

Week 5 - Deborah & Barak: Irony Abounds - Judges 4:1-24

Scripture Reading: 2Corinthians 5:1-10

Introduction

Let me begin by asking how many of you like to read mystery novels or watch mysteries on TV

Most mystery stories tend to frustrate me because the authors of them often tend to introduce elements at the end of the story that I, as a reader, would have no way of knowing previously

And, because I like to try to figure out the mystery as I read, I view those “surprise” solutions as cheats since they don’t allow for any way to come to the solution

I hate that

And it might seem contradictory in some way, but I do like a story that has twists and turns in it

I actually prefer a bit of the unexpected over a straightforward account - it keeps things interesting

We have one of those accounts in the judge cycle before us today

The account is filled with dramatic irony and counterturns, and things aren’t always as they first seem

However, the account starts just as we would expect it to according to the formula introduced in chapter 2

Israel relapsed into apostasy as, once again, the divine victory of Ehud over Eglon had not altered their deeply rooted tendency toward paganism

It’s an unfortunate fact that security often leads God’s people to respond not with loyalty but with apathy

As a result, we see Israel again begin to engage in behavior that was evil in the sight of the Lord

And, accordingly, God remains faithful to his covenant promise as he sends an oppressor to punish Israel

In this case, God’s agent of punishment was *“Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor.”*

And we are told, seemingly incidentally, that the commanding general of his army was a man named Sisera from Harosheth-hagoyim

Sisera, not being a known Canaanite name, may well have been a foreign mercenary hired by Jabin

If that’s correct, it shows the power and influence of Jabin as he was able to attract a foreign general to lead his forces

And we are told that Jabin was able to thoroughly oppress Israel because Sisera’s forces included 900 iron chariots

And just as we saw in 1:19 [**Judges 1:19**], the existence of iron chariots tended to frustrate the Israelites as they could conceive of no way to defeat them

And the truth is that they couldn’t defeat them in their own strength because they were overmatched

So, because the Lord had left them to fight their own battles as a result of their compromise with the Canaanites, as we saw in 2:3 [**Judges 2:3**], Jabin was able to oppress the Israelites

And oppress them he did for 20 years before the people cried out to the Lord in pain, prompting God to provide them with a deliverer once more

So far, everything fits neatly into the formula we have been provided

But, from here on, very little will go the way we expect as twists and turns abound and, once more, treachery plays a crucial role in Israel’s delivery

So let’s turn our attention to God’s provision of a deliverer as we look at the call of Barak found in verses 4-10

I. The call of Barak

In the first two judge cycles, we see the provision of a deliverer stated very simply

In the case of Othniel, we read, “the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel,” and in the case of Ehud, “the Lord raised up for them a deliverer”

Just a simple statement of fact in both cases

But the call of Barak is quite a bit more involved as we are first introduced to Deborah, who acts as God’s agent

And, in verse 4 [**Judges 4:4**], we learn three things about Deborah: she was a prophetess, a wife, and a judge of Israel

Being a prophetess makes Deborah special, but she is far from unique as she joins the ranks of Miriam, sister to Moses and Aaron [**Exodus 15:20**], Huldah, the wife of Shallum [**2Kings 22:14**], and Noadiah [**Nehemiah 6:14**] from the O.T.

We also see prophetesses in the New Testament, namely, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel [**Luke 2:36**], and the four daughters of Philip [**Acts 21:9**], and we see a false prophetess named Jezebel in Revelation 2

The role of a prophet is to be a spokesperson for God to the people, and whatever else is revealed about Deborah here, she is, first and foremost, a prophetess who speaks and acts on God’s behalf

But she is also a judge, as we are told that she was “*judging Israel at that time*”

And that has the effect of catching us off guard as we have come to expect a male to be named as the deliverer

So we are left to determine what exactly the author means when he says that Deborah was “judging Israel” and sitting under a specific palm tree while “the people of Israel came up to her for judgment”

The best sense is that the people were coming to her to settle disputes - not for deliverance

They were looking to Deborah to give them divine answers to their legal disputes, and they came to her because she was a prophetess who was capable of arbitrating the matters brought before her in a God-honoring way

However, it’s not the rendering of decisions on personal matters that we see before us in verse 5 [**Judges 4:5**]

What we have in view here is that the people of Israel came to her for a particular judgment - *the* judgment, if you will

Verse 5 is a continuation of the people crying out to the Lord, and the people are coming before Deborah to discover God’s response to their cries of pain

That’s the reason God caused the author to record the otherwise extraneous information regarding her judging activities

And that understanding becomes apparent as the focus in verse 6 shifts from Deborah, the medium through whom the Israelites seek God’s answer, to Barak, whom God has actually appointed to solve the crisis

