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PROPHETESS DEBORAH'S EXPLOITS IN THE PATRIARCHAL ANCIENT ISRAEL AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Prophetess Deborah reign in ancient Israel as portrayed in the Biblical narratives emerged at a period when women's rights in many aspects in a patriarchal society like ancient Israel are so restricted. Women were not permitted or allowed in any decision making in the family and community meetings or gathering in ancient Israel. The socio-religious and political aspect of ancient Israel does not allowed women leadership a breathing space. However, despite this precarious condition, Prophetess Deborah was able to emerge as a judge at a critical period in one of the tribes in northern Israel who was facing an existential threat by the army of Jabin the king of Canaan, whose captain was Sisera. The emergence of Prophetess Deborah altered the age long patriarchal traditions where male dominated all aspect of life in ancient Israel. How was Prophetess Deborah able to break the jinx of the age long patriarchal traditions? What are the implication of Prophetess Deborah's courageous act and leadership style for contemporary women in Nigeria? Thus, using the historical and descriptive method, the research explores the historical background of Prophetess Deborah and how it affected her prophetic ministry. The paper recommends that

for women to overcome gender inequality in highly patriarchal society like Nigeria, they must rise up like Prophetess Deborah and takes up the challenge and confronts every hurdle that poses as a barrier to women rise to leadership position.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchal, Prophetess, Contemporary, Gender, Inequality

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Judges, in which the biblical story of the prophetess Deborah is detailed, covers a period of more than 300 years. Given that the Exodus from Egypt took place in 1446 B.C., this is the period between Joshua's death around 1390 B.C. and the establishment of the monarchy by Saul as the first king of Israel around 1028 B.C. During this period, ancient Israel experienced political instability and suffered confusion, paralysis, defeat, and internal and external oppression. Once Joshua's generation died, the promised peace and prosperity of a land flowing with milk and honey disappeared, and confusion and chaos followed. Because of the leadership vacuum created by Joshua's death, everyone does what they want during this period.

He left ancient Israel as a nation without a central administrative system. The Amphictyony or Tribal Teague Administrative System that emerge at this period has no unifying force and was very weak. It was during this interregnum that Deborah and many other judges like Gideon, Samson, Jephthah and so on, emerged.

Deborah's ministry was unique because she came at a time when the custom of patriarchy has been entrenched in ancient Israel. Every aspect of Religious and social-political life of ancient Israel was dominated by males. Despite Deborah living in a male dominated culture, she serves as the head of state, commander-in-chief and Chief Justice through her prophetic ministry (Judg. 4:1-5; 5:7). Her prophetic ministry was carried out with candour and this endeared her to the Israelites. Due to the divine backing she received, combine with her charisma and character, she became courageous and very competence. She was of the conviction to finish her ministry with a total commitment. However, in contemporary Nigeria, gender issue is still a major challenge particularly in area of political leadership. Nigeria has had her First, Female Vice-Chancellor, First Female governor, though in acting capacity, the country had yet to have a female folk attaining to the seat of presidency which is the most coveted in Nigeria. Like in ancient Israel and during Deborah's era, Nigeria's Social-Political Landscape in patriarchal in nature and this has become a barrier to the eradication of gender motivated discrimination that had plagued this country for years. But the story of the biblical prophetess Deborah shows that women can be just as capable as male leaders.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN ISRAEL BEFORE THE EMERGENCE OF PROPHETESS DEBORAH

