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WOMEN, MINISTRY AND THE GOSPEL

EXPLORING NEW PARADIGMS

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DEBORAH

A Role Model for Christian Public Ministry

Rebecca G. S. Idestrom



JOHN GOLDINGAY HAS WRITTEN THE FOLLOWING about Deborah: “As someone who combined the role of judge, prophet, leader, and poet, there is no doubt that she is the greatest figure in the book.”¹ What leads Goldingay to make such a claim? Is Deborah the greatest figure in the book of Judges? What is it about her and her character that make her stand out? What can we learn from Deborah regarding faithful leadership? In this article, I will explore the leadership role of Deborah in the book of Judges and see how she can become a role model for both men and women in Christian public ministry. In the conclusion, I will consider what we can learn from Deborah and her example as a leader and servant of the Lord.

Deborah was a very gifted, capable and well-respected leader, who served in a number of roles. Her story is told in Judges 4—5. From these two chapters, we learn that as a leader raised up by God, Deborah was a prophet and a judge, who played a major role in bringing deliverance to the people from Canaanite oppression. Besides this, she is also described as a worship leader, a singer, a poet, a wife and mother. Some have also suggested that in the Song of Deborah, she is described as a warrior or military leader. As we can

¹John Goldingay, “Motherhood, Machismo, and the Purpose of Yahweh in Judges 4—5,” *Anvil* 12, no. 1 (1995): 24.

see, she had a number of responsibilities as a leader and played an important role in serving the Lord and her people at a critical time in their history. I want to explore these various roles and what we can learn about leadership from her.

There are also a number of things that make her unique within the book of Judges, which make her stand out in many ways. Interestingly, there are a number of similarities and parallels between her and Moses as well as with Samuel. What do these parallels tell us about Deborah and her significance? Deborah is the only judge in the book who is also a prophet. Deborah is the only person who has a song attributed to her. No other narrative about a judge in the book is followed by a poem, a victory song. What is the significance of this? Deborah is also the only judge who is described as doing the work of judging *before* she plays a role in the deliverance of her people from oppression. She is the only woman described as a judge. This makes her unique not only in comparison to the male judges, but also in comparison to the women characters in the book. Deborah stands out among the women in Judges. She is a strong, independent woman who is a person of integrity and faithfulness, whose character is without fault and is seen in a positive light. She is a spiritual leader whose commitment to the Lord is seen in her faithful obedience to be the Lord's messenger and representative to his people.

God raised up Deborah to be a prophet and judge to the people of Israel during the time of the Judges. Let us consider the context in which she ministered. The period of the Judges was a time of crisis for the Israelites, both physically and spiritually. They had entered and settled in the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership. But once Joshua had died (and the elders that followed him also had died; Judg 2:7), the people began a cycle of turning away from the Lord. The book describes a repeated, cyclical pattern in which the people continually did evil in the sight of the Lord by turning to idolatrous worship of other gods. In response, the Lord allowed the Israelites to be oppressed by their enemies. However, when the people cried out to the Lord in their distress, he had mercy on them by raising up judges who governed the people and delivered them from oppression. As long as the judge lived, there was stability and peace in the land, but as soon as the judge died, the people turned away from the Lord and the whole cycle began again (Judg 2:11-23; 3:7-11). As a result the narrator describes this period as a time when the peo-

ple were doing what seemed right in their own eyes, rather than what was right in the Lord's eyes (Judg 17:6; 21:25). They needed leaders who would remind them that as God's chosen people they were called to faithful love and obedience to the Lord and to the covenant.

What exactly was the role of a judge? Deuteronomy 16:18-20 describes the role of a judge as an arbitrator and dispenser of justice and righteousness. Judges were to be fair and just, and not pervert justice by accepting bribes. Their role was to administer justice according to the law of the Lord. In the book of Judges, we only see Deborah described explicitly in this role (Judg 4:4-5). The other judges are simply described as "judging Israel" without further elaboration. This has led some scholars to suggest that "judging" (*sāpat*) has the broader meaning of governing.² Because the Lord used the judges to bring deliverance to the people, they are also referred to as saviors or deliverers (and some argue that this was their primary role).³ Clinton McCann, following Jon Berquist, suggests that "judge" should be rendered as "bringer of justice." He writes, "This designation suggests that the judges were persons entrusted with the enactment of God's will for the world; this encompassed deliverance from external oppression (2:16, 18), leadership exercised to ensure the exclusive worship and service of God (2:19), and hence the creation of internal conditions to support life as God wills it to be."⁴ Thus, the judge was called to bring justice both physically, from external oppression, and spiritually, to instruct and help the Israelites live out their spiritual commitment to the Lord in faithful obedience to the covenant.

