

My wild guess is that many people have never read Judges chapters four and five before today. Or if they did, they might only have some hazy recollection of Deborah being a judge. But when it comes to Jael and her hammer and tent peg – most people have not a clue! And isn't that a shame?! Because too many people think the Bible is full of dull, boring semi-historical stories that are hundreds and hundreds of years old and hard to understand – so why bother? . . . And for all those people, I just want to introduce them to my biblical friends Deborah and Jael – because Deborah and Jael are anything but dull, boring, and hard to understand! And their stories are just a small part of a larger ongoing story of adventure, heartache, fear, joy, betrayal, forgiveness, love, and wonder – which encompasses God's dynamic relationship with God's people.

The stories of Deborah and Jael also illustrate one of the most beautiful aspects of the Bible: the many layers of information, history, connection, and nuance that are held within a few words on the page. For example, there is the basic story line layer of what 'happens' – but that's not all that is 'happening' in the story. Sure, the basic story line reads: Deborah has received a word from God for Barak, so she summons Barak and shares what God needs him to know; but Barak isn't going into battle unless Deborah will go with him; so Deborah agrees to do that – but then she tells Barak that the real victory is now going to come from the hand of a woman. By this point in the story line we're not sure: if Barak totally believes God; or if it makes a significant difference *where* Deborah is during a battle; or if it is Deborah or some other woman who is going to be instrumental in the victory. The story already has suspense and mystery! Then there is the side bar about Heber the Kenite. Is he a distracting “red herring” in this mystery, or should we pay closer attention to him? Why does it matter that Moses' father-in-law was a Kenite? Well, that bit of history implies that Heber is related to the Israelites, yet he was living apart from the other Kenites, and he had signed a peace treaty with the Canaanite King Jabin of Hazor – who had been making life miserable for the Israelites for the past twenty years. The same King Jabin who had 900 iron chariots. Now this particular detail is interesting because the Kenites were traditionally known for their metal smithing skills. And as the Bronze Age transitioned into the Iron Age they would have learned to work with iron. So did Heber the Kenite separate his household from the other Kenites and the Israelites in order to do iron work for the Canaanite King Jabin? We also learn that Heber lived near the place where Barak's troops took on King Jabin's army (in their 900 iron chariots) under the command of Sisera. . . . And the plot thickens.

The story line continues with Deborah telling Barak when to attack Sisera – and that the Lord had already gone ahead to fight for Barak. The attack turned into a rout, with Barak's forces chasing down Sisera's chariots and army. . . . We'll stop for a second here and try to remember another time when God confused the opposing army so they went

into a panic. . . . I think it wasn't that long ago that we read about how God confused the Egyptian army by holding the water back until they had entered into the dry sea bed of the Red Sea – and then God let the water crash down. I believe Moses was leading the Israelites that day when the Egyptian army and their chariots got stuck in the mud and drowned. Do you also remember something about Miriam and the other women breaking out the tambourines to dance and sing about how the Lord had triumphed gloriously by throwing horse and rider into the sea? Hmm, we might want to hold that thought while we return to the story line where Sisera escaped from the confusion of battle and sought help from Jael, the wife of Heber, near the village of Oak in Zaananim. Jael welcomed Sisera and extended hospitality to him. (Which reminds me of the story of Abraham welcoming those three strangers who appeared by his tent under the oaks of Mamre. But I digress.) When Sisera asked for some water to drink, Jael brought him something better: milk. And the milk helped to soothe and calm Sisera as Jael wrapped him up in a blanket so no one could see he was there. This certainly made it seem like Jael was on board with protecting Sisera. But once he was asleep, Jael picked up a hammer and drove a tent peg through his head. Wow! Sisera wasn't the only one who didn't see that coming, was he?! Why would Jael do that?! Her husband had signed a peace treaty with King Jabin – and Sisera was in charge of King Jabin's army! Putting a tent peg through Sisera's head was an extraordinarily audacious way to break the peace treaty! Do you think it meant that Jael felt her husband shouldn't have entered into that treaty in the first place? That he should have maintained his allegiance to the other Kenites and to the Israelites? Because I'm thinking it couldn't have been easy for Jael to have their household separated and set apart from the rest of their clan. And maybe this was her way of bringing their household back into the fold? Or was Jael more pragmatic and astutely understood that if Sisera was on his own, running and hiding from the Israelites, that the power dynamic had changed? Because it wasn't long before Jael clearly welcomed Barak and showed him into the tent to see exactly what had happened to Sisera. And ironically we have never heard, nor seen, anything of Jael's husband, Heber. And since Heber was not there, and was not even mentioned, it was clearly Jael who must have defeated Sisera in this tent. That probably surprised Barak, despite Deborah's warning that a woman would defeat Sisera.

