



## Introduction

The following outline explores the life of Deborah and her call to be a great judge for the people of God.

Deborah's story is set during the years when the people of Israel were settling in to the Promised Land but were under constant harassment and attack from the tribes, who were living in Canaan at that time. God chose a succession of judges to give wise leadership to God's people and inspire them to put their faith in God and not be tempted to throw their lot in with the Canaanites, who believed in many gods.

Deborah was the first and only woman judge and she was also a prophet (Judges 4:4). She was known for her wise decisions and was respected by the people. She saw how they were being oppressed by King Jabin, through his military commander Sisera, so she appealed to Barak to lead soldiers from the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to respond to this aggression and deal with Sisera and his army. Barak held Deborah in such high regard that he would not go to battle without her. Deborah makes it clear that the victory will be God's alone (Judges 4:9).

God helps Deborah and Barak to win a great victory – it seems that the chariots got stuck in the mud when the Kishon River broke its banks (see Judges 5:21). Sisera runs for his life but is killed by another woman, Jael, in the very place where he seeks sanctuary. Deborah and Barak sing a song of praise to God in chapter 5. This is a very ancient poem and is a victory song that tells how God marches with his people, stirs them up again and again to fight enemies and helps them in their wars. It includes a very moving description of how Sisera's mother waits in vain for her son's return – this is the sad, hidden cost of all such wars. It ends with a blessing on the Lord's people, who, like Deborah, are to shine with light, like the sun at its brightest (Judges 5: 31). This is the story we are exploring in this outline.

## Preparation

Use a child-friendly retelling of the story from Judges, chapters 4 and 5. You may wish to tone down the descriptions of some of the violence.

## Development

1. This Bible story is a rare but welcome celebration of the role of women of faith. Deborah is up there with the prophets (she is the only judge who was a prophet as well) and with the military commanders of God's people, as well as being, in her own words 'a mother in Israel' (Judges 5:7).

So much of the Old Testament story is dominated by male role models that it is important to include stories like this one in your RE lessons, in order to begin to even out the imbalance. Christians believe that God uses women, too, and in fact they dominate this story. There is not only Deborah

but also Jael, and even the sad reflections of Sisera's mother.

2. As a way of identifying some of the other stories of women in the Bible, use the following exercise, which involves using Bibles and looking up references.  
Place a number of Bible women's names around the room and then on separate pieces of card some of the reasons for which they are well known plus the reference in the Bible where they are named. Can the class in groups find and match up the women and what they are famous for?

Eve - the first woman (Genesis 3:20)

Sarah - married to Abraham (Genesis 12:4-5)

Rebecca - mother of twins (Genesis 25:21-22)

Rahab - the rescuer of the spies in Jericho (Joshua 2:15)

Ruth - and ancestor to King David (Ruth 4:13-17)

Miriam - prophetess and a dancer (Exodus 15:20)

Huldah - prophetess (2 Kings 22:14)

Esther - brave queen (Esther 2:17)

Anna - prophetess who became one of the first evangelists (Luke 2:36)

Mary Magdalene - first woman to see Jesus alive after the resurrection (John 20:14-16)

Philip's four daughters - all prophetesses! (Acts 21:9)

Priscilla - teacher and friend of Paul (Acts 18:2, 26)

Phoebe - church leader (Romans 16:1)

3. As you now tell the story of Deborah, involve your class by asking them to create some of the objects that you mention by linking up their bodies and becoming a human statue of each of these items:

The seat on which Deborah sits as judge

One or more of the chariots (made with iron!) that Sisera commanded

The mountain (Mount Tabor) near which the battle took place

Some of the weapons that were used in the battle, for example shield, sword and spear

The river Kishon, which flows through the valley

Sisera's chariot stuck in the mud and abandoned

The tent in which Sisera hid

The instruments to which Deborah and Barak sang their victory song (choose your own instruments!)

4. Deborah was clearly a good singer and songwriter as well as everything else!

Can the class make up a poem that tells the story of Deborah and Barak so that each line starts with a letter of each of their names?

For example:



**D**ark days had come upon the people of God  
**E**nemies such as Jabin ruled over them with a rod  
**B**ut God chose Deborah to be in command  
**O**n her special seat she judged the land

5. Perhaps the class could make up a song like Deborah did? Use a well-known tune, such as the nursery rhyme with a military flavour 'The Grand Old Duke of York'. Here is an example of how it might sound, celebrating this Bible story. Can they add more verses?

Deborah and Barak  
They had 10,000 men  
They marched them up to Mount Tabor  
And they marched them back again  
And when they were there, they won  
And when they had won, they sang  
And when the people heard their song  
They knew what *God* had done  
(see Judges 4:14!)

6. Deborah's words of encouragement to Barak in Judges 4:14 are key for this story and an insight into her strong faith in God:

*Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?* (Judges 4:14, NIV).

Christians believe that God promises to go before them into all situations. Jesus promised something similar to his disciples in Matthew 28:20.

As a creative response to the story, the children could make shields such as those that Deborah and Barak might have taken into battle and design a crest for the shield that includes some of these words.

Use some shiny material to make the shield so that it will reflect the light and pick up the theme at the end of Deborah's song, where she sings that the people of God will shine like the sun (Judges 5:31).

7. For a time of reflection together, collect some iron filings and place them on a flat surface under which you can manoeuvre a magnet.

Sisera's force had *iron* chariots. These represented a powerful, technological advance on anything that Barak and Deborah could muster. But God made the difference! Talk about some of the big and daunting challenges that the children may be facing at the moment. As each one is mentioned, move some of the iron filings by the invisible force of the magnet off the surface. Christians believe that God's power is available to help them and go ahead of them into every situation. Each time you do



this, you might like say together words linked to Deborah's encouragement to Barak:

*Thank you, God, that you have gone ahead of us to help us.*