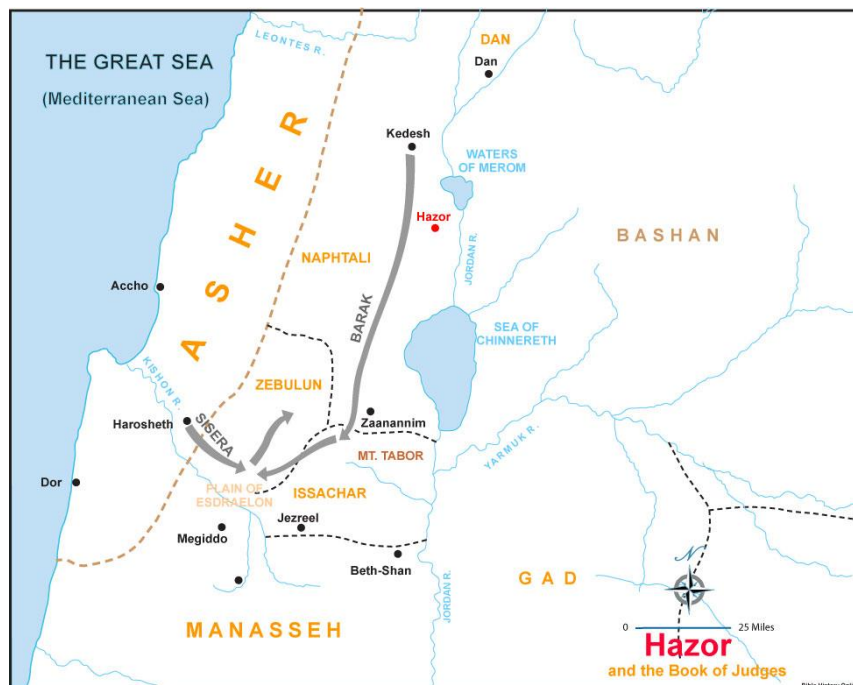


### Immediate Context

Chapters 4 and 5 of Judges provide an uncommon account of a biblical event. Chapter 4 provides a narrative of Deborah and Barak's war against Jabin and Sisera. Chapter 5 retells the same event in a poetic form (a song) from the perspective of Deborah. Both accounts are complementary, yet both provide unique perspective and help us to understand the distinction between Bible narratives and the more poetic forms of biblical literature.

### Judges 4:1-3 – The Oppression

- What was the catalyst for Israel's fall back into sin? It was the death of Ehud, the second judge and removed the restraint upon wickedness within Israel.
- What evil did Israel commit? Again, we are not told, but it appears to be similar to the prior evils of idolatry.
- Who is Jabin? Jabin appears to be a royal dynastic name, like King George (there have been six so far) in England. We first read of a Jabin in *Joshua 11:1-15*. The Jabin of Joshua united several Canaanite tribes together to face off with Israel. They had access to horses and chariots and a very large army. Joshua soundly defeated them in battle and destroyed Hazor (Jabin's capital) and killed all who dwelt there. Now, almost 200 years later, it appears that Hazor has been rebuilt and the royal Jabin dynasty has been reestablished (perhaps by a relative who didn't live in the original Hazor) and has ascended to becoming the King of the Canaanites. He grew in power and was able to oppress Israel severely.
- Who is Sisera? He was a powerful military commander who did not live in Hazor, but to the southwest in Harosheth-hagoyim. The derivation of his name suggests that he was a Hittite and possibly a mercenary, not being of the same people as Jabin, but a hired and effective military leader. Harosheth-hagoyim possibly means, "cultivated field of the Gentiles". The map below provides an overview of the area relevant to this narrative.



- Where did the 900 chariots come from and why are they significant? Israel faced the previous incarnation of Jabin's chariots and were victorious by the Lord's help, as we read in Joshua 11. However, in Joshua 11:9, we read that Israel burned their chariots with fire, indicating that they were made of wood. Israel's more recent campaigns in against iron chariots were unsuccessful (*Judges 1:19*). It is likely that their enemies recognized Israel's weakness against the iron chariots and therefore multiplied them in order to oppress them. The iron chariots were no obstacle for God, but Israel's faith had not yet matured to a point at which they could overcome by His help. **How is this relevant in your life?**
- Is there any significance to the length of time Israel was oppressed? It is interesting to note that the length of their slavery is increasing every time they fall back in to sin (see *Judges 3:8, 3:14, and 4:3*).

