The Name Game

Dating the Book of Judges

By Richard S. Hess

I study names. We can learn an enormous amount from names and their etymology. Since one of the issues raised in BAR recently has been the historicity of early sections of the Bible, I wondered whether names could make a small contribution to that discussion.

Let’s look at the personal names in a famous poem, the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. It is generally agreed that this is one of the oldest compositions in the Bible; its archaic language bears all the hallmarks of its hoary origins. According to the traditional Biblical chronology, the poem describes events occurring during the period of the Judges (1200 to 1000 B.C.), before the establishment of the United Monarchy. To understand the poem, we should also look at Judges 4, a later prose account of the same episode. To paraphrase:

For 20 years, Israel has been oppressed by the Canaanite monarch Jabin, king of Hazor (who is mentioned only in the prose account; in the poem, Israel is oppressed by a coalition of Canaanite kings). Jabin’s troops are commanded by his general Sisera. The prophetess Deborah calls on Barak, son of Avinoam, to engage the Canaanites in battle. Barak agrees, but only if she will join him. Deborah consents but tells him that he will earn no glory because the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman. The battle occurs at Ta’anach, by Megiddo’s waters.

The stars fought from heaven,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.

The Israelites are successful against the Canaanite chariots. Sisera, however, flees on foot. He ultimately seeks refuge in the tent of Heber the Kenite, a friend of Jabin’s. Exhausted, Sisera asks for water; Heber’s wife Yael gives him soothing milk instead and he promptly falls asleep.

When he fell asleep,
He asked for water, she offered milk;
In a princely bowl she brought him curds.

Her [left] hand reached for the tent peg,
She struck Sisera, crushed his head,
Smashed and pierced his temple.
At her feet he sank, lay outstretched,
Where he sank, there he lay—destroyed.
And the land of Israel remained at peace for the next 40 years.

I have examined the seven personal names mentioned in Judges 5 and compared them to evidence from the archaeological record. It turns out that the elements that make up these seven names have been attested mainly in other personal names from the period of the Judges, rather than from other periods. This confirms the antiquity of the names and their context that would be highly unusual if the story were composed centuries after the events it recounts.

Let us look more specifically at these names. Two belong to Israelite leaders, Deborah and her general, Barak. A third is that of Barak’s father, Avinoam. A fourth is the opposing general, Sisera. Fifth and sixth are the Kenite Heber, to whose tent Sisera flees, and Heber’s wife Yael (Jael). Finally, there is Shamgar. He is not active in the battle, but the text dates the battle to his time: “In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath [or the Anathite]” (Judges 5:6).

The name Deborah probably stems from a root (DBR) meaning to lead or pursue, also preserved in Debir, the name of a Biblical town in Judah near Hebron. Debir is mentioned as a town only in the time of the Judges, what archaeologists call Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.). The king of Eglon is also named Debir (Joshua 10:3). He is mentioned as ruling in this same period, during the Israelite appearance in the Promised Land.

Deborah may be a shortened form of a name that included the name of a deity, which in the case of “Deborah,” was omitted. Thus the name may have originally meant “(God) leads.” Such names are common in the ancient Near East and can appear with and without the name of a god or goddess attached.

The prophetess Deborah is mentioned in the Bible only in this episode. One other Deborah appears in the Bible, the nurse of the matriarch Rebecca (Genesis 35:8). Thus, in the Bible the name is used only in accounts of early periods.

Outside the Bible, a woman whose name contains the same DBR root as Deborah is mentioned in an Egyptian text of the time of Ramesses II, who reigned in the 13th century B.C. In short, we can find insights into the name Deborah only from this early period, the late second millennium B.C.

The name of Barak’s father, Avinoam, contains two elements. “Avi” means (my) father. It is followed by a noun or adjective “noam,” meaning beauty (Psalms 27:4), favor (Proverbs 9:17) or pleasant one (Proverbs 3:17). This two-element structure is more common among personal names in the second-millennium B.C. West Semitic world and less common among Israelite names in the first millennium B.C., although the name does appear in an eighth-century B.C. ostraca from Samaria. (An ostraca is a pottery sherd used as note paper, that is, with writing on it.) The element noam appears frequently, however, in personal names in inscriptions from the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.)—at Ugarit in Syria and at Ta’anach by the Jezreel Valley in modern Israel. It also appears in the name...
of Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi. According to the Biblical chronology, she, too, lived in the time of the Judges.

A pattern emerges. These names and their variations appear in the Late Bronze Age and in Iron Age I, but rarely, if at all, in later periods.

Heber, to whose tent Sisera fled, is a Kenite (the Kenites were a Semitic tribe associated with the Hebrews). Indeed, the word Heber is often used in modern Hebrew (pronounced hever or chaver) to mean a close friend. In Biblical Hebrew it may be associated with the place name Hebron. As a West Semitic noun, heber is related to Amorite $h\times i\times b r u m$, “tribe, clan” and to second-millennium personal names such as $h\times i\times i\times b r a\times a\times n$. Again, the second millennium B.C. provides us with the illuminating parallels.

