

“God Subdued Jabin the King of Canaan ”

The ninety-fifth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 3:31-4:24; Revelation 13:1-10

In the days of Israel’s judges, the people of God found themselves surrounded by pagans on virtually every side. There was the Aramean empire of Cushan-rishathaim to the northeast. Then there were a number of old enemies to the southeast, just across the Jordan River: the Moabites, Ammonites, and Amlekites. To the northwest, there were the fierce Philistines, living in what is now Lebanon, but who traveled by boat and terrorized all those living along the coast. And then there were Canaanites of every sort, living within Canaan as well as on various areas of the frontier. In effect, Israel was surrounded. Although YHWH had promised to be Israel’s shield and defender, the people of Israel continued to forget YHWH, worship Canaanite “gods,” and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Given the geopolitical realities of the age, there was no shortage of enemies for YHWH to raise up to chasten his disobedient people so that they would cry out to him for deliverance. Because he has pity on his people, YHWH responded to Israel’s trials by sending his people a series of judges (deliverers), who lead Israel to victory over these enemies and who secure for them a time of peace. And this pattern plays out again and again in this book.

As we continue our series on the Book of Judges, we have seen a number of rather interesting things playing out on the stage of redemptive-history. Throughout this period of Israel’s history, God’s sovereignty has been evident as he directs the affairs of both men and nations. To chasten his disobedient people, YHWH will raise up a pagan nation and its leader, who will come and oppress Israel whenever they turn away from YHWH, worship false gods, and then do what is right in their own eyes. And when the people of Israel have finally had enough of their oppressor and cry out to YHWH to be rescued from the current crisis, YHWH takes pity on Israel and raises up someone who will deliver them from the current crisis. These individuals sent by God to rescue his people are known as “judges.” And while they serve to rescue Israel from its current crisis, the judges can do nothing to improve the spiritual condition of Israel, whose condition largely stems from the failure of the Levitical priesthood to instruct the people in the ways of the Lord. If this period of Israel’s history shows us anything, it is that Israel needs a king (which will come to pass with the monarchy), and that the solution to human sin cannot come about by human means. It will take a divine Messiah, who is God in human flesh, to save God’s people from the guilt and power of sin.

The first of the series of judges sent by God was Othniel, a man from that first generation born in Canaan. The text doesn’t say much about him, but in his rather bare-bones account, the author of Judges tells us that Othniel is a brave and heroic man, who was very willing to fight Canaanites in obedience to God’s command issued back in the days of Joshua. Othniel led Israel to victory over Cushan-rishathaim, which gained for the Israelites a generation (forty years) of peace.

The second man God raised up to deliver Israel is a different story. Here, perhaps, we are given too many details. Ehud, the south-paw, is an unlikely candidate to be God’s chosen deliverer for his people. Not only is Ehud left-handed (although he hails from the tribe of Benjamin—a name meaning “son of the right hand”), but more important, Ehud is a calculating assassin. After killing Eglon, the buffoonish and obese king of Moab who has been fattened for the slaughter, Ehud then led the men of Israel against the Moabites, delivering Israel from eighteen years of subjugation at the hands of a coalition of three former enemies (the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Amlekites). Making good on his escape, the men of Israel

followed Ehud into battle, as Ehud led them to a stunning victory when over 10,000 of Moab's best men were killed by the Israelites when they attempted to cross the Jordan River so as to make their way back into Moab. As a result of the death of Eglon and Israel's defeat of the cream of the Moabite army, Israel enjoyed eighty years of peace—twice that won for them by Othniel. But while Israel enjoyed the two generations of rest from war, the nation continued its downward spiral into sin and unbelief.

With that, we now turn to the account of Shamgar, a mysterious man who rescued Israel from the Philistines in the days after Ehud was judge of Israel.

The account of Shamgar is extremely brief—just one verse, the last verse of chapter 3. “*After him [Ehud] was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.*” Given the scant information that we do have from this verse, it appears that Shamgar came on the scene at some point after Ehud's assassination of Eglon and after the defeat of the Moabite army. Since Shamgar is mentioned later in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:6), it is likely that he lived during the era of Deborah and Barak (to whom we will turn shortly).

The Philistines were known as the Sea Peoples. They settled in Lebanon, but would travel by boat, arrive without warning and then terrorize the people living along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They were feared by everyone. Shamgar likely faced the Philistines when they first began raiding the cities along the coast of Israel, but their raids went as far south as the Egyptian frontier and what is now the Gaza strip.¹ Everyone living along the coast (Jew, Egyptian, and Canaanite alike) constantly worried that a Philistine raiding party would show up and burn their village, kill their women and children, and steal whatever they could get their hands on.

