The Holy War in the Book of the Judges: Some Remarks on the Song of Deborah

Alexandru MIHĂILĂ

Der Artikel stellt die linguistischen Elemente vor, die für die Datierung des Deboraliedes herangezogen sind und diskutiert die Querverbindungen mit anderen alttestamentlichen Texten wie Ps. 68, Gen. 49 und Jdc. 4. Das vom 9.-8. Jh. stammende Lied hatte als Zweck die Grenzen der Israelgemeinde durch Einschluss- und Ausschlussprozesse einzustellen: Die Kanaaniter sind radikale Feinde, Nachbarvölker wie die Keniter und vielleicht die Amalekiter und Midianiter sind positiv oder neutral dargestellt, einige israelitische Stämme blieben passiv, aber die wichtigsten führten den Heiligen Krieg.

Schlüsselwörter: heiliger Krieg, Deboralied, Richter, frühe Geschichte Israels.

The scholarly literature concerning the Song of Deborah is tremendous[1], since the text, after the debates around the Pentateuch and its young age opened by the Wellhausian documentary hypothesis, enjoyed a "good critic". For titans like Wellhausen and Albright the song of Deborah was even the earliest example of Hebrew literature[2]. But in the aftermath the chronological span grew wider, covering generally more than ten centuries, from the mid-12th BCE to the 1st BCE, with a majority favoring the early period[3].

[1] For a compressive bibliography from 1990 Tyler Mayfield, "The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4-5) in Recent Research, *CBR* 7 (2009), no. 3, p. 306-335; cf. also Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2009, WBC 8, p. 110-113 http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/9Bibliography.pdf.

[2] J. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, de Gruyter, Berlin / New York, [10]2004 ([1]1896), p. 37. W.F. Albright, "The Earliest Forms of Hebrew Verse", *JPOS* 2 (1922), p. 69-86; idem, "The Song of Deborah in the Light of Archaeology", *BASOR* 62 (1936), p. 26-31.

[3] Mid-12th cent. BCE: John Gray, "Israel in the Song of Deborah", in: Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor (ed.), *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1988, JSOTSup 67, p. 421-455 (p. 440). Hermann Michael Niemann, "Taanach und Megiddo: Überlegungen zur strukturell-historischen Situation zwischen Saul und Salomo", *VT* 52 (2002), no. 1, p. 93-102 (99) one to two decades before Saul and Ishbaal. 1131 BCE: John F.A. Sawyer, "'From Heaven Fought the Stars' (Judges V 20)", *VT* 31 (1981), no. 1, p. 87-89. Around 1125 BCE: William Foxwell Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, Fleming H. Revell, New York, 1932, p. 117; Arthur E. Cundall / Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity, Notingham / InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 1968, TOTC 7, p. 99. Period of the Judges: Han-Jürgen Zobel, *Stammesspruch und Geschichte. Die Angaben der Stammessprüche von Gen 49, Dtn 33 und Jdc 5 über die politischen und kultischen Zustände im damaligen "Israel"*, de Gruyter,

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

It is obvious that the language is in some cases deviant from the Standard Hebrew. The most significant recent linguistic debate over the age of the song involved Waltisberg and Knauf, the former assuming to find clear elements of imperial Aramaic in the Song, while the latter being convinced of archaic and dialectal traces. Waltisberg's arguments for late dating are the following:

The sufformativ of *qaṭal* 2nd pers. fem. is /*-ty*/ as in Aramaic: קַמְתִּי (Judg. 5:7). But this ending, preserved in Aramaic and Samaritan Hebrew, is primitive in Hebrew, although is attested in the orthography of late books (Ruth, Jeremiah and Ezekiel)[4].

The plural masc. in /*-yn*/ as in Aramaic: מְדִין (Judg. 5:10)[5]. But the reference is not ascertained: it could refer to Midian[6] or to "judgment seat"[7].

The pl. nouns with stem II geminated written with double consonant: עֲמָמֶיךָ (Judg. 5:14), חֹקְקִי (Judg. 5:15), attested only in late literature: עַמְמֵי / עַמְמִים (Neh. 9:22.24); חֹקְקִי (Isa. 10:1).

The verb תני Pi. "to tell" as in Aramaic: יְתַנּוּ (Judg. 5:11), while in Hebrew it would be שנה Pi. But as A. Lemaire has pointed out, the verb appeared also in pre-exilic Judean Hebrew in genuine epigraphic context (Lachish ostracon 3:12: אתנהו, dated approx. 589 BCE).

The temporal locution עַד שֶׁ־ attested only in late literature (Ps. 123:2; Cant. 1:12; 2:7.17; 3:4×2.5; 4:6; 8:4).

Berlin, 1965, p. 54-55; Daniel I. Block, *Judges. Ruth*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, 1999, NAC 6, p. 215. The monarchic period: Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, p. 215. 1025 BCE: Heinz-Dieter Neef, *Ephraim. Studien zur Geschichte des Stammes Ephraim von der Landnahme bis zur frühen Königszeit*, de Gruyter, Berlin / New York, 1995, BZAW 238. 950-850 BCE under Ishbaal or Jeroboam I: Ernst Axel Knauf, "Deborah's Language: Judges Ch. 5 in its Hebrew and Semitic Context", in: Bogdan Burtea / Josef Tropper / Helen Younansardaroud (ed.), *Studia Semitica et Semitohamitica: FS für Rainer Vogt*, Ugarit-Verlag, Münster, 2005, AOAT 317, p. 167-182. Late monarchic period (722-586): Ulrike Bechman, *Das Deboralied zwischen Geschichte und Fiktion: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu Richter 5*, EOS, St. Ottilien, 1989, DiTh 33, p. 212. Between 700-450 BCE: Serge Frolov, "How Old Is the Song of Deborah?", *JSOT* 36 (2011), no. 2, p. 163-184 (183). Late dating M. Vermes, "Le cantique de Débora", *REJ* 24 (1892), p. 52-67, 225-255. 5th-3rd cent. BCE: Michael Waltisberg, "Zum Alter der Sprache des Deboraliedes Ri 5", *ZAH* 12 (1999), no. 2, p. 218-232; Christoph Levin, "Das Alter des Deboralieds", in: *Fortschreibungen: Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 2003, p. 124-141. Hellenistic period (after 100 BCE): B.J. Diebner, "Wann sang Deborah ihr Lied?: Überlegungen zu zwei der ältesten Texte des TNK (Ri 4 und 5)", *ACEBT* 14 (1995), p. 106-130, reprint in: Bernd J. Diebner, *Seit wann gibt es "jenes Israel"? Gesammelte Beiträge aus 35 Jahren Neuansatz*, ed. by Veit Dinkelaker / Benedikt Hensel / Frank Zeidler, Lit, Münster, 2011, Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel 17, p. 153-192 (187-188).

[4] Paul Joüon / T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome, 2006, §42f, p. 122.

[5] The sense is supported by the occurrence of the plural of מַד "cloth" in Judg. 3:16. George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1901, ICC, p. 148.

[6] Cf. n. 50.

[7] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, Doubleday, New York, 1975, AB 6A, p. 102, 110, following David N. Freedman.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

As already noted, not all his arguments are convincing. Other authors such as Bechmann, Levin and Frolov, favoring the late dating, took into discussion the frequency of the words[8].

Verb נדב Hitp. (5:2.9) is attested only in Ezra, Nehemiah and the Chronicles (Ezr. 1:6; 2:68; 3:5; Neh. 11:2; 1Chr. 29:5.6.9×2.14.17×2; 2Chr. 17:16).

