

EVERY WOMAN IN THE BIBLE

DEBORAH

(Judges 4:4,5,9,10,14 & 5:1, 7,12,15)

The judges era extended from around 1350 BC. It was a time of spiritual and political stagnation. The pagan peoples, they permitted to stay in Canaan after the conquest, pressured the children of Israel. Events during this period are reported in the books of Judges, Ruth 1:1-4, and 1 Samuel 1:11).

DEBORAH: Date: About 1300 B.C.

Name: Deborah [DEB-uh-rah, “honey bee” or “hornet”].

Greatest

Accomplishment: She led Israel as a prophetess and judge.

The only woman in the Bible who was placed at the height of political power by the common consent of the people, was Deborah. Though she lived in the time of the “Judges”, some thirteen centuries before Christ there are few women in history who have ever attained the public dignity and supreme authority of Deborah. She was like Joan of Arc, who twenty-seven centuries later rode in front of the French and led them to victory.

Deborah was introduced in Judges as , the wife of Lapidoth, [who] was judging Israel at the time. Other resources say she was the keeper of the tabernacle lamps. If this is true, what a wonderful yet humble task for this woman who was to become so great in Israel.

It may seem strange to us that, while Deborah's husband is identified, he played no role in the story of the victory over the Canaanites. In view of the fact that Israel was a patriarchal society, it is not surprising that Deborah would be defined as the “wife of Lapidoth”. Women throughout the old Testament era were identified by the men in whose households they lived, whether their fathers' or husband's. The family “belonged” to the man; the woman belonged to the household.

Some have felt that because of Deborah's position she would not have been so defined by her husband. Some have gone so far at the translate the Hebrew phrase as a “woman of valor” rather than the “wife of

Lepidoth". We need to remember that the traditional translation is most likely, and important. Deborah was clearly an unusual woman, we need to remember that Deborah's special role in Scripture is not view as a challenge to the natural of Old Testament society.

While Deborah was clearly an unusual woman, we need to remember and the - text emphasizes the fact – that Deborah’s special role in Scripture is not viewed as a challenge to the natural order of Old Testament Society. She was a prophetess, and a “leader in Israel”, but she was also a wife, a member of Lepidoth's household. There were no essential conflict between being a wife in a patriarchal age and being a spiritual leader. While the biblical text casts Deborah in a strongly positive light, the later rabbis, whose negative view of women, was explored in chapter 1, were disturbed by the OT portrait of her. They developed a play on Deborah's name, “honey bee”, rendering it “hornet” in an attempt to ridicule her as a woman who overstepped.

Deborah was introduced as a prophetess. Prophets were significant persons in Old Testament times. God chose these men and women to communicate His will to His people.

Deuteronomy 18 reminds us that all the peoples of the ancient world sensed a need for supernatural guidance when circumstances forced them to make critical choices. The people of Canaan looked to mediums and spiritualists. All the occult avenues were defined in Deuteronomy as “detestable to the Lord.” So God promised to raise up individuals, prophets, from among His own people, through whom He would speak and provide the guidance needed. God called men and women to be His spokesperson.

Unlike other roles in the religion of Israel, this was not a cultic position – such a priest or Levite – and it was not hereditary. God called whomever He wished to be His spokesperson, and those He called He confirmed as prophets and prophetesses in the eyes of the people.

The first thing we learn of Deborah is that she had a special relationship with God. She had been called by Him and commissioned to speak in His name. All Israel recognized that special relationship.

In all of her roles, first as a counselor to her people, next as judge in their disputes, and finally as deliverer in time of war, Deborah exhibited womanly excellence. She arose to great leadership because she trusted God implicitly and because she could inspire in others that same trust.

The word translated “judging” implies more than a judicial function. The judges were in fact spiritual, political, judicial, and in most cases military leaders. During their lives they functioned as the government of the tribes they led, much as kings functioned in the following era.

Deborah both fit and did not fit the pattern we see in the male judges. Deborah fit the pattern in that the people recognized her as the tribe's judicial/political authority. Judges 4:5 tells us that she held court “under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim.” She settled many disputes that the Israelites could not resolve locally. Moses had fulfilled this role before her, as had the other judges. The kings that followed her era also performed these functions. Clearly Deborah was the acknowledged leader of the Israelite tribes. It is totally appropriate to say that during her time Deborah was leading Israel.

Two things set Deborah apart from other judges. First, she was a prophetess. None of the other judges aside from Samuel, who was a priest as well as a prophet, are so identified. We can assume that Deborah was first recognized as a prophetess, and that this special relationship with God preceded her recognition by the Israelites as a judge.

Second, she was *not* a military leader. When Deborah was about to call on her people to fight the Canaanites of Hazor, she first summoned Barak, a military man, in the name of the Lord. She then passed on the instructions that God gave her, which Barak were to follow. Barak arrived from Kedesh. Together they worked out a plan for action against the enemy. Deborah let Barak know she was not afraid of Sisera, commander of Jabin's army; neither was she afraid of his 900 chariots. She made him feel that the Spirit could animate an army was greater than either weapons or fortifications. She may have brought up the memories of what God had done with the Israelites and the the trek through the Red Sea, and broke a mighty oppressor – Pharaoh. And she made Barak realize that God, who had proven Himself to be mightier than Pharaoh, also was mightier than either Jabin or Sisera.

