

Deborah as a Leader

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Deborah's leadership. Deborah was a judge during the pre-monarchic period. Deborah's leadership is evaluated according to three requirements for a good leader. These requirements imply that a good leader maintains a God-oriented perspective, keeps sound relationship with God and humans, and gives priority to communal interests over personal interests. According to these requirements, Deborah is rated as a successful leader. In the Deborah narrative, Deborah's leadership was revealed when Deborah participated in the war against the Canaanites. Before the war, Deborah prepared for it by obeying God's words and by encouraging faint-hearted Barak to go to war. When the war broke, Deborah was sure of the Israelites' victory even though the Israelites were weaker than the Canaanites. After the war, Deborah was not interested in taking the plunder and spoils, but praised God. Therefore, Deborah's attitude before the war indicates her good relationships with God and humans. Her attitude during the war indicates her God-oriented perspective. Her attitude after war indicates her precedence over communal interest.

Keywords: Deborah, leadership, relationships, perspectives, and interests

Introduction

The motto of the school where I have been teaching is "to educate Christian leaders who transform this world." In this motto, Christian leaders include both

female and male students, but the educational emphasis has to be more on the female students than the male students because the former outnumbers the latter. About eighty percent of registered students are female in my school.

Who can be a good model for the female students? Although there are many outstanding leaders in the Bible, this paper chooses Deborah as a model because Deborah was a national female leader for the Israelites as well as a successful leader.

The Deborah narrative is in the book of Judges. This book is about judges, but it is also filled with many female characters. Klein categorizes the women in the book of Judges according to how mature they are and how positive their attitudes are. Deborah is described as one of mature and positive characteristics.¹

When we try to analyze Deborah as a leader, three questions arise. First, was it really possible for a woman to serve as a judge? As we know, the national leaders for the Israelites were all men except Deborah. Second, were there any analogies between Deborah and a female warrior in Canaanite myth? Was Deborah a Canaanite goddess in Israel? In the Canaanite myth, there was always a female counterpart of a supreme god, but in the Bible there were not any goddesses. Third, was Deborah a good leader? Deborah's leadership will be evaluated by three attributes of a leader that was proposed by Park.²

A Female Judge?

¹ Lillian R. Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges," In *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 33.

² Young Ran Park, "What are the Attributes of a Biblical Leader?" *Journal of Christian Education & Information Technology* 15 (April 2009): 135-146.

Deborah was the one and only woman among twelve judges. How could a woman serve as a judge in the pre-monarchic period? The most obvious fact during this period is that a centralized political system and political or religious hierarchy did not exist.³ In addition, women's roles were not limited only in domestic areas: "With households managed by women, the decisions made by them will have great social impact. In short, female power will be as significant as male power, and perhaps even greater."⁴ This quotation reveals that women could be a judge during the pre-monarchic period.

With regard to Deborah, a noteworthy fact is that Deborah is mentioned only in Judges. In 1 Samuel 12:11, Jerub-Baal, Barak, and Jephthah are mentioned. In Hebrew 11:32, Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah are mentioned. Why is Deborah removed? Why is Barak replaced? In regard to these omissions, Block argues that Deborah was not a judge, but a prophet.⁵ Furthermore, Deborah was different from other judges. When the Israelites cried out to God, God raised judges such as Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, who saved the Israelites. However, Deborah was neither raised by God nor saved the Israelites.⁶

Against Block's claim, Amit (1987) argues that "the mention of Deborah after the crying-out stage means she was chosen to be the savior."⁷ Between two opposite

³ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 140; Lelia Leah Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?: The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources." In *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 72.

⁴ Meyers, 176.

⁵ Daniel I. Block, "Why Deborah's Different," *Bible Review* 17 (June 2001): 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ Yairah Amit, "Judges 4: its contents and form," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39

stands, Amit's assertion seems to be more reasonable.