The expression בָּרְכוּ יהוה (5:2) appears in late Psalms (Ps. 66:8; 68:28; 103:20.21.22: 134:1.2; 135:19×2.20×2), Nehemiah and Chronicles (Neh. 9:5; 1Chr. 29:20).

Noun רֹזְנִים (5:3) appears only in Habakkuk (1:10), Deutero-Isaiah (Is. 40:23), Psalms (Ps. 2:2) and Proverbs (8:15; 31:4).

The expression "new gods" (אלהים חדשים) (5:8) reminds of Deut. 32:17 (אלהים לא ידעום חדשים), a late post-exilic text. Also the conditionality of foreign oppression by Israel's abjuration of Yhwh and the choice of other gods (Judg. 5:8) is a theme in the Deuteronomistic History (cf. Deut. 28)[9].

Adjective צָחֹר (pl. fem. 5:10) occurs only in Ezek. 27:18.

Term שָׁרִיד (5:13) is attested only in post-exilic prophets (Isa. 1:9; Jer. 31:1; 44:14; Joel 3:5; Obad. 14; Lam. 2:22), postdating the fall of Samaria or most probably the fall of Jerusalem.

Pl. noun עַמָּמִים (5:14) with the reduplicated second consonant (cf. above) is found only in Neh. 9:22.24.

Noun פְּלַגָּה (pl. 5:15.16) occurs only in Job 20:17; 2 Chr. 35:5 (פְּלֻגּוֹת).12 (מִפְלַגָּה).

Expression שָׁלַח בְּרַגְלָיו (5:15) is attested only in Job 18:8.

Yiqtol-LF of שׁכן (יִשְׁכּוֹן 5:17) occurs only in Ps. 104:12.

Pl. construct מְרוֹמֵי (5:18) is found only in Prov. 9:3.14.

Expression מַלְכֵי כְנַעַן (5:19) belongs to the Dtr redaction.

Verb דהר from the noun דַּהֲרוֹת (5:22) occurs only in Nah. 3:2.

Noun רַקָּה (5:26) appeared, except Judg. 4:21.22, only in Cant. 4:3; 6:7.

Noun עָמָל (5:26) is attested only in Prov. 16:26; Job 20:22 and Eccl. 3:9.

Noun אֶשְׁנָב (5:28) occurs only in Prov. 7:6.

Noun pl. fem. שָׂרוֹת (5:29) is attested only in Isa. 49:23; 1 Ki. 11:3; Est. 1:18.

---

[8] U. Bechmann, *Das Deboralied*, p. 166; Christoph Levin, "Das Alter des Deboralieds", in: *Fortschreibungen: Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 2003, p. 127; Serge Frolov, "How Old Is the Song of Deborah?", *JSOT* 36 (2011), no. 2, p. 163-184 (171-172).

[9] The connection already recognized by Artur Weiser, "Das Deboralied: Eine gattungs- und traditionsgeschichtliche Studie", *ZAW* 30 (1959), no. 1, p. 67-97 (76). Serge Frolov, "How Old Is the Song of Deborah?", *JSOT* 36 (2011), no. 2, p. 163-184 (182). But for P.C. Craigie, "Some Further Notes on the Song of Deborah", *VT* 22 (1972), no. 3, p. 349-353 (350-351), Judg. 5:8 should be translated "God choses new men. Then was there for five cities a fortress to be seen?", dividing differently the consonantic text of v. 8aβ (אז לחמש ערים).

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

But it must be stressed that such linguistic comparison remains a cumulative argument and bears no irrefutable support for late dating. On the other hand, Knauf reiterated a series of evidence for archaic features in the Song of Deborah[10].

The Šaphel שקמתי (5:7) and another possible Šaphel שריד (5:13). But Ludwig Wächter analyzed the allegedly remnants of *š*-causative in Hebrew and summed up that there are no conclusive examples. The only possible cases came in Hebrew from ancient Western Semitic linguistic stratus (שכן < כון, שגל < גלה, השתחוה Št < חוה) or secondarily from Aramaic (שגא < גאה, שלהבת < להב)[11].

The Standard Hebrew demonstrative זֶה as a relative particle in the phrase זֶה סִינַי (5:5) "the One of Sinai". But for others the expression is a gloss[12].

The absence of the article and of the relative אֲשֶׁר and the use of אֲשֶׁר with its initial sense of "place". But the absence of the article, of the relative pronoun and of the accusative particles אֵת are markers for poetic style. For example Ps. 111 and 138 don't use the article at all, but they are late literary products.

The verbal system is archaic with *yiqtol*-SF as a narrative in initial position, as a jussive in initial and final position; *qatal* as a narrative in initial and non-initial position, *yiqtol*-LF as present and historical present; participles never predicates.

Knauf also found peripheral and central (Samaritan) Israelite features, which are more substantial than the allegedly archaic features.

Tributary to the early dating, Gerleman pointed out the archaic poetic technique: the poem is atomized into small independent scenes (the paratactic technique), the parallelisms and chiasms are not so developed as in classical Hebrew poetry, instead the poet constructing repetitions. As a conclusion the Song of Deborah was considered a good example "of a primitive, unconscious type, a naïve, spontaneous art"[13]. But other scholars underlined the disciplined and sophisticated style[14] and the probability that the Song could not be eye-witness report of the battle, because in reality such folkloristic poems are distant with at least a century from the events praised in them[15].

In fact the scribe mentioned in 5:14 presupposed a royal court apparatus in Israel, although no king of Israel acts in the Song, which presents the Israelite leaders either with no special titles (Barak son of Abinoam), or with symbolic

[10] Ernst Axel Knauf , "Deborah's Language: Judges Ch. 5 in its Hebrew and Semitic Context", in: Bogdan Burtea / Josef Tropper / Helen Younansardaroud (ed.), *Studia Semitica et Semitohamitica: FS für Rainer Vogt*, Ugarit-Verlag, Münster, 2005, AOAT 317, p. 167-182.

[11] Ludwig Wächter, "Reste von Šaf'el-Bildung in Hebräischen", *ZAW* 83 (1971), no. 3, p. 380-389.

[12] Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford / New York, 1985, p. 55, discussing Ps. 68:9, renders the gloss as meaning "this [earthquake caused by Elohim] refers to [the theophany of] Sinai". Cf. C. Levin, "Das Alter des Deboralieds", p. 133.

[13] Gillis Gerlemen, "The Song of Deborah in the Light of Stylistics", *VT* 1 (1951), no. 3, p. 168-180 (180).

[14] Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), no. 2, p. 143-165 (145).

[15] Peter R. Ackroyd, "The Composition of the Song of Deborah", *VT* 2 (1952), no. 2, p. 160-162.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

(Deborah, "mother in Israel") and general appellatives (the rulers of Israel חקקי ישראל 5:9). On the other hand, the enemies are "kings of Canaan". Nevertheless this might be an intended avoidance of the anachronism and no necessarily reflects the premonarchic date of the poem.

Also Judg. 5:4-5 presupposed in my opinion at least a basic Exodus tradition. Yhwh went out from Seir, from the plains of Edom, but must arrive somewhere. The Exodus tradition, originated in the north, must have had in the earliest form a northern final destination for Yhwh, perhaps a certain sanctuary (Shiloh in Ephraim?).

The inter-textual connection of Judg. 5

Together with Ex. 15, Judg. 5 is considered the only example in the Hebrew literature of victory songs, but despite some similarities in motifs, there is no literary dependence one way or the other[16]. A better example for a victory song is 1 Sam. 18:7.

