**Is There a Discrepancy in the Prose and Poetic Account
of Sisera's Death in Judges 4:17-22 and 5:24-27?**

Introduction

A careful study of the prose account of Judges 4:17-22 compared to the poetic

account of 5:24-27 reveals apparent discrepancies. At a glimpse, one can see that the

poetic description of Sisera's death by Jael lacks some elements mentioned in the prose.

On the other hand, the poetic account 5:24-27 adds various things not found in the prose

account of 4:17-22. Thus, some have suggested discrepancies exist between these

accounts.[1] Is that correct, or is it a matter of understanding how the way prose and poetic

accounts function? Such a view, of course, undermines the inerrancy of Scripture, besides

causing believers to question the accuracy of other areas of the Bible.

The objective of this article is to answer the question: "Why are there

distinctions between the accounts of Judg 4:17-22 and 5:24-27?" Hence it will be best to

contrast both accounts in order to show omissions, additions and differences in style and

content.

Comparison of Judg 4:17-22 and 5:24-17

v 17 However, Sisera had fled away on foot
to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite;
for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor
and the house of Heber the Kenite.

v 24 "Most blessed among women is
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Blessed is she among women in tents.

v 18 And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said
to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me;
do not fear." And when he had turned aside
with her into the tent, she covered him with
a blanket.

v 25 He asked for water, she gave
milk; She brought out cream in a
lordly bowl.

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[1] Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Harper & Row, 1988; reprint, Unversity Park, PA: The Pensylvania State University Press, 1996), 81, says, "The hypothesis that the prose relies on SDeb also accounts for the discrepancies arising over Sisera's assassination."

v 19 Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him.

v 20 And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' you shall say, 'No.'"

v 21 Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

v 22 And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, I will show you the man whom you seek." And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple.

v 26 She stretched her hand to the tent peg, Her right hand to the workmen's hammer; She pounded she pierced his head, She split and struck through his temple.

v 27 At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; At her feet he sank, he lay still; At her feet he sank, he fell; Where he sank, there he fell dead.

Just by merely looking at both accounts the prose contains much more content than the poetic account. In fact, below there are twenty-one elements within the prose that will be compared to see the additions and omissions of both accounts:

4:17-22		5:24-27
v 17		**v 24**
(1) How Sisera fled (on foot)	⟷	Excluded
(2) Where does Jael come from (the wife of Heber the Kenite)	⟷	Included
(3) The political relationship of peace between Jael and the king of Canaan	⟷	Excluded
(4) Excluded	⟷	Jael called most blessed among women
v 18		**v 25**
(5) Jael went out to meet Sisera	⟷	Excluded
(6) Jael convinced Sisera to stay	⟷	Excluded
(7) Jael comforted Sisera by covering him with a blanket	⟷	Excluded
(8) Ask for water	⟷	Included
v 19		
(9) Sisera gives reason for asking (thrist)	⟷	Excluded
(10) Jael provided milk	⟷	Included
(11) Excluded	⟷	Emphasis on the kind of milk (cream) and bowl (lordly)

(12) Refers to opening the jug of milk	Excluded
v 20	**v 26**
(13) Sisera asked Jael to guard the tent	Excluded
(14) Instructions in case someone comes	Excluded
v 21	
(15) The tools Jael used to kill Sisera	Included
(16) The way Jael killed Sisera	Included-with the term "head" being added
(17) Excluded	Emphasizes the progressive repeated action how Jael killed Sisera
(18) What and where the weapon (tent peg) wound-up as a result of Jael's action	Included-but excludes where the weapon wound-up (the ground)
(19) Where Sisera was (fast asleep) when Jael killed him	Excluded-but says Sisera fell
	v 27
(20) The result of Jael's blow killed Sisera	Included-with repeated emphasis
v 22	
(21) Jael shows Barak Sisera's death	Excluded

Comparing Contents

Obviously, prose narrative is much more detailed than the poetic account that abridges and simplifies the narrative account. However, the poetic account does well in highlighting Jael's craftiness by adding more information through the common poetic device of repetition.[2] Usually when a writer describes a historical event it will be much more thorough than a poetic account in a song describing the event. For example, Exodus 14:1-31 describes in prose narrative Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh's army when crossing the Rea Sea. Compared to Moses and Israel's poetic song of the event in the

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[2] Repetition in poetic narratival accounts is typical in Ancient Near Eastern texts, see John Soden, "Prose and Poetry Compared: Judges 4 and 5 in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context" (Ph. D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 25-74.

following sequel 15:1-18 much more details appear in the prose. Thus *no discrepancies*

existed that were corrected by later editors as some might suggest.[3] Perhaps similar to

many Psalms the "Song of Deborah" (SDeb) is a poem that first "consisted of a

description of the battle in secular ballad or epic style, to which were later added the parts

in psalm style so that the poem could be used in a cultic setting."[4] However, this may not

be the case as Alexander Globe who tentatively suggested the latter statement now says:

