

# Deborah & Barak: Example for Women or Embarrassment for Men?<sup>1</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Deborah an Example?

Does Deborah provide us with an example about the place and function of women in marriage, in church and in society? There are those who think so. Donna Strom, professor at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dehra Dun, Northern India, laments that women have, in the main, been involved only in increasing the human population, and done so little (“except for a rare Margaret Thatcher or Indira Gandhi”) to join men in ruling the earth.<sup>2</sup> So she writes of Deborah: “What Deborah’s example obviously teaches is that women should not be excluded from any levels of decision-making, religious or political.”<sup>3</sup> Because Professor Strom sees men hindering women in taking positions of leadership, she writes: “Many have asked, ‘Where are the Deborahs?’ But a more relevant question today is: where are the Baraks, Lapidoths, and 10,000 men who will allow God to use His Deborahs?”<sup>4</sup>

Is it really true that God provides us in Deborah with a model for how He would have women to act? Ought the brothers of God’s church to recondition their thinking to “allow God to use His Deborahs?”

The answer of our contemporary world is distinctly Yes, we should. Does the Lord agree? Should you as wives and mothers make it your business to encourage your husbands and sons to be willing to let God use the women in positions of leadership? In our feminist age, what picture should we strive to place in the minds of our children about the place of the woman? By implication: in our age of weak men, should we seek to encourage all our sons to be leaders?

### 1.2 What do we want to Prove?

It is for us to listen carefully to what the Lord says in His Word. In the climate of our day, our lives –both as men and as women– are to be conformable to God’s Word, so that in turn we live as lights in this world. As I set out this morning in my attempt to lay before you what the Lord says about the place He has assigned to the woman, I choose to take as starting point what the Lord says to us in Judges 4 and 5 about Deborah and Barak. However, if we are to hear what the Lord says in these chapters, we shall need to read this passage without preconceived ideas about the place of the woman. I say this since it’s not difficult to prove from these two chapters just about anything you want to prove about the place of the woman.<sup>5</sup> For example:

- If you want to prove on the basis of Judges 4 and 5 that women should be prophetesses in the Church today, you can make a strong argument with an appeal to Judges 4:4, where we read that Deborah was a prophetess.
- If you want to argue that the place of the woman is beside her husband, submissive to her husband, you can make a strong case out of it with reference to Deborah, for in Judges 4:4 she is identified by her husband’s name: “*Deborah, ... the wife of Lapidoth.*”
- If you want to prove that one can be happily married, take up one’s place in the family, and at the same time have a leading place in society, you can prove it from Judges 4. After all, this woman Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth, was at the same time a Judge.

My point is: the feminist can appeal to Judges 4 to find Scriptural justification for her position. So can the ‘traditionalist’. But then we do not listen to the Scripture, but to ourselves! We therefore need to set aside our own thoughts, and *listen* to what Scripture says. We need to read the passage for what it is without any preconceived ideas and –as much as possible– without the baggage we’ve inherited from our fathers or received from our contemporary society.

### 1.3 Descriptive or Prescriptive?

One more introductory item that needs to be mentioned is the distinction between what is **descriptive** and what is **prescriptive**. Judges 4 is descriptive; it *describes* what Deborah did. Does this description of what Deborah did in her day boil down to a prescription for us? That is: does Judges 4, which *describes* Deborah’s conduct years ago,

<sup>1</sup> Text of an address prepared for the Women’s League Day, held on October 29, 1997, in the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott. I express my appreciation to Johanna vanderPlas for taking copious notes and so ably putting to paper what I said.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Strom, “Where are the Deborahs and Baraks?” in *Evangelical Review of Theology* (Vol 10/1), pg 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg 25.

<sup>5</sup> A deSnoo in *Vrouw, wie ben je?* (Uitgave van de Bond van Gereformeerde Meisjesverenigingen in Nederland, 1988), pg 43.

*prescribe* how we should act today?<sup>6</sup> In various places in the Bible a given action is described and yet we're convinced that we ought not to follow that example. One may think of Judah's conduct with the harlot he met along the road.<sup>7</sup> We agree that the Bible *describes* for us what Judah did, but that it does not *prescribe* that we should do the same thing. After all, in the seventh commandment the Lord told us not to commit adultery. Judah's action is clearly *descriptive* of his sin, but not *prescriptive* for our conduct. Well now: are Judges 4 and 5 simply descriptive or are they also prescriptive? That is: do these chapters set the norm for how our women (and men) ought to behave? Does the appearance of Deborah as leader in the land (prophetess and judge) indicate that our daughters may/must aspire to positions of leadership? The only way to answer this question is to go back into God's revelation in order to find out what God has commanded us.

## 1.4 Outline

Before we go back into God's revelation to learn His norm for us, we first spend some time reading what the Lord tells us about Deborah in Judges 4 and 5. This forms Section 2 of this paper. In Section 3 we look at the material God had revealed to Israel on the subject by the time of Deborah's day. Section 4 sets before us what God revealed to His people after the time of Deborah. We're interested specifically in discerning whether there has been a change in God's revelation after the time of Judges 4. A final section draws out conclusions for us today.

