

Black History School:

God's Glory...Our Story

Biblically based • Culturally relevant • Education as liberation

BHS Overview

Black History School (BHS) relates powerful stories from the past to our present. By studying the similarities between selected passages from the Book of Judges with certain aspects of Black History, we will discover that the only way evil can win is if the people of God stop fighting.

Why study the Book of Judges?

Set after Joshua leads the people of God into The Promised Land and before they turn haplessly to earthly rulers for safety and security; the Book of Judges shows God's chosen people wavering from faithfulness to faithlessness, from obedience to disobedience. Each time they stray and suffer the consequences of their actions, they cry out to God for deliverance. At this stage in salvation history, God's deliverers are divinely appointed judges. Each judge is a combination of military leader, justice of the peace, and liberator.

Our focus is on Judges 4 & 5 – where the prophet Deborah, military leader Barak, and a tentmaking sister named Jael work together to deliver God's people from oppression – because the same God who empowered them in their fight for freedom, is still empowering us as our struggle continues.

Judges opens with a cry to the Lord for help and closes with moral relativism.

(JUDGES 1:1 AMP)	(JUDGES 21:25 THE MESSAGE)
"Now it came about after the death of Joshua, that the sons (descendants) of Israel (Jacob) asked the Lord, 'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?'"	"At that time there was no king in Israel. People did whatever they felt like doing."

Two great leaders – Moses and Josuha – had already warned previous generations that if they fell away from faithful obedience to God's divine commands, they would suffer. As is often the case with willful human beings, those warnings were insufficient.

Socioeconomic Implications Then & Now

Faithfulness (obedience to the Decalogue) is an embrace of neighborliness that ensures there are no have-nots. Think of the ancient African word Ubuntu, which means 'humanity to others.' It is often described as 'I am because we are.' Conversely, faithlessness (disobedience to the Decalogue) gives way to the selfish utilization of power and resources that creates haves and have-nots.

Crying Out to God Judges 4:1-5

Lesson Aim:

To highlight that God sees and responds to injustice

- In the biblical text, God calls prophets and judges to deliver God's people from oppression and to establish justice
- Then and now, God empowers God's people to fight for freedom

Biblical Exegesis (NIV)

"After Ehud died," (Judges 4:1a) – Judge Ehud defeated the Moabites (Judges 3:30)

"the Israelites again did evil in the eyes of the Lord." (v. 1b) – disobeyed the Decalogue

"So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor" (v. 2a) – Due to the biblical writers' belief in God's sovereignty, the phrase the Lord sold them into the hands of is stating that God allowed the Israelites to be conquered. Canaan is the territory that God promised Abraham his descendants would inherit. Hazor is in the northern region of Galilee.

"Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim." (v. 2b) – his fortress was southwest of Hazor

"Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help." (v. 3)

Main Point: God responds when God's people cry out for help (cf Exodus 3:7-10)

"Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time." (v.4)

- "In a day when men ruled families and nations and women were typically considered minors in court, Deborah became one of Israel's most charismatic judges." – Stephen Miller, *Who's Who and Where's Where in the Bible*
- We often say that prophets speak truth to power. We will see the prophet Deborah speaking truth to a military general in our next lesson.
- Other versions of the Bible say that Deborah was "judging" Israel.

"She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided." (v. 5)

- Matters that could not be resolved at clan festivals were brought to the judges
- Deborah's palm tree was in the hill country of central Israel
- Since Sisera's chariots were ineffective up there, it was a place of peace to which people made pilgrimage when seeking justice

Salvation History: Life during the period of Judges

(12th century BCE; circa 1107 BC until her death in 1067 BC)

At the time of the text, God's people were living in a tribal society characterized by the social structure of self-supporting families in agricultural villages

- the extended families in each village grouped with extended families in neighboring villages to form clans
- clan festivals fulfilled important religious, social, political and economic functions (cf 1 Sam 20:27-29 NRSV)
 - o religion – rituals were observed; priests and Levites explained covenant laws
 - o social – villagers exchanged news, shared genealogies, resolved disputes
 - o political – heads of families arranged marriages, and planned military strategies
 - o economic – families shared resources for mutual aid (this practice ensured that everyone had what they needed)

Black History: Life in Antebellum America (1812-1861)

Hush Harbors

- clandestine meetings held under the cover of darkness in secluded places (woods, ravines, areas with lots of brush to provide cover)
- behind quilts, or other rags which were dampened to help muffle voices
- a tabernacle of sorts - this invisible institution was more than a place of worship; dreams and plans of freedom were shared and hatched here
- attendees risked being beaten or even killed if caught at these assemblies
- spirituals were sung as coded notifications of the secret gatherings
- ring shouts, also known as circle dances, continued from Mother Africa

In his 2015 eulogy for the nine worshipers murdered at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, President Barack Obama invited the nation to remember when Black churches served as “hush harbors,” where

enslaved people could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah, rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement.

They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart —and taught that they matter.

Present Day Reflection

Are any – or all – of these things happening at your church?

¹ <https://advocatesc.org/articles/the-message-of-the-hush-harbor-history-and-theology-of-african-descent-traditions>