

Deborah

Opening Hymn: #41 — “Awake From thy Sadness”

Heb. 11:6 [NIV] Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

A few special people are named as heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. I think these were people that simply came to Paul’s mind as he wrote this letter. Moses was one, but I’m surprised he names Rahab, not Joshua, when he mentions the destruction of Jericho (he does refer to Joshua earlier in the book). Rahab and Sarah are the two women he names. If he had mentioned no women, I suppose some would argue that women had a less important role to play in the plan of God, or worse, that Paul knew of none that had faith.

In verse 32 he says he doesn’t have time to talk about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. These people belong to the period following the death of Joshua until Saul became the first king of Israel. We call it the period of the judges. It was a long time. Think back to when the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. That was about 375 years ago. The period of the Judges was either 350 years (if you accept the testimony of 1 Kings 6:1 and do the math) or 450 years if you think Paul was making an exact chronological statement in Acts 13:20.

We associate a judicial meaning with the word “judge.” We think of a person who decides questions of right and wrong. Although that is often the sense of the Hebrew word in the Old Testament, in nearly all cases a “judge” in the Book of Judges was a military figure, a deliverer. The Israelites entered the land of Canaan and did not actually conquer the Canaanites; in fact the Canaanites had conquered them. So when God saw they had suffered enough for their apostasy, he did something about it:

Judges 2:16 [NIV] Then the Lord raised up **judges** who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their **judges** . . . [vs. 19] When the **judge** died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers . . . They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.”

2 Chron 22:8 “And it came to pass, that, when Jehu was executing **judgment** [*same Hebrew word*] upon the house of Ahab, and found the princes of Judah . . . he slew them.”

Great leaders lead; people follow. Great leaders die and . . . and what? Generally a power struggle takes place. The movement splinters. The vision is lost. People drift away and go back to doing what they were doing before, or perhaps what they always wanted to do.

Barak and Deborah

I would guess that Barak is the least known of those named in this chapter. Actually it surprises me that he’s mentioned at all because when it comes to faith, his partner had more of it than he did. His partner was a woman, Deborah by name. There are differences about when this occurred, but it was certainly before the half-way point in the period of the judges, perhaps around the 200-year mark:

Judges 4:1 [Good News] “After Ehud died, the people of Israel sinned against the Lord again. So the Lord let them be conquered by Jabin, a Canaanite king. The commander of his army was Sisera. Jabin had 900 iron chariots and he ruled with cruelty and violence for 20 years. Now

Deborah was a prophet and she was serving as a judge for the Israelites at that time. One day she sent for Barak and said to him, The Lord has given you this command: Take ten thousand men and lead them to Mount Tabor. I will bring Sisera to fight you at the Kishon River and I will give you victory over him. Then Barak replied, I will go if you go with me, but if you don't go with me, I won't go either. She answered, All right, I will go with you, but you won't get any credit for the victory because the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman. *[They gather for war. Verse 14:]* Then Deborah said to Barak, Go! The Lord is leading you! Today he has given you victory over Sisera."

Sisera's entire army was defeated in the battle, probably because the Kishon River experienced a flash flood and mired the 900 chariots making them useless. Sisera flees on foot in an opposite direction while his army is slaughtered. He accepts an offer of hospitality from Jael, a Kenite woman whose husband is apparently away. He hides in her tent and tells her to say he is not there if anyone should ask:

Judges 4:21,22 [Good News] Sisera was so tired that he fell sound asleep. Then Jael took a hammer and a tent peg, quietly went up to him, and killed him by driving the peg right through the side of his head and into the ground. When Barak came looking for Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, "Come here! I'll show you the man you're looking for."

So Sisera was handed over to a woman as Deborah predicted, but it was not the woman Barak thought it would be. It was Jael.

Jael has been criticized for violating the Bedouin code: instead of protecting a stranger who accepts her hospitality, she murders him. But lest we forget, this is war and the rules are different. Jael knows who Sisera is, and she could guess why he was all alone. Sisera and King Jabin may have been just as cruel and oppressive to the Kenites as they were to Israel; thus Sisera was an enemy of her people too. It was also the Bedouin code that if a man was found in a woman's tent, both the man and the woman were to be put to death. In Judges chapter 5 Jael is highly praised for what she did (verses 24-27).