There is a typical pattern that prevails in the book of Judges: (a) the Israelite did evil in the eyes of God; (b) God punished them by handing over to an oppressor; (c) the Israelite cried out to God; (d) God saved them by subduing the oppressor; (e) The Israelites lived in peace. In the cycle between (c) and (d), God raised up a judge to save the Israelites.

In the Deborah narrative, the Israelites were afflicted by the Canaanite for 20 years (Judges 4:3). Without any explanations, Deborah is introduced in 4:4-5: "a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah..." After Deborah was introduced, God called her to prepare for the war against the Canaanite (4:6). As Amit insists, Deborah was raised by God in the cycle (c). At this war, the Canaanites were defeated and the Israelites were saved by the oppression, which is the cycle (d).

With Amit, Boling and Gill maintain that Deborah was a judge. Boling emphasizes "the abrupt shift from narrative tense to nominal and participle sentence" in 4:4-5.⁸ According to Gill, the participle in 4:5 implies "duration and permanence of her office."⁹ In addition, verse 5:31 means that Deborah ruled for forty years.¹⁰ Therefore, as Amit, Boling, and Gill assert, it is natural to conclude that Deborah was a judge.

A Canaanite Goddess?

(October, 1987): 91.

⁸ Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 6 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 94.

⁹ Deborah Menken Gill, *The Female Prophets: Gender and Leadership in the Biblical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1991), 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

At Ugarit, Baal is a god of storm, who rides in a chariot of cloud. He travels with wind, thunder, and rain. He uses the lightning as his weapon. When he speaks, his voice is roaring like thunder.¹¹ His counterpart is Anat, a goddess of war. She is said to eat flesh and to drink blood and to wear a necklace made of enemies' skulls and a girdle made of their hands.¹² It is sometimes suggested that Deborah is similar to Anat.¹³ Moreover, Baal-Anat is parallel with Yahweh-Deborah.¹⁴ Just as Baal and Anat fought against Mot, god of death, and won a victory,¹⁵ so did Yahweh and Deborah against Jabin's army. In Judges 5, Deborah is qualified as a human counterpart of Yahweh because she is described as "a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7), who was "committed to Israel's well-being."¹⁶ Barak functions as second-in-command (p. 31).¹⁷

In Judges 4, the parallel between Anat and Deborah is weakened. Deborah's role as a commander is replaced by Barak. Deborah serves as an adviser. What Ackerman asserts in Judges 4 and 5 could be summarized as in (1).

(1) Demythologization of Canaanite Goddess

Canaanite Myth		Judges 5		Judges 4
Baal (god)	--->	Yahweh (God)	--->	Yahweh (God)
Anat (god, warrior)	--->	Deborah (warrior)	--->	Deborah (advisor)
		Barak(second-in-command)		Barak (warrior)

¹¹ Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59; J. Glen Taylor, "The Song of Deborah and two Canaanite goddesses," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (July 1982):102.

¹⁴ Ackerman, 28, 57-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

In the summary (1), Judges 5 precedes Judges 4 because the former is presumed to be written earlier. Ackerman assumes that Judges 5 was written in “the late twelfth or eleventh century B.C.E,” ... “Judges 4 stems from the Deuteronomistic period of composition in the seventh B.C.E.”¹⁸ The difference in (1) between the Canaanite myth and the Bible is that the former has a symmetrical tension between Baal and Anat, but the latter has asymmetric tension between Yahweh and humans. Yahweh always has the initiative. While Yahweh himself was fighting against the Canaanite kings and their troops in Judges 5, Deborah and Barak were with Issachar. In Judges 4, Yahweh planned first and then He let his plans be known to Deborah and Barak.

Let us narrow down Anat and Deborah in (1), by focusing on how different the Canaanite myth and the Deborah narrative are. In the Canaanite myth, Anat is not replaced by any humans, but in the Deborah narrative, a female warrior (Deborah) is replaced by a male warrior (Barak). Ackerman refers to this process as demythologization of the Canaanite goddess: “Israel moves during its history from a position of “more Canaanite influence to “less Canaanite influence.”¹⁹ In fact, the Bible did not give any hint on the similarities between Anat and Deborah.

