
Deborah and God's Unlikely Heroes

SCOTT HOEZEE

In Shakespeare's classic play, *Macbeth*, Macbeth is told that he cannot be killed by any man born of a woman. Macbeth takes that to mean he cannot be killed; I mean, everybody is born of a woman, aren't they? Well, not quite, because then his opponent, Macduff, arrives, and stabs Macbeth; and as he dies, Macbeth cannot understand how this could be, until it is revealed that Macduff had been delivered by C-section... a caesarean; and so, he was *not* born of a woman the usual way. Who knew? Well, something surprising like that happens in Judges 4, as well; and today on *Groundwork*, we will explore that story. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are now embarking here on program two of a five-part series on the book of Judges; and I think we established pretty well in the first program, Dave, that we are dealing with a very sinful, sad, tawdry time in Israel's history; kind of a yoyo time, where the people sin terribly and God turns them over to one enemy or the other; but then they repent a little bit and ask for help, and God sends a judge—a leader to lead them out; but, then when that leader dies, they do it again...they sin and it is kind of a sickening pattern; but that is sort of where we are here in this era after the death of Joshua, but before the rise of someone like Samuel, and eventually leading to the first kings of Israel.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; if you happened to listen to the first program in this series, you know that we promised that a lot of Judges is not G-rated; it is pretty tawdry, pretty messy stuff, even gross at times. You know, it is the kind of thing that tends to make us ask: What in the world is this doing in the Bible? Well, one thing we can say about it for sure is that it is honest; it tells the truth; it shows God's people as they are. There was a famous line of Oliver Cromwell, the leader in English history who once said to the painter about to do his portrait: Paint me as I am, warts and all...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is certainly what the Bible does with the Old Testament people of God; and for that matter, with the early Church as well. I mean, it doesn't gloss over the bad parts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; it is very honest. I think, as you said, Dave, when we tell our own stories, we often conveniently leave out things where we don't come off looking very good. The Bible could have left out the whole era of Judges, but it doesn't, because, indeed, it needed to show us why the world needs God's salvation...

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, the whole book, in kind of a left-handed way, we could say, is a showcase of God's patience, his mercy, his grace.

DAVE BAST

And also, the kind of people that God uses to further his purposes in the world. God has a big plan. God has an agenda; and it is going to involve Israel. It is going to require Israel...that is where the Messiah is going to come from, but along the way, there are going to be little pre-figurings of the Messiah, little saviors who will come and deliver people from this or that problem, and they are not always perfect people. Sometimes they are very surprising people; and the story that we are going to look at today, which begins in Judges 4, is the first extended story about a judge...there are a couple of little ones prior to this, but it is one of those unexpected people, a woman named Deborah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, from Judges Chapter 4: Again the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead.² So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jaban, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Hagoyim.³ Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron, and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.

DAVE BAST

⁴Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lapidoth, was leading Israel at the time.⁵ She held court under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.

So, that is pretty remarkable. She is functioning like a judge...

SCOTT HOEZEE

A judge, yes.

DAVE BAST

Kind of like Moses...she is settling disputes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We said in the first program that these judges were not judges in our modern sense of somebody who delivers verdicts, but were more champions who went forth to deliver Israel from their enemies, which Deborah is going to do, too; but here, she does have also that more usual sense of a judge, settling their disputes; but again, it is the Canaanites who are now roughing up the Israelites. The Canaanites the Israelites failed to drive completely from the land, as God had told them to do, so now that is coming back to get them. So, they cry out to the Lord, and then we get Deborah; and in the Hebrew here, at the beginning of verse 4 we get Deborah, and that verse begins with the Hebrew word *vav* which can mean just *and*, but there is this thing in Hebrew called a *vav consecutive*, and it clamps two verses together; and whenever that happens, we are told this happened because of this; and so, when we read Judges 4, we can say this: The Israelites cried out to God for help, and because of that, here is Deborah, who was leading Israel. So, Deborah is the answer to their prayers.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we can see here the characteristic pattern of the book of Judges. We emphasized that in the introductory program, the first program in this series, how there had been a judge, a fellow named Ehud; maybe we will get to his story in a later program, but it is a brief story. He died, and Israel slid back into their old ways of worshipping the gods of their neighbors. So, then things get bad because the Canaanites come in