Within this group of leaders we find Deborah. How did Deborah fulfill this role as judge? As judge, she both administered justice as well as played a major role in bringing deliverance to her people. Since Deborah is the only one who is described in the role of judge as outlined in Deuteronomy 16:18-20, perhaps her example helps us know what is meant when the narrator simply states that the other judges "judged Israel." She sets the example so there is no need for the narrator to elaborate further. Her example suffices.

There are twelve judges mentioned by name in the book of Judges.⁵ Debo-

²J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, Int (Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 2002), p. 4.

³The Hebrew word for "save/deliver" (*yāsa'*) is often used to describe what the judge does (Judg 2:16; 3:31; 6:15; 8:22; 10:1; 13:5).

⁴McCann, *Judges*, p. 4.

⁵McCann argues that the number twelve is significant because the twelve judges represent the twelve tribes. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

rah is the fourth person listed after Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar.⁶ How are these twelve judges depicted? The narrative does not tell us much about the six so-called minor or secondary judges, and therefore one can say that they are described in more neutral terms.⁷ With the remaining six “major” judges we get a clearer picture of the narrator’s evaluation of their leadership. One can argue that the first few judges, including Deborah, are described in more positive terms by the narrator.⁸ After that there seems to be a downward spiral during which the failings of the leaders become more and more obvious and tragic. Thus, one of the themes of the book is leadership and/or the lack of leadership that leads to the eventual moral and spiritual decline and disunity among the tribes.⁹

In many ways one can argue that the judges presented in the book are a group of unlikely heroes. In fact, most of these heroes are seen as less than perfect, which has led some to call them “antiheroes.”¹⁰ Ehud, an assassin, was probably disabled (unable to use his right hand);¹¹ Shamgar son of Anat was

⁶Most scholars do not include Abimelech in the list of judges, even though he ruled over Israel for three years (Judg 9:22). The words *judge* or *savior* are never applied to him. This makes twelve judges in the book of Judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson. However, not every one of the twelve judges named are explicitly called judges in the book (for example, with Ehud, Shamgar and Gideon, the Hebrew noun or verb for judge (*sōpēt* or *sāpat*) is never applied to them. But they all played some kind of role in delivering the people from oppression. The noun and verb derived from the Hebrew root “save/deliver” (*yāsa*) is applied to only six judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Gideon, Tola, Samson. Only three judges are described as both judges and saviors (Othniel, Tola and Samson). In 1 Samuel, Eli and Samuel also judged Israel (1 Sam 4:18; 7:15-17). Samuel appointed his two sons Joel and Abijah as judges (1 Sam 8:1-3), but since they perverted justice, the elders of the Israelites complained and demanded a king instead. Thus their time as judges did not last long before Saul was appointed king. Therefore, Samuel is usually remembered as the final judge.

⁷Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. These judges are only called minor in that there is not much information given about them in the book.

⁸Dennis T. Olson, “The Book of Judges,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), p. 774. Olson argues that there are three phases that describe the gradual spiritual decline in Israel and its leaders. The first phase (Judg 3:7—5:31) depicts faithful and victorious judges, the second phase (Judg 6:1—10:5) begins the decline into idolatry and disunity, and the third phase (Judg 10:6—16:31) demonstrates the serious deterioration of Israel as reflected in the increasingly tragic and misguided judges.

⁹C. Brown, “Judges,” in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, New International Biblical Commentary, ed. J. Harris, C. Brown and M. Moore (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), pp. 132-33.

¹⁰Daniel I. Block, “Deborah Among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historian,” in *Faith, Tradition and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier and David W. Baker (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), p. 236.

¹¹John Goldingay suggests that the fact that Ehud used his left hand indicates that he was disabled not merely left-handed (Goldingay, “Motherhood, Machismo,” p. 22). The Hebrew usually translated as left-handed in Judg 3:15 actually reads that he was bound or restricted in his right hand, indicating

probably a Canaanite;¹² Gideon lacked confidence and faith, needing divine assurances in signs; Jephthah, a son of a prostitute, made a foolish vow and ended up sacrificing his daughter; and Samson was a tragic figure whose morality was highly questionable and whose downfall was women and pride.¹³ One could argue that when one looks to the book of Judges for examples of leadership that for the most part one gets an ambiguous picture. Many of the judges were part of the problem in Israel's idolatry and apostasy. The morality of some were highly questionable. In many ways, the book illustrates how *not* to be a leader, so that we can learn from the failings and mistakes of the judges. Yet it also demonstrates the grace of God, that the Lord can use less than perfect leaders to do his work. However, not all the judges are described in negative terms. Othniel, the first judge, is not portrayed negatively (Judg 3:7-11), although his story is not elaborated upon but is rather given as an illustration of a judge who follows the paradigm given in Judges 2:16-23.¹⁴ In contrast, the narrator elaborates on the story of Deborah; she is the only judge who is portrayed positively in the narrative. Therefore, when one compares Deborah with this motley crew of judges, she really stands out! In Daniel Block's words, "Deborah is different. She is the only one the narrator cast in an unequivocally positive light."¹⁵