Deborah’s Leadership

Unlike kings, Deborah’s leadership is not inherited, so it is called charismatic leadership. A charismatic leader is defined as one who becomes a leader because the people “see something persuasive and powerful in that person’s self-presentation.”²⁰ Thus, the difference between Canaanite kings and Israelite judges is that the former is a kind of established leadership, but the latter depends on the situation (e.g. when the Israelites were afflicted by their enemies) and God’s intervention.²¹

Why did God choose Deborah? Some scholars suggest that God chose a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁰ Jo Ann Hackett, “Violence and Women’s Lives in the Book of Judges,” *Interpretation* 58, no. 4 (October 2004): 356.

²¹ Donald Bruce MacKay. *Ethnicity and Israelite Religion: The Anthropology of Social Boundaries in Judges* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1997), 130.

woman because men failed to play their roles.²² Female leadership is needed to cope with emergency.²³ (Yee, 1993, p. 112). However, the general principle of God's selection is given in Deuteronomy 7:7 and Corinthians 1:27. God chose the Israelites not because they are numerous, but because they are the fewest. God also chooses the weaker to shame the stronger.

According to God's selection principle, the reason why God chose Deborah seems to be clear. God might choose Deborah because she was weak, but God used her to shame the stronger and to achieve his will. In fact, God does not always choose a perfect man as a judge. Some judges chosen by God are rather imperfect: Ehud was a left-handed man (Judges 3:15); Samson was a son of Baal's priest (Judges 6:25); Jephthah was a son of a prostitute (Judges 11:1).

In order to evaluate Deborah's leadership, this paper will use three attributes: relationships, perspectives, and interests.²⁴ The first attribute "relationships" includes two types of relationship: a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with humans. The first attribute "relationships" implies that a good leader has to keep good relationships with God and humans. When the leader has a pure heart, he can see God (Matthew 5:8). If the leader has a sincere relationship with God, then he becomes humble and is able to have a Christ-like attitude toward God and humans (Philippians 2:5). The second attribute "perspectives" includes two contrastive perspectives: God-oriented perspective and Baal-oriented perspective. The second attribute "perspectives" implies that a good leader has a God-oriented perspective. When the leader has the God-oriented perspective, the leader can lead the people into the right direction. The third attribute "interests" includes two opposite interests: communal interest and personal interest. The third attribute implies that the leader keeps a balance between personal and communal interests (Philippians 2:4). Based on three attributes of a leader, a good leader is defined as in (2).

(2) Requirements for a Good Leader

²² Johanna W. H. Bos, "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3" *Semeia* 42 (1988): 58; Michael John Smith, *The Failure of the Family as a Theme in the Book of Judges* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2004), iv.

²³ Gale A Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4" *Semeia* 61 (1993): 112.

²⁴ Park, 138-44.

- a. A good leader keeps good relationships with God and humans.
- b. A good leader has God-oriented perspectives.
- c. A good leader gives priority to communal interests over personal interests.

