

STUDIES IN JUDGES No. 7

Judges 5:1-31

August 22, 2004

Review

We have begun the examination of the successive narratives of individual judges and what each did to deliver Israel from her enemies, or better, how God used each one to deliver his wayward people. We have so far examined the narratives of Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar and Barak.

We have begun to notice that not only is there a similarity in the literary form of each narrative in succession, a form introduced in the prologue of the book and then repeated in identical or similar form in the individual narratives that follow, but that there are overarching themes that also connect each narrative to the others. We have looked at two of those themes so far. In the narrative of Ehud we noted the narrator's emphasis on *concursum* – the interplay between the divine action and the human; how God and a man can at one and the same time be regarded as the deliverer of Israel, both at work, both responsible for the deliverance. Last time, in the narrative of Barak and his defeat of the forces of Jabin and Sisera, we noted the narrator's emphasis on the flawed character of the judges themselves – how it is that God uses weak and defective men to deliver his people, among other things as a way of demonstrating to them that salvation is of the Lord and that they must look to him and not to men or to themselves. God uses a man to deliver Israel, to be sure, but such a man as could never have done it by himself, without God's help, indeed without God propping him up every step of the way. Left to himself each of these judges would have left Israel in precisely the mess he found her. He could not have rescued her. Indeed, while this lesson is taught elsewhere in the Bible, it is in Judges that it is painted in the boldest strokes. The author of this book has raised the depiction of believing men as screw-ups whom God uses in spite of themselves to an art form.

Last week we also pointed out that in the case of Barak we have two accounts of the same deliverance, one in prose and the other in poetry. We noted that Judges 4 and 5 are one of the very few places in the Bible in which this happens. These two chapters, therefore, offer students of OT literature an invaluable resource for examining the differences between Hebrew prose and poetry. The only perfect 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 Reed Sea.

Interestingly, a number of the differences between prose and poetry which are illustrated in the comparison of Judges 4 and 5 are the same as the differences that separate those two very different forms of English literature in our own day. Prose, especially narrative prose, prose that is telling a story, 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 on the other hand uses an elevated literary style, is more likely to use archaic words and expressions because they are needed for the right rhyme or rhythm, and much more commonly employs both creative

and compressed grammar and syntax. That is one of the reasons why poetry is more difficult for us to read and appreciate. We have to stop and think about what the author means. In Hebrew poetry there are some very obvious signs of compression. The sign of the direct object (אֵת) disappears as does the common conjunction introducing subordinate clauses (אִשֶּׁר). Those are very common words in Hebrew prose and their absence gives to Hebrew poetry the impression of being compressed, clipped, or condensed. Another difference is the character of the literature, its quality, and this too is a difference we see between English prose and poetry. Hebrew prose, especially narrative 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. By and large, Hebrew prose is written to inform, educate, and indoctrinate and the literary style serves those ends; Hebrew poetry is written to celebrate, commemorate, and inspire. [Block, 175-176] Its literary form well serves that purpose. It will be very clear to us as we read that the poem will not tell us precisely what happened, how the battle was fought or precisely how the events unfolded. For that we need the narrative of chapter 4. But, the poem very powerfully tells us how we ought to feel about the deliverance that the Lord wrought, how wonderful it was, and what impact the moral evaluations and theological lessons that we ought to take from this history should have upon our hearts. Interestingly, we do learn things in the poem that we had not been told in the prose narrative, but this new information is also impressionistic. That is, we can't very easily incorporate it into the historical narrative because we don't know enough about where it fits, but it does help to deepen the impressions the poet is after.

Text Comment

- v.1 The “on that day” places the poem within the narrative of Barak’s deliverance of Israel, which is further demonstrated by the fact that we don’t find the formula detailing how many years Israel enjoyed peace after her deliverance – the formula we have come to expect at the end of each narrative – until after the poem in 5:31. What is more, the poem depends upon the prose narrative that precedes it. It assumes we know what happened. Sisera, for example, is introduced in 5:20 without any comment or explanation. We know who Sisera is because we have already read the prose account of his defeat by Barak.

