

## A Mother's Refrain: Judges 5:28-30 in Cultural Context

Abstract: The Song of Deborah's unusual language and style, and the potency of its imagery combine to make it one of the most analysed and debated texts in the Hebrew Bible. Although many aspects of the Song have remained opaque, there is scholarly consensus that it was composed in approximately the form we have it in the period of the Judges. This consensus is largely founded on linguistic analysis of the text. This article approaches the Song from a different direction. It considers the cultural markers found in Judges 5:28-30 and analyses what they reveal about the *Sitz im Leben* of these verses.

Key words: Song of Deborah; Sisera's mother; Ugarit; woman-at-the-window; ivory; textiles; Assyria; Ramat Raḥel.

### 1. Introduction

In an article devoted to Judges 5 for the inaugural volume of this journal, Gillis Gerleman observed that the chapter "presents difficulties in many ways unparalleled in the Old Testament. Its language is stamped by an archaic quality and a brevity which makes its meaning not easily intelligible. The Song of Deborah belongs also to the most conjectured upon and the most criticized of Old Testament texts".<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Gillis Gerleman, "The Song of Deborah in the Light of Stylistics", *VT* 1 (1951), pp. 168-80 (168). On the textual difficulties, see J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (London, 1981), pp. 92-93.

Although in the intervening sixty-five years Judges 5 has lost none of its appeal for commentators, the vast majority of explorations of the poem have been primarily concerned with its linguistic analysis. This analysis has led to an overwhelming scholarly consensus that it was composed in the late second millennium BC, within a century of the events it describes. The cultural information the poem provides, however, has received little attention. In her commentary on Judges, Susan Niditch posed the question “Does the social reality pictured by the song reflect an actual period in the history of Israel [...]?”<sup>2</sup> The present paper seeks to provide an answer, at least for one section of the poem, namely, the section that introduces Sisera’s mother (vv. 28-30).

Two reasons make this part of the Song particularly propitious for such an investigation. First, it is rich in cultural references. Second, it is the only major episode in Judges 5 that is neither directly nor indirectly reflected in the Judges 4 account.<sup>3</sup> In other words, whenever this vignette was composed, it cannot have been influenced by Judges 4 in whatever compositional process brought the two pieces together.

## 2. Through the Lattice of Time

The three verses that treat Sisera’s mother in her futile wait for her son abound in parallelism and detail. They parallel the scene that precedes them, Jael’s despatch of the

---

<sup>2</sup> *Judges: A Commentary (OTL)*; Louisville, 2008), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Peter R. Ackroyd, “The Composition of the Song of Deborah”, *VT* 2 (1952), pp. 160-62 (161).

hapless Sisera.<sup>4</sup> What is immediately striking in the description of his mother's flight of fancy regarding the booty in luxury fabrics she and her son are to enjoy is that it contradicts the earlier part of the Song. Sisera did not set out to fight a regular army, far less one from a wealthy country. His opponents were ragtag volunteers from an oppressed community whose economy was in ruins,<sup>5</sup> and who, before this engagement, had not even forged weapons (5:6-8). If plunder was the object, he would have stayed at home. That his mother had no idea of the identity or condition of his opponents reminds us that, even in its apparently concrete details, the Song is not an exercise in realism.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Freema Gottlieb, "Three Mothers", *Judaica* (1981), pp. 194-203 (201); Robert H. O'Connell, "Proverbs VII 16-17: A Case of Fatal Deception in a 'Woman and the Window' Type-Scene", *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 235-41 (236); Gregory T.K. Wong, "The Song of Deborah as Polemic", *Biblica* 88 (2007), pp. 1-22 (17); Gerleman, p. 173; Ackroyd, p. 161; Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah", *CBQ* 40 (1978), pp. 143-66 (153-4); K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth (NIV Application Commentary)*; Grand Rapids, 2002), p. 155; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges (NICOT)*; Grand Rapids, 2012), p. 216; Mark S. Smith, *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, 2014), pp. 252-8.

<sup>5</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. edn completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago, 1977), p. 119; G. Ernest Wright, "Archaeological Observations on the Period of the Judges and Early Monarchy", *JBL* 60 (1941), pp. 27-42 (30-32).

<sup>6</sup> Compare Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History*, Part 1 (New York, 1980), p. 163; Jan P. Fokkelman, "The Song of

That said, the description of the cultural artefacts in the three verses has, as we shall now explore, traceable referents.

In the reader's encounter with Sisera's mother she is found at a window. The writer highlights the iconic role of the window plus its synonymous parallel "the lattice" in the section by employing them syntactically to frame the mother.<sup>7</sup> The verb used to describe her looking out (רָקַשׁ), whether in *Niphal* or *Hiphil* form, denotes looking from a raised position. In the account, she looks down from the window, she moans through the lattice, implying, perhaps, that she is pacing up and down in her anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Sisera's mother, David's queen Michal, and Ahab's queen Jezebel are all presented, at a moment that determines their respective fates, looking down through a window (2 Sam 6:16; 2 Kgs 9:30). As numerous scholars have remarked, the scene of "the woman at the window" represented in these three biblical episodes had considerable currency in the Levant.

