

Mother in Israel: Deborah's Story

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*The villagers ceased in Israel;
they ceased to be until I arose;
I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.*

*When new gods were chosen,
then war was in the gates.*

(Judges 5:7-8)

Mother in Israel

Biblical heroines have uniquely powerful stories, and I've long been entranced by them. But my keenness to broadcast their triumphs had always been tempered by the feeling it "wasn't my place to comment" on the women of the Bible; it seemed an arrogance for a man to attempt to speak on women's behalf or tell their stories. This likely worsened an existing problem: since most presenters in church communities are male to start with, any reluctance to present women's stories, even out of a misplaced sense of deference, exacerbated the shortfall of Biblical heroine's voices being heard, and their being elevated as role models. I needed to make a change. Thus, I'm venturing to present several inspiring, faith-based, life-stories from Biblical women, starting with Deborah, as "Mother in Israel."

As we'll see, the title "Mother in Israel" identifies a very special understanding of God's style of leadership which one woman – Deborah – earns and owns, and by which she, solely, emulates Messiah.

Who is Deborah? Translators commonly introduce her as "wife of Lappidoth" (Jdg 4:4). But the phrase may be more striking. There is no Hebrew word for 'wife,' Hebrew has only the word for 'woman,' and 'Lappidoth' means 'torches,' burning firebrands such as Gideon's

(Jdg 7:16). Thus, some academics propose that the text is saying: “Deborah is a firebrand woman”!¹² If so, it makes sense that a woman with a fiery character would be found in a leadership role. Deborah judges Israel under “Deborah’s Palm” (Jdg 4:5), in the hill country of Ephraim, bordering Benjamin, and since it’s “Deborah’s Palm,” not “*Lappidoth’s Palm*,” it underscores the idea that there may be no husband, and she is autonomous in her lifestyle.

Deborah’s road to becoming a Mother in Israel has some formative steps. She is first Israel’s Judge. She will add to that role a Warrior aspect. Having tasted both regimes, she writes her Victory Song, in response to God’s liberation of His people from the Canaanites, in which she reveals her divine perception of her truest, most valuable role.

Deborah the Judge: A Misconception

God calls the faithful to war under Barak, to fight against a northern incursion from the Canaanites. Deborah – God’s appointed judge – delivers the message to Barak.

Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you, “Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor?” (Jdg 4:6)

Barak balks at the responsibility. Unimpressed, God tells Barak that due to his timidity a woman will have the honour of being recognized as the battle’s victor, an honour which otherwise would have been his.

Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” And she said, “I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” (Jdg 4:8-9)

Let’s be clear: the woman referred to above is not Deborah. It’s Jael. Many times I’ve heard it misconstrued that the only reason Deborah is leading the people is because Barak was demoted. This is untrue. The glory removed from Barak is the slaying of General Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite armed forces, and that glory passes to Jael. Jael is elevated by God due to Barak’s shortcoming; Deborah was already elevated. Deborah was chosen as Israel’s judge

¹ Susan Niditch, “The Old Testament Library: Judges,” 2008, p60

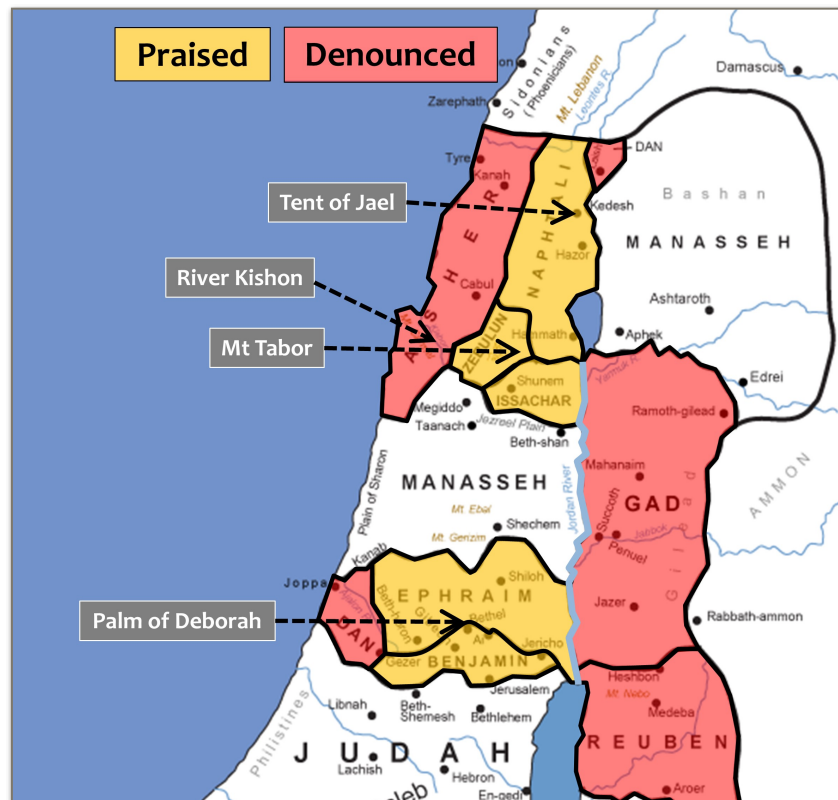
² Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Reading the Women of the Bible,” 2002, p46