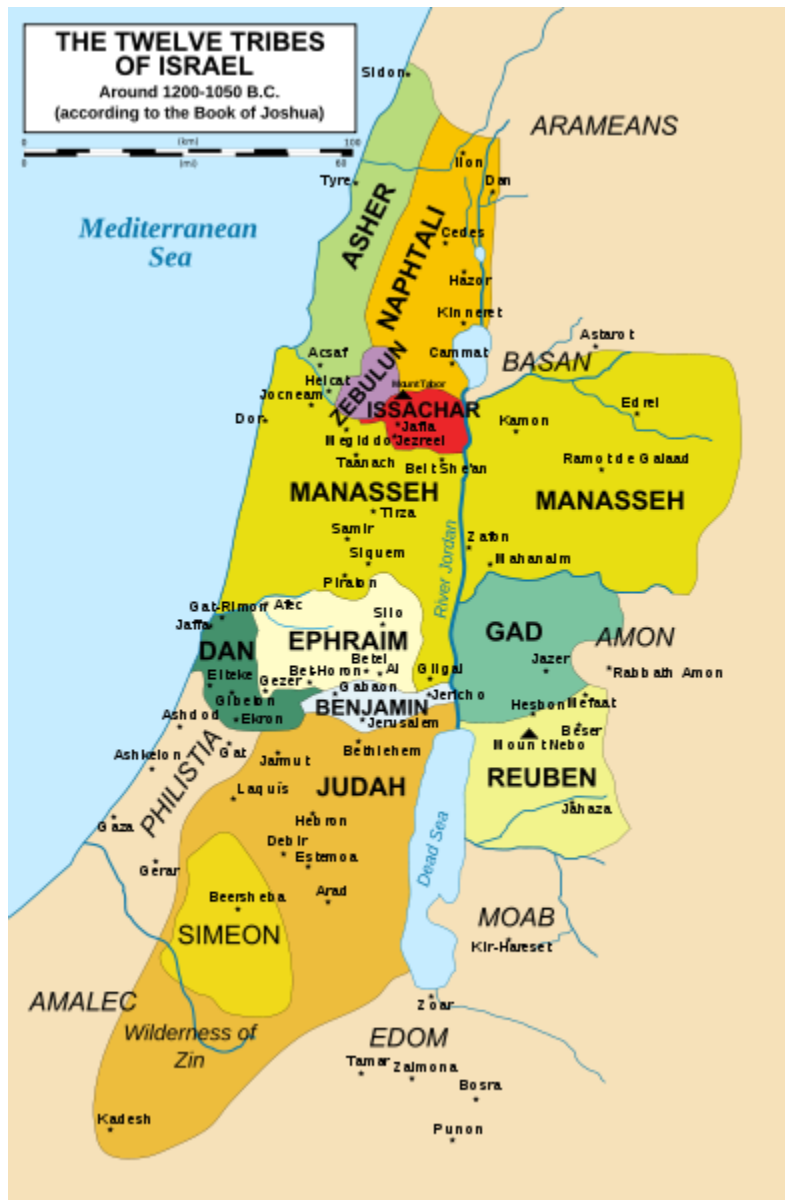
Three requirements in (2) are like three sides of a triangle. If a leader satisfies one out of three requirements or two out of three requirements, then the leader can not be rated as a good leader. Thus, a good leader has to meet all three requirements in (2).

Did Deborah have sound relationship with God and humans?

The introduction of the Deborah narrative shows that the lives of the Israelites in the north and in the south were quite different. The Israelites in the north lived in the hill, but the Canaanites in the plain that is located near Beth Shan and the Valley of Jazreel (Joshua 17:16). The following map shows the territories where twelve tribes occupied²⁵ and will help us recall the Deborah narrative.

(3) Land of the Twelve Tribes

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg



Jabin, a king of Canaan, reigned in Hazor (Judges 4:2) in the land of Naphtali. Sisra, Jabin's command, stationed in Harosheth Haggoyim (4:2) which was located in the north bank of the Kishon river.²⁶ This river rises around Tabor and finally falls into the Mediterranean sea.²⁷ Sisra had 900 chariots (4:3), which threatened the Israelites and kept them from coming down to the plain: "the roads were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths. Village life in Israel ceased" (Judges 5:6-7). Thus, the Israelites who lived in Naphtali, Zebulun, Issachar, and Manasseh might cry to God for help.

²⁶ <http://refbible.com/h/harosheth-hagoyim.htm>.

²⁷ <http://refbible.com/k/kishon.htm>.

The Israelites in the south might not be oppressed by the Canaanites. Deborah led the Israelites by holding court and by resolving the disputes among the Israelites. Deborah's court was in the region between Ramah and Bethel.