#### Judges 4:4-5 – Introducing Deborah

- The name Deborah means "bee".
- What do we learn about Deborah personally from this passage? She was a prophetess, a wife, and a judge of Israel. She also appears to be an Ephraimite or perhaps her husband was of the tribe of Ephraim.
- Is this the first time we read of a prophetess in the Bible? No. Miriam, Moses' sister was a prophetess (*Exodus 15:20*). We will later read of Huldah the prophetess (*2 Kings 22:14*), Noadiah, the false prophetess (*Nehemiah 6:14*), Isaiah's wife (*Isaiah 8:3*), Anna (*Luke 2:36*), Philip's daughters (*Acts 21:8-9*), and Jezebel, the false prophetess (*Revelation 2:20*). In fact, the Lord promised that both sons and daughters of Israel would prophecy in the days in which He poured out His Spirit (*Joel 2:28* and repeated in *Acts 2:17*).
- What was the role of a prophet? A prophet is a mouthpiece chosen by God (*Numbers 12:6*) and proclaims the Word of God to others (*2 Peter 1:20-21*). The manner in which the prophet fulfills their calling varies throughout scripture. Some prophets, like Jonah, appear to have been full-time vocationally engaged as a prophet, traveling the country for the purpose of proclaiming God's Word in the streets. Others seemed to function differently, only occasionally exercising their prophetic gift (e.g. Abraham in *Genesis 20:6-7* or the prophet Daniel, who worked as an advisor to kings).
- What does Deborah's status as a wife suggest? She was a woman under authority, but her husband recognized her gifts and calling and allowed her to use them for the good of Israel and the glory of God. **This is a good example for husbands, who should desire and seek for the gifts and callings of their wife to blossom and yield fruit to the fullest capacity.**
- How does Deborah function as a judge in Israel? It appears that Deborah's gifts and calling were noted and people began coming to her for God's judgment on various matters. She would sit in a centralized location (under a palm tree that became identified with her) between Ramah and Bethel in Ephraim and would hear the requests of the Israelites and give them wisdom from God. Her location is significant. She was somewhat centrally located in Israel, so she had an influence that was pervasive. It was not in Shiloh where the tabernacle stood and the

priesthood was centralized, nor was it in Shechem at the most centralized seat of power in Israel. Her posture was also significant. She did not usurp power in Israel; God gave her this gift and people came to her for judgment.

- Why is Deborah functioning as a judge in Israel? While we do see several examples of prophetesses in the Bible, this is the only example we see of a woman thrust into the position of a judge or de facto leader in Israel. It is not surprising that we find this in Judges, a book full of unusual circumstances.
  - Isaiah 3:1-12 indicates that a woman coming into leadership is an indication of a moral failure of the people. This is not an indictment of Deborah, but an indictment of Israel. God had ordained the Aaronic priesthood to be the source of ongoing judgment in Israel (*Numbers 27:20-21*), but there was an apparent failure of the priesthood (as later exemplified in *Judges 17* and *1 Samuel 2:12-17*).
  - Deborah does not function as a typical judge in Israel and lead them into battle. She is a prophetess who delivers God's message for Barak to take this role. He is empowered to go by himself but he insists on Deborah coming along. Even then, she is not the leader, nor a warrior, but an accomplice and advocate. Barak is also told that he would lose glory because of his lack of faith in God.
  - Barak's hesitance appears to represent an epidemic of spiritual anemia among the men of Israel. This is a result of their idolatry. Deborah rejoiced in the following psalm that the "leaders led in Israel and the people volunteered, bless the Lord" (*Judges 5:2 and 9*). She saw the spiritual movement as an act of God.
  - She identified herself as a mother in Israel, not a queen, not a father, not a king (*Judges 5:7*). **Ultimately, God again delivers His people, but not by an expected vessel.**

### Judges 4:6-10 – Rethinking Barak

- What does Deborah's summons of Barak demonstrate about her authority? She dwelt in Ephraim and called Barak from Kedesh-Naphtali, around 85 miles away, and he came. She had recognized authority throughout Israel, not only in her local community and tribe.
- Where does Deborah's authority and call to Barak originate? The call was from God. He chose Barak, created the battle plan, and promised the victory.
- What is significant about Mount Tabor? It is located in Galilee, 11 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. It is believed by many to be the site of Jesus' transfiguration during His ministry. It rises 1,843 feet above sea level, is surrounded by a large plain (the



valley of Jezreel) which is suitable for a war, and was located near important trade routes.