long before Barak balked at anything. Her position of honour as judge of God's people, and subsequent leader of the victory celebrations, is independently hers.

Deborah has now extended her role; there's a new chapter to her Story. By comforting Barak that she will accompany him to battle, she has added the facet of active warrior to her discipleship.

Deborah the Warrior-Judge: Judging a Fragmented Nation

God called men to fight against Sisera from just two tribes: Naphtali and Zebulun. This makes sense geographically: the battle is to be joined on the slopes of Mt Tabor, at the crux of three tribal territories: Naphtali, Zebulun & Issachar. Barak, the commander, is from Naphtali, which will assist with the motivation of those local troops.



Map of the battle, including tribes praised for loyalty (in gold) and denounced for disloyalty (in red) in Deborah's Song

As the battle flowed, it traveled west from Tabor through Zebulun's territory into Asher's, with the Canaanite army routed against the Kishon river. General Sisera fled northeast, before being trapped and killed in Naphtali's land.

Ultimately, five tribes cooperated in the war: Naphtali & Zebulun (as God commanded) plus Issachar, Ephraim and Benjamin. Again, the map explains what otherwise might sound like arbitrary additions. Issachar is the other territory connected to Mt Tabor: their men will literally see their brothers amassing for battle on the mountain. Prompted by good conscience, Issachar faithfully joins them. To me, it's no coincidence that the other two tribes who joined the battle voluntarily were Ephraim and Benjamin, the two tribes bordering the Palm of Deborah, where she judged Israel. Deborah likely heard many more cases from Ephraim and Benjamin than any of the other tribes because of their proximity, and they evidently identify with her: she's their leader, she's their judge. A closeness has grown between Deborah and these two tribes; and they respond to this kinship with camaraderie in battle.

I see both good and bad in this. It's good that tribes who see they have a representative in battle step up in solidarity. Deborah's Victory Song recognizes them appropriately:

*From Ephraim their root they marched down into the valley,
following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen;
from Machir marched down the commanders,
and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff;
the princes of Issachar came with Deborah,
and Issachar faithful to Barak;
into the valley they rushed at his heels...
Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death;
Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field. (Jdg 5:14-15,18)*

But it's sad this loyalty has such a short wingspan. The tribes who don't have a direct connection to the battle territory, or to the leaders, simply don't show up. Israel is fragmenting. Deborah's Song doesn't spare their cowardice and disdain, and she renders due judgment. Reuben is the first tribe decried, quite possibly because he's the firstborn, who bears the most responsibility for family integrity and solidarity, yet was among the failures. Deborah chides the Danites too, who are as much affected by the Canaanite invasion as Naphtali, since one of their two territories is the northernmost. She also denounces Asher; doubtless because the warring armies went directly into his land, yet their people remained disengaged. The river Kishon,

against which the Canaanite army fell, flows right through Asher's territory to the Mediterranean coast, yet they still didn't help!

Among the clans of Reuben

there were great searchings of heart.

Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds,

to hear the whistling for the flocks?

Among the clans of Reuben

there were great searchings of heart.

Gilead [Gad] stayed beyond the Jordan;

and Dan, why did he stay with the ships?

Asher sat still at the coast of the sea,

staying by his landings...