and they are powerful. They have iron chariots, which is to say...it is sort of like having tanks when all you've got is a bow and arrow...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They are in a bad way; they cry out to God, and as a result, here comes Deborah, as you say. So, in direct response to their prayers, God raises up a prophet...she is called a prophet, but she is a woman.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; which has surprised many people throughout history, because there are not that many prominent female leaders, certainly in the Old Testament; and yet, here is one. Now, Deborah is presented as a singularly positive character in all of these stories. She is God's leader. She has been anointed by God to be a prophet; and let's remember, back in Deuteronomy 18, Moses said: After I am gone, God will raise up prophets who will be just like me. So, as you said, Dave, she is a lot like a contemporary Moses now. So, she is very positive, and her leadership is going to become key here to deliver the Israelites from the current threat.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, of all the characters...the major characters in Judges...Deborah is the only about whom nothing negative is said...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; that is right.

DAVE BAST

She is entirely positive; and she is going to be a model who we will find repeated as we move through the story of the Bible. I mean, you think of Esther, for example, the great queen. Like Deborah, she is there for a purpose. God has laid his hand on this woman, and brought her to just the position where she is; and eventually, when we get to the New Testament, we will see Jesus' attitude toward women, which is revolutionary. Many of his disciples, especially the most faithful ones, are women. So, this is the story that the Bible tells, and we will look in detail at what Deborah does to deliver Israel in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this program in our five-part series on the book of Judges, focusing on the character of Deborah, whose story is told in Judges 4 and 5. The main story comes in Chapter 4; so, Dave, let's get right to it and hear the main story of how Deborah helped deliver the Israelites from the hands of the Canaanites.

DAVE BAST

⁶Deborah sent for Barak, son of Abinoam, from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go; take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun, ⁷and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jaban's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River, and give him into your hands.'" ⁸Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I will not go!"

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁹"Well, certainly I will go with you," said Deborah, "but because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours. For the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh, ¹²and when they told Sisera that Barak, son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³Sisera summoned all his men and all his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron; ¹⁴and then Deborah said to Barak,

“Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?” So Barak went down Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him; ¹⁵and at Barak’s advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword; and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. ¹⁶Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all Sisera’s troops fell by the sword; not a man was left.

DAVE BAST

So, this is one of the great victories in Israel’s history. It is an astounding victory because, as we pointed out, Sisera has all these chariots, and that is a modern weapon, and a powerful weapon that Israel could not contend with, really...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they should not have won.

DAVE BAST

No, they shouldn’t have, but as one Bible passage says: The stars in their courses fought against Sisera. It was the Lord’s hand—it was the Lord’s doing—that overthrew this tremendous army; and Deborah was the real catalyst...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

She is the one who kind of nerved Barak to go do this thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Barak doesn’t come off real well here; General Patton he’s not. He was a little bit trembling and a little weak in the knees. He said: You’ve got to go with me. So, Deborah said: Fine, but the glory of this victory is going to go to a woman. Well, now; if you are Barak, for one thing, or if you are reading this story, or if you are Sisera himself, the Canaanite commander, and you get wind of some prophecy that a woman is going to defeat you, everybody is thinking: Well, Deborah? Deborah is going to be the one to get the glory. Deborah is going to be the one to take the credit for the victory, because Barak was too timid. So, we are all thinking Deborah; maybe Sisera was thinking: If I just stay away from that Deborah woman, I will be okay; but it turns out there is a little bit of a twist.

DAVE BAST

There is a big twist—a major twist, and things get a little grim here coming up in the story; but note what has happened so far. The Canaanite army has been routed, and they kind of scatter to the hills; and Sisera runs away, too. He is just trying to get back home...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He doesn’t go down with the ship.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, he runs off, and here is what happens to him:

¹⁷Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jaban king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Come, my lord; come right in; do not be afraid.” So he entered her tent and she covered him with a blanket. ¹⁹“I am thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.” She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. ²⁰“Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he told her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone in there?’ say, ‘No.’”

