

DEBORAH

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Deborah is the only female judge in Israel. She was the wife of Lappidoth, a prophet, song writer and a 'mother for Israel' (Judges 5:7). Her name means 'bee'. Deborah was a courageous leader who demonstrated unwavering faith and trusted God to bring victory over a ruthless enemy.

Turn to: Judges 4-5

Context

The judges ruled in the period between the end of Joshua's reign and the appointment of kings. In total, 12 judges were appointed. They were God's appointed servants:

"Then the LORD raised up judges to rescue the Israelites from their attackers. ... Whenever the LORD raised up a judge over Israel, he was with that judge and rescued the people from their enemies throughout the judge's lifetime. For the LORD took pity on his people, who were burdened by oppression and suffering." (Judges 2:16,18)

But note:

"Yet Israel did not listen to the judges but prostituted themselves by worshiping other gods. How quickly they turned away from the path of their ancestors, who had walked in obedience to the Lord's commands. ... But when the judge died, the people returned to their corrupt ways, behaving worse than those who had lived before them. They went after other gods, serving and worshiping them. And they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways." (Judges 2:17,19)

The book of Judges captures a series of similar cycles:

1. The people are disobedient and oppressed (4:1-2, 5:8, 6:1)
 2. The people call out to God (4:3)
 3. God raises up a judge (4:4)
 4. The people are rescued (4:23-34, 5:31)
 5. The people are disobedient....
- Sisera – commander of King Jabin's army - had been 'ruthlessly oppressing' the Israelites for 20 years (4:3).
 - Sisera's 900 chariots were a stark contrast to the Israelites armoury: 'not a shield or spear could be found among 40,000 warriors in Israel' 5:8).

Key lessons:

- God is in control of the world order. He can use non-believing kings providentially and for his purposes (Daniel 2:21)
- God responds to a repentant heart (Luke 15) and repentant people (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Deborah as Judge

"She would sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would go to her for judgment." (Judges 4:5)

- The palm tree would have been a distinct landmark. There was an openness, transparency and accountability to her decision making.
- As 1 Corinthians 4:15 reminds us, it's possible to teach without a paternal or maternal heart. Deborah is the only woman in the Bible to be described a 'mother for Israel'. Her leadership, prophetic ministry and wise counsel was accompanied by the love, grace and nurturing heart of a mother (also see Judges 5:9 – "my heart is with the commanders of Israel, with those who volunteered for war").
- Deborah was appointed by God. Several other women are noted throughout the Bible as leaders or 'deacons' (e.g. Phoebe, Romans 16:1), prophets (e.g. daughters of Phillip, Acts 21:9; Anna, Luke 2:38; Miriam, Exodus 15:20), worship leaders (e.g. Miriam, Exodus 15:20), those who share the good news (e.g. Euodia and Syntyche, Philippians 4:2), co-workers with Paul (e.g. Priscilla, Romans 16:3) and those who minister to the poor (e.g. Tabitha, Acts 9:36). Deborah was neither usurping her husband's authority nor Barak's. She was faithful to the work given to her by God and remains within the authority given.
- Deborah's capacity for wise, divine counsel and judgments was tied to her ability to remain obedient, loyal and faithful to God, and attentive to his voice. The same need to stay close to God applies to us (see Mark 6:30-31, John 15).
- Deborah's credibility is clear. People came to her for judgment; when she calls for Barak, he comes to her.

"Wise words satisfy like a good meal; the right words bring satisfaction." (Proverbs 18:20)

"The wise are mightier than the strong, and those with knowledge grow stronger and stronger." (Proverbs 24:5)

Deborah's Prophetic Intervention

"Then she sent and called for Barak ... Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded, 'Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun; and against you I will deploy Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hand'?" (Judges 4:6b-7, NKJV)

- Deborah fully trusted the word of the Lord. She was not distracted by the circumstances, nor the length of time the Israelites had endured oppression.
- Barak told her, "I will go, but only if you go with me" (Judges 4:8). The cause of his hesitancy is unclear but contrasts sharply with the repeated refrain to earlier generations to "be strong and courageous" (e.g. Deuteronomy 31:6-7, Joshua 1:18, Joshua 10:25).

"For the Lord protects those who are loyal to him, but he harshly punishes the arrogant. So be strong and courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord!" (Psalm 31:23b-24)

- This was an unusual request: women did not ordinarily go to war or take up positions as military leaders. Confident that God would triumph, Deborah did not shy away from war or its brutality and courageously accepted Barak's request.

"Very well," she replied, "I will go with you. But you will receive no honour in this venture, for the Lord's victory over Sisera will be at the hands of a woman." (Judges 4:9)

- Note that Deborah's prophetic word was not instigating a feminist movement. Rather, she conveys something of the dishonour and shame that Barak's hesitancy would invite (also see Judges 9:54 – "don't let it be said that a woman killed Abimelech!"). Deborah does not waiver or doubt but continues to express faith in God and the certainty of victory. Three times she reminds Barak that God will deliver him (Judges 4:7, 9, 14).
- Barak and Deborah go to Mount Tabor with 10,000 of Barak's men, and Sisera responds by gathering his chariots and warriors. Deborah discerns the timing of

the victory and prophesies: "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you?" (Judges 4:14)

- God went before them (Judges 4:15; 5: 4-5), delivering Sisera and his army into their hands.

"Some nations boast of their chariots and horses, but we boast in the name of the Lord our God. Those nations will fall down and collapse, but we will rise up and stand firm." (Psalm 20:7-8)

- Barak chased the enemy army over 30km and killed all Sisera's warriors (4:16). No one was left but Sisera.
- Barak is recorded in Hebrews 11:32 amongst the heroes of faith and obedience.

Jael: Victory at the hands of a woman

- Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite. Heber was a descendant of Moses' brother-in-law (4:11, 17). The Kenites had travelled with the tribe of Judah (1:16) and were on friendly terms with King Jabin (4:17). Jael's motive in killing Sisera is unclear, but she shows remarkable presence of mind in seeking to reassure Sisera (4:18) before driving a tent peg into his temple while he sleeps (5:26-27). In so doing, the prophetic word is fulfilled. Judges 5:24 records Jael as "most blessed among women."
- The victory over Sisera and his army was remembered in the prayer of the psalmist ("Do to them as you did ... to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon." Psalm 83:9). We too should "remember the deeds of the Lord" and "miracles of long ago ... consider all [his] works and meditate on all [His] mighty deeds" (Psalm 77:11-12).

Conclusion

It is tempting to focus on Deborah as a woman in leadership, but Deborah has much to teach us about faith and leadership irrespective of her gender. Deborah was a highly credible, courageous and faith-filled judge who steadfastly prophesied and held to the word of the Lord.

"So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11 NIV)

"Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear." (Matthew 24:35)