There are several things that make Deborah stand out from the rest of the judges. First of all, she is the only woman who judges Israel. In a list of leaders where only men are mentioned she stands out in terms of gender.¹⁶ Yet nothing within the biblical record indicates that this was a problem. In fact, Deborah is described as a well-respected authority within the Israelite community.

that he could not use his right hand. See also J. Alberto Soggin's support for this interpretation in his commentary, *Judges*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 50.

¹²His name seems to indicate that he may have been a foreigner rather than an Israelite, worshiping the warrior goddess Anat, or he may have been an Israelite who may have syncretistically incorporated the worship of Anat into his faith. Or perhaps this syncretism represents the practice of his parents, who named him son of Anat.

¹³Goldingay highlights the unlikely heroes among the judges in his article, "Motherhood, Machismo," p. 22.

¹⁴Goldingay points out that Othniel is also an unlikely hero. As Caleb's younger brother he is an example of how God uses a younger brother for his purposes, in a culture where the firstborn is the favored one. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁵Block, "Deborah Among the Judges," p. 236.

¹⁶The Hebrew emphasizes her gender in Judges 4:4 by stating "a woman prophetess" (*'issā nēbī'ā*) when it is not necessary to say "a woman" before prophetess. The female gender is already indicated in "prophetess."

Ailish Ferguson Eves writes, “The text takes Deborah’s status and responsibilities in Israel for granted. She is not introduced as an emergency substitute for the men who have failed to come forward (as some would interpret Judg 4:4; cf. Judg 5:6-7). Her standing in society is a secure and accepted one as a prophet through whom God speaks.”¹⁷ In contrast to the other judges, her character stands out as impeccable. The narrator finds no fault in her character; he describes no character flaws. She is highly respected in the community, demonstrated in that the people come to her for advice and counsel, and in how Barak responds to her (Judg 4:4-8). Her authority is never disputed.

There are those who argue that Deborah never really was a judge, although this is a minority view; the majority of scholars do believe that she was a judge. For example, Daniel Block argues that her role was exclusively as a prophet.¹⁸ Block argues that Judges 4:4-5 do not refer to Deborah settling legal disputes for the Israelites as a judge, but rather that the text describes the people coming to her in her role as a prophet, asking God to deliver them from the Canaanite oppression.¹⁹ I do agree with Block that

¹⁷Ailish Ferguson Eves, “Judges,” in *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 133.

¹⁸Richard Schultz is another scholar who agrees with Block on this matter. See his discussion on *spt* in *NIDOTTE*, 4:216.

¹⁹One of Block’s arguments is that in the Hebrew there is a definite article on “judgment” (*lamispāt*), that “the judgment” refers to a particular issue. Block, “Deborah Among the Judges,” pp. 238-40; see also his article, “Why Deborah’s Different,” *Bible Review* 17, no. 3 (2001): 34-40, 49-52. My arguments against Block are the following: the use of the two Qal active participles (*sōptā* and *yōsebet*) seems to indicate continuous action, that this is something she did regularly. The break in the Hebrew narrative sequence to give circumstantial background information also supports this. The fact that she also sits (*yōsebet*) in a certain geographical location under the palm of Deborah and the Israelites know where to find her for advice also supports the view that she served in some “official governmental function,” which is something Daniel Block admits: “In fact, her central location between Ramah and Bethel in the highlands of Ephraim made her accessible to the entire nation” (Block, “Deborah Among the Judges,” p. 236). The reference to the “palm of Deborah” may refer to Deborah’s fame as an important and respected leader. Even if the palm is not named after Deborah but rather after Rebekah’s nursemaid Deborah who was buried there (although in Gen 35:8 it is referred to as the Oak of Weeping, rather than as a palm), the narrative still gives the impression that this was the place where Deborah fulfilled her duty as judge. Although Block argues that “judging” can be interpreted in a number of ways, why would the narrator use the word “judge” (*sōptā*) differently from how he used it in the rest of the book? In the larger context of the book, the most natural reading and interpretation of the word *judge* is the one that is used with all the judges. As I have argued above, the example of Deborah actually elaborates on what judging meant in the context of the book. Even if the final clause in verse 5, beginning with the waw consecutive verb, “the people of Israel came up to her for (the) judgment” (*waya’ ālū ’elēhā bēnē yisrā’ el lamispāt*) refers to a specific incident when the Israelites came to her as a prophet to ask the Lord to deliver them, this does not negate the description in the previous clauses (vv. 4-5a) of her judging the people on a regular basis.

