

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Austen: My name is Austin Hartke, I am the author of a book called *Transforming: The Bible And The Lives Of Transgender Christians* that just had a new second edition come out, which I'm very excited about. I'm also the executive director of an organization called Transmission Ministry Collective that supports transgender and gender expansive Christians with online support groups and workshops and all kinds of programming. I'm a big Bible nerd and I love talking about stories like this.

Anne: Can you just give us a brief overview of Debora's story?

Austen: So the story of Debora that we read in Judges 4 and 5, we have one sort of narrative version in Judges 4, we have the song version in Judges 5. So we get two different versions of what this story looks like. And the story of Deborah starts out with a description of who Deborah is, and the one sentence description we have at the very beginning of the story of who Deborah is, is fascinating because it really emphasizes her gender.

So we get this - we're told that she is a prophet woman. We are told that she is a Lapidoth woman, which could mean she's the wife of a guy named Lapidoth, or it could mean something else, which we can get into later. But we're told that she is this woman who is judging in Israel - so she's not called a judge, which is what you would expect in the Book of Judges, but we're told that she is judging in Israel, so she's given the action. And she is judging Israel in the time of an oppressive cultural leader in the nearby area.

Right, so the Hebrews are being oppressed at this time. And so she calls upon this person named Barak. And she says, "Barak, we are called by God to free the Israelites from this oppressive leadership." And so they go to fight this battle against this general called Sisera, and together they essentially like, together with God, they rout Sisera's army, and totally win the day. And at the end of it, this general Sisera is running away from the battle, and as he runs away from the battle, he meets this woman named Jael.

And Jael says, "Here, Sisera, come into this tent. I will hide you." And Sisera is like, "Oh, great, this is perfect. This is my escape route." So he goes into this tent, and Jael kind of, like, comforts him and makes him feel very safe and cozy. And then as soon as he falls asleep, she drives a tent peg through his head and kills him. And so she ends up being the person who kills the general.

And so Barak runs up, and is like, "Oh, my gosh, where's Sisera?" And Jael says, "Oh, he's in here." And then as soon as Barak comes in, he realizes that Sisera is already dead. So it's the story of these two women, Deborah and Jael, essentially winning this war.

And so then in Judges 5 you get this beautiful song that is sung by Deborah, and Barak is sort of a back up chorus about this whole situation.

Anne: What does it mean to be a judge in pre-monarchic Israel? And how often do we see women as judges or also as prophets?

Austen: The interesting thing about that first sentence, where Deborah is described, is that, number one, she's the only woman that's talked about as a person judging Israel, and so that, you know, makes her interesting just in that fact.

But what it means to be a judge in Israel is part of why the language is very careful about how it refers to Deborah. Because to be a judge in Israel meant to be a leader, and it also meant to be a leader in the context of military action. And so, when the text calls Deborah that and says that she is judging in Israel, rather than saying she was a judge of Israel, they're trying to skirt around this issue of a woman as a military leader. Like, is that an okay thing to call her? So I really think this story of Deborah and Jael is a story about gender loopholes. Every single thing that happens with them is like trying to figure out how to get around, and through, these issues of what is expected or allowed for women. And they're not breaking the rules, but they are bending them and finding these loopholes.

So that's true about Deborah when we talk about Deborah as a prophet, and, like I said, it calls her a prophetess woman, so it's like doubly really re-enforcing that she's a woman doing this job. What it means for her is that she is in contact with God. So she's the one that is essentially the intermediary between God and the people. So when she calls Barak, she says, "Barak, go be the general of our army, and we're going to free the Hebrew people," and Barak is like, "I'm not going unless you come with me."

There's been a lot of discussion about why Barak says that, like, is Barak being cowardly, or what's going on? In the Septuagint, which is the Greek version of the text, they actually add a second little bit to Barak's speech, where Barak says, "I won't go unless you come with me, because how will I know when God says to, like, go take our army." So in the ancient Greek version of this story, they kind of give Barak this out of, like, Deborah's the prophet, so she's going to know when God says to attack, and so that's why they need Deborah to be there.

But in reality, when Barak says, "I won't go unless you come with me," Deborah says, "Well, then God will deliver the general Sisera into the hand of a woman." And when you're first reading that story, you think, oh, it's going to be Deborah. She's going to be the one that wins everything. But as the story progresses, you realize Deborah is actually prophesying about Jael. Jael is the one who defeats the general Sisera.

Anne: What you're saying about the coded language is so interesting and it reminded me of one of the writers you quoted in your book, whose name escapes me. I went and read her paper that you cited, and she was talking about how we don't know what the intention of the writer of this passage was. Maybe they're even trying to make us think it's a dystopian version of Israel by saying, like, "Oh, it's led by a woman and it's, so chaotic." It's so interesting because I think we tend to read the story as, "Wow, this is so empowering to women!"

