



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Deborah's Daughters
(*Women in the Bible*,
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Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Preaching About Women
in (and on) the Bible
(*Women in the Bible*,
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- 📖 Feminist Scholarship on
Women in the Bible
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Deborah's Daughters

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. Here are women—preachers, devotional writers, suffragists, and abolitionists—who were Deborah's daughters.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Judges 4:1-16

Responsive Reading from Deborah's Song (Judges 5:3, 5, 11b-12a, 13, 31a)

Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the Lord I will sing,
I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.

**The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai,
before the Lord, the God of Israel.**

Then down to the gates marched the people of the LORD.

**Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, utter a song!**

Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the
LORD marched down for him against the mighty.

**So perish all your enemies, O LORD! But may your friends be
like the sun as it rises in its might.**

Reflection

The prophet Deborah "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." This story is filled with great "disruptive potential," Joy Schroeder explains, because "Deborah exhibits characteristics that many readers have felt should never be encouraged in women."

Deborah's remarkable leadership in ancient Israel had many facets. The ancient prophetess, poet, and judge provided nineteenth-century proponents of women's leadership with "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," Schroeder observes.

Here are some examples of the women Schroeder calls "Deborah's daughters," because they 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."

- ▶ *Prophetess Deborah heartened many women preachers.* Harriet Livermore, a New England Baptist who was the first woman to preach to Congress, and Zilpha Elaw, an African-American Methodist who preached in America and Great Britain, often used her story to defend their divine callings. Noting that Deborah calls herself "a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7), Methodist evangelist Phoebe Palmer explained that women do not become "unfeminine" when God calls them to leadership: "the God of Providence will enable [a woman] to meet the emergency with becoming dignity, wisdom, and womanly grace." To charges that a woman's preaching was "unnatural and unfeminine,"



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Catherine Mumford Booth, the co-founder of the Salvation Army, replied, “the authority of Deborah as a prophetess...was acknowledged and submitted to as implicated in the cases of the male judges who succeeded her. ... [W]ho 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.”

- ▶ *The poet Deborah stirred the imagination of devotional writers.* The British Jewish novelist Grace Aguilar imagined that ancient Israel embraced the contributions of women more than the Judaism or British society of her day. Similarly, the American social activist and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, “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 [Deborah’s leadership] is announced.” She interpreted Deborah’s song (Judges 5) as a vestige of a once-flourishing women’s literary culture: “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.”
- ▶ *Judge Deborah inspired suffragists and abolitionists.* “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?” asked activist Clara Neyman. She took Deborah’s work with Barak to show how “Together [man and woman] will slay the enemies – ignorance, superstition and cruelty.” The suffragist Anna Howard Shaw believed women should emulate Deborah by seeking public office. America, she said, had “been fathered to death. The great need of our country today is a little mothering to undo the evils of too much fathering.” As Schroeder notes, “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.”

Study Questions

1. Which facets of Deborah’s story most encouraged the nineteenth-century women whom Joy Schroeder calls “Deborah’s daughters”?
2. Which facets of Deborah’s story might inspire the discipleship of both men and women today? Are there facets of her story that you find problematic?
3. Discuss Scott Spencer’s advice: “Beyond incorporating women’s insights, feminist and otherwise, into our regular course of preaching, we might also consider occasional sermon series devoted to women characters in the Bible.” How does this fit with the advice from “Deborah’s daughters”?
4. Sheila Klopfer notes that nineteenth-century “feminists either naively regarded the Bible as affirming gender equality or pessimistically regarded it as patriarchal and thereby denied its authoritative nature.” Do you see this among Deborah’s daughters? What alternative does Klopfer commend?

