

Deborah (and Jael)

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Scripture: Judges 4 and Judges 5
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How many of you have never heard of the biblical character of Deborah? Never read this passage from the book of Judges? Never heard a sermon preached about Deborah? I grew up in the church, and among all the many sermons I've heard, I don't remember a single one that focused on this fascinating, powerful woman from the Hebrew Bible. And what a shame that is!

I think there are several possible reasons for this. First of all, there's sexism and patriarchy. I bet you are familiar with one story from Judges: the story of Samson and Delilah. Patriarchy is accustomed to highlighting scandalous women as temptresses. But patriarchy often doesn't quite know how to approach strong, competent women who take charge and leave their male counterparts in the dust—or, in this case, asleep with a tent peg hammered through the brain.

Also, the book of Judges is totally problematic, especially to modern, mainline, progressive Christians. It is full of violence, with a God that seems judgmental and oppressive, rather than loving. It's a hard work to read, and a hard one to preach. Since very few people, including the preachers, have studied the book much, it takes a lot of prep work and teaching to prepare a sermon on it. It's hard to find the good news in a book that by the end, devolves into chaos and depravity.

Finally, and this is probably related to this problematic nature of Judges, the book barely appears in the Revised Common Lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of four biblical readings for every Sunday—one from the Hebrew Bible, one from one of the four gospels, a psalm or part of a psalm, and one from the letters of Paul or other books of the New Testament. The readings illuminate the church seasons, and, if followed for the three-year cycle, a congregation will have a pretty good sense of the contents of the Bible. Many mainline protestant preachers preach from this cycle; Jeff and I often do, although more and more, we have been creating our own lectionaries for sermon series, based on topics that interest us and that we think are relevant for the issues of our day—like this series on women in the Bible.

But in the Revised Common Lectionary, a reading from the Book of Judges appears only once in the whole three-year cycle. It is, at least, the story of Deborah, but it's only the first seven verses of Chapter Four, which is only a teaser for the story and doesn't complete the narrative. With such a brief appearance in the cycle—that doesn't even tell the whole story—it's no wonder that most preachers take a look at the lectionary, and choose to preach on the gospel reading instead, which is the story of the talents from Matthew. I **know** you've heard a few sermons on that one.

Given all this, and the violence and problematic nature of Judges, why bother reading it at all? Why not set it aside and focus on the books that seem to have more relevance for our time, or focus on the gospels and the teachings of Jesus?

Well, I'm going to argue that Judges actually **is** relevant for our times, and well worth our attentive reading. Consider the following list of issues:

- Tension and strife between rival groups
- Disputes over land and territory
- Uncertainty over the roles of men and women
- Power-hungry political leaders
- Child abuse
- Spouse abuse
- Senseless and excessive violence
- Male political leaders who chase women
- Excessive individualism
- Moral confusion
- Social chaos¹

What time and place does this list describe? We could say that this is the state of the world we find ourselves in, here in the early 21st-century United States. It is, in fact a pretty thorough description of the contents of the book of Judges. And, while our world is considerably different from the world of those who lived over three thousand years ago, human nature sure hasn't changed much. The world may have changed dramatically, and human civilization may have come a long way, but "the book of Judges is a timely reminder of how far we have *not* come."²

We may dismiss the violent battles in Judges—and there are a lot of them—as vestiges of a bygone era, but in doing so, we forget that the 20th century was the most violent 100 years in human history. Considering the fact that we have been at war in Afghanistan for eighteen years, this century isn't looking to reverse the trend. Dismissing Judges as just a "collection of barbaric stories from a primitive and relatively uncivilized time [...] is both a disservice to the book of Judges, and to ourselves." Because Judges explores issues that are of perennial importance for the human community, and especially of people of faith. How do we "achieve justice and peace among human beings who seem inevitably to be self-centered and self-assertive"?³ How do we resist the temptation to worship the idols of our world, and return to the covenant we have with a God who will not—indeed, *cannot*—"stop loving a persistently idolatrous and frustratingly faithless people"?⁴

The last few chapters of the book, where the world dissolves into a chaos of terror and brutal violence, are a reminder to us of what happens when a people stray farther and farther from their spiritual center. It may be that our reluctance to study Judges reveals our reluctance to look inside our own society in our own time and face our own violence and faithlessness. And that may be one of the best reasons to confront this book and come to terms with it.

¹ McCann, *Judges* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1-2.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

Another reason to study Judges, of course, is that it tells the story of two incredibly strong, smart, focused, and brave women: Deborah and Jael. And it tells those stories without apologizing for or diminishing them at all because of their gender. In fact, the way these stories are recounted here “suggest that women may have been more active in [leadership] than the [ancient] literature implies.”⁵ Recent scholarship suggests that the time period that Judges describes—roughly the period of 1200 to 1,000 BCE, may actually have been “radically egalitarian.” Historians of this period describe Israelite society in this time as one in which “women and men worked ”together in small family units [to] squeeze out a subsistence-level existence in the hill country of Canaan.”⁶ In this pre-monarchy period, it was possible for a woman like Deborah to “play a major administrative and religious role in the life of early Israel.”