- Why call out 10,000 from Naphtali and Zebulun rather than from the other tribes? We know Barak was from Naphtali. Also, this war would take place in their back yard and affect them most directly. We will see later that some of the other tribes joined in as well.
- Why would God draw out the entirety of Jabin's army? The battle would prove to be decisive and would allow the destruction of the iron chariots that advantaged Jabin and Sisera.
- How should we view Barak's requirement to have Deborah accompany him in battle? Our first reaction might be to consider his response cowardice, yet there are a couple of different passages that should be reviewed before being decisive.
  - *Hebrews 11:1-2, 31-35* – Barak is listed in the Hall of Faith while Deborah is not. While this doesn't imply that Deborah was without faith, it does set forth Barak as an example of faith. Lest we think that this list is misogynistic, note that Sarah, Rahab, Moses' parents, and other women (generally) are included in this list. Our consideration of Barak's response should not result in a determination that he was without faith.
  - *Exodus 33:12-17* – Barak's request for Deborah's presence strongly echoes Moses' request for God's presence in bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land. While Barak required Deborah to go with him, consider that God spoke to Moses face to face, yet He spoke to Barak through Deborah. Barak had faith that Deborah was God's representative, and by bringing her along, he believed that the Lord (who would deliver Israel in this battle) would be there too. While his faith could have been stronger, he was facing an enemy with resources that had never been conquered in Israel's history and he was willing to go as long as he knew the Lord would be with him. He is an example of faith, not cowardice.
- How should we view Deborah's condition that Sisera would be delivered into the hands of a woman if Deborah accompanies Barak in this battle? While we might again see this as a consequence to a lack of faith, we also see something of virtue from Barak. His greatest concern is the welfare of Israel and success in this battle, not personal glory. He is willing to share the glory of this battle if it means that he has greater confidence of the Lord's presence and participation in the battle. **Perhaps one of the most important lessons from this chapter is that God is most concerned about progress in His servants and not perfection. God met Barak where he was at, and even though Barak didn't leap to perfect faith, he was willing to step forward and the Lord covered all his weakness.** Remember that even Moses had Aaron, David had Jonathan (early on), and the Apostles were sent out two by two.

#### Judges 4:11 – Heber the Kenite

- Who is Heber the Kenite? He was a descendant of Hobab, the son of Moses' father-in-law. Heber previously lived with the other Kenites in the wilderness of Judah (*Judges 1:16*), who were given a promise of safety and land among the Israelites (*Numbers 10:29-32*).
- Why is he mentioned here? Heber lived near Kedesh, where Barak was from (Kedesh-Naphtali), which was also near Hazor where Jabin ruled as well. He may have played a role in what happens next (see *verse 12*) by alerting Jabin and Sisera about Barak and Israel.

