

# Material from Tim Kellers Leaders Guide on Living in Pluralistic Society

## Deborah: The woman leader

### Study 4 Judges 4:1 - 5:31

#### INTRODUCTION

Chapters 4 and 5 of Judges is very interesting, because each chapter deals with the same event, but one from the perspective of the historian, and the other from the perspective of the poet/musician.

#### **1. 4:1-24. What are the gifts and skills Deborah possesses (4:4-14) What were the effects of her career (5:6-9)**

First, Deborah was a “*prophetess*” (v.4). We see her exercising this gift v.6 when she tells Barak, “*The Lord commands you...*” This means that she preaches and teaches the Word of God. Second, she was very wise. She “*held court*” under the Palm of Deborah (v.5). Notice that this did not so much mean a “*queen’s court*” as a real judge’s courtroom. People came to have “*disputes decided*”. This means that for some time she had been recognized as a wise counselor and judge and people came to her with all sorts of social, legal, and relational “*cases*”.

Third, she was a leader. 4:9 says she was “*leading*” (NIV) or “*judging*” Israel. We have seen before that to lead and to judge was the same thing. She was given authority to rule. This call to leadership is put in a very vivid way in the Song — 5:6-9. Deborah says that under idol-worship, Israel fell into great social decay. Shared, common life ceased. “*Village life in Israel ceased.*” 5:7. This means that things got so bad that it was every family for itself. There was not a common life of culture, commerce, etc. But Deborah became “*a mother in Israel*”. The implication is that she acted as a “*parent*” for the larger community, so that individual families could become part of a larger “*family*” of the whole nation. She “*rose*” into power in order to do this.

Fourth, she seems to have had a tremendous inspirational gift. This probably is an extension of her abilities as a prophetess and a leader. She “*stirs*” up Barak and the army — “*This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands! Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?*” Fifth, Deborah was a poet/musician. Her “*song*” is considered by most scholars to be one of the great artistic works of the ancient world.

Her tremendous gifts led Barak to refuse to go into his campaign without her. (See #2).

#### **2. How is the judgeship of Deborah both like and unlike the judgeships of the Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar?**

Deborah's judgeship is **like** the others in its most basic patterns. Though it is not mentioned directly, clearly God's Spirit came upon her (making her a prophetess) so that through her God could deliver his people from a military oppressor. Secondly, Deborah's judgeship is *like* most of the other judgeships because it is so unexpected. Remember last week's study. Women, especially in ancient times, were not usually rulers and leaders. Deborah becomes one of the many "unexpected", paradigm-busting saviors who point to the ultimate Savior, who saves in the most "inside-out" ways, clean contrary to the wisdom of the world.

But Deborah's judgeship is mainly **unlike** the others. (1) First, it was unlike in that it was in many ways the greatest of all. Of all the twelve judges mentioned in the book, none is depicted as the wise, talented, brilliant, and godly person that she is. Only Othniel is seen in such unmixed positive terms — all the rest are seen as very flawed. But even Othniel seems to have been simply talented in one way — as a military leader. He "*went to war*" (3:10). That is the only talent we read of which is used by God to deliver Israel. But, as we have seen, Deborah is multi-talented.

(2) But second, Deborah is also very different in that she alone is not a warrior. Though she goes with Barak to the military campaign, that was not originally her plan. There is no indication that she literally led anyone into battle (3:14). That leads to a third related difference. (3) In every other case of deliverance, God raises up one person — the judge — to deliver Israel alone. In Samson's case, the deliverance is *literally* alone. He has nearly super-hero-type strength which enables him to fight battles with the oppressors single-handedly. But even in every other case, from Othniel on through, there is never any more than one single hero and protagonist. In every other case, one person gets all the honor. Only in this chapter of Israel's history do we see a "team" of deliverers — Deborah, Barak, and Jael. *All* the honor goes to no one person (4:9). Jael uses subterfuge, Barak is not really the leader of Israel, and Deborah is not the military hero. Deborah, however, is the one who creates a team. She identifies, recruits, and encourages Barak with her Spirit-anointed leadership gifts. She is the one who "puts it all together" — but no other judge does anything like this at all.

(4) Finally, we can say that Deborah was a different in that she led from wisdom and character rather than sheer might. She came closest to being a fully-orbed *leader* of her people instead of just a general. There is no indication that any of the other judges actually "judged" cases as Deborah did. She wisely directed people in how to live. She restored "village" life — meaning she re- wove the social structure. She was as good a judge in peace-time as in war- time. The other judges simply broke the power of the oppressors. In all this, Deborah was more a fore-runner of the monarchy and even the Messiah, who was "*wonderful Counselor... Prince of Peace*". (Isaiah 9).