## 2. WHO WAS DEBORAH?

### 2.1 Deborah's identity as a person:

Concerning Deborah's person Judges 4:4,5 tells us that "*Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.*"

#### - A WOMAN

Although it is not evident in our translation, the Hebrew text makes a point of stating that Deborah was a woman. In the original text, verse 4 reads, "*Now Deborah, a woman, a prophetess.*" The Lord makes specific mention of her gender. The reference to her being a woman is also meant to convey, according to the Hebrew rules of grammar, that she was "*a certain woman*".<sup>8</sup> The author of Judges 4, then, did not see Deborah as standing head and shoulders above the other women of her day, as if she were an obvious leader. She is portrayed as a normal, average woman in Israel.

#### - A PROPHETESS

She is further described as a prophetess. In the Bible we read of more women who were prophetesses:

- Miriam: In Exodus 15:20,21 we read of Miriam prophesying before the Lord and before Israel after the people had crossed through the Red Sea. "*Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them: "Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!"*"
- Huldah: In 2 Kings 22:14 we read, "*So Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum ... And they spoke with her.*"
- Isaiah's wife: In Isaiah 8:3 Isaiah's wife is described as a prophetess: "*Then I (i.e. Isaiah) went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son.*"
- Anna: Of her we read in Luke 2:36, "*Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.*"

So we have five women in the Scriptures who are known as prophetesses.

We need to note that the Old Testament does not tell us of an official function of the prophet in the divinely appointed worship service. A prophet is simply someone whom God was pleased to use in order to make known His will to the people in a given situation. Deborah was a prophetess, but no where do we read that she was ordained to an office in any way. This differs from Elisha and Jeremiah, for example. The Lord called those two men to the office of prophet. (See I Kings 19:19ff; Jeremiah 1:4ff).

What we also need to bear in mind is that although Deborah is a prophetess, no where do we read that Deborah went to the people with a word from God; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and all the other prophets did. Said they, "*Thus says*

<sup>6</sup>cf Miriam and Huldah

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 38

<sup>8</sup> Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, §131b makes this comment on this passage: "*a certain (indefinite) woman (named) Deborah, who was also a prophetess.*"

the LORD ...” and then spoke their prophecy. We do not read that concerning Deborah at all. She did not go to the people with a word from God, but the people came to her. “*And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment*” (Judges 4:5b). She sat under the palm tree. Exactly the same thing happens with Huldah; she did not go to anyone with a prophecy but instead, we read that “*Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess*” (2 Kings 22:14).

#### - THE WIFE OF LAPIDOTH

We read further in Judges 4 that Deborah was the wife of Lapidoth. It's intriguing to note that she is known by her husband's name! She is not known independently of her husband, even though she had a special place in Israel. That raises the question: why?! Why is she mentioned here by her husband's name, the wife of Lapidoth? This is a question that needs to be answered later on.<sup>9</sup>

#### - A JUDGE

Deborah is called here a judge. It is this term that gives Deborah her profile in the book of Judges. Deborah is one of a series of twelve judges. Of the twelve judges, six are major judges (including Deborah), and six are minor judges, of whom we have very little detail. For the purposes of this paper, we shall focus on the six major judges and do some comparisons between them.

##### - Deborah was an unlikely choice for a judge

It turns out that the six major judges (i.e. Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson) are all unlikely and unexpected choices for a judge.<sup>10</sup>

- **Othniel**: “... the son of Kenaz, Caleb's **younger brother**” (Judges 3:9). Bible history teaches us that the younger brother had the less privileged position and had the least chance of making a stamp on society.
- **Ehud**: “... the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a **left-handed man**” (Judges 3:15). Ehud, in the accepted way of things, had a disadvantage in that he was left-handed (which in the course of events God turned to an advantage).
- **Deborah**: From Judges 4:4 we learn that she is a **woman**. That makes her an unlikely choice for a judge.
- **Gideon**: When the Lord told Gideon that he had to go and save the people, Gideon replied, “*O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the **weakest** in Manasseh, and I am the **least** in my father's house*” (Judges 6:15). Gideon: an unlikely choice for a judge.
- **Jephthah**: Although described in Judges 11:1 as “*a mighty man of valour*”, he was also “*the son of a prostitute*.” That made him an unlikely candidate. Even his brothers rejected him, Judges 11:2.
- **Samson**: From Judges 13:7 we learn that he was a Nazirite, which meant that he had to be different from the other young men of his day (cf Num 6:1-21). Samson was a social ‘odd-ball’: he wasn't allowed to cut his hair, was not allowed to touch anything dead, and had to abstain from all alcohol.

Altogether, the picture arises that the major judges were rather unlikely choices for being judges, and this was true of Deborah too. God chose what is weak, what is base, what is despised in the eye of the world to shame the mighty and the boastful (see I Cor 1:26ff).

