing the saving and delivering, which is why neither Barak or Deborah is explicitly assigned the role. He claims, “In her activity as prophetess, Deborah is represented as going about the business routinely, until that day when the Israelites, by-passing judge Baraq, took matters into their own hands.” Schneider draws out how similar the introduction of Barak is to the introductions of the previous two judges: Ehud and Othniel. All three are introduced first by name, then by family name, and lastly by clan name, and Schneider claims Deborah is not introduced with any of these three elements. Many who claim Barak is the judge still recognize Deborah engaged in some type of judging activity—just not the type of judging that indicates she was an official judge.

**Role as a Prophetess**

Among those who deny Deborah’s role as a judge, it is common to emphasize her prophetic role. Josephus, for example, sees Deborah only as a prophetess and asserts any judgement she meted out was a result of her prophetic role. He emphasizes the disobedient state of the Israelites at the beginning of story, noting “their obstinacy and

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113 Boling, *Judges*, 95, 98.
ingratitude,” in order to demonstrate the Israelites going to Deborah “for judgement” was an act of penitence when they finally realized their disobedience had led to their current calamity. Subsequent Jewish interpreters were also much more comfortable with Deborah’s role as a prophet despite almost universally denying her role as a judge. Schwartzmann provides the following explanation for this phenomenon:

Contrary to other aspects of women's public activities, prophecy, as a rule, did not represent a problem. Paradoxically, despite being by definition the public activity, prophecy is seen both by the Hebrew Bible and by the rabbinic sages as an egalitarian phenomenon. Thus, while many commentators questioned Deborah's activities as judge, no one objected to her being a prophet... It appears that the reason for such a positive attitude towards female prophets is rooted in the nature of prophecy: prophecy may be regarded as the essence of Judaism, but a prophet has no legal authority whatsoever.

This type of reasoning has likely led most interpreters to accept Deborah’s prophetic role without question. As seen in the discussion of those who accepted a multi-faceted role for Deborah, her prophetic giftings and spirit empowerment often enable Deborah to overcome the weaknesses suffered by common women. While Deborah’s prophetic role seemed to be accepted without comment for much of interpretive history, the emergence of historical criticism resulted in her prophetic role being widely questioned and eliminated.

For a time, many historically minded scholars denied Deborah’s status as a prophet based on the assumption that prophets, especially women prophets, were not in

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117 Josephus, *Ant.*, 5.5.2.


operation during this time in Israel’s history. However, this theory’s widespread acceptance was short lived. Pressler notes that the discovery of ANE literature provided incontrovertible evidence of prophets operating in the surrounding cultures, which virtually eliminated the aforementioned claim that she could not have been a prophet. Furthermore, Pressler claims it would not have been unusual for a prophet to be a woman as evidence by the plethora of female prophets operating in surrounding cultures and within the Hebrew Bible (HB). Boling acknowledges that the Mari texts, in particular, have shown female prophets were politically active during this period and that the title could not be considered anachronistic in reference to Deborah. However, he still relegates the title to a “value judgement,” claiming the narrator uses prophetess to describe a characteristic of Deborah rather than an official office; thus, he gives the impression that Deborah’s contemporaries would not have seen her as a prophetess. Pressler, however, picks up on the political involvement aspect of Deborah’s prophetic role, noting how ANE prophets were highly political and responsible for determining whether a deity would grant victory over military enemies. While some interpreters favor Boling’s approach, most modern interpreters follow Pressler’s method and view Deborah as a fully-fledged and stereotypical prophet. However, with the exception of a few interpreters, many choose to highlight Deborah’s gender above her status as an

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120 Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 155.
121 Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 155.
122 Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 155.
123 Boling, Judges, 95, 99.
124 Boling, Judges, 98.
125 Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 155.
prophet due to the wording of her introduction as a prophet, but this phenomenon will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

**Military Leader and Warrior**

The origins of Deborah’s warrior role stretch all the way back to Josephus. In his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus claims Barak wanted Deborah to serve as co-general with him—a rather large leap since Barak only says he wants Deborah to accompany him and does not define in what capacity she was to do so. In Josephus’ mind, this makes it plain that Barak’s error was trying to “meanly” relinquish the authority and responsibility that God had assigned to him. The fact he was relinquishing it to a woman seemed important as well, but Josephus main concern seems to be the delivering of the God-given authority. Josephus also writes of Deborah accepting this position of co-general stating, “and I do not reject it!” For Josephus, Deborah’s position as co-general was integral to the Israelites’ victory since Barak and the army are so frightened they try to retreat until Deborah restrains them and commands them to fight since “God would be their assistance.”

Although not the most prominent theme in literature surrounding Deborah, a steady stream of interpreters after Josephus reference Deborah as a warrior or military leader. For example, Peter the Venerable (ca. 1092–1156 CE) believed Deborah’s role as

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126 Deborah’s reproach, in Josephus’ words is as follows: “deliverest up meanly that authority which God hath given thee into the hand of a woman,” (Josephus, *Ant.*, 5.5.3).

127 Josephus, *Ant.*, 5.5.3.

128 Josephus, *Ant.*, 5.5.3.

129 Josephus, *Ant.*, 5.5.3.
prophetess included stirring “up, armed and impelled holy men to war.” Of course, Peter used Deborah to admonish women to lead and teach other women as part of the Lord’s army and to fight spiritual battles, not physical ones. In the reformation era, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535 CE) emphasizes her involvement with the battle—even claiming she killed men to be victorious. Pellican likewise asserts her prophetic role included operating as the military commander.

Modern feminist interpreters often highlight Deborah’s role as a warrior. For example, Susan Ackerman claims “Judges 5 is unambiguous and emphatic in its depiction of Deborah as Israel’s chief military commander.” Gale A. Yee also claims Deborah held a position of military leadership, but she claims it was only a temporary position necessitated by an extreme crisis in the country. While she regards Deborah’s role as a military leader as exceptional, she argues it would not have been too far outside the norm of women to be shocking. Knight, however, argues Deborah was only

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131 Peter the Venerable, Letter 115, 305.
132 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83.
133 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83.
136 Yee, “By the Hand of a Woman,” 112. Yee argues men would have been more willing to respect and honor a female leader due to the fluidity between “domestic and public domains” at that time (“By the Hand of a Woman,” 112). She claims there was a “concentric social structure that extended from the family household outward to the tribe,” and this structure made women’s roles significant and powerful (112). While Yee overstates Deborah’s involvement in the battle, her observations apply to Deborah’s potential roles of judge and prophetess as well. Women were not as far down the social ladder in ancient Israel as many suppose. In fact, they could exercise a significant amount of authority and power within their households and clans, even more power than some men.
involved in the battle in a mediator role, not in a warrior or commander role. Knight, therefore, concludes that “Judges 4–5 never depicts Deborah as a powerful female warrior leading her people to war, despite a chorus of voices to the contrary.” With the exception of many feminist interpreters, most modern interpreters align with Knight rather than Ackerman and Yee in denying Deborah’s an active military role in the battle. Butler and Younger, for example, claim “there is nothing in the text that indicates any warrior status or abilities on the part of Deborah.”

Deborah’s Purpose and Function in the Narrative

Reversal or Upending of Traditional Gender Roles

As seen in this literature review, the emphasis on gender roles and role reversal is extremely prominent. Robert Alter communicates a common sentiment when he states gender represents a primary element of the narrative and one that is emphasized from the very beginning due to the “abundance of feminine words in the introduction.” Similarly, Block claims Deborah’s response to Barak that God would deliver Sisera into a woman’s hand “raises the issue of gender” and shows how the narrator “highlights the initiative and power of female participants while humiliating the male characters.” According to Butler, “It is precisely the reversal of role expectations that gives interest and entertainment value to the narrative and allows an audience to follow its depiction of

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137 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 119, 97, note 44.
138 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 97.
139 Butler, Judges, 102.
140 Robert Alter, The World of Biblical Literature (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1992); Butler echoes this when he concludes the gender issue is “precisely the point of tension around which the entire narrative turns,” (Judges, 99).
141 Block, Judges, 183.
Deborah as the supposed heroine.”142 In Matthews’ estimation, the narrative intends to depict a reversal of roles: men become little boys rather than courageous men, and women become protective mothers rather than frightened, uncertain women.143

**Indictment and Shaming of Barak, Israel, and Canaanites**

The consequence of this fascination with gender and role reversals is an abundance of interpretations that place the punishing and shaming of Israel, Barak, and even the Canaanites as the central point of the narrative. These interpretations assume God would not have called Deborah, a woman, if Israel was not especially sinful and male leadership completely absent and that Jael would not have needed to kill Sisera if Barak had not been so cowardly and unmanly in his response to YHWH’s call to arms.

This type of reasoning begins early in interpretive history with Psuedo-Philo, an early Jewish work that includes a retelling and elaboration of Deborah’s story. The author begins by narrating the Israelites falling into transgression and claims the downfall occurred since they did not have a suitable man to serve as judge.144 Only once they acknowledged and repented of their disobedience, according to Pseudo-Philo, did YHWH send a woman to rule over them.145 Her gender serves as a slight for their initial depravity. Similarly, Ambrose indicates the Israelites—not YHWH—chose her because of the lack of a worthy man to judge them, and he seems to imply this is why no other judge was a woman.146


146 Ambrose, *Concerning Widows*, 8.44.
This trend continued into the fifteenth century. Pellican showcases Deborah publicly judging, preaching, teaching, composing songs, receiving revelations from God, and exercising military command in order to show the deplorable nature of Israel for only having a woman available. In his reasoning, this elevated the might of God who could use even “female innate weakness” to achieve victory. Dennis the Carthusian likewise claimed God “appointed a woman as judge over them to greatly humble the proud and rebellious Israelites.” According to Martin Bucer (1491–1551 CE), Deborah proves that God only calls women to authoritative roles when men—such as Barak—fail to act; since Deborah’s calling is seen as a punishment for men, he willingly acknowledges her military leadership. Pellican takes this a step further than some other commentators by claiming even the Canaanites were shamed by God’s use of a woman.

This evaluation persists in the early modern period even when women become part of the conversation. For example, Wright emphasizes Deborah only left her home and went to war due Barak’s failures. Baxter also asserts Deborah was only called

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147 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83. In his words, “The Word of the Lord was so scarce because of the sins of Israel that he permitted the spirit of prophecy to be given to a woman” (Conrad Pellican, Commentaria Bibliorum, as quoted in Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83).

148 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83.

149 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 40.

150 Johannes Brenz, In Librum Judicium, as quoted in Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 80–81, 84–85.

151 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83–84. Pellican places the following in Deborah’s mouth: “by the mercy of God on our injury and perpetual shame he placed me, a woman, against your tyrant,” (Commentaria Bibliorum, as quoted in Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 83–84).

152 Wright, Saints and Sinners, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 98. Wright claims that need alone prompted Deborah to go outside her womanly sphere and perform actions normally regulated to men, and because women are intellectually equal, she was up to the task (Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 98).
because of the exceptionally sinful state of the nation and lack of men able and willing to perform the necessary tasks.\textsuperscript{153} She even claims if Barak had been more manly he would have gone to war without Deborah’s prompting, asserting “Barak was not sufficiently acquainted with his God to receive direct communications from Him.”\textsuperscript{154} Thus, even Deborah’s prophetic gift results from the failings of a man and serves as condemnation for said man.

In the modern era, many interpreters echo similar sentiments. Butler concludes the narrator emphasizes her gender not only to highlight her “extraordinary talents” but also to show the weakness of Israel’s leadership that lacked capable men to fulfill the roles of judge and prophet.\textsuperscript{155} He ultimately regards God’s prophetic promise to give a woman glory as a “threat.”\textsuperscript{156} He agrees that the narrative focuses on the shaming of men, and he places this alongside the narrative’s focus on the success of women in order to show women’s success equals men’s shame.\textsuperscript{157} For Butler, the one cannot exist without the other. In his estimation, the text neither elevates or diminishes the character of Deborah but presents her neutrally and thus “explicitly criticizes the nation of Israel for having to rely on women to deliver them from danger and to fulfill the major roles in society.”\textsuperscript{158} Similarly, Matthews believes the narrative intends to shame the cowardice and inaction of the men who allow themselves to be superseded by “dominant female

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\footnote{Butler, \textit{Judges}, 93–94.}
\footnote{Butler, \textit{Judges}, 99.}
\footnote{Butler, \textit{Judges}, 99.}
\footnote{Butler, \textit{Judges}, 93.}
\end{footnotes}
He claims that Deborah and Jael “as heroic characters… both surprises and entertains the reader and even allows for a form of comedic satire in which male characters are superseded or humiliated, and power figures (kings, generals) can be laughed at.” This theme in modern interpretation is not limited to male interpreters. For example, Schneider claims this narrative showcases the “decline in Israelite leadership” because a woman was forced to take on the roles of men who could not carry them out. However, in contrast to other interpreters, she emphasizes Deborah’s leadership does not cause this degradation but is a symptom of it. This allows her to highlight and praise Deborah’s ability to serve as prophet, judge, and pseudo-military leader while still claiming Deborah only took on the pseudo-military role because Barak failed to lead the campaign. In her opinion, the narrator indicates the original plan was for Deborah to be the judge and Barak the military leader until Deborah was forced to step up due to a man’s failure. The result of her military role, Schneider argues, was “the degradation” of Barak as the military leader “loses his prey to a woman” as well the degradation of Sisera who “dies at the hand of a woman.” Like many other interpreters, Schneider’s interpretation uses Deborah’s gender to accentuate the

159 Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 66.
160 Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 78.
161 Schneider, Judges, 82.
162 Schneider, Judges, 81.
163 Schneider, Judges, 81.
164 Schneider, Judges, 82.
corruption of the Israelites, the cowardice of Barak, and the ineptitude of Israel’s enemies.

However, Knight has recently challenged this widely accepted assertion, claiming the narrative does not depict Deborah or Jael as humiliating Barak. Knight claims just because Barak would not experience honor does not necessitate that he would experience shame or that any shame experience would be the result of a woman. She points out the word translated as honor or glory in v. 9 (תפראת) is not the likely antonym of the Hebrew word translated as shame (בשׁת) nor is the word for shame ever used in this narrative. Both of these facts make it highly unlikely the narrator is making a statement about shaming Barak or that a primary theme in the narrative is the contrast of honor for women and shame for men. Furthermore, Knight claims the central conflict and reversal in the narrative is not about male and female role reversals but about combatant and non-combatant role reversals. Following Yee, she sees Jael is representative of the typical noncombatant, far removed from the battle and also the stereotypical victim of the

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165 This interpretation holds little weight since Deborah operated during one the first downward cycles in the book, meaning the Israelites would stray much further into corruption.

166 This does not stand up to textual evidence either since the Canaanites are clearly presented as a mighty and powerful foe. While they might be shamed by the defeat by a woman, that defeat comes at the hands of Jael, so it has nothing to do with the Israelites being led by a woman. Furthermore, claims related to role reversal do not hold up if it would not have been as shocking for the audience to see Deborah as a prophetess, judge, or military leader as some claim. Scholars now agree prophetess would have been well within the bounds for a woman, and Amit makes claims that judge and military leader would have been acceptable given the circumstances as well.

167 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 125.

168 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 124, n. 118.

169 Knight also draws attention to the work of Daniel Wu who convincingly argues that the biblical concepts of honor/shame do not overlap with modern understandings of honor/shame (“Like the Sun in Its Might,” 125, n. 118).

In addition, as a non-combatant, her “social situation would normally render her inconsequential to military victory.” According to Knight, the poetic account in Judges 5 accentuates this truth as Sisera’s mother expects her son to rape women after his military victory. If this is true, then the humiliation is not about a man, but about the strong military might being humiliated not just by a poorly equipped Israelite military but by a non-combatant the victor intended to conquer. In the same way, Deborah’s activities are not about her gender but about her role as a prophetess of YHWH.

**Confusing Interaction with Barak**

Another common debate regarding Deborah’s function in the narrative is the nature of her interactions with Barak. In addition to the shaming mentioned above, much ink has been spilled to explain how and why Deborah was able to summon and command Barak as well as why Barak initially hesitated and then complied with her commands. Those who choose not to see Deborah as shaming Barak seem to diminish Barak’s apparent failure and Deborah’s reprimand. The LXX, for example, felt the need to further explain why Barak insisted a woman come to battle with him. In Judg 4:8, the LXX has Barak adding “because I do not know the day on which the Lord will prosper his angel with me.” This seems to indicate the LXX viewed the reason for Barak’s stipulation as him wanting Deborah’s direct connection to YHWH for military strategy and timing. This lessens Deborah’s role and helps portray Barak in a more positive light because what he

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172 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 127.

desires is YHWH’s help and not Deborah’s military acumen. This rational continues into the Reformation era.

Denis the Carthusian devotes considerable attention to figuring out why Barak wanted Deborah to accompany him. He lands on a desire for revelation as Barak’s reason for refusing to go without Deborah.174 In Denis’ words, Barak told Deborah, “I need your presence so that through you—because you are a prophetess—the Lord might reveal to me what I ought to do.”175 However, Denis seemed unsure how this could be understood as a failing for Barak while noting the text indicates it was some type of imperfection since it resulted in him losing the glory of the battle. So, he provides another possibility, positing Barak thought the people would not believe his words and so he needed Deborah to provide confirmation.

This debate continues among modern interpreters. Boling, for example, follows the LXX in the reason for why Barak did not want to go to battle without Deborah.176 Similarly, Soggin removes the possibility of Deborah commanding Barak by his choice of translation, and he gives the impression Barak was acting in a smart, strategic manner in contrast to Deborah who operated with excitement and impulse but no military acumen.177 He attempts to remove the majority of the fault from Barak, claiming he was acting in the best interest of his troops, but this meant he failed to trust YHWH’s

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174 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 40–42.

175 Denis the Carthusian, Ennarationes in Judicum, art.7, in Opera Omnia, vol. 3 (Monstrolii: Typis Carusiae Sanctae Mariae de Pratis, 1897), 130, as cited in Deborah’s Daughters, 41.

