

AN ANALYSIS OF
THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD, DEBORAH AND HANNAH
AS WISE BIBLICAL WOMEN

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Introduction

In this thesis, I analyze the narratives of the Daughters of Zelophehad, Deborah and Hannah as models of women who were innovators in the Tanakh. These women shape new laws, dispense legal judgments, serve as a conduit of Adonai, help to defeat an enemy of Israel and create new forms of prayer. They break the cultural norms of their society and stretch the boundaries of gender roles. As part of this process, these women become leaders in the public domain, a sphere usually dominated by males. In each of these biblical accounts, women are the primary actors and through them the Israelite community is transformed.

I interpret not only the changes instigated by Zelophehad's Daughters (Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah), Deborah and Hannah but how they made them. These biblical characters are labeled "wise" women by rabbinic sources and modern scholars. I examine what the commentators think is wise about them and how this wisdom is utilized to alter Israelite society.

In each of these narratives, the women seek justice either for themselves or for the Israelites. It is this longing for a more equitable society that leads these biblical women to take action. In each of the narratives, the women confront authority figures in the pursuit of their goals. I analyze how the characters formulated their challenges to the people in power.

In choosing to focus my thesis on wise biblical women I sought out characters who exhibit different types of wisdom (legalistic, political, strategic, judicial, militaristic, and spiritual). The diversity in the wisdom utilized by these women emphasizes the multitude of

ways to be wise. Since these women successfully create societal change by employing a range of wisdoms, the text provides an array of wisdom prototypes. I argue these characters are role models: thus I looked for biblical characters with a variety of wisdoms to appeal to a wide range of contemporary readers. I conclude my thesis with an exploration of the ways these selected biblical women can be role models for us in today's society.

In addition to being one of my favorite biblical narratives, I selected the Daughters of Zelophehad because they exhibit legalistic, political and strategic wisdom. When the daughters bring their inheritance claim to Moses, they know how and when to present their case by appealing to the dominant male concerns of the time. The daughters demonstrate extraordinary bravery when they advocate for themselves to Moses, Eleazer the priest and the elders in such a public way. I chose to include this narrative because of the courage shown by the daughters, the unity of the siblings and the wisdom of their appeal to men in power. I picked the Daughters' narrative because their story can be inspiring to others who feel powerless but take a risk to stand up for themselves.

I included Deborah in my thesis because of her unprecedented role as a prophetess and a judge. Deborah demonstrates judicial wisdom when the Israelites seek out her counsel as she sits under the Palm tree. Deborah utilizes militaristic wisdom when she calls upon Barak to lead the Israelites in battle against Sisera. I picked Deborah as one of the women to include in my thesis in part because I knew she was a groundbreaking figure in Israelite society, but I knew little about her character. Through my research I discovered Deborah had the ability to

command authority and to make the Israelites listen to her. I selected Deborah because of her success as a woman with unequalled leadership responsibilities in Israelite society.

I selected the story of Hannah because of the way she expresses her deepest longings in prayer. Hannah utilizes her spiritual wisdom to create a new form of personal prayer, even when her intentions and sobriety are questioned by Eli the priest. Hannah's emotional outpouring makes a sharp contrast to the text's usual silence about the state of mind of its characters. I was drawn in by Hannah's clear and eloquent vocalization of her pain, as she articulates the suffering women can feel when facing infertility. As a woman studying to be a rabbi, I was moved by the text's acknowledgement of this sensitive issue which continues today. I chose Hannah's story for my thesis based on her spiritual wisdom, her ability to express her anguish and her articulate prayers.

In researching this thesis, I used a combination of rabbinic material and contemporary commentaries. I studied the rabbinic material to examine how the women in these narratives were viewed by the rabbis. The rabbinic sources I found praised the Daughters of Zelophehad and Hannah but had a more mixed view of Deborah. While all of these women were leaders in the public domain, Deborah's role as a prophet and judge seemed the most threatening the rabbinic view of gender roles. I focused my research on the Talmud, Midrashim and Genesis Rabbah. When reading the contemporary commentaries I sought out the modern perspectives on these narratives. I examined how the biblical scholars utilized the language of the text. Through a close reading of the text, the commentators analyze the language utilized by these women and their interactions with the other biblical characters. I included a variety of modern

scholarship including by not limited to: Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss's *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Victor Matthews's *Judges and Ruth*, Susan Nitiditch's *Judges*, Eugene Peterson's *First and Second Samuel*, the editions from The Anchor Bible and the Word Biblical Commentary for *Numbers, Judges and I Samuel*. I also included recent articles on these narratives such as: Yael Shemesh's "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," Gail O Day's "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," and Tyler Mayfield, "The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4-5) in Recent Research."

Chapter One:
The Daughters of Zelophehad
Numbers 27:1-11 and Numbers 36:1-13

- 1) And then approached the daughters of¹ Zelophehad son of Hepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, the family/clan² of Manasseh, son of Joseph. These are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noa, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Tirzah.³
- 2) And they stood⁴ before Moses, Eleazer the priest, the chieftains, and the whole congregation at the entrance to the tent of meeting saying:
- 3) “Our father died in the wilderness. But he was not among of the congregation that gathered against⁵ Adonai, Korah’s congregation. Rather, he died for⁶ his own sins, and there were no sons belonging to him.
- 4) Why should the name of our father be withdrawn⁷ from the midst of his clan because he does not have a son? Give to us a landed possession⁸ in the midst of our father’s kinsman.”

¹ This word זֵלּוּפְהָדָה in this form is only used in reference to the Daughters of Zelophehad. It is also found in Joshua 17:4.

² לְמִשְׁפַּחָה is usually translated as “family,” but it also has the connotation of “clan.” Belonging to a family, clan, tribe is an important component to the narrative about the Daughters of Zelophehad, thus I included both possible translations.

³ The significance of the naming of the Daughters of Zelophehad is often noted: each one is named individually. They are named four times in verses: in Numbers 26:33, in Numbers 36:11 and in Joshua 17:3. The women are listed in different order in the different texts. It is unclear which one of the daughters is the oldest because of the changes in the order of their listing. It is also unclear why the order changes.

⁴ This form of the word וַתַּעֲמִידָנָה is found only in this verse and in Genesis 41:3.

⁵ עַל can have multiple meanings, but in this context, I thought it was most appropriate to translate it as “against” because of the reference to Korah’s rebellion.

⁶ כִּי has a large semantic range, but I choose “with” instead of the commonly used “for” or “because” since it is unclear what sins if any were committed by Zelophehad.

⁷ This form זָנַח is found six times in the Tanakh; once in Exodus 21:10 in reference to a wife’s rights if her husband takes another wife; once in this line; in Numbers 36:3 and 36:4. Additionally, it is located in the Book of Job twice in 36:7 and 36:27.

- 5) And Moses brought their case before Adonai.
- 6) And Adonai spoke to Moses saying:
- 7) "The daughters of Zelophehad speak rightly. You should surely give⁹ them an inherited¹⁰ land possession in the midst of their father's kinsmen. Transfer¹¹ their father's property¹² to them."
- 8) "And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying, if a man dies and he does not have a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter."
- 9) "If a man dies and he has no daughter, you shall give¹³ his property to his brothers."
- 10) "If a man dies and he has no brothers, you shall give his property to his father's brothers (uncles)."
- 11) "If his father had no brothers, you shall give his property to the rest of his close relatives in his clan, and they shall inherit it, and it will be for the people of Israel a statute of judgment as Adonai commanded Moses."

⁸ אֲחֻזָּה can be translated as "possession by right of inheritance" (BDB pg 28) but I choose not to render it that way because the Daughters are arguing for the right of inheritance when they were making their plea to Moses.

⁹ This combination creates נָתַן וְנָתַן an infinitive absolute because the same verb (to give) is repeated, reiterating the giving of the land.

¹⁰ This word נִחְלָה is commonly used, but rarely in connection with אֲחֻזָּה. Here the repetition of the two words together emphasizes the inheritance now given to the daughters.

¹¹ Literally, וְהָעֲבָרָתָּה can be translated as "cause to pass:" however I choose to translate it as "transfer" as in the new JPS translation for the sake of a smooth English syntax.

¹² The repetition of נִחְלָה (the inheritance) emphasizes the importance of this transfer of property.

¹³ This is a different verb: instead of transfer or pass, וְנָתַתָּה it is give.

- 1) And the family heads¹⁴ of the clan¹⁵ of the children of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manassah, of the family of the sons of Joseph spoke before Moses, and¹⁶ the chief princes, the heads of the family¹⁷ of the people of Israel.
- 2) They said: “Adonai commanded my lord to give the land by inheritance by lot to the people of Israel and my lord was commanded by Adonai to give inheritance to Zelophehad our brother to his daughters.
- 3) If they be married to sons of another tribe of the children of Israel their inheritance land possession¹⁸ shall be diminished from our fathers and it shall be added to the tribe which they married into,¹⁹ so our property will be diminished.
- 4) And when it shall be the jubilee²⁰ for the children of Israel, their inheritance will be added to the property of the tribe they married into so their inheritance shall be diminished from the property of our father.
- 5) And Moses commanded the children of Israel according to the words of Adonai saying: “the tribe of the sons of Joseph speak right.”²¹”

¹⁴ Literally ראשי אבות means the heads of the fathers, but to create a smooth English translation, I choose to translate it as head of the family according to the NJPS translation.

¹⁵ למשפחת Often translated as family, but I rendered it here “clan” to indicate the clan’s concern about their property rights.

¹⁶ I took out the repetition of ו to create a smoother translation.

¹⁷ Here I rendered למשפחת as family in the more common translation of this word.

¹⁸ This is the same combination of words נחלתן מנחלת is found in the first half of the Daughters of Zelophehad narrative.

¹⁹ There are several ways to translate this phrase, וְהָיוּ לְאֶחָד מִבְּנֵי שְׁבֵטִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְנָשִׁים In the KJV it is rendered “the tribe to where unto they were received” and original JPS translates it as “the tribe where unto they belong.” I chose to render “the tribe they married into” because I believe it follows the logic of the sentence.

²⁰ The jubilee year הַיָּבֵל is discussed in Exodus 19:13 and in Leviticus 7 times (in 25:40, 25:50, 25:52, 25:54, 27:17, 27:18, and 27:23). This verse is the only reference to the jubilee with this word in Numbers.

- 6) This is the matter that Adonai commanded the Daughters of Zelophehad, saying, “Let them become married to (a person) who is agreeable²² in their eyes, but only in the family of the tribe of their father they shall be married.”
- 7) “And no inheritance of the children of Israel may pass over²³ from tribe to tribe, for every man²⁴ of the children of Israel shall cleave²⁵ to the inheritance of their fathers.”
- 8) “And every daughter that is in possession of inheritance in a tribe of the children of Israel shall become a wife (of a person) in the family of the clan of her father in order that (each) man of the children of Israel will inherit his father’s property.”
- 9) The inheritance will not change²⁶ from one tribe to another because each man in the tribes of the children of Israel shall cling to his inheritance.
- 10) Thus the daughters of Zelophehad did²⁷ as Adonai commanded Moses.

²¹ This same word is נָחַד used in the first half of the Daughters of Zelophehad narrative. This word is found 530 times in the Tanakh.

²² This expression לְטוֹב is found 12 times throughout the Tanakh. In Esther it is a reference to King Ahasuerus’s feelings about Esther prior to their marriage. It means “attractive, fitting” etc.

²³ Literally, תָּסַב, means “turn about,” “go around,” or “surround,” but I translated it in accordance with the NJPS translation as “pass over” to create a smooth English sentence correlating to the sentiment of the Hebrew.

²⁴ While I often translate אִישׁ as “person” following the women’s Torah commentary, in this sentence, I think it is meaning specifically men and not women unless otherwise specified like in the first half of the Daughters of Zelophehad.

²⁵ This word דָּבַק is found in Ruth and in the creation story.

²⁶ This word תָּסַב here is translated as “change” instead of the more commonly used “go around, turn about, surround” to fit with the idea of land changing ownership.

- 11) Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah and Noa, the daughters of Zelophehad, became married to the sons of their uncles²⁸.
- 12) They were married into the clan of the sons of Menasseh the son of Joseph, and their inheritance became part of the tribe of the family of their father.
- 13) These are the laws that Adonai commanded to the children of Israel through the hands of Moses in the desert plain of Moab in Jericho.

²⁷ The verb עָשׂוּ is in the form of the third person common plural, it is unclear why it is in the common plural and not the third person feminine plural. This verb is in the third person feminine plural which is archaic and its use was inconsistent.

²⁸ The word can also be translated as beloved אֲהִבָּהּ, but in this context I chose to render it according to the familial relationships of the marriages without the sentiment of the daughter's feelings since that is not specified in the text.

The daughters of Zelophehad, Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, are categorized as wise biblical women in rabbinic literature and by modern commentators. In this narrative, the daughters demonstrate their strategic and legalistic wisdom. The daughters' plea to Moses, the elders and God, increases inheritance rights not only for themselves for all women in their situation. They stretch the boundaries of biblical society as they stand up for themselves and their rights. In this unprecedentedly bold action by the daughters, they help to create new laws as they seek to correct an unjust inheritance system.

