

# Psalm 83

## The song of the last days (2)

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*In the [first part](#) of this study it was noted that the writer of Psalm 83 appeals to Israel's history. In particular he refers to the book of Judges. Two episodes from Judges are considered in more detail in this article.*

**“D**UNTO THEM as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kison: which perished at En-dor: they became as dung for the earth. Make their nobles like Oreb, and like Zeeb: yea, all their princes as Zebah, and as Zalmunna” (Ps. 83:9-11).

### Deborah and Barak (Judges 4–5)

*“And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera, which dwelt in Harosheth of the Gentiles. And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel” (Judg. 4:1,2).*

Jabin plays little part in the narrative; it is his commander Sisera who features strongly. He dwells in Harosheth of the Gentiles, a city in the vicinity of Mount Carmel; the suffix to the name implies a border city that could be occupied by Jews or Gentiles according to national fortune. Power is wielded by Sisera's nine hundred chariots of iron (probably with iron-rimmed wheels). In normal warfare an expertly driven chariot with a soldier or two perched on the platform was a formidable fighting machine, particularly when, as in this case, the enemy was demoralised, hungry, and weakened by twenty years of 'mighty' oppression.

The message Deborah relayed to Barak from the Lord was forthright:

“Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the

river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand” (vv. 6,7).

With hindsight Sisera should have known better than to concentrate his

finest weapons in, of all places, a river valley! The narrative is sparing on detail as to exactly how they were defeated, but the song of Deborah more than makes up for this:

“LORD, when Thou wentest out of Seir, when Thou marchedst out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water. The mountains melted from before the LORD, even that Sinai from before the LORD God of Israel . . . The river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the river Kishon. O my soul, thou hast trodden down strength” (5:4,5,21).

A cloudburst loosened the mountainside soil, coupled with earthquakes that caused mudslides. The River Kishon rose rapidly, and the nine hundred chariots of iron became nine hundred useless hulks, sinking into the mud. The soldiers, trained in chariot warfare, were unable to adapt to the changed conditions and became easy prey for Barak's ten thousand followers:

“But Barak pursued after the chariots, and after the host, unto Harosheth of the Gentiles: and all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left” (4:16).

A rout pursued Sisera's host even to their own strongholds, and left Jabin's nation so weakened that it ultimately led to his own overthrow (v. 24).

### Israel oppressed

Before moving on to the Gideon episode, a few other points are worth taking note of:

“In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways. The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose,

that I arose a mother in Israel. They chose new gods; then was war in the gates: was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?" (5:6-8).

So sings Deborah in her song of triumph. She paints a picture of a nation wasted under oppression:

- Nobody ventures onto the open roads, so any form of trade or travel is difficult.
- The villages become desolate; presumably the people took to the fortified cities for protection, thus increasing the risk of food and water shortages, with overcrowding and subsequent illness and plague.
- Deborah styles herself "a mother in Israel".
- Of the forty thousand soldiers in Israel, few, if any, had suitable armour or weaponry.

"Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Abinoam. Then He made him that remaineth have dominion over the nobles among the people: the LORD made me have dominion over the mighty" (vv. 12,13).

Twenty years of grinding, unrelenting oppression—then, overnight, the tables are turned, and the oppressor becomes the hunted, the destroyer the destroyed. The "mother in Israel" becomes the one with "dominion over the mighty". And the land had rest forty years.

But much worse was to follow.

### **Gideon's defeat of the Midianites**

The Midianite oppression was relatively short by comparison, but a great deal harsher. There were seven years of what was effectively a 'scorched earth' policy:

"And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; and they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it. And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the LORD" (6:3-6).

For seven years Israel endured this war of attrition. Once again the villages and highways

were deserted, but this time the people took to the mountains and dwelt in caves and dens. The 'fleece of Israel' was wet with the dew of heaven while the Midianites plundered their goods, terrorised the people and destroyed their future stores of food.

But, at the end of this time, when it was judged that Israel were sufficiently weakened, it appears from the text that a concerted attempt was made to finish the job. Concomitant with destroying the land is the destruction of its people. Psalm 83 has already stated that this was their intention. An overwhelming show of force is mustered (perhaps taking note of the fate of Sisera) to ensure a decisive finale. Not only that, but they are bringing their cattle with them, preparing for an indefinite stay. We know that this took place at harvest time because Gideon was threshing wheat surreptitiously in the winepress. We are not far removed from one of the most solemn moments in the Jewish calendar: the Day of Atonement.

