

“Studies in Judges No. 6”
Judges 4:1-24
August 15, 2004

Review

We have begun our studies in the narratives of individual judges, having so far considered Othniel, whose career is given only in sketch, then Ehud and Shamgar, who make something of a pair. Shamgar, remember, may not have been an Israelite judge *per se* but, even if not, he was a man the Lord used to deliver his people from an oppressor. Later, remember, even Cyrus, the Persian emperor, will be described in Isaiah as the Lord’s “servant.” He was not Yahweh’s servant because he intended to be, but because the Lord used him to restore his people to the Promised Land. We have noticed in general that the presentation of each judge is according to the formula that was introduced in the prologue. We will find in each case, more or less, the same basic sequence as we were given in the summary material in chapter 2, often in the same or similar wording: Israel’s apostasy, her subjugation by an oppressor, her appeal to the Lord, his raising up for her a deliverer, and, finally, the ensuing peace for the time of the judge’s life.

There are other broad themes that tie these various narratives together. In the narrative of Ehud we took note of the emphasis on *concursum*, that the narrator insists at one and the same time that the deliverance comes from God *and* is the achievement of the men whom God raised up. This will be a characteristic feature of the following accounts of the judges. We will be introduced to another of these broad themes of the book in this next account concerning Barak.

Text Comment

Judges 4 and 5 provide the relatively rare phenomenon of the same event reported in two versions, one prose the other poetry. These two chapters offer students of OT literature an invaluable resource for examining the differences between Hebrew prose and poetry. The only parallel to this juxtaposition of prose and poetic accounts of the same event is found in Exodus 14-15 where we again have two accounts, one prose and one poetry, this time of Israel crossing the Red Sea. Some of the differences between prose and poetry in the Bible are the same as the differences that separate those two very different forms of literature today. Prose generally uses words commonly used in everyday speech and common grammar and syntax. Sentences tend to be longer and more complex, with more subordinate clauses. Poetry uses an elevated literary style, archaic words and expressions, and both creative and compressed grammar and syntax. For example, in Hebrew poetry the sign of the direct object (אֶת) disappears as does the common conjunction introducing subordinated clauses (וְ). That is, poetry is a more condensed and compressed mode of writing. Hebrew prose is more matter-of-fact, literal, precise and logical. Hebrew poetry is more impressionistic and, as we have learned, is heavily dependent on the use of parallelism. Hebrew prose is written to inform, educate, and indoctrinate; Hebrew poetry to celebrate, commemorate, and inspire. [Block, 175-176]

- v.1 Our formula again, as in 3:12 and 3:7. God’s gracious deliverance of his people had not lessened, much less destroyed Israel’s attraction to the paganism of the people of Canaan among whom she was now living.

- v.3 The reference to Jabin, king of Hazor poses a problem. The reason is that in Joshua 11:1-15 we read of Joshua's victory over Jabin, of his having killed Jabin, King of Hazor, and of his having burned the city of Hazor. The name Jabin is not the problem for it is, in any case, to have likely been a dynastic name for the kings of Hazor rather than a personal name. Hazor dominated the valley north of the Sea of Galilee for five centuries until it was destroyed by Joshua. It was not rebuilt until the days of Solomon when it became an important northern Israelite fortification. So, how could Hazor, destroyed and burned by Joshua, hold Israel hostage, for 20 years until the victory under Barak?

In all likelihood Hazor, though burned, was not as decisively defeated as Joshua 11, by itself, might have suggested. We have been gathering that the accounts of Israel's conquest of the land under Joshua left more room than we might have thought at the time for not only the survival but the survival in strength of many Canaanite peoples. Nothing in Joshua 11 requires us to believe that no member of the royal family escaped or that, in time, some royal figure did not return to what was left of the city to reassert his rule, all the more given Israel's failure to consolidate her control of the conquered territory of the Promised Land. The fact is, Judges reminds us that large numbers of Canaanites remained in the land and reorganized themselves and continued their political life after Israel's penetration of their territory and settlement in it. Remember, for example, what we read in 1:22-26: how the city of Luz was destroyed but soon rebuilt nearby by a survivor and allowed to do so by the indolence and spirit of accommodation that had overtaken the Israelites after their initial zeal began to flag. Remember also that the oppression described here in v.3 may well have been more local in effect. That is, Hazor did not assert control over the entire nation of Israel but only some of its parts. The pressure would have been felt primarily by the northernmost tribes.

