

## **Deborah Judges 4-5**

### **A. Setting the Scene: Israel, Jabin and Sisera**

Background to this great victory story set out in 4.1-3 and 5.6-8

- Following the death of the Judge Ehud, and presumably of his successor Shamgar too (5.6), Israel had again reverted to “doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD”, specifically “they chose new gods” (5.8)
- Consequently, YHWH had sold Israel into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan who reigned from Hazor, a city which Joshua had captured and burned (Josh 11.10-13). However we learn from 1.33 that Naphtali, in whose territory Hazor was situated, failed to drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh and Beth-Anath, towns in its territory; so the Canaanites had been able to rebuild Hazor. Jackman: “Incomplete victories are a sure recipe for future defeats.’ Hazor and its king now very powerful.
- The Israelites were oppressed cruelly for 20 years under Jabin, King of Hazor, at the hand of his cruel general Sisera
- Life was so dangerous for Israelites that the highways were abandoned and travellers kept to the byways; “villagers ceased in Israel” because there was always “war in the gates” (5.8).
- Sisera had complete control of the entire northern plain
- Israel was defenceless, having no “shield or spear” (5.8)

Pitiful picture of once-conquering Israelites now paralysed by fear

Jackman: “When God is marginalised in our lives, decline and disintegration inevitably follow.”

Then finally, after 20 years, “cried out to the LORD for help”

---

## **B. Introduction of Deborah and Barak**

Deborah – a prophetess – judging Israel

- Cheryl Brown notes: Even the grammar of the text introducing Deborah accents her stature as a leader by departing from normal Hebrew word order to place her name first in the clause:  
Deborah... was leading Israel at that time.
- “I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel” – i.e. God raised her up.
- She sits under the Palm of Deborah, probably named after Rachel’s nurse (Gen 35.8) who was buried under an oak tree near Bethel
- The people of Israel came up to her for judgment (not self-appointed)
- God has called and gifted her – supernaturally. She hears the word of the LORD
- She has a prophetic word, from the LORD, for Barak son of Abinoam: “Has not the LORD commanded you. ‘Draw out your men...’ and I will draw out Sisera... and I will give him into your hand?”
- What respect she must have been held in:
  - people went up to her for judgment – wisdom, judgment, pastoral direction
  - Barak obeyed her call and command
  - Barak wouldn’t go out without her (she was the guarantor of God’s presence)

Barak – Deborah’s words (God’s word through Deborah) not enough; Deborah’s presence required.

Barak, whose name ironically means “lightning”,

- is hesitant and
- his obedience is conditional. But cut him some slack: his life and men on line, 9,000 chariots and cf. Gideon
- He seems to have more confidence in the presence of Deborah than in God’s word – his promise to him.

God is displeased.

- though the LORD has “given Sisera into (Barak’s) hand”, it is at a woman’s hand that he will die. Great indignity and shame in this for Barak – cf. 9.53-54.

May be a timeless lesson here: if we hesitate, God will use someone else to fulfil his purposes.

Cf. prophetic call to ministry from PH at St D’s.

Deborah: I will go, but you will get no glory: the LORD will *sell* Sisera into the hand of a woman.

Hearer/Barak assumes, at this stage, that Deborah refers to herself. “You take me, OK; but in that case I take the glory, not you.”

Barak draws out his army. The two tribes most affected by Jabin’s rule form the heart of the army and are mentioned here. But the song in ch 5 records all who went up and who didn’t.

- Some tribes (northern) responded bravely and willingly, joining the fray – Naphtali, Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, and the cis-Jordan half-tribe of Manasseh. See 5.13,18
- Reuben (in spite of “great searchings of heart” and “great resolves of heart”!); Dan and Asher (too busy trading with the Phoenecians) and the trans-Jordan half-tribe of Manasseh (Gilead) did not (5.15d-17) (cf. Phil 2.4)

The main determinant seems to have been self-interest. Those oppressed by Jabin/Sisera responded; those who were not, didn’t.

Cf. Nehemiah gets people to build the section of the wall closest to where they live! (see Neh 3.23, 28-30).

How much is the Church weakened by such divisions today?

Barak draws out his men at Mt Tabor: Sisera responds by calling out all his chariots.

Just when seems getting to climactic point, the battle about to begin, the writer makes what seems to be an unnecessary and trivial digression, but - in God’s providence - what seem trivial/irrelevant acts in the past have impact in the present – i.e. vv. 10-11 seem unnecessary detail, and are a surprising inclusion in what is otherwise a story very short on detail/background info), but the fact that Heber the Kenite had separated and migrated N all those years ago sets everything up for Jael to play her part.

Deborah says to Barak: “Arise/Get up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?”

Note Deborah’s prophetic vision in v.14: “Has not the LORD gone out before you?” She can see what no one else has yet seen, and is absolutely confident about it.

Israelites safe from Sisera's iron chariots on Mt Tabor, but now commanded to descend to the plains where he held a massive advantage => act of great courage, inspired by Deborah's promise from the LORD of victory

The narrative of ch 4 simply records that "the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army". It is Deborah, in her victory song, who tells us how: The heavens opened (5.20) and a flash flood burst the banks of the Kishon. Sisera's chariot wheels got bogged and many of his men were swept away by the current and drowned (5.21). Only Sisera himself escaped – fleeing on foot.

Both narrative and song stress the battle was entirely the LORD's.

