

Listening Carefully to the Bible:

The Many Voices in Deborah's Story and Song

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Students often approach the familiar stories of the Bible wondering what more they can learn from texts they have been reading since childhood. As teachers, we face the challenge of getting students to focus on the text itself, without being overly influenced by the preconceptions and interpretations that have become attached to these stories through centuries of retelling and commentary.

One day, early in the history of ancient Israel, men and women gathered in the hill country of Palestine with their timbrels and harps to celebrate the victory of Yahweh over the gods of Canaan. Their voices can still be heard in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5).

In Judges 4, the narrator invokes the standardized formula of disobedience and deliverance established earlier in Judges (i.e., Chapter 2: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”). Then, as the pattern leads us to expect, the Israelites “cried out to the Lord”

for deliverance from Jabin and his 900 chariots of iron. Out of the communal clamor, we can distinguish the voices of individuals: Deborah speaks to Barak; Barak speaks to Deborah. Their dialogue leads to other dialogues—between (1) Jael and Sisera, (2) Jael and Barak, and (3) Sisera’s mother and her wise ladies of the court. Within the story, we also find voices cited indirectly. Finally, bringing all these voices together in concert are the voices of the storyteller and the poet.

BY BEVERLY BEEM AND DOUGLAS R. CLARK

Listening to Stories

Is there anything we can learn by listening carefully to the varied voices that appear in a story like that of Deborah? Is it possible that we might find here, as elsewhere in the Bible, levels of voices, harmonizing together? Like a choir, the voices blend together with occasional solo parts (even if some are slightly off-key). If we better understood the individual parts, would this increase our appreciation of the final choral performance and help us more clearly understand the mind of the composer? Yes! And here is why.

Perceptive readers quickly learn that what seems like a simple Bible story, with a familiar, straightforward plot line and few details, is actually a narrative rich in complexity and depth. Erich Auerbach, in an essay

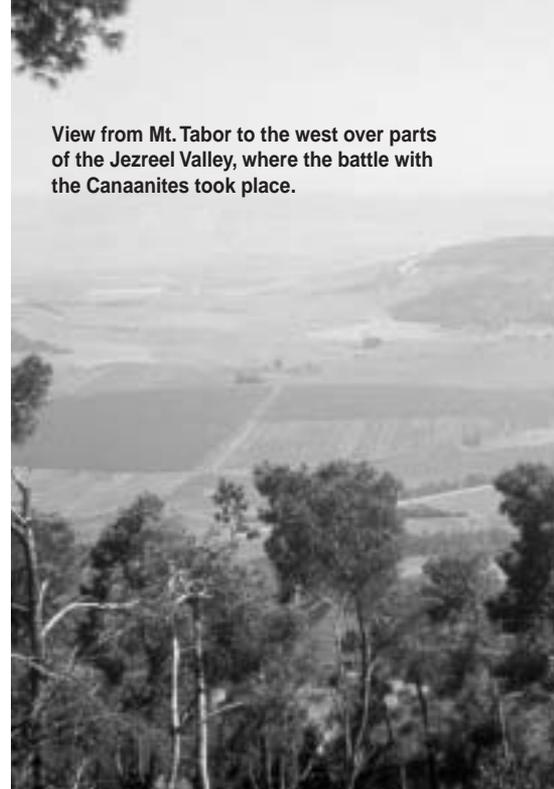
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called “Odysseus’ Scar,” explains how a sparse narrative can offer richer meaning than a fully developed one with many details. To demonstrate, he contrasts the Hebrew narrative style (illustrated by the

shadowed in the background, the Hebrew narrator leaves much in the shadows, giving the reader only carefully selected details—each carrying great meaning. No detail is gratuitous. The challenge for the reader is to discover the purpose.²

The tools of literary analysis can help the reader with this task. Kenneth Gros Louis, a literary scholar who has often turned his attention to biblical narratives, describes the process required. He begins by reading the text six to eight times, writing summaries and “summaries of the summary” until he becomes so immersed in the text that he breaks through the sense of over-familiarity. He examines each action, speech, motif, and image “to see when one action or speech is an echo of another, when one scene is related to another.” By attending to details and their relationships, he begins to see the “small changes that might occur in the repetitions and thus to begin to answer the question: Why is there repetition at all? Is it used for emphasis? to accelerate the action? to emphasize attitudes? to

View from Mt. Tabor to the west over parts of the Jezreel Valley, where the battle with the Canaanites took place.



attitude, tone or language, motives for a character’s action or a narrative intrusion or digression, [and] reasons for placing a scene where it is.”³

This method helps readers see the text in new ways. What may, at first glance, have seemed like an incidental detail or a pointless repetition, on closer examination becomes a key to the meaning of the story.