Numerous biblical interpretations emphasize the wisdom in both the timing and the framing of the daughters' presentation to Moses. The daughters place their inheritance plea within the societal concerns of the time of preserving their father's land and name. This approach appeals to the dominant male culture in which they lived. Zelophehad's daughters had the tactical wisdom not to ask for their inheritance rights only for their own sake but through the lens of honoring their father connecting with the concerns of the men in power.

The daughters demonstrated intentional wisdom by presenting themselves as united in their inheritance claims. This narrative marks a sharp contrast from other biblical stories since there is no evidence of sibling rivalry. The eldest sister does not ask for a double portion of the land as the eldest male child is entitled, as the daughters seek land rights for all siblings.

Although Zelophehad's daughters make tremendous strides for women, their gains are tempered in the second half of the narrative. When the tribesmen express the concerns about losing property if the daughters marry outside of the tribe, endogamy is imposed upon the

daughters. Even with this decision that seemed like a setback for women, the daughters demonstrate wisdom in the choices they make. They know when to stop pushing the societal norms and they choose husbands that are pleasing to them.

To gain an understanding of the wisdom shown by the daughters, a close examination of the biblical text is necessary. In the first verse of this narrative, the Daughters of Zelophehad are distinguished from many other female characters in the Tanakh because they are mentioned by name. The last part of verse one reads: וְהָיָה שְׁמוֹת בָּנוּתָיו מִחֵלָה נָעָה וְחִגְלָה וּמֵלָכָה וְתִרְצָחָה

The fact that the daughters are named individually signifies their importance in the text as innovators in Israelite society. These women are so noteworthy that they are listed by name four times in the Tanakh in Numbers 26:33, Numbers 27:1, Numbers 36:11 and Joshua 17:3.

In each of these citations the daughter's names are listed in different order, thus it is unclear which sibling is the eldest daughter. In the Tanakh the oldest male child is entitled to a double portion of the inheritance property, adding to the importance of birth order. Since the birth order of the daughters is unknown, the first born child is not asking for a double portion of inheritance. Instead of arguing with each other, the sisters present a united front. There does not seem to be any hierarchy in their interactions with one another thus Rashi asserts that they were all equal to each other. The unity of the sisters is an important distinction between them and other siblings in the Bible.²⁹

²⁹ Rashi, *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*, by A.M. Silbermann (Jerusalem: Phillip Feldheim Incorporated, 1973), 172.

In verse 2, as a united front, the daughters bring their case to Moses, Eleazer the priest and the elders at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The text reads as follows:

וַתַּעֲמִדְנָה לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְפָנֵי אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וּלְפָנֵי הַנָּשִׂאִים וְכָל־הָעֵדָה פָּתַח אֱהֹל־מוֹעֵד לְאַמֹּר

According to Katharine Doobs Sakenfeld, Zelophehad's daughters showed extraordinary initiative with this action. Even though the daughters were among the least powerful demographic in desert society as unmarried women with no father, they confronted Moses in an extremely public way.³⁰ Yael Shemesh credits the daughters for their courage to stand before these powerful men in this way. These women are demanding justice from the highest judicial authority which was comprised of men.³¹ When the daughters make their plea to Moses to demand their inheritance, it was unprecedented in Israelite history. The daughters are treated differently than other women in the Bible who often must achieve their goals through subterfuge. Zelophehad's daughters are publically straightforward in their request and they are viewed as powerful because they speak directly to Moses without a male intermediary. The daughters, unlike Miriam, are rewarded for their challenge of Moses.³²

The daughters begin their plea by reiterating that their father was not a part of the Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16, but he died for his own sins. The text states the following:

אֲבִינוּ מֵת בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהוּא לֹא־הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַנּוֹעֲדִים עַל־יְהוָה בְּעֵדַת קֹרַח כִּי־בִחָטְאוֹ מֵת

³⁰ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Numbers Journeying with God*, ed. International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 149.

³¹ Shemesh, Yael "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash" *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, volume 15, no. 1 (2007): 82.

³² Katherine Doobs Sakenfeld, "Feminist Biblical Interpretation," ed. *Theology Today*, vol. 46 (1989) 157-158.

This reminder strengthens the daughters' claim because those who died as a result of their participation in this rebellion were denied the right to pass their inheritance on to their children.³³ When the daughters mention this, it demonstrates that there was no legal impediment to transferring the property to them since Zelophehad still had the right to pass property to his heirs.³⁴ Inheritance not only preserves the name of the deceased and provides economic survival for the dead man's heirs, it is also considered a gift from God in fulfillment of a promise or as a reward for obedience.³⁵

Tamara Eskenazi cites the reference to Korah as a means for the daughters to separate their father from Korah and reiterate their right to inherit in verse 3. It also distances them from suspicion of illegitimate challenges to authority.³⁶ Raymond Brown asserts the daughters mention their father's lack of involvement with Korah's rebellion to prove his merit even though he died in the desert. According to Brown, Zelophehad suffered the fate of the older generation of wanderers with this death in the desert, but he did not hasten his death by association with Korah. Brown suggests that Zelophehad was a respected leader within the tribe of Manasseh who might have served as a member of the council. Underscoring the daughter's desire to reiterate their father's distance from Korah and his followers.³⁷ Shemesh

³³ Jacob Milgram, *Numbers*, ed. The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 297.

³⁴ J. Weingreen, "The Case of the Daughters of Zelophehad" *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 16, (1966): 518.

³⁵ David Noel Freedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 701.

³⁶ Tamara Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 972.

³⁷ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, ed. J.A. Motyer (Madison: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 243.

interprets the daughter's use of Korah's rebellion here to emphasize they are not challenging God and Moses's authority as the followers of Korah did.³⁸

In verse 4, the daughters say לָמָּה יִגָּרַע שֵׁם אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מְשִׁפְחָתוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֵּן "let not our father's name be lost." The daughters choose to frame their claim of inheritance not in terms of their own need, rather as a reference to their desire to preserve their father's name. According to Eskenazi, this is a respected obligation throughout the Bible because it protects not only the name itself, but also the person's property and legacy. Eskenazi credits the daughters' strategic wisdom in this verse because they frame their request within the language of communal and especially male concerns.³⁹ The daughters' vulnerable economic state is not the subject of their plea; rather, they frame it within the patriarchal societal male needs. Through these words, they also emphasize they are not acting in their own self interest, but out of a desire to preserve their father's name.⁴⁰

The daughters continue their bold request within the communal context because they say "among our father's kinsmen" בְּתוֹךְ אַחֵי אָבִינוּ. By emphasizing their desire to remain connected with their father's community and family, this increases the moral force of their plea.⁴¹ When Shemesh recounts the daughter's words, she notes they mention their father twice and the fact that he left no sons twice. Even though the daughters are the petitioners, they do not mention themselves at all, except as a solution to the problem of preserving their

³⁸ Shemesh, "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 85.

³⁹ Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 972.

⁴⁰ Shemesh, "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 87.

⁴¹ Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 973.

father's name. Shemesh suggests the daughters wisely do not demand justice for all women in the same situation, or even themselves, but for their father.⁴² While Sakenfeld agrees this was a wise move by the daughters, but she questions their real motivation for linking their claim with their father's name. She suggests they might have used their concern about preserving their father's name as a means to an end.⁴³

God responds to the daughters as though they are wise women with the literal response "rightly the daughters of Zelophehad speak" כִּן בָּנוֹת זֶלּוֹפְחָד דִּבְרֹת נָתֵן in Numbers 27:7. Eskenazi suggests when God speaks this phrase it is an emphatic approval about the daughters' plea. Rashi explains the adjective "just" here reflects recognition that the daughters see something that Moses does not. They have a broader understanding of what is just in the laws of inheritance than Moses does.⁴⁴ Rashi claims this as one of the only places where God acknowledges an error and fixes it.⁴⁵

J. Ellen Nunnally highlights the significant of verse 7 as one of the only instances in the Bible when God sides with a woman, and in this case, it is five of them.⁴⁶ Rashi notes the remarkableness of God's words giving the daughters honorable status within the community because they are allowed to inherit. John Litke suggests in this verse God proves that women can lead families and should be counted in the nation of Israel, changing how woman are

⁴² Shemesh, "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 86.

⁴³ Katherine Doobs Sakenfeld, "Feminist Biblical Interpretation," ed. *Theology Today*, vol. 46 (1989) 157-158.

⁴⁴ Rashi, *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*, 133.

⁴⁵ John Litke, "The Daughters of Zelophehad," *Current Theology and Mission*, vol. 29, (2002): 218.

⁴⁶ J. Elaine Nunnally, *Foremothers Women of the Bible*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 239.

viewed in Israelite society.⁴⁷ These five women have become valid receivers of the land and bearers of the family name when they are given inheritance rights. In this verse the daughters are treated like male heirs making monumental strides for themselves and for women's rights.⁴⁸

Eskenazi interprets God's response to the daughters as another sign of their wisdom because God repeats their language almost verbatim. In God response to Zelophehad's daughters, God states the leaders should grant their request. Yet, God takes this a step further when God strengthens their claim with the addition of the word נַחֲלָה or "hereditary portion of land." With this addition, God secures the daughters' inalienable right to inherit their father's property and secures their right to bestow this land upon others. Through God's language, the daughters who sought to ensure their father's name was not forgotten, create a legacy for themselves, preserving their own names in Israelite history.⁴⁹

In God's response to the daughters, not only does God secures the inheritance rights of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, but God changes the law for all women in the same situation. With the new law daughters now take precedence over other more distant members of the family.⁵⁰ This emphasizes the wisdom of the daughter's words because God changed the law for all women in their situation. However, it is left ambiguous if the daughters are actually

⁴⁷ Litke, "The Daughters of Zelophehad," 218.

⁴⁸ N. H. Snaith, "The Daughters of Zelophehad" *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 16, (1966): 127.

⁴⁹ Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 973.

⁵⁰ Ibid 973.

allowed to inherit or if they are just a holding vessel for land to be passed to their sons.⁵¹ This is in contrast to the women in the surrounding cultures like Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt, where women could inherit land even when there were male heirs.⁵²

Although the daughters are allowed to inherit, the second half of the story Numbers 36:1-13, diminishes their victory. The two parts of the story are linked in style and word usage. They both begin with a genealogy of the person/people making their case, and continue with the main characters “coming forward” before the authorities to ensure that their case is known.⁵³ The individual next “stands before” וַתַּעֲמֶדְנָה, Moses and the assembled priest(s) to summarize their claims, appearing before Moses at the location in the camp that is the equivalent of the city gates where the judicial court convened מוֹעֵד אֶהְיֶה⁵⁴ Moses takes the case directly to God who issues a ruling. In the second half of the narrative, that Moses consults God even though it is not explicitly stated.⁵⁵ It is significant that Moses brings cases before Adonai, because only the difficult ones were taken to God.⁵⁶ The decision applies not only to the specific case before the court, but it is also the basis for a more general law.⁵⁷ When the new casuistic law is stated, God tells Moses to “speak the children of Israel...” וְאָל וְאֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תְּדַבֵּר לֵאמֹר⁵⁸ and states the new law.

⁵¹ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1996), 827.

⁵² *Jewish Study Bible Tanakh Translation* ed. Adele Berlin, Michael Fishbane and Mark Zvi Brettler, (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 338.

⁵³ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, (New York: Schocken Books Inc. 1983), 797.

⁵⁴ *Jewish Study Bible*, 338.

⁵⁵ Milgram, *JPS Commentary*, 297.

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 339.

⁵⁷ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 546.

⁵⁸ Milgram, *JPS Commentary*, 230.

In the first part of the story, the women speak first and have the dominant role. In the second half, the daughters are more passive. They do not plead with Moses again, even after their marital choices are limited.⁵⁹ God and the tribesmen make decisions about the daughters' lives; yet, the kinsmen never question the daughters' authority or the legitimacy of their claim.⁶⁰ Once endogamy is imposed, the women do what Moses commands them to do. After the rule is established for the daughters, they have the choice of either marrying within the tribe and retaining their inheritance, or marrying a man from a different tribe and losing their ancestral right.⁶¹ The daughters choose their own husbands within these limitations and inherit property.

Although the choice of marriage for the daughter is constrained in the second half of the narrative, they were viewed in rabbinic times as women who stretched the boundaries of Israelite society. Rabbinic texts praise the daughters of Zelophehad as being "wise, skilled in interpreting Scripture and virtuous."⁶² The Talmud credits Zelophehad's daughters with wisdom for knowing the texts because they would not have spoken up if their father had had a son. The daughters were valorized by the rabbis for the unity they exhibited and for their faith in God. Moses was taught a lesson by the daughters as further evidence of the rabbis' high esteem for these women.

⁵⁹ Rabbi Pamela Wax, "Daughters and Inheritance Law" *Women's Torah Commentary* (Woodstock: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 307.

⁶⁰ Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 1026.

⁶¹ Rabbi Pamela Wax 309.

⁶² Shemesh, "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 99.

The rabbinic interpretation of this narrative begins with Chapter 27:1. The rabbis viewed this verse as evidence of the lack of hierarchy between the daughters. Midrash Sefer Hama'asim and Yalkut Shimoni, Pinhas, states the daughters were equally righteous, because they each spoke a part of the plea. The midrash breaks the daughters' plea into five separate statements that each person said instead of one long sentence spoken by one of the daughters. The midrash breaks down the daughters' statement in this way

“the first said: ‘Our father died in the wilderness.’ The second said, ‘he was not among the faction.’ The third said, ‘why should our father’s name be excised?’ The fourth said, ‘because he had no son.’ And the fifth said, ‘Give us a portion.’