In ancient Israel women were generally restricted in their social as well as their religious life. It is believed that they should stay in door as much as possible, not meddling in affairs outside the household management. They did not count as part of the Minyan (quorum for a congregation); customarily, women were not called upon to read lessons at worship and they could not act as legal witness. Women in ancient Israel's social relationship were mostly confine to other women (Bromiley 94). Inequalities were constant features in the treatment of women prior to the emergence of prophetess Deborah in ancient Israel. Ancient Israel at this period runs a patriarchal system were male dominate every sphere of social-political and religious activities. Israel's social organization presupposed male leadership. However, exceptions occurred at a periods when women of renounced virtue rose to leadership position in a rare period of social-political and religious despondency in ancient Israel's national life. A period when the male dominated ancient Israel was called to questions. Women such as prophetess Huldah, Esther and Prophetess Deborah among others use their influence to save the Jews people from extermination plans of the Persians, brought religious reform and through their rare display of bravery, brought victory to the Israelite against the Canaanite army led by Sisera (Judges 4:5; 2Kings 22:14-20; Esther 7:8:9). Biblical narrative about these women were that of bravery, courageous actions, piety, prayer, respect for custom and cultural value, humility, trust and so on. Their exceptional character and their reputed deeds made them heroin in the anal of history in Israel of which Prophetess Deborah was extraordinary.

Even before the time of the ancient Israelite prophetess Deborah, there were several notable women who played important roles in leadership, but the overall leadership system in Israel was patriarchal, and women's roles in public leadership were generally limited compared to men. However, the Hebrew Bible and other ancient sources do mention several important women who were influential and played leadership roles:

Miriam: Miriam, sister to Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20-21), stands out as a key woman in the history of early Israel. She is called a prophetess and guided the Israelite women in song and dance following the crossing of the Red Sea. Although she wasn't a formal leader like Moses or Aaron, Miriam significantly contributed to the community and was a leader among the women.

Jael: Jael, while not a formal leader, (Judges 4:17-22) is famously remembered for her act of bravery in killing Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, which led to the victory of the Israelites. Her actions were pivotal to the battle and the overall deliverance of Israel at that time.

Hannah: Although not a political leader (1 Samuel 1-2): Hannah was a woman of great faith and influence. She prayed fervently for her son Samuel and dedicated him to God.

Samuel became the prophet and judge of Israel. In this sense, Hannah was not a political or military leader, but her actions had a lasting impact on the leadership of Israel, as her son played a central role in moving Israel from the time of the Judges to the establishment of the monarchy.

The Zelophehad's Daughters: A significant episode that shows women's role in leadership in ancient Israel occurs when the daughters of Zelophehad, (Numbers 27:1-11, 36:1-12) who had no brothers, petition Moses and the elders for the inheritance rights of their father (Jordan 57). The case was brought before God, who ruled that women could inherit property when there were no male heirs. This was an important step in recognizing women's rights within the Israelite society, and while not a leadership role per se, it shows women influencing laws and policy.

These women, along with various others, established the groundwork for women such as Deborah to assume important leadership positions later in Israel's history. Deborah stands out as she fulfilled the roles of both a prophetess and a judge, an evident illustration of a woman possessing spiritual and civic power.

DEBORAH: A PROPHETESS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

The name Deborah means a bee. Deborah was a prophetess and the fifth inline judge in ancient Israel between 1409 – 1369. She was the fifth and the only Female Judge in Israel. The biblical narrative did not tell us much about her family except that she was the wife of Lapidoth (Lockyer 82). Prophetess Deborah is from the tribe of Issachar and she organized the affairs of the tribes from a spot between Ramah and Bethel, which was later known as Tomer Deborah, (Judg.4-5) that is, the palm tree of Deborah. There is a presumption that her house may have been at Deborah of Issachar, at the westernFoot of Mount Tabor (Bromiley). She is probably from Ephraim because her home was in the hill country of Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah where she live in a tent, under a palm tree which was very rare in Palestine at that period.

