
JUDGES 4:1 The children of Israel again did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead.

The Israelites again rebel against God, and they are delivered into the hands of Jabin, king of Canaan, Jdg 4:1, Jdg 4:2. They cry unto God, and he raises up Deborah and Barak to deliver them, Jdg 4:3-10. Some account of Heber the Kenite, Jdg 4:11. Barak attacks Sisera, captain of Jabin's army, at the river Kishon, and gives him a total overthrow, Jdg 4:12-16. Sisera leaves his chariot, and flies away on foot; enters the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber, by whom he is slain, while secreting himself in her apartment, Jdg 4:17-24.

Verse 1

When Ehud was dead - Why not when Shamgar was dead? Does this not intimate that Shamgar was not reckoned in the number of the judges?

JUDGES 4:2 The LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth of the Gentiles.

Verse 2

Jabin king of Canaan - Probably a descendant of the Jabin mentioned Jos 11:1, etc., who had gathered together the wrecks of the army of that Jabin defeated by Joshua. Calmet supposes that these Canaanites had the dominion over the tribes of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar; while Deborah judged in Ephraim, and Shamgar in Judah.

JUDGES 4:3 The children of Israel cried to the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.

Verse 3

Nine hundred chariots of iron - Chariots armed with iron scythes, as is generally supposed; they could not have been made all of iron, but they might have been shod with iron, or had iron scythes projecting from the axle on each side, by which infantry might be easily cut down or thrown into confusion. The ancient Britons are said to have had such chariots.

JUDGES 4:4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she judged Israel at that time.

Verse 4

Deborah, a prophetess - One on whom the Spirit of God descended, and who was the instrument of conveying to the Israelites the knowledge of the Divine will, in things sacred and civil.

She judged Israel - This is, I believe, the first instance of gynaecocracy, or female government, on record. Deborah seems to have been supreme both in civil and religious affairs; and Lapidoth, her husband, appears to have had no hand in the government. But the original may as well be translated a woman of Lapidoth, as the wife of Lapidoth.

JUDGES 4:5 She lived under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgement.

Verse 5

The palm tree of Deborah - It is common for the Hindoos to plant trees in the names of themselves and their friends; and some religious mendicants live for a considerable time under trees. - Ward.

JUDGES 4:6 She sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh Naphtali, and said to him, "Hasn't the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded, 'Go and draw to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun?"

Verse 6

She sent and called Barak - She appointed him to be general of the armies on this occasion; which shows that she possessed the supreme power in the state.

Mount Tabor - "Mount Tabor," says Maundrell, "stands by itself, about two or three furlongs within the plains of Esdraelon. It has a plain area at the top, both fertile and delicious of an oval figure, extending about one furlong in breadth, and two in length. The prospect from the top is beautiful: on the N.W. is the Mediterranean; and all around you have the spacious plains of Esdraelon and Galilee, which present you with a view of many places famous for the resort and miracles of the Son of God. At the bottom of Tabor, westward, stands Daberah, a small village, supposed to have taken its name from Deborah. Near this valley is the brook Kishon. During the rainy season, all the water that falls on the eastern side of the mountain, or upon the rising ground to the southward, empties itself into it, in a number of torrents: at which conjuncture it overflows its banks, acquires a wonderful rapidity, and carries all before it. It might be at such a time as this when the stars are said to fight against Sisera, Jdg 5:20, Jdg 5:21, by bringing an abundance of rain, whereby the Kishon became so high and rapid as to sweep away the host of Sisera, in attempting to ford it." See Maundrell and Shaw. This mountain is very difficult of ascent; it took Mr. Maundrell nearly an hour to reach the top; this, with its grand area on the summit, made a very proper place for the rendezvous of Barak's army. Antiochus used it for the same purpose in his wars; and Josephus appears to have fortified it; and Placidus, one of Vespasian's generals, was sent to reduce it. See more in Calmet.

JUDGES 4:7 I will draw to you, to the river Kishon, Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into your hand."

JUDGES 4:8 Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go."