The fact that this is a song to be sung indicates, as does its poetic form, that it has another purpose than that of the prose account that preceded it. And we will read explicitly in v. 3 that this is a song to be sung *to the Lord*. It is a song of worship.

By the way, the fact that both Deborah and Barak *sang* this song is not, by itself, an indication that either of them composed it. The song is formally anonymous. However, the traditional view, that Deborah composed the song, is not without some strong support in the song itself. In v. 7, for example, Deborah is named as the person speaking in the poem and much of the poem is cast in the first person. She was a prophetess as was Miriam, Moses’ brother, and Miriam seems to have had something to do with the song that Israel sang after crossing the Reed Sea (Ex. 15:20-21). There have, after all, been many fine women hymn-writers.

- v.2 Here we have Israel in the ideal. She was much less than the loyal covenant partner of the Lord in these days, of course. She had, over and over again, made her peace with the paganism around her. But the song sees in her rising to fight under Barak a glimpse of what she has been, could be again, and ought to be.
- v.3 What makes this expression striking – though we encounter expressions like it all the time in the Psalms, for example – is how rare such an expression is in the book of Judges. It was precisely this mind that was absent from the people most of the time.
- v.4 Here is the great theme of the poem. It was the Lord that marched out to defeat the enemies of Israel. It is anthropomorphic, of course; the Lord is being described as if he were a man, a great warrior, and his actions are those of such a warrior. But such is poetry. It is not hard to grasp the point. The description is very powerful.
- v.5 Again, the point made much more simply in the prose account of chapter 4 is elaborated more powerfully in the poem: it was God who went before Israel in the past, from Sinai to the Promised Land, and it is God who has gone to battle for Israel in this instance as well. God is the “One of Sinai” because it was at Sinai that he both revealed his covenant to Israel and revealed his glory.
- v.6 The fact that this particular period of *Israelite* history could be identified by the names of two foreigners indicates Israel’s lack of spiritual leadership. Shamgar is identified as “a son of Anath.” Anath was the consort of Baal in Canaanite mythology. The point of the identification is the irony. God used a member of a military guild dedicated to Anath to defeat the Canaanites and their so-called gods. Remember we said that there is a good bit of evidence indicating that Shamgar was not an Israelite and did not deliver Israel for Israel’s sake. It just happened in God’s providence that Shamgar’s victory, perhaps on Egypt’s behalf, liberated Israel as well.
- Vv. 6-8 describe the crisis, the effects of Israel’s oppression by Hazor and so the background of her deliverance by the Lord through Deborah and Barak. The roads were abandoned, the normal trade routes ceased to be used either to avoid attack or the extortionary tolls demanded at crossroads by the king of Hazor. [Block, 225] Travelers and traders took to the hill country roads to avoid these dangers.
- v.7 Villagers were afraid to go out to the fields to work. They huddled in their unfortified towns. The economy ground to a halt.
- v.8 The lack of arms is another indication of Israel’s pathetic state at the time. But Israel’s lack of equipment only makes the more clear that it was God who gave the victory. It did not come about because Israel had such a well-equipped army; far from it.