There are two narratives on prophetess Deborah's exploit in the biblical account of Judges 4 and Judges 5. These two account or narrative differs in one or two important details (Safrá 115). The most conspicuous contrast is the identity of the enemy the Israelites defeated at this period. In the narrative of the prose, Jabin is mentioned as the enemy, king of Hazor, though a prominent part is played by his commander-in-Chief, Sisera, who lived at Harosheth-haggoyim. In the poetic narrative, Jabin's name does not appear, and Sisera is an independent king. It is suggested that the appearance of Jabin's name is due to the conflation of two traditions, one of which referred to Sisera, while the other was parallel to the story of the defeat of Jabin, king of Hazor, by Joshua at the waters of Merom(Safrá 115) (Jos. 10:1-9). A contradiction can also be found in the account of the manner through which Sisera died. Judges chapter 4 says he was murdered in his sleep, but in chapter 5, he

was said to have been struck down from behind while drinking a bowl of milk. However, since the narrative of Deborah's victory over the military superior Canaanites in the north is told in two versions or account and they differs in details, it would be a mistake to try to harmonize them or to prefer one over the other as the more correct or likely version (Mays 251).

Taking into account the tradition preserved in Judges Chapter 4, ancient Israel holds the larger parts of the land, the hills and the forests but their settlements in the central range are cut off from those in the northern hills by a chain of Canaanite fortresses down to the Plain of Esdraelon. At that period, the plain dominates the hills; the Israelites are disarmed and their communications are cut. During this period, Israel suffers twenty years of oppression at the hands of Jabin, king of Canaan, and his general, Sisera, whose characters outfitted with iron gave them a military advantage over the Israelites (Mays 251). It is suggested that the reference to Jabin who was a king in Hazor is problematic. The biblical narrative in Joshua 11:1-11 shows that Israel defeat a Canaanite Coalition under Jabin king of Hazor in the time of Joshua. Jabin's name is not mentioned in the account of Chapter 5 and the real antagonist is Sisera whose name is not Semitic and who may have belonged to the sea people (Mays 251). However, from the insinuations in the biblical narrative contain in Judg. 5, and from other accounts, the Israelites seem to have sunk into a state of total discouragement under the oppression of the Canaanites at this point in time, so that it was difficult to rouse them from their despondency, and to induce them to make any exertion to burst the fetters of their bondage. But at the instigation of prophetess Deborah, and possibly aided by her spells, Barak raises the clans of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (which is Manasseh), Zebulun, Isachar and Naphtali. Asher, Dan, Gilead (which is Gad) and Reuben look the other way. Sisera's army were routed at Taanach, and Sisera the Commander and the antagonist was treacherously slaughter by Jael as he drinks or sleeps. (Safra 116). Recent investigations have shown that Hazor, once a mighty kingdom (Joshua 11:10), had retained during the Israelite conquest at least a vestige of its former greatness (Seale 56).

ISRAEL AT THE TIME OF PROPHETESS DEBORAH

The redactors of the book of Judges were not really concern with history per se but with its religious interpretation. Thus it is challenging if not impossible for us to get behind their highly stylized artificial presentation of events to establish a chronology for the period or to discover very much about Israel's political or religious organization during her time (Mays 251). However, many of the Old Testament Scholars have sought to reconstruct as much as possible about the real historical situation. If the events as recorded in Judges is followed in an orderly manner, the figures for the number of years the Israelites experienced, the tenure in office each Judge spent including Deborah's, and the period of rest when added up is about 410 years. This is without the inclusion of the period of Eli and Samuel (Mays 251). The importance of the figures is lost to us because when you recall the

frequency appearance of the round number of 20, 40 and 80, when compare with 410 years is much longer than the generally accepted dating of the period of the Judges between the initial occupation under Joshua, roughly 1200 BC, and the accession of Saul around, 1020 BC (Mays 253).Replying on the archaeological and extra-biblical proof such as the Ugaritic texts, the Alalakh tablets, and the Amana letters, scholars have been able to shed light on life in Syro-Palestine before the emergence of Israel as a political entity. The crisis between Canaanite and Israelite society is essentially one between a city-state society and a rural, tribal social system.