## Judges 4:12-16 – The Battle

- Why did Sisera assemble the full array of his military for this fight? The threat of 10,000 men of Israel was significant; but it was also an opportunity to make a statement at the same time. Winning this battle decisively would cement their control over the Israelites.
- What is Deborah's role in this battle? She does not address the soldiers, but rather addresses Barak. She is there because he requested her presence. She does not try to usurp authority or go beyond his request. She is the mouthpiece of the Lord. She does not call Barak to follow her but rather declares that this is the day the Lord would deliver Sisera into his hands and exhorts him to arise and follow the Lord into battle.
- What significance should we give to her exclamation, "Behold, the Lord has gone out before you."? It implies that there was something observable that could be recognized as the presence of the Lord leading the way in this battle. This harmonizes with the theory that the Lord used a strong thunderstorm and rainfall to flood the Kishon River and mire the iron chariots.
- How was Sisera and his army defeated? The Lord routed (confused, sent into panic) Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword. The Hebrew word for "routed" is used elsewhere when natural events are used by God in battle to Israel's advantage (see Exodus 14:24, Joshua 10:10-11, and 1 Samuel 7:10). More to come on this later. It appears that a combination of natural events and the skill of Barak's army were used to defeat Sisera.
- Why did Sisera leave his chariot (drawn by horses) and flee the battle on foot? It was likely a result of the rainfall and the flooding of the Kishon. If his chariot were functioning, he would have been faster if he had remained with it (on reasonable terrain). He didn't even take his horse. During World War I, the armies found that 15 minutes of hard rain on the clay soil of the plain of Jezreel (aka the plain of Esdraelon) endangered all cavalry operations.<sup>1</sup> Because of poor natural drainage and neglect, the plain was a sparsely inhabited swampland for many centuries.
- What was Barak's priority after Sisera flees? His focus is on destroying Sisera's army, which if left unchecked could be marshalled under someone else. The victory needed to be decisive and enduring. Note that distance from Mt. Tabor to Harosheth may have been around 30 miles, making this a multi-day campaign that Barak waged against Sisera's army.
- What was the extent of Israel's victory over Sisera's army? Not a single soldier remained. Consider the impact of this victory. **It took the Israelites from slavery and oppression to freedom and the victor's spoils... all by the hand of God.**



<sup>1</sup> See John Garstang, *Joshua-Judges*, 1931; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978, at 299.

## Judges 4:17-22 – Jael and the Tent Peg

- Why would Sisera flee to Heber's tents? Perhaps he was on his way to Hazor to seek safety from Jabin, or perhaps he felt that Heber's tents were safer than Hazor, which would undoubtedly be in Barak's crosshairs. *Verse 17* states that there was "peace" (shalom) between Heber's household and Jabin. This implies more than begrudging acceptance of one another; it suggests an alliance. Hobab broke off alliance with Israel to be allied with Israel's oppressor.
- Did Jael intend to kill Sisera from the moment he came to camp? What facts support this?
  - She invited him into her tent when she heard that he had arrived at their camp, rather than letting him find shelter elsewhere in the camp. It was considered an immodest proposal for a woman to invite a man who wasn't her husband into her tent, so her action seems very purposeful.
  - She covered him with a rug, which would warm him (and induce sleep in a cold and tired man), would make him easier to hold down, and would muffle the sounds of his cries.
  - She gave him milk rather than water, which would calm him, encouraged him to let his guard down (she went above and beyond water), and also induce sleep.
  - She covered him and let him rest after the meal and his travels to induce sleep.
  - She agreed to be lookout, having gained his confidence, which would allow him the comfort he needed to fall into a deep sleep.
- Why would Jael kill Sisera? We don't know her motivation. It could be that she had a personal allegiance to Israel, despite her husband's alliance with Jabin. It could also be that she saw herself as a protector of the home after her husband was found to be in alliance with the losing party. By killing Sisera, she would find herself on Israel's side (the winning side in this battle). **Regardless of her motivations, the Lord was behind this action. There is no indication that Jael knew anything about the prophecy... there was no need to for it to be fulfilled. God was in control!**
- What do you think about Jael's deceitful murder of Sisera? Do you consider it to be honorable? Why or why not? Also see *Judges 5:6, 24-27*. She lied to Sisera and she murdered him while he slept (similar to Ehud's deception of Eglon). Yet, a battle was being waged and she chose to stand on God's side when she chose to align herself with Israel. This was an act of faith, though the means of accomplishing the task are the means of battle (deceit and murder). Recall that David was a man after God's own heart but wasn't fit to build the temple because he was a man of war (see *1 Chronicles 28:2-3*).
- When Barak arrived, seeing Sisera dead in the floor of Jael's tent would no doubt bring him back to the Palm of Deborah where the prophecy was given. There would be no question in his mind or anyone else who knew the truth... this was the work of the Lord!

## Judges 4:23-24 – Final Victory

- Who is the hero of this story? See verses 7, 9, 14, 15, and 23. God is the hero. **Even when using natural (rainstorms), common (Israelite warriors), and imperfect (Jael) means to accomplish His plan, He is no less worthy of glory! In the end, we are all just tent pegs and hammers in God's hands. We should desire His glory above all because any other motive is based on a lie.**