---

Deborah and Barak: Its Prosodic Levels and Structure," in David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, Ari Hurvitz (eds), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, 1995), pp. 595-628 (611).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.

<sup>8</sup> Compare J. Blenkinsopp, "Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah: A Discussion", *Biblica* 42 (1961), pp. 61-76 (74-75); John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (*The New Century Bible Commentary*; Grand Rapids, 1986), p. 281; Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. A.D.H. Mayes (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 281; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (*NAC 6*; Nashville, 1999), p. 242 n. 448. Note Vulgate "per fenestram prospiciens ululabat mater eius et de cenaculo loquebatur".

These scholars have linked the literary image presented in the scenes with the well-known carved ivory plaques showing a woman at a balustraded window.<sup>9</sup> Such plaques, in slightly different forms, were extensively produced. Multiple examples have been found in Samaria, Nimrud, Khorsabad and Arslan Tash.<sup>10</sup> Their meaning has been much

---

<sup>9</sup> Don Seeman, "The Watcher at the Window: Cultural Poetics of a Biblical Motif", *Prooftexts* 24 (2004), pp. 1-50 (23, 38); J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge and New York, 1992), pp. 89-92; Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit, 1998), p. 16; Claudia E. Suter, "Die Frau am Fenster in der orientalischen Elfenbein-Schnitzkunst des frühen I. Jahrtausends v. Chr.", in *Jahrbuch der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen in Baden-Württemberg* 29 (Munich and Berlin, 1992), pp. 7-28 (22-23); Philip J. King, *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1988), pp. 146-8; Eleanor Ferris Beach, "The Samaria Ivories, *Marzeah* and Biblical Texts", *BA* 55 (1992), pp. 130-9 (135, 138); Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York, 1998), pp. 156-62; O'Connell, p. 239 n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Irene J. Winter, "Is There a South Syrian Style of Ivory Carving in the Early First Millennium B.C.?", *Iraq* 43 (1981), pp. 101-30 (116-7); Beach, pp. 131, 139; Georgina Herrmann, *Ivories from Nimrud IV, 1: Ivories from Room SW 37, Fort Shalmaneser* (London, 1986), pp. 13, 29-31; Claudia E. Suter, "Images, Tradition, and Meaning: The Samaria and Other Levantine Ivories of the Iron Age", in Grant Frame et al. (eds), *A Common Heritage: Studies on Mesopotamia and the Biblical World in Honor of Barry L. Eichler* (Bethesda MD, 2011), pp. 219-41 (220); Joan Oates and David Oates, *Nimrud: An Assyrian Imperial City Revealed* (London, 2001), p. 188; Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry*

debated. The thesis that the woman in the window represents either a fertility goddess or a sacred prostitute attached to her cult is no longer favoured.<sup>11</sup> Susan Ackerman's imaginative proposal that it is an image of a Canaanite queen-mother, herself a representative of the goddess Astarte, is not well supported by evidence concerning the goddess.<sup>12</sup> Claudia Suter offers a more straightforward and persuasive postulate, namely, that the visual and biblical literary representations convey a popular cultural motif in the South-Syrian-Phoenician area of "the queen waiting for her returning husband". She argues that the biblical and extra-biblical evidence agree that "ivory furniture was the showpiece of royal palaces [...] the motifs of their decoration are borrowed from the vocabulary of royal life".<sup>13</sup> These goods were status symbols of the ruling class and, in the

---

*and Literary Miscellanea* (SAA 3; Helsinki, 1989), p. 35. Georgina Herrmann (p. 12) notes that the hair of some of these ivory women was stained an orangey-red.

<sup>11</sup> J.W. Crowfoot and Grace M. Crowfoot, *Early Ivories from Samaria* (London, 1938), p. 29; Richard D. Barnett, "Phoenicia and the Ivory Trade", *Archaeology* 9 (1956), pp. 87-97 (96-97); King, p. 100; Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London and New York), 2001, p. 169; Suter, 2011, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ackerman, pp. 155-62. On Astarte, see N. Wyatt, "Astarte", in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter van der Horst (eds), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd rev. edn (Leiden and Grand Rapids, 1999), pp. 109-14.