Listening to Voices in Stories

By using literary theory, narrative analysis, and biblical studies, we can learn a great deal as we listen to the voices in the text and pay close attention to detail. While enthusiastically affirming the divine credentials behind and throughout the text, we can make exciting discoveries by close reading of the text. We find a range of easily traceable human voices recorded by inspired authors and editors, who use a variety of literary conventions as they transform oral stories into written records.

How do we make these discoveries? By listening to the varied voices embedded within narratives and at different levels of the story, as well as those that were inserted during the process by which the story came to us. By approaching this quest from inside a story, we notice sev-



A modern Bedouin tent illustrates the Middle Eastern tradition of providing hospitality and protection.

story of the binding of Isaac), with that of the Greeks (illustrated by the recognition scene in Homer’s *Odyssey*). While the Greek storyteller typically illumines every detail, leaving no gesture, motive, tool, setting, or speech unexplained or

reveal a new aspect of a character or of the action? to foreshadow later action?” This close reading of a text also helps him notice other elements in the story, particularly the “development of character, changes in a character’s situation or



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eral levels of voice communication. The most easily recognized of these is (1) *the quoted voice*, cited directly or indirectly. But who is quoting these voices? (2) *The voices of narrators* (in the story of Deborah, a storyteller and a poet); the *authors* who created them; and *the voices of editors/compiler*s of stories like those in the Book of Judges. In addition, we hear (3) the subtle *voices of the receivers*, specifically the audience to/for whom the story was told/written, sometimes called the implied audience, as well as the people who are hearing/reading the story now. Above and beyond this choir of voices there is (4) *the voice of God*. In Deborah's story, God is not often quoted directly. How do we hear His voice above and through this chorus? By looking at each of these four levels of voices operating in a narrative, we can see how they work together, each contributing something unique and indispensable.

1. By quoting direct speech, the author can slow the progress of the narrative, giving space for the audience to reflect and absorb important information, as well as react sympathetically to the action. Through words spoken by the characters, authors carefully reveal the story's central ideas and sentiments. Robert Alter explains, "Spoken language is the substratum of everything human and divine that transpires in the Bible, and . . . is finally a technique for getting

at the essence of things."⁴ Authors can use many rhetorical devices to clarify a concept or set an atmosphere. Most biblical storytellers speak and write, in the words of Alter, "with a sense of great spiritual urgency."⁵

2. Behind these more obvious voices, if we read carefully, we will hear a chorus of other voices. First, the narrator. As Shimon Bar-Efrat puts it, "in narrative the narrator exists alongside the characters, and the narrator's voice is heard as well as theirs."⁶ In fact, he goes on to say, "We see and hear only through the narrator's eyes and ears."⁷

Behind the narrator is an author, who uses a number of strategies to ensure that his or her voice comes through. While the narrator directs traffic, helping us keep track of what is happening and who is speaking, the author helps us understand the meaning and significance of the story. The narrative reveals a complex relationship between author and narrator, discernible through close reading.

Behind the author is yet another, more subtle voice—that of the editor(s). Editors are responsible for maintaining a common perspective and explaining what is not otherwise clear to hearers/readers removed from the original story. The Book of Judges reflects editorial activity, for example, in the six-part literary pattern apparent throughout the book: Israel sinned; the Lord raised up an enemy against them; Israel suffered oppression for a period of time; Israel cried to the Lord for deliverance; the Lord raised up a deliverer judge; Israel enjoyed a period of prosperity.

As part of a larger collection, the so-called deuteronomistic history (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), the book also reflects a common theological perspective on acts and their

consequences—Israel reaps what it sows. It is called "deuteronomistic" because its theological core comes from the Book of Deuteronomy, with its strong emphasis on obedience (with its rewards) and disobedience (with its disastrous results). By paying careful attention, watching for small clues and often nearly hidden literary seams, we will hear the voices of the editors and compilers.

