

DEBORAH - THE GREATEST WOMAN IN ISRAEL

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And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt [sat] under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel, in mount Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment (Judg. 4:4-5).

Deborah was the most outstanding lady in Israel's history. During a period when women were only valued as child-bearers, homemakers, and laborers in the fields, she arose from obscurity to become the most important person in the nation. She was a judge, a military general, a ruler, a prophetess, a musician, and a poet. She excelled in every quality, and, if for no other reasons, what is known of her life deserves consideration.

This lady was born sometime between the thirteenth and twelfth centuries before Christ, and her parents must have been elated for they gave their child a name which meant honeybee. This suggests they considered her to be small, very active, and the producer of sweetness. Maybe the name was prophetic, for the baby was destined to reach a place of unprecedented excellence. No other details of her childhood are known, but when she became an adult, she was given in marriage to a man called Lapidoth of whom nothing else is known. She must have been good, gracious, and wise, for when God appointed judges to rule the land, Deborah was the only woman chosen. She held her court beneath a great palm tree that was later named in her honor. This was astonishing for no other woman in Biblical history shared that distinction. The Bible says:

And when the LORD raised them up judges, then the LORD was with the judge, and delivered them [the children of Israel] out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge (Judg. 2:18).

Israel's transgressions were great, and in a period when individuals pleased themselves, law and order were ignored.

32

The nation was dominated by aggressors, the chief of which were the kings of Syria and Canaan. The Promised Land had not been completely conquered, and, consequently, the Canaanites, led by King Jabin, were deadly foes. They lived during what is now called the Iron Age, and the people had capitalized on the art of using metal. They had hundreds of iron chariots against which the Hebrews had no defense. God was intensely disappointed with the corruption of His people, for even the ministry of judges did not abolish idolatry. The ancient writer said:

And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way (Judg. 2:19).

Deborah - The Magistrate... Strange

When the problems of administering justice became too strenuous, Moses, the patriarch, accepted the advice of his

DEBORAH - THE GREATEST WOMAN IN ISRAEL

father-in-law and delegated duties to a special panel of judges (see Exod. 18:13-27). If for any reason they could not solve a problem, it was transferred to a Supreme Court. It was surprising when God chose a woman to be one of the judges;

all other appointees were men. God raised Deborah to prominence and imparted the wisdom necessary for the performance of her duties. It was amazing that argumentative men were willing to accept her decisions. She expressed her views and had the courage to uphold and enforce her verdicts. It cannot be overemphasized that men, who probably disliked and disdained females, accepted the rulings of this official. They listened to her reasoning and sometimes feared, for she possessed authority and could not be challenged. A woman had become the representative of the laws of God.

Today the Western world has been made aware of the inherent capabilities of women to reach any level of society. Ladies have become famous administrators, politicians, and surgeons. Some occupy the highest positions in government.

33

That which was almost unknown in antiquity has become commonplace. It is worthy of note that in some countries the age-old customs prevail, and millions of women are still enslaved by tradition. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has done more to emancipate females than anything else in existence. It teaches the so-called weaker sex was meant by God to be the cherished partners of men. Wise women recognize this fact and are grateful to the Savior who liberated them.

Deborah - The Messenger... Startling

The term "judge" referred to her judicial character and professional ability; her decisions affected people. The designation "prophetess" indicated she was inspired by the Almighty. Deborah was apparently the only woman of her generation who enjoyed that privilege. It may appear strange that other prophets such as Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the ten minor prophets, and several men in the New Testament, bequeathed to posterity permanent records of their ministry. Yet no woman left a record of her work. This lady had the ability to predict things to come, and her accuracy astonished the nation.

Dr. Herbert Lockyer wrote: "We have the exceptional case of Deborah, one of the most remarkable women in the Bible: prophet, judge, ruler, warrior, poetess. Boldly she could say-

The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose; that I arose a mother in Israel (Judg. 5:7).

"Genius and talent found her able and ready to meet her nation's emergency and peril, so she became the first woman leader of men; the first public woman of the Bible with a passionate patriotism achieving such a victory that the land had rest from war for forty years."

Perhaps Deborah's fame as a prophetess had developed over several years. People knew that her predictions were reliable, and her reputation reached new proportions when she foretold the destruction of enemies who had oppressed the

34

DEBORAH - THE GREATEST WOMAN IN ISRAEL
nation for decades. God may have used this remarkable lady because He could not find a man capable of doing her work. Males like to believe they are indispensable, but history has demonstrated that when the best of men failed, the Lord found women whose courage and wisdom superseded anything possessed by males.

Deborah - The Militant... Skillful

It is interesting to note that Barak, the commander in chief of Israel's armies, was residing at Kedesh-Naphtali, apparently indifferent to the danger confronting his nation. That Deborah thought it necessary to assume command of the situation indicates the general's reluctance to defend his country. The enemy had a fortified city near the plains of Esdraelon, and the plain provided space in which their iron chariots could operate. The comparatively small army of Israel was vastly outnumbered, and it was evident the defenders had no chance of victory. Barak's fear was evident when he said to the prophetess, "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go" (Judg. 4:8). Deborah replied, "I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judg. 4:9). The ten thousand men under the command of Barak were drawn from the northern tribes of Israel, but they were apprehensive

as they followed their leader to the battlefield. What happened afterward is best described by Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian.

