

The Book of Judges

Lesson 9 - Chapter 5 Continued

Our subject is Judges chapter 5 known better as the Song of Deborah. We started studying it in earnest last week and ended with verse 11. We're going to continue to carefully dissect this song as there is so much to be gleaned from it, and it has so much to say for our modern lives and the age in which we live whether as Jews or gentiles. We still won't finish it today. Further the era of the Judges explains to us WHY there would then be the era of the Kings to immediately follow it and this song provides us with some important clues about the progress of Israel as both a spiritual and national entity.

As a sort of preface to our learning what we can take theologically and as life applications from the Song of Deborah I stressed that we must first and foremost understand the very nature of the type of literature called "song" that makes up the entirety of Judges 5. And that nature is that significant liberties are taken with the words and phrases in order that it makes the intended impact. Therefore the point of a song (whether it is a song in the bible or just a song composed for human entertainment like Rock and Roll) isn't necessarily to impart concise or terribly accurate information; rather it's for the authors to pour out their souls or to express their feelings. Those feelings will center on current events in the culture they are living such as a war, or a weather calamity, or a few year era of relative peace, or a national mood of darkness and despair for example. Therefore to understand a song, any song, means by definition that we must understand the context of the times and society in which it was created. Because if we try to take the words of a biblical song fully literally, or we try to hold it above its era or its culture, we'll miss the point or worse we'll create some kind of misguided but far reaching philosophy or all encompassing doctrine and declare it as universal and rigid.

What I'm getting at is that while the essence of the Song of Deborah is truthful, we need to be careful not to take every word as an accurate and balanced portrayal of a significant historical event. The Song of Deborah was made to commemorate and transmit to future generations the great and joyful (at least to Israel) military victory of the northern tribes of Israel, led by Deborah's sidekick Barak, over the Canaanite coalition army led by Sisera on behalf of King Yavin of Hatzor.

We finished up last time by discussing an important theme in the first third of the Song of Deborah, which had to do with leadership. And we find that Deborah mostly blames the dire situation Israel found itself in (under the thumb of some oppressive Canaanites) on the lack of leadership from Israel's Tribal chieftains and elders. Thus she also extols the virtues of herself and a handful of men who rose up to become leaders in order to lead Israel out of their doldrums and their passivity to fight the good fight to restore their liberties and their proper relationship with the God of Israel even though it was both dangerous and unpopular.

It's important that we understand that while the Lord has authorized the establishment of human governments, He also requires that those who lead are to lead with a servant's heart and for the welfare of the people they govern. But even then it must not be accomplished by means of enforcing their own ideas of humanitarian ideologies or what to them seems like decent and good justice. Rather it is the Word of God and the Lord's direction that the leader is to fully submit to; and then the result of that obedience will be that the people are properly cared for and they will receive divine blessing.

We have in our times one the greatest examples of a probably well-meaning but misguided leader of our own nation. Our President who on the one hand seems to be sincerely connected to the God of Israel and His son Yeshua, on the other often prefers his own concepts of mercy and justice to the Lord's specific commands. Of course the subject I'm referring to is Israel and this administration's infamous Roadmap to Peace whereby Israel is being relentlessly pressured to divide Jerusalem, give up the Temple Mount, and carve off pieces of the Promised Land that are to be handed over to their enemies. Why would he do this? Because to his humanistic and geopolitical way of thinking it will bring peace and promote brotherly love; it is fair and balanced to all parties involved, and therefore it must be the right thing to do.

This kind of leadership was one of the many kinds that were condemned in the bible, because while it might seem that the actions of such a leader could bring a short-term earthly benefit it also brings a longer term and inescapable chastisement from Yehoveh. Good intent and sincerity have never, and will never, trump obedience to the Lord. And such errors in our leaders can have devastating effects upon their people.

Let's reread some more of Judges 5.

READ JUDGES 5: 12 – 18

We could probably give this stanza of the song the name of "The Roll Call of the Tribes" because it begins to speak of each of the tribes' enthusiastic participation in Israel's liberation or their ambivalence and disinterest in joining in the Holy War that the Lord has called for.

Verse 12 has Deborah exhorting herself to awake and do what she must; that is to throw herself into this great event that she initiated as the Lord's earthly agent, and now to equally throw herself into commemorating the event through song. She also calls on Barak to lead away his prisoners of war.

