

The Book of Judges

Lesson 7 - Chapters 4 and 5

As we moved into chapter 4 last week, we encountered the female **Shophet Deborah**. The judges discussed in the chapters before **Deborah** dealt with the idolatrous rebellions of the tribes of Israel that were generally located in the southern end of the Promised Land, and thus enemies from the south and the southwest and southeast troubled those particular Israelite tribes.

With the judge Deborah the scene shifts now to the northern end of Canaan and the Israelite tribes who lived there. Thus it was Canaanites and others whose kingdoms and nations were located to the north and northeast that created havoc for those particular Israelite tribes.

Note that as result of this southern versus northern picture that is painted for us, it means that when we look at the list of **Shophetim** in the Book of Judges the order they are presented appearing to be chronological is likely only partially correct; certainly some judges in the south were operating at the same time as some judges in the north (there was overlap). This is because the various enemies of Israel were not acting in concert with one another but in their own interests and thus what went on in the north of Canaan had little to do with what went on in the south.

I find it interesting that this north/south dynamic is being set up so early. Israel by the time of Deborah has only been in the land for a century or a little more. But due to the natural terrain of Israel with a ridge of hills at the northern end of Judah that provides a natural boundary between the 3 main tribes in the south (Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin) and the remaining tribes, this fact of geography would have an ongoing effect on Israel's politics and economy and prophetic futures.

I have taught rather extensively on the period following the judges, when David and then Solomon ruled over a united nation of Israel. We find for instance that King Saul who preceded David had at least as big a fight on his hands trying to unite all 12 tribes (the southern Israelite tribes were battling against the northern Israelite tribes) as he did against foreigners because the Israelite tribes located at the two ends of Canaan tended to coalesce into two distinct groups and sets of inter-tribal alliances and so progressed rather independently. Thus after King Solomon died and there was no clear line of succession to the throne, the country of Israel fell rapidly into Civil War and of course divided along the same general boundary as had always existed for Israel, the rugged hills that separated Judah from Ephraim. Thus from that time forward we hear of the two kingdoms of Israel, the southern kingdom and the northern kingdom; or their more official names, Judah in the south and Ephraim-Israel in the north.

So it is here in Judges that we see the breeding grounds created for the conditions that would

establish and cement this north versus south mindset among the Israelites, which in turn would make it such a challenge for the 12 tribes ever to unite into one sovereign nation under God under one ruler. These unintended consequences of divided loyalties and tribal alliances would greatly affect Israel's history and will even continue to play out in our present and future (as revealed especially in the Book of Ezekiel). And all of it was ordained as part of Yehoveh's master plan of redemption for a fallen world.

Let's re-read some of Judges chapter 4 to get our bearings today.

RE-READ JUDGES 4:4 – end

Deborah was unique among the *Shophetim* as she was a bench judge and a prophetess. Verse 5 explains her location as being in the hills of Ephraim, meaning she operate among the northern tribes Israel. What is kind of hidden here is that by some non-stated reason Deborah was revered by most if not all the tribes and clans of the north such that they would come to her to settle serious legal disputes. This was not merely advice or suggestions that were being sought by the people; it was a binding legal ruling that resulted from Deborah's decisions. Each tribe had the equivalent of lower courts that settled smaller matters; but when a member of one tribe had a dispute with a member of another tribe the matter became more complicated as clan and tribal loyalty overruled almost all other considerations so finding a neutral party to arbitrate and judge was never easy.

The matter of Deborah being a prophetess also played a role in her judging and likely it was this general acknowledgement that she had been anointed by God as His legitimate prophet that gave her an uncontested position of authority to make legal rulings. Thus in verse 5 (in typical prophet protocol) she announces an oracle from God by making it clear that this message is NOT her message as a wisdom teacher but rather it is directly from God. And this typical format is to say something to the effect of, "the Lord says", or "Adonai has given you this order", or "here is what the God of Israel says", and then proceeds to speak what must have been a near (if not precise) word-for-word instruction from YHWH that is almost always in the first person. In other words, the instruction says, "I, the Lord". The "I" is NEVER the prophet, but always a direct quote from God.