One midrash asserts the daughters were all alike in the excellence of deeds, and another emphasized they are all like the first born because Zelophehad was the first born.⁶³ With these midrashim, the rabbis compliment the unity of the daughters making a clear distinction from the other siblings in the Tanakh. Through these midrashim, the rabbis also reiterated the eldest daughter was not asking for a double portion of inheritance, instead the goal was to ensure all of children inherited and their father’s name was preserved.

Zelophehad’s daughters not only exemplify equality between siblings, but in rabbinic material they also symbolize the faith of the desert generation women. The women did not participate in the Golden Calf ritual and they were not scared by the reports of the spies.⁶⁴ Sifre Zutta 27 praises the daughters with their wisdom in 27:4 because they did not doubt the

⁶³ Shemesh, “A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash,” 101.

⁶⁴ Eskenaski, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 984.

Israelites are going to enter the Promised Land, while the men wanted to return to Egypt.⁶⁵

Rabbi Nathan applauds the daughters for demanding their portion of Israel in Sifra Numbers

133. He praises the daughters' faith in God and God's promise to the Israelites.⁶⁶ Sifre

Numbers 133, credits the daughters' trust not only in God's promise of land, but also in God's

mercy for all people. It was this confidence in God that enabled the daughters to bring their

plight forward. In this midrash, the daughters knew God had mercy for both males and female

unlike humans whose compassion was reserved for men.⁶⁷

The rabbis praised not only the daughters' faith in God, but also their strategic wisdom in

how they brought their case to Moses. According to the Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 119 ,

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah showed their intelligence by waiting until the

opportune moment to speak out. Instead of bringing their plea forward when Moses might not

have been as willing to hearing it, the daughters calculated the right moment to speak out.⁶⁸

Numbers Rabbah 21:11 reads:

They were wise and righteous women. What shows their wisdom? They spoke at the appropriate moment. Moses had been speaking to the Israelites on the subject of inheritances and it was said at this moment that the women aired their grievance. They did not merely launch a resentful gripe. They spoke cleverly, so cleverly that their logic stumped Moses. The five sisters based their argument on the law of Levirate marriage. .. In effect the women are saying: You say the daughters cannot be heirs, but here is a circumstance wherein girls are, indeed, looked upon as heirs.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Shemesh "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 98.

⁶⁶ Ibid 98.

⁶⁷ Ibid 101.

⁶⁸ Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 984.

⁶⁹ Barbara Thaw Ronson, *The Women of the Torah Commentaries from the Talmud, Midrash and Kabbalah*, (North Bergen, New Jersey: Book-mark Press, 1999), 234.

In this quote the rabbis praise the daughters for their astuteness and insights into how and when to bring their case forward.

According to the Talmud, the daughters were virtuous because they only married men who were worthy of them. R. Eliezer b. Jacob adds to their virtue that although they married later in life, they were still blessed with the miracle of children.⁷⁰ The sages ascribed to the daughters the masculine qualities of wisdom and scriptural knowledge; according to Shemesh they did this partially because the daughters had not yet fulfilled their feminine role as wives and mothers. Shemesh presents the theory the rabbis mentioned they became mothers to counterbalance the masculine characteristics they exhibit, even though there is no record of progeny in the biblical text.⁷¹

Some rabbinic sources diminished the daughters' achievements arguing that their purpose was to rebuke Moses not to gain inheritance rights for themselves. According to B Sanhedrin 8a, the laws of inheritance should have been written by Moses, but they were written on account of the daughters of Zelophehad because they were so worthy. Rashi credits the daughters with writing a new Torah, while it should have been written Moses, but it was composed by the daughters instead.⁷² In Midrash Tanhuma, God wanted to taunt Moses and to rebuke him for his arrogance so God introduced the inheritance laws through Zelophehad's daughters. This is based on Deuteronomy 1:17: 'any case that is too hard for you-bring it to me and I will hear it.' This midrash is a reproach of Moses because the daughters knew more about

⁷⁰ Shemesh, "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 99.

⁷¹ Ibid, 99.

⁷² Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 971.

the halakhah than he did.⁷³ Genesis Rabbah viewed the narrative of the daughters of Zelophehad not as a censure to Moses, but as praise of their ancestor Joseph. According to this midrash, Joseph was not tempted by the Egyptian women who tried to seduce him, therefore his descendants are worthy of their own section of the Torah.⁷⁴

Just as the rabbinic material is expansive about Zelophehad's daughters, modern commentators have strong opinions about them, their plight and their imposed martial restrictions. Shemesh notes modern feminist scholarship reflects discomfort with the endogamy placed on the daughters, but there is no evidence that the daughters themselves are troubled by it.⁷⁵ To contemporary readers, marriage limitation is a significant detraction from the daughters' earlier victory; however, the daughters are still empowered to pick their own spouses, a task normally given to male members of the family. Since the size of the clan is unknown to modern readers, it is unclear how much of a restriction this ruling was for the daughters.⁷⁶ The decision about who to marry remains with the daughters; even with the new limitations it remains a gain for the daughters' rights.

Although no one knows why the daughters choose to marry their first cousins, Hara Person speculates they understand God wants them to keep the property in the family, so they comply. Person credits Zelophahed's daughters for having the wisdom to know when to stop pushing societal boundaries. Since they had achieved their goals, they do not push so far that

⁷³ Shemesh, "A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash," 96.

⁷⁴ Ibid 97.

⁷⁵ Ibid 94.

⁷⁶ Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 1028.

there is no place for them. Despite the limitation imposed on them, when assessing the strength of the daughters, Person concludes: “as a group, they are clearly a force with which the Torah must contend.”⁷⁷

Richard Elliot Friedman summarizes the narrative about the daughters of Zelophehad as a mixed blessing for women’s rights. On the one hand, God decides that the daughters can inherit, but at the same time, women are still dependent on either their husbands or their sons for property. He argues social change is a long, slow process and this is an example of the small steps that lead to larger transformations. This narrative helped to develop women’s rights even if it was not a revolution. For the time in which it was written and for the male dominated society in which it occurred the story of Zelophehad’s daughters changes the balance of power between men and women. He writes, “the diminution of the increase in women’s rights is one of the major developments of the past century. The Torah laws played an early and determining part in birthing and nurturing this revolution.”⁷⁸ In Sakenfeld’s evaluation of Zelophehad’s daughters, she writes that they gain increased rights for themselves and women in their situation lose some rights with the limitation of their marriage partners, but most importantly they are not victims.⁷⁹ Tal Ilan writes, “it is a tale of a personal victory by five intelligent women, whose initiative bettered the legal status of women.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Rabbi Hara Person, “Boundaries and Limits” *Women’s Torah Commentary* (Woodstock: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 327.

⁷⁸ Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 521.

⁷⁹ Katherine Doobs Sakenfeld, “Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” ed. *Theology Today*, vol. 46 (1989) 157-158.

⁸⁰ Shemesh, “A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash and Modern Feminist Midrash,” 82.

The narrative of the daughters of Zelophehad is a struggle for women's rights in a patriarchal society. These women are not afraid to stand up for what is just and speak out in defense of what is right. They demonstrate strategic wisdom in the unity among the siblings and in how and when they present their case to Moses. The daughters' wisdom is evident because God changes the inheritance laws to reflect their plight for them and all other women in the same situation based on their words. Even though the marriage choices are limited for the daughters, they still achieve tremendous strides, particularly considering the time and place in which the narrative is situated. They set a precedent for women to strive to emulate and they continue to be role models for contemporary readers. The daughters of Zelophehad are exemplars of women who stand up for themselves and employing strategic and cultural wisdom to help create new more just laws.

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Chapter Two:
Deborah
Judges 4:1-24-5:1

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כד וַתֵּלֶךְ יָד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלֹּחֶם וְקִשָּׁה עַל יָבִין מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן עַד אֲשֶׁר הִכְרִיתוּ אֶת
יָבִין מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן :

פרק ה
א ותִּשֶׁר דְּבוּרָה וּבָרַק בֶּן אֲבִינֶעַם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְאִמֶּר :

Chapter 4

- 1) The Israelites continued doing of what was evil in the eyes of Adonai now that Ehud was dead.
- 2) And Adonai sold them to the hand of Jabin the King of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The captain of his army was Sisera who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim.
- 3) And the children of Israel cried out to Adonai, because he had nine hundred iron chariots and he forcibly oppressed the children of Israel for twenty years.
- 4) And Deborah, a woman prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth⁸¹, was judging⁸² Israel at that time.
- 5) And she sat under the Palm of Deborah⁸³, between Ramah and Beth-el in the hill country of Ephraim and the children of Israel went up to her for judgment.
- 6) And Deborah summoned Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh in Naphtal, and she said to him: "Has not Adonai, the God of Israel, commanded you to go and march toward Mount Tabor, and you will take with you ten thousand men from the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun?"
- 7) I will draw Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his crowd to you at the Wadi Kishon and I will deliver him into your hand.
- 8) And Barak said to her: "If you go with me⁸⁴, I will go, but if you do not go with me, I will not go."

⁸¹ This is the only time לִפְּי יְדוּת word appears in this format in the Tanakh

⁸² This word appears שִׁפְטָה in this form two other times in the Tanakh, in Psalms 82:8 and Lamentations 3:59.

⁸³ This word תִּמְרָה appears most frequently in II Samuel.

- 9) She said: "Surely, I will go⁸⁵ with you, but there will be no glory for you on the journey you take but you because Adonai will give⁸⁶ Sisera, to the hand of a woman." And Deborah got up and she went with Barak to Kedesh.
- 10) And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh, and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet, and Deborah went up with him.
- 11) And Heber the Kenite was separated from Kenites the descendants of Hobab, the father in law of Moses, for he pitched his at Elon-bezaanaim which was (by) Kedesh.
- 12) And they told Sisera that Barak, the son of Abinoam, had gone up to Mount Tabor.
- 13) And Sisera assembled all of his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all of the people that were with him from Harosheth-goyim up to the valley of Kishon.
- 14) And Deborah said to Barak: "Get up, because this is the day that Adonai will deliver Sisera to your hands.⁸⁷ Hasn't Adonai gone out before you?" Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men after him.
- 15) And Adonai vexed Sisera and all of (his) chariots and the whole camp by the sword before Barak, and Sisera came down from (his) chariot and fled on foot.

⁸⁴ This word תִּלְכִּי in this form also appears in Genesis 16:8 when Hagar is explaining her fear of Sarai, in Ruth 1:16 when Ruth is making her pledge of loyalty to Naomi and in Ruth 2:8 when Boaz is entreating Ruth to glean in his field and not another.

⁸⁵ הֵלֵךְ אֵלַי is an infinitive absolute construct. The original JPS translates it as "I will surely go with thee" while the NJPS renders it as "Very well, I will go with you".

⁸⁶ This verb יָמַךְ literally means to "sell in" other places in the Tanakh. (Exodus 21:7, Leviticus 25:15, Leviticus 25:29, Leviticus 25:34, Leviticus 27:28, Deuteronomy 15:12 and Jeremiah 34:14). However, the original JPS translates it as "give" while the NJPS renders it as "deliver" or it means "hand over" as punishment. I choose to translate it according to the original JPS. Idiomatically this root is used throughout the Tanakh to describe how Adonai delivers people into other people's hands in war as a means of exacting judgment.

⁸⁷ The original JPS translates הֲלֹא as "is not" while the NJPS translates this phrase as "the LORD is marching before you." I choose to render it as "behold" to keep with the prophetic nature of Deborah's speech to Barak. This phrase is rhetorical, meaning "isn't it true that..."

- 16) And Barak pursued the chariot and the camp until Harosheth-hagoyim, and Sisera's whole camp fell by the sword; not one remained.
- 17) Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was peace between Jabin, the King of Hazor, and the house of Heber, the Kenite.
- 18) And she went out and greeted Sisera. She said: "Turn aside, my master, turn aside towards me. Do not be afraid." And he turned into her tent and she covered him with a blanket.
- 19) And he said to her: "Please give me a little water to drink because I am thirsty." And she opened the skin bottle of milk and she gave him drink and she covered him (again).
- 20) And he said to her: "Stand at the opening of the tent. And if a man comes to ask you and says to you, 'is there a man here?' You will say 'No.'"
- 21) And Jael, the wife of Heber, took a tent pin and she put a hammer in her hand and she went to him secretly and she thrust the pin into his temple through the ground, for he was fast asleep with weariness. And he died.
- 22) Behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and she said: "Come and I will show you the man that you seek." And he went inside with her. Behold, Sisera was lying dead with a pin in his temple.
- 23) And on that day, Adonai subdued Jabin, the King of Canaan before the children of Israel.
- 24) And the hand of the children of Israel prevailed more and more⁸⁸ against Jabin the King of Canaan until they destroyed Jabin the King of Canaan.
- 1) And that day Deborah sang and Barak the son of Abinoam saying:

⁸⁸ I have chosen to translate this phrase וַתִּלָּךְ יָד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלּוֹךְ וְקָשָׁה עַל יָבִין מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן according to the original JPS translation because I thought it is remained consistent with the meaning of the text.