"This explanation of the genesis of the poem rests on the assumption that a mixture of

'secular' and 'sacred' styles is a valid criterion for detecting the work of different authors

writing at different times. . . . [T]his assumption is not valid for several of the Near

Eastern peoples that lived before and during the period of the Judges. Israel itself had

undeniably absorbed the 'mixed' style at least as early as the reign of David, to judge by

the historiographical methods of 1 and 2 Samuel."[5] Immediately after Israel's triumphant

battle over the Canaanites, this "thanksgiving hymn of military victory" was sung as

would be expected in a "society where poetry was oral rather than a written art."[6] Thus,

since poetry was meant to be heard rather than read or written, various elements peculiar

to poetry must of necessity be distinct from prose. Though prose was also typically heard,

not just read unlike poetry, prose was not sung. Therein lies the difference that answers

the distinctions of both accounts.

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[3] Peter C. Craigie, "The Song of Deborah and the Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (September 1969): 254, fn 7; Halpern, *First Historians*, 78, 81.

[4] Alexander Globe, "The Literary Structure and Unity of the Song of Deborah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (December 1974): 493.

[5] Ibid., 493-94.

[6] Ibid., 495.

Most poems were usually short and simple for dramatic effect.[7] For example, 1 Samuel 18:7 is composed of two cola. Moses and Israel's triumphant song in Exodus 15:1-18 is half the size of Deborah's song, and David's lament over both Jonathan and Saul in 2 Samuel 1:17-27 follows the same brief pattern. However, even if the SDeb is by contrast longer and more complex, its structure may be broken up into three parts: a thanksgiving introductory hymn (vv 2-11d), the gathering of the Israelite tribes (vv 11e-18), and the battle and aftereffects (vv 19-31).[8] If such divisions are maintained, the brevity and simplicity[9] of each part common to this type of genre[10] (that was heard not read) must stand. Hence upon comparing the prose of Judges 4:17-22 to the poetic account to that of 5:24-27, one will normally expect to find a more simplistic form in structure and content. That is, there will be in poetic genre less content than normally found in prose narratives that by nature are meant to describe historical accounts in succession.

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[7] Craigie, "Song of Deborah and Tukulti-Ninurta," 263-64. Craigie shows how this also worked in Ancient Near Eastern Ugaritic poetic battle accounts. He says, "The short line—or thought unit—creates drama and tension in a way that would be impossible with longer or more complex lines." See also Peter C. Craigie, "Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery (Judges 5)," *Zeitschrift für die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft* 1978 (1978): 374-75.

[8] Globe, "Literary Structure," 495.

[9] Craigie, "Song of Deborah and Tukulti-Ninurta," 263, sees this simplicity as well: "In the Song of Deborah, one of the most striking stylistic features is the use of very short staccatotype lines in the description of dramatic events. . . . Since the division of lines in the poem is a somewhat arbitrary procedure, we may put it another way by saying that the units of thought and description become very short and simple . . .

[10] Ibid., 254. Craigie says, "The unity of the song, in spite of its structure from small sketches, is largely one of the atmosphere created by the individual sketches."

**Common Features in Poetry
and Judg 5:24-27**

     A common feature in poetic language is parallelism and/or overlaid repetition.

Hence 5:25-27 adds phrases to further describe the previous one or repeats them, but

changing a word or two in the process. For example, in v 25 Jael gives Sisera milk, then

immediately the kind of milk (a description missing in the prose) is defined here to be

"cream." Furthermore in the poem there is nothing of Sisera's coming and Jael's gesture

of apparent concern. Robert B. Chisholm in describing the poem's device including

repetitions of synonyms, verbs and the poem's unique focus of Sisera's death says:

> The poem mentions nothing of of Jael's tucking Sisera into bed; instead it focuses
> on the deadly deed. The narrative account uses only one verb to describe the
> murder stroke (see 4:21); the poem employs four synonyms, emphasizing the
> deadly force of the blow and forcing us to replay it in our minds. The narrative,
> while describing how the peg went through his skull into the ground, notes simply
> that he died (4:21-22); the poem uses seven infinite verbal forms (כָּרַע and נָפַל
> appear three times each, and שָׁכַב once) to emphasize the efficiency and finality
> of the deed. It also repeats the location of his death ('at her feet,' lit. 'between her
> legs') to set up ironic connection with verses 28-30 … and concludes with a
> resounding passive form, 'dead' (שָׁדוּד 'violently destroyed, devestated').[11]

     Thus, one can see how the author uses here a figure of speech called

"Epibole," i.e., overlaid repetition.[12] This means, "The figure is so named, because the

same sentence or phrase is *cast upon* or *laid upon* (like layers or courses of bricks)

several successive paragraphs."[13] Such an example occurs in 5:26*b*-27:

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[11] Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Judges Commentary" unpublished in class notes of "OT 1005
Exegisis in the Prophets" (Dallas Theological Seminary: Fall, 2003), 129.