As for biography, all we are told is that Shamgar is the son of Anath. Many scholars believe that the name itself is Hurrian (it is not an Israelite name) and that the reference to Anath indicates that this man is not a Jew, but was instead a worshiper of Anath. Anath was the Canaanite god of war, while Ashtoreth was the goddess of fertility. This tells us that Shamgar is a pagan—he is not a believer in YHWH. In all probability, Shamgar was a mercenary, many of whom were paid to fight for the Egyptians against the Philistines, who were attacking Egyptian ships using the trade route along the coast of Canaan. The irony here is that Shamgar was not fighting the Philistines to rescue Israel. Rather, he was probably fighting the Philistines in the employ of the Egyptians. But in fighting the Philistines, who were everyone's common enemy, Shamgar was protecting the people of Israel. Thus his heroic efforts on behalf of Egypt, actually helped preserve Israel.² Shamgar, the pagan worshiper of Anath, the Canaanite god of war, now becomes yet another unlikely deliverer of God's people.

Shamgar's act of deliverance is remembered because it was so heroic. An oxgoad is a hardwood club with a forged iron tip. Somehow, Shamgar managed to kill 600 Philistines with a cattle prod. His actions prevented these 600 Philistines from attacking Israelites living along the coast. The way in which this account is set forth, the author of Judges indicates that Shamgar was raised up by God (in the sense of being strengthened and empowered) to “save” Israel from these Philistine attackers. The fact that God must raise up a non-Israelite worshiper of the Canaanite god of war to “save” Israel from Philistine attackers, is, no doubt, yet another sad sign of how far Israel had fallen and how thoroughly the nation

¹ Block, Judges, Ruth, 172-173.

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 173-174.

had been Canaanized. Even though not much was known about Shamgar, his heroic act lives on because God used him (a Canaanite) to save Israel from the Philistines. In this we see that there was no one like Othniel left in Israel who would lead God's people. So, YHWH rescues Israel through the efforts of a pagan.³ Again, God will allow Israel to be chastened, but he will not allow them to be destroyed.

This brings us to the fourth judge in the series of judges (the account of Deborah), as we find Israel continuing to feel the effects and reap the consequences of Canaanization.

Once again, in the opening verse of chapter 4, we read the disappointing words the reader of Judges has come to know quite well. *“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died.”* Even though YHWH repeatedly had come to their aid and shown himself faithful to his covenant promises, the people of Israel still did not repent of their sins nor do they seek God's face. And so once again, YHWH will raise up an oppressor who will come and oppress Israel as the Lord chastens his people. This time the oppressor is a Canaanite with a grudge. As we read in verse 2, *“and the Lord sold them [the Israelites] into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim.”*

Recall that in Joshua 11, Joshua led the armies of Israel to a complete and total victory over Jabin and ordered Jabin's city (Hazor—which was seat of power of all the Canaanite tribes to the north), to be burned to the ground. Since a century or more has passed since the days of Joshua and the destruction of Hazor, the man named Jabin who appears here must be an ancestor of the Canaanite king mentioned back in Joshua 11. The name Jabin is not a personal name, but a family or royal name. Even though Hazor had been destroyed, once the Canaanites were allowed back into the land, the city was eventually rebuilt and had regained its dominance. Hazor was located just to the north of the Sea of Galilee and stood on the important trade route between Egypt and the countries in Western Asia. At the time of the Conquest, scholars believe that Jericho (a fortified city) had 1500 inhabitants. Hazor, on the other hand, had a population during this time of at least 40,000. The man who ruled this city could rightly be called the king of Canaan.⁴ The result of Jabin's rise to power and subsequent oppression of Israel (especially the northern tribes) continues the pattern found throughout the Book of Judges. We read in verse 3, *“then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, for he [Jabin] had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.”*

What is unique about this particular account of one of Israel's judges is the great detail given us as to how God raised up Deborah as judge over Israel as a direct response to the cry of the people mentioned in verse 3. According to verses 4-5, *“Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.”* There is much here to unpack, because this sets the stage for what follows.

The name Deborah means “bee.” She was a prophetess, that is, one who speaks for God. Her prophetic gift places her in good company with women like Miriam (Moses and Aaron's sister—Exodus 15:20). Deborah was married to a man (Lappidoth) whose name means “torches” (or “flashes”) and she was widely known throughout Israel for prophetic activity such as that depicted in Exodus 7:2, when the Lord

³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 174-175.