Deborah is a wise biblical woman who exhibits wisdom through her judgeship and prophecies in Judges 4-5. This unique combination gives Deborah unprecedented status and enables her to stretch the boundaries of women's roles in biblical society. She leads in the public sphere, not only expanding the function of a woman in the text, but also saving the Israelites from their oppressor. The text does not state why Deborah was chosen for these roles and includes limited background information about her. Yet despite this significant gap in material, the other biblical characters do not question her authority. Deborah's wisdom is recognized by the Israelites as they sought her advice and respected her prophecies. She acted as a conduit for Adonai, and she wisely uses her distinctive positions to help the Israelites in their time of need.

Deborah demonstrates her wisdom by the way she utilizes her positions of power. Instead of Deborah traveling around the country to dispense her judgments, she remains stationary and individuals come to her. She sits under the "Palm of Deborah" a tree named in her honor, between Ramah and Beth-el in the hill country of Ephraim. The significance of Deborah staying in one spot is underscored because Moses is the only other biblical character with that privilege. This commonality with Moses highlights Deborah's wisdom because he is thought of as the Bible's greatest icon of leadership.

As a judge Deborah is likened to Moses and as a prophet she utilizes her wisdom in groundbreaking ways, enabling the Israelites to overthrow an oppressor. Speaking on behalf of Adonai, she summons Barak to her. When Deborah predicts that Barak will be successful in

battle, he states he will only engage in warfare if Deborah accompanies him. It is extraordinary for a man to depend on a woman in battle in this way.

When Deborah states the glory of war victory will not be Barak's but will belong to a woman, it emphasizes the reversal of gender roles in this narrative. Women are acting in roles normally filled by men: for example, women do not usually capture the opponent's military commanders. When women play such an active role in war it is perceived that men lose glory.⁸⁹ Victor Mathews suggests the males in the Deborah narrative are not the stereotypical heroes who are courageous, forceful and direct; instead they are more like little boys who are dependent on their mothers. The women are not uncertain and frightened victims; rather, they act like warriors. It is the women who meet the needs of the Israelites to help ensure their survival.⁹⁰ Deborah takes initiative to change the fate of the Israelites while the men do not act.⁹¹

Deborah's wisdom is written into the text, thus it is necessary to closely examine the verses to understand her character. The first three lines of chapter four establish the backdrop of the story of Deborah which is in keeping with the cycle of the book of Judges. The Israelites have displeased Adonai who has allowed a foreign ruler to gain power over them. These people mistreated the Israelites who saw the error of their ways and cried out to Adonai for help. Deborah is introduced to redeem the Israelites in the next part of the cycle of Judges.

⁸⁹ Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1962) 70.

⁹⁰ Victor Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 65.

⁹¹ Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61, (1992): 114.

Deborah's role with the Israelites is established in verse 4. Each word in this verse shapes the reader's interpretation of Deborah as a leader and biblical character.

וַדְּבוֹרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אִשָּׁת לַפִּי יָדוֹת הִיא שֹׁפֵטָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵת הַהִיא :

In this translation, Deborah is introduced by a string of seven feminine nouns.⁹² According to Robert Alter, the abundance of feminine words in Deborah's introduction establishes that gender is the overall main feature of this narrative.⁹³

On the subject of Deborah's gender Mathews focuses on her age suggesting she is a postmenopausal female similar to the "wise women" in the David narrative. This would make Deborah's role like an elder, deemphasizing her gender. After menopause a woman was no longer disqualified from serving in authoritative roles and Mathews argues Deborah was in that category.⁹⁴ He observes that Deborah is a liminal figure because she functions outside the typical categories assigned to women at the time in Israelite society. Mathews attributes Deborah's ability to fulfill these roles to her postmenopausal state.

The second word in this verse, אִשָּׁה can mean "woman" "wife" or "female." In this context, it could be modifying the term "prophetess" נְבִיאָה, but according to Tammi Schneider this is unnecessary because it is already in a female form of the word. Judges 4:4 is the only place where the term "prophetess" appears in the book of Judges, thus Schneider suggests the function of the combination of these words is to emphasize Deborah's femaleness. This could

⁹² Schneider, *Judges*, 64.

⁹³ Tyler Mayfield, "The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4-5) in Recent Research" *Currents in Biblical Research*, volume 7 no. 3 (2009): 310.

⁹⁴ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 64.

be translated either as Deborah was a female prophetess or Deborah was a woman, a prophet.⁹⁵ Either way it highlights Deborah's unique status as a female prophet. Schneider notes that in contrast to the male prophets who are introduced by their family lineage, no father is connected with Deborah's status as a prophet. Commentators assess what it means for Deborah to be a prophet. When discussing this topic, Susan Niditch writes that Deborah's wisdom came from Adonai because she is a prophet.⁹⁶ According to John Goldingay, Deborah is the first proper prophet and judge and the "greatest figure in the book of Judges."⁹⁷

The term *אִשְׁתּוֹ* is applied to Deborah a second time and the way it is interpreted here shapes how commentators view her. It can be rendered as being in *smihut* *אִשְׁתּוֹ לִפְּיָדוֹת* so it can be translated as wife of Lappidoth. Lappidoth as a name is a hapax legomenon.⁹⁸ If Deborah is introduced as the wife of Lappidoth, it is implied that she is married. Since women were introduced by their relationships with their male relatives (fathers, brother, husbands) Deborah's husband could be part of her introduction.⁹⁹ Yet some scholars question why a woman this powerful still is introduced through her husband. Lillian Klein suggests the introduction of Lappidoth as Deborah's husband, but the lack of information about him is comparable to the function of many women in the text. In Klein's opinion, Lappidoth has the role of spouse, as part of the background, but does not have a voice of his own.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 65.

⁹⁶ Susan Niditch, *Judges A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 65.

⁹⁷ John Golingay, "Motherhood, Machismo and the Purpose of Yahweh in Judges 4-5," *Anvil* 12: (1995) 30.

⁹⁸ Lillian Klein, *From Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 33.

⁹⁹ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 67.

¹⁰⁰ Klein, *From Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 33

Other scholars such as R.G. Boling note the connection between Lappidoth meaning “torches” or “flasher” and Barak meaning “lightning.” Boling argues that “flasher” and “lightning” are so closely connected, that Barak and Lappidoth are the same person.¹⁰¹ Scholars such as Marcella Weiner and Blema Feinstein assume that Barak and Lappidoth are one person. In their book “A Woman’s Voice” they state explicitly that Deborah is married to Barak without any reference to the debate about it or mentioning Lappidoth.¹⁰² The interpretation of Deborah’s marital status is significant because it impacts her status as a prophet and raises questions about the roles of women in Israelite society. The connection in the meaning of the names Lappidoth and Barak has been used to make the case that there is only one man. If there is one man instead of two, it is argued that he is the real prophet instead of Deborah and she has status because of him and not in her own right.

However, Schneider notes that the text does not say Lappidoth and Barak are the same person and raises the question about why her marital status is mentioned at all. Schneider questions if a married woman would have been allowed to hold the positions of power Deborah held. Schneider inquired not only if Deborah could be a prophet if she was married, but how being married would have affected her role as a prophet.¹⁰³ Susan Ackerman describes Deborah’s marital status as being ambiguous and states it is noteworthy that the text does not mention any children.¹⁰⁴ Klein suggests that Deborah fulfills numerous roles in the narrative: in

¹⁰¹ Schneider, *Judges*, 67.

¹⁰² Marcella Bakur Weiner and Blema Feinstein, *A Woman’s Voice: Biblical Women: Divine Wisdom Transformed into Action for Today’s Woman*, (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc.,) 112.

¹⁰³ Schneider, *Judges*, 66.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Ackerman, “What if Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, volume 8, no 1-2, (2000): 38.

the social realm, she is a wife. In the spiritual, she is a prophet and she unites them in her role as a judge. Klein writes that she fills these roles between two poles of light with Lappidoth “torches” and Barak “lightening.”¹⁰⁵

The other possible translation of this phrase is that Deborah was a fiery or spirited woman. Danna Fewell and David Gunn render this phrase אִשָּׁת לֶפֶת יָדוֹת as “woman of fire” or “spirited woman” describing Deborah’s personality or leadership style rather than her marital status.¹⁰⁶ Niditch translates this phrase as a “woman of fire.”¹⁰⁷

The next phrase הָיָא שֹׁפֵטָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵת הַהִיא, “she judged in Israel at that time,” is also the subject of interpretation by commentators.¹⁰⁸ Many of the judges in the Book of Judges led the Israelites in military campaigns; despite the fact that Deborah will fulfill this role, she had not done so when she is called a judge. This hints that Deborah was a leader in other ways within Israelite society because her authority is established.¹⁰⁹ Mathews advocates that in this brief sketch of Deborah’s role as a judge, she is the only character among the Judges who functions in a judicial position since she hears and decides cases for Israelites who seek out her council.¹¹⁰

Deborah’s wisdom and unique role are emphasized in the next verse when the text states וְהָיָא יוֹשֶׁבֶת תַּחַת־תֹּמָר דְּבוֹרָה בֵּין הָרָמָה וּבֵין בֵּית־אֵל בְּהַר אֶפְרַיִם וַיַּעֲלֻ אֵלֶיהָ בָּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִמְשָׁפֶט

¹⁰⁵ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5,” *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, volume 58, no. 3 (1990): 391.

¹⁰⁷ Niditch, *Judges*, 60.

¹⁰⁸ Schneider, *Judges*, 67.

¹⁰⁹ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 35.

¹¹⁰ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 64.

“Deborah sat under the palm tree of Deborah and the Israelites came to her for judgment.” It is implied that Deborah’s time as a judge is both important and long since the location of her court is noted in the text.¹¹¹ Deborah and Moses were the only leaders that remained in one location and the Israelites came to them for judgment. Placing Deborah in the same category with Moses is remarkable because Moses is the exemplar of leadership throughout the Bible.¹¹² Mathews draws on the parallel between Deborah and Moses, reiterating the prestige of Deborah’s judgeship.¹¹³ Cheryl Anne Brown emphasizes this connection between Deborah and Moses, giving Deborah the accolade of being the “feminine counterpart to the greatest leader in all of Israelite history –Moses.”¹¹⁴

Moses functions as both a prophet and a judge: while these roles can be distinct, Niditch links them for Deborah. According to Niditch, the definition of a prophet is a person who is capable of mediating between God and human beings and a vessel for divine communications. In Niditch’s opinion, it was this gift that enabled Deborah to “judge” Israel.¹¹⁵

In verses 6-7 Deborah switches to her role as prophet when she commands Barak to take military action against Sisera. The text states that Deborah believed she was speaking at

¹¹¹ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 34.

¹¹² Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 68.

¹¹³ Ibid, 65.

¹¹⁴ Cheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 40.

¹¹⁵ Niditch, *Judges*, 65.

Adonai's instruction. Deborah frames her military prophecy within the divine realm.¹¹⁶

Deborah, who was Adonai's representative, ensured victory for the Israelites.¹¹⁷

Deborah's role in inciting war is based on her prophecy in verses 6-7. Barnabas Lindars calls Deborah a "war prophet."¹¹⁸ These verses leads some commentators to celebrate her achievements as empowering to women while others condemn her as a disgrace because of her role in the military campaign. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld states that some readers think it is unacceptable for women to initiate killing as Deborah did.¹¹⁹ Still others note that Deborah's role in the battle is ambiguous and her main function was to spur Barak to action, not to participate in the battle herself. In this interpretation, Barak is the war hero and not Deborah.

Yet, it is noteworthy that Barak enters the narrative in Judges 4:6 after Deborah was presented establishing Deborah as the primary leader. This is reinforced because Barak's family lineage is mentioned while Deborah's is not. Barak continues in the secondary leadership role, or typically feminine part, when he responds to Deborah's summons. Barak respects Deborah's authority as a prophet and judge, thus he responds to her words.¹²⁰ Deborah's request of Barak is the only instance in the Tanakh when a woman calls for a man in this way.¹²¹

Barak's subservient role reaches a peak in verse 8 when he states he will only go to war if Deborah will go with him. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָּרַק אִם תִּתְּלָכִי עִמִּי וְהִלָּכְתִּי וְאִם לֹא תִתְּלָכִי עִמִּי לֹא אֵלֶךְ.

¹¹⁶ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 35.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 35.

¹¹⁸ B. Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 182.

¹¹⁹ Kathrine Dobbs Sakenfeld, "Deborah, Jael and Sisera's Mother: Reading the Scriptures in a Cross-Cultural Context," in ed. J.D. Douglass and J.F. Kay, *Women, Gender and Christian Community*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997): 18.

¹²⁰ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 64.

¹²¹ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 34.

It is unprecedented for a male to refuse to go to war without a female as Barak does here.

Barak's request emphasizes Deborah's prestige and importance.¹²² Klein suggests that Barak is insecure and facing his own limitations whereas Deborah is certain and secure.¹²³ This interaction reiterates the reversal of gender roles prevalent throughout this narrative.

