

Culmination of a Conquest: An Analysis of Judges 4-5*

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This article explores what appear to be two contradictory accounts of the battle of Deborah and Barak against the Canaanites. By placing the stories in their proper historical and political context, it suggests that the second version is not merely a poetic rendition of the first but a story in its own right recounting a more sweeping and sustained struggle for the land of Israel.

- A. Dual Leadership and Contradictory Chapters
- B. Iron Chariots and the Historical Backdrop
- C. Deborah: Religious Piety or Political Power
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A. Dual Leadership and Contradictory Chapters

And the Israelites continued to do evil... And Hashem delivered them into the hands of Yavin, King of Canaan, who ruled in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera...

And Deborah... sent and summoned Barak the son of Avinoam out of Kedesh-Naphtali and said to him: Has not Hashem, the Lord of Israel commanded: 'Go and lead them towards Mt. Tabor...' And Barak replied, 'If you will accompany me then I will go; if not I will not go.' And Deborah said, 'Willingly will I go but the glory... will not be thine for into the hand of a woman will God deliver Sisera.' (Judges 4:1-2, 5-9)

The above verses record the dialogue between Barak and Deborah following God's instructions to wage war against Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite forces. On the surface, their meaning is clear. They delineate Barak's reluctance to accept the leadership role thrust upon him by God and his negotiation for Deborah to chaperone him. On a second reading, however,

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these few sentences raise a host of questions.

While the theological issue of how Barak could consider disobeying God's directive troubles some commentators,¹ others wonder what benefit Barak would derive from Devorah's accompanying him.² Was she needed to offer prayers on the battlefield or for her tactical help in developing a military strategy? Additionally, how are we to interpret Devorah's response? Why should her presence diminish Barak's glory; after all, Devorah is not even mentioned in the account of the actual battle in Chapter 4! What then could she mean by the enigmatic "for into the hand of a woman will God deliver Sisera?"³

Before venturing to solve these difficulties, we must address an even more fundamental series of complications within our story. The tale of Devorah and Barak's clash with the Canaanite forces bears the distinction of being the only battle in the entire book of Judges described in both prose and poetry. While to some extent, the lyrical account in Chapter 5 supplements the narrative of Chapter 4, it also deviates from it in many fundamental respects.

¹ See Abravanel and Malbim (4:8), who note that defying the instructions of a Divine prophecy is punishable by the death penalty.

² See Ralbag, Abravanel, and Malbim, who address this issue.

³ The verse does not identify the "woman" destined to be the savior. While Radak and Ralbag (4:9) interpret it as referring to Devorah, their interpretation encounters the difficulties delineated above. The alternative, noted (and rejected) by Radak, identifies the "woman" as Yael, who impales Sisera at the conclusion of Chapter 4. As Radak already notes, this option does not fit the context of Devorah's remarks as there is no connection between the role of Yael and the participation of Devorah. See also Mezudat David and Malbim who attempt to synthesize both possibilities.

The following table summarizes these discrepancies.

	<u>Chapter 4</u>	<u>Chapter 5</u>
Leading the struggle	Barak leads (4:15,16,22) while Devorah fades into the background	Devorah is featured more prominently than Barak (5:1,7,12,15)
Participating tribes	Zevulun and Naphtali (4:10)	Ephraim, Binyamin, Menasseh, Zevulun, Yissakhar, and Naphtali (4:14-18)
Number of soldiers	10,000 (4:6,10,14)	40,000 ⁴ (5:8)
The opposition	Yavin and Sisera (4:2-3, 23-24)	The "kings" of Canaan (5:19)
Location of the battle	Nahal Kishon (4:13)	Ta'anakh, Megiddo, and Nahal Kishon ⁵ (5:19)

From the above table it is apparent that Chapters 4 and 5 diverge regarding almost every defining element of the battle. It is thus no wonder that the incongruity of these two versions has led some Biblical scholars to conclude that “the Editor” conflated two disparate recollections of the same event.⁶ In our analysis, by exploring the historical background of the conflict, we will

⁴ The difficulty inherent in this contradiction is highlighted by the exertions of the various exegetes in explaining this verse. The Targum and Rashi render the verse as referring to the number of enemy soldiers. Radak and Malbim offer the suggestion that it refers to the number of volunteers from the tribes of Gad and Reuven in the time of Yehoshua. Both of these interpretations, however, depart decisively from the plain meaning of the text.

