

Four Female Episodes

Daughters of Zelophehad *Numbers 27: 1-11*

¹ A claim was presented by the daughters of Zelophehad son of Hopher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, son of Joseph. Their names were Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. ² They appeared before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chiefs, and all the community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and spoke as follows: ³ 'Our father died in the wilderness. But he was not among the company of Korah which combined together against the Lord; he died for his own sin and left no sons. ⁴ Is it right that, because he had no son, our father's name should disappear from his family? Give us our holding on the same footing as our father's brothers.'

⁵ Moses brought their case before the Lord, ⁶ who said to him, ⁷ 'The claim of the daughters of Zelophehad is good: you must allow them to inherit on the same footing as their father's brothers, and let their father's holding pass to them. ⁸ Intimate this to the Israelites: When a man dies leaving no son, his holding is to pass to his daughter. ⁹ If he has no daughter, give it to his brothers. ¹⁰ If he has no brothers, give it to his father's brothers. ¹¹ If his father had no brothers, then give possession to the nearest survivor in his family, and he will inherit. This is to be a legal precedent for the Israelites, as the Lord has commanded Moses.'

Jael *Judges 4: 1-24*

¹ After Ehud's death the Israelites once again did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord, ² and he sold them into the power of Jabin, the Canaanite king who ruled in Hazor. The commander of his forces was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-of-the-Gentiles. ³ The Israelites cried to the Lord for help, because Sisera with his nine hundred iron-clad chariots has oppressed Israel harshly for twenty years.

⁴ At that time Deborah wife of Lappidoth, a prophetess, was judge in Israel. ⁵ It was her custom to sit under the Palm Tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill-country of Ephraim, and Israelites seeking a judgement went up to her. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, 'This is the command of the Lord the God of Israel: Go and lead out ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun and bring them with you to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I shall draw out to you at the wadi Kishon Jabin's commander Sisera, along with his chariots and troops, and deliver him into your power.' ⁸ Barak answered, 'If you go with me, I shall go, but if you will not go, neither shall I.' ⁹ 'Certainly I shall go with you', she said, 'but this venture will bring you no glory, because the Lord will leave Sisera to fall into the hands of a woman.' Deborah set off with Barak and went to Kedesh. ¹⁰ Barak mustered Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh and marched up with ten thousand followers; Deborah went up with him.

¹¹ Now Heber the Kenite had parted company with Kenites, the descendents of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and he had pitched his tent at Elonbezaananim near Kedesh.

¹² When it was reported to Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³ he mustered all nine hundred of his iron-clad chariots, along with all the troops he had, and marched from Harosheth-of-the-Gentiles to the wadi Kishon. ¹⁴ Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! This day the Lord is to give Sisera into your hands. See, the Lord has marched out at your head!' Barak came down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men at his back, ¹⁵ and the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into panic-stricken rout before Barak's onslaught; Sisera himself dismounted from his chariot and fled on foot. ¹⁶ Barak pursued the chariots and the troops as far as Harosheth, and the whole army was put to the sword; not a man was left alive.

¹⁷ Meanwhile Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite, because King Jabin of Hazor and the household of Heber the Kenite were on friendly terms. ¹⁸ Jael came out to greet Sisera and said, 'Come in, my Lord, come in here; do not be afraid.' He went into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. ¹⁹ He said to her, 'Give me some water to drink, for I am thirsty.' She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him again. ²⁰ He said to her, 'stand at the tent door, and if anyone comes and asks if there is a man here, say "No"'. ²¹ But as Sisera lay fast asleep through exhaustion, Jael took a tent-peg, picked up a mallet, and, creeping up to him, drove the peg into his temple, so that it went down into the ground, and Sisera died. ²² When Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him. 'Come', she said, 'I shall show you the man you are looking for.' He went in with her, and there was Sisera lying dead with the tent-peg in his temple. ²³ That day God gave victory to the Israelites over king Jabin of Canaan, ²⁴ and they pressed home their attacks upon him until he was destroyed.