Barak's response could also have theological implications. Barak's request to Deborah could suggest he does not want to go to war without a divine representative.¹²⁴ Niditch offers that Barak wants Deborah's presence on the battlefield to symbolize Adonai's support in battle. Alternatively, Barak's reluctance to take on military leadership could be a sign of his lack of faith in Adonai.¹²⁵ When Barak states he will only go to battle in her presence, he could be questioning Deborah's authority. According to Fewell and Gunn, Barak is really saying if Deborah is willing to stake her own life on her faith in Adonai and her prophecy then he is too. But if she is not willing to do so, he is not.¹²⁶

Deborah agrees to Barak's condition, but informs Barak that Sisera will be killed by the hand of a woman and not him. Chapter 4 verses 17-24 continue the Deborah narrative through the story of Jael and Sisera. Jael invites Sisera into her tent, gives him milk, and plunges a tent stake into his temple. Commentators and scholars have analyzed Jael's actions from the rabbinic period into contemporary times. This chapter will focus on Jael's actions only in the context of Deborah's prophecy. Deborah's prediction that Sisera will fall at the hands of a

¹²² Niditch, *Judges*, 65.

¹²³ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 35.

¹²⁴ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 65.

¹²⁵ Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5," 391.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

woman could lead a reader to assume she would kill him herself, but that is not how the narrative unfolds.¹²⁷ According to Elie Assis, Jael's role in the narrative is to materialize Deborah's prophecy.¹²⁸ Jael becomes an extension of Deborah's hand, fulfilling her prophecy and bolstering her qualifications as a prophet.¹²⁹ Mathews agrees with Assis's assessment of Jael, because it is through her that Deborah's prophecy is realized. Not only was Jabin's army defeated, but Sisera is killed by the hand of a woman.¹³⁰ Jael completes Deborah's prophecy proving the wisdom and truth in her prophetic ability.

Chapter 5 retells the Deborah narrative in the form of a poem. The similarities and differences between chapters 4 and 5 will not be discussed here; instead, this chapter will analyze the first verse of chapter five. Even though the first verse states that Deborah and Barak sang, the verb is in the singular feminine form. This emphasizes Deborah as the primary subject and Barak as secondary. It is unknown which chapter was written first, but this indicates that Deborah was the leader in both accounts of the narrative. According to Schneider, Deborah's introduction in chapter five suggests she is an unmarried woman since no husband is mentioned. Since Deborah is introduced without a male relative, it implies she has status in her own right without relying on her husband or any other man for power.¹³¹

In Judges 5:7 Deborah is referred to as a "mother in Israel." The text does not reference children of Deborah's, therefore, it is unclear if she is a biological mother or not. Schneider

¹²⁷ Schneider, *Judges*, 65.

¹²⁸ Elie Assis, "The Choice to Serve God and Assist his People: Rahab and Yael" *Biblica* 85, (2004): 89.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 88.

¹³⁰ Mathews, *Judges and Ruth*, 73.

¹³¹ Schneider, *Judges*, 87.

suggests the title of “mother in Israel” has meanings beyond childbearing. Klein offers that this reference to Deborah as a “mother in Israel” could mean she functions as a “national” mother to the Israelites.¹³² Leila Leah Bronner links the title “mother in Israel” with Deborah’s role as a judge because she mothers the Israelites with her words.¹³³ Denis Olson argues the term “mother in Israel” is not an office, but a poetic title.¹³⁴ Tikva Frymer-Kensky offers this was an “honorific title for a female authority figure.”¹³⁵ Similarly, Larry Helyer states this term is “the highest accolade a Hebrew woman might receive.”¹³⁶

If the title “mother in Israel” is as Helyer suggests, such a high tribute, it is evidence of the strong opinions Deborah elicits. Beginning in the rabbinic period interpretations of Deborah’s character simultaneously praise her accomplishment and diminish her status. Because the rabbis clearly defined men’s and women’s roles in society, Deborah threatened them when she defied these boundaries. The rabbis’ discomfort with Deborah is written into the commentary about her. For example, Midrash Tehilim 22:20 and Yalkut Shimoni, Judges 42, states explicitly how the rabbis felt about Deborah as a female leader of the Israelites.

Deborah, a prophetess...judged Israel” (Judges 4:4) With regard to this verse, Rav Berekhiah had four sayings: woe unto the living who need help from the dead; woe unto the strong who need help from the weak; woe unto the seeing who need help from the blind; woe unto the generation to be led by a woman.

¹³² Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 33.

¹³³ Leila Leah Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible*, (Dallas: University of America Press, 2004), 82.

¹³⁴ Denis Olson, “The Book of Judges: Introduction, Commentary, Reflections” in ed. L.E. Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume II*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 787.

¹³⁵ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah 2” ed. Carol Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001): 67.

¹³⁶ L.R. Helyer, “Hero and Heroine Narratives in the Old Testament” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (1998): 36.

This quote demonstrates how strongly the rabbis objected to Deborah's leadership since it was not the role of a woman to lead in the ways she did.

While some of the rabbinic material objected to Deborah's leadership, other rabbis expressed their disapproval of Deborah's expansion of gender roles.

R. Nahman said: Haughtiness does not become a woman. There were two haughty women and they were appropriately odious, one being called hornet (Deborah) and the other weasel (Huldah). Of the one called hornet scripture says: 'and she sent and called for Barak,' (Judges 4:6) she would not deign to go to him.¹³⁷

This quote exemplifies the rabbis' opposition to Deborah's summoning of Barak since it was not a woman's role to call for a man in this way.

Since the rabbis disapproved of Deborah's summons of Barak in her role as a prophet, they attempted to explain her actions through a lens they could accept. Because the rabbis believed a woman's primary role was to be a devoted and selfless wife they determined Deborah earned her role through devotion to her husband. In the quote below, the rabbis acknowledge Deborah's status as a prophet, but only because she met the needs of her husband.

It is said that Deborah's husband was unlettered in Torah. So his wife told him: "Come I will make wicks for you; take them to the Holy Place in Shiloh. Your portion will then be with men of worth in Israel who will be studying by the light of your wicks, and you will be worthy of life in the world to come." She took care to make the wicks thick, so that their light would be ample. He brought these wicks to the Holy Place in Shiloh. The Holy One, who examines the hearts and reins of mankind, said to her: Deborah, since you took care to make the light for

¹³⁷ Genesis Rabbah 18:1

the study of Torah ample, I will make the light of your prophecy ample in the presence of the twelve tribes.”¹³⁸

In this example, Deborah earned her prophetess status by enabling her husband to study Torah.

Beyond enabling her husband to study Torah, according to the rabbis Deborah proved herself worthy of her status acting modestly as a woman should (in their opinion). This seemed to be the rabbis’ method of explaining Deborah’s judgeship.

“The point of the words “She sat under the palm tree of Deborah” (Judges 4:5) is taken to be that, since it is improper for a woman to be alone in a house with a man, Deborah went outside and sat down under a palm tree where she instructed multitudes in Torah.”¹³⁹

In this quote, Deborah is breaking gender roles by instructing Torah, but she is doing so while maintaining her modesty and protecting the men that came to her.

While some of the rabbinic literature diminished Deborah’s accomplishment or credited only because she still upheld the proper behavior of a woman, some of it credited Deborah based on her own merit. This quote presumes Deborah deserved the honors she was given.

Now Deborah was a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth and she judged Israel at that time (Judges 4:4). What was the special character about Deborah that qualified her to prophesy about Israel and to judge them? Was not Phinehas son of Eleazer still alive at that time? In the school of Elijah it was taught: I call heaven and earth to witness that whether it be a heathen or a Jew, a manservant or a maidservant, the holy spirit will suffuse any one of them in keeping with the deeds he or she performs.¹⁴⁰

In this quote, the rabbis believed Deborah was worthy of the special roles she was given.

¹³⁸ Genesis Rabbah 40:8

¹³⁹ Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah and Yalkut Shimoni Judges 42

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Other rabbis praised Deborah for her role in defeating an enemy of Israel. In this example, the rabbis acclaim Deborah and Esther for the strategic way they destroyed Israel's foes.

R. Judah bar Simon taught: You find that when a house in which a snake nets if fumigated with a hind's horn or a woman's hair, the snake immediately flees. So, too Deborah and Esther were as effective as a hind's horn, for Deborah did not budge until she destroyed Sisera and his hosts; and Esther did not budge until she had Haman and his ten sons hanged.¹⁴¹

This is the clearest example of the rabbis recognizing Deborah's militaristic wisdom and her role in the defeat of Sisera. The idea in this quote is that she was successful because she is a woman.

When the rabbis acknowledged Deborah's value as a prophet, scholars in the medieval period applied this to her role of protecting Barak in battle. In the Zohar 4:21, it was written that Barak was saved because Deborah was a prophet. The Zohar states: "Barak reasoned thus: Because the Holy Spirit rests upon her, I shall be delivered through her merit and shall come to no harm." This quote explicitly recognizes Deborah as Barak's protector in war.

While Deborah's role in battle is acknowledged in this last quote, it is clear scholars had a range of opinions about her. Modern commentators also have a variety of views of Deborah as a woman who stretched the boundaries of Israelite society. While some interpretations of Deborah diminish her accomplishments as highlighted throughout this chapter, others herald her as a role model. Mieke Bal interprets Deborah as combining four forms of leadership: religious, military, juridical and poetical. According to Bal, Deborah's gender was an asset

¹⁴¹ Aggadah Esther 7:11

because only a woman could fulfill the combination of roles that she did. Bal asserts that Deborah mixed prophecy and poetry and in a womanly way. In Bal's opinion, she combined military, politics and justice through judging and through this she made order out of chaos.¹⁴²

According to Carol Blessing, Deborah has a long list of roles in this narrative. She is a "judge, prophet, military leader, wife, mother, and woman." Blessing states Deborah used prophecy to conquer an enemy of Israel. Blessing writes Deborah did not act for self glorification or to achieve power over others, but for the good of the Israelites.¹⁴³ Blessing advocates that Deborah is an inspiration to women in her contemporary setting and today.¹⁴⁴

Deborah is a wise biblical woman who broke through the gender barriers in Israelite society. She was recognized for her intelligence as a judge as the Israelites sought out her council. Barak responded to Deborah's commands and took up arms against an enemy of Israel based on her prophecy. Deborah is a conduit for Adonai and her prophecy is actualized through Barak's battle and Jael's actions. She is a woman who speaks her mind and is not intimidated by people in power. The limited textual information about Deborah does not diminish her achievements or her place as a role model. Since Deborah ruled within the public, traditionally male realms in society she is viewed as a threat by the rabbis. Commentators have attempted to minimize Deborah's accomplishments or to find ways of attributing them to the males in the narrative instead of her. The fear that Deborah elicits in some interpretations of her highlights the importance of her character. Deborah's wisdom is evident in the text and in

¹⁴² Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 208-209.

¹⁴³ Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 40.

¹⁴⁴ Carol Blessing, "Judge, Prophet, Mother: Learning from Deborah" *Daughters of Sarah* 21, Winter (1995): 34.

the ways she is celebrated as a role model and a ground breaker beginning in rabbinic times and continuing into contemporary scholarship.

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Chapter Three:

Hannah

1 Samuel 1:1-2:11

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כו וַתֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנִי חַי נִפְשְׁךָ אֲדֹנִי אֲנִי הָאִשָּׁה הַנִּצָּבֶת עִמָּכָה בְּזֶה לְהִתְפַּלֵּל
אֵלֶי יְהוָה:

כז אֵלֶי הִנָּעַר הַזֶּה הִתְפַּלֵּלְתִּי וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לִי אֶת־ שְׁאֵלְתִּי אֲשֶׁר שְׁאֵלְתִּי מֵעַמּוֹ:
כח וְגַם אָנֹכִי הִשְׁאֵלְתִּהוּ לַיהוָה כָּל־הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה הוּא שְׂאוֹל לַיהוָה
וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה שָׁם לַיהוָה:

פרק ב

א וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל חַנָּה וַתֹּאמֶר עֲלֹץ לִבִּי בַיהוָה רָמָה קִרְנִי בַיהוָה רָחֵב פִּי עַל־ אוֹיְבֵי
כִּי שִׁמְחֵתִי בִישׁוּעָתְךָ:

ב אֵין־ קְדוֹשׁ בַּיהוָה כִּי־אֵין בְּלִתִּי וְאֵין צוּר כְּאֱלֹהֵינוּ:

ג אֵל־ תִּרְבּוּ תִדְבְּרוּ גְבוּהָה גְבוּהָה יֵצֵא עֲתָק מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֵל יַדְעוֹת יְהוָה וְלֹא
נִתְּכָנוּ עֲלָלוֹת:

ד קִשֵּׁת גְּבָרִים חֲתִים וְנִכְשָׁלִים אֶן־ רוֹחִיל:

ה שְׁבָעִים בִּלְחָם נִשְׁכְּרוּ וַרְעָבִים חִדְּלוּ עַד־ עֲקָרָה יִלְדָּה שְׁבָעָה וּרְבֵת בָּנִים
אֲמָלָה:

ו יְהוָה מִמִּית וּמַחְיָה מוֹרִיד שְׂאוֹל וְיַעַל:

ז יְהוָה מוֹרִישׁ וּמַעֲשִׂיר מַשְׁפִּיל אֶף־מְרוֹמָם:

ח מְקִים מַעֲפָר דָּל מַאֲשֵׁפֶת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן לְחוֹשֵׁיב עִם־ נְדִיבִים וְכֶסֶף כְּבוֹד
יִנְחָלִם כִּי לַיהוָה מִצָּקִי אֶרְץ וַיִּשֶׁת עֲלֵיהֶם תִּבֵּל:

ט רַגְלֵי חֲסִידוֹ יִשְׁמֹר וַרְשָׁעִים בַּחֲשָׁךְ יִדְּמוּ כִּי־לֹא בָלַח יִגְבֵּר־אִישׁ:

י יְהוָה יַחֲתוּ מְרִיבּוֹ עָלוּ בַשָּׁמַיִם יַרְעֵם יְהוָה יִדִּין אֶפְסִיר־ אֶרֶץ וַיִּתֵּן עֹז לְמַלְכוֹ
וַיָּרֶם קֶרֶן מְשִׁיחוֹ:

יֵא וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶלְקָנָה הָרָמָתִי עַל־בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנְעֵר הָיָה מִשָּׁרֵת אֶת־יְהוָה אֶת־פְּנֵי עַל־י הַכֹּהֵן :

1 Samuel 1:1-1:28

- 1) There was a man from Ramathaim-zophim from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephratite.
- 2) He had two wives. The name of one was Hannah and the name of the second was Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah did not have children.
- 3) This man went up from his city year to year¹⁴⁵ to worship¹⁴⁶ and sacrifice to Adonai of hosts in Shiloh and there the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to Adonai.
- 4) On the day when Elkanah sacrificed he gave Peninnah his wife and all of her sons and daughters portions.¹⁴⁷
- 5) To Hannah he gave a double portion¹⁴⁸ because he loved¹⁴⁹ Hannah and Adonai had closed her womb.

