

Was Deborah's Leadership of Israel a Sign of God's Judgment?

Some people claim that Deborah, rather than being a blessing, was actually a judgment on Israel.

This opinion is derived from Isaiah 3:12, which in most translations says something like this: "As for My people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them" (NKJV).

Undoubtedly the context of this passage in Isaiah, as rendered in most versions, is that of judgement on Israel for their sins.

The story of Deborah comes in the book of Judges. The theme of this book, spelled out in Judges 3:11-19, is this: The people of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, so He delivered them into the hands of their enemies. When they cried out to the Lord to help them, He raised up a deliverer for them who defeated their oppressors. This cycle is repeated over and over again. We see it in the stories of Othniel and Ehud (Judges 3), Gideon (chapters 6-8), Jephthah (chapter 11) and Samson (chapters 13-16).

Sandwiched in the middle of this saga is the story of Deborah, and it follows the same pattern. The people of Israel did evil in God's sight (4:1) and so he delivered them into the hands of Jabin, king of Canaan (4:2). After 20 years of harsh oppression, the people cried out to the Lord (4:3). God then used Deborah and Jael, two women, along with Barak, commander of the armies to defeat Israel.

There is not a hint anywhere in this story that Deborah is a punishment on Israel. On the contrary, she is described as a

prophetess (4:4) and a mother in Israel (5:7). The Israelites came to her for judgment under a palm tree (4:5).

There's no indication that her leadership of Barak is in any way inappropriate—in fact, the partnership between Deborah and Barak is a beautiful picture of what can happen when men and women co-labor together in the body of Christ. Nor is there any suggestion that God used Deborah to deliver Israel because there wasn't a man available. Following their victory, the people of Israel had peace for 40 years.

The Isaiah passage also says “children are their oppressors.” Again, the impression given is that a child as king is a punishment on the people. Yet perhaps the most godly king apart from David was Josiah. His story comes in 2 Kings 21-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35. Josiah was eight when he began his reign, and he set his heart to follow God. He, unlike any of the other kings, removed all the pagan worship from the land and reinstated the Passover celebration. His story stands out in a long list of kings as perhaps the only one who pleased God in all that he did.

2 Kings 23:25 says this of him:

Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor after him did any arise like him.

So is the problem one of translation?

Brenton's Septuagint renders Isaiah 3:12 as:

O my people, your exactors strip you, and extortioners rule over you.

So at the very least, there is some question on the exact meaning of this verse.

However, there is no question that God used both a woman and a

child in the two stories I've described, just as he is using women in leadership today.

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*Adapted from **Felicity Dale**'s blog, *Simply Church*. Felicity Dale is an author and an advocate for women in the church. She trains people to start simple, organic house churches around the world.*