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The Fourth Cycle: Deborah

4: 1-24

The fourth cycle: Deborah DIG: What familiar cycle is repeated here? What were the characteristics of Deborah and Barak? Do the Scriptures condone everything that it records? Why? Why not? In what sense was Deborah a judge? What are the reasons for Deborah being considered as a Judge of Isra'el? What are the reasons for Barak being the deliverer of Isra'el? Why did Ja'el assassinate Sisera?

REFLECT: Has there been a time in your life when you have had a sense of God's timing (as Deborah did)? How does God used such people in the Church today? Where in your life do you wish you had Deborah's certainty and confidence? If ADONAI were to tell you something about the future, what one thing would you like him to tell you? How do you feel about Deborah as a leader? Would you follow her?

Deborah didn't function in the same role as the other judges, and so no number of years of her judgeship is given. The forty years in 5:31 is attributed to God and Isra'el's military strength in 4:23-24, not to Deborah. However, Deborah was a judge in the traditional role of helping to settle disputes. She was a prophetess, and so she received direct revelation from ADONAI, but she was not the savior of Isra'el, as was the case with the other judges. The savior, in this case, was actually Barak.

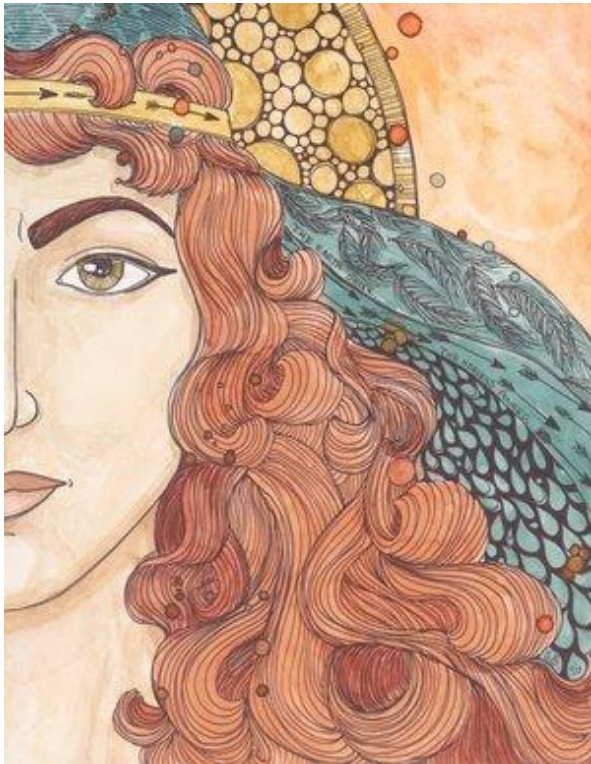
In contrast to the one-verse report of **Shamgar's** contribution to **Isra'el's** survival (**to see link click [Ar](#) - The Third Cycle: Shamgar**) in the south against **the Philistines**, we now have a much longer account of the battle against **the Canaanites** and **their** allies in the north for control of the strategic Jezreel Valley. Furthermore, and this is unique in **Judges**, this time we have two accounts of the crucial events: the first is a prose narrative (**Chapter 4**), and the second is a poem (**Chapter 5**), or, to put the matter more simply, a story and a song.⁸⁶

Here is the list of characters in this story: **Jabin: King** of **Hazor** in **Canaan**, a

tyrant; **Deborah**: a Jewish **judge**, a **woman** of faith and courage; **Barak**: a reluctant Jewish general; **Sisera**: the **general of Jabin's army**; **Heber**: a **Kenite** neighbor, **on friendly terms with King Jabin**; **Ja'el**: **wife of Heber** and handy with a hammer; **ADONAI-Tzva'ot**: **The LORD of heaven's angelic armies** (Joshua 5:13-15; 2 Kings 19:31; Psalm 24:10; 2 Cor 6:18).⁸⁷