⁵ The Targum, Rashi and Radak explain that Sisera's army was so vast that it stretched from Ta'anakh all the way to the waters of Megiddo. In contrast, Ralbag posits the existence of other Canaanite kings who joined forces with Sisera and attempted to recapture Ta'anakh and Megiddo.

⁶ See Yehezkel Kaufman's Sefer Shofetim (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 113-115 for a summary of some of the extant

present an alternative approach which will harmonize the two accounts.

II. Iron Chariots and the Historical Backdrop

The battle against Sisera and Yavin, in contrast to all of the other battles recounted in the book of Judges, is the only one fought against an enemy dwelling within Israelite borders. As we possess additional Biblical texts informing us about these remaining Canaanite pockets, we may employ them to our advantage.

The opening chapter of the Book of Judges, for instance, delineates the cities and territories on the western bank of the Jordan River, which remained unconquered by the Israelites. Joshua 13:13 does likewise for the eastern bank. The composite list contains three distinct groups of places:

- 1) Some locations were never conquered and remained as "thorns" in Israel's side as late as the days of the Monarchy. These include Zidon, the intended inheritance of the tribe of Asher, as well as Geshur and Ma'akhah, destined for conquest by the tribes living on the eastern bank of the Jordan.
- 2) Others, such as Yerushalayim, in the land of Binyamin, and Rehov, in the portion of Asher, were finally captured in the time of King David.⁷
- 3) The bulk of the remainder, i.e., the Canaanite pockets in the tribes of Menasseh, Ephraim, Zevulun, and Naphtali, are never heard from again, leaving us to wonder whether they were

literature.

⁷ See 2Samuel 5:5-7 and 8:3-8.

ultimately decimated by the Israelites or whether they merely disappeared due to other reasons. Interestingly, among these places, we find a number of the cities figuring prominently in the offensives of Devorah and Barak - Ta'anakh, Megiddo, and Dor.⁸

We also possess sufficient data to understand why these Canaanite pockets proved so resilient. Two verses from the books of Joshua and Judges enlighten us:

And the Canaanites who dwell in the valley are in possession of iron chariots. (Joshua 17:16)

And they conquered the mountainous regions, as they could not vanquish the inhabitants of the valleys for they possessed iron chariots.⁹ (Judges 1:19)

These "iron chariots" provided the Canaanites with a distinct military advantage in the valleys and plains, though they rendered little assistance in the mountainous regions. The Israelites, by contrast, did not even know how to smelt iron. This placed them at a serious disadvantage, a situation which continued all the way through the days of King Saul.¹⁰

⁸ Ta'anakh and Megiddo appear in the Song of Devorah in 5:19. Ein Dor surfaces again in a verse in Tehillim 83:10, ostensibly relating to the victory over Sisera (see Radak). Cf. Ibn Ezra's attempt to explain that the verse refers to Gid'on.

⁹ Most commentators (Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, Radak, and Ralbag) interpret this verse as referring to the tribe of Yehudah's inability to conquer the inhabitants of the valleys. Alternatively, we may understand it to refer to the impotence of the rest of the tribes, in which case the verse would serve as an introduction for the remainder of the chapter which lists the unconquered cities. This second reading seems more attractive since the text records no remaining Canaanite pockets in the territory of Yehudah, and the verse cited above from Joshua 17, speaks of the challenge the iron chariots posed specifically for the tribes of Ephraim and Menasseh.

¹⁰ A subsequent verse in our story (Judges 5:8) as well as verses in 1Samuel 13:19-22 highlight this reality in stark terms. In great part, because of this situation, the Israelite armies frequently resorted to surprise tactics so as to offset their enemies' superiority in firepower. We will return to this point in our subsequent discussion.

Surprisingly, "iron chariots" ("*rekhev barzel*") appear quite infrequently in Tanakh. In fact the only additional place they surface is in our story of the battle of Barak and Devorah against Sisera.¹¹ Chapter 4 explains that iron chariots allowed Yavin and Sisera to oppress the Israelites for twenty years. It also records that these same iron chariots accompanied Sisera to the Kishon valley in order to do battle with Israel. Their presence induced Barak to camp on the Tavor mountain range, as Sisera's chariots could not negotiate the precipitous terrain.

