

THE ECLIPSE OF GOD IN THE SONG OF DEBORAH (JUDGES 5)

THE ROLE OF YHWH IN THE LIGHT OF HEROIC POETRY¹

Charles L. Echols

The so-called Song of Deborah (Judges 5; hereafter, ‘the Song’) celebrates a decisive victory during the era of the Judges, and praises Jael and the Israelites for their defeat of a Canaanite coalition led by Sisera. The richness of the Song is apparent from the wide variety of research which it has prompted (e.g. poetics, settlement-era history, feminist criticism). However, despite generations of scholarship, critical aspects such as date, authorship and unity remain disputed. Concentrating on the poem’s genre, this thesis elucidates the role of YHWH in the poem in the light of a comparative study of heroic poetry.

Part One addresses preliminary critical issues, the most important being the unity of the poem (ch. 2). The argument for a unified composition has merit, and draws upon stylistic, structural, thematic and form-critical considerations for support as well as upon comparative ancient Near Eastern texts. However, other thematic and form-critical factors, together with late vocabulary and glosses, as well as tensions in syntax and speech, are more persuasive and lead to the conclusion that the poem has been reworked from a religious perspective. Without the secondary material, references to YHWH remain, that is the occurrences of his name in verses 11, 13 and 23, and the likely allusion to his role in the battle in the enigmatic verses 20-21. Despite these references, the original poem is essentially profane, and the predominant focus of the poet on the human characters enables one to speak metaphorically of an eclipse of YHWH.

Because an eclipse presupposes that YHWH features prominently in texts which are comparable in date, genre and occasion, chapter 3 compares the portrayal of YHWH in Judges 5 with that in Judges 4,

¹ Abstract of a Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2005. Supervisor: Prof. G. I. Davies.

Exodus 15, 2 Samuel 22 (= Ps. 18) and Habakkuk 3.² Each of these texts has material which is of disputed provenance, but even if one assumes that the material in question is secondary the result is striking: each text unambiguously credits YHWH as the deliverer in several explicit statements (and still more if the disputed material is included). By contrast the Song lacks even one such affirmation. Instead, the victory is portrayed as essentially the result of human effort.

The last aim of Part One is to address further arguments which reaffirm YHWH's presence and emphasis as deliverer in the Song (chapter 4). These arguments are based upon allusions and/or implications which are internal and external to the poem. On the former, for example, Hauser (1980, 1987) argues that the connection between YHWH and water (e.g. vv. 4-5, 20-21) indicates his prominence and decisive role. On the latter, several scholars have posited connections between various ancient Near Eastern myths and the Song (e.g. v. 20). It is claimed that YHWH's prominence lies at a cosmological level. While not denying the use of implication in the poem, the theory that the poet would present primary themes solely through implication is determined to be implausible. Moreover, the comparative myth argument is problematic (e.g. loose parallels, different goddesses denoting Jael). These arguments are further weakened by the fact that the poem is lucid without resorting to implication or mythology.

Part Two breaks new ground by giving a detailed examination of the Song in the context of heroic poetry. Analysing the original Song in this way resolves the current impasse over its genre, and clarifies the role of YHWH. The general classical generic divisions are epic, lyric, comedy, tragedy, satire and pastoral. Of these only epic and lyric (and their subgenres) are plausible candidates for comparison with the Song. Moreover, because it is maintained that heroic poetry has interpretive significance, *heroic* epic and lyric are primarily relevant.

Chapter 5 thus begins by surveying the principal characteristics of the most well-known expression of heroic poetry, heroic narrative poetry, in order to begin to build a template of heroic poetry for comparison with the Song. Of its subgenres, the most familiar is 'epic' – a term which, in the literature, is often applied to more than one

² Judg. 4 is the narrative account. Although it is thus generically (and chronologically) dissimilar to Judg. 5, it is worthwhile comparing it with the poem since it presents a second viewpoint about God on the same occasion (cf. Exod. 14/15).

genre. Because it is necessary to distinguish epic from other narrative subgenres, an excursus takes up the difficult task of reaching a suitable definition. Since it is also essential to be able to distinguish between heroic and non-heroic poetry, criteria are introduced which may be used to identify the latter. In the course of surveying the characteristics of heroic and non-heroic poetry, many comparative texts are adduced. Moreover, because the Song's domain is the ancient Near East, one section offers a selection of ancient Near Eastern texts to illustrate the breadth and complexity of heroic and non-heroic poetry in this corpus. Although many features of the epic genus occur in the Song, the chapter concludes that it cannot be classified as such.