But I'm fascinated with Deborah. She is more interesting than Barak. She is a respected woman in the nation. She is a prophetess. She is not really a "judge" in the military sense of the word, not a deliverer. Barak **is** a "judge" in that sense. Deborah is assumed to be the author of chapter five which contains a poem of unusual Hebrew beauty celebrating the victory God gave them that special day. This battle was so momentous that Barak's name appears in Hebrews 11 and the battle is also mentioned in a psalm:

Psalm 83:9 "Do unto them as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kishon."

"And there was peace in the land for forty years."(Judges 5:31) If Israel had remained faithful to God, the peace would have been a lot longer than 40 years. But they lose the vision of their forefathers and follow their own preferences. Invariably that gets them into trouble. The last verse of the book of Judges seems to offer a weak excuse for what they have done:

Judges 21:25 "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

One can almost hear the rationalization: “If there were a king in Israel, he would tell us what to do and we would do it.” They had previously accepted Jehovah as their “king,” he had told them what to do, and they didn’t do it. When Samuel grows old and the people come to him and ask that he give them a king like all the other nations, God correctly tells Samuel:

1 Samuel 8:7 “The LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected **me**.”

Deborah

Except for what we have in Judges chapters 4 and 5 we read nothing more about Deborah in the Bible. How did she become so influential in Israel? Of all the people the nation could consult for judgment in Israel, Deborah appears to be the one they want. One day she sends for Barak, and—surprise!—he comes! He wants to believe that the Lord has a message for him, but his faith is not that strong. He wants Deborah at the battle too; only then will he go to war. She has such standing in Israel that her presence makes all the difference to him.

Her position in Israel becomes even more impressive when we think about how patriarchal Israel was under the law. Those who served the tabernacle were all male. The kings were male in Israel though the land of Sheba did have a queen in the time of Solomon. Jewish men had the right to divorce a wife in whom they found no favor, but wives seemed to have no similar right. A woman’s place was supposed to be in the home, raising the children.

But God reaches outside this patriarchal arrangement and picks a woman to speak for him. Deborah is recognized as a prophet in Israel. This is just like God. He does not do the expected thing. When we meet Gideon, the next judge, he says of himself: “My clan is the poorest in all Manasseh and in all my father’s house none counts for so little as I.” (Judges 6:15, Knox) Later when we meet Jephthah, we learn he was illegitimate (Judges 11:1). Although we know we cannot judge a book by its cover, most of us do it anyway. God never does.

In New Testament times, the patriarchal system continued. We meet a few exceptional women. At the time of the birth of Jesus, Anna was a prophetess (Luke 2:36). Lydia was a businesswoman, a seller of purple, and evidently the owner of her own home (Acts 16:14,40). Paul said that male/female distinctions among the fellowship were over:

Gal. 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Really? All one in Christ Jesus? No difference between males and females?

1 Cor. 14:34 “Let your women **keep silence** in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.”

How can Paul say there is no difference in Galatians and a big difference in Corinthians?

Women Keeping Silence

Some may think that this text means exactly what it says and that women should never say anything in any meeting. But do those who think this believe other scriptures mean exactly what they say when

they counsel us to wash one another's feet, greet one another with a holy kiss, or lift up our hands when praying? We know that Paul did expect women to participate in the meetings:

1 Cor. 11:5 "But every woman that **prayeth** or **prophesieth** with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven."

These words come from the same letter. He says women may pray or prophesy but only if they have a covered head. We know what it means to pray, though in American ecclesias women are rarely called upon to pray. What does "prophesy" mean? The Greek is Strong's #4395 and means "to speak under inspiration." We see the word again in chapter 14:

1 Cor. 14:29,31 "Let the prophets [Greek: #4396 "an inspired speaker"] speak two or three, and let the other judge. For ye may all prophesy [Greek: #4395 "to speak under inspiration"] one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted."

What did Paul mean when he said that women should be silent? Perhaps we have a clue to what Paul was thinking in the verse preceding the one about silent women:

1 Cor. 14:33 "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints."

Things were different in Corinth. It was an idolatrous city. Women priestesses were associated with heathen temples. Respectable women were generally poorly educated and completely covered when they went out. Paul was concerned about the witness that would be given to those who visited a Corinthian meeting. Would people speaking gibberish be edifying? No. Would uneducated women acting like heathen temple prostitutes give a good impression about Christianity? No it would not. I believe that's why Paul wrote as he did to this church. Here is what Bro. Russell said:

"It is clear that when Corinthian men became Christians and, disregarding the prevailing public sentiment, brought their wives with them to meetings of the church, the women were very ignorant and lacking in essential decorum, and were inclined to disturb the meetings by asking unprofitable questions, which the Apostle instructed them to inquire of at home of their husbands, who could give them the simple instruction which they needed; for it was an improper thing for those women to speak in the church and to disturb its proper, orderly worship, etc."— R1551:5

He goes on to say that conditions were quite different among the Roman and Hebrew women which is why the apostle said nothing similar in his letter to the Romans or Hebrews. Bro. Russell quotes from a scholar who said that the Roman wife presided over the whole household and was equally esteemed with her husband. The scriptures show that Hebrew women freely conversed with the Lord and the apostles, and had freedom of expression and movement. Thus Bro. Russell acknowledges the worth of women and their contributions to the body of Christ.

