

Deborah – Judge and Prophet

1. Are you seated comfortably? Then I'll begin the story of Deborah, the Judge and Prophet over Israel. To understand what is going on in Judges 4 and 5, we have to recognize that Israel was in the Bronze Age...but a neighbor had entered the Iron Age. While iron had been smelted before, say, 1200 BC, it was a brittle metal and not highly regarded. Somewhere in modern day Turkey, someone found how to add elements to the process to make iron much, much harder than any metal known before that time. This becomes very important later in the story.
2. This story is not in the Book of Joshua but the Book of Judges. The Book of Joshua tells a linear story: the people enter Canaan and take it over, bit by bit, tribe by tribe, territory by territory. The Book of Judges is very different. Here, Israel struggles to take territory or defend its own territory. There is considerable give and take, wins and losses. It is anything but linear and there is no feeling that Israel was unstoppable. This was less a series of wars than a series of hit and run engagements, guerilla action.
3. The people of Israel were in bad straits. The Moabites and Canaanites were alternatively beating them up, destroying their harvests, taking and killing their people. Ehud, the judge, had killed the fat king of the Moabites (Eglon) with a sword and called the people to battle. They had retaken the fords of Jericho and were at peace for 80 years.
4. The Philistines had invaded next and Shamgar rose up to lead the Israelites. He isn't called a judge in scripture, but he won the Israelites some decades of peace. Kind of. The people were not united. The temple wouldn't be built for a long time. They had the tabernacle but most people worshiped at private altars. Judges arose over Israel, but they were often at odds with their people.
5. There was NO national identity or cohesiveness. We use the word "Israelites" but they would not have considered themselves one people. The battles with other tribes were more a battle of the haves and the have-nots. The enemies are described as royal with riches and powerful armies (only the super rich had anything approximating an army) while the Israelites were described in weaker terms: Jephthah is the son of a prostitute, Deborah a woman, Samson a wild man, etc.
6. And Israel WAS weak. They were largely disarmed. And so a woman rises up to lead them. Unusual? Among the Israelites it must be said that this was unusual. However, it was not without precedent. Moses' sister, Miriam, was called a prophet in Exodus 15:20 as were Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14, Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and Isaiah's wife in Isaiah 8:3.

7. Plus, with the family as the dominant social institution, the important role of women in family life was more readily transferred to matters of public concern than during the monarchy. The women in our story are all strong and their leadership was not questioned.
8. Deborah held court under a tree in a central area. This is a Semitic phrase that has great significance that often gets right past us. It means that she was open, available, with nothing done in secret. No bribery or favoritism, no secret grabs for power. Her name means “bee” and the phrase “wife of Lappidoth” should be translated “woman of lightning.” That is poetically important here because word play and poetry are central to ancient literature and the general she would call to lead the battle was named “Barak” which means “lightning.”
9. And here comes a major factor in what is about to happen. The Canaanites had entered the Iron Age. The Israelites had not. With iron bands on their wheels (or, perhaps, they were entirely iron), they could field chariots in war. And they had 900 of them making the Canaanites the most formidable force in the ancient Middle East.
10. . Wooden wheels break, but iron ones can take far more stress. They had iron swords and iron tipped spears. Israel had wooden tools used for farming and not much else. They had cowered so long they were unprepared to fight anymore. Scripture says “the roads were abandoned. Travelers took to winding paths. Village life in Israel ceased.”
11. Deborah was holding the nation together. She was the Judge (fourth in the series) – the one who settled matters than lower courts could not. The tree on the high ground where she held court was even called the Deborah Palm after her.
12. The Commander in Chief of Israel in the Book of Judges was Yahweh. When Deborah calls in Barak, she says that she is giving him the orders that Yahweh gave her. (Flashback to Joshua in Joshua 5:13)
13. Barak said he would go... but only if Deborah went with him.
14. First of all – why just recruit from Naphtali and Zebulun? It seems that they had to settle on those two tribes because the others refused to fight.
15. God praised those who followed Deborah in 5:2. The verse is very hard to translate. While some translate it princes and others strong warriors, it also means to loose and to have long hair. I believe the difficulties can be answered if we look at it as saying “The best in Israel loosed themselves.” In the same sense, we cannot serve the Lord when we are bound up in fear or “entangled in the affairs of this world” and not love our lives “so as

to shrink from death.” (Rev. 12:11) Or, to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare, “Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war.” (from Julius Caesar, spoken by Mark Anthony).

