

***The Interplay of Power and feminism: A Typical Interpretation of Judges 4:4-22***

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The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion and Philosophy 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract:**

The word “Power” has been given various interpretations by sociologist, philosophers, theologians etc. depending on each perspective. One basic fact about human societies and communities is the fact that leadership does not exist without power. The Old Testament presents the issue of power standing at the heart of story of ancient Israel. God challenges the judges and the rules of Israel to protect the rights of the “poor and the oppressed.” They were to exercise their power in a godly manner, a manner that would rescue the needy and deliver them from wicked individuals. In all culture and religions, women are considered to be inferior, unequal and secondary to men. They are regarded as weaker vessel, thereby containing Power in the masculine palace. Masculinity hinges on a man’s capacity to exercise power and control. Where male dominance is buttressed by an ideology of male superiority and dominance, women are bound to suffer biological, social political oppression and exploitation. The thrust of this paper is to examine the interplay of power by a woman based on a critical and theological interpretation of Judges 4:4-22. After which recommendation and conclusion shall be made.

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## **Introduction:**

The role of women in traditional Judaism has been grossly misunderstood. The position of women is not nearly as lowly as many modern people think, in fact, the position of women in Halakhah ( Jewish law) that dates back to the Biblical period is in many ways better than the position of women presently.

Although, in the culture of Bible times, women generally found their identity through men, father, husbands, or even sons. The stories of the creation and the fall continue to be regarded by messianic Judaism as indicators of biological and physical difference between the sexes. Women's role as mothers is interpreted from the following passage in Genesis: " so God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He Him, male and female created He them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:27-28). Many leaders within messianic Judaism read this verse as meaning that, "A woman is called to partner with her husband, raise children and create a God-fearing home" (Kollontal, 2009:2).

Although there are few cases of women who did occasionally serve independently in such leadership roles as judges, prophet and deacon. In a male dominated society, women face the challenge of relevance. The argument has been for ages about the unique role of women in exercising (power) and how much they can contribute to the overall benefit of the society. In Africa particularly, the role of women in the light of the supremacy of men have been a battle for the mind of many people ( Kareem,2012:230) consequently, as of old; many people are still asking about what women can contribute to the betterment of the society.

Since Deborah is our focus and what she as a character has to lend to women in particular and the society at large, we need to critically appraise her qualities. Deborah as a character happens to function in Israel at the time of the judges. Deborah was a prophetess, wife, mother, and a judge. As a prophetess she was consulted among male counterpart to say the mind of God at that particular moment and as a judge she led, governor Israel for a period of forty years. She was consulted to deliver Israel from oppression.

In the African scene, the woman is faced with marginalization from patriarchal African culture, colonialism, Christianity, class, sex, race, neo-colonialism, globalization, HIV- AIDS etc. (Abigail, 2012:213). Therefore in this paper we shall reiterate the positive role played by a woman, prophetess Deborah in liberating the people of Israel from the oppression of king Jabin of Hazor, a Canaanite king. In critically examining the life of Deborah, answers will be provided to the following question relating to the theme:

- (i) Is the use of Power legitimate?
- (ii) What is the negative use of Power?
- (iii) And can Power be use positively?

The paper adopts the historical, theological, as well as contextual method with the general goal of making the message that will emerge relevant to the African context.

## **Jewish Women and leadership**

In traditional Judaism, women are for the most part seen as separate but equal. Women's obligations and responsibilities are different from men's, but no less important (in fact, in some ways, women's responsibilities are considered more important than those of men. (Kresel's, 1995).

The equality of men and women begins at the highest possible level: "God". In Judaism, unlike traditional Christianity, God has never been viewed as exclusively male or masculine. Judaism has always maintained that God has both masculine and feminine qualities. God has no body, no genitalia; therefore the very idea that God is male or female is patently absurd. The Hebrew has no neutral gender; God is no more male than table is. Both man and woman were created in the image of God. According to most Jewish scholars "Man" was created in Gen.1:27 with dual gender, and was later separated into male and female. According to traditional Judaism, women were endowed with a greater degree of "binah" (in tuition, understanding and intelligence) than men, (Kresel's, 1995).

