

Judges

Lesson 8

As our last lesson ended, we were introduced to a new judge that arose shortly after the death of Ehud, but we did not have time to discuss this man named Shamgar.

a) Enter Shamgar - Israel's Judge - Unknown Years (3:31)

Enter Shamgar – Israel's judge for an unknown number of years in verse 31. *“After him [Ehud] came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.”* (3:31)

There was never just one judge over the Israelites. Judges were in every major city in every tribal area. It is quite possible that Shamgar was a minor judge in the tribal area of Dan, Judah, or Simeon and served in that position during the rule of the major judge, Ehud. In addition, we cannot doubt that Shamgar killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. No doubt he did. An oxgoad was a long metal or wooden rod that a herder used to poke an ox to entice it to move along in plowing a field. It was also used to keep cattle moving down a path or road.

Two issues arise with this verse. First, between and before Ehud and Deborah, the Philistines were not enemies of Israel. They did not appear to be enemies until the time of Saul in 1st Samuel. We will see them in the story of Samson, but not as enemies of Israel. Second, Shamgar, whose name means *“the name of a stranger,”* saved Israel by killing these Philistines, for which we have no biblical knowledge why. The entry in the Scripture must be accurate. For some reason, the Philistines were a threat to the nation, and Shamgar handled the problem. That is all we can draw from this verse. Be that as it may, the historian, Flavius Josephus, tells us that Shamgar died in his first year as a judge. (Antiquities Book V. Chapter 4, Paragraph 3) But how long after Ehud's death did it take for Shamgar to become a judge? We do not know. Was he already a minor judge operating in his tribal area? Most likely. We must notice an interesting change in the way Shamgar was introduced compared to Othniel and Ehud. In the case of the two previous judges, they were introduced with the words, *“But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them....”* Shamgar was not introduced in that way. Therefore, he must have been a minor judge operating in the normal structure of the magistrates of the nation. Chapter 4, verse 1 indicates that he was not a major judge because the people of the Nation of Israel did not follow him in forsaking the worship of the Canaanite gods.

Nevertheless, we will hear about Shamgar again in Judges 5:6. There he will be a contemporary of Jael being alive at the same time in Israel. Because Shamgar was alive at the time of Ehud, that leads us to believe that Jael was also alive at the time of Ehud. Jael was a married Kenite woman. But we will be introduced to her soon as we investigate the third cycle of sin in the Nation of Israel in chapter 4.

Chapter 4

2. Cycle Three – The Canaanite Takeover

a) Enter Jabin – Canaan's King - Twenty Years (4:1-3)

With the first verse in chapter 4, cycle three – the Canaanite takeover of the people in the Nation of Israel begins as Israel falls into sin again. Enter Jabin – Canaan's king for twenty years. Chapter 4, verse 1. *“Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died.² And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was*

Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. ³ The sons of Israel cried to the LORD; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years.” (4:1-3)

Verse 1 tells us that Israel fell back into sin “*after Ehud died.*” How long after? We do not know. The writer did not choose to tell us how long the nations sinned before the LORD allowed the oppressor to take over the nation with any of the cycles. But the one thing we might draw from this verse is that Shamgar’s time as a judge did nothing to curb the sin of Israel’s people.

Our attention now turns to Jabin, the Canaanite king whose capital was in Hazor. Hazor was a fortified city in the tribal area of Naphtali (Joshua 19:36). Naphtali had failed to destroy all the Canaanites in its territory, and that disobedience had now festered into the nation’s oppression. Hazor sat between Ramah and Kedesh (Joshua 12:19) on a high plateau overlooking the Lake of Merom. It was there that Joshua defeated the Canaanite kings that united and met the army of Israel there (Joshua 11:5-7). Israel won. But with that win, Israel thought the northern campaign of the Promised Land was over. Israel defeated the Canaanite kings and their armies at Hazor, but they did not destroy the Canaanites who lived in the area. Neither did the tribe of Naphtali when Joshua sent them home to complete the task in obedience to the LORD’s instruction.

