



Judges - Chapter Four

II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

This chapter describes Israel's remarkable victory over the more powerful Canaanites. The judge is the prophetess Deborah and the leader of the Israelite army who supported her was Barak. The Israelites, because of their apostasy, had been handed over by the Lord to King Jabin of Canaan.

It is Deborah who gives direction to Barak in his battle against Sisera, the leader of Jabin's army. Barak gives chase to Sisera but his death comes from an unlikely source, a woman called Jael drives a tent peg into his temple as he rested in her tent, thus fulfilling the prophecy Deborah had given from the Lord. Israel went on to defeat Jabin and his army.

II.d Judges 4:1-5:31 - Deborah

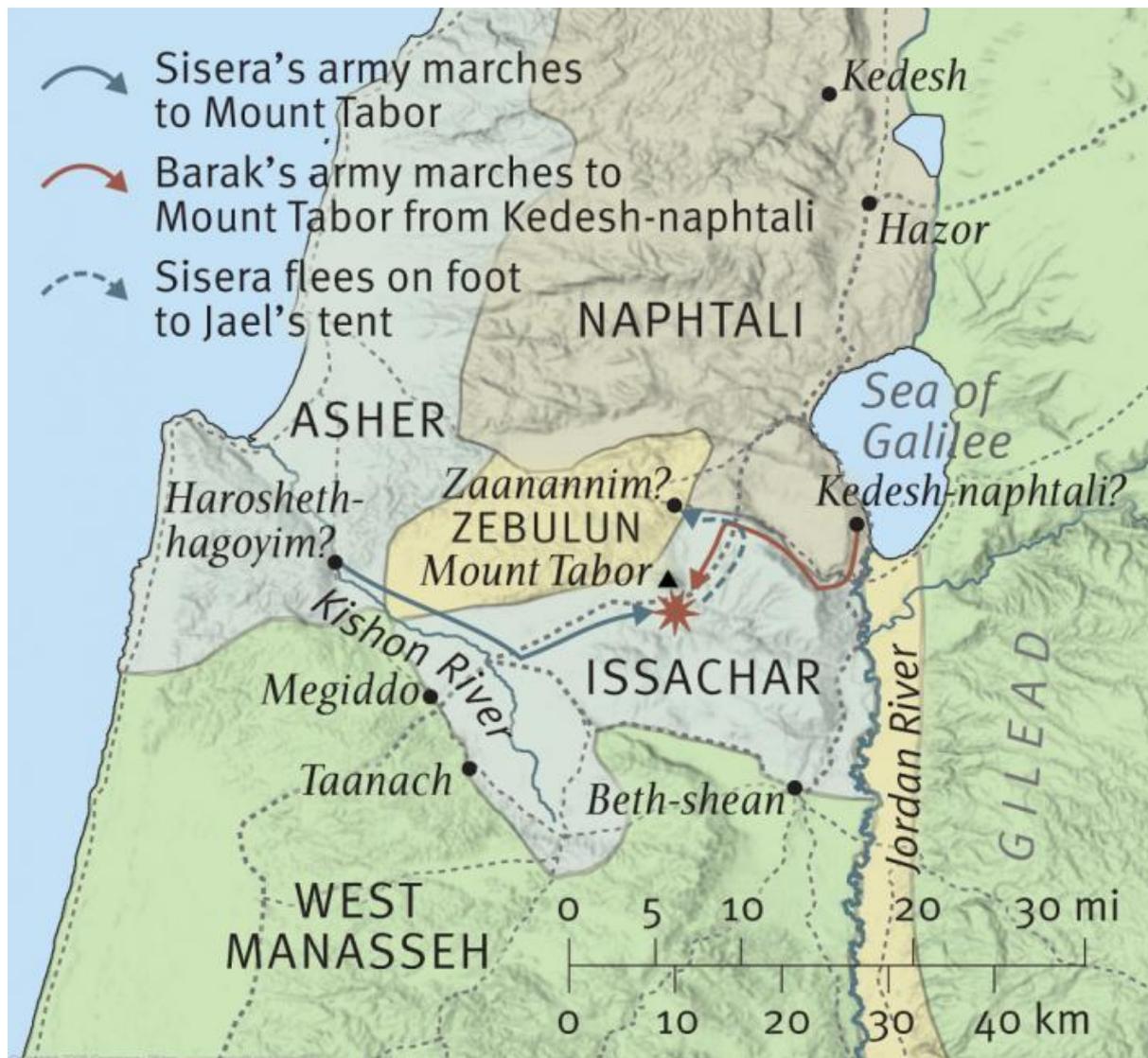
The fourth judge was Deborah, whose story is the first extended account in the book, which will be the pattern for Gideon in Chapters 6-8, Jephthah in Chapter 11, and Samson in Chapters 13-16.

While the pattern of apostasy continues, as confirmed in Judges 4:1-3, Deborah distinguishes herself as the most godly of all the judges; it is ironic that the most distinguished judge was a woman. She was a prophet and <<*a mother in Israel*>> (Judges 5:7), and many sought out her judicial decisions <<*under the palm of Deborah*>> (Judges 4:5).

