

# Judges

## Chapter 4

### *Deborah*

After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD. <sup>2</sup> So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim. <sup>3</sup> Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help. <sup>4</sup> Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. <sup>5</sup> She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. <sup>6</sup> She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. <sup>7</sup> I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’ ” <sup>8</sup> Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” <sup>9</sup> “Very well,” Deborah said, “I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh, <sup>10</sup> where he summoned Zebulun and Naphtali. Ten thousand men followed him, and Deborah also went with him. <sup>11</sup> Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses’ brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh. <sup>12</sup> When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, <sup>13</sup> Sisera gathered together his nine hundred iron chariots and all the men with him, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River. <sup>14</sup> Then Deborah said to Barak, “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men. <sup>15</sup> At Barak’s advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. <sup>16</sup> But Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim. All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword; not a man was left. <sup>17</sup> Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. <sup>18</sup> Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.” So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him. <sup>19</sup> “I’m thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.” She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. <sup>20</sup> “Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he told her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say ‘No.’ ” <sup>21</sup> But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died. <sup>22</sup> Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. “Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.” So he went in with her, and

**there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.<sup>23</sup> On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites.<sup>24</sup> And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him.**

**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 (see note on Jos 11:10). 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 (see note on 9:54). (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)

*Hobab.* See Nu 10:29. (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** *gone ahead of you.* As a king at the head of his army (see 1Sa 8:20). See also Ex 15:3 ("the LORD is a warrior"); Jos 10:10–11; 2Sa 5:24; 2Ch 20:15–17, 22–24. (CSB)

*Barak went down Mount Tabor.* The Lord's "thunderbolt" (see note on v. 6) descends the mountain to attack the Canaanite army. (CSB)

**4:15** *routed.* See note on v. 7. 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)

**4:15** *routed*. 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** *he entered 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*. See note on 5:25. 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” (see note on v. 4) and “Mountain Goat” (see note on v. 19). (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)