Sisera's name suggests to scholars of such things that he may have been a mercenary, a general for hire. As we have learned already in 1:19, Israel, in her present state of spiritual life, was no match for a force of iron chariots. It also accounts for the fact that the eventual battle would take place on the plains, where chariot forces could be deployed. So we read in 4:13. In any case, the information about Sisera indicates that Jabin will remain in the background in the following narrative.

- v.4 In this instance we do not have any explicit statement to the effect that the Lord *raised up a deliverer* for Israel. What we have in vv. 4-10 instead is an account of how, in this case, the Lord did raise up Israel's deliverer. Remember, *concursum* is assumed. The Lord's unseen hand is orchestrating these events.

As a prophetess, Deborah was a spokeswoman for the Lord. There are several other women prophets named in the Bible: Miriam, Moses' sister (Ex. 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kgs. 22:14). Anna, who saw the infant Jesus in the temple, is also called a prophetess in Luke 1, though it is not entirely clear what was meant by that title in that context. In keeping with the biblical understanding of men and women and marriage, Deborah, though a prophetess, is identified with reference to her husband.

- v.5 The text says that she was “judging” Israel at that time (the verb used is the verbal form of the noun “judge”) and the description of her activity, at least as the NIV renders the text, seems to indicate that she really was serving as a judge. As we noted in a previous study, this is the only instance of the use of the word group (“judge” or “judging”) in the book in which actual judging seems to be involved. That fact has led scholars to suggest that it may be better to take “to have their disputes decided” – literally, “for the judgment” – to mean not that she was hearing cases but that the sons of Israel came to her to learn what God would say in answer to their cries for help. That is, here too, “judgment” has not to do with the work of a day-to-day court but with the question of Israel’s deliverance from oppression. [Block, 196-197]

On the other hand, the narrative makes it quite clear that she is not Israel’s deliverer in the same sense in which this is true of the other judges named in the book. She is not said to be summoned to that task by the Lord, she needs Barak actually to lead Israel into battle and to victory, it is not said that Deborah delivered Israel from oppression, she appears not to have had any particular role in the actual battle – though the poet may suggest she was present in 5:15, the narrative in 4:14-16 does not explicitly say that she was – and she is identified not as a savior of Israel but as a mother in Israel (5:7). Interestingly, in later lists of Israel’s deliverers (those in 1 Sam. 12:9-11 and Hebrews 11:32), Barak is mentioned, but not Deborah.

- v.6 Now the attention shifts from Deborah, the prophetess who has been told what the Lord intends to do, to Barak, through whom the deliverance will come. It is clear that she sent for Barak on the Lord’s instructions. We are not told anything as to why God chose Barak for this assignment, as is the case with regard to the other judges. He was of the tribe of Naphtali, which was one of the tribes bearing the brunt of Hazor’s oppression.

Mount Tabor rises steeply from the floor of the Jezreel Valley some 1,843 feet. You Covenant College students can think of Lookout Mountain. The mountain controlled one of the most important crossroads in that region. So here we have God indicating the strategy to be used in defeating Hazor.

- v.7 God is in control even of Sisera’s army. In fact the verb the NIV translates “lure” in v. 7 is the same verb it translates “take” in v. 6. As Barak *deploys* his army; the Lord will *deploy* Sisera’s army to as to lead it into defeat. The Kishon River drains the Jezreel Valley indicating that the battle was fought in the valley. Chariots were unsuitable to mountainous terrain.
- v.9 Barak’s hesitation was cowardice as Deborah’s response makes clear it was. His desire to have the prophetess accompany him was the expression of his lack of confidence in the word that had already been spoken to him. He wanted to be sure that he could continue to get instructions. [Cf. Webb, 137 and n. 49] And to sustain the weak-kneed Barak, Deborah gives him a sign. The Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman. The reader, at this point, imagines that the woman will be Deborah herself. It proves not to be in a most unexpected and striking way. In this way Barak will know that it was the Lord who delivered Israel when this sign appears.