176 Boling, Judges, 96.

177 Soggin, Judges, 73.
guidance and act on faith. Other modern interpreters present Barak positively by explaining this confusing interaction as a call account, with Barak being called and Deborah serving as a spokesperson for YHWH.

J. S. Ackerman, W. Ritchter, and Block to claim the interaction is a “‘protested call’ account, in which the challenge to enter divine service is resisted by the person called.” This informs Block’s understanding of Barak’s initial refusal as a plea for God’s presence in the battle (through the presence of Yahweh’s agent Deborah) and Deborah’s response reassuring him of God’s presence. In his words, “It is easy to trivialize the significance of this declaration by interpreting them simply as the words of a strong woman to a weak-willed man.” However, he insists this interpretation is outside the bounds of the text because they are placed exactly where the agent of Yahweh traditionally provides promises to the reluctant leader being called. Not only, in Block’s view, does Deborah reassure Barak of Yahweh’s presence in the battle by promising to accompany him, but she also provides a sign through predicting how the battle will unfold. This fulfillment of this sign, according to Block, will confirm Barak was called by Yahweh even though he won’t be the one to whom God delivers Sisera.

178 Soggin, Judges, 73.

179 Block, Judges, 191. Block lists the features of a protested call account as follows: “(1) the person called experiences a personal encounter with Yahweh or his messenger. (2) The person receives word of the task to which he is being called. (3) The person expresses resistance and objects to the divine call. (4) The person is reassured by special authenticating signs and/or promises of Yahweh’s presence” (191, n. 176.). Block notes the presence of each of these elements in the Deborah/Barak dialogue, which reinforces his argument that Deborah is the divine messenger and Barak is the deliverer/judge being called.

180 Block, Judges, 200.

181 Block, Judges, 199–200.

182 Block, Judges, 200.

183 Block, Judges, 200.
Knight, like Block, does not interpret Deborah’s response as a harsh reprimand to Barak’s reluctance. However, she understands this interaction quite differently than Block. For Knight, Barak’s initial response communicates a misunderstanding about how the battle is going to unfold, and Deborah’s response is a clarification about how YHWH was always going to win the battle.\textsuperscript{184} While she acknowledges a punitive nature to Deborah’s response, she asserts the punitive component is only secondary to the instructive element. To support this, she interprets \textit{derek} in Judg 4:5 as a literal rather than a metaphorical/moral way. In her words, “while Barak fancied himself and his forces central to YHWH’s plans, and thus requested that the prophet accompany them to the battlefield, Deborah explained that God would bring victory in a completely different setting through an agent not associated with the militia.”\textsuperscript{185} Assis interprets this similarly by interpreting Deborah’s response as indicating the “victory over Sisera will not be on the battlefield where Barak and Deborah act.”\textsuperscript{186} This view of both Deborah and Barak is more neutral, with neither being portrayed as excessively positive or negative.

However, some modern interpreters do view Barak very harshly. Schneider, for example, views Barak’s request of Deborah to join him as entirely illegitimate and claims Deborah’s prophetic reprimand that he would not receive glory by killing Sisera evidences this fact.\textsuperscript{187} Butler also views Barak extremely negatively because he does not

\textsuperscript{184} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 115.

\textsuperscript{185} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 126. For Knight, Deborah’s response “introduces a clarification to God’s earlier promise in a way that emphasizes that the initial promise remains unchanged,” (“The Sun in Its Might, 115). This clarification pertains to the “unexpected nature of YHWH’s deliverance” at the hand of “a female civilian—not the Israelite military officer or his army,” (Knight, “The Sun in Its Might, 115).

\textsuperscript{186} Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 123.

\textsuperscript{187} Schneider, \textit{Judges}, 69.
see Barak’s demand that Deborah join him as a heartfelt plea for God’s presence on the battlefield (contra Block) or as concern for the safety of his troops (contra Soggin).\textsuperscript{188} Rather, he asserts the narrator gives no indication anywhere of Barak being pious, obedient to God, or heroic. He claims Barak refused to accept his solo appointment by God and made himself dependent on Deborah.\textsuperscript{189}

**Divine Exception**

A prevalent theme throughout all of Deborah’s interpretive history is the claim that she was a divine, even miraculous, exception to normal standards. Despite no textual evidence in Judges 4–5 to support this claim, a plethora of interpreters make this choice, which allows them to acknowledge the evidence showing Deborah operating outside their preconceived ideas of proper womanly behavior without encouraging women to emulate her actions. For example, Bucer, Johannes Brenz (1499–1570 CE), and Martin Borrhaus (1499–1564 CE) all assert Deborah was a prophet, judge, and military leader/liberator, but they also claim she was a divinely ordained exception that went against the natural order.\textsuperscript{190} Brenz goes so far as to claim her authority had to be proven by miracles so women should not seek to fulfill these roles themselves, and Bucer emphasizes God can but rarely does bypass his own rules against women being subordinate to men.\textsuperscript{191} Similarly, books on canon law from the medieval period asserted YHWH’s use of

\textsuperscript{188} Butler, *Judges*, 95.
\textsuperscript{189} Butler, *Judges*, 95.
\textsuperscript{190} Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 80–84.
\textsuperscript{191} Johannes Brenz, *In Librum Iudicum*, as cited in Schroeder, *Deborah’s Daughters*, 80–81, 84–85.
Deborah was one of the “miracles of the Old Testament” and thus does not set a precedent for women in leadership.192

The prevalence of Deborah as a divine exception to the rule resulted in an influx of women debating this notion in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Mostly, this included citing Deborah as one among numerous examples of biblical women displaying similar qualities.193 However, some engaged the text of Judges 4–5 more thoroughly in attempts to disprove this notion. Aguilar, for example, appeals to the simplicity of the narrator’s descriptions, claiming the narrator depicts Deborah’s positions and gifts as ordinary for a woman.194 She reasons if women were viewed as poorly in Ancient Israel as many assume, then Deborah could never have been a prophetess “as her words would have been regarding as idle rambling” nor a judge because she would have lacked the “opportunities to train and perfect her intellect.”195 Instead, the simple descriptions of Deborah clearly indicate “her natural position must have been so high, that there needed not even adventitious state and splendor to make it acknowledged.”196 Like Aguilar, Stowe picks up on the narrator’s casual introduction of a woman as the leader in Israel.

192 Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 40.

193 For example, Esther Sowernam, publishing in 1916, includes Deborah among a list of eighteen women who God used as instruments to save his people, claiming Deborah “won the battle” against King Jabin (Schroeder, Deborah’s Daughters, 108).

194 Aguilar, Women of Israel, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 79. She consistently emphasizes Deborah was drawing on and refining the natural abilities God had given her while she was performing her roles as judge, prophet, and military leader. In this way, she uses Deborah’s story to help defend women’s “essential quality” with men in the eyes of God (Aguilar, Women of Israel, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 79).

195 Aguilar, Women of Israel, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, 79. For Aguilar, the narrator describes Deborah’s “intellect and judgement” as “so cultivated” that people naturally flocked to her and Barak refused to go to war without her by his side (Women of Israel, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, Women of War, 79–80).

She asserts readers should not be surprised at the “familiar manner” the narrator uses to announce Deborah’s position since Mosaic institutions and Jewish custom support the presence of a woman among the people’s “inspired deliverers.”\textsuperscript{197} In Stowe’s understanding, the narrator’s introduction shows Deborah’s position “as a thing quite in the natural order.”\textsuperscript{198}

However, not all women agreed with Aguilar and Stowe. While Baxter also assumes Deborah is both a prophetess and a judge, she claims Deborah was an exception for holding such leadership positions. Baxter begins her treatment of Deborah by stating bluntly “It is not the usual order of God to put woman in the place of authority.”\textsuperscript{199} She equates the calling of Deborah, a woman, to the later calling of Samuel, a child, to the role of judge, which was more suited to a man.\textsuperscript{200} Furthermore, Baxter is quick to point out that Deborah did not operate in a military capacity after the victorious battle. Instead, Deborah returned to “her ordinary work, and composed a song of victory”—a task Baxter deems more appropriate for a woman.\textsuperscript{201}

This debate concerning Deborah exceptionality persists in modern scholarship. Butler, for example, claims the “extensive modifiers” in Judges related to Deborah’s gender emphasize her “how exceptional Deborah, the woman, is rather than how


\textsuperscript{198} Stowe, \textit{Woman in Sacred History}, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, \textit{Women of War}, 103. Stowe concludes, “We have a picture of the reverence and confidence with which, in those days, the inspired woman was regarded” (Stowe, \textit{Woman in Sacred History}, as quoted in Taylor and De Groot, 104).


typical.” However, the emerging consensus that women prophets were common in the ANE and women leaders, while not commonplace, were not altogether shocking, has mostly silenced those arguing that Deborah was a historical exception. Debates continue to rage regarding her theological significance for female leadership in the church and society, and those who do not redefine her leadership roles still appeal to her as a divine exception for extraordinary circumstances.

Conclusion

The preceding summary of interpretive history and discussion of the key debates and themes highlight two important issues. First, there is an obvious lack of scholarly consensus related to almost every aspect of Deborah’s character as interpreters scramble to make sense of a text filled with what they perceive are narrative gaps and unanswered questions. In particular, scholars who approach the text with gender in mind often assume—perhaps incorrectly in many cases—that the text should but does not answer the following questions:

- Why is Deborah’s introduction different than introductions of other judges?
- Why was a woman leading Israel?
- What was Deborah’s marital status?
- Why is Deborah’s judging seemingly different than the judging of the other judges?
- What is the significance of the location from which Deborah issues judgment?
- What was Deborah’s relationship to Barak?
- Why does Deborah need to summon Barak?
- Why does Barak respond to Deborah’s summons?
- Why does Barak insist Deborah accompany him?
- Why does Barak’s request cause reproach and eliminate his glory in battle?
- Why does Deborah disappear from large sections of the narrative?
- Why does Deborah not fight in the battle or engage in military deliverance as the other judges?

202 Bulter, Judges, 91.
• Why does Deborah refrain from taking glory for herself?
• Why does Deborah describe herself as a mother in Israel?
• Why does the narrator not attribute the peace directly to Deborah as is done for other judges?
• Does the text present Deborah as perfect and modest or haughty and neglectful?

In seeking to fill in this supposedly missing information, scholars have often appealed to Deborah’s gender as the explanation without considering the questions they are posing were not intended to be answered by the text or that the text answers these questions in ways not related to Deborah’s gender.

Second, there is a preponderance of interpretations that emphasize the role of gender as interpreters both ignore and highlight elements of the biblical text that further their own agendas related to the roles of women in the home, church, and society. While Deborah was certainly a woman, this preoccupation with her gender obfuscates important aspects of her character and the meaning of the narrative in which she is a primary character. It is also possible the distraction of gender has resulted in the lack of consensus regarding Deborah’s various roles and function in the narrative.

Recent scholarship, especially the work of Knight and Yee, calls the historically accepted interpretive key of gender into question as they challenge the emphasis on Deborah’s gender in the narrative and centrality of gender role reversals. If their work is correct, then historical interpretations stressing Deborah’s feminine virtues or manly vices as well as interpretations that rely heavily on gender as the interpretive key become questionable. Consequently, new interpretations that discuss Deborah’s roles and actions apart from her gender must be conducted. Perhaps, once the issue of gender recedes into the background, more satisfactory answers can be found about her roles as prophet, judge, and military leader as well as her relationship with Barak. The remainder of this
study aims to prove these two points by discussing the textual evidence for Deborah’s roles as judge and prophet with limited discussion of gender in order to demonstrate that gender issues have distracted interpreters from other textual clues that resolve most of the apparent narrative gaps and unanswered questions mentioned above. As a result of this focus, readers will notice many of the key debates from history disappear from discussion in the remainder of this study—including Deborah’s role as a wife and evaluations of her as either perfect and modest or haughty and neglectful. When gender recedes into the background and the text itself centers the discussion, such questions and speculative answers disappear.

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203 I say limited discussion rather than no discussion since Knight wisely cautions not to eliminate gender entirely from discussions since an underemphasis on gender could result in a similar effect of distracting readers from the key thematic developments in the text (“Like the Sun in Its Might,” 108).
CHAPTER 2
DEBORAH THE JUDGE

Introduction
As seen in chapter 1, no scholarly consensus exists regarding whether Deborah was a judge or what type of judging Deborah engaged in if she was a judge. The presence of Barak as a potential alternative to Deborah as the judge in the narrative of Judges 4–5 complicates the discussion, but it remains unclear whether Barak becomes an alternative because he better fits the pattern set by the book of Judges or because he is a man and better fits the expectations of most interpreters. Therefore, I aim to determine whether setting aside issues and questions related to gender will allow for a clearer picture of Deborah’s role as a judge to emerge.

First, I examine the various problems with the term *judges* as a translation of the word *šōpētîm* found in Judg 2:16–19 and, consequently, the translation *judged* for the verb *šāpat* found throughout Judges. Second, I identify common formulaic patterns as well as common characteristics and behaviors associated with most *šōpētîm* throughout Judges to establish a baseline by which to compare Deborah.204 Once this baseline has been established, I examine the common formulaic patterns as well as characteristics and behaviors in relation to the narrator’s205 portrayal of Deborah in Judges 4–5.206 As a

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204 Since my starting place in this study does not assume Deborah’s place among the *šōpētîm*, I do not initially use Deborah’s behaviors and actions to inform what constitutes a *šōpēt*. Considering I ultimately do recognize her as one of the *šōpētîm*, future studies will need to explore how the portrait of Deborah the *šōpēt* should inform our understanding of *šōpētîm* in general.

205 I use the term narrator in place of author, compiler, redactor, etc. in full recognition that no term is perfect and the term narrator may raise concerns for those who seek to acknowledge the work of editors and redactors.

206 Unfortunately, the parameters of this study prevent me from providing a summary or even verse-by-verse discussion of these chapters. Instead, I focus in only on verses that contain potential
result, I aim to determine whether Deborah fits the pattern established for šōpēṭîm and whether the narrator portrays her as having the characteristics and behaviors necessary to be considered one of the šōpēṭîm foreshadowed in Judg 2:16–19. I reference Deborah’s gender when necessary, but I examine the text without giving undue attention to her gender so as not to obscure the narrator’s portrait of her with unnecessary complications.207

**Defining šōpēṭîm in Judges**

The Hebrew word šōpēṭîm in Judges 2:16–19, from which the book derives its name, used to be unanimously translated *judges*. Recently, many scholars have started questioning whether *judge*—given its common usage to describe someone judging in a court or settling disputes—adequately represents what the individuals identified as šōpēṭîm are portrayed as doing in the text. For example, Pressler and Evans claim none of the judges operate in a judicial sense, and Gorospe shows how the šōpēṭîm do not interpret law208 or “preside in judicial proceedings” like judicial judges.209 Gorospe acknowledges such judges existed in ancient Israel but claims those with the verb šāpat

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207 This means I will not attempt to answer questions related to whether she could have judged as a woman and will simply assume this is a possibility. I will also not discuss her role as a wife, woman, or mother since these are not central to the narrative or related to her potential role as a judge.

208 Some interpreters have claimed this was how the verb was used in reference to Deborah. See Chapter 1 for examples.

attributed to them in Judges do not operate in this way. While most agree judges is not the best translation of šōpēṭīm, a consensus does not exist regarding a better alternative.

The titles saviors and deliverers represent the most frequently proposed alternatives due to a widespread recognition that the primary task of šōpēṭīm in the book of Judges was delivering or saving Israel from oppressors. This is likely because, as noted by O’Connell and Butler, the narrator assiduously crafts Judges’ opening framework to create an analogy between the term šōpēṭīm and the action of saving (yāš’ā) Israel. Furthermore, as Gorospe notes, “some of these šōpēṭīm are specifically called deliverer or savior—moshia’ (from the same word as ‘Messiah’—or are described as delivering Israel in a brief sentence or in an extended narrative.” Even though, as Butler notes, the narrator only identifies the first two šōpēṭīm with the title mōší’a, the narrator uses the verb yāš’ā frequently enough in reference to various šōpēṭīm to make savior or deliverer viable options for šōpēṭīm. However, not all agree these titles are broad enough.

Many scholars argue the titles deliver and savior fail to encompass the range of duties implied by the root špēt and attributed to šōpēṭīm throughout Judges. Knight, for example, argues the narrator does not “distinguish between forensic judges and those

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210 Gorospe, Judges, 33. None of those typically referred to as judges are described with the noun šōpēt (Boling, Judges, 5). Only YHWH is described with this noun in Judg 11:27.


213 Gorospe, Judges, 33.

who function as saviors” and does not limit šōpēṭîm to military or deliverance roles. Sometimes, the roles of judicial judges, deliverers, and military commanders overlap neatly, but according to Knight, this is not often the case. For example, she claims “Shagmar delivers, but does not judge, Deborah judges, but does not deliver … and Samson judges, but does not command.” While Deborah represents a common example of a šōpēṭ not delivering, other examples exist in and outside of Judges. In Judges, Othniel—the first of the šōpēṭîm—judges before delivering, implying the action of šāpaṭ was possible without yet delivering. Outside of Judges, the expectations for šōpēṭîm clearly expands beyond military deliverers or saviors if we accept Eli and Samuel into the group of šōpēṭîm as the narrator of 1 Samuel clearly expects. Both Eli and Samuel have the verb šāpaṭ associated with them before accomplishing a military victory. Eli never accomplishes deliverance, and Samuel may initially seem to deliver but does not actually engage in the fight (just like Deborah). Therefore, some scholars claim the term šōpēṭîm has broader connotations for all forms of leadership or decision making, as further evidence by its root špt.

Niditch appeals to the work of Jo Ann Hackett in defining the root špt as dealing broadly with decision making in the HB. In extrabiblical literature, the root refers to “various ‘judicial’ and ‘administrative’ functions” including “the administration of justice” and governing. Therefore, Hackett claims the term šōpēṭ describes an

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215 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 111.
217 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 111.
218 Niditch, Judges, 1.
219 Niditch, Judges, 1. In 1 and 2 Samuel, Niditch notes the term carries religious implications related to “divinatory capacity” (Judges, 2–3). Based on the descriptions of Samuel, she claims šōpēṭîm
individual who governs over a society but not as part of a dynasty passed for generations. Rather, a šōpēt governs because the people recognize him or her as possessing charisma and presenting themself as “persuasive and powerful.” Pressler similarly identifies šōpētim as charismatic, divinely chosen, and spirit empowered leaders. Within Judges, Hackett claims the term šōpētim refers to “non-dynastic governors, in a period before a monarchy had been established in Israel.” However, other scholars who regard šōpētim in terms of decision making do not narrow the term in Judges to non-dynastic governors.