SCOTT HOEZEE

²¹But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and quietly went to Sisera while he lay fast asleep, exhausted; and she drove the peg through Sisera's temple, into the ground, and he died. ²²Just then, Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you are looking for." So he went in with her, and there laid Sisera with a tent peg through his temple, dead.

DAVE BAST

Yikes! Yuck!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; yuck! But, surprise! Who is the woman who defeats Sisera? Not Deborah; it is this previously unknown figure.

DAVE BAST

Jael, wife of Heber, as she is sometimes known. The story is artfully told; I mean, we can picture this, really, how it all came about. There was an alliance between the Canaanite king, whose commander Sisera was, and this clan, the Kenites; Heber, the husband of Jael...he is not in this story anywhere. He is out somewhere. You know, Sisera comes by; he is on the run; he is looking for a place to hide; he is exhausted; he is thirsty; he is tired: What do I do? Oh, come on in, says Jael. Here, I will take care of you. She doesn't only give him a drink of water, she gives him a drink of milk; and wow, he is so thankful and tired, and he says: Now, watch at the door, and if anyone comes by, tell them there is nobody here; and he falls into a sleep and boom! That is the end of him!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, this sounds more like a mafia story, right? I mean, it kind of reminds me of the mantra from *The Godfather* movies, where, you know, the key saying was: Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Well, Jael regards Sisera as an enemy, as it turns out, and she keeps him very close: Feeds him, being super nice to him, and so forth; and then, again, in a hit...a murder worthy of *The Sopranos* or some other mafia movie, she rather decisively dispatches with him in a very, very brutal act.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know...you read this story and you think: That's not a nice thing to do. She breaks the law of hospitality, which was one of the ironclad rules of the ancient Near East. I mean, that was just culturally...you didn't do that. If you gave someone shelter under your roof, and even fed them, you had an obligation as a host. So, what she does is a really underhanded thing; and yet, the Bible portrays it as a heroic action. She is the one who is going to win credit for the great victory, because she does in the enemy general. It is a little bit hard for us, I think, to wrap our heads around this...why what Jael did was such a good thing, and worthy of praise, as we are going to see. It *is* praised, in fact.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and as we have been saying earlier in this program, Dave, and also in the first program in this series, one way or another, this is part of the history of Israel, and the Bible does not try to sugar-coat it, or pretty it up, or make us look away. No; we are brought up close and personal to this fairly awful story; and yet, somehow all of this is another step along the way of God's ultimate plan of salvation...of God's ultimate plan to save Israel, and through Israel, the whole world by ultimately bringing his Messiah. So, it is not pretty. It is not easy to read. It is probably no more terrible than things that happen in the world every day today; but it certainly does show us why we need salvation; and so, maybe even through a story like this, there is a little bit of encouragement to be had; and as we close the program in a moment, we will wonder what that might be.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we have been reviewing the story of Deborah, a judge in Israel, a prophet in Israel we are also told; a key leader, and the story of her general, Barak, and of the Canaanite general Sisera, and finally of this woman who comes from out of nowhere in Judges 4, Jael, who wins the final victory by personally and very brutally dispatching of General Sisera, and ending the Canaanite threat against Israel at that time. That is Judges 4; Judges 5 is dedicated to what is essentially the song of Deborah...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or a psalm of praise that she wrote in commemoration of this story.

DAVE BAST

Here is how part of that goes. We won't read the whole thing; it is fairly long, but we will start at verse 24 of Judges 5: Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; most blessed of tent-dwelling women. ²⁵He asked for water and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles, she brought him curdled milk. ²⁶Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. ²⁷At her feet, he sank, he fell, there he lay; at her feet he sank, he fell where he sank; there he fell dead.

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁸Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice, she cried out, "Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?" ²⁹The wisest of her ladies answered her, Indeed, she keeps saying to herself, ³⁰"Are they not finding and dividing the spoils? A woman or two for each man; colorful garments as plunder for Sisera; colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck. All this as plunder." ³¹Well, so may all your enemies perish, Lord; but may all who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength.

