

## **Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 25, Judges 4-5 Deborah and Barak**

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 25, Judges 4-5, Deborah and Barak.

Greetings again, and in this segment, we're going to be discussing Judges chapters four and five.

This is the story of Deborah and Barak and their battle against the Canaanites, and in here we have a unique set of texts because the details of the story are told in chapter four in prose form, a straightforward narrative, and then in chapter five we have a hymnic reflection back upon those events. We have Deborah singing and composing this song. It's in poetic form.

If you look at your Bible, you'll see that chapter five looks like the song, looks like poetry, and this is one of the places in the Bible where we can have sort of a hermeneutical test case for how to interpret prose, how to interpret poetry. In most languages, intuitively we understand that poetry can tend to be more figurative in its depiction of things. The prose tends to be more straightforward, and poetry sometimes is more emotive than prose, so there are lots of characteristics that are different, and we see them in action here.

We see them laid out here. We discussed this in a previous segment when we were discussing the passage in Joshua that talked about the sun and the moon standing still, so to speak, but I would argue that that little passage is poetic. It's a hymnic reflection back upon the battle that's just been completed in that chapter, verses six to eleven, but this is a really helpful kind of control to help understand how to interpret things.

So maybe just to look at that from the hermeneutics of it before we look at the beginnings of the story, just to point out, we have the prose account in 24 verses in chapter four, and we have kind of the prosaic, the word prosaic is kind of, you know, every day and it comes from the word prose, the prosaic conclusion to the chapter in chapter four, verses 23 and 24. So on that day, God subdued Jabin, the king of Canaan, before the people of Israel, and the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin, king of Canaan, till they destroyed Jabin, king of Canaan. So that's just kind of the general prose wrap-up.

In the poem, we have a lot of that ground covered that's in chapter four, but a lot of the things in the poem are not really found in the prose account, and some of it's much more figurative. So, for example, in chapter five, verse four, it says, Lord, when

you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, or Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. Verse five, the mountains quaked before the Lord.

There's no account of thunderstorms and earthquakes and so on in chapter four, but the poem kind of talks about this as if God is bringing to bear all the forces of nature against the Canaanites, and that's even more so when you read down in verse 20. When it says, from heaven the stars fought. From their courses, they fought against Sisera, who was the Canaanite general, and so on.

So, we don't really imagine that there was something happening with the stars and special gamma rays or X-rays coming down. We understand that intuitively as figurative language to say that God brought all things to bear and the victory was total and overwhelming. So, this is a really good test case to see how to interpret prose versus poetry.

Another really helpful case that is very similar, is the story of the Exodus out of Egypt passing through the Red Sea. We see that in the prose account in Exodus 14, and the poetic account in Exodus 15, the first 18 verses. And if you're very inspired to do further work, spend some time making a chart listing the things in Exodus 14 against the things in Exodus 15 or Judges 4 and 5, and you can see how poetry works versus vis-a-vis how prose works.

So now let's talk about the actual story as it unfolds in chapter four and see what is happening. Deborah is the fourth of the judges, and the story begins again with her being told that the people of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, verse one. God sold them into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan, Jabin, pronounced in Hebrew, who reigned up in Hazor, Hatzor.

Hazor is far north of the land, and his general was a man named Sisera. So, the people of the Lord were oppressed. Jabin had 900 chariots of iron, so obviously a well-equipped army, and he oppressed the people for 20 years.

Now Deborah is introduced here in a different way than any of the other judges because we see her judging as we would think a real judge does in our modern day, namely giving out advice or rendering judgments or decisions. So, in verses four and five, chapter four, first of all, it calls her a prophetess and says she was judging Israel at the time. She sat under the palm of Deborah, a place that her name was attached to, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim in the center part of the country.

People came to her for judgments. So that sets her apart, above and apart and away from others. We see later in the chapter, and then in chapter five, that she ends up taking the lead in the military conflict.

Barak, the other man here in the story, seems to be afraid to take the lead, and so she steps up and does that. So, she is a leader par excellence. She's a prophet.

She's a judge. She's a military leader, essentially, and so she's kind of unique and steps out in a way. She's the only woman among the judges.

She's the exception in that sense, and ironically, she is the judge that shines most brightly of all the twelve judges that we see in the book. So she sends in someone's barrack in verse six, and says to him that we should go and take your men. He appears to be the military commander.