In the narrative history of ancient Israel, the time period of Judges falls between the stories of the Exodus and the people entering the promised land with Joshua, and the unification of the twelve tribes of Israel under the monarchy established by Saul, David, and Solomon. In between these two narratives lies this time of transition and disorganization, as the Israelite people try, and fail, to govern themselves and to keep their covenant that Moses established with God.

This trying and failing takes on a particular pattern in the book of Judges:

- The people try for a while, but fail to keep their covenant with God and they “do evil” by worshipping idols;
- God gets angry and frustrated with them, and allows the people to be oppressed by one of the many stronger and more powerful communities around them;
- The people cry out for help, and in response God raises up a deliverer to restore them to peace and stability and proper behavior;
- The deliverer, or judge, eventually dies, the people devolve into idolatry again, and the cycle begins all over.⁷

This happens at least twelve times in Judges, and each time the cycle becomes more disjointed and incomplete as the book progresses. By the time we reach chapter 16, the cycle completely falls apart, and social chaos ensues.⁸

The “judges” described in the book of Judges are not necessarily what we think of as judges—someone with a legal education, with a black robe and a gavel. Biblical judges had a broad role in the life of the community. They were entrusted to deliver the people from external oppression by outside group, and to ensure that internally, the community remained in covenant with God and worshipped God alone. They were often military leaders who went to war against Israel’s oppressors. Deborah was unique among all the judges portrayed in the book, partly because she was a woman, but also because she was the only judge who actually performed a judicial function of settling disputes in the community; none of the other judges is described as doing

⁵ Miriam Therese Winter, *WomanWitness: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter* (New York: The Crossroad Press, 1992), 32.

⁶ McCann, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

this. She was a national leader, a self-described “mother of Israel,” as well as a military leader. She is also one of only two judges who is also described as a prophet.

More hints about Deborah’s nature and her importance to the community are in her name and how she is described. The name “Deborah” has traditionally been translated as “bee,” but the consonants that make up her name in Hebrew are also an anagram for the root word for “speak” and “word,” an appropriate name for a prophet. She is also described as being the “wife of Lappidoth,” which may be either factual or symbolic. The word that is translated as “wife,” *eshet*, also means “woman.” The word “Lappidoth” could indeed be a man’s name, but it also means, “flames.” This, “wife of Lappidoth” may actually mean, “woman of fire.” Poetically, this makes sense, not only because of her fiery nature, but also because the name “Barak” means “lightning.” They are appropriate counterparts for each other.

Throughout the story, Deborah is unfailingly knowledgeable, brave, and confident. Unlike other women portrayed in the Hebrew Bible—such as Miriam, from last week’s sermon, she is never “put in her place” by either men or God. She leads ably and unopposed throughout her story, and her leadership is successful; Deborah’s story ends by saying that the land was at peace for forty years.

And yet, as I said before, patriarchy has difficulty dealing with strong, capable, powerful women. The rabbinic interpreters of Torah through the ages have “labeled Deborah arrogant, haughty, and boastful. Rabbi Hillel, [an influential Jewish scholar from the first century,] said she was punished and the Holy Spirit was taken from her because she boasted that: ‘I, Deborah, arose a mother in Israel.’”⁹ Rav Nachman, another influential Jewish scholar from the 19th century, said that her name was hateful because she was arrogant. Feminist Jewish scholar Leila Leah Bronner notes that in the historic Jewish biblical interpretation and commentary, “not one sage came to her defense or suggests a different interpretation. This is not in keeping with Talmudic discussion, in which both pro and con arguments are given.”¹⁰

Jael, too, who delivers the final blow to Israel’s oppressors by killing the general Sisera with a tent stake through the skull, has often been criticized and condemned by interpreters of the book of Judges. She is most often accused of violating the “sacred customs of Near Eastern hospitality.” But if we take a closer look at her part of the story, we realize that it is Sisera himself who has violated customs of hospitality. Sisera should not have come to Jael’s tent alone but should have first gone to her husband to ask for asylum.

This violation of custom and ritual quite likely alerted Jael to the fact that something was amiss. It is also not a far stretch to imagine that Sisera, alone in Jael’s tent, may have asked Jael for more than just a drink of water and a place to rest. For every woman ever abused by a man, Jael’s action feels like she’s driven a tent stake into the skull of patriarchy itself.

Deborah, and Jael, and the entire book Judges deserve to be lifted out of obscurity. For in and confronting humanity’s ancient tendency toward violence and chaos, we can recommit ourselves to follow God’s path to justice and peace. And in studying the stories of these extraordinary

⁹ Miki Raver, *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

women, we can recognize and support the women of extraordinary courage and power who are working tirelessly to change our world in *this* time and place. Amen.