Knight, for example, uses the traditional term judges, but she defines the term very broadly to encompass all leaders who make decisions. She claims the scope of functions for šōpētim align with that given for šōpētim in Deut 17:8–9, and so she identifies them as ones who “assist in decision-making… in conjunction with other elements of tribal and national leadership.” Gorospe arrives at similar conclusions but...
for different reasons. She argues the verb šāpaṭ when attributed to šōpēṭīm usually describes an activity over a duration of time, “which implies more than performing acts of deliverance, but includes governance or administrative tasks.” Thus, she expands her definition of a šōpēṭ to include deciding legal cases, leading, and administrating.

While I agree with the broader definition of leader as espoused by Knight and Gorospe, I will continue to use the Hebrew term šōpēṭīm (and šōpet) from Judges 2 when referring to those traditionally called judges. In doing so, I hope to avoid limiting or broadening the definition too much before I examine the common characteristics and behaviors of the šōpēṭīm. With this established terminology, I now move to identifying the common patterns and formulas associated with the šōpēṭīm accounts in Judges.

**Formulaic Patterns and Elements in šōpēṭīm Accounts**

While outliers exist, most scholars agree Judges contains twelve distinct šōpēṭīm accounts: (1) Othniel, (2) Ehud, (3) Shagmar, (4) Deborah/Barak, (5) Gideon, (6) Tola, (7) Jair, (8) Jephthah, (9) Ibzan, (10) Elon, (11) Abdon, and (12) Samson. Of these, the accounts of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah/Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson are considered primary (or major) accounts and the remainder secondary (or minor). Scholars generally agree on the boundaries of these accounts based on formulaic patterns and elements that form a common framework for each account.

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227 Shagmar is sometimes excluded since his account lacks many formulaic elements; some scholars replace him with Abimelech even though Abimelech’s story also lacks all of the common formulaic elements.
Formulaic Elements in šōpēṭîm Accounts

While most scholars agree these twelve šōpēṭîm accounts contain formulaic patterns, they disagree regarding how many formulaic elements exist and how relevant each is for establishing meaning.²²⁸ Enough overlap exists between the various opinions, however, to establish the most important formulas. For example, Block identifies seven major formulaic patterns in the primary šōpēṭîm accounts that appear frequently in other scholars’ lists.²²⁹ Block’s first two elements appear in all six primary šōpēṭîm accounts: (1) the negative evaluation (“the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the YHWH”); and (2) the divine committal (“YHWH gave/sold them into the hands of…”).²³⁰ Pressler also lists these two elements as the first two in her series of five “stock phrases” derived from Judg 2:6–3:6, and Evans includes them as two of the first four formulaic elements present in all šōpēṭîm accounts.²³¹ O’Connell also identifies them both as a formulaic elements—although he sees two variations of the divine committal element.²³² Block’s third element is the cry of distress (“the sons of Israel cried out to YHWH”).²³³ Pressler, Evans, and O’Connell agree this constitutes a major formulaic

²²⁸ O’Connell, for example, identifies “as many as twenty distinct and recurrent” formulaic elements—twelve of which he deems “essential”—but most scholars recognize only four to six (The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges). Evans aligns with O’Connell in identifying twelve elements, but she differs on the content 7–10 (Judges and Ruth, 59–60).

²²⁹ Block, Judges, 146–148.

²³⁰ Block, Judges, 146–148.

²³¹ Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 138; Evans, Judges and Ruth, 59–60. Evans identifies 12 elements. She adds the “description of that evil” done by the Israelites and “God’s anger toward” the Israelites in between Block’s 1 and 2, but as she comments on the various šōpēṭîm accounts, her additional 2 elements only appear with Othniel and Jephthah.

²³² O’Connell, Rhetoric of the Book of Judges, 28, 34–35. The first variation is “YHWH gave them into the hand of …” and the second is “YHWH sold them into hand of …” (Rhetoric of the Book of Judges, 34–35).

²³³ Block, Judges, 146–148.
Evans, Pressler, and Block assert this element appears in the first five šōpēṭīm accounts, and Block makes a theological point of its absence in the final account, claiming the disintegration of the framework mirrors the disintegration of Israel. O’Connell, however, notes this element follows a “fairly standard pattern” and marks it as a pervasive element that “appears in every major deliverer story.” He regards Samson’s cries to YHWH in 15:18 for water and in 16:28 for vindication against the Philistines as important variations of this pattern. While these first three elements help establish and introduce the primary šōpēṭīm accounts, Block’s final four elements pertain to the šōpēṭīm themselves and so have greater bearing on the current study.

The final four elements as identified by Block are as follows: (4) the divine provision of leadership (“YHWH raised up a deliverer”); (5) the subjugation (“YHWH gave … into the hands of the deliverer”); (6) the tranquility (“the land had rest for … years”); and (7) the death of the deliverer. Pressler also identifies elements 4–6, but she combines 4 and 5 into one formulaic element. O’Connell identifies Block’s fourth element as a standalone element, but he then divides Block’s fifth element into two

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234 O’Connell, *Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 39; Evans notes this formula is used when “God gives/sells them to oppressive enemies,” *Judges and Ruth*, 59–60; Pressler labels this the distress and outcry (*Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 138). She also claims the “crying out” does not include repentance and only in Judg 10:10 does Israel actually repent. However, if one views Judges 10:10 as defining what the Israelites typically “cried out,” then every instance of their crying out would be considered repentance.


239 Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 138. Her final two elements are as follows: deliverance (“God raises up a savior who rescues Israel and the enemy is subdued”) and a period of peace (“the land had rest”).
separate formulas (the humbling of the enemy and the selling/giving of the enemy into Israel’s hand). O’Connell also adds the action of the šōpēṭ judging as part of the tranquility element (6), and the burial of the šōpēṭ as part of the death element (7). All scholars, including Block and O’Connell, note the disappearance of Block’s fourth and fifth elements as the cycle progresses. As previously noted, Block claims this breakdown in the structure mirrors a “general and spiritual disintegration of the nation.” Given these final elements speak to typical patterns associated with šōpēṭîm as well as characteristics and behaviors, I will discuss them each in greater detail below.

Othniel as the Model šōpēṭ

While the formulaic elements discussed in the previous section derive from the introductory framework in Judges 2:10–23, scholars also use the Othniel account in Judg 3:7–11 to define standard characteristics and behaviors of šōpēṭîm. Even though the Othniel account contains less plot details and more flat characterizations than other accounts, it contains most of the formulaic elements that occurred in the introductory framework (Judg 2:10–23) and reappear throughout the book. For example, Gorospe notes six elements from the introductory framework that appear in the Othniel account. The first two are actions of YHWH: he raises up of the individual, and he empowers

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242 Block, Judges, 146–147.

243 Block, Judges, 147.

244 Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 140; O’Conner, Rhetoric, 81–84; Schneider, Judges, 35; Boling, Judges, 82; Gorospe, Judges, 41; Butler, Judges, 56; Block, Judges, 149–150.

245 In the framework, she notes the deliverer is referred to as a šōpēṭ but here is called a mōšî’a (Gorospe, Judges, 46).
the individual. The final four elements are actions of the šōpēt: the šōpēt judges and delivers the people; overpowers the enemy; brings peace to Israel; and dies. 

Since Othniel is the first šōpēt and possesses so many of the formulaic elements from the framework, many scholars consider Othniel the “ideal judge” by which others should be measured. For example, Schneider claims he provides a model and standard of evaluation for all who follow him, and Block refers to him as a “paradigmatic leader” and his account as a “paradigmatic model against which the rest must be interpreted.” Likewise, Matthews call him “a paragon of virtue,” and Gorospe claims he “fulfills the prevalent conception of the ideal deliverer.” As such, many look to the first deliverer’s story to form a “pattern for understanding the theological significance of the remaining deliverers.” While not every šōpēt possesses all the characteristics Othniel, all šōpēṭîm are portrayed as possessing some of them. Furthermore, the presence or absence of a characteristic or behavior usually reveals something important about that šōpēt.

Schneider provides a helpful list of the characteristics in the Othniel account by which later šōpēṭîm should be evaluated. These characteristics correlate closely to the

246 Gorospe, Judges, 46.
247 Gorospe, Judges, 46.
248 Schneider, Judges, 35
249 Schneider, Judges, 35; Block, Judges, 149; See also Butler, Judges, 66.
250 Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 8; Gorospe, Judges, 41.
252 Matthews also uses Othniel to provide a model for the šōpēṭîm, but his model is much less restrictive than Schneider’s model. For Matthews, Othniel demonstrates that a šōpēt “is raised by God to serve the needs of the people, provides them with a military victory, and then provides them with forty years of rest without claiming the title of king or imposing any strictures on them” (Judges and Ruth, 8).
formulaic elements identified in the previous section. The first four characteristics are as follows: the selection of the šōpeṭ by YHWH; the effect/result of the spirit of YHWH upon šōpeṭ; the deliverance of the enemy leader into the hand of šōpeṭ; and the attribution of the victory to YHWH and not to the šōpeṭ.253 Schneider stresses the importance of the victory element since “many of the later leaders erred by claiming the victory for themselves rather than attributing it to their deity.”254 This element, thus, represents the ideal šōpēṭîm, meaning its presence or absence does more to distinguish the quality of the šōpēṭîm than the identity of the šōpēṭîm. One can except the praise for a given šōpēṭ to diminish when praise for YHWH rightfully prevails; likewise, one can expect effusive praise for a šōpēṭ when praise for YHWH’s deliverance languishes.

The final two characteristics Schneider recognizes in the Othniel account are the achievement of rest/peace for the land and the completion of the task without leaving lose ends, such as problematic children or revered burial places.255 Matthews also highlights these final two characterstic when he states Othniel “provides them [Israel] with forty years of rest without claiming the title of king or imposing any strictures on them.”256 As with the victory element, Schneider and Matthews contend the rest of the šōpēṭîm should be measured by how closely they align to Othniel in regard to providing peace and not providing unnecessary stumbling blocks to the people’s devotion to YHWH.

253 Schneider, Judges, 41–43.
254 Schneider, Judges, 42.
255 Schneider, Judges, 41–43.
256 Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 8.
Othniel’s account as an ideal model becomes important for a few major reasons. First, it helps one expect deviations from the formula because it both acknowledges a formulaic pattern and expects that pattern to be broken since not every šōpēţîm will match the ideal standard. Second, it helps the reader recognize the significance of both the presence and absence of the formulaic elements. The absence of an element, for example, does not eliminate an individual from being considered a šōpēţ as long as a clear reason exists for that absence—whether it is not an essential element or the narrator intentionally excluded it to make a theological point.

For the above reasons, variations should not automatically be regarded with suspicion. As Block notes, “Obviously, the author did not indent for the prologue, particularly 2:11–23, to serve as an exhaustive introduction to the formulae he will use in the narrative. Nor did he feel bound by the preamble in the development of the narratives. On the contrary, in each of the six major narrative cycles, he will introduce fresh ideas and formulae.”257 One of the variations, according to Block, concerns how the narrator chooses to elaborate on one of the formulaic elements. In all the šōpēţîm accounts except Othniel’s, Block observes the narrator elaborating on a specific formulaic element, such as raising of the deliverer, the details of the oppression, the manner of deliverance, or the continuing impact of the šōpēţ.258 As a result, the formulaic elements, even when present, can appear different from one account to the next.

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257 Block, *Judges*, 150.

258 Block, *Judges*, 149.
Common Characteristics and Behaviors for šōpēṭîm

The previous sections identified seven common characteristics and behaviors associated with šōpēṭîm that appear in numerous scholars’ lists. These seven common characteristics and behaviors will now be discussed in detail and then compared to the Deborah’s account to determine who in the narrative best displays these characteristics. If the characteristics or behavior is missing or incomplete, I will discuss possible reasons for the deviation from the formulaic pattern, acknowledging the absence of formulaic elements does not disqualify Deborah from being one of the šōpēṭîm since only Othniel and Ehud possess the majority of the ideal characteristics and behaviors.

The šōpēṭ is Raised Up by YHWH

O’Connell argues the formula “YHWH raised up … to save” is a pervasive formulaic element in Judges, and most scholars agree with this conclusion based on its presence in the framework of Judges and in the Othniel account.259 In Judges 4–5, this element is noticeably missing after the first three formulaic elements: (1) the Israelites did evil in the eyes of YHWH, (2) YHWH sells them into the hands of an oppressive foreign enemy, and (3) the Israelites cry out in distress. As Gorospe notes, “If the narrative were following the expected framework, the next element (in response to the people’s cry) would be, ‘he raised up for them a deliverer. . .’ (3:9, 15).” 260 Instead, the narrator simply introduces Deborah without the use of this formula, stating she is a prophetess and the wife of Lappidoth. This introduction might not identify Deborah explicitly as the

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259 O’Connell, Rhetoric of the Book of Judges, 41.

260 Gorospe, Judges, 59.
šōpēt, but it introduces Deborah in a “prominent and authoritative role in society.”\textsuperscript{261}

While most scholars throughout history have been perturbed about the manner in which Deborah is introduced,\textsuperscript{262} Knight regards Deborah’s introduction as a “remarkably straightforward” introduction of Deborah as a prophet.\textsuperscript{263} Two primary options exist for explaining this deviation from the established formulaic pattern: (1) Deborah is the šōpēt since she is introduced at this key juncture, but the narrator deviates from the pattern for a specific purpose; or (2) Deborah is not the šōpēt (alternatives would be Barak and Jael), which is why the formulaic element is omitted.

If we assume Deborah is the šōpēt, numerous reasons exist for the narrator’s deviation. First, the narrator’s description of Deborah could imply she was raised up by YHWH and thus no explicit statement is needed. Evans takes this approach when she posits Deborah’s prophetic role made the statement that YHWH raised her up redundant, which resulted in the narrator excluding it.\textsuperscript{264} Interestingly, Niditch appeals to Deborah’s gender as implied evidence that Deborah was raised up by God. She claims, “that she is a female and therefore not expected to lead in a military context only enhances the impression of the judge as one raised by God, inspired and unusual, beyond the workaday roles of men and women.”\textsuperscript{265} While these types of explanations are possible, the idea of

\textsuperscript{261} Gorospe, \textit{Judges}, 60.

\textsuperscript{262} Evans, for example, claims the narrator provides significantly more background information for Deborah than for the šōpēt before her (\textit{Judges and Ruth}, 74–75). See also the overview in chapter 1 for how scholars have emphasized her gender and wifely roles based on her introduction.

\textsuperscript{263} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 110.

\textsuperscript{264} Evans, \textit{Judges and Ruth}, 75.

\textsuperscript{265} Niditch, \textit{Judges}, 65.
the narrator of Judges—who relies heavily on repetition and patterns—leaving out this formulaic element to eliminate redundancy or because it seems obvious seems unlikely.

A more likely reason for the absence of this formulaic element is that it is not as reliable of a formulaic element as scholars initially assume. O’Connell notices the extreme variation among the various uses of the formula and the seemingly random pattern for its exclusion. The first two occurrences with Othniel and Ehud are consistent, but after these first two, the formula varies substantially or is entirely absent. For example, YHWH as the subject is completely absent from the formula after Othniel and Ehud, and the raising becomes passive. Nothing close to the formula appears in the Deborah, Gideon, Ibzan, Elon, or Abdon accounts, and the Shagmar account only contains the verb yāšʿa—one of the potential six parts of the formula. Some could argue the Gideon account contains echoes of the formula embedded in dialogue, but these can hardly be counted as the presence of the formulaic element at the correct juncture. Given all these individuals (with the exception of Deborah and Shagmar) are universally acknowledged as šōpēṯim, it seems unreasonable to claim this formulaic element must be part of an account in order for it to be classified as a šōpēṯ account. Additionally, this variation of the formula cannot be attributed to the downward spiral pattern since it reappears in the Jephthah and Samson accounts.

If we assume Deborah is not the šōpēṯ, we must then decide why the narrator introduces her in the place where the audience expects the šōpēṯ to be identified for the first time. I mentioned the first option above (Barak is the šōpēṯ, and this is the beginning

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267 See O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 41, for the other five parts.
of the downward spiral) but ruled that out since the pattern reappears after this account. Another option, as espoused by Amit, is that the narrator intentionally introduced Deborah at “the strategic point where the reader expects reference to a savior” so that readers assume Deborah is the šōpēṯ and the narrator can undermine that assumption later in the narrative. In order to prevent the solidification of Deborah as the šōpēṯ, however, the narrator explicitly excludes the standard formula.

Another common explanation is that Deborah is introduced here because she serves as YHWH’s representative who raises up Barak as the deliverer. In Knight’s words, “her summons to Barak to muster the troops is parallel to YHWH’s action to ‘raise’ a deliverer in other cycles.” In other words, Deborah takes the place of YHWH and her summoning Barak takes the place of the “raising up.” Wong explains it this way: “In the Othniel and Ehud narratives, Israel’s cry to YHWH is immediately followed by a report of YHWH raising up a deliverer to save them (3:9,15). In the Barak narrative, the same pattern is implied as Israel’s cry is immediately followed by the introduction of Deborah, through whom YHWH commissioned Barak to deliver Israel from the hands of Sisera (4:3–7).” With this explanation, a deviation from formulaic word choices occurs, but the general pattern is maintained. Knight and Webb both see Deborah the

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268 Amit, “Judges 4,” 92. The follows the stance that the narrative of Judg 4–5 is about reversal of roles and expectations.