16. The ones who did not come? 5:15b-16. Reuben had a great deal of sympathy with the idea of national independence. It passed great resolutions and made great statements but when the time for fighting came, they remained behind. They stayed in the shepherd’s fields and listened to music instead.
17. Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh “rested.” Dan and Asher were too busy with business (some of which was with Canaanites) to show up.
18. Judah and Simeon aren’t mentioned at all. That is probably because Barak didn’t recruit there. Those tribes were already busy defending against the Philistines.
19. But Naphtali and Zebulun show up! Ten thousand men had gathered whatever weapons they could fashion and were placed between Mount Tabor and the River Kishon. At this time of year the river would have been dried up to a mere brook. Rain almost never falls in this area between June and September.
20. It looked like a perfect place to die. Nowhere to run, facing 900 chariots and who knows how many other kinds of forces. Deborah told Barak to attack because God had ridden out in front of them. Rain came out of nowhere and flooded the plain, trapping the chariots and allowing the Israelites to overrun them. The Canaanites were crushed. Sisera ran.
21. This time, there was no plunder. The Canaanites were through taxing, robbing, and pillaging the Israelites.
22. Sisera abandoned his chariot and ran on foot while his army died. He and his army had to pass by a town they had repeatedly robbed and trashed – Meroz. However, the people of Meroz did not come out and help in the fight. They were cursed for that by the Angel of the Lord.
23. He got to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. He thought he was safe for two reasons. One, she would have to take him in because the Kenites were on good terms with the Canaanites. Two, once he was inside, the laws of hospitality meant that they would be responsible for his safety.
24. Let’s pause a moment and talk about the Kenites. They were a nomadic group that was already resident in Canaan when the Israelites arrived. Moses’s father in law was called a priest in Midian and a Kenite. The

- Kenites had formed an alliance, a friendship, with Israel but the owner of this place, Heber, has moved his tent toward the Canaanites – a way of indicating he was friendly with them, not Israel. His wife...seems to have had her own opinion of who they should befriend. Her name may give us a clue; “Jael” means “Yahweh is God.” She came from a Kenite family that honored Yahweh and she would work as an agent of God in this story.
25. She let him in and, because he was thirsty, she gave him milk to drink (more than he asked for – Bedouin). It is hidden to our eyes, but the phrasing in Judges 4:18, repeated twice with slight variations, was a common phrase used to describe seduction. It is also used in the Book of Ruth. It could be that he assumed she was a priest of a cult that used ritual prostitution as part of their worship.
 26. He was exhausted and fell asleep whereupon Jael took a tent peg and a hammer (the women put up the tents in this part of the world) and drove the nail through his head and into the ground.
 27. Barak came by looking for Sisera and was shown where he was nailed. From then on, the Canaanite king, Jabin, was under pressure from the Israelites until they finally destroyed him by taking his capital, Hazor.
 28. Deborah composed a song commemorating the battle (Judges 5) which gives us other information about the battle. God is called “the One of Sinai” in verse 5 as a reminder of His defeat of pagan gods in Egypt. Her song says that the people had chosen other gods as a way to fit in and make peace with their neighbors...but choosing other gods brought war to the gates. We need to work that into our language: when you choose other gods, you are welcoming war to the gates of your homes and lives.
 29. The haves and have-nots are all through this story. Tent dweller/warrior, mother/assassin, lover/killer...and it continues with a picture of Sisera’s wife. Sisera was the great general who led the Canaanites army and his wife is pictured in a fine house with latticed windows and a host of attendants...but it is her who will be grieving that night.
 30. The women and men of Israel, the song says, will be the one who will be grieving that night as will a Kenite woman who, against her husband’s wishes, literally struck a blow for Yahweh and the people of Israel. The attendants comfort Sisera’s wife by saying his delay is caused by his victory. They will be so busy raping and stealing (v.30). Shades of phone calls intercepted from Russian to soldiers in Ukraine.

The story of Deborah should give us insight on the wisdom, strength and bravery of women, the value of courage, the need for unity, and the need to stand up and show up when and where God needs you. As Deut. says... along the way.