CHAPTER III

DEBORAH
After a period of peace, the Israelites drifted into worshipping the Canaanite gods:

The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods. (Judges 3: 5-6)

For this they were punished as their enemies attacked and defeated them. They cried to God for help and a leader - a judge - emerged who led them to military victory and moral and religious reformation.

The book of Judges covers a period of transition in the history of the Hebrews, and deals with the settlement of the various tribes in Palestine, their gradual combination into one people, and their conquest of the native Canaanites. In this book we see the result of disobedience to the law; Israel's slow and painful task in gaining possession of Canaan was the punishment for their disregard of the law and for their apostasy from their God.

The book of Judges introduces one and only woman judge-cum-prophetess. She was largely a civil leader but also the inspiration behind Barak, the military commander.
This book also introduces Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who was cause for the completion of victory.

Both Deborah and Jael appear as the heroines. Deborah inspired Barak to attack Sisera, promising him victory. Sisera was defeated and he took refuge in the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. She killed him while asleep with a tent peg: "It was a grievous breach against the law of hospitality but the end was held to justify the means."¹

Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor, occupied Israel after Ehud's death and oppressed the Israelites for twenty years:

After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim.

Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help. (Judges 4:1-3)
Deborah was anointed by God to be a judge in Israel. "Deborah" means "Bee." In view of the reputation of the bee as intelligent and hardworking, Deborah was a fitting name for the fifth judge in Israel. She was a sting for her enemies but honey for her friends. Her husband was Lappidoth. "Lappidoth" means "torch." It is not known if Deborah and Lappidoth had any children.

Deborah was a prophetess and judge in Israel during the time when Jabin, terrorized the Hebrews with his military power. Before this there was peace in Israel. But the people did evil continually until at last God sent the mighty army of Jabin, without warning. The commander of his army was Sisera. With nine hundred chariots of iron they destroyed vineyards, abused women, and captured and killed children for about twenty years. The Israelites felt helpless and forsaken.

In spite of this, year after year Deborah sat under a palm tree near Bethel, and the people flocked to her to judgements and wisdom. Many times she persuaded them to cast themselves upon God's mercy and drive out the Canaanites boldly, but they were too fearful. Hence the land of Israel grew darker every year:
Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.

She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. (Judges 4:4-5)

As Carl Edwin Armerding observes,

Deborah would be worthy of special mention even without her military exploits. The question she faced was whether Israel could exist as a nation split in two by a powerful Canaanite force. In calling for mobilization in Yaweh's name, she prophetically stood for all that God had set forth in his original covenant with Israel.

But at last God's voice was heared by Deborah the prophetess. The message was to call Barak, a Hebrew from Naphtali, the commander of army, and to tell him to gather ten thousand men and lead them to steep Mount Tabor near Nazareth. As soon as the enemy approached, the Israelites were to climb the mountain quickly to attack from above. God promised complete victory for His people. Deborah called
Barak and told him the plan which God wanted them to do and ordered him to do in the same way:

The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebuleen and lead the way to Mount Tabor.

I will lure Sisera, the commander of Tabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hand. (Judges 4:6-7)

But her order was in vain. Barak, though the name means "thunderbolt," refused to go alone. It was an act which in a way degraded the meaning of his name. He said:

If you go with me, I will go; but
If you don't go with me, I won't go.

(Judges 4:8)

The above verse shows Barak's timidity and lack of trust in the Lord. He was astonished at the message, and became fearful because he knew that Sisera had nine hundred iron chariots and his army was nothing when compared to Sisera's. The credit goes to Deborah, a woman, in having
great faith in God's word and acting according to it. With
great courage and trust in God she agreed to go with Barak to
the battle when he demanded Deborah's company. She agreed
but warned him that the honour for destroying the Canaanite
general would then go to a woman:

Very well, I will go with you. But because of
the way you are going about this, the honour
will not be yours, for the Lord will hand
Sisera over to a woman. (Judges 4:9)

Barak's request makes us to feel that Deborah must
have been a very strong and reassuring presence for Barak to
demand her company as he went into battle. She must have
possessed profound wisdom to draw Hebrews from all over
Israel for her judgements:

So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh, where he
summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, Ten thousand
men followed him, and Deborah also went with
him. (Judges 4:10)

They marched to the base of steep, Mount Tabor.
When Sisera heard that Barak, son of Abinoan, had gone to
Mount Tabor, he gathered his nine hundred iron chariots and
all the men with him, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon.
At the steep of Mount Tabor, stood the powerful army of Sisera ready for battle. Then Deborah said to Barak:

Go! This is the day that Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you? (Judges 4:14)

As the men of Israel scrambled to higher levels, lighting began to flash. Then thunder roared as a fearful storm swept down before the advancing army of Canaan. Their frightened horses ran wild. Their chariots were thrown into confusion on the steep muddy slopes of Mount Tabor. The swollen river Kishon further threw them into chaos. It was the hand of God that the Israelites swooped down upon the Canaanites with a triumphant cry of victory, driving them into the sea below. It was a miracle that the dreadful army of Sisera was destroyed. But the exhausted Canaanite commander stopped to rest during his retreat, in Jael’s tent.

