

women in scripture

EXPLORING ALL THE WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

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Jael: Most Blessed of Women

by Stephanie Catmull



By Jael's one act, she saves Israel from oppression, reverses the traitorous bedmates of Israel with Canaan, demolishes the law of rape under the guise of hospitality, saves her own reputation, becomes a woman warrior in her own right, and fulfills Deborah's prophecy.

"Blessed is she among women." A distinctive honor not just given to the Virgin

Mary, but also to a little-known nomadic warrior who descended from a priestly clan in 1125 B.C.

A woman who, akin to the Virgin Mary, courageously helped save the Israelite nation despite the oppressive cultural norms for women, and chose God's people over her own reputation.

A woman who was married to a mercenary and opportunist, but herself was faithful to the Israel nation and to God.

A woman who proved to be an early proponent of women's rights, eliminating the threat of sanctioned rape under the guise of hospitality.

And just like the Virgin Mary, she became an unlikely heroine of a prophecy fulfilled.

A woman whose physical strength, faithfulness, patience, and discernment were praised in the very first poem of the Hebrew Bible: "The Song of Deborah."

A woman who rose from obscurity to greatness, and becomes synonymous with the likes of other well-known tent dwellers: Sarah, Hagar, Leah and Rachel.

A woman who, without her remarkably courageous deed, the descendants of Israel would have been lost.

Her name is Jael.

The name itself signifies a wild mountain goat – apropos for a Bedouin's wife whose feet and character stay sturdy amongst the harsh crevices, rocks, and unforgiving surroundings of her society. Jael was married to a Kenanite named Heber, a man descended from Jethro (Moses' father-in-law of the Midianites). Her family were priests, pathfinders, metalworkers, and wanderers, looking for work wherever they could find it.

During Jael's adult life, the Israelites were being horrifically oppressed for over twenty years by the Canaanites' King Jabin. Jael had a front row seat to the vicious cycle of idolatry and judgment upon the nation of Israel – namely the destruction of the lands and the assimilation of pagan practices. Jael is perceptive enough to understand why this is happening: she equates the suffocating oppression her people are enduring due to Israel's lack of faith and worship. But Jael also knows that her faithful God will break the bonds of slavery as long as the Israelites humble themselves, and turn back to the One True God of their nation.

In Judges 4, the Israelite army, led by General Barak and under the prophecy of Judge Deborah, planned a surprise attack against their oppressors and rescue Israel from the bonds of slavery. The Israelite army, however, had strategically no chance of success since they were sorely lacking in soldiers and weaponry. Only an act of God would make this plan work. And Deborah prophesies: "I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Presumably this "hand"

was that of the Judge Deborah, not an obscure woman living in the high desert amongst the enemy.

Heber mistakenly assumes that the Canaanites have the military advantage; he forgets that God is on Israel's side. Heber (whose name means "ally,") contracts himself out to the Canaanite army – led by General Sisera - for weapon-making. Quite the opportunist, Heber travels north from Judah to Canaan, taking Jael with him. Unfortunately, Heber falls into the same trap as did the nation of Israel, and enjoys the riches and spoils of the land, compromising his integrity and beliefs to do so. And to protect his interests, Heber quite probably informs General Sisera of Barak's battle plan, and is richly rewarded with a commission to build 900 iron chariots. Together, Heber and Jael live under the rich umbrella of safety and wealth afforded under a ratified peace treaty between themselves and General Sisera.

Heber made weapons. Jael's primary job, though, was to pitch tents, and she had become an expert in all phases of making, pitching, and striking such dwellings. She spun the goat hair, wove it, and made the tents. She pulled down and packed the tents when they traveled to another place. She set them back up at the end of the day's journey. According to tradition, both her and husband would have had separate tents, doubling her work, efforts and skill. Jael would have been remarkably adept with a tent pin and hammer, knowing how to grind a stake into the desert ground. Ironically her life in a tent, and the skills this entailed, would serve as apt training for General Sisera's betrayal and execution.

Jael specifically pitched their tents under a sacred oak tree in Zaananim, paying homage to her priestly Israeli ancestors, and thus consecrated it as holy ground. Incidentally, this historic ground was located in Nephtali - a land set apart for fleeing inhabitants of the 12 tribes of Israel. (Joshua 20:1-7) Sisera ultimately chooses this tent, this family, this land of protection to flee to for safety after the Canaanites' disastrous defeat.

As the predicted battle between Canaan and Israel ensues, it is clearly evident that another David vs. Goliath scenario was playing out. With the finger of God directing judgment on the oppressors, hail, sleet and hurricane-force winds were

driven into the faces of the Canaanite army, blinding their vision and mucking the grounds into which the chariots' iron wheels get buried. Reminiscent of the Egyptians' plight in the parting of the Red Sea, the Canaanites are slaughtered, with Sisera being the lone survivor. He escapes with his life, running 5 miles to Jael's tent of asylum, assured of his safety and protection at the hands of his friends. Jael's tent is seen as sacred ground, and this is why Sisera enters: he believes himself to be safe.

One point to notice is that Sisera went into Jael's tent, not the tent of her husband. Heber is noticeably absent, probably killed on the battlefield. The ancient laws of hospitality in the ancient Middle East were very strict. A guest, once ritually invited into the home, had to be protected and cared for, even at the expense of everyone else in the house - even at the expense of "giving" the woman of the house to the guest of honor for his lascivious pleasure. But only the chief man of the household could offer ritual hospitality. Jael, however, offered refuge to a fleeing enemy general, NOT ritual hospitality. Thus, Jael is not guilty of failing to provide hospitality. In any case, it would still be disastrous for Jael's reputation for Sisera to be alone with her. And understandably, her virtue is at risk of being violated.

