

MOUNT TABOR: A PLACE OF UNITY AND COURAGE

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This issue of "Diggings" will discuss a story that is set on *Mount Tabor* in Galilee. The main biblical text is set in the time of the Judges in chapters 4 and 5.

DEBORAH THE JUDGE:

The texts are unusual within the Bible in that they come to us in both a prose and a poetic version. This story is set in the beginning of Israelite origins in the land, after the Exodus from Egypt. Judges 4 is the story in prose and Judges 5 is a folk ballad in poetic song.

It is refreshing to observe that judges in ancient Israel were not only male. There was a judge named Deborah who sat under a date palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the tribe of Ephraim, just north of Jerusalem. The people came to her for discernment, judgment and deliverance. She was used by God in this period to help deliver the Children of Israel from servitude to the Canaanites. It is encouraging to learn

that even within the patriarchal society of this period if someone was gifted, being a woman apparently did not keep them from being able to exercise those gifts in serving God and society. This story not only honors Deborah, a female judge, but also honors another heroine, Jael, a Kenite woman. We discover that the Lord, of course, uses people whether male and female. Deborah's influence was apparently such that she was the one person who inspired the Israelites of Galilee to face a tyrant named King Jabin from the Canaanite capitol of Hazor.

Recognizing Mount Tabor as the geographical setting of the story helps us recognize the wisdom of Deborah. When the Galilean tribes were being hassled by the tyrant Canaanite ruler King Jabin, Deborah suggested that they gather together on the top of Mount Tabor. This location would not favor any particular tribe but was used as a military gathering point perhaps because it was a territory that was *shared as a unifying location* owned



Mount Tabor ended up being a border post shared by the three tribes of Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtali. Being a high, isolated peak it was only natural that it became a border post. Most borders were along mountain ranges which separated two regions. In this case a mountain peak marked the territory of three tribes which shared its slopes.

by three tribes. The previous book of Joshua set out the tribal inheritances in the land of Canaan. Chapter 19 contains a list of cities describing the borders of the tribe of Zebulun which included the town of Daberath (19:12), which is on the western slope of Mount Tabor. The tribe of Issachar includes the town of Shunem (19:18) on the southern slope. The tribe of Naphtali included the northern slope of Mount Tabor, touching Zebulun (19:34).

Let us now look at some details in the story. As we have mentioned, Jabin's capitol was at the city of Hazor, on the edge of a beautiful, fertile valley which has produced one of the highest yields of alfalfa in the world. The ancient tel is the largest archaeological site from the Old Testament period in the country, a city which must have seemed unconquerable. The Book of Judges says that Hazor was "the capitol of all those kingdoms" (11:10). The ruin of Hazor is 200 acres in size. In fact, it is such a large archaeological site that the early explorers thought it was a Canaanite chariot parking lot! But every place within those 200 acres they have excavated, they have found ruins. Several Canaanite temples have been found at Hazor, most of them to Baal, the storm god. The ancient Hebrew folk ballad celebrating the victory over the Canaanite army, however, recalls a storm aiding the Israelites, not the Canaanites.

Whenever the Israelites tried to move from their rugged mountainous areas down to the fertile plains they were attacked by the Canaanites. They had to travel long, circuitous routes through mountainous areas in order to get from one place to another because the Canaanites controlled the plains. Jabin was a tyrant and an oppressor of the ancient Hebrews. Deborah inspired the people of Galilee to do something about this oppression. She chooses a man named Barak to serve as her commander.

Verse 12 of Chapter 4, "So when Sisera was told Barak son of Abinoam had gone up Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all of his chariots, 900 chariots of iron." Verse 14, "Then Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! This is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you.' So Barak went from Mount Tabor with 10,000 warriors following him. And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak. Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away from his troops on foot." The texts present a great contrast. On the one hand we have the Israelites (who have no chariot warfare) as they ran on foot down the mountain slope towards the Canaanite army in the plain below. On the other hand we see the cowardice of Sisera who was the chief military officer of King Jabin of Hazor who fled eastward from his troops as they fled westward from the Israelites.



View from Megiddo's famous Canaanite altar towards Mount Tabor and the Hill or Morel seen in the distance. Sisera is said to have gathered his men at the Waters of Megiddo. We are not sure if the text means the famous water tunnel of Megiddo, which led out to a nearby spring.