in the larger narrative she is described primarily in her role as prophet and as the Lord's representative. However, this does not negate her other role as judge.²⁰ The description of Deborah judging the people in Judges 4:4-5 is a circumstantial clause in Hebrew. "At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came up to her for judgment." The verses are giving background information about Deborah, who she was and her roles, setting the context for what is about to happen when the Lord brings a prophetic word to her to summon Barak. Deborah was both a judge and prophet according to these verses.

In these two roles, Deborah's ministry has some very interesting parallels with Moses, the great leader, liberator and prophet who also judged the Israelites. In Exodus 18:13-16 we learn that Moses also "sat to judge" the people who came to him to inquire of the Lord and to have their disputes settled. He administered justice by teaching them the statutes and laws of the Lord. Moses' example illustrates what is meant by "judging" (as outlined in Deut 16:18-20). "Sitting in the seat of Moses" so to speak, Deborah, as judge and prophet, also served in this judicial role of administering justice, ministering to the needs of the people by interpreting the Law and speaking the word of the Lord. There are more parallels between Moses and Deborah when one compares Exodus 14—15 with Judges 4—5, where the narrative account of victory over one's enemies is followed by a poem that celebrates the victory in a song. Just as Moses and Miriam sang and celebrated in song after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and were delivered from the Egyptian army (Ex 15:1-21), Deborah and Barak sing a victory song after the Canaanite enemy is defeated, recorded in the Song of Deborah (Judg 5).²¹ The fact that the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 is the only example of a victory song

²⁰Block and others have noticed that Deborah's name is absent from the list of judges given in 1 Sam 12:9-11 and Heb 11:32, whereas Barak's name is included. In response I must say that these texts do not give comprehensive lists; several judges are left off the list. First Samuel 12:9-11 highlights Barak as one of four people who play a role in bringing deliverance. The writer of the book of Hebrews explicitly says that there is not enough time to tell the stories of all the heroes of faith, highlighting the fact that his list is incomplete (Heb 11:32).

²¹There are a number of interesting parallels between the Song of Deborah and the Song of the Sea, which also strengthen these connections. See Alan J. Hauser, "Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), pp 265-84.

following a deliverance in the book of Judges causes the reader to make the connections between these events and the account of salvation and celebration by the Red Sea even more. This is something that Jewish commentators have noted, even as early as the first century A.D., as demonstrated in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, where Deborah is described as a leader like Moses.²² As did Moses, Deborah leads the people as judge, as prophet, as worship leader.²³

There are those, however, who argue that Deborah's calling as judge is the exception to the rule. It is true that she was the only female judge, but does that make her the exception? Does that mean that this was only a one-time occurrence, never to be repeated? One can argue that if women were not meant for this role, God would not have raised her up in the first place. The fact that he did speaks volumes! God can raise up wise and capable women, to govern his people, to administer God's justice and to speak his word. Deborah sets the example. But Deborah *was* exceptional in many ways, as we have already seen. She is exceptional when one compares her with the other judges. Deborah is different and stands out in more ways than one.

Most of the judges in the book of Judges became recognized leaders and judges *after* they had defeated the oppressing enemy, whereas Deborah's ministry began *before* the military victory. She was already recognized by the people as a wise and authoritative figure, indicated by the fact that people²⁴ went to her to have her settle their disputes. Her importance as a leader is acknowledged by the fact that the place where she would give advice and administer justice was named after her as the palm of Deborah (Judg 4:4-5).²⁵ Moreover, her geographical location, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, was accessible to all the tribes, being centrally located. She served the nation as a whole.

Not only was Deborah called to serve the people as a judge, she was also

²²In Cheryl Brown's study of Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, she finds that Deborah "becomes the feminine counterpart to the greatest leader in all of Israel's history—Moses." Cheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women, Gender and the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p. 40.

²³Some would argue that Deborah is also a military leader or warrior-like Moses. I will comment more on this below.

²⁴The "sons of Israel" (*benē yisra'el*) is an expression for the people as a whole.