Go take your men at Mount Tabor. Take ten thousand from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun, and I will draw Cicero, the general. So, she's proposing a strategy where she and he would collaborate in defeating the enemy.

But Barak is much more squeamish, it appears to be. He says, if you go with me, I'll go, but if you're not going to go with me, I'm not going to go. So, he's unwilling to leave and be on his own and try to do a joint effort in a different way.

So, after that, he sort of fades into the background, and she's the one that gets the credit. So, she says, verse eight, I'm sorry, verse nine, she says, I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you're going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Cicero into the hand of a woman.

And there's a second woman who is a hero in this book, in this chapter, a woman named Jael, who's the one that actually kills the Canaanite general, Cicero. Ironic, because Barak is the Israelite general who should have, in a sense, been the one to kill his Canaanite counterpart, but he is being led by a woman, and it's another woman who kills the Canaanite general. So, they have quite an army.

Verse 10, they call out from Zebulun, Naphtali. So, we've mentioned the early part of the book in the introductory comments and the lectures that it appears that most of the judges were not judges leading a coalition of all 12 tribes of Israel in any given battle against the Canaanites. Here it appears that Deborah and Barak are working with a couple tribes, so these are smaller coalitions, and it is very possible, probably likely, that also some of these actions of the judges were contemporary with each other.

They overlapped, at least, because the number of the years that is told here in the Book of Judges exceeds the timeframe that we know is sort of the beginning and end points of the period of the judges. So, here's an example of that, primarily coming from Zebulun and Naphtali. So Sisera hears of the threat in verse 12, and he calls out his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and Deborah instructs Barak to go with his 10,000

men following, but the Lord, verse 15, routes Sisera and the chariots before Barak, so Barak does engage in some of the battle here.

But Sisera appears to be able to escape, and all the army of Sisera falls to Barak at the end of verse 16, but Sisera escapes, and he arrives at the tent of a woman named Yael. In verses 17 to the end of the chapter, we have two more women, so there are really three women that figure in this chapter, Deborah and Yael, but then, ironically, at the end, the mother of Sisera is, well, I'm sorry, it's not here, it's in the poem, but the mother of Sisera appears at the end of the poem as one who is mourning as well, so we'll see that in a few minutes. So Sisera flees away to the tent of Yael, she welcomes him in, she covers him up, he asks for some water, she gives him some milk, and so on.

Long story, when he falls asleep, she takes a tent peg and pounds it through his skull, and he ends up dead along with the rest of his army. So, the victory over the Canaanite coalition is complete, and it's mainly at the hands of two of the women leaders here in the chapter. So there's a song composed, and sung, to celebrate the occasion that we find in chapter five, and it says that Deborah and Barak sang this song.

It's usually called the Song of Deborah in the literature, as you'll see in commentaries, but we see Barak is part of this, and to give him credit, he does lead the army and destroy the army of Sisera, but he seems to want to do it in the shadow of Deborah, and he doesn't have the honor of killing his counterpart, Sisera. So it begins in verse two, the leaders took the lead, and the peoples offered themselves willingly, and the verb here offered themselves willingly, is one word in Hebrew. It's the same word that's found in Exodus, when the people were coming out of Egypt, and the people were willingly taking the treasures and bringing them and giving them to the Tabernacle to build the Tabernacle.

It's the same word found years later, almost a thousand years later, in the book of Nehemiah, when people were offering themselves willingly to help in the construction of the walls of Jerusalem, in Ezra, with the construction of the temple. So, there's this idea that people are pitching in and doing their job, and the nation is coming together in a positive way at this point. And verse three sounds almost like a psalm.

Hear, O kings, give ear, O princes, to the Lord, I will sing, I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel. And then it begins lauding the Lord, praising the Lord for the things he has done, verses four and five, talk about him marching forth. And then it kind of goes along and mentions the days of Shamgar, the earlier judge, the days of Yael, verse six, and then it kind of gives a history of what's happening.

There's no kind of narrative storyline in these comments, but they're kind of coming around and just touching down on different things and kind of praising God. But from verses 14 and following, well, verse 13, it talks about the marching there, and marching, of course, is usually done in a sequence. And so, verses 14 and following, we have eight different tribes mentioned as part of the coalition.

So, we've had a couple mentioned earlier, but now there's more. So verse 14, there's Ephraim, also in verse four, Benjamin, verse 14, I'm sorry. And then verse 14 mentions Zebulun, 15 mentions Issachar and Reuben, 17 mentions Dan and Asher, and 18 mentions Zebulun again and then Naphtali.

