

JOY A. SCHROEDER



Deborah's Daughters

GENDER POI [REDACTED] BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION

Deborah's Daughters

GENDER POLITICS AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Joy A. Schroeder

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by

Oxford University Press

198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2014

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-19-999104-4

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Acknowledgments

I WAS INSPIRED to write this book in 2006, when my friend and colleague Rachel Ben Dor, a feminist scholar of rabbinic literature, asked me to be a guest speaker at a session of her women's Talmud class in Bexley, Ohio. In this class, sponsored by Congregation Tifereth Israel, we planned to compare rabbinic images of biblical women with the ideas of the Christian church fathers who were the Jewish sages' contemporaries. As I prepared for the class session, my mind went back to my days as a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame. In the course of my research for a patristics class, I came across a statement from the third-century biblical interpreter Origen of Alexandria who asserted that Deborah exercised her prophetic role only privately. Perplexed by Origen's claim, I shared this with my teacher, Mary Rose D'Angelo. She exclaimed with amazement: "'Under the palm tree' was *private*?" I tucked this little detail about Origen away in the back of my mind. My guest teaching for Rachel Ben Dor's Talmud class gave me an opportunity to take another look at early Christian claims that Deborah was a "private" prophetess. Rachel and I continued our collaborations by delivering complementary papers on the topic of early Jewish and Christian interpretation of Judg 4–5 at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in San Diego in 2007, where I presented parts of Chapter 1. Much of my discussion of the Jewish sages' interpretation of Judg 4–5 relies on the insights Rachel has shared with me during the course of our conversations. My friendship and scholarly conversations with her have been a source of ongoing inspiration and insight.

I thank my editors at Oxford University Press, Elisabeth Nelson, Charlotte Steinhardt, and Theo Calderara, for their faith in this project. I'm grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their excellent suggestions.

In Chapter 5, material from my article “Deborah’s Daughters,” *Women in the Bible*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics 47 (Waco, Tex.: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013), is used by permission of the publisher.

This project could not have been completed without the valiant work of the many librarians who helped me obtain the materials that I needed. At Trinity Lutheran Seminary’s Hama Library, Kathy Nodo helped me track down microform copies of numerous Reformation-era books. Ray A. Olson and Carla Rothfuss Birkhimer provided immense help—especially their tireless efforts to keep the microfilm machine running. At Capital University’s Blackmore Library, Scott Bates, Elizabeth Woods, Elaine Dickinson, Jamie Gieseck-Ashworth, Debbie Flood, and the rest of the library staff helped me in countless ways. I also thank the staff at the Ohio State University Rare Books and Manuscripts Room for their assistance and gracious hospitality as I used their resources.

I am grateful to departmental student assistants Jennifer Jones, Megan Neubauer, Ed Streitelmeier, and Kevin Sullivan for careful proofreading of the manuscript. I thank Doris Taylor, Maureen McCann, Brittany Carter, and Matthew Hazzard for photocopying and other office support. I also wish to extend my gratitude to all of my faculty colleagues at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University. I delivered part of Chapter 3 as a lecture in November 2007 at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. The members of the Religion & Philosophy Department at Capital University read and commented on Chapter 1 at our departmental colloquium. Don Huber made comments on Chapter 5, and his suggestions improved the accuracy of its historical detail. I also offer thanks to the Trinity Lutheran Seminary Board of Directors, Capital University Board of Trustees, and Capital University Faculty Development Committee for granting me a one-year sabbatical leave, during which I began this project.

Other friends and colleagues have been enormously supportive. For ten years I have belonged to a group of scholars who meet weekly to offer one another support and encouragement. I thank all of the women who have been part of this group: Wendy Blakely, Erica Brownstein, Cynthia Duncan, Suzanne M. Marilley, and Mary E. Shields. I also thank the baristas at the Bexley Cup O Joe, Così, and Starbucks—where most of this book was written—for their hospitality. Nita Sweeney’s writing workshops helped me keep forward momentum on this project. Chasity Binau Kuttrus was a source of inspiration. I also thank Franklyn and Marlene Schroeder, Karen Schroeder-Tutko, and Sarah Schroeder Maroof for all of their support. With a keen understanding of my written voice, Julie A. Kanarr read and commented on portions of my manuscript. I gratefully acknowledge Lynn Allan Kauppi’s expert assistance reading and editing my manuscript. Cheryl Peterson has been a valued colleague, as we often worked at the same table to keep on task with our respective writing projects. Finally, I thank John E. Birkner, not only for reading many pages of draft and offering suggestions for improved wording, but for the numerous ways he has supported my work through the years.