##### - Deborah was not raised up by the Lord to be a judge

A second point concerning Deborah being a judge is that we do not read in Scripture that she was raised up by the Lord to be a judge.<sup>11</sup> That was the case though for the other (major) judges.

- **Othniel**: “*When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, **the LORD raised up a deliverer** for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel ...*” (Judges 3:9).
- **Ehud**: “*And when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, **the LORD raised up a deliverer** for them: Ehud ...*” (Judges 3:15).
- **Gideon**: “*Then **the Lord** turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand to the Midianites. **Have I not sent you?**”* (Judges 6:14).
- **Jephthah**: “*Then **the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah** ...*” (Judges 11:29).
- **Samson**: “*And **the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him** ...*” (Judges 13:25). “*And **the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him** ...*” (Judges 14:6). Already before Samson's birth the Angel of the LORD told his parents that their son would deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines; Samson was an instrument of God.

<sup>9</sup> cf Point 4 below: Conclusion for Deborah's day

<sup>10</sup> cf Lillian Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Decatur: The Almond Press, 1989), pg 41. See also A Janse, *Eva's Dochteren* (Kampen: Kok, 1923), pg 93.

<sup>11</sup> Cf Thomas R Schreiner, “The Valuable Ministries of Women in the Context of Male Leadership: a Survey of Old and New Testament Examples and Teaching”, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, editors: John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), pg 216.

However, we do not read any such qualification for Deborah; she was different! What we do read of Deborah is Judges 5:7, “*until I, Deborah, arose, ... a mother in Israel.*” Notice the different emphasis between Deborah and the other five major judges. Certainly, the Lord God was behind Deborah’s rise as judge; all things are in God’s hand. But Deborah is the only major judge of whom it is not stated in so many words that God laid the office upon her. One wonders why. What makes the difference?

- *Deborah was not a judge with a military function*

A third point in relation to Deborah’s office as judge is that she, unlike all the other judges in the book of Judges, did not have a military function.<sup>12</sup> Of the five other major judges for example, we read in Scripture of their military feats:

- **Otniel:** “... *He went out to war, ... and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim ...*” (Judges 3:27).
- **Ehud:** “... *he blew the trumpet in the mountains of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mountains; and he led them up ...*” (Judges 3:27-30).
- **Gideon:** “*So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands...*” (Judges 7:19f).
- **Jephthah:** “*So Jephthah advanced towards the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands*” (Judges 11:32).
- **Samson:** “... *he went down to Askelon and killed thirty of their men ...*” (Judges 14:19); “... *So he attacked (the Philistines) hip and thigh with a great slaughter ... He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached out his hand and took it, and killed a thousand men with it ...*” (Judges 15:8,15); “*Then Samson said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines!’ And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he killed in his life.*” (Judges 16:30).

But no similar statement is recorded concerning Deborah. Instead, we read concerning her in Judges 4:6 that “*she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, ‘Has not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, ‘Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun.’*” Deborah was not a military leader but she seconded military responsibility to another, to a man. Again, one wonders why?

- **WOULD SIT UNDER THE PALM TREE**

In Judges 4:5 we are told that “*she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim.*” Why are we told that Deborah sat under the palm tree? In order to appreciate this one needs to turn to Deuteronomy 16:18. There it is written, “*You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the LORD your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment.*” Here is an instruction of the Lord to the people of Israel, that once they come into the Promised Land they were to make it their business to appoint judges. These judges were to function “*in all your gates*”, these gates being a reference to the town gates. Judges did not have a national or a trans-tribal authority but rather, according to Deuteronomy 16, the ordinance of God was that the judges in Israel were to have local authority. A judge had a place in a particular town (or tribe), and it was in that town that the people of the community had to come to the judge in the event that they had a dispute. No one in Israel was to be without recourse to judgment and hence they were to expect and receive from the judge in their own town a “*just judgment.*”

Deborah, however, was not sitting in the gates of her city but in the field somewhere, “*under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim.*” She didn’t sit in her city, did not even sit in a city. Although it cannot be said with certainty, Deborah probably came from the tribe of Issachar (see Judges 5:15). In any case, Deborah knew the people of Issachar and they knew her. However, she removed herself far from those whom she knew, and found a place “*under the palm tree ... in the mountains of Ephraim*” (Judges 4:5). Hence she wasn’t even close to home. Deborah gave judgment, not in her own place, but out in the open. She gave judgment, not to the locals of her town, but to all and sundry! That is what we read in Judges 4:5b: “*And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.*” Deborah’s position was not restricted to just her own local people but her position was national, trans-tribal. Again, one wonders why. Given the instruction of Deut 16, why did she function as she did?

## 2.2 Deborah’s relation to Barak:

All indications are that Deborah did not try to upstage Barak. On the contrary, she very deliberately attempted to place herself in the shadow of a man. Consider the following:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg 216.