So there is, it seems like a larger coalition than we saw in chapter four, and a larger coalition than most of the engagements of the other judges. The kings came, they fought, verse 19, fought the kings of Canaan by Tanak, by the waters of Megiddo, they had no spoils. The stars fought from heavens, in verse 20, and the imagery keeps piling up of this great total victory against the Canaanites.

There's a really radical change in the tone of the poem when we get to verse 24. And it kind of slows down and focuses on one person. It focuses on Yael, the one who killed Sisera.

So, it praises her by saying, in verse 24, most blessed of women be Yael, the wife of Heber the Canaanite. He asked for water, she gave him milk, brought him curds, and so on. She set her hand on the tent peg, her right hand on the working mallet.

Now verse 26 kind of gives us an illustration of how poetry works. There are discussions of exactly what was the sequence there, if the video camera was running, what would we have seen? We imagine, you know if she has a tent peg in one hand and she has a mallet in the other, pounding it this way.

So, in verse 26, she set her hand on the tent peg, and she set her right hand on the worker's mallet. Some scholars argue that the reference to the hand in the first part of the verse and the right hand in the next line are the same. But that kind of jumbles up the picture of how is she going to be doing that, holding everything in one hand.

So, I think it's just a straightforward reading, grabs the tent peg in the other. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered, she pierced his temple. So notice there are four verses, bang, bang, bang, bang.

Kind of adds to the imagery, to the vividness of things. And then I think verse 27 is one of the most remarkable depictions in words in the Bible of the drama of something happening. Because here, the poetry, you probably know that Hebrew poetry is very regular and it occurs usually in paired lines.

And the lines are usually of pretty similar length, sort of a certain rhythm in the lines. But here in verse 27, that poetry is fractured. The lines get shorter and shorter and it kind of ends with one word.

So let me just try to read it in a way that captures that. It's talking about Sisera, the general who was killed, and Yael, the one who killed him. So, verse 27, between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still.

Between her feet he sank, he fell. Where he sank, there he fell, dead. And so it kind of pictures the death spiral, almost, of this man.

The poetry gives three verbs in the first part. Sank, fell, lay still. The second one sank, fell.

The third one sank, then he fell. And then the last word in here is just dead. And so, there's this kind of this funnel, this death spiral here, and it captures, I think, the drama of things.

And I think the author of the poem is Deborah, who was intentionally breaking, intentionally fracturing the poetry here to kind of show that. Then there's another dramatic change, and it's even more dramatic, because it shifts the scene out of Israel, in the battleground, to wherever Sisera is from. And it focuses on somebody that has not been mentioned at all in the text, either in chapter four or chapter five, up to this point.

And that is Sisera's mother. And so now we're looking at the character of a Canaanite. It's one of the only passages in the Old Testament where we have the sort of the internal mental processes of a Canaanite person, an enemy of Israel, described.

Usually, the Canaanites are depicted in what, in literary terms, is sometimes called a flat character. They're not really very highly developed. We just know that they're usually bad guys.

Rahab is one that's described in much more detail. She would be what's, in literary terms, called a round character. Much more fully developed, literarily.

Sisera's mother. We see a little bit about the inner workings in her mind, and she is sort of in between, just a totally flat character and a fully round character. Anyway, so out of the window, she is looking.

Verse 28. The mother Sisera wailed through the lattice, Why is this chariot so long in coming? Why, tarry, the hoofbeats of this chariot is her wisest princesses answer,

Indeed, she answers herself. Have they not found and divided the spoil? A womb or two for every man. The spoils.

And it's just a sad and tragic picture of a woman bereft of her son. Surrounded by her servants, and princesses. But she can do nothing to bring back her son.

He's not going to show up. And so, the final verse of the poem, verse 31, appears to be the author of the poem now, Deborah's final response and reflection on things, kind of picking up on this statement about Sisera's mother. And it says, May all of your enemies perish, O Lord.

Let your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might. So, it's a very dramatic poem. It's a very dramatic story of victory.

Led by an unexpected type of person, a woman. But the poem is just a very dramatic poem. And it highlights the exploits of a great woman leader, Deborah.

Another woman, Gael, who kills the Canaanite general. And then the Canaanite general's mother, who is seen as a mournful, forlorn person, which adds to the drama of the chapter.

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