At Barak’s advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim. All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword; not a man was left.

(Judges 4:15-16)
Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin, king of Hazor, and the clan of Heber the Kenite. "Jael" means "mountain goat." She went out to meet Sisera and assured him of his safety:

Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid.

(Judges 4:18)

She covered him and gave him a drink when he asked for. She promised him that she would not let anyone knew his whereabouts. When Sisera was asleep, Jael took a tent peg and a hammer and drove the peg through his temple to kill him:

But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died. (Judges 4:21)

The laws of hospitality normally meant that one tried to protect a guest from any harm. Jael might have been an Imaelite and hence remained true to her family's previous alliance with Israel. Armed only with domestic implements,
this dauntless woman destroyed the great warrior whom Barak had earlier feared.³

Jael showed the dead Sisera to Bark who came by in pursuit of him:

"Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple-dead. (Judges 4 : 22)

That day God subdued Jagin the Canaanite king, and the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin until they destroyed him. With Sisera dead the kingdom of Jabin was no longer a threat. The land "flowing with milk and honey" had been saved by the courage and faithfulness of "Bee" and "Mountain goat."

Deborah was responsible for two successes: God's permission for the destruction of Jabin and the destruction of Jabin's kingdom. On the day of the destruction, Deborah along with Barak sang a song in praise of God. Then the land had peace for forty years. Deborah's song is considered by many as one of the finest specimens of ancient Hebrew poetry in existence:
The historical value of the song of Deborah can hardly be exaggerated. It is the oldest extant monument of Hebrew literature, and the only contemporaneous monument of Hebrew history before the foundation of the kingdom.4

The poem is usually called "The Song of Deborah" though Barak is included in the title basing the verse 7 of the poem. It may be called a "Victory Hymn" or "Triumph Ode." As Carl Edwin Armerding points out,

The poem may be divided in various ways, but the dual themes of blessing and cursing seem prominent throughout. Blessing is given to Yahweh for his acts of old (4-5), for the volunteers who willingly come forth (2, 9), for the defeat of the enemy (19-22), and for the death of Sisera (24-27). Blessing is also specifically due to Jael (24-27) and Deborah, together with the tribes which heeded God’s call to fight (13-18). Conversely, the curse is the lot of Meroz (23), the tribes which did not respond (13-18), Sisera (24-27), and Sisera’s mother (28-30). Finally, all enemies of the Lord are cursed while those who love...
him are blessed as the sun rising 'in his might' (31).5

To commemorate a national victory with songs was a common practice (Exod 15:1-18; Num 21:27-30; Deut 32:1-43; I Sam 18:7). The song was probably written by Deborah or a contemporary and is thus one of the oldest poems in the Bible.

The song may be divided into the following sections:

1. the purpose of the song (praise) and the occasion for the deeds it celebrates (2-9);
2. the exportation to Israel to act in accordance with her heroic past (10-11a);
3. the people's appeal to Deborah (11b-12);
4. the gathering of warriors (13-18);
5. the battle (1-23);
6. the crafty triumph of Jael over Sisera (24-27);
7. the anxious waiting of Sisera's mother (28-30); and
8. the conclusion (31).6

The song is presented in Appendix.
This was the victorious song of praise to God by Deborah that day. Deborah fascinates us. In an age when women were largely subordinate to men, it undoubtedly took a remarkable woman to win the respect and admiration of so many.

Deborah's prophecy had come true. The glory was now shared by two women. Deborah, whose courageous call to a holy war had initiated the battle, and Jael, whose savage act of cruelty had finished it. In conclusion, we can say,

God is not prejudiced regarding gender, age, or race. He will accomplish his purposes through men, women, or even children. Deborah made herself available to God, and God used her to achieve great things. Christendom is not to be characterized by gender wars and dog-eat-dog ambition. Simply offer your abilities to God, and, as he did with Deborah, he will give you a mission to accomplish whether you are male or female, young or old, one race or another.
REFERENCES