Women have held position of respect in Judaism since Biblical times. Miriam was considered one of the liberators of the children of Israel, along with her brothers Moses and Aaron. Seven of the 55 Prophets of the Bible were women (they are included in the list of the Biblical Prophets, (kresel's, 1995 ). All early biblical leaders of the Jewish people were elected by God. The matriarchs and patriarchs, priests, prophets, kings, Judges and warriors were chosen by divine plan to lead the nation at different time in its history. Deborah was a judge, a prophetess, a warrior and a poet. The roles of leadership, authority, power and influence usually over-lapped. Jewish texts seem to support the view that the leadership style of a person, rather than gender is the key to leadership strategy, (Cayam, 2009).

Relatively few women were mentioned in the bible by name and role. This suggests that they were rarely at the fore front of public life. There were a number of exceptions to this rule, including the Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam- the prophetess amongst others.

## **The Book of Judges**

The book of Judges describes the life of the Israelites in Canaan after the death of Joshua and before the Lord had given them kings. Because of their sin against the Lord in serving the heathen gods of Canaanites, the Lord allowed their enemies to gain power over them and to destroy their Land. When they poured out their heart to the Lord, the Lord was faithful to his promises and in his grace, He sent them judges to deliver them and rule over them. The story of Deborah is recorded in the Books of (Judges 4:1-5:31). Deborah became a judge in Israel at a time when the Jewish nation was experiencing spiritual and moral oppression. (kohn, 2002).

With the death of Joshua, the Jewish nation entered a new era. No longer was there a single national leader, a virtual king of the nation, as Moses and Joshua had been. True, there were courts in town and city, as command by the Torah, so that there would be a system of justice, but there was no formally constituted national Leader. As noted by the Book of judges, ".....In those days there was no king in Israel;

every man did what was proper in his own eyes” (Judges, 17:6 & 21: 25), (Leah, 2002). There were episodes of extreme sinfulness that caused God to remove His protective providence from Israel. And foreign oppressors would exercise predatory control over parts of the country.

Nevertheless, not all the people lost their faith in God at such times and their basic allegiance to Torah receive the undeserved help of God would choose a leader, known as a judge, who would rally the people to repent and thus deserve God’s help once again. Then, generally the judge would conquer and expel the oppressor and the nation would enjoy period of tranquility until it slid downward again, (Oguntoye, 2003: 31).

In Judges 4:4-9. Deborah was a prophetess, one instructed in divine knowledge by the inspiration of the spirit of God. She judges Israel as God’s mouth to them, correcting abuses, and redressing grievances. By God’s direction, she orders Barak to raise an army and engage Jabin’s forces. Barak insisted on her presence. Deborah promised to go with him. She would not send him where she would not go herself. Those who in God’s name call others to their duty should be ready to assist them in it. Barak value the satisfaction of his mind, and the good success of his enterprise, more than his honour and therefore will by no means drop his request. He dares not fight unless he has Deborah with him, to direct him and pray for him. She therefore stood to her word with a masculine courage; this noble heroine arose and went with Barak. (Matthew Henry’s commentary, 2006).

As a prophetess, Deborah heard messages from God and transmitted them to the Israelites, settled difficult (mostly legal) cases from the people, led the Israelites in war against the enemies and attempted to keep the Israelites from turning idolatry. Deborah was from the tribe of Ephraim, she held court in a fixed location. Deborah’s court was located under a palm tree in the hill country between Ramah & Bethel. The site was called the palm of Deborah. At the time that Deborah was judging Israel, the Israelites had been oppressed for 20years by Jabin, King of Hazor. Jabin ruled a large, well-fortified city in Northern Canaan. It is probable that he also led a confederation of Canaan City States. King Jabin had a disciplined well-armed army under the command of Sisera. This Canaanite army had 900 iron chariots

God instructed Deborah that Jabin’s yoke of tyranny was to be thrown off under the military leadership of Barak, a man from the tribe of Naphtali. God specified the approach to use to defeat the superior army “I will lure Sisera with his chariots and his troops to the kishon River and give them into your hand”. (Judges 4:7) (Jewshencyclopedia.com)

Barak gathers ten thousand troops and comes to mount Tabor. As soon as the news of the rebellion reaches Sisera, he collects nine hundred chariots of iron and a host of people. A battle is fought, and Sisera is completely defeated. He himself escapes on foot, while his army is pursued as far as Harosheth of the Gentiles and destroyed, not a man is left. Sisera passes the tent of Jael the Kenites, who calls him and he lies down to rest. He asks for a drink, she gives him milk, and while He is at sleep she hammers a tent pin through his temple and He died. The narrative closes with the power of Jabin waned until he was finally destroyed.