One more supplementary Biblical text provides us with information useful for our analysis. Our narrative describes Yavin as the "King of Canaan", despite his ruling only in Hazor. While we might dismiss this appellation as inconsequential, the description of Hazor in Joshua 11:10 as "the leader of all of the [Northern Canaanite] kingdoms" dispels this notion.

As in the Book of Joshua, Yavin, the "King of Canaan", rules not over one city only; rather he commands the confederacy of all of the remaining Canaanite armies (and their iron chariots) in the northern and central portions of the land of Israel. Bearing this in mind, we may explore the possibility that Sisera's army is only one of many Canaanite armies confronting the Israelites, albeit the most dangerous one. A careful examination of Judges 4:23-24 supports this possibility:

And on that day, God subdued Yavin, King of Canaan, before the children of Israel.

And the hand of Israel continued to come down hard on Yavin, King of Canaan, until they obliterated Yavin, King of Canaan.

¹¹ "Chariots" often appear without the adjectival "iron." It is noteworthy, though, that their only mention in the Book of Joshua is in the battle against Yavin, King of Hazor.

These two verses state explicitly that the one-day battle waged against Sisera was not a solitary confrontation but rather part of a campaign of much broader scope and longer duration. The verses are illuminated against the backdrop of our thesis that the war against Yavin only began but did not end with the Battle of Kishon; it raged on between the Israelites and the remaining Canaanite pockets in many other locations. Accordingly we may make sense of the enigmatic nineteenth verse of Chapter Five:

Kings came, they fought; then battled the kings of Canaan at Ta'anakh, by the waters of Megiddo...

Viewing the clash with Yavin as part of a confrontation of much broader scope allows us to understand another unique facet of the battle - the participation of so many different tribes. The Book of Judges describes not an era of national unity, but rather an epoch of dissension and even civil war¹² among the various tribes. When the Israelites fight against an external foe during this time span, the entire nation does not fight, but rather only the tribes whose personal welfare is endangered by the enemy at hand, that is, those who have a vested interest in the outcome of the war.¹³ Thus, it surprises us that so many tribes (including several from the central region of the land) would participate in the battle against Sisera (in the North) to free the Northern tribes from the oppression of Yavin.

This seemingly singular occurrence ceases to puzzle us when we realize that in addition

¹² See Chapters 12 and 20 (as well as 8:1).

¹³ It is for this reason that the leader ("*shofet*") always comes from the region of Israel which is subjugated at that particular moment. See the cases of Ehud, Gidon, Yiftah, and Shimshon.

to the main battle against Sisera in the North, additional struggles ensued throughout the central region of the land against all of the remaining Canaanite strongholds listed in Chapter 1 (Ta'anakh and Megiddo are only two examples). The war against the remaining forces of Canaan was not merely a regional battle affecting one or two tribes, but, unlike the other battles of the Book of Judges, was a national battle enveloping the majority of the tribes.

To be sure, Menasseh, Ephraim, and Binyamin did not participate in the local battle against Sisera (as we will see shortly). However, they had a great personal stake in the broader war against the rest of the Canaanite forces; hence, their participation in these battles need not puzzle us.¹⁴

Thus, the battles of Judges 4-5 provide the solution to the disappearance of the remaining Canaanite pockets and their iron chariots detailed in Chapter 1 of our book. These Canaanite forces did not gradually fade into oblivion, but were systematically routed in a series of confrontations beginning with the encounter with Sisera.

C. Devorah: Religious Piety or Political Power

We may now return to our original point of departure and attempt to shed light on the reasons Barak conditioned his own involvement on Devorah's participation. Several commentators see Devorah's virtue as the key. The Zohar (Parashat Vayakhel p.21a) explains

¹⁴ Those tribes that did participate in the war managed to vanquish their troublesome neighbors. Those who did not (mentioned in 5:15-17), suffered under their enemies for many years to come. Asher, for example, who did not partake in the war never managed to conquer Zidon and Rehov, which continued to exist in the time of David. Similarly, Dan, another tribe which did not take part, is compelled to search elsewhere for an additional inheritance (see Judges 18). Finally, the tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan who did not join in the fray never subdued Geshur and Ma'akhah.

that Barak calculated that Devorah's holy presence would prevent him from coming to any harm. Similarly, both Ralbag and Malbim explain that Barak hoped that through Devorah's piety, the nation would merit special providence which would guarantee victory in battle.¹⁵

Such explanations mesh well with the Aggadic axiom that the judges ("*shofetim*") were not merely military or political leaders (as it would seem from a plain reading of the text), but religious mentors as well.¹⁶ According to these interpretations, Devorah is called upon for assistance in this latter capacity.¹⁷

Moreover, these explanations conform to the view that the victories described in the Book of Judges deviate from the natural order. Often, when considering Biblical victories which describe the hand of God, the reader may choose to believe that the people of Israel simply went through the motions, without any plans or strategies of their own, relying instead on a miracle from God for their salvation.