Without going through familiar territory, the points that need noting are:

- By the time Gideon's forces had been pruned down to what was for God a workable number, the ratio of Arab to Jew was 450:1. (In 8:10 we read that after the battle there remained 15,000 alive. 120,000 had died in the battle.) Whether this ratio has any special significance is debatable; however, it is the same ratio by which Elijah was outnumbered by the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. If it serves for nothing else, it demonstrates utter, comprehensive and overwhelming apparent advantage.
- Although previously Sisera and his armies terrorised Israel, they were *drawn* to the battle by God. In this case, the Midianites had chosen their location, and it seems apparent that the strategic initiatives were with them.
- The upshot of the bizarre dream that Gideon overhears being told is that something small is going to overturn something immense.
- Once the stratagem to panic the huge host of the enemy starts proving effective, many more of Israel pour in to assist in the routing of them from the Land.

Psalm 83 then describes the decapitation of the aggressive powers:

"Make their nobles like Oreb, and like Zeeb: yea, all their princes as Zebah, and as Zalmonna: who said, Let us take to ourselves the houses of God in possession" (vv. 11,12).

The Judges account renders the event alluded to thus:

“And they took two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb; and they slew Oreb upon the rock Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb, and pursued Midian, and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side Jordan” (7:25).

But it was left to Gideon personally to despatch the other two tribal leaders:

“Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise thou, and fall upon us: for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose, and slew Zebah and Zalmunna, and took away the ornaments that were on their camels’ necks” (8:21).

Strangely appropriate to the whole event is Psalm 110:

“The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at My right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning; thou hast the dew of thy youth. The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. The Lord at Thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries. He shall drink of the brook in the way: therefore shall he lift up the head”.

The references to the people being willing, the dew of thy youth, the kings being struck through, and wounding the heads of many countries—not to mention the last phrase, for the main slaughter took place at Jordan, by Bethbarah, and the heads of Oreb and Zeeb were carried over the river—are remarkably apt.

These two incidents from Judges, consecutive, with a forty-year gap between them, are used by the psalmist in Psalm 83 to flag up a template for the final conflict of Jew and Arab for the honour of God.

### **Twenty years and seven years**

Psalm 83 has taken a ‘snapshot’ from the Judges time period and invited us to compare it with events leading up to the end. If this is a coincidence, it is a remarkable one. These two time periods, twenty years (Judg. 4:2) and seven years (6:1), have already elapsed in recent Jewish history, with wars to conclude them both.

Israel was founded as a nation in 1948. Start the clock ticking and count twenty years *inclusively*

(as is usually the method for determining the length of reign of a king by Hebrew numbering), and you will arrive at 1967 and the Six-Day War.

Count on from here seven years, again inclusively, and you will reach 1973 and the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) war.

Using the oft-repeated phrase as a marker, the next two occasions we read of the ‘Sin-Suffering-Seeking-Salvation’ cycle in the book of Judges are in 10:6 and 13:1:

“And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the LORD, and served not Him” (10:6);

“And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years” (13:1).

In the first case the outcome was as follows:

“And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon. And that year they vexed and oppressed the children of Israel: eighteen years, all the children of Israel that were on the other side Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. Moreover the children of Ammon passed over Jordan to fight also against Judah, and against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was sore distressed” (10:7-9).

The second outcome was:

“the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years” (13:1).

Using the inclusive numbering system on the first eighteen-year time period brings us to another decisive period of conflict: 1990—the warning to Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War (Aug. 1990–Feb. 1991).

Prior to this, and also since, the descendants of the Philistines have conducted a relentless *intifada*, or low-level campaign of attrition, against Israel. This has been divided into two, the first *intifada* recognised as spanning 1967 to 1991 and the second triggered by the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount in September 2000. This second unrest witnessed some of the grisliest scenes imaginable, such as the murder of young Israeli soldiers in Nablus in front of television cameras. It was also the time for deliberate targeting of Jewish holy sites, such as Rachel’s tomb.

The end of the second forty-year interval brings about a total change in the nature of the book of Judges; after Samson has brought down the temple of the Philistines upon them and himself, the book switches direction, focusing on a moral atrocity that brings the nation to its knees in hypocritical outrage, culminating in civil war.

### **A few caveats**

Before going too much further, a few caveats:

Psalm 83 makes mention only of the first two incidents; the other eighteen- and forty-year time

periods are suggested connections. It is unwise to try to correlate whole chunks of the Old Testament record into a last-days scenario. Also, as the psalm takes a 'snapshot', intervening time periods when the land had rest have been discounted.

Secondly, such a framework gives perfect opportunity for backwards reasoning. The temptation to examine every minute detail and endeavour to fit it into the situation is considerable. So I have limited myself to the details that do lend themselves to comparison, and with great caution at that.

[\(To be concluded\)](#)