It's been awhile since I've broached the dicey subject of prophets, and especially modern era prophets, but I want to make a very brief point and then we'll move on. Prophets of the bible had to be infallible in what they pronounced with the consequence for error being death. While that might seem harsh or barbaric (superstition gone wild), in fact it is completely logical. If one is going to pronounce to another a "word from the Lord", then if it actually IS a word from the Lord it MUST happen exactly as pronounced. If it does not happen as prophesied then whether the source of the incorrect oracle was from that persons' own mind or prompted from the evil spiritual source, it most certainly was NOT from God. Therefore we have a false prophet, and never is a false prophet to be believed.

So one test for a person who publicly professes a gift of prophecy is infallibility. One mistake, one pronouncement that does not happen, and that person should realize that they are either

not a prophet at all, or they are grossly misusing their position. My email is constantly flooded by people professing “a word from the Lord”, and I tend to keep track because if a person constantly hits the nail on the head, and what is prophesied could not possibly be otherwise known by a human, and it comports with Holy Scripture principles, I want to hear what that person has to say because I want to hear from God. On the other hand, if that person tells me that the Lord says that so-and-so is going to become president and it doesn't happen, or that a certain building is going to burn down next week and it's still there, or that Israel is going to be attacked in July and nothing happens, I will NEVER pay any further attention to that person's pronouncements because they are in no ways a prophet from God but only a wannabe. And by the way, if this applies to any of you listening to me, beware: if what you have ever pronounced as being a message from the Lord has proved to be false, stop now and save yourself from a very harsh judgment because you are misleading people and using God's name to do it. Being a prophet is a dangerous business when you are TRUE prophet; being a false prophet can be fatal physically and spiritually. So be very careful if you have developed a habit of telling people that you have a word from the Lord for them. Every last thing you say in that context had better come about, or you are working against God even if you have good intentions. Being labeled a false prophet is one of the worst epithets the bible can pronounce upon a person. Enough said.

So in verses 6 and 7 Deborah, being a true divinely anointed prophet, simply relays the Lord's message to the military commander Barak with the specific details that he is to take 10,000 Israelite troops with him to Mt. Tabor, and that these troops are to be from the two tribes of Naphtali and Zevulun. There in the river valley below Mt. Tabor the Lord will cause the defeat of the enemy as led by their military commander **Sisra**, or Sisera.

So now the emphasis of the story shifts away from Deborah as God's messenger to Barak the one who is commissioned to confront the enemy forces and carry out God's promise to hand over the enemy to him. It is Barak, not Deborah, who would be YHWH's instrument to deliver the northern Israelites from the very oppression that God had influenced to happen as a means to punish His people for their rebellious idolatry. Notice that Barak is from Kadesh; as I have said on a few occasions Kadesh was a common city name all during the bible era and it was copied and used at several locations simultaneously. Apparently this particular Kadesh was in the tribal territory of Naphtali, although there was another located very near Mt. Tabor that could have been his home.

Barak was probably of the tribe of Naphtali, and consequently the passage immediately mentions the primary source of his army as Naphtali and Zevulun (although as we'll find out later other northern tribes also supplied soldiers for the battle against **Sisra**). More, the enemy's capital city of Hatzor (Yavin, King of Hatzor's royal city) was also in Naphtali so Barak was a logical choice to command Israel's troops. The Valley of Jezreel (which was very much a prize to be had if Israel could succeed against **Sisra**) was in Zevulun's territory so it was to be expected that Naphtali and Zevulun would supply the most troops and be at the forefront of the coming battle. That said the next chapter of Judges (5) does open the door slightly to the possibility that Barak was of the tribe of Issachar, but nothing is certain.

The Kishon River at the foot of Mt. Tabor was the 2nd biggest river in Canaan even though it

generally was dry in the summer so it had the capacity to be a force in any battle depending on the time of year and the current conditions; thus we can guess that the Lord would supernaturally use it as all of nature is under His control and is often a prime weapon in His arsenal (which, by the way, though it is not politically correct to mention is something we need to be aware of as in our day we watch some blatantly evil anti-God affair of men come about only to be “coincidentally” followed by some catastrophic weather/nature related event).

There is a classic divine dichotomy set up here that we should be used to by now: it is the “if, then” dichotomy. That is, IF a man or a people will do a certain thing in obedience THEN God will respond in favor. And here it is that IF Barak will lead 10,000 men to Tabor and attack at the river Kishon, THEN God will ensure smashing victory.

