

Deborah – a Woman of Spirit

It is often said that the world of the Bible was a patriarchal society in which God always chose to act, speak and reveal the divine purposes through men. It is quite probable that you are not familiar with the story of Deborah from the book of Judges, especially since the letter to the Hebrew in the New Testament singles out Barak as one of the great heroes of faith in ancient Israel when it refers to this story – an interpretation that is somewhat at odds with the narrative that we heard read this morning.

The name Deborah is the normal Hebrew word for a bee or a hornet – and it sounds very similar to the feminine form of the Hebrew participle meaning ‘one who speaks’. So is the name encouraging us to anticipate a woman who will produce the honey that Israel expected to flow in the Promised Land, or a woman who will speak in mellifluous tones? – or perhaps the writer is preparing us for a story with a sting in its tail. There is only one other woman in the Hebrew Bible called Deborah and her story is told in Genesis where she is the wet nurse to Rebekah, the mother of Jacob, who is subsequently renamed Israel. They are different women; but the Deborah of Genesis was buried beneath an oak tree just to the south of Bethel – a place remembered by tradition as somewhere that their ancestors had regularly discerned God; and exactly the same location where we find the Deborah of Judges, between Ramah and Bethel, sitting under a palm tree.

We are told straightaway that Deborah was a prophetess, someone who acted as a mouthpiece for God and as a mediator between the people and God. We are told that the people of Israel went to Deborah for wise judgements and divine guidance, at a location where the woman who had wet nursed, nourished the infant Israel, as a mother would, was remembered.

Deborah’s story is set in the pre-monarchic period of Israel’s history, the period when they lived as a loose confederation of tribes in the land of Canaan. Although Deborah isn’t unique as a female prophet, Huldah in the reign of King Josiah and Isaiah’s wife are similarly described, she is the only one credited with uttering more than a single prophetic oracle. She is presented as someone whose reputation had spread far and wide; and who had been sought out by the people for divine guidance on many occasions prior to this story that is recorded. Deborah was a woman of stature in her community, with acknowledged authority.

In our reading Deborah was also presented as the wife of Lappidoth. I want to suggest that translation is indicative of the patriarchal culture in which the biblical texts have been handed down and translated from the original; a culture that presumed that no woman could be independent and virtuous, that a woman must always be identified in terms of her relationship to a man, be it her father, brother, or husband, to whom she belonged. There is no distinction in Hebrew vocabulary between a woman and a wife, but Lappidoth is actually a feminine plural noun that would consequently be a very strange name for a man; it simply means torches. It could be the name of the town or village from which Deborah originated, as places were often understood in feminine terms; but as no such place is attested elsewhere we might wonder why the narrator would draw attention to it. However a natural reading of the phrase describing Deborah the prophet would lead to the concept 'a woman of torches', or a fiery, spirited woman, which accords with the way she is presented throughout the story. Deborah is an independent woman, answerable only to God; a woman who calls others to action in the name of God and determines when and how to act herself – a woman whose words were infused with divine power and authority.

In Judges 4 Deborah takes the initiative to summons Barak – she doesn't wait for him to come to her. She is the one in tune with God, with a commission for Barak to fulfil. He is told to gather the forces of Israel and prepare to carry out God's purposes of rescuing Israel from oppression. But rather than acting instantly, Barak, whose name ironically means lightning, shows reluctance and declares that he won't go unless Deborah accompanies him. He could be challenging Deborah's prophetic status, or quite the opposite – his words might denote a recognition that she is the one who is in communication with God, who will be able to mediate ongoing wisdom and advice to him; and therefore be an acknowledgement that without Deborah's presence, representing God's presence, he is unlikely to succeed.

Whatever motives we attribute to Barak, Deborah's response indicates a negative judgement on his failure to act with unquestioning obedience. She declares that as a consequence the oppressor will be given into the hands of a woman – the ultimate insult to a warrior. As we listen we imagine that Deborah is prophesying that God will grant her the victory; but as the story unfolds we discover that another woman, Jael, the wife of a Kenite blacksmith is the one who ultimately overcomes the oppressor by pinning him to the ground with a

tent peg! So Deborah's prophecies are fulfilled, Israel is set free from oppression; and she is affirmed as a true and faithful prophet.

But another version of this story is found in Judges 5, one written in poetry and presented as a victory song, being sung after the events, in praise and thanks to God for Israel's deliverance. Deborah is the songstress – like Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who led her people in praise of God after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and safe passage across the Reed Sea. Now Deborah leads the community in praise and worship of God; and although Barak is made a co-singer by translators the feminine singular verb in the Hebrew text excludes him from this role. Deborah attributes all power and glory to God and sings of her role in the events as a mother in Israel – another allusion to her namesake in Genesis to emphasise her matriarchal status? – as she tells how the people flourished under her leadership and how she was called upon by them in a time of trouble to awake and sing her songs, perhaps her way to proclaim messages from God as a prophet.

Deborah, an inspired and spirited woman in the pages of scripture, who has been side-lined by tradition and patriarchal assumptions. In the Gospel we heard of Jesus being rejected at Nazareth by those who thought they knew him and just couldn't imagine that he might be God's chosen means of revelation in their day. I wonder what presumptions, prejudices and misplaced confidence in our own wisdom prevent us from recognising those through whom God is at work in our world today? Amen.