The text with which Judg. 5 shows clear literary connection is Ps. 68. First and most important, the depiction of Yhwh's theophany from Sinai is shared literally by Judg. 5:4-5 and Ps. 68:8-9 with the significant difference that the names of Yhwh is transformed into Elohim according to the tendencies of the Elohistic Psalter. Second, the expression אם תשכבון בין משפתים (Ps. 68:14a) reminds of למה ישבת בין משפתים (Judg. 5:16a). It is worth noting that in Ps. 68 the expression is used in a positive way. Third in Ps. 68:13 an allusion is made to "kings of armies" (מלכי צבאות) similar to the "kings of Canaan" (Judg. 5:19). Fourth, Ps. 68:28 describes a tribal procession similar to the tribal list of Judg. 5, but in a different setting: Benjamin, Judah, Zebulun and Naphtali. For Levin Jud. 5 quotes Ps. 68 and even Is. 63:19. But in my understanding Ps. 68 knew Judg. 5: the absence of Judah from the tribal list in Judg. 5 is older (*lectio difficilior*), a problem solved by Ps. 68, which probably preserved old traditions accommodated at a later moment to the world view of the southern kingdom, Judah (cf. also Bashan as a mountain of God, later put in relation with Zion). If Ps. 68 in the present form could not date prior to the Egyptian 25th dynasty (cf. Ps. 68 where Egypt stands parallel with Cush), than Coogan's conclusion that Ps. 68 knew the Song of Deborah "quite possibly in written form"[17] is correct.

Judg. 5 shows some similarities with Gen. 49 too. They are the only texts that place שׁבט ("scepter") and מחקק ("ruler") in parallel stichs (Gen. 49:10; Judg. 5:14). Some of the characterization elements of the clans are interchangeable with other traditions. The interstice between the blessing for Judah and the blessing for Joseph (Gen. 49:13-21) has much in common with Judg. 5:15b-17.(22), a stanza dedicated to the rebuke of the inactive tribes.

[16] Alan J. Hauser, "Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5", in: Elaine R. Follis (ed.), *Directions in Biblical Poetry*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1987, JSOTSupp 40, p. 265-281.

[17] Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), no. 2, p. 143-165 (161).

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

Reuben יָשַׁבְתָּ בֵּין הַמִּשְׁפְּתַיִם (5:16) // Issachar רֹבֵץ בֵּין הַמִּשְׁפְּתָיִם (Gen. 49:14).
Dan יָגוּר אֲנִיּוֹת (5:17a) // Zebulun וְהוּא לְחוֹף אֲנִיּוֹת (Gen. 49:13).
Asher יָשַׁב לְחוֹף יַמִּים (5:17b) // Zebulun לְחוֹף יַמִּים יִשְׁכֹּן (Gen. 49:13).
Israelites הָלְמוּ עִקְּבֵי־סוּס (5:22) // Dan הַנֹּשֵׁךְ עִקְּבֵי־סוּס (Gen. 49:17).

J.L. Wright considers that Judg. 5:14-18 is inspired from Gen. 49: several lines that praised Issachar and Zebulun, the tribes active in the battle of Kishon, were applied to non-participants, but the former quietude is changed to passivity and censured.[18] But it might be pointed out that the descriptions "he stays among the sheepfolds" fits better to Reuben in the song of Deborah than Issachar in the blessings of Jacob and the connection with ships and seashore is out of place regarding Zebulun, but is more appropriate for Asher and Dan. Therefore I consider Gen. 49:13-21 later than Judg. 5.

A very important issue is also the relation with the prose account in Judg. 4. Many scholars sustain a direct influence of the Song of Deborah on the prose account[19]. The similarities might indeed suggest a literary dependence: Yhwh went out (יצא) into the battle (5:4; 4:14), the Israelites descended (ירד) for battle (5:13; 4:14) and they marched (משך) for troop muster (5:14; 4:6), the location of the battle in Wadi Kishon (5:21; 4:7.13)[20], the assemblage of the troop "at the feet of Barak" (ברגליו) (5:15; 4:10). There are obviously some contradictions: in Judg. 4 the enemy is a single "king of Canaan", Jabin (v. 2), but in the song of Deborah "kings of Canaan" (5:19) engaged themselves in the battle. In the prose only two tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, participated (4:6.10), but in the poetry six tribes are active (Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir, Zebulun, Issachar and Naphtali), while four tribes are staying home (Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher) (5:14-18). Another contradiction refers to Sisera's death: he was struck asleep (4:21) or standing (5:26-27). Halpern

[18] Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), no. 2, p. 143-165 (164). Jacob L. Wright, "War Commemoration and the Interpretation of Judges 5:15b-17", *VT* 61 (2011), no. 3, p. 505-521 (511-512).

[19] Barcuh Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography", *HTR* 76 (1983), no. 4, p. 379-401 (394): "there is virtually nothing structural in Judges 4 that does not stem directly from SongDeb or from questions and assumptions arising from SongDeb". "Judges 4 does not exhibit a striking internal elaboration, a living growth of its own. It sticks close to the poetic evidence. In addition, the author of Judges 4 was not attuned either to the nature or to the culture of his source" (p. 395). "On the other hand, the historian does feel free, or responsible, to plug the gaps in his source material with conjectural reconstruction". "little in his work stands out as being independent of his sources"; "In sum, Judges 4 seems to present a prime example of an Israelite historian interpreting a source, and having a bad day at it" (p. 396). James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hyns in Hebrew Narrative*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1992, JSOTSupp 139, p. 93-95. "The psalms' narrative role is best explained by presuming that the Song of Deborah was composed first, served as a basis for a prose account with different thematic interests, was later combined together with that narrative, and still later came to be incorporated as a single unit into the redactional framework of the book of Judges" by the Deuteronomistic Historian (p. 95). Heinz-Dieter Neef, "Deboraerzählung und Deboralied: Beobachtungen zum Verhältnis von Jdc. IV und V", *VT* 44 (1994), no. 1, p. 47-59.

[20] James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hyns in Hebrew Narrative*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1992, JSOTSupp 139, p. 84.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

observed also that Barak seems to be connected with the tribe Issachar in 5:15, while he is from Naphtali in the prose account (4:6.9-10)[21]. J.L. Wright noticed further contradictions: the pan-Israelite perspective is essential to the Song, but marginal in the narrative from ch. 4, confined to the redactional frame (4:1-3.23) and secondary additions (4:4b.5b); the references to Kishon river, integral to the Song, were also added later to the prose (4:7.13); the Israelite army descended in the Song, but in the prose went up to mount Tabor (4:12) and the only going down is the assault (4:14). Wright recognized a problem, which he deemed solvable: Sisera is similar to a king in the Song, but a general in the prose account[22].

I am not so convinced by the literary dependence of ch. 4 on ch. 5, the main argument referring to the tribal list. Why did the prose account get rid of the assemblage of more tribes and limit the participation to only two tribes? More plausible is to approach separately the poem and the narrative: they derived from a common (oral?) tradition, but they went on separate ways.

The limits of the community

The Song of Deborah is not only a victory song[23], but "a piece of political polemic dressed up as a victory song"[24]. The holy war evocated in the Song expressed most appropriately the ideological separation of the community of Israel from the Canaanites. Through the victory song the limits of the community are established: belonging to the people of Israel is negotiated and alliances with friendly neighbors are reinforced[25]. Anyway this is not yet a "national identity" as J.L. Wright observes, rather one should speak of community identity.