According to this school of thought, here, too, Barak was counting on a Divine miracle in confronting the vastly superior forces of Sisera, requesting only Devorah's sanctified presence to ensure the miracle. And simply put, the miracle really was delivered, gift wrapped, as promised:

¹⁵ Compare to the more rationalistic exegesis of Abravanel, who suggests that Devorah's presence would serve to bolster morale (see also Malbim). Neither explanation accounts for why Barak's request should result in the diminishing of his own glory.

¹⁶ See the discussion in the Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 2:8 (Cf. Bavli 25b) equating the status of the courts of Gidon, Yiftah, and Shimshon with those of Moshe, Aharon, and Shemuel. See also Bavli Temurah 16a regarding the legal scholarship of Otniel ben Kenaz.

¹⁷ Devorah's case is the only one in which a religious role explicitly appears in the text (see 4:4). Thus, even if we do not extend such a notion to the other "judges," we might still view Devorah from this vantage point.

"And Hashem wreaked havoc upon Sisera, all of his chariots and the entire camp..."(4:15).¹⁸

However, not all victories - those in our chapters included - need be explained as complete aberrations from the natural order. Though triumph, of course, ultimately depends on God, man must do everything in his power to prepare for victory.¹⁹ The challenge for the Jewish people in the time of the Tanakh, as well as in our day, is to see Hashem's hand as revealed through nature, not only on the rare occasion when it supplants the laws of nature.

Undoubtedly, during the era of the Judges, the Israelites faced a severe military handicap due to their dearth of weaponry. However, in order to compensate, leaders continuously improvised all sorts of strategies; the confrontations pitted mind against might.²⁰

Barak is no exception. Faced with the iron chariots of Sisera, he knows that a frontal assault is doomed to failure. Instead, he camps on the mountains of Tavor, where he cannot be reached by the Canaanite chariots. Knowing that he possesses the advantage of determining the day of the battle, he bides his time, waiting for the appropriate opportunity. The miracle comes in the form of an unexpected fierce storm (as alluded to in 5:4 and 5:20-21) - one that turns the valley of Kishon into a muddy bog, trapping the wheels of the chariots and rendering them inoperable.²¹

¹⁸ See the interpretation of R. Yosef Kara who explains that the Canaanite forces began to kill each other after hearing thunder, as well as the explanations of Abravanel and Malbim (consistent with his earlier interpretation) that hearing sounds of non-existent horses and chariots prompted their confusion (compare to 2Kings 7:6).

¹⁹ See Radak on 1Samuel 16:2.

²⁰ See examples of Ehud, Gidon, and David against Goliath, among many others.

²¹ The account is almost identical to the description of the drowning of the Egyptian chariots at Yam Suf in Shemot 14:24-25. The scripture actually uses the same verb *vayahom Hashem* in both places. See Radak (5:20) who notes the

"And Hashem wreaked havoc" of verse 15, then, portrays God working through rather than against nature. Barak, it turns out, is not waiting around with his hands on his hips, but is rather a capable military strategist familiar with the terrain and the weaknesses of the opposition. Why, then, we wonder yet again, did he insist that Devorah join him?

Furthermore, as mentioned, the book of Judges depicts local battles; the leader always emerging from the oppressed tribe. Thus, Barak, from the subjugated Naphtali, not Devorah, from Ephraim, is the logical choice to lead the battle. Why does Devorah participate at all?

The solution to our puzzle is that the dual leadership parallels and, in fact, produces the two-pronged public commitment. Barak, as we noted, faces not just Sisera but an entire array of Canaanite forces. He fears that his troops alone will not suffice to overcome the Canaanite coalition, and he desires the support of other tribes in his venture.²² When he turns to Devorah, hailing from the region of Ephraim, he views her not (only) as the nation's moral compass but as a political leader who can deliver the support of the armies of the central region of the land. Barak looks to Devorah with the hope of forming a tribal coalition to counterbalance Sisera's confederation with the other kings of Canaan.