### **3. How does Deborah's career modify both the "strong conservative" and "strong liberal" views of women's leadership?**

Please forgive me for bringing up such a vast and "hot" topic, but the career of Deborah very obviously leads us to reflect on this subject. The question is chosen to moderate the discussion away from polarizing view points.

A “strongly conservative” view will insist that women should not as a rule be in positions of leadership in family, church, or society at all. Though women often have to step in and take such a role, it should be the normal scheme of things. A “strongly liberal” view, however, will insist that “gender roles” are basically a fiction, that women and men are simply interchangeable when it comes to leadership. Women will and should not differ from men in when and how they lead.

**The conservative view is challenged** by the fact of Deborah’s career. In 4:9 it is stated that Deborah was “*judging*” or “*leading*” Israel (the words are the same). Of all the judges, Deborah (except for Othniel) This had been going on for some time. If women are never to be in positions of social leadership, why was Deborah clearly called by God as both a prophet and a judge?

This view often responds that Deborah was an anomaly caused by the “abdication” of Barak and other men. This view has been bolstered by the NIV translation’s rendering of 4:9. Barak says he won’t go to war unless Deborah goes with him. The Hebrew is translated to read, “*but because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours...*” If this reading is correct, then Deborah is rebuking Barak for timidity. That means that both Deborah’s accompaniment of Barak and the victory of Jael are ‘punishment’ to Barak. This fits the conservative view. It means that the prominence of women in leadership is really an anomaly caused by the unwillingness of males to take up leadership.

A point in favor of this rendering is the fact that the withholding of honor from Barak does seem to be some kind of penalty. But there are some very good reasons to reject this view. The Hebrew can also be translated as the NIV footnote says — “*but on the expedition you are taking, the honor will not be yours...*” Here’s why that rendering is more likely. (1) First, why would Barak’s desire to take Deborah along with him constitute disobedience? When Moses is given the same command to go forth, he says to God “*not unless you go with me*”. God’s response is identical to Deborah’s “*I will go with thee*.” (See Exodus 33:12-17). We have seen how godly and anointed Deborah was. Why would it be disobedient of Barak to want such a godly woman with him? Second (and this is telling) Heb.11:32 lists Barak as a great hero, who “*through faith conquered kingdoms... and routed foreign armies*”. That is quite significant. Barak is put in the same sentence here with Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah. We are told that his victory was done in great faith. Notice that Deborah is not named in this list. It was a greater act of faith on Barak’s part than Deborah! So in the NT we learn that Barak showed great faith to ask for

Deborah’s presence and help, and to go into a battle knowing that he would *not* get all the honor — that a woman would begin the campaign and another woman would end it.

All this undermines the conservative belief that Deborah was only a judge because Barak and others were too timid. Deborah’s career makes it hard to insist that the Bible forbids women to take leadership positions in society.

**The liberal view is challenged too**, by the shape of Deborah's career. The liberal view denies the relevance of gender differences with regard to leadership. Why? Some conservatives have insisted that a woman's "feminine" characteristics make it difficult for her to lead. This has led the more liberal to insist that "anything a man can do a woman can do", and to dismiss gender differences as socially constructed fictions.

But Deborah's leadership skills and strategies are very distinct from those of her male counterparts. First, she is not a warrior — she cannot physically lead the army. Therefore she has to recruit someone who complements her gifts. Related to that, we see that secondly she is a team builder, not a "lone ranger". [As we noted in #2 above, she is the only judge who does not accomplish the deliverance single-handed. There are, not one, but three "channels" by which God destroys the oppressors: Deborah, Barak, and Jael.] While the male judges are highly independent and warlike, Deborah is a team builder who creates interdependence between leaders. Thirdly, the other judges are excellent in warfare, but show little ability during peace time (cf. Gideon). But we saw in 5:7 that Deborah was excellent in building community.

This supports the idea that gender distinctions have an abiding effect on the way leadership is carried out. Many thoughtful people today are pointing out that the way women lead *is* different than the way men lead, and these differences lay along the same lines as we see in Deborah's history. Unfortunately, many of these same commentators are insisting that the woman/leader approach is inherently better. But it seems much wiser to say that male and female leadership approaches are appropriate for different situations.

It is a mistake to say: a) men should always lead, b) women are always better leaders, or c) women can do anything men can do and men can do anything women can do.