Abbreviations

ANCIENT LITERATURE

Hebrew Bible

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
1 Sam	1 Samuel
1/2 Kgs	1/2 Kings
1 Chron	1 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Ps(s)	Psalms(s)
Prov	Proverbs

Apocrypha

1 Macc	1 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach

Midrash, Talmud, and Related Literature

<i>b.Pesah</i>	<i>Bavli Pesahim (Babylonian Talmud)</i>
<i>Meg.</i>	<i>Megillah</i>
<i>Midr. Rab. Gen.</i>	<i>Midrash Rabbah Genesis</i>

<i>Midr. Rab. Ruth</i>	<i>Midrash Rabbah Ruth</i>
<i>Yal.</i>	<i>Yalkut Shimoni</i>

New Testament

Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
Heb	Hebrews
Rev	Revelation

Early Jewish Literature, Early Christian Literature, and Patristic Texts

<i>Acts Paul</i>	<i>Acts of Paul</i>
<i>Apos. Con.</i>	<i>Apostolic Constitutions and Canon</i>
<i>Cels.</i>	Origen, <i>Contra Celsum</i>
<i>Civ.</i>	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>Comm. Cant.</i>	Origen, <i>Commentarius in Canticum</i>
<i>Epist.</i>	Jerome, <i>Epistulae</i>
Eusebius, <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>Hom. Judic.</i>	Origen, <i>Homiliae in Iudices</i>
<i>J.A.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>L.A.B.</i>	Pseudo-Philo, <i>Liber antiquitatum biblicarum</i>
LXX	Septuagint
<i>Pan.</i>	Epiphanius, <i>Pan.</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i>
Theodoret, <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Theodoret, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>Trin.</i>	Didymus of Alexandria, <i>De Trinitate</i>
<i>Vid.</i>	Ambrose, <i>De viduis</i> (<i>Concerning Widows</i>)

Journals, Periodicals, and Series

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	The Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1969–.
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series latina. Turnhout, Belgium: 1953–.
<i>ChrLit</i>	<i>Christianity and Literature</i>
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. 85 volumes. Vienna, 1866. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1961.
CSHJ	Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
FCB	The Feminist Companion to the Bible

<i>Proof</i>	<i>Proof texts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
<i>LW</i>	Luther's Works. 55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia; and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1986.
<i>NAC</i>	The New American Commentary
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTA</i>	<i>New Testament Apocrypha</i> , 2 vols., ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964.
<i>OECT</i>	Oxford Early Christian Texts
<i>OTL</i>	The Old Testament Library
<i>OTP</i>	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Ed., James H. Charlesworth. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983–1985.
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia graeca</i> [= <i>Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca</i>]. Ed. J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886.
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia latina</i> [= <i>Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina</i>]. Ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris, 1844–1855.
<i>SBLSymS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
<i>SC</i>	Sources chrétiennes. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1941–.
<i>Spec</i>	<i>Speculum</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TSAJ</i>	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
<i>WA</i>	Weimar Ausgabe. D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. 66 vols. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–1987.
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>

DEBORAH'S DAUGHTERS

Contents

List of Figures vii

Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xi

Introduction: Woman of Flames or Inflammatory Woman? 1

1. *Domesticating Deborah: Disputes about Women's Leadership in Early Judaism and Christianity* 6

2. *Wife of Barak: Deborah in the Middle Ages* 29

3. *Judge Deborah and the Monstrous Regiment of Women: Sixteenth-Century Writers and the Prophetess* 70

4. *A "Heroick and Masculine-Spirited Championess": Deborah in Early Modern Gender Debates* 106

5. *Mothers in Israel: Suffragettes, Women Preachers, and Female Roles in the Nineteenth Century* 139

6. *A Fiery Woman: Deborah in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries* 190

Conclusion: The Prophet Deborah in Jewish and Christian Imagination 247

NOTES 259

BIBLIOGRAPHY 327

INDEX 351

List of Figures

- 2.1 Deborah the Prophetess encourages Barak to attack Sisera, Morgan Picture Bible, c. 1244–1254 64
- 2.2 The Prophet Deborah, St Louis Psalter, c. 1260 66
- 3.1 Pierre Eskrich, Deborah and Barak, 1566 100
- 4.1 Charles Audran, Deborah, 1647 123
- 5.1 Gustav Doré, The Prophet Deborah, c.1865 187
- 5.2 J. James Tissot and Followers, Deborah beneath the Palm Tree, c.1896–1902 188

Introduction: Woman of Flames or Inflammatory Woman?

