

# Judges

## Chapter 4

### *Deborah and Barak*

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. 2 And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. 3 Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years. 4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. 6 She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, “Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. 7 And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river 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 arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him. 11 Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh. 12 When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. 14 And Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. 15 And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot. 16 And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left. 17 But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. 18 And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. 19 And 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 And he said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” 21 But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. 22 And behold, as Barak was pursuing 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 in to her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple. 23 So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. 24 And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

**Chs 4–5** The account of Deborah and Barak is presented in both prose and poetry. The prose version uses more common words than the poetic account and focuses on telling the story in logical order. The poetic account offers impressions of the story and adds details. (TLSB)

**4:1–5:31** Deborah’s triumph over Sisera (commander of a Canaanite army)—first narrated in prose (ch. 4), then celebrated in song (ch. 5). At the time of the Canaanite threat from the north, Israel remained incapable of united action until a woman (Deborah) summoned them to the Lord’s battle. Because the warriors of Israel lacked the courage to rise up and face the enemy, the glory of victory went to a woman (Jael)—and she may not have been an Israelite. (CSB)

**4:1–2** Except for the Canaanites, Israel’s enemies came from outside the territory she occupied. Nations like Aram Naharaim, Moab, Midian and Ammon were mainly interested in plunder, but the Canaanite uprising of chs. 4–5 was an attempt to restore Canaanite power in the north. The Philistines engaged in continual struggle with Israel for permanent control of the land in the southern and central regions. (CSB)

**4:2** *Jabin*. See Ps 83:9–10. The name was possibly royal rather than personal. Joshua is credited with having earlier slain a king by the same name (Jos 11:1, 10). (CSB)

Probably a royal title rather than a personal name. (TLSB)

*Hazor*. The original royal city of the Jabin dynasty; it may still have been in ruins. Sisera sought to recover the territory once ruled by the kings of Hazor. (CSB)

Called “the head of all those kingdoms” at the time of Joshua, who burned the city (Jsh 11:10–11). Hazor occupied a strategic site in the valley north of the Sea of Chinnereth along a major road connecting Egypt with Mesopotamia. (TLSB)

*Sisera*. His name suggests he was not a Canaanite. (CSB)

Neither a Canaanite nor Hbr name; he may have arrived in Canaan with the Sea Peoples, some of whom were the Philistines. (TLSB)

*Harosheth-hagoyim*. Lit, “metal forge of the nations.” Perhaps the Canaanites forged iron there, with which they built the chariots that play prominently in the story. (TLSB)

**4:3** *nine hundred*. The number probably represents a coalition rather than the chariot force of one city. In the 15th century B.C., Pharaoh Thutmose III boasted of having captured 924 chariots at the battle of Megiddo. (CSB)

Technological advantage over the Israelites, who did not acquire such things until the time of the Israelite kings. (TLSB)

*cruelly for twenty years*. The oppression of Israel grew still worse (cf 3:8, 14). (TLSB)

*Israelites*. Mainly Zebulun and Naphtali, but West Manasseh, Issachar and Asher were also affected. (CSB)

**4:4** *Deborah*. Means “bee”; cf. Dt 1:44. She is the only judge said to have been a prophet(ess). Other women spoken of as prophetesses are Miriam (Ex 15:20), Huldah (2Ki 22:14), Noadiah (Ne 6:14) and Anna (Lk 2:36), but see also Ac 21:9. (CSB)

A prophet was one who spoke on behalf of another (Ex. 7:1-2). Luther noted the service of Deborah and other women as rulers; they “have been very good at management” (AE 28:276). Luther even suggested that women’s leadership in other areas of life might motivate men to properly fulfill their responsibility of preaching (AE 36:151-152). (TLSB)

**4:5** *Ramah and Bethel.* In southern Ephraim, 50 mi S of where the decisive battle against the Canaanites later took place (vv 12–16). (TLSB)

**4:6** *Barak.* Means “thunderbolt”—which suggests that he is summoned to be the Lord’s “flashing sword” (Dt 32:41). He is named among the heroes of faith in Heb 11:32. (CSB)

*Kedesh in Naphtali.* A town affected by the Canaanite oppression. (CSB)

5 mi NW of Lake Huleh, the northernmost outpost in Israelite territory. (TLSB)

*commanded you.* Deborah’s words to Barak may indicate that the Lord had already commanded him and he had hesitated. He needed affirmation to fulfill his duty (cf v 8). (TLSB)

*Naphtali and Zebulun.* Issachar, a near neighbor of these tribes, is not mentioned here but is included in the poetic description of the battle in 5:15. In all, six tribes are mentioned as having participated in the battle. (CSB)

*Mount Tabor.* A mountain about 1,300 feet high, northeast of the battle site. (CSB)

**4:7** With the Israelites encamped on the slopes of Mount Tabor, safe from chariot attack, the Lord’s strategy was to draw Sisera into a trap. For the battle site, Sisera cleverly chose the Valley of Jezreel along the Kishon River, where his chariot forces would have ample maneuvering space to range the battlefield and attack in numbers from any quarter. But that was his undoing, for he did not know the power of the Lord, who would fight from heaven for Israel with storm and flood (see 5:20–21), as he had done in the days of Joshua (10:11–14). Even in modern times storms have rendered the plain along the Kishon virtually impassable. In April of 1799 the flooded Kishon River aided Napoleon’s victory over a Turkish army. (CSB)

