

Story of Barack and Deborah: Judges 4

The account of Deborah and Barak is found in Judges 4 and 5 in the Old Testament. The Israelites had been under the control of the Canaanite king Jabin and the commander of his army, Sisera. The Canaanites had 900 chariots of iron and ruled over Israel for 20 years (Judges 4:2–3).

A prophetess named Deborah judged or made rulings for the people of Israel under a palm tree during that time. One of Deborah's judgments was to instruct Barak to summon 10,000 men and attack Jabin's army. Likely fearful to comply with such a command, Barak told Deborah, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go" (Judges 4:8). She replied, "Certainly I will go with you. . . . But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman" (verse 9).

Deborah and Barak then gathered 10,000 troops and attacked Sisera and his army. Barak's troops won: "All Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left" (Judges 4:16). Sisera himself fled to the tent of a Hebrew woman named Jael. She gave him milk to drink and covered him with a blanket in the tent. Then, "Jael . . . picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died" (verse 21).

Following this battle, "God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him" (Judges 4:23–24). Deborah's prophecy was fulfilled: Barak won, Sisera was killed by a woman, and the Israelites were freed from their enemies.

Judges chapter 5 then records the song of Deborah and Barak, written to rejoice in God's victory over the Canaanites. The lyrics encourage the actions of Deborah and Barak, saying, "Wake up, wake up, Deborah! / Wake up, wake up, break out in song! / Arise, Barak! / Take captive your captives, son of Abinoam" (Judges 5:12). Jael's role is also heralded: "Most blessed of women be Jael, / the wife of Heber the Kenite, / most blessed of tent-dwelling women" (verse 24).

The song of Deborah and Barak also gives some more detail about the victory over the Canaanites: "The earth shook, the heavens poured, / the clouds poured down water" (Judges 5:4). Evidently, God used a flood to disable the iron chariots of Sisera. The victory was supernatural (verse 20). Chapter 5 concludes with the statement, "And the land had peace forty years." This impressive time of peace lasted until Midian took control of Israel, necessitating Gideon's rise.

Lessons for today from the lives of Deborah and Barak include the following: 1) God often calls people to step out in faith to attempt the unexpected, 2) God often uses unlikely people and sources to accomplish His plans, 3) God sometimes requires great risk and effort on our behalf as part of His divine plan. In the case of Deborah and Barak, they risked their lives in war, while Jael took in a runaway fugitive and risked her life to end his and help free Israel from oppression. Ultimately, this account reveals that God is in control of the nations and changes their leaders according to His desires.