We see two roles explained here: Deborah was the prophet and Barak was the deliverer. As the prophet Deborah represents God's presence or at least His voice; Barak was the one who was to ACT on the instructions of the Lord.

Verse 13 gives us the response of Deborah's call to Israel for Holy War. We are told that only a remnant of the noble ones (the new leadership) and just some of the brave of the nation heeded the call; meaning that many refused to serve. Apathy was the mood in Israel at this time, and the sense of verses 12 and 13 is that it would fall to the prophetess Deborah to

shake the people of Israel out of their deep sleep.

Verse 14 throws us a king-sized curveball. It says that Ephraim came to join the battle but that they were “rooted in Amalek”. Since there is no sense that this is a negative comment, then we have the problem of figuring out what this means. Obviously Ephraim was not genetically or nationally rooted in Amalek; Amalek is an age-old enemy of Israel that will only be destroyed once and for all when Messiah returns. So what is the idea behind saying that the tribe of Ephraim was rooted in Amalek?

Well, there are a few opinions floating around about how to take this statement. One is that there was a minor copiest error and that Amalek was accidentally substituted for **emek; emek** means valley. Saying that Ephraim was rooted (came from) the valleys is certainly true and it fits.

But Rashi says that the word translated as “in” (rooted IN Amalek) ought to be more properly translated as “against” (rooted AGAINST Amalek). Thus we Ephraim properly defined as being against Amalek.

Kiel says that the translation of “rooted in Amalek” is fine as is, if we understand that Ephraim took much of their territory away from the Amalekites; in other words the area where Ephraim now lived was formerly called Amalek thus it could be said they were “rooted”, they lived, in an area that used to known as Amalek.

The bottom line here is for sure this cannot mean that Ephraim had some sort of national or genetic connection to Amalek. Ephraim was Joshua’s tribe and it was Deborah’s tribe so its no wonder it got top billing in this song.

Now the next part of this same verse is that some from the tribe of Benjamin came to fight once enough people from the tribe of Ephraim committed to the battle. And a few interesting nuances to this piece of information shouldn’t be ignored. The Rabbis say that this is actually a prophetic pronouncement with the meaning that after Ephraim fights against these Canaanites, sometime later so will Benjamin. And that “some time later” turned out to be about 1020 B.C. when King Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, fought to claim back more territory from the Canaanites.

Another line of thought is that since Benjamin’s territory was located south of Ephraim, Benjamin was physically “behind” Ephraim. I must tell you that my opinion is that we have a lot of speculation about what is meant to be a very simple statement: Ephraim committed first, it was probably the largest tribe this time, and thus Benjamin followed suit. Again, this is a song and we’re off the mark to tear apart every word or phrase trying to find something much deeper. The words were chosen as much for how well they rhymed as for what they meant.

Next we find that the military commanders of Makhir also decided to supply troops. This needn’t confuse us; saying “Makhir” is merely referring to the tribe of Manessah, but it was known by the name of Makhir in Deborah’s day. Manessah, the founder of the tribe, had only one son; and that son’s name was Makhir. Makhir was at one point the accepted tribal leader

over Manasseh. But in typical Middle Eastern culture it was more usual that a tribal leader would have many sons, each who would head up his own clan. The firstborn of the tribal founder would by custom eventually become the new leader over the tribe, although if another of the tribal founder's sons headed a clan that became more powerful than the firstborn son's clan the more powerful clan leader might become the overall tribal leader instead. The point is that with a tribal founder having multiple sons that thus produced multiple clans, the identification of the tribe (Manasseh in this case) would remain the same even as a new tribal leader took over. BUT, when only one son is produced, he bears a status almost as great as the original tribal founder. So it was not uncommon for a tribal name to change to bear the name of that only child, when that only child assumed leadership. Thus we find the tribe of Manasseh is being called Makhir at this point in history rather than its original name of Manasseh. Manasseh and Makhir would have been interchangeable terms to a large degree.