In addition, as many literary specialists remind us, there is another set of voices not inherent in the story itself, but (3) in front of it, on our side. It is often significant, for two reasons: First, ancient biblical stories and songs were performed publicly and communally with active audience participation, emphasizing the wider community's role in understanding and appreciation. Second, modern reader-response studies remind us that we all bring personal perceptions to what we read, and these help shape what we hear from these stories and songs.

The human voices in these three categories come to us through writing and editing processes done mostly by men in urban settings. The voices of women and children, and virtually everyone among the rural poor (who made up the largest segment of ancient Israelite society) are less directly accessible. This makes the story of Deborah especially significant, as it is one place where the voices of women are heard and remembered.

Hearing the Voice of God in the Narrative

(4) The final voice to people of faith is the word of God. Literary analysis opens our ears to a variety of voices within, behind, and in front of the story. Close reading of the text reveals details and nuances that might otherwise be overlooked. But does any of this contribute to our devotional lives?

We think so. In fact, we believe a close reading not only contributes to a

more responsible understanding of the Bible, but also to a deeper appreciation for it as God's Word to us today as well as to the ancient Israelites. Narrative conveys theology through both its content and literary forms. Irony, satire, ambiguity, paradox—these carry theological truths, and only the attentive listener/reader will “get it.”

In addition to close reading of the text, we recommend a type of devotional reading known as *lectio divina*—reflective spiritual reading. Gros Louis suggests reading Bible stories over and over again, day after day, listening each time for something missed previously, some gem or idea that can tune us into God's voice

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they thrive under God's blessing, but when they turn to other gods, God leaves them to their enemies until they cry to Him for deliverance; then God raises up a judge and delivers them. This formula conveys the editor's message while organizing the stories of the major judges. Each one illustrates the deuteronomic promise that as long as Israel obeys, it will live. But a formula is not a story. When King Jabin and his commander Sisera appear, the text moves from historical commentary into narrative.

Embedded in the formulaic opening is another voice, that of the Israelites who “cried out to the Lord for help,” because their oppressors had 900 chariots of iron—clear evidence of the hopelessness of their cause. We hear their voices only indirectly and as a group, crying to the Lord. Their voice has the tone of desperation, for their oppressors are great, as is their apostasy. Their audience is the Lord, whom they have abandoned, but who alone can deliver.

From then on, we hear the Israelites as individuals, beginning with Deborah, a prophetess and judge and “woman of flame” (as some would define her title—also, the wife of Lappidoth) who “used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim.” Deborah's voice is not disembodied but rooted in time and place. Behind the narrator is the voice of the historian, who chooses details that prepare us to hear the voice of this woman of flame.

The verbs that describe Deborah's actions also provide the setting for her speech: She “sent and summoned” Barak of Kedesh in Naphtali, and repeated to him the words of the Lord. Through Deborah, God commanded Barak to go to war against the commander of the Canaanite armies with their 900 chariots of iron. God also prescribed the battle strategy, the location, and the participants of the conflict. Speaking in the first person, God says, “I will draw out Sisera . . . and I will give him into your hand.”

Barak does not respond to God but to Deborah. He offers his own strategy: The prophetess and judge of Israel will put her life on the line and go with him into battle. She agrees but describes the consequences of his plan. God will in-



The central hill country of ancient Israel, where Deborah judged the people.

in new and ever fresh ways. By means of this spiritual discipline, we open ourselves to insights not accessible to the casual eavesdropper on the story.

Following the Voices in the Story of Deborah

To demonstrate how an awareness of the voices in a text can enrich one's reading of a biblical narrative, let's listen to the voices encountered in the story and song of Deborah, taking them in the order they are heard.

The Narrative Account

The story begins with the voice of

the narrator, invoking the formula established by an editor in the second chapter of the book: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The Lord then allows them to fall into the hands of their enemies, in this case, King Jabin of Canaan. The narrator tells us that he reigned in Hazor, one of the mighty cities of the Canaanites, and that Sisera was the commander of his army.

