

# **STUDIES IN BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP**

## ***Deborah, Judge and Military Leader of Israel***

The Book of Judges records the history of the people of Israel after their forty years of wandering in the desert was over and the land of Canaan was occupied by military force. After impressive military victories under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites quickly lost their sense of dependence on God, disregarded God's commandments, and found themselves struggling with a series of crises related to their spiritual malaise.

The history of a nation in which "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" does not make for enlightening reading. The Book of Judges describes a nation in decline, punctuated by brief periods of revival led by judges, who served as both spiritual and military leaders. The best-known judges from this period of Israel's history are probably Gideon and Samson.

### **Deborah's Leadership and Reputation**

It is striking to me that the first major threat against the Israelites, following the conquest of the land of Canaan, occurred during a time when a woman, Deborah, was serving as the judge of Israel. In the tribal structure of Israel, women normally occupied a subordinate position and rarely exerted leadership over men. There were exceptions, of course, and Deborah was one of them, along with Miriam (Exodus 15:20) and Huldah (Second Kings 22:14). We know nothing about Lappidoth, Deborah's husband, other than his name.

The first mention of Deborah, "a prophetess," describes her holding court "between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim" (Judges 4:5). Israelites who had disputes would bring them to her and she would adjudicate between the parties in conflict. It is fascinating that in the song of Deborah, which celebrates Israel's deliverance from the hands of the powerful Canaanites, she is portrayed as "a mother in Israel," not as a judge or prophetess. She must have been an amazing woman, a woman of character, integrity and courage. People were attracted to her, came to her for counsel, were willing to follow her.

The fourth chapter of Judges records how Deborah was concerned about the growing military threat of the Canaanites, led by Sisera, commander of Jabin's army, who was King of Canaan. The people of Israel were terrified of the strength of their opponents, who had 900 chariots of iron against which the Israelites had no military defense. For twenty years, the Canaanites had "harshly oppressed the children of Israel," and Deborah decided it was time for this oppression to stop.

When Deborah discussed the Canaanite threat with Barak, a military commander in

Israel, he refused to take the leadership of Israel's forces. These are not the words you



expect from a military leader: "If you (Deborah) will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go."

Deborah would not have had to search too hard to find reasons to refuse this challenge. What business is it of "a mother in Israel" to fight on a battlefield? She had her judicial responsibilities to take care of. Why should she risk her life against an army of 900 iron chariots? Besides, refusing to accept this challenge, or at least balking at the initial invitation, would have placed her in good company-- with Moses, Gideon and Jeremiah. But she did not hesitate. She continued to provide the same inspirational leadership that had elevated her to the position of judge in Israel. Deborah accompanied Israel's troops into battle and was the one who ordered them to attack, assuring her soldiers that the Lord had gone ahead of them.

### **Learning from Deborah's Example**

Absolute confidence in God characterized the life of Deborah. The possibility of success against the overwhelming military force of the Canaanites was slight, yet Deborah knew that God would be at her side and would deliver her people from oppression -- despite the odds. Deborah was willing to step up to the challenge, to demonstrate leadership, even in a culture where men were in charge! Her willingness to lead Israel's forces against the Canaanites, and the subsequent rout of Israel's oppressors, resulted in forty years of peace for her people.

Deborah was not driven by personal ambition, nor was she seeking an expanded leadership role in Israel. She was simply being faithful to the God she served, accepting the responsibilities given to her by others who sought her counsel, and trusting in God as she took on the challenge of military leadership, for which she had not been trained. Deborah did what she knew was right in God's eyes, confident that the Lord would honor her actions.

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