

March 22 – Tough Questions
Are Women in the Old Testament Marginalized?

Tim Perry here – pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church - coming at you with Week 12 of *Tough Questions*.

My tough question this week comes to you from the Book of Judges Chapters 4 and 5 where we read a story about two women who were heroines for the whole nation of Israel. I want to ask the question about how the Bible views women. Does the Bible in the Old Testament in particular – view women as being marginalized or second-class citizens?

We know that the culture and the society surrounding that period of time and in that part of the world – looked down on women. It didn't elevate women to a very high status in terms of social class. Women were not able to be educated, women were viewed as those who were to stay home with children and bear children.

Well we have a very different picture of women in these two women in Judges Chapter 4 and 5. I wonder if this picture jars your memory of who we're talking about. Here you have a gal with a hammer in her hand and a man laying here all sprawled out. That's a tent stake she's driving through his temple! This scene captured the imagination of so many painters and artists.

Here are a couple of other renditions of this same scene. She can get the job done! Pretty beefy looking shoulders if you ask me. And that dude is going to have a splitting headache! Whoa! Here's the same scene – she definitely looks like she's enjoying her work!

Well the issue I think that this scene – and others that go with it from Judges Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 is essentially this question right here. Are women in the Old Testament marginalized?

Let's go over to my whiteboard and we'll take a look at some of my artwork and I'll tell you the whole story. You can decide for yourself if you think the Old Testament marginalizes women.

Let's head over here. So here's the story of Deborah. Deborah is called by God in identical fashion to all the other judges that God raised up during this period of time - whether that's Othniel or whether that's Gideon. The same word is used of her and her leadership position as all the other judges in Israel. That word is "Shophet" – so along comes a Shophet named Deborah who serves as the judge in Israel. And Deborah is really interesting. She's unique among all the other Shophets because she also is what's referred to as a Navi and as you read it in the passage – that word actually gets translated "prophet". Some Bibles might even translate it "prophetess" because she's a woman.

Did you know that there are eight prophetesses mentioned in scripture? I'll let you find them. There are several in the Old Testament and five mentioned in the New Testament.

So here we have Deborah – she's the judge, the ruler, the leader in Israel at the time. She gets a word from God as a *Novi* or a prophet, and that word from God says – you need to clear out the Canaanites that are living in your territories. So she addresses this guy – his name is Barak, and Barak is living among the southern tribes of Naphtali, Issachar and Zebulun. She tells Barak, "We're going to take out all of the Canaanites that are living in your territory." Barak, at first, is a little puzzled. He's not sure he wants to go into battle, especially with Deborah. She's the recognized leader in Israel at the time, but because of his hesitation to immediately do what the word of the LORD is telling him through Deborah to do, Deborah prophesies against him in a subtle prophecy that says, "Barak, if you don't go along with this, someone other than you is going to get the credit for this victory. In fact, God is going to have his victory, but he's going to give the credit to a woman instead of you." Well Barak heeds the warning – he allies himself with Deborah and their leadership and they go in and God miraculously chases these people out of their territory and they track down all of the Canaanite military and wipe them out.

Well, there's one last Canaanite leader that doesn't get eliminated in that battle. His name is Sisera - pretty foreboding looking in my drawing. Sisera is the commander of all of the Canaanite forces. He has a force of some 900 iron chariots that he commands, and Deborah and Barak defeat him – except he runs from the battlefield and he runs into the tent of another woman in our story. That's the woman whose picture I just showed you on the screen a minute ago. Her name is Jael. Jael welcomes him into her tent. He's so exhausted from being engaging in the battle, he says – do you have something I can drink? He's just dying of thirst. She says, well let me give you something to drink and let me give you a place to rest as well. She pours him literally a warm bowl of milk just like a kitten and he lies down on the floor inside of her tent. While he's sleeping, she comes with her little hammer and her tent stake and "ouch" drives it right through his head and kills him! So the prophecy comes true that Deborah prophesied to Barak about. Barak – you're not going to get the credit for this military victory – a woman is going to get the credit for it – and that woman is not Deborah – it's not me, she says, it's actually this woman right here named Jael. So at the end of the day, Jael is credited with the military Victory and the person who is in leadership in Israel at the time is Deborah.

Well, what do you make of that? In light of our question, are women in the Old Testament marginalized? – we would have to look at what happened in Judges 4 and 5 and say, no way, they're not marginalized – God actually has them front and center in his plan. They're showing leadership. They're taking risks and showing courage in actually engaging in the fight that's happening among God's people and among the Canaanites.

Well, it turns out that if you read Judges Chapter 5, you get a replay of this whole scenario in almost a poetry slam fashion. If you want to read some good poetry slam, read Judges Chapter 5. I want to read a little section of it for you and it helps us understand a little more of what's really happening here and helps us answer our question as well.

You'll find this on page 353 in your yearly Bible. This is a stanza of poetry that's at the very end of this long song that Deborah has written and she writes this last stanza in the voice of Sisera's mother. Listen to this:

"Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried out, 'Why is his chariot taking so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?' (Remember his 900 iron chariots?) The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself, 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a girl or two for each man, (it's even steamier than that in the original language, it literally says a womb or two for each man) and colorful garments as plunder, colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck – all this as plunder?"

So Deborah in her poem about what happened here is slamming the lid on Sisera. She's pretending like she's the mother of Sisera – Wow, why is he taking so long in getting home? Oh, I know why he's taking so long getting home, he's having his way with all of the spoils of war. In that period of time – in that culture – the women of the defeated army were treated as sexual trophies - as property to be enjoyed by the soldiers – two girls for every boy! So Sisera's mother is thinking, well I know why he isn't home yet. He's just having his ways with some of the daughters of the Israelite soldiers when, in fact, this drips with sarcastic sexual irony because instead of Sisera enjoying two women of the Israelites along with all of his soldiers enjoying two Israelite women, two Israelite women have defeated his whole army. Sisera himself has been taken out by one little girl here who knows how to use a hammer and test stake.

So let me come to a conclusion then about the question that's hanging in the air. Aren't women in the Old Testament marginalized and somewhat demeaned? I don't think so. Not according to God's view of who women are. In this scenario, God is viewing women as equal combatants along with men in the struggle of what it means to be people of God. God doesn't view them as sexual property the way that the opposing army viewed them. In fact, they would be better off to view them as people who should be feared. Not because they're women, but because they know Yahweh. They follow a powerful God. So I don't think that even God has a problem with leadership among his own people. Not in this chapter of the Israelite story. In Judges Chapter 4 and 5, Deborah is put on the same platform as any of the other prophets that he raised up. She got the job done. But the essence of leadership for Christians and for us today even in the body of Christ is portrayed right here in Judges. It's not a battle between the sexes – between men versus women and who should be in charge – it's a matter of who God calls into leadership and who God gifts and equips to get the job done. And here in Judges – right in the middle of the Old Testament in some of the grittiest passages in the

Bible – we see that God can use Godly women to get his work accomplished. As you read your Bible, you're going to find other examples of women like Deborah who God calls up, gifts and empowers to lead.

Lastly, in the Christian worldview and in the worldview of the Israelites, women were not to be treated as mere sexual objects. They were not to be demeaned or marginalized. They were to be valued and prized. They were equal participants in the drama of what God was doing through his people.

Well, if you are excited about this as I am to discover what God is doing through the lives of these women, why don't you hit on the "comment" button and give me a few of your thoughts.