**Conclusion** Deborah's career can by no means be the basis for drawing conclusions about male and female roles and leadership. Judges 4 and 5 are written to simply tell us what happened, not what should have happened! It is not written to teach us about gender roles per se. Inferences we draw about gender must be tentative and tested against the rest of Scripture. We cannot put a implicit inferences up against explicit teaching elsewhere in the Bible. But Deborah does point to something we *do* see taught elsewhere, namely that women are equal in dignity and ability, but differences in gender are to be expressed through some differentiation in role within the church. In the Old Testament, there were three great offices — prophet, priest, and king (or judge). Some women were prophets and some were judge/queens. But there were no women priests. In the New Testament, women are free to use their gifts in any role but elder (1 Tim.2:12).

Why? This is God's way to express this "equal but not equivalent" nature of gender. Gender differences are to be rejoiced in and embraced as a gift, not used to oppress (on the one hand) and not feared and loathed (on the other hand). This Biblical view does not fit in with current views of doctrinaire traditionalists or secularists today.

**4. Read 4:6-16 and cf. with Hebrews 11:32-34. Barak is praised for the faith he exercised in this campaign. a) In what ways does he show faith? b) In what ways does he point the way to the ultimate Savior/judge?**

a) In what ways does he show faith?

Only three or four people out of the whole book of Judges get named as one of the “heroes of the faith” in Hebrews 11. We mentioned under #3 that the unhelpful NIV translation of 4:9 makes it much harder to see why Hebrews would have such a lofty view of him. But with some reflection we can see why.

First, Barak’s faith exercises itself in courage. He is told that he must lead an army into battle against a force of vastly superior technology. Yet Barak went. At this time the Bronze Age was ending and the Iron Age beginning. Those nations with the ability to develop iron tools and weapons were virtually invincible against those who could not. An iron chariot could charge through foot soldiers like a hot knife through butter. The Israelites could muster 10,000 men (4:10), but Sisera had 900 chariots along with “*all the other men*” (4:13). This was more than a match for the Israelites. In human terms, it would be a slaughter.

Second, Barak’s faith exercises itself in humility. He is told that he must be prepared for the fact that, despite all the valor he would have to exhibit, “*the honor will not be yours*” (4:9). A woman (Deborah) was the impetus for the campaign, and another woman (Jael) would strike the final triumphant blow. So Barak would not get “the glory”. Yet Barak went. Even if the withheld glory was a punishment, it was remarkable that Barak would go. [But see under #3 for the reasons why this is unlikely.] It would have taken remarkable maturity for a man to be willing to share the honor of battle with a woman. Many people today will admire Barak as being a modern, “enlightened” man who shows that his male ego is under control. But it is wrong to read our modern sensibilities back into ancient history. Barak was able to subjugate his normal fierce masculine independence and pride out of faith in the Lord, who was speaking through Deborah. That brings us to a third aspect to his faith.

Third, Barak’s faith exercises itself in obedience to God’s Word. Deborah is a prophetess, and her directions to Barak is more than “advice”. She says, “*The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go...’*” (4:6). That is the first time Deborah says, “Go!” The second time she says “*Go!... Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?*” (4:14), he charges down the mountainside. Barak’s faith is not just a kind of general humility. That would mean he was simply an “enlightened”, non-macho type man. Rather, his humility springs from his obedience to the Word of the Lord as it comes through Deborah.

b) In what ways does he point to the ultimate Savior/judge?

In his faith, Barak conforms to the pattern of the great Deliverer — he empties himself of glory and becomes obedient (Phil.2). Through his humble, obedient faith, God redeems his people. He would do the same thing on the cross.

“...the New Testament Savior-god is reflected in Barak, who like him is a man under authority and does nothing apart from that authority (Lk.7:6-8; Jn.8:28 – 29), cannot act independently of the one who sends him (Jn.5:19), and is victorious through obedience (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8-11; Heb. 5:8-9).”

– Wilcock, p.123, n.24.

**5. 4:17-22 and 5:24-31. a) How does 5:29-30 perhaps shed light on the motives of Jael? b) How does God's concern with the thing he wants done relate to his concern with the methods of the person who does it?**

a) Jael's motives.

Deborah's song is rather fierce at the end of the Song! As a woman, Deborah knows how Sisera's mother and her ladies-in-waiting will be waiting for him to come back victorious from battle, as usual (5:28). But as they talk about the “usual” campaign of Sisera we get a glimpse of his normal results of one of his campaigns. “*A girl or two for each man*” (5:30). It was normal for Sisera's armies to steal and rape and subjugate women — one or two for every soldier as “spoils of war”. [The NIV translation “*girl*” is not illuminating. The Hebrew word roughly means “*wench*” or “*girl-slave*”. It means the women would become sex-slaves.]

Now we know something of the justice and irony of what happened to Sisera. After making the lives of many women into hellish nightmares, now two women finally bring him down. Deborah engineers the military campaign and Jael strikes the actual blow. This probably accounts for Deborah's triumph song being so pointed and vehement. It also is deeply ironic that Sisera's women should now finally know the grief that he had visited on so many other women and families for so many years.