So, the people come to Deborah for an answer from God, and in response, Deborah sends for Barak, and when he arrives, she either pronounces God’s call upon him or confirms it with him - I think it’s more likely the latter

I believe Barak had already heard God’s call but hasn’t acted on it, and Deborah summons him so that she can confirm it - my reason for thinking this way will be revealed when we see how Barak responds to Deborah

Deborah issues God’s charge to Barak, and it is to go, rally, and deploy 10,000 troops from Naphtali and Zebulun from Mount Tabor, which was located at one of the most critical crossroads in the region

Then she went on to reveal that God would deploy Sisera and all his forces, including the chariots, against Barak and his troops and give them into Barak’s hand

Again we see God first sell Israel into the hand of their oppressor and then orchestrate the oppressor’s defeat when his people cry out

And in verse 8, we come across another twist in the narrative: Barak is reluctant to answer God’s call

Let's look at verse 8 together [**Judges 4:8**] and see Barak's response:

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."

That verse shouldn't be there - the narrative should have proceeded directly from verse 8 to verse 10 - from God's call to Barak's obedience

But instead, we see Barak hesitate and vacillate as he puts a condition on his obedience

And the condition he places on his obedience makes him look weak and cowardly

He won't comply unless Deborah is by his side, holding his hand

But that may not be the correct conclusion for us to draw

Barak may only be acknowledging Deborah's status, and his request for God's prophet to accompany him might be an appeal for an assurance of God's presence and activity - he wouldn't be the only judge to seek such assurance

Either way, Deborah agrees to go along, and her assent occurs right at the point in the narrative where we would expect God to promise his personal presence based on other call narratives

So, apparently, Deborah serves as God's proxy in this case, and her presence alone is enough to get Barak to obey and achieve his God-ordained victory over Sisera

And Deborah reinforces God's commitment by giving Barak an ironic guarantee -

One that forces Barak to step out in faith because he will only know for sure that God has acted on his behalf after the battle

The sign that will assure Barak that God has indeed called him and that God has intervened is that Barak and his troops will be victorious without Barak getting the glory - because God will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman

And the obvious impression we, as readers, are left with is that the woman who will get the glory will be Deborah

As the call of Barak comes to a close, we see that Deborah's mission has been successful

So, to recap what has happened so far:

The people of Israel have come to Deborah to seek an answer from God concerning their oppression by king Jabin

Deborah receives word from God and sends for Barak to come to her

Barak responds by coming to Deborah under her palm tree, and after they converse, he returns home accompanied by Deborah

And when he summons the men of Zebulun and Naphtali, a force of 10,000 troops assemble

The reluctant general has been successfully commissioned, and the army has been assembled

Let's now look at the battle and the military victory that we anticipate

II. The battle and victory

Based on the two judge cycles we have seen so far, the reader would expect a short account retelling a swift and decisive victory even though, somehow, the victory will go to Deborah

But remember, this account is full of twists and turns, and we'll soon find both of those expectations prove to be mistaken

The account of the conflict is unexpectedly long and begins with what appears to be an irrelevant interjection about a man named Heber the Kenite, who is described as a nomad and a loner

It seems that he had moved as far away as he could get and pitched his tent at a specific spot near a place called Kedesh

Now, if this is the same Kedesh as Barak's home of Kedesh-Naphtali, Heber the Kenite may well have been the informer who let Sisera know that Barak had amassed troops and that they were headed for Mt. Tabor

The sense of this detail might have been more evident to the original audience than it is to us but God doesn't include details for no reason and we are going to discover why this information is here when we get to the end of the account

Regardless of whom it was that told Sisera about Barak's troop movement when he heard, he called out his chariots and all his troops and mobilized them in response to the news - thus, God has set the stage for the showdown to come

And when all the pieces were in place, God signaled the moment of action by giving the attack signal through Deborah and assuring victory to Barak, who responded by charging down Mt. Tabor with his troops behind him

Then we come to verse 15 and the key to the entire account related in this chapter [**Judges 4:15**]

And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword.