<sup>13</sup> Suter, 1992, pp. 25-27; compare Beach, p. 131.

view of prophets such as Amos and Ezekiel (Am 3:15; 6:4; Ezek 27:6, 15), epitomized the corruption and godlessness of that class.<sup>14</sup>

The window through which the woman is looking in the plaques is of a type found in palaces in Phoenicia and Palestine in the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Richard Barnett writes that the window is

over a little balcony supported on small columns. According to the Talmud, this type of window was known in ancient Palestine as the “Tyrian window out of which one could put one’s head” [...]. Such windows were built in palaces of Phoenicia or Palestine as depicted on an Assyrian sculpture from Sennacherib’s palace illustrating his campaign on the west coast in 700 B.C. They marked the upper chambers, the women’s quarters.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *The Prophet Amos: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (London, 1987), pp. 66, 105; Claudia E. Suter, “Luxury Goods in Ancient Israel: Questions of Consumption and Production”, in Paolo Matthiae et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the 6th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 1: Near Eastern Archaeology in the Past, Present and Future. Heritage and Identity* (Wiesbaden, 2010), pp. 993-1002 (996). Suter argues that, so associated were ivory objects with the projection of power, the Assyrian kings looted them to strip their owners of status. Compare J. Gachet, “Ugarit Ivories: Typology and Distribution”, in J. Lesley Fitton (ed.), *Ivory in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean from the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic Period* (*British Museum Occasional Paper* 85; London, 1992), pp. 67-89 (75).

<sup>15</sup> Barnett, pp. 94-96.

The excavations at Ramat Raḥel, a site located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem which was first settled in the eighth-seventh centuries BC in the period of the Judean kingdom,<sup>16</sup> uncovered a royal palace. It typifies the “Israelite-Phoenician” architectural style. The palace, which is seventh-century, boasted balustraded windows, most likely on the upper storey.<sup>17</sup> Other examples are found in Phoenician cities. They are all approximately contemporary.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Gary A. Rendsburg and William M. Schniedewind, “The Siloam Tunnel Inscription: Historical and Linguistic Perspectives”, *IEJ* 60 (2010), pp. 188-203 (190).

<sup>17</sup> Suter, 1992, p. 20; Beach, p. 136; Yohanan Aharoni, “The Citadel of Ramat Raḥel”, *Archaeology* 18 (1965), pp. 15-25 (18-20); Gabriel Barkay, “Royal Palace, Royal Portrait? The Tantalizing Possibilities of Ramat Raḥel”, *BAR* (Sept/Oct 2006), pp. 34-44 (40-41); Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 424-7; <http://www.tau.ac.il/~rmtrachl/archaeology/> [accessed 20/09/16]. Compare Jer 22:14. Jack Sasson’s dismissal of the connection between the biblical woman-at-the-window motif and the imagery of the plaques reflects a misunderstanding of the window in question and its geographical distribution (Jack M. Sasson, “‘A Breeder or Two for Each Leader’: On Mothers in Judges 4 and 5”, in David J.A. Clines, Ellen van Wolde [eds], *Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum* [Sheffield, 2012], pp. 333–354 [345]).

<sup>18</sup> Compare H.G. May and R.M. Engberg, *Material Remains of the Megiddo Cult (OIP 26;* Chicago, 1935), p. 14 n. 22; Mazar, pp. 474-5.



The eighth-seventh century date, unsurprisingly, corresponds with the date of the ivories showing the woman at the window. Suter avers that the centre of the ivory-working industry was Syria and Palestine and concludes that the woman-at-the-window motif appeared there in the early first millennium BC.<sup>19</sup> The Samaria ivories, which include woman-at-the-window artefacts, are unlikely to predate the founding of the city in 880. Most scholars consider them of eighth-century provenance.<sup>20</sup> Their counterparts found in Nimrud may have been taken there by Sargon II in 720 following his campaign that led to the final destruction of Samaria.<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew inscriptions on them show these Nimrud ivories to be eighth-century.<sup>22</sup> The pieces found in Nimrud, as well as those in Arslan Tash and Khorsabad, conceivably came from the same workshop as the Samaria ivories.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding, as Irene Winter comments, “[with] an iconographic theme [such as the woman in the window] which clearly had cultural significance in the Levant at this time,

---

<sup>19</sup> Suter, 1992, pp. 8-9, 21; also Crowfoot, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Bo Reicke, Leonhard Rost (eds), *Biblisch-historisches Handwörterbuch*, 3 vols (Göttingen, 1966), p. 1656; Suter, 2011, p. 219; King, pp. 142-4; Herrmann, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>22</sup> A.R. Millard, “Alphabetic Inscriptions on Ivories from Nimrud”, *Iraq* 24 (1962), pp. 41-51 (51); Oates, p. 169. Without such evidence as these inscriptions, ivories are difficult to date since they may be held for generations as heirlooms (Suter, 2010; David Ben-Shlomo and Trude Dothan, “Ivories from Philistia: Filling the Iron Age I Gap”, *IEJ* 56 [2006], pp. 1-38 [3, 29]).

