

In this session, we are going to do some background work to aid us in better understanding the fourth cycle in Judges: Barak and Deborah (Judges 4.1-5.31). Using the Commentary on Judges by Daniel I Block as a primary source, we are going to take a brief look at the literary composition and style of Cycle Four. The Barak and Deborah Cycle offer us an unusual biblical opportunity, to read the “presentation of a single event in two versions, one prose (chap. 4), the other poetic (chap. 5).” The goal of this session is to gain a better understanding of what the writer was intending in his presentation of the fourth cycle and to learn something about the differences between Old Testament Hebrew poetry and prose. The only other time we encounter a prose and a poetic account of the same event in the Old Testament, is in Exodus 14-15 which depicts the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea (Reed Sea). Let’s do some digging into the background of Judges, chapters four and five.

The first question most people would ask is which came first, the narrative or prose of chapter four or the poetry of chapter five? There are at least five important possibilities.

The first possibility is that the poem is original, and the narrative is derived from it. The poem’s archaic grammar, vocabulary, and rules for writing indicate that poem’s is a greater deal older than the prose. This would mean that prose account (chapter four) is an explanation, a rewriting, of the rather vague and unclear poetic version (Chapter five) of the Israelites defeat of the Canaanites under the leadership of Barak and Deborah. The intent of the narrative is to retell the defeat of the Canaanites in a more realistic form while filling in some missing information about these events.

A second possibility, held by a few scholars is that the prose account was the original and the poem was a creative retelling of the narrative version of history.

Third, is the possibility that the two accounts are two independent versions of a favorite and important part of Israelite history told in two different literary forms of writing. This would allow for the idea that poem may have been written earlier but that each text was based on its collection of oral traditions.

In the fourth possibility, it is believed that the poet and narrator each had access to the same oral traditions. In this case, any differences between the accounts are based more on whether it was written in prose or poetry. It is assumed that there was no great difference in the historical material used by each writer.

Our last possibility is perhaps the most commonly accepted one. It recognizes that it is more important to understand the relation between the prose and the poetic account of the Barak and Deborah Cycle than it is to try to realize which account came first. The important issue is to understand how each account compliments the other in the telling of the events related to the fourth cycle. This approach would make the most sense if we were intent on understanding what

the writer of Judges was trying to accomplish. Despite which came first it is only because of the writer of Judges that we have any account of the events at all. The writer intentionally placed the poetic account of Barak and Deborah to follow the prose and our concern should be to understand how the writer intended it to relate to the Book of Judges. Daniel Block speaking of the poem says: "This means that its present literary purpose cannot be understood without reference to the overall agenda of the book."

Let's turn now to look at some of the differences between the two accounts. There are the obvious stylistic differences between the prose and poetic accounts of Israel's victory over Sisera and the Canaanites. When we get beyond the differences in vocabulary, tone, and poetic style, there are some other differences worth noting.

Perhaps the most obvious difference is that although the two versions are looking at the same sequences of events, each version is highlighting a different aspect of those events. For example, Block identifies seven variations in the prose from the poetic accounts. "The prose version lacks any reference/ allusion to: (1) Israel's celebrative response (5:1-3); (2) Yahweh's approach from Sinai to aid the Israelites (5:4-5); (3) praise for Israel's warriors (5:9-11); (4) a roll call and evaluation of tribal participation (5:13-18); (5) cosmic involvement in the victory over Sisera's army (5:20-21); (6) the curse of Meroz for noninvolvement (5:23), or anyone else for that matter; (7) interest in the secondary victims of the slaughter on the battlefield, the families of the warriors (5:28-30)."

On the other side, Block tells us that: "The poetic account lacks any reference/allusion to: (1) the role of Jabin, king of Canaan (4:2); (2) the personal background and professional activity of Deborah prior to the battle (4:4-5); (3) her role in calling up Barak (4:6-9); (4) the relationship between Heber, the husband of Jael, and the Canaanites (4:11); (5) Sisera's mustering of his forces (4:12); (6) Deborah's specific involvement in the battle (4:14); (7) Barak's pursuit and defeat of Sisera's army (4:16); (8) Sisera's flight to Jael (4:15, 17); (9) Barak's pursuit of Sisera, his encounter with Jael, and discovery of the slain enemy (4:22)."

