

Deborah and Barak

Judges 4:1-24

As I studied this week I ran across several interesting titles for this episode in Judges 4. One preacher called it “Wonder Woman and the Wimp,” another “The Adventures of Honeybee and Lightning.” Others focused on the end of the story, like “Sisera Goes to Jael.” or “The Last thing to Go Through Sisera’s Mind.” Or how about, “Hitting the Nail on the Head”?

Although this text is a goldmine of possible puns, we are here because it is a text that we must take very seriously. There are a few things that it would be good to know before we get into the text itself, so let’s turn to them first.

Judges 4 is the first of a two-part account of God’s deliverance through Deborah and Barak. [Judges 4](#) is an historical account of God’s deliverance of Israel through Deborah, Barak, and Jael. [Judges 5](#) is a song of praise, a poetic account of this same deliverance.

The account here reminds us of when the Israelites safely passed through the Red Sea and the Egyptians and their chariots are drowned ([Exodus 14](#)). Afterward they sang the “Song of Moses and Miriam.”

Unlike chapter 3, which dealt with Israel’s oppression at the hand of foreign kings, in chapter 4 Israel’s bondage and oppression was at the hands of a Canaanite king, who lives in the land – a king and a people whom the Israelites should have destroyed.

The episode takes place primarily in northern Israel. Back in Judges 1:19 we learned that the Canaanites had iron chariots and this was used as an excuse for not driving them out as God had commanded. Chapter one made it clear that the tribes named of Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali, all tribes in the northern portion of Israel, never succeeded in totally destroying the Canaanites in their territory, and all were therefore forced to coexist with them.

The Setting

Judges 4:1-3

- 1 When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord.**
- 2 So the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Harosheth Hagoyim.**
- 3 And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he harshly oppressed the children of Israel.**

Warren Wiersbe in his commentary helps us identify the players in this chapter:

Jabin: King of Hazor in Canaan; a tyrant

Deborah: a Jewish judge; a woman of faith and courage

Barak: a reluctant Jewish general

Sisera: captain of Jabin’s army

Heber: a Kenite neighbor, at peace with Jabin

Jael: wife of Heber; handy with a hammer

The LORD God: in charge of wars and weather

Now we see from the last part of chapter 3 of Judges that under the leadership of Ehud, a Benjamite, Israel was delivered from the Moabites and so they enjoyed peace for 80 years. But Ehud finally died and the people once again did evil in the sight of the Lord.

That's when you know your religion isn't real; when as soon as you are free of accountability you slip back into your old ways, following your fleshly desires and you forget the Lord. That's what Israel did.

Verse 1 says, **"the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord."** Later on in Judges it says twice that the Israelites of that day **"did what was right in their own eyes."** It is very likely that the Israelites did not think what they were doing was that bad. They might not have thought of it as sin. In a time like that— a time very similar to our own — people believe that something is wrong only if you think it is, and there isn't much these days which is considered wrong.

But the Bible is clear, right and wrong are not determined by what we think about it. They are determined by God. It's not what is right in our own eyes that matters, it's what is evil in the sight of the Lord that matters.

As a result of Israel's sin, God acts consistently with His covenant, disciplining His people. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, king of Hazor. This is the pattern through the book of Judges. Oppression sent by the Lord to chasten, the repentance of the people, deliverance from the oppressors, also provided by the Lord, and the return of the people to apostasy.

Hazor was a city located approximately 12 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Under Joshua the Israelites had destroyed Hazor and killed one King Jabin more than a hundred years before this. Obviously the Canaanites have rebuilt the city. And now a new Jabin exerts his tyrannical rule from there.

Sisera was the commander of Jabin's military forces. He is said to live in Harosheth Haggoyim, which means the wooded place of the Gentiles. Sisera's army had 900 iron chariots to employ against the Israelites. With these chariots Sisera could run down his enemies and overtake them. Sisera had terrorized the Israelites for 20 years, prompting them to finally cry out to the Lord for help.

We should note one more piece of background information which is not found in chapter 4, but is described for us in the song of Deborah in Judges 5:8, **"Then there was war in the gates; Not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel."**

Israelites were not well armed. Perhaps the Canaanites had confiscated all the weapons. One fighter, Shamgar, used an ox goad, a long stick with a point on the end for prodding the ox as you were plowing. That is not good news if one were contemplating taking on a large army equipped with many swords and iron chariots. Israel's situation looked hopeless, but God acts . . .