<sup>23</sup> Crowfoot, pp. 4-5; Winter, pp. 111-7; Suter, 2011, p. 220.

there are likely to be repeated occasions on which, and several places in which, the theme will be repeated".<sup>24</sup> She goes on to observe:

The second half of the eighth century is the best period in which to account for *all* our ivories' movement: on the one hand, the campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III in Damascus [...]; and on the other hand, the activity of Sargon II in Samaria, his installation of the palaces at Khorsabad, and the ties between the collections of ivories from Samaria, Khorsabad and the buildings used by Sargon at Nimrud. This is precisely the time when Isaiah records the bringing of spoils from both Damascus and Samaria before the king of Assyria [Isa 8:4]. Furthermore, [...] André Parrot has suggested that the Samaria ivories seem more logically to be placed in the eighth century.<sup>25</sup>

It is very probable, then, that the potent image of the woman at the window and the type of Tyrian window in which she is depicted would have been part of the cultural hinterland of eighth- and seventh-century biblical authors.<sup>26</sup> The question is would they have had currency for a late second-millennium author? Nehema Aschkenasy thinks they would: "Deborah places the Canaanite mother in a pagan pictorial context that she is probably familiar with, 'at the window'".<sup>27</sup> We are fortunate in having concrete evidence

---

<sup>24</sup> Winter, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-29.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Ackerman, 1998, p. 161; Mazar, pp. 475, 505.

<sup>27</sup> Aschkenasy, p. 24.

with which to answer the question. The other significant cache of ivories from the territory that would constitute the Hebrew-speaking space comes from Canaanite Megiddo. These carved pieces were produced no later than ca 1100 BC, and perhaps the earliest items originated in the mid- or late fourteenth century.<sup>28</sup> This period has been characterized as “the heyday of Canaanite art”, and the ivories cover a “very wide stylistic range”.<sup>29</sup> The *terminus ante quem* corresponds with the period in which scholars place the battle against Sisera, and the find-site lies in the same geographical area. Moreover, the cache provides costly goods of the kind one would associate with Sisera’s mother and her ladies. The find furnishes a rich insight into Canaanite life, cult and culture. None of the artefacts shows a woman at the window.<sup>30</sup> Among a considerable quantity of carved

---

<sup>28</sup> Gordon Loud, *The Megiddo Ivories* (OIP 52; Chicago, 1939), pp. 9-10; RIA 8 (1993), p. 18; Graham I. Davies, *Megiddo* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 65-67; Mazar, pp. 269-71; A. Caubet and F. Poplin, “La place des ivoires d’Ougarit dans la production du Proche Orient ancien”, in Fitton, pp. 91-100 (92).

<sup>29</sup> Helene J. Kantor, “Syro-Palestinian Ivories”, *JNES* 15 (1956), pp. 153-74 (160).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*; Wright, p. 33. The same obtains for the approximately contemporary carved ivories discovered at Lachish, Tell el-Far’ah and Ugarit (Gachet, p. 75; Mazar, pp. 269-71; Marian H. Feldman, “Luxurious Forms: Redefining a Mediterranean ‘International Style,’ 1400-1200 B.C.E.”, *The Art Bulletin* 84 [2002], pp. 6-29 [8-9, 12-20]). The Ugarit pieces, which are comparatively standardized, may in part date to the mid-thirteenth century (Jacqueline Gachet-Bizollon “Le panneau de lit en ivoire de la cour III du palais royal d’Ougarit”, *Syria* 2008 [71], pp. 19-82). On female images from Megiddo generally, see May and Engberg, pp. 28-34.

ivory pieces found at Ekron, Ashdod and Ashqelon, which are provisionally dated to the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first (the period of the Judges and United Monarchy), we likewise search in vain for the woman-at-the-window image, despite the Canaanite influence evident in some of the designs.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly remarkable since the motifs of Syrian and Palestinian ivories display considerable continuity from the Late Bronze age to the seventh century BC, despite a virtual cessation of prestige ivory-working between the twelfth and late tenth centuries.<sup>32</sup>

If, as many scholars agree, Judg 5:28 makes oblique reference to the icon of the woman at the window depicted in the ivories, there is no evidence that its referent would have meaning for an Israelite audience in the era of the Judges or Early Monarchy. It was, on the other hand, almost certainly a stock motif for a Judean audience between the eighth and early sixth centuries.

### 3. "Symbols of Excellence"<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Ben-Shlomo and Dothan, pp. 28-33; Kantor, p. 171.

<sup>32</sup> Caubet and Poplin, p. 94; Martin Noth, *The Old Testament World*, trans. Victor Gruhn (London, 1966), p. 162; Marian Feldman, "The Legacy of Ivory Working Traditions in the Early First Millennium B.C.", in Joan Aruz, Kim Benzel, Jean Evans (eds), *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium BC* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 445-8.

<sup>33</sup> Joan Aruz, "Introduction", in op. cit., p. 7.