Behind this narrative voice is the voice of the editor, who has collected these stories from the early days and interpreted them according to the deuteronomistic understanding of Israel's history. As long as the people of Israel obey God,

deed deliver Israel, but because of his detour from God's words, the victory will not result in glory for the warrior Barak. Instead, God will "sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." This statement opens the way for a new character, which will surprise the reader, who assumes that Deborah is speaking of herself.

Barak next speaks as the commander who "summoned" the 10,000 warriors of Zebulun and Naphtali to go to war behind him and Deborah. The narrative could proceed to the victory of Barak, but the narrator has to prepare the way for the woman alluded to in Deborah's speech, in giving her a setting in time and space. He intrudes into the narrative with a brief history lesson reminding the reader of Barak's lack of faith and of the origin and location of the Kenites. These words seem to intrude into the flow of the story, but unfolding events will reveal their importance.

The movement of Israel's 10,000 warriors does not escape the notice of Sisera, and an unidentified voice tells him that an army has gathered at Mount Tabor. Deborah utters the call to war with the one word: "Up!"

The next voice we hear is that of Jael: "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." Warrior and woman meet. Deborah has prepared the way for her entrance; the narrator has explained her identity. Her dialogue is filled with suspense and irony. She speaks words of safety to the fleeing general (as expected in a world of tent hospitality for peoples connected by treaties), and he responds with action. She invites him to "turn aside," and he does so. His only words are a request spoken from guest to host, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty," and a twofold command. He tells Jael to stand guard and says: "If anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?'" say, "No.""

But Jael has her own voice. Her actions prepare the way for her words. She

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The stream Kishon in the Jezreel Valley, where the chariots of iron bogged down due to the storm.

"took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died."

Israel is victorious. The Lord has overthrown Sisera and his chariots of iron, but it is Jael who receives the honor for administering the coup de grace. She tells the pursuing Barak: "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." Ironically, Sisera has told her to speak the truth. There is indeed no man there, only a corpse. The narrator closes the narrative by explaining its significance: "So on that day God subdued

King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites."

The narrator has told the story through action and dialogue. We have heard the direct speech of Deborah, Barak, Jael, Sisera, and God and the indirect speech of the people of Israel. His account creates in the theological—Israel sins, and God delivers. An editor from a later time recounts and explains the action to the Israelites, and ultimately to people today.

The Poetic Account

The prose account of the war against Sisera captures the suspense of the action and its significance in the history of Is-

Gros Louis suggests reading Bible stories over and over again, day after day, listening each time for something missed previously, some gem or idea that can tune us into God's voice in new and ever fresh ways.

rael. But it is the poetry, seen by most Old Testament scholars as perhaps the earliest poetry in the Bible, springing up on the day of victory, that captures the joy and emotion of the events. The story is retold, this time by the voice of the poet, not the historian.

The historian's voice gives way to the voice of celebration, in the form of song. No explanation is needed. While the historian describes the conflict between Barak and Sisera as a war between chariots of iron and marching armies, the poet envisions the battle in terms of God's actions on humans and nature. God "went out from Seir," "marched from the region of Edom," and made the earth tremble. When the kings come to fight, their chariots of iron pale into insignificance against the waters of Kishon that "swept them away." Utilizing the power of metaphor, God marches into battle, using as weapons the stars that "fought from heaven" and the "onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon."

There are many voices in this song and many audiences. The singers are the people of Israel, from the elite who "ride on white donkeys" and "sit on rich carpets" to the poor who "walk by the way." God's victories are praised throughout Israel by the "musicians at

the watering places." They sing in concert, as "down to the gates marched the people of the Lord." All the voices of Israel are raised in song, but one by one, various voices come out as solos that address various audiences.

Although they are singing to the Lord, the singers call the kings and princes, the powers of the Earth, to "give ear" as Israel celebrates God's power. Their praise becomes a blessing on those who fought with God and a curse on those who shirked their duty.

The song is history in the present tense. There are words of praise and taunt. Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, Zebulun, and Issachar are commended for rushing out on the heels of Barak. But the singers contemptuously describe Reuben tarrying by the sheepfolds, with "great searchings of heart," listening not for the battle cry of Deborah but the "piping for the flocks." They contrast Dan (abiding with the ships); Gilead (staying safe beyond the Jordan); and Asher (sitting still by the sea, beyond the reach of battle), with the faithful people of Zebulun and Naphtali who "scorned death . . . on the heights of the field."