Departing Hymn: “Holy, Holy, God of Power”

Deborah's Daughters

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how nineteenth-century proponents of women's leadership were inspired by the biblical story of Deborah.
2. To survey Deborah's story in Judges 4-5 to inspire our discipleship today.
3. To reflect on the contributions of feminist biblical scholarship in guiding our reading of Scripture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Joy Schroeder recounts how Frances Willard (1839-1898), a popular Methodist speaker and president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, called for more women biblical commentators in her book *Woman in the Pulpit* (1889). "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," she wrote. Women could add a "pinch of commonsense" that would be "an excellent ingredient in that complicated dish called Biblical interpretation."

Willard appealed to the biblical stories about Deborah and other women leaders to challenge interpretations of Scripture that limited women's roles in church and society. In a stirring roll call of the Bible's heroines Willard wrote, "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."

In this study Joy Schroeder explores how the many facets of Deborah inspired women preachers, political activists, and writers in the nineteenth century. How does her story inspire our discipleship?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to inspire your discipleship in his way through the life of Deborah.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Judges 4:1-16 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading from Deborah's Song

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Joy Schroeder introduces a range of nineteenth-century women abolitionists, suffragists, and novelists who drew upon the story of Deborah in order to articulate and defend an expanded role for women in leadership. She calls them "Deborah's daughters." Though most of these women were not professionally trained in biblical

studies, they pioneered feminist biblical scholarship. Sheila Klopfer calls their era the “First Wave of Feminism.” Invite members to reflect not only on the contributions these women make to our appreciation of Deborah’s story, but also on the role feminist biblical scholarship should play in our discipleship today.

Study Questions

1. Joy Schroeder distinguishes three major facets of Deborah’s leadership: she was a prophetess, political leader (“judge”), and poet. While all of the facets were recognized by each of the nineteenth-century women Schroeder calls “Deborah’s daughters,” they tended to be emphasized, in turn, by the women preachers, social activists, and novelists. Reading between the lines in Deborah’s story, these interpreters suggested she was not unique in ancient Israel in these facets of leadership.
2. The same three facets of Deborah’s leadership might inspire our discipleship. Christian women and men are called to speaking and teaching ministries, political leadership, and literary pursuits. Because the story of Deborah (indeed, the entire biblical book of Judges) is absent from lectionaries, it is rarely used in sermons or lessons in churches today. Perhaps this is due to the violence in the story, on both a grand scale – the “army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left” (Judges 4:16b) – and a personal scale – when Sisera is murdered by Jael (Judges 4:17-22). While the song of Deborah in Judges 5 celebrates these events for their divine protection of the people of Israel, it concludes by emphasizing the enduring peace brought by Deborah’s rule: “And the land had rest forty years” (5:31b).
3. Consider Scott Spencer’s reasons for advising us to (1) incorporate women’s insights into all preaching and teaching, and (2) study women characters in the Bible. Both recommendations are prominent in the writings of Deborah’s daughters.

Consider practical steps your congregation might take toward these ends. Do lay men and women meet regularly with the pastors and teachers to help plan sermons and lessons? Are women invited to preach sermons or teach discipleship classes? Are there opportunities for sermon or study series about women characters in the Bible?

4. Sheila Klopfer cites these examples of the extremes: “Christian abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott and Sarah and Angelina Grimké understood Scripture to be liberative. Their interpretations became the basis for actively opposing slavery and gender inequalities in America. Other nineteenth century feminists, such as the prominent suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, came to a different conclusion about Scripture. After a careful study of the Bible she concluded that it was largely responsible for the subjugation of women. She...considered only the passages that dignified women as inspired divine truth.”

Klopfer commends contemporary Christian feminist scholars, men and women, who balance the “hermeneutic of suspicion” with a “hermeneutic of trust.” She notes, “They are keenly aware that Scripture was produced in a patriarchal culture and is shaped by the narrator’s perspective. However...[they] read each scripture passage with an eye to the story of God’s redeeming and liberating work, which is a theme that emerges across the entire canon of Scripture.” The articles by Junia Pokrifka and Mona LaFosse in this issue are good examples of the approach Klopfer is describing.

Departing Hymn

“Holy, Holy, God of Power” is on p. 69 of *Women in the Bible*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.