She instructed Barak in the conduct of the battle and led in the victory song in Chapter 5, where she figures prominently. Deborah's actions and words consistently pointed to God, not away from him, in contrast to the poor choices of judges like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

II.d.i Judges 4:1-24 - Deborah and Barak

Refer to the chapter summary above.



Deborah and Barak Defeat the Canaanites

When King Jabin of Hazor oppressed the Israelites, Deborah called upon Barak from Kedesh-naphtali to fight against him. The Israelite forces gathered at Mount Tabor, and Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, marched his men to the Kishon River. The Israelites defeated Sisera's forces and chased them all the way back to Harosheth-hagoyim, but Sisera fled on foot to the oak at Zaananim, where a woman named Jael killed him as he rested in her tent.

¹ The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. ² So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goim. ³ Then the Israelites cried out to the

Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.

Judges 4:1-3

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. The cycle of apostasy continues. Ehud's victory over Moab in Chapter 3 had brought peace but he has now died and the people return to their wicked ways, so the Lord hands them over to the Canaanite King Jabin. Finally, after twenty years of cruel oppression the people cried out to the Lord for help: <<*Their enemies oppressed them, and they were brought into subjection under their power. Many times he delivered them, but they were rebellious in their purposes, and were brought low through their iniquity*>> (Psalm 106:42-43).

Seeing the continual drift to disobedience makes one less and less confident of man but more and more impressed with the mercy and grace of God. Even though Israel kept forsaking him, he kept working with them.

⁴ At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement.

Judges 4:4-5

Deborah is called a prophetess, one of five such women in the OT: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3), and Noadiah, a false prophetess (Nehemiah 6:14). And in the NT there is Anna (Luke 2:36), and Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:8-9).

Some consider it unexpected for God to raise up a woman as prophetess. However, the NT makes it clear that God grants the gift of prophecy to women as well as men, and they are to practice it appropriately with regard to cultural acceptances: <<*but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved*>> (1 Corinthians 11:5). From 1 Corinthians 11:5, the essential element to a woman's ministry as a prophetess in the early church was her clear submission to the male leadership in the church, evidenced by her wearing of a veil. In the NT church, a woman was to use her gifts in the context of order established by the leaders of the church, just like anyone's gift. This is always possible because the gift of prophecy never overwhelms the one who receives it: <<*And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets*>> (1 Corinthians 14:32). However, care needs to be taken to differentiate between some of the cultural practices of the early church and the will of God. If he gives women gifts of prophecy, teaching and leadership, as was the case with Deborah, then

they should be allowed to use those gifts and not have them stifled by male dominated dogma. The writer to the Hebrews seems to clearly have a preference for male heroes when he makes reference to Barak without even mentioning Deborah: <<And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets>> (Hebrews 11:32).

Still more people consider it unexpected for God to raise up a woman to be a judge, a *shaphat*, a heroic leader for Israel. Deborah was a woman greatly used by God and she was also a woman who respected the people God raised up for other purposes, notably here, Barak as a military leader. Deborah functioned as a civil leader (vv.6-10 and 5:7), and as a judge who decided cases. She lived in southern Ephraim, near Judah. Therefore, it can be assumed she was an Ephraimite.

The Israelites came up to her for judgement. This was the function of civil leadership. Often it is assumed that Deborah was allowed leadership because unspecified men failed to take the position, although Scripture does not offer this up. While later it will be seen that Barak does not seem to be all he should be as a military leader, there is no indication that he failed to do something God told him to do in taking leadership. God had given him a role at this point in history just as he had the two principle women in the account.

⁶ She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, ‘The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, “Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷ I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.”’ ⁸ Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.’ ⁹ And she said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.’ Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Judges 4:6-10

She sent and summoned Barak. Deborah never believed that God called her alone to deliver Israel. She realised that God would do much of the work through Barak. It is recorded that he lived in the land allocated to Naphtali and is accepted that he came from that tribe.

The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you. The use of this phrase suggests that Deborah simply confirmed something that the Lord had already given to Barak. God often brings confirmation when he speaks to people, especially if what they believe he wants them to do will affect other people. Deborah did not lead the army herself, but challenged Barak, a man, to do so; a woman would not normally be a military leader in Israel. In response, Barak summoned the tribes of Israel and led the army. At least six tribes participated in the battle: **Zebulun and Naphtali**, Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh (i.e. Machir), and Issachar (Judges 5:14-15). This is the nearest thing to a national coalition in the book. To his discredit, Barak hesitated to lead the Israelites in battle. Thus, Deborah agreed to go with him but predicted that the glory for the battle would go to a woman; refer to the comment made on Judges 5:24-27.

If you will go with me, I will go. It did not seem unwise of Barak to ask Deborah to come with him. Yet the fact that he demanded it showed that he trusted more in Deborah's relationship with God than with his own relationship with God.

