

The Prophetess

Can a woman be a prophet?

Can a woman be a prophet? If the foundation of the New Testament prophetic calling is Ephesians 4, then there is clearly no gender issue here. But if a woman is to be a prophet, what kind of person is she to be? Is there any difference between what we teach to men about prophets and what we teach women? Let's see what the Bible says. We begin in Ephesians 4, and I have explained this passage in the material called "The foundation ministries." This can be downloaded from the same place as this material - www.serving-africa.org

Ephesians 4:11-13

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

The Bible clearly teaches about prophets, but what does it say about "prophetesses?" There are a number of places where we can look:-

MIRIAM (Ex 15:20: Num 21:1-2: Micah 6:4)

Miriam is described in the Bible as "prophetess." She is also described in Micah as a leader of Israel, and in Numbers, she describes herself as one who receives from the Lord. In the early parts of the Bible, this would have meant someone who heard from the Lord, who gave direction, and spoke of things to come. Her prophetic ministry is described only in a few verses. She was led into her prophesying through singing and dancing – not the last time we read of music being used as an aid to prophecy. (1 Samuel 10:5: 1 Chronicles 25:1)

Miriam's prophecy

"Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.'" (Exodus 15:20-21)

This is clearly a prophecy of explanation. Miriam was revealing to the people the acts of the sovereign Lord. Interestingly enough, Moses had just done very much the same thing, but in his case there was not the dancing, worship and music.

Miriam adds to our understanding of prophecy. Prophets do not only stand, receive and deliver. We can also receive through worship, praise and dance. This is a very interesting point. It would appear that if the Lord left it all to the male characteristic, we might have missed out on the joy of receiving through music and dance. It took the female characteristic to identify and use this part of the gift.

DEBORAH (Judges 4:4)

Life was going badly for Israel. They had sinned and as a consequence, “the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.” (Judge 4:2-3)

At this point Deborah makes her appearance:-

“Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.”
(Judges 4:4)

Her first prophetic function was to discern that the time for returning to the Lord had come:-

“She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

She knew God’s time. This is classic prophetic function – the gift of discerning what is happening in the heavenly places, and the ability to interpret that into the earthly places.

However, the one God had chosen for the task hesitated:-“Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” (v8)

Deborah immediately shows us another of the prophetic characteristics:-

“Very well,” Deborah said, “I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman.” (v9)

Prophets cannot tolerate those who will not or cannot accept the pure will of God.
Saul, David and Hezekiah all fell into this same trap. (1 Samuel 13: 2 Samuel 12: 2 Kings 20:14)

Deborah follows Miriam in a song of victory, but unlike Miriam, it is very much longer, and **is truly reflective of a prophetic nature**, reviewing hearts and minds as much as celebrating victory. I have printed the song here, and picked out verses which I think are very much those of a prophet.

- * **Deborah sees the vital part she must play. (v7)**
- * **She identifies totally with the task. (v 9)**
- * **She sees the leaders working with her. (v 15)**
- * **She points out the weaknesses of the people – that some did not respond to the call to battle. (v 16)**
- * **She understands the full and wide nature of the spiritual battle, involving all of creation. (v 20)**
- * **She rejoices at the faithfulness of one woman (v 24); and, like David, she proclaimed “the battle is the Lord’s”.**
- * **She rejoices in God’s victory, seeing it all as his work. (v 31)**

1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:
2 "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the Lord!
3 "Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I will sing to the Lord, I will sing; I will make music to the Lord, the God of Israel.
4 "O Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water.
5 The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.
6 "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads were abandoned; travellers took to winding paths.
7 Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel.
8 When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates, and not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.
9 My heart is with Israel’s princes, with the willing volunteers among the people. Praise the Lord!
10 "You who ride on white donkeys, sitting on your saddle blankets, and you who walk along the road, consider
11 the voice of the singers at the watering places. They recite the righteous acts of the Lord, the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel. "Then the people of the Lord went down to the city gates.
12 ‘Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up, break out in song! Arise, O Barak! Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam.’
13 "Then the men who were left came down to the nobles; the people of the Lord came to me with the mighty.
14 Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek; Benjamin was with the people who followed you. From Makir captains came down, from Zebulun those who bear a commander’s staff.

15 The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with Barak, rushing after him into the valley. In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.

16 Why did you stay among the campfires to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.

17 Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves.

18 The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the heights of the field.

19 "Kings came, they fought; the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo, but they carried off no silver, no plunder.

20 From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.

21 The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon. March on, my soul; be strong!

22 Then thundered the horses' hoofs—galloping, galloping go his mighty steeds.

23 'Curse Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord. 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord against the mighty.'

24 "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women.

25 He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.

26 Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple.

27 At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.

28 "Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried out, 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?'

29 The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself,

30 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a girl or two for each man, colourful garments as plunder for Sisera, colourful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck—all this as plunder?'

31 "So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength." Then the land had peace for forty years.

HULDAH (2 Kings 22:14-20)

Huldah lived in the time of Josiah, in Jerusalem. Obviously known and respected, she gave a prophecy with two main points to it - prophesying both the failure of King Josiah's reforms, and the piety of the King himself. It is a classic prophetic word, but not unique. **What is so special is that the leaders had no problem with going to the house of a prophetess.** Clearly, there was no gender issue for them:-

"Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas,

keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District.

15 She said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me,

16 'This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read.

17 Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.'

18 Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to enquire of the Lord, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard:

19 Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord.

20 Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'" So they took her answer back to the king."

ISAIAH'S WIFE. (Isaiah 8:3)

We know nothing of the spoken ministry of Isaiah's wife, except that she was a prophetess. Yet prophets do not just minister by their speech. Isaiah's wife was involved in the sign ministry of Isaiah. She gave birth to the children which he would name as part of his prophetic ministry. (Compare her "sign" children with the sign ministry of Ezekiel)

3 "Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said to me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.

4 Before the boy knows how to say 'My father' or 'My mother', the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria."

It is interesting to see that a woman can be involved in the prophetic sign ministry – another indication to us that God uses women in his prophetic work.

ANNA (Luke 2:36-38)

We generally assume that Anna was quite elderly. Unlike the Western world, God takes no account of age. As a prophetess, she had learnt two valuable lessons – to wait God's time, and to act when God's time had come. This is nothing new, but it is interesting to see that we find these same gifts in the lives of God's male prophets.

"There was also a **prophetess**, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but

worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:36-38)

PHILIP’S DAUGHTERS (Acts 21:8-9)

We know nothing about Philip’s daughters, except that the Bible tells us that they “prophesied.” The New Testament teaches clearly that all can prophesy, (1 Cor 14:31) and these women were using that gift. I don’t think we can give them the title “prophets”, but they do encourage God’s women into the ministry of prophecy.

“Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.” (Acts 21:8-9)

What do we learn from these prophetesses?

- 1. Prophets do not only stand, receive and deliver. Prophetesses teach that we can also receive through worship, praise and dance.**
- 2. Prophetesses can know God’s time.**
- 3. Prophetesses cannot tolerate those who will not or cannot accept the pure will of God.**
- 4. God’s Old Testament people had no problem with female prophets.**