¹⁴⁵ This is a repetition of the word **מִיָּמִים וְיָמִים** meaning days, but I translated it as “year to year” following the NJPS translation. This expression appears five other times in the Tanakh, in Exodus 13:10, in Judges 11:40, in Judges 21:19, in 1 Samuel 2:19 and in Job 42:14. The dictionary entry also reflects the meaning of “annually” or “at regular intervals.”

¹⁴⁶ **לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת** literally means to “bow down,” but I have chosen to render it as “worship” as in the NJPS translation since bowing down is done during worship.

¹⁴⁷ This term **מִנְחֹת** implies choice portions of the animal for sacrifice (BDB 584).

¹⁴⁸ The original JPS and the New King James version translate **מִנְחָה אֶחָת** as “a double portion.”

¹⁴⁹ The NJPS translates **כִּי אֶת־חַנָּה אָהָב** as “though Hannah was his favorite”, I chose to render it as “and” instead of “but” as seen in the NJSP translation.

- 6) Her rival wife, used to taunt her, in order to humiliate her¹⁵⁰ because Adonai closed her womb.
- 7) So it was year after year: when she went up to the House of Adonai, (Peninnah) would vex her (Hannah) and she would weep and would not eat.
- 8) And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart so distressed?¹⁵¹ Am I not better to you than ten sons?”
- 9) Hannah got up after they ate and drank in Shiloh, and Eli the priest was sitting in a chair at the doorpost of the temple of Adonai.
- 10) In her anguish, she wept greatly¹⁵², and she prayed to Adonai, she wept and bewailed.¹⁵³
- 11) And she vowed a vow to Adonai of hosts saying: “If you will really see¹⁵⁴ the affliction of your maid-servant and remember me and not forget your maid-servant and if you give your maid-servant a male child, I will give him to Adonai all the days of his life and no razor shall come up to his head.”

¹⁵⁰ Alternative translations of this word הָרַעְמָה are “thunder,” “utter complaints” or “tremble.”

¹⁵¹ This וַתִּבְכֶּה can be translated as quiver or disheartened. The NJPS renders it as sad, while the original translates it as “grieved”. This is the same word that is found in Genesis 21:12 when God is telling Abraham not to be distressed over Ishmael the son of his slave. God commends Abraham to listen to Sarah and do what she says because his line will be continued through Isaac and not Ishmael.

¹⁵² NJPS translates וְהָיָא מְרַת נָפֶשׁ as “in her wretchedness” while the original JPS renders it as “she was in bitterness in the soul.”

¹⁵³ The repetition of the Hebrew verb וַתִּבְכֶּה וַתִּבְכֶּה, forms an infinitive absolute emphasizing Hannah’s tears.

¹⁵⁴ This repetition of the Hebrew verbs רָאָה וַתִּרְאֶה creates an infinitive absolute. I choose to render it as “really see” because it is the verb for seeing that is repeated. The NJPS translates it as “if you will look upon” and the original JPS renders it as “if thou will indeed look upon.”

12) While she continued to pray before Adonai, Eli watched her mouth.

13) And Hannah spoke in her heart and only her lips quivered¹⁵⁵ and her voice was not heard and Eli thought she was drunk.¹⁵⁶

14) And Eli said to her: “How long will you make yourself drunk? Remove yourself from your wine.”

15) And Hannah answered and she said: “No my lord, I am a woman with a sorrowful spirit,¹⁵⁷ I have not drunk wine nor an intoxicating drink, but I poured out my soul before Adonai”

16) “Do not take your maid-servant as a worthless woman; because of the abundance of my complaint and vexation, I have spoken my words until now.”

17) And Eli answered and said: “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel give you what you asked of him.”

18) She said: “Let your maid-servant find favor in your eyes.” And the woman went on her journey and she ate and her face was no longer sad¹⁵⁸.

19) And they rose early in the morning and worshiped before Adonai, and they returned to their house in Ramah. Elkanah knew Hannah his wife and Adonai remembered her.

20) And the days passed, and Hannah conceived and she gave birth to a son and she named him Samuel, meaning “I asked God for him.”

¹⁵⁵ נָעוּת can mean “waver,” “tremble” or “trotter;” I choose to render it as “quiver” because of the context of Hannah’s prayer.

¹⁵⁶ The only other place where לִשְׁכָּרָה appears in this form in the Tanakh is in Haggai 1:6 when Adonai is telling the Israelites to examine themselves because they eat but do not feel satisfied, drink without getting their fill and clothe themselves without getting warm.

¹⁵⁷ I have chosen to translate this phrase אִשָּׁה קָשֶׁת רֹחַ אֲנָכִי as is found in the original JPS translation.

¹⁵⁸ I have rendered this in an idiomatic translation.

- 21) And the man Elkanah, with his whole house, went up to offer to Adonai. The yearly sacrifice and his votive sacrifice.
- 22) But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not bring him up until the child is weaned, (for when) he appears before Adonai, he will dwell there forever."
- 23) And her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do what you think is good in your eyes, remain until you have weaned him.¹⁵⁹ Surely Adonai will uphold his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him.
- 24) And when she weaned him, she took him up with her, along with three young bulls, one ephah of flour, and a jar of wine. She brought him up to the house of Adonai at Shiloh though the child was young.
- 25) And after slaughtering the bull, they brought the young boy to Eli.
- 26) And she said: "My lord, by your life, my lord, I am the woman who stood with you, praying to Adonai.
- 27) "I prayed for this boy and Adonai granted to me that what I requested from him.
- 28) "Now I lend him to Adonai. All of his days (of his life) he shall be lent to Adonai. They worshiped to Adonai there."

¹⁵⁹ This word גִּמְלָה is only found in his form in three places in the Tanakh, in this verse, in Proverbs 3:30 and in Oba 1:15.

1 Samuel 2:1-11

- 1) And Hannah prayed and she said: “My heart rejoices in Adonai, my horn is lifted to Adonai, my mouth is enlarged over my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation.
- 2) “There is no holy one like Adonai because there is none except you, and there is not a rock like our God.
- 3) Speak no more with excess pride, arrogance should not go out from your lips. For Adonai is the God of knowledge and by Him, all deeds are measured.
- 4) The bows of the mighty are shattered, and the stumblers are girded with strength.
- 5) Those that are sated hired out for bread, those who are hungry are no longer (hungry) the barren woman births seven children, and she that has many sons has become bereft.
- 6) Adonai kills and creates life, Adonai sends to Sheol and brings up.
- 7) Adonai impoverishes and makes rich, Adonai makes low and rises up,
- 8) Raises the poor from the dust, lifts the needy from the dust, to give them a seat with noblemen, and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are Adonai’s and on them Adonai has founded the world.
- 9) Adonai will guard the way¹⁶⁰ of Adonai’s¹⁶¹ faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off¹⁶² in darkness. For not by strength shall people prevail.
- 10) The enemies of Adonai will be broken into pieces, Adonai will thunder in heaven. Adonai will judge the ends of the earth, and will give strength to the God’s king and exalt the power of God’s anointed.”
- 11) And Elkanah went home to Ramah, and the young boy remained to serve Adonai in the presence of Eli the priest.

¹⁶⁰ This literally means “feet” רַגְלֵי, but I choose to render it in the more figurative meaning of way.

¹⁶¹ This is translated in the gender neutral form of Adonai instead of the literal “his”.

¹⁶² The word מָוֶה has a range of translations including “perish” and “put to silence.” I choose to render it as “shall be cut off.”

Hannah is considered by rabbinic sources and modern scholars to be an exemplar of prayer, exhibiting her spiritual wisdom and deep connection with God. She creates an unprecedented and different model of prayer as she expresses her deepest longings and heartache in a prayer without utilizing rituals, sacrifices or clergy. Even though Hannah utilizes tears to attract God's attention, she is considered to be a strong woman who stretches the boundaries of her societal norms. Hannah is the main actor in the narrative because she prays to God for a child, she makes the vow to God, she decides when to wean him and she brings him to the temple. Hannah does not rely on her husband or Eli the priest to change her situation; instead she takes control and appeals directly to God to help her. Hannah demonstrates her spiritual wisdom through her prayer even though it is unstated why she longs for a child so deeply.

Hannah's barrenness is complicated by her relationship with the other characters in the narrative. Peninnah, Elkanah's other wife, has borne several children and she uses this stark contrast in their fertility to torment Hannah. Elkanah, unlike many biblical male characters does not devalue Hannah because of her childlessness. Instead Elkanah tries to bring her comfort, and to reassure her of the stability of his love. Hannah is accused of being drunk while she is praying by the Eli, the priest. After she explains that she is not drunk, but praying with sincerity, Eli blesses her. The poem in Chapter 2 of Samuel is attributed to Hannah, even though there are anachronisms since she refers to a king ruling over Israel. At this point in Israelites history, the monarchy had not been established, thus it is unlikely that she could have recited it. Yet the fact that it is attributed to Hannah is further evidence of her unique spiritual

status within the Biblical text. This fact is noted and expanded on in rabbinic material and by modern commentators.

Not only does Hannah face the humiliation of being infertile, but she also is taunted about her barrenness by Elkanah's other wife Peninah in Chapter 1 verse 6 as follows:

וְכַעֲסָתָהּ צָרָתָהּ גַּם כַּעַס בְּעָבוּר הָרַעְמָהּ כִּי סָגַר יְהוָה בְּעַד רַחֲמָהּ :

Peninnah, who has born seven children, purposefully tortures Hannah about her infertility adding to her heartache and longing for a child. The Anchor Bible notes that the term used here is צָרָתָהּ, which literally means rival wife.¹⁶³ This term צָרָתָהּ is used throughout the Tanakh and in the Talmud to describe a situation when a male character has more than one wife. While it sometimes connotes an additional wife, in this context, it implies a rivalry between the women.¹⁶⁴ Instead of comforting Hannah and helping her through her difficulty of her infertility, Peninnah boasts of her successes and Hannah's failures increasing Hannah's torment.

Hannah's relationship with Peninnah is one of the ways she is compared with the other sets of rival wives in the Tanakh. In these pairs of rival wives from Genesis (Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah) barrenness is a major source of tension between them. In each of these cases, the favored and more loved wife is the barren one. Mary Callaway attributes her

¹⁶³ P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *I Samuel*, The Anchor Bible, vol.8 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1980), 60.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

taunting of Hannah as an attempt to gain status within the household.¹⁶⁵ While there are similarities in the rivalry between Hannah and Peninnah and the pairs from Genesis, the text is silent regarding Hannah's feelings toward Peninnah.¹⁶⁶ Hannah does not make Peninnah an outcast the way Sarah and Rachel did, nor does she use her position of power in the household against her rival. Hannah is the victim of Peninnah's taunts, but there is no indication that Hannah torments her back.¹⁶⁷

Jessie Fischbein offers an apologist view of Peninnah's motivation for tormenting Hannah. Fischbein suggest Penninah taunts Hannah in order that her pain would become so great that she would pray for solace. Peninnah knew the Hannah's prayers would be answered thus she tortured her to encourage Hannah to pray.¹⁶⁸ Fischbein highlights Peninnah's torment of Hannah only occurred at the "House of God". If Hannah and Peninnah lived in the same house, she would have had numerous opportunities to torment Hannah, but only did so when Hannah could pray to God in a sacred place.¹⁶⁹ Fischbein suggests Peninnah recognized Hannah's spiritual wisdom, thus encouraged her to pray to God for help.¹⁷⁰ Fischbein holds a minority opinion about Peninnah's treatment of Hannah as the majority of commentators argue she deliberately taunted and tormented Hannah adding to her pain.