So do you really think that after the battle was over that day that Deborah and Barak sang the song we find in chapter 5 of Judges? Or did Deborah and Barak sing with Jael? Or maybe Deborah and Jael were singing while Barak went off to celebrate the victory with his troops? Hmm. I do know that scholars date the origin of this song somewhere between the time of the judges to the early Israelite monarchy, which makes this song one of the most ancient parts of the Bible. This song was important to the Israelites. It has been sung and passed on, and remembered for centuries – much like that other song about God triumphing gloriously by throwing horse and rider into the sea. But of those two songs – which one is more well known today? What can I say? Moses and Miriam always seem to get more air play than Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Even though there are distinct echoes of the exodus story within the stories of Deborah, Barak, and Jael – their song is

hardly ever heard these days. But what I find most interesting about the song of Deborah, Barak, and Jael is the part about Sisera's mother wondering what's keeping her son – why hasn't he come home yet? And how he must be busy collecting the victor's spoils. Yes, that must be why it is taking so long for him to return home from battle. As if his mother doesn't want to think that there could be another reason why he has been delayed. As if she can't bear the thought that Sisera might have lost the battle. She certainly can't bring herself to wonder if he has lost his life. No, she's not going to give up her hope that he's on his way home – not until she absolutely has to. . . . But the singers of this song know she's going to have to let go of that hope. They know that the death of Sisera will change her life. And this small remembrance that the 'enemy' of Deborah, Barak, and Jael was still somebody's son – and that he would be missed – provides a very interesting glimmer of compassion in this song of praise to God for victory.

Victory songs usually have NO compassionate regard for those who have lost the battle. That's because the victors get to write the songs – and they don't *have* to include the view from the other side. They don't *have* to have empathy for those losers. . . . But we're talking about the Israelites as being the victors here. And the Israelites have a history of losing as many, or more, battles than they've won. If it hadn't been for God being on their side in this battle, they probably would have lost – again. I mean the tribes of Reuben, Dan, Asher, Gad, Simeon, Levi, and Judah didn't even bother to send *anyone* to fight alongside the soldiers of the tribes of Zebulun, Naphtali, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Issachar in this battle! And there was certainly NO mention of any iron chariots for the Israelite troops. If God had not gone on ahead of the Israelites, to fight for them by confusing Sisera, his chariot drivers, and his whole army – the battle could have been won by the Canaanites. (And, of course, Sisera's mother probably thought a Canaanite victory would still be almost guaranteed even with God in the battle.)

And, of course, we know that any battle can go any which way because there are so many variables. I think we saw that in the recent election battle, didn't we? That's why we might all be drawn to the idea of picking up a hammer and a tent peg and putting an end to this year's election battle coverage, if we could. But seriously, it really doesn't feel like *anyone* has earned the right to sing a straight up victory song after this election. We've all felt the pain of this battle. And yet, if the love of God resides in the heart of every believer, then God has to be in the hearts of people on both sides of the election battle (and I say that despite what you might have read to the contrary on Facebook or Twitter). So I think what we ALL need is a song of compassion and empathy after this election battle. A song that both sides can sing together. And, yes, I do see this as an opportunity for people to circle up into ONE circle, so that there are no longer separate sides to be on. And I think God could join us in singing that song. That all of us would sing together with God.

Amen.