The Assyrians took the woman-at-the-window ivories together with other plunder to their palaces in Mesopotamia. Booty is the closing topic in the oration of Sisera's mother and it performs a structural role in the Song: the mention of spoils is one of the inclusios that bind her segment to the central part of the poem.<sup>34</sup> We learn in 5:19 that the kings under Sisera's command had their sights on silver.<sup>35</sup> She, on the other hand, envisages women – “one womb, two wombs”- allocated per head of his troops, and fine textiles for her son and herself. The couplet רחם רחמתים, in which the singular of the noun denoting “womb” coupled with its dual form in the verse's second colon, is reworked with evident alliteration in the verse's penultimate colon in the singular-dual citation of the textiles she desires: רחמתים [צבע] רקמה.<sup>36</sup> Although the text of 5:30 is opaque, it is clear that it concerns fabrics and that these fabrics are presented using climactic parallelism.<sup>37</sup> Of the two words employed as descriptors of the fabrics, רקמה is a term found in Ezekiel, as well as in the late texts Ps 45:15 (English 14) and 1 Chr 29:2. The root is encountered repeatedly in Exodus in participial form in the context of the embroidery for the tabernacle and the high priest's vestments. The second word, צבע, is a hapax, albeit with a related past participle evinced in Jer 12:9 where it describes a “variegated bird of

---

<sup>34</sup> Compare Baruch Halpern, “The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography”, *HTR* 76 (1983), pp. 379-401 (379 n. 1).

<sup>35</sup> Niditch, p. 75; Webb, p. 217; Fokkelman, pp. 616, 617 n. 58.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 623. The counterpoint – both conceptual and alliterative - of defeated women stripped naked with victorious women sumptuously clothed provides a morbid parallel to the antiphonal nature of the discourse between Sisera's mother and her ladies.

<sup>37</sup> C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*, 2nd edn (London, 1920), p. 156; Blenkinsopp, p. 75.

prey”.<sup>38</sup> *Ṣebaʿ* possesses an Akkadian cognate *ṣibûtu* which signifies “1) dyed fabric,<sup>39</sup> 2) soaked mash (in brewing)”.<sup>40</sup> On the basis of the Akkadian form, it would appear that

---

<sup>38</sup> *BDB*, p. 840.

<sup>39</sup> It is attested with this meaning in *ḪAR.ra* = *ḫubullu* XIX (*CAD* S, p. 171).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* The presence of a cognate in Akkadian, and also in Aramaic and Arabic, with the meaning “dye” may indicate that a Proto-Semitic lexeme generated all these forms and thus *ṣebaʿ* existed in second-millennium Hebrew (Ernst Axel Knauf, “Deborah’s Language: Judges Ch. 5 in Its Hebrew and Semitic Context”, in Bogdan Burtea et al. [eds], *Studia Semitica et Semitoamitica: Festschrift für Rainer Voight* [AOAT 317; Münster, 2005], pp. 167-82 [178]). In this case, it is curious that an analogue is not evident in Ugaritic (see below), particularly since Ugarit was a renowned centre of fabric-dyeing in the second half of the second millennium (Cemal Pulak, “The Uluburun Shipwreck and Late Bronze Age Trade”, in Aruz et al., pp. 288-310 [296-7]; Valérie Matoïan and Juan-Pablo Vita, “Les textiles à Ougarit: Perspectives de la recherche”, *UF* 41 [2009], pp. 469-504 [486-8]). Alternatively, it may have been coined in one of the languages with this specific meaning and spread with the product or manufacturing process to the others. Jeremy Black, Andrew George and Nicholas Postgate (*A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* [CDA], 2nd edn. [Wiesbaden, 2000], p. 331) surmise that the Neo-Babylonian term *ṣābû* “dyer” may be an Aramaic loanword (compare Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* [Assyriological Studies 19; Chicago, 1974], pp. 95-96; *CAD* S, pp. 45-46). The related word, *ṣibtum*, in the meaning “a garment mainly for clothing cult statues”, is likewise attested only in Neo-Babylonian (*ibid.*, p. 162).

*šeba'* denotes dyed material, and *riqmāh* embroidered work, as proposed in *BDB* and several translations and commentaries.<sup>41</sup>

*Riqmāh* appears in the same text in Ezekiel as the references to the Tyrian ivory trade (27:6-7, 15-16).<sup>42</sup> Here Egypt and Syria are cited as the sources of *riqmāh* work, with Tyre serving as the entrepôt. In his excoriation of Jerusalem, Ezekiel defines the glorious garment in which Yahweh robed her as *riqmāh*, but Jerusalem desecrated it by using it to clothe her anthropomorphic idols (16:10, 13, 16-17). The word appears in Ezek 17:3 in a parable concerning the king of Babylon. He is presented as an immense eagle with feathers of *riqmāh*. It conveys a similar sense of variegated colouring in 1 Chr 29:2 where it qualifies the stones that David amassed for the Jerusalem temple. In Ps 45:15 (English 14), a text in which ivory palaces also feature (v. 9, English 8), it refers to the

---

<sup>41</sup> For example, LXX, KJV, RSV, NRS, NAS; Burney, pp. 155-7; Niditch, pp. 69-70; *BDB*, p. 955.