[12] Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and
Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman
Publishers, 1999), 241, says, "Verse 27 offers one of the most impressive examples of staircase parallelism
in the Old Testament."

[13] E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode
Baker book House, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 346. Italics are in the original.

She pounded Sisera, [שַׁעֲמֵלִים וְהָלְמָה סִיסְרָא]

she pierced his head, [מָחֲקָה רֹאשׁוֹ]

She split and struck through his temple. [וּמָחֲצָה וְחָלְפָה רַקָּתוֹ]

At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; [בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפַל שָׁכָב]

At her feet he sank, he fell; [בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפָל]

Where he sank, there he fell dead. [בַּאֲשֶׁר כָּרַע שָׁם נָפַל שָׁדוּד][14]

Thus, because poetic language uses figures of speech, the account in 5:24-27 should not be read literally. This is precisely Craigie's point: "The supposed discrepancies mentioned in many commentaries [here] are based on an overliteral interpretation of poetic passage."[15] Some have even suggested "we have no right to approach heroic poetry as if it were a record of fact. Its materials are largely historical, but its arrangement and adaptation of them are not."[16]

Nevertheless, there are no apparent reasons to disregard the SDeb as a factual event, unless one finds a "discrepancy in the mechanics of the murder" in 4:21 compared to 5:27.[17] The prose uses the verb נִרְדָּם, "fast asleep." That is, he was sleeping before Jael killed him. However, the poetic account uses the נָפַל, "fell," which may imply "a collapse"[18] as a result of Jael's fatal blow. All the other elements missing in the poetic account mentioned in the prose really pose no problem due to the fact that one is looking

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[14] Ibid. Although Bullinger only refers to v 27 as describing Epibole figure of speech, the latter part of v 26 follows the same pattern. So it should be qualified as thus.

[15] Craigie, "Song of Deborah and Tukulti-Ninurta," 254 fn 7.

[16] Michael David Coogan, "A Structural and Literary Analysis of the Song of Deborah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 143.

[17] Halpern, *First Historians*, 81-83.

[18] Ibid., 83.

at different type of genre (as explained above). This problem is really more apparent than real when one deciphers the issues involved.

Both terms נָפָל, and כָּרַע appear together in Psalm 20:8 , כָּרְעוּ וְנָפָלוּ where God gives the victory to the king. What makes this phrase enlightening in the Ps 20:8 is that it is contrasted and parallel to another phrase that helps define one's term even better: קַמְנוּ וַנִּתְעוֹדָד. That is, as the king's enemies "have bowed down and fallen" Israel will "rise and stand upright." The enemies die as the Israelites live. These are two concluding results of the battle. The term נָפָל in Judges 5:27 as here should really be understood as "fallen," i.e., dead. Therefore, נָפָל "does not mean he fell as a result of Jael's blow. This 'is poetic license for 'fallen.'"[19] It has also been recognized that the root word for נָפָל was commonly used to describe what occurred to defeated warriors (cf. Lev 26:8; 1 Sam 18:25.[20] Hence the poet's main intent is to communicate the warrior's defeat literally by using the term נָפָל, in a figurative manner.[21]

Conclusion

Thus, a careful study of the prose account of Judges 4:17-22 compared to the poetic account of 5:24-27 reveals *no* discrepancies since we are dealing with different genres that serve their unique purposes. Furthermore, the poetic description of Sisera's death by Jael lacks some elements mentioned in the prose because it is meant to be short

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[19] Block, *Judges*, 241, fn 444.

[20] J. Clinton McCann, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 57.

[21] George Bush, *Notes on Judges* (New York: Newman & Ivison, 1852; reprint, Minneapolis, MN: James & Klock Publishing, 1976), 75, acknowledges, "The several kindred words appear to be merely a poetic amplification of the circumstances of his death."

in order to create a more forceful imagery. Hence the visual effect caused by repeating

נָפַל, and כָּרַע three times forms a stair case effect of "gradual motion of collapsing; but

again, the poem communicates at more than a pictorial level."[22] A matter of

understanding the way prose and poetic accounts work will indeed help one interpret the

distinctions found between Judg 4:17-22 and 5:24-27. Thus, believers can fully trust

Scripture and approach it with confidence that God's intent to communicate His will to

man is not subverted.

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[22] McCann, *Interpretation*, 57.

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