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Judges 4:13–14, ESV.

¹³ Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. ¹⁴ And Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him.

God vs. Iron.

There is a biblical story about a Judge named Deborah who lived at the advent of the Iron Age. The Judges were the leaders of Israel in the era after entering Canaan but before the kings emerged, people like Saul, David, and Solomon. The Judges were in truth warlords, but this Judge was also a true “judge” in a certain sense. But before we look at the story of Deborah, we need to talk about bronze and iron. I had a friend in grad school who was studying Materials Science. His specialty was metals and their use in construction. We’ll call him Patrick, and I do remember being very bored as he told me the tedious history of the use of metals by various cultures. What I am about to tell you I had to look up to remind myself. The Bronze Age lasted from 3300 B.C. to 1200 B.C. It was a critical age, when people began making tools and weapons and armor from bronze, instead of

stone and wood. It led to rapid advancements of certain civilizations, like that of the Egyptians. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. Only at the time of Deborah, during the 12th century B.C., did people in her part of the world begin to work with iron. The challenge, of course, is the much higher melting point of iron, about 2,800° Fahrenheit, compared to about 1,700° Fahrenheit for working with bronze. Also, it is much easier to cast bronze into molds or to cold hammer it into desirable shapes than iron, at least using ancient technology. And iron tends to require more complex smelting procedures to remove impurities. Importantly, for our story, under Deborah the Judge, Israel was still working with bronze, while their immediate enemy was already working with iron. Despite me not wanting to listen to the dull story of the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age, my geeky friend Patrick taught me something very important that I do remember. The relative lack of available tin in the ancient world led to minimal use of metal. But once people were able to create sources of heat that allowed them to work with iron, the use of metal exploded. This led to a military revolution. We are going to get a small, early glimpse of this in the story of Deborah the Judge.

The Book of Judges is named after the group of people who ruled Israel from the time of the conquest of Canaan until the first king, Saul. The biblical Hebrew word for the Book of Judges is *Shofetim*, and although it nominally means

“*Judges*”, it more precisely denotes charismatic tribal leaders, people with both administrative and military duties. We believe that the book was written over an extended period, many hundreds of years, by multiple people, and put into its final form around the time of the Babylonian invasion – perhaps 700 years after the initial creation of the material. The historical context of *Judges* is that Israel was still fighting to maintain control of the land they had inhabited. They were surrounded by peoples who wanted them gone. There was a small nation called Ammon east of the Jordan, a loose confederation of Canaanite peoples nearby, Philistines to the west, and Moabites to the southeast. A critical need of the Israelite people, therefore, was that they stay united so that they could fight off the frequent intrusion of invaders. The problem – one that confronted Deborah the Judge – was that the land of Israel had been divided among the twelve tribes by Joshua, and so it was very much a decentralized, disorganized theocracy.

Deborah is the only female Judge described in the Book of *Judges*. Serving alongside her, as her military commander, is Barak. We are in Israel’s northern territories. We believe that Deborah is in the Tribe of Ephraim, because that is apparently where the story takes place. It is a hilly area, and surrounding enemy peoples are keeping the Israelites trapped there, not allowing them to work the more fertile and easier to farm plains. The peoples oppressing them are

apparently Canaanites who are themselves only loosely organized. Deborah is facing a particularly scary invasion, and God has allowed this, as the Chosen People have fallen into idolatry. Chapters 4 and 5 tell slightly different versions of the same story; Chapter 4 is in prose and Chapter 5 consists of a poem – one that has become very famous. It is known as the Song of Deborah. I’m going to blur over the minor inconsistencies between the two accounts.

This is how Chapter 4 begins. Ehud was a Judge:

4 And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. 2 And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. 3 Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

The commander of the Canaanite army, Sisera, who serves under a king named Jabin, has an extreme advantage as he invades the hilly lands of the disorganized Israelite tribes. He has 900 chariots made of iron, allowing him to attack the infantry army of Israel with a rapid, overpowering force. But we are told that the Israelites, before the onslaught of the enemy, pray, asking God to help them. Deborah is referred to not just as a Judge, but as a Prophetess, and she holds court under a palm tree called the “Palm of Deborah”. She summons Barak, the military commander and tells him to gather 10,000 soldiers from the various tribes of Israel. They are to intercept Sisera’s army in their iron chariots. Note

that Barak's army consists of civilians only recently gathered into a fighting force and using bronze weapons, while Sisera commands a trained, highly combat-experienced army with iron chariots and weapons. We read this in Chapter 4:

¹³ Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. ¹⁴ And Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him.

Barak knows that God is with Deborah, and so we are also told this:

⁹ And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.

Barak asks her to come with him into battle, so that God will stand behind him.

She says yes, but as a result, if Barak is going to be helped by a woman, she predicts that God will see to it that it is a woman – and not Barak – who will eventually get the extreme honor of personally defeating Sisera.

