

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The triumphant song of Deborah and Barak, after the defeat of Sisera, captain of the armies of Jabin, king of Canaan.

Verse 1

Then sang Deborah, and Barak - There are many difficulties in this very sublime song; and learned men have toiled much to remove them. That there are several gross mistakes in our version will be instantly acknowledged by all who can critically examine the original. Dr. Kennicott has distributed it into parts, assigned to Deborah and Barak alternately. But his division is by far too artificial. Dr. Hales has also given a version of it which, perhaps, comes nearer to the simplicity of the original; but it also leaves several difficulties behind. As these are the two best versions I have met with, I shall lay them both in parallel columns before the reader, after introducing the general description of this song, given by each of these learned men. These the reader will find at the conclusion of the chapter.

Verse 2

For the avenging of Israel - See the notes, etc., at the end of the chapter, Judges 5:28 (note).

Verse 4

When thou wentest out of Seir - Here is an allusion to the giving of the law, and the manifestation of God's power and glory at that time; and as this was the most signal display of his majesty and mercy in behalf of their forefathers, Deborah very properly begins her song with a commemoration of this transaction.

Verse 6

The highways were unoccupied - The land was full of anarchy and confusion, being everywhere infested with banditti. No public road was safe; and in going from place to place, the people were obliged to use unfrequented paths.

Verse 7

The villages ceased - The people were obliged to live together in fortified places; or in great numbers, to protect each other against the incursions of bands of spoilers.

Verse 8

They chose new gods - This was the cause of all their calamities; they forsook Jehovah, and served other gods; and then was war in their gates - they were hemmed up in every place, and besieged in all their fortified cities; and they were defenseless, they had no means of resisting their adversaries; for even among forty thousand men, there was neither spear nor shield to be seen. The Vulgate gives a strange and curious turn to this verse: *Nova bella elegit Dominus, et portas hostium ipse subvertit; Æœ*The Lord chose a new species of war, and himself subverted the gates of the enemy. Now, what was this new species of war? A woman signifies her orders to Barak; he takes 10,000 men, wholly unarmed, and retires to Mount Tabor, where they are immediately besieged by a powerful and well-appointed army. On a sudden Barak and his men rush upon them, terror and dismay are spread through the whole Cannanitish army, and the rout is instantaneous and complete. The Israelites immediately arm themselves with the arms of their enemies, and slay all before them; they run, and are pursued in all directions. Sisera, their general, is no longer safe in his chariot; either his horses fail, or the unevenness of the road obliges him to desert it, and fly away on foot; in the end, the whole army is destroyed, and the leader ingloriously slain. This was a new species of war, and was most evidently the Lord's doings. Whatever may be said of the version of the Vulgate, (and the Syriac and Arabic are something like it), the above are all facts, and show the wondrous working of the Lord.

Verse 10

Ye that ride on white asses - Perhaps *x•xªx x•xª x!x—x"x•xª* (athonoth tsechoroth) should be rendered sleek or well-fed asses; rendered *asinos nitentes*, shining asses, by the Vulgate.

Ye that sit in judgment - *x™x©x'x™ xçxœ xžx"x™xŸ* (yoshebey al middin); some have rendered this, ye who dwell in Middin. This was a place in the tribe of Judah, and is mentioned Joshua 15:61.

And walk by the way - Persons who go from place to place for the purposes of traffic.

Verse 11

The kings came and fought - It is conjectured that Jabin and his confederates had invaded Manasseh, as both Taanach and Megiddo were in that tribe: and that they were discomfited by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali at Taanach and Megiddo; while Barak defeated Sisera at Mount Tabor.

They took no gain of money - They expected much booty in the total rout of the Israelites; but they were defeated, and got no prey; or, if applied to the Israelites, They fought for liberty, not for plunder.

Verse 20

They fought from heaven - The angels of God came to the assistance of Israel: and the stars in their orbits fought against Sisera; probably some thunder storm, or great inundation from the river Kishon, took place at that time, which in poetic language was attributed to the stars. So our poet sung relative to the storms which dispersed the Spanish armada in 1588: -

“Both winds and waves at once conspire
To aid old England - frustrate Spain’s desire.”

Perhaps it means no more than this: the time which was measured and ruled by the heavenly bodies seemed only to exist for the destruction of the Canaanites. There may be also a reference to the sun and moon standing still in the days of Joshua.