This is not to imply that lexemes denoting fabrics and garments remain constant over time or that cognate forms share identical meanings in cognate languages or even dialects of the same language (Cécile Michel and Marie-Louise Nosch, "Textile Terminologies", in C. Michel, M.-L. Nosch [eds.], *Textile Terminologies in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean from the Third to the First Millennia BC* [Ancient Textiles Series 8; Oxford, 2010], pp. ix-xix [xi, xiv-xvi]; Agnete Wisti Lassen, "Tools, Procedures and Professions: A Review of the Akkadian Textile Terminology", in op. cit., pp. 272-82 [275-6]; Stefan Zawadzki, "Garments in Non-Cultic Context (Neo-Babylonian Period)", in op. cit., pp. 409-29 [411, 418, 422]).

<sup>42</sup> Compare Robert W. Jensen, *Ezekiel* (SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible; London, 2009), p. 216.

garment of the queen. What is implicit in these references is that *riqmāh* work is associated with the deity, his betrothed/consort, and royalty.<sup>43</sup> Even when the participial form in Exodus is included, the word's semantic range does not change significantly. It continues to emblemize separation from mundane existence through either sacred or royal association.<sup>44</sup>

Excepting Judges 5, *riqmāh* per se is not encountered in texts that can be confidently dated earlier than the late seventh century, although the participial forms in Exodus may indicate that it had currency somewhat earlier. As with the Megiddo ivories, we have extra-biblical evidence from the period preceding the Judges era with which to explore the question. The evidence lies in Ugaritic texts which furnish a wealth of references to textiles and finished garments.<sup>45</sup> The kingdom of Ugarit (Ras Shamra), until its collapse at the beginning of the twelfth century BC, was an economically important

---

<sup>43</sup> Compare A. Leo Oppenheim, "Essay on Overland Trade in the First Millennium B.C.", *JCS* 21 (1967), pp. 236-54 (246-7).

<sup>44</sup> An analogous taboo was attached to the embroidered clothing of Assyrian gods and kings (A. Leo Oppenheim, "The Golden Garments of the Gods", *JNES* 8 [1949], pp. 172-93 [191]). Ezekiel's description of Jerusalem dressing anthropomorphic idols in sumptuous garments reflects Ugaritic and Mesopotamian practice (Jean-Claude Margueron, "Ugarit: Gateway to the Mediterranean", in Aruz et al., pp. 236-50 [239]; Stephen W. Cole and Peter Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* [SAA 13; Helsinki, 1998], pp. 146-7).

<sup>45</sup> Matoian and Vita, pp. 472-3.



centre,<sup>46</sup> located in a region long famed for its high-quality fabrics.<sup>47</sup> While Ugaritic displays many differences from biblical Hebrew, these texts are particularly relevant to our study because of the close similarities that many commentators identify between Ugaritic narrative material and Deborah's Song.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Frank Cross states that its

---

<sup>46</sup> Feldman, 2002, p. 8; Gachet, p. 67; Juan-Pablo Vita, "Textile Terminology in the Ugaritic Texts", in Michel and Nosch, pp. 323-37 (323).

<sup>47</sup> Matoian and Vita, p. 470.

<sup>48</sup> W.F. Albright, "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems (Psalm LXVIII)", *HUCA* 23 (1950-51), pp. 1-39 (5); David N. Freedman, "Archaic Forms in Early Hebrew Poetry", *ZAW* 72 (1960), pp. 101-7 (102); Frank M. Cross and D.N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Grand Rapids, 1997), pp. 3, 7, 20, 37; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 16; Garden City NY, 1966), p. 49; Blenkinsopp, pp. 67-68, 74; Alexander Globe, "The Literary Structure and Unity of the Song of Deborah", *JBL* 93 (1974), 493-512 (500); Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 6A; Garden City NY, 1975), p. 106; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge MA, 1973), pp. 69-70, 115-6 n. 14, 125 n. 4; Gray, p. 280; J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden (London, 1976), pp. 178-9; Block, p. 237; Mark S. Smith, "Warfare Song as Warrior Ritual", in Brad E. Kelle et al. (eds), *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (Atlanta, 2014), pp. 165-86 (170); Tania Notarius, "Narrative Tenses in Archaic Hebrew in the North-West Semitic Linguistic Context", in Viktor Golinets et al. (eds), *Neue Beiträge zur Semistik* (AOAT 425; Münster, 2015), pp. 237-59 (250).

composer was “strongly under the sway of Canaanite stylistic canons”, as evident from Ugaritic documents, while for N.H. Snaith [the Song’s] “genius is truly Canaanite and the style is closely similar to that of some of the Ras Shamra texts”.<sup>49</sup> The references to textiles in Ugaritic records have received meticulous scholarly analysis.<sup>50</sup> Neither *riqmāh* nor *šeba’*,<sup>51</sup> nor plausible cognates, are found in these texts. One of the fabric-terms used alongside *riqmāh* in Ezek 16:13 - משי - has an Ugaritic cognate, *mtyn* (and an Akkadian cognate *maššijannu*), however.<sup>52</sup> These forms ultimately derive from Hittite.<sup>53</sup> In Ezek 27:24, listed together with *riqmāh* is תכלת, a much more frequently encountered word in biblical Hebrew, including in the late books Esther and 2 Chronicles. In the form *takiltu* it occurs frequently in Ugaritic tablets, too, not least in the late fourteenth-century treaty