So, that is quite something to sing about, when you think about it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, isn't it? And not only sing, but mock. I mean, that whole second part of the psalm is really kind of told for laughs, I think. Deborah is singing, and for laughs she pictures Sisera's mother standing at the window saying: Where is my boy? He seems to be a little bit late. How come I don't hear the garage door open, you know; and her ladies in waiting say: Well, you know, no wonder; they won such a great victory. There is a lot of loot to divide up: Women and goods and riches and wealth. That must be what is keeping him. No, that is not what is keeping him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it seems like rubbing salt in the wound, but there it is. It's in the Bible. So, what does it all mean? I mean, is there anything even remotely edifying here? Again, there is a reason you didn't learn this story in Sunday school, and probably haven't heard many sermons on this particular story either, because it is a tough one; but I think, Dave, there are some things that even this difficult story can teach us; one of which is, of course, a theme that we will just keep coming back to in this series, and that is that God does raise up leaders for Israel, even when, by all objective standards, Israel most certainly does not deserve it; and God is going to keep doing that. You know, the end of the psalm there was: May all who love you, Lord, be like the sun when it rises in its strength. That is the last line of Deborah's song. Well, you know, we pick up on those

themes in the New Testament, too. You think of Zechariah's song in Luke 1 about the rising sun coming to us from heaven, and that is referring to God's own Son...*S-o-n*...Son, who shines the light on the people living in darkness.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you get some previews of that, even in this rather grim song.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that is the key to the whole story, really, that last verse of Deborah's psalm. You mentioned the ending phrase, but look at the phrase before that, too: ^{31a}So may all your enemies perish, Lord. So, God has raised up a champion from an unexpected place. I mean, not just Deborah...that is unexpected...but a second woman: Jael. Who is she? Was she even an Israelite? I'm not sure. I mean, her husband's connections are with the Canaanites...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, she is totally unexpected. What made her...it kind of reminds me of Rahab, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

In the story of Jericho, and Joshua, and the people. She throws her lot in, not with her natural alliance, but with God's people—with Israel; and so does Jael do it in a dramatic act; and I have to believe that we are not meant, obviously, to literally imitate Jael and the violence, but that we should see in this a symbol of all the forces of evil...of Satan and all the powers of darkness, and their ultimate destruction, which God will finally inflict the decisive blow at the cross, where Jesus crushed the serpent's head, in effect. So, it is kind of a prefiguring in that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in that sense, too, Dave, it reminds me...and we have looked at this before on *Groundwork*...the family tree of Jesus as Matthew puts it together in Matthew Chapter 1, where Matthew doesn't hide the skeletons in Jesus' closet. You mentioned Rahab the prostitute; and Tamar, who played a prostitute with her father-in-law; and then, of course, Bathsheba and the whole bad business with Uriah. Matthew brings that all out in Matthew 1; he doesn't hide it, he doesn't pretty it up, just like Judges, to say: Yes, all of this has gone on, and that is why we need a savior; and that is *what*, also, Jesus has come to save us from; and so, it is also, as we have said, Dave, a story of God's ultimate faithfulness. You never know where or in whom God is working, but what you do know is that God is working; and as you just said, in this story, through a surprising out-of-nowhere character named Jael, who will appear nowhere else in all of scripture or history, and yet, she becomes God's instrument to save his people for that day; but history is full of unlikely heroes, unlikely key leaders in Israel and later in the Church, who come out of nowhere sometimes and God does great things through them.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. You know, one modern example, I think, that we could point to...another woman, as it turns out, an 18-year-old young lady from Albania moved to India and became a Catholic nun, and eventually, in the face of the desperate need of the slums of Calcutta, she left the walls of her cloister and engaged with that terrible suffering and need. We know her today: Mother Teresa of Calcutta—Saint Teresa of Calcutta; and

she once said of her life: I am just a little pencil in God's hand; but God can write great stories with little pencils, and he can do it with us, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he continues to do it to this day, thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study the Lord's might in the story of Gideon, found in Judges 6 through 8. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, and tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/deborah-and-gods-unlikely-heroes>

Printed on February 5, 2025