Verse 21

The river of Kishon swept them away - This gives plausibility to the above conjecture, that there was a storm at this time which produced an inundation in the river Kishon, which the routed Canaanites attempting to ford were swept away.

Verse 22

Then were the horsehoofs broken - In very ancient times horses were not shod; nor are they to the present day in several parts of the East. Sisera had iron chariots when his hosts were routed; the horses that drew these, being strongly urged on by those who drove them, had their hoofs broken by the roughness of the roads; in consequence of which they became lame, and could not carry off their riders. This is marked as one cause of their disaster.

Verse 23

Curse ye Meroz - Where Meroz was is not known; some suppose it was the same as Merom, nigh to Dotham. The Syriac and Arabic have Merod; but where this was is equally uncertain. It was certainly some city or district, the inhabitants of which would not assist in this war.

Curse ye bitterly - *אָרַרְתֶּם אֶרְצָאֵל* (*oru aror*), curse with cursing - use the most awful execrations.

Said the angel of the Lord - That is, Barak, who was Jehovah’s angel or messenger in this war; the person sent by God to deliver his people.

To the help of the Lord - That is, to the help of the people of the Lord.

Against the mighty - *בַּגִּבּוֹרִים* (*baggibborim*), “with the heroes;” that is, Barak and his men, together with Zebulun and Naphtali: these were the mighty men, or heroes, with whom the inhabitants of Meroz would not join.

Verse 24

Blessed above women shall Jael - be - She shall be highly celebrated as a most heroic woman; all the Israelitish women shall glory in her. I do not understand these words as expressive of the Divine approbation towards Jael. See the observations at the end of Judges 4:24 (note). The word bless, both in Hebrew and Greek, often signifies to praise, to speak well of, to celebrate. This is most probably its sense here.

Verse 25

She brought forth butter - As the word *חֵמָה* (*chemah*), here translated butter, signifies disturbed, agitated, etc., it is probable that buttermilk is intended. The Arabs form their buttermilk by agitating the milk in a leathery bag, and the buttermilk is highly esteemed because of its refreshing and cooling quality; but there is no reason why we may not suppose that Jael gave him cream: Sisera was not only thirsty, but was also exhausted with fatigue; and nothing could be better calculated to quench his thirst, and restore his exhausted strength, than a bowl of cream. I am surprised that Mr. Harmer should see any difficulty in this. It is evident that Deborah wishes to convey the idea that Jael was more liberal and kind than Sisera had requested. He asked for water, and she

is expressed more fully and strongly by this silence than could have been painted by any colouring of words. See Dr. Lowth, 13th Prelection, Proverbs 4:18, Proverbs 4:19.

“We cannot do better,” says Dr. Dodd, “than conclude this chapter with the words of Pelicanus: ‘Let a Homer, or a Virgil, go and compare his poetry, if he be able, with the song of this woman; and, if there be anyone who excels in eloquence and learning, let him celebrate the praises and learning of this panegyric, more copiously than I am able.’”

For other matters relative to this song I must refer to the two translations which immediately follow; and their authors’ notes on them.

Dr. Kennicott says, “This celebrated song of triumph is most deservedly admired; though some parts of it are at present very obscure, and others unintelligible in our English version. Besides particular difficulties, there is a general one that pervades the whole; arising as I humbly apprehend, from its being considered as entirely the song of Deborah. It is certain, though very little attended to, that it is said to have been sung by Deborah and By Barak. It is also certain there are in it parts which Deborah could not sing, as well as parts which Barak could not sing; and therefore it seems necessary, in order to form a better judgment of this song, that some probable distribution should be made of it; whilst those words which seem most likely to have been sung by either party should be assigned to their proper name; either to that of Deborah the prophetess, or to that of Barak the captain.

