



Two women who stepped up
when men failed

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[Judges 4:1-10, 15-24, Judges 5:24-31](#), 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

One day, when I was quite young, I stumbled upon the passage that we read in the Book of Judges this morning. It was just the sort of story that an adolescent boy can't get enough of. What can I say, I loved the violence and the gory details of the story of Jael. It quickly became the Bible story that I loved to show off to people when they wanted to know something weird from the Bible. I guess some things never change.

Heroic Women

But I have learned recently to appreciate the story for some reasons beyond the somewhat gory details. It is a story of how men messed everything up, pushed people to the edge and they were only making everything worse. And it is a story about how women had to step in and save the day.

And, if you do much reading in the Bible, and especially in the Old Testament, you will know what a truly extraordinary thing such a story is. The Bible is a book that was written within a society that was completely oriented towards male dominance and authority.

The Usual Biblical Heroine

The heroes of the Bible, by and large, are men. Whenever the nation is in need of saving, they are the ones who ride to the rescue. Female heroines are few and far between and most often their work of saving the nation comes in the form of producing children to ensure the next generation, which is not to suggest even for a moment that such work is not important or heroic, it is. It is just that the Bible so often assumes that that is the *only* heroic role that a woman can have.

It is for that reason that the story of Deborah and of Jael stands out in the Bible. And, unfortunately, the tradition has often ignored these extraordinary women. That is a real shame because, while it is true that the Bible is focused on the stories and fates of men, it is not true that it simply discounts the women of the history of faith. Sometimes it takes some digging, but incredible stories are there. So, I would like to share with you the story of two extraordinary women who saved the Hebrew nation at a time of great peril.

Embeyisrael

Deborah sat under a palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim as she did most every day. The place, which was indeed a holy and sanctified place, was so closely associated with this extraordinary woman, that you just had to say the Palm of Deborah, and everyone immediately knew what tree you were talking about.

Deborah was acknowledged by all as a wise and thoughtful woman. People respected her opinions so much that they would come from miles around to stand before her and ask her to settle their arguments and disputes. She always sought to act with justice and compassion and so her judgments were highly valued. Because they believed that she had been designated by God to lead the people, they called her Embeyisrael – the mother of Israel.

Bigger Problems

But, while Deborah could certainly help people to work through their individual disputes, they still struggled collectively with a very big challenge. Jabin, the King of Hazor, had become very wealthy and powerful throughout the whole region. And he had used his wealth and his influence to exploit the Hebrew people.

He kept them from living peaceably in the land and profiting from the work of their hands. His chief enforcer, Sisera, squeezed the people to wring every last bit of profit that he could out of them. And Deborah felt that, if she was to be a true leader of the people, she ought to have the courage to tackle this system of subjugation and exploitation that was destroying them.

But there was a problem. The systemic exploitation of Jabin and Sisera could only be challenged through direct confrontation. In that culture, it was not considered seemly for a woman to engage in that kind of thing. If she was going to take direct action, she would have to ask another to lead.

The Man for the Job

And so she sent for Barak. Barak was a man, a requirement for the job, but he had also shown himself capable of leading the militia of the tribes of Israel. She knew that if he spoke on her behalf and asked the tribes to come in the name of the Mother of Israel, they would respond.

But Barak was hesitant. The problem was not that he didn't believe that he could do it. He was a man; he had no doubts about that. But he was somewhat resentful of the very idea that he might need to call up the tribes on behalf of the *Mother* of Israel. He felt as if this would rob him of the honour and the glory that was due to him and his name.

Barak's Condition

And so, he said that he would only do it on one condition. She would have to go with him. He figured that this way, if he was not successful, he could always blame the failure on her. Whereas, if he actually managed to defeat Sisera, that could only happen in the thick of battle where Deborah could not go. Thus, only he would have the glory from such a victory.

He thought that Deborah would refuse. Most men would have, for what man is willing to risk his life in battle without the possibility of earning personal glory? But Deborah didn't think like a man. She would have laid aside all her own glory in order that her people might be safe from those who oppressed them. And so, Deborah agreed. But she could not help herself from giving a warning to Barak that he might be valuing the wrong things.

"I will surely go with you;" she said. **"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."** But Barak only laughed at that. He was absolutely certain that there was no way that Deborah could steal his glory when he won.

The Wife of Heber

Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite. And Heber, like most of the Kenites, had a rather precarious existence in the territories of the people of Israel. He lived as a nomad, herding sheep and cattle and living in tents as he travelled around in search of the best pastures.

As a herder, he had often had many clashes with the Israelite tribespeople. The Israelites, who were trying to eke a living out of their little plots of farmland, often resented it when herders like Heber let their animals graze on their land and destroy their crops.

And so, Heber sought some protection from his enemies, the Israelites. He went to the only strongman he could find and one who had no great love or respect for the Israelites. He made a deal with Sisera – a protection deal. He paid off Sisera and Sisera made sure that bad things happened to anyone who clashed with Heber.

So, Heber was actively participating in the exploitation of the settled Hebrews. Jael, his wife, hadn't been consulted about any of this, of course, she was just expected to go along with it.

Her Own Person

But Jael was not just a possession belonging to her husband. The Hebrews might have had a law that went like this: **“You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour,”** but Jael knew that she was more than her husband’s possession.

Jael had eyes to see, and she had a brain to interpret the things that she saw. She saw how Sisera was oppressing the people. She knew that it wasn't right. And the safe thing to do about that would have been to just keep her head down and do what her husband told her to do, but Jael wasn't that kind of person.

