



Echols, Charles L.

***“Tell Me, O Muse”: The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) in the Light of Heroic Poetry***

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According to Echols, the song of Deborah originated as a heroic victory song composed and sung in the premonarchic period shortly after the events it describes. He tries to show that in its present, canonical form, Judg 5 is the result of a later theological adaptation of a song in which Yhwh was added to the song as the real deliverer. This very detailed study is based on his doctoral dissertation in 2005 at the University of Cambridge, supervised by G. I. Davies. Echols published an outline of his theory in the “The Eclipse of God in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005): 149–52.

There is no end to writing books and articles on the song of Deborah, as was recently illustrated in the survey by T. Mayfield, “The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4–5) in Recent Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 7.3 (2009): 306–35. Although Echols has the ambition to pave the way to a consensus on the song’s genre (201), his study will not be the last word on this aspect of the interpretation. He does offer an interesting, new, and well-founded form-critical approach, but it is likely that this will end up in the scholarly discussions as no more than one of the many possible interpretations.

Given the enormous amount of literature on Judg 5, the book of Echols can be welcomed as an excellent survey that not only lists and classifies nearly all relevant recent literature but also gives a critical discussion of the arguments used. This takes up almost half of the book, in which Echols gives an annotated translation of the song of Deborah and discusses the date and the unity of the song. His translation is conservative, as is his dating in the period before the monarchy with a *terminus a quo* of circa 1150 B.C.E. He is reluctant in his use of archaeological and linguistic data in stating that they offer no direct evidence for a certain date. They merely do not contradict the dating indicated by the song itself. In some cases Echols may be too confident when it comes to the historical reliability of the text, such as when he connects the mention of Shamgar in verse 6 with the reference to a person with the same name in Judg 3:31 who is said to have killed many Philistines. Although this identification is not certain and although no Philistines are mentioned in the song of Deborah, Echols uses the archaeological evidence for the presence of the Philistines in Israel as an important argument for the date of the song.

With regard to the question of the unity of the song, Echols is of the opinion that the many differences between those who defend the unity show that the metrical and syntactical arguments are “equivocal” (72). The same could be said on the basis of his summary of the case against the unity of the song. Nevertheless, he comes to the conclusion that we are dealing with an original song comprising verses 6–30 and without the phrase “Bless Yhwh” in verse 9. This means that nearly all references to Yhwh as taking part in the battle are to be interpreted as secondary. Only later will the reader of the book realize the importance of the result of this literary-critical analysis. It is the necessary basis of the following form-critical exercise comparing it to secular heroic poetry. This makes it difficult to avoid the idea that this analysis by Echols is not as self-evident as he suggests and that it was very much influenced by the wish of the author to find correspondences between Judg 5 and heroic poetry.

Echols pays much attention to the genre of heroic poetry. As a starting point he takes the description by H. M. and N. K. Chadwick in *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, 1932–1940). He elaborately describes and defines the genre’s characteristics, based on examples taken especially from classical literature. He also pays much attention to parallels in ancient Mesopotamian and Indian literature. His conclusion is that the song of Deborah bears the following characteristics of heroic narrative poetry: (1) it pertains to the heroic age; (2) it was crafted by an anonymous poet; (3) it contains typical formulae, such as accusation and blessing; (4) it describes a short duration of events; (5) it puts emphasis on warfare; (6) the scale is high; and, what appears to be one of the most important elements, (7) it seeks to entertain by recounting a story of adventure in which heroes strive for fame and glory.

These are rather general qualifications and thus will hardly convince the reader that we are dealing here with a specific genre. Therefore, Echols tries to be more specific and discusses the question whether the song should be classified as epic or lyric and the possible heroic or nonheroic features in the song. In his view, the heroic element is predominant. The overarching purpose of the song would have been to praise the human characters for their actions. He tries to prove that the role of Yhwh was obscured in verses 20–21. They seem to point to an intervention from heaven, but according to Echols this should be taken figuratively. He interprets the reference to Yhwh in verses 11 and 13 as a “gentilic identifier.” In a later stage the profane song would have been turned into a sacred text. This was done in a manner so “skillful and sensitive to the original composition” (200) that this theological adaptation did not take away the original purpose of the song. So now we have a poem that praises both the heroes and Yhwh.

It is interesting to note that a similar “theological” redaction is maintained by a number of scholars with regard of the stories about Samson. Judges 13 telling the story of the announcement of Samson’s birth, with a central role for the messenger of Yhwh, would function as a kind of Yahwistic introduction to the following chapters 14–16, in which Yhwh is hardly mentioned. Unfortunately, Echols pays no attention to the place of chapter 5 in the book of Judges as a whole. It would also have given him the opportunity to discuss other possible correspondences with the story of Samson that can also be labeled as heroic. This seems to make more sense than the elaborate comparison with literature from Ugarit, Mesopotamia, Greece, and even India. It would at least have made it more clear why Echols can be so firm in his statement that it is “immediately apparent that heroic narrative poetry ... does not occur in the canonical Old Testament” (159). This may be based on a too strict distinction between poetry and prose (see, e.g., the book of Y. Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* [Kampen, 1993], which interprets these chapters as poetic prose).

Echols undoubtedly has made an important contribution to the interpretation of Judg 5, but it is not to be expected that his literary-critical and form-critical analysis will add to the consensus he hopes to find. For instance, in his recent commentary, W. Groß (*Richter*, [HTKAT; Freiburg, 2009], 338–39) criticizes Echols’s attempts to play down the role of Yhwh by reducing the original song to verses 6–9b, 10–30 and by minimizing his active role in the verses where he is mentioned. The strongest part of Echols’s book is where he enters the discussion about philological problems and the analysis of the structure of the song. His theory about the genre of the song is less convincing. The basis on a reconstruction of the growth of the text is weak. Also, the characteristics pointing to the genre of a heroic victory song are not very specific. Nevertheless, his study is stimulating. Looking at this much-discussed text from this new perspective helps to get a

better view on a number of details and on the place of this song within the book as a whole.