Sisera comes to Jael's tent presuming upon alliance with Heber the Kenite

Similarities between Jael's cunning and deception, and Ehud's and Rahab's.

- Jael must break her husband's treaty
- Need to remember that the Kenites were related to Moses' father-in-law, so some sense of tie to Israel should not be unexpected.
- But again, not meant to speculate about moral issues raised. This is all about God's victory over those who cruelly oppress his people.

Among Bedouin, it is the women's task to pitch the tents, so Jael adept with mallet and peg.

Sisera's slaying is recorded with great economy in ch 4, but Deborah tells it with great relish in 5.25-27

Then Jael goes out to meet Barak and brings him into her tent and shows him Sisera: lying, dead, with the tent peg in his temple (*beraqqato* – same consonants as Barak, *baraq*)

Note above all that Deborah declares Jael, who was not an Israelite, "most blessed among women" (5.23), because she has fought on the LORD's side, whereas it is those Israelites who have failed him (Meroz, by not pursuing the fleeing Canaanite) who are cursed (5.24).

- But also Goslinga: "Deborah's blessing does not make Jael into a Saint."

Sisera may have been YHWH's agent of discipline/judgment on sinful Israel, but it does not excuse his excesses and cruelty. He is still morally accountable. Cf. Hitler's chief of staff Wilhelm Keitel's defence that he was simply obeying orders.

Sisera's mother is also "a mother" (cf.5.7), and she comforts herself when her son does not return home by assuring herself he has been delayed by the collecting of the spoils, "but the reality is that God has called him up for judgment" (Jackman).

Emphasis is on exalting YHWH for his great victory, see esp. 5.3-5

- Another important aspect of Jael killing Sisera is so there is no question of anyone but YHWH having achieved this. It isn't a military victory for the army, but proof that YHWH had planned and overseen the whole operation. If God wins the victory, it shouldn't matter what/which agent he uses.

## CONCLUSION

What did God achieve through Deborah's inspiring leadership?:

- Deborah stands out as the greatest of the Judges,. Next best = Gideon, but he lacked Deborah's unquestioning faith. NB 40 years of rest in 5.21
- Deborah's leadership inspired the previously fearful and unarmed leaders (beginning with Barak) to "take the lead" and the people "to offer themselves willingly" for the LORD's service (5.2) These are marks of true leadership –
  - To inspire others, esp "the leaders to take the lead"; "After 20 years under the tyrant's yoke... there were no leaders, no armaments and no vision" (Jackman)
  - To give the glory to God – "bless the Lord!" (5.2c)
- Peace and security and prosperity restored to Israel (5.10-11). The rare white donkeys symbolise the return of civil order and freedom of movement (essential for economic well-being, as we are learning currently!). Likewise shepherds at the watering holes and villagers at the gates
- Deborah leads not only in battle (giving the command to Go!), but also in giving praise and thanks to God. Mark of a true Christian leader.

Sound assessment of spiritual reality: As revealed in the last verse of the song (5.31) she sees all people as falling into one of two categories:

- God's enemies (those opposed to him)
- God's friends (those for him)

This, not power, wealth or status, is indeed the true measure of every person, the only one that counts.

Those who oppose God will, eventually, share Sisera's fate. They will be humbled under God's mighty hand.

Others called prophetesses in OT= Miriam (Exod 15.20); Huldah (2 Kgs 22.14); Noadia (Neh 6.14)

BUT

Deborah is the only woman in the Bible appointed by God to a position of civil leadership.

Note the parallels with Moses – seated as judge (Exod 18.13-16) and the parallel between the flooding of Sisera's chariots with the Red Sea destruction of Pharaoh's chariots, likewise told in narrative and then celebrated in song (Exod 14-15).

Can detect allusions to the prophet Samuel as well:

- He was based at Ramah (1 Sam 7.15-17), cf. 4.5,
- and he too directed kings (Saul), incl. when to go into battle.

Deborah a wise strategist (under YHWH's direction): start with one leader – Barak - to inspire and gather an army.

- did not usurp Barak's role and take over leadership of the army. That was Barak's God-given role. It is into his hand that God has promised to deliver Sisera (even though he won't get the glory).

The people (finally) cried out to the LORD, but it was Deborah who had the faith to hear and believe God's answer; it was therefore her privilege to deliver it.

Churchill has been hailed by many as the greatest leader of the 20thC because of his stirring speeches during WWII, but he himself said "It was the nation and the race dwelling all round the globe that had the lion's heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar."

Not so Deborah: she was the lion!

Perhaps ironic that the writer to the Hebrews includes Barak in his roll-call of heroes of faith and not Deborah or Jael!

### Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Unlike Deborah's words for Barak, many prophetic words given today are not undeniably from the LORD, but may be, so *do* need further testing and discernment. You might like to discuss the importance of this, and how to test words which are given as prophecies.
2. Have you ever received *a clear/unenable* prophetic work and then either hesitated or sought further confirmation? If so, what was it, and why your hesitation.?
3. What impresses you most about Deborah's leadership?
4. Jael went against her husband, violating his covenant with King Jabin. Deborah calls her "most blessed among women". When is it right/necessary to break human covenants or laws to advance God's purposes? This is particularly pertinent to those whose spouses are not Christians, e.g. how firm a stand to do they make about attending worship regularly, or discipling their children?
5. Deborah categorised people as either friends or enemies of God. Are these categories we should use today? If so, in what sense/ways?