

Deborah and the seven tribes

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De Moor found twelve tribes in Judg 5¹, Caquot found none². Most readers find ten, but in an early stage, there might have been only seven.

The facts

After a vivid description of Israel in dire straits (6-8) and a new summons addressed to the best of the Israelites (9-11), the song starts to call the roll of the volunteers (14-18):

14 מִנֵּי אֶפְרַיִם שָׂרָשָׁם בְּעַמְלֶק אַחֲרֶיךָ בְּנֵימִין בְּעַמְמִיד

From **Ephraim**, their root in the plain³, behind you **Benjamin** with your mighty ones.

מִנֵּי מַכִּיר יִרְדּוּ מִחַקְקִים וּמִזְבוּלָן מִשְׁכֵּם בְּשֶׁבֶט סֹפֵר:

From **Makir**, rulers went down, but from **Zebulun**, holders of bronze sceptre.

15 וְשָׂרֵי בִישָׁשְׁכָר עַם־בְּרָה וַיִּשְׁשַׁכְּרָן כֵּן בְּרֹק בְּעַמּוֹק שְׁלַח בְּרַגְלָיו

Princes in **Issakar** are with Deborah and **Issakar** is sent as Baraq in the plain under his orders⁴.

בְּפִלְגֹת רְאוּבֵן גְּדֹלִים חֻקְקֵי־לֵב:

16 לְמַה יִּשְׁבֶּת בֵּין הַמִּשְׁפָּתִים לְשֹׁמֵעַ שִׁרְקוֹת עֲדָרִים

לְפִלְגֹת רְאוּבֵן גְּדֹלִים חֻקְרֵי־לֵב:

In the ravines of **Reuben**, great determinations!

Why do you stay between the bivouacs to listen to the shepherds' pipes?

For the ravines of **Reuben**, great hesitations!

17 גִּלְעָד בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁכֵן וְדָן לְמַה יָגוּר אֲנִיּוֹת

אֲשֶׁר יָשַׁב לַחֹף יַמִּים וְעַל מַפְרָצָיו יִשְׁכּוּן:

Gilead lives in Transjordan and **Dan**, why does he expatriate himself on boats?

Asher stays by the sea and lives in his harbours.

18 זְבוּלוֹן עַם חָרַף נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוֹת וְנַפְתָּלִי עַל מְרוֹמָי שָׂדֵה:

Zebulun is a people who scoffed at death and **Naphtali** is on his highlands.

¹ J.C. De Moor, "The twelve tribes in the Song of Deborah", *Vetus Testamentum* XLIII (1993), pp. 483-493.

² A. Caquot, Les tribus d'Israël dans le Cantique de Débora", *Semitica* XXXVI (1986), pp. 47-70.

³ The emendation of the ל of עמלק (ס*) avoids the negative connotations of Amaleq which are foreign to the tone of this section. Knauf considers בעמלק שרשם as a gloss in the left margin of verse 14 but commenting on "Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite" in verse 24 opposite: E.A. Knauf, "Zum Text von Ri 5,14", *Biblica* 93 (1983), pp. 428-429.

⁴ For this expression cf. Ex 11:8; Judg 8:5; 2Sam 15:16.18; 1K 20:10 and B. Halpern "The resourceful Israelite historian", *Harvard Theological Review* 76/4 (1983), pp. 379-401.385.

Remarks

- These ten groups don't all receive the same treatment. Some are mentioned only once (Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir, Gilead, Dan, Asher and Naphtali), some get two consecutive mentions (Issakar and Reuben) while Zebulun is the only group cited in two different places (14 and 18).
- There seems to be a first sequence of participating tribes (14-15a), followed by a second sequence of absentees from the battlefield (15b-18).
- The double mention of Zebulun comes roughly at the end of each sequence. Only Issakar comes after Zebulun (15) as a participating group and Naphtali after the second mention of Zebulun apparently as non-participant (18).
- The structure of these verses is not obvious. The hypothesis is that the original structure has been obscured by the intrusion of secondary material. The following observations could lend support to that hypothesis.

The first sequence (14)

Verse 14 is perfectly balanced. Its two parts begin by בְּנֵי, each mentioning two tribes: Ephraim-Benjamin and Makir-Zebulun. Provided that Amaleq be read as עֲמֹלֵק «plain» and that Makir be an ancient designation of what will become Manasseh⁵, this verse sets apart the core of Israel, localised in the Mountain of Ephraim. Ephraim is the root which produced Benjamin and Makir. Benjamin follows Ephraim (when heading north, Benjamin is behind Ephraim). With Zebulun a new claim is made on the plain. Ephraim and the settlers of the central range of Canaan affirm that they have the right or the desire to come down and take root in the plain. The plain is the Izreel valley, the valley of Wadi Kishon (21) surrounded by the hills of Lower Galilee, the abode of Zebulun (Tabor and Nazareth Range)⁶. Makir is graced with leaders, but Zebulun receives the honour of holding a distinctive rod, the token of his new position among the people of Yhwh (3.5). The Song celebrates the victory that secured the extension of Israelite territory towards the plain. The hill-dweller can't believe his luck to have a share of the lush flatlands. Now milk will really start flowing!

The second sequence (15-18)

Issakar is next in line after Zebulun. His double mention results from the evocations of both Deborah and Baraq⁷. Issakar's participation (עַם) and obedience (בְּרַגְלֵי) are heavily emphasised, so heavily that it becomes suspect. Given the fact that Issakar is known neither in Richter's *Retterbuch*⁸ nor in Judg 1, and that the structure of the verse is overloaded, the weight of the emphasis on Issakar is probably due to a late date of introduction.

