

## TRADITIONAL BIBLICAL TIMELINE

1. 1<sup>st</sup> Temple destroyed in 586 BCE
  2. Rehoboam becomes king in c.930 BCE – using length of reigns in the Tenach
  3. Solomon rules for 40 years – so he becomes king in c.970 BCE
  4. David rules for 40 years – so he becomes king in c.1010 BCE
  5. Saul rules for c.20 years – so he becomes king in c.1030 BCE
  6. Solomon starts to build the Temple in the fourth year of his reign, i.e., c.966 BCE
  7. Temple takes 7.5 years to complete – finished by c.958 BCE
  8. Bnei Yisrael left Egypt 480 years before work on the Temple commenced
  9. So, the Exodus took place in c.1446 BCE (966 + 480)
  10. So, the Israelites crossed the Jordan into Canaan in c.1406 BCE.
  11. Joshua died 28 years later (7 years of fighting and 21 years of peace)
  12. So, Joshua died in c.1378 BCE
  13. The period between Joshua's death and the monarchy (covered in the Books of Judges and Samuel) spanned 348 years (1378 – 1030) – but see spreadsheet on the Judges
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## BOOK OF JUDGES

### Chapter 1

**1** After the death of Joshua, the Bnei Yisrael asked YHVH, saying, "Who will go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them?"

**2** And YHVH said, "Judah will go up; behold I have given the land into his hand."

**19** YHVH was with Judah; they drove out the inhabitants of the mountains; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, for they had iron chariots.

*Rashi: Targum Jonathan paraphrases: But after they had sinned, they were unable to drive out the inhabitants of the plain.*

*Alshich and Malbim: They were satisfied to conquer the mountain only and were completely unconcerned with conquering the valley.*

*Radak and Metzudat David: God did this to test them. As Israel had not realised that they won their wars only because of God's intercession, He helped them only in conquering the mountains.*

**21** Bnei Binyamin **did not drive out** the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem; the Jebusites dwelt with Benjamin in Jerusalem until this day.

**27** Manasseh **did not drive out** the inhabitants of Bet-Shean,.....Megiddo and their towns; and **the Canaanites wanted to remain in this land.**

**28** And it was when Israel became strong, that **they put the Canaanites to tribute, but they did not drive them out.**

*Me: Don't you find it somewhat ironic and appalling that a people who had been enslaved in Egypt should then impose forced labour on other nations?!*

*Robert Alter: Whether this subjugation was a historical fact or was merely a face-saving formula for the failure of the conquest is uncertain. The text underlines the incompleteness raised in the Book of Joshua. In the first half, conquest of the land seemed comprehensive; in the second, much remained to be conquered. Now we have a whole catalogue of failed conquests, all attributed to the northern tribes who would constitute the breakaway kingdom of Israel.*

**29** And Ephraim **did not drive out** the Canaanites that dwelt in Gezer; and **the Canaanites dwelt among them** in Gezer.

**30** Zebulun **did not drive out** the inhabitants of Kitron and Nahalol; and **the Canaanites dwelt among them** and **became tributary.**

**31** Asher **did not drive out** the inhabitants of Akko, Zidon, Achlab, Achzib, Chelbah, Aphik, and Rechob.

**32** And **the Asherites dwelt among the Canaanites**, the inhabitants of the land; for **they did not drive them out.**

**33** Naphtali **did not drive out** the inhabitants of Bet-Shemesh or Bet-Anat; **he dwelt among the Canaanites**, the land's inhabitants; and the inhabitants of Bet-Shemesh and Bet-Anat **became tributary to them.**

**E. John Hamlin:** *The Canaanites dominate the first chapter of Judges. They appear more often in this chapter (14 times) than in any other chapter of the Tenach. We meet them in three situations: i) Driven out (Me: from power and expelled?) by Judah; ii) They are a minority living among the Israelites – Benjamin (?), Manasseh, Ephraim and Zebulun; and iii) They are the dominant group among whom live the Israelites as a minority. – Asher and Naphtali.*

**34** And the Amorites forced the Bnei Dan to the mountain; for they would not let them come down to the valley.

**35** The Amorites wanted to remain on Mount Cheres,.....; but the hand of the house of Joseph prevailed and **they became tributary**.

**EJH:** *There are four references to forced labour by the northern tribes. Why did the author omit any such act by Judah? Was it: i) He overlooked it because he was pro-Judah? ii) He was referring to actual history in the northern kingdom (“the house of Joseph”)? iii) He wished to illustrate the difference between Judah and the northern tribes’ compromises with Canaanite values?*

**EJH:** *There is NO evidence for the practice of forced labour by Israel before the monarchy. David first imposed it on the Ammonites [2 Sam. 12:31] and appointed an official in charge [2 Sam. 20:24]. With Solomon, it became a national institution [1 Kings 4:6 and 9:15; 9:20 & 21 – he targeted the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites]. When the source of cheap labour proved to be inadequate, it became necessary to press gang the Israelite population [1 Kings 5: 27-30].*

**EJH:** *The use of such labour proved to be the undoing of the united kingdom. Jeroboam was a former overseer of all the burdens of the House of Joseph [1 Kings 11:28] and Rehoboam’s chief official was stoned to death [1 Kings 12:18].*

## Chapter 2

**2** You will not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you will smash their altars; but you have not listened to My voice; what is this you have done?