⁴ Cundall, *Judges & Ruth*, 81-82.

said to Moses, *“You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land.”* Clearly, God raised up Deborah and gave her this prophetic gift, because of the failure of the Levitical priests to instruct the people in the ways of the Lord.

At the time Deborah was “judging Israel,” the priesthood (the Levities) had become so corrupt that the people of Israel were seeking out Deborah because she was known as a prophetess. Given the unfaithfulness of the Levities, it fell to Deborah to announce God’s plan to deliver of his people. It is clear that God was shaming the unbelieving Levitic priesthood by proclaiming his word of deliverance through Deborah. It is Deborah who will speak forth God’s word announcing the forth-coming deliverance of Israel from the cruel rule of Jabin. That word of deliverance is described in what follows in the balance of this chapter and then in the “Song of Deborah” which is recorded in chapter 5.⁵

As the account of the defeat of Jabin unfolds, the story shifts from Deborah (who speaks the word of God’s deliverance) to Barak, the man who will lead the armies of Israel against Jabin. As we see in verses 6-7, the plan to oppose Jabin soon begins to take shape, but then takes a very surprising turn. *“[Deborah] sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, ‘Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?’”* Barak (whose name means “lightening”) comes from the region in Northern Israel most directly affected by Jabin’s armies. This is important because it explains why Barak would be the one called by God (through Deborah) to gather an army of 10,000 men from among those Israelites feeling the sting of Jabin’s rule. Through Deborah the prophet, God directs Barak to assemble his men at Mount Tabor above the Jezreel Valley, which was another important crossroad where the battle would take place.⁶

Although Barak has his marching orders, he suddenly balks. As we read in verse 8, *“Barak said to [Deborah], ‘If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.’”* While at first glance, this appears like cowardice on Barak’s part—he’s afraid to go unless Deborah goes with him—more than likely, Barak wants to go into battle accompanied by someone whom he knows speaks for God, and who can reveal to him the Lord’s directions as the battle unfolds. In the first part of verse 9, Deborah grants Barak’s request. *“And she said, ‘I will surely go with you.’”* Deborah’s presence then, ensures YHWH’s presence with the armies of Israel.

We now learn that YHWH’s presence with Barak will be confirmed by an interesting sign. According to Deborah’s prophetic word, *“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.”* When Barak sees that Sisera (the commander of Jabin’s chariots) is betrayed by a woman, only then will he know that YHWH’s glory will be manifest and Israel will be rescued from yet another oppressor. With the prophetic word now given, the plan is immediately put in motion. *“Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.”*

Suddenly, the narrative takes a surprising turn in verse 11 as a new character is unexpectedly introduced into the story. *“Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the*

⁵ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 195-197.

⁶ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 198.

father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaananim, which is near Kedesh.” Why is Heber suddenly a part of the story? Heber was a Kenite (the tribe of Moses’ father-in-law). He had lived in the southern desert, but moved his tent to an oak tree near Kedesh, to the north of the Sea of Galilee. We’ll find out shortly why Heber (and his wife) are so important to the story.

Given the use of scouts and spies, it was not long before Jabin learned that Israel’s men were on the move and preparing to attack. According to verses 12-13, *“When Sisera [commander of Jabin’s chariots] was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 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.”* Knowing that Barak was taking his men to Mount Tabor (to the south of Hazor), Sisera gave orders to mobilize his forces and to march to the Kishon river which drains into the Mediterranean at the foot of Mount Carmel. This means that Sisera was probably trying to flank Barak and get him to fight against the Canaanite chariots in an area better suited for chariot combat—chariots were not useful in mountainous areas, but the Jezreel Valley is flat and well-suited to both calvary and chariots. But God arranges the circumstances so that the reader knows it is Sisera who is heading into a trap, not Barak.

In verse 14, YHWH reveals his intentions for Israel—it is time to march since YHWH will give them victory over the forces of Sisera. *“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.”* As we see, God’s prophetic word now comes to pass. *“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. 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.”* This was a stunning victory. Israel’s 10,000 men defeated a force of 900 iron chariots, no small feat. But the only reason this came to pass was that it was YHWH (Israel’s shield and defender) who routed Sisera. YHWH led Sisera out to battle. YHWH sent Barak to Mount Tabor and granted him the victory, through the word from Deborah the prophet (and now the deliverer) of Israel.

