

41. The Song of Deborah

Judges 5

Its claim to be the oldest thing in the Bible¹ is here considered separately, lest it unduly interrupt our reading of Judges.

That claim rests on the Song's vividness and its linguistic archaisms. But those qualities are within the power of any poet. Let us reconsider the matter.

In Judges 4, Jael, having offered hospitality to the fleeing enemy general Sisera, kills him while he is sleeping, by driving a tent peg through his temples:

4:21. Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent-pin, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the pin into his temples, and it pierced through into the ground, for he was in a deep sleep. So he swooned and died.

In Deborah's Song, Jael kills a Sisera who is *awake and standing before her*. And being thus slain, in a combat more nearly equal, he falls at her feet:

5:27. At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;
At her feet he bowed, he fell;
where he bowed, there he fell down dead.

This makes her braver than did the Judges 4 account. She is a woman warrior, one of several we meet in Biblical texts.

After this, the Song shifts the scene, to envision Sisera's mother:

[28] Through the window she looked forth, and cried,
The mother of Sisera cried through the lattice,
Why is his chariot so long in coming;
Why tarry the wheels of his chariots?

[29] Her wise ladies answered her,
Yea, she returned answer to herself,

[30] Have they not found, have they not divided the spoil?
A damsel, two damsels to every man;
To Sisera, a spoil of dyed garments,
A spoil of dyed garments embroidered,
Of dyed garments embroidered on both sides,
on the necks of the spoil?

And the poem ends with the wish that all enemies of Yahweh may so perish.

But the prose version (Sisera slain while sleeping) and the poem (Sisera slain while he is awake and standing) are incompatible. Which is earlier?

¹Cornill (1891) 160, "such as only a contemporary and eye-witness of the events narrated could have known." Moore (1898) 129, quoting Kuenen, "Form and contents alike prove that it is rightly ascribed by all competent judges to a contemporary." Soggin (1981) 80, "considered by the majority of scholars to be the earliest text in the Hebrew Bible." Niditch (2008) 76, "may be one of the most ancient works of the Hebrew Bible." For imagined support from archaeology, see Albright *Archaeology* 13. For dissents from that early dating see Becking *Song* 191.

The poem is brilliant, but its very brilliance argues against its antiquity.

The dramatic shift of scene after Jael's murder of Sisera, to Sisera's vainly waiting womenfolk, is brilliant. The way Sisera's mother soothes her anxiety by imagining him delayed by gathering gifts for her, is brilliant. The way she lovingly imagines the brilliance of those gifts, each line making them more brilliant than the preceding, is brilliant. Above all, it is brilliant that the scene concludes without resolving the uncertainty: the waiting mother is still hopeful.

We know, but she does not.

Ornamental Poems

Other long poems exist, some added to a prose passage, and some original:

- The Blessing of Jacob in **Gen 49** extends to his own sons the blessing he has just given to the sons of Joseph, and brings the Joseph Story almost to its end.
- The song of Moses in **Exod 15** is attached as the conclusion of an incident (the drowning of Pharaoh's chariots) which is itself late.²
- The brief Song of Miriam, following that of Moses in **Exod 15**, merely repeats the beginning of Moses' Song, and is probably a still later appendage.²
- The Song of Moses in **Deut 32** gives a lengthy history of Israel and of Yahweh's goodness. Deut 32:44 is a prose conclusion, but **Deut 32:45-46** ("Set your heart unto all the words which I testify unto you this day, which ye shall command your children to observe") refers to something else; namely, the laws which are the point of the Decalogue Code in Deuteronomy. The Song and its Deut 32:44-46 double conclusion are best regarded as later additions.³
- The Blessing of Moses (**Deut 33**) addresses the sons of Jacob. In its positive comment on Reuben, who was trashed in Gen 35:22, it is a *response* to Genesis. It was added to harmonize Deuteronomy with other Pentateuch texts, at the time when the Pentateuch was being textually finalized.⁴
- The Song of Deborah (**Judg 5**), discussed above.
- **Job 28** has long been regarded as a digression within Job 27-30.
- The song of **Job 39-41**, with its magnificent survey of natural wonders, is the thing which Job 28 is imitating and anticipating. It is an integral part of God's response in 38-41, showing that the decorative song was well established as a literary form in its own right, by the time Job was written.

The Deborah Error has led to the conviction that Biblical poetry is always earlier than Biblical prose. But the above poems are better read as literary ornaments, and thus as later, not earlier, than *the thing which* they ornament. That details of some song do not exactly fit the situation the song celebrates, but *elaborate* it, is merely one standard device in the poet's art of praise.

²See §20, Pharaoh's Chariots.

³von Rad (1968) 200, "there can hardly be any question of an early date."

⁴See §37-38 for the later additions to Deuteronomy, some of which are songs.

A Chinese Postscript

The brilliance of the Song of Deborah has parallels in other antiquities. One may be found in classical China, in the 03c tradition of Mencius, the second great Confucian. Mencius himself (0384-0302) is but scantily documented; only a few of his speeches to the rulers of his day are preserved. But his two posthumous schools left much behind them. At the end of the first chapter of the northern Mencian writings (MC 4B) comes a story which has nothing to do with what precedes it, but makes its own ethical point.

Here is that story.

MC 4B33. (1) There was a man of Chí who had a wife and a concubine, and they all lived together in the same household. When the goodman went out, he always filled himself with meat and drink and afterward returned, and when the wife asked about those with whom he had been eating and drinking, it was always someone of “wealth and position.” The wife said to the concubine, “When our goodman goes out, he always fills himself with meat and drink and afterward returns, and when I ask who he has been eating and drinking with, it is always someone of ‘wealth and position,’ – but no distinguished person has ever come to visit. I am going to find out where our goodman goes to.”

She got up early, and surreptitiously followed where their goodman went, and all through the city, there were none who stopped to talk to him. In the end he went up to some people who were offering sacrifices in the eastern outskirts, and begged their leftovers, and this not being enough, he turned about and went over to some others. This was the way he had gotten enough for himself to eat. The wife went back and told the concubine, “Our goodman is one we look up to, one we shall spend all our lives with. And now he turns out to be like this.” And she and the concubine said hard things of their goodman, and shed tears together in the central courtyard.

But the goodman, knowing nothing of it, came proudly in from outside, and got ready to brag before his wife and concubine.

(2) As the gentleman sees it, considering the how men seek for wealth and honor, profit and success, those whose wives and concubines would not be ashamed of them, and would not weep together – they are few indeed!

The time is different, the place is different, the literary purpose is different. The only things that this piece and the Song of Deborah have in common are: (1) they are later than their context, (2) they have women as their protagonists, and (3) a literary device: the suppression of the end of the story.

We know, but *she* (Sisera’s mother) and *he* (the returning goodman) *do not*.