The words of praise and taunt that sweep over the tribes of Israel finally settle on two women. The encounter between the first woman, Jael, and Sisera is transformed from history to song. The direct speech between the two characters in the later historical account is related in the parallel lines of a song: "He asked water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl."

The song focuses on the moment when Jael kills Sisera: "She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet." And with that, in the intensified parallel lines of Hebrew poetry, "she struck . . . she crushed . . . she shattered and pierced." The singers glory in the power of the moment. The death of Sisera is here turned into a dance, with the sleeping general depicted as upright and falling at the feet of a woman. The death dance is drawn out to seven verbs: "he sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead."

The song does not end with the death of Sisera; the Israelite singer's imagination strays over national boundaries

to imagine the palace where Sisera's mother, the second woman, is peering out the window. She is waiting for her son to return in his iron chariot, bringing with him the spoil of battle—dyed stuffs embroidered by the women of Israel to decorate her neck, and Israelite women brought as spoils of war, "a girl or two for every man." She is waiting and wondering, "Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?" The singers know the answer, and they delight in her surprise. The wisest ladies of the court answer her question—or they start to, but their voice is left hanging in the air, replaced by more words from Sisera's mother, who is not to be deprived of her own voice: "Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?" The answer is clear to the wise ladies of the court, and the singers of Israel delight in her discomfiture.

The song ends by extending the blessing and the curse to all, including the reader. However, the editor of the story and song of Deborah offers one final word about what happens when God delivers: "And the land had rest forty years."

Sorting Out All the Voices in the Story

We believe that voices in literature are worth hearing, especially in biblical literature—whether cited, sung, narrated, edited, or reported. Each voice conveys strong convictions, often expressed in creative ways in order to persuade listeners/readers of something important. Listening to these voices and understanding their place in story and song leads us to see their meaning for the audience that first heard them, and to hear the voice of God as it speaks through these texts to readers today.

By listening to the quoted characters in the story/song, we are drawn into the essence of the account. Human preparations for war mask stark terror as the Israelites face overwhelming force and years of oppression. Those quoted voices also reveal the exuberant celebrations of victory accomplished through the ruse of a (mis)spoken invitation to hospitality. Interestingly, we hear no confessions of sin, only pleading to escape oppression, followed by songs of unbridled joy at God's victorious march from Seir. Blessing and

curse, praise and taunt, conveying God's good will toward His people and judgment on enemies so insolent as to dream, like Sisera's mother, of smashing successes against Israel and its God.

By paying attention to the voices of narrator and poet, of author and editor, we become aware of the variety of concerns addressed by the inspired Bible writers. Dialogue and action coalesce by means of these voices to communicate history and doxology—history in the events of battle, and doxology through metaphors for the divine march amid earthly and heavenly forces. And the editor(s) places it all within the context of an overarching theological theme of actions and their consequences.

Thus, we find varied lessons in the varied levels of voices, which enrich biblical stories with multiple applications. These can be found through repeated close readings of the Bible stories. By fol-

lowing Gros Louis' advice, cited above, we can always learn something new from these stories and, at the same time, avoid the temptation of replacing the story with our own interpretations.

Through a close reading of the Bible, we can open ourselves more completely to God's voice, mediated through the voices of characters, narrators, poets, writers, and editors of His Word. ✍



Beverly Beem

Beverly Beem, Ph.D. (*Renaissance Literature*), a Professor of English at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington, is currently doing research in biblical narrative and early Adventist spirituality. Dr. Beem has traveled extensively with Dr. Clark,

her coauthor, and his wife, Carmen, and with small groups in Israel and Jordan, tracking down and studying the sites connected with the Book of Judges. **Douglas R. Clark, Ph.D.** (*Old Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*), is Executive



Douglas R. Clark

Director of the American Schools of Oriental Research, a Boston, Massachusetts-based North American organization of scholars doing/studying archaeology in the Middle East. Dr. Clark is also Co-director of the Madaba Plains Project excavations

at Tall al-'Umayri, Jordan, and has been published widely on a range of biblical and archaeological topics, with special interest in the text and time of the Judges.

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Phoenician woman in a window, reminiscent of the mother of Sisera, awaiting his return from the battle.