Canaanite social structure was hierarchical, maintaining a clear distinction between the privileged ruling class and its subject population. These numerous city-states operated by the Canaanite were not united but they have separate governments. At times these city-states were loosely confederated as allies, and more often they were aligned with major powers, especially Egypt, that often dominated the region(Hill and Walton 195). In contrast, Israel was organized politically by a tribal structure. Each clan descended from Jacob's son had it own leaders. Some scholars are of the view that the organization of twelve tribes united by a central sanctuary had parallels in the Greek amphictyonic which is the centralized sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi (Hill and Walton 195).

Before the emergence of monarchical system of government in ancient Israel, the relationship between the clans could be described as an amphictyonic, (Tribal league Administrative system) or an association of neighbours to defend a common religious centre (Gower 266). During Joshua's leadership, there was a formal agreement made at Shechem which involved the worship of the same God at a common shrine and the keeping of the common code of law that was inscribed upon a stone and left at the shrine. After the death of Joshua, the formal agreement made at Shechem continued as a binding force among the existing tribes of ancient Israel. Aside other challenges there was no properly organized government and little political unity. Each tribe had its own leader. As a result of this condition, the Israelites began to lose their contact and identity with one another and began to assimilate some of the culture of the people around them (McCain 95). Things became so challenging as the Israelite were constantly under immense pressure from other military powers. This was the period prophetess Deborah emerged among other judges. Through her accomplishments and that of Jael, her leadership raises some questions about the failure of male leadership in Israel (Dillard and Longman III 125). Some of the distinctive features of the life of the amphictyonic as identified by Martin Noth are: there is a fixed membership, a central shrine, an annual festival and a common purpose (Dranne 94). Those features were all identifiable in the community life of ancient Israel at the time of prophetess Deborah.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

In contemporary Nigeria, gender inequality is still a major issue, particularly as regard religious and political leadership. Cultural impediment which tend to promote and perpetuate inequality between male and female have persisted in our society. Historically, women in Nigeria have played a very important role in the development of the country. Some of these roles are caregiving and development of leaders since the existence of amalgamation of Nigeria in 1944. These activities have contributed in shaping the political system of Nigeria (Fayomi and Ajayi 56). From pre and post-colonial eras, women in contemporary Nigeria have struggled to gain relevance in the political and religious leadership and in most cases their efforts were being thwarted by men. Nigeria's democratic and religious practices have not evolved within the basis of gender cohesion. Thus, these are fundamental issues that continue to hinder the rise of women to most coveted seats in a male dominated society like Nigeria. Most of the Nigerian women political participation is characterized by significant losses in both power and authority (Egwu 38). Tinuke Fapohunda (72) suggests that the advent of Colonial period in Nigeria brought a setback on women progress towards control of political powers. Women were systematically rendered invisible as a preference for male domination by the colonialists. Prior to this period, women were no stranger to politics and political power because they have access to political participation through a complex and sophisticated network of relationships, rights and control of resource. Their political power varied from one society or community to another (Fapohunda 72). In some communities women share equal power with, while in others their roles were complementary or subordinate. In some historical record women were said to have founded some of the ancient cities. An example is Igala which is said to have been founded by a woman name Ebele Ejaunu. Records have it that in some Yoruba and Hausa communities, women occupied important positions in the social, political and economic spheres. Examples include Queen Amina of Zazzau (Zaria) and Madam Ransom Kuti of Egba, Abeokuta. Thus, they were directly involve in policy making in their various communities (Fapohunda 72). Despite the patriarchal nature of various communities, like ancient Israel, women have always been in the forefront in contributing to the development of their communities at some particular period of time and even in the face of gender discrimination.