Sisera’ forces are wiped out to a man. The victory was so stunning that Sisera dismounted his chariot and fled for his life. The reason why Heber the Kenite was introduced earlier, now becomes evident as his wife now enters the story. According to verse 17, *“But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.”* When Heber arrived in Kedesh, he probably paid tribute to Jabin, king of the Canaanites in exchange for access to land. Sisera, having fled from the battle, eventually arrives in Kedesh where he meets Jael, the wife of Heber. Sisera obviously expects to be safe here, since Heber had bound himself to Israel’s sworn enemies, through this payment of tribute (peace) made to Jabin.

But Sisera will be sold into the hands of a woman, just as Deborah had prophesied to Balak. This is recounted in verses 18-22. *“And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, ‘Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid.’ So [Sisera] turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. And he said to her, ‘Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.’”* Sisera was obviously worn out from the battle and from his flight to safety. He had no idea that he was in mortal danger. *“So [Jael] opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. And he said to her, ‘Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’”* Sisera thinks he has found safety and will remain hidden. But instead of standing watch, *“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.”* Sisera was indeed sold into the hand of a woman, just as Deborah foretold.

Meanwhile, Barak, who had been pursuing Sisera, eventually discovered where he had been hiding. As we read in verse 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.”* All of this had come to pass exactly as Deborah had foretold that it would. YHWH has accomplished his purposes yet again. And so as the episode comes to an end, we read in verses 23-24. *“So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. And the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.”* For the fourth time, the people of Israel had fallen into sin, come under the rule of a fierce and cruel oppressor, and cried out for deliverance. And once again we see the sovereign hand of God. YHWH raised up a fourth judge to speak his word, he gave Sisera’s chariots into the hand of Balak, and he used Jael, the wife of a man who made peace with Israel’s enemies, to accomplish his purposes. And once Sisera’s chariots were wiped out, Jabin’s cruel twenty-year hold over Israel was broken as he and his city were wiped out again.

What can we take with us from this passage?

We see here one of the main tactics used by Satan to oppose the gospel. In Revelation 13 (our New Testament lesson), we read of the dragon (Satan) empowering the beast (Rome) so as to direct worship unto the dragon—the thing he craves the most. It was Satan who gave Rome its great power, which was used both to oppress the people of God, and to strike fear into the heart of any nation who opposed Rome and who refused to submit to the emperor’s will. Whether it be men like Jabin or Nero, or empires like that at based at Hazor or at Rome, nothing offends godless kings and emperors any more than God’s people refusing to grant them the homage to which they think they are entitled. When Israel confessed YHWH is our God (even at a time of national unbelief), or when Christians confess that Jesus is Lord, the emperor is enraged, because he wants to be worshiped and God’s people won’t do it.

In our passage, Jabin (whose ancestors were defeated by Joshua, and whose capital was burned to the ground) has returned to full-flower. As a Canaanite city, ruled by a Canaanite king, Hazor was obviously a bastion of paganism. Jabin and Hazor have been figuratively raised from the dead by the power of the dragon. Because Israel was disobedient to YHWH, YHWH permitted Jabin, the king of the Canaanites, to oppress Israel for twenty-years. But when God’s people cried out to him, God delivered Israel through his word, spoken by an unlikely candidate, Deborah. Giving Sisera and his chariots into the hand of Balak, who thoroughly defeated Sisera, YHWH subdued Jabin and broke his rule. YHWH even used the treacherous wife (Jael) of a man who had turned his back upon YHWH and made peace with Jabin (Heber) to deliver the coup de grace to Jabin’s key general. All of this is to say, no nation, whether it be Jabin (the king of the Canaanites), or Nero/Domitian (the emperor of Rome), is any match for the power of God. God may allow his people to be chastened, but they will never be destroyed.

In this we see yet again that God will accomplish his purposes, no matter how great the opposition. The kingdom of God will spread to the ends of earth through the preaching of Christ crucified and the administration of the sacraments, no matter what those doing the bidding of Satan attempt to do to stop it. God will raise up the most unlikely of prophets and preachers to speak his word to his people, and he will use the most unlikely of means to protect and preserve his church. God will save his people from their sins, and there is nothing that a Caesar, a despot, a king, a fuhrer, or a president, can do to stop it. If the preaching of Christ and him crucified can raise the dead, what can the Jabins of this world do to stay the mighty hand of God. In spite of Israel’s unbelief, all of Canaan knew that YHWH is the great king, not Jabin. And where YHWH’s kingdom is present, there he delivers his people. Amen.