

Deborah: Prophet and Judge

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-part series

August 9, 2015

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Judges 4:1–24 (CEB)

After Ehud had died, the Israelites again did things that the LORD saw as evil. ²So the LORD gave them over to King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, and he was stationed in Harosheth-ha-goiim. ³The Israelites cried out to the LORD because Sisera had nine hundred iron chariots and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.

⁴Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was a leader of Israel at that time. ⁵She would sit under Deborah's palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the Ephraim highlands, and the Israelites would come to her to settle disputes. ⁶She sent word to Barak, Abinoam's son, from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "Hasn't the LORD, Israel's God, issued you a command? 'Go and assemble at Mount Tabor, taking ten thousand men from the people of Naphtali and Zebulun with you. ⁷I'll lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, to assemble with his chariots and troops against you at the Kishon River, and then I'll help you overpower him.'"

⁸Barak replied to her, "If you'll go with me, I'll go; but if not, I won't go."

⁹Deborah answered, "I'll definitely go with you. However, the path you're taking won't bring honor to you, because the LORD will hand over Sisera to a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰He summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand men marched out behind him. Deborah marched out with him too.

¹¹Now Heber the Kenite had moved away from the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' father-in-law, and had settled as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.

¹²When it was reported to Sisera that Barak, Abinoam's son, had marched up to Mount Tabor, ¹³Sisera summoned all of his nine hundred iron chariots and all of the soldiers who were with him from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Kishon River. ¹⁴Then Deborah said to Barak, "Get up! This is the day that the LORD has handed Sisera over to you. Hasn't the LORD gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men behind him. ¹⁵The LORD threw Sisera and all the chariots and army into a panic before Barak; Sisera himself got down from his chariot and fled on foot. ¹⁶Barak pursued the chariots and the army all the way back to Harosheth-ha-goiim, killing Sisera's entire army with the sword. No one survived.

¹⁷Meanwhile, Sisera had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was peace between Hazor's King Jabin and the family of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come in, sir, come in here. Don't be afraid." So he went with her into the tent, and she hid him under a blanket.

¹⁹Sisera said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink. I'm thirsty." So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and hid him again. ²⁰Then he said to her, "Stand at the entrance to the tent. That way, if someone comes and asks you, 'Is there a man here?' you can say, 'No.'"

²¹But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent stake and a hammer. While Sisera was sound asleep from exhaustion, she tiptoed to him. She drove the stake through his head and down into the ground, and he died. ²²Just then, Barak arrived after chasing Sisera. Jael went out to meet him and said, "Come and I'll show you the man you're after." So he went in with her, and there was Sisera, lying dead, with the stake through his head.

²³So on that day God brought down Canaan's King Jabin before the Israelites. ²⁴And the power of the Israelites grew greater and greater over Canaan's King Jabin until they defeated him completely.

Deborah and Jael. Two women put to work by God for the sake of Israel.

This week, we turn to the story of a woman who lived more than three millennia. She was a prophet and judge of Israel during the time of the judges. What a person she must have been to stand alongside Gideon, Othniel, Samson, and Samuel as one of Israel's judges. Try telling Deborah that God restricts the role that women can play in the accomplishment of God's purposes.

We can better understand Deborah's story if we know some of the backstory. Since we recently completed a series on the Ten Commandments, we'll start there.

The back story

Having given the Israelites his Law at Mt. Sinai, God leads his people to the land he had promised to Abraham. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the people turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. As you might expect, God is angry with them and tells them

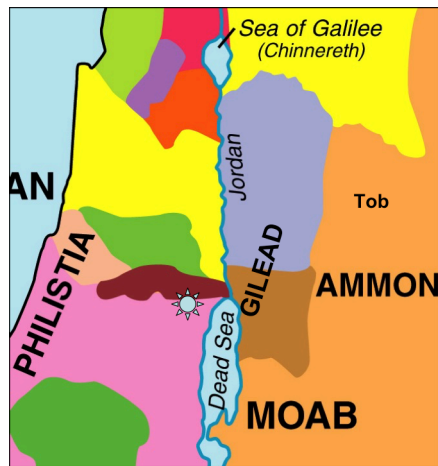
Map of Ancient Canaan

The book of Judges is set more than a millennia before Jesus, during the time when the tribes of Israel were consolidating their conquest of Canaan (ancient Palestine). It was a time when survival often seemed doubtful. The tribes were not ruled by a king, for God was to be their king. Instead, their chief administrators, such as Deborah and Samson, were known as judges.

The various shadings on this map represent the areas settled by the twelve tribes of Israel. You can see, for example, that the land of Gilead is east of the Jordan River.

I've put a sun symbol on the map just west of the Dead Sea to mark the site of Jerusalem. David would conquer Jerusalem more than a century after the time of the judges.