---

<sup>49</sup> Frank M. Cross, Jr., “Notes on a Canaanite Psalm in the Old Testament”, *BASOR* 117 (1950), pp. 19-21 (20); pp. 1-26 (13); N.H. Snaith, “The Historical Books”, in H.H. Rowley (ed.), *The Old Testament and Modern Study: A Generation of Discovery and Research* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 84-114 (94-95).

<sup>50</sup> W.H. van Soldt, “Fabrics and Dyes at Ugarit”, *UF* 22 (1990), pp. 321-57; Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition (DUL)*, 2 vols, trans. Wilfred Watson (Leiden, 2003); Vita.

<sup>51</sup> Note, however, van Soldt, p. 324 n. 30, where *šb’* is listed with the meaning “hyena” (compare *BDB*, p. 955).

<sup>52</sup> *CAD* M/2, p. 389.

<sup>53</sup> *DUL*, pp. 606-7; Vita, pp. 331, 334.

with the Hittite king Muršili II.<sup>54</sup> It signifies costly blue/purple wool and, in the Ugaritic documents, was offered to kings and queens.<sup>55</sup> Like *šibûtu*, *takiltu(m)*, the Akkadian form of *t<sup>a</sup>kēlet*, is found in 𐎲AR.ra = *hubullu* XIX,<sup>56</sup> and like its Hebrew cognate, *takiltu(m)* remained in use into the mid-first millennium.<sup>57</sup>

Considering the prestige of *riqmāh* as fabric apparently associated with the deity and royalty, it is remarkable that, if the word was in use in twelfth-century Hebrew, it has no echo in Ugarit, in contrast to *t<sup>a</sup>kēlet* and *mešî*, items of roughly commensurate value. The conception of *riqmāh* held by Sisera's mother echoes that of the mid-first-millennium writers, evaluating it as reserved for rulers, not soldiers. Despite it being highly valued, *šeba'*, as already noted, is likewise not attested in Ugaritic. The evidence, albeit *ex silentio*, indicates that these words are unlikely to have existed at the time of Deborah as

---

<sup>54</sup> van Soldt, pp. 329, 335, passim; see Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330*, vol. 1 (London, 1995), pp. 307-10.

<sup>55</sup> van Soldt, pp. 344-5. Traces of blue- and purple-dyed fabrics were found on the Uluburun shipwreck (ca 1300 BC). The vessel appears to have set sail from the port that served Megiddo (Pulak, "Uluburun", pp. 296-9).

<sup>56</sup> Note, however, the caveat in B. Landsberger, "Über Farben im Sumerisch-akkadischen", *JCS* 21 (1967), pp. 139-73 (155).

<sup>57</sup> Oppenheim, 1967, pp. 246-7; Heinrich Zimmern, *Akkadische Fremdwörter als Beweis für babylonischen Kultureinfluß* (Leipzig, 1915), p. 37; Pierre Villard, "Les textiles néo-assyriens et leur couleurs", in Michel and Nosch, pp. 388-99 (397). Sargon II lists *takiltu* material among his plunder from Mušāšir (François Thureau-Dangin, *Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon (714 av. J.-C.)* [Paris, 1912], p. 56 l. 366).

designations of precious fabrics. Indeed, Leo Oppenheim considers that *riqmāh*, “work done by the craftsmen called *rōqem*”, represented an innovative textile technique that was developed in the Levant in the first millennium. He suggests that *riqmāh* “combined linen with multi-coloured embroidered or – perhaps – woven-in decoration”.<sup>58</sup> The Assyrian monarch and royal household in the eighth and seventh centuries prized it highly.

The other word in the plunder list, *raḥam* “womb” in the meaning “sexual spoils”, also lacks second-millennium corroboration. It is first encountered in mid-ninth-century Moabite, on king Mesha’s stela (l. 17).<sup>59</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

---

<sup>58</sup> Oppenheim, 1967, pp. 246-7. It is tempting to see the garment with “woven or embroidered stripes” (Barkay, p. 43) worn by the seated man portrayed on the eighth-seventh century sherd found at Ramah Raḥel as an example of *riqmāh*. Gabriel Barkay believes the individual to be the king of Judah, and notes the resemblance to the representations of Tiglath-pileser III (ibid., pp. 42-44; compare Aharoni, “Ramat”, pp. 20, 22). Elizabeth Bloch-Smith considers the figure a Judean “dignitary”, observing that the style of his beard is typical of Israelites represented on the Black Obelisk (“Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten in Israel’s History”, *JBL* 122 [2003], pp. 401-25 [415-6]).

