

Introduction

Roles of men and women

One of the difficult topics in the church and in our culture is the roles of men and women. In some cultures, there are clear distinctions, but in our culture, there are fewer distinctions. We should not separate ourselves from culture; however, we should view all things with a biblically based worldview.

Today, we will read about Deborah and Barak. Women play a strong part of this story. Deborah acts as judge and prophet in Israel. Jael defeats Sisera (rather than Barak).

Deborah and Barak

Canaanite oppression

[Judges 4:1-3](#) “1 And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. 2 And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. 3 Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.”

After Ehud’s death, Israel again rebelled against the Lord. *Who did God allow to oppress them for their rebellion?* Notice that verse 2 states that the Lord “sold” Israel to the Canaanites. Just as the Lord set them free from slavery in Egypt, He now has sold them into slavery.

There are two important characters in these verses. First, the king of Canaan was Jabin. Jabin reigned from Hazor. [Joshua 11:1-11](#) describes Joshua’s defeat of Jabin, king of Hazor. After the victory, Joshua burned the city of Hazor. Joshua killed that king ([Josh 11:17](#)), so this is a different king. Jabin may have been a hereditary name for kings of Hazor. Although Hazor was burned, it seems to have been rebuilt by [Judges 4](#). Archaeologist John Garstang estimated that Hazor covered 200 acres, with a population of 40,000 (vs Jericho’s estimated population of 1500) (Arthur Cundall, TOTC).

Second, Sisera was the commander of the Canaanite army. The army had 900 iron chariots. While Canaan was using iron, Israel was still in the bronze age.

Deborah

[Judges 4:4-5](#) “4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.”

Who was Deborah? Deborah was a prophetess and a judge. She judges Israel between Ramah and Bethel. Israel's last judge, Samuel, was from Ramah and judged Israel from Ramah ([1 Sam 7:17](#)). Deborah was the only female judge in Israel, but she was not the only prophetess ([Exod 15:20](#); [2 Kgs 22:14](#); [2 Chr 34:22](#); [Neh 6:14](#); [Luke 2:36](#)).

Barak

[Judges 4:6-10](#) “6 She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, “Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. 7 And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?’” 8 Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” 9 And she said, “I will surely go with you. 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.” Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.”

Where would Barak face Sisera in battle? The Lord said he would draw out Sisera to the river of Kishon. This location is part of God’s plan for defeating Sisera.

What was Barak’s condition for leading the battle? Barak said he would only go if Deborah went with him. Based on Deborah’s response, we might conclude that Barak lacked faith; however, [Heb 11:32](#) says that Barak was an example of faith. So, Deborah’s response may not be a rebuke.

Interestingly, Deborah is not mentioned outside of Judges. Barak is mentioned twice. In both situations, Scripture lists some of the judges of Israel, including Barak. [1 Samuel 12:11](#) “11 And the Lord sent Jerubbaal and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety.” [Hebrews 11:32-33](#) “32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,” If we view this event from the perspective of the full canon of Scripture, we should not downplay Barak’s role. Although Deborah was the one who handled judicial matters, Barak is the one whom God raised up to lead Israel out of oppression.

[Judges 4:11](#) “11 Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.”

This verse is a little difficult to reconcile in Scripture. Moses’ father-in-law is called Reuel in [Exodus 2:18-21](#) and Jethro in [Exodus 3:1](#). Hobab is called the son of Reuel in [Numbers 10:29](#). I suspect the word translated here as “father-in-law” would be better translated, “in-law.” The

stem seems to refer to father-in-law, brother-in-law, son-in-law, and mother-in-law, depending on the context. Based on those other passages, I think Hobab was Moses' brother-in-law. The Kenites were nomadic people, descendants of Moses's in-laws, who lived among Israel. This is important later in this story.

Jaer vs Sisera

Sisera's defeat

[Judges 4:12-16](#) “12 When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. 14 And Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. 15 And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot. 16 And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.”