The torrent Kishon swept them away,

the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.

March on, my soul, with might! (Jdg 5:15-17, 21)

Some academics recast these verses to remove the criticism of non-participating tribes, rendering "why" as "indeed," thus removing any sense of challenge from Deborah's words,³⁴⁵ and rendering the "searchings" of heart as "stoutness" of heart.⁶ I am unconvinced. If we rewrite "*Why did Reuben/Dan stay among the sheepfolds/ships?*" as "*Indeed Reuben and Dan stayed at home,*" the statements become weird irrelevances, so I reject these niche interpretations.

By contrast, other analysts directly translate Reuben as cowards:

To Reuben's divisions belong faint-hearted chieftains!(Jdg 5:16, Boling)⁷

³ Frank M. Cross, "Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: essays in the history of the religion of Israel," 1973, p235

⁴ Baruch Halpern, "The Emergence of Israel in Canaan," 1983, p383

⁵ Frank M. Cross, "From Epic to Canon: history and literature in ancient Israel," 1998, p54-55

⁶ Susan Niditch, Op. cit., p74

⁷ Robert G. Boling, "Judges," in "The Anchor Bible," Eds. William F. Albright & David N. Freedman, 1975, p103

This translation is much more likely, since it matches what Reuben's own father had to say about him, that he was 'weak as water' (Gen 49:4).

This fragmentation of Israel is something God had explicitly commanded against from their very entrance to the Land. The two and a half tribes who had territory on the eastern banks of the Jordan, and gained their land first, were sternly told that they should make the effort (no small effort!) to cross the Jordan and help their brothers acquire their land, before returning home (Jos 1:13-15). Their disintegration during the Canaanite invasion is a marked departure from a Father's command for familial solidarity

Deborah's Song: Contrasting Mothers

Deborah sings:

*In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned,
and travelers kept to the byways.*

*The villagers ceased in Israel;
they ceased to be until I arose;
I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. (Jdg 5:6-7)*

This is a key moment in Deborah's Story. We have met her as Israel's Judge, and witnessed her extend her role to include Warrior. Yet, when this Warrior-Judge composes her Victory Song, she chooses to describe herself one way only: as a Mother. A spiritual mother, since her 'children' are the populace of Israel. As we delve deeper into this choice, two lines of exploration yield rich spiritual treasure: one local to the Song, the other much broader.

Locally within the plot development of the Song, I believe Deborah presents herself as a mother to draw deliberate contrast to the other mother involved: Sisera's mother.

*Out of the window she peered,
the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice:
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?'*
Her wisest princesses answer,

*indeed, she answers herself,
'Have they not found and divided the spoil?—
A womb or two for every man;
spoil of dyed materials for Sisera,
spoil of dyed materials embroidered,
two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck
as spoil?'*

So may all your enemies perish, O Lord!

But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might. (Jdg 5:28-31)

The contrast is between the Mother in Israel and the Mother in Canaan. Deborah is a woman of God, and God's people – her children – live. By contrast, the mothers of the godless see their children perish. The contrast is enhanced by seeing Sisera's mother posing at the window lattice, which I suspect is a comment styled to show her pose echoing that of Queen Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:30).

In this way, the song's focus remains on God. In another culture, parallel might be drawn between Deborah and Sisera's mother: a female-focused empathy connecting two mothers; a metaphorical sisterhood stretching across the brutal divide of male-dominated warfare. But Deborah's inspired song is having none of this. Deborah shows no sympathy whatever to Sisera's mother; to the contrary, the Song triumphantly denounces her culture and her son. Between the two mothers is not sorority, but enmity. One is from God's people, the other from a godless, abusive system.

Deborah is not a Leading Lady because she is a mother, but because she is a godly leader in Israel. This provokes us to distinguish between the natural and the Divine. Parenting can be understood to be among the noblest occupations in society, but there is no secular post or practice that brings us to God of itself. Godliness can be practiced in all trades and professions, however elevated or humble, but it is an essence of itself, sought by conscious commitment in suppressing the ego and augmenting the needs of others, and bestowed by Divine blessing. It is the times under Deborah's Palm when she prayed and meditated, the times when she agonized over a

godly ruling and sought Divine insight, the time she strode forward in faith to battle, that this type of mothering was honed, and her role as Mother in Israel was forged.

