

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Barak: the supported saviour

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FOLLOWING eighty years of peace, and the subsequent removal of the righteous influence of Ehud, an affliction which often plagued Israel during times of equanimity recurred. A spiritual famine descended on the nation, similar to that chronicled by Amos 8:11: “not a famine of bread . . . but of hearing the words of the LORD.” Judges 5:8 informs us that as a result Israel “chose new gods.” It is characteristic of human nature to call upon God only when in trouble (Isa. 26:16); indeed, times of repose are often not conducive to spiritual development, as the flesh feels contented and self-assured in its own strength.

Divine retribution for their actions was meted out to Israel, and the Lord “sold them [lit. into slavery] into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan” (Judg. 4:2). Because they were “mightily oppressed,” Israel “cried” (or ‘shrieked,’ v. 3) to the Lord for deliverance. Sin brings sorrow and suffering, but supplication was to bring deliverance, ultimately through the saving work of Barak.

Other than the inspired commentary that lists him among the worthies of faith in Hebrews 11:32, we glean only a limited insight into the background of Barak himself. Judges elucidates just a few brief details. He was the son of Abinoam (‘my father is gracious’) and resided in Kedesh-naphtali, a city of refuge (Josh. 20:7). The name Kedesh implies ‘a sanctuary’. This appears somewhat ironic at this period, since it was anything but a sanctuary to Barak. It was sited on the route that Sisera would take on his descent from the north into Israel.

Barak was one of the few in Israel who had sufficient courage to face the situation, but even he needed the encouragement of a faithful woman. His name means ‘glittering’ or ‘lightning,’ and it is a depiction of the power of God to deliver (2 Sam. 22:15; Ps. 97:4), manifested through His Son (Mt.

24:27). Facing up to the anti-typical Canaanite force of sin can be a daunting task and often takes courage, but we can gain encouragement from the example of Barak and the support granted him by Deborah.

Barak appointed by the Lord

In response to the bitter cry of the nation, the Lord initially sent Deborah, styled a “prophetess” and not a saviour (Judg. 4:4). A similar Divine pattern is followed at the time of Gideon (6:7,8). Initially a prophet is sent, followed later by a Divine messenger, who subsequently appointed Gideon to be the saviour of Israel. We see Deborah also undertaking this role of messenger: “she [Deborah] sent and called Barak . . . and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun?” (4:6). The word “commanded” literally means ‘appointed.’ We note how Deborah states that this is a Divine appointment, not one of her own volition. It would appear that Deborah foreshadows the “prophetess” Anna, who spoke to all those who looked for redemption in Israel through the anti-typical Barak, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We too have been ‘appointed’ by God to “obtain salvation,” through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ; wherefore we “comfort [ourselves] together” (1 Thess. 5:9,11). As a result we should attempt to glitter forth the Truth in the age in which we live.

A mother in Israel

In studying Barak, Deborah must also be considered in juxtaposition, as their roles are both interlinked and complementary. We see Barak typifying the headship of Christ, and hence Deborah is symbolic of the ecclesia. In this she is

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Picture: Mark Pennington

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a pattern of how men and women should fulfil their respective roles. It would appear that at the time there were no men willing or even perhaps able to become a judge over the nation, and therefore Deborah became a judge *in* Israel (as the text should be rendered) and not a saviour *of* it.

In fulfilling her role, Deborah describes herself as “a mother in Israel” (Judg. 5:7). The principle of a mother in a Scriptural context is to build up her children in those things pertaining to the Lord. Reference is often made to the mother of a king in the historical record of Kings and Chronicles, as one who played a major part in influencing whether or not the appointed ruler at the time followed the ways of the Lord. Deborah was in a position to be an influence for good. She was in a position to nurture the nation back to God and Barak to leadership.

Barak the saviour

Barak, on the other hand, fulfils the role of a saviour to Israel. The judges are described as those that “delivered” Israel (2:16). The word “delivered” is the Hebrew *yahsha*, literally ‘saviour.’ Combined with the initial part of the name of God, *Yah*, we have the original form of the name of Jesus, *Yahshuah*. The judges, then, could be styled ‘saviours’ in the same way that Christ was. Barak’s role was typical of the headship of Christ over the ecclesia.

We see before us Barak as a type of the headship of Christ (men) and Deborah the symbol of the body of the ecclesia (women), and yet with “one mind and one mouth” they glorified God (Rom. 15:6). In ecclesial life it is vital that both male and female roles are fulfilled properly to ensure that God’s work is conducted in line with Divine requirements.

Actions speak louder than words

The actions undertaken by Barak are of great exhortational value to us. In fact Barak is recorded as saying only one thing in Scripture (see Judg. 4:8). Before him was the army of Sisera—a formidable foe—and Barak had good cause

to hesitate before accepting this extremely challenging commission. However, in recognising a measure of justifiable apprehension on his part, let us not misinterpret his reply to Deborah’s message as implying a complete lack of faith and a disinclination to obey the Divine call.

Some may say that it was a feeble-sounding proviso: “If thou wilt go with me, then I will go”; however, surely this should be seen rather as a measure of Deborah’s influence with the people and counsel to guide. With her backing to confirm his leadership Barak would be assured of the people’s support. Joining battle with sin can be a daunting prospect; we need one another in the ecclesia to support and help us overcome.

