



DEBORAH AND BARAK Judges 4

MAIN CHARACTERS

- Deborah, a prophetess; Barak, an Israelite general; Jabin, King of Canaanite Hazor; Sisera, foreign general commanding Jabin's army; Heber, a metalworker allied with Jabin; Jael, wife of Heber, who kills Sisera

LITERARY FEATURES AND GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

- *a piece of literary art*: brief story with few details, fast paced, vocabulary pairing, and inverted parallelism (ABCDC'B'A')—

Sons of Israel Oppressed (4:1–3)
 Deborah the Prophetess (4:4–9)
 Barak and Sisera "Call Out (*za'aq*)" Their Armies (4:10–12/13)
 Jehovah the Warrior (4:14a)
 Barak and Sisera "Go Down (*yarad*)" to Fight (4:14b/15–16)
 Jael, the Wife of Heber (4:17–22)
 Jabin, King of Canaan, Subdued (4:23–24)

- location and battlefield: the main action takes place in the north—in the Plain of Esdraelon and near the Sea of Galilee
- Hazor, Jabin's capital, is 10 miles NW of the Sea of Galilee; Mount Tabor is 10 miles SW of the Sea of Galilee

SONS OF ISRAEL OPPRESSED (A 4:1–3)

- *verse 1*: (1) apostasy soon followed Ehud's death, (2) the people return to idolatry and Baal worship (cf. Judg 2:11–15; 3:7), (3) the third oppression begins (ca. 1215 B.C.), and (4) an important spiritual principle—forced worship is never lasting
- *verse 2*: (1) the LORD sold his people into slavery to a new master because they refused to serve Him (cf. Judg 10:6–7), (2) Jabin and his general Sisera recovered the territory once ruled by the kings of Hazor, (3) Sisera is not a Canaanite name: perhaps he was a soldier of fortune, (4) Hazor was conquered by Joshua and possibly still lay in ruins (Josh 11:10), (5) Jabin is probably a royal name (like Pharaoh)

and not a personal name (cf. a former Jabin slain by Joshua, Josh 11:1, 10)

- *verse 3*: (1) the third oppression mostly affected the northern tribes of Zebulun, Naphtali, West Manasseh, Issachar, and Asher, (2) lasted 20 years, from 1215–1195 B.C., (3) most likely 900 chariots were the combined force of several allied Canaanite cities

DEBORAH THE PROPHETESS (B 4:4–9)

- (1) her name means "bee" (cf. Deut 1:44); (2) she is never called a warrior or deliverer—just a prophetess; (3) her character is blameless—unlike other judges; (4) she was serving Jehovah before her battle with the Canaanites (she "was judging Israel" 4:4–5): "judging" is not judicial, but prophetic (people came to her to cry out to God for help and to hear her "judgment")
- apparently they went to her because the priesthood was apostate and no longer received answers or judgments from God
- this is a protested call narrative, as is the story of Gideon (Judg 6; cf. Luke 1:26–38): Introduction (4:4–5), Confrontation (4:6a); Commission (4:6b–7), Protest (4:8), Reassurance (4:9), and Conclusion—Barak defeats Sisera (4:10–24)
- conditional obedience brings loss of reward (honor) but not loss of service—Barak does not kill Sisera (Judg 4:9; cf. 4:21–22)
- *verse 6*: (1) Barak means "Thunderbolt," (2) Kedesh in Naphtali was affected by the Canaanite oppression, (3) six tribes participated in the battle, (4) Mount Tabor is about 1300 feet high and NE of the battleground
- *verse 7*: (1) Barak camped on the slopes of Mount Tabor, safe from chariot attack, (2) Sisera chose the Valley of Jezreel along the Kishon River to give his chariots ample maneuvering space, (3) the LORD plans to draw Sisera and his army into a trap, (4) Deborah clearly indicates the source of deliverance—the LORD

BARAK AND SISERA "CALL OUT (ZA'AQ)" THEIR ARMIES (C 4:10–12/13)

- Kenites were a clan of metalworkers allied with Israel since the days of Moses
- apparently Heber moved from the south near Arad to the north to help make Jabin's iron chariots (cf. 4:17)
- no doubt Heber informed Jabin of Barak's military preparations (4:12)

YAHWEH THE WARRIOR (D 4:14a)

- this is the literary center and turning point of the story—the most important verse in the chapter
- she pictures the LORD as a King leading his army to victory and again gives credit for the victory to the LORD (cf. 4:15, 23)

BARAK AND SISERA "GO DOWN (YARAD)" TO FIGHT (C' 4:14b/15–16)

- Deborah ordered Barak to attack from Mount Tabor (4:14)
- "the LORD confused Sisera" (4:15) refers to a thunderstorm that swelled the Kishon River and flooded Wadi Kishon (5:20–21)
- as a result Sisera's horses and chariots became mired in the mud or were swept away in a raging torrent
- Sisera's tactical advantage went down the drain and the muck kept his army from escaping
- Sisera fled on foot through the hills of Lower Galilee toward the Jordan River
- Barak (Thunderbolt) began his attack *before* the thunderstorm—a great act of faith that put him in the Hall of Fame (Heb 11:32)
- the flooded Kishon River helped Napoleon defeat a Turkish army in April of 1799
- a quarter of an hour's rain on the clay soil of Esdraelon delayed all cavalry maneuvers in World War I

JAEL, THE WIFE OF HEBER (B' 4:17–22)

- Jael means "wild goat" or "mountain goat"
- she offered Sisera an ideal hiding place: in the ancient Near East only a woman's husband or father could enter her tent
- Sisera probably would not have entered her tent without her invitation
- ancient Near Eastern laws of hospitality demanded protecting a "guest" (a custom still practiced in Arabic countries today)
- Sisera trusted Jael because her family was bound by treaty with Jabin (4:17)

JABIN, KING OF CANAAN, SUBDUED (A' 4:23–24)

- with Sisera dead the kingdom of Jabin was no longer a threat

MORAL PROBLEM

- Jael has been unjustly vilified by many commentators: (1) "What happened then was as much an outrage against the ethics of her own time as against ours today. The terrible deed done, Jael stood guilty of violating the laws of hospitality, of falsehood, treachery, and murder (*New Bible Dictionary*, 596). (2) "Even regarded solely as a triumph in a righteous war, it seems strange that such an unnatural act should prove the subject of holy rejoicing" (*New Bible Dictionary*, 596).

TREACHERY OR HEROISM?

- things to consider: (1) the nation was at war, (2) as a woman Jael could not meet Sisera in combat, so she resorted to cunning
- she knew how to use a tent peg: pitching tents and striking camp is women's work among modern bedouin
- was Jael guilty of the sins of lying, treachery, and murder? apparently not, since Deborah commends Jael (5:24–27)

CONCLUSION

- assassination of foreign leaders is a legitimate weapon of war in the Old Testament (cf. Ehud in Judges 3:12–30)
- killing in war is not murder and deception in war is one of the rules of the game