The Battle at Kishon

When Barak looked down upon the Wadi Kishon and saw where Sisera had gathered his army, his heart quailed at the sight. The army of Hazor was massive and well-equipped. There had to be about 900 iron chariots on the floor of that valley. Barak knew that the men at his back who had gathered from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were only farmers who had beaten their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears. How could they possibly hope to take on such professional troops? He was ready to call the whole thing off.

But, as Deborah looked over his shoulder, Yahweh allowed her to see something that he had missed. There had been a rainfall the night before, and the floor of the wadi was a mass of churned-up mud. She suspected that Sisera's chariots would not give him the advantage that Barak feared. She commanded Barak in front of all the men. "Go, for God has given Sisera into your hand today!"

Barak really had no choice. His honour would not allow him to be chastised by a woman and do nothing about it. And so he brandished his sword and with a cry to Yahweh, the warrior god of Israel, he led the tribesmen as they charged down the steep sides of the wadi.

Victory!

The men of Hazor were taken by surprise in the sudden attack. Under normal circumstances, they would have recovered quickly and maneuvered their chariots by the time the Israelites fell upon them. But the wheels of the chariots quickly became mired in the mud and Sisera's army fell into confusion. The lightly armoured Israelite infantry swept over the trapped charioteers and they began to flee in every direction. But the wheels turned so slowly because of the mud, that the infantry were able to give chase and Barak led his troops in what felt like a rout.

So, there was victory that day, but there was no honour. For, in the confusion and while everyone was concentrating on the chariots, Sisera had slipped away on foot. And so, Barak knew that part of what Deborah had promised had come to pass. He would not gain the glory that he was due for such a victory. But, as he looked across the field and saw Deborah standing there, he took solace in one thing. At least *all* that she had predicted had not come to pass. She had not stolen his glory. So, at least the very worst had not happened and he had not been outshone by a mere woman.

A Demanding Visitor

Jael was alone in her tent. Her husband was away following his herds as usual. He would often be gone for days at a time leaving her to deal with whatever might happen.

And, it seemed, something definitely was happening outside her tent right now. There had been sounds of battle just beyond the hills for several hours. Now she heard the sound of somebody running. As she looked out, she saw that there was a man who was coming towards her. He was panting and, as he cried out with what little breath he had left, she suddenly recognized him. It was Sisera, the enforcer of Hazor.

As he approached the tent, all red and sweaty, he began to demand things of her. He reminded her of the alliance that her husband had made with his king and that she was required to live by it. That meant, he insisted, that she must hide him from his enemies who were seeking to kill him. She had no choice.

Jael Makes a Choice

And so, Jael responded immediately. "Oh, you poor dear," she cried. **"Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear."** And so, he came into her tent. He seemed to be afraid that his pursuers were only just a little behind him. He insisted that she hide him inside the tent as well. She laid him down in a corner and covered him with a rug. His final request to her was for a little water to drink, for he had been fighting and then running all day.

As she turned away to fetch what he requested, her eye fell on something. There, right by the tent flap, was a skin of milk. She had filled it from the she goat only minutes before Sisera had appeared and it would still be warm. As a mother, she knew very well that a bit of warm milk can do wonders to calm an impetuous child and perhaps even send it to sleep. Ever since he had appeared, Sisera had been acting like an impetuous child. And so, she gave him the milk to drink instead of water. And it worked like a charm. The exhausted man soon fell into a deep sleep.

The Tent Peg of Justice

Jael should not have done what she did next. It was a betrayal of the alliance her husband had made with the king of Hazor. It also violated the laws of hospitality, for anyone she had invited into her tent should have been under her protection. But then again, had she really invited him, or had she been invaded?

There, in that tent that day, something changed for Jael. She knew the damage that Sisera did to the people of Israel. She knew that, even if

letting him have his way might be in the interest of herself and her family, it was truly not the right thing.

She also knew that nobody else was going to do a thing about it. So she decided that she would. She slipped outside the tent, grabbed a spare tent peg and a mallet, and the rest is a gory story to fascinate adolescent boys.

When Jael went out to find Barak and bring him back to her tent to witness the results of her handiwork, she expected him to be pleased. His enemy was gone! But his face fell, and he muttered darkly something about how the Mother of Israel had tricked him.

The Oldest Story?

The story of Deborah and Jael is thought by many scholars to be one of the oldest stories in the Bible. The Song of Deborah, from which we also read this morning, is written in some of the most archaic Hebrew in the entire book. I definitely think that more people should know the story and that is why I wanted to deal with it today.

But that still leaves us, of course, with the question of what we are supposed to do with it. I'm sure that none of us would want to take the lesson from it that we ought to all try and solve our problems with tent pegs.

Learning from Two Extraordinary Women

But, while we shouldn't emulate their methods, I think we can all learn a lot from these women's spirits. They were confronted by huge problems and great injustices. They also suffered from the curse of being told all their lives that they couldn't do anything about the problems of this world because of who they were.

I think we are all given that message – many of us are given it constantly. What is the point of trying to challenge injustice? Who do you think you are? You are just a woman – just a minority – just a small church – just fill in the blank – why even try?

But whenever someone makes you feel like that, I think you should be able to tell them a story of a woman sitting under a palm tree and another woman who just finished milking a goat. If God could use them, why not you? Why not us?