Austen: Well, that's, like, one of the fascinating things about this text. There's an article called *Gendering Violence and Violating Gender in Judges 4 and 5* by Susan Haddocks, and she talks about how one of the things that's going on in this whole story is that there's an association of masculinity with violence. Whether that means Deborah, as a military leader, or whether that refers to a couple of places in this story, especially in chapter 5, in the song, where there's talk about sexual violence in the context of war, and so there's a real sense of this story that is connecting masculinity and violence.

And so then when we look at what Deborah and Jael are doing, one as sort of a military leader and the other as killing in this very specific way, there's a lot we can say about Jael and what's going on there. But we're connecting masculine with violence, and then we're seeing Deborah and Jael, and seeing them enacting violence, and therefore thinking about them as more masculine women. And that's a complex thing to think about. Like, if we only think about gender in this story in connection with violence, is that really a way that we want to understand how gender works? Do we want to celebrate these two women as powerful women just because they're enacting violence in some way, or they're connected to violence? There should be another way of thinking about what it means to be a strong woman, without thinking about it within that context of violence.

Anne: Speaking of women and violence and war, in what ways do Deborah and Jael subvert traditional narratives about the roles of women during war?

Austen: So, at the very end of chapter 5, we get this vision of Sisera's mother. One of the interesting things about, like, femininity, or gender, and especially in times of war, is we have this vision of Deborah and Jael almost in opposition to Sisera's mother, who we hear about at the very end of chapter 5. So chapter 5 is this song, like I said, sung by Deborah, and sort of by Barak, and at the very end of it we get this almost sort of teasing, or taunting, version of what must be going through Sisera's mother's head at the time. So it says, "Behind the window peered Sisera's mother, behind the lattice, she cried out, 'Why is his chariot so long in coming?' And so the wisest of her ladies answer her, and she says to herself, 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils a woman or two for each man, colourful garments as plunder for Sisera.'"

So there's this vision of not just plunder and sexual violence within the context of war, but that's also the typical version of what women do in war, they sit at home and they wait for the men to come back. So that's this version of, that's what women are kind of supposed to do. But the interesting thing is that this is in Deborah's song. We have this vision of Debora talking about this woman, Sisera's mother, in almost a taunting way, which is kind of weird, especially Deborah mentioning sexual violence in war, almost as if it's a good thing. So there's a weirdness about putting that in Deborah's mouth, right.

But we've got this vision of, women are supposed to sit at home and wait for the men to come back, versus Deborah, who is going out with the army, and Jael. We can talk about class in response to this, right? If Sisera is the general of this army, his mother probably is of a higher class than Jael, who is the wife of one of these weapons-making

or tent-making people. So, women of high class wait for the men to come home. Women of lower class are often stuck near the battlefield, right, so there's a lot going on about the contrast of Deborah and Jael, and Sisera's mother, as we think about what women technically and generally do in war time.

Anne: You mentioned earlier that there could be alternate readings of what it means when they say that she's a woman of Lapidoth. I'm also interested in the phrase when they say Deborah, a mother in Israel. They don't say she has kids, she's just a mother in Israel, which is kind of ambiguous. I would love if you could speak to that.

Austen: There are different readings of so much of this, right, and especially of Judges 5. Because Judges 5 is written in a really archaic version of Hebrew, so people have a whole bunch of different ideas about the translation. So when it talks about Deborah, where it says she's a prophetess woman, a Lapidoth woman, and Lapidoth could be the name of a husband, and so many people, as you read in English, will often read "the wife of Lapidoth," because technically that is a possible reading.

But the weird thing is Lapidoth is not a common man's name, we don't find that anywhere else. And it's kind of just like, well, that doesn't even really make much sense as the name. The other way you can translate that is, basically, "of the torches." So, another way you might see it translated is "Deborah, prophetess woman, a torch woman" – torch as in fire. And there's some really interesting stuff there with a connection of ancient Mesopotamian myths.

In ancient Mesopotamian mythology, there are two gods who are sort of the precursors of a storm god. One of them is known as the torch person, and the other one is known as the lightning person. And the interesting thing here is that Deborah, when she's called Lapidoth woman, that can be torch woman, and Barak's name means lightning. So there's a connection here of these two people that are, if you were reading this in ancient Mesopotamia, you would be familiar with this idea of these two people who are connected to some kind of storm god.

And part of what happens in the battle that they fight is that they fight Sisera. They're told by God to fight Sisera in this river valley. And so part of the chaos that's happening, there is sort of a stormy chaos.