⁵ Gen 50,23.

⁶ Cf. E.A. Knauf, "Kinneret and Neftali", in A. Lemaire (ed.), *Congress Volume Oslo 1998 II: Historiography*, VT.S, Leiden, Brill, forthcoming.

⁷ > ⚡.

⁸ W. Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch*, Bonn, 1964, p. 333.

On the contrary, Reuben's twofold mention frames perfectly the playful ritournelle⁹ of v. 16a. There is no reason to emendate it. Reuben probably served as model for Issakar (Reuben... Reuben —> Issakar... Issakar).

Gilead is paired with Dan. Gilead's abode in Transjordan is sufficient to explain his absence from the scene. Dan's connection with boats is surprising, whether we think of Samson's Danites in the Shefelah or of Dan the city at the source of the Jordan. To be sure, the verb **גָּרַ** indicates that the Danites are at sea, employed by Phoenician merchants, unable to come to the battle. But the real surprise comes with the mention of Asher which seems bent on clarifying the situation of Dan. Contrarily to Dan, Asher lives on the seaside, so much so that in Judg 1 and Josh 19, Asher appears as just another name for Phoenicia, "as far as Great Zidon". Historically, the weight of evidence is overwhelmingly favourable to the attribution of Asher's biblical territory to Tyre and to Zidon. This «tribe» merely floats over the Phoenician coastal plain. In fact, Judg 1:31 reminds the reader that Asher never conquered what Josh 19 claims as Asherite territory. On the basis of the repetition of **שָׁכַן** (17a Dan and 17bβ) one could even claim that **אֲשֵׁר** must be understood as the relative just as it is in v. 27. This casts doubts on the very existence of a tribe bearing this name. Of course, one could object that Judg 1¹⁰ already understands Asher as a tribe. Also if Asher was only a relative particle, the Dan section would become so inflated that it would be three times as long as Gilead's¹¹. These objections could be placated by pointing out that the creation of a tribe of Asher *ex* **אֲשֵׁר** comes as a corrective for the migration of Dan, not towards the city of Dan (Judg 18), but to the Phoenician harbours. This new tribe of Asher fulfilled a useful purpose as an intermediate group inserted between Dan and Tyrian-Zidonian territory, in order to limit the real extent of Phoenician control on Northern Israel and to avoid transforming all the Northern Israelites into Phoenicians dockers and sailors. In fact, this transmutation of a relative particle into a tribal name isn't quite as unthinkable as the changing of lead into gold. 2 Sam 2:9 refers to some mysterious Ashourites which could easily provide some ancestors for the ghost tribe of Asher.

Zebulun reappears at the end of this list of groups which are either too busy (Reuben) or too far away to provide help. As in v. 14, he receives a clearly positive note, more so in this context: at the end of the list of absentees, Zebulun receives the special distinction reserved for warriors who didn't hesitate to risk their lives. After the sceptre, the war-medal!

At last, Naphtali. Like Issakar, he arrives late, after Zebulun. His presence troubled even the Masoretes who didn't know were to fit the *'atnah*. Naphtali is credited with **בְּרֹמֵי שָׂדֵה** «highlands» which correspond well with what can be inferred from other biblical texts.

⁹ E.A. Knauf, "Debora", unpublished.

¹⁰ Possibly dating back to the VIIIth century B.C. Cf. Ph. Guillaume, "The date of the *Negatives Besitzverzeichnis* (Judg 1:27-36)", *Biblische Notizen*, forthcoming.

¹¹ This isn't impossible as parallelism can be broken for special effect.

Within the Song, this indication has no function, unless it is read as a reference to the battle at the waters of Merom (Josh 11:7)¹², thus providing a link with the cursed Meroz (23). The Tribe of Naphtali existed, of course, but its mention in Judg 5 seems secondary.

If the secondary character of Issakar, Asher and Naphtali is accepted, the original structure of verses 14-18 becomes obvious, the attention is on Zebulun:

Ephraim - Benjamin - Makir + Zebulun (14).

Reuben - Gilead - Dan + Zebulun (16b-18a).

Date

As noticed earlier, 2 S 2:9-10 offers an interesting historical setting for the performance of Deborah's play¹³. In spite of a vastly pro-Davidic redaction, this vignette offers a glimpse into Israel's first steps out of its Ephraimite-Benjaminite cradle. Not only did the State of Israel survive its founder's death on mount Gilboa, but it expanded significantly under Ishbaal, Saul's son, reaching down to Jezreel and as far as Gilead. Judg 5 is likely to celebrate that process: the ability of Yhwh, the mountain God from Seir (4) and Sinai (5), to lead victoriously his people in the plain of Jezreel. Despite the cosmic aspects of the battle (20), the action is concentrated in a small area in the Kishon Valley: Sarid¹⁴, Taanach on the waters of Megiddo (19). Around the end of the Xth century B.C. the Israelites (the dwellers of the Cisjordanian mountains, Ephraim - Benjamin - Makir, of the Transjordanian hills, Reuben - Gilead, and of the Northern Galilee around Dan) celebrate their new territorial gain by singing a psalm in praise of Yhwh and Zebulun, the group that frames the rich valleys of Galilee. That feat was all the more remarkable as the Israelites managed it on their own, without David, who is nowhere to be heard in this great story!

¹² Already R. De Vaux, *The early history of Israel*, Philadelphia, 1978, p. 665.

¹³ Proposed by E.A. Knauf, *Die Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, Stuttgart, 1994, p. 188.

¹⁴ *Tel Shadoud*, N. Na'aman, "Literary and topographical notes on the battle of Kishon", *Vetus Testamentum* XL (1990), pp. 423-436.