Sisera's character is seriously lacking as he willfully broke every rule that governed hospitality. He brought the battlefield to his ally's encampment. He dealt with the wife rather than her husband. He entered the tent of a married woman. Worse, he did this when she was alone. He made requests of his hostess—bad manners for a guest. He ordered her to lie to protect his life. He remained in her tent though his presence there endangered everyone in the encampment. Sisera was the epitome of the moral flaws of Canaanite men, and had a cruel streak that was not to be ignored.

Remember too, the horrific account as noted by Jewish historian, Josephus. Just a few years earlier, a woman born in Bethlehem was married to a Levite, and the couple argued constantly. She took a leave of absence, and stayed with her parents for awhile, leaving the husband to travel hundreds of miles to fetch her back. They reconciled, and warily journeyed home through the land of Canaan—staying the night with an old man of the friendly Ephraim tribe. While there, the leering inhabitants of the city noticed her beauty in the marketplace, banged on the door of the old man, and demanded he hand her over to them.

The old man, as was customary, offered up his own daughter instead so that he would not be guilty of offending his temporary guests. (Notice the similarity to Lot offering up his daughter in the annals of Sodom and Gomorrah: Genesis 19:4-8). The Canaanite men kidnap the Bethlehem wife, brutally beat, torture, gang-rape her, and leave her for dead. The woman lost her will to live due to her insurmountable shame. Her grieving husband cuts her body up into twelve pieces, and sends it out to the 12 tribes of Israel as a stark reminder of the lust

and violence that were the Canaanites, and to severely warn them against co-habiting with such mongrels. Jael may have seen this actual body part in her country, or at the very least heard about it.

Women, especially Jael, then had every reason to be terrified for fear of being raped at the hand of her “guest.” And Jael was living amongst the Canaanites, harboring a Canaanite general, knowing full well the evil he was capable of. The story of the Bethlehem woman and Lot’s daughters are only two among thousands of similar stories during this time. Jael understandably feared for her body and her life.

Jael would also be familiar with the legendary Ehud, a Benjamite who recently drove a knife into the heart of King Eglon of the Moabites during Israel’s last cycle of oppression. Eglon was another king who brutally treated the Israelites for 18 years, again a punishment handed down by God because of Israel’s unfaithfulness and idolatry. Ehud wisely befriended the king by giving him presents and praise, and eventually made himself welcome in the king’s court. In the heat of the day, the king and Ehud sat together in the parlor, conversing, laughing, and sharing stories. With no one else around, Ehud tells the king of a private dream he wanted to share, and whispered for the king to come close. The king, trusting Ehud, obliges. And Ehud smotes him in the heart, leaving the dagger in his body with a treacherous slight of hand. Jael learns her method from Ehud, who, through false pretenses, brought the enemy to within arm’s reach, and slays him to save the Israelite nation. (Judges 3:12-25)

So here Jael sits, with the commander of the Canaanite army in her tent, and she has a decision to make. If Jael’s husband were to catch her alone with Sisera, he could accuse her of adultery and have her stoned to death. If General Barak were to catch her, she could be accused of conspiracy, harboring a fugitive, and summarily executed. If Jael did not act, she would be considered an extension of her husband - a traitorous mercenary. If she did not act, King Jabil and the Canaanites would continue their oppressive power over the Israelites. If she did not act, she probably would have been raped by a vicious Canaanite man. If she did not act, women would continue to be raped and tortured by their “guests.” If she did not act, she would miss the only chance of aligning herself with the Israelite conquerors. If she did not act, Deborah’s prophecy from God would not have been fulfilled. And if she did not act, Israel would not have been saved.

It was divine intervention, then, that Jael was alone with General Sisera, and she seized upon it with the courage, wisdom, strength and vigilance as her predecessors. Her decision was an easy one. When Sisera asked for a drink of water and Jael instead gave him prized goat milk, she was offering the best of the house, setting his mind at ease and allowing him to feel safe from his

enemies. Tearing a page from Ehud's handbook, she lulls Sisera into trust and complacency.

“Then Jael, Heber’s wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died. And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, “Come, I will show you the man whom you seek.” And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple.” (Judges 4:21-22)

Note that the death of Sisera was unusual because the general of the Canaanite army lost his life by the hands of a woman, which in the culture of the Ancient Near East, was considered to be the greatest humiliation a soldier could ever experience.

Jael followed the law of God in murdering a general of a Canaanite – symbolic of taking away the oppression of the land and returning back to the Law of God, and not choosing to follow the unquestionable law of hospitality that led only to abuse, oppression, detriment, and horror to women.

Remember that as a woman, you too have the ability and the right to discern God's Truth and will, regardless of the war and chaos surrounding you. Be patient, and wait for the opportune time when God will use you, while staying faithful and steadfast to His laws and commands.

You have the right to your own mind, no matter what your husband says and does, or where he takes you. You will have that defining moment in your life, just like Jael did, where you will be used mightily to further His kingdom. You are not a second-class citizen, and you have the right to assert God's will.

Deborah had great reason to applaud Jael's actions in her poem. By Jael's one act, she saves Israel from oppression, reverses the traitorous bedmates of Israel with Canaan, demolishes the law of rape under the guise of hospitality, saves her own reputation, becomes a woman warrior in her own right, and fulfills Deborah's prophecy.

The Song of Deborah recounts:

**“Most blessed among women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite,
Blessed is she among women in tents.
He asked for water, she gave milk;
She brought out cream in a lordly bowl.
She stretched her hand to the tent peg;**

**Her right hand to the workmen's hammer;
She pounded Sisera, she pierced his head.
She split and struck through his temple.
At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still;
At her feet he sank, he fell;
Where he sank, there he fell dead."
(Judges 5:24-27)**

"So on that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan."

Most Blessed is Jael among women, indeed.

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