¹⁶⁵ Mary Callaway, *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, SBL Dissertation Series 91, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 41.

¹⁶⁶ Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, Westminster Bible Companion, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁶⁷ Callaway, *Sing O Barren One*, 42.

¹⁶⁸ Fischbein, *Infertility in the Bible: How the Matriarchs Changes their fate How you can too*, (Jerusalem: Devora Publishing Company, 2005), 150.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 151.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 152.

Rabbinic literature expresses an extremely negative view of Peninnah's behavior towards Hannah. According to Radak and Rashi, every time Hannah gave birth to a child, Peninnah would bury two of her own children as a consequence for her behavior toward Hannah when she was barren.¹⁷¹ Losing a child was a severe punishment that Peninnah brought upon herself by causing Hannah so much shame and pain. This interpretation of Peninnah emphasizes how highly the rabbis viewed Hannah.

In Chapter 1 verse 8, Elkanah asks Hannah: "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart so distressed? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" or וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ אֶלְקָנָה אִשָּׁה חַנָּה לָמָּה תִּבְכִּי וְלָמָּה לֹא תֹאכְלִי וְלָמָּה יָרַע לְבָבְךָ הַלּוֹא אֲנִכִּי טוֹב לָךְ מֵעֲשָׂרָה בָּנִים

Many commentators analyze this interaction between Elkanah and Hannah as a glimpse into their relationship to gain understanding of each character, and Hannah's longings for a child. According to Fischbein, Elkanah is desperately trying to comfort Hannah. With this question, Elkanah demonstrates his love and concern for her, but he does not understand the depth of her pain.¹⁷² In Elkanah's attempts to comfort his sad wife, he misunderstands the source of her pain. While Hannah is loved deeply by him, it does not compensate for her unfulfilled maternal instincts or her social isolation based on her barrenness.¹⁷³

With this question, Elkanah may be trying to shift Hannah's attention away from the pain over her infertility to something more tangible and controllable. Fischbein writes that Elkanah is telling Hannah that she will be taken care of and provided for, usually a role fulfilled

¹⁷¹ Fischbein, *Infertility in the Bible*, 142.

¹⁷² Ibid, 137.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 138.

by sons. Elkanah might not be able to create a son with her, but he can ensure that her material needs will always be met.¹⁷⁴ In the Anchor Bible Commentary, it is suggested that Elkanah is asking Hannah “do I not treat you better than would be appropriate, even if you had borne me ten sons.” In this interpretation, Elkanah is reminding Hannah that he does not value her based on her fertility instead he treats her as if she had given birth to ten sons.¹⁷⁵

Lillian Klein interprets Elkanah’s words less kindly than Fischbein. She argues that Elkanah completely misses Hannah’s needs and takes a very stereotypically male approach to comforting Hannah. Klein states that instead of understanding Hannah’s pain and trying to console her based on it, he inserts his own needs and dismisses her longings for a child. This interpretation of Elkanah’s relationship with Hannah adds to her level of deep distress because not only is she childless, but her husband does not understand her.¹⁷⁶

Rashi suggests that Elkanah’s question is his way of telling Hannah that she is such a good wife to him, it is as if she had borne him ten sons. Alternatively Rashi proposes Elkanah is stating that his love for Hannah is so powerful, it is the equivalent of ten sons. In Rashi’s third interpretation of Elkanah’s words, he suggests that Elkanah loves Hannah more than all of the sons that Peninnah has borne for him.¹⁷⁷ Metzudas Dovid argues that Elkanah’s question to Hannah is a way for him to tell her that he could not love her more, even if she bore him ten sons.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ McCarter Jr., *The Anchor Bible*, 10.

¹⁷⁶ Lillian Klein, *Deborah to Esther Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 41.

¹⁷⁷ Fischbein, *Infertility in the Bible*, 139.

¹⁷⁸ Fischbein, 138.

In all of these interpretations of Elkanah, he breaks the mold of the husband who values his wife based on her fertility. Throughout history women have been valued not only for their fertility, but on their ability to bear sons, leaving Hannah valueless by this standard. Elkanah makes it explicitly clear fertility is not how he values his wives. Fischbein suggests Elkanah married Peninnah to fulfill his obligation to have children, not because he did not love Hannah. Since it was the male's, and not the females, commandment to have children, and Hannah could not have them, Elkanah was required to have children another way. Because of this need to fulfill the requirement he married Peninnah, but it did not diminish his love for Hannah.¹⁷⁹

Verse 5 can be translated as another indication of Elkanah's love for Hannah.

וּלְחִנָּה יָתַן מִנָּה אֶחָת אֶפְסִים כִּי אֶת־חִנָּה אָהָב וַיְהִי־הָ סֵגֶר רַחֲמָהּ

If it is rendered "he gave her a double portion because he loved her and Adonai closed her womb," it is clear how Elkanah was helping her compensate for her barrenness with a demonstration of his love for her. Yet even with Elkanah's unconditional love, Hannah longs for a child and this deep unfulfilled need increases Hannah's spirituality.

In Chapter 1 verse 11, after eating and weeping, Hannah decides to take action to change her infertility and she makes a vow to God and creates a new form of personal prayer.

וַתִּדֹּר נֶדֶר וַתֹּאמֶר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אִם־רָאָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵינִי אֲמַתְךָ וְזָכַרְתִּינִי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אֲמַתְךָ וְנִתְּתָה לְאֲמַתְךָ זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּתִיו לַיהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּמוֹרָה לֹא־יַעֲלֶה עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ

¹⁷⁹Ibid 140.

She states that if God remembers her and gives her a child; she will give him to God's service. In this verse, Hannah departs from the other barren women in the Bible. When the text describes the infertility of the women in Genesis, their pain is not as stated as explicitly as it is for Hannah.¹⁸⁰ Sarah's longings for a child are not mentioned in the text, and she laughs when the messenger of God informs Abraham of her impending conception.¹⁸¹ Isaac intervenes and prays on Rebecca's behalf to help her conceive, but it is unclear if Isaac, Rebecca or both of them desire a child.¹⁸² Rachel's longings for a child are mentioned briefly, more akin to background information than as a significant point in the narrative.¹⁸³ Rachel's barrenness is a counterpoint to Leah's fertility and it is significant because of the impact it has on Jacob's relationship with the children she bore, but not the primary focus of her story.¹⁸⁴ The text states that Rachel cries out for a child, but it does not elaborate further.

The outpouring of Hannah's emotions are so great that she does not wait for Elkanah to pray for her, rather she takes initiative and prays for herself.¹⁸⁵ She distinguishes herself with her spiritual wisdom and prayerful innovation. Hannah is the first person to offer a spontaneous prayer in the formal setting of a House of God. She sidesteps the existing system of liturgy and does not depend on a priest to intervene for her. Hannah voices the deepest longings of her heart and freely expresses her heart-wrenching desire for a child.¹⁸⁶ Hannah articulates her needs through her prayer without relying on any of the existing means of

¹⁸⁰ Callaway, *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, 40.

¹⁸¹ Ibid 42.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 40.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 41.

¹⁸⁶ Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 19.

reaching God such as offering a sacrifice or asking a priest to pray on her behalf. While other Biblical characters have prayed in the Tanakh, such as Moses's prayer of healing for Miriam, Hannah is the first to offer a personal prayer of her own in a sacred space in the presence of a priest.¹⁸⁷

Even though Hannah is an ordinary woman, she is not intimidated by hierarchy or clergy; instead she expresses her desire for a child in her own way, creating a new type of prayer.¹⁸⁸ Hannah is marginalized in society because of her childlessness and she is not a priest, yet she innovates new ways to pray and is considered to be an exemplar of prayer.¹⁸⁹ Peterson defines Hannah as a spiritual woman who is not afraid to defy her cultural norms or the societal expectations of her. She put her fate in God's hands and prays for God to be the catalyst for changing her circumstances. Hannah prays for God to create a reversal of fortune for her and she utilizes the longings of her heart as the basis of her prayer.¹⁹⁰

Hannah begins her prayer with her pain, but she does not limit it to a sorrowful note; instead she takes action through her vow. She petitions God to help her conceive a child, and promises she will give the child to God's service. Thus Hannah is both asking for assistance while simultaneously giving back to God.¹⁹¹ Since this unborn child has a predestined purpose in his life, Hannah is providing God with a reason to allow her to conceive. Part of the wisdom

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 19.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 19.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 20.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 18.

of her prayer is her recognition of this give and take with God and her ability to include her sacrifice into her plea.¹⁹²

Hannah's spiritual wisdom is demonstrated in her prayer, yet her vow is also viewed by modern commentators as a form of sacrificing her son. The theme of sacrificing the first born (usually male) child is prevalent throughout the Tanakah. Exodus 13:1, 12-13 reads: "Set aside for me all first issue of every womb in the children of Israel, in man and in animal, they are Mine...Set apart every first issue of the womb to God; every first issue of your livestock-the males are for God."¹⁹³ Exodus 22:28-29 states, "You shall not put odd the skimming of the first yields of your vats. You shall give me the first-born among your sons. You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me."¹⁹⁴ In Exodus 34:19-20 the text reads: "Every first issues of the womb is mine, from all your livestock that drop a male as firstling, whether cattle of sheep. But the firstlings of an ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first born among your sons."¹⁹⁵ Numbers 18:15 reads "every first issue of a womb of any flesh that they offer to God, whether man or beast, shall be yours..."¹⁹⁶ In Micah 6:6-7 the text is as follows: "with what shall I approach YHWH, do homage to God on high? Shall I approach him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Would YHWH be pleased with thousands of rams with myriad of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgressions, the fruity of my body for my sins?"

¹⁹² Fischbein, *Infertility in the Bible*, 160.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Professor Beatrice Lawrence, Hebrew Union College, Judges Class, Fall Semester, November 10, 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Fischbein, *Infertility in the Bible*, 161.

There is a clear connection in these texts between sacrificing the first fruits of the harvest to God and offering the first born male child to God. By offering the first fruit of the harvest to God, it enables the rest of the produce to grow; similarly, with people, it opens the womb for subsequent children. Even though Isaac is not sacrificed, Abraham almost offers him to God in the famous narrative of the Akedah in Genesis 22. The book of Judges includes the narrative of Jephthah's daughter when an only child is sacrificed in Judges 11:29-40 based on a vow made by a father. While Hannah does not kill her son, she still offers him as a sacrifice to God.¹⁹⁷ Fischbein questions if Hannah had the right to make a lifelong vow for her unborn child. Samuel is not given a choice if he would like to dedicate his life to the service of God or not. Samuel's lifestyle is decided for him before he was born and he is given to God as soon as he is weaned. Samuel spends his life living out the vow made by his mother before he was conceived.¹⁹⁸

When Hannah makes the vow that her son will serve God, it is similar to, but not identical to a Nazarite vow. As stated in Numbers 3:11-13, in order for a person to become a Nazarite, not only does he have to abstain for certain behaviors including drinking alcohol, eating unclean food, cutting hair and being in the presence of a dead body, but it is necessary for him to declare his own intention to serve God. Since Hannah makes this vow on Samuel's behalf, it does not fulfill the exact requirement for Samuel to be a Nazarite even though she

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Fischbein, *Infertility in the Bible*, 154.

dedicates his life to the service of God.¹⁹⁹ Hannah makes this vow publically, formally in a religious setting.²⁰⁰

While this type of prayer is not seen previously in the Tanakh, Hannah's words are compared with personal psalms of distress. In both Hannah's prayer and the Psalms, there is a direct address to God, a description of the distress, a plea for redemption, a confession of sin or innocence, another plea for redemption, a pledge or vow and a conclusion.²⁰¹ Hannah's prayers echo the lament Psalms because the focus is on her grief and how it affects her. Hannah says she is weak with grief.²⁰²

Chapter 1 verses 12-18 include Hannah's interactions with Eli the priest. In these verses Hannah exhibits spiritual wisdom and perseverance even when her sobriety is questioned by him. In this interaction, Eli fails to comprehend the sincerity of Hannah's prayers or her new methods of praying since her lips moved but she made no sound. Eli's accusation of Hannah insults her as it discredits her prayers.²⁰³ However, Hannah is careful not to offend Eli when she speaks to him and she is role modeling connecting to God through silence as a form of personal prayer.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Professor Beatrice Lawrence, Hebrew Union College, Judges Class, Fall Semester, November 10, 2009.

²⁰⁰ Joe E. Cook, *Hannah's desire, God's design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 282, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 50.

²⁰¹ Ralph Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 10, (Waco: Word Book Publisher, 1983), 5.

²⁰² Callaway, *Sing O Barren One*, 47.

²⁰³ Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 21.

²⁰⁴ Cook, *Hannah's Desire, God's Design*, 55.