We read this in the poetry version of Chapter 5:

*²¹ The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!*

God brings a sudden torrent of rain down as the two armies, Sisera's rapidly moving army of heavy iron chariots and the foot soldiers of Israel. The iron

chariots become bogged down in a wadi called Kishon, a ravine that is dry except in the rainy season. We are told this is the prose version of the story in Chapter 4:

¹⁵ And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot. ¹⁶ And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

Barak destroys the Canaanite army, with his lightly armed, quickly assembled army gathered from multiple Israelite tribes. Sisera flees to the home of a nomadic tribe called the Kenites. He finds the tent of the wife of the king of these people. He finds the king's wife Jael there. She agrees to conceal him from Barak, who is hunting him down. This is what happens, from Chapter 4:

Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. ²² And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went in to her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

Jael realizes that Sisera is an evil man who is terrorizing God's people. Jael's tribe, though not Jewish, had adopted the Jewish God. Her actions fulfill Deborah's prophesy that a woman would become the hero of the war against Sisera.

Here is how Chapter 5, the Song of Deborah, ends:

*³¹ "So may all your enemies perish, O LORD!
But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might."
And the land had rest for forty years.*

Through Deborah's faith and God's guidance, Israel enjoys 40 years of peace.

My grad school friend Patrick, whom I did not appreciate at the time, but very much warrants my appreciation today, said that iron revolutionized warfare by allowing the mass production of sharper swords, more durable tools, and siege weapons. Iron led to the rise of professional armies, as opposed to rat tag civilian armies like Israel's. This is what we read about in the story of Deborah. It's the Bronze Age meets the Iron Age. After the time of Deborah, the major Canaanite urban centers went into decline. The agriculture and pastoral based Israelite society blossomed. The point of the story of Deborah in Chapters 4 and 5 of Judges is that this was possible only because of the intervention of God.

What do we make of all this? The story of Deborah is not a defense of warfare, nor does it argue that God's people should be out there fighting other peoples. It's just the opposite. The Israelites were not the aggressors. They had no standing army. They were busy tending sheep and planting crops and worshipping God while their neighbors were building up a professional army to run the Israelites out of even the least desirable land. Much later, during the time of King Saul, the first king of Israel, we are told this in 1 Samuel:

¹⁹ *Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears."*

The enemy of the Israelites at the time of King Saul was the Philistines. This passage tells us that 200 years after the time of Deborah, the Israelites were still fighting with Bronze Age weapons. Later in 1 Samuel, when the shepherd boy David meets Goliath, we are told this about Goliath's spear:

⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron.

The Israelites are still battling iron with bronze – but again, with the aid of God. In fact, David goes back to a previous age and uses a stone against Goliath.

There are some scholars who believe that this version of the Deborah story, since it was written so long after the events took place, is anachronistic. Perhaps long after the end of the Bronze Age, when the Book of Judges was put into its final form, the authors simply imagined that a superior army would be using iron for their weaponry. There are scholars who believe that items that were once thought to be local archeological artifacts made of iron were in truth imported from Cyprus and not made by the Philistines themselves. A more recent theory is that the “iron” chariots of the Canaanites at the time of Deborah were strong, well-made war chariots, but not literally made of iron. Because of the long period of time over which this book was written, we will most likely never know the true story, at least with respect to the use of iron vs. the use of bronze. As we have

seen so many times, it's not the literal nature of the Bible story that matters. It's what we can extract from it spiritually - and how we can apply it to our lives.

In the story of Deborah, there is a dramatic contrast between the incredible power of God and the almost pathetic nature of Israel's army as they go into battle against the Canaanite army. Israel was poor, militarily weak, almost unarmed, and not at all united. It was a society that lived off the land in a survival mode. The salvation of the people of Israel didn't come from its army: it came from God. God brought a brutal thunderstorm and God then revealed himself to Jael, the queen of a people who were friends of the Canaanite invaders. Our lesson today is that it is not through our own strength and our own power, or our ability to fight evil, that we are able to live the way God wants us to. We cannot on our own survive in a corrupt world surrounded by selfish, angry, and embittered people. We need God just as much as Deborah and Barak needed God. Like the people of Israel, we accept the things that God puts before us to help us: our Christian community and the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

There is one more important point to this story. Whether it represents literal history or whether parts of it were imagined long after the events took place, it's clear that the author is more concerned with us learning moral and spiritual lessons from reading about Deborah and Barak. Near the end of Chapter

5, the poem version of our story, we read these words where both Deborah and Barak are honoring Jael, who killed Sisera. It reveals something subtle that we might miss if we were only reading this as an Israelite history lesson:

- 24 “Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.*
- 25 He asked for water and she gave him milk;
she brought him curds in a noble’s bowl.*
- 26 She sent her hand to the tent peg
and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;
she struck Sisera;
she crushed his head;
she shattered and pierced his temple.*
- 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.*

Barak joins in the praise of Jael despite him originally very much wanting to be the hero of the war. This illustrates a critical human factor when it comes to faith. God gives us each other. We must support each other. We must honor each other. Barak recognized that God had given Jael an important role in protecting the people of God – and he was quite happy to acknowledge that. Those are the lessons of the story of Judge Deborah. We turn to God for guidance. We turn to each other for support. We praise both God and our peers for helping us.