The main enemies are Israel and Canaan, entities already attested at the end of the 13th century BCE in the pharaoh Merneptah's stele. Canaan represented a macro-structure the inhabitants were aware of[26], despite the famous conclusion of Lemche's monograph: "The Canaanites of the ancient Near East did not know that they were themselves Canaanites. Only when they had so to speak 'left' their original home, only when they lived in some other part of the Mediterranean area, did they acknowledge that they had been Canaanites"[27]. Lemche wanted in fact to

[21] Barcuh Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography", *HTR* 76 (1983), no. 4, p. 379-401 (388).

[22] Jacob L. Wright, "Deborah's War Memorial: The Composition of Judges 4-5 and the Politics of War Commemoration", *ZAW* 123 (2011), no. 4, p. 516-534 (524-525).

[23] For Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2009, WBC 8, p. 133 the Song reflects a blessing and curse ritual from a cultic milieu.

[24] Gregory T.K. Wong, "Song of Deborah as Polemic", *Bib* 88 (2007), no. 1, p. 1-22 (3).

[25] Jacob L. Wright, "War Commemoration and the Interpretation of Judges 5:15b-17", *VT* 61 (2011), no. 3, p. 505-521 (507, 509, 521). Jacob L. Wright, "Deborah's War Memorial: The Composition of Judges 4-5 and the Politics of War Commemoration", *ZAW* 123 (2011), no. 4, p. 516-534 (527). J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 55 (1993), no. 1, p. 18-38 (38).

[26] Cf. Anson F. Rainey, "Who Is a Canaanite? A Review of the Textual Evidence", *BASOR* 304 (1996), p. 1-15.

[27] Niels Peter Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land*: *The Tradition of the Canaanites*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1991, JSOTSupp 110, p. 152.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

distinguish between endonym and exonym. For the so-called "Canaanites" their immediate regional context (the city, the tribe, the region) was by far the most important in the self-identification and "Canaan" was too large to make sense for this, being used mostly by foreigners (as עברי in the Old Testament). Canaan in the Song of Deborah included all the non-Israelites ethnic groups as shown by Sisera's name, which is perhaps a descendant of the Sea Peoples.

Israel is also hard to articulate. The entities actants in the battle are not called tribes, leaving it open to discussion. Instead they are rather clans or the population of a particular region. The majority of scholars presume that the Song of Deborah mentioned ten Israelite tribes: six tribes are active, while four are passive in the battle of Kishon. Nevertheless A. Weiser considered the Song a cultic composition for a feast dedicated to Yhwh perhaps on the sanctuary on Mount Tabor, even with dramaturgical observation concerning the participants. Historically speaking only the two tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, waged the battle against the Canaanites, but later the victory was understood as a Yhwh's saving act to the sacral league Israel, composed of ten tribes. Judg. 5:14-15a represents an attendance list of the feast and the tribes allegedly reluctant to the participation (5:15b-17) were in fact absent tribal leaders from the sacral procession (cf. Judg. 21:5)[28]. Reaching a similar conclusion with different arguments, Cross understood לָמָּה in 5:16.17 as emphatic *lamed* extended by *-ma* as in Ugaritic and translated it "verily", avoiding the meaning that suggests rebuke[29]. Halpern considered לָמָּה as a negative *lamed* and enclitic *ma* (attested in an El Amarna letter, cf. EA 244:13.15.19.27.37), translating "you did not sit still" or "do not sit still", so the allegedly nonparticipating tribes are active too[30]. The theory, in all its three forms, is seducing, but lacks solid foundation. J.L. Wright observed that the tribes in vv. 15b-17 are described using verbs of inactivity, rest and tranquility that suggest passivity[31]. The recourse to the Ugaritic or Akkadian of Amarna at the expense of Hebrew should be avoided.

Other scholars tried to find in the Song different numbers of participants. Suggesting a clever emendation of the consonantal text (supplying only *matres lectionis*) of vv. 13-14, J.C. de Moor considers that twelve tribes appear in the Song of Deborah[32]. Knauf takes into account only seven tribes, excluding Gilead, Dan

[28] Artur Weiser, "Das Deboralied: Eine gattungs- und traditionsgeschichtliche Studie", *ZAW* 30 (1959), no. 1, p. 67-97 (81, 84-86).

[29] Frank Moor Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religon of Israel*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1973, p. 235, n. 74. Susan Niditch, *Judges*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008, OTL, p. 74.

[30] Barcuh Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography", *HTR* 76 (1983), no. 4, p. 379-401 (383-384).

[31] Jacob L. Wright, "War Commemoration and the Interpretation of Judges 5:15b-17", *VT* 61 (2011), no. 3, p. 505-521 (510). The verb ישׁב in sense of non-participation is attested in. Num. 32:6; 1 Sam. 30:24.

[32] Johannes C. de Moor, "The Twelve Tribes in the Song of Deborah", *VT* 43 (1993), no. 4, p. 483-494 (486-487). The emendation: בגבורים (י)לו ירד יהוה עם לאדירים (ה)ד(ו) יר(י)שׁר אז ירד(ו) "Then the princes of Yôdah (= Judah) descended to the dignitaries, with Yhwh descended Levi with heroes".

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

and Asher, considering v. 17 a later addition (from 9th-8th cent. BCE)[33]. On the other hand he used the framework of six active and four inactive tribes to draw the historical setting of the Song in the times of Ishbaal or Jeroboam I. Guillaume spoke also of seven tribes, but excludes Issachar, Naphtali (considered later addition in vv. 15 and 18b) and Asher (considered relative particle in 17b)[34]. Both identified the geographical area of the tribes in Judg. 5 with the kingdom of Ishbaal (2 Sam. 2:9-10). But to this historical reconstruction a question might be asked: why should the Song of Deborah expect participation in the battle from tribes such as Reuben (Knauf) or Gilead and Dan (Guillaume), if they are not yet included in Israel?

Finkelstein supported the 10th century dating from the archaeological perspective and attributed the total annihilation of the Jezreel valley (Megiddo VIA, Yokne'am XVII, Taanach IB, Beth-Shean Upper VI and Tel Hadar IV) to the highlanders' battles against those cities. New studies refuted the initial conclusion that Megiddo VIA was destroyed in "an earthquake followed by a fierce conflagration"[35], instead Finkelstein proposed to relate it to the battle of Kishon[36].

Considering the Song a product of editorial work, de Hoop regards 5:14 the original list of the participant tribes, comprising only four entities, initially geographical names: Ephraim (possibly extended northward to Jezreel Valley), Benjamin, Machir (in Transjordan) and Zebulun[37].

But in my opinion there are in fact 12 names in vv. 13, subsumed to "army of Yhwh": Sarid, Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, Zebulun, Issachar, Reuben, Gilead, Dan, Asher, Naphtali and Meroz. The list is not an exhaustive and coherent presentation of Israel, because some of names are cities (the first, Sarid, and the last, Meroz), regions (Ephraim, Gilead) or clans (Benjamin, Zebulun, Naphtali, Reuben, Dan, Asher, and two nicknames reflecting mercenary clans, Machir and Issachar).

But his proposal produces more problems: he is forced to equate Machir with Simeon, suggesting that the Simeonites were travelling salesmen (490).

[33] Ernst Axel Knauf , "Deborah's Language: Judges Ch. 5 in its Hebrew and Semitic Context", in: Bogdan Burtea / Josef Tropper / Helen Younansardaroud (ed.), *Studia Semitica et Semitohamitica: FS für Rainer Vogt*, Ugarit-Verlag, Münster, 2005, AOAT 317, p. 167-182 (174, n. 37).

