

### *Deborah and the Degradation of Israel*

Throughout the Book of Judges, women play a significant role in showing the degradation of morality in Israel. When men do not come forward to stop those harming Israel, a “certain woman” kills the devious Abimelech with a stone, Jael defeats Canannite military leader Sisera with a tent peg, and Deborah the prophetess effectively succeeds in bringing Israel to war against the Canaanites. The text contrasts strong, obedient women with men who the authors represent as reluctant and less courageous in following the moral path to help the Israelites – qualities that are parallel to the deterioration of Israel as the Book develops. An analysis of Deborah’s time as a judge offers insight into the complex representation of women in Judges.

The narrator depicts Deborah as strong, wise and obedient. The text’s presentation of Deborah juxtaposed with that of Barak emphasizes the lack of confidence and courage in the male leader’s actions. It is Deborah who requests that Barak meet Jabin’s army, an act that shows her desire for freedom for the Israelites. In Judges 4:8, Barak requests Deborah’s company and assistance: “If you will go with me, I will go.” Deborah’s offering to go with him shows selflessness along with an unlikely boldness for her gender and time. At the time of battle, her commands to Barak further the unexpected behavior of a woman – instead of the typical, passive behavior, Deborah’s character takes control and Barak merely follows her instruction. Barak as the male figure, on the other hand, seems reluctant and uneasy about the battle. With the woman’s support, Barak achieves in destroying the army of Sisera. It is evident that without Deborah going “up with him” – however this could be interpreted – Barak may not have been so successful. It is interesting that Deborah comforts Barak by saying, “The LORD

is indeed going out before you.” It suggests a comparison of the comfort the two figures provide.

Deborah’s prophetess allows her the ability to foresee events that other judges could not. In her assurance of Barak, she warns him that he will not gain the glory from defeating the Canaanites: “...nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” (Jud. 4:9) In the passage, the text depicts Deborah’s words as reassuring verses threatening. The authors make Deborah appear as admirable in her ability to persuade Barak to act.

It is interesting that Deborah is defined as being the wife of her husband rather than her origins, her place of residency, or who she descends from: “At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel”(Jud. 4:4). The text does not present Deborah as the daughter of anyone; the reader does not know what her roots are and cannot follow the layers of her decent – here, Deborah is only defined as a wife. While the song later refers to her as a mother, it is interesting that this strong leader is not more clearly associated with an Israelite past. It is one detail that sets Deborah apart from the other judges, and again emphasizes her courage in a powerful role.

From the first passage of her introduction, the setting of Deborah’s judgment also sets her apart from the other judges: “She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment” (Jud. 4:5). Deborah sits in a protective setting, under the shade of a palm, which could either be interpreted as her need for protection as a female or the approachability a counselor with this casual “office”– versus one set in Jerusalem – might suggest. Deborah makes herself public, accessible. Another significant detail is that the

palm sits between the Ramah and Bethel in the hills of Ephraim. Israelites travel from both areas to receive her guidance. Ephraim as a geographical point between the two cities could imply Deborah's unifying of the Israelite people in the text. Another explanation for Deborah's setting could be that her "prophetess" makes her different from the other judges who physically go out to reach their people, making her advice more valuable.

Along with other disparities between Deborah and the male judges, Deborah's femininity could also contribute to her effective leadership. In Judges 5, Deborah and Barak sing, "The peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder, because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel" (Jud. 5:7). The text's referral to Deborah as a mother highlights her femininity and the author's positive portrayal of the use of the feminine power. According to the text and outcome of the war, the Israelites were able to prosper and rejoice. The song recalls poetry and the expressive, typically joyous songs of the text, exemplifying the success during Deborah's time as a judge. The language of Barak's timid quote referenced earlier is distinctive amidst the surrounding prose. "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." The parallel, poetic verse expresses Barak's insecurity.

The reason Deborah, as a female, is a judge is not explained in the text. Other stories in the Book of Judges, however, can help analyze the situation to generate possible reasons for her position. Jael, for instance, is an unlikely hero, especially relative to Deborah. Prior to murdering Sisera, Jael plays an insignificant role in society – she is a wife, and not much else; she is not even an Israelite. Jael uses her femininity and hospitality, however – the two traits she is likely accustomed to as Heber's wife – to

lure Sisera into her home to kill him. Instead of directly confronting him in a way she would most likely fail, Jael waits until he is resting, tired, vulnerable. She goes “softly” to Sisera, an adjective that hints to Jael’s femininity and an aspect of Jael that possibly makes the defeat of Sisera successful. Before, no man in Barak’s army succeeds in defeating Sisera. From Jael’s story, the text could imply that Deborah rose to judgment when no man was willing.

Another “certain woman’s” actions mimic those of Jael’s. In Judges 9:53, “a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head, and crushed his skull.” In this, the text further shows the decline of male leadership, or leadership in general, in Israel. The text deems it appropriate that a woman and a stone stopped Abimelech, the man who killed all of his brothers to gain power. The text does not provide much information about this woman, but the two stories of a female striking a male in the head with a similarly unconventional object are undeniably similar. It also stresses the independence of Jael and the “certain woman” in both actions – the text describes no cohorts in either scene. After no men have taken the chance to kill either Sisera or Abimelech – none of the men in the war with neither Sisera’s army nor any of the men at the tower in Thebez. It was the woman in both situations that stepped forward to act in what the text says is Adoshem’s punishment for the crimes Sisera and Abimelech committed, making these instances analogous to Deborah’s situation. The men remain in the background, passively following commands of those they fear.

The text also uses women to further show the immorality of Israel. While Jael killed an enemy, the certain woman rid Israelites of one of their own. Abimelech was, whether appropriately or not, a leader. After killing all but one of his seventy half

brothers, Abimelech gains his leadership. It is the unknown, “certain woman” who the text presents as courageous enough to murder him. Again, although the authors do not write it directly, the passage about this woman could suggest one reason that Deborah is a judge.

The role of women in the Book of Judges is crucial to its representation of the downward moral and religious state. A thorough look at the relationship between Deborah and Barak offers a potential understanding of the text’s portrayal of other women throughout the book. Female roles emphasize inadequate representations of male characters. Deborah was judge at the Canaanites, for example, but it cannot be certain why she was a judge. Passages in Judges, such as the housewife Jael killing Sisera rather than a male or the certain woman killing Abimelech before another man, suggest that Deborah rose judge Israel when no male was willing.