THE BOOK OF Judges tells the story of a remarkable woman, a prophet named Deborah seated under a palm tree as she judged the Israelites, who were oppressed by the Canaanite king Jabin. Deborah (also spelled Devorah and Devora) is the only female judge in the book of Judges. She is fourth in a series of heroes who rise up after the death of Joshua (Othniel, the left-handed Ehud, and Shamgar who killed six hundred Philistines with an ox-goad). In Judg 4:4, Deborah, whose name means “bee” or “hornet,” is called *’iššā nēbī’ ā*, “a woman, a prophet.” The narrator uses the participle *šōpēṭā* (from the verb *šāpaṭ*, “judge”) to characterize Deborah’s activity: she was “judging Israel.” In Judg 4:5, the Israelites come up to her for judgment (*lammišpāt*). Though the image of Israelites coming to her for judgment as she sat beneath her palm tree may suggest that she had a forensic role, in the book of Judges, the role of judge usually refers to a warrior who leads the Israelites in battle against their enemies. The narrator gives Deborah credit for summoning a military commander named Barak to overthrow the Canaanite army. She addresses him directly with words of the Lord:

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’” Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” And she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then

Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him. (Judg 4:4–10; NRSV)¹

The reason for Barak's refusal to engage in this battle without her has been a source of constant speculation. Was it Barak's lack of courage and "manliness"? Was it respect for Deborah and affirmation of her prominence and competence? Or were his words disrespectful? In the biblical text itself, there is arguably some sort of reproach offered to Barak, spoken by Deborah herself, when she announced that the victory would eventually be credited to a woman. As the story continues, the reader learns that the Canaanite commander, Sisera, is routed by the Israelite army and is assassinated with a tent peg by the woman Jael who promised him safety in her tent (Judg 4:17–22). Thus Deborah's prophecy, that Sisera will be conquered by a woman, is fulfilled.

The scriptural text includes the "Song of Deborah," a victory ode sung by Deborah and Barak in Judg 5. Scholars believe Judg 5 is an ancient poem that predates the prose narrative of the preceding chapter. It may be among the oldest passages found in Hebrew scripture. Susan Niditch says that the poem "for reasons of texture, text, and context may date to the twelfth century BCE, a very early date."² A number of details differ from Judg 4, including the battle account and elements of Jael's assassination of Sisera. In the poem, Deborah is praised as "mother in Israel" (5:7) and Jael is commended as "most blessed of women" (5:24).³ As we will see, the meaning of the phrase "mother in Israel" is open to interpretation. Readers through the centuries gravitated toward this phrase to emphasize Deborah's supposed maternal tenderness, but recent interpreters have connected it with her protective military leadership—noting the parallel with cities that are called "mothers in Israel." Susan Ackerman argues for military connotations for the term "mother in Israel," since the other biblical occurrence of this term (a reference to the city Abel-Beth Ma'acah in 2 Sam 20:19) takes place in a military context.⁴ Helena Zlotnick asserts that in the Hebrew scriptures "the supreme appellation of 'a mother in Israel' is reserved not for women with a proven maternity record or for those ardently desiring motherhood but for women, like Deborah, who lead Israelite males to victory in battle."⁵

An individual who reads Judg 4–5 might see Deborah as a strong woman who speaks authoritatively on behalf of the Lord, taking charge of the situation at hand. Arguably, scripture portrays Deborah as a forthright, assertive prophet and judge who plays a crucial role in a military victory. The prophetess sits under the "palm of Deborah" (Judg 4:5) as the Israelites come up to her for judgment. She speaks in a commanding way to Barak, an Israelite officer, as she provides military instructions from the Lord. Barak says he will not set forth on the venture unless she accompanies him and his troops, and he is told by Deborah that the credit for the victory will be given to a woman. The victory song placed in Deborah's mouth (5:1–31) exults in Israelite plunder of their enemies and relishes the gory violence meted out by the woman Jael, whose tent peg impaled the head of the enemy general Sisera.