Our own society has long been patriarchal just like Jewish society. It was only in the beginning of this century that women gained the right to vote in elections. Only in my lifetime have women been allowed to hold certain jobs. Women now receive equal education with men. Even our own ecclesia has learned that sisters are better at some jobs than brothers. We all want their thoughts, ideas, and questions in our studies.

But is it OK for a woman to write articles that are published in religious journals? What would you think if you saw a woman's name as the author of an article in *The Herald*? What would Bro. Russell think of that?

In fact the first article signed by a woman appeared in the January/February 1882 issue of the *Watchtower*. It was signed "Mrs. C. T. Russell." Her next article appeared near the end of 1882, and then more frequently after that. I found an article by a "Mrs. L. R. K. Bishop" in April, 1883, and then stopped turning the pages. (I ignored numerous poems written by women that appeared in its pages.) Bro. Russell had no qualms about publishing the thoughts of women, and also giving them appropriate credit. Probably few would agree with his position today.

1 Cor. 14:34 "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to **speak.**"

Starting in 1 Corinthians 12:30 and extending to 14:39, the word "speak" occurs 14 times and always in connection with speaking in tongues or unknown languages (possible exception: 14:29 "let the prophets speak"). First Corinthians is the only letter in which Paul discusses speaking in tongues and I believe this is what caused Paul to say what he did. Since neither women nor men speak in tongues in our fellowship today, we can say that our women [and our men too!] do keep silence in the church.

Head Coverings

You may have noticed that Paul said a woman could pray or prophesy if her head were covered. Only in this letter, and only in chapter 11, does Paul say anything about women covering their heads:

1 Cor. 11:5 "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven."

Quoting again from Reprint 1551:

"The condition of the Corinthian women also makes very clear the necessity of the Apostle's instructions in 1 Cor. 11 about the covering of the head which among that people specially was an indication of modesty. To have suddenly disregarded the custom when they began to see the liberty of the gospel would have been misunderstood and would probably have cultivated in them, in their ignorance, a disposition to ignore the headship of man and to become self-conscious and self-assertive."

There is a difference of opinion among ecclesias world-wide, and even among sisters in the same ecclesia about whether head coverings are a commandment of the apostle that applies today or not. We are reminded that Paul does not say that he is asking women to do this so they wouldn't stumble the general public who won't understand the liberty they have in the gospel. At the start of chapter 11 he says it should be done because of the symbolism of the woman finding her glory in the man; the man should have an uncovered head because he finds his glory in God. Speaking personally, I don't find this a strong argument. And he never made this argument again to any other church. I think he was giving the women in the Corinthian church a reason that was not the real reason. It was, however, a reason they might find acceptable.

Should non-Corinthian Christian women cover their head today? I believe this is something each sister must decide for herself. The wearing or not wearing of a head covering should not be forced on anyone:

1 Cor. 11:16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

Conclusion

We see in Deborah a respected women in Jewish society. Although no woman was called to wander with Jesus in the highways and byways of Israel as an apostle, they did freely converse with him. On the day of Pentecost when the holy spirit came upon the faithful ones, Peter explains what is happening by quoting from the prophet Joel:

Acts 2:17 “And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God,I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons **and your daughters** shall prophesy...”

Clearly the holy spirit had come upon both the males and the females in this group.

Paul mentions a sister who had a valued position within the church: “I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a **servant** of the church which is at Cenchrea. (Rom. 16:1) The word servant is #1248 [dee-ak-on-ee-ah] and is another form of #1249, a Greek word rendered minister or deacon. Phebe was a deaconess in the ecclesia at Cenchrea.

In Deborah we have an outstanding example of a gifted woman. Our sisters today possess gifts, and have a valuable contribution to make within the body of Christ. Let us never say to them—or any other member of the body—“I have no need of you.”

Closing Hymn: #310 — “Triumphant Zion”

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