'Witch' of Endor *I Samuel 28: 7-14 & 20-25*

⁷ So he said to his servants, 'Find a woman who has a familiar spirit, and I will go and enquire through her.' They told him that there was such a woman at En-dor.

⁸ Saul put on different clothes and went in disguise with two of his men. He came to the woman by night and said, 'tell me my fortune by consulting the dead, and call up the man I name to you.'⁹ The woman answered, 'Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has made away with those who call up ghosts and spirits; why do you press me to do what will lead to my death?'.¹⁰ Saul swore her an oath: 'As the Lord lives, no harm shall come to you for this.'¹¹ The woman asked whom she should call up, and Saul answered, 'Samuel'.¹² When the woman saw Samuel appear, she shrieked and said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!¹³ The king said to her, 'Do not be afraid. What do you see?' The woman answered, 'I see a ghostly form coming up from the earth.'¹⁴ What is it like?' he asked; she answered, 'Like an old man coming up, wrapped in a cloak.' Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed low with his face to the ground, and prostrated himself.

²⁰ Saul was overcome, and terrified by Samuel's words he fell full length to the ground. He had no strength left, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night.

²¹ The woman went to Saul and, seeing how deeply shaken he was, she said, 'I listened to what you said and I risked my life to obey you.'²² Now listen to me: let me set before you a little food to give you strength for your journey.'²³ He refused to eat anything, but when his servants joined the woman in pressing him, he yielded, rose from the ground, and sat on the couch.²⁴ The woman had a fattened calf at home, which she quickly slaughtered; she also took some meal, kneaded it, and baked unleavened loaves.²⁵ She set the food before Saul and his servants, and when they had eaten, they set off that same night.

Rizpah *II Samuel 21: 1-14*

¹ In David's reign there was a famine that lasted for three successive years. David consulted the Lord, who answered, 'Blood-guilt rests on Saul and on his family because he put the Gibeonites to death.'² (The Gibeonites were not of Israelite descent; they were a remnant of Amorite stock, whom the Israelites had sworn that they would spare. Saul, however, in his Zeal for Israel and Judah, had sought to exterminate them.) King David summoned the Gibeonites, therefore, and said to them,³ 'What can be done for you? How can I make expiation, so that you may have cause to bless the Lord's own people?'⁴ The Gibeonites answered, 'Our feud with Saul and his family cannot be settled in silver or gold, and there is no other man in Israel whose death would content us.' 'Then what do you want me to do for you?' asked David.⁵ They answered, 'Let us make an end of the man who caused our undoing and ruined us, so that he will never again have his place within the borders of Israel.'⁶ Hand over to us seven of that man's descendents, and we shall hurl them down to their death before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, the Lord's chosen one.' The king agreed to hand them over.⁷ He spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, son of Saul, because of the oath that had been taken in the Lord's name by David and Saul's son Jonathan,⁸ but the king took the two sons whom Rizpah daughter of Aiah had borne to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth, and the five sons whom Merab, Saul's daughter, had borne to Adriel son of Barzillai of Meholah.⁹ He handed them over to the Gibeonites, and they flung them down from the mountain before the Lord; the seven of them fell together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest at the beginning of the barley harvest.

¹⁰ Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out as a bed for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until the rains came and fell from the heavens on the bodies. She kept the birds away from them by day and the wild beasts by night.¹¹ When David was told what Rizpah, the concubine of Saul had done,¹² he went and got the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh-gilead, who had carried them off from the public square at Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hung them on the day they defeated Saul at Gilboa.¹³ He removed the bones of Saul and Jonathan from there and gathered up the bones of the men who had been hurled to death.¹⁴ They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan at Zela in Benjamin, in the grave of his father Kish. Everything was done as the king ordered, and thereafter the Lord was willing to accept prayers offered for the country.