

THE FAITHFUL JUDGES OF ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

Oppression and deliverance by the first three judges did not teach Israel the lesson that God refuses to tolerate sin. Once again as a result of Israel's sin, the Lord sold them into bondage (4:1, 2). This time the Canaanites were permitted to oppress Israel for 20 years.

The LORD's battle plan for Israel's deliverance from Canaan's oppression demanded faith on the part of Deborah and Barak. These two leaders of Israel believed that the Lord would enable their poorly equipped army to defeat Jabin's mighty 900 chariots of iron. The Lord did this by causing a heavy rain to flood the plain of Esdraelon. Normally, the Kishon River, which is located in the plain of Esdraelon is scarcely more than a rivulet (4:7), but the Lord made it turn into a raging torrent (5:21). This storm made the 900 chariots of iron useless. Besides Deborah and Barak, the Lord also used Jael, a second woman, to bring deliverance to Israel (4:18-21).

Deborah's song of victory pays tribute to the people who were willing to fight against Canaan (5:14-15, 18). It also makes mention of the cowardice of certain tribes who refused to fight (5:15b-17).

The story of Deborah and Barak is given twice. In chapter four it is given in prose, and in chapter five it is given in poetry. Since different facts are given in the poetical account, the liberal critics have claimed that one or the other of these accounts, or maybe both, are inaccurate. Their conclusion is not necessary. New facts do not make one account more trustworthy than the other. These are not contradictory accounts, but rather, they are supplementary.

I. The Problem — 4:1-3

4:1 — "Israel again did evil" - Israel enjoyed peace and rest for 80 years by keeping themselves from sin, but eventually the new generation went back to sin and idolatry (5:8).

4:2 — "The Lord sold them" - Israel sinned grievously and the Lord enslaved them to the Canaanites who took over the northern parts of Israel's land. The Canaanites were so cruel to the Israelites that they did not dare to travel on the main highways; instead they took the back roads (5:6). Also, the peasants, who lived in the open areas and in unwalled villages, left those places to live in the walled cities where they could find more protection (5:7). God allowed Israel to be stripped of all of their weapons and be made militarily weak because of their idolatry.

"Jabin king of Canaan" — this Jabin lived about 100 years after the one that was defeated by Joshua (Josh 11:1-13).

"Hazor" — this was an important city that was defeated and burned by Joshua. Later it was rebuilt by the Canaanites.

