

The Rational Poet: Appealing to the Heart and the Mind in the Book of Judges

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Not a single book of the Hebrew scriptures lacks what most of us would label “poetry”—an elevated form of speech that tends to be shorter, imagery-laden, and highly repetitive. Poetic language, such as the Song of Deborah in the book of Judges, is foundational to Hebrew expression, just as it was to the ancient Near East more broadly. This may seem foreign to contemporary readers, especially those in the West, for whom poetic discourse is a very small part of their normal parlance. Many of us lack the basic literacy to engage well with poetry.

An additional complication to engaging meaningfully with the poetry of the Hebrew bible is the popular characterization of poetry as an especially “emotional” form of expression. On the one hand, popular entertainment characterizes poetry as the language of romance; on the other, resources on biblical literature have themselves contributed to this impression. Take, for example, these observations from two popular textbooks on biblical interpretation:

“[T]he poet wants us to experience his topic—to feel the cold of that particular night. So his words appeal not so much to our reason as to our imagination.”¹

“Poetry is a more affective (emotional) type of discourse than ordinary expository discourse.”²

To be clear, the claims above are not *false*; however, when we totalize such statements, fueled in part by our own cultural presuppositions, we run the risk of reducing Hebrew poetry to a means of emotive expression and miss out on the rich intellectual tradition it represents.

Poetry as an Appeal to Reason

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that poetry is an appeal to *reason* just as much as it is an appeal to emotion. Fundamentally, poetry is an appeal to the listener or reader to perceive and act in the world in a particular way. Before exploring the example of the Song of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5:1–31), two clarifications are in order.

First: Poetry is not monolithic. To speak of “biblical poetry” is, admittedly, not precise. The poetry of the Hebrew Bible is varied not only in its form, but in its length, subject matter, patterns of repetition, and overall intent. Different kinds of poetry in different contexts function differently. The example here is a poem embedded in a narrative context.

Second: To claim that poetry appeals to reason does not exclude appeals to emotion. It is worth noting that a variety of modes of discourse—both ancient and modern—wed emotional and rational pleas in an attempt to *persuade*. A modern legal case is an example: a lawyer’s closing statement appeals to the heart as much as the head. Interpreters err when they attempt to argue that poetry is *merely* emotional.

The Prophet’s Song in the Book of Judges

Judges 5 is the perfect poem to challenge our preconceptions about poetry and its effect. The Song of Deborah (and Barak, who sings also; Judg 5:1) is an



¹ William W. Klein, et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 275.

² Leland Ryken, *Sweeter than Honey, Richer than Gold: A Guided Study of Biblical Poetry*. Reading the Bible as Literature (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 27.

ideal starting point to explore the phenomenon of Hebrew poetry, because it recounts a battle for which a narrative is *also* included. Two accounts sit side-by-side at a critical juncture in the book of Judges—one in prose (4:1–23) and the second in poetic line (5:2–30). Scores of studies have been written about these two pieces and their compositional history, relationship, and historical veracity.

Of interest to us is how the poem functions in its context. One especially brilliant interpreter of Judges has helpfully articulated a common sentiment about the unique contribution of Judges 5: “This is after all a song, an impressionistic literary portrait, rather than a historical narrative. Driven by emotion, it is pervaded by figurative language.”³

While the song is certainly stirring, evocative, and rhetorically powerful, as we shall see, it is also evaluative, theologically robust, historical, and persuasive. In its context, the primary function of the song of Deborah and Barak is to theologically reframe the Kishon Battle—as an exemplar of the battles of the period—so as to instruct and challenge a beleaguered people to keep expecting their faithful God to rescue them in their moments of distress.

The poem unfolds in three parts. The first (5:2–8) describes the condition of Israel before the start of the Kishon Battle:

- 2 “When the princes in Israel take the lead,
when the people willingly offer themselves—
praise the Lord!
- 3 “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!
I, even I, will sing to[a] the Lord;
I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song.
- 4 “When you, Lord, went out from Seir,
when you marched from the land of Edom,
the earth shook, the heavens poured,
the clouds poured down water.
- 5 The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,
before the Lord, the God of Israel.
- 6 “In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned;
travelers took to winding paths.
- 7 Villagers in Israel would not fight;
they held back until I, Deborah, arose,
until I arose, a mother in Israel.
- 8 God chose new leaders
when war came to the city gates,
but not a shield or spear was seen
among forty thousand in Israel.”

Here, the poet appeals to Israel’s historical memory of Sinai and the covenant relationship they undertook with the powerful deity there (4–5). But more pressingly, the situation at the start of the battle was one of complete dilapidation (6–7a): highways were abandoned, travel was sparse, and commerce was at a halt. No one was functioning normally until God sent a prophet to muster a general and an army to battle (7b). Even then the situation was dire—Israel was vastly out-gunned by the armies of Canaan, which wielded chariots reinforced by iron (5:8; 4:3). The imagery here is not metaphorical but concrete, and clarifies a simple, abstract statement offered in the narrative account: “[Sisera] oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years” (4:3).

³ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*. Vol. 6. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 217.

The second (and most extensive) portion of the poem (5:9–23) describes the battle itself. The first of these sections recounts and evaluates the actions of all of those involved in the Kishon conflict. Verses 9–13 offer a celebratory account of what transpired, highlighting that the participants came willingly and acted righteously:

9 My heart is with Israel's princes,
with the willing volunteers among the people.
Praise the Lord!
10 "You who ride on white donkeys,
sitting on your saddle blankets,
and you who walk along the road,
consider
11 the voice of the singers[b] at the watering places.
They recite the victories of the Lord,
the victories of his villagers in Israel.
"Then the people of the Lord
went down to the city gates.
12 'Wake up, wake up, Deborah!
Wake up, wake up, break out in song!
Arise, Barak!
Take captive your captives, son of Abinoam.'
13 "The remnant of the nobles came down;
the people of the Lord came down to me against the mighty."

The next verses, however, juxtapose two sets of Israelites: those who answered the call to battle (14–15, 18) and those who did not (16–17). Finally, in verses 19–23 the poet describes the battle theologically, using imagery ("the stars from their courses," 20) to argue that the most triumphant of the warriors was YHWH, who used the very forces of nature to bring victory. Like the narrative account, the song assures its listeners that "YHWH routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword" (4:15).

The final portion of the poem (5:24–30) features two vignettes: one of Jael and her tent (5:24–27) and a second of Sisera's mother in her fortified home (5:28–30):

28 "Through the window peered Sisera's mother;
behind the lattice she cried out,
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?'
29 The wisest of her ladies answer her;
indeed, she keeps saying to herself,
30 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils:
a woman or two for each man,
colorful garments as plunder for Sisera,
colorful garments embroidered,
highly embroidered garments for my neck—
all this as plunder?'"

The two scenes stand in stark contrast: in the first, the strong general is slain by a vulnerable woman; in the second, Sisera's household daydreams about how he would conquer (even sexually) vulnerable women and bring them back as spoil. The contrast is rhetorically effective: the physically and sexually vulnerable conquers the conquerer, whose fortifications, day dreams, and war machines are no match for the God of Israel, who empowers the weakest for his purposes.

Given such a contrast, and the miraculous victory offered by YHWH, the composer (the prophet!) concludes the song with a challenge: those who fail to align themselves with Israel's God perish, but whoever is faithful and committed to him would go forth like the sunrise in all of its might (5:31).

The rhetorical power of the Song of Deborah and Barak is undeniable. Its imagery is at times poignant, and at others uplifting. The poet celebrates, laments, and criticizes, using every tool at her disposal to draw the audience in to her appraisal of the battle, including, but not limited to emotional appeals (e.g., 5:21: "March on, my soul, with might!"). However, the song is far from a simple emotive retelling of a stirring story. Instead, as a prophetic voice with the authority of a divine emissary, Deborah (with Barak) reinterprets the events that had just transpired to address a theological shortsightedness among the Hebrews. Barak, like Gideon after him, was under the faulty impression that it would be under his leadership and on the field of battle, by means of the talents of his army and the weapons they wielded that Israel would secure victory. Deborah corrected this perspective twice: prospectively, in her clarification that it would be in a completely different location and by a different hand that YHWH would bring victory (4:9) and then retrospectively, in the form of a song.

As such, the Song of Deborah joins several other poems embedded in narrative contexts (Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32, 1 Samuel 2) that provide crucial interpretive guidance for the surrounding context. Judges 5 clarifies what was implicit in Judges 1–3: the God of Israel could overcome the mightiest of foes with the weakest of instruments. With its evaluative slant, the song highlights a dynamic from the introduction of Judges, namely, that the wars of the pre-monarchic period served as tests of the people's faithfulness and exclusive devotion to YHWH (3:4). Only when the people were convinced of their deity's saving power and covenant faithfulness would they overcome their fear of the surrounding people and entrust themselves entirely to his care.

Judges 5 as Theological Reasoning

It is the unique quality of Hebrew poetry—its images, repetition, terseness, and vocabularic freedom—that best clarifies the state of affairs after the Kishon Battle. Simultaneously celebratory and convicting, this poem says explicitly what narrative can only intimate and argues forcefully what prose can only state. Judges 5 is evocative, certainly, but its aim is a shift in *theological reasoning*.

As anyone familiar with the book of Judges knows, the perceptual clarification that the prophet offers in Judges 5 falls on deaf ears. A handful of verses later, with the Song of Deborah still echoing from the Jezreel Valley—a song that assured God's people he was still saving them with all of the might and wonder of the Exodus!—Gideon says:

"Where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian" (6:13).

What was challenging and celebratory, then, becomes condemnatory in the ongoing narrative. The song is now the means by which Gideon's theological blindness is highlighted. Far from a simple victory song, an emotional outpouring, or an artistic soliloquy, Judges 5 is crucial part of its narrative context, drawing a line in the sand and highlighting a sharp downturn in the faithfulness of God's people. In many ways, Judges 5 is the theological, narrational, and hermeneutical core of Judges.