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The Response of the Tribes

5: 12-18

The response of the tribes DIG: Which six tribes responded positively to Debrah's call to war? Which four tribes responded negatively? Why were Judah and Simeon not involved at all? How different was the response to Deborah's call and Joshua's call? Why did Ephraim enlist first and Ruben resist?

REFLECT: Some of the tribes responded to Debrah's call to help, while others did not. How have you responded to God's call on your life? How are you using your spiritual gifts? In your life, who is responding to your need for help? Who is not? How so? Where are you feeling somewhat abandoned?

Isra'el had no king, and everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes (21:25).

As **Deborah's** victory **song** continues (**to see link click At - Deborah's Victory Song**), Warren Wiersbe summarizes in his commentary on **Judges**. **Deborah** was grateful that **the people** offered **themselves** willingly in the service of **ADONAI** (**5:2** and **9**), and that **the leaders** offered did **their** share in recruiting soldiers from **the tribes** (**5:13**). **Six tribes united in sending volunteers**. Except for the people in the town of **Meroz** (**5:23**), the men of **Naphtali** responded, as did the men of **Ephraim**, **Benjamin**, **Manasseh west (Makir)**, **Zebulun**, and **Issachar**. The phrase in **verse 14: those who bear the staff of the scribe**, may refer to the recruiting officers who wrote down the names of the soldiers. **Zebulun** and **Naphtali** are especially praised for risking **their** lives in the service of **God** and country.

However, there were **four tribes that didn't volunteer** and do their share of fighting. The tribe of **Reuben** pondered the call to arms, but finally stayed home. **They** were probably considering **Isra'el's** mitzvah of warfare, and examining **their** hearts to see whether **they** were exempt from going to war (see the commentary

on **Deuteronomy Dp - Regulations for a Holy War: Four military exemptions**). Since **Manasseh east (Gilead)** was safe on the other side of the Jordan River, **they** also stayed home (**5:17**). **Dan** and **Asher** on the coast elected not to heed the call to battle.

Keeping in mind that during this period, **Isra'el had no king, and everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes (21:25)**. When **Joshua** was the commander of **Isra'el's** armies, ALL of the tribes participated, but when **Barak** summoned the forces, only half of them went to war against **Jabin** and **Sisera** (see **As - The Fourth Cycle: Deborah - The Defeat of the Canaanites**). The people of **God** today are not unlike the people of **Isra'el** when it comes to the call of **ADONAI** for service: Some immediately volunteer and follow **the Lord**; some risk their lives; some give the call serious consideration, but say no; while others keep to themselves as though the call had never been given.¹¹¹

The Fifth Stanza (5:12-18): This first verse of the fifth stanza introduces two leaders: **Deborah** and **Barak**. **Wake up, Deborah, wake up! Wake up, wake up, and sing a song! Arise, Barak! Lead your captives away, son of Abinoam (5:12 NLT)!** It has become clear by this point that **Deborah** and **Barak** are not the only singers. In **verse 11** we have heard others remembering (perhaps in **song**) the righteous deeds of **ADONAI** and **His people**. Now it seems that these common people address **Deborah** and **Barak**, urging them to more enthusiastic praise.¹¹² This verse, then, serves as an introduction to the second part of **the song**. **Deborah** is called upon to strike up **a song** again, and calls upon **Barak** to lead away **his** prisoners of war. It is **Barak** who is called to arise because **he** is the deliverer. But **Deborah** plays the most important role, not as the deliverer, but as **the prophetess**; for as **the prophetess, she** represents the voice of **God**.

The second verse of the fifth stanza records the response of **Isra'el** and **ADONAI** to the call to go to war. **Then down came a remnant of the nobles and the people. ADONAI came down for me against the mighty enemy (5:13 Hebrew).** **ADONAI** is viewed here as summoning **the enemies** of **Isra'el** for this war. This marks the turning point in the struggle against **the oppressor**. **Ha'Shem** is viewed here as summoning the enemies of **Isra'el** for this war. This marks the turning point in the struggle against **the oppressor**.¹¹³



In **verses 14 to 18** of the fifth stanza, **Deborah** describes the specific responses of **the tribes**, both positively and negatively. The list of troops is divided into three groups: the volunteers in **verses 14-15a**; the resisters in **verses 15b-17**; and the award winners in **verse 18**. **She** begins the volunteers with **her** own tribe of **Ephraim**: **Some came from Ephraim**, in the spirit of **the Amalekites** (see the commentary on **Exodus Cv - The Amalekites Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim**). Throughout the book of **Judges**, **Ephraim** is presented as the leader of the northern tribes (**5:14a**). However, while the volunteers did come from **Ephraim**, **they** displayed some “**Amalekite**” characteristics; that is, they were hostile and quarrelsome. At this stage of the book such a mixed report on **the Ephraimites** seems puzzling, but the negative aspect of it will be confirmed by the way **they** act in both the **Gideon** (see **Be - Gideon’s call to Ephraim: The Complaint of Ephraim**) and **Jephthah** (see **Bs - The Judgeship of Jephthah: The War with Ephraim**) episodes which follow.¹¹⁴