Verse two indicates that Sisera was Jabin’s commander. Sisera’s home was Harosheth-hagoyim with sat right on the west bank of Lake Merom.

Once again, as with the other cycles of sin, the LORD waited for Israel to cry out for help. In the first cycle, it took the people of Israel eight years to plead their case before the LORD. In the second cycle, it took the people eighteen years to plead their case. In this third cycle, it took the people twenty years to plead their case. What took them so long?

b) Enter Deborah – Israel’s Judge - Forty Years

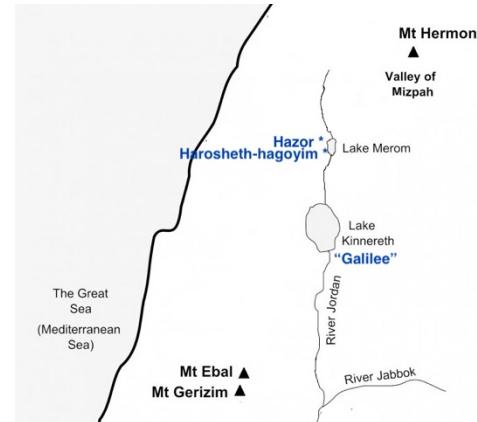
(1) The Rise of Deborah

Now enters Deborah – Israel’s judge for forty years. Deborah was not a normal judge in the magistrate system of the Nation of Israel. But, when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, we see the rise of Deborah to prominence in the story. Verse 4. *“Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment.”* (4:4-5)

The text tells us that Deborah was the “*wife of Lappidoth.*” We know nothing about this man or his importance in the story. Nevertheless, for the Nation of Israel, who would receive this record in their history, his name needed to be associated with Deborah in the text.

Deborah was a “*prophetess*” who sat under a palm tree in the tribal area of Ephraim where the people of Israel came to entreat the LORD for divine guidance – “*judgment*” as rendered in the verse. Let us discuss the title given to Deborah as a “*prophetess*.”

In the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, a woman “*prophetess*” never could tell the future. Therefore, they were never *foretellers of events to come*. Instead, they were considered “*prophetesses*” because of their ability to communicate the instructions of the LORD that had been previously given. Such was the case with Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Hannah (1st Samuel 2:1), Huldah (2nd Kings 22:14), Anna (Luke 2:36), and the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8, 9). These women, including Deborah, knew very well the Scripture they had and were able to communicate the desires of the LORD based on the Word of God. For Deborah, all she had to rely



on was the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. That was enough. It was all the whole Nation of Israel needed to stay on the straight path in obedience to the LORD. As a “prophetess,” Deborah simply listened to the people's issues and gave her understanding of the Scripture to determine the correct direction or judgment with the needs of the people. But, even with these women that I have mentioned, I cannot discount that the LORD spoke to these women just as He speaks to you and me. Some of the principles of the LORD's words to Deborah would come from the Word of God that she knew, and the originals were stored in the Ark of the Covenant. From that, she could deduce what needed to be done.

The palm tree that she sat under was a long way from Hazor. The palm tree was between Ramah and Bethel but still in the tribal area of Ephraim. What does that mean? Ramah was actually in the tribal area of Benjamin and sat about five miles from Jerusalem. Bethel, the old Canaanite city of Luz, was in the tribal area of Ephraim. It was about twelve miles from Jerusalem. So, Deborah's palm tree was located between Bethel and Ramah near the Ephraim border with Benjamin. From Bethel, Hazor was about seventy-five miles. From Ramah, Hazor was about eighty miles.

(2) The Communication of Deborah

(a) LORD's Command to Barak of Naphtali (4:6-7)

When the people cried out to the LORD for help to take them out from under the thumb of Jabin, the LORD stirred Deborah with a message. We come to the communication of Deborah with the LORD's command for Barak of Naphtali. Verse 6. *“Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and said to him, ‘Behold, the LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded, ‘Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.’”* (4:6-7)

First, Deborah summoned Barak to come to her. Where was Barak? He was in his hometown of Kedesh-naphtali. Kedesh is a town just north of Hazor in the tribal area of Naphtali. Hence, Kedesh-naphtali. He was a long way from Deborah, at least eighty-five miles.