- though she could conceivably have whipped up the troops behind her in order to attack the enemy, she did not do so. Rather, “*she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali*” (Judges 4:6) and asked him to take the initiative in fighting the enemy.
- she accompanied Barak in his campaign not because she wanted the honour, but only because Barak was scared. “*And Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go’*” (Judges 4:8). He was afraid, and so she went along in order to temper his fear.
- Judges 5 records a song. Though we tend to refer to it as “the Song of Deborah”, it is in fact not the song of Deborah alone. Judges 5:1 we read that “*Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying: ...*”

### 2.3 Deborah’s relation to Jael:

When it comes to the defeat of the enemy, it was not Deborah who defeated the enemy, but another woman, Jael (Judges 4:17-22). Of Jael it was sung, “*Most blessed among women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; blessed is she among women in tents*” (Judges 5:24). In the face of attempts to present Deborah as a feminist model, it is important to note that she did not pursue the glory that comes with defeating the enemy. The Lord tells us that this honour went to another, not to Deborah.

### Conclusion:

To sum it up so far, we do wrong on the basis of Judges 4 and 5 to envisage Deborah as some sort of a feminist. That is a misreading of the Scripture. In His Word the Lord does not present Deborah as an “emancipated woman”, a feminist who placed herself on centre stage, a woman striving to stand tall to exercise her rights to lead. What we do read here is of a woman who gave leadership without placing herself on centre stage. Deborah distinctly did not draw attention to herself.

This conclusion comes into sharper focus when we turn our attention now to Deborah’s context.

### 2.4 The context in which Deborah lived:

Time and again in the book of Judges we read the phrase “*the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord*” (Judges 2:11). This is mentioned in relation to each of the major judges:

- Othniel: “*So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs*” (Judges 3:7).
- Ehud: “*And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD*” (Judges 3:12).
- Deborah: “*When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD*” (Judges 4:1).
- Gideon: “*And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD*” (Judges 6:1).
- Jephthah: “*Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve him*” (Judges 10:6).
- Samson: “*Again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years*” (Judges 13:1).

It’s a refrain: “*the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD.*” This refrain comes to its climax in the reformulation of the same thought in Judges 21:25, where is written the well known phrase, “*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*” That typifies also the days of Deborah: each did what was right in his own eyes.

It was, then, a time of radical deformation, a time of decay. The degree of degeneration characterising the time is possibly best illustrated by the material written in Judges 17-21, where we read of Micah’s idolatry and the brutal raping of the Levite’s concubine. It was a time where standards of behaviour and godliness in Israel were far removed from the *norms* God had established in His Word. In a word: it was an *ab-norm-al* time.

Specific to Deborah’s day: deformation and decay is pointed up by the fact that there were no leaders. Deborah had to call upon Barak to come and lead (Judges 4:6). Once he had been chased up, he was too scared to do anything (Judges 4:8).<sup>13</sup> Where was Barak’s backbone? Barak had none; he was not a leader. He didn’t know, at least it didn’t come out in his conduct, that he could lean on the Lord for strength and wisdom. Nor was Barak the only spineless man in Israel. We read in Judges 5:6 and 7, “*In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, and the travellers walked along the byways. Village life ceased, it ceased in Israel.*” Imagine for a moment that we couldn’t freely walk or drive down our main roads. Imagine if we, in order to do our business, had to sneak out at night and move cautiously from tree to tree lest we’d be fallen upon. We’d very quickly

<sup>13</sup> Cf Holwerda, *Richteren I* (Kampen: vandenBerg, n.d.), pg 17: “*Hij steunt niet simpel op de Here en heeft dus niet verstaan de les van cap. III, dat de Here ALLEEN het doet, en Hij daarom onnutte dienstknechten kiest. Daarom komt de eer dan ook toe aan een vrouw (iemand die tot de strijd niet geroepen en bekwaam is) als dienstmaagd des Heeren.*”

complain to the authorities in town that our streets aren't safe. That is exactly what happened in the days of Judges 4. The streets were not safe. What does that say about leadership? This context of fear makes evident that there were no leaders able to lead the people against their oppressors. Recall in this context none of the major judges were likely persons to have been judges! That was the problem of the day: there were no leaders.

Why were there no leaders? Can we find an answer to that question? Yes, we can. For the Lord had promised to deal with Israel according to a pattern. In Deuteronomy 28 the Lord promised His blessings on obedience: *"Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth (vs 1) ... And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only and not beneath, if you heed the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them"* (vs 13). Such security requires leadership, and this is what the Lord promised His people when there was obedience. Conversely, when there was no obedience: *"But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country (vs 15) ... And you shall grope at noonday, as a blind man gropes in darkness; you shall not prosper in your ways; you shall be only oppressed and plundered continuously, and no one shall save you"* (vs 29). Here is the fear of Judges 5:6,7, a condition the people could do nothing about because those who were to be leaders had no back-bone.<sup>14</sup>

Why weren't the streets safe in the days of Deborah? Why didn't anyone dare to assume leadership? It was because of a spiritual decay. The people of Israel did not live according to the Word of God. In Deuteronomy 16:18 the Lord had commanded to appoint judges in every town. But the people did not go the judges of their community because their men were not functioning as the leaders God wished them to be.<sup>15</sup> So they went to Deborah instead. A spiritual decay amongst the people of God produced a paralysis that drove the people to an unlikely person as judge.