## **Symbolism of the Palm Tree**

The palm tree and its branches represented peace, plenty and fruitfulness, grace and elegance and majesty and military triumph. In Deborah's situation, the palm tree signified 'justice'. Deborah held court under the palm tree and distributed justice. Deborah responded to God's call and initiated a battle wherein she obtained justice for the Israelite against their Canaanite oppressors. Deborah dispensed God's justice when she told Barak that a woman Jael would be credited with killing Sisera because Barak refused to go to war without Deborah's presence.

God expected the Israelites to exhibit justice. Through God's law they were instructed not to pervert justice show partiality to the poor, or favoritism to the great, "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" (Exodus 23:6; Leviticus 19:15). Also in Deuteronomy 16:19, God reaffirm it to the Israelites that they should not pervert justice: "You shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the just judgment".

They were told the man who withhold justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow is cursed (Deuteronomy 27:19). The Israelites even had proverbs that addressed justice e.g. "when justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoer" (Proverbs 21:15).

## **Deborah as a National Leader**

Deborah according to Judges Chapters four and five was a woman married to Lappidoth. She has brought her husband's name into limelight. Although we do not have insight into the character of Lappidoth, we can deduce that he is a man who recognized the attribute of his wife and gave her enough leverage to obey the call of God. He did not debar her from doing God's work neither did he pose any known problem for her. Buttressing this point (Kessier, 2014:5) stated that the 'family or spouse's positive attitude towards the woman's leadership role is a source of energy'. She was also a prophetess, like the other women so designated, these were Miriam (Ex.15:20), Huldah (2Kings22:14), Noadiah (Neh.6:14), Isaiah's wife (Isa.8:3) and Anna (Lk.2:35). (Adeoti, 2003: 83).

The assumption of leadership position by a woman was extra ordinary to be found during that period. Deborah was so outstanding in her days, for instance no other person was both judge and prophet except Samuel. She was God's spokeswoman according to Judges 4:6 and 14, always in communion with God. Thus she commands Barak in the name of the Lord. Not only that, Deborah was a General in command of God's army (Judges 4:9-10, 14). She was a singer and a composer. Thus we see the attributes and qualities of Deborah the judge. Now, we need to have a critical appraisal of this great and distinct woman but even among the leading male characters in the scriptures. Deborah's selection as a judge raises a fundamental question. Given that Torah law prohibits a woman from holding public office why does God appoint her the highest public official in the Land? This and other issues would be addressed as we look at the qualities of Deborah as a leader.

## **A Critical Interpretation of Deborah's Leadership Qualities**

The choice of Deborah by God has attracted explanations by different commentators. One describe her as the only female judge in Jewish history while others saw her as the only female judge in Jewish history who was also a prophet. As a prophetess\judges, Deborah did not formulate rulings in the traditional manner, but she was essentially a spokeswoman for divine rules. For this reason, she might be considered an exception to the rule that a judge should be a male. Beyond Deborah's validity as a judge according to the explanations of the above commentators and others, the question remains: why does God proceed outside mainstream parameters of Torah in order to appoint a woman? Why does He not make the choice of a qualified man? God choses Deborah because 1) She has a particular merit, 2) her feminine character is appropriate for a leader. And also Deborah, herself, states "I arose as a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7).

As a prophetess, Deborah exercises this right by making an exception to the rule excluding women from public office. She does so not in order to pave way for future female judges, but in response to her assessment that she, alone, is best equipped to respond to that needs of her generation and to cites a prophet prerogative to make one time change in Jewish law and to rectify a problem, (Kohn, 2002).

Deborah's unique vitality radiates from the privacy of her own home (where it transforms her husband), to the public domain where it re-inspire the Jewish nation. Deborah's poise to empower was the source of her effectiveness as both public leader and wife. As a leader, Deborah motivates the Jews to take responsibility for their own internal illumination. In the same subtle way that Deborah inspires her husband, she moves the Jewish nation to re-embrace Torah.

As judge, Deborah brought a feminine sensibility to a male dominated office. She refers to herself as a "mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7), and her commitment to nurturing the Jews with subtlety and patience bespeaks this title. Deborah's leadership style is profoundly generous – focused as it is on her populace, rather than on herself. The style, together with her appreciation and knowledge of Torah, and her prophetic gift, marks her, Deborah as an agent of national rejuvenation.

