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# Challenges for women's leadership in organisations, from the perspective of judge and prophetess Deborah

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a contextual and biblical approach to the phenomenon of women's low participation in top-management positions. Studies show that the difficulties women face in organisations are related to biases that assume a natural inferiority of women compared to men. These biases have uncritically been assimilated into the culture, including the work environment, and to overcome them, it is necessary to create scenarios of individual and collective confrontation, in order to recognise women's capacity to exercise authority and power. The biblical narrative of judge and prophetess Deborah and her editorial process in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC provide clues for confrontation and transformation by naturally portraying a woman exercising authority in a patriarchal setting, relating to men on an equal footing, and being recognised and respected through attitudes of listening, care, and empathy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The presence of women in leadership positions within organisations is scarce, with representation below 40 per cent in the vast majority of industries worldwide, according to data from the World Economic Forum (WEF 2022:23). Similar statistics are reflected in the Deloitte Global Boardroom Program for the year 2021, which reports female participation on corporate boards at 19.7 per cent, with only 6.7 per cent holding leadership roles

within those decision-making bodies. Regarding senior executive positions, only 5 per cent of women hold the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and 15.7 per cent serve as Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) (Deloitte Global Boardroom Program 2022:13). This reality highlights that decision-making in the global economy remains concentrated in male-dominated circles, despite women often constituting the majority of the workforce in their respective sectors (Smith & Sinkford 2022:1145-1147), disregarding and limiting the potential of women to generate strong and productive economies (Glass & Cook 2018:823-837).

Various studies have shown that the low participation of women in senior management positions is related to existing biases against women, where qualities associated with female leadership receive limited value, and it is not easily accepted for a woman to hold a position of authority (Rudman & Glick 1999:1004-1010; Eagly & Karau 2002:573-598; Kark & Eagly 2010:443-468; Smith & Sinkford 2022:1149). These biases have led to the emergence of barriers that women must face within organisations, amidst a male-dominated work culture that perpetuates beliefs and practices in respect of the exercise of power, positioning men in a superior role to women (Cuddy *et al.* 2007:631; Júlíusdóttir *et al.* 2018:603; Hovden *et al.* 2011:408; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard 2010:767-780; Acker 1990:139-158; Acker 2006:441-464; Holton & Dent 2016:542-561; Nagy & Vicsek 2014:318-333; Weyer 2007:482-496; Ro 2021).

The harm of these biases lies in their potential to become fundamental components of thought models that are uncritically naturalised, and as a result, they are used to justify forms of segregation (Mella 2022:157-158, 178). Regarding the status of women in society, the unconscious and naturalised reception of thinking patterns since ancient times, which posited women's biological, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual inferiority, has led to the disregard and disqualification of their ability to act in the public sphere of society (Patou-Mathis 2022:12-13, 30-31, 41, 88). In organisations, this translates into a series of conscious or unconscious behaviours and organisational policies that restrict women's access to senior management or leadership positions (Ryan & Haslam 2005:81; Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams 2021:2; Vaahtoniemi 2021:413; Ramos *et al.* 2022:47).

The solution to address gender disparity in top management and leadership positions must begin with strategies that make conscious biases feeding various types of barriers faced by women. This is achieved not only through regulatory and structural changes, but also by working on cultural transformation, viewing biases as a reflective model that helps raise awareness

of encountering others and valuing their richness and differences (Mella 2022:179). Theology has an essential role to play in this regard, as it constantly examines history and reflects on the various ways in which human beings experience God. It engages in a dialogue with culture, taking into account existing social circumstances, in order to contribute to the consolidation of the divine project of human fullness revealed in Jesus of Nazareth (Santamaría 2002:305-306), where there is no exclusion or domination of one over another (see Gal. 3:28).

In light of this reality, questions arise: What can theology contribute to the creation of spaces for reflection and confrontation of biases against women's managerial capabilities? From what perspective can it provoke a conscious transformation of the barriers women face in reaching top management positions?

To answer these questions, this article proposes a proactive approach based on a dialogue at three levels, namely understanding the dynamics of female leadership in society and organisations; analysing the reality of female leadership in the context of the biblical narrative, and updating the biblical text in terms of transforming the state of female leadership in society and organisations.