We need to pause here and recognize that, despite there being 10,000 Israelite troops on the battlefield, God was the one who caused Sisera's contingent of chariots and all his troops to panic and flee from the battle

The Hebrew word used here for our English "routed" means "to throw into confusion and cause motion" and it was God who caused the confusion that resulted in Sisera's troops fleeing the battlefield in disarray

This isn't the last time that we will see this motif in the book of Judges, where God secures a great victory over a formidable opposing force despite a reluctant and timid military leader

And we want to be very careful to note it because it shows us that God isn't limited by the quality of the instruments at hand as long as they are willing to be used

Then, sensing that the battle was out of hand, Sisera himself leaps from his chariot to flee on foot

But Barak, whose primary concern was the fleeing chariots and the army, pursued them all the way to Sisera's headquarters in Harosheth-Haggoyim, and he didn't stop his attack until they had all been slaughtered

We might reasonably suppose that Barak took Deborah's assurance at the start of the battle as a reversal of her earlier pronouncement and that God would give Sisera into his hand after all

But, after pursuing Sisera's army all the way back to their base, he came up empty-handed because Sisera wasn't with his troops - he had fled away separately on foot, a fact that was unnoticed by Barak in all the confusion

If this were a made-for-TV drama, this would be the point where the show paused for a commercial break

Sisera's successful escape has resulted in a complication leaving us wondering how God's word through Deborah would be fulfilled

And, if this were a made-for-TV drama, the show would come back from the commercial break with Deborah in hot pursuit of Sisera while Barak chased down the troops

But as we read on, we discover that, after her announcement that God was about to deliver Sisera into Barak's hand, Deborah has disappeared from the narrative entirely as the plot slows down once more to follow Sisera's flight

So let's turn our attention to the flight and slaying of Sisera

III. The flight and slaying of Sisera

Look with me at verse 17 [**Judges 4:17**], where the author focuses on Sisera and also introduces a second woman to the narrative, a woman named Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite from verse 11

We can only speculate as to how much time has elapsed since Sisera's escape in verse 15 and his arrival at Jael's tent - all we are told is that Sisera is exhausted when he arrives

It makes perfect sense that Sisera would flee toward the camp of Heber the Kenite because, as verse 17 tells us, he had entered into an alliance with Sisera's boss, Jabin

The word "peace" translates the Hebrew word *shalom* which indicates more than an absence of hostility

Salom is more of a covenant term indicating friendly relations, perhaps even being formalized with a treaty

So Sisera would naturally feel safe in heading there and expect to be welcomed and shielded

And the original readers would have understood that Heber posed a double threat to Israel

Not only had Heber separated himself from the main clan of Kenites, who were Israel's allies, but he had also bound himself by treaty to their enemy

The original audience would have understood that, according to political and ethical standards, Sisera should have found safe harbor there

However, that isn't going to be the case as Jael comes on the scene and takes complete control of the ensuing events

The author relates in verse 18 [**Judges 4:18**] that Jael comes out to meet Sisera and takes the initiative to speak to him and invite him into her tent, where she covers him with a rug - all before Sisera utters a word

Jael's words, "Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid," would have served to assure Sisera that he was safe in doing what she invited him to do

And Sisera is lulled into what will prove to be a false sense of security, and he innocently enters her tent, lays down, and permits Jael to cover him with what was likely a heavy covering of some kind, likely a sheepskin rug to conceal him

In verse 19 [**Judges 4:19**], we see Sisera, now safely concealed in Jael's tent, finally speak as he asks her for a drink of water to quench his understandable thirst

Why exactly Jael retakes the initiative by substituting milk for the requested water is a matter of scholarly debate

Some speculate she did so to induce sleep, and some think it may be a part of the "mothering" motif of the entire account

However, since God didn't see fit to reveal Jael's motive, we will have to put her reasoning in the unknown column

But we see her movements related in rapid-fire succession as if she was in a rush to get him back under concealment

Then, in verse 20 [**Judges 4:20**], we see Sisera issue his final command

Sisera was a military commander who was used to giving orders, and he used language that's partially obscured in many of our English translations

What Sisera *actually* said was, "Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any *man* comes and asks you, 'Is any *man* in here?' say, 'No.'

It's a subtle difference that we could easily read right past, but we need to slow down and recognize the implication of what Sisera has just said

He has just impugned the character of Jael by implying that some random man would suspect she had a man in her tent - that she was being unfaithful to her husband at a time when marital unfaithfulness would mean her death

Even if it was unintentional, this was a slander that would not have passed unnoticed in those days

I don't intend to imply that this slander motivated Jael to do what she did, but it couldn't have helped his situation, and it's easy to envision Jael having a wry smile as she carries out her treachery

And little did Sisera realize that in ordering Jael to answer with an absolute negation, he was prescribing what he was about to become - a nobody

A transition that verse 21 [**Judges 4:21**] describes in all its brutality

The treacherous nature of what Jael proceeds to do is highlighted by the author's inclusion of "the wife of Heber" after her name

And we read that “*Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand*” and crept up on the sleeping Sisera, and then she drove the tent peg through his skull, pinning him to the ground by his head