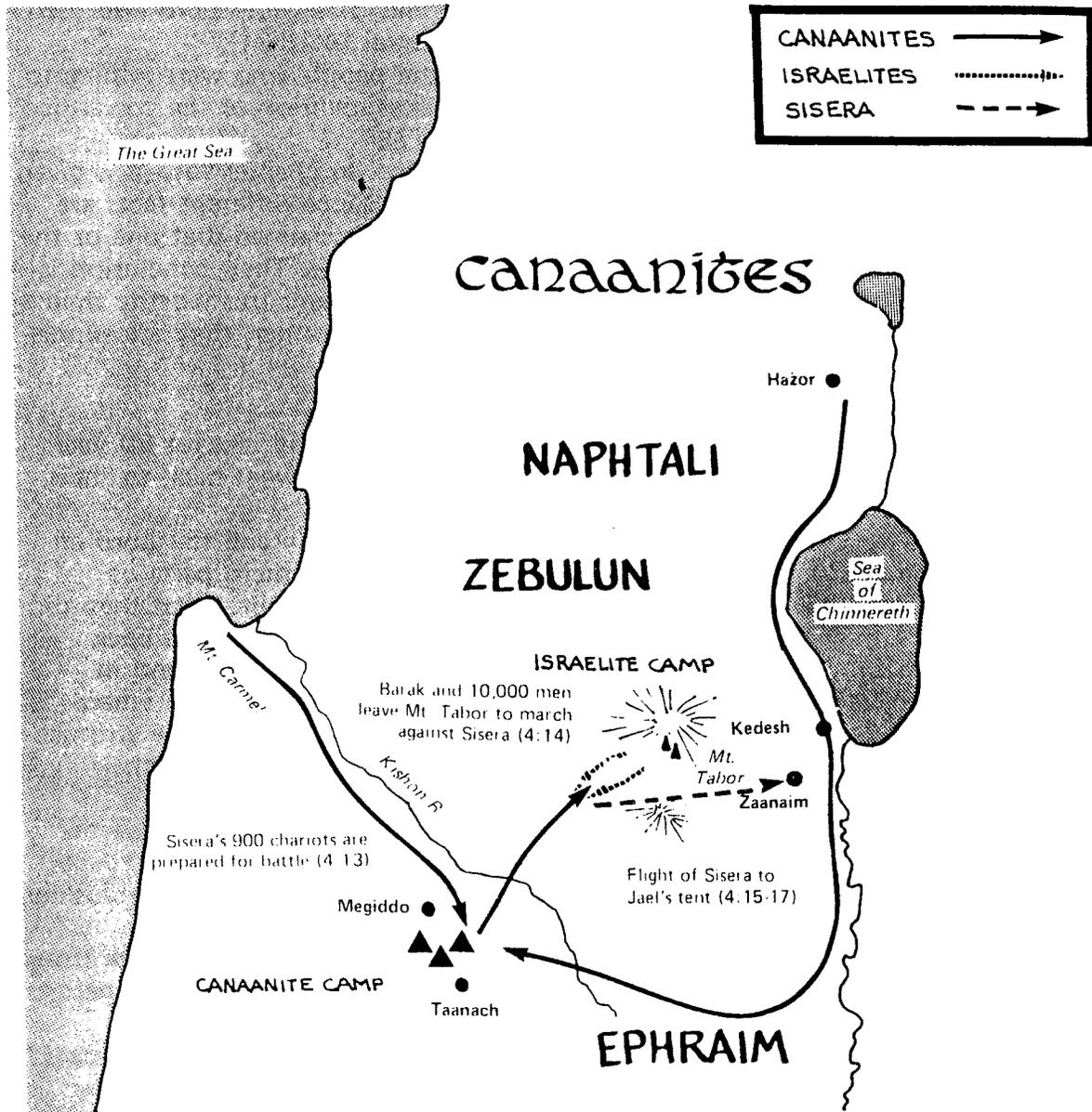
"Sisera" — a capable general who was in charge of the Canaanite troops in the plain of Esdraelon, armed with the awesome force of 900 chariots

4:3 — "Israel cried unto the LORD" - this was a cry of sorrow that Israel experienced for their sin. It took twenty years of slavery before they would turn from their idols and humbly cry out to the LORD. Sin had a tight grip on their lives.

II. The Prophetess — 4:4-9

4:4 — "Deborah, a prophetess . . . judged Israel" - Deborah was an unusual woman who revealed the messages of the LORD God to His people and who also judged them by resolving their problems.

BATTLE OF DEBORAH AND BARAK



4:5 — Many came to Deborah for her decisions because she was highly respected.

4:6 — "She sent and summoned Barak" - Barak lived about 70 miles to the north of the place where Deborah was judging Israel, yet she had heard about him and sent for him. She told him that the LORD wanted him to lead Israel in an important military battle against the Canaanites.

"Kedesh-Naphtali" — this is the town of Kedesh, where Barak lived in the lot of land given to the tribe of Naphtali. It was probably east of Mt. Tabor on the high western bank overlooking the southern end of the Sea of Galilee (Khirbet Qedish).

"Ten thousand men" — Deborah called on Barak to gather 10,000 men chiefly from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, which were located in the area where the Canaanites were strongest. Other tribes also helped such as Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (half-tribe of Manasseh on west side of Jordan) and Issachar (cf. 5:14-15). Barak was to take these men and march them to Mt. Tabor. This mountain is located on the eastern end of the plain of Esdraelon. From Mt. Tabor Barak had a good vantage point where he could survey the actions of Sisera.

4:7 — "River Kishon" - this river was a mere rivulet most of the year, located in the Plain of Esdraelon, flowing northwest past Mt. Carmel out to the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, this river was going to be used by God to defeat the mighty chariot army of Sisera.

4:8 — Barak's faith depended on Deborah's presence. For this lack of faith, he lost some of the honor that God intended to give to him (4:9, 18-22).

4:9 — "I will surely go with thee" - Deborah's faith was strong and consented to go with Barak.