I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. Because of this, Barak would not be the one to personally defeat Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, but a woman would be the one. At this point it might be expected that this to be fulfilled by Deborah herself, but this prophecy will be fulfilled rather unexpectedly.

Ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him. Nevertheless, Barak and all who went with him showed real courage and trust in God to go out against Sisera and his much stronger army. They had essentially no weapons to fight with against a technologically advanced army, having nine hundred chariots of iron. In addition, God led them to fight on a plain, which gave great advantage to the forces with chariots.

¹¹ Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.

Judges 4:11

The introduction of **Heber**, Jael's husband, anticipates vv.17-22.

The Kenites were distantly related to the Israelites through **Hobab** or Jethro, the priest of Midian and **the father-in-law of Moses**, back to Abraham and his second wife Keturah; refer to Genesis 25:1-4.

¹² When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³ Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots

of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. ¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you.’ So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. ¹⁵ And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, ¹⁶ while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.

Judges 4:12-16

Nine hundred chariots of iron. Sisera’s army was very impressive: chariots were swift, manoeuvrable weapons of war, the ancient equivalent of tanks; refer also to the comment made on Judges 1:19. However, the chariots got mired in the river Kishon as recorded in Judges 5:19-22.

And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak. Because of Barak’s great trust in God, as well as the trust his armies had in the Lord, God granted them a great victory against great odds. It is known from Judges 5:4-5 and 5:21 that God helped Israel to victory by bringing a flash flood. The muddy conditions made the chariots of iron a hindrance, not an asset in the battle.

So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. This was a wonderful act of faith on the part of Barak, who moved to a battleground where his armies were at a great disadvantage against the enemy’s chariots. Church tradition identifies Mount Tabor as the site for the Transfiguration of Jesus, although most scholars favour Mount Hermon, outside of Galilee and rising 9,166 feet or 2,794m above sea level. Tabor is about 12 miles or 19 km from the Sea of Galilee; refer to Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36.



The Lord is indeed going out before you. This is a phrase that speaks of a king or general leading his troops: <<***But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles’***>> (1 Samuel 8:19-20). Therefore, Deborah played a big role in this victory. She was an encourager, building up the faith of

Barak and his men. Her encouragement was that God, as the King, would go out before his people into battle.

¹⁷ Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. ¹⁸ Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.’ So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. ¹⁹ Then 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. ²⁰ He said to her, ‘Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, “Is anyone here?” say, “No.”’ ²¹ But Jael wife of Heber took a tent-peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground – he was lying fast asleep from weariness – and he died. ²² Then, as Barak came in pursuit of 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 was Sisera lying dead, with the tent-peg in his temple.

Judges 4:17-22

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite. Here the story takes an unexpected turn. God promised that a woman would defeat Sisera (v.9). One would logically assume that this would be Deborah, but God had something else in mind. Instead, he used the wife of a Kenite to accomplish Sisera’s end.

Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear. Because there was peace between the people of Sisera and the people of Jael, he had reason to believe he could trust Jael’s invitation to rest.

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent-peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple. The gory detail of this matter supports the idea that this was an eye-witness account. Jael knew how to handle a tent-peg because it was customarily the job of women to set up the tents. She struck the peg so hard that it went down into the ground.

Jael broke a fundamental principle of hospitality and many in the ancient world would think her a treacherous woman. She broke her promise to Sisera and killed a man that her own husband had made peace with. Yet God used even her treachery to accomplish his purpose. Surely, Sisera deserved to die; he fought against God’s people on behalf of a leader who had harshly oppressed

the people of Israel (v.3). The lesson here is important, God can make even the evil of man serve his purpose: <<*Human wrath serves only to praise you*>> (Psalm 76:10a). Yet, that never diminishes the personal responsibility of the one doing the evil. Judas' betrayal of Jesus served the eternal purpose of God, yet he still answered for that treacherous deed.

He was lying fast asleep from weariness. The adrenalin rush from battle and then flight had clearly worn off and he had become very tired to the point of exhaustion. This made it easier for Jael to approach him undetected. This was probably the same exhaustion that Jonah felt when fleeing from the Lord that allowed him to sleep during the great storm that threatened their ship and the lives of all aboard: <<*Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep*>> (Jonah 1:5).

There was Sisera lying dead. The story of Sisera's death by the hand of Jael is detailed in a slow, suspenseful manner reminiscent of the story of Ehud's killing of Eglon in Judges 3:12-30. God himself is credited with subduing Jabin, a process that took some time to complete.

²³ So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites. ²⁴ Then the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan.

Judges 4:23-24

So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites. Once again, it is clear that it is God who goes before his people and wins the victory for them: <<*So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hands, with their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them as they pleased*>> (Nehemiah 9:24), as David confirms: <<*The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation, the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me*>> (Psalm 18:46-47).

Then the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan. The battle against Sisera was important, but it did not end the struggle. It was an important event that Israel had to continue to develop and walk in. The war was not over until Jabin was destroyed. Israel could not think the war was over when a great battle was won.