270 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 113.

prophet as YHWH’s stand in who calls Barak to deliver the Israelites.\textsuperscript{272} The likelihood of this explanation being correct increases by comparing the Deborah and Gideon accounts. First, the sons of Israel do evil in the eyes of YHWH (4:1; 6:1), then they are sold/given into the hand of their enemies (Jabin in 4:2; Midianites in 6:1). In both instances, the narrator provides details about the type of oppression dealt by their enemies and the number of years this oppression lasted. Then, the sons of Israel cry out to YHWH (4:3; 6:6). After the sons of Israel cry out, the narrator introduces Deborah the prophetess in 4:4 and an unnamed prophet in 6:8. The unique syntax further supports the connection as Deborah is called “a woman, a prophetess” (ʾiššâ nəḇîʾâ) and the unnamed prophet is called “a man, a prophet” (ʾiš nâḇî). Both introductions contain a somewhat awkward and unnecessary pronoun.\textsuperscript{273} Here the narration diverges. In Deborah’s case, the people come to her for judgment, prompting her to summon Barak. With the unnamed prophet, he delivers a message explaining their oppression, but the “sons of Israel” do not come to him for judgment. In this deviation, the narrator portrays the downward spiral based on how the Israelites respond to the words of YHWH’s prophet. In Judg 4, the people respond to the YHWH’s prophet; in Judg 6, the people remain silent.

This final theory could be slightly altered to maintain Deborah as the šōpēt by seeing Barak representative of Israel and Deborah as representative of YHWH. Amit’s theory could also be altered to allow for the narrator’s literary crafting of ambiguity regarding the identity of the šōpēt. Perhaps, the purpose of this particular šōpēt account

\textsuperscript{272} Knight also translates Judg 5:8 to mean God chose new leaders and thus equates Deborah arising as a mother in Israel (a prophet) to YHWH’s raising her up (“Sun in its Might,” 66).

\textsuperscript{273} Interestingly, no interpreters read the latter as an emphasis on the unknown prophet’s male gender, which has been consistently done by interpreters of Deborah. This alone is almost enough to rule out any deliberate emphasis on Deborah’s gender by the narrator.
hinges on the šōpēt not receiving honor for the enacted deliverance since YHWH should receive all the honor. Taken this way, the formula’s absence is a positive assessment of the šōpēt—even the narrator does not falsely attribute the deliverance to the šōpēt. Of course, this option leaves the identity of the šōpēt up for grabs between Deborah, Barak, and Jael. If that is the point though, it would be reasonable to refer to all three as šōpētim since they each play an important role in the deliverance of the people.

Empowered by the Spirit
Another element commonly pinpointed as formulaic is the empowerment of the šōpētim by the rūaḥ (spirit) of YHWH. This element is not contained in the opening framework of Judges, but it is added in the paradigmatic Othniel account and then used in reference to Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. For this reason, O’Connell does not consider this a pervasive formulaic element. This means it only occurs in roughly half of the primary šōpētim accounts and none of the secondary accounts, and the exact formula is not the same each time. Considering this evidence, using this formula to gauge whether an individual is being portrayed as one of the šōpētim seems untenable.

Despite its absence in all the secondary šōpētim accounts and two of the primary šōpētim accounts, scholars, such as Block, have used the absence of this formulaic element in reference to Deborah to question her status as one of the šōpētim. However, Block confusingly does not ask this same question of Barak when asserting he is the real

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274 Butler, Judges, 66. Othniel and Jephthah have the spirit come upon them (3:10, 11:29); Gideon is clothed with the spirit (6:34); and Samson has the spirit rush upon him (14:6, 19; 15:14) (Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 57).

275 O’Connell, Rhetoric of the Book of Judges, 43.

276 Block, Judges, 194.
šōpēt in Judges 4–5. Instead, Block claims the explicit reference to his empowering by the spirit “would have been superfluous” because the presence of YHWH’s prophet with him indicates the presence of YHWH’s spirit with him.²⁷⁷ If this is true of Barak, then it would be reasonable to say it is true of Deborah who is the actual prophet. Schneider uses similar reasoning when she explains there is not an explicit reference to the Spirit empowering or coming upon Deborah because it would be redundant given Deborah’s prophetic status.²⁷⁸ Amit, who ultimately concludes Deborah is not the šōpētìm, explains away this omission in the same way she explained the omission of the YHWH raising up the šōpēt element. She asserts the reference to Deborah as prophetess right at the location where the audience expects to be given evidence of a “direct link” between her and YHWH implies Deborah is being set forth at the šōpēt.²⁷⁹ The narrator, she explains, uses this intentional devise to create an assumption to undermine later in the narrative.

Perhaps, the best explanation for this element’s absence in Judges 4 is that the empowerment by the deity is not an essential component of the šōpētìm formula since it is also absent from other šōpētìm accounts, both primary and secondary. Most notably, the previous primary šōpēt account of Ehud is also missing this formulaic element. However, this cannot be the result of degeneration since it reappears with the final three primary šōpētìm accounts (Gideon in 6:34; Jephthah in 11:29; and Samson in 14:19 and 15:14). Even more convincing that this is an acceptable deviation is that even if one were to classify either Barak or Jael as the šōpēt, this formulaic element would still be missing.

²⁷⁷ Block, Judges, 200, n. 228.
²⁷⁸ Schneider, Judges, 68.
So either this cycle does not have a šōpēt because it is missing this formulaic element or an individual can be a šōpēt without explicit reference to YHWH empowering them.

Enacts Military Deliverance

Most scholars recognize military leadership and deliverance of the people from an oppressor as an essential behavior for šōpētîm.²⁸⁰ Evans, for example, claims šōpētîm mostly served in military roles in order to deliver the people from foreign powers oppressing them.²⁸¹ As Matthews notes, besides Deborah, all the šōpētîm act as military leaders or engage in military endeavors that deliver Israel from oppressors.²⁸² Likewise, Pressler claims all the šōpētîm “lead Israel into battle” and “the deliverers God raises up are military heroes who rescue Israel from oppression.”²⁸³ However, after introducing Deborah, the narrator does not depict her in a military role as a leader or warrior.²⁸⁴ Instead, she is introduced with a “prominent and authoritative role in society [prophet].”²⁸⁵ Part of this authoritative role is summoning a military leader, the very role one would expect her to fulfill as the šōpēt in this account. Many different explanations

²⁸⁰ For Block, this is the subjugation (“YHWH gave … into the hands of the deliverer”) element (Judges, 146–148); for O’Connell, this constitutes both the humbling of the enemy and the selling/giving of the enemy into Israel’s hand (Rhetoric of the Book of Judges, 24–25); Schneider traces this characteristic back to Othniel, claiming a šōpēt has the enemy leader delivered into their hand (Judges, 41–43).

²⁸¹ Evans, Judges and Ruth, 30.

²⁸² Matthews, Judges, 54, 58.

²⁸³ Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 144.

²⁸⁴ Gorospe, Judges, 59. Evans notes that Deborah is not “actively involved as a warrior” as the rest of the šōpētîm are described, and Bulter observes that Deborah instigates the war but neither leads the battle or participants in it (Evans, Judges and Ruth, 75; Butler, Judges, 95). Likewise, Schneider makes it clear that Deborah commanded Barak to lead the battle and did not intend to lead the battle herself (Judges, 71). While she assigns Deborah a pseudo-military role, she ultimately maintains Barak was the real military leader (Schneider, Judges, 81).

²⁸⁵ Gorospe, Judges, 60.
have been proposed for why this characteristic action is missing from the narrator’s depiction of Deborah.286

One common explanation is that—despite claims to the contrary—Deborah did fight in the battle. Niditch, for example, consistently describes Deborah as a warrior who engaged in the battle, and she claims Barak’s demand that Deborah accompany him to the battle “enhance[s] her prestige as woman warrior.”287 However, she provides no textual evidence for these claims, and she contrarily states Barak requested her presence since she was “God’s favorite” and would ensure his victory.288 David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss also insist Deborah was a successful warrior, and they claim both the narrative in Judges 4 and the poem in Judges 5 depict her as a warrior-leader.289 As evidence, they use the “I” in Deborah’s initial commission of Barak (Judg 4:7) to refer to Deborah herself rather than YHWH, and so they depict her as drawing in Sisera’s troops and delivering Sisera into Barak’s hands.290 However, this interpretation is extremely suspect since Deborah was clearly speaking those words on behalf of YHWH.

Wong effectively counters claims of Deborah fighting in the battle by examining the verbs associated with Deborah.291 He notes that after the exposition, Deborah “summons” and “calls” in 4:6 and “speaks” in 4:6, 9, 14. The other three verbs assigned

286 For example, Assis claims since Deborah was a prophetess and a non-combatant (as established by her gender), she could not conduct warfare and thus needed to enlist Barak (“Man, Woman and God,” 120). Given the aim of this study, I will not discuss further the frequent explanation of Deborah’s gender.

287 Niditch, Judges, 65.

288 Niditch, Judges, 65.


290 Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting Sexuality,” 34.

to her (qûm, hālak, and ʿālā) all relate to accompanying Barak, and only one verb
assigned to her occurs in the “pre-battle narrative of 4:6–10.” The only action assigned
to her in the battle narrative is the verb ʾāmar in 4:14 when she communicates the proper
timing for Barak to initiate the battle and reiterates YHWH’s promise of aid and victory.
In contrast, the verbs assigned to Barak occur in the battle narrative and portray him as
engaged in the battle. Expanding the search radius to include Judges 5 still does not
reveal evidence of Deborah fighting since the statement that the “princes of Issachar were
with Deborah” (Judg 5:15) does not indicate participation in the fighting.

Others claim Deborah served as a military leader and commander by inspiring and
directing the troops or by commanding Barak, which qualifies her as a deliverer even
though she did not fight. Hackett, for example, asserts Deborah’s involvement with the
battle was inspirational as she reassured and inspired the soldiers to fight, which qualifies
as “battling.” Even though Asiss claims Barak is the “savior-deliverer” and Deborah
the prophet, he still asserts Deborah conducts the war because she commissions,
commands, and instructs Barak who implements all the tasks of the war. Ackermann
assigns Deborah the role of “Israel’s chief military commander” without pointing to any
instance in the text where she functions in this role. Niditch claims Deborah’s military

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293 Wong, *Compositional Strategy*, 243
294 Hackett, *Violence in Women’s Lives*, 357.
295 Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 112–114. Pressler claims this as well, stating Deborah delivers
by “calling upon the general, Barak” and commanding him to lead the people into battle (Joshua, Judges,
and Ruth, 156).
296 Susan Ackermann, *Warrior, Dancer, Suductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*,
ABRL (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 31. Mayfield notes the following about Ackermann’s
conclusion: “Although she admits that Deborah only exhorts Barak to go fight in ch. 4, and ch. 5 does not
mention Deborah having weapons or fighting, she concludes, in the end, that Deborah is a warrior” (Tyler
role included mobilizing “the troops based upon an oracle from God” (Judg 4:6–7) and then commanding Barak to follow YHWH’s directions.\textsuperscript{297} However, the text describes Barak as mobilizing the troops, not Deborah, so this only works if (1) Deborah’s actions qualify as delegating her task, and (2) delegating a task is the same as completing the task. Taking a different angle, Knight details Deborah’s role in the battle as follows:

She recounts the people’s call to her to rouse herself and sing a song (v. 12). One should not underestimate the martial overtones of the root ʿור. Deborah was not a ‘warrior’ in the song’s perspective, but she was an active agent in the fight against Canaan, and the representative to whom the people called when they sought God’s intervention (as in 4:5d). That God responded and intervened in accordance with the people’s call permits her to perceive that YHWH went down ‘for me’ in v. 13.\textsuperscript{298}

Thus, Knight argues Deborah was active in the battle against the Canaanites because she called upon YHWH for deliverance and YHWH answered.

However, none of the above explanations solve the absence of the formulaic element of the oppressive leader being delivered/sold into the hand of the šōpēt. This is not an instance of the formulaic element missing either. Instead, it is specifically attributed to other characters in the narrative. Even though Barak does not ultimately have the enemy leader delivered into his hand, he receives this promise initially from YHWH through Deborah. Instead, the enemy is delivered into the hand of Jael (still not Deborah). Some have tried to solve this issue by attributing the victory to Deborah but

\textsuperscript{297} Niditch, \textit{Judges}, 65. Matthews also claims Deborah summoning Barak shows her role as a šōpēt as well as a prophet (\textit{Judges and Ruth}, 65). However, when he describes similar summoning, he only describes other prophets summoning military leaders and does not provide any examples of another šōpēt summoning a leader, so his assertion is hardly convincing.

\textsuperscript{298} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 116.
through Jael, asserting Jael served as the hand of Deborah,\textsuperscript{299} Yee views Jael as “a crucial part of Deborah’s whole guerilla warplan,”\textsuperscript{300} and still others assert Jael was the fulfillment of Deborah’s prophecy and so Deborah’s responsibility.

A more satisfactory explanation is found in examining the occurrence of the formula in the Ehud and Jephthah accounts. In both instances, the formula occurs in the direct speech of the šōpēt and includes the promise of YHWH delivering the enemy into the hands of the Israelites, not into their own hands. With this in mind, Deborah promising another the enemy would be delivered into their hand does not disqualify Deborah from being the šōpēt. This is reinforced when, after Jael defeats Sisera, YHWH subdues Jabin before all of Israel and the hand of the Israelites, not the hand of Barak or Jael, ultimately defeats Jabin. As Knight implies—and as supported by the Othniel account—Deborah not serving in a military role prevented the victory from being attributed to her name.\textsuperscript{301} Assis similarly claims the narrator splits the traditional judge-savior role between Barak and Deborah so that one individual could not claim the victory and honor above YHWH as happens in other šōpētim accounts.\textsuperscript{302}

Another option for assigning fulfilling Deborah’s deliverance role without having her function as a warrior or military leader relates to the nature of her involvement in the battle and to the nature of deliverance itself. Both Knight and Pressler note that

\textsuperscript{299} Assis, “Hand of a Woman,” 4. Knight counters this with the claim that Jael is the hand of YHWH, not Deborah (“Like the Sun in Its Might,” 116, n. 96).

\textsuperscript{300} Yee, “By the Hand of a Woman,” 114.

\textsuperscript{301} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 97. In the words of Knight, “Judges 4–5 never depicts Deborah as a powerful female warrior leading her people to war, despite a chorus of voices to the contrary; rather, in both narrative and song YHWH receives all credit for having led his people to victory” (“Like the Sun in Its Might,” 97).

\textsuperscript{302} Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 120.
deliverance in Judges is more than freeing the people from military oppression. Pressler observes that the deliverance provided in Judges is both material and spiritual—political and social.\textsuperscript{303} Knight details the ways deliverance for the Israelites encompasses more than a simple military victory and involves leading the people to respond properly to YHWH.\textsuperscript{304} As Knight convincingly argues, only when the people participate and respond to YHWH do they experience true deliverance and peace. This final explanation accounts for a more wholistic definition of deliverance for the downward spiral that takes place as the šōpētîm and people demonstrate increasingly less concern for wholehearted devotion to YHWH and willingness to respond to the words of YHWH.

Judged (šāpat) Israel

Perhaps the most pervasive behavior assigned to šōpētîm is in the formulaic element “and he/she judged Israel for X years.”\textsuperscript{305} O’Connell asserts the formula contains three primary elements: (1) the verb šāpat; (2) the direct object ʾet-yišrāʾēl; and (3) a period expressed in a numbers of years.\textsuperscript{306} This formula is found in all the šōpētîm accounts except three (Ehud, Shagmar, and Gideon). Since this is the most pervasive formulaic element in Judges, and it is used in Judg 4:4 in reference to Deborah, it seems her status among the šōpētîm should go unquestioned. However, a few deviations with Deborah’s formula have caused authors to question this evidence. Most noticeably, Deborah’s account is missing the third part of the formula (the number of years), and it appears

\textsuperscript{303} Pressler, \textit{Joshua, Judges, and Ruth}, 144.

\textsuperscript{304} Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,”

\textsuperscript{305} As O’Connell states, “the formulaic regularity of this motif is so apparent that almost all scholars acknowledge this as one of the pervasive motifs of Judges’ framework” (\textit{Rhetoric of the Book of Judges}, 49).

\textsuperscript{306} O’Connell, \textit{Rhetoric of the Book of Judges}, 49.
before military deliverance is achieved. However, these deviations also occur in the model šōpēt account (Othniel). Like Deborah’s account, the Othniel account is missing the number of years, and the narrator describes him with the judging formula before he engages in battle. Since these deviations occur in the model account and the first occurrence after the model (Deborah), it is reasonable to conclude they are acceptable deviations rather than problematic deviations indicating Deborah’s account is somehow different.\(^\text{307}\) Furthermore, considering the formula is entirely absent from the Ehud, Shagmar, and Gideon accounts and they are still considered šōpētîm, it would be inconsistent to disqualify Deborah since her version deviates in the same ways as the model account.

Another reason scholars question the evidential nature of the formula with Deborah is the form of the verb šāpat and what appears to be a further definition of the type of judging in vs. 5. In Judg 4:4, the verb is a Qal Active Participle rather than a Qal Imperfect. Gorospe asserts the nature of the participles used for “judging” in vs. 4 and “presiding” in vs. 5 indicate repeated and continuous actions.\(^\text{308}\) However, as noted previously, most šōpētîm are described as “judging” over a long period of time, meaning they all engaged in continuous and repeated “judging” even though the participle is not used in their formulas. Furthermore, since most are described as judging after the military battles, during a time of peace, the nature of their judging must have expanded beyond

\(^{307}\) This detail causes significant consternation for those interpreting Deborah’s account, but it seems to go entirely unnoticed in the Othniel account. With Othniel, we see the following sequence: (1) Israelites do evil in the eyes of YHWH, (2) YHWH sells them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim, (3) the Israelites are oppressed for eight years, (4) the sons of Israel cry out to YHWH, (5) YHWH raises up Othniel as the deliverer, (6) YHWH empowers him, (7) he judges Israel, (8) he goes to battle, (9) YHWH delivers Cushan-Rishathaim into Othniel’s hand, (10) the land has peace, (11) and Othniel dies.