The battle at Mt. Tabor took place southwest of the Sea of Galilee. That is where God leads Barak and the Israelites in defeating Sisera and the forces of the Canaanites.



that they will not enter the Promised Land until that entire generation dies.¹ Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years. The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses' final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses' death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.

Settling in Canaan – the time of the judges

After the Israelites conquered large portions of Canaan under the leadership of the Lord God and his commander, Joshua, they settled into a long period of consolidation. There was still much fighting to do, as the various tribes of Israel lived in constant tension with their neighbors. The book of Judges tells the story of this very difficult, indeed tragic, period in Israel's history.

Unlike the peoples around them, the Israelites did not have a human king, for God was to be their king. The leadership and administration of the twelve tribes was handled by men and women known as "judges." Generally, the judges of Israel were chosen from among the heads of the twelve tribes. They provided military leadership and had the authority to settle disputes and promote justice.

As we might expect, some of the judges were "minor" and of little note. But others were lauded by Israel

as saviors who led the tribes in times of crisis when the existence of Israel was threatened. For example, Othniel was the first judge and is presented in the book of Judges as an ideal leader who rescued the Israelites from oppression. Other judges are better known, such as Gideon and Samson.

Though God raised up many judges who led the people back to God, the Israelites' faithfulness was inevitably short-lived. Succeeding generations would fall further and further away from God, until God raised up yet another judge. The time of the judges

¹Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urge the people to trust in God's promises and enter the land, but they

could be described as cycles of faithlessness that spiraled ever downward. In the end, the people abandoned God's way entirely, doing "what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Deborah

It is pretty hard for people in our time to comprehend just how patriarchal the ancient world really was. I once heard a series of lectures by an expert on ancient Rome. One of his talks was about the role of women and slaves in the ancient world; he titled it: *Women and Slaves: Less than Human*. Women were often seen as property, lacking the better qualities and abilities of men. There were even some who thought women were basically incomplete men, whose development had been arrested. Weird but true.²

So just imagine . . . in the long line of thirteen judges, the leaders of Israel, recounted in the book of Judges one was actually a woman, Deborah. She must have been really something. And not only was she a judge of Israel, she was a prophet of Israel, like Huldah who we learned about last week. Deborah is also the only judge of Israel depicted as actually rendering decisions in disputes within and among the tribes.

Deborah would sit in the shade of a tree between the villages of Bethel and Ramah in the hills east of what would be Jerusalem. There, she would hear the cases brought by the tribes and render decisions. At the time, the tribes were under threat from King Jabin of Hazor in the north. As God's judge and prophet, Deborah sent a message to Barak of the tribe Naphtali and reminded him that God had instructed him to assemble an army and head for Mt. Tabor in the southern portion of Naphtali's tribal lands (southwest of the Sea of Galilee). Not surprisingly, given what little we know of Deborah, Barak wants her to go with him. Deborah agrees but warns Barak that the honor of dealing with Sisera, King Jabin's commander, will go to a woman. The reader thinks it will be Deborah, but the story will turn on yet another woman.

God wins; Sisera loses

At Mt. Tabor, Sisera arrays his forces, including more than nine hundred iron chariots, along the Kishon river. The battle itself is almost anti-climactic in that when God sets out to win and the people do he says, God wins. On this day, God tells Barak and his men to race down the mountain and confront the opposing and very superior army. As they do so, God sends Sisera's forces into a panic and they flee in terror, where they are hunted down and killed.

Sisera flees on foot and seeks refuge in the tent of a Kenite woman named Jael. She is not an Israelite and commentators debate the nature of her family's allegiance. Jael takes Sisera in according to the hospitality customs of the day (see the textbox on page 4 for more on these customs). But in utter violation of those customs, when Sisera lays down to rest and falls asleep, Jael drives a tent peg into his brain, killing him on the spot. When Barak, the Israelite commander, passes by her tent, Jael calls to him, telling him what she had done. Thus, it was as Deborah had said it would be. God had handed Sisera over to a woman.

Quite a story. Little wonder that it is recounted not only in the prose of Judges 4, but also in the poetry of chapter 5. Be sure to read at least verses 24-31 of the poem, which expresses the contrast between Jael and Sisera's mother. It is very poignant.

Women were often little more than chattel in the patriarchal system of the ancient world (or the Taliban/Isis world of today!), "a girl or two for each warrior" (5:30). Yet, that is not God's way. God continually goes against the expectations of the day, using women as well as men to pursue God's ends. May we be committed to seeing that women can participate fully in the church's life and ministry. Anything less would be a denial of God's work through people like Deborah – a genuine hero of the faith.

² Read the end of the second century AD gnostic writing, the so-called "Gospel of Thomas," for an example.

Near-Eastern Hospitality Customs

From the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, InterVarsity press, 1998

[Jael's violation of her society's hospitality customs is a central part of the story.
Here is an overview of those customs.]