In religious sphere, women, through Christian Ministry and various group have been very active. Chiedozie Obia (47) is of the opinion that there is hardly any African Community, Nigeria inclusive with an association for women and they failed to contribute extensively to the development of the community and church (Obia 49). Historically, women through divine enablement have played a major role in church establishment in Nigeria though with great opposition. For instance, Captain Christiana Abiodun, a co-founder of Cherubim and Seraphim in Nigeria encountered opposition in her struggle to be recognized as the supreme head of the church. She as vehemently opposed when she attempted to hold a staff, the symbol of authority in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

(Obia 54). Despite consistent opposition from male dominated religious sphere, women had continue to play a leading role in the establishment of churches, and also creating women ministry to cater for peculiar challenges that women encounter. However, women in contemporary Nigeria must rise up, shake up the shackles of gender inequality and discrimination for them to be able break the barriers that have hinder them from attaining the leadership position where policy that directly affect the women are being made.

IMPLICATIONS OF DEBORAH'S STORY FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN WOMEN

Deborah's narrative, when specifically examined through the perspectives of gender, socio-cultural influences, and power dynamics in modern Nigeria, holds important meaning for Nigerian women. Without directly mentioning "Deborah," within a broader context where "Deborah" symbolizes the experiences, hardships, and challenges encountered by women in Nigeria. Here are several interpretations of how a narrative like Deborah's might impact modern Nigerian women.

Family Ties and Cultural Expectations: In many communities in Nigeria, women are expected to put family before personal aspirations. Stories like Deborah's may highlight the conflict between these traditional family expectations and the pursuit of one's dreams and independence. This dichotomy is a common conflict today for Nigerian women who juggle their roles as wife, mother, and professional. Deborah's experience may serve as an allegory for the challenges faced by women who seek to assert their identity and ambitions without being judged by traditional norms.(Gagnier 72)

Gender Inequality and Patriarchy: Patriarchal systems continue to restrict women's agency in Nigerian society. Deborah's tale could serve as an example of how women experience systematic oppression through unequal representation in leadership positions, access to education, and professional possibilities. Whether it's in relation to marriage, family, or public leadership, women in contemporary Nigeria nevertheless frequently find it difficult to escape traditional gender roles and cultural expectations. Women may be inspired by the story to confront and question these social norms.

The Battle for Autonomy and Empowerment: Narratives like Deborah's can inspire women who aspire to autonomy by showing a path toward self-reliance, independence, and resilience. They can also inspire modern Nigerian women to confront oppressive structures and assert their rights in fields like politics, business, and education. In a culture where gender norms frequently restrict women's freedom of movement, such a story can empower women and serve as a source of motivation for activism and leadership.

Violence, Abuse, and Resistance: The story may also highlight the pervasiveness of gender-based violence and abuse, as well as the tenacity of Nigerian women in facing these realities. Whether it be sexual harassment, domestic violence, or exploitation, these issues are still pervasive in Nigerian society. A narrative such as Deborah's could highlight how women are not only survivors of such violence but also change agents, pushing for legislative changes, cultural norms, and systems of support for women.

CONCLUSION

The issue of gender inequity and discrimination cut across every society, ethnic group and race, in both ancient Israel during prophetess Deborah time and in contemporary Nigeria. The findings revealed that Deborah was able to lead Israel at a particular period because of the divine enablement combined with brave and courageous character despite the patriarchal practices and cultural norms that were prevalent at that period. The findings revealed that she had a great influence on the people and her impact was felt because of the deliverance from the Canaanite led by Sisera.

Nigerian women must rise up to the challenge that gender inequality poses if they want their voice to be heard in the scheme of things as regards politics, economy and religion. Nigerian women can better understand their roles in influencing the future, pushing for change, and supporting one another in the collective fight for equality by thinking about these themes. Deborah's story has many implications for modern Nigerian women, addressing important issues of gender equality, empowerment, socio-cultural expectations, and the fight for autonomy. Stories like these highlight the struggles women face as well as their potential for transformation, adding to the broader conversation on gender justice, women's rights, and societal advancement in Nigeria.

It is recommended that though patriarchy may be deeply entrenched in Nigeria's democratic and religious practice, women must confront these challenges from all fronts in order to overcome it.

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