Meet Deborah and Barak

Judges 4:4-10

4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time.

5 And she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

6 Then she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded, 'Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun;

7 and against you I will deploy Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hand'?"

8 And Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!"

9 So she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

10 And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; he went up with ten thousand men under his command, and Deborah went up with him.

Deborah is introduced to us first as a prophetess and then as the wife of Lappidoth. Judges shows that she was both a wife and a mother who “judged” Israel in a similar way that Moses settled disputes among the Israelites. She was a “shade tree prophetess.” Who helped people understand and apply God’s law to their particular circumstances. In a day when men were “doing what was right in their own eyes,” it is encouraging to find those who sought to know what was right in God’s eyes.

In her role as a prophetess, Deborah summons Barak and conveys God’s instructions to him.

Defeating Sisera, with his large and well equipped army (including his 900 chariots), seemed like an impossible task, and indeed it was. God had Barak and his men assemble for battle on Mount Tabor. This “mountain” has an “cone” shape and is a little over 1800 feet high. It is located northeast of the Esdraelon Plain, roughly half way between Nazareth (6-8 miles to the west) and the Sea of Galilee (approximately 12 miles to the east).

Looking at pictures of Mount Tabor, one can readily understand how Sisera would be “drawn” to the valley at the base of Mount Tabor, and thus to the Kishon River, which runs through that valley. That plain surrounding Mount Tabor was the perfect place to employ his 900 chariots. He could encircle the mountain like he was besieging a city. And whenever any Israelites sought to escape, Sisera’s chariots could easily overtake them and run them down. The army that Barak gathered would look like “easy pickings” to Sisera, and thus he would be drawn there to suppress this uprising.

That Barak would be apprehensive is not too surprising. After all, he was commanded to take on a large, well-armed force with 10,000 poorly equipped men. But mere cowardice isn’t really what we find here. Barak makes his obedience to God’s command contingent upon Deborah’s presence with him when he takes on Sisera and his men. He will do as God commanded if she goes with him; but if she does not accompany Barak, he will not go.

Surely we would have to agree that Barak is not merely seeking to add one more warrior to the 10,000 who will gather with him. No, I believe that Barak’s request is

similar to that of Moses when God told him to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. In Exodus 33:15 **“And Moses said to him, ‘If your presence does not go with us, do not take us up from here’.”**

The reason that Barak wanted Deborah (a **“mother in Israel,”** 5:7) to accompany him was because she was a prophetess. I believe Barak was convinced that God would go with him if Deborah accompanied him. In a way, it was good for Barak to want to be assured that God was with him. But in another way it was sad, sad because he had no assurance of God’s presence with him apart from Deborah. Yes, Deborah spoke for the Lord, but he was not content to act on the word of the Lord. Barak wanted her with him as well. No Deborah, no battle.

Deborah agreed to accompany Barak, but she made it very clear that this arrangement was not ideal. Indeed, although Barak would win the battle, as promised, he would not get the glory (or honor) for this victory. Instead, the glory would go to **“a woman.”** No doubt Barak assumed that the **“woman”** Deborah referred to was herself, but it was not, as we will see in a moment.

A Significant Parenthesis

Judges 4:11

11 Now Heber the Kenite, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, had separated himself from the Kenites and pitched his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is beside Kedesh.

While we’re wondering what will become of Deborah and Barak, the narrator introduces us to another character. What, pray tell, does Heber the Kenite and the location of his tent have to do with Deborah and Barak and their pressing business with Jabin and Sisera? Nothing, apparently—except that Heber has pitched his tent near Kedesh, the destination of Deborah and Barak.

Heber had separated himself from the rest of the Kenites who had settled in Judah and he lived near Kedesh. Heber apparently tried to live in Israelite territory and yet maintain peaceful relations with Jabin. In verse 17, we read that Heber had entered into a covenant of peace with Jabin. It seems he was trying to “play both ends against the middle.”

The Defeat of Sisera’s Army

Judges 4:12-16

12 And they reported to Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor.

13 So Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth Hagoyim to the River Kishon.

14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the Lord gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.