Rebellion (4:1-2): After **Ehud** died (see [Aq - The Second Cycle: Ehud](#)) the **Israelites once more did evil in the eyes of ADONAI**. Not when **Shamgar** was **dead**, but when **Ehud** was **dead**, again implying that **the Shamgar judgeship** was within **the judgeship of Ehud**. This circumstantial clause means that it was **Ehud** who kept **Isra'el** from **idolatry**, but now that **he** was **dead**, all restraints were gone. **So Ha'Shem sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor**. **Jabin** was a dynastic name for **the king of Hazor**; and, for that reason, the same name appears in the book of **Joshua**. **Hazor** was located north of the Sea of Galilee at the south end of the Hulah Valley, a strategic city along the Via Maris, which was the most important trade route of ancient times. **Hazor** was the leader of the northern alliance against **Joshua** (see the commentary on **Joshua Bm - Conquest of Northern Canaan**). **Joshua** had destroyed **the city**, but **Isra'el** didn't occupy it. Consequently, **the Canaanites** had come back and rebuilt that very strategic **city**. While **Jabin** was **the king**, **Sisera was the general of his army**. **Sisera** was not a **Canaanite** name, but a Hurrian or a Hittite name, or **he** was a mercenary of the nationality in the service of **Jabin**. **His** palatial residence was **in Harosheth-hagoyim**, located in Galilee (**4:1-2 NIV**).

Repentance (4:3): And the **Israelites** cried out to **ADONAI** for help because of the strength of **the Canaanites**. **Jabin had nine hundred iron chariots**. This many **chariots** were not unusual, for in the inscriptions of Thutmose III (the Napoleon of Ancient Egypt) he states that he captured nine hundred and twenty-four chariots from **the Canaanites** in the Battle of Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley which plays a role in the battle recorded in **Chapters 4 and 5**. **For twenty years he cruelly oppressed the Israelites (4:3 NIV)**. On the human side, **the Canaanite** ability to oppress **Isra'el** for so long was due to **their chariot** strength. On the divine side, it was **God's** discipline due to **Isra'el's** spiritual adultery, chasing after foreign gods.



Retribution (4:4-10): As Arnold Fruchtenbaum relates in his commentary on *Judges and Ruth*, **Verse 4** introduces the key person. **Now Deborah was a prophetess.** The name **Deborah**, which means *bee*, has been encountered once before in **Genesis 35:8**, where it identifies **Rachael's nurse**. The Hebrew literally means *a woman of prophecy*. It is used of two other women: **Miriam** the sister of **Moses (Exodus 15:20)** and **Huldah the prophetess (Second Kings 22:14)**. **Deborah** was the wife of **Lappidoth**, and **she was judging Isra'el at that time (4:4 ESV)**. However, there are those who contend that **Barak** was the one who **delivered Isra'el**? That **he** was actually **the judge of Isra'el**.

There are five reasons why **Deborah** (rather than **Barak**) was **the one who delivered Isra'el**. First, the Bible says that **she judged Isra'el**, and that should be taken as **Deborah** having led **Isra'el**. Second, in **Judges 5:6-8**, **she** is connected to the security of **Isra'el**. Third, **she** was involved in marshaling the troops. Fourth, in **5:1**, **her** name appears before **Barak's**, which suggests that **she** should receive primary credit for the victory. Fifth, the parallels with **Sisera**, who **sits** or rules (Hebrew: *yashav*), with **Deborah** who **sits** and rules (again *yashav*), **under a palm tree** suggests that **she** is the equal of **Sisera**. These five reasons may support the fact that **she** was actually **delivering Isra'el**; and, in that sense, **she** was **the**

judge.

But there are thirteen reasons against this view that **Deborah** was **Isra'el's deliverer**. First, the word **judge** (Hebrew: *shopet*) allows for a variety of meanings like *leader, ruler, deliverer, or champion*, even within the book of **Judges** itself, and is used in more than one way. Second, **Deborah** is not introduced as the one “whom **ADONAI** raised up.” Third, there is no reference to **her** being empowered by **the Spirit of God**. Fourth, **she** needed **Barak** to accomplish **the deliverance**. Fifth, the verb *yashav* is never really applied to **her** in the sense of ruling. Sixth, **she** states that **YHWH** will deliver **Sisera into the hands of a woman**, but **she** doesn't say “into **my** hands.” Seventh, the text states that **she went up with Barak**, but doesn't say that **she** actually led the troops. Eighth, **she** states that **God will deliver Sisera into your hands** (meaning **Barak's hands**), not into “**my** hands” (meaning **Deborah's hands**). Ninth, **she** is totally absent from the description of the actual battle, and **she** never encounters either **Jabin** or **Sisera**. Tenth, **she** is referred to as **the mother of Isra'el**, never as the “savior” of **Isra'el**. Eleventh, the human author doesn't use the term *kum* (meaning *to raise up*) or state that **God** is the cause of **Deborah's** prominence. Twelfth, in later lists of **deliverers** of **Isra'el**, it's **Barak's** name that appears, not **Deborah's** (**First Samuel 12:9-11; Hebrews 11:32**). Finally, in this passage, **she** functions in the traditional role as **a judge** in settling disputes, not in the sense of **delivering Isra'el** from **the Canaanites**.