When God heard the Israelites' moaning and groaning, God called Deborah who lived in the land of Ephraim. If God had called Barak first, God could have saved time and efforts. Jabin reigned in Hazor in the land of Naphtali and Barak lived in Kedesh in the land of Naphtali. They were in the same territory. However, God called Deborah first. In order to obey God's words, Deborah might choose a messenger to send for Barak. It might take several days or months for the messenger to go to Barak and to ask Barak to come to Deborah. Why did God not call Barak first? Why did God refuse efficiencies in resolving the Israelites' urgent appeal?

Deborah could ignore God's words because the region she was ruling did not have any urgent problems. However, Deborah obeyed God even though God's words seemed to be illogical and impractical. Deborah did not complain by saying, 'Why did you call me? I live in the south, but Barak lives in north. Do I have to make a trip to Kedesh?' Deborah believed in God even though his decisions went beyond her understanding.

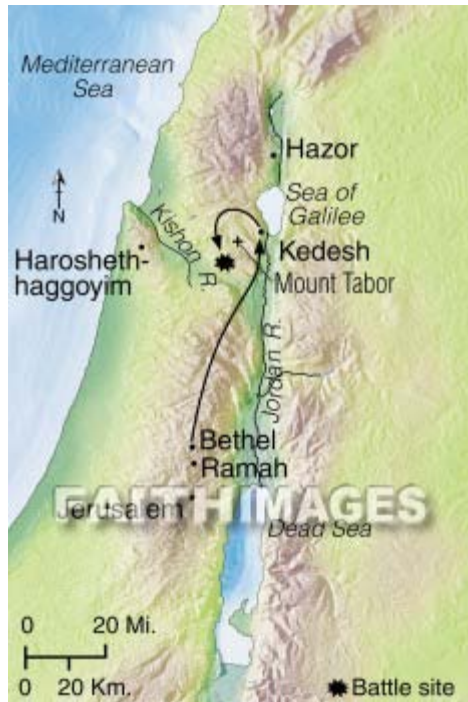
Finally Deborah met Barak. When Barak heard God's commands from Deborah, he told Deborah that he would not go to Kedesh if Deborah did not accompany him. When Barak hesitated to take action, Deborah did not ridicule him by saying, 'Are you not a man? How can you tell me to go together? Are you a coward?' In addition, Deborah did not threaten Barak by saying, 'If you don't obey God, you would be cursed.' Without mocking or threatening faint-hearted Barak, Deborah encouraged him by saying, "Very well, I will go with you" (Judges 4: 9) and helped him to obey God's commands. In conclusion, Deborah's obedience to God's words and her attitude toward Barak demonstrate that Deborah had good relationships with God and men.

Did Deborah have a God-oriented perspective?

When the war broke, Deborah manifested her perspective. The black arrows in the following map (4) show the places where Deborah and Barak moved and a small

cross inside the second arrow is Mount Tabor, and the asterisk is the place where the Israelites fought against the Canaanites.²⁸

(4) War against the Canaanite



The first arrow in (4) shows that Deborah and Barak left the region between Ramah and Bethel in the land of Ephraim and went to Kadesh in the land of Naphtali. In Kadesh, Barak summoned 10,000 men from his tribe and Zebulun. Then, Deborah, Barak, and 10,000 men went to Mount Tabor. The second arrow in (4) shows that Barak and 10,000 men came down Mount Tabor and went to the battle site. Sisra's army which had stationed in Harosheth Haggoyim moved to the battle site. The Israelites and the Canaanites fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo (5:19).