III. The Preparations — 4:10-14

4:10 — "At his feet" - under Barak's control. Although several tribes responded to Barak's call in addition to Zebulun and Naphtali, who jeopardized their lives (cf. notes on 4:6), some did not respond to his call for help. These tribes were Reuben, Gilead (Gad and Manasseh on the east side of the Jordan), Dan, and Asher (5:15-17). A strong curse was placed on Meroz for not helping the Lord when it was needed (5:23). This is probably an indirect rebuke on all the tribes that refused to help.

4:11 — "Father-in-law" - the Hebrew term simply refers to a relationship by marriage and is better translated as "brother-in-law."

"By Kedesh" — Heber lived near the hometown of Barak (cf. 4:6).

4:11-13 — Sisera made preparations for war too. He had been warned by Heber, a distant relative of Moses, that Barak was getting ready to attack. Therefore, Sisera got his 900 chariots and other soldiers ready for war.

4:14 — Barak had a great advantage over Sisera because he was told by Deborah when it was the right time to attack (cf. 5:12). Barak obeyed the Lord when Deborah gave him the message. Even though Barak and his army were no match for Sisera's 900 chariots, the timing of the attack was crucial to the outcome of this battle. For Barak's act of faith, his name is listed with the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 (11:32).

IV. The Pursuit — 4:15-22

4:15 — "The Lord discomfited Sisera and all his chariots, and all his host" - not only did the sword of Barak's army defeat Sisera, but a heavy rainstorm, sent by the Lord just as Barak was descending Mt. Tabor, was even more crucial to Barak's victory (5:20-22). The downpour made the battlefield so soft that the wheels of the chariots sunk into the mud and made them useless. The horses became wild with fright and Sisera's army was at the mercy of Barak's men. The timing of the attack was perfect.

"Sisera . . . fled away on his feet" — it appears that Sisera considered the battle a complete loss when he decided to leave his troops and tried to make it back to Hazor to break the bad news to King Jabin before anyone else could do so. No doubt, he wanted to put himself in the best light possible in spite of these adverse circumstances.

V. The Prosperity — 4:23-24

4:23 — "God subdued . . . Jabin" - it was God that provided Israel with the power to get the victory. No one could get proud over this feat. Without God's power, Jabin would not have been

defeated at the height of his power. This defeat of Sisera was not expected at all by his mother and her lady friends. They thought Sisera would easily win the battle against the weak Israelites, but they did not comprehend the power of the LORD (5:28-30).

4:24 — "Israel prospered" - Israel had to work, but it was God that made their labors worthwhile. God does not bless laziness; He blesses faith and hard work.

"Until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan" — the victory over Sisera was the beginning of the end for Jabin himself. It seems that Jabin was finally killed and the tyranny of the Canaanites was over. Israel was saved and had rest and success in their land for forty years (5:31). Thus the cycle of sin, slavery, sorrow, salvation and security was completed once more.

VI. The Praise — 5:1-5, 9-11

5:1 — "Deborah and Barak . . . sang on that day" - it was good for them to sing praise to the LORD for the victory that He gave.

5:2 — "When the people willingly offered themselves" - God is good to those who were willing to sacrifice their lives for His service (cf. 5:9).

5:11 — "Rehearse the righteous acts of the LORD" - it is good to remember the good works of the LORD and praise Him continuously. New generations also need to be told of His righteous acts so that they give proper honor to Him.

5:16 — "All the host of Sisera fell" - Barak's victory over Sisera was complete. No one man survived to make trouble for Israel at a later time.

5:17-21 — Sisera tried to escape from Barak, but he made the mistake of asking Heber's wife (Jael) for help and protection. The Lord gave Jael wisdom to count him as an enemy after she had helped him. At first she gave him milk to quench his thirst and a place to rest for his tired body, but then she rightly counted him an enemy and killed him. She took a tent stake and a hammer and drove the stake through the temples of his head while he was asleep at her feet (cf. 5:24-27). This may sound gruesome, but war is never beautiful. For this act, Jael was blessed by Deborah in her song (5:24).

5:22 — Barak pursued after Sisera, but God did not let him destroy his enemy, because he had not been willing to fight without Deborah's help. His faith was strong, but not strong enough to get all the honor that God had intended to give him. Some honor was shared with Jael, because she actually destroyed the wicked Sisera.