She would sit under the Palm of Deborah, to hold court, **between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would go to her for judgment (4:5 ESV)**. There, **the Israelites** come to **her** for judgment. **They** were not coming to **her** asking **her** to save **Isra'el** from **the Canaanites**; **they** were coming to **her** asking **her** to solve **their** legal disputes. This showed that **the people** had lost confidence in the priesthood to provide spiritual direction. The focus now shifts away from **Deborah** to **Barak** to deal with the military crisis. **Barak** is both commissioned to attack and is promised success. **One day she sent for Barak son of Abinoam, who lived in Kedesh in the land of Naphtali. She said to him, “This is what ADONAI, the God of Isra'el, commands you: Call out 10,000 men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun** (because **Naphtali** was **Barak's** tribe in whose tribal territory the city of **Hazor** was located). After **Barak** fulfilled the human condition by responding to the call to arms, then **Ha'Shem's** roll would be: **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 deliver him into your hands (4:6-7 Hebrew). This is an example of **ADONAI's** sovereignty in action without eliminating human responsibility.

Then **Barak** said to **Deborah**, **“If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go” (4:8 NIV).** The plea of **Barak** was not due to cowardice, for **he** was no coward as the context proves. **His** plea was due to **his** desire to be assured of **the Presence of God** in the war. **Barak** recognized **Deborah's** prophetic status. **Her** response was a promise and a prophecy. First the promise: **Very well, she** replied: **I will go with you.** Then the prophecy: **But you will receive no honor in this battle, for ADONAI will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.** The assumption may have been that **Deborah** was that **woman**, but it will turn out to be another **woman** altogether. **So Deborah went up with Barak to Kedesh. There Barak called together the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, and 10,000 men followed him, and Deborah went with him (4:9-10 Hebrew).** **She** was present as promised, though **she** did not take part in the battle nor lead any of the troops.⁸⁸

Restoration (4:11-24): The restoration of **Isra’el** by **Barak** and **Ja’el** can be seen by some as a dilemma. But it is important to remember that we must distinguish between what the Bible reports and what it recommends, between what the Bible says and what it supports. For example, the Bible may report that **David** had multiple **wives (Second Samuel 3:2-5)**, but it doesn’t thereby recommend or authorize that men do likewise. In **Ja’el's** case, the Bible doesn’t specifically condemn **her** act. The problem is that the Bible seems to approve of it.⁸⁹

The Movement of Heber the Kenite (4:11): **The Kenites** were a branch of the Midianites that had sided with **the Israelites**. From that **tribe** came **Moses' wife, brother-in-law, and father-in-law;** and this was **the clan** that had settled in **the Negev** in **1:16.** **The Kenites** were normally pro-**Isra’el**, but **Heber the Kenite** had separated himself from the pro-**Isra’el** **Kenites, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh (4:11 ESV).** This would have placed **him** in close proximity with **King Jabin** and **Hazor.** The purpose of this verse is to set the stage for the death of **Sisera.** **Heber's** position would allow **him** to observe the troop movements of **Barak** and report **them** to **Jabin** and **Sisera.** **Heber** would have assumed **he** was doing **the Canaanites** a favor; but in reality, **he** was, by **God's** sovereignty, working to bring about **the Canaanites' defeat.**

The Defeat of the Canaanites (4:12-16): When Heber told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called for all nine-hundred of his iron chariots and all of his warriors, and they marched from Harosheth-hagoyim to the Kishon River. But Sisera had no idea that Ha'Shem was luring him to his death. Then Deborah said to Barak, “Get going! This is the day when ADONAI-Tzva’ot will deliver Sisera into your hands! ADONAI has gone out ahead of you” (4:12-14a. Hebrew).

