

Neith and the Two Biblical Deborahs: One and the Same

Paper presented by Gary Greenberg at the annual meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, Atlanta 1995

ABSTRACT

The bible makes reference to two separate women named Deborah. One was the nurse to Abraham's son Isaac and the other was, in the much later period of the Judges, a military leader referred to as "a mother in Israel". Both seem to have mythic images and both are identified with a particular Tree of Weeping.

The Egyptian goddess Neith has a reputation as both a military figure and as a mother goddess and nurse, characteristics that caused the Greeks to identify her with the goddess Athena. In Hebrew, Deborah means "Bee" and that symbol is closely identified with Neith. A Temple to Neith was called "House of the Bee", and the Bee was the symbol of kingship in Lower Egypt.

In this paper I will argue that both Deborahs were mythological figures based on Hebrew recollections of the goddess Neith, the goddess who ruled in the area of Egypt where Israel dwelled in earlier times. In support of this argument I will draw upon some materials in Plutarch's account of the Osiris myth, which suggests that Neith may have been associated with a Tree of Weeping. I will also make other mythological comparisons between Neith and the two Deborahs.

Prior to the onset of the Hebrew monarchy, the Old Testament tells of two woman named Deborah, one a nurse, the other a warrior/judge. Although chronologically separated by several centuries, the two Deborahs appear to be related, not only by name but apparently by a tree known as the "tree of weeping." The tree reference, however, is somewhat ambiguous.

The first Deborah, the nurse, is buried beneath a tree known as either the "tree of weeping" or the "Oak of Weeping." The second Deborah, the warrior/judge, is introduced to us as sitting beneath "The Palm of Deborah". The ambiguity comes from the fact that the phrase "Oak of Weeping" uses the Hebrew word "allon", one of several possible words for "oak", but which is often used to refer to any large or important tree of any species. In both instances, the tree is located in the religiously important city of Bethel, leading many commentators to suggest that both trees are one and the same. We will return to the image of a "Tree of Weeping" further below, when we consider a portion of the Osiris cycle.

The name Deborah, in Hebrew, means "bee." In Lower Egypt, the bee was the symbol of kingship. Also, the Goddess Neith, one of the more important deities in Lower Egypt, had a temple known as "the House of the Bee". That Neith, a goddess who has a dual nature as both nurturer and warrior, is symbolically connected to the bee, suggested to me the possibility that this goddess might be mythologically related to the two Deborahs, each representing a different aspect of Neith's character. I thought, therefore, it might be interesting to see if there were any other literary or symbolic connections between Neith and the two Deborahs. The examination revealed numerous pieces of evidence suggesting that such a connection existed.

Let us begin with the two Deborahs. About Deborah the Nurse there is very little information. Strangely, all we know about her comes from her obituary. We are told only that she died, she was the nurse of Rebekah, that she was buried beneath an oak in Beth-El, and that the oak was named Allon-bachuth, which means "tree of weeping". (G:35:8). Why the tree was so named is not stated. There is no previous mention of her existence prior to this death notice, suggesting that portions of her story were omitted in transmission.

The second Deborah, the warrior/judge, is one of those rarest of historical characters, a woman of such charismatic presence that she served as both the spiritual and military leader of a nation. The bible provides two different

accounts of her story, a prose version in Judges 4 and a poetic version in Judges 5. Most biblical scholars consider the poetic version to be much older than the prose. In fact, they consider the poetic version to be one of the oldest original texts in the bible, perhaps contemporary with the twelfth century events that it describes.

In both versions there is a powerful Canaanite king named Jabin, whose army is led by a general named Sisera; Deborah promotes a rebellion against this king and is aided by a Hebrew general named Barak; Barak defeats Sisera's army and Sisera flees from the field, seeking hospitality in the tent of Heber the Kenite, a neutral in the dispute; but while in the tent, Heber's wife, Jael, sympathizing with the Hebrews, strikes Sisera dead.

There are some differences between the two, however. In the prose version, Barak is hesitant about taking on the battle, and says to Deborah, "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go. If thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go." Deborah agrees to accompany him, but prophesies that despite his journey, he will not achieve glory for his victory. Instead, she predicts that Sisera will be killed by a woman. Deborah leaves with Barak, and then disappears from the story. Barak administers a defeat to Sisera's army and Sisera flees, winding up in Jael's tent where she drives a tent peg through his skull while he sleeps.

In the poetic version there is no hesitation on Barak's part or prophesy about his achievements. Instead, Deborah calls out a roll of the tribes, praising those who heeded her battle cry and condemning those who held back. This recitation of a tribal roll call involving all of Israel is absent in the prose version, which talks only of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, Naphtali being the territory from which Jabin ruled. In the poetic version, Sisera is struck through the head while sitting and eating.

Another difference between the two versions is one of style. The prose version comes across as a simple story about battling kings and generals. The poetic version, however, seems to have echoes of an earlier cosmological battle.

