

EXCERPT

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## **Tell Her Story** *How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*

March 14, 2023 | \$24, 224 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0074-8

For centuries, discussions of early Christianity have focused on male leaders. But there is ample evidence in the New Testament that women were respected leaders at the frontier of the gospel ministry. Nijay Gupta shines light on the inspiring contributions of women like Phoebe, Prisca, Junia, Nympha, and more.

## **Deborah: Prophet, Judge, Mother over Israel**

When I was in the early years of my Christian faith, the idea of a woman leader among God's people with any kind of executive power or high office was, frankly, unfathomable. I never felt that women were lesser people or bad leaders as a matter of fact. But it just seemed to add up that men were meant to lead, women to follow and support. But I am sure back then, some twenty-five years ago, I never read through the book of Judges. If there is one figure in this book that stands out, it is Deborah. Deborah is not the only impressive woman of faith and courage in the Old Testament—Miriam, Ruth, and Esther come to mind as well—but I find Deborah the most remarkable. Israel had many, many leaders throughout its long history before Jesus showed up. Some leaders were good, men like Jehoshaphat and Josiah. But by and large, Israel's kings and military leaders were dismissive of Torah and unfaithful to God and to their duty of leading the people of God toward covenantal faithfulness.

Deborah appears in a brief period before the monarchy of Israel—its pre-royal days, if you will. She is not mentioned in the rest of the Old Testament. She is not mentioned by name in the New Testament either, for that matter. But she certainly had an impact on the great story that the Bible tells. In her own time, her wise leadership and responsiveness to God's giftings and calling led to forty years of peace in the land (Judg 5:31). Beyond that, Deborah's warrior song of victory and praise for God may have inspired Mary's own Song of Praise (Lk 1:46-55). And surely Deborah deserves a special spot in the book of Hebrews' "Hall of Faith Heroes" (Heb 11:4-32), where many patriarchs and leaders are presented as models of perseverance in suffering. Some are named, but Hebrews gives tribute to many more heroes who "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, . . . and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies" (Heb 11:33-34). Judges celebrates Deborah as just such a hero of faith, so Hebrews surely has leaders like her in mind too.

The reason that I wanted to start this book off with Deborah is that she defies so many gender stereotypes, then and now, as she led Israel with confidence and courage. Whatever terms we might use to describe femininity and "ladylike" behavior from days of old, she does not seem to fit that mold. Whenever we might be tempted to say, "Women can't perform such and such a role in ministry because they are too . . ." I wonder, if we can't say that about Deborah, ought we to say it about anyone?

When I was sixteen, I honestly don't know what I would have thought if someone were to sit me down and explain to me all the amazing things God did through this woman for the faith and glory of Israel. But about a decade ago, I was assigned to teach a college course on Judges. As I learned more about her leadership in a man's world, I was immediately struck by this leader: prophet, judge, and "mother over Israel."

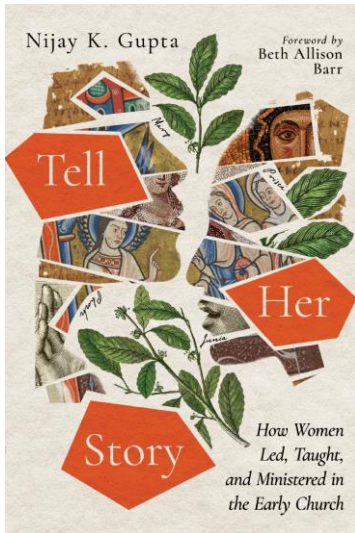
To fully appreciate how Deborah stands out as a courageous, wise, and effective leader in the history of Israel, we need to understand the moment in history that she found herself. The era of the "judges" was a major transition period after Israel's slavery and before the monarchy. As the Old Testament story goes, God rescued Israel from Egypt and the heavy and cruel hand of Pharaoh (Exodus). God reclaimed Israel as his own and gave them a covenantal constitution (the law of Moses) and a mission to become a priestly kingdom and holy nation (Ex 19:6). The plan was to settle them in a special land as a base of operations for their ministry as a light to the nations. One problem (actually, more than one problem, but this one is a major focus of Joshua and Judges): there were people in the Promised Land. God would drive these people out of the land, but as the Israelites encountered any of them, they must not be tempted to worship false gods and live in the people's wicked ways (Deut



