

T. Austin-Sparks:

Judges 4-5

It is a fairly far cry from Joshua to the Judges, and there is a terrible lapse from those days of triumph and conquest, as there was at the close of the apostolic days. The book of Judges is perhaps the most tragic book in the Bible.

We are going to look at two of the breaks in the darkness of those times which give us some light on this matter of leadership; that is, in the cases of Deborah and Gideon.

That those were times of spiritual declension needs no arguing. That a primary reason for the declension was the absence of authority is definitely stated four times (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It is as though the narrator focused all the trouble upon this absence of an authoritative leadership.

There seems to be more than the statement of a fact. The suggestion or implication is that it was more than an absence of leadership; it was a disposition. When it says that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes", it seems to imply that that was how they were disposed to have it. They did not like the restraints of authority. They felt that leadership implied limitation; they made their own judgment the final authority. As they saw was the "right" way — "right in his own eyes". It was independence run amok.

Possibly the loss of true spirituality and the enthronement of the natural mind had resulted, as it usually does, in an inability to see the difference between spiritual and anointed leadership on the one hand, and of autocracy on the other. The dislike for and resentment anything autocratic or in the nature of dictatorship makes people throw over and utterly repudiate law and authority and become a law unto themselves. The unspiritual Corinthians gave this "autocratic" interpretation to the authority which Paul said had been given him in Christ. To read his letters to that church is to see how he claimed and used that authority, but it is also to see that it was absolutely necessary to their salvation as a church. But it certainly was not autocratic domination.

It is only lack of the spiritual discernment as to "things that differ", although they may appear alike — about which Paul said much to the Corinthians — that confuses things, and loses the values of what is God-given. On the one side it was disastrous for Israel, and meant four hundred years of confusion, weakness, and impotence. On the other hand the salvation and periods of improvement were because the Lord raised up leaders.

When we come to Deborah, we have a significant and impressive thing. There is first Deborah herself, and then there are those to whom she refers when she says: "For that the leaders took the lead..." (5:2).

Deborah overshadows the whole story, therefore she must be seen for what she is. Being a woman in such a position, she must represent a sovereign activity of God.

Deborah and divine sovereignty

The Bible is quite clear that, in the normal order of God, women are not given authority over men. Normally it would be disorder if they were. We state the Bible fact without staying to expound it. In God's first order man is given the position of authority. But here in the case of Deborah we have a woman by divine consent and approval in that place. It has often been argued that it was because there were no men available or suitable. Much importance has been given to the argument in the evident coercion which Deborah had to use in order to get Barak on his feet. That may be but a feature of abnormal times and conditions, and it may lend force to the statement that, when things are not normal, God acts sovereignly. That is, He transcends His own rules and acts as the One who has the right to do exactly as He wills. That argument may be allowed to stand in this and in other instances, but it does not dispose of the whole matter.

The context of this record, and the fact that not Deborah but Barak is mentioned in the list in the letter to the Hebrews carries with it another explanation. Why is Deborah left out of the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11? The answer surely has to be found in a wider context and one which, after all, upholds rather than violates divine principles. If you look into the Bible, and not merely on it, you will see that

Women represent principles

— good or bad. The first woman, Eve, is definitely pointed to as a representation of the church's relationship to Christ, its Head, and she is shown to have embodied the principle of subjection in honour and glory. Out of that honourable subjection the first Adam and the last Adam realize their destiny by "being fruitful and multiplying". The violation of that principle, whether in Eve or the church, has been most disastrous for the race and the world. If Mary, the mother of Jesus, is to receive honour, not homage, it is because she recovered and embodied this primal principle of exalted submission — "Be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). There may be humility in that, but there is certainly no humiliation in it. This is a supreme example of the truth to which we are pointing. This truth can more or less easily be traced in a host of women in the Bible: Sarah, Rebekah, Asenath, etc.

In the same way evil principles are represented by another line of women until the great harlot, the scarlet woman of the Apocalypse is reached; and the very term "harlot" betrays the principle. Having established the fact that women represent principles in the Bible, we can return to Deborah.

Deborah, while being a real person, is, in effect, the spirit or principle of leadership. This is borne out in that she is called a prophetess. What is the supreme characteristic of prophetic ministry? It is inspiration. So we see that leadership in Deborah's case was her power to inspire. Both Barak and the leaders who took the lead fulfilled their leadership by reason of the inspiration received through Deborah. Leadership is a matter of inspiration.

It is an endowment. Not all who take the position can fulfil it. It is a pathetic thing to observe someone in the position without the inspiration or anointing. That is why it is so wrong and dangerous for anyone either to assume the position or be put into it by vote or human influence.

Let our godly women realize that their function is not to rule and govern, but to inspire. Deborah said to Barak: "Hath not the Lord commanded..." She knew the Lord, and out of that knowledge she was the spirit of inspiration.

It is no small thing to see the purpose of God and to inspire to leadership in it. This can be done, as in the case of Deborah, without personally going into the forefront of the battle.

Our lesson, then, from Deborah, is that, whether officially in the office of a leader or not, leadership is essentially a matter of the gift and power of inspiration: a contagious influence, an emanating spiritual energy, and a potent example.

A mother in Israel

How often is leadership regarded as an official thing. The leader must have a title, an office, an appointment. Deborah teaches us that leadership is the expansion of the mother-spirit to embrace the whole of God's people. "Until that I Deborah arose... a mother in Israel" (5:7). Not "Till I a leader, a prophetess, a divinely-chosen instrument arose", but "a mother". Hers was evidently a heart-concern, an affectional-concern for the Lord's people.

We have earlier referred to the revolt against Paul's spiritual authority, but his answer to that was his love, even "as of a nursing mother" (1 Thess. 2:7,11), and any seeming severity was born of his very deep paternal or — spiritually — maternal concern for them.

This element must be in all leadership; the element of a jealous yearning over the spiritual interests of those concerned. "I arose a mother", said Deborah. The incentive of her inspiring leadership was the mother-passion for a spiritual family.

Back of all that appears and sounds otherwise in the Prophets of Israel, there can always be detected this sigh and sob of a heart-relationship with a wayward family, in trouble because of its waywardness.