Regarding the second level of dialogue, in this research exercise, we have opted for the biblical tradition of judge and prophetess Deborah in the Book of Judges. Deborah's story presents an alternative experience within a patriarchal environment, where the relationship between men and women was interpreted from an egalitarian perspective, and the exercise of authority and power by a woman was considered natural. This narrative possesses a performative power that can contribute to the transformation of organisational culture, accepting, validating, and promoting women's participation in decision-making bodies and top-management positions.

The first part of the article delves into the historical and sociocultural dynamics that have given rise to biases against women and the various forms of barriers to female leadership in top-management positions. The second section will present the characteristic elements of Judge and Prophetess Deborah's authority, highlighting the thematic, symbolic, and contextual keys found in chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Judges. Finally, hermeneutical updates of the biblical narratives about Deborah are proposed, which can inspire the creation of critical environments for reflection to confront the biases underlying the barriers that hinder women's advancement to top management positions, ultimately fostering a transformation of organisational culture.

## 2. HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS UNDERLYING THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Although women constitute approximately half of the workforce in organisations, they are largely absent from decision-making positions and senior management roles (Maida & Weber 2022:488), a reality that has been studied since 1970 (Powel & Butterfield 1994:69). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicates that senior management positions are subject to gender segregation, with a higher number of women in managerial positions in support areas, human resources, and administration, while men dominate in strategic, research, accounting, and development roles. This situation prevents companies from benefiting from the talents and capabilities of competent women, who have increasingly fewer opportunities to influence management and decision-making in the organisations of which they are part (ILO 2019:40.45.61).

Gender bias is not something new. Estévez (2012) argued that interpretations of physiological, mental, and emotional differences between men and women in ancient times gave rise to the creation of a complex system of symbols, meanings, and reasoning in which men were considered superior to women. Thus, masculinity became the interpretive framework for all human reality, and women were not recognised as existing in and of themselves but rather in dependence on men. They were viewed as complements, distortions, or imperfect similarities to the male universe (Estévez 2012:69-71). Similar aspects can be observed in Greek thought, where masculinity is meant to subdue feminine force represented by the uterus (Patou-Mathis 2022:50).

In line with the aforementioned, the Greek philosopher Xenophon ([n.d.] *Oeconomicus* 3.15; 7.10-43) argued that the division of spaces and tasks was correct and necessary, because the man brings wealth and sustenance to the home, while the woman is responsible for managing them. On the other hand, the Pseudo-Aristotle ([n.d.] *Physiognomonics* 809b; 812a; 813a) maintained that, since men possess greater physical strength and a more rational rather than emotional thinking, they are called to develop and contribute to the construction of society in public activities such as politics, war, economy, and philosophy, among others (Mirón 2004:73). By contrast, women have a fragile body, a more emotional psyche, prone to providing affection and care, and are considered to be cowardly compared to men. Therefore, the private sphere of the home was regarded as the appropriate space for women (Mirón 2004:72-73).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the positivist movement significantly contributed to a hierarchical view of reality based on natural determinism. The domination of the superior over the inferior, based on race or gender, was not only considered just, but also natural. Those in the inferior category could never aspire to be equal to those considered superior (Patou-Mathis 2022:40.88; Rennes 2005:168). Expressions such as those by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), when referring to women, reflect a mixture of elements from Greek philosophy, the prevailing science of the time, and certain religious concepts of that era:

The weak reason of women does not partake in these advantages or disadvantages. They suffer from intellectual myopia which, through a kind of intuition, allows them to perceive nearby things in a penetrating manner, but their horizon is very limited, and distant things escape their grasp. Hence, everything that is not immediate, that is, the past and the future, has a weaker influence on women than on us (Schopenhauer 1998:56).

Although interpretations of biological differences between men and women are certainly questionable, social hierarchisation based on these differences began to receive normative support. Thus, legal guidelines emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries to establish what is considered properly masculine and feminine. This has influenced the strengthening of the sexual division of space and activities beyond the home, contributing to the consolidation of work environments structured around the sexual division of labour (Schweitzer 2002:17-59).

The naturalisation of women's place in the home and the philosophical, medical, and religious arguments about their supposed inferiority to men, and thus their necessary dependence on men to exist socially (Patou-Mathis 2022:31-39.40-56.58-80; Bitocchi 2019:240-243) contributed to the notion of women's incapacity for leadership and indirectly to the belief that authority and power are not part of women's abilities. Like any prejudice that translates into a mental model that permeates culture (Mella 2022:157-158), leadership has been erroneously viewed as a masculine skill, leading to an almost unquestionable conclusion that being a man and being a leader are inherently connected (Coleman 2019:4), while women are perceived to lack ambition to pursue high ideals (Marry *et al.* 2015:47). As a result, it has been considered that men have their rightful place in positions of authority and power.

