

“Here Comes the Judge!”
A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges
Session 4 October 14, 2020
Deborah Judges 4:1 – 5:31

Recap: The Judges’ Cycle

The Judges’ Cycle (found in Judges Chapter 2, verses 10 through 19) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashtaroth, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another people group to rise up and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

Session 3 Recap

In Session 3, we looked at the two judges, Ehud and Shamgar. Ehud was a left-handed assassin who defeated the Moabite king, Eglon, after 18 years of oppression. His story reminds us that God can use “unexpected” individuals to do incredible things. Shamgar is the first of the “minor judges” found in this book, with his story summarized in one verse! He single handedly defeated 600 Philistines with an ox goad, a herding tool used by shepherds and farmers alike.

Session 4: Deborah, the 4th Judge

Judges 4:1 – 5:31

In the story of Deborah, the 4th Judge for the tribes of Israel, we see a unique approach to sharing her story. Judges Chapter 4 focuses on the narrative telling of Deborah’s call and leadership. The narrative account focuses on the actions of three individuals – Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Judges Chapter 5 follows the narrative account with a “poetic prose” relaying the story. Many of the details are the same, but emphasis is placed on the work of God through the actions of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. This two version telling of the story provides a unique glimpse into the multiple forms of writing found in the Old Testament.

(1) Cycle Step One: Judges 4:1

As in previous accounts, the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. This reoccurring statement signifies the “short memory” of the tribes of Israel. After Ehud dies (scholars agree that Shamgar, as a minor prophet, is not mentioned because of the lack of details in his story), the tribes did evil – we can assume this means turning their back on God and/or worshiping the idols and false gods of the Canaanites. This evil/sin is a reminder that disregarding the commands and authority of God has consequences.

(2) Cycle Step Two: Judges 4:2 - 3

In his anger with the tribes of Israel, God once again allows a group to come in and oppress the Israelites. This time, Jabin, the king of Canaan, who lives in Hazor. Jabin is also mentioned in the Old Testament book of Joshua, chapter 11, when describing the defeat of the city of Hazor by the Joshua-led Israelite army. Joshua burned down the city in this defeat. Joshua is also said to have killed the “king of Hazor”. So, some scholars believe this is not the same king, instead, a direct descendant. Scholars also believe that the city had been rebuilt already, or the desire to rebuild was fresh in Jabin’s mind. Either way, this is the first and only occurrence where the “oppressing group” comes from within the borders of Canaan, the Promised Land. If the tribes of Israel had followed God’s initial plan of driving the other groups out, Jabin and his people would have been long gone.

Jabin’s main force of oppression came through his commander of the army, Sisera. The source of Sisera’s powers was the 900 iron chariots he had at his disposal. The “ultimate weapon” of that time, iron chariots were pulled by horse(s) and was the feared military tool of the day. If you had “iron” chariots, you often won in battle. Many chariots were adorned with knives attached to the wheels or chariot box to wound and mutilate soldiers on foot. This detail of the iron chariots shows the developing military style during this time period. The Canaanites were the most established and powerful of the neighboring groups to the Israelites. Their wealth allowed them access to military weapons (iron chariots) that other groups surrounding them did not have.

(3) Cycle Step Three: Judges 4:3

After the Canaanite king oppresses the tribes of Israel for twenty years, the tribes of Israel finally “cry out to the Lord”. Notice that the length of oppression is longer than the previous oppression (18 years by the Moabites before Ehud). One can assume, based on the Canaanite power and length of oppression, that the rule by Jabin over the Israelites was the cruelest that the tribes of Israel had experienced to this point. Again, it took twenty years before the Israelites cried out to God...

(4) Cycle Step Four: Judges 4:4 – 24

God calls the prophetess Deborah to emerge as judge for the tribes of Israel. By coincidence (or not), she was already serving as “judge” for Israel – a literal judge! Deborah was respected for her wisdom and guidance among the tribes, so she would “mediate” disputes among tribe members. Individuals with disputes would travel to meet with her in her “courtroom”, under a palm tree between the cities of Ramah and Bethel in the area of Ephraim. She was serving as a “spiritual leader” for the tribes and was then called by God. Unlike Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar thus far, Deborah is not a “military leader” – physically leading an army into battle. This shows that God can and will call the leader who is needed for that specific occasion, and leadership is revealed in many different forms.