[34] Philippe Guillaume, "Deborah and the Seven Tribes", *BN* 101 (2000), p. 18-21.

[35] Robert S. Lamon / Geoffrey M. Shipton, *Megiddo I. Seasons of 1925-34. Strata I-V*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1939, p. 7.

[36] Israel Finkelstein, "Destructions: Megiddo as a Case Study", 2008, p. 113-126 (116, 122-123). But E.A. Knauf, "Who Destroyed Megiddo VIA?", *BN* 103 (2000), p. 30-35 the people of Taanach IIA destroyed Megiddo VIA as a revanche for the destruction of Taanach IB by Megiddo VIA. Cf. also Hermann Michael Niemann, "Taanach und Megiddo: Überlegungen zur strukturell-historischen Situation zwischen Saul und Salomo", *VT* 52 (2002), no. 1, p. 93-102 (100-101).

[37] Raymond de Hoop, "Judges 5 Reconsidered: Which Tribes? What Land? Whose Song?", in: Jacques van Ruiten / J. Cornelis de Vos (ed.), *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology: Studies in Honour of Ed Noort*, Brill, Leiden / Boston, 2009, VTSupp 124, p. 151-164.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

Sarid is a city 10 km south of Taanach, mentioned also in Josh 19:10.12[38]. Meroz might be an Israelite city which made alliance with the Canaanites[39]. It is worth noting that Meroz is twice cursed, probably first by Yhwh himself, later through a redactional addition, by the angel of Yhwh[40], while Jael, the Kenite woman who killed Sisera, is twice blessed. The curse means not necessarily (temporary) exclusion from the community, as the blessing does not imply the inclusion of the Kenite Jael. Anyway Meroz acquired a peripheral status in the community. Scholars asked an important question: why is the difference between the rebuke against the non-active tribes and the curse upon Meroz? For J.L. Wright the answer lies in the redactional additions[41], but the reason might be found in the geographical proximity of Meroz (location unidentified) to the battlefield and the importance of its political allegiance.

The big absent is Judah[42]. Manasseh and Gad are missing too, but the Song mentioned Machir and Gilead. Such a setting need to be compared with the history known from the extra-biblical resources and therefore a short excursus should be inserted in order to discuss better the historical framework.

Before the Omride period, the historian has only information obtained from the Bible, which could be later reworking of the traditions, but thereafter archaeological/epigraphic material could be corroborated with the biblical information. During the reign of Omri, Israel ruled over Moab (for 40 years according to the Stele of Mesha) and developed some contacts with the Phoenicians, showing their influence (cf. the Samaria ivories). Probably after Ahab's death (and not after Omri's death as claimed by Mesha) Moab fell out from

[38] Nadav Na'aman, "Literary and Topographical Notes on the Battle of Kishon (Judges IV-V)", *VT* 40 (1990), no. 4, p. 423-436, reprinted in: *Canaan in the Second Millennium B.C.E.*, Collected Essays, vol. 2, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 2005, p. 303-316. Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges*, p. 33.

[39] Heinz-Dieter Neef, "Meroz: Jdc 5,23a", *ZAW* 107 (1995), no. 1, p. 118-122 (120). D. Block, *Judges. Ruth*, p. 239. For B. Lindars, *Judges 1-5*, p. 272-273 Meroz could be an Israelite clan.

[40] J. Blenkinsopp, "Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah: A Discussion", *Bib* 42 (1961), no. 1, p. 61-76 (72) considers an interpolation the whole phrase: "says the angel of Yhwh".

[41] Jacob L. Wright, "War Commemoration and the Interpretation of Judges 5:15b-17", *VT* 61 (2011), no. 3, p. 505-521 (520-521). Jacob L. Wright, "Deborah's War Memorial: The Composition of Judges 4-5 and the Politics of War Commemoration", *ZAW* 123 (2011), no. 4, p. 516-534 finds two strands: a symbolic and mythic poem (vv. 2-5.8-11.13-14.16-20a.21-23.31) and a concrete and realistic heroic epic (vv. 6-7.12.15.24-30). Already Hans-Peter Müller, "Der Aufbau des Deboraliedes", *VT* 16 (1966), no. 4, p. 446-459 discerned an heroic epic in vv. 12-17.19-30 (vv. 15b-17 reworked older *Stammessprüche*; v. 18 represents another tradition, about a battle of Barak against king Jabin of Hazor and vv. 6-8 are an extension of the heroic epic, younger than the yhwhistic psalm if compared to vv. 9-11) and an Yhwhistic psalm, representing a reworking located in Jerusalem (vv. 2-5.9-11.31a).

[42] For Serge Frolov, *Judges*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2013, FOTL 6B, p. 148 the omission is on purpose: the text neither could place Judah under northern leadership, nor could let it impassible in a matter of joined war like the inactive tribes. The Song of Deborah, which Frolov considers late, presented Ephraim as "rooted in Amalek", the traditional enemy, explaining why the northern kingdom had disappeared from the history. The two active tribes represented Benjamin and Judah.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

Israelite domination. This suggests that at least under Omri and Ahab, the northern kingdom ruled over parts of Transjordan (Gilead, Moab or the territory ascribed in the Bible to Reuben). Now the Gadites were included in Israel, becoming perhaps for the first time Israelites. Probably from 853 (the battle of Qarqar where Ahab is explicitly mentioned in the Assyrian sources) to 845 Israel under Ahab and Joram maintained war alliances with Damascus against Assyrians. These friendly relations broke up around 842/841 when Joram, accompanied by his vassal Ahaziah of Judah, confronted in Ramoth-Gilead the ambitious Hazael, who shortly had grasped the throne of Aram-Damascus. Joram lose the battle and subsequently was executed in Jezreel, possibly with Aramean aids, by one of his own officers, Jehu, who also killed Ahaziah of Judah. After the coup d'état of Jehu and the collapse of the Omride dynasty, in 841 Jehu submitted to the Assyrians, paying tribute together with the Phoenician kings, while Hazael chose to fight back. The Assyrians ravaged his territory, but didn't succeed to conquer Damascus. Probably after the Assyrian campaign in 838 or after Assyrian retreat from Syria in 829, Hazael retaliated the broken alliance with Israel – especially indeed if he helped Jehu to rise to power – and gained supremacy over Israel, conquering the northern cities such as Dan, Hazor, Jezreel and Megiddo and penetrating even to the Philistine territory, conquering Gath around 835, and to Judah, laying siege on Jerusalem. Now Transjordan is lost for Israel (cf. 2 Kgs. 10:32-33) and the Aramean hegemony continued during Joahaz of Israel (814-798) (2 Kgs. 13:3-5.7.22). The Assyrian resumed the campaigns against Syria (Arpad) in 805 and Joash of Israel (798-784), obeying the Assyrians (Adad-nirari III) by paying tribute, was able at the same time to fall out from the Aramean suzerainty, an example followed also by Zakkur of Hamath. In 796 Samaria was besieged by Arameans, but the approaching of the Assyrians (Nergal-eresh) determined the relief of the city. Dan was occupied again by Joash or his son Jeroboam II and it was probably Jeroboam II (not Jeroboam I) who posed in Dan and Bethel the bull statuettes.[43] So the Aramean control over Gilead lasted from aprox. 835/825 to 796, but even afterwards the Aramean influence was present as attested by the inscriptions of Deir Alla. Nevertheless in 733 the Assyrians (Tiglath-pileser III) conquered Galilee, the northern Transjordan and Gilead (cf. 2 Kgs. 15:29).