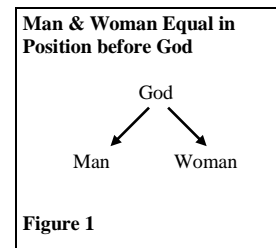
Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, arose as prophetess in Israel in abnormal circumstances. In a time of spiritual decay, it pleased the Lord God to send a judge in the person of His choosing. The Lord showed mercy according to His Word in Deuteronomy 18:15, *"The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren."* The person of His choosing was first of all that younger brother, then the left-handed man, then a woman, then the son of a harlot, then the least of all the tribes in Israel, etc. Specific to Judges 4, God calls upon a woman. Truly, God chose what is weak, what is base, what is despised in the eye of the world to shame the mighty and the boastful (see I Cor 1:26ff).

How does all this relate to what God had ordained in the beginning? What could Deborah and Israel have known from God's revelation about how God wanted things to be in the relation between man and woman? Does Deborah's express action of placing a man in center stage instead of herself reveal an insecure character *or* humble obedience to God's instructions?

### 3. THE NORM GOD HAD REVEALED BY THE TIME OF DEBORAH

#### 3.1 Man and woman are equal before God

The Scriptures Deborah and Israel had taught that the Lord had been pleased to give to man and woman an equal position before Him (see Figure 1). Genesis 1:26,27 tells us, *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."* Man and woman are both created to image God, and man and woman both receive the mandate to have dominion over the earth, the sea, the cattle, etc. Man and woman both, receive also the task to *"be fruitful and multiply"* (Verse 28). In this regard there is no difference between the man and the woman. Male and female have an equal position before God, and both receive the same broad mandates.



The fall into sin touched both equally, so that both suffered the consequences of the fall (Gen 3:16ff). When the Lord God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, He made clear that both the man and the woman needed to come with their sacrifices. Said the Lord to Moses, *"Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD ... if a person sins ...'"* (cf Leviticus 1-4). What God said here applied to

<sup>14</sup> See in this context also Isaiah 3:4 & 12.

<sup>15</sup> Holwerda, *Exegese Oude Testament (Deuteronomium)*, (Kampen: vanderBerg, n.d.) pg 424 *"...achter berichten also Richt IV 4v en I Sam VII 6v ligt dus een ontsellende tragiek: de ambtsdragers spelen algemeen met hun ambt, en alleen de genade van Jahwe die charismatici verwekt behoedt het volk voor totale instorting van het rechtsleven."*

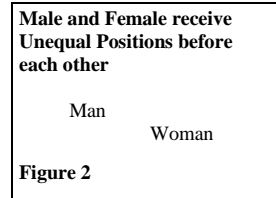
man and woman alike. Leviticus 15 likewise makes clear that men and women alike were unclean, and hence both needed cleansing. Both the man and the woman are in need of redemption; both receive forgiveness in Jesus' blood. This is the clear instruction of the tabernacle service to all Israel: male and female have an equal position before God.

We may conclude: Deborah and all Israel with her could know from God's Word that male and female alike were equally dependent on God's grace for forgiveness of sins and therefore for life and breath itself.

### 3.2 The relation God has placed between man and woman in their inter-personal relation

#### - PARADISE

As it turns out, God has given to the man and to the woman different positions with respect to each other. Though equal in talent no doubt, and though certainly equal before God, God has nevertheless arranged a hierarchy in the relation between the man and the woman (see Figure 2). In Genesis 2:7,8 we read that *"the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed."* The man –that is Adam– received a place in the garden with the mandate to *"to tend and keep it"* (vs 15). Then in verse 18 we read that *"the LORD God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.'" From the rib of the man God made a woman (vss 21,22).*



Note that the woman is characterised here as a helper. The term 'helper' does not denote that the woman is less than the man. With our sinful (western?) ears, we tend to hear in the word 'helper' the notion of 'assistant', i.e. one who is told what to do. The Scriptures do not allow that loading of the term 'helper'. That same word is used repeatedly in Scripture in relation to God being a helper for His people. Consider the following Psalms:

- Psalm 33:20: *"Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield."*
- Psalm 70:5: *"But I am poor and needy; make haste to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer."*
- Psalm 115:9-11: *"O Israel ... O house of Aaron ... You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD; He is their help and their shield."*

In the above passages there is no concept of 'less' involved in the term. That underlines the point that we may not think of men and women in terms of 'better' or 'lesser'.