Hospitality customs provided ways whereby strangers could be welcomed and made guests and might depart as friends instead of as strangers or enemies. For this process to run smoothly people had to carry out their roles as host, stranger/guest or servant. There were four phases in hospitality: initial invitation, screening, provision and protection, and departure.

Outsiders were suspect and had to be approached cautiously, but for a community not to approach them with a ready invitation would be dishonorable and could result in violence. During the nomadic period strangers approaching an encampment might be intercepted before reaching it (Gen 18:2), thus it became customary for travelers approaching a town or city to wait in an open place, such as the well or the city gate for a preliminary invitation to be extended (Gen 19:1-2; 24:23-25, 31-33; Ex 2:20; 1 Kings 17:10; 2 Kings 4:8-10; Job 31:32; Acts 16:13-15). The failure of a community to approach the strangers and issue an invitation before nightfall to dine and lodge in an established household was a serious breach of honor signifying an insult toward the strangers and an indication of the locals' bad character (Judg 19:15, 18; cf. v. 20, where the custom is properly enacted).

Strangers had to be assessed in some way to discern their intentions (Josh 2:2-3; Gen 19:4-5; 42:7). In various biblical contexts we observe instances of this. In the NT a traveling teacher, might be asked to speak (Acts 13:15). A letter of recommendation might be presented but was not always accepted (Rom 16:3-16; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 2 and 3 John). The stranger would either be asked to leave (cf. Mk 5:17, where the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave) or would be advanced to the next step and received as a guest.

The host assumed the responsibilities of providing food, water and lodging for the guests and their animals (Gen 24:23-25; 26:30; 31:1-33, 54; 43:16, 24). The host usually was a male head of household but might be a woman of means. Examples include the widow who hosted Elijah (1 Kings 17:10); the wealthy woman who set up a room for Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-10); the NT women who provided for Jesus (Lk 8:2-3); Jesus' friends Mary and Martha, who took him into their home (Lk 10:38; Jn 12:1-3); and the women of the early church who hosted church meetings and, like Lydia, provided for traveling missionaries (Acts 16:13-15).

The provision and protection extended in hospitality were well defined and elaborate. Acceptance of strangers as guests was signified by washing the guests' feet (Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; neglected in Lk 7:36-50) and by providing a meal. The meal, prepared and served by women and household servants, might be lavish and could include entertainment (music, dancing) and discussion of Torah. In order not to insult the guests and dishonor the host, the meal must be the best the host could provide, as with the choice calf, curds and milk that Abraham provided for three angelic visitors. Additional honor would be signified by inviting a (male) guest to speak or anointing his head with oil and by giving him an honored place at the host's table. It was also the duty of the host to provide protection from harm (Gen 23:7-9; Josh 2:1-6; 2 Kings 6:22-23; cf. Gen 19, where Lot is unable to fulfill this duty). The reference in Psalm 23:5 to a table prepared in the presence of enemies may refer to the desert code of hospitality in which the fugitive from blood vengeance could find safety within a tent for the space of one day and two nights. Significantly, this psalm ends with the poet contrasting such temporary hospitality to God's house, in which he can dwell (literally "return to") forever.

Departure was the final phase in the cycle of hospitality. Customarily guests could expect to stay in one household for no more than two nights (cf. *Didache* 11.5). It would be rude and dishonorable for a guest to prolong the stay unless the host clearly extended the invitation (the extended stay in Judg 19:1-9 is extraordinary). The goal at this final phase of hospitality was to have the guest depart in peace without having disrupted the social harmony of the household or the community-as when Isaac sends Abimelech and his advisers off after a feast celebrating a peace treaty (Gen 26:26-31). A generous host would send guests off well fed and supplied for the journey (*Didache* 11.6, 12 suggests sending missionaries off with food, but not money; cf. Rom 15:24).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Judges 5 The story of Deborah is retold in a lengthy poem, which probably predates the prose version.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Judges 2:6–3:6 The pattern of Israel's disobedience depicted in the book of Judges.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Judges 3:7-31 Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar – the first three judges of Israel; Deborah was the fourth.</p>	<p>Thursday, Judges 6 Gideon is commissioned as the judge to follow Deborah</p>
<p>Friday, Judges 7 & 8 Gideon's battle with Midian and his revenge</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can
check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the book of Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Biblical stories that will make you feel better about your own family!*

Information Meeting: Fall 2016 Israel Trip with Scott Engle and Arthur Jones

Sunday, August 30 at 6:30 in Piro Hall

We are planning a ten-day trip to Israel, similar to the Fall 2014 trip. If you've ever thought about taking an in-depth tour of Israel, this is the trip to take. Visit Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Masada, and much more with friends and family. This trip is life-changing. Your faith will be deepened, you will never read the Bible the same way, and you will have a great time. We hope that you will join us!

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