Organisations, being symbolic systems anchored in culture, have drawn from the historical reservoir of prejudice against women. Thus, the barriers that women face in reaching senior management and leadership positions are nothing more than conscious or unconscious expressions of everything the organisational system tries to do to remain faithful to one of the beliefs it has assimilated. This is better understood through the analysis of Enriquez (1989:84-92), who argued that every organisation is built on a basic belief that it seeks to maintain through the proposal of values, norms, roles, modes of interaction, and thought patterns as mechanisms to influence its members and ensure the acceptance of patterns of work organisation.

While strategies have been developed to close the gender gap at the highest levels of management, the policies adopted by organisations have focused on outlining paths for women to simply adapt to the situations, without fully understanding the barriers inherent in the system itself. In addition, the human tendency to establish affinity and solidarity with peers contributes to male power elites tending to favour other men to assume executive roles and underestimating women's capacity to fulfil these roles (Evans & Maley 2020:4-5).

Currently, prejudices continue to operate in a more subtle manner, segregating women based on their responsibilities and family ties. Despite entering the public sphere of work, the private environment of the home still traps and limits women, who are forced to make choices or sacrifices that men never consider, in order to access senior management and leadership positions, as women still maintain a higher percentage of dedication to the home (Chevillat 2016:2; Opoku & Williams 2019:6-8).

## 2.1 From gender segregation to barriers for women's access to senior management

The aforementioned describes the glass-ceiling effect, a term coined to describe the invisible yet existing barriers that prevent women from reaching the highest positions in the organisational hierarchy, with those positions being reserved for men (Ryan & Haslam 2005:81; Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams 2021:2; Vaahntoniemi 2021:413). However, this metaphor may give the impression that the glass ceiling is only located one step below the highest level of organisational hierarchy, when, in reality, women face various difficulties throughout their professional careers.

On the other hand, researchers such as Acker (2009:202) prefer to speak of regimes of inequity, which are systematic imbalances among individuals in terms of power and control over objectives, resources, and outcomes, reflected in participation in decision-making processes, organisation of work,

career-advancement opportunities, security, and compensation, among others. Seen in this light, gender segregation should be understood as a matrix of experiences, trends, and behaviours that become barriers and constitute various forms of regimes of inequity that hinder women's progress and development in organisations. The queen-bee syndrome, tokenism, and the glass cliff (Ramos *et al.* 2022:47), along with the so-called sticky floors or labyrinths (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams 2021:820), are diverse metaphors for the same reality that reveals the multiple nuances of the barriers women face nowadays in becoming part of senior management in the organisational world.

The queen-bee syndrome is a phenomenon that contributes to reinforcing the patriarchal and androcentric system, causing internal strife among women. This syndrome occurs when a woman succeeds in a male-dominated environment, attains a position of recognised authority and power, but instead of paving the way for other women, she becomes critical and harsh towards them, shows more indulgence towards men, and prefers the protection of male circles (Mella 2022:157-158). This dynamic hinders female advancement, not only because it leads women to view each other as enemies and prevent the formation of alliances (García-Velasco 2013:18), but also because they are compelled to replicate imposing and aggressive leadership styles, thus reinforcing prejudices regarding the validity and naturalness of strong masculinities based on dominance, which do not admit conciliatory, collaborative, empathetic, or dialogic attitudes associated with femininity, and are viewed as weak and strategically ineffective for success.

Tokenism refers to the superficial and symbolic declaration of solidarity and support for minority individuals or groups, without taking concrete actions to build equity (Ramos *et al.* 2021:47). Women in senior management positions become tokens and, like any minority group, they face increased exposure and visibility, resulting in constant scrutiny of their performance, often more intense than that experienced by the dominant group. This exerts pressure on women to prove to men that they possess the necessary skills to hold their positions (Duyvejonck 2021:11-12). Tokenism also reinforces labour stratification in terms of the superiority of the dominant group. In the case of women, it reinforces dynamics of gender-based division of roles, encapsulating women in certain types of work and socially penalising those who aspire to something different from what the dominant group offers (Kurt & Sürgevil 2019:209-212).

