

Haftarah

'You rose, a Mother in Israel!'



All governance had left Israel,
till you rose up, Deborah,
you rose, a Mother in Israel!

.....

Most blessed of women be Jael,
wife of Heber the Kenite;
most blessed of the women in
tents.

From the Song of Deborah,
Judges 5:7, 24

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Judges 4:4—5:31) accompanies the Torah portion *B'shalach*: Exodus 13:17—17:16.
- Both readings describe the defeat of an enemy of Israel (Pharaoh, Sisera), followed by a celebration of victory in song. Both readings refer to a female prophet (Miriam, Deborah).

Background

- The Book of Judges presents traditions relating to the 12-13th centuries BCE when the Israelites lived as a loose confederation of tribes, guided by *shof'tim*: 'judiciary officers' who also provided military and administrative leadership. This is the period after Joshua's death and before the establishment of a monarchy. The Israelites were often at war with the neighboring Canaanites and Philistines.

Ponder

- *Deborah*: her name means 'bee.' Deborah sits in judgment at a sacred palm tree in the north of the Israelites' land: '*Palm of Deborah*' (4:4).
- In the Hebrew Scriptures, Deborah is one of five women with the title 'prophet': Miriam (Exodus 15:20), the unnamed wife of Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3), Hulda (2 Kings 22:14), and Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14). Rabbinic tradition names seven female prophets.
- Female figures feature prominently in this Haftarah: Deborah, Jael (who kills Sisera), Sisera's mother and her 'wisest ladies' (5:29).
- '*That day God humbled Jabin king of Canaan before the people of Israel*' (5:23). Jael's deed, preceded by the military strategies of Deborah, is ultimately viewed as the act of God who protects his people.
- Note the similarities and differences between military accounts found in the Song of Deborah (from 5:1) and the preceding prose. Scholars note the older dating, and the complexity, of the Song of Deborah. Since her name is mentioned before Barak's it is traditionally attributed to her.
- '*Galloping, galloping*' (5:22): Plaut's translation captures the Hebrew poetic rhythm: *daharot daharot*.
- '*The land was at rest for forty years*' (5:31). Peace after so much turbulence is significant. The number forty is used several times in the bible to refer to the tenure of judges and can be interpreted to mean 'for a whole generation.'

Talking point

In the bible the divine Word of God speaks to us through the fragile words of human storytelling in history. Discuss in relation to seeking the theological and spiritual meaning of the text amidst stories of violence and bloodshed.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY: UAHC Press, 1996). Scripture: Plaut.