Barak needs the assistance not merely of Devorah participating as an individual, but also of Devorah leading her constituents to battle. While these central tribes (Ephraim, Menasseh, Binyamin, and Yissakhar) might have little vested interest in the specific conflict with Sisera, they did stand to gain immensely from the defeat of the other Canaanite strongholds. Barak

parallel and interprets similarly.

²² By forming the alliance with Devorah and her troops, Barak prevented the possibility of being surrounded by the other Canaanite forces, as they would be preoccupied with their own battles.

hoped that, through Devorah, he might gain their cooperation.²³ Thus the two battlegrounds account for the phenomenon of dual leadership, present in our narrative, but nowhere else in the Book of Judges.

IV. The Wide Angle Lens and the Zoom Lens

Devorah and Barak's war against the Canaanite forces comes alive through this reading. It comprised not just one but many battles, spanning not just one but many days. While Barak took charge of the Northern tribes in the main battle against Sisera in the Kishon Valley, Devorah led the other tribes in a series of battles in the central area of the land. After the initial victory over Sisera, the Central tribes took the opportunity to rid themselves of all the pockets of Canaanites still left in the land - and in so doing, to finish what Yehoshua had started: *kibbush ha'aretz*, the conquest of the land.

The discrepancies between the two chapters are now easily reconciled. Chapter Four views the war through a zoom lens, focusing on only one part - the battle against Sisera at Kishon. Chapter Five, in contrast, looks through a wide angle lens, taking in the scope of the entire war.

Chapter 4 depicts the Battle of Kishon in the North, fought exclusively by the tribes of Naphtali and Zevulun - for they alone were oppressed by Sisera. The 10,000 soldiers who participate in this battle hail solely from these two tribes, as explicitly stated in 4:6. Barak, not Devorah, is the military leader, because he is a member of the oppressed tribe. Thus Devorah's

²³ Compare to Yehudah and Shimon's alliance (for their mutual benefit) in Shofetim 1:3.

absence in the entire account of the battle does not surprise us. This chapter focuses on the central battle and the clearest manifestation of Divine power.

Chapter 5, in turn, gives a panoramic view, describing the broader war and the roles played by both Devorah and Barak. The chapter alternates between the two leaders, yielding a structure of A-B-A-B-A-B. First, Devorah is summoned to battle, "Awaken, awaken Devorah" (5:12) and only then Barak, "Barak, stand..." (5:12). Verses 14-17 praise those tribes who participated in the battle with Devorah (Ephraim, Binyamin, Menasseh, Zevulun, and Yissakhar) while verse 18, in turn, lists those who fought with Barak (Naphtali and Zevulun²⁴). Finally, verse 19 mentions the clashes with the entire Canaanite coalition - "then battled the kings of Canaan at Ta'anakh, by the waters of Megiddo" while verses 20-21 follow with details regarding the specific confrontation of Barak and Sisera at Nahal Kishon. Since Chapter 5 describes the collective war and not the individual battles, it records a different number of soldiers, 40,000, the number who participated in the entire armed conflict.

In the Song of Devorah, then, Kishon is just one of several sites mentioned, and the battle of Barak and Sisera is just one of many battles. Though Barak is noted, Devorah takes center stage. After all, she commands the bulk of the forces - "Into the hand of a woman will God deliver Sisera." The focus of the song is not the victory of Barak, but the defeat of all the Canaanite forces, and the completion of the process begun by Yehoshua.

From this perspective, we can readily understand why such a song appears only after this

²⁴ It would appear that forces from Zevulun fought under both commands. Zevulun is located between Naphtali (who accompanied Barak only) and Yissakhar (who joined with Devorah).

war. Just as the Israelites did not sing when they exited Egypt since that was only the first stage of their redemption, so too the Book of Joshua records no song as the conquest had not yet reached completion. Only after each of the culminating stages, the drowning of the Egyptians in Yam Suf and the vanquishing of the remaining Canaanites in the time of Devorah and Barak, could the Israelites finally sing the praises of the God who endows man with the wisdom and inspiration essential for victory.