Three of the groups mentioned in the Song of Deborah, Machir, Gilead and Asher, could offer some hints for dating if compared to the historical background summarized above. Asher is mentioned in Egyptian texts under pharaoh Seti I (1294-1279)[44] and in a short list of the districts reigned by Saul and Ishbaal, his son (2 Sam. 2:9), where the Ashurites (i.e. Asherites) should be most probably located

[43] Jonathan Miles Robker, *The Jehu Revolution: A Royal Tradition of the Northern Kingdom and Its Ramifications*, de Gruyter, Berlin / Boston, 2012, BZAW 435, p. 285 ff.; Shuichi Hasegawa, *Aram and Israel during the Jehuite Dynasty*, de Gruyter, Berlin / Boston, 2012, BZAW 434, p. 64.

[44] W. Max Müller, *Asien und Europa nach altägyptischen Denkmälern*, W. Engelmann, Leipzig, 1893, p. 236; Diana V. Edelman, "Asher", in: *ABD*, vol. 1, p. 482-483.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

in Galilee or, as suggested by D. Edelman, in the southern Ephraim.[45] Anyway these Ashurites inhabited not yet the seashore in south Phoenicia as supposed by the Song of Deborah (5:17). If v. 17 is not a later addition, then the Song reflects a situation of political expansion of the Omride dynasty or Jeroboam II.

Machir was the first son born to Manasseh by an Aramean concubine (1 Chr. 7:14-19), a note that might preserve ancient traditions about the settlement of Machir in Transjordan (cf. Num. 32:39; Josh. 17:1)[46], where a strong Aramean influence was felt. Nothing proves the migration of the Machirites from W to E Jordan, assumed by many scholars[47], so if Machir is located from the beginning in Transjordan, then a big part of the tribal/region puzzle posed by the Song of Deborah is strangely missing, namely the region given to Manasseh in the hill country, unless Machir itself represents this region. So the Song of Deborah either knows the secondary tradition that Machir is the first-born of Manasseh and used freely Machir including Manasseh, or Ephraim from the Song extends northwards up to the Jezreel valley. For me the most plausible hypothesis remains that the Song places Machir in the east, but assumes that the western part is also related with Machir, reflecting the secondary tradition about Machir as the first-born of Manasseh.

Gilead is according to Lemaire a mountain region located north of Jabbok, identified with Jebel Ajlun, while Machir instead occupied the plain of Ghor at the mouth of Jabbok near Deir Alla[48]. The two tribes are associated in other biblical traditions too (cf. Num. 32:40; Deut. 3:15). The absence of the Gadites does not indicate in my opinion a pre-Omride period, because their place is kept by the region they inhabited.

If one postulates that a political cohesion must have preceded other forms of community identity (ethnic, religious, linguistic etc.), then the Song of Deborah should be based on a political power that unified in some extent the tribes and regions described. One cannot expect, even from the moral point of view, the reluctant tribes/regions to participate in the battle, unless they were already or have been previously integrated in a sort of political unit. In my understanding the Song of Deborah presupposes a former political Israelite dominance in Transjordan (Gilead, Machir), which occurred certainly during the first Omrides (Omri and Ahab) and the last Jehuites (Joash, Jeroboam II) up till the Assyrian conquest in 733. The placing of the Asherites on the seashore evinces also a period of expansions and excludes the early stages (Ishbaal). Therefore the Song dates from the period after Ahab, when parts of Transjordan were lost and strong feelings were still active in Samaria that these regions belonged to the Israelite community. The Song could be also composed as a propagandistic tool that sustained the reconquest

[45] Diana V. Edelman, "Ashurites", in: *ABD*, vol.

[46] Horst Seebass, "Machir im Ostjordanland", *VT* 32 (1982), no. 4, p. 496-503.

[47] Cf. M. Patrick Graham, "Machir", in: *ABD*, vol. 4, p. 458-460.

[48] André Lemaire, "Galaad et Makîr. Remarques sur la tribu de Manassé à l'est du Jourdain", *VT* 31 (1981), no. 1, p. 39-61 (46, 50).

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

of Transjordan by Joash and Jeroboam II, but the dating in the times of Ishbaal is problematic, because the tribes mentioned in the Song spread across a wider territory than Ishbaal's kingdom (cf. the territory of Reuben and the seashore ascribed to Dan and Asher).

The earliest parts of the Song of Deborah might have been folkloristic traditions of Zebulun and Naphtali (Judg. 5:18) that commemorated a battle at the foot of Mount Tabor near Wadi Kishon[49] against a Canaanite force under the command of (king?) Sisera. If the biblical history is correct, then during king Ishbaal (2 Sam. 2:9) an incipient stage of state formation included Ephraim, Benjamin, Jezreel valley and part of Transjordan (Gilead), nevertheless a smaller region in comparison with the political framework of the Song of Deborah. During king Baasha's long reign of almost a quarter of year (cca. 900-877), the tribal traditions of Issachar were surely promoted, because the king was of Issacharite descend (cf. 1 Kgs. 15:27), subsequently Deborah and Barak being related with Issachar (Judg. 5:15a). But only after the Omride period the new conquests were ideologically integrated sufficiently enough that their lost at the hands of Arameans (835/825-796) was missed and included in the Song of Deborah under the metaphor of rebuke for non-participation in the holy war of Israel.

Beside the Canaanites and the Israelites, the Song of Deborah describes other ethnic/political entities: the Kenites, possibly Midian[50] in 5:10 and Amalek[51] in 5:14. The positive perception of the Midianites is shared by other ancient traditions (cf. Ex. 3:1 Moses' father in law, the priest of Midian), but if the *lectio difficilior* of Judg. 5:14 TM[52] is to be preferred, then this positive mention of Amalek and its connection with Ephraim, similar to Judg. 12:15, should be an evidence of the ancestry of the Song of Deborah, excluding a post-exilic authorship. Anyway the

---

[49] Artur Weiser, "Das Deboralied: Eine gattungs- und traditionsgeschichtliche Studie", *ZAW* 30 (1959), no. 1, p. 67-97 (68).

[50] The translation may vary: Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), no. 2, p. 143-165 (148); J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 55 (1993), no. 1, p. 18-38 (25-26): "who sit over Midian". But Susan Niditch, *Judges*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008, OTL, p. 68, 72 "who sit near Midian". The problem of the former rendering is that ישב על is not attested with the sense "rule".

[51] Cf. also Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), no. 2, p. 143-165 (149); Barcuh Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography", *HTR* 76 (1983), no. 4, p. 379-401 (385); J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 55 (1993), no. 1, p. 18-38 (27); T.C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 146-147; S. Frolov, *Judges*, p. 121-122, 148.

[52] TM מִנִּי אֶפְרַיִם שָׁרְשָׁם בַּעֲמָלֵק "From Ephraim, they whose root is in Amalek". LXX^{A} understands בעמק "in the valley" (ἐν κοιλάδι) instead of בעמלק as LXX^{B} (ἐν τῷ Αμαληκ), a conjecture preferred by RSV, NRSV, NAB, BJ, Luther, EÜ. P.C. Craigie, "Some Further Notes on the Song of Deborah", *VT* 22 (1972), no. 3, p. 349-353 (352) suggests for שרשם the meaning "officers (of high) rank", from the Egyptian word *srs* (cf. also Peter C. Craigie, "An Egyptian Expression in the Song of the Sea (Exodus XV 4)", *VT* 20 (1970), no. 1, p. 83-86).