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7:1-6). But by and large, Israel *failed* to conquer them and set them to flight and had to put up with the consequences: the Israelites were constantly at war with Canaanites and struggled to maintain a pure devotion to the God who freed them and made them his special possession. This “war” was not just a battle of swords and bloodshed. That happened a lot, of course. But it was also a war *within* the hearts and minds and wills of the Israelites as they struggled with divided allegiances without and temptations within.

The narrator of Judges makes it clear that this was a particularly dark era for Israel because they lacked clear and sustained leadership. This retrospective line is repeated several times: “In those days Israel had no king” (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). Looking back (from the monarchy period), the narrator recognizes that Israel wrestled in this period with living and behaving as a unified people. Instead of moving forward with their mission and ministry, they were “dragged away . . . and enticed,” as James puts it (Jas 1:14), by their own evil desires, which constantly got them into situations they could not get themselves out of. Two haunting refrains are repeated in Judges: “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judg 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1 NRSV) and “All the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25 NRSV).

So Judges narrates a seemingly hopeless cycle of ups and downs for this wayward people: (1) they cry out in suffering at the hands of the Canaanites (due in part, of course, to their failure to put them to flight); (2) God has compassion on them and sends to them an Israelite “judge” to deliver them; (3) they experience a season of peace and rest; (4) they settle back into old wicked ways of idolatry and irresponsible intermixing with their enemies, and the trouble starts all over again.

Here is where the Israelite judges come in. First, they are not “judges” in the sense of a gavel, robe, and courtroom. The majority of them functioned as temporary warrior-leaders raised up by God to get Israel out of the mess that they got themselves into. But it is helpful to know that, by and large, the judges were not role models. (Remember, the book of Judges points ahead to the ideal of the Davidic monarchy.) Gideon, for example, struggled with faith and courage. Samson was pretty much an antitype to the righteous Israelite leader. Deborah is the only judge given extensive narration of whom nothing negative is said or implied. In fact, her narrative episode ends with a beautiful song of triumph and praise of God sung together with her military partner, Barak. In one of the darkest eras of Israel’s history, Deborah stands as a singular, but intensely bright, luminary.

—Taken from chapter one, “Deborah: Prophet, Judge, Mother over Israel”



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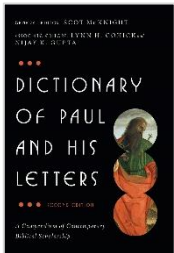
*"Oh, what we can learn when we tell her story! Wherever you stand on women in the church, Tell Her Story will enrich you. This book shows that we still have a lot of work to do in making women visible. What do the stories of women in Scripture teach us about our God, discipleship, and ministry? How we listen to these stories can reveal what we value. Nijay Gupta gives witness to God's work in the unfolding of the prominence of women in the Scriptures, which also makes visible the overarching story and our location in it as the bride of Christ."*

Aimee Byrd, author of *The Sexual Reformation*

## Exploring the Hidden Figures of the Early Church

**Nijay K. Gupta** (PhD, University of Durham) is professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary. He has written several books, including *A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Studies*, *Paul and the Language of Faith*, and academic commentaries on Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1-2 Thessalonians. He is coeditor of the second edition of IVP Academic's *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* and serves as a senior translator for the New Living Translation. He blogs at [cruxsolablog.com](http://cruxsolablog.com).

Also by Nijay K. Gupta:



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General Editor: Scot McKnight, Associate Editors: Lynn H. Cohick and Nijay K. Gupta | April 11, 2023 | \$40, 1264 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-1785-6

In this thoroughly revised and updated edition of a classic reference work, topics like Christology, justification, and hermeneutics receive careful treatment by trusted specialists. New topics like politics, patronage, and different cultural perspectives expand the volume's breadth and usefulness for scholars, pastors, and students today.



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