Second, When Barak arrived to meet with Deborah under the palm tree, she said to him, *“Behold, the LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded....”* Evidently, the LORD had spoken to Deborah saying, *“Go and march to Mount Tabor and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.”* But like you and I, when we believe we have heard a word from the LORD, how can we be sure that it was a true word from Him. It was easy for Deborah because she knew the Scripture. The LORD had commanded that all the Canaanites in the Promised Land be destroyed; therefore, hearing a word from the LORD that helped with that command could be trusted. Next, the promise that the LORD would act on the behalf of Israel to defeat the Canaanites could also be proved in the Scripture Deborah had because the LORD promised He would fight for Israel if Israel would take up the battle against the Canaanites. Finally, Deborah instructed Barak to gather the army from the tribal areas of Naphtali and its neighbor, Zebulun. In other words, the local tribes were enlisted to do what their forefathers failed to do in their territories. In addition, it may mean that Jabin's oppression of the Promised Land may have been widespread; his forces of nine-hundred iron chariots may have been a smokescreen used to scare the Israelites more than being used in warring against them.

Nevertheless, the promise from the LORD through Deborah was that the LORD would draw the armies of Jabin and his commander, Sisera, out to the Kishon River. Where is the Kishon River? This River Kishon runs in the Jezreel Valley. The valley will have many names in the future history of the Nation of Israel. More battles will be fought in this valley than in any other valley in the world. You know it by another name, the Valley of Armageddon. The name of the valley depends

on where you are in the valley. If you are standing on the plateau of Megiddo, you call it the valley of Megiddo or the Valley of Armageddon. If you are near the village of Jezreel on the northeastern side of the valley, you call it the Jezreel Valley. The River Kishon is actually a stream that flows from the winter runoff of snow each year and the runoff water from Esdraelon. The waters make their way through the plain of Acre and flow into the Mediterranean Sea. Long after this passage, Elijah will slaughter the prophets of Baal during the time of Ahab and Jezebel at Carmel near the Kishon (1 Kings 18:40).

(b) Barak's Reply to Deborah in Ephraim (4:8)

Moving on in the story, we hear Barak's reply to Deborah in Ephraim. Verse 8. *"Then 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.'"* (4:8)

For some reason, Barak was not willing to face Jabin and Sisera without the presence of Deborah with him.

(c) Deborah's Reply to Barak in a Warning (4:9-10)

We hear Deborah's reply to Barak in a warning. Verse 9. *"She said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman. Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him.'"* (4:9-10)

Deborah agreed with Barak but warned him that the victory would not be his; it would be hers. No greater insult in the world could be placed on Sisera than to have him defeated by the army led by a woman. Nevertheless, Barak must have agreed because she journeyed to Barak's hometown with him. Once there, Barak gathered the army as directed by Deborah.

c) Enter Heber the Kenite (4:11)

At this point in the story, the writer introduces a Kenite family. Enter Heber the Kenite. Verse 11. *"Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the Kenites, from the sons of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh."* (4:11)

The Kenite descendants were introduced in Judges 1:16-17. We said the following in the notes for chapter 1.

Moses' father-in-law was Reuel. He was a priest of the tribe of Midian. His priestly name was Jethro. Jethro means *his excellence*. Reuel means *friend of God*. His daughter was Zipporah, who married Moses before he was called by the LORD at the burning bush. She gave Moses two sons. As a Midianite, Jethro, and his daughter Zipporah, were distant relatives of Moses. Midian, Jethro's ancestor, the father of the tribe, was one of Abraham's sons through Keturah (Genesis 25:1-6). ... Jethro was a Midianite, but he was also a Kenite, a branch of the Midianites. Some of this Kenite branch of the Midianites were evidently with Moses at the Plain of Moab and crossed the Jordan River on dry ground and helped destroy the *city of palms*, another name for Jericho. As we find in this verse, these Kenites settled with the people of the tribe of Judah, moving as they moved and living as they lived. But not all of the Kenites joined the tribe of Judah. In chapter 4, we will meet Heber, with his wife Jael, who moved into the northern Promised Land instead of joining Judah in the south.