"Most blessed of women be Jael,
 the wife of Heber the Kenite,
 of tent-dwelling women most blessed.
 He asked water and she gave him milk,
 she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.
 She put her hand to the tent peg
 and her right hand to the workmen's mallet;
 she struck Sisera a blow,
 she crushed his head,
 she shattered and pierced his temple.
 He sank, he fell,
 he lay still at her feet;
 at her feet he sank, he fell;
 where he sank, there he fell dead." (Judg 5:24-27; NRSV)

JUDGES 4-5: A TROUBLING, DISRUPTIVE TEXT

The story of Deborah in Judg 4-5 has disruptive potential. This scriptural account of a female judge, prophet, and war-leader frequently disturbed traditional cultural assumptions and expectations about women's roles through the centuries, both in the Bible and in the world of the interpreter, by exhibiting Deborah as assertive, outspoken, and playing a public role among her people. We will see that this created a problem for countless readers. Israeli historian Tal Ilan has argued that "anomalous women have been treated as textual mistakes which need to be eliminated or manipulated or interpreted so as to fit into the reader's limited concept of what women could and did achieve in history."⁶ Because of her extraordinarily authoritative behavior and speech, the biblical Deborah was especially prone to such reinterpretation. Speaking of some interpreters who wished to downplay Deborah's involvement in the war against the Canaanites, Mieke Bal asserts that "Deborah poses a problem" especially in "her capacity as a military commander."⁷

In fact, Deborah would be a problem in *many* capacities, including wife, mother, prophetess, civil leader, and judge. Through the centuries, numerous women (and men who supported women's aspirations to leadership) used Deborah's story to justify their own claims to political and religious authority and to offer reflections about female identity. Those opposed to women's public leadership usually worked to define Deborah's role as *private* or argued that she was a divinely authorized exception, not to be emulated. A few critics of Deborah recognized her assertiveness and used her as a negative example, urging women not to model themselves after her. Many readers believed that women should be obedient to men and remain confined to the private sphere. Thus most of them projected "domesticity" into the biblical text by ignoring parts of the scripture or supplementing it with details that made the text conform to their own gender expectations.

In such accounts, Deborah became a submissive, “wifely” figure who acted in accordance with the interpreter’s own social norms by offering advice to men humbly and privately. Ironically, men sometimes used the story of a loquacious Israelite female to silence the women of their own day.

This book is the history of how Deborah’s story was used in gender debates. It is an account of Deborah’s journey through nearly two thousand years of Jewish and Christian interpretation, with special attention to how her story was used *against* women, *for* women, and *by* women who aspired to leadership roles in church and society. As we progress chronologically, we will see cases where interpreters added their own details to the story, avoided uncomfortable elements of the biblical account, or ignored the text all together. In many instances, the prophetess is completely unrecognizable, especially when she is turned into a submissive, humble housewife. Others would use the text for the opposite purpose, to make strong claims in support of women’s leadership. For instance, a male Methodist minister (and women’s suffrage advocate) writing in 1887 said: “The position of this woman appears to have been much the same as that of president of the United States, with the additional functions of the judicial and religious offices of the nation. Hence this woman was President, Supreme Judge, and Right Reverend in the Theocratic Republic of Israel.”⁸ As we will see, the competing claims about Judg 4–5 were closely bound up with the agendas and cultural expectations of the interpreters.

TEXTUAL GAPS, VARIANTS, AND ALTERNATIVES IN TRANSLATION

The text of Judg 4–5 omitted many of the details that readers wished to know: What is the significance of Deborah’s name (“bee” in Hebrew)? What does it mean that she “judged” Israel? Was her authority official or unofficial? Should she be included in lists of the judges? Who was her husband Lappidoth?⁹ Why don’t we hear more about him? Were Barak and Lappidoth the same man? Why did God speak through a prophetess rather than through a male prophet? Why did Barak insist that Deborah accompany him to the battle? Why did Deborah approve of Jael’s apparent treachery when she slaughtered Sisera? As interpreters filled in the gaps, they used their own cultural assumptions and imagination. Christian readers frequently turned to Jewish sources for their explanations.

One of the questions, why Barak needed Deborah to accompany him, is answered in the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation (4th–1st cent. BCE). In Judg 4:8, which may reflect a variant Hebrew textual tradition, Barak says, “If you go with me I will go, but if you do not go with me I will not go, because I do not know the day on which the Lord will prosper his angel with me.”¹⁰ In other words, in this reading Deborah was a sort of oracle who could instruct Barak about the most auspicious time to attack the Canaanites.