- v.10 The narrator doesn't say but seems to imply that the men followed Barak by the thousands at least in part because Deborah went with him. Her presence with Barak was the indication that God would be with him. That unbelieving Israel would care for such a thing is another evidence that when God delivers his people not even their own spiritual failure can deter him.
- v.11 Here the narrator anticipates the unfolding of the account of the battle and supplies some information beforehand that would have interrupted the flow of the narrative had he supplied it later. Simply put, Heber, an independent man, had left the arid south, in the territory of Judah, and moved to greener pastures among the people of Naphtali.
- v.14 Yahweh himself, through his prophetess, gives the order to march and promises victory. Now Deborah's work is done and she disappears from the narrative.
- v.15 This statement is key to the entire point of the narrative. It was the Lord who undid Sisera and his army. Barak and his forces were only his instrument. Before the Lord, Sisera's chariots that had, heretofore completely stymied Israel, amounted to nothing. In 5:20 the poet will put it this way: "From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera."
- v.16 Barak, concerned primarily about the army fleeing before him, pursues it and lets Sisera escape.
- v.17 Not only had Heber separated from the clan of the Kenites, who were allies of Israel, but he had formally bound himself by treaty – the much stronger sense of the words the NIV translates as "friendly relations" – to Hazor, Israel's enemy. By all political and ethical standards, Sisera should have been safe with Heber. [Block, 206]
- v.18 Like Eglon last time with Ehud, Sisera is seduced by Jael's speech and pretend kindness.
- v.19 Why she substitutes milk for water isn't clear. Did she want him to go to sleep faster? Was she trying to lull him into a false sense of security by the impression that she wanted to do the best for him?
- v.20 A strange question to anticipate. After all, any man in Jael's tent who was not her husband should not be there. Sisera does not appear to be a man who cared a fig for others. Certainly a woman's reputation meant nothing to him.
- v.22 Barak has now mopped up operations against Sisera's army and is looking for the general himself. Given what has been said before, it seems likely that we are to picture Barak as eager to capture Sisera and get the glory for himself. He was hoping to disprove Deborah's earlier prophecy that the glory would go to a woman instead. Jael bursts his bubble.

The Lord's prophecy was fulfilled: Sisera was delivered into Barak's hands (v. 7) but the honor for the victory did not go to Barak (v. 9).

In chapter 5's great poem Jael will be celebrated. She is not an Israelite, she is not a man, a warrior, but it is she who does in Sisera, Israel's nemesis. It is not clear, however, that what she did was motivated by any regard for the Lord or Israel. She violated all the canons of statecraft, hospitality, and social convention. What Heber thought about what his wife had done, what even Barak thought, is left unsaid.

- v.23 Once again the author reminds us that what we have just read is really, primarily about what *God* did, not about the exploits of these characters: Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Contrary to many modern studies, the chapter is not about sexual politics or the conflict between men and women, it is not an early feminist tract, but an account of the conflict between the kingdom of the Lord and the kingdom of darkness.
- v.24 The battle just concluded did not entirely destroy Jabin and Hazor's power, but it weakened it so that the total destruction came in due time.

We have spent a great deal of time clarifying the text, but I wanted to be sure that we appreciated what we were reading and what the author was saying to us with his narrative. Now last time we considered a theme that is characteristic of the narratives of the judges, viz. that of concursus, the same deliverance of Israel being both the work of God and man, each being a real cause, God using means to accomplish his will.

Tonight we have before us another characteristic feature of these narratives, at least of the narratives from this point onward: viz. the flawed character of the judges themselves. We start with Barak, who is a man of weak faith and to some significant degree a coward. We know that because the narrator lets us hear Deborah say that to his face in v. 9. And the point of Barak's unworthiness is then confirmed by the fact that the climactic deed – the execution of Sisera – is performed not by Barak, who wanted to perform it, not even by an Israelite, but by a Kenite woman. God took the honor of total victory away from Barak and gave it to a foreign woman because Barak proved himself unworthy of such an honor.

In other words, the emphasis in the narrative falls on the total victory that the Lord achieved on behalf of Israel, but achieved through a flawed and unworthy servant. If we have questions about Ehud's character after reading of his exploits, the questions are removed in Barak's case. The narrator tells us straight away of his cowardice and hesitancy.

And what is true of Barak will continue to be the case in ever increasing measure in regard to Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. They are Israel's deliverers to be sure. Heroes they are not, except in a very attenuated sense. Nevertheless, they are men of faith. The Bible leaves us in no doubt about that. Barak is listed in the same breath with Samuel and David in Hebrews 11. They are men of faith but they are weak men, men with serious defects of character.

I was reading recently Arthur Herman's book, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*. At the very beginning of that book Herman tells the story of 18 year old Thomas Aikenhead, a smart-

alec theology student in Edinburgh in 1696 who was accused of blasphemy, indicted, tried, and sentence to be executed. No matter that this was his first offense; no matter that he retracted all his sentiments and plead for forgiveness, no matter that he was so young and impressionable. No matter, as it turned out, that his last words, while standing on the scaffold, were,

‘It is my earnest desire that my blood may give a stop to that raging spirit of atheism which hath taken such footing in Britain.... And now, O Lord, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in thy hands I recommend my spirit.’ [7]

What arrested my attention in Arthur Hermon’s account of this trial and hanging was the name of Thomas Halyburton among those demanding the boy’s execution. It always grieves me to find a hero of mine on the wrong side of some question or doing something unworthy of the Lord and his cause. Halyburton was the son of a Covenanter pastor, he was later professor of theology at St. Andrews, wrote several important works of theology. John Newton once said that he wouldn’t part with Halyburton’s great work against deism for its weight in gold. He is most famous for his spiritual autobiography, published after his death, *Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Halyburton*, one of the classics of Scottish and of all Presbyterian spiritual writing. I have quoted from Halyburton’s *Memoirs* in any number of sermons preached to you over the years.