- v.9 Deborah is proud of the Israelites who responded to the call to arms.
- v.10 This seems to be a reference to the wealthy Canaanite merchants who continued to ply their trade – they had no fear of traveling Israelite roads – and were enjoying the wealth that Israel’s misery had created. Light colored donkeys were preferred by the rich to the ordinary gray animals. And these were then dressed out with luxurious saddle blankets. [Block, 228] But now, with their army destroyed, let them consider what the Lord has done.
- v.11 The watering places were a kind of post office in the ancient world. It was where one heard the news. Now follows the song that they would hear the Israelites singing at the waterholes.
- v.13 The sense seems to be that “the motley remnant of Israelite survivors of the oppression dares to attack the vastly superior might of the Canaanites...” [Block, 231]
- v.14 Now comes a list of those Israelites who volunteered to serve under Barak.
- v.17 But some Israelite tribes were not represented. The Reubenites were unwilling to march. So were other tribes. In other words, some of the tribes rallied to Barak and provided men for his army and others did not. There was disunity in Israel, a harbinger of bitter things to come later in the book. So the poem pays tribute to those who “came to the help of the Lord,” (v. 23) and rebukes those who did not. [Webb, 144]
- v.18 Among the volunteers the men of Zebulun and Naphtali deserve special honor.
- v.19 Vv. 19-22 are a poetic account of the battle itself. There is no reference to other Canaanite kings being present at the battle in chapter 4. This is probably a flourish indicating that Deborah saw Israel’s victory as a victory over all the Canaanites.
- As the image of the stars fighting, so probably the flooding of the River Kishon should be taken as a figurative, not a literal account of what happened. Of course, heavy rain and a swollen river would have made chariots stick fast in the mud, but here is probably simply a poetic account of the Lord’s fighting on Israel’s behalf. The heavens and the earth are at God’s command.
- v.21 It is all so wonderful to Deborah that she interrupts her description of the Lord’s victory with an interjection of her own.
- v.22 The horses decamp from the battle and the Canaanites have lost the advantage given them by their chariots.

- v.23 Meroz cannot be identified. In the song it seems to be cursed as a representative of those Israelites who have made their peace with the Canaanite world around them.
- v.25 The fancy bowl confirms our thought last time that the milk she gave to Sisera when he had asked only for water was to lull him into a false sense of security. She was treating him with deference and respect.
- v.27 This is the sight that Barak would have seen when he entered Jael's tent looking for Sisera. In the poetic account of Sisera's death the point made in the prose narrative that the honor of killing Sisera was taken from Barak because of his cowardice and given to a woman falls away. The interest is solely in Sisera's fate: his death and his abject humiliation, being killed by a woman. Later in Judges (9:54), Abimilech will rather commit suicide than face the shame of having been killed by a woman!
- v.30 This quiet scene, painted by the poet, is in sharp contrast to the violence of the scene in Jael's tent. In this way the author of the poem extends the account of Sisera's death and allows us to contemplate it in another way, this time from the vantage point of Sisera's mother and her servants. The mother of Sisera, the enemy of the Lord, is a counter-balance to Deborah, a mother in Israel. The one bereft and desolate, the other triumphant. But we also see Sisera's mother as somewhat heartless. She imagines her son dividing up the spoils of his victory; that is why he is so late in returning; each of his soldiers getting two Israelite girls for himself. Hardly. He lies dead at a Kenite woman's feet! How confident they were; how utterly ruined they are now.
- v.31 Here is the reason we have been given the account of Sisera's humiliating death in such detail: we are to wish the same for *all* the enemies of the Lord. It is a prayer for the vindication of the Lord's name like a great many others we find in the Bible. Remember, this is poetry. What is being sought, what we are being called upon to hope for is not the sorrow of other human beings – though that is an inevitable result and we can do nothing about that – but the honor of the Lord's name and the victory of his cause. It is sheer sentimentality to want to see the victory of righteousness without the consequences for the human beings who have allied themselves against the Lord and his anointed. We cannot pray for Christ's coming again without, in effect, praying for that day to come on which the enemies of the Lord will be overturned and their lives subjected to defeat, to sorrow, and to fear. The one is the result of the other and cannot help but mean the other.

Here is another instance of "love" used where we might expect "faith." Paul says the same thing you remember at the end of 1 Cor. 16: "a curse on all who do not *love* our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now we have spent a great deal of time just reading the text. I thought that was necessary as it is not immediately obvious what everything means. But having taken so much time I will limit my remarks in exposition and application of this ancient and marvelous poem.

