

## YHWH, DEBORAH, BARAK, AND Jael

### Judges

Lawson Younger

**GLORIFICATION OF YAHWEH.** It is also important to remember that each cycle-narrative works on two levels: human and divine. (1) On the human level, the characters of Deborah, Barak, Jael, the tribal participants/nonparticipants, and Sisera's mother evidence positive and negative qualities that serve to bridge the ancient context to the modern context. (2) On the divine level there is the continuing theme of the glorification of Yahweh. In this passage, both in the prose account and the poem, God is glorified by his work on Israel's behalf. His sovereignty in accomplishing this is intensified by the fact of the shortage of dedicated Israelites from which he might work. The hesitancy of Barak and the noninvolvement of a number of Israelite tribes emphasize this situation. This problem will become worse in the successive cycles.

The cycle's satirization of the military commander Sisera as an agent of Jabin's oppressive foreign kingship is in contrast to the glorification of Yahweh, who controls all circumstances that lead to Israel's; deliverance—both those of the temporal order in the prose portrayal and those of the cosmic order, with which Jael's actions are consonant, in the hymnic portrayal. This oppression of Jabin and Sisera (especially with Sisera's iron chariots) is a significant trial and affliction for the Israelites. Like the previous oppressions, it is brought on the Israelites by God in order to chasten them, and it once again stresses his justice. God is utterly consistent in dealing with apostasy. He will not allow the Israelites to do as they please without certain repercussions in accordance with his covenant with them. But God is also compassionate; he does not over punish. He uses his prophetess to raise up the deliverer. In spite of spiritual failings on the part of this deliverer, God brings about Israel's deliverance, ultimately using a non-Israelite tent-woman to bring judgement to the enemy leader.

**DEBORAH.** It is significant that the role over against the powerful monarch Jabin is Deborah, the prophetess—a person whom Jabin and Sisera would have mockingly derided as a leader. But in her weakness in a patriarchal world, Deborah proves to be God's answer. As his prophetess she will commission God's general, Barak, the counterpart to Sisera. And she will willingly and with great faith initiate the process of the demise of the mighty Canaanite king and his military commander.

It should be added that Deborah also stands in the commissioning position in the narrative structure that the angel of the Lord does in the Gideon narrative that follows. God is proving here what he proves many times over: He uses the weaker things (or what the world considers the weaker things) in order to confound the wise and mighty. He will bring down the arrogant and abusive Jabin and Sisera in his timing.

**BARAK.** If Ehud was no Othniel, then Barak is no Ehud. Barak's unwillingness to go and fight even though he has tangible assurance of God's prophetess is serious. While this fact documents the continuation of the moral declivity of the major/cyclical judges, it especially reveals the reluctance to believe God's promise. Even though Barak gains the victory, he expends much time and energy trying to obtain the prize he has already forfeited. This is one of the sad truths testified to in the Bible as well as throughout the history of the church. God in his goodness is constantly looking for opportunities to give good gifts to men and women. Yet because of their lack of faith, they forfeit those blessings that God would freely give.



In the case of Barak, he loses the opportunity to truly be used of God. True, he does win the battle, and this is a testimony to his faith (this is why he is listed in Heb. 11:32). But this is not completely what God had in mind to give him. When Christians fail to trust God, demanding assurance when God, in fact, has already spoken, they lose out on the opportunity to be used by him to the fullest extent.

**Jael.** In the case of Jael, as in the previous case of Ehud, the interpretation of the narrative absence of Yahweh is understood differently by scholars. Some argue that the absence of Yahweh's involvement in Jael's actions indicates that her deeds: "have been lifted from the Canaanite notebook." Block maintains,

The narration offers no hint of any spiritual motivation on her part or any concern for Israel. She acts entirely on her own and for her own (mysterious) reasons. Her actions are not only deviant and violent but socially revolutionary, challenging prevailing views of female roles in general and the relationship of husband and wife in particular. However, just because the author records her deeds does not mean he approves of them. It simply adds to the mystery of divine providence, demonstrating implicitly what the following verses explicitly affirm: God is able to incorporate the free activities of human beings into his plan for his own glory and for the salvation of his people. (Block, *Judges*, Ruth, p. 209).

O'Connell, by contrast, argues that the lack of plot complication (i.e., this problem-free development leading to Jael's success in killing Sisera), like the lack of plot complication in the Ehud story, indicates that it is Yahweh v/ho has control of the circumstances leading to the success in both cases. He puts it this way:

As in the Ehud account, Jael cannot claim final credit for success in humiliating Israel's enemy. The two foreshadowings of Jael in 4:9 and 4:11 seem designed to demonstrate YHWH's control over events in the story. That is, before anyone (character or reader) knew her name or understood her significance, YHWH is seen to have predicted the outcome of Jael's actions through Deborah (4:9) and to have set up the conditions for her humiliation of Sisera (and, unwittingly, Barak) by positioning her tent beside that of her husband on the route by which Sisera would escape (cf. 4:11, 17). Thus, as with Ehud, the strategies of Jael are seen to work in concert with those of YHWH. What is more, the humiliating effect that Jael's assassination of Sisera has upon Barak (4:22) comes as the result of a strategy outside Jael's interest (and probably awareness) and demonstrates that YHWH, who predicted her actions and positioned her tent, was the one ultimately in control of the circumstances leading to Jael's success. (O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of Judges*, p. 110)

As with Shamgar, deliverance comes from an unexpected source and in an unexpected manner. Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, is the person who is the ultimate human hero(ine) of the story. She takes the initiative to do what needs to be done.

It is noteworthy that in the deliverances in these cycles the enemy leadership must be effectively dealt with. Ideally, as with Othniel, the leadership can be simply overwhelmed. In the case of Ehud, he personally deals with the leadership. Here Barak is ineffective in successfully dealing with Sisera, so God uses Jael to accomplish this.

Jael risks her own life to deliver a people that she is not even a part of. She could easily have remained uninvolved. Her husband's treaty with Jabin meant that Sisera was not a threat. In fact, if she aided Sisera in his escape, perhaps this would be rewarded. After all, Jabin is still intact as the king of the region, and there is no guarantee that the Israelites will defeat him (note 4:24, which clearly implies a more prolonged process that eventually culminates in Jabin's demise). Sisera's defeat may be only a temporary setback. With all these factors Jael's involvement is remarkable—again for people with whom she is not directly associated.

Like Ehud, Jael accomplishes the victory over God's enemy. Her willingness to risk her life is in greatly heightened contrast to the Israelite tribes who chose to remain at home, to play it safe.