

Jael

Judges Chapter 4

As a parent, there are times we can be pretty disappointed with our kids. But we still love them. This is likely how God felt at times when the Children of Isreal lost track of their one true God. According to the scriptures, after Moses led them out of Egypt to the promised land, each of the 12 Tribes of Israel were given a portion of the land in Canaan. God commanded them to destroy the people living there, make no covenants, and show no favor to them. (Deuteronomy 7:2)

Israel took the land, but they did not completely annihilate or remove the people who were already living there. Instead, they became neighbors, made business deals, and intermarried with them. It didn't take long before Israel began to worship Baal and other gods, just as the pagans did. In scripture, it says, *"they did evil in the eyes of the Lord."*

For punishment, the Lord allowed Jabin, the king of the Canaanites, to enslave the Israelites. In time, the Israelites began to complain to God; they cried out for deliverance. In his mercy, God raised up a leader among the people to be their judge. Following the death of Judge Ehud, a woman named Deborah was appointed by God to be the next judge of Israel. Like Moses before her, Deborah was also a prophet, chosen by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit.

As a judge, she held court under the Palm of Deborah, listening to the legal disputes brought before her by the Israelite people. As a prophet, she was God's representative, reminding the people of what they already knew about God. She was recognized as both a military and spiritual leader.

In Judges 4: 11-12, we learn about a man named Heber, who was a member of the Kenites, a branch of the Midianite tribe. The Kenites were friendly to Isreal, but Heber was estranged from his family, had sided with the Canaanites, and moved away from his own people. Heber was perfectly positioned to hear the grumblings of the oppressed Israelites and was likely the "they" mentioned in verse 12 who shared information about an impending battle. Regardless of his involvement, these two verses are an important part of the rest of the story.

The Lord instructed Deborah to call for a man named Barak to arise and lead Israel's sons from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun in destroying the Canaanite's army at Mt. Tabor. Now, remember, there is no formal Israeli military, these are enslaved men, coming from the two tribes to fight together. They have no weapons other than sticks, animal bones, or slingshots. On the other hand, the Canaanite army was well-equipped with 900 chariots fitted with iron. Perhaps it was because of those terrifying odds that Barak, though faithful to and anointed by God, said he would only go into battle if Deborah went with him. Deborah agreed with this condition but told him that because of this decision, there would be no glory for him. Instead, the victory would come from the hand of a woman.

This is our first inkling of a flip in the script and this time, it's a double flip!

Sisera and his army of ironclad chariots raced to meet their enemy – Barak and his 10,000 men. Both sides headed to the River Kishon at the foot of Mt. Tabor. There, a fierce battle ensued, and the Lord delivered Sisera's army to Barak; not one man remained. Seeing that all was lost, Sisera jumped out of his chariot and escaped on foot. Barak and his men followed in hot pursuit.

Sisera ran to the home of Heber the Kenite, a family friend of the Canaanite king, Jabin. Heber's wife, Jael, was at home and saw him coming. She invited Sisera to come in. We'll let scripture take the story from here.

18 *Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my Lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.*

19 *"I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.*

20 *"Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'"*

21 *But Jael, Heber's wife, 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.*

22 Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. “Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.” So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

23 On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. **24** And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

Not only was the victor a woman, but it was not Deborah. She was an unknown, ordinary housewife named Jael. Hospitality was the norm of her culture – anytime a stranger entered a tent as a guest, they were to be defended or concealed from harm. Jael responded to this man in the customary fashion by inviting him into her home. (For another example of this custom, read about the fate of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19-21.)

Regardless of her husband’s support of the enemy, we don’t know how she felt toward the Canaanites. Even though they were living away from her relatives, Jael knew they were being horribly mistreated. She had witnessed their suffering. This was a war against her own family, the chosen people of Jehovah God.

She was not trained as an assassin, but she knew how to use a tent peg and a hammer. Jael was fully equipped to fulfil God’s purposes when she heard his calling. When she saw an opportunity, she was moved by the Holy Spirit to act, and she did so with courage.

Jael was positioned where God needed her. She did something the men of Israel had failed to do; she destroyed the Canaanites as God had commanded.

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Study Questions

- How do you think Deborah was received as a judge? Why?
- What was Barak’s attitude toward Deborah?
- Who won the battle? How do you know?
- What do you think of Jael’s motive? Cold-blooded killer? Opportunist? Spirit led?
- What lessons can we learn from Deborah? From Barak? From Jael?

Further Study

If you found it unusual that all the men were killed in battle, read Deuteronomy 7:2 and Numbers 33:51-56 and compare the entries. Read them in different translations for a more in-depth understanding. Assess how this outcome reflects on what God asked the Israelites to do when they first moved into the Promised Land.