From the immediate outset in verse 4, we are told Deborah is “judging” Israel, but not in the sense we are used to. Then another individual is introduced, Barak, son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali. Deborah relays the message to Barak to take 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and go to Mount Tabor, ready to do battle. Remember, 10,000 soldiers compared to 900 iron chariots is a complete mismatch – chariots should win! Deborah served as counselor and guide, rather than a military leader. While she would not “rescue” the tribes from the Canaanites, she would “rule” the tribes through her leadership. Deborah shares that God will be the one who draws Sisera, the Canaanite army commander, and the chariot army out to the Kishon River and deliver him to the tribes.

Barak responds with a condition – only if Deborah will go with them will Barak lead the troops. This speaks to the esteem Deborah has in the community. Barak’s response, however, can be viewed in two different ways. (1) Some might

see Barak's response as cowardly, not exhibiting faith in the Lord, but instead putting his faith in Deborah. (2) Others might see Barak's response in a more positive light, showing his faith in Deborah as leader and God as her "ultimate guide". Many base their opinions on Deborah's response. In verse 9, Deborah shares that she will go, but the honor will not be Barak's in military battle. Sisera would be delivered into the hands of a woman. Some see this as a rebuke by Deborah of Barak's response, while others see this as a "prophetic" statement that simply reveals how things will play out. Of course, Barak is probably assuming that the "woman" was Deborah, but we will wait and see...

Either way, Deborah's presence gives Barak the courage and spiritual leadership he needed to face the Canaanites. The ambiguity in understanding the two differing views of Barak and the ambiguity in Deborah's response is very intentional. Deborah, as a prophetess, was challenged with the task to remind the tribes to obey God. As a woman attending the battle (which was very unusual for the time), Deborah would be the spiritual lead and "rallying cry" that the soldiers would need. (One additional point to notice is that only two tribes sent troops to assist with this conquest. In previous examples, all the tribes came together and sent soldiers. This is the beginning of showing how the tribes are becoming decentralized and deeper divides are taking place.)

In the middle of this conversation and narrative, we have a one-verse interlude in verse 11. This detail will play a big factor later on. Heber, from the non-Israelite nation of the Kenites, had separated from the rest of his nation folks and set up a tent/home near Kedesh. One interesting note is that the Kenites had connection back to Israel, with Moses's father-in-law Hobab being a Kenite. The Kenites had a special ability to working with iron. It is believed that Heber separated himself to work near the Canaanites and their "iron chariots" as an iron smith. In verse 17, we are told that Heber had a peaceful relationship (most likely work relationship) with Jabin, the king of Hazor. This detail is also important to see how things turned out.

Sisera hears about the move of troops by Barak to Mount Tabor, so he prepares his 900 chariots and soldiers and travel towards Mount Tabor along the Kishon river. (Heber may have even been the one to tell Sisera about the Israelite's movement.) Deborah then commands Barak to get the troops ready and descend Mount Tabor to take on Sisera. One interesting thing to note is that Deborah states that God will deliver Sisera into "his hands", meaning Barak.

Maybe this served as encouragement for Barak and the soldiers, about to face a superior army based on supplies. (The disproportion between the armies is again to show that God is the deliverer, not humanity.) The battle ensues and the Canaanite army and all their iron chariots are destroyed, except for Sisera who escapes on foot. This fleeing as a military commander would be cowardly and speaks to the character of Sisera.

In fleeing, Sisera comes upon the tent of Heber, which is currently inhabited by Heber's wife Jael. Sisera would assume this would be a "safe place" to hide, since Heber has a peaceful relationship with his king. Jael encourages Sisera to hide inside of "her tent", meaning a woman's tent. Sisera was encouraged that he would be safe because of the alliance and because men were not allowed into a woman's tent. The soldiers chasing after him would never look for him in there! Sisera asks for water because of thirst, but instead Jael provides him with milk that makes him sleepy. Before he falls asleep, he asks Jael to stand outside the tent and encourage anyone that comes to look somewhere else, because Sisera was not there. In this imagery, we see Jael in a "motherly" role, providing for the basic needs of a "child", Sisera.