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

safest mention refers to the Kenites. Even through inglorious killing of Sisera[53], Jael is blessed (5:24), alluding to a positive view about the Kenites (cf. Judg. 1:16 Hobab the Kenite as Moses' father in law; 1 Sam. 15:6 Kenites spared, but Amalekites killed; in contrast to the negative traditions cf. Gen. 4:11; Num. 24:21-22).

Aspects of the holy war

In the song of Deborah the verb ירד occurred four times (5:11.13×2.14), having not an adversative meaning ("marching down [to battle] against") as Stager argued[54], but suggesting that the Israelite militia are climbing down from the highland. But it is very interesting that the battle is fought not in the hill country, but "in Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo" (5:19)[55] and the initiative for the battle belonged to the Israelites, not to the Canaanites.

The warriors went to battle at the initiative of God. The verb נדב Hitp. (5:2.9) suggests the devotional participation in the holy war and the phrase בִּפְרֹעַ פְּרָעוֹת (5:2), literally "let the hair grow loosely" (cf. Lev. 13:45; 21:10; Num. 5:18; 6:5), could be understood too as devotional: "when men wholly dedicated themselves" for war (similar to the Arab verb *faragha*)[56]. The expression אַחֲרֶיךָ בִּנְיָמִין, quoted also in Hos. 5:8, might have been a war cry[57]. As observed by A. Hauser, the phrase "bless the Lord" (vv. 2, 9) appeared after the leaders and people of Israel are praised, underlining the association of divine and human actants. Also in v. 23, the cursing of Meroz is motivated by its reluctance to come to the help of the Lord[58]. All these elements confirm the ideological aspect of the holy war: it is propaganda, theology and reflects rather the political interests of the authors, not the realistic unfolding battle.

On the other hand the Song presents clearly the bone of contention as an economic one: "caravans ceased and travelers kept to the byways" (Judg. 5:6) and also the enigmatic פרזון ceased (5:7)[59]. If פרזון means indeed "unwalled village"[60]

---

[53] The rabbinical interpretation (*b.Yebamoth* 103a; *Horayoth* 10b; *Nazir* 23b) even suggest that Jael had sexual relation with Sisera. Cf. Yair Zakovitch, "Siseras Tod", *ZAW* 93 (1981), no. 3, p. 364-374.

[54] Lawrence E. Stager, "Archaeology, Ecology, and Social History: Background Themes to the Song of Deborah", in: J.A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress volume: Jerusalem, 1986*, Brill, Leiden, 1988 (VTSupp 40), p. 221-234 (226).

[55] The "waters of Megiddo" could be Qina stream, an affluent of Kishon river (Nahr al-Muqaṭṭa') cf. Hermann Michael Niemann, "Taanach und Megiddo: Überlegungen zur strukturell-historischen Situation zwischen Saul und Salomo", *VT* 52 (2002), no. 1, p. 93-102 (98).

[56] P.C. Craigie, "A Note on Judges V 2", *VT* 18 (1968), no. 3, p. 397-399. The supposition of Robert D. Miller II, "When Pharaohs Ruled: On the Translation of Judges 5:2", *JTS* n.s. 59 (2008), no. 2, p. 650-654 for translating "when pharaohs ruled" is too speculative lacking any philological base.

[57] M.D. Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis", p. 164.

[58] Alan J. Hauser, "Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5", in: Elaine R. Follis (ed.), *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1987, JSOTSupp 40, p. 265-281 (268).

[59] For the retaining of the verb חדל I and against the theory of חדל II cf. Theodore J. Lewis, "The Songs of Hannah and Deborah *HDL*-II ('Growing Plump'), *JBL* 104 (1985), no. 1, p. 105-108.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

(cf. פרזות as "dwelling without city walls, bars or gates" in Ezek. 38:11), then the Israelites have an affected rural population. But they are not limited to the villages, as the majority of scholars stressed, because "gates" (שְׁעָרִים) in 5:11, possibly in 5:8, implied a city life too. This aspect pleads against the too early dating of the poem (Iron I), when the settlements in the highland present poor economic issues. The Israelites are indeed poorly armed: "no shield or spear was seen among forty thousands in Israel" (5:8), against an enemy with war horses (5:22) and chariots (5:28×2), but on the other hand it is interesting that luxury booty was expected, such as silver (5:19) and ornate dyed cloth (5:30). Schloen advanced what he called the "caravan hypothesis" and considers that Israelite tribes from the central and the northern hills were very active serving as guards and donkey drivers allied with the Midianite, Kenites and Amalekite caravan traders. Because the Canaanites oppressed the caravans through "extortion of exorbitant tolls, or even outright plunder", the affected Israelite tribes participated in the battle of Kishon, while the pastoralist tribes, such as Reuben and Gilead, which did not share the same economic interests, stayed aside[61]. Through Sisera's killing by Jael, the Kenites defended their own economic interests, and the expression by which Jael is called, אֵשֶׁת חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי (5:24; cf. 4:11), could suggest according to Schloen the existence of a sort of "trading company of Kenites" (חבר)[62]. The economic reason to control the trade routes, as the west-to-east road from Dor to Beth-shean and the south-to-north road from Joppa to Hazor via Megiddo[63], is plausible, but Schloen's reconstruction goes far beyond the text of the Song.

Another element of the holy war ideology consists of the cosmic implication in the battle: the stars fought (נִלְחֲמוּ × 2) from heaven (5:20) and Kishon river swept them (the kings?) away (5:21). Most commentators following Blenkinsopp took into consideration the Ugaritic literature, where the stars are the sources of rain[64], and assumed that the stars combined their raining power with the forces of Kishon.

---

[60] Nadav Na'aman, "Amarna *ālāni pu-ru-zi* (EA 137) and Biblical *'ry hprzy/hprzwt* ('Rural Settlements')", *ZAH* 4 (1991), p. 72-75, reprinted in: *Canaan in the Second Millennium B.C.E.*, Collected Essays, vol. 2, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 2005, p. 280-284. But for P.C. Craigie, "Some Further Notes on the Song of Deborah", *VT* 22 (1972), no. 3, p. 349-353 (350), פָּרָזוֹן means as a collective noun, "warriors", from Arabic *baraza* "going forth in battle".

[61] J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 55 (1993), no. 1, p. 18-38. "No doubt, the caravans of the Song of Deborah kept to 'roundabout routes' (Judg. 5:6) in order to avoid excessive tolls" (p. 35).

[62] J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 55 (1993), no. 1, p. 18-38 (32). Even the place name אֵלוֹן בְּצַעֲנַנִּים could mean originally "the oak of the caravaneers" or "the oak where loading is done", becoming later simply a toponym, Elon-bezaanannim (cf. Josh. 19:33).

[63] E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary on the Book of Judges*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids / Handsel, Edinburgh, 1990, ITC, p. 82.

[64] J. Blenkinsopp, "Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah: A Discussion", *Bib* 42 (1961), no. 1, p. 61-76 (73). *[rbb] tskh kbkbm* cf. 'NT II:41, in: Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook: Grammar, Text in Translation, Cuneiform Selections, Glossary, Index*, revised reprint, Pontificio Istituto Bibliclo, Rome, 1998, p. 253. *[r]bb nskh kbkbm* cf. J.-L. Cunchillos et al., *The Texts of the Ugaritic Data Bank*, Hermeneumatics Lab, Madrid / Zaragoza.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

But the text says actually nothing about the stars pouring water, it rather presupposes in my understanding the astralization of the host of heaven, a concept well developed in the 8th century BCE[65].