\(^{308}\) Gorospe, *Judges*, 60.
decision-making related to military battles to encompass other parts of life in the community. Despite the usage of Deborah’s formula before a battle instead of after, it is reasonable to assume this continual aspect of judging would be the same. This relates closely to the further definition of Deborah’s judging activity in vs. 5.

In vs. 5, Deborah’s judging is described in what appears to be judicial terms. Based on this description, most scholars agree šāpaṭ in Deborah’s accounts means something different than it does in every other occurrence in Judges, with most claiming it is used in a judicial or legal sense. According to Assis, the exposition presents Deborah as a šōpēt, but a šōpēt of a different kind than all the other šōpēṭîm. Like many others, he notes Deborah is the only judicial judge in the book, and he concludes the verb šāpaṭ in vs. 4 carries the meaning “to judge” rather than “to rule” as in most other instances in Judges. He claims the verb was likely used to link her to the rest of the šōpēṭîm while also accentuating her unique quality as a judicial judge rather than a savior-judge. Wong summarizes this commonly held position perfectly:

As for the explicit mention of Deborah’s ‘judging’ Israel in 4:4, while on the surface, this seems indistinguishable from summary statements found with

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309 “She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went up to her for judgment” (Judg 4:5, NASB).

310 Butler, Judges, xxvii. Even among those who classify Deborah as one of the šōpēṭîm in Judges, a consensus exists that the verb šāpaṭ in vs. 4 use used much differently than when used in connection with the other šōpēṭîm to refer to judicial activity. See also Gorospe, Judges, 60; Matthews, Judges, 54; Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 155. Block is the notable exception to this, since he believes her judging was in a prophetic sense rather than a judicial sense, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

311 Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 112.

312 Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 112. See also Butler who asserts, “Certainly, the text in vv4 and 5 means to underline strongly her role as a judge, but as a case-hearing judge, not as a deliverance-bringing judge” (Judges, 93).

313 Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 112–113. Ultimately, he concludes, “the presentation of Deborah as a judge” in the exposition of the story is meant to “present her as a publicly recognized institution rather than a charismatic character” (Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 119).
Othniel (3:10), Tola (10:2), Jair (10:3), Jephthah (12:7), Ibzan (12:8,9), Elon (12:11), Abdon (12:13,14), and Samson (15:20, 16:31), it should be noted that it is only with Deborah that the precise nature of her judging is specified. According to 4:4–5, she held court to decide the people’s disputes. Thus, of all the human characters that are considered judges within the book, Deborah is the only one whose judgeship is explicitly said to fulfil a judicial function. In this respect, the role of Deborah as ‘judge’ is actually similar to the role of Moses in Exod. 18:13–16 and to the role of Israel’s appointed judges mentioned in Exod. 18:21–26; Deut. 1:16–17; 16:18–20; 17:8–13; 19:16–21; 25:1–3. A case can therefore be made that the kind of judgeship exercised by Deborah is actually fundamentally distinct from and much more narrowly defined than the kind of judgeship exercised by the other military/deliverer judges mentioned in Judges.”

Wong, like most who hold this position, considers the content of vs. 5 as evidence of Deborah’s different type of judging, claiming it limits the definition for how she was judging Israel. Both Wong and Amit believe the narrator was aware of the dual meaning of the verb šāpaṭ, and purposefully played on this. Amit, for example, claims the narrator knew readers would assume Deborah is judging in the sense of a deliverer since the 2:11–19 created a strong connection between šōpēṭ and deliverer. However, she believes the narrator immediately undermines this assumption by stressing “Deborah’s judgeship as dealing with personal disputes and not as leading a military force.” The consensus among scholars, therefore, seems to be Deborah is a šōpēṭ, but not the kind of šōpēṭ for which the books derives its title.

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314 Wong, Compositional Strategy, 243–244.

315 Wong, Compositional Strategy, 245.

316 Of the narrator, Wong claims, “he had left at least two clues that would enable the discerning reader to figure out what he was doing. The first is the clear description of Deborah’s role as judge in 4:5. By specifying her role to be judicial, the author/redactor seems to be making sure that the reader will be aware that she is a different kind of judge from the others described within the book” (Compositional Strategy, 245).


However, all these interpretations make a couple common mistakes. First, they assume the narrator only needed to describe Deborah’s judging because it is different than the judging of the other šōpēṭîm. Block, however, notes that the narrator often deviates slightly in šōpēṭîm accounts to provide further exposition of certain formulaic elements. With this in mind, vs. 5 can easily be viewed as further exposition of the formulaic element in a way that furthers this particular story. This is especially true if Knight is correct about vs. 5 not being background information but the beginning of the main story as will be discussed below. 319

Second, such interpretations assume a dichotomy between šāpaṭ as “delivering” and šāpaṭ as “adjudicating,” asserting the true šōpēṭîm (foreshadowed in Judges 2) only operate in the capacity of “delivering” and not in the capacity of adjudicating. Thus, they assume an adjudicating judge cannot be seen as “ruling” or “leading,” and they blatantly ignore the connection throughout the HB between the ruler/king and a wise judge. Stek seems to make this connection when he describes Deborah’s holding court and the people coming to her for judgement as within the bounds of her role as šōpēṭ because this identifies her “as a source of justice where the wronged in Israel can secure redress and the oppressed relief.” 320 Therefore, he sees no issue with Deborah exercising the role of a judicial judge and still being considered one of the šōpēṭîm. 321 Gorospe likewise claims

319 This argument will be discussed in further detail in the section “Additional Complications for Deborah’s Role as šōpēṭ.”


321 Stek, “The Bee and the Mountain Goat,” 63. Furthermore, he claims her summoning of Barak falls under her dual authority as prophet and judge. However, he consistently refers to Barak as the reluctant deliverer, so it would seem he either splits the role of šōpēṭ into judge and deliverer, viewing them
that Deborah’s judging links her to the other šōpēṭîm even though her judging pertains to “presiding over the affairs of Israel” much like a contemporary judge.\(^{322}\) When the verb šāpaṭ is allowed to communicate the broader action of leading in a decision-making capacity, the false dichotomy between the ruler/deliverer šōpēt and the judicial šōpēt is eliminated because both senses fall within the parameters of this broader definition. In addition, one does not need to make value judgments regarding whether a judicial šōpēt like Deborah qualifies to be called one of the šōpēṭîm. Therefore, Deborah’s leadership as a šōpēt can easily include judicial functions without disqualifying her from being a šōpēt in the same way as the šōpēṭîm who serve in military roles.\(^{323}\)

The explanations provided above for the deviations of the formula in relation to Deborah all find further support by examining the two šōpēṭîm narratives outside of Judges that use the full formulaic element “and he judged Israel X years.” This formulaic element is applied to two men after Samson and before the institution of Saul as king: Eli and Samuel. Just like Deborah (and Othniel), neither Eli or Samuel accomplish military victories before this formula occurs. With Eli, the narrator ends his account with the typical Judges formula after his death: “and he judged Israel forty years.” All three parts as identified by O’Connell are present, but absent from Eli’s life is any sense of deliverance. This supports the assertion that šāpaṭ applies to all leaders, even those who do not engage in military battles. This conclusion is reinforced with Samuel whose story

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\(^{322}\) Gorospe, Judges, 60.

\(^{323}\) Therefore, I believe the verb šāpaṭ should still be translated with the same English word a translator chooses for every other instance throughout Judges (i.e., she was leading Israel at that time. . . and the sons of Israel went up to her for judgement).
bears striking parallels to Deborah. First, his reputation as a prophet is firmly established among the people (1 Sam 3:30) just like Deborah. Despite the presence of a prophet among the people, the enemies of Israel oppress the people because they continue to disobey YHWH (1 Sam 4). Their enemies are described in detail as Samuel recedes from the narrative for three chapters. Eventually, the Israelites repent, put away their false gods, then Samuel calls the people to assemble and says he will intercede on their behalf (1 Sam 7:5), which could compare to the people coming to Deborah for judgement. After this intercession, the narrator states, “And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah” (1 Sam 7:6). As with Deborah, the formula “and he judged” does not contain a number of years, and it is used of Samuel right before he initiates (but does not participate in) a military battle on behalf of YHWH and then memorializes YHWH’s victory afterward (1 Sam 7:14). Then, the land has peace (albeit not the whole land in this case), but that peace is not specifically attributed to anyone, as with Deborah in Judges 5. Following this, the narrator again describes Samuel with the formula “and he judged.” This time, however, a number of years is given (Samuel’s entire life), and the action of judging receives a longer description that takes on a judicial sense—much like with Deborah in Judg 4:4–5. This judging entails traveling and establishing a primary place of judgement for people to come directly to Samuel.

As seen with Othniel, Samuel, and Eli, the verb šāpaṭ when used in this formulaic element can refer to more than military deliverance (notably judging in a judicial sense)

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324 The resemblances to Deborah continue in how the battle with the Philistines unfolds. The Philistines hear of the Israelites assembling and come to attack them, so Samuel encourages the people to cry out for YHWH to deliver them. Samuel then cries out to YHWH himself on their behalf. As Samuel is offering a sacrifice to the Lord, the Philistines attack and YHWH uses nature to defeat them. The Israelites then pursue and kill the remainder of the Philistine army.
and still comfortably encompass the behavior of one of the šōpēṭîm referenced in Judges 2. Furthermore, as seen with most of the šōpēṭîm, šāpat usually refers to a continuous activity over a span of years rather than just a one-time action, meaning the continuous nature of the verb in relation to Deborah is not unusual. If anything, the longer description of Deborah’s activities in Judg 4:4–5 could provide a glimpse into what a šōpēt might have done after the people were delivered from foreign oppression as further evidenced by the description of Samuel’s judging. Therefore, it is likely the verb šāpat in Judg 4:4 is used as part of the formulaic element, and that it connotes leadership related to decision-making, where the leader is not dynastic but chosen by the people for specific qualities. In this case, the quality could be wise judgment in the judicial sense, which is further elaborated in vs. 5 as either background information or the inciting action for the narrative. Or, this quality could be her prophetic role, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 3. Regardless of the quality that inspired the people’s respect, the text clearly portrays her as respected by her community and operating in a continuous and established leadership role connected to decision-making, which qualifies her as one of the šōpēṭîm.

Death and Burial

Another formula common to most the šōpēṭîm accounts is the death formula. O’Connell divides this into two separate formulas with the first one being “and … died” and the second one being “was buried … at.” The first one is generally comprised of “(a) the verb מוות or היה in combination with a derivative of מוות and (b) the personal name of a judge (sometimes with epithet).” This formula occurs with Othniel, Ehud, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson, meaning it is only absent from the Shagmar

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325 O’Connell, Rhetoric of the Book of Judges, 52.
and Deborah accounts. However, the formulaic pattern differs significantly with the Ehud account. With Ehud, the reference to his death occurs after the Shagmar account and in the midst of the Deborah account, so it is separated significantly from Ehud’s account and should probably be excluded from the formula based on the significance of the deviation from the pattern. Excluding Ehud removes the necessity of dividing the formula into two parts since the supposed second part occurs alongside the first part in every instance except for Othniel and the potential Ehud occurrence. Given the Othniel account is the model pattern, it makes sense to include the death element since it will be picked up in later accounts, but it also makes sense for the narrator to deviate and not include the place of burial since it comes to represent a stumbling block for the Israelites.

Starting with Gideon, who sets up an ephod and a family dynasty, the people seem to give the šōperfîm too much credit for their deliverance and shift the focus from YHWH. As a result, the commemoration of their deaths and the burial sites takes up prominence. O’Connell concludes the pattern with the death formula in the second half of the cycles “presents an ever-darkening mood.” Therefore, it seems likely the narrator excluded the place of burial for Othniel since it represents a problem to be dealt with and not an ideal, but he included his death since he is setting up a bank of formulaic elements to draw from later. With this understanding of the death formula, it becomes evident its absence in the Deborah account does not disqualify her from being one of the šōperfîm. Rather, it represents her place among the šōperfîm at the beginning of the downward spiral before the people began attributing too much honor to the šōpēt instead of to YHWH. This conclusion is supported throughout Judges 4–5 as the narrator portrays YHWH as

the primary warrior and deliverer who receives the praise for the deliverance of the people.

Brings Peace for the Land

The formulaic refrain that the land has rest or peace marks the end of the first four primary šōpētim accounts, but it disappears as the book progresses and the šōpētim become less effective.\(^{327}\) As Pressler notes, all the primary šōpētim accounts except for Jephthah and Samson result in peace for the land, which reveals deficiencies of Jephthah and Samson’s leadership.\(^{328}\) As with the previous element though, this formula does more to establish the quality of the šōpēt than their identity. Its inclusion at the end of the Deborah account (Judg 5:31), therefore, only solidifies that the narrator viewed this šōpēt as successful, but it does not help identify Deborah or Barak as the šōpēt.

**Additional Complications for Deborah as One of the šōpētim**\(^{329}\)

Up to this point, I have limited my discussion of Deborah as one of the šōpētim to the presence and/or the absence of key formulaic elements in šōpētim accounts, including common characteristics and behaviors. However, a few other complications arise in the narrative that could detract from or solidify Deborah’s place among the šōpētim.


\(^{328}\) Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 144–145.

\(^{329}\) An astute reader will notice the absence of Deborah’s gender among the list of potential complications for her being one of the šōpētim. Given the narrative gives no indication this is the case, and nothing negative is said about Deborah being a woman, this topic will not be addressed here. Instead, I will consider it a complication added by those unable to accept the possibility of a woman exercising such a position and not a complication inherent in the narrative. See Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 108–110 for an excellent refutation of the centrality and emphasis of Deborah’s gender to the narrative.

In addition, I do not consider the complication of Barak, not Deborah, being listed among the šōpētim in Heb 11:32 because this falls outside the parameters of the narrative. The aim of this study is only to consider how the narrator intended to portray Deborah in the text of Judges 4–5, not how others came to interpret her.
Diminishing Leadership Qualities and Outcomes

While not a formulaic element, a widely recognized theme among the šōpēṭîm accounts is how each šōpēt is worse than the prior šōpēṭîm. According to Schneider, the first and last judges (Othniel and Samson) are poles that “highlight the steadily decreasing worth of the judges over time, and at the same time, the downward spiral of all of Israel.” Many notice the downward trend intensifies after Deborah. Matthews, for example, says the trend begins after Othniel but does not rapidly decline until after (and possibly because of) Gideon. Block likewise emphasizes the rapid decline of the šōpēṭîm after Deborah, showing how “Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson were themselves all parts of the problem.” However, the consensus remains that the downward trend begins before Deborah. This is not problematic for those who regard Deborah’s gender as evidence of the depravity of the Israelites during her time or view her as prideful. However, most current scholars recognize the qualitative difference between Deborah and the rest of the šōpēṭîm. Butler, for example, observes the narrative does not do anything to implicitly or explicitly criticize Deborah. Therefore, this viewpoint of the downward trend seems to exclude Deborah due to her exemplary character, especially when Barak—the other potential option for the šōpēt in Judges 4–5—perfectly fits into the downward spiral.

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330 Schneider, Judges, xiv.
331 Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 9.
332 Block, Judges, 194.
333 Butler, Judges, 93.
334 Block is most prominent scholar representing this approach. One of Block’s twelve reasons for disqualifying Deborah as one of the šōpēṭîm is the qualitative difference between her and the rest of the
Schnieder, Block, and Wong all draw attention to Barak fitting this downward spiral trend better than Deborah. Schneider claims, “all of the judges” except Othniel adopt at least some non-Israelite practices, and then she implies Barak was fighting for honor as the non-Israelites do and not fighting because of the command of YHWH. Block draws out how Barak fits the pattern by describing Block’s response to Deborah as a protested call account. Wong comes to similar conclusions as Block when he outlines the lack of faith seen in Barak’s response, which is contrasted with the outstanding faith of Ehud in the previous account. Wong remarks, “in spite of YHWH’s explicit promise, which incidentally, was absent in the Ehud narrative, Barak acted with hesitation.” This lack of faith intensifies with Gideon and each subsequent šōpēt. If the downward trend begins after Othniel, Block, Schneider, and Wong’s conclusions seems reasonable. Since there is nothing unsatisfactory about Deborah—nothing to indicate she adopted Canaanite practices or failed in her leadership—then we must look elsewhere for the šōpēt, and Barak is the obvious conclusion.

However, if Ehud is not portrayed negatively, then it is possible the downward spiral begins after Deborah, meaning the absence of character flaws is not an issue. The

šōpētîm. He questions how she could be viewed as one of the šōpētîm if she does not follow the pattern of cyclical decline demonstrated by the rest of the šōpētîm.

335 Schneider, Judges, xiv, 70.
336 Block, Judges, 191–201.
337 Wong, Compositional Strategy, 159.
338 Wong, Compositional Strategy, 159. According to Wong’s assessment, Barak’s lack of faith manifests in asking for a prophetic presence to guarantee his victory; Gideon’s lack of faith results in constant demands for miraculous signs that confirm the promises already made by YHWH; Jephthah’s lack of faith reveals itself in his rash vow that he makes to guarantee victory even after YHWH has already promised him victory; and Samson’s lack of faith further escalates because YHWH has already delivered him, and then Samson tries to manipulate YHWH in complaining about dying of thirst (Compositional Strategy, 158–165)
evidence for Ehud fitting the downward trend is surprisingly scant. Block, for example, attempts to establish the decline beginning with Ehud, but his evidence is not convincing. Of Ehud, he can only say his “personality is not criticized overtly, but his tactics, which look for all the world like typical Canaanite behavior, leave the reader wondering whether he is to be viewed as a hero or as a villain.”\(^{339}\) Such an assessment seems very dependent, however, on modern ethical principles of warfare and fails to pinpoint where the narrative itself makes such a claim. In fact, Block notes that “the narrator appears not to be concerned at all about the morality of the affair.”\(^{340}\) He also translates \(\text{pəsilîm}\) as idols, claiming Ehud walks past idols without destroying them (Judg 3:26). This could be an indication that he failed to eliminate idolatry even though he provided military deliverance.\(^{341}\) However, Wong and many other convincingly argue what Block calls “idols” are actually boundary stones.\(^{342}\) O’Connell views Ehud negatively, but he readily admits this is not based on textual evidence in the Ehud account. Rather, the “growing concern of the Judges compiler/redactor with the leadership qualities of Israel’s deliverers” prompts him to retrospectively “inquire whether Ehud’s characterisation as a self-promoting saviour is an intended nuance.”\(^{343}\) However, it is not universally accepted that Ehud begins the deterioration cycle in Judges.

