

# Judges

## Chapter 5

### *The Song of Deborah*

On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song: <sup>2</sup>“When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD! <sup>3</sup> “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I will sing to the LORD, I will sing; I will make music to the LORD, the God of Israel. <sup>4</sup>“O LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water. <sup>5</sup>The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai, before the LORD, the God of Israel. <sup>6</sup>“In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths. <sup>7</sup>Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel. <sup>8</sup> When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates, and not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel. <sup>9</sup>My heart is with Israel’s princes, with the willing volunteers among the people. Praise the LORD! <sup>10</sup>“You who ride on white donkeys, sitting on your saddle blankets, and you who walk along the road, consider <sup>11</sup> the voice of the singers at the watering places. They recite the righteous acts of the LORD, the righteous acts of his warriors in Israel. “Then the people of the LORD went down to the city gates. <sup>12</sup>“Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up, break out in song! Arise, O Barak! Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam.’ <sup>13</sup>“Then the men who were left came down to the nobles; the people of the LORD came to me with the mighty. <sup>14</sup>Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek; Benjamin was with the people who followed you. From Makir captains came down, from Zebulun those who bear a commander’s staff. <sup>15</sup>The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with Barak, rushing after him into the valley. In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. <sup>16</sup> Why did you stay among the campfiresto hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. <sup>17</sup>Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves. <sup>18</sup>The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the heights of the field. <sup>19</sup>“Kings came, they fought; the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo, but they carried off no silver, no plunder. <sup>20</sup> From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. <sup>21</sup>The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon. March on, my soul; be strong! <sup>22</sup>Then thundered the horses’ hoofs— galloping, galloping go his mighty steeds. <sup>23</sup>‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the LORD. ‘Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the LORD, to help the LORD against the mighty.’ <sup>24</sup>“Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women. <sup>25</sup>He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk. <sup>26</sup>Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman’s hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple. <sup>27</sup>At her feet he sank, he fell; there

he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.<sup>28</sup>“Through the window peered Sisera’s mother; behind the lattice she cried out, ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?’<sup>29</sup>The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself,<sup>30</sup>‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a girl or two for each man, colorful garments as plunder for Sisera, colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck— all this as plunder?’<sup>31</sup>“So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength.” Then the land had peace forty years.

**Ch 5** The first lines of the poem state its theme. It is a call to praise “the LORD, the God of Israel” (v 3), who by omnipotence (v 4) raised Israel from the depths of humiliation (vv 6–9). The “triumphs of the LORD” (v 11) were achieved when the people rallied to Deborah’s and Barak’s call for action against the oppressor, even though some tribes failed to cooperate (vv 12–18, 22). The kings of Canaan (v 19) were swept away by the power of the Ruler of the universe (vv 19–21). Their commander suffered an ignominious death at the hands of a woman (vv 24–27), while his mother waited in vain for his return (vv 28–30). The Lord’s victory demonstrated the futility of all opposition to His will. (TLSB)

**5:1–31** To commemorate a national victory with songs was a common practice (see Ex 15:1–18; Nu 21:27–30; Dt 32:1–43; 1Sa 18:7). The “Book of the Wars of the LORD” (see note on Nu 21:14) and the “Book of Jashar” (see note on Jos 10:13) were probably collections of such songs. (CSB)

The song was probably written by Deborah or a contemporary (see v. 7 and NIV text note) and is thus one of the oldest poems in the Bible. It highlights some of the central themes of the narrative (cf. Ex 15:1–18; 1Sa 2:1–10; 2Sa 22; 23:1–7; Lk 1:46–55, 68–79). In particular, it celebrates before the nations (v. 3) the righteous acts of the Lord and of his warriors (v. 11). The song may be divided into the following sections: (1) the purpose of the song (praise) and the occasion for the deeds it celebrates (vv. 2–9); (2) the exhortation to Israel to act in accordance with her heroic past (vv. 10–11a); (3) the people’s appeal to Deborah (vv. 11b–12); (4) the gathering of warriors (vv. 13–18); (5) the battle (vv. 19–23); (6) the crafty triumph of Jael over Sisera (vv. 24–27); (7) the anxious waiting of Sisera’s mother (vv. 28–30); and (8) the conclusion (v. 31). (CSB)

**5:4–5** Poetic recalling of the Lord’s terrifying appearance in a storm cloud many years before, when he had brought Israel through the desert into Canaan (see Dt 33:2; Ps 68:7–8; Mic 1:3–4; see also Ps 18:7–15). (CSB)