Now I'm not trying to turn you into bible historians, but this situation is a terrific example of how challenging the bible can be unless you do your homework. If you'll recall, when Moses led Israel up to the Jordan River, about ½ of the clans that formed the tribe of Manasseh didn't want to go into the Promised Land, they wanted to stay on the east bank of the river. Interestingly it was Makhir, the tribal chieftain of Manasseh, plus some number of other clans of Manasseh who wanted to make their new roots in the Trans-Jordan. But Makhir was apparently OK with the idea of some of the other clans of his tribe crossing over the river and claiming territory there as well. For Makhir the good news was that he would preside over TWO large territories both under the banner of his tribe, Manasseh. One might think that it wouldn't take too long before one of the clan leaders who occupied the western territorial area of Manasseh would rise up and stake a claim as the "tribal leader" of that group (leaving Makhir and his successors as the tribal leader of the eastern section of Manasseh). What Deborah's song shows us is that not only (after perhaps 150 years) had that scenario not occurred, but also the use of the tribal name Manasseh actually became inferior to the name of Makhir. Thus even the western clans of Manasseh went by the name of "Makhir".

It was these western clans of Makhir that came to fight, because as we'll soon see those tribes who had remained on the eastern side of the Jordan River had little interest in assisting their brethren who lived in the Promised Land.

Next Zevulun is mentioned and he is said to be holding the musterer's staff, or in some translations the "marshal's" staff. If you have a KJV it will say Zevulun is holding the "pen of the writer". Let's face it, not one of these translations is much help to us in figuring out what was meant. Who are those who hold the musterer's staff? Who are those who hold "the pen of the writer"? However I am pretty confident that the KJV is closer to the proper sense of it, we just have to flesh it out a little more.

What the phrase most literally says is, "the rod of they who handle the pen of the scribe". Now a rod is usually a symbol of authority in ancient times, but a scribe was not a royal person with governing authority. Rather the rod of a scribe is referring to his writing instrument, his pen. His pen was his rod. Very few people in the age of the Judges could write, so a scribe (whose job it was to record the kings' pronouncements) was held in high esteem. However, many ancient Rabbis say that as used here the phrase is an idiom. In other words saying "the rod of a

scribe” is merely a lofty or poetic way of saying “men who use a pen”. And of course we are dealing with a song here, full of lofty words, aren't we? Further, Zevulun was known to be heavily involved in trading; they were known as a merchant tribe. Merchants were among the few outside of actual scribes who used a pen because they had to record their accounts. However the original Hebrew does NOT say that the men being referred to as coming to do battle were scribes (**sofertim**), rather it's that these particular men USED the **instrument** that was the chief tool of a scribe (a pen). Thus what this verse is actually referring to is that even merchants (men who were trained in buying and selling, not in warfare) rose up in religious fervor and responded to Deborah's call to arms.

Verse 15 says that members of the tribe of Issachar volunteered for this battle as well. Then we get to Reuben. Up to this point in the roll call of the tribes all has been of a positive nature; with Reuben it changes. And what a lesson for modern Jew and Christian is the tribe of Reuben's (and some of the other tribes') response, and let's pay close attention so we either don't make the same mistakes or (if in our lives as Believers) we're already doing what they did we repent and turn back.

What Reuben did was to have long and heartfelt discussions about what to do when the Lord called them to Holy War. Do they join with their brethren (as they know they should) on the opposite side of the Jordan as their leaders from the days of Moses promised they'd do if they were allowed to settle in the Trans-Jordan? Or do they view the battles against Sisera and Yavin as a foreign conflict that was none of their business because it wasn't in their own backyards?

Here we also encounter another translation problem. In the CJB along with several other versions, it says in the 2nd half of verse 15, “concerning the **divisions** of Reuben”. The Hebrew word being translated as “divisions” is **pelaggah**. **Pelaggah** is a word that is always associated with waterways like rivers and streams. It is usually meant to denote a place where a river divides or branches off into rivulets or what we more commonly today might call brooks. The Hebrew sages are pretty unanimous that this ought to be translated as “among the brooks of Reuben they made great resolutions in their hearts”. In other words, the territory occupied by Reuben was well known as being pretty well watered and it had many brooks and streams that criss-crossed the land. So the picture is of the leaders and nobles of Reuben sitting around and discussing the matter in a sort of defeatist or even detached way; and they were gathering along the many pastoral water courses of their territory and opining why they would want to leave this for Holy War and risk so much? Answer? They didn't and wouldn't.

Instead it says they stayed safe and sound by the many sheepfolds they had erected for their abundant flocks and they listened to the lovely and enchanting musical notes coming from the flutes some shepherds would play to pass the time. Are you getting the picture? This is a derogatory remark about Reuben whereby Deborah is basically bordering on calling them cowards and traitors. At the least Reuben was essentially disavowing their familial obligation and the past promises to Moses and God to stand with their fellow Israelites against their common enemies.