²⁵I think that the palm was named after her rather than after Rebekah's nursemaid because in Gen 35:8 she was buried under an oak tree, not a palm (*tōmēr*), and Jacob named it the Oak of Weeping (*allōn bākūt*).

called to be a prophet, raised up to proclaim the word of the Lord in a time of crisis. In the book of Judges, Deborah was the only judge who was also a prophet.²⁶ In this way, she parallels Samuel, the final judge before the inauguration of the monarchic period (1 Sam 3:19-21; 7:15-17). Samuel was also judge and prophet. Let us consider these parallels and the significance. In 1 Samuel 7:15-17, we learn that Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life and that he would judge the people in a circuit from four locations annually, in Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah and Ramah (his hometown). Interestingly, Deborah ministered in the same geographical area, although stationed in one place somewhere in the hill country of Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah (Judg 4:5). In Daniel Block's words: "In 1 Samuel, Samuel was obviously presented as a 'judge' after the order of Deborah"²⁷ (although in his writing, Block emphasizes the parallels between Samuel and Deborah in their prophetic role, rather than in their judicial office). Cheryl Exum has also noted the similar function that Deborah and Samuel play as judge and prophet. Just as Deborah commissions Barak to go into battle, Samuel "anoints Saul king and sends him off to fight the Lord's battles (see esp. 1 Sam 10-15)."²⁸ Furthermore, Exum points out that Barak is accountable to Deborah as Saul is to Samuel and the Lord.²⁹ As God's prophet, both Deborah and Samuel represented the Lord and his presence. This is why Barak insisted on having Deborah accompany him into the battle (Judg 4:8) and why the Israelites and Saul sought Samuel's help and presence. Deborah and Samuel symbolized the Lord's divine presence. Daniel Block writes: "Like Samuel in 1 Sam 7:10-11, Deborah clearly functioned as the *alter ego* of Yahweh. Her presence alone was enough to guarantee

²⁶Besides Deborah, there is only one other prophet mentioned in the whole book of Judges, an anonymous prophet in Judges 6:7-10. As one of only two prophets explicitly mentioned in the book, her role as prophet also stands out and is highlighted.

²⁷Block, "Deborah Among the Judges," p. 237. Block points out similarities and differences between Deborah and Samuel in their role as judge. Because he argues that Deborah was not really a judge in the sense of a savior who delivers the people from oppression, he also asserts that Samuel was not a "deliverer judge." He writes, "As a matter of fact, the view that the narratives of the charismatic judges actually continue through the life of Samuel should be rejected" (Ibid., p. 237 n. 32). But one can also argue that both Deborah and Samuel serve in the role of judge as outlined in Deut 16:18-20, following the example of Moses (Ex 18:13-16), and not as "deliverer judge." As I have already argued above, not all the judges in the book are described explicitly as having delivered the Israelites from oppression (i.e., Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, Judg 10:3-5; 12:8-15).

²⁸J. Cheryl Exum, "Mother in Israel: A Familiar Figure Reconsidered," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 84.

²⁹Ibid., p. 84.

victory over the enemy.³⁰ Barak's request that Deborah accompany him into battle on the surface looks like a lack of faith on Barak's part, yet it does not necessarily have to be interpreted as Barak being cowardly or distrusting. Of course, he would be disobedient to the Lord if he did not go! Yet, in Barak's mind, her presence as the Lord's representative would both encourage the troops and guarantee the victory.³¹ Perhaps Barak also wanted to consult her for further divine direction as the battle proceeded. In fact, this is exactly what she does. In Judges 4:14, she gives another message from the Lord, assuring him again that the Lord will give him victory. Her prophetic words come true and the enemy is defeated. Just like Samuel (and Moses), she is a true prophet, confirmed in that her prophecies come true (cf. Deut 18:20-22).

In this context I want to highlight that, although Deborah is the only female prophet in the book of Judges, Deborah is not the only female prophet in the Bible. Within the biblical record we have a number of examples of women prophets (both named and unnamed). In fact, there are women prophets mentioned from all the major periods of Israel's history: Miriam (Ex 15:20) and Deborah (from the premonarchic period), Huldah (during the reign of Josiah in the second half of the seventh century B.C.; 2 Kings 22:14-20) and Noadiah (during the postexilic period of Nehemiah's time in the fifth century B.C.; Neh 6:14),³² as well as unnamed prophetesses like Isaiah's wife (Is 8:3).³³ Not only were there female prophets within Israel, there is evidence that women served as prophets in the other ancient Near Eastern religions. Based on evidence of women proph-

³⁰Block, "Deborah Among the Judges," p. 249. For the same reason, Block points out, Saul felt relatively secure as long as Samuel was with him, because that meant the Lord's presence was with him (pp. 249-51).

