

The first and most remarkable thing about the story of Deborah is that a woman is a prophet, [judge](#) and leader of Israel. Judges chapter 4 opens as she is sitting under a palm tree judging disputes and making decisions for the people. The previous judge, Ehud, had died and Deborah had assumed the vacancy in local politics and [spiritual](#) life.

It's remarkable because women didn't have a voice in Biblical times. Although we know about Eve, Sarah and Rachel, women were usually referred to as the wife, the daughter, the mother or the harlot. If a couple was childless it was because the woman was barren. We know about Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, but we never get the names of the wives.

After Joshua's stellar leadership comes to an end with his death, the twelve tribes of Israel each settle on their own parcel of land. There is no national leader to replace him but God raises judges from time to time to deal with problems. As this story will show, Deborah probably fills a role that either no one wants or no one is courageous enough to play.

The judges were national heroes who came to the forefront whenever Israel was threatened by an armed force. The lead-in was always the same: "The people of Israel sinned against the Lord." (Judges 4: 1) God protected them as long as they were faithful to Him. But the people were having a hard time ignoring the pagan gods around them in Canaan. When their [worship](#) of these gods became accepted practice, an enemy would appear to conquer them.

The people would return to YHWH and pray for help when things got really bad. A judge would rise up (Ehud, Deborah or Samson) and lead the defense of Israel. Worship of YHWH would return for a while and there would be peace. Then the cycle would repeat itself. This went on for a century or so between Joshua and the first king, Saul.

In defense of the people of Israel, scattered throughout Palestine, the [pagan](#) gods must have offered something that was hard to resist. Let's not forget that the children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for a few hundred years. Then they were nomadic wanderers in the deserts of the Sinai. They probably weren't great farmers or ranchers. The Canaanites had been settled there for maybe a thousand years prior. They no doubt had successful harvests and great flocks of sheep.

To the poor Israelite, this must have been a cause of great distress and envy. It must have seemed as if their gods were doing a great job. Maybe YHWH wasn't such a great god for farmers and if they prayed to another god and got results, Amen! I'm sure there was a lot of mixing and matching of deities in an effort to secure a good crop. But YHWH proves what He said. He is a jealous God and demands fidelity to him only. Especially from His own chosen people.

Deborah, as prophet, receives a revelation. She summons Barak from the city of Kadesh. She instructs him to take an army of 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and take them to Mount Tabor. A Canaanite king had conquered the land and Barak was to lead an army against this intruder. The [Bible](#) says that Jabin, the Canaanite king "ruled the people of Israel with cruelty and violence for twenty years." (Judges 4: 3)

Not only was his rule ruthless, the Canaanites had 900 iron chariots. Chariots were the new thing in the Iron Age and knowing how to make them gave an army great superiority. After twenty years of

this “the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help.” (Judges 4: 3) The commander of King Jabin’s army was Sisera. This was the force that Deborah called Barak to challenge.

Deborah tells Barak that she will summon Sisera to fight him at the Kishon River. She says to him, “He will have his chariots and soldiers, but I will give you victory over him.” (Judges 4: 7) Barak is not too sure and tells her that he will only go if she goes with him. She answers, “All right, I will go with you, but you won’t get any credit for the victory, because the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman.” (Judges 4: 9)

When Sisera’s nine hundred chariots were near, Deborah gave the command to Barak and he led his 10,000 Israelite soldiers against them. The Lord threw the Canaanite army into confusion. It seems that a pouring rain had rendered the heavy iron chariots useless. They were trapped in the mud and all fled on foot. The whole army was killed by Barak’s troops and Sisera himself ran away.

In the meantime, Heber the Kenite had set up his tent nearby and his wife Jael also had a tent there. Sisera ran into Jael’s tent asking for her protection. She hid him behind some curtains. When he asked her for water, she gave him milk. He fell asleep and Jael took a tent peg and a hammer and drove the peg through Sisera’s head. Jael proudly displayed the corpse to Barak when he came looking for him. And so it happened just as Deborah had prophesied. A woman had executed Sisera. The army marched right on to Hazor, the king’s city, and destroyed him too.

Chapter 5 is “The Song of Deborah and Barak” and gives more details of the struggle. It talks of God’s power in helping win the battle; of the rains that fell; how “[The stars](#) fought from the sky.” (Judges 5: 20) She also heaps scorn on those tribes of Israel that did not come to the aid of Israel. Zebulun and Naphtali are praised as heroes and the other tribes are listed with their excuses.

There was peace in the land for forty years and then the whole process will repeat as once again the people will become guilty and sin against the Lord. The mantle will fall on Gideon next.

Sources:

Good News Bible, American Bible Society, 1982