A second difference is that the prose account gives us an account that can stand alone with a chronology of events that bring us to a logical conclusion in 4:23-24. In contrast the poetic version presents us with an assembly of a variety of "more or less independent scenes," without the advantage of an intuitively obvious plot line. If all we had was the poem we would be hard pressed to understand that events of the battle or those leading up to it

The portrayal of God's participation and Israel's participation in the victory presents us with a third important difference. The prose highlights Yahweh's role in the account and points to His actions throughout the account. As an example Yahweh summons "Barak [through his prophet] (4:6), promises to lure Sisera into battle and deliver him into Barak's hands (4:7), announces through his prophet

the day of victory (4:14), routs the enemy (4:15), and effects the subjugation of Jabin (4:23).” In contrast, although the poet credits Yahweh for the victory and calls for praise to God (5:2,9), the poem just alludes to Yahweh’s involvement indirectly.

Note the difference in the prose account, even with its focus on Barak and the deliberate diminishment of his role, Barak “pursues the enemy army, but Yahweh routs them (4:15-16); he pursues Sisera, but Jael claims the prize (4:17-22). In the poem, Barak, always mentioned with Deborah, is also alluded to only indirectly.

A fourth difference deals with how women are portrayed in each chapter. Although both chapters address the “involvement of women in the pursuit and outcome of the battle,” it is the prose account that makes sex an issue in 4.9. In the prose account the writer intentionally plays up the initiative and power of female participants at the same time humiliating the male characters. In the poetic version, while limiting the role of Barak, the writer, at least, makes no attempt to humiliate him. In the prose version Barak is portrayed as always less than Deborah while the poetic version treats Barak on somewhat equal footing with Deborah (5:1, 12).

Block makes the observation that gender problems, though not a primary concern of the poem (chap. 5), certainly communicates a woman’s point of view and “gives this text its distinctive flavor. One may propose that whereas the narrator (prose) expresses the way the world views women, the poet expresses how women view the world.”

These differences do not at all disprove the idea that the prose and the poem are working with the same characters, the same crisis and the same events. In fact the opposite is true. The poem “fits the picture of Israel painted in the rest of the book.” For example, consider the various responses of the tribes to the crisis of Jabin’s rule over Israel. It fits nicely with “the same fractured sociopolitical realities portrayed elsewhere.” The tribes listed in 5.14-18 also reminds us of a similar list from chapter 1 pointing to the tribes that could not conquer their apportioned land. Block provides us several other “links” from chapter five to the remainder of the Book of Judges. “Amalek (5:14) will resurface in chaps. 6-7 and 10; Issachar (5:15) and Gilead (5:17) reappear in chapters 10-12 and 21. The chronological note in 5:6 links the time of the crisis and the ensuing battle to events known from elsewhere in the book (3:31), but the preamble fixes the composition of the song in the aftermath of the present defeat of the Canaanites.”

It is our contention that instead of considering chapters four and five to be contradictory, it would be better to understand them the writer of Judges providing us with two lenses with which to see a single event. There are differences between the prose and the poem, but issues of style aside, the differences are easily resolved. The prose and the poem both use a common

source that speaks to the historical defeat of the Canaanites by Israel under the prophetic leadership of Deborah in conjunction with the military leadership of Barak.

Looking at Judges 4 and 5 (and Exodus 14-15) it is apparent that Israelite writers could produce different accounts of the same events. This was not unique to Israel but was also true of many cultures in the Near East. What was unique to Israel, and in particular to Judges 4-5 was the deliberate use of differing accounts to deliberately persuade or influence its readers.

In our day, it has become commonplace to try to impose a feminist agenda into the biblical text. To do this obscures and frequently obliterates the original intention of the writer of the book. Yes, the writer was interested in the achievements and the affairs of Deborah and Jael, but they are “not heroic figures because of their revisionist challenges to prevailing social structures; they are heroines because of what they accomplish as agents of the divine agenda, which in this instance has less to do with overthrowing oppressive patriarchy than the role they play in Yahweh’s overthrowing oppressive Canaanites.” The fourth cycle: Deborah and Barak, was written to demonstrate God’s salvation of the Israelites. God is in charge. It is the saving working of God that ties chapter four and five together. In our next session we will look at the prose, chapter four.