There is an interesting word usage here that is invariably masked by the English translations that adds to this “if, then” reciprocal action of man, then God. In verse 6 the Lord instructs Barak not to “march” his men to Mt. Tabor (as is often translated like in the CJB), but to **mashak** to Mt. Tabor. **Mashak** means “to draw”, to influence his men to come. Barak’s leadership and courage then would be the influential spark that would cause the downtrodden Israelites (downtrodden under years of Canaanite oppression) to rise up, follow him, and have hope for liberty put into action. Then in verse 7 God says in return He will **mashak** (draw) Sisera and his troops to come and do battle at the place God has ordained their destruction: the Kishon River valley. We Christians like to say to one another that the Lord never overrides a man’s free will; but in fact we see something similar to it all the time in the bible when the Lord determines to do so. We saw the Lord harden Pharaoh’s heart thus causing him to make destructive decisions that he would not have normally done. We see here that from a strategic standpoint Sisera would do battle with a large force of Israelites who held the high ground, Mt. Tabor, usually a situation that is avoided militarily (even in today’s high tech military) if at all possible. And then later in Revelation we’ll see God draw Israel’s enemies from the north to this very same place to be annihilated by the Saints of the Lord as led by our Warrior/King Messiah Yeshua at the battle of Armageddon. And in between all these passages we’ll find many places where the Lord CAUSES, influences, draws a man to do something that he would not ordinarily do.

Barak responds to God’s call through Deborah by saying that he is a bit skeptical and has some preconditions if he’s going to accept this assignment (sounds a bit like Moses doesn’t it?) No doubt part of his skepticism is why a very good military commander like Sisra would irrationally put his troops in the untenable position of being 1000 feet below his opponents. His primary precondition is that Deborah accompanies him to the battle arena. We should not interpret this as cowardice as Barak was anything but a coward; rather he wanted to be assured of God’s presence and Deborah was that assurance.

Deborah tells Barak that she will indeed go with him, but that as a consequence of his reluctance to simply believe God the glory of victory will not go to the military commander (Barak), but instead will go to a woman! Naturally at this point we all assume (as Barak must have) that this woman was Deborah since now she would be present at the battle and her notoriety would supersede even Barak’s.

Even more it turns out that what is said about **Sisra** being handed over to a woman will turn out to be more literal than it appears; because in this context saying “Sisra” usually is referring to **Sisra’s army**. Here it means that **Sisra** himself will be handed over to a woman (although likely Barak didn’t understand that). And of course such a thing not only takes glory away from Barak, but it also is greatly humiliating to **Sisra**, his army and his nation that a woman (in a completely male dominated society) would be the agent of defeat.

Verse 11 begins another angle on this story; it is about a group of people led by **Hever** the Kenite. Kenites were a clan that belonged to the tribe of Midian; and this clan had a closer than usual attachment to Israel because it was the clan of Moses’ wife Tzipora. The Kenites were normally pro-Israel (to use a modern vernacular), but this particular sub-clan or extended family had broken away and either formed a direct alliance with Yavin of Hatzor or informally agreed to inform on the movements of Israel to some degree or another, likely in return for being protected from Canaanite oppression. The Kenite clan was located in Arad in the Negev (south of Judah), but here we find that Hever’s family was located up north near the royal city of Hatzor so indeed the separation from his clan was both political and geographical. In any case while what **Hever** did was meant for evil, we will see that God would use it to bring about His will.

Verse 12 begins the unfolding of how the battle actually went down. Hever informed Sisera that Barak had formed an army and was heading for Mt. Tabor. Just as Deborah’s prophecy foretold Sisera reacted by mustering his forces and leading them from a place called Harosheth-HaGoyim (the woodlands of the gentiles) to the Kishon River that ran along the base of Mt. Tabor. Even though standard military tactics say that such a move was foolhardy, Sisra was greatly confident in his enormous battalion of iron chariots, a most fearsome weapon that terrorized Israel. Certainly even in his arrogance Sisra knew that a muddy battlefield would essentially neutralize the advantage of his chariots so he must have expected a dry riverbed and firm ground; therefore likely this battle was going to take place in the summertime. Sisera was completely unaware that the Lord was setting a trap for him.