JUDGES 4:9 She said, "I will surely go with you: nevertheless, the journey that you take shall not be for your honour; for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh.

Verse 9

The Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman - Does not this mean, If I go with thee, the conquest shall be attributed to me, and thou wilt have no honor? Or, is it a prediction of the exploit of Jael? In both these senses the words have been understood. It seems, however, more likely that Jael is intended. The Septuagint made a remarkable addition to the speech of Barak: "If thou wilt go with me I will go; but if thou wilt not go with me, I will not go; Ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὴν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ εὐδοκίᾳ Κύριος τὸν ἀγγέλον μετ' ἐμοῦ, because I know not the day in which the Lord will send his angel to give me success." By which he appears to mean, that although he was certain of a Divine call to this work, yet, as he knew not the time in which it would be proper for him to make the attack, he wishes that Deborah, on whom the Divine Spirit constantly rested, would accompany him to let him know when to strike that blow, which he knew would be decisive. This was quite natural, and quite reasonable, and is no impeachment whatever of Barak's faith. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine have the same reading; but it is found in no MS. nor in any other of the versions. See Jdg 4:14.

JUDGES 4:10 Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh; and there went up ten thousand men at his feet: and Deborah went up with him.

Verse 10

Ten thousand men at his feet - Ten thousand footmen. He had no chariots; his army was all composed of infantry.

JUDGES 4:11 Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the Kenites, even from the children of Hobab the brother-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far as the oak in Zaananim, which is by Kedesh.

Verse 11

Hohab the father-in-law of Moses - For a circumstantial account of this person, and the meaning of the original word חוֹתֵן chothen, which is translated son-in-law in Gen 19:14, see the notes on Exo 2:15, Exo 2:16, Exo 2:18; Exo 3:1; Exo 4:20, Exo 4:24; Exo 18:5.

JUDGES 4:12 They told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam was gone up to Mount Tabor.

JUDGES 4:13 Sisera gathered together all his chariots, even nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth of the Gentiles, to the river Kishon.

JUDGES 4:14 Deborah said to Barak, "Go; for this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Hasn't the LORD gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him.

Verse 14

Up; for this is the day - This is exactly the purpose for which the Septuagint state, Jdg 4:8, that Barak wished Deborah to accompany him. "I know not," says he, "The Day in which God will send his angel to give me prosperity: come thou with us that thou mayest direct me in this respect." She went, and told him the precise time in which he was to make the attack: Up, for This is the Day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand.

Went down from Mount Tabor - He had probably encamped his men on and near the summit of this mount. See the note on Jdg 4:6.

JUDGES 4:15 The LORD confused Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot, and fled away on his feet.

Verse 15

The Lord discomfited Sisera - יהוה ויהם יחיהו vayahom Jehovah; the Lord Confounded, threw them all into confusion, drove them pell-mell - caused chariots to break and overthrow chariots, and threw universal disorder into all their ranks. In this case Barak and his men had little to do but kill and pursue, and Sisera in order to escape, was obliged to abandon his chariot. There is no doubt all this was done by supernatural agency; God sent his angel and confounded them.

JUDGES 4:16 But Barak pursued after the chariots, and after the army, to Harosheth of the Gentiles: and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; there was not a man left.

JUDGES 4:17 However Sisera fled away on his feet 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.

JUDGES 4:18 Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; don't be afraid." He came in to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.

Verse 18

Jael went out to meet Sisera - He preferred the woman's tent because of secrecy; for, according to the etiquette of the eastern countries, no person ever intrudes into the apartments of the women. And in every dwelling the women have a separate apartment.

JUDGES 4:19 He said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty."

She opened a bottle of milk, and gave him drink, and covered him.

Verse 19

She opened a bottle of milk - She gave more than he requested; and her friendship increased his confidence and security.

JUDGES 4:20 He said to her, "Stand in the door of the tent, and it shall be, when any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' that you shall say, 'No.'"

Verse 20

Stand in the door of the tent - As no man would intrude into the women's apartment without permission, her simply saying, there is no man in my tent, would preclude all search.