Who does Scripture credit for the victory over Sisera? The Lord went before Barak ([Judg 4:14](#)). The Lord routed Sisera ([Judg 4:15](#)). Notice that Sisera fled on foot, rather than by chariot. *Why do you think he fled on foot when the chariot would have been faster?*

Jael's victory

[Judges 4:17-20](#) “17 But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. 18 And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. 19 And he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. 20 And he said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’ ””

Who was Jael? Jael was the wife of Heber, the Kenite. Heber and Jabin had peace. However, the Kenites also had a connection with Israel through Moses' in-laws.

How did Jael provide for Sisera? She gave him a place to hide in her tent ([Judg 4:18](#)). She gave him milk to drink ([Judg 4:19](#)).

[Judges 4:21-24](#) “21 But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. 22 And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.” So he went in to her tent, and there lay Sisera

dead, with the tent peg in his temple. 23 So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. 24 And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.”

Deborah told Barak that he would not get the glory for defeating Sisera. The Lord would defeat Sisera through a woman. *How did Jael kill Sisera?* She drove a tent peg through his head while he slept. Once again, Scripture credits the Lord with the victory over Canaan ([Judg 4:23](#)).

Song of two mothers

The Lord's victory

[Judges 5:1-3](#) “1 Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day: 2 “That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord! 3 “Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the Lord I will sing; I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

To whom is this song directed? This is a song (melody) to the Lord. The Lord is the one who has delivered Israel from the Canaanites.

[Judges 5:4-5](#) “4 “Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. 5 The mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel.”

What physical events happened as the Lord gave Israel victory over the Canaanites? Verse 4 says that the earth trembled (perhaps and earthquake). Also, it rained ([Judg 5:4](#)).

Before the battle

[Judges 5:6-8](#) “6 “In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned, and travelers kept to the byways. 7 The villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased to be until I arose; I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. 8 When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel?”

During the days of Shamgar (the previous judge) and Jael, people stayed off of the main roads, perhaps because of Canaanite oppression. *How does Deborah describe herself?* She describes herself as a mother to Israel. Notice the situation in Israel. They were worshipping false gods, war was at their gates, and they did not have weapons.

Going to battle

[Judges 5:9-13](#) “9 My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the Lord. 10 “Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets and you who walk by the way. 11 To the sound of musicians at the

watering places, there they repeat the righteous triumphs of the Lord, the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel. “Then down to the gates marched the people of the Lord. 12 “Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, break out in a song! Arise, Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam. 13 Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the Lord marched down for me against the mighty.”

Although the Lord gets credit for the victory, the song still acknowledges the courage of the soldiers who marched to war. Remember, they were going against a stronger army who had iron chariots.

[Judges 5:14–18](#) “14 From Ephraim their root they marched down into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen; from Machir marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant’s staff; 15 the princes of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak; into the valley they rushed at his heels. Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. 16 Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. 17 Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings. 18 Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death; Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field.”

Notice that many of the tribes fought together against Canaan: Ephraim, Benjamin (who led), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali. Notice also that there were tribes who did not help fight: Reuben, Dan, and Asher.

[Judges 5:19–23](#) “19 “The kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they got no spoils of silver. 20 From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. 21 The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! 22 “Then loud beat the horses’ hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds. 23 “Curse Meroz, says the angel of the Lord, curse its inhabitants thoroughly, because they did not come to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.”

Notice that Sisera’s army was swept away by the “torrent of Kishon” ([Judg 5:21](#)). If we compare this with [Judges 5:4](#), it seems that Sisera’s army was defeated by the storm that the Lord sent.

Jael’s victory

[Judges 5:24–27](#) “24 “Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. 25 He asked for water and she gave him milk; she brought him curds in a noble’s bowl. 26 She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. 27 Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.”

These verses recount the events at the end of chapter 4. Jael gets the credit, not Barak, for killing Sisera.

Sisera's mother

[Judges 5:28-31](#) “28 “Out of the window she peered, the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice: ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?’ 29 Her wisest princesses answer, indeed, she answers herself, 30 ‘Have they not found and divided the spoil?— A womb or two for every man; spoil of dyed materials for Sisera, spoil of dyed materials embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil?’ 31 “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.” And the land had rest for forty years.”