³¹Olson points out that the Hebrew is ambiguous in terms of whether Barak's request for Deborah's accompaniment is seen as wrong and whether her response to him in Judges 4:8-9 is intended as a rebuke or not. The narrator does not explicitly give his evaluation of Barak as either positive or negative. We do not know the tone in which Deborah responds to Barak. Deborah may simply be making a statement of fact, that God will use a woman to bring down the enemy (as the nuance of NRSV). Olson also points out that Barak is never dishonored or shamed in the Song of Deborah but rather is praised along with the rest. Olson makes the interesting observation that Joshua is also not shamed or dishonored for having received help from Rahab, a Canaanite woman and prostitute, in conquering Jericho. Olson believes that the ambiguity in the text is there intentionally to create suspense for the reader. Olson, "Book of Judges," pp. 775-76, 780. I also want to add that in Deborah's prophecy to Barak that God will use Jael, it is *the Lord* who is given the ultimate credit. *He* is the one who will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman (Judg 4:9).

³²Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, The Biblical Seminar (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 57-66.

³³In the New Testament, besides the Spirit being poured out on both men and women in fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29 in the book of Acts, there is the specific mention of Anna, the temple prophetess in Luke 2:36-38, and Philip's four daughters who prophesy (Acts 21:9).

ets from Mari, Daniel Block points out that Deborah's female gender as a prophet would not have been "surprising in the second-millennium cultural milieu."³⁴ Even though it was a patriarchal society, the role of prophet was not limited to men; women could also function in this role and be well respected. As God's prophet, Deborah played a significant role in the deliverance of her people from foreign oppression. She was obedient to her calling.

Deborah also stands out in the book of Judges when one compares her with the other women in the book. Interestingly, there are more women characters described in the book of Judges than in any other biblical book.³⁵ Although Deborah is the only woman judge and prophet, she is not the only woman in the book. The women can be divided into three main categories in terms of their portrayal: valiant women, tragic victims and manipulating villains. Most of the women in the book are portrayed either as victims (Jephthah's daughter, Samson's Philistine wife, the Levite's concubine) or as villains (like Delilah). However, a few women are seen in a more positive light by the narrator; they are strong and courageous women: Achsah, who asks and receives an inheritance (Judg 1:11-15), Manoah's wife, who has a divine encounter with an angel of the Lord and becomes the mother of Samson (Judg 13), and Jael, who played a role in destroying Israel's enemy (Judg 4:17-22; 5:6, 24-27).³⁶ Among these women, the most valiant one is Deborah, whose character and faithful service stands out.³⁷ Although there are some who view Deborah with ambivalence because of the role she plays in a war,³⁸ it is clear that the biblical author

³⁴Block, "Deborah Among the Judges," p. 247.

³⁵Olson finds nineteen women characters altogether in the book. Olson, "Book of Judges," p. 782. Lillian R. Klein finds "eleven fully differentiated females," those who are dramatized as opposed to those women mentioned but undramatized, like the daughters of Jabesh-Gilead and the daughters of Shiloh. Klein categorizes the women further by whether their deeds are active or passive or understood as positive or negative by the reader. See Lillian R. Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 24-33.

³⁶Klein classifies Jael as a woman who is evaluated negatively by the *reader*. But there is nothing in the text that indicates that the *narrator* viewed Jael and her actions in a negative light. In fact, in the Song of Deborah, Jael is celebrated as the "most blessed of women" (Judg 5:24) for her role in conquering the enemy. Jael is often evaluated negatively by those who feel uncomfortable with the notion of women involved in war and violence.

³⁷It is important to note that Ruth and Naomi also stand out as positive characters during the period of the Judges, as narrated in the book of Ruth.

³⁸Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 125. Of course, for some this ambivalence applies even more to Jael. This ambivalence is rooted in the theological difficulties associated with violence and war in the Bible in general.

views her positively.³⁹ Through her faithful obedience in proclaiming the word of the Lord, the Israelites were delivered from suffering and oppression.

