

Judges 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Judges chapter 4 Judges chapter 4 Judges chapter 5

Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zainanim, which is near Kadesh.

When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-Hegoyim to the river Kishon.

And Deborah said to Barak, Up, for this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you? So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.

And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot. And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harasheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword.

[2 : 25] Not a man was left. But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. For there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.

And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me, do not be afraid. So he turned aside to her into the tent and she covered him with a rug.

And he said to her, Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty. So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. And he said to her, Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, Is anyone here? Say no.

But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness.

So he died. And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking. So he went into her tent, and there lay Sisera dead with the tent peg in his temple.

[3 : 34] So on that day, God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

Judges chapter 4 begins with the usual depressing refrain that runs throughout this book. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Ehud has died, and the peace that he bought for Israel has passed too.

Once again, the Lord sells them into the hand of a cruel enemy. And one would think, after a few iterations of this, that Israel would be thankful to serve the Lord. But this doesn't seem to be the case.

This time, Israel is oppressed by Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Hazor was a powerful city in the north of Israel, near Galilee. And this king is a reminder of the ground that Israel has lost.

They had already fought a king, Jabin, who ruled in Hazor, back in Joshua chapter 11. There they defeated him. Now they are losing to old foes again, and this is a very bad sign.

[4 : 35] Jabin's military commander is called Sisera, who has a war machine of 900 iron chariots, the latest military hardware, as Barry Webb puts it. Back in chapter 1, Judah hadn't been able to control the plains, as the inhabitants of the lowlands had chariots.

And of course, Pharaoh had pursued Israel with chariots when they left Egypt in the Exodus. Chariots are clearly a problem for Israel. And in this context, we're introduced to the character of Deborah.

Deborah is a judge, but not like the judges that we have encountered to this point. She is someone who settles disputes and adjudicates in difficult cases, but she is not herself a deliverer. In this story, the role of deliverer is principally played by Barak.

Deborah's calling as a judge is closely related to the fact that she is a prophetess, someone who could deliver the word of the Lord to Barak and to others. While most of the judges were primarily military men going out before Israel, leading them against their enemies, the dynamic with Deborah was different, and perhaps more akin to figures like Samuel or Moses, other prophetic judges.

Deborah sat under her palm tree and delivered judgment upon the cases brought to her by the children of Israel. We might be surprised at seeing a woman judging Israel, and indeed it is surprising.

[5 : 53] There was no other woman as a judge in Israel's recorded history, and no reigning queen among the 42 monarchs in the subsequent history of Israel or Judah, save for Athaliah the murderous usurper, who is not included among the official number.

The surprise that the Lord is going to deliver Israel, with two women being the great heroines of the hour, is part of the significance of this text. Deborah and Jael are surprising instruments in the hand of the Lord, much as Shamgar's ox goad or Samson's donkey's jawbone.

Much of Judges is about the Lord's proof that his deliverance of his people doesn't depend upon those things and persons that we would usually rely upon or look to. The stories of Scripture so often depend upon the most surprising characters.

The story of the kingdom begins with a woman praying in the temple, a woman whom no one notices, even the high priest thinks that she's just drunk. Yet it's through Hannah's prayer that the story of the kingdom begins.

The crushing or the suppression of the virility of a nation was always one of the most important concerns for an impressing power. Remove the weapons, kill or enslave the males, and emasculate and subjugate their leaders.

[7 : 05] That was the way in which one nation could be brought under the domination of another. Scripture presents us with a number of such moments in history, the Exodus being one example. Pharaoh enslaves Israel, kills their boys.

And in this situation, deliverance arose from women. As women delivered the infant Moses and protected the Israelite boys from Pharaoh, women protected the seed that would crush the serpent's head.

And Deborah is associated with the other women who lived at such times, with Jochebed, Miriam, the Hebrew midwives, with Hannah, with Esther, with Elizabeth and Mary. All these characters who, in times of great desperation, rose up to save their people.

Throughout the book of Judges, there is a lot of wordplay. Anyone interested in this aspect of the text, I highly recommend that you read James Bajan's notes that work through the book of Judges and give a special attention to this feature of it.

Deborah's name means bee, and she will sting the Canaanites, much as Ehud brought a sting to Eglon in the preceding chapter. The Canaanites might dismiss women like Deborah and Jael, yet they have a deadly sting.

[8 : 10] Deborah seems to be based in the region of Benjamin, and Ephraim in the middle of the land. The battle is fought towards the north of the land, in the territory of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar.

They assemble not too far from the bottom of the Sea of Galilee. A number of the tribes participated in the battle, but the tribes in Gilead seem not to have been involved, and there is no mention of Judah.

It's a battle of the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali. Deborah summons Barak to her and gives him the word of the Lord. He is to gather his men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 men from Naphtali and Zebulun.