Yael, Heber’s wife’s name, means mountain goat. A name with an identical consonantal spelling occurs in the Ugaritic texts in Syria from the 13th century B.C.

Shamgar, mentioned in passing in the poem, is another judge, like Deborah, as we learn from the only other reference to him in the Bible (Judges 3:31). Determining the etymology of Shamgar has proved difficult, and scholars have put forth several proposals. One possibility links the name to the Hurrian language and its sun deity ŠSimigi. There are several Hurrian personal names from the Middle Bronze-Age city of Nuzi in modern Iraq that seem to be related, including a šŠi-mi-qa-ri. The final element “ar” in Shamgar would then reflect the Hurrian verb, “to give.” The full etymological meaning of Shamgar could be something like, “Šimigi has given.” This is called a confessional name. It expresses the belief that the deity has given the child to the mother. Similarly the Hebrew name Jonathan means, “Yahweh has given” or “Yahweh gives.” While there are some difficulties with this explanation, it nevertheless seems more likely than other proposals. Hurrian is not related to Hebrew. However, Hurrian names date from the second millennium B.C. exclusively. Both in the Bible and everywhere else these names disappear after the tenth century B.C.

One of the last Hurrian names may be Araunah; in the Bible, Araunah sold David the threshing floor where the Temple was ultimately built (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21).

Sisera, along with Shamgar, it also seems to be a non-Semitic name. Only Sisera, among the people mentioned in the poem, is clearly not an Israelite. Nor is his name Canaanite (or Amorite), for a Semitic name can be Canaanite or Hebrew. And there are no correspondences among the Hurrian sources or any of the other common language families attested in the Levant in the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age I.

The strong Philistine presence referred to so often in the Book of Judges seems to invite us to look westward, to the Aegean home of the Philistines, for an etymology, as suggested by Giovanni Garbini, a Biblical philologist. Used on a second-millennium B.C. Linear A text from Crete, the name (\(j\)a-sa-sa-ra), Garbini has proposed, is related to Sisera and can bear the sense of “master, lord.” The name in the Linear A text resembles Sisera more closely than anything yet proposed. Sisera may have been a Philistine, but the Linear A connection is speculative. All we can say is that the name Sisera has no attestations in first-millennium B.C. sources, and it may have arisen earlier.

Setting aside the mysterious Sisera, the six names from Judges have parallels, either Semitic or otherwise, with names of the late second millennium B.C. The single exception is Heber, whose closest parallels occur earlier in the second millennium B.C. Avinoam is the only name that appears at all in the first millennium B.C.
I referred earlier to how the name Deborah was probably a shortened form with the name of the deity omitted. Sometimes Israelite and other West Semitic names have the name of the deity included. In later Israelite names this is often the divine name Yahweh, shortened to “yo,” “yah” or “yahu.” Names such as Josiah and Hezekiah are examples of this. But there are many other theophoric elements in ancient names—for example, “el,” the generic name for god, as in Nathaniel, Gabriel and Biblical El-natan. In Moabite, Ammonite and Edomite names, theophoric elements often refer to the gods Chemosh, Milkom and Qos. Canaanite names often allude to Baal. But so do some Israelite names. The birth name given by his father to the famous judge Gideon was Jerub-baal.

As we have seen, many peoples besides the Israelites spoke Semitic languages. So just because someone in our poem has a Semitic name hardly means that he or she is an Israelite. But what if a person has a name containing a form of the divine name Yahweh? Some 47 arrowheads inscribed with names have come onto the antiquities market in the past 25 years or so, and more are appearing all the time. Most seem to have originated in southern Lebanon, although a seller of some of them has identified his batch with the Arab village of el-Khadr, near Bethlehem (which is why they are often called el-Khadr arrowheads). Apparently it was fashionable in the late second millennium B.C. (based on the style of the letters, the inscriptions are dated to the latter part of Iron Age I and the beginning of Iron Age II) for a warrior to own a ceremonial arrowhead, possibly with his name inscribed on it. There are 54 names inscribed on these 47 arrowheads. And there are approximately the same number of names in the book of Judges—49. The book of Judges includes possibly four names containing shortened forms of Yahweh (Jonathan, Joash, Jotham and Micah) and only one relating to Baal—Jerub-baal. Among the arrowheads, however, the situation is just the opposite: Ten names contain the theophoric element for Baal. One name, read as \textit{yw\textit{h}.nn} (all writing was alphabetic and consonantal, without vowels), has been identified as containing a shortened form of Yahweh; however, this reading remains disputed.
This is by no means proof, but it is certainly suggestive that the writer of the Book of Judges, who used traditions that contained authentic early names, saw Israel emerging as a society that knew and worshipped Yahweh.

**Reference for this article:**