Together with Barak, she went into battle and proclaimed the Lord's victory (ahead of time) in overthrowing the enemy (Judg 4:6-8, 10, 14). After the enemy was defeated, Deborah and Barak sang a victory song, recorded as the Song of Deborah (Judg 5). Some have suggested that the song depicts Deborah as a warrior and military leader. A number of studies have compared her with the Canaanite warrior goddess Anat.⁴⁰ It is true that in this victory song Deborah's role in bringing deliverance is celebrated (Judg 5:1, 7, 12, 15), but she is only one of several participants highlighted who contributed to the victory. In the song, Barak, Jael, the various tribes who participated, the role that nature played, and most importantly, what the Lord did, is emphasized. Furthermore, there is nothing in the narrative account nor in the song to indicate that Deborah actually did any fighting when she accompanied Barak. The woman who does is Jael, not Deborah. Deborah's role in the battle remains the prophet, the messenger of the Lord.⁴¹

What we do learn from the song is that Deborah is a singer, a poet and a worshiper of the Lord. She is introduced as singing the song together with Barak (Judg 5:1) and then she is admonished to break out in a song (Judg 5:12). Throughout the song, she blesses the Lord (Judg 5:2-3, 9).⁴² In the poem, Deborah describes herself as "a mother in Israel" (5:7). This may mean that biologically she was a mother, although the biblical text never mentions

³⁹Katharine Doob Sakenfeld has written a thought-provoking article on the topic of Deborah and Jael and war, in light of having met women who have experienced the atrocities of war. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's Mother: Reading the Scriptures in Cross-Cultural Context," in *Women, Gender, and Christian Community*, ed. Jane Dempsey Douglass and James F. Ka (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 13-22.

⁴⁰P. C. Craigie, "Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery (Judges 5)," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978): 374-81; J. Glen Taylor, "The Song of Deborah and Two Canaanite Goddesses," *JSTOT* 23 (1982): 99-108; Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 51-73.

⁴¹One could argue that the real warrior in the song is the divine warrior, Yahweh (Judg 5).

⁴²This poem is one of the oldest Hebrew texts in the Bible. The majority of scholars date it to the mid- or late twelfth century B.C. Although we cannot know for sure who wrote the song, the fact that the song is introduced as having been sung by Deborah and Barak (Judg 5:1) means that the narrator understood it to have been written in that day and perhaps composed by Deborah since she sang it (the Hebrew has the verb "to sing," in feminine singular [*watasar*]). The song and the narrative are meant to be read together because the song does not make sense without the narrative filling in the details, where there are gaps in the poem. The song sung by Deborah and Barak "on that day" (*bayom hahu*) refers back to the victory described in the narrative account (Judg 4), which concludes with the same phrase "on that day." Olson, "Book of Judges," p. 787.

any of her children. In Judges 4:4, Deborah⁴³ was introduced as the wife of Lappidoth. But the Hebrew may also be rendered as “a woman of torches” or “a fiery woman” (the meaning of Lappidoth). Therefore, from this introduction it is not completely clear whether she was married or not. However, in the context of ancient Israelite culture, it is most likely that Deborah was married and had children (in a patriarchal world where it was expected for women to marry and have children). Being a judge or prophet did not mean that she had to be single. We know that the prophet Huldah was married, for example (2 Kings 22:14). Yet Deborah’s role as wife and mother is not something highlighted in the text; her husband is never mentioned again and no children are named. In Deborah’s roles as judge and prophet and in the context of the poem, the phrase “mother in Israel” should probably be understood metaphorically. She was a mother *to* Israel, playing a nurturing, comforting and protective role. The only other time this phrase is used in the Old Testament is in 2 Samuel 20:19, where the wise woman of Abel of Beth-maacah describes the city as a “mother in Israel.” Dennis Olson believes that this phrase is more than an endearing title, but instead “may represent the place and office of a wise woman prophet who delivers divine oracles to resolve disputes (see 4:5; 2 Sam 20:16-19).”⁴⁴ Deborah has been given an honorific title in Israel in light of her office and authoritative role, as a wise judge and prophet.⁴⁵ The phrase “mother in Israel” also highlights her role as a national leader, a mother or leader to the whole nation.⁴⁶ Cheryl Exum asks the question, “What does it mean to call Deborah a mother in Israel? Her accomplishments described in Judges 4—5 include counsel, inspiration, and leadership. A mother in Israel is one who brings liberation from oppression, provides protection, and ensures the well-being and security of her people.”⁴⁷

In conclusion, what can we learn from Deborah about Christian leadership? How can she become a role model for both men and women in public service? Deborah was an influential and prominent leader on the national level, serving

⁴³The meaning of Deborah’s name is “bee.” But the root consonants of her name (*dbr*) also form the word “to speak,” which relates to her calling as a messenger of the Lord.

⁴⁴Olson, “Book of Judges,” p. 787.

⁴⁵Just as “Mother” can be a title of honor, “Father” is also used as an honorific title in the Bible. See Judg 17:10; 1 Sam 24:11; 2 Kings 2:12; 6:21; 13:14.