“For example: Deborah could not call upon Deborah, exhorting herself to awake, etc., as in Judges 5:12; neither could Barak exhort himself to arise, etc., in the same verse. Again, Barak could not sing, Till I, Deborah, arose a mother in Israel, Judges 5:7; nor could Deborah sing about a damsel or two for every soldier, Judges 5:30; though, indeed, as to this last article, the words are probably misunderstood. There are other parts also which seem to require a different rendering. Judges 5:2, For the avenging of Israel, where the address is probably to those who took the lead in Israel on this great occasion, for the address in the next words is to those among the people who were volunteers; as again, Judges 5:9. Judges 5:11, Judges 5:13-15, have many great difficulties. It seems impossible that (Judges 5:23) any person should be cursed for not coming to the help of Jehovah; to the help of Jehovah against the mighty. Nor does it seem more probable that Jael should, in a sacred song, be styled blessed above women for the death of Sisera. Judges 5:26 mentions butter, of which nothing is said in the history in Judges 4:19; nor does the history say that Jael smote off Sisera’s head with a hammer, or indeed that she smote it off at all, as here, Judges 5:26. Lastly, as to Judges 5:30, there being no authority for rendering the words a damsel or two damsels, and the words in Hebrew being very much like two other words in this same verse, which make excellent sense here, it seems highly probable that they were originally the same. And at the end of this verse, which contains an excellent compliment paid to the needlework of the daughters of Israel, and which is here put with great art in the mouth of Sisera’s Mother, the true sense seems to be, the hopes She had of some very rich prize to adorn Her Own Neck.” - Kennicott’s Remarks, p. 94.

Dr. Hales observes, “That the design of this beautiful ode, which breathes the characteristic softness and luxuriance of female composition, seems to be twofold, religious and political; first, to thank God for the recent victory and deliverance of Israel from Canaanitish bondage and oppression; and next, to celebrate the zeal and alacrity with which some of the rulers volunteered their services against the common enemy, and to censure the lukewarmness and apathy of others who stayed at home, and thus betrayed the public cause; and, by this contrast and exposure, to heal those fatal divisions among the tribes, so injurious to the commonwealth. The first verse, as a title, briefly recites the design or subject of the poem, which consists of eight stanzas.

“The first opens with a devout thanksgiving, to which she calls the attention of all, friends and foes.

“The second describes, in the sublime imagery of Moses, the magnificent scenes at Mount Sinai, Seir, etc., in the deserts of Arabia, while they were led by the Divine power and presence from Egypt to Canaan.

“The third states their offending afterwards by their apostasies in serving new gods, as foretold by Moses, Deuteronomy 32:16, Deuteronomy 32:17, and their consequent oppression by their enemies; the insecurity of travelling, and desertion of the villages, during the twenty years that intervened from the death of Shamgar till Jael’s exploit, and till Deborah became judge. By this time they were disarmed by the Philistines and Canaanites, and scarcely a sword or a spear was to be seen in Israel. This policy was adopted by the Philistines in Saul’s time, 1 Samuel 13:19, and was probably introduced before, when Shamgar, for want of other weapons, had recourse to an ox-goad, which was only left with them for the purpose of agriculture, 1 Samuel 13:21.

“The fourth contrasts their present happy state of security from the incursions and depredations of their foes, especially at the watering places, which were most exposed to attacks; owing to the Divine protection which crowned the victory, the zeal and exertions of ‘a remnant of the people,’ or a part of the tribes, against the enemy, under her conduct; these were the midland tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, including, perhaps, Judah and Simeon, which bordered on Amalek southward, and Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali, northward.

â€œThe fifth censures the recreant tribes Reuben and Gad, beyond Jordan eastward; and Dan and Asher, on the Mediterranean Sea westward, who deserted the common cause in consequence of their divisions, and their paltry attachment to their own concerns.

â€œThe sixth records the miraculous defeat of the confederate kings of Canaan, who were swept away by the torrents issuing from the different springs of the river Kishon, swollen by uncommon rains. Meroz was probably a place in the neighborhood.

â€œThe seventh contains a panegyric on Jael, who is here â€'blessed above women,â€' for attempting an exploit above her sex to perform; and a picturesque description of her giving Sisera buttermilk to drink, which is considered as a great treat at present among the Arabs. Then follows a minute and circumstantial description of her mode of slaying him.

â€œThe eighth affords an admirable representation of the impatience of the mother of Sisera at his delay in returning; her sanguine anticipation of his success; in which she dwells, not upon the greatness of his exploits, or the slaughter of his enemies, but upon the circumstances most likely to engage a light female mind, such as captive damsels, and embroidered garments, or the spoils of victory, which she repeats and exemplifies with much grace and elegance.

â€œThe unexpected and abrupt apostrophe which concludes the poem, So perish all thine enemies, O Lord! tacitly insinuates the utter disappointment of their vain hopes of conquest and spoil more fully and forcibly than any express declaration in words; while it marks the authorâ€™s piety, and sole reliance upon the Divine protection of His people, and the glorious prospect of a future and greater deliverance, perhaps, by the Sun of righteousness.â€• - New Anal. Chron. p. 324.