Still, the term 'helper' remains in the relation of woman to man. It is important to note that the woman is given to the man that she may be his help and we do not read of it being the other way around. It is not so that the man is given to the woman to be her helper. The man receives the position of leader; he must go to his garden to fulfil his task of tending and keeping it, and the woman is his helper in carrying out that task. Before God both are to fulfil the cultural mandate, but in their working side-by-side the one is the helper and the other is not, (and so) the one is the leader and the other is not.

Again, it is important to note that in Genesis 2:22 the Lord God brought the woman to the man and not the man to the woman. There is a God-given order, a hierarchy in their relation together; the one is the leader and the other is the helper. In Genesis 2:23 we read that Adam greeted her; she did not greet Adam. Adam took the initiative; the one is the leader and the other is the helper. To give names is (as we learn from Genesis 2:19) a function of leadership. Adam gave Eve a name; Eve did not give Adam a name. Whilst man and woman are equal before God, the Lord God, in Genesis 2, put in place an authority / submission structure in the relation between the man and the woman.

#### - FALL

The Fall into sin in Genesis 3 ruined God's creation. However, this authority / submission structure as implied in Genesis 2, is maintained. It was Eve who was tempted and consequently fell. Yet God called Adam to task first. See Genesis 3:9: The Lord God knew that Adam and Eve had fallen into sin but *"the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'"* Adam was responsible first of all. See Genesis 3:10,11: *"I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."* And (God) said, *"Who told you that you were naked?"* The man was addressed.

This is a theme that comes back in the New Testament, e.g. Romans 5:12, where Paul writes, *"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin ...."* This "one man" is a reference to Adam; by one man sinned entered the world. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 15:22 we read, *"For as in Adam all die ...."*; i.e., death came through Adam. We would possibly have expected to read that death came through Eve, for Eve sinned first. Yet we read that God held Adam responsible. Here we see the authority (or responsibility) aspect.

The relation between man and woman (husband and wife) after the fall into sin is described in Genesis 3:16b. The Lord says to the woman, *“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; **Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.**”* How are we to understand the word ‘shall’ in this text? Does the word ‘shall’ reflect a command: the man *must* rule over the woman? Or does the word ‘shall’ reflect a prophecy: in the brokenness of a fallen world, the woman will find her husband constantly trying to dominate her? If it is the latter, of course, redemption in Christ will mean that the Christian husband will not seek to *“rule over”* his wife, and the Christian woman will not quietly accept the man’s domination. In a word: do we have here a different relationship structure between man and woman than that portrayed in Genesis 2 which speaks of an authority / submission structure?

As it turns out,<sup>16</sup> the formulation in Genesis 3:16 is parallel<sup>17</sup> to what we read in Genesis 4:7. There the Lord says to Cain, after he has offered his sacrifice, *“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And **its desire is for you, but you shall rule over it.**”* God is telling Cain that sin wants to master him; that is a reality in this fallen world. However, God adds to this that Cain is responsible; he is not allowed to let sin master him. Cain must fight sin. That is also exactly what is meant in chapter 3:16. The woman, God says, as a result of the fall into sin, desires to rule over the man (*“your desire shall be for your husband”*), but the man must not permit her to succeed (*“he shall rule over you”*).<sup>18</sup>

In Genesis 3:16, then, we have the same thought as that presented in Genesis 2: an authority / submission structure. Whereas in chapter 2 however it was a structure which lived itself out in harmony, now the Lord says that this authority / submission structure is going to be a battle. To accept the place that God has given is going to be difficult. Genesis 3:16 *“describes the beginning of the battle of the sexes.”*<sup>19</sup> So we see that the authority / submission structure implied in Genesis 2 is maintained after the fall, but now the woman protests her place and the man does not have the wherewithal to keep the woman kindly in her place. There is therefore pain for the woman and for the man as a punishment on the fall into sin.<sup>20</sup>

#### - AFTER THE FALL

That the authority / submission structure of Genesis 2 is maintained after the fall becomes evident from what we read further in the book of Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch:

- Only masculine names are to be found in the genealogies of Genesis 5,10: In these chapters we read who lived, for how long, and who begat which son. Why is it that the names in the chapter are all of men? It is so because headship lies with the man so that the woman is known by and with her man. Here expression is given to the principle that the man is the leader and the woman is his helper.
- Abram is called; not Sarai: In Genesis 12:1 we read that *“the LORD had said to **Abram**: “Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.”* Why is Abram called and why is Sarai not called? Sarai did come along, for she was married to Abram. Yet God was pleased to address the man. Why? It’s because of that same authority / submission structure of Genesis 2.
- Only males were to receive the sign and seal of the covenant; not the females: In Genesis 17:10f we read, *“This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every **male child** among you shall be circumcised.”* Why are the females not circumcised? Circumcision for the female is possible. Besides, God, sovereign as He is, could have given a different sign and seal of the covenant, one that could easily be applied to both male and female. But God did not do so. Why not? Again, here God gives expression to the leader / helper structure established in the beginning and maintained despite the fall.
- Only the men were addressed with regard to how the people of Israel were to sanctify themselves in preparation for the Lord’s coming to Mount Sinai. On the mountain God would make His covenant with His people. One of the instructions received in relation to this sanctification was this, *“.. do not come near **your wives**”* (Exodus 19:15). That is: this passage is addressed to the husbands, the men. God makes His covenant with Israel and He speaks to the men. It’s not that the women don’t have a place in the covenant, for they most certainly do. But here is evidence again of the authority / submission structure where the one is the head and the other is the help.