In the course of the poem, Deborah sings "The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel." Then she says, "They chose new gods; then was war in the gates:" Later we are told, "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera."

The identification of Deborah as "a mother in Israel" is somewhat ambiguous. The text never refers to any of her children. The only two persons with whom she is associated are her husband, Lapidoth, and Barak. Does the reference to "a mother in Israel" describe her role as an actual parent or is it a throwback to her image as a mother goddess? We will return to this question after we consider the nature of Neith.

Neith was one of Egypt's oldest and most important deities. She was most prominent in the delta region of Sais, and her cult goes back to predynastic times. Her name appears as an element in the name of Queen Neithhotep, who was married to either Narmer or Hor-Aha the founders of the first dynasty. The marriage of an Upper Egyptian warrior-king to a queen named after a prominent Lower Egyptian deity suggests to some scholars that the unification of Egypt may have begun with a military venture but ended with a diplomatic marriage.

Neith was mostly noted as a fierce warrior who had a strong domestic side to her. Although her symbol was a pair of crossed arrows over a shield, she was also identified as the patroness of weaving and as a mortuary goddess. Together with Isis, Nephthys, and Selket, she watched over Osiris's bier. As patroness of weaving, the mummy shrouds and bandages used to wrap the deceased were thought of as her gift, permitting the deceased to partake of her divine power.

More important though, among some Egyptians she was identified as both the author of Creation and/or as the consort of the author of Creation. In the temple at Esna, she is described as "Father of the fathers, mother of the mothers", a phrase that is intended to identify her with the process of Creation. Since the god Khnum is also associated at the Esna temple with the process of Creation, it is apparent that she and Khnum shared a joint role in the process, making her a mother goddess in the fullest sense of that term.

Her role as both mother goddess and warrior is most evident from the Hymn to Neith preserved at the Esna temple, where she is quoted as saying:

“An august god will come into being today. When he opens his eyes, light will come into being; when he closes them, darkness will come into being. People will come into being from the tears of his eye, gods from the spittle of his lips. I will strengthen him by my strength, I will make him effective by my efficacy, I will, make him vigorous by my vigor. His children will rebel against him, but they will be beaten on his behalf and struck down on his behalf, for he is my son issued from my body, and he will be king of this land forever. I will protect him with my arms . . . I am going to tell you his name: It will be Khepri in the morning and Atum in the evening; and he will be the radiating god in his rising forever, in his name of Re, every day.”

Compare elements of this hymn with the Song of Deborah.

1. Deborah and Neith both talk about their role as a mother.
2. Deborah and Neith each talk about how their actions led to an increase in population.
3. In both stories we find a rebellion of new gods battling against heaven.
4. In both stories, the mother, in her role as mother, promises to intervene in the fighting.
5. In both stories, the mother fights on the side of the chief deity; 6. In both stories there is talk about the enemy being struck down.
7. In both stories the side representing the chief deity wins.

Additionally, we note that in the prose version, Barak is made effective by Deborah’s participation, and, in the Hymn to Neith, Re was made effective and vigorous by the actions of the goddess.

One difference between the two stories is that Neith is identified as the mother of the chief deity, but the child of Deborah is not named. This is not surprising given the monotheistic nature of Hebrew religion. Permitting a character to have too close a resemblance to the chief Egyptian deity would be highly offensive.

Although we don’t know the name of Deborah’s child, we do know the names of the only two persons with a close relation to her. Her husband’s name, Lapidoth, translates as “torches”. Barak’s name means “lightening.” Both of these names are interesting in connection with the iconography of Neith.

One of the features of Neith worship, according to Herodotus, was a great festival known as the Feast of Lamps, during which her devotees all through the night kept numerous lights burning. So we have Neith, who is worshipped at the House of the Bee with a festival of torches, and Deborah, “the Bee” who is married to “torches”. A coincidence? Perhaps, but certainly very suggestive of a close mythological relationship.

Neith and Deborah also have a connection as Judges. In the New Kingdom story known as “the Contendings of Horus and Set”, Neith appears twice in a judiciary role. In this story, Set and Horus sue for the right to succeed Osiris as king of Egypt. Early in the story we are told that the struggle has been going on for eighty years but the dispute was unresolved. The gods then implored Thoth to send a letter to Neith, asking for guidance on how to resolve the dispute. Neith replied that the office should go to Horus, and then adds that if the gods don’t award judgment to Horus, “I shall become so furious that the sky will touch the ground.” This threat sounds very much like a description of lightening, an interesting phrase considering that Deborah’s general, the enforcer of her will, is named “lightening.” Later in the story of the “Contendings”, Neith is once again called upon to decide.

From the above, we can see a number of points of comparison between Neith and Deborah the warrior/judge. Not only were there thematic similarities between the Hymn to Neith and the Song of Deborah, we find both are judges, both are associated with the bee, and both have an important connection to torches and perhaps lightening. All of these connections, however, apply primarily to Neith and Deborah the warrior/judge. What about Neith and Deborah the Nurse?