It is recorded in verse 14 that Deborah encouraged Barak and his troops by the call to action of, “Get going! This is the day that YHWH hands Sisera over to you!” The context is such that she must have been at the plateau of Mt. Tabor with Barak because immediately Barak and his 10,000 soldiers rush down the hill towards the ready-and-waiting **Sisra** and his formidable army. Located at the western end of the Jezreel Valley, the battle began in earnest but just as quickly something went terribly wrong for the Canaanite army and they flew into a panic. At this point we’re not told what exactly happened (but we’ll get more details in the next chapter).

The Canaanites began abandoning many of their chariots and running away on foot, as did their leader **Sisra**. The only reason to run instead of using a much faster team of horses attached to a chariot is that the chariots were unable to move. Some chariots were able to escape and as usual the fleeing soldiers began to make their way back to their home base in Harosheth-HaGoyim; but Israel was in hot pursuit. The Hebrew soldiers caught up to the **Sisra’s** men and killed them all. The victory was not complete however because **Sisra** himself was still on the run. **Sisra** obviously was taking a different route to safety than his men; while his army was trying to return to Harosheth-HaGoyim he was undoubtedly heading for the

fortified royal city of Hatzor. The encampment of **Hever** the Kenite was apparently on the way and **Sisra** knowing that this man was pro-Canaanite stopped there to hide and rest for a while.

As Sisera entered the tent village he encountered **Hever's** wife **Yael** (Yael means mountain goat). That they lived in tents explains that their lifestyle was as nomads; they lived as the Bedouin. Middle Eastern custom greatly valued hospitality but for nomads hospitality was especially sanctified; the code of the Bedouin is such that they would give up their own lives to protect a guest, friend or stranger. This was common knowledge so Sisera knew what he was doing in coming to **Hever's** people.

In verse 18 we see Yael's actions; first she properly greet Sisra and then in finest Bedouin tradition offered him more than he asked for. It was obvious to Yael that he was running for his life, thus the words, "don't be afraid" (the implication being that she and her people would, of course, be a shield for him). He asked to rest; she offered him her own tent and a blanket. He asked for water and she offered milk.

It's been a folk remedy for all cultures that warm milk is soothing and helps to bring on sleep; in that day there was not such thing as cold milk. So exhausted, and now drowsy from the warm milk, Sisra Yael to stand guard at the tent entrance and if any of the Israelites come looking for him she is to explain that no one is in her tent. Modesty traditions would dictate that if indeed she had said that to a male Israelite soldier he would have honored it and not entered. Now feeling comfortable enough that he is safe **Sisra** lays down in **Yael's** tent and she covers him with a blanket; immediately he falls asleep.

In a very uncharacteristic move Yael surprises us when she picks up a tent peg and hammer, steals into her tent and when she is assured that Sisra is in a deep sleep she drives a wooden tent peg through his temple, all the way through his skull and brain and out the other side such that the peg buries itself in the ground. Death is instantaneous and **Sisra** doesn't even stir.

We should not doubt **Yael's** ability to pull off such a grisly murder; it was the duty of the nomadic females to disassemble and to erect the tents. Yael was expert with a hammer and those sharp, hardened wooden stakes; it would have taken little more than 2 or 3 quick strikes with the heavy hammer to drive the tent peg clean through Sisera's sleeping noggin. Thus in a most unsuspected way we find that indeed Deborah's prophecy was fully accurate: Sisera was handed over to a woman (just not the woman that one expected).

Needless to say Yael must not have agreed with her husband's pro-Canaanite stance. When the pursuing Barak came to the village of **Hever**, **Yael** ran out to meet him, directed him to her tent and presented the skewered corpse. NOW the victory was complete, but poor Barak was denied the honor of executing the opposing military commander as was customary. And this was the result of his doubt when Deborah first presented God's instructions to him.

Judges chapter 4 ends with giving all the glory to the God of Israel for this resounding victory and deliverance. This battle was a tipping point and so a people (the northern Israelite tribes) who had known only humiliation and subjugation for many years now found their courage and turned the tables. In a short time Yavin King of Hatzor was no more and the threat ended.

However this by no means indicates an overall destruction of the Canaanites, but only those in alliance with Hatzor; so future oppressions and subjugations by various groups of Canaanites were all but assured

Let's now move on to Judges 5 where additional details of this episode are recorded.