<sup>16</sup> For this paragraph I am indebted to Susan Foh, *Women & the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co, 1979), pg 68f.

<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew is identical except for the pronouns.

<sup>18</sup> If I may quote Foh’s own words:

*“After the fall, the husband no longer rules easily; he must fight for his headship. The woman’s desire is to control her husband (to usurp his divinely appointed headship), and he must master her, if he can. Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband. And so, the rule of love founded in paradise is replaced by struggle, tyranny, domination, and manipulation”* pg 69.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> NOTE: Gen 3:16b is not a curse!!! The serpent is cursed (Gen 3:14) & the ground (vs 17), but *not* the woman (vs 16) nor the man (vs 17ff).













- God appointed only men to priesthood: In Exodus 28:1 the Lord gives this instruction to Moses, “Now take Aaron your brother, and his **sons** with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to me as priest, Aaron and Aaron’s **sons**: Nadab, Eleazar, and Ithamar.” Why not Aaron’s children or Aaron’s daughters? It’s because of Genesis 2: the place of the man is to be the head and the woman to be the help.
- Only the males are commanded to appear before the Lord, and not the females: “Three times in the year all your **males** shall appear before the Lord GOD” (Exodus 23:17; Deuteronomy 16:16). Were the women not welcome? They definitely were welcome: didn’t Hannah go along with Elkanah to Shiloh once a year to worship the Lord there? The point is that the instruction is to the male because he is the head.
- Elders were to be men: Moses’ father-in-law, inspired by the Lord, gives this advice to Moses, “Moreover you shall select from all the people able **men**, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.”... And Moses chose able **men** ...” (Exodus 18:21,25). Why are the women not mentioned? Because the man is ordained by God to the position of head, leader.
- Only the males to be counted in the census of Israel: The Lord tells Moses in Numbers 1:1-4 to number the people. “Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, ... saying, “Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every **male** individually ....” God gives instruction according to the principle revealed in Genesis 2.
- The wife is under her husband’s authority: In Numbers 5:19f we read of God’s law concerning the unfaithful wife, “And the priest shall put her under oath, and say to the woman, “If no man has lain with you, and if you have not gone astray to uncleanness while under **your husband’s authority**, be free from this bitter water that brings a curse.” Notice the phrase, “your husband’s authority.” “The wife is ‘under’<sup>21</sup> her husband. It is an explicit statement of the wife’s subordinate position.”<sup>22</sup> This text does not reveal simply an aspect of Israelite culture, but the ordinance of Genesis 2.
- God’s use of the masculine pronoun: Leviticus 1 tells us of the offerings that the Israelites had to bring if guilty of specific sins. In verse 3 we read, “If **his** offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let **him** offer a male without blemish; **he** shall offer it of **his** own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD.” Why is the pronoun masculine? Is that because only the men were to bring a sacrifice if they were thankful? We appreciate that that was not the case. Inclusive language translators would translate this in the following drift: “If anyone offers a burnt offering of the herd, let that person offer ....” The Lord however uses the masculine pronoun. That’s not culture, but a reflection of the structure which God has placed in Genesis 2: the man is the head and the woman is the help. The masculine pronoun does not exclude women, but gives recognition to fact that woman is part of man and therefore the masculine pronoun can stand for all people.

It is clear then that what God ordained in the beginning, namely, that man is the head and the woman his help, is a norm that God consistently applied throughout the Pentateuch. Though both man and woman are equal before God, their functions in life are different. The man is characterised by ‘leadership’, the woman by ‘helping’. This is material that Deborah could know.

#### 4. CONCLUSION FOR DEBORAH’S DAY

In relation to Deborah we need to conclude the following:

1. That there were no men in Israel willing to take on a role of leadership as per God’s commands in Deuteronomy 16:18 and 17:8f is tragic. The men in Israel were reneging on the duty that God gave to them.
2. That the Lord raised up a leader in this particular leadership vacuum is evidence of God’s grace in that He gave a leader to the unworthy. However, that this leader is a woman is evidence of God’s judgment in that He embarrassed and put to shame those who should have been leaders, by turning to the helpers.
3. Deborah’s attitude, as noted above, was very much in keeping with God’s revelation to Israel about the place and function of the woman in relation to the man. Deborah was a woman who knew her God-given place as a help to the man. So, when the man did not rise up to lead, she did, in order to encourage Barak to get out there and do what he had to do. Deborah used her position to ‘help’ the men be the ‘leaders’ they were supposed to be. In Judges 4 we see how Deborah was not just a help in relation to her husband Lapidoth, but to man in general. Even in her position as judge in Israel, she acknowledged the man as head, and we understand that this was in agreement with God’s instruction in Genesis 2. As stated earlier, Deborah is mentioned in Judges 4 as the wife of Lapidoth, because she knew her God-given place and she accepted it. Deborah was a woman of faith.