**4:8** Although Barak’s name means “thunderbolt” and he is listed among the “heroes of faith” in Heb 11:32, he appears hesitant to go to battle without assurances from Deborah. His hesitance may be attributed to fear, or it may have been a commendable reluctance to fight without the assurance of the Lord’s support. (TLSB)

**4:9** *a woman.* Barak’s timidity (and that of Israel’s other warriors, whom he exemplified) was due to lack of trust in the Lord and was thus rebuked. (CSB)

Shameful defeat for a proud warrior. *woman.* Not Deborah but Jael (v 21). (TLSB)

**4:10** *at his heels.* Following him. (TLSB)

**4:11** *Heber the Kenite.* Since one meaning of Heber’s name is “ally,” and since “Kenite” identifies him as belonging to a clan of metalworkers, the author hints at the truth that this member of a people allied with Israel since the days of Moses has moved from south to north to ally himself (see v. 17) with the Canaanite king who is assembling a large force of “iron chariots.” It is no doubt he who informs Sisera of Barak’s military preparations. (CSB)

*other Kenites.* Settled in the south not far from Kadesh Barnea in the Negev (see 1:16). (CSB)

*Zaananim.* Meaning “to pack up,” possibly a location where traders and caravanners stopped to sell or trade goods. (TLSB)

**4:12–13** *Mount Tabor*. The Israelites camped on the slopes of the mountain as a refuge from chariot attack, hoping to draw Sisera and his troops into a trap. (TLSB)

*to the river Kishon*. Sisera chose to station his army in the Jezreel Valley, where his sizable chariot force would have room to maneuver. This decision led to his downfall. (TLSB)

**4:14** *Barak went down Mount Tabor*. The Lord’s “thunderbolt” descends the mountain to attack the Canaanite army. (CSB)

**4:15** *routed*. The Hebrew for this word is also used of the panic that overcame the Egyptians at the “Red Sea” (Ex 14:24) and the Philistines at Mizpah (1Sa 7:10). (CSB)

Deborah did not lead the troops herself but fulfilled the prophet’s true role by encouraging with the words and promises of God. (TLSB)

The poetry version explains how the rout occurred (5:20–22). The wet ground around the Kishon River made the chariots ineffective. A downpour and a flash flood swept the army away. (TLSB)

*fled*. When the battle was clearly lost, Sisera abandoned his panic-stricken men to seek shelter for himself. (TLSB)

**4:17** *Jael*. Her husband, Heber the Kenite, was mentioned earlier (v 11), foreshadowing what would come. Kenite territory was far to the south, but Heber had left his homeland and thrown his support to Jabin and Sisera. Jabin and Heber had made a covenant with each other but, as will become clear, Jael remained loyal to Israel. (TLSB)

**4:18** *into her tent*. Since ancient Near Eastern custom prohibited any man other than a woman’s husband or father from entering her tent, Jael seemed to offer Sisera an ideal hiding place. (CSB)

**4:19** Clearly, Jael knew Sisera, and her comforting words lured Sisera into false security. (TLSB)

*skin*. Containers for liquids were normally made from the skins of goats or lambs. (CSB)

*milk*. Jael, whose name means “mountain goat,” gave him milk to drink—and it was most likely goat’s milk (see Ex 23:19; Pr 27:27). (CSB)

Jael appeared to be showing kindness by offering Sisera something better (goats’ or sheep’s milk) than he had requested (water). Yet the milk made him sleepy. Jos: “He [Sisera] drank so unmeasurably that he fell asleep” (*Ant* 5:208). (TLSB)

**4:21** *drove the peg through his temple*. The laws of hospitality normally meant that one tried to protect a guest from any harm (see 19:23; Ge 19:8). Jael remained true to her family’s previous alliance with Israel (she may have been an Israelite) and so undid her husband’s deliberate breach of faith. Armed only with domestic implements, this dauntless woman destroyed the great warrior whom Barak had earlier feared. (CSB)

In a dramatic, brutal act, Jael proved that her loyalty to the Lord and to Israel was greater than her devotion to her husband. She fulfilled the NT directive “We must obey God rather than men” (Ac 5:29). (TLSB)

**4:22** *I will show you the man whom you are seeking.* Barak could now see how Deborah’s prediction (v 9) had come true: the Lord delivered Sisera into the hand of a woman, and the glory was hers, not his. (TLSB)

*there lay Sisera ... dead.* With Sisera dead the kingdom of Jabin was no longer a threat. The land “flowing with milk and honey” had been saved by the courage and faithfulness of “Bee” and “Mountain Goat.” (CSB)

**Ch 4** After Israelite armies led by Barak defeat Jabin and the Canaanites, an Israelite woman kills Sisera the Canaanite general by pounding a tent peg through his skull. Barak does not demonstrate strong faith, but many Christians can sympathize with his misgivings. We, too, can be weak and slow to act. Yet the Lord is with us, alongside us. Jesus went ahead of us to the cross and through death to everlasting life. He will lead us to the victory ground of heaven. • Lord Jesus, give us faith to believe Your promises and courage to wage our battles and win the victory You give. Amen. (TLSB)