**5:1** *on that day*. Poetic outburst of exuberant thanksgiving for Israel’s deliverance. In short sentences and vivid descriptions, the poem voices spontaneous emotion. Such superb qualities suggest that it was composed by Deborah. Barak joined her in singing it just as “Moses and the people” sang his hymn of praise (Ex 15:1). It may have been preserved in such anthologies of war songs as “the Book of Jashar” (see note, Jsh 10:12–13) or “the Book of the Wars of the Lord” (see note, Nu 21:14). The text in its present form is at times difficult to translate. Apparently later copyists no longer understood some of its ancient terms and expressions. (TLSB)

**5:3** *the LORD, the God of Israel.* This title for God expresses that the triumph belonged to the whole nation as His people. (TLSB)

**5:4** *Seir.* Edom. For a similar association of Seir (and Mount Paran) with Sinai see Dt 33:2. (CSB)

Just as the Lord once led His people out of Sinai's wilderness, so He again arose from the desert to rescue Israel from its oppressor. (TLSB)

*the heavens poured.* See Ps 68:7–10. (CSB)

**5:5** *the One of Sinai.* See Ps 68:8. An earthquake and thunderstorm occurred when God appeared at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16–18). (CSB)

**5:6** God worked change and victory through His chosen judges. The verse demonstrates how devastating Jabin's grip on Israel had become. Frightened travelers were forced to abandon major roads, where chariots could easily travel. Unwalled villages became easy marks for marauding Canaanites. (TLSB)

*Shamgar.* See note on 3:31. (CSB)

*roads were abandoned.* Because of enemy garrisons and marauding bands (see note on 4:1–2) the roads were unsafe. (CSB)

**5:7** *Village life ... ceased.* The inhabitants of villages fled to walled towns for protection. (CSB)

*a mother in Israel.* Though no biological children of Deborah are mentioned, she encouraged and strengthened her people. (TLSB)

**5:8** *not a shield or spear was seen.* Either because Israel had made peace with the native Canaanites (see 3:5–6) or because she had been disarmed (see 1Sa 13:19–22). (CSB)

**5:10** *who ride on white donkeys.* An allusion to the nobles and the wealthy (see 10:4; 12:14). (CSB)

Reserved for the wealthy. (TLSB)

**5:11** *voice of the singers.* The leaders are encouraged by the songs of the minstrels at the watering places—songs that rehearse the past heroic achievements of the Lord and his warriors. (CSB)

Storytellers would relate the Lord's victory. (TLSB)

*watering places ... gates.* Where people gathered for civil conversation. (TLSB)

**5:12** *Wake up.* A plea to take action (see Ps 44:23; Isa 51:9). (CSB)

*Take captive your captives.* The same action is applied to God in Ps 68:18 and to Christ in Eph 4:8. (CSB)

Anticipation of victory before the battle began. (TLSB)

**5:13–18** The warriors of the Lord who gathered for the battle. The tribes who came were Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh (“Makir” is possibly both East and West Manasseh; see Dt 3:15; Jos 13:29–31; 17:1), Zebulun (vv. 14, 18), Issachar (v. 15) and Naphtali (v. 18). Especially involved were Zebulun and Naphtali (v. 18; see 4:10), the tribes most immediately affected by Sisera’s tyranny. Reuben (vv. 15–16) and Gad (here referred to as Gilead, v. 17), from east of the Jordan, and Dan and Asher, from along the coast (v. 17), are rebuked for not responding. Judah and Simeon are not even mentioned, perhaps because they were already engaged with the Philistines. Levi is not mentioned because it did not have military responsibilities in the theocracy (kingdom of God in the OT). (CSB)

In previous episodes, each tribe was expected to regain control of its own territory. In this battle, however, help from neighboring tribes would have been welcomed, but only some tribes offered assistance. The tribes that did respond—Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh (Machir; cf Gn 50:23), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali—were concentrated in the central and northern regions of the land most affected by the Canaanite coalition under Jabin. Reuben, Asher, Dan, and Gilead (east of the Jordan River) were situated at a distance from battle with the Canaanites, yet Deborah deplored their indecision and lack of resolve to offer help to their fellow tribes. Two tribes, Judah and Simeon, are not even mentioned since they were in the far south. Deborah’s words betray a lack of unity and cohesion among the tribes, anticipating the later verdict, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25). (TLSB)

**5:14** *roots ... in Amalek.* Some Amalekites apparently once lived in the hill country of Ephraim (see 12:15). (CSB)

*Makir.* The firstborn son of Manasseh (Jos 17:1). Although the descendants of Makir settled on both sides of the Jordan (see Dt 3:15; Jos 13:29–31; 17:1; 1Ch 7:14–19), reference here is to those west of the Jordan (see v. 17; Jos 17:5).