Jael, as a married woman, would have the responsibility to erect and take down the tents wherever her family would move. She was skilled with the hammer and tent peg, so when Sisera falls asleep in her tent, she seizes the opportunity. Jael drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple and into the ground, while he was asleep. As Deborah had stated earlier in her prophecy, Sisera would be delivered by the hands of a woman! When Barak arrives, Jael shows him into her tent to the now dead Canaanite commander. Similar to the ambiguity before, we are not told if Barak was "happy" to share the glory with Jael or not! However, Jael was used by God to deliver the enemy into the Israelites' hands. Her motivation we are not sure of, but the prophetic fulfillment is powerful. (Interesting correlations between the other judges. While not the "judge", Jael is a foreign agent similar to Shamgar. She also uses a "weapon" – a tent peg - not intended to be a weapon similar to Shamgar's ox goad. Jael is an "unusual" choice to claim this victory, similar to the left-handed Ehud. She also "drives the tent peg in", like Ehud "drives the sword into Eglon, the fat king.) Verse 23 again reminds the reader that God was true source of power in subduing the Canaanites!

(5) Cycle Step Five: Judges 4:24, Judges 5:31

God then leads the Israelites into the Canaanite land and they eventually destroy Jabin the Canaanite king. At the end of chapter four, we are not told how long the period of peace is following this win. However, at the end of the poetic form in Judges 5, verse 31, we are told the period of peace was forty years. (Notice this time period is significantly shorter than after the reign of Ehud, which was eighty years.)

Judges 5:1 – 31 – The Poetic Story of Deborah

Titled “The Song of Deborah and Barak” by biblical scholars, many believe this piece of literature is one of the oldest in the Old Testament, perhaps dating to the 12th century BC. The song “fills in some details” of the narrative account of Deborah the judge. The way the poem is written, for example not shedding light on who Sisera is, would assume that the reader has already read the narrative story or is familiar with the story in general.

Judges 5:1-11 emphasizes the overwhelming power of God weighed against the weakness of Israel amid oppression to the Canaanites. Attributed to both Deborah and Barak, the assumption is that the song was sung right after the military win. The Lord’s presence and leadership is repeated in verses 2 and 9, recalling who was the true deliverer. God is pictured as a “divine warrior” heading into battle. Praise is lifted for the soldiers who fought as well. God’s powerful status is compared with the “weak” status of the tribes during the period of Shamgar. Deborah is described as a “mother in Israel”, a nod toward her prophetess status and her wise leadership.

Judges 5:12-18 shares the disparity between the tribes that joined the fight, and those tribes who refused to help. Those tribes that answered the call, “the remnant”, are Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, Naphtali, and the half tribe of Manasseh. Those tribes that were “hesitant” and did not show include Reuben, Gilead, Dan, and Asher. This reflects the lack of faith in God prevalent in the tribes of Israel, a reoccurring theme!

Judges 5:19-22 depict the battle scene itself. Unlike the narrative version, details are given about how the chariots were defeated. Torrential rains and the flooding of the Kishon river area made the chariots useless, literally “stuck in the mud”. Again, God’s divine hand dictated the victory, emphasizing the rains and floods to overcome the strong army by the “weaker” Israelites.

Judges 5:23-30 focuses on the role of Jael. A curse is first lifted towards the “Meraz” people (a tribe who failed to answer the call), then returns to the heroic deeds of Jael. The poetic version tends to indicate that Sisera was either sitting or standing, because he “sank and fell”. The curd mixture provided by Jael served as the sedative to make him sleepy. Some of the sexual overtones, for example “between her feet” he fell, alludes to Sisera’s reputation as an exploiter of women, even gathering women after military defeats to rape or bring back “home” to his harem. An image of Sisera’s mother waiting for her general son to return is the final stroke towards human arrogance. God was in charge, and instead of bringing the spoils of war (including “women” for each warrior), a woman had laid claim to Sisera’s defeat.

Judges 5:31 concludes the poem with a warning to all enemies of the Lord. They will surely perish. Those who are faithful to God (how long will this faith last this time...) will be strengthened light the rising of the sun. Forty years of peace followed during the “reign” of Deborah.

Questions to Reflect On...

Repeatedly, we are reminded in Judges that God uses “flawed” people. In this story, Barak was used as instrument for God, despite maybe a lacking faith. Jael, who violated two Israelite commandments – thou shalt not lie or kill, is given esteem for her ability to kill Sisera. How is it encouraging and humbling that God uses us “despite our faults”? Are you letting your faults or God’s call guide you?

Are there areas in your life where you need to leave “justice” to God, in the meantime praying or blessing your “enemies”? How can we use Deborah’s story as a reminder of this?

Next Week...

“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 5

Wednesday, October 21 6:30 PM

Focus – Gideon

Judges 6:1 – 8:35