

Jael

Judges 4:8-23

4:8 And Barak said unto her [*Deborah*], If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go. **4:9** And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of **a woman**. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kadesh. ...

4:17 Howbeit Sisera fled away on his feet to the tent of **Jael** the wife of Heber the Kenite: for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. **4:18** And **Jael** went out to meet Sisera, and said unto him, Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not. And when he had turned in unto her into the tent, she covered him with a mantle. **4:19** And he said unto her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water to drink; for I am thirsty. And she opened a bottle of milk, and gave him drink, and covered him. **4:20** Again he said unto her, Stand in the door of the tent, and it shall be, when any man doth come and enquire of thee, and say, Is there any man here? that thou shalt say, No. **4:21** Then **Jael** Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died. **4:22** And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, **Jael** came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come, and I will shew thee the man whom thou seekest. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples. **4:23** So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel.

Judges 5:6-7

5:6 In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of **Jael**, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways. **5:7** The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel.

Judges 5:24-27

5:24 Blessed above women shall **Jael** the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent. **5:25** He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish. **5:26** She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote *off* his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples. **5:27** At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead.

Judge Jael?

As the only commonly recognized female judge, Deborah is well known. And Barak who worked closely with her is remembered by many. But Jael, the judge-like woman who struck the critical blow against the leader of the Canaanites in 4:21, is often overlooked.

Worse still, many remember Jael as a murderess. In so doing, they fail to appreciate the perplexity of the time in which she lived (5:6-7), the terrible brutality of the Canaanite general whom she killed (5:28-30), and the judge-like nature of her position (3:21, 4:21).

negatives

Jaer killed Sisera, but was it murder? She did not kill any others that we know about. And more importantly, a state of war existed at the time between Israel and Canaan (4:23-24), and Jaer's tent was so near the battlefield (4:11, 17) that she was forced to take sides.

Even so, there was a peace agreement of some sort between Jaer's husband, a Kenite, and the powerful Canaanite king (4:17). So she acted contrary to that treaty and contrary to her husband's position in the land when she killed Sisera.

Did Jaer change sides because the Israelites had already defeated Sisera (4:15-16)? Maybe. If so, she was an opportunist rather than a woman of principle. This may be the case. To this day Bedouins are often forced to adjust to power shifts around them.

That said, Deborah and Barak contrasted Jaer with Sisera and his mother in a positive way (5:24-30). The Canaanites were looters and rapists (5:30), but Jaer was blessed (5:24). So did this blessed woman really commit murder?

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

| | |
|----------|---|
| A | () Jael was not an honorable woman. |
| A-1 | () She was a murderess. |
| A-2 | () She was a Bedouin (4:11, 17, 5:24). |
| A-3 | () She deceptively pretended to help Sisera. |
| A-4 | () She acted without her husband's approval (4:17). |
| A-5 | () She was probably seeking favor with the Israelites. |
| A-6 | () She was no better than Sisera' evil mother (5:28-30). |
| A-7 | () She should not have been praised as she was (5:24-27). |
| A-8 | () She was like the men who killed Ishbosheth (2 Sam. 4:5-12). |
| B | () Jael was not a woman of faith. |
| B-1 | () She was not Jewish (4:11, 17). |
| B-2 | () Her husband was allied with an evil king (4:17). |
| B-3 | () Her husband was a Kenite, a descendent of Jethro. |
| B-4 | () Judges does not say that she was a believer. |

positives

Deborah prophesied that a woman would kill Sisera (4:9). That woman, of course, was Jaer. Moreover Jaer was praised for her action (5:24-27). Though many men failed to come to the fight (5:17, 23), Jael, *a woman*, finished the battle by killing the Canaanite commander. God apparently approved of this.

If only we knew what Jaer was thinking when she picked up that tent stake! Did she do the right thing for the right reason or for a wrong one? Sadly, we do not know for sure why she acted as she did.

Was Jael one of the judges? Probably not, but killing Sisera was an act that a judge might have done. Ehud, a judge, deceived and assassinated the king of Moab in 3:21, and Jael did the same to Sisera in 4:21. Ehud used a dagger, and Jael used a stake, but the result was the same. (Maybe the motives were the same as well.)

Several judges, including Shamgar (3:31) who is closely connected with Jaer in 5:6, used unconventional weapons. They used whatever was available at the time.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C () Jael was a woman of action.

C-1 () Her husband was away when Sisera came (4:17).

C-2 () She did more than many men (5:17, 23).

C-3 () She acted quickly but cautiously.

D () Jael acted like a judge.

D-1 () She lived in a violent age (5:6).

D-2 () She used what she had on hand.

D-3 () She killed a leading enemy of Israel.

D-4 () She was strong and courageous (4:21).

D-5 () She did what God wanted (4:9, 5:24-27).

D-6 () She was like Deborah (4:4-5, 5:6-7, 24-27).

D-7 () She was more courageous than Barak (4:6-9).

D-8 () She was like Ehud (3:21) and Shamgar (3:31, 5:6).

D-9 () Judges 5:24-27 may imply that she was a believer.

worksheet answers

All of the lines on the positive worksheet on the previous page are either correct or partly correct.

The most controversial point is probably the final one (D-9), since it is impossible to tell if Jael was a believer or not. The high praise for her in Judges 5:24-27 may imply that she believed in the God of Israel. But it does not prove that she did. Conversely, it is impossible to declare with certainty that she was not a woman of faith (B) despite some evidence that points in that direction (lines B-1 through B-4).

Moreover, in light of 5:24-27, it is unfair to call Jael a murderess (A-1) or a dishonorable woman (A). Apparently Deborah and Barak considered her to be part of God's army in the battle against the Canaanites. And since a state of war existed, her killing Sisera was not murder. This also means that she was not like the two murderers who killed Ishbosheth in 2 Sam. 4:5-12 (A-8).

If the taking of human life is always murder, then it would be wrong to praise Jael (A-7). The Bible, however, differentiates between murder and acts of war (1 Kings 2:5-6).

So what?

Jael was either selfishly seeking favor with the Israelites (A-5) or she acted like a believer and a judge (D). Though it is impossible to tell with certainty which is the case, the victory song in chapter five favors the latter view. Therefore it is correct to say that 5:6 and 5:24-27 *may* imply that Jael was a true believer (D-9).

This study shows that we should side with God's people like Jael did. Does this mean that believers should attack and kill unbelievers? No, of course not! Today, God's people are to be members of local churches which are *not* government controlled. Though churches have sometimes been nationalized to promote the political and military agenda of various nations, this is not in line with the Bible. God's program is very different today from the nation-centered one seen in Judges.

One thing that is sometimes the same today, however, is the lack of enough men in God's work. So women may occasionally be called upon to act in exceptional ways (Rom. 16:1-2). Even so, it is dangerous to emphasize this! Like Deborah, Jael was a special case.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