This probably gives us some insight into Jael's motives. It is possible that she simply had faith in the God of Israel and wanted to strike a blow against the enemy of God's people. Such noble impulses may have been the dominant ones. But since she was not an Israelite, and since this was an age of terribly low-grade spirituality it is much more likely that Jael hated Sisera for his cruelty and even perhaps for the havoc he wreaked on people that she knew. Jael's husband and tribe were political allies (or at least formal non-belligerents), but Jael obviously had personal reasons to despise Sisera and his king Jabin.

b) Jael's method.

The method of Jael's attack on Sisera deepens the irony of the passage even further. Setting up and taking down tents was considered the work of women. Therefore, the tent peg and hammer were essentially a woman's household appliance! It was especially ironic that the abuser of women would die by a female hand with a woman's tool — not even a spear or lance. In that age, death at the hand of a woman was particularly humiliating, of course. All this was probably designed by Jael to make Sisera's death the most devastating possible defeat for him and his army.

Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that Jael's methods is a clear violation or at least a "flouting" of the 10 commandments (e.g. those vs. killing, lying). Some would say that, since she was not a believer, she was not responsible to obey God's law. But Jael also broke all the very strong policies and rules of Middle Eastern hospitality. It was treachery by the standards of any culture. Deborah's blessing of Jael does not mean that she is a model of faith or virtue.

In the final analysis, we have to remember that God often uses people to do what he wants to happen without violating their personal responsibility or condoning their methods. Judas is perhaps the classic example. Other places we read of God using a people (such as Assyria) to punish Israel, even though God held Assyria responsible for their brutality.

#### **6. 5:1-31. How is the Song's description of the same events different from the historical account in chapter 4?**

Observers will find many differences to note, and we do not have to describe them all here. First, the main, foundational difference is that the Song's approach is more *theological*. It looks beneath the surface of the historical specifics and sees God's hand behind it all. In the historical report, the Lord is named in only three verses (and each time in a quote from Deborah). But in chapter 5, the Lord is literally everywhere. It is *he* who marches out to war when Israel amassed its troops (5:4-5). In other words, Deborah reveals that it is God who is the Judge behind the judge, and the general behind the general.

Because of this theological perspective, we actually learn a historical fact that is not evident in chapter 4. According to 5:19-23, the rout of Sisera's army was because of a flash flood in the Kishon valley. In the Song, it is the stars of heaven and the rising river (cf. 5:4 – *the heavens poured down*) that fight for the Lord (v.23). Barak is not even mentioned! Truly, the victory was God's. Sisera would never have come out to fight Israel on the plain in his chariots if it was the rainy season. In rain and wet ground, the iron chariots become immobilized and "sitting ducks" for foot soldiers. But God's miracle evidently was that the rain came out of season at a time Sisera would never have expected it.

**[Note:** This sheds much light on 4:14-15. One commentator suggests that Deborah saw the thunder clouds coming and realized what God was doing, so she cried to Barak, "*Look! God has gone out ahead of you! Go!*" and Barak charged down the mountainside with 10,000 men as the "*heavens*" poured down against their enemies. What a picture!]

Besides the main theme, the Song tells us other details we did not know about, such as the effects of idolatry on the social fabric (5:6-9), and that many of the Israelites failed to come to the aid of their brethren (5:15-18).

**[Note:** Many people question how fierce and blood-thirsty the Song is. This raises the broader issue of how often Old Testament texts (especially some of the Psalms) seem to speak hatefully of enemies, while Jesus tells us to love and pray for our enemies. This is

not the time to deal with that issue. Suffice it to say that when the people of God saw God's justice falling on sin and evil on to Jesus Christ dying on the cross, it changed our attitude toward our enemies. It is good and right to want to see justice done, and evil destroyed by a holy God. The Old Testament saints had a much dimmer view of how that was to be done. We now can yearn for justice and still pray for our enemies. Jesus, praying for those who were killing us is now our model for dealing with those who oppose us.]

#### **7. Choose application questions for discussion:**

**a) Do you have a Judges 5 perspective on what is happening in your life, or only a Judges 4 perspective? How could Deborah's perspective on some recent events help you? b) Is God calling you, like Barak, to do something for which you won't get much credit? How can you respond in faith? c) Can you pray like Jesus does for your enemies, or only like Deborah?**

a) Keep in mind that Judges 4 is certainly a believing perspective, but it doesn't look beneath the surface, nor have the continual note of "Praise!" that Deborah's Song has.

b) We should remember that while Barak certainly did not get much credit for his victory during his lifetime, he came down to us as one of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. Thus we should remember that it only God's opinion that matters.