Now Halyburton himself was quite a young man when he weighed in on Thomas Aikenhead’s conviction and death sentence. He was only some 22 years of age himself. Indeed Halyburton was only 38 at his death. But his own family had suffered persecution. After his father had been cast out of his pastorate, following the restoration of Charles II, and after the death of his father, young Thomas and his mother had fled to Holland. He only returned to Scotland when the coast was again clear. We might well have felt that such a man would have been particularly sympathetic to a young man who was, after all, unabashedly repentant and publicly sorrowful for the things he had so foolishly said. But not so. Aikenhead, “this inconsiderable trifler,” Halyburton said, had broken the law and had to be punished. [7] We might well have thought that Covenanters, who had suffered so cruelly at the hands of an oppressive state, would be very cautious about the use of state power to punish religious dissent, but it was not so.

Well, it is not the first time I have learned that great Christians of the past had feet of clay. Whether it is Jerome’s brittle and so easily wounded pride and penchant for public criticism of other Christian ministers; or Calvin’s temper; or Luther’s too violent condemnation of his theological enemies, including the Jews, or Whitefield’s fawning over people with titles, church history is chock full of Christians who were used of God to accomplish great things but who had embarrassing defects. And alongside all the defects of character and behavior, are those of thought and conviction: From Jerome’s ridiculous and harmful dismissing of marriage as a second-class life for Christians to the American Presbyterian Robert Dabney’s chilling defense of southern slavery.

Every Christian leader is not a Barak, to be sure. There have been men and women of the noblest bravery who have, through the ages, fought the good fight of faith without wavering. Every Christian is not a Gideon or a Jephthah or a Samson in terms of their specific sins and failures as men of faith. But, take Hebrews 11 and its list of faithful men and women together and there is

hardly a name in that list for which the Bible does not furnish us some description of weakness or failure.

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, we are in this way taught not to put our trust in man or princes, even believing men and believing princes. God must save us and to make sure that we never forget that, that we are never seriously tempted to put our trust elsewhere, the Lord shows us over and over again how much even the best of men are a broken reed if we must lean on them for life and salvation.

Several lessons are compressed in this characteristic feature of the judges as they are presented to us one after another. The one is that it is necessary that we learn to take with full seriousness our own shortcomings and those of others. Clearly there is a penchant on our part to think that we do not need the Lord, that we or others can do for us what must be done. There would not be so much of this sad disclosure of moral frailty and failure if it were not necessary to counteract a tendency on our part to count on men more than we should. And, of course, we are given this warning explicitly over and over again in the Bible precisely because we are so susceptible to this error.

“Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?” [Isa. 2:22]

“But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the fate of those who trust in themselves.” [Psalm 49:12-13]

Time and again the Lord tells his people that they are trusting in the wrong thing and in one way or another their trust is a trust in men, either other men or themselves. It makes a valuable exercise for us to ask ourselves from time to time how we might be committing that error and that sin. In what way am I looking to man, to myself for what only God can give me and only God can guarantee me. When we read of Barak and of God’s deliverance of Israel through him, we are reminded that the men who appear in the narrative succeed only because *God* was with them. It is God who gives the victory.

The other lesson is that we be careful to give God the glory for what he has done and given. It is easy enough to fail to do this. We can see men, we can see the processes by which something comes to us – a job or a raise; a wife or husband; some particular blessing or provision; some deliverance from a difficulty or problem – but we cannot see God. This is the constant struggle of faith, to remember that God is the source and the cause of every good thing that we enjoy. Every thoughtful Christian knows how often he or she forgets this. Even in matters where we have prayed earnestly, once the blessing comes it is so easy to forget whence that blessing came and to whom we owe our thanks and love for it.

Barak is a lesson in faith, pure and simple: a lesson in the importance of looking past what we can see to the God who is there but whom we cannot see. It is what we are to do every hour of every day that we live in this world, until we are finally where there will be no possibility of failing to appreciate that all things are from him and to him and for him.