

Who was Sisera in the Bible?

There are two men named Sisera in the Bible. One is mentioned briefly in Ezra 2:53 and Nehemiah 7:55; this Sisera was a temple servant who returned to Jerusalem when the Israelite exiles were allowed to leave Persia and go back to their own land.

The other Sisera—the infamous Sisera—lived in the time of the judges and was the commander of a Canaanite army. The Canaanites, led by King Jabin, had been God’s tool of judgment upon the Israelites for their idolatry (Judges 4:2).

Sisera had 900 iron chariots at his disposal, compared to the Israelites, who had no chariots. For twenty years Sisera “cruelly oppressed the Israelites” (Judges 4:3). As was their habit when they were in trouble, the Israelites called to God for deliverance. Deborah the prophetess, who was also judging at the time, received word from the Lord in answer to the Israelites’ call. She summoned a man named Barak and told him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands’” (verses 6b-7).

Barak was hesitant and requested that Deborah accompany him. Because of this hesitation, Deborah prophesied that Sisera would fall at the hands of a woman and Barak would get none of the glory (Judges 4:9). But Deborah agreed to go with Barak to Mount Tabor, where Barak and his 10,000 men met Sisera in battle. God sent a flash flood that disabled Sisera’s chariots, and the Israelites routed their enemies (Judges 5:4, 20-21). In the face of defeat, Sisera fled on foot (Judges 4:15).

As Barak and the Israelites tracked down and destroyed Sisera’s army, Sisera himself

sought a hiding place. He came to the dwelling of Heber the Kenite, who was allied with King Jabin of Canaan (Judges 4:17). As Sisera approached, Heber's wife, Jael, called him into her tent with the promise of safety (verse 18). Sisera accepted her offer. Since it was against social norms for a man to enter a woman's tent, Jael seemed to be offering a perfect hiding place.

Sisera told Jael that he was thirsty, and she gave him some milk and covered him with a blanket (Judges 4:19). Feeling relatively safe, Sisera asked Jael to watch at the door of the tent and then fell asleep. As Sisera was sleeping, Jael took a tent peg and hammer, sneaked up on the sleeping commander, and drove the tent peg through his skull and into the ground (Judges 4:21). When Barak came looking for Sisera, Jael led him into the tent to show him Sisera's body with his head pinned to the ground. Deborah's prophecy that Sisera would be brought down by a woman had been fulfilled.

The death of Sisera and his army greatly weakened King Jabin's grip on the Israelites, and God's people were eventually able to overcome him and be free of the Canaanite oppression (Judges 4:23-24). On the day of Sisera's death, Barak and Deborah sang a song of praise, which can be found in Judges 5, detailing God's deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the evil commander. Near the end of the song is a unique passage full of irony. Deborah takes the perspective of Sisera's mother waiting for her fallen son:

"Through the window peered Sisera's mother;
behind the lattice she cried out,
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?'
The wisest of her ladies answer her;

indeed, she keeps saying to herself,
‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoils:
a woman or two for each man,
colorful garments as plunder for Sisera,
colorful garments embroidered,
highly embroidered garments for my neck—
all this as plunder?’” (Judges 5:28-30).

The Canaanites, under Sisera’s military leadership, fully expected to defeat the Israelites, who were outgunned, outnumbered, and seemingly powerless. Sisera’s mother’s mention of rich spoils and the abuse of captured women indicate the greed and ruthless nature of the Canaanite army. What Sisera (and his mother) did not count on was the God of Israel, who intervened on behalf of His people.

So great was the triumph of Israel over Sisera and his army that King David would later remember it in one of his psalms: “Do to [your enemies] as you did to Midian, / as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon” (Psalm 83:9).