She said, positively to the fainthearted Barak, “ Go, and draw toward mount Tabor and take with you 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and the children of Zebulun” (Judges 4:6). She convinced Barak that the Lord would deliver Sisera and his chariots and multitudes into their hands. Barak placed a condition on his acceptance, “If you go with me, I will go,

but if you don't go with me, I won't go.” (Judges 4:8) This demonstrates how much confidence Barak had in Deborah. This is one of the most unusual passages in the Bible spoken by a man to a woman.

In (Judges 4:9) Deborah said; “I will go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that you take will not be for your honor; for the Lord will put Sisera into the hand of a woman.” In these words, Deborah demonstrated more than leadership. Her people were to discover that she was also a prophet.

Deborah “arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.” (Judges. 4:9) To say that she arose demonstrates that it was positive action, without staying home and pondering the matter. She knew it was time for action, and she firmly believed she was armed with the strength of God.

When Barak summoned the troops from Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, he saw that none of them were well armed, and none had chariots. But Deborah's faith drove them on. When Deborah and Barak's army approached the hills near where Sisera and his men were, Deborah, looked out from a high rock. She told Barak, “Up; this is the day in which the Lord will deliver Sisera into your hand, has not the Lord gone out before you?” (Judges 4:14)

We learn from Josephus and indirectly from the song of Deborah that God sent a storm of sleet and hail bursting over the plain from the east, driving right into the face of Sisera and his men and charioteers. The slingers and archers were disabled by the beating rain and the swordsmen were crippled by the biting cold.

Deborah and Barak and their forces had the storm behind them and were not crippled by it. As they saw the storm beat the enemy, they pushed on, believing all the more in providential aid. The flood waters were now racing down the Kishon River. So violent was the rain that Sisera's heavy iron chariots sank deep in the mud and as they did many of the charioteers were killed. The rest of the men on cavalry horses splashed through the mud as a small remnant made its retreat.

Sisera, abandoned his mighty chariot and ran for his life through the blinding rain. He managed to reach the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Because the Kenites had been at peace with Sisera, he thought that here he would be safe, especially since Jael had come forth to offer him her hospitality. Weary from battle and comforted by a warm milk and lodging which Jael had so hospitably given to him, Sisera fell soundly asleep. As Sisera lay sleeping Jael took a peg which her husband had used to stretch the tents on the ground and with a hammer drove it into Sisera's temples.

Hot in pursuit of Sisera, Barak soon came to the tent of Jael. She went out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you seek" (Judges 4:22). And Jael took him into the tent and showed him the dead Sisera. It was just as Deborah had prophesied: (For the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judges 4:9).

To celebrate this great victory the Ode of Deborah, one of the earliest military songs in history was composed (Judges 5:2). Deborah took no credit for herself. She gave all the credit to God, because she knew that only He could cause the earth to tremble, the heavens to drop torrents of water, and the mountains to melt. In the song she is called a ("mother in Israel") because like a mother, had lead panicky children of Israel to victory.

Tribute is paid to putting Sisera to death. In every line of the song one senses Deborah's extreme devotion to God and to the well-being of her nation.

In the end her clear voice comes forth like a trumpet, stating her people were no longer enslaved. Now with her they could declare, "So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord but let them

**that love him be as the sun when He goes forth in his might.”
Such fire as Deborah possessed literally never died out of Israel.**

Her glorious victory is best recorded in the including meaningful lines of her Bible biography: “And the land had rest forty years. (Judges 5:31).

DEBORAH: A CLOSE-UP

Deborah was a woman whose confidence was rooted in a close personal relationship with God and in her awareness that God had chosen to use her to guide His people. It is certainly true that Deborah's role was not a typical role for a woman in a strongly patriarchal society. Yet Deborah clearly did not draw back, concerned about what other might think. Deborah had heard God speaking to her, and she was willing to put herself forward only because she knew that God had also chosen to speak through her.

At the same time Deborah was sensitive to the limitations that her sex seems to have placed on her, Deborah would settle disputes, like any other judge, but Deborah would not lead the army. The military role was one God chose to give to Barak, and Deborah clearly agreed. In fact, Deborah was not even comfortable with the role Barak insisted she fulfill. She would have preferred it if Barak had simply trusted God and gone off to battle without her. Deborah neither needed nor wanted any credit for the victory.

What an unusual combination of traits Deborah displayed. She was self-confident and assertive, and yet modest and self-effacing. She was bold enough to step out of the shadows in which most women of her time lived, yet she was unassuming enough to seek to avoid the spotlight in a military campaign whose results would define her own leadership. In displaying these qualities Deborah stands as timeless example for spiritual leader of either sex.

DEBORAH: AN EXAMPLE FOR TODAY

Deborah reminds us that God does gift women for spiritual leadership. We do violence to Scripture if we rule women out of leadership solely on the basis of gender. At the same time, God's choice of Barak as military commander may indicate that not every leadership role is appropriate for women.

Deborah was an obedient servant of the Lord, and He blessed her with spiritual discernment. Certainly the roles of prophet and judge were more significant in Israel than that of military commander. We must make sure that godly women have the opportunity to exercise the gifts given to them by the Spirit.

Deborah was a woman who balanced her many roles in life. She was a wife, possibly a mother, a prophetess, and a judge. In each capacity the Lord gave her, she served Him competently. It is not always easy to balance our roles in life. Let's be sure that we seek God's guidance and, like Deborah, serve Him in each of our callings.

Anymouse