⁴⁶Linda L. Belleville, “Women Leaders in the Bible,” in *DBE*, p. 113.

⁴⁷Exum, “Mother in Israel,” p. 85. See also Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, pp. 38-44; Claudia V. Camp, “The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?” *CBQ* 43 (1981): 24-29.

the people as judge and prophet. Today we often make a distinction between serving in the secular sphere, in the marketplace, in the role of governing, and that of being in ministry within the Christian or religious context. This, however, is not how leadership was understood in biblical times. There the two worlds overlapped; the secular and religious spheres were one. All of life was integrated. In biblical times, the judge and king were also spiritual leaders (just as the prophet and priest) called to set an example for the people of faithful living and wholehearted commitment to the Lord. Deborah set this example. Deborah was a respected, trusted leader, a person of integrity, whose commitment to the Lord earned the trust of Barak and of all the people.

As leaders, we too need to gain the trust and respect of the people we serve. This comes with time as we serve and live our lives faithfully within the community. We also need to see all of life as integrated, and not see ministry as something separate from serving in the so-called secular sphere. All service should be seen as ministry.

Deborah was obedient and faithful to her calling as a prophet by giving the word of the Lord in a time of crisis. She was both a woman of faith and of courage. From a human perspective, the odds were against the Israelites. This reality is emphasized by the narrator who twice mentions that Sisera had nine hundred chariots of iron (Judg 4:3, 13). But Deborah had faith and courage. She did not hesitate to accompany Barak into the battle, to be available to give divine direction when needed. We too need to be ready to respond to God's call in the midst of a crisis and fearlessly follow the Lord wherever he may lead us.

Deborah also sets the example of cooperation between leaders, even perhaps between men and women.⁴⁸ Deborah and Barak worked together in leading the people to victory over their enemies. Dennis Olson believes that the story of Deborah demonstrates that God works through humans' actions involving "shared leadership, mutual responsibility, and glory that is distributed among several of the main characters (Deborah, Jael, and Barak)."⁴⁹ Although many would argue that the book of Judges tends to promote a need for a strictly centralized type of government in the form of the monarchy as a solution to the chaos at the time (see Judg 17:6; 21:25), Olson asserts that Judges

⁴⁸Sakenfeld, "Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's Mother," pp. 18-19.

⁴⁹Olson, "Book of Judges," p. 783.

4—5 demonstrate that God also works “effectively through more complex systems where power may be decentralized, duties may be distributed, and no one leader need take all the credit or responsibility.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the story of Deborah presents a different model of leadership, where leaders cooperate and do not compete with each other. Each share their unique gifts to serve the community as a whole.

Deborah sets the example of a worshiper who leads the people in song and praise to the Lord after he has done a marvelous work. As “mother in Israel” Deborah also played a nurturing role to her people.⁵¹ Ministering in a difficult and chaotic time, she became an instrument of hope and inspiration by speaking the word of the Lord prophetically at a critical time. Deborah is an example of how God raises up leaders to stop oppression and bring justice, freedom and peace.⁵² Throughout history, God has always raised up leaders to help his people in times of suffering and oppression. Deborah was such a leader who responded to the divine call. May we learn from her example.

⁵⁰Ibid. Olson points out that the Song of Deborah highlights several key players who all “participated in saving Israel: God (5:2-5, 20-21, 31), Deborah (5:7, 12), Jael (5:24-27), some of the Israelite tribes (5:13-18) and Barak (5:9, 12). The praise of God begins and ends the song as an affirmation that God integrates and works across boundaries of gender, tribe, nation and creation within the poem (male/female, Israelite/non-Israelite, some tribes/not other tribes, human/non-human forces of nature).” (Olson, “Book of Judges,” p. 776). In his analysis, Olson sees ambiguities in the biblical text in terms of who is the actual judge in the story. He suggests that this is intentional to demonstrate that the role and task of judging is shared between Deborah, Barak and even Jael! (Ibid., p. 774). McCann also suggests that perhaps Deborah, Barak and Jael should be considered as “co-judges” (McCann, *Judges*, p. 49). Although I do agree that all three share in the role of bringing deliverance to Israel, I find it hard to see how the narrator sees Jael as a judge. Barak plays an important role, but the narrator gives the Lord the credit for actually subduing the enemy (Judg 4:7, 9, 14, 15, 23). Deborah is the only one who is explicitly referred to as judge.

⁵¹Deborah fulfilled many roles as she served the Lord. Today, both men and women juggle several different roles as they fulfill their calling in life. Just as the Lord helped Deborah, he can help us today, as we wear different hats.

⁵²As a result, the land had rest and peace for forty years (Judg 5:31).