The Lord will draw out Sisera to the river Caishon, where he will be given into Barak's hands. Barak was instructed to go to battle, but he suffered a minor judgment when he requested that Deborah accompany him, partly because she was unlike the typical male judge, and partly also because she was one who was a prophetess primarily, not primarily a deliverer.

Deborah was expected to be absent from battle. We see the same sort of thing in the case of Samuel. He's not a deliverer in the way that someone like Barak or Saul or some of these other figures were, and so he's not expected to be at the battle in the same way.

[9 : 22] Deborah is neither a warrior nor a military commander, and the judgment upon Barak for calling Deborah to accompany him was that the opposing general would be delivered into the hands of a woman, who would do Barak's job for him.

He presumably thinks this is going to be Deborah, but it turns out to be someone different. Had Barak courageously followed the word of the Lord and not called for Deborah to accompany him, she would not have gone into the battle, and Sisera would have been delivered into Barak's own hands, galvanising Barak's authority in Israel.

Akin to a figure like Joan of Arc, Deborah is a prophetic woman who leads a movement to restore the rule of her nation at a moment of crisis and the utter breakdown of its power. She's not an ordinary leader in time of peace.

Barak is like the Dauphin, who must be helped to achieve his victory, after which the security and power of the nation can be restored under his rule. Sisera goes out to the river Kishon, where Barak and his men go down to attack him with Deborah, and Sisera was given into his hands.

But before we hear about this, we are introduced to the character of Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Jethro or Hobab, the Midianite, and Moses' father-in-law. The reminder of Moses at this point is probably not insignificant.

[10 : 35] The chapter doesn't explain how the victory came about. We have to wait to discover that until the next chapter, where we get some hint in verses 20 to 21. The strength of Sisera's chariots became a liability with the flooding of the Kishon.

Deborah could be compared to Moses in this battle. She presides over the new birth of a nation when all had seemed lost. Like Moses, she is the divinely instructed prophet who directs the battle from behind the scenes, leading to a miraculous victory over a powerful army of chariots through a sudden torrent of water.

The chariots of Pharaoh were swept away by the waters of the Red Sea, and the chariots of Jabin and Sisera were swept away by the river Kishon. Like Moses, she sings a song of victory afterwards.

The parallels are very important, and they give some indication of the significance of Deborah's work. Sisera flees to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, where he thinks he will find shelter.

However, he has a surprise coming. There are themes of motherhood throughout this story, which continue into the next chapter, where they're even more prominent, Deborah stalling herself a mother in Israel.

[11 : 54] Jael treats Sisera like an infant. She soothes him, lays him down, covers him with a rug, gives him milk to drink, protects him, and puts him to sleep. And then she drives a tent peg through his temple.

Once again, the victory is won for Israel by a strange instrument and an unexpected person. This is a story where the glory is won by the women. In both cases, there is a sort of deception involved.

In the case of Deborah, it's in the drawing out of Sisera's army into a position of danger, a trap that he's not aware of. In the case of Jael, it's in deceiving Sisera with the false appearance of hospitality.

She acts as a tender mother, yet like Deborah, she is a deadly hornet sent before the people of God. Jael's slaying of Sisera was associated with Barak's failure to assume his proper role.

Crushing the head of the serpent Sisera was the task of the seed, which Barak was supposed to be. He was supposed to be the deliverer of his people. However, since the seed was not yet powerful enough to crush the serpent's head himself, the woman had to do it for him, the mother.

[12 : 58] This was a sign that the woman's task in raising the seed was not yet completed. Yet Jael deceiving the serpent Sisera and crushing his head is a poetic reversal of the great deception, the serpent's deception of Eve.

It's a minor fulfilment of the promise of Genesis 3.15, the crushing of the serpent's head by the seed of the woman. Jael's slaying of Sisera occurs, not as she goes out into the battle, but as she invites him into her tent, deceives him with the apparent extension of hospitality, then pierces his head with the domestic tool of a tent peg.

Jael, not being a fighter, employs the tactic of cunning deception, which is characteristic of women in their struggle against the serpents in history. Sarai against Pharaoh, Rebekah against Pharaoh and Abimelech, Rachel against Laban, Tamar against Judah, the Hebrew midwives against Pharaoh, Rahab against the king of Jericho, Michael against Saul, Esther against Haman, etc.

The Song of Deborah does not class Jael with the warriors, but with women in tents. The point of all of this is not to suggest that women cannot be heroes, that heroism is restricted to the front line of battle.

Rather, the point is to show the heroism of the mothers of Israel, the way in which they will fight against the serpent and win the victory. Here, this occurs through deadly means, but elsewhere in scripture it repeatedly occurs through the means of prayer, through the means of wisdom and cunning.

[14 : 29] The front line warriors in the Lord's battles are not the people that we expect. A question to consider. How does Deborah's character as a prophetess make her stand out from many of the other judges?