The glass cliff is the phenomenon where women and individuals from minority groups are more likely to reach high levels of hierarchy in their professional development during times of crisis and difficulty (Ryan & Haslam 2005:81-82). This creates a leadership experience characterised by high levels

of physical and psychological stress, a strong fear of failure, and exposure to criticism that is greater than what men selected for similar positions under more favourable conditions experience (Kulich & Ryan 2017:2-3).

The existence of the aforementioned barriers is fuelled by organisational thought patterns that normalise the logic of segregation. The establishment of managerial management can be one of these patterns that perpetuate attitudes that segregate women from senior management. Aubert and De Gaulejac (1993) describe managerial management as a management style where only winners and conquerors deserve to succeed. Under this logic, strength, power, success, strategy, competition, calculation, and conquest are the most esteemed values for advancement and professional recognition (Aubert & De Gaulejac 1993:30), thereby confirming the acceptance and normalisation of attitudes of dominance and submission (Restrepo 2015:109).

### 3. JUDGE AND PROPHETESS DEBORAH: THE NATURALNESS OF FEMALE AUTHORITY AND POWER

While the Holy Scripture is not immune to the influence of the patriarchal culture in which it originated, the internal tension between a perspective that marginalises women and another that affirms their place is notable in both testaments (Obiorah & Okafor 2020:87.94-95; Mudimeli & Van der Westhuizen 2019:118-131). The tradition about Deborah aligns with the latter view, in which gender does not limit women's authority to teach, speak, and make decisions on behalf of the community and for themselves (Olojede 2013:172; Thomaskutty 2019:79-80, 93), despite being in male-dominated cultural and religious environments (Taubes 2011:15-24; Kordovero 2009:83-85; Herzberg 2013:15-33; Assis 2005:1-12; Aviner 2006:160-162; Skidmore-Hess & Skidmore-Hess 2012:2).

The story of judge and prophetess Deborah is found in Chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Judges, a text that, in its 21 chapters, expresses a deep concern for the exercise of authority and power. The reason for this emphasis is that the book offers a more theological than historical construction (Lanoir 2008:272) of the transitional period between the establishment of the people of Israel in the land of Canaan after the death of Joshua and the emergence of the monarchy, covering the period from 1220 BCE to 1050 BCE (Vergara y Vásquez 2016:165). As the book progresses, corruption and misuse of power increase, and the figure representing authority moves further away from its proper role (Lanoir 2008:268).



In Judges 4:4, Deborah is presented as a woman, prophetess, judge, and wife, roles that demand mental acuity and a deep spiritual sensitivity that is not diminished by being married to Lappidoth. Furthermore, the text shows that Deborah is a judge and prophetess autonomously, not as a delegation from her husband or in dependence on him. The verb *shaphat* (to judge) is conjugated in the *qal* perfect participle form, indicating the ongoing and present action of judging or ruling while still being a woman, prophetess, and wife:

וְדִבּוֹרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אֲשֶׁת לַפִּדְיֹת הִיא שֹׁפֵטָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעַת הַהִיא:

*But Deborah, a prophetess and the wife of Lappidoth, was a ruler in Israel during that time (Judg. 4:4).*

Indeed, the epic poem in Chapter 5 presents her with the honourable title of mother of Israel, who, upon awakening and rising, brings about a sense of security and peace for the people of Israel, allowing the farmers to freely traverse their land once again (Judg. 5:7):

חֲדָלוּ פָּרוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ עַד שִׁקְמַתִּי דְּבוֹרָה שִׁקְמַתִּי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

The peasants were not seen in Israel; they were not seen until you, Deborah, arose, until you stood up, mother of Israel.

The verb to rise *קום* denotes an immediate action of standing up, establishing or confirming. It, therefore, implies a recognition of authority and the ability to do something or carry out a special delegation. It is worth noting that the text does not resort to typical images of authority and strength such as queen or warrior, which is suggestive in that the most natural and simple aspect of the feminine being contains a force of transformation and the capacity to lead.

Contemporary studies on leadership define it as the ability and process to generate collective change and achieve goals in coherence with the needs of a group or the demands of a context (Kaiser *et al.* 2008:96; Rowe & Guerrero 2011:1). Change is brought about by a person's ability to influence a group, but also by the influence that the group has on the leader, making the results depend not only on the leader, but also on the relationship that the leader builds with the group, and these, with the context (Klingborg *et al.* 2006:280; Van Vugt 2006:355; Rowe & Guerrero 2011: 1-2; Thomas *et al.* 2013:7-10). The way in which the biblical text describes the relationship between Deborah and the people presents her leadership in the terms indicated earlier, in which there is an influence based on trust and credibility regarding her decisions (Judg. 4:5) and confirms her ability to commit to the success of those who seek her, providing guidance, security, and support for each one to develop the skills they need (Judg. 4:8-9).