**5:17** *Gilead.* Not a tribe, but a region east of the Jordan. The people there were too attached to their land to offer their help. (TLSB)

*ships.* People from Dan and Asher may have worked on Canaanite or Philistine ships or docks. (TLSB)

**5:18** *on the heights of the field.* Perhaps connected to Ge 49:21, where Naphtali is described as a “doe set free.” (CSB)

**5:19** *Megiddo*. Megiddo and Taanach dominated the main pass that runs northeast through the hill country from the plain of Sharon to the Valley of Jezreel. Because of its strategic location, the “plain of Megiddo” (2Ch 35:22) has been a frequent battleground from the earliest times. There Pharaoh Thutmose III defeated a Canaanite coalition in 1468 B.C., and there in A.D. 1917 the British under General Allenby ended the rule of the Turks in Palestine by vanquishing them in the Valley of Jezreel opposite Megiddo. In Biblical history the forces of Israel under Deborah and Barak crushed the Canaanites “by the waters of Megiddo” (v. 19), and there Judah’s good king Josiah died in battle against Pharaoh Neco II in 609 B.C. (2Ki 23:29). See also the reference in Rev 16:16 to “the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (i.e., “Mount Megiddo”) as the site of the “battle on the great day of God Almighty” (Rev 16:14). (CSB)

Dominated the main pass that runs northeast through the hill country from the Plain of Sharon to the Plain of Megiddo. Megiddo was the site of numerous key battles. (TLSB)

**5:20** *stars fought*. A poetic way of saying that the powers of heaven fought in Israel’s behalf (see note on 4:7). (CSB)

Israel’s victory was no mere human achievement. The skies opened and torrential rain fell, overwhelming Sisera’s chariots. (TLSB)

**5:21** *Kishon*. This normally small river flooded. (TLSB)

*swept them away*. See note on 4:7. (CSB)

**5:22** *galloping, galloping*. In the downpour of rain, riders panicked and the horses pulling Sisera’s chariots broke rank. As the chariot wheels became stuck in the mud, the horses galloped away from their helpless drivers. (TLSB)

**5:23** *Meroz*. Because of its refusal to help the army of the Lord, this Israelite town in Naphtali was cursed. Other cities were also punished severely for refusing to participate in the wars of the Lord (see 8:15–17; 21:5–10). (CSB)

Apparently a city in one of the tribal areas that refused help. (TLSB)

*to the help of the LORD*. The Creator of the universe needs no help from His creatures, yet He enlists us to labor and fight for His cause. (TLSB)

**5:24** *Most blessed of women be Jael*. The prose account simply recalls Jael’s grisly deeds, but the poetic account begins with praise for her resourcefulness and courage. (TLSB)

**5:25** *He asked water*. Sisera requested the very element that had just destroyed his army. (TLSB)

*curdled milk.* Artificially soured milk made by shaking milk in a skin-bottle and then allowing it to ferment (due to bacteria that remained in the skin from previous use). (CSB)

Jael treated Sisera with mock obeisance. The verse is a taunt: this powerful commander of men was reduced to asking a woman for a drink of water. (TLSB)

**5:26** Sisera is not the only would-be victor to become the victim of a woman; cf 9:54. (TLSB)

**5:27** *Between her feet he sank.* Completely vanquished. Cf Jsh 10:24–25. (TLSB)

**5:28–30** Just when the reader might muster some sympathy for Sisera, the poetic account closes with a gruesome, mocking vignette featuring his mother, who waited anxiously at the window for a glimpse of his return. As she agonized over his delay, she was reassured by the women around her. Raping the defeated enemy’s wives and daughters takes time! She callously depersonalized her son’s imagined victims, reducing them to mere “wombs.” Unknown to her, Sisera had been killed by one of these “wombs.” (TLSB)

**5:28** This graphic picture of the anxious waiting of Sisera’s mother heightens the triumph of Jael over the powerful Canaanite general and presents a contrast between this mother in Canaan and the triumphant Deborah, “a mother in Israel” (v. 7). (CSB)

**5:31** The song ends with a prayer that the present victory would be the pattern for all future battles against the Lord’s enemies (see Nu 10:35; Ps 68:1–2). (CSB)

*your enemies ... they who love you.* The two basic attitudes of people toward the Lord. As Lord of the covenant and royal Head of his people Israel, he demanded their love (see Ex 20:6), just as kings in the ancient Near East demanded the love of their subjects. (CSB)

*forty years.* A conventional number of years for a generation (see Introduction: Background). (CSB)

**Ch 5** The Song of Deborah and Barak is a poetic and vivid retelling of the Lord’s victory over the Canaanites, especially praising Jael’s triumph over Sisera. It rightly gives God credit for the triumph, for He is the ultimate Judge and Savior. • Almighty God, we implore Your daily help in our struggle with our spiritual enemies—the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. Forgive us our failings, and grant us victory through Jesus, Your Son and our Savior. Amen. (TLSB)