<sup>21</sup>          

<sup>22</sup> Foh, pg 75.

## 5. GOD HAS UPHELD THIS NORM AFTER THE TIME OF DEBORAH

### 5.1 Man and woman continue to be equal before God

Is there any change in God's revelation after Judges 4 and 5? There is not. The principle of Genesis 1 and 2 is maintained throughout the rest of Scripture: man and woman are equal before God. Both man and woman are equally in need of salvation through Jesus Christ and so Jesus proclaimed His gospel to man and woman alike.<sup>23</sup> In Galatians 3:28 one reads, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" Before Christ we are all the same. In 1 Peter 3:7 one reads that the husband is to care well for his wife because husband and wife are "heirs together of the grace of life." Before God man and woman are equal.

### 5.2 God made no changes to the relation He placed between man and woman in their inter-personal relation

In the inter-personal relation between man and woman the principle of Genesis 2 is also maintained.

- There is a reason why the Saviour of the world was a man and not a woman.<sup>24</sup>
- There is a reason why the disciples Jesus chose were men and not women and again, it's not because of the culture of the day. "*To argue that Jesus' choice of apostles was determined by culture is to ignore the fact that God chose the culture and time in which his Son was to be born.*"<sup>25</sup> If God wanted a woman to be a disciple He would have called a woman to be a disciple and made it culturally acceptable too.
- In Acts 1:16 we read of Peter standing up in the midst of the disciples (120 in total, including both men and women) and speaking on the matter of filling the vacancy left open by Judas. Peter addressed his speech to "*men and brethren.*" Though Peter's words were no doubt intended for all 120 disciples, regardless of gender, Peter reflects the principle of Genesis 2 by addressing the meeting with reference to the leaders.
- In 1 Corinthians 11:3 the apostle writes, "*But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*" The authority / submission structure of Genesis 2 remains.
- Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:34: "*Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.*" The law: that is a reference to the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The principle of the beginning is maintained throughout the Scriptures.
- Similarly, we read in Ephesians 5:22-24 "*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.*" Granted, much is also written in the verses that follow concerning the task of the husband to love the wife in order to make it possible for her to submit. But the point here is that the principle of Genesis 2 remains.
- The Lord tells the woman in 1 Timothy 2:12, "*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.*"
- One finds a similar exhortation in 1 Peter 3:1-6: "*Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands....*"

Altogether, it comes down to what we read in Titus 2:1-5. The apostle Paul instructed his servant Titus in what he was to do. Titus was to "*speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine.*" Titus had to address the older men (verse 2) and the older women (verse 3). To the older women he had to say "*that they be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things – that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands ...*": echoed here is Genesis 2, and the attitude of Deborah! That is what the older women are to teach the younger women, and the reason is: "*that the word of God may not be blasphemed.*"

## 6. CONCLUSION FOR OUR DAY

Should we encourage our daughters to aspire to the sort of position that comes up in our mind when we hear that Deborah was a judge? Should we encourage our sons to be "the Baraks, Lapidoths, and 10,000 men who will allow God to use His Deborahs"? The answer is distinctly No! Instead, women need to encourage in themselves and in their daughters a spirit of being the helper, recognising that God has given authority and responsibility to the man. Equally, it is for the women to encourage their men and their sons to be leaders in marriage and family, in church, and in society.

<sup>23</sup> cf Foh, pg 91f

<sup>24</sup> cf Mt 1:25; Rev 12:5

<sup>25</sup> cf Foh, pg 93.

This is not to say that women or their daughters may never end up with a position of leadership; sovereign God may give it as He did in Judges 4. But to find yourself having such a position is rather different than aspiring to, or setting your sights on, that position.

At bottom, it is a question of faith. God's revelation is clear on the place He has given to the woman in relation to the man. Important is not whether this revelation sits well with us, sinful as we are. Important is what the Lord says. Faith prompts humble acceptance of God's revelation. That there is an unhappiness with the positions received for man and for woman has been prophesied (cf Gen 3:16b). It's for us, though, humbly to accept the position that God gives.

Is Deborah then an example for women? Yes, she is, but not as advocated by the feminists. Deborah is an example for women, for she was a woman of faith. In her circumstances Deborah sought to help the men to be the leaders they were meant to be. Is Deborah (and Barak) an embarrassment for men? Yes, for the men of those days weren't the leaders they were supposed to be, and so God shamed the men by giving a Deborah.

May men and women of the Lord encourage each other humbly to accept the respective places that God has given to men and women in His world, *"that the word of God may not be blasphemed."*