Translation always entails making choices. In the NRSV text of Judg 4:4, quoted above, the opening sentence reads: “At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.” In fact, the phrase *’ēšet lappîdôt*, usually translated “wife

of Lappidoth,” could also be rendered “woman of torches.” The Septuagint renders this γυνή Λαφιδωθ, which could be interpreted either as “wife of Lappidoth” or as “woman of Lappidoth,” with the possibility that the translator regarded “Lappidoth” as a place name. Most Christian translations have followed the understanding of the phrase found in the Vulgate, Jerome’s authoritative Latin translation (late 4th–early 5th cent. CE), which calls her *uxor Lappidoth* (wife of Lappidoth).¹¹ The rabbinic tradition, on the other hand, interpreted this phrase to mean “woman of flames,” explaining that she had been a wick-maker for the tabernacle’s sanctuary lamps.¹² As we will see in Chapter 6, contemporary feminists have suggested that translators ought to use epithets such as “woman of flames” or “fiery woman,” to reflect the fiery personality of a strong woman leader.

JOURNEYING WITH DEBORAH THROUGH THE CENTURIES

This book is a critical investigation of the history of interpretation of Deborah’s story. The chapters of this book will progress chronologically, from late antiquity to the present day, looking at how interpreters dealt with gender in their treatments of Deborah’s story. We will look at places where interpreters stretched the plain meaning of the text—to the point that the female character they describe bears no similarity to the biblical figure found in Judg 4–5. We will look for significant omissions, additions, and retellings of the story. As we move through the centuries, we will see surprising examples of interpretive creativity, as well as disturbing limits and failures in human imagination. We will see that men (and a surprisingly large number of women) interested in curbing women’s authority chose to “domesticate” the prophetess or delimit her role in other ways. We will also see that numerous women wrote about Deborah as they worked out their own struggles for authority or expressed ambivalence about their changing roles as working mothers and leaders in church and society. Some nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminists writing about Deborah romanticized about the “peacefulness” of female leadership—an odd sort of lesson to draw from the text that seems to celebrate violence.

While I generally sympathize with attempts to celebrate Deborah as precedent for women’s leadership in church, synagogue, and society, I will not advocate for one particular interpretation or application of the biblical text. The diverse range of readings of gender in Judg 4–5 suggests that, all too often, exegesis says more about the interpreter than it does about the text itself. Some individuals invoked Judg 4–5 as proof text for a particular political or ecclesiastical position. Others found the story of Deborah so unlike their idea of God’s plan for female behavior that they ignored, qualified, or denied the words of the text altogether. At the same time, I have seen that scripture has the capacity to challenge preconceptions and stretch the imagination of readers. Scripture can expand our views about God, justice, and—as in the case of Deborah and her spiritual daughters—it can expand our beliefs about what divinely inspired individuals can accomplish.

I

Domesticating Deborah: Disputes about Women's Leadership in Early Judaism and Christianity

IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY, many religious leaders sincerely *wanted* to lift up the prophet Deborah as a role model for women.¹ After all, she was a holy woman highly praised in scripture. However, her strongly assertive behavior seemed at odds with the apostolic instructions in 1 Tim 2:11–12: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” Many of the church fathers felt that if a holy woman was commended in the Bible, she *must* have conformed to the apostolic commands—even if these instructions had not yet been given. But the biblical text, taken at face value, was problematic and potentially destabilizing in its depiction of gender roles. The text celebrates Deborah as someone who “arose as a mother in Israel” (Judg 5:7), but arguably the maternity of the biblical Deborah was something very different from conventional expectations of womanhood found among Greco-Roman Christian interpreters from the second through the fifth centuries.² The Jewish sages, working at the same time, struggled with the same issues. Could one approve of a woman who took initiative and spoke so commandingly to Barak?

This chapter explores early Jewish and Christian reception of the story of Deborah, showing the range of interpretations of the text in the first six centuries of the Common Era.³ Christian interpreters brought to the text the concerns raised by the presence of women of their own day, such as deaconesses, married women, wealthy widows, and female prophets, both those deemed orthodox and those considered heretical. Some Jewish interpreters wondered about the implications of a woman summoning a male warrior and his apparent yielding to her by insisting that she accompany him.