We noted earlier that the two Deborahs appear to be symbolically linked together by the “tree of weeping”. Although there is some ambiguity in this identification, I believe that a portion of the Osiris myth provides some evidence of a connection between the “tree of weeping”, the two Deborahs and Neith.

We have no full Egyptian version of the Osiris myth, only bits and pieces from inscriptions and paintings. Our chief source for the full story is the Greek writer Plutarch, but his version suffers from a number of problems. It is a very late version that may have evolved from the original, and he succumbs to the Greek practice of interpolating Greek names and beliefs for elements in the Egyptian story.

Without going into full detail, suffice it to say that in Plutarch’s account, Set trapped Osiris in a chest and floated it out to sea. The chest somehow wound up in Byblos and lodged in the branches of a Tamarisk bush, which shot up in a very short time to become a large and beautiful tree that completely enveloped the chest. The king, amazed at the giant size, cut it down and used the portion containing the chest as a pillar to support the roof of his house.

The king and queen of Byblos are identified as Melkart and Astarte, both of whom are actually chief deities of Byblos. However, Plutarch indicates that some say the queen was named Athena, not Astarte. Now, due to Plutarch’s substitution of Greek god names for foreign god names, we cannot be sure which goddess was the true queen. It might have been some other Canaanite deity, such as Anath, but we must recall that the Greeks identified Athena with Neith. Also, we can’t be sure that in the original version of this story, the king and queen weren’t located in the Egyptian delta rather than Byblos.

Nevertheless, returning to the story, Isis learns of her husband’s location and sets out after him. She takes a job as nurse to the queen and cares for her child. Each night she would put the child into a fire to burn away his mortal parts, and she would transform herself into a swallow and hover around the pillar, bemoaning her sad fate. Iconographically, we have a nurse weeping by a tree, a “tree of weeping” if you will. However, the nurse is Isis, and the queen, who may be Neith, is the mother, a case of role reversal that makes true identification with Deborah a bit troublesome.

In this regard, however, I want to take note of another Greek myth, written down much earlier than Plutarch’s account, the myth of Io. As you may recall, Io was Zeus’s lover and he transformed her into a cow to protect her from Hera, his wife. But Hera wasn’t fooled and sent a gadfly to torment the cow. The cow tried to escape and eventually wound up in Egypt.

Subsequently, she has a son but the son is kidnapped to Byblos where, according to Apollodorus, “the wife of the king of Byblos was nursing her son.” Apollodorus also adds that the Greeks identified Io with Isis.

Note that in this story, which appears to draw upon some of the same story elements as in Plutarch’s account of Isis’s trip to Byblos, it is the queen of Byblos who is the nurse, not the Isis character, and it is Isis’s son that is being nursed, not the queen’s.

Resuming Plutarch’s account, the queen discovered what Isis was doing with her child, but not realizing that the procedure was intended to confer immortality, she cried out and prevented the immortality from taking hold. Isis asked for the pillar, and cut out the chest. She took the remaining stump, wrapped it in linen, and poured perfume over it. She then gave it to the queen and it was subsequently worshipped as an icon of Isis.

The appearance of the queen alongside Isis as she watches over the chest of Osiris, reminds us that Neith, in her mortuary aspect, also stood by Isis as she watched over the bier of Osiris. Furthermore, Neith was associated with

the linen wrappings on the mummy during the funerary process, and in the story, the queen winds up holding the linen wrapped tree stump.

In attempting to connect Deborah the nurse with Neith, we showed some similarities in story elements between the Plutarch account and the biblical obituary. However, in the Plutarch version, it is Isis, not Neith, who is depicted as the nurse, a case of role reversal. We also noted that in the myth of Io, though, it is the queen who is the nurse. This problem with role reversal, may have to do with Neith's connection to the bee, the symbol of kingship in Lower Egypt. As the symbol of kingship she appears alongside the king in her symbolic royal role rather than in her nurturing role.

Perhaps the most important icon linking Neith to Deborah the nurse is the "Tree of Weeping". The bible omits the explanation for that name, but in the Plutarch story we see the sad nature of the tree. It has encased the body of Isis's husband within. The need to eliminate from the bible any clear connections between biblical characters and important Egyptian deities may account for why Deborah's story has been so truncated.

The abbreviation of the story of Deborah the Nurse to just a death notice certainly hampers us in our effort to develop this Deborah's true identity. Nevertheless, her name and association with the "tree of weeping" forges a good iconographic connection to Deborah the judge, for whom there appears to be substantial evidence for a link to Neith.

In conclusion, I would say that there is strong evidence that the "Song of Deborah" drew heavily upon the iconography of the Egyptian goddess Neith. The evidence is less strong but certainly suggestive that the story of Deborah the nurse drew heavily upon the story of Isis's search for Osiris, but that Neith's association with the bee as a symbol of kingship led to a role reversal between her and Isis, and confused the story in transmission. The symbol of the bee and the link to a "tree of weeping" seems to be the common thread that binds the two Deborahs to each other and to Neith