

# Judges 4-5

Lesson 2 Spring 2013 Series 1

Chapter 4 begins with the, all too familiar, formula that, “That the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”. So the cycle continues, and “the Lord sold” (מָכַר) them, this time, into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan. Jabin ruled from Hazor, where apparently there was a dynasty of kings (cf. Joshua 11).



The town of Hazor is mentioned, but plays no role in the

narrative except as the place where Jabin dwells and waits for information from the battlefield. It was important to the audience because it will have brought to their mind the importance of this city and the kingdom's size in dominating the northern part of Israel. Sisera was the commander who would actually conduct the battle and will act as the main antagonist in the narrative.<sup>1</sup>

When reading the account of the judgeship of Deborah it must be noted that there are two versions of the story, the prose narrative (Judges 4) and the poetic account, "Song of Deborah" (Judges 5). While both accounts are certainly of the same story they do differ in a number of details. Judges 4:2 describes Sisera as the general who serves Jabin, a Canaanite king of Hazor. Jabin does not appear at all in the "Song of Deborah", which focuses its attention on Sisera and depicts him as a royal figure (5:19), although it does not specifically refer to him as a king: one of the most striking differences is between the accounts of the mustering of the Israelite tribes. In 4:10 Zebulun and

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<sup>1</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon GA: Smyth &

Naphtali are called up, while the song praises also Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, and Issachar (5:14-15). Machir represents the tribe of Manasseh in this list as he was the son of Manasseh.<sup>2</sup>

These two different genres will most often treat a single common incident in radically different ways and for equally distinctive purposes. Narrative normally intends to relate the substance of an event with some attention to chronological sequence, details of the main action and even dialogue. Narrative engages a storyteller and a listener or perhaps reader. Song by contrast seeks to evoke emotion and attitudes associated with the subject of the song. Song summons the audience to become involved as performers in the action described. Chapter 5 bears all the marks of such a song and thus will have a disregard for chronology and historical detail that would be expected in a narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 5 will seek to stir the heart and touch the emotion

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<sup>2</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary*, pp. 55-56.

of the audience and summon them to sing along, and thus join in the action.

Once again Israel “cried out to the LORD” after twenty years of oppression under Jabin. The answer to this cry for help comes in a form that appears to have been strange to the Israelites. It comes in the form of a “prophetess” (נְבִיאָה) who served as judge (שֹׁפֵטָה) (This is a Qal, Feminine, Singular, Participle) over Israel during this time. Deborah carries the title of “prophetess” along with Mariam (Exodus 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). The description is not ascribed to any other judge.<sup>4</sup> Much has been made of the fact that Deborah is a women and I think perhaps this has often become a distraction to the actual source of the power in the events taking place here. God is the source of the information, the power, and ultimately the victory for Israel. It is perhaps noteworthy that God is no respecter of gender in choosing the instrument of salvation for his people.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 186.

In verse 6 Deborah summons Barak and delivers a message to him from God with the words, “The LORD, the God of Israel commands you” .... She then proceeds to convey to him the plan of God for victory over the forces of Jabin. At verse 8 Barak makes a request for Deborah to go with him and implement the plan that God has laid out before him. In the same vein as many others that have encountered God’s directives and have expressed either doubts or conditions so too Barak indicates that he needs proof of God’s presence in the form of Deborah’s presence. Moses said he was slow of speech, Gideon that he was too insignificant and Jeremiah said he was too young, so also Barak has a request too. This request will result in the loss of glory for Barak in the victory over Sisera. The victory instead will fall to a woman.<sup>5</sup>

The information supplied by verse 11 is essential in understanding the role that would be played by the Kenites in the battle that is about to begin.<sup>6</sup> Heber the Kenite is

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<sup>5</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>6</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 189.

related to the in-laws of Moses and he has moved to the spot where Sisera has deployed his forces. Much of the story's narrative here relies upon the tension and resolution that hangs on the struggle Jael faces in choosing which allegiance to honor. This is a story that downplays the role of hesitant male leadership figure and highlights the role of a cunning and daring woman, or perhaps women in general, as Deborah and Jael are the truly heroic characters in this story. Some see the implication of verses 11 and 17 as that Heber has made some form of treaty with Sisera, they are after all deployed on the territory of Heber, without resistance it seems. Verse 17 also indicates that there was "peace" between King Jabin and the clan of Heber. This perhaps explains why Sisera would feel safety in taking refuge in the tent of Jael.<sup>7</sup> In reality all we are actually told by this intrusive comment at verse 11 is why some of the Kenites are further north than we might expect them to be.<sup>8</sup> It is not until later that it will be made clear that an agreement exists between Heber and Jabin (Verse 17).