Contemporary society is only now beginning to recognize that in order to succeed; a woman need not jettison her innate patience, insight and ability to inspire. Indeed, these feminine assets may prove essential to her accomplishment and personal fulfillment in life. Deborah embraced and utilized the full extent of a woman's power for positive change. As wife, judge, prophetess, mother, or in the essentially male role of commander-in-chief. Deborah was consistently, successfully and wholeheartedly a Jewish woman.

### **Contemporary Women in leadership.**

In all cultures, women are considered to be inferior to men. Women are wives and mothers. They do the cooking, the mending, the sewing and the washing. They take care of the men and are subordinate to male authority. They are largely excluded from high status occupations from positions of power. (Yetunde, Ola-Aluko & Edewor, 2002:17). In recent times the status of the women is changing particularly in Africa

and many are taking position of leadership. But there is much to be done to bridge between the sexes. (Animashaun, 2002) reveal that intimidation of women has forced her to believing that she is passive, thus believing that she cannot exercise power.

To most Africans womanhood fundamentally means motherhood and the female child are appreciated only for her bride price and price and ability to bear children. Though women's labour has been efficiently exploited in that they have contributed immensely to the nation's economy, women have had a much more the limited access to positions of authority and could not invest their resources in the same way as men, (Oderinde, 2002:28).

The African's idea and people's approach to power among women is quite different from that of the traditional western conception implies. When people in the west consider the concept of equality between the sexes, they think of men and women sharing equal roles in society. However, in traditional West African culture, power actually lies in the dynamic differences between the roles of men and women. It is within these unique characteristics that are distinctively male or female that the power emerges. A lot of women had held position of power and had used their position of power to affect their society positively.

Africa's women are increasingly taking center stage in Africa's politics, occupying positions of power across the 54 strong continents. The women in Africa are better off today than they have ever been. The 21st century shows an increase in the number of women occupying leadership positions in Africa. All these women have affected the nation positively.

### **Conclusion:**

From the study so far, it can be deduce that power is legitimate. Both male and female are endowed with power from God as it is stated in the creation story in Genesis 2:28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground". Also all human power including the power over other human beings is derived from God's power (Roms13:6) "for all authority comes from God and the existing authorities by Him".

The exercise of authority is legitimate if only it is carried out in order to create something good or to prevent something bad like the case of Deborah. As leaders, we need to recognize that God never bestow positional and personal power as an end in itself but always as a trust to be exercised with stewardship to the benefit of others.

Deborah, a Mother, a wife and a judge in Israel show by her courage that a woman can exercise power not by cohesion but with a sense of responsibility which only a woman can give. Power is not associated with male alone, any woman that tries to exercise power in masculine palace lose her true identity. According to (Kessier,2014:1), often female leaders simply try to copy the male leadership style they are familiar with, but in so doing, they lose their femininity and the organization misses out on the specific opportunities of female leadership. As a judge, Deborah brought a feminine sensibility to a male dominated office; she refers to herself as a

“mother in Israel” (Judges. 5:7) and her commitment to nurturing the Jews with subtlety.

Both the Bible and reality of the contemporary world expect women to go beyond home-making, cooking and nursing to make the best use of their talents, gifts and skills in national reconstruction and development. Just like Deborah, it will be incorrect to assert that African women, in traditional society did not provide for women to share power with men. Women in traditional society lost ground owing to continued opposition by men who exploited the super imposition of the laws of the colonial masters to their advantage. Women should reflect on their desire for power and make it very clear to themselves exactly how much power they want to have power. How much power is needed to fulfill their current position and their desired position? Desire and reality should correlate as much as possible. Whoever has power must also use it positively (Kessler, 2014:4).

**Recommendation:**

Looking at the life of Deborah one can say that there is much to be done for the contemporary women in order for them to take their rightful place in the helm of leadership and in bridge the gap that currently exists between women and men.

- Women in position of power need to do more to improve the lot of those who are less privilege in the society.
- African women in power can help to re- orientate the attitudes of the women towards the position of leadership and towards themselves.
- Women and men can work together to help promote and enforce gender equality, the right of women and the most vulnerable groups of people in the society.
- Also men and women can work together to understand male and female leadership strengths as complementary, they might strive to work together and accept that the challenges posed by the other gender are actually constructive for the success of the society.
- There is need to create an enabling environment for the girl- child to be educated, particularly in the rural areas of Africa.



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