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WOMEN IN THE BIBLE. VI DEBORAH AND YAEL

The Opposite Reversal of Miriam and Zipporah - Leadership, Female Initiative, and Shared Destiny

Tsippy Levin Byron
(Bar-Ilan University)

Summary

- 1.- Deborah: An Established and Uncontested Leader;
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- 4.- The Correction: Deborah Versus Miriam;
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1.- Deborah: An Established and Uncontested Leader

Deborah does not emerge ex nihilo at the moment of crisis. The text emphasises her prior status: "And she sat under the palm tree of Deborah... and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment" [Judges 4:5]. She is described as a learned woman, an accepted judge, just and faithful to the law and order of the Israelite community. Her authority is not momentary-charismatic but institutional and recognized.

Here lies the similarity to Miriam. Miriam is the first prophetess, the spiritual leader of the women, "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel" [Exodus 15:20]. Her leadership predated the Exodus and she is perceived as senior. Yet Miriam, by choice, gives overt leadership primacy to her younger brothers - Moses and Aaron. Deborah does not do this. The key to understanding Deborah's supremacy is precisely in the conduct of Barak son of Abinoam. Deborah is well aware of the limits of her power. She is a woman of vision and justice, not a military tactician. The crisis with Jabin king of Hazor and his general Sisera requires military sophistication that she does not possess. She calls upon the professional.

To the reader's surprise, Barak, the professional male warrior, refuses to go on the mission without her command: "And Barak said unto her: If thou wilt go with me, then I will go; but if thou wilt not go with me, I will not go" [Judges 4:8]. This is an exceptional moment in the Bible. The general prefers to be number two. He understands that without the moral, legal, and spiritual backing of Deborah, the move lacks legitimacy and chance of success. Thus, her status as the sole and supreme leader - over the preparation, over the decision to go to battle, and over the strategy of war ("Hath not the Lord commanded") - is not in doubt.

2.- Yael: The Double Surprise

In contrast to the open and explicit coordination with Barak, with Yael the Kenite there is no prior connection or acquaintance. The text deliberately emphasizes: "Now Heber the Kenite had severed himself from the Kenites... and had pitched his tent as far as Elon-bezaananim, which is next to *Kedesh*" [Judges 4:11], "Now there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite" [Ibid 4:17].

Yael surprises with the leap she takes to one side of the warring armies. The surprise is twofold:

- a. Political Surprise: She belongs to the house of Heber the Kenite, a house known for absolute neutrality regarding the wars of the city-states with one another. The Kenites in general maintained neutrality, and the house of Heber had even made a covenant of peace with Jabin. She would have been expected to honour her husband's alliance.
- b. Gender Surprise: She is a woman. In the ancient Near East, women do not fight. Their sociological role is to hide in the tent and guard what exists - the children, the property, and continuity - until the men return from battle. Her emergence from the tent onto the battlefield, and moreover as the initiator of a military assassination, is a complete break of the norm.

3.- Two Women Who Did Not Know Each Other - A Chain of Salvation

Deborah and Yael did not know each other. There was no planning of a joint move between them, no signal, no division of roles. This is the fundamental difference from the hierarchical military model of Deborah and Barak.

Each of them invented her own move and risked her life when reality called her to act. Deborah descends from Mount Tabor although she is not a warrior, and Yael brings Sisera into her tent and decides in one moment to become a traitor to her husband's camp and a saviour of Israel. Here they act like the chain of women who saved Moses: Shiphrah and Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter - each in her own timing, without overall coordination, completing the other's move without knowing it. Deborah created the conditions for victory and the defeat of Sisera's army at the Kishon River, but without Yael - Sisera would have escaped and raised a new army. Yael completes what Deborah began.

4.- The Correction: Deborah Versus Miriam

Here comes the perfect reversal of the story of Miriam and Zipporah.

In the desert, Zipporah, the foreign woman, the Midianite, saves Moses from death at the lodging place from the angel through the act of circumcision: "Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son" [Exodus 4:25]. This is a courageous act of heroism by a foreign woman who understands the sanctity of Israel better than the leader himself.

Miriam's response, as the established Hebrew leader, is a failure of containment. Instead of making Zipporah a partner in the great act of salvation, Zipporah remains foreign and alienated. "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had taken" [Numbers 12:1]. This criticism, which comes after the act of rescue, pushes Zipporah out of the national story. She is not made a partner.

Deborah, in complete contrast to Miriam, knows how to appreciate and thank Yael the foreigner who gambled her life for the victory of Israel. In the Song of Deborah, which is the great feminine song in the Bible, she dedicates the climax to Yael:

"Blessed above women shall Yael be, the wife of Heber the Kenite, above women in the tent shall she be blessed" [Judges 5:24].

Deborah does not see in Yael a threat to her leadership, or a foreign "Cushite woman" to be pushed aside. She sees in her an equal partner, and even superior to her - "above women in the tent shall she be blessed" - a blessing reserved for the heroine who did in the tent what men could not do on the battlefield. She gives her a place of honour in eternity.

This is the correction: If with Miriam - the veteran leader rejects the foreign woman who saves, with Deborah - the veteran leader embraces, exalts, and immortalizes the foreign woman who saves. Thus, the coincidental partnership of two women strangers to each other becomes an eternal covenant of complementary female leadership.

5.- Appendix for the Italian Reader: Who Was Sisera? Prof. Adam Zertal's Sardinian Thesis

A final point, of particular interest to the Italian reader, concerns the identity of the enemy himself.

Israeli archaeologist Prof. Adam Zertal [1936-2015], famous for the Manasseh Hill Country Survey and the discovery of the altar on Mount Ebal, proposed a radical thesis regarding the name "Sisera". According to him, Sisera is not a personal name at all, but an ethno-geographic title indicating the commander's origin.

The root S-S-R is identified with the ancient city of Sisri in Sardinia. Zertal argued that Sisera was in fact "the Sardinian man" - a professional mercenary commander who served in the Canaanite army of Jabin, king of Hazor.

This thesis fits into the broader historical picture of the 14th-12th centuries BCE, the period of the Late Bronze Age collapse and the Sea Peoples migrations. At that time, many tribes across the Mediterranean islands were displaced by invaders and migrants arriving from Central Europe. This is how the Minoan culture in Crete came to an end, and how the Philistines left the Greek islands to found the five lordships of Philistia on the southern coastal plain of Israel. According to Zertal, that same wave of migration that struck Sardinia caused the exile of a professional Sardinian warrior, who arrived on the shores of Canaan and offered his services as a mercenary to the strongest Canaanite army in the region. Thus, the battle at the Kishon River becomes not only a battle between Israel and Canaan, but an early encounter between Israel and the world of Mediterranean mercenaries - the same world from which, shortly afterwards, the Philistines would also emerge.

ABSTRACT

The story of the war against Sisera in Judges 4-5 presents a unique model of dual female leadership. Through an analysis of the figures of Deborah the Prophetess and Yael the wife of Heber the Kenite, this paper argues that the story constitutes a perfect reversal and correction of the tragic relationship between Miriam and Zipporah in the desert.

SOMMARIO

La storia della guerra contro Sisera, in Giudici 4-5, presenta un modello unico di doppia leadership femminile. Attraverso un'analisi delle figure di Debora la Profetessa e Yael, moglie di Heber il Kenita, questo lavoro sostiene che la storia costituisce un perfetto rovesciamento e correzione della relazione tragica tra Miriam e Zippora nel deserto.

KEYWORDS

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PAROLE CHIAVE

Debora

Yael

Sisera

Miriam

Giudici

Contributo, come da regolamento, non sottoposto a referaggio “double blind”.