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<sup>7</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary*, pp. 56-57.

At verse 12 the story switches modes to providing more detail as the point of the story begins to draw near. Sisera is informed that Barak had gone up to Mount Tabor and so he prepares his forces for battle. Notice at verse 14 it is Deborah who gives the order for Tabor to engage the enemy. The promise she gives is that the Lord “has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you.” This language and the idea that are conveyed here, where “panic” is introduced, is reminiscent of an idea associated with Israel’s Holy War tradition. The idea conveyed here exemplifies a major strand of God’s activity in the realm of humans: God creates the conditions, but there is the expectation that human beings must be obedient in following the command of God in order for the conditions to produce the result desired.<sup>9</sup>

God expects us to follow him in faith and trust him. When that happens great and powerful things happen. In this instance it was easy for Barak to know what God wanted because he had the voice of Deborah, who had

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<sup>9</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary*, p. 59.

served as a faithful servant of God for at least some period of time. Barak seems to have trusted her, and the fact that the words she spoke came from God. Barak also seems to love his people and God enough that knowing that the glory of the victory not going to him does not deter his participation in the battle. He proceeds in obedience despite the knowledge that Deborah had given him, which made clear that the “glory” of the victory would not be his.

With verse 17 Sisera abandons, what had been his source of confidence, his chariot, and flees on foot. He thinks he is fleeing to safety, but again God is going to use a woman to demonstrate his power and to perhaps highlight the role of loyalty to God. Jael demonstrates more loyalty to God, by providing protection and safety for God’s people than had the male leader of the clan Heber. She also demonstrates a wisdom, or at least shrewdness, in using her abilities to lay a trap for Sisera. There was probably no hope for her to personally overpower him with either strength or skill in battle, but through shrewdness she overcomes him.



Some have seen in this encounter a problem with the fact that Jael seems to violate not only the treaty made by her husband but also a sacrosanct custom with regard to hospitality and refuge. First, it should be noted that women were not subject to the political treaties made by their husbands, as they were not involved in politics, normally. What about the charge that she violated rules governing the host? Some have lambasted her for her seeming violation of the cultural norms that were expected in this time and in this culture.<sup>10</sup>

However, Matthews has written an article that challenges this perspective and offers an alternative view. Matthews notes that hospitality in the Near East, not only in ancient times but also in modern times, followed a set pattern of expectation and obligation. The concept of hosting likely originated from the need for aid when a person was away from home. Reciprocal actions as well as expectations grew out of this need, allowing strangers to be welcomed into an encampment, village, or even a town. The

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<sup>10</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary*, p. 60.

stranger was given a new status, he was a guest and this relationship was regulated by tradition. If either party violated the pattern of ritual that governed such a relationship then overt hostility could occur.<sup>11</sup>

The protection and comfort to which the pattern would have entitled the guest to have, and the host to provide, were no longer required whenever the norm was not followed. Violence could be the result, with the host inflicting violence, and anticipating violence from the guest. It is perhaps a curiosity to note how seldom this sacred custom follows proper protocol in the biblical narratives. The majority of instances speak of hospitality from a negative aspect with the characters of the Bible either consciously, or unconsciously violating the structures of such expectations, or perhaps even reversing roles. Only at Genesis 18 and 24 are there examples of what appears to be the proper manner of behavior within the biblical hospitality ritual. It is possible though, from these examples, to draw a model that can be used to compare

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<sup>11</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", in *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, (1991), 21:13-21.

with the remainder of the examples of hospitality in the context of the Old Covenant.<sup>12</sup>

The expectations of hospitality are clearly delineated in the article by Matthews and the story of Jael and Sisera contains so many violations of the code of hospitality that was expected that it can only be concluded that a conscious attempt was made by the author of Judges to justify the actions of Jael. The author points out clearly where proper protocol was not adhered to by the two parties, i.e. Jael and Sisera. The attack that is inflicted by Jael is telegraphed throughout the account by one violation after another of the proper etiquette by both Sisera and Jael. In such an instance hospitality becomes hostility and the host retains the right of hostility against a stranger in the midst of the community.<sup>13</sup>

The violations begin at 4:17 where Sisera seeks refuge at the tent of the “wife” of Heber the Kenite. It is logical that Sisera would seek refuge at the tent of an ally, but the logic breaks down when Sisera seeks refuge at the tent of Jael

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<sup>12</sup> Victor H. Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4”, 21:13-21.

