

JUDGES 4

DEBORAH, BARAK, AND Jael

The next judge featured in the book of Judges after Ehud (see Judges 3:12–30) is Deborah, the only female judge mentioned in the book. Her story is told twice in Judges 4–5: once in a narrative (Judges 4) and once in an epic poem (Judges 5). The account of Deborah’s reign as judge begins, as would be expected, with the customary formula introduction (see Judges 2:11–23). The villain in this episode was Jabin, a Canaanite king, and the captain of his army, Sisera, who oppressed Israel (Judges 4:1–3).

Deborah, whose name means “bee” or “wasp,” is introduced in Judges 4:4 as both a judge and a prophetess (Hebrew *nevi’ah*). In her role as a prophetess she would have made oracular pronouncements, such as the one she made at verses 5–9. In this declaration the warrior Barak, whose name appropriately means “lightning,” was commissioned to battle the Canaanites as Israel’s champion. However, because of his initial hesitation, Deborah prophesied that the ultimate honor of victory would be credited not to him but to Deborah and Jael, a woman encountered later in the story.

After battling the Israelites, the Canaanite captain Sisera was defeated and fled to what he supposed to be a friendly refuge at the tent of Jael and her husband, Heber the Kenite (verses 10–17). However, Sisera was not aware that Jael was lulling him into a false sense of security. The details of her treatment of Sisera are rich with irony. For example, she treated him like a mother would treat a child, giving him milk and a blanket and putting him to sleep (verses 18–21)—all the while preparing him for a grisly demise: “Then Jael . . . took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died” (verse 21).

True to Deborah's prophecy, the text credits Jael with slaying Sisera, not Barak, even though he led Israel's forces against the Canaanites (verses 22–24).

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