What is noteworthy about the victory poem is the way in which the concentration so much more dramatically falls on what the Lord did to deliver his people from the oppression they were suffering at the hands of the king of Hazor. In the prose account in chapter 4 it is said, in v. 15, that the Lord routed Sisera and his army. But, otherwise, there the concentration falls on what Barak and Jael did, on the human element. Here in the poem it is different. Tribute is paid to those Israelites who offered themselves for service in the army, but the poem begins and ends with a celebration of Yahweh's power and victory. This is a hymn to God, about God, and about God's victory.

We have often spoken of the Bible's dialectical way of teaching salvation, how in one place all the emphasis falls on what man must do or has done and in another all the emphasis falls on what God must do and has done. Biblical Christianity absolutely requires the assertion of both divine grace and human responsibility. But we must also be as clear about this in our minds as the Bible is: viz. these two emphases are not equally ultimate. The one is not as complete an explanation as the other. The freedom, the accountability, the responsibility of man is absolutely real and must be given its due. We do not understand the Bible and we cannot take seriously its teaching or its summons to us if we do not believe that our hope of salvation hangs on our putting and practicing our faith in God, hangs on our repentance from sin and our obedience to God's law, and our perseverance in both faith and obedience. But, true as that is, it is still much more the case, it is first and last the case, it is ultimately the case that our salvation is God's gift, God's work, and God's doing. There are many places where this point is made clearly enough in the Bible and this is one of them.

The prophets, the Gospel writers, Jesus himself, the Apostle Paul will all teach that our faith, our repentance, our perseverance in faith and obedience are all God's gifts to us and work within us. But here the same point is made in a more celebratory and inspirational form. Here in the celebratory account of the great victory Israel won over her enemies, the human element recedes and the divine element is brought to the fore as the key, the essential explanation. The people of God were delivered from bondage to their enemies, no matter that her bondage was the consequence of her own sin and disloyalty to God, not because of what *Israel* did, but because of what God did *for her* and *on behalf of her* through those who fought on her behalf. God uses means, but they are only means and, in fact, he chooses means that are themselves designed to remind us that it is God and only God who gives the victory. It is Jael who kills Sisera, not some great warrior. It is God who routed the army of Hazor, not really the forces that Barak deployed.

This is the more interesting and important because it was a commonplace of ANE society to celebrate the victory of a king in battle with a victory hymn. Archaeology has provided for us to read hymns written in praise of Thutmose III and Merneptah, Egyptian Pharaohs, after great victories won by them and their armies, and we have such hymns in celebration of other such kings and their military exploits. In fact, scholars have noticed

striking similarities between Judges 5 and these other ANE victory hymns. It seems, as is often the case, that here too the Bible employs the conventions of the literature of its time. It uses literary forms that were familiar to the people and invested those forms with new significance and used them to a new purpose, as the Holy Spirit and Moses, for example, used the literary convention of a standard ANE international treaty in which to disclose and publish the covenant between God and Israel. However, there is this noteworthy difference between the ANE victory hymns and Judges 5. The former celebrate human achievement, often with so much hyperbole that human achievement is presented as super-human achievement. Judges 5 celebrates instead the victory of God. Once again, as in so many ways in the Bible, where the world puts man, the Bible puts God; where the world celebrates man, the Bible celebrates God; and where the world draws attention to the exploits of men, the Bible fixes our eyes on what God has done and only God could do. There is a *theocentricity*, a God-centeredness, in the Bible that is unique in human literature, even in other religious literature.

Even in the later part of the poem, where the accent falls on two women, Jael, who killed Sisera, and Sisera's mother, the point is not so much to draw attention to what these women did, but to indicate how thoroughly the Lord's enemies were vanquished. In the case of Jael, there is no doubt that the point is that God used a mere woman to defeat the great general. Sisera, you see, is being taunted in these verses of the poem. Once God decided to get rid of him he used a woman to dispatch him. Sisera's mother appears only to allow us to dwell a little longer on the fate of those who raise their hand against the people of God. In an era of weak men, Judges 4 and 5 demonstrate that God will use women instead to accomplish his will. He is not bound by the spiritual defects of his servants.