<sup>13</sup> Victor H. Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4”, 21:13-21.

rather than at the tent of Heber, who was head of the household. By approaching the tent of the wife of Heber, Sisera robs Heber of his rights as head of household to offer hospitality. This change dishonors Heber. It may have been the case that Heber had more than one wife and in such an instance Heber will have provided a tent for each of his wives. There could be all sorts of reasons that Sisera approached the tent of Jael rather than the tent of Heber, but all of them are for the advantage of Sisera and do not honor Heber. It is also highly unlikely that there were no men nearby in the precincts of where Jael was at, but it likely speaks of the stealth with which she was approached that no one else was alerted. He was sneaking about.<sup>14</sup>

At Judges 4:18a the indication is that Jael came out to meet Sisera, she then offered him hospitality. It is a violation of the code of hospitality for a woman to offer hospitality. Only the male head of house had the right to offer the hospitality. The way this narrative reads it will have jangled the sensibilities of the original readers and

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<sup>14</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", 21:13-21.

held their attention as they await the outcome of this scenario. Jael's statement to have no fear is unprecedented and functions as part of the deception and serves as another piece of irony in the story. In this story Sisera places himself at risk, not by trusting Jael but by breaching the code of custom that was expected. Matthews holds the view that what Jael does in deceiving Sisera she does for the protection of her household and for her own protection.<sup>15</sup> In 5:30 the text reads, "A girl or two for every man"; with the Hebrew law on this subject being that women taken in war belonged to their captors (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). This verse is extremely hard to translate properly, but the word here for "girl" is literally "womb" (רַחֵם) and is a derogatory term depicting the Israelite women as sex objects by whom the soldiers could satisfy their lust.<sup>16</sup>

The implication of the entire narrative is that Jael had every reason to fear being raped by this man who was known for such things even by his mother and was clearly

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<sup>15</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", 21:13-21.

<sup>16</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 203.

willing to obviate even the some most sacred customs for Near Eastern peoples by not observing properly the customs of hospitality. At Judges 4:18b Sisera enters the tent of Jael and is covered with a rug. It was improper for Sisera to accept Jael's invitation in the same way that it was improper for Jael to make the offer. In accepting the invitation the narrator is showing that Sisera does not merit the protection that would generally be anticipated under the hospitality code. In this scene there is a further departure from the normal hospitality code and that is that footwashing is not offered. This may be an additional hint offered by the narrator that Sisera has not been granted true guest status in this instance. It was customary for the host to have a servant wash the feet of an honored guest.<sup>17</sup>

At 4:19a Sisera asks for a drink of water. This is a flaunting of what was customary, as it is improper for the guest to request anything of the host. It infringes on the honor of the host to make a request, giving the implication that the needs of the guest have been inadequately met.

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<sup>17</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", 21:13-21.

This is the only instance in the Old Testament of a guest making a request of the host. Genesis 24:17 is not an exception to this statement as hospitality has not been offered in that instance and it is improper for a stranger to take water from a source without permission.<sup>18</sup>

Jael's reaction to the improper request of Sisera is not improper, but the giving to him of the milk may be a part of an effort to insure that Sisera becomes drowsy so that he may be killed more easily. At 4:20 Sisera makes an additional improper request of Jael when he asks her to stand at the door of the tent to keep watch for him. This shames Jael and is even an implied threat to her by Sisera. It should also be noted that after Jael kills Sisera and goes out and finds Barak she invites him to her tent. This is not an offer of hospitality; it is simply informational; to show Barak where Sisera's body now was. We are not informed in any way in chapter 4 of the reaction of Barak to what he found and indeed there is no praise or condemnation of her act until we get to the Song of Deborah

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<sup>18</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", 21:13-21.

which does praise her act as a sign of loyalty to God (Judges 5:24; 31).<sup>19</sup>

Detailed commentary on Judges 5 may be one of the most difficult tasks that is to be faced by the interpreter of the Old Testament. In the Old Greek translation of this section in verses 7, 16, 21 and 22 the translator had to transliterate Hebrew words which had no corresponding value in Greek. At least twenty-two verses, in this chapter, have at least one word for which translation is only conjecture. Verses 2, 10, 11, 12, 14, 21, 22 and 26 are not completely comprehensible to the interpreter or the translator. Some have conjectured that the prose portion (chapter 4) was written because the poem was barely comprehensible even in antiquity. The poem plays with words and it quite obvious that it is very elegantly written even though its meaning remains obscure.<sup>20</sup>

Because of these difficulties I will not undertake a detailed analysis of this chapter, but simply a cursory overview. Note that as the song begins, it is sung not simply

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<sup>19</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", 21:13-21.

