

# Deborah's Daughters

BY JOY A. SCHROEDER

**As prophetess and judge, Deborah became a potent symbol of female authority and speech, an obvious exemplar for women aspiring to claim a public voice in the nineteenth century. These women—preachers, devotional writers, suffragists, and abolitionists—were Deborah's daughters.**

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**D**eborah's story in Judges 4-5 has disruptive potential. A female prophet sits beneath her palm tree, judges Israel, summons the war leader Barak, provides military and tactical instructions, and accompanies the commander to battle. She publically sings a lengthy victory song, relishing gory violence meted out to Canaanite enemies. In the biblical text, Deborah exhibits characteristics that many readers have felt should never be encouraged in women. Her assertive behavior seemed at odds with the apostolic instructions: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2:11-12, KJV). Some felt that if Scripture commended Deborah, she *must* have conformed to the apostolic commands—even if these instructions had not yet been given!

However, at the pulpit and the speaker's podium, nineteenth-century women used Deborah's story to argue for their right to preach, lecture publicly, hold political office, vote in elections, and enter the political sphere as men's equals. Deborah was a potent example for nineteenth-century proponents of women's leadership in Church and society.

The nineteenth century experienced a virtual explosion of women's preaching. During the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening (c. 1790-1844), hundreds of American women felt called to preach the gospel and were "a prominent part of the evangelical landscape."<sup>1</sup> Many evangelical

Protestants, especially in Methodist and Baptist traditions, regarded women's preaching as a sign that they were living in "the latter days," when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon male and female alike (Joel 2:28-29). Though numerous nineteenth-century clergymen *did* support women's right to speak publicly, women preachers and exhorters encountered considerable opposition from detractors.<sup>2</sup> They were regularly challenged and obligated to justify their ministry.

## WOMEN PREACHERS AND THE PROPHETESS

Harriet Livermore (1788-1868), a white New England preacher licensed in the Baptist tradition, was the first woman to preach to Congress—delivering a fiery ninety-minute address in the chamber of the House of Representatives in 1827.<sup>3</sup> (President John Quincy Adams had to sit on the steps because the gallery was filled!) Livermore's autobiography reports her struggles to be accepted as an itinerant preacher.<sup>4</sup> Scriptural women were sources of personal comfort to Livermore as she took relish in female accomplishments: "How lovely, my dear sister, was female piety in...Deborah, as she marched by Barak's side, at the head of an army, prepared for battle against the idolatrous heathen; or returning home with a song of praise to the God of battles, for avenging his people, or seated in her dwelling amid the palm grove, as Israel's teacher, counselor and judge." After praising Miriam, Huldah, and Anna, she concludes: "I glory in Scripture's female worthies."<sup>5</sup>

In 1846, Zilpha Elaw (c. 1790-?), an African-American who preached in the Methodist tradition, wrote an autobiography describing her preaching journeys in North America and Great Britain. Elaw reports evangelistic successes among black and white listeners, but also recounts verbal opposition and threats. She defended herself with the example of Deborah. When an unnamed Methodist woman derisively told Elaw to join the Quakers, for there was no place for female preachers in Methodism, she responded: "The...Lord, who raised up Deborah to be a prophetess, and to judge His people, and inspired Hulda[h] to deliver the counsels of God, sent me forth not as a Quakeress but a Methodist..."<sup>6</sup>

Frances Willard (1839-1898), a white Methodist speaker and president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, used examples of biblical women like Deborah to challenge literalist readings of biblical texts that enjoined women's silence. In *Woman in the Pulpit*, Willard uses a homey cooking metaphor: "A pinch of commonsense forms an excellent ingredient in that complicated dish called Biblical interpretation..."<sup>7</sup> She observed that most biblical commentators have been men: "We need women commentators to bring out the women's side of the book; we need the stereoscopic view of truth in general, which can only be had when woman's eye and man's together shall discern the perspective of the Bible's full-orbed revelation."<sup>8</sup> To demonstrate that Scripture itself opposes universal literal application of commands concerning women's silence and subjection, she created a chart

in which each of seven Pauline hierarchical statements was rebutted by other words from Scripture supporting women's ministry. Willard placed Judges 4-5 into direct opposition to 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>9</sup>

After listing many biblical examples, Willard concludes: "There are thirty or forty passages in favor of woman's public work for Christ, and only two against it [1 Timothy 2:11 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35], and these are not really so when rightly understood."<sup>10</sup> Imitating the roll call of male heroes named in Hebrews 11:32-34, she writes stirring: "Time would fail to tell of Miriam, the first prophetess, and Deborah, the first judge.... Suffice it to say that these all stand forth the equal stewards with their brethren of God's manifold grace."<sup>11</sup>

