

Most of you are aware that since the fall I've been attending classes at the U of S and at St. Andrew's United College. Last semester I took an Intro to Hebrew Scriptures class at St. Andrew's in which we learned about the Jewish Bible (generally speaking, what we call the Old Testament) from a topical perspective. It was for this class that I was required to do a research paper on Judges 4:1-16. A passage about Deborah. The specifics as to what I actually wanted to research about this passage were up to me to decide. Naturally, I began by reading the passage over a few times and asking myself "What jumps out at me?" "Is there anything that is unclear about this passage that I want to research to clarify?" Well, aside from names of places that I didn't know how to pronounce (which is kind of why I didn't have Margaret read the whole thing), the story seemed pretty straight forward. A judge and prophetess, Deborah, instructs the military commander of Israel, Barak, that God has commanded him to gather his troops and chariots to fight against Jabin's army, led by Sisera, and God would give Barak victory. Barak agrees, on the condition that Deborah would come with him. She does. They win the battle, and verse 16 ends with "all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; no one was left."

So after reading this passage a few times, sure, there are some interesting kind of twists in that caught my attention. The fact that the prophet in this story is a woman is pretty cool. Also, it seemed kind of odd that Barak would refuse to go into battle without her coming along. But mostly, I just really didn't like how violent it was, and so I was still left with a blank space in my paper where my thesis statement should be. I began looking through commentaries on the passage and focusing my attention on books written about this woman, Deborah, and her character. It was then that I came across a work by Tikva Frymer-Kensky (a professor of the Hebrew bible) that really struck my fancy. She points out that the part of Deborah's introduction which states that she is the wife of Lapidoth, which in Hebrew is "**eset lapidot**", literally translated means "woman of torches" or "fiery woman". She goes on to say that translating

“lapidot” as a proper noun(a name) as the name of Deborah’s husband, may not be accurate. Alternatively, it is quite possible that this phrase is simply a common noun(a thing, a torch) and that Deborah was NOT married. Now here was a nugget of information I was ready to spend my time researching! A woman prophet? A woman judge? Speaking for God? Telling a military commander what to do? Maybe this isn’t so groundbreaking in 2017, but for ancient Israel this was not the norm, and now you’re going to tell me that on top of all this she was SINGLE?! This is just too much! But I’m totally on board! Go Deb! But if there is one they like to stress in university, it is the skill of critical thinking. So despite my initial excitement over this discovery of a female, single, super-prophetess-judge character in our Holy scriptures I realized I must take a step back and ask what evidence is there that this could be the case. Here’s what I found to support such a claim:

1. Names are really significant, powerful literary devices that authors across many genres use to pass on meaning to their readers. It is no coincidence that the name Jesus comes from the Latin form of a Greek name meaning “to rescue” or “to deliver”. How appropriate! Now if we take a look at the name of Barak we will find that it means “lightning”. With this light imagery in mind it’s not difficult to make the connection to Deb as a ‘woman of torches’. Frymer-Kensky would say she is “the torch that sets the general Barak. . . on fire.” She is the one who initiates, or gives the go-ahead for Barak to take his troops into battle.
2. There are other literary techniques that are at play here as well. There is a pattern that has been set when introducing previous judges. If we look earlier into chapter 3 at Othneil and Ehud, their primary relationships were *first on the list* of how they were described. “...the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother.” and “the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite...”. Therefore, if Deborah was married, then this fact should be stated first also. But instead we find this: “Now Deborah, a

prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.” The argument is that if Deborah were married, her primary relationship *should* be first, but it isn’t.

3. As mentioned already, the Hebrew word “lappidoth” is a noun. Not only that, it’s a *feminine* noun. Nouns in English are not gendered as they are in many other languages, but I can imagine it’s not very often that a male child would be given a name based on a feminine noun. I feel like Johnny Cash’s “A Boy Named Sue” is the closest thing in English of an example of why that doesn’t really happen.

There are a couple other points that could be added, but I was asked yesterday if I’d be doing a quick, Patty-length sermon or keeping you all afternoon. I recommended that afternoon plans be cancelled, but since I forgot to send that memo out ahead of time, I’ll start wrapping things up.

The thing is, for me, it’d be kinda nice to have a single, woman prophet and judge to look up to, but in reality, the other side of this argument is actually pretty awesome to. And here’s the other side, (lest you think I’m speaking from a biased point of view) even if Debbie was married to a guy named Lappidoth, Frymer-Kensky points out that *this would then emphasize* that:

1. A *prophet* can be married and
2. A woman who is married can have a role outside of being a wife.

Again, this may not be super ground-breaking for us, but at the time this was written it very well could have been.

--Personally, I would also add that it also breaks gender norms by giving a male a name that is based on a Hebrew feminine noun.

The goal of what I’m wanting to say today though, isn’t to convince you of what Deborah’s marital status was. Rather, I hope that maybe these perspectives are new to you, maybe they’re interesting for you to ponder and maybe even my interest and excitement around

this sort of analytical study of biblical verses and word origins and meanings is contagious enough that you might be inspired to do some analyzing of your own.

So this is where I'm going to plug in the passage Margaret read from Matthew, which I did not intend to connect to the Deborah passage in any way. I know we've been focusing a lot on the Old Testament recently. Personally, I've really been enjoying it. But for those of you who feel like you've been lacking New Testament input in your life, this is a little something for you. I would be thrilled to know why it is that in this passage from Matthew, Jesus seems to be riding on two donkeys at once. Maybe there's some common sense answer here I'm not seeing, but if you're as confused as I am about it and want to do a little biblical analysis this week, I'd love to hear about what your research uncovers!

Let's Pray

God, thank you for gifting us with this beautiful text that is deep and rich and just waiting for us to discover what surprises lie within it. Help us to be critical thinkers, willing to look at all angles of your word to find what you might be trying to share with us. Help us also, as we go forth into this week, to seek your hand at work in our lives, in ways, and people, and experiences, that we may not have seen before. AMEN