<sup>59</sup> S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1913), pp. lxxxv–lxxxvi; Gray, p. 293.

Insofar as the information vouchsafed in Judg 5:28-30 reveals the cultural context of its composition, it points to an eighth-seventh-century rather than a late second-millennium provenance. If this conclusion is justified, it would suggest that these verses of the Song of Deborah were composed during the period in which Judah experienced direct Assyrian political and cultural influence. As it happens, the interests of Sisera's mother and the Canaanite kings of Judges 5 coincide with those of Tiglath-pileser III. In one of his inscriptions he lists tribute he has received from, inter alia, Menahem of Israel and Hiram of Tyre: "gold, silver, tin, iron, elephant hides, ivo[ry], multi-coloured garments, linen garments, blue-purple (and) [red]-purple wool".<sup>60</sup> Women appear in Neo-Assyrian tribute/booty inventories as chattels, and its rulers commonly carried the daughters and other harem women of conquered kings back to Assyria, as Sennacherib did with Hezekiah's.<sup>61</sup> Is it fanciful, therefore, to discern in Judg 5:28-30 a list of some of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Hayim Tadmor and Shigeo Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC), and Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC), Kings of Assyria (RINAP 1; Winona Lake, 2011)*, pp. 46-48. Tiglath-pileser's acquisitiveness for precious metals particularly vexed Yahwists of the late eighth-seventh centuries because Ahaz had "bribed" him using silver and gold from Yahweh's temple (2 Kgs 16:8; Hayim Tadmor and Mordechai Cogan, "Ahaz and Tiglath-Pileser in the Book of Kings: Historiographic Considerations", *Biblica* 60 [1979], pp. 491-508 [499-503]).

<sup>61</sup> J.E. Reade, "The Rassam Obelisk", *Iraq* 42 (1980), pp. 1-22 (19); P. Hulin, "The Inscriptions on the Carved Throne-Base of Shalmaneser III", *Iraq* 25 (1963), pp. 48-69 (65); L.W. King, *The Bronze Reliefs from the Gates of Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, B.C. 860-825* (Oxford, 1915), p. 26, pl. XXVIII, XXXIV; Daniel David Luckenbill, *The Annals of*

characteristic spoils taken by the forces who had destroyed the northern kingdom and large swathes of Hezekiah's realm, namely, the Assyrian army;<sup>62</sup> a list that includes not

---

*Sennacherib* (Chicago, 1924), p. 34. Compare Sarah C. Melville, "Neo-Assyrian Royal Women and Male Identity: Status as a Social Tool", *JAOS* 124 (2004), pp. 37-57 (40). Assyrian soldiers are portrayed on the Balawat Gates parading women as booty (King, *Gates*, pl. XXIII, CXXV). . Compare Julian Morgenstern, "Amos Studies I", *HUCA* 11 (1936), pp. 19-140 (37); A.R. George, "Four Temple Rituals from Babylon", in idem and I.L. Finkel (eds), *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W.G. Lambert* (Winona Lake, 2000), pp. 259-99 (279). While Judg 5:30 provides the sole biblical attestation of *rhm* possessing an erotic connotation, its Akkadian cognate *rēmu*, according to a first-millennium text, can mean 'female genitalia' (Jerrold S. Cooper, 'Virginity in Ancient Mesopotamia', in Simo Parpola and Robert Whiting [eds], *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East*, CRRAl 47/1 [Helsinki, 2002], pp. 91-112 [106]).

<sup>62</sup> Hayah Katz and Avraham Faust, "The Assyrian Destruction Layer at Tel 'Eton", *IEJ* 62 (2012), pp. 22-53 (48-50). A contemporary text extols Sennacherib as "The king who from east and west made all the lands be looked upon as booty" (Livingstone, *Poetry*, 32r l.23). On the Assyrian economy's reliance on plunder and tribute, see W.G. Lambert, "The Reigns of Aššurnāširpal II and Shalmaneser III: An Interpretation", *Iraq* 36 (1974), pp. 103-9 (106); M.J. Geller, "Akkadian Sources of the Ninth Century", in H.G.M. Williamson (ed.), *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel (Proceedings of the British Academy 143; Oxford, 2007)*, pp. 229-41 (231-4). See Avraham Faust, "Settlement, Economy, and Demography under Assyrian Rule in the West: The Territories of the Former Kingdom of

only fine fabrics, silver and slaves, but also metaphorically the ivory likeness of a woman at the window, Sisera's mother? Whereas all such booty was no doubt desired by ancient Near Eastern potentates, it is only with the Assyrians that we find caches of woman-at-the-window images plundered from the Hebrew-speaking area.<sup>63</sup>

---

Israel as a Test Case", *JAOS* 135 (2015), pp. 765-89 (782), on the impact of Assyrian predation on Israel.

<sup>63</sup> Compare Caubet and Poplin, pp. 94-95; Reade, "Obelisk," p. 18; Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 2001), pp. 207-8.