In relation to the above, it is important to note that the text does not reveal any aura of suspicion or surprise at the place of influence and authority that Deborah holds in the community. Given that the text reflects naturalness and agreement with this situation, it becomes a testimony to an alternative way of thinking in antiquity that considers women as people capable of having and exercising authority, and therefore, it is legitimate for them to have access to instances of leadership in the community.

Four characteristics of Deborah's leadership and authority are analysed below, which, according to current typologies, is framed in a transformational style (Khan *et al.* 2016:4), as it seeks the self-realisation of each individual and is able to engage on a personal level with the quests and needs of those who turn to her. Deborah's style of influence was rooted in her ability to nurture each member of the community with recognition, listening, closeness, and support so that they could reach their full potential and give the best of themselves to their environment. Debora did not generate a leadership in which she was the role model; rather, she generated a dynamic of empowerment so that each person could discover the skills s/he possessed, the place s/he occupied in the context, and in accordance with this, contribute to the solution of a determined need or challenge.

### 3.1 Deborah is a woman who acts freely in public and exerts influence in her environment

This aspect constitutes a first element of dialogue between the biblical text and the culture permeated by prejudice towards female leadership. Deborah is not only a woman who assumes roles related to the public life of the community, but she also performs them outside the confines of her home, in a visible and accessible place for everyone. "She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came up to her for judgment." (Judg. 4:5). The text reflects the general recognition of Deborah's authority in administering the life of the people in all its dimensions, as they sought her for *מִשְׁפָּט* *mishpat*, that is, commands and decisions to be followed. Deborah's judgment and reasoning abilities are evident in this detail, reaffirming once again that the communal environment that produced and received the text, naturally acknowledged women's intellectual development and capacity to influence the transformation of their surroundings, not only by proposing ideas, but also by issuing instructions to be fulfilled.

The location of Deborah under a palm tree is highly significant. She sits like the Torah masters (Albarral 2011:97), thus possessing the authority of someone who deserves to be heard. In addition, in the context of the ancient Middle East, nature is an expression of divine communication. Palm trees

have a sacred or spiritual connotation as they represent a favourable place for the communication of divine will and are a symbol of blessing (*beraká*), understood as “the testimony of a subtle presence of God’s capacity to transmit prosperity and fertility, both spiritual and physical” (Pikaza & Aya 2009:58, 162).

Deborah’s ability to be in contact with others and to become a teacher, companion, and counsellor meant that her leadership is strongly rooted in the trust she generated in others. As the story goes, she could be consulted in a variety of situations, and was, therefore, someone who inspires. In addition, the exercise of listening and advising helps the person discover the resources they have in their favour in a given situation. Hence, Deborah did not generate dependence on her followers but turned them into agents of transformation.

### 3.1.1 Deborah is a spiritually insightful woman with her own voice

In Judges 4:4, the text mentions that Deborah is married to Lapidot. This detail is not insignificant, as Lapidot is not only a male name but also represents Deborah’s deep connection with divinity. The name Lapidot לַפִּידוֹת is actually a feminine noun and translates to torches. Therefore, Deborah is married to the fire, a symbol of divinity, and in Exodus 3:2, fire is one of the ways in which Yahweh manifests himself. If we add to this indication the fact that Deborah דְּבוֹרָה translates to bee, this woman is adorned with strong symbolism in the ancient Mediterranean, as bees were regarded as messengers or communicators of the gods (Fernández 2011:19-20). In addition, Deborah’s name shares a root with the Hebrew verb דָּבַר (*Dabar*), which translates to speak, direct, or proclaim. Thus, the judge and prophetess are not only the bee that delivers messages from the divine, but they also become the transformative word themselves. The narrative clearly presents that depth of reason and spirituality are also attributes of women.

At this point, we can intuit that Debora’s discourse, within her leadership style, denotes a communication that sought to connect from the intimate. It is, therefore, interesting to note the relationship between Debora and divinity in the text, since communicating from transcendence implies generating dynamics that go beyond the achievement of a task and propose personal and community work itineraries based on a system of higher values such as empathy, cooperation, and solidarity.