\(^{339}\) Block, \textit{Judges}, 199.

\(^{340}\) Block, \textit{Judges}, 171.

\(^{341}\) As noted previously, Ehud is not referred to with the formulaic element “and he judged Israel for X years,” which could provide further evidence for the deficiency of his leadership.

\(^{342}\) Wong, \textit{Compositional Strategy}, n. 23.

Wong believes Barak is the šōpēt and sees the deterioration begin with him, and Knight believes the deterioration begins after Deborah. Wong notices deterioration throughout Judges in five key areas, none of which begin with Ehud:

1. “the judges’ decreasing faith in YHWH,” which begins with Barak (158);
2. “the increasing prominence of the judges’ self-interest as motivation behind their actions,” which begins with Gideon (165);
3. “decreasing participation of the tribes in successive military campaigns,” beginning with Barak (Wong specifically mentions all the tribes participating in the Ehud account) (176);
4. “the judges’ increasing harshness in dealing with internal dissent,” beginning with Barak (178);
5. and “YHWH’s increasing frustration with His people as the cyclical pattern breaks down,” which begins with Gideon.344

Knight believes the first three šōpētîm accounts maintain a “celebratory tone,” and she highlights the response of the Israelites. She claims, “Especially given the song’s contextual awareness and covenantal focus, Judges 5 helps to define the first three cycles as, primarily, stories of YHWH’s faithful deliverance of an unfaithful nation.”345 Knight, thus, does not see the initial three cycles primarily as concerned with the deterioration of the nation but with how people participate with and respond to YHWH’s deliverance. In Knight’s words, “Deborah and Barak’s refrain ends the third narrative cycle with hope and finality for the nation—Israel has witnessed YHWH’s most decisive victory yet, a prophet has explicitly interpreted for the Israelites its theological significance, and God’s people have received a challenge for renewed covenant faithfulness.”346 Therefore, she sees Gideon as the “transitional figure exemplifying Israel’s sharp descent into unfaithfulness” because of his “bold-faced incredulity and unapologetic fear when faced

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345 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” vi, 162.

346 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 162.
with the challenge to deliver God’s people and the assurance of YHWH’s empowerment.”347 His actions, according to Knight, are all the more deplorable given YHWH’s repeated salvation of the Israelites in the first three cycles.348

Even if one decides Ehud begins the deterioration, one can still see deterioration in Deborah’s account when she is the šōpēt without diminishing her exemplary character. While Deborah may not do anything explicitly wrong, even with the direct words of YHWH as his prophet, she is initially unable to convince the Israelites (as represented by Barak) to engage in battle. Ultimately, she must agree to the common ANE practice of the prophet accompanying the military to battle (this practice will be discussed in chapter 3). This situation deteriorates further in the Gideon account when it is the šōpēt himself who lacks faith in the word of YHWH when given through an angel. Another possibility is that Deborah’s leadership results in an upward trend before the steep incline with Gideon. Knight argues for the sharp decline in quality after Deborah by viewing the song in Judges 5 as a reminder of YHWH’s might and faithfulness and call to covenant obedience that ultimately goes unheeded as seen when the Gideon account picks up.349 Another possibility is that the Israelite’s deterioration (as represented by Barak) begins in Deborah’s account, and the šōpētim deterioration follows subsequently with Gideon.

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347 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 182.
348 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 182.
349 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 161–162.
Multiple Roles Including Prophet

Deborah is the only šōpēt who is portrayed as serving in another official capacity: prophet.\textsuperscript{350} While this makes Deborah unique among the šōpētîm in Judges, she is not the only šōpēt in the HB who also serves as a prophet. Both Moses and Samuel seem to operate in similar multi-faceted roles as Deborah. Gorospe notes that Samuel and Moses fulfilled the roles of prophet and judge as well as “the task of deliverer.”\textsuperscript{351} Thus, she concludes, “In the chaotic times of transition from the oppression of Egypt to life in Canaan, and from the period of the judges to the monarchy, it seems that an individual could play complex and multifarious roles which, during more stable times, were distributed among several people.”\textsuperscript{352} Among those who accept šōpētîm refers to a broad range of leadership roles related to decision-making, Deborah’s multifaceted role presents no challenges. Those who retain a strict deliverance-based view of the šōpētîm, however, regard this dual role as problematic. For example, Block and Assis argues Deborah only functions in the role of prophet, and all the actions that could be attributed to her being a šōpēt are part of her prophetic role.\textsuperscript{353} I will discuss this view in detail in chapter 3. Since I have already established the higher probably of the broad definition šōpētîm, this complication proves inconsequential.

\textsuperscript{350} Schneider, Judges, 81.

\textsuperscript{351} Gorospe, Judges, 61.

\textsuperscript{352} Gorospe, Judges, 61.

Established Leadership Position

Many scholars draw attention to how Deborah is unique because the narrator picks up with her operating in an already established and ongoing position of leadership while the rest of the šōpētim accounts depict the šōpēt ascending to their place of leadership as a šōpēt. As Knight points out, Deborah’s established position and authority are part of the background information the narrator provides. She is already functioning in the capacity of šōpēt before the story picks up. Assis likewise argues the depiction of the people coming to her for judgment at a “well-established place of judgement” emphasizes both the permanency of her office and “her well-established status as a judiciary.”

One of the reasons some see this as problematic is because Deborah’s only actions related to “judging” occur in what appears to be the background information before the main story begins. If this is true, Deborah’s judging is not an integral part of this narrative account.

However, this is not as much a complication as it first appears. While the initial use of the verb šāpat in vs. 4 is part of the background information, the noun form mišpat in vs. 5 is directly related to the current events in the narrative. Knight explains, contrary to the way most popular Bible translations translate Judg 4:5, the wayyiqtol precedes the people going to Deborah for mišpat, which indicates the people going is the “first action… after that exposition.” The statement that Deborah judged in 4b thus serves to

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354 Pressler, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, 155; Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 64. It is based on this already established authority that Matthews believes Deborah was able to summon and command Barak, but he goes on to define that authority as not being legal but prophetic. He concludes, “it is quite likely that the people as well as military leaders like Barak chose to ‘come up’ to consult her as a prophetic voice of God” (Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 65).

355 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 112.

356 Assis, “Man, Woman and God,” 119.

357 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 112. Similarly, Tikva Frymer-Kensky further asserts the switch to the imperfect verb for ‘ālā in vs. 5 indicates a switch from the background information in vs. 1–
explain why the people went to Deborah for mišpaṭ. In other words, it establishes her position of authority as recognized by the people. If this is correct, then Deborah is depicted in the narrative (and not just in the exposition) as a šōpēt with a direct line of communication to YHWH, making her a sought after guide for assistance with decision-making.

The other reason this unique aspect of Deborah is considered problematic is because no other šōpētim appear to have established positions before they militarily deliver the people. Even Schneider—who sees Deborah as leading the military campaign later—still feels Deborah is unique her in seemingly attaining this title before engaging in battle since all the other šōpētim gain that office after a military victory. However, as already discussed above, Eli and Samuel are both in established leadership positions before being identified with the formulaic “and he judged Israel” element: Eli as a priest and Samuel as a prophet. While Samuel is depicted gaining this role, Eli is already serving in the established leadership position of priest prior to the start of the main narrative and the narrator feels no need to provide background on him attaining this office. Within Judges, one other šōpēt is already recognized as something of a leader before being identified as a šōpēt. Jephath’s šōpēt account opens on him already being an established warrior, and it is this characteristic as recognized by the people that prompts them to seek him out to lead them. Therefore, Deborah’s established position hardly serves as a barrier to her being considered among the šōpētim.

5a to the current action (“Warriors by Weapon and by Word: Deborah and Jael” in Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories, ed. Tivka Frymer-Kensky [New York, NY: Schocken, 2002], 47.)
Absence and Flat-Characterization

Many draw attention to Deborah’s extremely flat characterization in comparison to the other primary šōpētim and how she disappears for large portions of the narrative. Wong, for example, claims Deborah is portrayed as agent of YHWH rather than a “full fledged character,” and he sees her only function as communicating YHWH’s will.358 According to Knight, her character is “almost entirely” representational since “of the eleven verbal forms used to describe Deborah’s actions in the narrative after her introduction, four are related to speaking to Barak for YHWH and seven are related to accompanying Barak (for the purpose of speaking on YHWH’s behalf).”359 Assis claims this “relatively flat characterization” prevents her character from distracting from YHWH’s agency because her personality is not emphasized; instead, she is present only as the representative of YHWH.360 The limited development of Deborah’s character has led many commentators to classify her as a flat character since she functions as a “stereotypical prophetic spokesperson” for the part of the story she is actively involved in.

In addition, to being a flat character, Deborah also disappears from large portions of the narrative, not even appearing in all the story’s major episodes.361 After Deborah gives Barak the correct time to begin the battle in vs. 14, she remains absent for the rest of the chapter, including the advance of Barak and the Israelite army, the routing of the enemy by YHWH, the flight of Sisera, the pursuit of Barak, the defeat of Sisera by Jael,

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358 Knight, Judges, 114.

359 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 113.

360 Assis, “Choice to Serve God,” 89.

361 Bulter, Judges, 91.
the discovery of Sisera’s death by Barak, and the eventual defeat of King Jabin by the Israelites. It is only after the defeat of King Jabin that Deborah reappears and sings with Barak (5:1). After her and Barak’s song, there is no more mention of Deborah as the land’s peace goes unattributed to Deborah, Barak, or Jael (5:31). Block draws specific attention to Deborah’s absence with the peace for land formulaic element, asserting the land’s peace is not exclusively attributed to Deborah (or Barak) but rather to YHWH and the Israelites. However, it is not entirely accurate to say Deborah’s is not present for the important points in the story. In both the narrative and the poem, Deborah represents turning points—the start of the people’s deliverance. In the story, she is introduced as soon as the people cry out to YHWH, and her action in calling and commissioning Barak lead to the deliverance of the people by Jael. In the poem, she is introduced when the situation seems hopeless, and she credits herself with beginning the restoration of the land even though she does not reference her role in a militaristic way but in a prophetic way (i.e., she arose as a mother in Israel, 5:7). Because of this, we understand Deborah participates in the deliverance of the people before Barak or Jael step on the scene, and her actions prompt the actions of both Barak and Jael. Therefore, her absence in certain places hardly diminishes her role as šōpēt. In addition, Deborah’s absence from large portions of the narrative and her representational role as evidenced in her flat characterization do not automatically disqualify Deborah from being a šōpētim.

Many recognize the wider book and the individual šōpētim accounts were crafted to communicate specific theological points. With this account, the might and strength of YHWH is being emphasized, and the narrator is conveying YHWH as the deliverer in contrast to a single human figure. Therefore, the downplaying of the šōpēt could serve as
a natural rhetorical method to achieve this result. Even the introduction of two other characters to share in the actions of deliverance can be seen to as serving this purpose. Furthermore, as Knight argues, this cycle could provide a slight uptick before the drastic downward spiral. The leadership of Deborah and Barak together (as Deborah helps Barak develop faith and obedience to YHWH) results in the Israelites modifying their behavior. Therefore, the peace is correctly not linked to the obedience of the šōpēt but to the faithfulness of the people who responded appropriately to the word of YHWH as given through Deborah. Likewise, Deborah’s role as šōpēt takes a necessary backseat so the action and power of YHWH can shine through.

Conclusion

This chapter has established šōpētîm as leaders recognized and chosen by YHWH or the people for their charisma, military acumen, or other inherent quality necessary for leadership at their given time. While Judges utilizes common formulaic elements with šōpētîm as well as common characteristics and behaviors, significant variations exist in the formulas, characteristics, and behaviors depending on the account’s placement and purpose. Consequently, an element’s absence does not automatically disqualify a character from being among the šōpētîm. So while some šōpētîm are raised up and empowered by YHWH, neither characteristic is essential. Furthermore, šōpētîm can be described with the verb šāpat before, after, and without fighting for Israel’s deliverance.

Based only on the above definition of šōpētîm and the common formulaic elements, characteristics, and behaviors, Deborah can easily be classified among the

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362 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 162.
The most enigmatic question related to Deborah remains the nature of her judging. However, even if one concludes her judging was judicial in nature (or prophetic as will be discussed in chapter 3), Deborah is still portrayed as a leader recognized by the people who aids them in decision making. Furthermore, based on her words and actions, Barak and the Israelites assemble, obey the commands of YHWH, and completely defeat their oppressor all while giving praise to YHWH alone. However, one major complication exists for which answers are not entirely satisfactory: Barak’s presence.

If either Barak or Deborah were absent from the narrative, the other would automatically be viewed as the account’s šōpēt. Barak being a man and being the warrior instead of Deborah surprisingly are not the primary complications as many claim. Rather, Block and Wong’s evidence for Barak fitting the protested call pattern and the deterioration cycle remains hard to overlook. While the presence of the “and he/she judged” formulaic element weights the evidence in favor of Deborah, the initial promise to hand the enemy leader into Barak’s hand tips the balance slightly back toward Barak. The greater importance of the “and he/she judged” formula, however, keeps the scales tipped toward Deborah if only slightly. Perhaps, the narrator assiduously crafted the narrative and the poem to make it impossible to choose one over the other.

The tendency with modern biblical interpretation to search for the single correct interpretation of a biblical text drives most scholars to choose either Deborah or Barak. However, the tendency of Hebrew narrative to live in ambiguity and double meanings leaves open the possibility that both can be the šōpēt, and the narrator could be using each of them to serve different theological points within the broader book of Judges and even the historical books. In addition, if the account stresses attributing praise for
deliverance to YHWH alone, the narrator may have employed two šōpēṭîm to prevent the possibility of the victory being attributed to a šōpēt instead of to YHWH. Whether this narrative contains dual šōpēṭîm or not, sufficient evidence exists to classify Deborah as one of the šōpēṭîm even if Barak stands alongside her as another šōpēt.
CHAPTER 3
DEBORAH THE PROPHET

Introduction
While not as frequently as her role as šōpēt, Deborah’s role as a prophet has been historically questioned by interpreters. Some doubt the historical reliability of a female prophet in ancient Israel, others claim the text contains no evidence she functioned as a prophet, and many assert she only receives this title because of the song she utters in Judges 5, which connects her to Miriam and her song after the Exodus. Even those who accept Deborah’s prophetic role often misunderstand or minimize it as a result of overemphasizing her gender. Therefore, in this chapter, I aim to once again set aside discussions of gender and examine the text itself for clues to her prophetic activity. First, I examine common questions regarding her prophet title. Then, I explore the many similarities between Deborah and ANE prophets to demonstrate how the narrator consistently depicts her as a typical ANE prophet. As a result, I show how Deborah’s prophetic role, rather than being a late textual addition, serves as a key interpretive lens that solves many of the interpretive questions scholars continue to wrestle with in Judges 4–5 (as detailed in chapter 1).

Questions Regarding Deborah’s Prophetic Title
While interpreters have questioned Deborah’s status as a prophet for a variety of reasons, the text itself seems to answer the question clearly by labeling her a nēviʾā (prophetess) in v. 4. Martti Nissinen calls nēviʾ/nēviʾā the “master term” in the HB for prophets,
appearing 325 times in reference to over fifty different people.\textsuperscript{363} In the HB, this is a technical term for prophets that refers to those who had been called by a divine agent and who practiced mostly non-technical forms of divination (as opposed to technical forms requiring training, such as extispicy).\textsuperscript{364} Nissinen claims \textit{nēvî’îm} are most commonly depicted as delivering divine oracles, and he includes Moses’ mediation of the Torah within this category.\textsuperscript{365} Furthermore, he regards the “basic occupation” of \textit{nēvî’îm} as transmitting “the word of God to the person or the people to whom it is addressed.”\textsuperscript{366} \textit{Nēvî’îm} most commonly addressed their prophetic oracles to kings, but they could direct them to ordinary individuals or even to entire communities.\textsuperscript{367} In Judg 4:4, the narrator bestows this technical title upon Deborah, so it would seem non-controversial to classify her as a prophet. However, this is often not the case.

Despite the use of \textit{nēvî’ā} in v. 4, many scholars claim Deborah was not actually a prophet. Instead, they argue the term represents a later textual emendation without supporting evidence in the text itself. For example, Robert R. Wilson states, “it is not completely clear why she is assigned this title,” and then he explains that “commentators usually consider the title to be a Deuteronomic editorial addition.”\textsuperscript{368} Some interpreters


\textsuperscript{364} Nissinen, \textit{Ancient Prophecy}, 27.

\textsuperscript{365} Nissinen, \textit{Ancient Prophecy}, 27.

\textsuperscript{366} Nissinen, \textit{Ancient Prophecy}, 28.

\textsuperscript{367} Nissinen, \textit{Ancient Prophecy}, 28.

\textsuperscript{368} Wilson, \textit{Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel}, 166. While he further explains that some believe two traditions existed—one regarding Deborah as a prophet and the other regarding her as a judge—he does not explain why there is a necessity for two traditions when other texts in the HB show clear overlap between the position of a prophet and other prominent positions (e.g., Samuel as both prophet
state Deborah was only considered a prophet because of the connection to Miriam and their equivalent songs of victory. Another common argument is that Deborah only fits later ideas of what was classified as a prophet and not ideas contemporaneous with Deborah’s activity. Interestingly, still others assert she does not fit the role of a prophet because she fails to resemble the stereotypical prophets as seen in Isaiah–Malachi.

Due to the lack of consensus in how Deborah relates to prophets in the HB, I primarily compare Deborah to ANE prophets who would have been roughly contemporary to her to show she fits the mold of prophets during her time, not just prophets who appear later in Israel’s history. I make this distinction because it is important to see how the narrative itself and the other characters within the narrative understand Deborah’s role. By examining ANE depictions of prophets and Deborah’s similarities with them, I demonstrate how those who reject Deborah’s prophetic role often misunderstand Deborah’s actions and role in Judges 4–5 and miss obvious explanations for many of the problematic elements in the text that I have discussed in previous chapters.