As already said, the Israelites are poorly armed, while the Canaanites have at their disposal horses and chariots. It might reflect an old tradition of the conflicts between highlanders and city-states' lords, but it could be also a literary motif: the victory of the underdog through divine assistance.

I would suggest that Judg. 5:22 reflects an ingenious tactic used by the Israelites. The suppression of the direct object ("ground") and the preposition מ before "the gallop" drew attention[66], but commentators explained the verse as describing the incapacitation of the horses, whose fore hooves were flailed in the torrent of Kishon[67], or their retreat in panic.[68] In my opinion, 5:22 should be translated: "Then they hit the hooves of the horses from the galloping, the galloping of the stallions"[69], a tactic attested in other texts too. In the battle of Merom with king Jabin, Joshua hamstrung (עקר Pi.) the horses and burned the chariots with fire (Josh. 11:6.9) and later king David hamstrung (עקר Pi.) the chariot horses in the battle with Hadad-ezer ben Rehob from Aram-Zobah (2 Sam. 8:4; 1 Chr. 18:4). This strategy helped the poorly armed peasants to gain advantage only with agricultural tools such as hammers over the trained troops from the cities of the plain. Such a tradition might be indeed very old, being used by early highland chiefdoms whose traces were preserved in the biblical texts related with the conquest (Joshua, Deborah/Barak) and the legendary great kingdom (David).

Conclusion

The Song of Deborah might preserve an ancient tradition of Issachar and Zebulun about the battle of Kishon. The war reason was probably economic, but the folkloric milieu transformed it into an ideological holy war poem. It is doubtful that the present form of the Song preserves anything of the ancient text, except some ideas impossible to identify with certainty. The existing shape of the song is late, from the end of the 9th till the mid-8th centuries BCE, and belongs to the northern traditions that after 722 BCE were incorporated into the Judean traditions via Bethel.

---

[65] Cf. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia", in: Beate Pongratz-Leisten (ed.), *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 2011, p. 137-187.

[66] G.F. Moore, *Judges*, p. 161.

[67] Daniel I. Block, *Judges. Ruth*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, 1999, NAC 6, p. 238.

[68] Alan J. Hauser, "Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5", in: Elaine R. Follis (ed.), *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1987, JSOTSupp 40, p. 265-281 (277). Artur Weiser, "Das Deboralied: Eine gattungs- und traditionsgeschichtliche Studie", *ZAW* 30 (1959), no. 1, p. 67-97 (91). P.C. Craigie, "Some Further Notes on the Song of Deborah", *VT* 22 (1972), no. 3, p. 349-353 (352-353) proposed also a *double entendre*: אַבִּירָיו "stallions" might be also employed for chavarly "officers", who were forced to run on foot.

[69] A similar translation in LXX Alexandrinus: ἀπεκόπησαν πτέρναι ἵππου.

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

I saw no irrefutable literary dependence of Judg. 4 upon Judg. 5. Chapter 4 might be a parallel development of the old tradition. In fact Judg. 4 preserved the initial belligerents, i.e. the northern tribes of Issachar and Zebulun, while Judg. 5 reflected a later historical framework, after the conquest of the Omride dynasty.

The holy war poem aimed to establish the limits of the community: some tribes formed the core of the kingdom, others are passive members and, finally, foreigners such as Kenites and possibly Midian and Amalek helped Israel or were presented positively/neutrally. This tradition differs from other holy war narratives where the Midianites and the Amalekites embodied the fierce enemies.

Late post-exilic redactions of the book of the Judges embedded the Song of Deborah and the narrative account in ch. 4 in a more general composition about the early history of Israel. In those times the community identity was questioned in a serious way. In opposition to the segregationist directions represented by Ezra and Nehemiah, the tradents of Judg. 4-5 pointed out that also some Israelites tribes were reluctant to the Israel liberation wars of the past and that on the other hand foreigners could be more attentive.

Selective bibliography

Bechman, Ulrike, 1989, *Das Deboralied zwischen Geschichte und Fiktion: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu Richter 5*, EOS, St. Ottilien, 1989, DiTh 33

Blenkinsopp, J., 1961, "Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah: A Discussion", *Bib* 42 (1961), no. 1, p. 61-76

Block, Daniel I., 1999 *Judges. Ruth*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, NAC 6

Boling, Robert G., 1975, *Judges*, Doubleday, New York, AB 6A

Butler, Trent C., 2009, *Judges*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, WBC 8

Coogan, Michael David, 1978, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), no. 2, p. 143-165

de Hoop, Raymond, 2009, "Judges 5 Reconsidered: Which Tribes? What Land? Whose Song?", in: Jacques van Ruiten / J. Cornelis de Vos (ed.), *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology: Studies in Honour of Ed Noort*, Brill, Leiden / Boston, VTSupp 124, p. 151-164

Frolov, Serge, 2011, "How Old Is the Song of Deborah?", *JSOT* 36 (2011), no. 2, p. 163-184

Frolov, Serge, 2013, *Judges*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, FOTL 6B

Guillaume, Philippe, 2000, "Deborah and the Seven Tribes", *BN* 101 (2000), p. 18-21

Halpern, Barcuh, 1983, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography", *HTR* 76 (1983), no. 4, p. 379-401

Knauf, Ernst Axel, 2005, "Deborah's Language: Judges Ch. 5 in its Hebrew and Semitic Context", in: Bogdan Burtea / Josef Tropper / Helen Younansardaroud (ed.), *Studia Semitica et Semitohamitica: FS für Rainer Vogt*, Ugarit-Verlag, Münster, AOAT 317, p. 167-182

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)

Levin, Christoph, 2003, "Das Alter des Deboralieds", in: *Fortschreibungen: Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, de Gruyter, Berlin, p. 124-141

Lindars, Barnabas, 1995, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh

Müller, Hans-Peter, 1966, "Der Aufbau des Deboraliedes", *VT* 16 (1966), no. 4, p. 446-459

Na'aman, Nadav, 1990, "Literary and Topographical Notes on the Battle of Kishon (Judges IV-V)", *VT* 40 (1990), no. 4, p. 423-436, reprinted in: *Canaan in the Second Millennium B.C.E.*, Collected Essays, vol. 2, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 2005, p. 303-316

Niditch, Susan, 2008, *Judges*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, OTL

Schloen, J. David, 1993, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 55 (1993), no. 1, p. 18-38

Stager, Lawrence E., 1988, "Archaeology, Ecology, and Social History: Background Themes to the Song of Deborah", in: J.A. Emerton (ed.), Congress volume: Jerusalem, 1986, Brill, Leiden, (VTSupp 40), p. 221-234

Waltisberg, Michael, 1999, "Zum Alter der Sprache des Deboraliedes Ri 5", *ZAH* 12 (1999), no. 2, p. 218-232

Weiser, Artur, 1959, "Das Deboralied: Eine gattungs- und traditionsgeschichtliche Studie", *ZAW* 30 (1959), no. 1, p. 67-97

Wright, Jacob L., 2011a, "War Commemoration and the Interpretation of Judges 5:15b-17", *VT* 61 (2011), no. 3, p. 505-521

Wright, Jacob L., 2011b, "Deborah's War Memorial: The Composition of Judges 4-5 and the Politics of War Commemoration", *ZAW* 123 (2011), no. 4, p. 516-534

BDD-A212 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:55 UTC)