The final verses of the song focus on Sisera's mother, who waited for him to return. The other women attempted to comfort her, that he was slow to return because of his great victory.

Notice how the song ends. [Judges 5:31](#) “31 “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might...” Sisera was not just an enemy of Israel. He was an enemy of the Lord.

New Covenant

No distinction

There are two broad principles of Scripture that should shape how we regard the roles of men and women (in the church and in the home). [Galatians 3:28](#) “28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

What are the implications of this verse? First, there is no distinction regarding personal faith and relationship with the Lord. Scripture teaches that in the New Covenant, we are all priests of the Lord ([1 Pet 2:5, 9](#)). Like the Levites of the OT, we all inherit the Lord and enter into the holy places by Christ's blood. Only men entered the holy places in the OT, but in the New Covenant, there is no distinction between men and women.

When we compare this with Scripture's teaching about men leading in the church and the home, one thing we should conclude is that women bear the responsibility of their own faith and their own spiritual growth. Although the husband is responsible for spiritual leadership in the home, the wife is responsible for personal faith and personal growth. Similarly, although men are responsible for spiritual leadership and teaching in the church, women are responsible for evaluating that teaching in relation to Scripture.

The role of men

Scripture also teaches that God has designed distinct roles for women and men in the church and in the family. In the family, husbands/fathers are responsible for leading the home. This is why [Eph 5:22-33](#) and [1 Pet 3:1-7](#) teach that husbands should love their wives and wives should submit to their husbands. Husbands leading the home is not a cultural topic; that is, it does not only apply in cultures that already have this view. It is something we see explicitly taught throughout Scripture, beginning with the Garden of Eden.

God has also appointed men to lead in the church. The New Testament teaches that churches should be led by multiple overseers (elders, pastors). Overseers have two main responsibilities; they lead (rule) the church and teach the church. [1 Tim 5:17-18](#) indicates that some overseers (elders, pastors) are paid so they can devote time to preaching and teaching and some are not paid. Just before the qualifications of overseers in [1 Tim 3](#), [1 Tim 2:12](#) states that women should not teach or exercise authority in the church. These are the two responsibilities of overseers (elders, pastors).

Deacons

What about female deacons? I think we should consider this topic carefully, because it is one of the more difficult topics regarding the roles of men and women in the church. I have a conviction about this topic, but I also recognize that there are solid arguments on the opposite side of my view.

[1 Timothy 3:8-13](#) lists the qualifications of deacons. One verse ([1 Tim 3:11](#)) is devoted to women. The Greek word (γυνή) can rightly be translated wife or woman. Therefore, people debate whether this passage refers to the wives of deacons or female deacons. I will save this debate for a future study on the church (hopefully this summer).

The role of women

What, then, should women do in the church? Again, we should view the roles of men and women from the two perspectives taught in Scripture: (1) there is no distinction concerning our relationship with the Lord and (2) God has appointed men to lead in the family and in the church.

This does not mean that women have no role in the family or in the church. [Eph 6:1-3](#) indicates that children should obey their parents and quotes [Exod 20:12](#), which says they should honor their father and mother. This implies that both parents, not just fathers, are expected to instruct their children.

Regarding Scripture's teaching that men should be overseers and women should not teach or exercise authority, this does not mean that women have no teaching role in the church. Again, that context is in relation to overseers, who are responsible for teaching and guarding sound doctrine in the church. However, we read in [Titus 2:3-5](#) that the older women should

teach the younger women. I think if we combine the instructions of [Titus 2](#) and [Ephesians 6](#), we should also conclude that women could lead children's classes in the church without breaking the intention of [2 Timothy 2](#).

Conclusion

[Judges 4-5](#) is an important contribution to us thinking about the role of women in the church. Deborah judged Israel. Deborah was a prophet. Barak led Israel, but Jael overcame Sisera. Even the Song of Deborah and Barak highlights Deborah as the mother of Israel, Jael as the military victor, and Sisera's mother's perspective of his defeat.

These chapters highlight that, although God has appointed men to certain leadership roles in home and in the church, He intends to use women to accomplish His purposes, even in relation to teaching and leading, within a biblical framework.