The battle is then described. Sisera and the Canaanites were by the Kishon River, located at the western end of the Jezreel Valley. So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten-thousand men following him at the eastern end of the same valley (4:14b Hebrew). And ADONAI’s role is spelled out: He routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak. What else God did and what other means He used will be revealed in Chapter 5. The effect on Sisera was immediate, he leaped down from his chariot and fled on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, killing all of Sisera’s warriors. Not a single one was left alive (4:15-16 NLT). The victory was total.



The Death of Sisera (4:17-22): Meanwhile, Sisera fled away on foot in

the opposite direction of **his** defeated army so as to elude pursuit, and went **to the tent of Ja'el, the wife of Heber the Kenite**. The name **Ja'el**, means *mountain goat*. **Sisera** was obviously on **his** way back to **Hazor**, and that would lead **him** past the place where **Heber** had pitched **his** tent. **The Kenites** were nomadic, and **their** tradition was that whenever a stranger was admitted into **the tent** as a guest, his claim to be defended or concealed from his pursuers would be honored. This was probably the reason why **Sisera** would specifically seek refuge into **her** tent. Another reason **Sisera** felt safe in **her tent** was because **Heber's family was on friendly terms with King Jabin of Hazor**. **Ja'el** took the initiative and **went out to meet Sisera**. **She said to him, "Come into my tent, sir. Come in. Don't be afraid."** So he went into her tent, and she covered him with a rug (4:17-18 NLT). He said to her, **"Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty."** Another point concerning nomadic tradition was that whoever ate or drank anything in **the tent** was presumed to receive *the peace of the tent*; therefore, **he** felt that **he** could relax inside **the tent**. **Sisera** may have asked for just a little water in order to establish this bond. **So Ja'el opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him up again.**⁹⁰

But then **Sisera** made a mistake when **he** asked **her** to lie: **If anyone asks you, "Is there a man here," say No (4:19-20 Hebrew)**. At that moment, she quickly concluded that **Sisera** was fleeing the battlefield, which meant that **the Israelites** had won the battle and **the Canaanite** grip on the land had been broken. If **she** protected **Sisera**, **she'd** endanger **her** own life, and pit **herself** against **her** own **relatives**. No doubt somebody was chasing **Sisera**, and whoever it was wouldn't be satisfied until **he** was dead. So, initially, she was merely thinking only of **her** own survival. **Sisera** had no reason to suspect danger. Nevertheless, what **he** didn't know was that **Ha'Shem** had promised that **a woman** would take **his** life (4:9). **Her** identity is delayed as long as possible in the story to enhance the impact when revealed. The irony was that **God's** choice was not merely **a woman**, nor even an **Israelite prophetess**, but **Ja'el, the wife of Heber!**⁹¹

But then **Ja'el** thought more about **her** situation and she changed **her** loyalty. **When Sisera fell into a deep sleep from exhaustion, Ja'el quietly crept up to him with a hammer and a tent peg in her hand. She drove the tent peg through his temple and into the ground, and he died.** Her ability to do this corresponded with the fact that, among the nomads, the

erection of **tents** was done by the tribal **women**. So **she** was well-trained in the use of **the hammer** and **the tent peg**. Thus, **Deborah's prophecy** about **Sisera** being delivered **into the hands of a woman** was fulfilled. Because **Sisera fell into a deep sleep**, **he** never realized what was happening until it was too late. Pursuing the runaway **Canaanite**, complete victory almost within **his** grasp, **he** was unexpectedly met by **Ja'el** who emerged from **her** tent. **Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Ja'el went out to meet him. She said** matter-of-factly: **Come, and I will show you the man you're looking for. So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera dead with the tent peg** climatically **through his temple (4:21-22 NIV)**.⁹² The ironic contrast of the victor (**Barak**) and the vanquished (**Sisera**) in the same tent is significant. **Ja'el** had conquered them **both**: **Sisera**, by literally assassinating **him**, and **Barak**, by depriving **him** of **receiving any honor (4:9)** that would have been **his** as the chosen deliverer of **Isra'el**.

