

One Woman, Three Kings

The Story of Deborah, Saul, David and Solomon

By Steven Liebowitz, ED.D

The Bible tells us that 175 years after Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt, there arose a woman, Deborah, a daughter of Ephraim, to be a Judge over her people, a prophetess and a righteous example unto them. The Bible also tells us of Deborah's husband, Lappodoth; Barak, the great Hebrew general; Sisera the Canaanite general; Yael the Kenite, slayer of Sisera; and of Sisera's mother, Bethena. The Bible touches only the high points of their lives. What follows is a more complete story.

Chapter Ten

Yael would be so pleased, Jereboam thought. Not only am I here with Deborah, but she looks like she's going to give birth any day now! I must find a scribe and try to get word to her.

"Jereboam, thank you," Deborah was saying. "You and your cousin and indeed your whole family are the kind of people who make my duty worthwhile." Deborah sighed and shrugged. "Of course I serve all our people, but...."

"No need to explain, Sar," he said respectfully. "You are human; with likes and dislikes as we all have." She looks so good, and healthy, Jereboam thought. Vigorous, bold, yet soft and cuddly. At one with the new life filling her belly. She is truly a blessing!

Lappodoth came in and nodded to Jereboam who was a stranger to him.

"Husband, this is Jereboam. He is a Judean and was recently released from the fortress of Charoshet after being tortured."

Lappodoth frowned and embraced Jereboam. "I am so sorry kinsman," he said.

"It is what is, Lappodoth. I have been a soldier of Israel for thirteen years." He turned to Deborah. "Sar, I have come for two reasons." She nodded to him. "First, I beg you on behalf of our people and with all the judgment and experience of my years of military training – call the tribes to battle. It is time."

"I agree, Jereboam" she said. "And so does Barak. Your second point?"

"We can have weapons of iron. The ore can be obtained overseas from the same sources the Canaanites use, and we have skilled blacksmith among our brothers of Mannasah."

"Yes. Thank you. We are aware of that. We have asked Eli of Asher to outfit a ship, lay-up trade goods, olives, oil and grain, and go to Macedonia where the ore can be obtained. Barak now has three blacksmiths from Mannasah with him on Tabor. They have raided Acco and have a sufficient amount of iron ore for 1,000 swords."

Jereboam was ecstatic. "That is excellent news!" he said. "Why have we not heard of this?"

“It must be kept secret from the Canaanites,” Lappodoth replied, “for obvious reasons. We cannot afford to provoke them, nor do we want them to ask the Sea Peoples to help them find our ship.” Jereboam was nodding. “They know about our raid on Acco, of course, but do not know exactly how much ore we have taken.”

“Jereboam,” Devorah said, “you have shown yourself to be a brave and intelligent man. May I ask you a spiritual question?”

“Please, Sar.”

“Devorah. Call me, Devorah.”

“Thank you, Devorah.”

“Our ability to win in battle against the Canaanites, given the facts, is non-existent.”

“It would take a miracle,” Jereboam agreed.

“I believe a miracle is possible, because I believe the One God is everywhere equally present – in us, the sky, the clouds, rain, in the Canaanites, the hills, the forests.” Jereboam nodded, not having any difficulty with what Devorah was saying. “I believe that the power we call God is a natural power like lightening or the wind, and that just as we may use the wind to sail our ships or run the pumps that bring water up from our wells – once we have learned its laws, so can we use the power of the One God within us to connect with the power of the One God that surrounds us.”

“I feel what you say is clear,” Jereboam said, “and perhaps even true. But it is not what the priests say.”

“I feel God, Jereboam; commune with him. Don’t you?”

“I do; with no need of priests and ceremony.”

“Yes!” Devorah said. “Yes! That is God. But as you said, the priests are not happy about that. I would have the priests be happy before I call the tribes to war. Half the tribes are already doubtful. The priests might provide the last excuse they need not to fight. If I am a blasphemer, how can my call be honored?”

“But you are not!” Jereboam exclaimed.

“In their eyes, perhaps I am. No ritual, nor ceremony, nor priests do I require to be righteous and serve the One God, our people and myself. And I think I have done a pretty good job of it.”

“You have!”

“The personal experience of connection is more powerful than any ritual. In fact, that is what the rituals, ceremonies and priests are intended to do, to make that connection and help

us experience the One God in and around us. Yet now the rituals have become a purpose in and of themselves and people are pining for the lack of true connection.

“General Barak is one such. He has the skill and intelligence, but he is unconnected and without faith. He feels alone and in danger. If he had an experience of his connection with the One God, he would be unbeatable. I will have to supply that connection for him.

“It is the fact of our connection – our Covenant, our belief and faith in it – with or without the rituals, that will sustain us and bring victory. The priests believe in a god that is little more than an idol, like the gods of Egypt and our neighbors. Yes, we make no graven images. But the priests’ god lives in the ark in the temple and can only be approached through ritual and ceremony.”

“That is not the god I experienced in the torture chambers of Charoshet,” Jereboam said. “Yes I sang praise, but that was not to invoke him, for I felt him first, within me. I sang the Shma for the joy of the feeling in my heart; for the sudden realization of the truth of my being and connection to him even as they broke first one arm, then the other.”

Devorah nodded. Lappodoth came and put his arms about her, kissed her on the cheek and turned to Jereboam. “We are few, Jereboam, very few. Devorah would call the tribes to rally to her, but what of the priests?” Jereboam nodded in agreement. “And besides,” Lappodoth said, patting her belly, “I think we have five or six weeks to go, then a few weeks of recovery before Devorah can be actively involved.”