So there's a lot going on about, like, what we mean when we call Deborah a Lapidoth woman? Is she a fiery personality? Is she the wife of a guy named Lapidoth? Is she connected to this ancient Mesopotamian mythology?

We're not totally sure what's going on there when it comes to the bit you said about motherhood. So in Judges 5, part of how Deborah is talked about, is she's talked about as a mother in Israel. So in verse 7, it says the villagers in Israel would not fight. They held back until Deborah arose, until "I arose, a mother in Israel." Right? And so there's this image of motherhood that is definitely connected to Jael's story, as well, this image of motherhood that, in Deborah's case, seems to be kind of like mother bear, mother

lion, fighting for the people, fighting for her children. And so it's interesting that she's talked about as a mother in Israel, because it could mean that she was actually a mother and had biological kids. It could also mean that this is more of, like, her sense of protection over the Israelite people.

Anne: And do you also think there's anything interesting in Jael's name? Because I've read that it's a more masculine name. That -el ending is something that you would see as part of a man's name, typically.

Austen: It's true, yeah, Jael's name, there would typically be a different version of that name to make it more distinctly feminine. So it's interesting that it's not. It's a more masculine-leaning, gender neutral name, is how we would read it. And yeah, there's a lot going on. Oh my gosh, I could talk forever about what's going on with Jael, and the way that she is gendered.

There's the normal stuff that, as people think about this story, one of the main things that people have been reading for ages, all the way back to Josephus. So in ancient times people have talked about how Jael kills Sisera with this tent peg and see it as a very phallic object. Especially because in Judges 5, it talks about Sisera falling, after Jael kills him, it talks about him falling between her legs in this sort of way that is very reminiscent of sexual violence in war. And so it's this flipping version of the narrative - especially when Sisera's mother talks about expecting sexual violence from men against women, what we actually have is this version of sort of simulated sexual violence from women against men in the pairing of Jael and Sisera.

And so that's something that people have talked about for a long time, but there's also more going on underneath. There's a moment when Sisera comes to the tent and says, "Hey, hide me here." And then he says, "Stand at the door and wait in case anybody comes in." And when Sisera says, "Stand at the door," he actually uses the masculine version of that command stand. He's actually referring to her as a man when he says, "You go stand at the door," which is really weird, and we don't know why that happens. Some translators have tried to kind of make that make sense by saying, like, "Oh my gosh, he was just so exhausted he couldn't even remember how to speak," but that feels like a real cop out, I think.

So, the way that he talks to her is an interesting one, in terms of the way she's gendered. And then what he says is, "Go stand at the door, and if anybody comes and asks, 'is there a man here?' say no." And so there's this moment where Sisera is almost sort of unmanning himself by saying, there is no man here. I, Sisera, am not a man. So there's a weirdness going on there, and you miss that in English translations, because English translations will tend to say, "Is there anyone here" and miss that aspect of Sisera saying, "Is there a man here?"

Anne: I just have one more question for you, which isn't directly related to Deborah and Jael, but was in your book in the same chapter that I found really interesting, and I think Canadian audiences would be interested in this. You wrote about the Council on Biblical

Manhood and Womanhood's doctrine on Biblical gender roles. Could you maybe just give a short explanation of what that is, and maybe the ways some women and men in the Old Testament aligned with these gender roles, and some ways in which they transgress them?

Austen: Yeah, I mean this statement about Biblical manhood and womanhood is something that feels so familiar, and it makes sense on the face of things to us in our current modern day. Because we have this sense of, this is what Christianity says. It's kind of like when people talk about Biblical marriage, and what they're using that as a shorthand for is marriage between one man and one woman. But Biblical marriage actually looked like half a dozen different things, So when people say Biblical manhood and womanhood, we think we know what that means, but in reality we read stories like this, we read stories of Deborah and Jael, and Barak and Sisera, and it's like, actually, there are so many different ways of experiencing what it is to be a man or a woman in the Bible. There are so many experiences and stories of people bending those rules for very good reason.

Like, Deborah is called by God to do these things that are not seen as womanly. Does that mean that Deborah is a bad woman? No, absolutely not. So we get these examples of people like Deborah, who do not fit what the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood would think of as what it means to be a woman. And so what ends up happening is we have to shove these characters into boxes to make them make more sense. So with the story of Deborah, people will try to say, well, she was actually a really good vision of what a woman should be, she shouldn't be going out to the battlefield. Because look, she gives all the power to Barak, and he's the general who does the fighting or whatever. And that really downplays all of what's going on with, like, Deborah's story, and with Jael's story as well.

So yeah, that sense of Biblical manhood/womanhood - stories like this really open that up and make us go, "Wow, there's a much wider sense of what that can mean beyond what we have decided it means in, you know, in the twenty first century in American or Canadian Christianity."