<sup>20</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 135.



by Deborah, but also sung by Barak. Reuben heads the list of those that demonstrate their disloyalty to the confederation (verses 15-16) of Israelite tribes, and the list continues with Dan and Asher (verse 17) while it praises Zebulun and Naphtali (verse 18). The clear implication of verse 20 is that there were supernatural forces arrayed against Sisera in the battle. It is conjectured that Meroz (verse 23) was a town along the road taken by Sisera in his flight, where those who dwelt there failed to capture Sisera and therefore they are cursed.<sup>21</sup>

Verse 24 begins by naming and praising Jael and in contrast to Meroz she provided not only aid to Israel she crushed the head of the enemies of God's people (quite literally - verse 26). At verse 28 the scene changes to the dwelling of the mother of Sisera who wonders why he is so long in returning and she is comforted by the words of the wise ladies who surround her with the implication that he is taking so long because raping and pillaging takes a while and there is a lot of spoil to divide. Verse 31 completes the

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<sup>21</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 201.

poem with a curse and a blessing. A curse is pronounced on the enemies of Yahweh and a blessing on the friends of the victorious tribes of Israel. This cycle then ends with the land being given rest for a period of forty years.

What then is the purpose of these two chapters? One of the purposes is to emphasize loyalty to God and another is to begin to build a more firm sense of unity between the divergent tribes of the sons of Israel, the people of God. There is a condemnation of those who fail to answer the call and follow the directions of God's prophetess, in this instance. Another lesson to be learned from this narrative and poem is that what is needed is obedience to God and not superiority of weaponry or physical preparedness. When God fights for you no one, nor anything, can stand in opposition. The fact that the commander of the army and the one who took the glorious victory were women indicates that God can work through anyone and in any circumstance, even when society and culture may be against what is happening. God powerfully uses people of faith to convey his will. Women in the ancient world were viewed

as inferior warriors compared to men and God uses this perceived weakness to demonstrate his power.

## Synopsis

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These two chapters begin a cycle of events that is all too familiar after the death of Ehud. “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord ...”. The enemy this time is King Jabin of Canaan with his general Sisera. Uniquely, in this cycle the primary heroes are going to be women. In a world that either undervalued or completely devalued women and their role in society this is truly a remarkable tale. Deborah the prophetess is fulfilling the role of “judging” Israel and she summons Barak and tells that “The LORD, God of Israel, commands you, ...”. She serves as a messenger for God and speaks with his authority. She also predicts what will happen in the battle and the ultimate outcome.

Barak listens, but places on Deborah a condition for his obedience; that she must go with him into battle. She agrees but informs him that because of this condition the glory will go to a woman. We are then introduced to Heber the Kenite who is encamped in the area where Sisera’s

forces are as a prelude to what will happen later in the story with Heber's wife Jael. The Lord gives a swift victory to Barak and Sisera flees to, what he must have thought was the safety of his allies' camp and seeks refuge in the tent of Heber's wife, Jael. In what Sisera assumes to be a safe place he falls to sleep and Jael drives a tent peg through his head thus gaining the glory of victory over the forces of Jabin and she demonstrates a loyalty to God and his people that is beyond that of her husband.

This story is told in the song of Deborah emphasizing different aspects and highly praising Jael for her part in the victory over Sisera and the enemies of Israel. At the end of this cycle the land of Israel is blessed with forty years of peace.

## Main Points

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1. The natural tendency of human beings is toward evil.
2. The natural tendency of God is to answer the call of his children even when they are evil and disobedient.
3. God continually strives for relationship with his people.
4. God can transform our weakness into a power stronger than even the greatest power on earth.

# Questions

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1. Why do you think people seem gravitate toward evil?
2. Why do you think God sold the Israelites into the hand of Jabin?
3. Why do you think God provides a judge for the people?
4. Why do you think God calls people to participate with him in doing things rather than simply doing the things himself?
5. How do you decide when you are being shrewd and when you are being deceitful in your dealings with other people?
6. How important is it to keep an agreement that you made with someone else? With God? Why?
7. Why do you think we are told the story of the defeat of Sisera in narrative and in song?
8. What does it mean for the land to rest?
9. Why do you think this story was included in the Bible?