In this verse, we learn that Hobab was the father-in-law of Moses. Was that another name for Reuel/Jethro? Numbers 10:29 states, *"Then Moses said to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law..."* (Numbers 10:29). That statement made Hobab Moses' brother-in-law instead. Which is correct? It seems best to accept the record in the book of Numbers. However, this Judge's verse is right that Heber, the Kenite, was a descendant of the sons of Hobab.

Here we learn that Heber traveled north to settle with the Israelites in the area of Naphtali, while the rest of his clan lived among the Israelites in the tribal areas of Judah and Simeon. If this is the case, Heber is extremely old. Considering that Heber was at least in his teenage years when he moved to Naphtali, here is the math to determine his age.

If Heber was about seventeen years old when Joshua died. The full cycle of Israel's sin took at least forty-eight years. Heber would have been sixty-five at the end of the first cycle. The full second cycle of Israel's sin took at least ninety-eight years. Heber would have been over one hundred and sixty-three years old. Then, the Nation of Israel was under the rule of Jabin for twenty years at the time of this verse. Heber would have been at least one-hundred and eighty-three years at this time in the story. A man this age is not completely out of the question; however, it is still unlikely. What can we make of this? No doubt, this verse is not a reference to the man named Heber, whom we are about to meet in verse 17. It is a short history lesson as to why the Kenites are living in the land of Naphtali with the Israelites. The name we will meet in verse 17 will be a younger man with the same common family name of "Heber."

(1) The Trap of Sisera (4:12-13)

The writer then moves on with the trap of Sisera. Verse 12. *"Then they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor.¹³ Sisera called together all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon."* (4:12-13)

Just as instructed by Deborah, Barak moved his army to Mount Tabor. Sisera was told that an army was on Mount Tabor. That aroused his concern, and he marched his army to the mount.

Mount Tabor is located in the tribal area of Zebulun. In 1st Chronicles 6, we will learn that it will be a Levitical city controlled by the Levitical line of Merari. Therefore, it was a special place in the area of Zebulun.

(2) The Tragedy of Sisera (4:14-16)

We come to the tragedy of Sisera and his army on Mount Tabor. Let us read the report. Verse 14. *"Deborah said to Barak, 'Arise! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the LORD has gone out before you.' So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.¹⁵ The LORD routed 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 foot.¹⁶ But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left."* (4:14-16)

The army of Sisera fell, but Sisera did not. He ran.

(3) The Tent of Sisera

Running away, Sisera found his way to a tent. We call this the tent of Sisera because it will be the place of his death. Let us read the whole story that ended in his death. Enter Jael, the wife of a man named Heber, a Kenite descendant of Moses' father-in-law and brother-in-law. Verse 17.

"Now 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.¹⁸ Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, 'Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid.' And he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.¹⁹ He said to her, 'Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.' So she opened a bottle of milk and gave him a drink; then she covered him.²⁰ He said to her, 'Stand in the doorway of the tent, and it shall be if anyone comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there anyone here?' that you shall say, 'No.'"²¹ But Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through into the ground; for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died.²² And 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 are seeking.' And he entered with her, and behold Sisera was lying dead with the tent peg in his temple." (4:17-22)

With the commander dead, all that was left was the king, Jabin.

(4) The Death of Jabin (4:23-24)

Commanders can be replaced by kings, but kings are not so easily replaced. The death of Jabin was paramount. The LORD was involved in finding the Canaanite king. Verse 23. *“So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. ²⁴ The hand of the sons of Israel pressed heavier and heavier upon Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin the king of Canaan.”* (4:23-24)

Jabin's twenty-year rule was over. Israel controlled her land again. And Deborah had something else to say about it. We will see that next in chapter 5.