So Deborah sent for Barak, and bade him choose him out ten thousand young men to go against the enemy, because God had said that number was sufficient and promised them victory. But when Barak said that he would not be the general unless she would also go as a general with him, she had indignation at what he said, and replied, "Thou, O Barak, deliverest up meanly that authority which God hath given thee into the hand of a woman, and I do not reject it." So they collected ten thousand men, and

35

men, and pitched their camp at mount Tabor, where, at the king's command, Sisera met them, and pitched his camp not far from the enemy; whereupon the Israelites, and Barak himself, were so affrighted at the multitude of those enemies, that they were resolved to march off had not Deborah retained them, and commanded them to fight the enemy that very day, for that they should conquer them, and God would be their assistance.

So the battle began; and when they were come to close fight, there came down from heaven a great storm, with a vast quantity of rain and hail, and the wind blew the rain in the face of the Canaanites, and so darkened their eyes, that their arrows and slings were of no advantage to them, nor would the coldness of the air permit the soldiers to make use of their swords; while this storm did not so much incommode the Israelites, because it came in their backs. They also took such courage, upon the apprehension that God was assisting them, that they fell upon the very midst of their enemies, and slew a great number of them; so that some of them fell by the Israelites, some fell by their own horses, which were put

DEBORAH - THE GREATEST WOMAN IN ISRAEL

into disorder, and not a few were killed by their own chariots 2

Deborah - The Musician... Superb

Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Ahinoam on that day, saying: Praise ye the LORD for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves... LORD, when thou wentest out of Seir; when thou marchedst out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water (Judg. 5:14).

They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. The river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the river Kishon. O my soul, thou hast trodden down strength. Then were the horsehoofs broken by the means of the pransings, the pransings of their mighty ones (Judg. 5:20-22).

36

Four facets of Deborah's life and work shine as stars against the blackness of her surroundings. They are her concern. consecration courage, and composition. They deserve investigation.

Her Concern

It is not known how this delightful woman became involved in Israel's legal system, but evidently her capabilities had been recognized by peers. She could have been as other women, a homemaker or a laborer in her husband's fields. The judge was scholarly and liked helping people with problems. Her decisions helped other women to obtain what otherwise might have been denied.

Her Consecration

Deborah's life had been surrendered to the Almighty. who blessed her with the spirit of prophecy. God used her intellectual capabilities, and when predictions were fulfilled, people in the vicinity began to appreciate her talent. This consecrated woman and the Almighty shared their lives. He inspired her, and she did the same for those who attended her court.

Her Confidence

When most of the inhabitants were overwhelmed by fear and invasions resulted in loss of life and property, this lady

was alone. She summoned a frightened army commander and strengthened the hopes of an oppressed nation. Later, when many soldiers were tempted to run away, the unshaken faith of Deborah revived their spirits and made possible one of the greatest victories in military history. It is easy to visualize her standing in the devastating storm, gazing up into heaven, and praising God. The Lord is always invincible, but when a woman of this type is on His side, He must be delighted.

Her Composition

Poets, lyricists, and musicians are special people. They express the inexpressible and see things which only the supernatural can provide. Poetry is the music of the soul, a language

37

which everybody understands. It captivates the glory of the

DEBORAH - THE GREATEST WOMAN IN ISRAEL

eternal, embraces human need, and brings to the surface treasures only found in the depth of human consciousness. Deborah was one of those rare women who inspire everybody.

When the battle ended, she and her colleague sang the only mixed duet mentioned in the Scriptures. It revealed the surging emotions of two happy warriors. The reference to divine assistance was unmistakable. Torrential rain had flooded the plain; the river had overflowed its banks, and "the dropping heavens" evidently referred to atmospheric disturbances. The noise of thunder seemed to suggest heaven's armies were using heavy armament, and flashing lightning struck terror to horses attached to the chariots of iron. When the animals reared on their hind legs they began smashing everything within reach. The warriors were filled with confusion. Chariots were sinking in mud. As panic spread, soldiers began killing their comrades. To make matters worse, the ten thousand men of Israel began attacking, and it became evident the Syrians and Canaanites were doomed. The thunder in the heavens seemed to be applauding the victory. With despair filling his soul, Sisera, the general, fled. It was a remarkable day in Israel, and when Deborah and Barak began to sing, perhaps every soldier cheered. This remarkable woman was the proverbial Jack or Jill of all trades; she was the greatest lady in Israel. She would have loved Paul's statement: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

1. Herbert Lockyer, All the Kings and Queens of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988).
2. The Complete Works of Flavius Josephus, ed. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979).

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