Verse 17 says that Gilead (meaning Gad) lives across the Jordan (next to Reuben); in other

words it has now been established that ALL the Israelite tribes and their clans who lived separated from the Promised Land; those tribes who decided so many years earlier that they preferred the fertility and peacefulness of the Trans-Jordan to the Promised Land offered by God; these 2 ½ Israelite tribes of the Trans-Jordan had begun the inevitable mental process of disassociating themselves from the 9 ½ tribes who went forward into that Promised Land and lived there now. And such a disassociation means that they had no interest in coming to the aid of their Israelite brothers when they needed them the most and especially when those 2 ½ tribes hoped that those troubles would bypass them.

Then the tribe of Dan is called on the carpet; “why, Dan”, the Song of Deborah asks rhetorically, “do you stay by the ships?” Implying of course that the Danites are staying near their homes by the sea instead of coming to fight at Mt. Tabor alongside several of the other tribes. Technically Dan was located on the seacoast with a good port at Joppa; however they didn’t ever control much of the seacoast in their assigned territory for very long. Dan was known to have forged an alliance with the Phoenicians (who were also seafarers and located a bit north of Joppa), and likely Dan was already on the move to relocate northwards at the time of Deborah. In any case Dan certainly had a political problem on their hands of some proportion; their alliance with the Phoenicians was an important one; it was their bread and butter and if they helped their brother Israelites to fight against what would have been Canaanite allies of Phoenicia....well....you see the bind Dan found themselves in. It was the classic case of a damned if you do, damned if you don’t to their minds. Of course, they were wrong. Their duty before God was to fight for their brothers, not to feather their nests with twigs from the world.

Asher who also were sea merchants living along the Mediterranean, had alliances too. Being merchants along the seacoast was big business and by definition their trading partners would have been gentiles that often had alliances many of the same Canaanite kings, as did Dan and the Phoenicians. It was a delicate situation so Asher along with Dan decided not to risk their tribal economic advantage by fighting alongside their brethren.

This stanza of the song ends the role call of the tribes in verse 18 by explaining that as opposed to the wrong-minded decisions by Reuben, Gad, and the Trans-Jordan portion of Manessah along with Dan and Asher, the tribes of Zevulun and Naphtali put their lives and their families’ lives and livelihoods on the line to answer YHWH’s call through His prophet Deborah.

If we were a smaller group I might stop at this point and ask each of you individually what you are thinking right about now after hearing this lesson. Here in Judges 5 we have the Lord wanting to continue His Holy War to both liberate Israel from their enemies and to continue to establish His Holy Kingdom on earth in the Promised Land; Deborah and Barak were his vehicles (for the moment) to this end. Many from several of the 12 tribes answered that call, and some entire tribes sat on their hands and pretended not to notice. Interestingly there is no mention at all of Judah or Simeon. I demonstrated in earlier lessons that already there had been established a north versus south mentality among the 12 tribes; Judah and Simeon (at this time) were the south, Benjamin vacillated in their loyalties back and forth between the north and the south (due to their geographical location), and the remaining tribes (including the

ones in this story) were generally considered part of the north. However here we see that in addition to the north-south alignment an east-west division had also arisen. Those 2 ½ tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan River (the Trans-Jordan) really didn't see that they had any solid attachment or obligation to those 9 ½ tribes located on the western side of the river. Things change; about a century earlier the tribes in the Trans-Jordan were terribly concerned that they would be excluded from the commonwealth of Israel by the 9 ½ tribes who went into Canaan; now they were separating themselves away.

What we have here is the description of a terribly fractured Israel at the time of the Judges just like we have a terribly fractured Christianity and an equally fractured Judaism today (and I can also tell you that the reborn nation of Israel is also very divided). Each group, denomination, sect, clan, and tribe cares only for they're own interests. Oh, as like with Reuben, some of the other tribes had endless handwringing sessions about what their obligations ought to be to their brethren. You can bet there were those Levite priests and elders who tried with all their might to remind the various Hebrew clan leaders of Moses' and Joshua's instructions to stay true to God and to His commandments, and that meant they were to work together to continue to fight for the establishment of God's Kingdom in the Promised Land. But the attitude for many of the people was, "let somebody else do it". It seemed dangerous to their personal wealth and power; dangerous to their economy; and dangerous to their mortal lives. For some it was simply an interruption in their everyday comforts that they didn't want.