15 And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot.

16 But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

When Sisera learned that Barak and his army had assembled at Mount Tabor, he knew it was time to put down this rebellion, and there seemed no better place to do so than there. Mount Tabor was on the upper edge of the Esdraelon Valley or Valley of Jezreel. The valley seemed to afford the perfect place to stage an attack using his 900 chariots. And so they began to converge on Mount Tabor. Through Deborah, God informed Barak that now was the time to attack. At this point in time, this must have looked like a suicide mission, but God had a plan. In verse 14, Deborah says, **“Has not the Lord gone out before you?”**

Barak and his army quickly descended from Mount Tabor in order to engage Sisera and his vastly superior army. But it is not Barak and his army that wins the victory, verse 15 says, **“And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword.”**

How could Israel rout such an army *with the sword* when they were virtually unarmed, at least comparatively? Because it was the LORD who routed Sisera and his army, not the Israelites. The song of Deborah in chapter 5 give us a clue as to how this happened:

- 19 "The kings came and fought,
Then the kings of Canaan fought
In Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo;
They took no spoils of silver.**
- 20 They fought from the heavens;
The stars from their courses fought against Sisera.**
- 21 The torrent of Kishon swept them away,
That ancient torrent, the torrent of Kishon.
O my soul, march on in strength!**
- 22 Then the horses' hooves pounded,
The galloping, galloping of his steeds.**

God created confusion among Sisera's warriors by employing the forces of nature. It sounds like God caused a great thunderstorm to send terror and confusion to man and animal. And the waters rushing down from the mountains created a flash flood that virtually immobilized Sisera's chariots.

The battle really is the Lord's. God used the 10,000 man army that gathered around Barak to lure Sisera into place, where God destroyed them. The Israelites surely fought, but theirs was largely a matter of cleaning up after God did the work.

Sisera's chariots were not an asset, but a liability. So we see Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. Barak pursued Sisera's men as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, Sisera's home town (4:2). Surely Barak hoped to find Sisera and have the honor of putting him to death. But God had revealed to him that a woman would get the honor, not him (4:9). Sisera had other plans. He knew that his master, Jabin, had a peace treaty with Heber the Kenite, and so he sought safety at his house.

Sisera's Dishonorable Death

Judges 4:17-22

- 17 However, Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.**

18 And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear." And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket.

19 Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him.

20 And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' you shall say, 'No.' "

21 Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

22 And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, I will show you the man whom you seek." And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple.

Sisera arrived at Heber's tent exhausted and desperate. Heber's wife, Jael, was home. She goes out to welcome Sisera, just as he had hoped. She urged him to stop and rest and to not be afraid. Exhausted, he sank to the floor to get some rest, as Jael urged him to do. She covered him with a blanket of some kind, and when he asked her for water, she gave him milk instead. He was getting even more help than he could have hoped for. And so, encouraged to trust her, Sisera asked Jael to keep watch at her door.

Sisera fell into a deep sleep. Jael had no weapons of warfare, but she did have the tools of her trade: a tent peg and a hammer. She crept beside Sisera and with one powerful blow, penetrated his skull and drove the peg through it, and into the ground.

Later, Barak arrives, pursuing Sisera. Jael invites him into her tent. There she presented to Barak the corpse of Israel's most powerful enemy, still stuck to the ground by Jael's tent peg. No, the honor of destroying public enemy number one was not Barak's, but Jael's just as Deborah had prophesied.

Israel Finally Gets it Right Judges 4:23-24

23 So on that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel.

24 And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

The defeat of Sisera and his army was a humiliating defeat for Jabin. The Israelites would continue to pursue and to defeat King Jabin until they **"did away with him."**

Conclusion

God worked a marvelous deliverance.

Deborah — A Female, yet God used her courage to inspire an entire army and then the whole nation.

Barak — A Fearful General, but we should not criticize him until we have shared his responsibility. At the call of Deborah, he marched into action.

Jael — A Foreigner. God can use the weakest among us.

The Lord delivered Sisera not into the hands of Barak but into the hands of a woman—and not Deborah the Israelite, as we might have expected, but Jael the Kenite. The Lord, as usual, is full of surprises. He gets the glory.

Principles to remember:

1. Overwhelming circumstances are not the measure of a situation. A cry to God can make possible the impossible.
2. Fear can make overwhelming circumstances the measure of a situation. But trust in God's Word can overcome that fear.
3. There is no power in overwhelming circumstances. The power is only in the hands of the one and only true and living God. He alone is able to deliver us in every situation.

Because of the people's sin, they were in bondage to the enemy for 20 years. Because one lady was willing to listen and obey God, "the land had rest for forty years."

Perhaps the enemy has had you down and defeated. Listen, it's time to "Awake!" Awaken to service! Awaken to sing! Awaken to the day of God's salvation! Come to Jesus today.