In Judges 5:7 Deborah calls herself "a mother in Israel." Some female preachers mentioned Deborah's maternal role to insist that public positions were not inconsistent with motherhood and femininity. A woman speaking publicly could remain feminine. In 1859, prominent Methodist evangelist Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) wrote a lengthy defense of women's speaking, insisting that women do not become "unfeminine" if God raises them up for extraordinary responsibilities in church or civil government. Using Deborah as example, Palmer asserted that "the God of Providence will enable [a woman] to meet the emergency with becoming dignity, wisdom, and womanly grace."<sup>12</sup> The situation called for the prophetess's courage and leadership, but this did not make her "unwomanly": "the holy zeal of this mother in Israel nerved her for the conflict, and, with...faith and courage... she led forth the armies of God to glorious conquest. Yet who talked of Deborah as overstepping the bounds of womanly propriety, in either judging Israel, or in leading forth the armies of the living God to victory?"<sup>13</sup> Deborah's victory song curses the people of Meroz, who did not join the Israelites in rebelling against their oppressors (Judges 5:23). Palmer creatively exegeted this passage to reproach those who reject the leadership of a woman called by God. She conjectures that perhaps the Merozites contained "whisperers" who stirred up dissent against Deborah's female leadership. Palmer's words conveyed an ominous warning to women's detractors. The Merozites "brought down the curse of the God of battles" on themselves. Their "names are written in the dust, while the name of this ancient prophetess, who led Israel forth to victory, stands recorded in the Book of eternal remembrance."<sup>14</sup> No doubt the same shall happen to small-minded enemies who malign Palmer and her sister exhorters!

Women preachers in the Salvation Army were popularly known as "Hallelujah Lasses." In 1859, Salvation Army co-founder Catherine Mumford Booth (1829-1890) published a pamphlet defending women's preaching. Against detractors who regard "the public exercises of women" as "unnatural and unfeminine," she responds that such opponents have mistaken custom for "nature." As proof of the "natural" ministerial abilities of women, Booth observes that Deborah's leadership was accepted without objection: "the

authority of Deborah as a prophetess...was acknowledged and submitted to as implicated in the cases of the male judges who succeeded her. Secondly, she is made the military head of ten thousand men, Barak refusing to go to battle without her.... In the light of such passages as these, who will dare to dispute the fact that God did...endow His handmaidens with the gifts and calling of prophets answering to our present idea of preachers."<sup>15</sup>

### **STIRRING THE IMAGINATION: DEVOTIONAL WRITINGS FOR WOMEN**

Deborah was frequently treated in collections of short inspirational biographies of biblical women. The writers—some of whom were also novelists—imaginatively entered into Bible stories, providing their own details and conjectures. They encouraged female readers to appreciate their own gifts and recognize that they had a worthy heritage. Deborah shows that female virtue could be put into public service.

Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) was a British Jewish novelist whose widely-read biographical collection *Women of Israel* argued that ancient Israelite women held a higher status than women did in either the Judaism or British society of her day. Aguilar's treatment of Deborah supported her defense of Judaism as she countered prevailing claims that Christianity had elevated women's status. Likewise challenging the Jewish community, she called for expanded women's rights. Since Deborah is introduced in Judges 4 "so naturally," without any explanation about why a woman held the office of prophetess and judge, "we cannot possibly believe her

elevation to be an extraordinary occurrence, or that her position as a wife forbade her rising above mere conjugal and household duties."<sup>16</sup> If women had been on a social par with slaves or heathens, Deborah could never have held such authority. Nor would Barak have refused to go to battle without her. Being wife or mother was perfectly compatible with being a public

leader. Her husband Lappidoth (Judges 4:4) supported her. Aguilar continues:

Yet the history of Deborah in no way infers that she was neglectful of her conjugal and domestic duties.... To a really great mind, domestic and public duties are so perfectly compatible, that the first need never be sacrificed for the last. And that Lapidoth in no manner interfered with the public offices of his wife, called as she was to

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them by God Himself through His gifts, infers a noble confidence and respectful consideration towards her, evidently springing at once from the national equality and freedom tendered to Jewish women; and from a mind great enough to appreciate and value such talents even in a woman; a greatness not very often found in modern times.<sup>17</sup>

Social activist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1895), best known for her abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, wrote a work entitled *Woman in Sacred History*, demonstrating that strong female leaders are consistent with biblical values. Stowe envisions Israelite society as respecting and encouraging the leadership of women like Deborah:

It is entirely in keeping with the whole character of the Mosaic institutions, and the customs of the Jewish people, that one of these inspired deliverers should be a woman. We are not surprised at the familiar manner in which it is announced, as a thing quite in the natural order, that the chief magistrate of the Jewish nation, for the time being, was a woman divinely ordained and gifted.<sup>18</sup>

Barak's refusal to go to war without Deborah (Judges 4:8) was a mark of his profound respect for Deborah and proof of the honor which Israelites showed to women leaders: "The warlike leader of the nation comes to her submissively, listens to her message as to a divine oracle, and obeys."<sup>19</sup> Stowe observes that her husband Lappidoth's name is preserved only because of Deborah: "The prophetess is a wife, but her husband is known to posterity only through her."<sup>20</sup>

Commenting on Deborah's song (Judges 5), Stowe assumes that Deborah must have written many other poems. With poignant wistfulness, she laments that no other poetry from this prophetess is extant. This poem, together with the songs of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:46-55), are remnants of a flourishing women's culture that is all but forgotten. A vibrant tradition of women poet-prophets has passed away, most of their works lost to the ages:

And as this song dies away, so passes all mention of Deborah. No other fragment of poetry or song from her has come down from her age to us. This one song, like a rare fragment of some deep-sea flower, broken off by a storm of waters, has floated up to tell of her. We shall see, as we follow down the line of history, that women of this lofty poetic inspiration were the natural product of the Jewish laws and institutions. They grew out of them, as certain flowers grow out of certain soils.<sup>21</sup>

Deborah's poem in Judges 5 is a vestige of an elusive and irretrievable women's history, a heritage which must have been fuller and richer than the extant historical sources have preserved.

## SUFFRAGISTS, ABOLITIONISTS, AND JUDGE DEBORAH

The most celebrated and vilified example of nineteenth-century female commentary was Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible*, published in two parts in 1895 and 1898. Stanton asserts that "Lapidoth" was a place name rather than the prophetess's husband. Stanton's beliefs about Jewish patriarchy cause her to believe that Deborah must have been unmarried: "Indeed Deborah seems to have had too much independence of character, wisdom and self-reliance to have ever filled the role of the Jewish idea of a wife."<sup>22</sup> Given Deborah's prominence, Stanton is indignant that Deborah had been omitted from the roll call of the great heroes in Hebrews 11:32: "Though she was one of the great judges of Israel for forty years, her name is not on the list, as it should have been, with Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah. Men have always been slow to confer on women the honors which they deserve."<sup>23</sup>

Appointed to comment on Judges 5 in *The Woman's Bible*, Freethought activist Clara Neyman differed from Stanton regarding the patriarchy in the biblical world, offering a generally positive assessment of "ancient Judaism's" treatment of women:

The woman who most attracts our attention in the Book of Judges is Deborah, priestess, prophetess, poetess and judge. What woman is there in modern or in ancient history who equals in loftiness of position, in public esteem and honorable distinction this gifted and heroic Jewish creation? The writer who compiled the story of her gifts and deeds must have had women before him who inspired him with such a wonderful personality. How could Christianity teach and preach that women should be silent in the church when already among the Jews equal honor was shown to women?<sup>24</sup>

Neyman posits that there were other women who carried out similar roles, for ancient Judaism cultivated women's leadership skills and honored their authority: "Deborah was, perhaps, only one of many women who held such high and honorable positions." Deborah is an example of what women of Neyman's own day might accomplish if their talents were respected and nurtured. "If Deborah, way back in ancient Judaism, was considered wise enough to advise her people in time of need and distress, why is it that at the end of the nineteenth century, woman has to contend for equal rights and fight to regain every inch of ground she has lost since then?" Neyman says that "by arousing woman to the dignity of her position we shall again have women like Deborah, honored openly and publicly for political wisdom, to whom men will come in time of need." Finally, the collaboration between Barak and Deborah exemplifies the united efforts of males and females to sweep away injustice: "Together [man and woman] will slay the enemies – ignorance, superstition and cruelty."<sup>25</sup>

Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), credited as the first African-American female political writer, frequently spoke on the topic of slavery, racism, and

women's rights. In an address delivered in Boston in 1833, she uses the example of biblical women to justify her own call to public oratory: "What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel?"<sup>26</sup>