Today I would ask you: if you are a Jew, why are you not making plans to migrate to Israel to the Promised Land set apart just for you? If you are a gentile Christian, why are you not standing up for Yeshua, standing with Israel, and boldly professing the universal sovereignty of the God of Israel or are you content to leave that to others? Whether Jew or gentile Christian what are you actively doing to help Israel to fight to keep the Holy Land that our God gave to them? The same Holy Land that is not only the birthplace of our Savior but to which He is soon going to return. What are you doing beyond experiencing simple emotion (or maybe guilt) about hanging back from going to visit God's people, or speaking out to an uniformed church on behalf of God's people, or spending some of your resources (even sacrificially) to directly comfort God's people?

Reuben discussed this and more among themselves, wrestled with it earnestly in their hearts, but also turned their eyes away and determined better to simply leave it at feeling badly than to disrupt their own lives. Asher and Dan had valuable friendships and business partnerships with those who worshipped other gods; and those friendships were economically beneficial to them so they refused to get involved. Gad and the portion of Manasseh that lived across a geographical boundary that served to separate them physically from their brethren didn't want to suffer their brothers' troubles, yet they also didn't want to give up their common identity as Hebrews and Israel; so kept their distance hoping they would be left alone by the enemy and that everything would just work out.

It's kind of interesting how it all turned out. Those Israelites on the east side of the Jordan River who sought to appease the enemy and fly under the radar and avoid the fate of their brethren were the first to be scattered and assimilated by Israel's enemies in later times.

Dan gave up and vacated their allotted territory in the Promised Land altogether and moved far north where they also gave up their God and set up pagan calf worship, and a remnant eventually wound up in Northern Africa.

With the recent rediscovery of substantial remnants of each of the 10 lost tribes of Israel in the last decade, the only tribe not yet found is Asher, who refused to get involved in the fight and rather chose to throw in their lot with their gentile business partners. Asher preferred their profitable ports and their serene beaches to the battlefields of God.

Let's read a little more.

READ JUDGES 5: 19 –22

Verse 19 tells us about the Canaanite coalition army. Where it says that “they took no spoil of silver”, it means that these were not mercenary soldiers but rather they were loyal nationalist troops; they were Canaanites bent on ejecting or subjugating Israel.

Verse 20 is difficult to deal with because it's hard to tell if the reference to the stars is meant to be spiritual or natural. That is, stars in heaven are often a metaphor for angels. Lucifer, the devil, is called the brightest and most beautiful star. Thus this could mean that Deborah is saying that in parallel with the human battle on the ground, there was a spiritual battle in the heavenlies for Israel. That would certainly fall in line with Hebrew and biblical thinking in general.

On the other hand it could be referring to the weather, which favorably and unexpectedly altered the battle for Israel's sake. Either way, it is referring to something supernatural and divine.

Verse 21 explains the involvement of the Kishon River in the war. That is, while it identifies the PLACE where it all happened it also explains that the river itself became the Lord's vehicle for giving victory to Israel. The river, we're told, “swept them away” (meaning the Canaanite forces). In other words something caused a trickle of water that would have barely qualified as a brook in the summer that this battle occurred to become a raging torrent that overflowed the Kishon's banks and muddied the surrounding fields in every direction thus rendering the fearsome chariots of the Canaanites useless. The River is spoken of as “that ancient river”, meaning that indeed it was a very well known place that had seen countless generations and races of people live upon its banks and water their fields with its flow.

What we're undoubtedly witnessing is a flash flood. This is not an uncommon occurrence in Israel in the summer months but what makes it so notable is the timing; it occurred at the Lord's command and it was supernatural in it's ferocity.

In poetic fashion verse 22 speaks of the horses stamping as they slip and slide in the mud, and rearing in panic as they pulled in vein on the heavy iron chariots they are attached to as they become as anchors sinking into the muck. Thus an army based on now immobilized chariots is

easy pray for an army based on foot soldiers. In chapter 4 we read how some of the chariots were able to escape, but many more were abandoned and the Canaanite soldiers along with the leader Sisra ran off on foot to try and escape. Israel chased them down and slaughtered them. The victory of the great divine warrior leader YHWH was lopsided and complete on that auspicious day.

We'll finish this up next week and move on in to Judges chapter 6.