The lyric family remains, and chapter 6 compares the Song with thirteen of its subgenres. Sonnet, haiku, aubade, dramatic monologue, epithalamion and *vers de société* are excluded on the grounds of form, style, structure, content or cultural-specificity. Hymn, elegy, song, ode and ballad are similar to the Song, but have dissimilarities as well. The two remaining subgenres, panegyric and victory song, compare closely with the Song. Although there is considerable overlap between these two, the greater resemblance lies with the victory song.

Next, the results of the survey of heroic poetry are adduced to determine whether the Song is heroic (ch. 7). The existence of a heroic victory song genre is strongly disputed. Although the possibility of heroic non-narrative genres is defended in chapter 5, each of the arguments against this specific type is evaluated. Those against heroic victory songs are shown to suffer from terminological imprecision and methodological inconsistency, and it is concluded that there is no *a priori* reason against the existence of such a subgenre. An assessment of heroic and non-heroic features in the Song provides abundant support for its classification as a heroic victory song. An excursus then outlines the contribution of the heroic dimension to the victory song in the Old Testament.

The thesis concludes (ch. 8) that the classification of the Song of Deborah as a heroic victory song provides the hermeneutical key to the poet's intention, the correct interpretation of the Song in general, and the role of YHWH in particular. The overarching purpose of the poem is to praise the human characters who predominate, for their roles in defeating the Canaanites. The subgenre's focus on the human personae accounts for the fleeting and obscure role of YHWH. It would have been well within the parameters of the heroic genre to portray YHWH

clearly and prominently (cf. *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, etc.). Yet the poet, while doubtless aware of the divine contribution, nevertheless has a different purpose, and therefore depicts the divine role indirectly. The genre indicates that the most likely occasion of the Song was a non-religious setting, and that it was sung relatively soon after the battle. The popularity of the poem meant that it was probably attractive to the cult, but the predominant secular tenor would have required modification for liturgical use. Although the possibility of multiple revisions cannot be dismissed, the transformation could have easily occurred in one stage. The revision of the poem, through the introductory and concluding material, did not deny the achievements of the human heroes and heroines; rather it clarified that it was YHWH who made the victory possible, and praised him for it.

The primary contribution of the study is the recognition of heroic poetry as a means by which a consensus can be reached on the genre of the Song. Perhaps because heroic poetry is scant in the Old Testament, prior research has, for the most part, ignored it altogether. The few scholars who recognize the heroicity of the Song either class it erroneously as epic, or refer to it as heroic poetry without either justification or satisfactorily explaining how this aspect elucidates the role of YHWH. The systematic use of heroic poetry in the classification of the poem's genre offers a lucid and compelling explanation of the role and depiction of both YHWH and the human characters. Moreover, incorporating heroicity as a criterion enables Old Testament victory songs to be classified with greater precision – a benefit which has potential application in extra-biblical literature. Heroic poetry, furthermore, presents a more realistic portrayal of ancient Israel. Since the material in the Old Testament was selected and edited according to theological interests, the profane dimension of life in ancient Israel is rather obscure. The original Song, however, attests to the breadth of composition prior to the canonization of the Bible by showing that not all pieces were created for worship. Remarking that the Old Testament's 'secular songs' give 'a picture of Israel's richness', Eissfeldt (1965) offered an inventory of work, harvest, drinking, marriage, love and watchman's songs. This study adds a heroic victory song to the list – one which witnesses to the fact that the ancient Israelites praised their heroes and enjoyed listening to entertaining accounts of their exploits, just as we do.