### 3.1.2 Deborah is a woman who relates to men with equity and a logic of personal and communal actualisation

Both the song in Judges 5:1-20 and the prose narrative in Judges 4:4-10 depict women and men as the main heroes of a great feat. Deborah, Baraq, and Yael are the central figures in these accounts. In Judges 5:12a, Deborah is encouraged to awaken herself, reaffirming that she has an independent existence. Her awakening does not depend on a man. She possesses everything within herself to be fully awakened: עִירִי עִירִי דְּבוּרָה עִירִי עִירִי (Awaken yourself, awaken yourself Deborah, awaken yourself, awaken yourself). As for Baraq, he is invited to adopt the same attitude as Deborah, to stand firm and rise up (Judg. 5:12b): קוּם בָּרָק (Rise up, Baraq). In the framework of the song, no one outshines another, and praises and requests are the same for both men and women. Each individual is urged to fulfil his/her potential in every way.

Perhaps this attitude is even more evident in the prose account of Chapter 4, as Deborah relates to Baraq not from a presumption of superiority but from a stance that reflects a special sensitivity towards the life of each individual and the community as a whole. Although she summons Baraq to her presence, she does so to remind him of a mission entrusted to him and that it is important for him to carry it out for the well-being of all (Judg. 4:6-7), not to express displeasure or mockery because he has not yet done what he was supposed to do. Baraq sets a condition for his action, requesting the presence and company of Deborah, to which she agrees, and the text highlights it with this expression (Judg. 4:9): הֵלֵךְ אִלַּי עִמָּךְ (Go, I will go with you). Deborah does not supplant Baraq's role, but she contributes what he needs from her, in order to fulfil it.

Deborah does not assume leadership through domination or by establishing superiority. It is likely that, for the redacted community, this text is not intended to ridicule the masculinity of the time or to show that Israel was so unstable due to the absence of a king that they resorted to being governed by a woman. Perhaps, for the vital context of the text, it was normal for a woman to perform these and other roles because she was equal to men in the ability to do so.

Winters (1993:21) supports this last statement when she explains that, by reporting Deborah as one of the great women who contributed to the consolidation of Israel, along with other women from the pre-monarchic era, it suggests that the collective memory preserved these traditions as a theological testimony of their experience in which men and women had equal

access to *Yahweh*, and their particular gifts were recognised and shared for the edification of the entire community. In fact, there is no evidence in the narrative account or in Deborah's song that suggests her.

### 3.1.3 Deborah is a woman who validates authority through motherhood, by promoting the well-being of others.

The tradition of the judge and prophetess Deborah does not mention whether she had biological children. However, the song praises her by calling her *אִמּוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל* (mother of(iz)in?) Israel) (Judg. 5:7). This exaltation may be related to the tribes mentioned in the song, which are located in the central and northern parts of Israel, where the tradition of Jacob is quite strong (Vergara & Vázquez 2016:98-101). Now, the mentioned tribes bear the names of sons with his wives, Rachel and Leah, with Rachel being the beloved one. According to the song, in times of difficulty, the tribes associated with Rachel and Leah are equally in danger, and Deborah rises up to rescue them all. In this line of thought, Deborah is a mother, even more so, a matriarch, not because she has borne children, but because of her ability to seek the well-being of the people, unify them, and make all the tribes feel they come from the same womb.

From the perspective of Jewish academia and spirituality, authors such as Aiken (2003) mention that every matriarch has the main task of ensuring the welfare of the people, and each one has a particular way of doing so (Aiken 2003:97-98, 366). Thus, motherhood is not achieved solely through giving birth but through concrete efforts to promote well-being and development. In this regard, motherhood becomes a feminine power that is positive, valued, and necessary for transforming history, as the mother nurtures physically and emotionally not only within the home but also outside it. Thelle (2019:443) emphasises that Deborah demonstrates her motherhood when she rises up, goes out to accompany the people, and mobilises them to work for their own liberation.