When Barak was ready to go to war, she told him, "This is the day the Lord has given Sisra into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" (4:14). This verse expresses Deborah's perspective. Let us compare the Israelites and the Canaanites. Barak had only 10,000 men, but Sisra had 900 chariots and his troops. The Israelites were weaker than the Canaanites. However, Deborah prophesied the Israelites' victory because she was sure that God would defeat the Canaanites. Deborah believed that God was the chief commander, who directed stars to fight against

²⁸ <http://biblestudio.com/d/deborah.htm>

Sisra (5:20). In fact, God caused the stars in the heaven and the river to fight against Sisra and his army. The Kishon flooded (5:21), so their iron chariots became useless. Finally, Sisra abandoned his chariot and fled to Jael's tent. Deborah's belief that God himself will fight for the Israelites demonstrates that Deborah had a God-oriented perspective.

Did Deborah give priority to communal interests over personal interests?

Deborah was the leader who surrendered personal benefits to accomplish the communal good. After the war, Deborah and Sisra were contrasted. Deborah won, but Sisra lost. Deborah was alive, but Sisra was dead. Deborah did not take any spoils and plunder, but Sisra's mother proves that Sisra coveted them. While Sisra's mother was waiting for her son, her maids comforted her by saying that Sisra could be late to bring plunder and spoils.

After war, Deborah did not mention any problems and difficulties, but she sang a praising song: "So may your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength" (5:31). In this verse, there are two types of people: God's enemies and God's people. Who are God's people? They are the people who love God. Then, how can God's people love God? The beginning of Judges describes God's mind: "the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them" (2:18b). God always loves his people, but most people were interested in their own benefits. They forgot God or ignore him. Who responds to God? The person who "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33) responds to God. Deborah was not interested in her own benefits, but she might seek for God first and then for communal interests. In other words, Deborah might be the one who responded to God's love. Besides, the Deborah narrative reminds us the forgotten truth: those who love God sincerely are surely found by God, who watches over them and wants to use them to accomplish his will. Finally, the Deborah narrative ended with the statement: "Then the land had peace forty years" (5:31). That is, the Israelites enjoyed liberty with Deborah who rejected to reap her personal benefits.

Conclusion

In Judge 5, Deborah praises the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun and Issachar, Makir (= Manasseh in Gilead; cf. Num. 36:1) who sent troops to support Barak,²⁹ but ridicules the tribes of Reuben, Dan and Asher because they did not send any troops in 15:14-17.³⁰ J. David Schloen explains why only a few tribes are involved in the war in terms of caravan trade.³¹ The tribes of Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali were threatened by Sisra's army because his army blocked their caravan route. Thus, Vicent argues that the Israelites gained a victory, but it was partial because all tribes did not fight.³² In addition, Smith points out that Barak hesitated to go to war and some tribes did not join the war.³³ Vicent's claim seems to be very plausible, but his claim is not absolutely true. What God commanded is described in Judges 4:6. God commanded Barak to take ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun. Deborah herself might want all twelve tribes to join the war, but God did not command to form a united army. In the Gideon narrative, Gideon collected 32,000 men, but God chose only 300 men. What God planned was always beyond human thoughts. Thus, the victory God gave the Israelites was not a partial one, but a complete one.

Deborah served as a prophet (Judges 4:4), judge (Judges 4:5), and mother in Israel (Judges 5:7). Her roles were quite exceptional. Bledstein claims that Deborah serves as a more exemplary judge than Othniel.³⁴ Bronner considers Deborah a perfect judge: "Unlike the male judges, Deborah seems to have avoided committing any sinful

²⁹ John Michael Engle, *The Redactional Development of the Book of Judges* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2002), 60.

³⁰ Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Man who Play God?" in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 41.

³¹ J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and Casus belli: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (January 1993): 29-30.

³² Mark Vincent, "The Song of Deborah: A Structural and Literary Consideration," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 91 (December) 2000: 12.

³³ Michael John Smith, *The Failure of the Family as a Theme in the Book of Judges* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2004), 142-3.

³⁴ Bledstein, 42.

actions of the sort of fallen into by Gideon, Jephthah and Samson.”³⁵ In addition, Deborah satisfied three requirements for a good leader in (2). Therefore, it is concluded that Deborah was a successful female leader.

³⁵ Bronner, 79.

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