So the central lesson of this great song, so much the lesson of large tracts of the Bible's teaching, is that we must turn our eyes and our hearts to the Lord. Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. This is precisely the lesson that Israel needed so desperately to learn. She was, at this time, trusting in everyone else *but* the Lord her God; she was setting her heart upon and lifting her eyes to the Canaanite gods, to the strong Canaanite armies and cities, and to herself.

And, of course, we are tempted to make the same mistake every moment of every hour of every day that we live.

What is faith after all? We can say with Luther that faith is nothing else but "a sure and steadfast looking to Christ." [Cited in Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, iv, 238] That is, counting on Christ instead of on ourselves in the conviction that Christ is here to save us. Or we can say with Adolphe Monod that faith is nothing less than the power of God placed at the disposal of man." [*Farewell*, 30-31] But can we make the point more simply? Faith is the reliance that one person places on the truthfulness and the power of another. Make a statement to me, or make a promise to me, and faith on my part is the credit I place in your statement, my confidence in its truth, and the reliance I place on your promise and your power to fulfill it. God had made many promises to Israel but they neither thought about those promises nor counted on his fulfilling them. If they did they

would have acted very differently, whether in rooting the Canaanites out of the Promised Land or believing that their prosperity and happiness lay in looking to God to give it to them and, so, honoring him with their lives.

And so today. What does God say to us? “Without me you can do nothing.” Or, putting it another way, says Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” But we find ourselves all the time doing, doing, doing with hardly a thought to God’s provision or Christ’s strength and we forget for days on end our absolute dependence upon his will and his power. And so we *do* much more than we *pray*. And left long enough in that state, no matter our Sunday worship, we are living our lives day after day with scarcely a thought of God and of what he has promised to do for us and alone has the power to guarantee to us.

And so it is with so many of the great and precious promises of God joined to the almighty power of God. “I will never leave you or forsake you,” but we feel bereft and lonely. “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Or “seek first his kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be added to you.” But we live with a sense of deprivation and of unmet need. We look to our spouses or to our families for our happiness, our employer for our security, our circumstances for our sense of fulfillment, our earthly prospects for our sense of hope. But, fact is, these things can no more give us what we need than the Canaanite gods could give Israel prosperity in the Promised Land. She got oppression instead, heartbreak, because she was not setting her heart, her love on the Lord her God. This is the most fundamental conviction to be at work in a believing heart. God is everything. Trusting in him is must be my way of life. Looking to him is the path to everything that I want and need as a human being.

Sitting as I was several times this past week at Sharon Allen’s bedside and talking with her and Andy of death and a Christian’s hope this becomes brilliantly clear as it was clear in my last conversation with Mr. Miller last week. I’m sure this is one reason why we must all pass through death. Death clears the mists away. It reveals all our pretense and the world’s pretense for what it is – nonsense, pure and simple. God must save us because no one else and nothing else can. We know that when we face the very real prospect of death. God gives victory there or we are defeated and there is nothing we can do to prevent that utter and ignominious defeat. And it is ignominious, as you know if you have ever waited by the bedside of a loved one, watched the body shrivel, listed to the shallow, labored breathing, waited for the end to come. Helpless, hopeless, unless God will give us victory.

But given what God has done in Christ, what he has promised, what he has assured us about the death of the righteous, it is all so wonderful that we found ourselves, Sharon, Andy and I, there in that bedroom, full of the thrill of victory, saying to ourselves, “March on, my soul; be strong!” The entire secret of life is to say the same thing for the same reason about everything, every day, because God is there, *God* is there, the Almighty, because he is *our* God, and has bound himself to us. Those who trust in him will never be put to shame. *March on, my soul; be strong!*