THE JOURNEY INTO CONFRONTATION:

And so, “This is the day,” Deborah said, “Go!” So she inspired Barak and the Israelites. Now, it is only fair that we also give Barak some credit. Deborah was on top of the mountain when she sent the troops down to the Canaanites. She was the inspiration and the unifier of the people and Barak ran ahead with them. The steepness of the slope may have also illustrated a spiritual lesson here: **One gathers courage as they begin moving.** In fact, particularly in this case, one might really gather speed as they began running down this steep slope

Perhaps the best guess for the location of the side of the mountain the ancient Israelites ran down is the south-western slope (the left hand slope on the picture above), which faced the direction of the enemy camp at the Waters of Megiddo. This slope began gradual but then got steeper and steeper as it neared the enemy’s chariots on the plain. One cannot help wonder if they gathered courage as they gathered speed charging into battle. In terms of spiritual guidance, the important lessons here may relate to first, *being unified* and second, *starting to move.*

The poetic version of the battle remembered that the Lord sent a rain front through the scene as the battle progressed. The account does not let us know if Deborah saw the distant clouds before she and Barak began the charge, but the storm was perfect timing and the Israelites gave God the glory. The Israelite foot soldiers would have been able to continue fighting in the rain, but the Canaanite charioteers would certainly have gotten their wheels clogged in the mud. In the description in the poetic version, the Lord swept them away in the mighty Kishon (Judg 5:21). The Kishon is the stream that drains the plain from Mount Tabor westward. A heavy storm front must have caused a flash flood. The 900 chariots of iron, the symbol of Canaanite dominance, were useless. The storm made their military technological advantage useless.

JAEL THE KENITE:

The story continues with another female hero, a Kenite woman named Jael. As we have indicated, the battle was probably on the south-west side of Mount Tabor

and the army probably continued their flight westward, back towards the Waters of Megiddo, where their base camp had been located. But it seems that Sisera fled east, abandoning his troops, fleeing towards the Kenite grazing areas of the Jordan Valley. The Kenites were shepherd folks who had flocks and herds and lived in tents. Apparently they sided with the Israelites, also pastoral people, in this difficult time of oppression under Jabin of Hazor and Sisera, his commander. When Sisera fled east he came to a tent encampment. Listen to the folk ballad version in Judges 5:24: *“Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Of tent dwelling women she is most blessed. He asked for water, she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.”*



Pictured here is our tent encampment at the Explorations in Antiquity Center. Women were responsible for weaving, transporting, setting up, and taking down the tent. Now tents were very heavy, made of thick panels of woven goat hair. (It required five people to lift our tent up to its poles.) Women had good tent-peg-pounding muscles. If you know the story, you’ll know why we make this point.

Ancient hospitality would not have been surprised that when he asked for water she gave him milk. In the Middle East today one is supposed to show courtesy to someone particularly if they ask for something to drink. One would invite them in and offer hospitality. Pardon me, I know this is not very nice to Sisera, but the story becomes both amusing and shocking. *“She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the mallet. She struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she*

shattered and pierced his temple. He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet. At her feet he sank, he fell, where he sank, he fell." I wonder if Sisera's final thought was, "It never entered my mind that you would do such a thing!" (Sorry.) The last stanza ends, "*Where he sank, there he fell – dead.*" Jael understood that the oppression of this tyrant was more serious than showing hospitality to a stranger. This man was responsible for hundreds, if not thousands, of people dying under Canaanite oppression of the people in the land, both Israelite and Kenite.

This folk ballad celebrated that through the hands of two women the oppression was brought to an end. The spiritual organizer of the revolt was Deborah, who united and led the people. Also, Sisera, the Canaanite commander, was killed by the hand of Jael, a Kenite woman.

SISERA'S MOTHER AT HAZOR

One more stanza to the ballad was added to the in Judges 5:28. Imagine Sisera's mother back home at Hazor in Judges 5:28--

*Out of the window she peered, the mother of
Sisera gazed through the lattice.*

*Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why
tarry the hoof beats of his chariot?*

*Her wisest ladies make answer; Indeed she
answers the question herself.*

*"Are they not fighting and dividing the spoil?
A girl or two for every man,*

*Spoil of dyed stuff for Sisera. Spoil of dyed
stuff embroidered,*

*Two pieces of dyed stuff embroidered for my
neck as spoil."*

She thought that maybe the reason he was taking so long was because the army was collecting all the booty and that she was really going to be well-dressed after the battle. Then the last verse ended, "*So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.*" So a third woman is mentioned in the poem, the mother of Sisera.

You know, the ancient Hebrews probably could have stayed on the top of Mount Tabor a long time trying to muster enough courage to go down to battle the army of Sisera, with 900 chariots of iron with 1800 horses. But they started moving. They believed the Lord was with them. And isn't it interesting that because of the steepness of that mountain it was difficult to slow down once they started! Their momentum gave them speed. Perhaps this story applies to when you and I are stuck to a spot, not so sure which direction to take. Sometimes it's important to try a path, to begin a new direction. If you are thinking about a job change or thinking about possibly volunteering for a service project, you can not always know the right direction in advance what is right for you. But you can begin. If, for example, you are not sure whether you are right for work in a prison ministry, why not volunteer to join them one time? See how it settles. Are you able to relax enough to be comfortable to share with a sensitive listening ear, yet a challenging voice as well? Even Paul was not sure which direction to go in Acts 16:6-8. The regions mentioned in these two short verses probably indicate about a month of hiking, trying both left and right directions. It is very hard to steer a parked car. But a little bit of movement helps begin a difficult journey. They started down that mountain and gathered courage as they gathered speed. Lord, help us to be open to new directions, to be willing to take a few baby steps and then begin reflection upon your guidance.

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