JUDGES 4:21 Then Jael Heber's wife took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him, and struck the pin into his temples, and it pierced through into the ground; for he was in a deep sleep; so he swooned and died.

Verse 21

A nail of the tent - One of the spikes by which they fasten to the ground the cords which are attached to the cloth or covering.

He was fast asleep and weary - As he lay on one side, and was overwhelmed with sleep through the heat and fatigues of the day, the piercing of his temples must have in a moment put him past resistance.

JUDGES 4:22 Behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you seek." He came to her; and behold, Sisera lay dead, and the tent peg was in his temples.

Verse 22

Behold, Sisera lay dead - What impression this made on the victorious Barak is not said: it could not give him much pleasure, especially when he learned the circumstances of his death.

JUDGES 4:23 So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel.

JUDGES 4:24 The hand of the children of Israel prevailed more and more against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

Verse 24

The hand of the children of Israel prospered - ותלך הלוך vattelech haloch, it went, going - they followed up this victory, and the consequence was, they utterly destroyed Jabin and his kingdom. It will naturally be expected that something should be said to justify the conduct of Jael: it must be owned that she slew Sisera in circumstances which caused the whole transaction to appear exceedingly questionable. They are the following: -

1. There was peace between her family and the king of Canaan.
2. That peace was no doubt made, as all transactions of the kind were, with a sacrifice and an oath.
3. Sisera, knowing this, came to her tent with the utmost confidence.
4. She met him with the most friendly greetings and assurances of safety.
5. Having asked for water, to show her friendship and respect she gave him cream, and that in a vessel suitable to his dignity.
6. She put him in the secret part of her own tent, and covered him in such a way as to evidence her good faith, and to inspire him with the greater confidence.
7. She agreed to keep watch at the door, and deny his being there to any that might inquire.
8. As she gave him permission to secrete himself with her, and gave him refreshment, she was bound by the rules of Asiatic hospitality to have defended his life, even at the risk of her own.
9. Notwithstanding, she took the advantage of his weariness and deep sleep, and took away his life!
10. She exulted in her deed, met Barak, and showed him in triumph what she had done.

Now do we not find, in all this, bad faith, deceit, deep hypocrisy, lying, breach of treaty, contempt of religious rites, breach of the laws of hospitality, deliberate and unprovoked murder? But what can be said in her justification? All that can be said, and all that has been said is simply this: "She might have been sincere at first, but was afterwards Divinely directed to do what she did." If this was so, she is sufficiently vindicated by the fact; for God has a right to dispose of the lives of his creatures as he pleases: and probably the cup of Sisera's iniquity was full, and his life already forfeited to the justice of God. But does it appear that she received any such direction from God? There is no sufficient evidence of it: it is true that Deborah, a prophetess, declares her blessed above women; and this seems to intimate that her conduct was pleasing to God. If Deborah was inspired on this occasion, her words are a presumptive proof that the act was right; unless we are to understand it as a simple declaration of the reputation she should be held in among her own sex. But we do not find one word from Jael herself, stating how she was led to do an act repugnant to her feelings as a woman, contrary to good faith, and a breach of the rules of hospitality. Nor does the sacred penman say one word to explain the case; as in the case of Ehud, he states the fact, and leaves his readers to form their own opinion. To say, as has been said in the case of Eglon, that "Sisera was a public enemy, and any of the people whom he oppressed might be justified in taking away his life," is a very dangerous position, as it refers one of the most solemn acts of judgment and justice to the caprice, or prejudice, or enthusiastic feeling of every individual who may persuade himself that he is

not only concerned in the business, but authorized by God to take vengeance by his own hand. While justice and law are in the world, God never will, as he never did, abandon cases of this kind to the caprice, prejudice, or party feeling, of any man. The conduct of Ehud and Jael are before the tribunal of God: I will not justify, I dare not absolutely condemn; there I leave them, and entreat my readers to do the like; after referring them to the observations at the end of the preceding chapter, where the subject is considered more at large.