It’s at this point that God’s pronouncement through Deborah that the glory would go to a woman comes to fruition

And in verse 22 [**Judges 4:22**], Barak - who we weren’t even aware was chasing Sisera - arrives belatedly on the scene to discover the same truth

Imagine his humiliation

Here he has just experienced a complete victory over Sisera’s fearsome chariots and his whole army of foot soldiers and, having come to recognize Sisera had escaped; he has hotly pursued him and the glory that will come from killing him

Only to have Jael emerge from her tent and speak to him much as she had spoken to Sisera, inviting him into her tent with the promise of showing him the man he was seeking

Jael is fully aware of Barak’s agenda, but he is ignorant of hers, and he undoubtedly expects to find Sisera cowering in fear and easy prey

You can easily picture him bursting through the tent flaps with his sword drawn, only to have his balloon burst when he sees Sisera pinned to the ground with a tent peg through his skull

The glory he was chasing despite God’s pronouncement is finally and irretrievably lost and, in the final act of irony, God had fulfilled Deborah’s prophecy

God has given Sisera into Barak’s hand while, at the same time, he has also given the glory for Sisera’s death to a woman

However, lest the true hero of the account be overlooked, we read in verse 23 [**Judges 4:23**] that it was God who subdued Jabin, the king of Canaan, before the people of Israel

This reminds us once more that the conflict in Judges is actually not between the humans involved but between God and the forces of darkness

Still, the commentary included in the closing verses of the chapter shows us that there is a joint effort between the divine and the human as God works through people to further his will

We read that God subdued Jabin before the people of Israel while the people of Israel, at the same time, kept the pressure on until they destroyed Jabin, king of Canaan

But in the final analysis, salvation is from the Lord

Conclusion

Like the account of Ehud, this account raises many issues

Not the least is what we should think of Jael - is she a heroine or a traitor?

She is obviously an instrument God uses, but does that mean God approves of her methods?

I believe the conclusion we came to when we studied Ehud is active here as well - sometimes, the tools available for God’s use are crude

And the people God uses are not always noble in their actions, but God can still further his will through them

And **we have to always be mindful of what the Bible reports and what it recommends and not confuse the two**

In this account, we see the continual downward trend in the quality of deliverers

Othniel was portrayed as exemplary, while Ehud was a far more ambiguous deliverer, but he was still a solo hero

Now we see that Barak was a reluctant recruit and that it took an army and two women to fulfill the human role of God’s plan to deliver Israel

And yet, God still sits alone at the top as he executes his plans

But what can we learn from the people in the account?

In the case of Barak, we see the consequence of being hesitant to engage in God's work

God apparently meant to bless Barak, but Barak forfeited that blessing by putting conditions on his participation

There is undoubtedly a lesson in there for all of God's people, as God's blessings are often according to the extent of our faith -

And faith is demonstrated when we put our trust into action

Jael, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be inhibited at all

The action she carries out is somewhat surprising considering all that she stood to lose by breaking the treaty her husband had entered into with Jabin

When you consider the potential wrath she would face and the loss of a possible reward from Jabin for protecting Sisera, you can't help but wonder what motivated her to carry out her assassination

Nothing in our text indicates that Jael was particularly spiritually minded, and there is no explicit statement of her having a relationship with God - God is never mentioned in connection with Jael at all

And, while Jael received accolades aplenty, as we will see next week, her honor seems to have been limited to the human plane, and we don't know if she is enjoying peace with God today

All we know is that she was blessed in this life while Barak was bereft because of their respective receptivity to God's agenda

Deborah alone seems to maintain respectability through the account

But, despite the efforts of some modern feminist theologians to transform her into a feminist hero against the patriarchy, Deborah isn't the point of the account -

We aren't supposed to come away from this account marveling about Deborah and seeking to be a Deborah

Except perhaps to the extent that she maintained an openness and willingness to play her part in God's work

The ultimate lesson we should take from the account concerns God, his love for his people, his faithfulness to his covenant promises, and his working in the world to bring about his ends

Because those things are still in force today - no matter how bad things around us might seem, no matter how "irony" the chariots arrayed against us appear, and no matter how fallible and weak God's people might be

God is still sovereign, and his plans will not be thwarted

And that is reason for God's people to persevere to the end and to celebrate along the way

And celebration is what's on the agenda for next week as we study Judges 5

In these two chapters, we have the privilege of viewing the same event through two different lenses and thereby to gain some significant insight into Hebrew literature

Because whereas Judges 4 is rendered in prose, Judges 5 looks at the same event through poetry

As you prepare for next Sunday, read through Judges 5 and make a note of the differences between the two literary forms and any questions those differences raise in your mind

Let's pray