By the end of the conversation Eli not only sees the sincerity in Hannah's prayer, but he adds blessings of his own for her.²⁰⁵ In Eli's blessing of Hannah, he is validating her new form of prayer and her spiritual wisdom. Hannah's innovations have not only been acknowledged by a religious authority, but by the very person who questioned her spiritual sincerity.²⁰⁶

Chapter one of Samuel emphasizes Hannah's spiritual wisdom through her word choice and with the repetition of references to praying. When Hannah is speaking to God, she demonstrates her piety and humility by referring to herself as a handmaiden three times.²⁰⁷ The word **לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת** is found seven times in this chapter 1, in verse 3,7, 9, 15, 19,21,and 24.²⁰⁸ In this chapter, Hannah's spirituality is also highlighted through the focus on the House of God at Shiloh. The journey to this location begins the narrative and it is the setting of the action between the characters. The backdrop of Shiloh emphasizes the unique spirituality of Hannah and her role as innovator of prayer.

In the second half of I Samuel Chapter 1, Hannah continues to break the societal expectations of the time as she remains the primary actor regarding her child. Hannah names her son in verse 20 which only eight percent of Biblical women do.²⁰⁹ She selects the name Samuel meaning "I asked God for him" which is a direct link to her prayer and her vow.²¹⁰ Hannah decides to refrain from making the pilgrimage to Shiloh until she weans him and she

²⁰⁵ Ralph Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 10, (Waco: Word Book, Publisher, 1983), 10.

²⁰⁶ Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 22.

²⁰⁷ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 9.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Cook, *Hannah's Desire, God's Design*, 52.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

decides it is time. In verses 26-28, Hannah reiterates her vow to God and gives Samuel to God's service, concluding the chapter with Hannah praying before God.

In rabbinic literature, Hannah is regarded by the rabbis as a spiritual innovator and an exemplar in prayer. Based on verse 13, when Hannah's lips move but she utters no sound, Talmud Berachoth 31a states:

A rabbi remarked "How many important rules can be deduced from Hannah's prayer. That she spoke from the heart teaches that prayer required devotion; that her lips moved tells us that it is necessary to articulate the words of the prayer with one's lips; that her voice could not be heard gives us the rule that it is forbidden to raise one's voice loudly in prayer."

This quote from the Talmud expresses the high esteem in which the rabbis held Hannah's prayer and spiritual nature.

The Talmud continues to cite Hannah as an exemplar in prayer. It is unusual for the rabbis to praise a woman to such a high degree in regards to prayer, but Hannah was considered to be such an innovator that they make an exception for her. Berachoth 31a highlights Hannah as person who expresses her personal pain in prayer using silence. This is a direct reference to Hannah's lips moving but uttering no sound.

I might say that he should let his voice be heard in praying? It has already been clearly stated by Hannah, as is said, But her voice could not be heard. I might say that a man should first ask for his own requirements and then say the Tefillah? It has been clearly stated by Solomon, as is said, To hearken unto the cry and to the prayer: 'cry' here means Tefillah, 'prayer' means [private] request.²¹¹

In the quote above, the rabbis used Hannah's prayers to redefine prayer itself.

Not only do the rabbis use Hannah's interaction with Eli to teach about prayer, they also use it as a teaching about how people, especially religious authorities should treat one another.

Berachoth 31b continues:

Therefore Eli thought she was drunk. From this we learn, that a drunken person is forbidden to say the Tefillah. And Eli said unto her, "How long wilt thou be drunken?" And Hannah answered and said, "No, my lord...Do you not know that I am a woman of sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink..." Then Eli answered and said, "Go in Peace." R. Eleazar said: "from this we learn that one who suspects his neighbor of a fault which he has not committed must beg his pardon and he must bless him." As it says, and the God of Israel grant your petition.

Here the rabbis credit Hannah with teaching the priest how to treat others, especially those he insulted. This speaks to the high regard in which the rabbis viewed Hannah because her reaction to Eli's mistreatment of her and her response to it becomes a model of prayer.

The rabbis also attribute spiritual wisdom to Hannah because she explains her needs to God articulately and logically. B. Berachoth 31b cites this example:

Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart... She said before the Sovereign of the Universe, among all the things that you created in a woman, you have not created one without a purpose, eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk with, breasts to give suck. These breasts that you have put on my heart, are they not to give suck? Give me a son, so that I may suckle with them.

In this example Hannah is not only spiritually wise, but she communicates her longing to God in a reasoned way. This demonstrates pragmatic spiritual wisdom. The rabbis hold Hannah in such a high regard that in b. Megillah 14a, they call her a prophet. She is cited in a debate between Beth Hillel and Beth Shammai in b. Chagigah 6a and as the reason why seven blessing recited on Shabbat in b. Berachoth 29a. Hannah's spiritual wisdom is noted emphatically throughout the Talmud.

I Samuel Chapter 2 opens with Hannah's prayer or song, crediting these words to Hannah, another example of her spiritual wisdom and innovation. Hannah is one of the few women with the words of song immortalized in the text, again reiterating the importance of her spiritual strength. Verse 5 includes a reference to a barren woman conceiving seven children.

שְׁבַעִים בְּלָחֶם נִשְׁכָּרוּ וְרַעֲבִים חָדְלוּ עַד-עֲקָרָה יֵלְדָה שְׁבַעָה וְרַבָּת בָּנִים אִמָּלָה

Hannah is credited with this song due to her spiritual wisdom and this reference to conception after barrenness even though many Biblical scholars state the historical anachronism of the reference to a king over Israel challenge the likelihood that Hannah is the author of it. Despite this historical inconsistency, Gail O' Day argues that this song fits with Hannah's experience of God because it was written by a person who experienced feelings of oppression and was lacking hope about a particular situation.²¹² O' Day writes this prayer

²¹² Gail O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, vol. 12 no. 5 (August 1985), 208.

expresses the sentiments of an individual who lived outside of the dominant social structure and who understood the feelings of marginalization.²¹³

Although Hannah focused on the private realm and the conception of a child in her prayer in chapter 1, much of the vocabulary in her song in chapter 2 is military victory language.²¹⁴ The language in this song is similar to Psalms 18 credited to David who was known for his military victories.²¹⁵ Hannah's song also has themes included in Psalms 75 focusing on God's ability to exalt the weak possible illusions to military victories by Saul, David, or Israel.²¹⁶

Hannah emphasizes God's power and the uniqueness of God's ability to reverse people's fortunes in her song.²¹⁷ In verses 4-8, God not only rises up the lowly, but also humbles the mighty. God provides sustenance to the hungry and enables barren women to have children. Hannah's song focuses on the specific, transformative, and tangible ways God liberates people from suffering.²¹⁸ According to the song, when God intercedes on behalf of individuals, it changes the reality to such a degree that the seemingly impossible becomes possible.²¹⁹ This song creates a new vision of reality in such the old social, political and economic rules do not apply and the previously oppressed people are given new opportunities and options for success.²²⁰ Peterson writes that Hannah's song had an agenda behind it because it states in verse 10, God shatters God's enemies and rewards the faithful. God helps

²¹³ Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* Women's song article 211.

²¹⁴ Beatrice Lawrence, personal communication.

²¹⁵ Stanley Walters, "The Voice of God's People in Exile," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 76.

²¹⁶ McCarter Jr., *I Samuel*, 68.

²¹⁷ Gail O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," 210.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 209.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 210.

²²⁰ Ibid.

the people who acknowledge God's sovereignty, but not those who forsake God. In order to receive God's help a person is required to demonstrate a loyalty to God.²²¹ Hannah's song praises God for helping God's faithful followers reiterating the direct cause of effect of remaining a follower of Adonai.

Hannah's song is a means of expressing thanksgiving and praise to God. The song opens with personal praise to God, but it transitions into a universal acclamation of God's power.²²² Hannah's song begins with the specific and individual appreciation of God, and transitions into an assertion of God's victory on universal scale.²²³ It opens with Hannah in Shiloh, and concludes at the end of the earth. Hannah starts her song with a retelling of personal triumphs and it concludes with a cosmic reversal of fortune. Hannah's song begins with her in the present time, and finishes in an age to come.²²⁴ It is a tribute to Hannah's spiritual wisdom that her song includes such a wide range of tributes to God including both personal and universal acclamations in her time and in the future.

There are many questions unanswered by the text about Hannah even though she is an exemplar of prayer and a spiritual innovator. Because of the spiritual nature of Hannah's prayer and song, Stanley Walters suggests that Hannah should be considered a prophetess.²²⁵ Walters argues that Hannah's prayers were visionary and not merely petitionary as a testament to Hannah's spiritual wisdom. Even if Hannah is not the author of her song, the fact remains

²²¹ O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," 211.

²²² Stanley Walters, "The Voice of God's People in Exile," 72.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 77.

²²⁵ Stanley Walters, "The Voice of God's People in Exile," 78.

that the redactors credited Hannah with it, implying they saw Hannah's spirituality. While they may have been other political motivations for the narrative about Hannah and Samuel, Hannah remains the first individual who prayed in a House of God without assistance from clergy, without offering a sacrifice or reciting a formula.

Hannah prayed from her heart expressing her deepest longing and desires in her prayer. Even if it unclear to modern readers why she had such a deeply felt longing for a child, it is undisputable that Hannah expresses these sentiments in her prayer. It is unexpressed why Hannah's desires for a child run so deep if she is willing to pledge him to God's service. The text elaborates on her pain and desire for a child, but not why she wants a child so badly, especially because she pledges him to God's services. From a modern maternal perspective, Hannah's deep longings for a child seem incongruous with her willingness to dedicate him to God. Perhaps she wants a child to elevate her own social status and standing or so Peninnah will stop tormenting her. Hannah might think that Elkanah will love her more if she provides him with a child that promising her first born to God's service is a means of opening up her womb for other children. The text also is silent on how Hannah's vow impacts her relationship with her other children and what it feel like for her to bring him a coat every year. This understanding of Hannah's motives might not comfort modern readers who question Hannah's maternal instincts yet she remains a Biblical woman who used with spiritual wisdom to her advantage and has become a role model for others.

Even as Hannah expresses herself through tears and extremely emotional language, she did so in a public way and in a spiritual space, breaking all of the previous rules and regulations

about prayer. Hannah was not afraid to express herself and to ensure that she made her longings become a reality despite the obstacles she faced. Hannah broke the mold of the other barren women in the Tanakh when she became the main actor in her story and her actions lead to her achieving her deepest desires.

Hannah expressed her spiritual wisdom in her vow, prayers and song. Even though modern readers may question Hannah's willingness to sacrifice Samuel, Hannah remains a role model for prayer and a spiritually wise biblical figure. The text about Hannah and the song attributed to her emphasize Hannah's spiritual wisdom. The praise and acknowledgement of Hannah's spirituality began in rabbinic texts and into modern scholarship. While Hannah might remain a complicated biblical figure, she is a wise woman who challenges the existing forms of prayer and her spiritual innovations continue to impact our prayers today.

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Conclusion

Zelophehad's daughters (Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah), Deborah and Hannah are role models both in the Tanakh and in our time. These wise biblical women stand up to the men in power defying societal and gender expectations of them. They stretch the boundaries of women's roles as advocates for a more just and equitable society. These biblical women take risks to achieve their goals as they challenge the established authority. Zelophehad's Daughters, Deborah and Hannah do not view themselves as helpless victims and nor do they rely on others to solve their problems for them. Instead, they take initiative and improve their situations for themselves.

Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah epitomize bravery when plead their case to Moses, Eleazer the priest and the elders at the entrance to the tent of meeting. In the most public location of the desert community, these five seemingly powerless women confront the most powerful male leaders of their time. Instead of being intimidated by the men in authority, Zelophehad's daughters articulately state their plight and clearly state their request. In doing so, they effectively frame their own needs to appeal to the prevalent leadership concerns of the time. In the first section of this narrative, Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are exemplars of women who stand up for their rights. The daughters are role models of women who can help inspire others, especially women, to speak up for themselves and others.

In the second half of Zelophehad's daughters' narrative, they continue to be role models even when their freedom is curtailed. In this section, the daughters retain the unprecedented power to choose their own husbands despite the setback to their autonomy. The daughters are

role models of women who can accept compromise, while remaining powerful at the same time.

Deborah is a role model of a wise biblical woman who successfully commanded judicial and militaristic authority. She bravely led in the public male dominated sphere. As a judge and prophet Deborah is respected by the other biblical characters as they sought out her counsel and followed her prophecies.

Deborah utilizes her authority not for her own glory, but to help the Israelites. Deborah risks her reputation as a prophet to help the Israelites overthrow their oppressor. As a leader Deborah aims to improve the lives of the Israelites. She is a role model of a respected woman who uses her authority for the betterment of her community.

Hannah is a role model of a spiritual person who expresses herself in prayer. She articulately conveys her pain and heart-wrenching longings for a child through her prayers. Hannah's expression of her vulnerability is rare and it adds a human dimension to her character.

Even when the religious authority figure of Eli questions Hannah's sobriety, she is not deterred from praying. Although Hannah is not trained as a spiritual leader, she creates new forms of prayer. Hannah's deep connection to prayer is inspiring as she expresses her faith in God and hopes for the future.

Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, Deborah and Hannah are wise biblical women who break the mold of women in the Tanakh. These wise biblical women exhibited

extraordinary courage as they stood up to the men in power and created change in biblical society. Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, Deborah and Hannah were role models of astonishing women in the Tanakh and they continue to be today. As modern readers, we can learn from the bravery, strength, flexibility, initiative, perseverance, vulnerability, spirituality, insight, charisma, and wisdom of Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, Deborah and Hannah.