“Need she be ‘actively involved’?” Jereboam asked. “What of Barak?”

Devorah shook her head, sadly, “Barak, as we have said, has little faith. I will have to be with him.”

“He is a good tactician and general,” Jereboam said.

“Indeed,” Lappodoth said. “Many admire his skill and will join with us because of him. But his heart is not in it.”

“It is not that, exactly,” Devorah said. “He can not overlook the odds against us. He can not imagine how we can triumph, even under the best of conditions. He wants more men, iron weapons, cavalry and a few chariots. I do not blame him. I want them, too. He knows we must fight and soon, but he can not see a way to win. A stalemate is the best he can see.

“I do not see a way to win, either. But I know we shall. We must plan and take the steps we can then trust in the rightness of our cause. A battlefield is a fluid place, is it not Jereboam?” He nodded. “Much can go wrong,” Devorah continued. “The weather, for one, can be quite treacherous.” As if on cue, masses of heavily laden rain clouds darkened the sky. She smiled.

“Our opportunities will arise and we must be prepared to seize them. We have what we have, what we’ve been given. It is good and enough. Let us make the most of it.”

Devorah’s smile turned to a grimace. She staggered. Her eyes rolled up into her head so that only the whites were showing. She moaned and collapsed in a heap. Lappodoth, nearest her, crouched and lifted her head to his breast. Jereboam also knelt, panic in his eyes.

“Fear not, Jereboam,” Lappodoth said. “She is well. See her chest rise and fall with her breath? She is having a vision. Usually she receives guidance in less traumatic ways, but often it takes this form.”

Twenty minutes later, Devorah stirred, opened her eyes and blinked. Normal consciousness had returned. Jereboam felt himself begin to breathe again. She made to stand and Lappodoth helped her up. Jereboam stood with them. She smiled and sought to put her visitor at ease.

“It is fine, Jereboam. I am well.” She paused. “I must go to the priests of Shiloh before I call the tribes to war.”

Jereboam was disappointed. “The priests are important. But the call to arms.... The call will take time - to reach the tribes and to have them respond. Could you not issue the call and while you are waiting for responses, visit Shiloh?”

Devorah smiled. “I had thought it was either one or the other, Jereboam, but now see that both the call and the visit can be done almost at once. Thank you! It shall be as you say.” She paused to consider. “I know you were on your way to Barak. But would you wait a few hours, until I can compose the call, then take it to all twelve tribes?”

“I would be honored, Devorah!” Jereboam looked down and swallowed, not wanting to contradict her a second time. “May I suggest that I take your call to Mt. Tabor and that you send twelve other messengers simultaneously to all the tribes? That would be faster.”

Devorah looked at him steadily then smiled. “Again you are correct, my kinsman! More proof that the One God is fully present in everyone and everything. It shall be as you have said. Go now.” She made gentle shooping motions. “I will compose the call, opening myself to our father. Lappodoth will give it to you when it is completed.”

Jereboam bowed and left the tent. “He is unusually nationalistic for a Judean,” he said.

“Indeed,” Devorah agreed. “They are a proud people. Almost a nation unto themselves.”

“That is putting it mildly, wife.” Lappodoth looked deeply into her eyes. “Surely you know how they foment doubt and mistrust with Dan, Simeon and Reuben so that the interests of Judah triumph?”

“I am aware, who can not be? The High Priest is Judean. Yet they are all not that way. What of Jereboam?”

“The exception to the rule,” Lappodoth said. “The leadership of Judah is not like Jereboam. You have heard the reports of our spies, there is some reliable evidence that they connive with the Philistines.”

Devorah nodded. “‘Connive’ and side with in a war involving their own people are two different things.”

“True. Yet they are fully capable of staying ‘neutral’ and sitting the war out.”

Devorah shook her head wearily. “Yes. Please, husband leave me now so that I may compose the Call to Arms.”

Lappodoth dipped his head, kissed her on the cheek and left the tent. Devorah collected the papyrus, ink and quill and seated herself and the writing table. She closed her eyes, allowed her breathing to slow and heard the busy sounds of camp grow muffled and distant. “Oh, Abba,” she said. “I am so blessed to be Your daughter. Thank you for my life, the unborn life within me,” she patted her stomach, “and all the lives everywhere around us. I know you intend the world to be a joyous life-affirming garden for all humankind; that we are to be good stewards of all You have given us: plants, animals, fish and birds. But we have forgotten this. We have lost sight of our oneness with You and of our Covenant. We have used Your gifts to harm one another, cause injustice, pain and suffering. I want to turn from all of that, Father, and return to Your dream for us.

“I want to rally the Haibru people to me, that they may act lawfully within Thy framework and use Your power to correct the injustice, pain and suffering they have been experiencing - that they themselves have created using Your power. Now is it time to use Your power differently, to see ourselves and our neighbors not as oppressors and ourselves as victims, but to stand before You, ourselves and our neighbors as people of strength and substance willing to assert our claims for justice, joy and sustenance.”

Devorah’s heart throbbed and leapt at her word/thoughts. How right they felt! How timely. “Now, Father, I claim my birthright as Your daughter and ask that You give me the words that will rally the Haibrus to me. We must stand, Father, and assert ourselves. You know that it is long past time for us to do so. I call for justice, not retribution; for freedom, not for slavery. I know I speak the truth, that we are one and that as I speak these words and release them into Your law, this will surely come to pass! Amen.”

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