READ JUDGES 5 all

We certainly won't get through all this today but we can at least get started. This chapter is known popularly among Jews and Christians alike as the Song of Deborah. Although some modern scholars disagree, the Hebrew sages say that there is no doubt that Deborah herself authored this song, even though (and equally without doubt) that some amount of editing was done in the centuries to follow.

Before we delve too deeply into this Song of Deborah a reasonable question right about now ought to be this: was Yael justified in murdering Sisra in cold blood? After all the Song of Deborah goes to great length to glorify (let alone justify) **Sisra's** death even going so far as to mock **Sisra's** mother who waited anxiously at home, scanning the horizon for a son she loved but who would never return.

I don't think that the moral issue of Yael's actions can be so easily resolved as some of the well-known Christian scholars claim. The usual take on this in Christian circles is that while the Lord was well aware that Yael would use treachery and murder to end Sisra's life, that it was wrong. C.F. Keil in his masterly commentary on the book of Judges sums it up this way:

“Nevertheless the act (of killing Sisera) was not morally justified, either by this prophetic pronouncement or by the fact that it is commemorated in song (the Song of Debra). Even though there can be no doubt that Yael acted under the influence of religious enthusiasm for the cause of Israel and of its God, and that she was prompted by religious motivations to regard the connection of her tribe with Israel, the people of the Lord, as higher and more sacred not only than the bond of peace in which her tribe was living with Yavin the Canaanite king, but even than the duties of hospitality, which are so universally sacred to the oriental mind that her heroic deed cannot be acquitted of the sins of lying, treachery, and assassination.....”

The Hebrew sages are, as one might suspect, a little more tolerant of her actions although they don't entirely excuse them either. In fact some very fanciful rabbinical commentaries say that what **Yael** did FIRST was to seduce **Sisra** and she did so 7 times! A couple of quick points to ponder in making your own decision: 1) **Yael** was NOT an Israelite and her god was not YHWH. 2) It is very hard to fault someone for ridding the world of a tyrant by whatever means. 3) We find Israel using deceit, spying, ambush, the cover of darkness, and other stealthy and grisly means to kill their enemies in a number of biblical situations and there is no recorded chastisement from the Lord against it.

Even so there is some line in the sand probably that ought not to be crossed even when

dealing with a vicious and heartless enemy. The problem especially for modern western Christians is that this assassination of **Sisra** by **Yael** seems so barbaric and horrible compared to our sentiments and sensibilities of morality and fair play. But our sentiments are certainly not the standard of those times, or Middle Eastern culture in general.

In fact the Islamic methods that we see depicted today with beheadings, lopping off of hands and feet for relatively minor crimes, honor killings by their fathers of daughters who refuse arranged marriages, blood feuds that go on for generations, etc., give us a pretty good picture of ancient Middle Eastern and biblical society in general. Of course with Israel God ordained a different way than all other peoples; but not so different as we might suppose. Their general customs still operated very much like their neighbors.

While we need to be thoughtful in our assessment of this act of Yael upon **Sisra**, we also need to note that NEVER did God ordain or direct Yael's actions even though He foreknew them. In the end, though, followers of the God of Israel are held to a higher standard than those who are not His. Not that a Hebrew woman might not have done exactly as **Yael** if she had the opportunity.

This is where the Rabbinical method called **Kal V'homer** is so valuable for us; the principle of light and heavy. There will always be in this sinful and fallen world, situations that have no good resolution, not even for the most pious Believers and studied bible teachers. I have given the example in prior lessons of Corrie Ten Boom who saved many Jewish lives during WWII by blatantly disobeying her government, hiding Jews wanted by the police, and regularly lying as to their whereabouts so as to keep them from the death camps. Yet in the both the OT and NT we are told that lying is a sin under any circumstance and in the NT especially that we are to submit to our governments because human government is ordained by God. For Hebrews the matter is handled by applying **Kal V'homer**, and thus the greater good of saving innocent life is weighed against the smaller evil of lying and not submitting to our human authorities, and thus the proper course of action for a God fearer becomes clear. I think that even though Yael was a pagan, we should likely look upon her murderous actions in the same way; committing a terrible evil ended an even greater evil.

We'll continue with the Song of Deborah next time we meet.