The Song's triumphalism over Sisera's mother is explicit, and harsh. I presume Deborah and Sisera's mother have never met, so it's only through Deborah's knowledge of Canaanite culture (or divine insight) that her song puts words into Sisera's mother's mouth. And what words they are! Sisera's mother wants every male warrior to come home with spoils of war, which includes captive Israelite women to abuse and enslave. "Two wombs for every Canaanite soldier!" she crows, revealing a contemporary Canaanite misogyny where a woman is merely a womb. Yet herein lies the searing irony. Sisera did indeed meet "two women": Deborah and Jael. One outmaneuvered him in battle (fully acknowledging that the battle "is the Lord's") and the other duped and killed him. Deborah scorns Sisera's mother in the Song, which is quite brutal. But Sisera's mother wanted her son to meet two Israelite women in warfare, and meet two women he did. Be careful what you wish for.

Deborah the Mother: Foreshadowing Messiah

The villagers ceased in Israel;

they ceased to be until I arose;

I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. (Jdg 5:7)

Why a mother? We explore the broader connotation, beyond the battle context of the Song, to investigate why Deborah describes herself this way. Deborah holds other accolades and statuses which appear superior. Deborah is a judge! In fact she is the judge in Israel: using her wisdom and discernment to judge God's people. And she's a warrior! She was unafraid, unlike Barak, to stand on Mt Tabor and confront Sisera's army.

But she eschews both ranks, and claims the mother role instead. I suggest this is because she understands that the mother role is the leadership style God respects most; it's the one He performs Himself.

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him. (Dt 32:10-11, KJV; also Ps 91:4, 131:2)

For sure, the excellence of intellect is well reflected in the role of Judge. Likewise, the excellence of courage is well reflected in the role of Warrior. But motherhood exceeds both these roles, arguably by incorporating aspects of both and adding more, which Deborah sees. Motherhood forms the ultimate servant leadership: a mother will sacrifice her own life for her children!

And that, ultimately, is Messiah's role at its core.

Some will balk at the gender distinction here. They will insist that God must only be a Father, not a Mother, and His Son must be understood as equally, exclusively, male. Jesus corrects this thinking, as we see below. This is the pinnacle of Deborah's brilliance. She presents herself as a Mother in Israel because she perceived the Messianic path, and walked it in foreshadow of the one who would walk it perfectly. Like Abraham before her (Jn 8:56), Deborah too saw Jesus' day and was glad. Her excellence is duly rewarded by Jesus embodying, and superseding, her motherhood role. It may sound surprising to hear Jesus describe himself as a Mother in Israel, especially as the role is necessarily female, but that is what he says. Jesus describes himself as a hen, with her chicks, in Jerusalem. A hen is necessarily female, and a hen with chicks is necessarily a mother, and Jerusalem is evidently in Israel.

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.' (Mt 23:37)

Within these words, I can plainly see Jesus describing himself as a Mother in Israel, just as Deborah had done before him.

When Deborah chose to portray herself as Mother in Israel, she set her rightful descriptions as Judge and Warrior to one side. Jesus does the same thing. Just like Deborah, Jesus eschewed the roles of Judge and Warrior first, to choose the Mother role instead.

'You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one.' (Jn 8:15, also Lk 12:14)

Jesus demurred the Judge's mantle in his mortal ministry – albeit, he will certainly return as The Judge (Acts 17:30-31).

Jesus resisted the role of mighty warrior, too – despite having twelve legions of angels at his direction! (Mt 26:53) – instead publicly rebuking those who tried to fight physically on his behalf,

confounding their violence with healing (Lk 22:49-51, also Jn 18:36). Again, though Jesus resisted the warrior's role in his first coming, he will certainly espouse it in his return (Rev 19:11-16).

The comparison between Deborah and Jesus is complete. Notably, Deborah is peerless here: no other disciples, male or female, ever prefigured Messiah's 'Mother in Israel' role. Jesus had every right to present himself as a wise and godly judge, and every right to debut as the world's mightiest warrior, but he deferred. Nor did he spurn greater roles than the one he chose: he chose the highest station. He presented himself as the greatest leader one can be for God's people: a Mother in Israel.

And Deborah saw his day, and was glad.