Angelina Grimké (1805-1879), a prominent Euro-American abolitionist writer and lecturer, made a similar point when urging southern women to work to end slavery. They should remember the host of biblical women who courageously stood up on behalf of liberty: "Who went up with Barak to Kadesh to fight against Jabin, King of Canaan...? It was a *woman!* Deborah the wife of Lapidoth...."<sup>27</sup> Grimké insists that the prophetesses did not confine themselves to the domestic sphere: "I read in the Bible, that Miriam, and Deborah, and Huldah, were called to fill *public stations* in Church and State."<sup>28</sup>

In an 1894 address, Anna Howard Shaw (1847-1919), a Methodist Protestant clergywoman and president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, explicitly used Deborah to argue in favor of women's voting rights. She reflected a perspective, often expounded in suffragist circles, that corruption and graft are particularly male vices. A female leader who has a "mother's heart" will root out injustice, ensuring protection and well-being for all people under her charge. Judge Deborah is proof that a nation afflicted with injustice and corruption can benefit from "a little mothering."

There never was another country which had so many parents as we have had, but they have all been fathers — pilgrim fathers, Plymouth fathers, forefathers, revolutionary fathers, city fathers and church fathers, fathers of every description, but...we have never had a mother. In this lies the weakness of all republics. They have been fathered to death. The great need of our country today is a little mothering to undo the evils of too much fathering. Like Israel of old, when the people were reduced to their utmost extremity, in order to save the nation, there was needed a ruler who was at once a statesman, a commander-in-chief of the armies and a righteous judge, who would render justice and be impervious to bribes. God called a woman to rule, and Deborah tells us in her wonderful ode that the great need of the nation in this hour of its extremity was the motherhood applied to government, when she exclaims, "Behold the condition of Israel when I, Deborah, a mother in Israel, arose." Then was there peace in Israel and prosperity and success, as Deborah ruled the people in righteousness for forty years.<sup>29</sup>

Most early feminists held romanticized views about the reforms that females could bring to government and politics. Deborah was not only as qualified as male leaders, but her maternal feelings made her a *better* leader than the men of her society. Women said that they, like their ancient fore-mother Deborah, possessed a maternal perspective which made them excellent candidates for political activity, where they could bring female values into a society which desperately needed their motherly expertise.

## CONCLUSION: MOTHERS IN ISRAEL

As prophetess and judge, Deborah was a potent symbol of female authority and speech, an obvious exemplar for women aspiring to claim a public voice in the nineteenth century. Women wondered: if Deborah was permitted to prophesy and lead Israel in ancient times, why could women not vote or preach in their own time? As we have seen, Deborah stirred the imagination, providing evidence of the great things females could accomplish in politics, literature, law, and religion, if only women's innate abilities were recognized, cultivated and respected.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.
- 2 Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 137.
- 3 Cynthia Jürisson, "Federalist, Feminist, Revivalist: Harriet Livermore (1788-1868) and the Limits of Democratization in the Early Republic" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994), 227-230.
- 4 Harriet Livermore, *A Narration of Religious Experience in Twelve Letters* (Concord, NH: Jacob B. Moore, 1826), 15-16.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 6 Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs Zilpha Elaw*, in William L. Andrew, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 147.
- 7 Frances E. Willard, *Woman in the Pulpit* (Chicago, IL: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889; reprinted Washington, DC: Zenger, 1978), 26.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- 12 Phoebe Palmer, *Promise of the Father; or, A Neglected Speciality [sic] of the Last Days* (Boston, MA: H. V. Degen, 1859; reprinted Salem, OH: Schmul Publishers, 1981), 2.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- 15 Catherine Booth, *Female Ministry; Or, Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (London, UK: Salvation Army Printing & Publishing Offices, 1891; reprinted New York: The Salvation Army Supplies Printing and Publishing Department, 1975), 3.
- 16 Grace Aguilar, *Women of Israel*, excerpted in *Grace Aguilar: Selected Writings*, edited by Michael Galchinsky (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003), 298.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 298-299.
- 18 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Woman in Sacred History: A Series of Sketches Drawn from Scriptural, Historical, and Legendary Sources* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1873), 100.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 22 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible, Part II* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1898; reprinted Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 18.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 21.

25 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

26 "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to her Friends in the City of Boston," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 68.

27 Angelina Emily Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, in *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings*, edited by Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 60.

28 *Ibid.*, 105.

29 Anna Howard Shaw, "The Fate of Republics," in Wil A. Linkugel and Martha Solomon, *Anna Howard Shaw: Suffrage orator and Social Reformer* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), 144-145.

30 I presented an earlier version of this essay at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in New Orleans in November 2009.

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