Benjamin is mentioned next. **The Benjaminites were with the people who followed you**, followed by **Manasseh west**. **From Makir captains came down**. **Makir** here does not just stand for the family of **Makir**, but for the tribe of **Manasseh**, because **Makir** was **Manasseh’s** only son. More specifically, **Makir** stands for part of the main branch of **Manasseh** located on the **west** side of the Jordan River (**Joshua 17:1**). **From Zebulun those who bear the staff of the scribe**. This **tribe** contributed the military leaders and was assigned territory in

the Jezreel Valley where the battle took place. **The leaders of Issachar were with Deborah and Barak (5:14b-15a Hebrew).**¹¹⁵ There is no inference that **Deborah** took an active part in the battle; rather, those from **Issachar** were **with her** in the sense that **they** were supportive of **her**, responsive to **her** call. It was **Barak** who, in the next line, led the charge into battle. **They** also **followed Barak, rushing,** without hesitation, **into the valley of Jezreel** and staying close to **him** during the attack. The general impression is that **Issachar**, especially, distinguished **itself** by the wholehearted support it gave **Deborah and Barak . . .** which makes the contrast with **Reuben** in the second part of the verse particularly damning.

Now the language of unity and loyalty gives way to resistance. The poet emphasizes **Reuben's** failure by placing its mention at the center of the overall poem. **But in the tribe of Reuben there was great indecision.** This **tribe** refused to participate. There is no reference to any leaders. **They** are pictured as sitting around the campfire, indifferent to the plight of **their brothers.** **They** wasted precious time in discussion instead of **rushing into the valley** like **the tribe** of **Issachar** did. But ultimately, **they** decided to stay behind with **their livestock** rather than **marching out** to assist **God's** army. **Issachar's territory** was directly adjacent to the Jezreel Valley, and therefore one of **the tribes** most affected. **Reuben's** territory, on the other hand, was in the southern Transjordan. So in a sense, it could afford to stay uninvolved in a way that **Issachar** could not. But that was not how **Deborah** and **Barak** and **their** supporters saw it. Note the bitter taunt in the following question. **Why did you stay among the sheep pens to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the tents of Reuben there was much hesitation and internal debate (5:15b-16 Hebrew).**¹¹⁶

Similarly, **the half-tribe** of **Manasseh east (Gilead)** remained east of the **Jordan** (see the commentary **Numbers Fz - Reuben and Gad Request Land**). **And** the text asks: **why did Dan stay in ships?** This may imply that the migration of **Dan** to the extreme north took place before **Deborah**, and **the Danites** had united somewhat with the sea-faring Phoenicians (see **Aj - The Failures of the Northern Tribes**). But more likely **Dan** was still in the South, too entrenched in the shipping industry with the Phoenicians, as **their** clients, to participate in an anti-**Canaanite** war, since the Phoenicians were **Canaanites.** **Asher sat unmoved at the seashore, remaining in their harbors,** preferring life on the beach than battlefields **(5:17 NLT).**

To accentuate the contrast between those who participated and those who ignored

the call, **the fifth stanza** ends with a focus on the heroism and courageous risk of **Zebulun** and **Naphtali** in the battle itself. **But Zebulun risked their lives.** This **tribe** is now mentioned for the second time in **Deborah's song** and is thus given a special place of honor for **their** bravery. **Barak's** tribe, **Naphtali**, **also risked their lives on the heights of the battlefield (5:18).** That **tribe** had the most to gain since **their** territory was in **the Jezreel Valley.**¹¹⁷

The tribes of **Judah** and **Simeon** are not mentioned as participants in the war, or chastised for staying away. This might imply that they were busy fighting **the Philistines** and therefore could not send a fighting force for **Barak**. If so, since they were already fighting **the enemies of Isra'el**, **they** would not be chastised for not sending any soldiers.¹¹⁸

Responding to the call of **ADONAI** can be difficult, especially in the postmodern world that we live in now. Oftentimes, to put yourself out there as a believer, one who loves **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**, or one who loves **Isra'el** and prays for the peace of **Jerusalem**, can draw a big target on your back. I went to **Isra'el** in 2023 for Sukkot, and we left the day before the war started. When I got back to America, I bought a royal blue baseball cap with the star of David on the front of it and have worn it ever since. I plan on wearing it until the war is won. It's my way of standing up for **Isra'el** and **her** right to exist. So far, I have been called "a terrorist" only once. But every other acknowledgement of my hat has been positive. Sometimes people say, "I like your hat," or they give me a thumbs up. Other times I have people smiling at me for seemingly no reason. Let me be blunt, **Satan** wants the world to turn against **Isra'el**; **ADONAI** loves **Isra'el**. This is a real battle. How will you respond to the call?

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for **Your** awesome gift of **righteousness (Romans 5:17)** to all who **believe in You (John 11:25-26)**. **Ja'el** showed **her** willingness to respond to **Your** call by **her** act of obedience in killing the general of **Israel's** enemy. It would have been easier for **her** to turn away, but **she** put **her** belief in **You** into action. Likewise, all who **have faith in You** are to respond to **Your** call by more than lip service of admiration. May we follow **Ja'el's** example and serve **You** even when we are alone and it is hard, for **You** are always with me to help and to guide me. Thank **You** that **You** have promised to never leave me. **For God Himself has said: I will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5)**. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*