

Judges

Chapters 4-5

I Will Go if you Go with me

10.02.2007

When God brought his people from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, he set out areas that they should live in. Each tribe had their own state in the Federation of tribes which would be unified one day under King Solomon.

As we go through the Book of Judges, one mistake that Christians often make is to think of the tribes as being a cohesive whole, which will work together and fight together. But the situation of the land was a bit more like Australia before our Federation. In the 19th century, each state was its own settlement, with its own powers bestowed from England. Part of the current hassles we have with water rights on our major rivers comes from the powers that states retained when we unified into a nation.

In Judges 4 and 5, we find that there was a judge living in the hill country of Ephraim (about in the centre of the land), while for 20 years a tyrant was wreaking havoc in the far north. The unity of the Israelites was fractured. Some lived in peace, while others suffered.

The detail of the tyrants and deliverers in this part of Judges also brings surprises. For we find that instead of simply having one tyrant who led the army and created problems, we now have two. There is King Jabin, and his feared commander of the army Sisera. No longer is this a tyrant from outside the Promised Land come in to oppress. For King Jabin is a Canaanite, one whom God had left as a thorn in the side of his people. And Sisera commanded a fleet of 900 iron chariots.

Fear and tremble, O faithless Israel, for God has raised cruel masters over you.

And to match the double tyrant, we find that God has raised a non-warrior judge, and an Israelite army commander. The judge is Deborah, a prophetess. She sits under a palm in the peaceful mid-country. And prompted by God, she summons Barak from the midst of a tribe stung by Sisera's cruelty. This brave man obediently travels south, and is informed that the Lord has called on him to raise 10,000 men from 2 affected tribes up north, and he is to marshal them on the slopes of Mt Tabor. God will call out Sisera's army to meet them on the plains of the Kishon river, and God will bring victory.

However, Barak surprises us with his manly response. This great and mighty warrior turns to

Deborah, the lady known as the mother of Israel, and said in his 'deepest' voice, *If you go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.* How could he raise the army? How could he fight 900 iron chariots? Deborah's the judge! She can do it! God is with her! Barak is just a nobody!

And like a mother of Israel, she said *Very well. I will go with you. But the glory will not be yours. The Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman!*

In chapter 4, we find that they do assemble, Sisera comes at them, and the Lord confuses Sisera's army, so that the Israelites win. But Sisera flees on foot. He escapes to an allies tent. Heber the Kenite was not an Israelite, and had an agreement with King Jabin. So Sisera felt safe enough to have a sleep. Heber's wife Jael, offered him food and lodging, and promised safety from the pursuing posse.

But while alone and asleep, with many similarities to the deeds of Ehud, who stabbed King Eglon alone and with surprise, so Jael killed Sisera.

So when Barak arrived, he found that he was like the courtiers of King Eglon. As he entered the room, there was Sisera impaled and dead. As Deborah had prophesied, so Sisera was killed at the hands of a woman ... but not Deborah, as readers would think, but at the hands of a third deliverer, Jael, the most blessed of all women.

With Sisera dead, the Israelites then took a bit of time to remove King Jabin the Canaanite, and then peace came for 40 years.

But in an unusual twist in the book, reminiscent of what happened on the safe side of the Red Sea, we are given a victor's song. Like entering the change rooms after a grand final, we hear them belting out a song. Deborah and Barak sing a song.

As they sing, they recount the events, and give more detail. Just as Judges chapter 2 went back through the details of chapter 1, yet looked at it from God's perspective, so the song clearly shows God's hand in the action. God is praised for keeping his promises and delivering.

He provided the storm which turned the dry plains into the boggy quagmire to neutralise the chariots.

For the ancient Israelite, there was a lot of irony in the fact that God saved them from the 900 iron chariots through a storm. For Baal, the Canaanite

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god, was the storm god. He had a club in one hand and a spear in the other, referring to thunder and lightning. The Lord often showed his superiority over the gods affecting his faithless people, by deposing the wicked with things that would normally have been seen as the strengths of those gods. God defeated the storm god's people with a storm.

The song then mentions Deborah and Barak's roles. Various tribes are cheered or jeered, depending on whether they helped in the army or not. Jael is praised as the most blessed of all women, and Sisera's mother is poignantly left waiting at the window for a son who would never return.

The song proclaims the theme of *Perish O enemies of Israel, and let all the faithful rejoice in the Lord who saves.*

Throughout history, Christians have loved to sing about our Lord who saves us. We sing the praise of the Lord who controls the storm, whether on Lake Galilee or at the Kedesh River. We sing the praise of him who raises up and exalts men and women, and brings down the proud; Who provides salvation through the impaling of metal, whether through a head or through hands and feet; Who strengthens the feeble and overcomes great odds, whether facing 900 iron chariots or legions of demons.

We sing the praise of him who spoke through prophets and prophetesses, and who came as the Word made flesh, to make clear not only what he directs, but also who He is.

And we also sing, hopefully with tears in our eyes and pain in our hearts, of those who refuse to join in and trust.

And we sing with praise of Him who gave his all to save us, and who calls on us to follow him and to live for him.

It's good to sing his praise.