In obedience to God’s command, Barak calls Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh (v. 10). The Hebrew word for “called” (see 4:10) means ‘to call

together' or 'to be joined together.' The nation was at low ebb in more than one respect. They were scattered in their tribes throughout the length and breadth of the land, and were having to compete against invaders who were more sophisticated and greatly superior in numbers. Without a national leader to succeed Joshua, the tribes fell apart, their strong family bonds giving way to petty jealousies.

Soon the only remaining means of unification, their system of worship, was discarded in favour of the corrupt religious practices of their neighbours. Now Barak seeks to unify; seeks to bring together in making a stand—just as the Lord Jesus Christ did for us, as Caiaphas prophesied: “[Jesus would] gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad” (Jno. 11:52).

We should ever strive to unite, to edify as one for the cause of the Truth. We must not give ourselves over to petty jealousies, nor disregard our faithful system of worship as set out in the Word, that there be “no divisions among [us]; but that [we] be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

Went up

Barak and all that were with him “went up” to Mount Tabor (Judg. 4:10). The phrase “went up” is the Hebrew word *alah*, which means ‘to ascend,’ and is used regularly in the context of the ‘offering up’ of offerings.

In the song of Deborah and Barak a similar theme is picked up: the people “willingly offered themselves” (5:2). The Hebrew word is *nadab*, which can be translated ‘volunteers.’ In this case the people were prepared to “present [their] bodies a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). Like them, we can all contribute to the cause of the Truth by willingly offering ourselves in the Lord’s service.

The event that caused Barak and Deborah to praise God in this verse is “the avenging of Israel.” This is a peculiar phrase in the Hebrew,

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Picture: Mark Pennington

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being literally, ‘when men let their hair grow.’ The RV suggests a parallel with the second half of the verse, as is common in Hebrew poetry: “For that the leaders took the lead in Israel, for that the people offered themselves willingly, bless ye the LORD.” It would appear that this is an allusion to Nazariteship, which was characterised by the practice of allowing the hair to grow long. This provides the perfect parallel to the second half of the verse, and could be expressed in a phrase such as, ‘when the people dedicated themselves.’

The second half of the verse picks up the thought of the freewill offerings under the Law.

The same Hebrew word *nadab* is used in 1 Chronicles 29:9, where David and the people who were assembled before him rejoiced “for that they [the princes] offered willingly . . . to the LORD.” The same word and principle is repeated at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (see Ezra 1:6; 3:5; Neh. 11:2). Do we ‘offer willingly’ from our hearts in dedicated service to our Father?

Went down

“So Barak went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him” (Judg. 4:14). The phrase “went down” in Scripture is often related to sin. We may consider the many who “went down” to Egypt (a type of sin), or the company of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who “went down alive into the pit” (Num. 16:33). The incident involving Tamar, initiated by Judah, who “went down from his brethren” (Gen. 38:1), also comes to mind. In contrast, Barak went down to *face* the enemy, in the same way as Moses “went down” from the mount to destroy the golden calf—that is, to do battle with apostasy and sin.

Barak goes forth to battle to show who the living God is, and to engage the very nation from whom apostate worship had arisen. It is not often that we find ourselves (encumbered with human nature as we are) readily relinquishing a vantage position of natural security in a bid to overcome sin in our lives. It is not often we come out of our ‘comfort zone’ openly to confront sin. In Barak we see a man of great faith with a tenacious desire to undertake the things of God.

Smote with the edge of the sword, and pursued

“And the LORD discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host, with the edge of the

sword before Barak . . . But Barak pursued after the chariots, and after the host, unto Harosheth of the Gentiles: and all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword . . .” (Judg. 4:15,16). The sword is a type of the Word of God (Eph. 6:17), for it is “quick, and powerful” and able to divide and discern (Heb. 4:12). It is only by utilising the Word in our lives that we are able to overcome.

The word “powerful” in Hebrews 4:12 carries the connotation of action, the principle being that the Word of God should drive us to action. If the Word is not being used—and through that use the spiritual mind sharpened—then our lives in the Truth suffer and the ability actively to smite sin becomes weakened. With the sword of the Spirit we can ‘pursue’ or ‘harass’ sin, just as the Lord Jesus Christ did during his temptations. Truly then, we, as Barak and Christ did, can “[turn] to flight the armies of the aliens” (11:34).

Conclusion

As we live in this epoch of ease and comfort, in a world in which there is a famine of the Word of God, we should ensure that we stand firm. We are those who have been “appointed” to salvation, and brothers and sisters have very different yet vitally important roles to play if the ecclesia is to function in accordance with Divine will. Brothers, like Barak, must pattern themselves on the headship of Christ, and sisters, as Deborah, must support and nurture as a type of the ecclesia. All can take example from the actions of faithful Barak, who grew in stature, who unified and built up his brethren, and presented his life a willing sacrifice in service. He removed himself from his ‘comfort zone’ to face sin head on, and he used that “quick, and powerful” sword to overcome, that the household of faith might remain strong.