Evidence of Deborah’s Status as a Prophet

Similarities between Deborah and ANE prophets include the following: her gender (Judg 4:4); her provision of judgment for the people in crisis (Judg 6:5); her initiation of military action (Judg 4:6–7; 5:12); her mediation of divine knowledge through prophetic oracles (Judg 4:6–7, 9); the military commander’s expectations of her in battle (Judg 4:6–10, 14; 5:13–15); her act of arising (Judg 5:7, 12); the absence of technical means of
divination (Judg 4–5); and the prophetic interpretation of the battle (Judg 5). These similarities will be discussed in order of their first appearance in the text. I aim to show how the text depicts Deborah as having the characteristics and behaviors her community would have expected of a prophet, regardless of whether the title in v. 4 was a late textual emendation. That said, support from other HB texts will be included when necessary to understand how words or ideas function in the context of Judges and the HB, thereby connecting them to common ANE prophetic practices.

Gender (Judg 4:4)

Before Deborah is called a prophet (nēvîʾā), she is called a woman (ʾāšā). Many claim this combination oddly fronts her gender and seems redundant since the word for woman immediately precedes the feminine form of prophet. This fronting of her gender contributes to interpreters’ fascination with her gender, which for a long time was regarded as countercultural for the ANE. However, more recent scholars acknowledge Deborah being a female prophet would not have been viewed as uncommon or unusual in the ANE, due mainly to discoveries of more ANE texts.

While other ANE professions were restricted to men, scholars now agree that prophecy was not. Nissinen concludes that women prophets are a “continuing pattern in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean.” Evidence from Neo-Assyrian texts, according to

369 No attempt is being made to defend anything from a “historical” position. The concern is whether the text depicts Deborah as a prophet. While I employ historical evidence to ascertain what would have been expected of a prophet, I do not claim to know the original historical reality. Rather, I am concerned with how the narrator depicted her according to his understanding of what constituted a prophet, which would obviously have been shaped by his post-exilic understanding of the term. That said, I do believe the text contains both language and actions comparable to what ANE prophets practiced during the time Deborah is depicted as being active.

370 See Chapter 1 for details concerning this viewpoint.

371 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 304.
Jonathan Stökl, reveals that the “vast majority of named prophets are female.” 372 Furthermore, he catalogues a “roughly even distribution of male and female prophets with a slight majority of women.” 373 He does find evidence of a different gender balance in the Mari prophetic texts, claiming only one professional female prophet appears in contrast to many male professional prophets. 374 However, this imbalance only maintains if one adheres to Stökl’s categorization of professional prophets (āpilum/āpiltum) versus lay prophets (muḫḫūm/muḫḫūtum) because he finds numerous female lay prophets. Stökl’s distinction between these two types, however, remains highly debated among scholars. Nissinen, for example, argues there is not enough evidence to support such a distinction. Rather, he observes that both function as spokespersons of deities, and the “āpilum typically conveys divine messages in the very same manner as does the muḫḫūm.” 375 While disagreement exists regarding the balance of male to female prophets in the ANE, scholars do agree that “no differences” existed in the ANE “between men and women prophets…with regard to their prophetic function.” 376 Not only was gender superfluous for the function of prophets, but evidence suggests those who collected prophetic oracles viewed the gender of prophets as inconsequential. Out of the 62 Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts, Stökl notes that 24 show no evidence of ever including the


373 Stökl, “Female Prophets,” 56.


375 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 35.

376 Stökl, “Female Prophets,” 56.
gender of the prophet.377 This means the gender of the prophet was irrelevant when considering the veracity of the message and whether it was worthy to be documented.

Despite the strong presence of women prophets in the ANE, the picture in the HB is quite different with only five female prophets being explicitly mentioned. Some consider this proof that the balance of male to female prophets was vastly different in ancient Israel than the rest of the ANE. However, scholarly census seems to be emerging that the scarcity of female prophets in the HB is not an accurate depiction of reality in ancient Israel. H. G. M. Williamson, for example, argues that “the figure of the prophetess was not nearly so unfamiliar in monarchical Israel and Judah as our scant sources initially suggest.”378 After surveying the evidence for women prophets in ancient Israel, Williamson confidently concludes “the broadly male orientation of our present prophetic texts” is likely “a later theological construct overlaying an earlier social reality.”379 Wilda Gafney also convincingly argues that many women prophets are represented and mentioned in the HB.380 Their apparent absence, she claims, derives significantly from Hebrew’s default use of masculine plural if even one male exists in the group.381 Furthermore, when female prophets are mentioned, the text gives no indication there is anything exceptional about their gender. Of the five nēviʿā explicitly mentioned in the HB, only Deborah’s gender seems emphasized in the narrative.

377 Stökl, “Female Prophets,” 56.


381 Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 160–164.
If gender in relation to prophets was truly inconsequential in the ANE and female prophets were common in both ANE and ancient Israel, the question remains why Deborah’s gender is clearly fronted and emphasized by the narrator. While many have posited explanations for this, none seem to align with the text itself. However, a potential solution to this problem can be found in Deborah’s oracle to Barak. In Judg 4:9, Deborah tells Barak that Sisera will be delivered into the hand of an īšā. This creates narrative tension because up to that point, Deborah has been fronted as the only īšā in the narrative, making it seem that Sisera will be delivered into her hands. The narrator, thus, sets up the expectations for one event to occur only to have those expectations subverted when Jael appears. It might make sense for YHWH to deliver the enemy into his prophet’s hands, but no one would have expected Jael whose husband was aligned with the enemy. As discussed in chapter 2, however, the fronting of Deborah’s gender is likely more apparent than real, so the undermining of assumptions is probably unnecessary.

Providing Judgment for People in Crisis (Judg 6:4b–5)
The next strong similarity between Deborah and ANE prophets is often associated with her role as a judge instead of her role as a prophet.382 As discussed in chapter 2, Judges 4:4–5 describes Deborah judging in what many label a judicial sense. While it is quite possible this is the case, some argue Deborah’s judging, while different than other šōpēṭîm, is not judicial but prophetic in nature. Block is the most prominent scholar making such claims, so I will summarize his key points.

382 For example, Nissinen’s understanding of Deborah as a judge seems to eliminate her from being considered a prophet in “the technical sense” (Ancient Prophecy, 29).
Block argues her judging was not judicial because neither šoṭēr in vs. 4 or mišpat in vs. 5 require “a judicial interpretation” and nowhere else in Judges is šāpaṭ used in this sense.383 So when Judges 4:5 states the sons of Israel went up (ʾālā) to Deborah for judgement (lammišpat), Block does not view this as individual Israelites going to Deborah to solve internal disputes.384 Rather, he claims the narrator portrays the nation of Israel collectively going to Deborah. He based this on the use of the phrase “sons of Israel,” which “always functions as a collective for the entire nation” in the book of Judges.385 He also points out that her location is central for all Israel, and its proximity to Bethel “represents an alternative to the priesthood which had lost its effectiveness as mediator of divine revelation.”386 Furthermore, he claims the verb ʾālā is being used in the technical sense of the people going up to inquire of the deity.387 This situation is very similar to the one with Samuel and Israel in 1 Samuel 7. The Israelites have once again sinned against YHWH and are being oppressed by foreigners. The priesthood is corrupt, and Samuel the prophet serves as the alternative mediator between the people and YHWH. As with Deborah, before YHWH enacts military deliverance for the people, they come to Samuel as a prophet and confess their sins. At this point, the text says Samuel judged (wayyīšpōt) the sons of Israel.

If Block is correct, the people were seeking Deborah, not as a judiciary judge, but as a prophetic mediator between them an YHWH. Tikva Frymer-Kensky further asserts

383 Block, Judges, 196.
384 Block, Judges, 195–196.
385 Block, Judges, 195–196.
386 Block, Judges, 196. Many scholars refute Block’s claims regarding the priesthood.
387 Block, Judges, 196.
the switch to the imperfect verb for ‘ālā in vs. 5 indicates a switch from the background information in vs. 1–5a to the current action.\(^{388}\) This means that, on this particular day, the Israelites come to Deborah for judgment on a specific matter that requires advice from YHWH. Block claims this could be why the Massoretes vocalized lammišpāt in vs. 5 to translate as “for the judgement” (emphasis original).\(^{389}\) While an individual might go to a judicial judge for help resolving disputes among fellow citizens, an entire nation seeking guidance during a time of political crisis or war would seek out a prophet.\(^{390}\)

While the context in 1 Samuel 7 clearly defines the type of judgement, this remains more ambiguous in Judges 4. Frymer-Kensky speculates the judgement could have been against Barak who was failing to provide military deliverance from their oppressors despite being commanded by YHWH to do so. She makes this speculation since their request for judgment impels Deborah to send for Barak in vs. 6.\(^{391}\) Frymer-Kensky further supports this interpretation by showing the same thing in the poetic version of the account in chapter 5.\(^{392}\) Judg 5:6–8 describes the dire plight of the Israelites. Then, in vs. 12, the people go to the city gates and call on Deborah to “speak a song” that resulted in Barak making their oppressors captives.\(^{393}\) Another option for the

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\(^{388}\) Frymer-Kensky, “Warriors by Weapon and by Word,” 47. As noted in chapter 2, Knight makes a similar argument based on the wayyiqtol in vs. 5 as (“Like the Sun in Its Might,” 112).

\(^{389}\) Block, Judges, 197.


\(^{391}\) Frymer-Kensky seems to conclude they wanted judgment against Barak for ignoring his earlier summons.

\(^{392}\) Frymer-Kensky, “Warriors by Weapon and by Word,” 47.

\(^{393}\) Frymer-Kensky, “Warriors by Weapon and by Word,” 47. The significance of the “Arise” verb and the song will be discussed later.
particular judgement could have been judgment against their oppressors. However, given the context in Judges, what resulted in the oppression (sin against YHWH), the consistent pattern of the people repenting and calling on YHWH for deliverance, and the connection to 1 Samuel 7 mentioned above, it seems judgment against themselves represents the best option. Since the priesthood was corrupt, the nation ascended to Deborah the prophet to seek their own judgment in order to secure deliverance from their oppressors. The specific judgment they sought further connects to ANE prophetic roles because of its result in military action. Whether judgement was against Barak, as Frymer-Kensky speculates, against their oppressors, or against themselves, the judgement still necessitated the call for military action as the result. In a time of national crisis, the nation sought Deborah out for judgement that necessitated she initiate military action. This means they were calling on Deborah in her role as a prophet to help mediate their relationship with YHWH and gain deliverance from their oppressors. They were likely not calling on her as a judicial judge as many interpretations imply, but rather as a prophet in an established leadership role (šōpēt) who could mediate divine knowledge to help them make a decision.

While the location of the call for judgement at city gates in the song account might seem to undermine the prophetic association, there is evidence the city gates were associated with prophetic activity in the ANE and not just judicial activity. Nissinen

394 See below for further support based on the narrative of Samuel judging the people as a prophet in 1 Samuel 7 before YHWH provide military deliverance from their oppressors.

395 The initiative of military action will be considered in greater detail below.

396 E.g., “The Israelites would come up to her to have their disputes settled” (Judg 4:5, NET); “the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.” (Judg 4:5, NIV).
quotes from a Neo-Assyrian text dating to 611 BCE that details the payment a prophet at the city gate receives for providing divination services when the “city was in dire straits” before a battle. This text lends credence to the idea of the city gates being the domain of the prophet, a place where the people can go for prophetic guidance. Also, the context has strong similarities to Judges 4–5 because the city, like Israel, was in extremely dire circumstances before an impending battle.

Initiating Military Action (Judg 4:6–7; 5:12)

As noted above, the people’s plea to Deborah results in her summoning Barak to initiate military action against the people’s oppressors. In the Mari letters, according to Nissinen, warfare was a “recurrent topic” in “letters with prophetic content.” While many interpreters wonder at Deborah’s summoning of Barak and commanding him to engage in warfare, both actions were often associated with prophets in the ANE. Frymer-Kensky argues that Deborah summoning Barak follows an ANE custom of prophets initiating battle. She notes this initiation was called a “song of support” in Assyrian records, and Deborah’s command to “Go” falls clearly within the line of this tradition. This also connects to the poetic account when the people urge her to “speak a song” in Judges 5:12.

Many scholars indicate it was typical for prophets in the ANE to provide impetus for rulers to initiate military campaigns. For example, Nissinen notes that prophets typically encouraged or warned rulers regarding whether they should go to war or not, and kings often used positive prophetic oracles regarding wars as evidence of their divine right to


both wage and win wars. For example, Wilson notes that King Assurbanipal mounted an “aggressive attack against the Elamites” on the basis of a prophetic oracle.

In addition to ANE sources, early descriptions of prophets in the HB support the conclusion Israelites prophets participated in this tradition as well. For example, Matthews notes Deborah’s summoning of Barak bears similarities to Moses summoning Joshua in Deut 31:7 to “lead the people into the conquest of the Promised Land.” Likewise, when the Israelites fight Amalek in Exod 7, Moses commands Joshua to choose men to fight with him while Moses and other leaders stood on the nearby hill. Matthews also compares Deborah’s summoning of Barak to Samuel summoning Saul in 1 Sam 15:2–3 “to carry out the ḥērem (holy war) with the aim of totally annihilating the Amalekites.” Therefore, the justification for Deborah initiating military action by calling a commander instead of waging the battle herself derives from her role as a prophet (not because she was a woman as many claim). As with Moses and Samuel, the role of YHWH’s prophets in war does not include participation in the battle itself. They supervise and advise during battles; they call on YHWH for help, but they do not fight. Like Moses before her, she summons the military commander, initiates the battle, and then remains on the nearby mountain with Issachar’s leaders (Judg 5:15).

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400 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 100–104.
401 Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, 112.
402 Mathews, Judges and Ruth, 65.
403 Mathews, Judges and Ruth, 65.
Mediation of Divine Knowledge (Judg 4:6–7, 9)

In Judges 4:6–7 and again in vs. 9, Deborah delivers prophetic oracles that clearly fall within the ANE concept of prophecy, which revolved around mediating divine knowledge to humanity. Gafney defines prophecy in the ANE as “the proclamation and/or performance of a divine word by a religious intermediary to an individual or community” and claims it occurred “at the instigation of either humans or divinities.” The purpose of prophets mediating divine knowledge, according to Stökl, was to provide “insight into the consequences” of making certain decisions and “to provide decision-makers with the information that they needed in order to make their decisions.”

Similarly, Nissinen defines the function of prophets in the ANE as being “intermediaries and channels of communication for the divine knowledge necessary for king and country to live in safety and receive divine advice in times of crisis and uncertainty.” Many of the Mari letters, in particular, describe prophets declaring victory over a king’s enemies or in times of a “specific political crisis.” In relation to prophetic oracles regarding warfare, this information often came in the form of military strategy, timing, and outcomes of victory or defeat. For example, in the Epic of Zimri-Lim, a prophet (āpilum) delivers an oracle to the king that provides instructions for battle groups,

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404 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 4.
405 Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 25.
408 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 80.
409 Frymer-Kensky, “Warriors by Weapon and by Word,” 48; Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, 98.
Deborah’s oracle to Barak in Judg 4:6–7 aligns with all these common understandings of ANE prophetic oracles, particularly those regarding warfare. Another prominent feature of Deborah’s oracle is its conditional nature, which is also typical of ANE prophetic oracles.

The decision-making component of prophecy is why prophetic oracles often appear to be predictions of the future, as Deborah’s oracle appears to be in Judges 4. However, Stökl notes prophetic oracles are not typically predictive; rather, they cast the future in conditional terms even though the conditionality is not expressly communicated in the oracle. Of typical prophetic oracles, he states, “only if certain preconditions are being kept is the announced future going to become reality.” This conditional aspect surfaces clearly in Deborah’s oracles to Barak in vs. 7 and 9. Attentive readers will notice the oracle in vs. 7 states YHWH will deliver Sisera into Barak’s hand, but the oracle is revised in vs. 9 with YHWH handing Sisera over to a woman instead. The revision results from Barak’s insistence that Deborah accompany him or he will not go—although it remains unclear why this request is evaluated negatively other than it was not part of the listed strategy in the first oracle (i.e., he is not told to take Deborah with him).

Regardless of the reason for the negative evaluation of his request, Deborah revises the oracle “because of the way” he “goes about this.” This aligns perfectly with

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413 Knight argues *derek* in vs. 8 should be taken literally, meaning it refers to the literal road or direction that Barak is taking. She concludes he will not receive the honor because he is simply not going to be at the location where the enemy leader is slain (“Like the Sun in Its Might,” 126). If she is correct, then it is possible Deborah is not correcting Barak due to his request but due to his misunderstanding regarding his central role in YHWH’s plans. In order for this to be the case, one must also understand YHWH’s initial
expectations regarding the conditional nature of prophetic oracles in the ANE. This conditional nature coupled with information regarding military strategies and outcomes clearly demonstrate that Deborah was mediating divine knowledge to Barak. This knowledge regarded the correct battle strategy to ensure victory—placing her comfortably within the company of ANE prophets of her time.

Not only does Deborah’s communication of divine knowledge reflect ANE customs, but she also reflects customary prophetic speech in the HB. She uses what Block calls “a variation of the prophetic citation formula” in Judg 4:6, and she also communicates the commands of YHWH in first person. Her commanding speech to Barak, according to Block, “reflect[s] clear prophetic self-consciousness,” with her use of the first-person command indicating she is speaking as a prophet—the “authorized representative of Yahweh.” For this reason, many scholars believe the narrator presents her as a “a stereotypical prophetic spokesperson.” Not only does the narrator present her mediating this divine knowledge, but also as calling Barak and the people to response. This is why Knight argues Deborah fits the portrait of a Deuteronomic prophet perfectly. She claims, “The Deuteronomic portrait of future prophets emphasizes that heeding the authorized voice of YHWH’s messenger presents an opportunity for Israel to demonstrate their Yahwistic devotion; indeed the narrative of Judges is framed in terms

promise to Barak that Sisera would be delivered into his hands as being directed at Israel as a whole and not Barak specifically. Since “into your hand” (Judg 4:7) is singular though, this remains unlikely.