## 3.2 Deborah viewed from the redaction process of Judges Chapters 4 and 5

Finkelstein (2017) suggests that Chapters 4 and 5 come from separate traditions that were brought together by an 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE redactor. It is interesting to note that, according to this author, the character of Deborah does not appear in the oral transmission phases of the narratives, which differentially shaped the memory of the territorial conflicts with the Canaanites in Israel during the 10<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. For the oral tradition behind Chapter

4, the feats of Baraq and Yael against the army of Sisera were narrated. As for the oral tradition of Chapter 5, the poem depicted a series of exploits in the vicinity of Megiddo without specifying the names of enemies or heroes (Finkelstein 2017:28-32). Moreover, concerning the poem, biblical criticism in general maintains that it may have originated as an oral composition in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Skidmore-Hess & Skidmore-Hess 2012:4-5).

According to Finkelstein's proposal, in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, an author from the Northern Kingdom committed the tradition concerning Chapter 4 to writing and introduced the figure of Deborah as a symbol of unification for the northern territory of Israel. This same author was likely familiar with the poem about the exploits around Megiddo (the oral stratum that would become Chapter 5) and enriched it by borrowing the characters from the narrative of Baraq and Yael's feats, including Deborah. Deborah thus became an anchoring character between the narrative and the lyrical piece. This 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE author combined the mentioned chapters with other disparate accounts of local heroes' struggles in the north, giving rise to the scroll known as *The Saviours of Israel*, which would later become the core of what would be the Book of Judges. After this redaction, a Deuteronomist author from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE added mentions of Yahweh's intervention in both narratives and framed the texts within their theological proposal of the cyclical experience of sin, punishment, supplication for help, and salvation that characterises the Book of Judges (Finkelstein 2017:39).

Seen in this way, the initial written version of Chapters 4 and 5 with the inclusion of Deborah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE was part of the primitive nucleus of the Book of Judges (Judg. 3:12-9:55, or perhaps Judg. 3:12-12:7) (Römer 2014:121). This character was not eliminated from Chapters 4 and 5 by the later pen of the Deuteronomist in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE or in the additional Deuteronomistic contributions to the entire book, which, according to Römer (2014:122), occurred during the Babylonian period. This fact is of vital importance, as it indicates that both for the 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE author and for Deuteronomistic theology, it was not scandalous or erroneous to think of a woman with communal leadership in religious, legal, and even political aspects. It is worth considering the possibility that the character of Deborah actually represents a process of reflection on authority and power, in which this woman is setting a pattern of transformation.

Lanoir (2008) argued that the final form of the Book of Judges actually reflects the situation of Israel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE rather than the pre-monarchic period (11<sup>th</sup> century BCE). In fact, the book caricatures and satirises the dangers of authority and power in charismatic, political, and military spheres, sparking debates on both suggestive female and male figures (Lanoir 2008:275, 264). While the figure of Deborah emerged two centuries

earlier in the Northern Kingdom, it also shed light on the Southern Kingdom, as both kingdoms faced difficulties in terms of social justice, corruption of political and religious authorities, and the threat of overpowering empires. The figure of Deborah would represent a shared longing for what is expected from a ruler in terms of an authority expressed through ethical attitudes, closeness, courage, rationality, empathy, and care. All of these qualities are inherent to women and, therefore, to all human beings.

#### 4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE BIBLICAL TRADITION ABOUT DEBORAH TO THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN TOP MANAGEMENT

Overcoming prejudice requires confronting the core belief that it holds. As mentioned at the beginning, the prejudice persists in organisations that women are not physically, mentally, and emotionally capable of assuming a position of authority in top management. The biblical tradition about Deborah, being the result of a process of confrontation within a human group about the meaning of authority and ways of exercising power, contains experiential and sociocultural elements that can engage in dialogue with organisations. In this instance, a series of hermeneutical keys are proposed to stimulate existential scenarios and reflection, in order to confront and overcome prejudices and barriers towards women's effective participation in top management.

##### 4.1 Key 1: Validation and recognition of the place of women and femininity

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the author of Judges Chapters 4 and 5 created disruption by presenting a woman as a symbol of Israel's unity and a model of authority based on administering justice from, with, and for the community. Considering that the oldest oral strata of Chapter 4 already included the exploits of Jael, the author builds on a past where women's participation in the struggle for territorial control was acknowledged and accepted. Thus, the creation of the character of Deborah continues and reinforces this trend, in order to showcase a way of governance and generate communal well-being where women take the initiative, possess the ability to analyse reality, and make decisions based on their observations.