The similarities between **Ja'el's** assassination of **Sisera** and **Ehud's** assassination of **Eglon** are striking. Both narratives feature a murder scene followed by a discovery scene. Both **Ehud** and **Ja'el** use false premises to set up the assassination (**Ehud's** claim to have **a message from Elohim** and **Ja'el's** seeming assurance of asylum). **Ehud** assassinated **Eglon** and **the king's servants** discovered **their dead master**; **Ja'el** assassinated **Sisera** and **Barak** discovered **the dead Canaanite general**. In both stories, the murder and discovery scenes play much more significant roles than the battle scenes themselves. In the **Ehud** story, the assassination takes place before the battle; in the **Barak** story, it happens after.⁹³

Should we **bless** or blame **Ja'el** for what **she** did? **She** invited **Sisera** into **her tent**, treated **him** kindly, and told **him** not to be **afraid**; so **she** was deceitful. **The Kenites** were **at peace** with **Jabin**, so **she** violated a treaty. **She** gave **Sisera** the impression that **she** would guard the entrance to **her tent**, so **she** broke a promise. **She** assassinated a defenseless man who was under **her** protection, so **she** was a murderer. Yet **Deborah** sang: **Most blessed among women is Ja'el, the wife of Heber the Kenite. May she be blessed above all women who live in tents** (see **Ax - Blessed by Ja'el**).

To begin with, all this took place during the Dispensation of Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of Torah**). So let's not read back into the era of **the judges**, the spiritual standards taught by **Yeshua** and **His apostles**. Also, let's keep in mind that **the Israelites** had been under

terrible bondage because of **Jabin** and **Sisera**, and it was **God's** will that **the nation** be restored. Both **Jabin** and **Sisera** had been guilty of mistreating **the Jews** for **twenty years**, and if the **Canaanite** army had won the battle, untold numbers of Jewish girls and women would have been captured and raped (**5:30**). **Ja'el** not only helped restore **the nation of Isra'el** from bondage, but **she** also helped to protect Jewish girls and women from the most vicious brutality. Consequently, it turned out that **she** wasn't a Semitic "Lady Macbeth" who murdered **her guest** for **her** own personal gain. There was a war going on, and this courageous **woman**, unlike **her** husband, stopped looking out only for **herself**, but took **her** stand with **the people of God**.⁹⁴

The Defeat of Jabin (4:23-24): So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the Israelites (**4:23 NIV**). The defeat of **Sisera** in the Jezreel Valley didn't mean the immediate defeat of **Hazor**, or the other cities who were still under **Canaanite** control. So there were several smaller victories. **But from that time on Isra'el became stronger and stronger and the Canaanites grew weaker and weaker until they finally destroyed Jabin, king of Hazor (4:24 NLT)**.⁹⁵ Consequently, the repetition of **King Jabin of Hazor** stresses the magnitude of the victory over the oppressor. Without **his** general **Sisera**, **Jabin** was no threat and quickly subdued. So **the land flowing with milk and honey** was saved by a "Mountain Goat" and a "Bee."⁹⁶

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You ADONAI-Tzva'ot, The LORD of heaven's angelic armies**, for helping **Isra'el** to conquer **her** enemies, both in times past and today! You can even use a Mountain Goat and a Bee! Like **Barak**, help me to desire **Your Presence** in my daily life. There is nothing more comforting than having **the Presence of the King of kings (Revelation 19:16)** who rules over all the world living within me (**Dani'el 7:14**). **Your love, Adonai, is in the heavens, Your faithfulness up to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God. Your judgments are like the great deep. You preserve man and beast, ADONAI. How precious is Your love, O God! The children of men find refuge in the shadow of Your wings (Psalms 36:5-7)**. Comfort can be found from **Your steadfast love** even in the midst of trials, as David felt your steadfast love when he had to flee into the wilderness. **Because Your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. (Psalms 63:3)**. Thank **You** for being such a wonderful heavenly **Father** and for **Your Presence** to live within those who believe in **You (Jn 14:23)**! To **the One** who sits at **Your Right Hand**. Amen*