414 Block, Judges, 198.
415 Block, Judges, 198.
416 Butler, Judges, 92.
of assessing Israelite adherence to the directives of YHWH through a process of testing (see 3:4).”418 Therefore, Deborah’s communication of YHWH’s divine words as well as her call for the people to respond appropriately, as depicted in both the narrative and the song, present her as both a typical ANE prophet and a typical HB prophet.

Military Commander’s Expectations of Her in Battle (Judg 4:8–10, 14; 5:13–15) As stated previously, ANE prophets were known for providing advice regarding battle tactics and outcomes. Because of this, prophets were often expected to accompany the army not only to provide advice but also to provide assurances of victory, promising “the presence and protection of the gods” when they urged kings to action. 419 A prophet on the battlefield could serve as a sign of victory or deliver that sign. For example, in lines 137–42 of the Epic of Zimri-Lim, Nissinen points out that the prophet serves as “sign” of victory for the king in battle.420 Nissinen notes that the prophet could either be the actual sign or could deliver a prophecy that functions as the sign (the text is highly poetic), but he seems to prefer the latter. 421 Therefore, one can clearly see why Barak wants Deborah to accompany him. As Hackett claims, “Barak was not, of course, in need of Deborah because of her prowess with a bow, but rather because her presence would symbolize YHWH’s presence and approval.”422 Barak expects the presence of Deborah as YHWH’s prophet to serve as a sign of YHWH’s protection and an assurance of victory.

418 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 127.

419 Frymer-Kensky, 48; Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, 98.

420 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 105.

421 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 105.

422 Hackett, Violence in Women’s Lives, 357.
In some cases, ANE prophets played even more active roles in the battles themselves, including leading troops or providing battlefield inspiration. Wilson, for example, cites Mari letter ARM (T) 2. 22:23–26 in which diviners are described as both accompanying armies and leading troops.\footnote{Wilson, \textit{Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel}, 98, footnote 24.} Prophets would often tell commanders when the correct time had arrived to begin a battle, and they would “muster and inspire the troops” before it started—all actions that required the prophet be present at the battlefield.\footnote{Frymer-Kensky, 48.} While Deborah provided assurances of victory and military strategies in her oracle to Barak, it seems he expected her to accompany him to the battlefield as well to provide further support and perhaps serve a more active role in the battle itself. The LXX, according to Frymer-Kensky, interpreted Barak’s request in this way by adding the phrase “because I do not know on what day the Lord will send his angel to my side” to his request for Deborah to join him. Based on Deborah’s words in Judges 4:14, this is exactly what she did—she indicated the opportune time to begin the battle and provided assurance that YHWH was present and giving him the victory. Matthews makes similar claims when he states Barak was asking for Deborah to come to the battlefield because he did not think the Israelites would rally to him without her there as the representative of YHWH.\footnote{Matthews, \textit{Judges and Ruth}, 65.} While he notes there is not an example of an Israelite military leader making such a request before Barak, Moses did serve as the spokesperson for YHWH at skirmishes and, later in Israelite history, Elisha accompanied armies into battle as
YHWH’s spokesperson. Furthermore, as seen in chapter 2, some see Deborah’s commands to Barak as evidence she helped muster the troops, and other see her as inspire the troops with song and inspirational words.

Interpreting Barak’s request in this way increases our understanding of Deborah’s role as a prophet both before and during the battle depicted. His insistence she go with him means he respected her as a prophet. However, as noted earlier, in the first oracle, YHWH did not command Barak to take Deborah; he was only supposed to take ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun. So, while his request for her to accompany him followed ANE customs, it did not align with the necessary preconditions of the first oracle. Thus, it resulted in a different outcome than originally predicted—namely, the shift of honor to Jael for the victory. Perhaps, Deborah’s presence on the battlefield necessitated a shifting of location for Sisera’s defeat lest the people attempt to give Deborah, the šōpēt, credit for the victory instead of YHWH.

Arising (Judg 5:7)

In Judg 5:7, the song celebrates the arising of Deborah. While the poetic language could be taken metaphorically, it is also possible to understand this as a reference to a prophetic tradition of standing up or arising to deliver divine messages. In vs. 12, Knight connects this verb to Deborah’s prophetic activity because her arising as a “mother in Israel” (a designation for a prophet) is what inspires the people to action. In other words, her arising to deliver YHWH’s word to the people precipitates the people’s response. Since

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427 Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam*, 38.

428 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” 66.
Knight translates vs. 8 as God choosing new leaders, she also connects Deborah’s arising as a prophet to God choosing her as the šōpēt. Nissinen references many Mari letters where prophets are said to “arise” or “stand up” to deliver their oracles.429 In the examples he provides, the prophets are in temples and “arise” to deliver the messages. While Deborah is not in a temple, Block argues Deborah was functioning at Bethel as an alternative to the corrupt priests and temple cult; thus her arising is of a similar nature.430

Absence of Technical Means of Divination (Judg 4–5)
Equally as important as what the narrator depicts Deborah doing and saying in the text is what the narrator does not depict her doing or saying: using technical forms of divination to induce or interpret the prophetic oracles she delivers. This argument from silence is important because some disregard her role as a prophet because there is no technical description of how she obtains the oracle. For example, Wilson dismisses her prophecy to Barak as only appearing to be a prophetic oracle because the text does not explicitly state “how she obtained this oracle.”431 While Wilson sees this as discounting her status as a prophet in the ANE, evidence from ANE sources indicates the opposite. Neither Nissinen or Stökl, for instance, consider those who use technical forms of divination to induce or interpret oracles as prophets. Stökl states, “the term ‘prophet’ refers only to individuals who receive a divine message, the words of which are understandable without further

429 Nissinen, Ancient Prophecy, 77, 205.

430 Block, Judges, 196.

431 Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, 166. In making these claims, Wilson fails to acknowledge the narrative’s goal is not to defend Deborah as a prophet, so it does not need to provide these details. He also does not apply this same criterion to male prophets. In other instances, if a text uses an official title and then contains a prophetic oracle, there would be no further need to defend the individual’s right to the title of prophet.
analysis with a special skill (such as reading livers).”

Likewise, Nissinen considers prophecy the non-technical form of divination—non-technical because it does not involve specific training or require systematization of signs or omens. Rather, the knowledge received and communicated by a prophet comes intuitively through divine inspiration or possession. This leads him to define a prophet as “a person who transmits divine knowledge predominately, if not exclusively, by non-technical or intuitive means, believed to be inspired by a divine agent.”

Since prophecy is intuitive, there are not technical or inducing actions to describe what brings on the prophetic message. Rather, prophets simply speak on behalf of the deity they represent, needing no impetus or invocation to prompt oracles. Interestingly, it is this overwhelming intuitive aspect of prophecy that likely accounts for the prophetic role being more open to women than other professions in the ANE. According to Nissinen, a common belief in ancient and more modern societies is that women are more naturally receptive to the divine realm. As such, they are able to naturally communicate messages from the divine to the human realm.

This means the lack of explicit description for how Deborah receives her prophecy bolsters the argument that she was a typical ANE prophet.

Furthermore, the text never describes Deborah or the people posing a direct question of YHWH to which they receive an answer. While this again may seem to disqualify her from being a prophet, Stökl observes that prophets in the ANE did not ask questions of deities or provide answers on behalf of deities, as people often assume.

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Rather, the question-and-answer aspect of divination was limited to technical diviners. Therefore, rather than diminishing support for Deborah being a prophet, the absence of another aspect of technical divination adds weight to the argument that she was a typical prophet. This also places her comfortably in the realm of HB prophets since they were forbidden from practicing technical divination of any kind. Here, we also notice the absence of technical divination to confirm the accuracy of her oracle. In the ANE, it seemed common to use technical forms of divination to confirm the veracity of a prophetic oracle. In the HB, however, the truth of a prophecy and prophet was determined by whether their prophecies came true, which clearly takes place in the case of Deborah’s oracles as confirmed in both the narrative and poetic account.

Prophetic Interpretation of Battle (Judg 5)

While many see the song of Deborah in Judges 5 as either a complimentary or a contrasting account of the battle in Judges 4, Knight argues the song serves a different purpose in the narrative. She claims, “the song is not simply an imaginative duplicate of the prose-style battle report in Judges 4. Instead, the song consists of the pedagogically motivated reflections of a prophet, concerned to interpret recent events theologically for the battle-weary Israelite people.” When seen in this way, the song becomes further evidence of Deborah’s prophetic role. She interprets the events of the battle for the people and also calls on the people to respond appropriately as she reminds them how YHWH blesses those who love him and the curses those who do not.

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435 Stökl, Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, 216.

436 Knight, “Like the Sun in Its Might,” v.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined Judges 4–5 with an eye for similarities between Deborah and ANE prophets as well as HB prophets. While the survey was not exhaustive, enough similarities emerged to conclude Deborah exhibited the behaviors and characteristics expected of a prophet in the ANE broadly and likely within ancient Israel as well. These similarities included her gender, her provision of judgment for the nation in a time of crisis, her initiation of military action, her mediation of divine knowledge, the military commander’s expectations of her, her arising, the absence of technical means of divination, and her prophetic interpretation of the events through song. Thus, even if the title nēvi’ā is a late textual addition, it is one fully supported by the text itself and not just a result of later traditions. Not only does the narrative depict her thoroughly as a prophet, but understanding her prophetic role properly provides an interpretive lens that helps solve many of the interpretive challenges in the text.

Deborah’s prophetic role satisfactorily answers the following difficult questions often posed by scholars in relation to her status as a šōpēt that possess only partially satisfactory answers when viewed from other angles: (1) why did the sons of Israel go to Deborah for judgment if she was a šōpēt in the same manner as other šōpētîm; (2) why should Deborah be regarded as one of the šōpētîm even though she called upon Barak to serve as commander—a task normally performed by the šōpēt; (3) why did Barak refuse to go to battle without Deborah; (4) why did Deborah change the promise to Barak regarding his victory after he responded conditionally to her command; (5) did Deborah engage in the fighting as a warrior or stand on the sidelines and why; (6) why does Deborah use the title mother instead of šōpēt or mōši’a in her song; and finally, (6) why does Deborah’s šōpēt account contain the unique feature of a poetic retelling of the same events
immediately following the narrative? Of these interpretive questions, 2, 3, 5, and 6 have been historically explained by appealing to Deborah’s gender (e.g., since she was a woman, she could not serve as military commander). However, such explanations dependent on gender become untenable when her prophetic role is properly understood and emphasized.437

In conclusion, Deborah’s role as a prophet does not negate her role as a šōpēt but enhances it because it explains why Deborah was accepted by the people as a šōpēt without having delivered them from oppressors and how the narrator depicts her fulfilling her role as a šōpēt without fighting. Knowing a prophet’s primary function included mediating divine knowledge to aid in decision-making—especially decisions related to warfare—reveals the quality that likely qualified Deborah to be considered a šōpēt. Whether one understands her judging as judicial in nature, as directly related to judging the people’s covenant unfaithfulness and mediating their repentance, or a combination of both, the judging and her role as šōpēt must be seen as an element of her prophetic role. Her direct connection to YHWH made her the perfect šōpēt to assist the people in decision making—particularly decisions related to covenant fidelity and warfare—and the perfect leader to mediate their repentance to YHWH and call for his deliverance through battle. Finally, as a prophet, she was able to interpret and commemorate the people’s deliverance while calling for them to faithfully respond as those who love YHWH, a task no other šōpēt in Judges is depicted as fulfilling.

437 Also, seeing Deborah first as a prophet, not a woman, changes the way interpreters have viewed Barak, but that discussion is beyond the scope of the current chapter.
CONCLUSION

Summary
In chapter 1, I summarized key themes and debates in the history of interpretation surrounding Deborah. This revealed a lack of scholarly consensus related to almost every aspect of Deborah’s character and a plethora of interpretations that emphasize the role of gender. Most interpreters either ignore or highlight elements of the biblical text that further their own agendas related to the roles of women in the home, church, and society. I asserted this preoccupation with her gender is not only unfounded but also obfuscates important aspects of her character and the narrative’s meaning. Therefore, in chapters 2 and 3, I allowed the issue of gender to recede into the background to determine whether more satisfactory answers would emerge about her roles as prophet, judge, and military leader as well as her relationship with Barak without appealing to Deborah’s (or Barak’s) gender as the interpretive key.

In chapter 2, I discussed Deborah in relation to her potential role as a judge. I first established a working definition of šōpētîm as referring broadly to leaders who assist with decision-making, particular decisions related to military decisions, rather than the misleading translation judges or the too narrow translations military leaders, deliverers, or saviors. Following this, I examined common formulaic elements scholars identify with the framework of Judges and defining characteristics and behaviors of all the judges. I found a surprising breadth of variation among the different formulaic elements that shows how the narrator adapted, expanded, and omitted formulaic elements to make theological statements and develop the narrative. With the potential for variations in mind, I found satisfactory explanations for the absence or variation of many of the formulaic elements
in relation to Deborah. I determined the verb šōpēt in 4:4 should be translated with the same English word the translator chooses for every other instance of the verb in Judges. Despite the seemingly judicial sense of the judgement in vs. 5, Deborah is still depicted as being in a leadership position in the community where she aids the people in making decisions, particularly decisions that result in the deliverance from oppressors. In the course of my discussion of Deborah as a šōpēt, however, I failed to find completely satisfactory answers for questions related to Barak and his interactions with Deborah.

In chapter 3, I compared Deborah as depicted in Judges 4–5 to ANE prophets. In doing so, I concluded the narrative contains so many similarities to both ANE and HB prophets that the narrator was clearly portraying Deborah as a prophet. I also found Deborah’s prophetic role solves many of the interpretive problems I was unable to answer effectively in chapter 2 and determined her prophetic role serves as an interpretive key for the narrative. Her role as prophet sheds light on her relationship to YHWH, to the people, and to Barak. Consequently, it explains why the people went to her for judgement, why she summoned Barak in response to the people, why Barak responded to her as he did, why she likewise responded to Barak, why she went to the battle but did not fight, why she sang a song following the victory, and why that song emphasized YHWH as deliverer as well as the people’s response to YHWH’s words.

Conclusions Related to Gender
My aim in chapters 2 and 3 was to determine if setting aside issues related to gender would help a clearer and more consistent portrait of Deborah to emerge. Notably, I avoided using gender or gender-related reasons to explain the following:

- Why is Deborah’s introduction different than introductions of other šōpētim?
- What is the significance of the location from which Deborah issues judgment?
• Was Deborah a judicial judge or a šōpēt in the same sense as the other šōpētim?
• What was Deborah’s relationship to Barak?
• Why does Deborah need to summon Barak?
• Why does Barak insist Deborah accompany him?
• Why does Barak’s request cause reproach and eliminate his glory in battle?
• Why does Deborah not fight in the battle or engage in military deliverance as the other šōpētim?
• Why does Deborah describe herself as a mother in Israel?
• Why does Deborah display humility and refrain from taking glory for herself?
• Why does the narrator not attribute the peace directly to Deborah?

While a few of these questions are best answered by understanding the variations possible with the formulaic elements in Judges, most of them find the most satisfactory answers by viewing Deborah foremost as a prophet (not as a woman or even a šōpēt).

For example, Deborah’s role as a prophet reveals why she is depicted so uniquely among the judges. Her introduction is different because her role as a prophet is what causes the people to view her as a šōpēt and not her role as a military leader. Thus, her time as a šōpēt began before battle. Her prophetic role also prevented her from serving as the military commander herself since she could not fight, but it also prompted her to summon the commander, provide instructions regarding troop movement and placement, and indicate the proper timing of the battle. Her role as a prophet also explains her relationship to and interactions with Barak and her unwillingness to take glory for herself but rather emphasize YHWH’s victory. In sum, her role as a prophet explains why she would be described differently and why she would perform her tasks as a judge differently than other judges. Her relationship to YHWH and the community were different than typical judges because she was first and foremost a prophet, so the manner in which she initiated and enacted deliverance was primarily through mediating divine knowledge to Barak and Israel.
Unanswered Questions and Their Implications

Using Deborah’s prophetic role, instead of her gender, as the primary interpretive key produces a much clearer picture of Deborah, Barak, and the meaning of the narrative. However, questions related to gender roles posed by interpreters throughout the centuries remain unanswered simply because the narrator shows no concern for them. While interpretations can certainly comment on gender roles as depicted in the narrative, the most important point to convey should probably be the inconsequential nature of Deborah’s gender. In relation to her role as šōpēt and prophet, the narrator shows little to no concern that her gender impacts how her community or how YHWH perceived her words or actions. She was prophet and a šōpēt who also happened to be a woman. She served in public and religious leadership, and she held authority over a man while maintaining his respect. The narrator portrays none of this as exceptional, dysfunctional, or problematic. While Deborah was certainly extraordinary, none of her exceptional qualities result from her gender. If the text does not present her as an exception, neither should the church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe this study effectively showed how an overemphasis and infatuation with Deborah’s gender—whether viewed positively or negatively—has historically prevented interpreters from presenting an accurate portrait of Deborah and an interpretation that remains faithful to the text. First, this gender infatuation has prevented interpreters from recognizing Deborah as one of the šōpētim because they have appealed to her gender as the reason for her unique presentation rather than recognizing the widespread allowance for variations and omissions of formulaic elements. While it
remains possible Deborah shared the role of šōpēt with Barak, such a possibility does not diminish Deborah’s role but enhances her ability to give YHWH the proper praise and glory he deserves and prevents the people from elevating Deborah (or Barak) in place of YHWH. Second, interpreters have failed to recognize her prophetic role because they needlessly frontal her gender and used it as the primary interpretive key for her relationship and interactions with Barak. Rather than using gender, I argue Deborah’s prophetic role provides the best interpretive key to use for understanding Deborah’s unique presentation and activities as one of the šōpēṭîm.