In organisations, it is necessary to create spaces where, starting with women, a reading of history can take place and recognise those who have excelled in different fields, breaking the prejudice that a woman's ultimate fulfilment is exclusively in the domestic sphere and dependent on the desires of men. This allows for the visibility of the Yael figures who preceded

present-day women in great achievements and helps ensure that women's history is not monothematic and hidden, but rather begins to be valued for the plurality and versatility of female genius in shaping history. This contributes to the recognition and empowerment of the existing Deborah profiles within organisations, who can bring renewal to top management through empathy and the ability to work by fostering networks and alliances.

Such actions would contribute to reducing barriers such as tokenism, as they would generate genuine inclusion and effective female participation in decision-making instances. Starting from the recognition of the place and value of women and femininity in themselves makes it possible to create more opportunities for women not based on their gender, but because their capacity and competence for a top-management position are recognised or can be developed.

## 4.2 Key 2: The authority of care and the power of empathy

As analysed earlier, care, empathy, and the ability to listen have been viewed as feminine skills linked to caregiving and useful in the private sphere of the home. However, in Judges Chapters 4 and 5, Deborah's authority is not evidenced by imposition but by her ability to listen and empathise with the situation of those in need. Deborah listens in an accessible place where anyone can enter and speak freely about the difficulties they are facing, with the assurance of being heard and justly advised (Judg. 4:4-5).

These elements are directly related to the challenges of managerial management described by Aubert and De Gaulejac (1993), where rationality, competitiveness, domination, and the silencing of the emotional world characterise a successful leader. The narrative about Deborah shows that the validation of each person's inner world is what makes her successful and trustworthy as a judge and prophetess. In the face of Barak's hesitation, there is a welcoming dialogue and a capacity to engage with his process without supplanting or shaming him (Judg. 4:7-9). In the song, Deborah's rising is interpreted as an attitude of care, earning her the title of mother of Israel (Judg. 5:7).

Female leadership at the top-management level must be viewed as an opportunity to maintain healthy and humanising work environments, where individuals can feel valued by their company, and likewise, the company recognises that it exists and thrives thanks to the contribution of each employee. The female capacity to embrace and structure life enables her management to enhance organisational productivity, by creating meaningful work environments, where each person recognises his/her place and influence, and sustained procedural dynamics are created over time.



### 4.3 Key 3: Hierarchies of actualisation

Eisler (2021:24) coined the phrase “hierarchies of actualisation” to refer to organisational styles, in which the focus is on maximising the potential of each member or participant within the structure. In the biblical tradition about the judge and prophetess Deborah, there is an inclination towards this line of thinking, as Deborah’s exercise of authority and power is not about ordering or imposing on others what they should do, but about creating the conditions for each individual to become aware and responsible for the role s/he occupies within the structure, thus enabling him/her to fulfil his/her mission.

Barriers to women’s participation in top management such as the queen-bee syndrome and the glass cliff are closely related to hierarchies of domination. In the former, the male world continues to be regarded as superior, and attitudes that nullify the potential of other women are replicated. A similar outcome is observed with the glass cliff, where women who reach decision-making positions are left without support or collaboration networks, leading them to fail in the responsibilities they have been given, thus providing arguments to assert male superiority.

According to research, male groups have a greater tendency to categorise their members, while female groups are more likely to establish egalitarian relationship systems (Van Vugt 2006:365). This indicator strengthens the argument for a greater participation of women in management positions, as it would help generate new organisational dynamics, in which men and women would relate to each other in a way that is different from domination. It is, therefore, relevant for organisations to be structured, based on a logic of actualisation, so that women’s talents can be recognised and used to address the needs of the business reality, not only at the operational level, but also in decision-making instances as part of the critical mass.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The barriers to women’s access to top-management and leadership positions are the result of a long and complex process of assimilation that will not be overcome until a confrontation of the culture itself takes place. The approach taken to the biblical tradition contained in Judges Chapters 4 and 5 provides elements to break the prejudice of viewing women as inferior to men and considering qualities such as listening, empathy, and care as unfavourable for exercising authority. In addition, the tradition about Deborah questions the prejudice of summarising women’s history in terms of perpetual subordination to men. The redactional process of the texts shows that there were experiences in the past where women were free and helped liberate others.

This research opens up a horizon of interdisciplinary work that is expected to motivate other researchers to delve into the study of this and other biblical traditions about women in leadership, so that not only the organisational world but also society as a whole can benefit from the keys of humanisation and transformation contained in the biblical texts. This can lead to changes in thought structures and modes of action.

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*Keywords*

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Women

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