**Alshich:** *The warning against treaties is found in Ex.23:32. Scripture here does not mention explicitly that Israel made treaties with them. Therefore, we must explain that, by being satisfied with merely subjugating and exacting tribute from them, it is as though a treaty had been made with them.*

**Alter:** *Smashing their altars is in keeping with the vehement anti-pagan agenda of Deut. 7:5 & 25; 12:3.*

**3** I also said: “I will not drive them out from before you; but they will be snares to you, and their gods shall be a pernicious lure to you.”

**Me:** *The Hebrew for “their gods will be a pernicious lure to you” is identical to Ex.23:33 except it is in the plural.*

**4** And it came to pass, when the angel of YHVH spoke these words to **all** the Bnei Yisrael, that the people lifted up their voices, and wept.

**EJH:** *“all” – only appears again in the penultimate chapter (which deals with the civil war against the tribe of Benjamin); Me: conspicuous absence of national unity and collective responsibility.*

**EJH:** *Weeping because of i) Frustration over “Paradise Lost” – a loss of control due to human weakness and moral perverseness seems to be a permanent part of Israel’s history as seen in Judges; the land is a place of testing where human adversaries remain to oppress the tribes and other cultures’ gods persist as snares; ii) A deep anxiety about coming troubles – those who read or heard about this incident would have knowledge of the tragic demise of the northern kingdom and the peril to Judah’s survival. There is a similarity to the tears of Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah; and iii) A repentant appeal to God – Each new saviour-judge sent by God meant a chance to begin again. An interesting parallel is King Josiah’s weeping over God’s word that Jerusalem would become “a desolation and a curse.” He not only showed penitence but attempted to reverse the curse by a covenant renewal ceremony and a cleansing of the land.*

**10** .....there arose another generation after them (Joshua and the elders), that knew not YHVH or the work which He had done for Israel.

**11** And the Bnei Yisrael did that which was evil in the sight of YHVH and served the Baalim.

**12** And they forsook YHVH, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they went after other gods, from the gods of the peoples who surrounded them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked YHVH.

**13** And they forsook YHVH and served Baal and the Ashtarot.

**Alter:** *Ba’al, the Canaanite god, was probably the most widely worshipped deity in the Canaanite pantheon. Ashtoret was the Canaanite fertility goddess and may also have been a warrior.*

**John Dancy:** *Ba’al was the Canaanite god of rain and fertility. Astarte (Ashtoret) was his consort – same as Assyrian Ishtar. Me: And Babylonian. Possible explanation for Esther’s name.*

**Wikipedia:** *Worship of Ba’al in Canaan. where he eventually supplanted El as the leader of the gods and patron of kingship, was connected to the region’s dependence on rainfall for its agriculture.*

**14** And the anger of YHVH was kindled against Israel, and He delivered them into the hands of plunderers that despoiled them; He gave them over into the hands of their surrounding enemies, and they could no longer stand before their enemies.

**Daat Sofrim:** *Even though they did not all sin, nevertheless they were responsible for one another; Me: cf. everybody paid for Achan’s crime at Jericho – collective responsibility.*

**EJH:** God's anger is not irrational or impetuous but educative and reformatory, designed to bring Israel back to the covenant way of life and their mission identity. In the perspective of God's time, His anger is "but for a moment" [Psalm 30:6; 103:9].

**15** Whenever they went out, YHVH's hand was against them for evil, as YHVH had spoken and sworn to them; they were very distressed.

**Radak** and **MD:** Whenever they went out to war, God did not assist.

**Alter:** A clear theological explanation for Israel's failure to conquer the entire land: its swerve into idolatry enrages God and causes Him to bring about Israel's defeat by its enemies.

**16** But YHVH raised up judges, who saved them from the hand of those that despoiled them.

**Alter:** A shofet means one who judges AND rules. The latter dominates this book. The judge was an ad-hoc, not a fixed or hereditary, military leader. Judges were figures suddenly invested with divine spirit that impelled them to success. From this model of biblical judges, sociologist Max Weber borrowed the term "charisma" from the Greek to indicate a purely personal, political power.

**EJH:** "Raise up" may indicate that the judges were periodic fulfillments of God's promise to "raise up for them a prophet like Moses" [Deut. 18:18].

**17** But they also did not listen to their judges, for they went astray after other gods, and worshipped them; they turned aside quickly from the way that their fathers walked, to listen to the commandments of YHVH; they did not do so.

**Alshich:** One of the essentials of repentance is to listen to rebuke and chastisement, but the people were not willing to listen.

**EJH:** "They did not listen" – Israel listened to Joshua [Deut. 34:9 and Joshua 1:17]. God had warned them to heed the words of His prophet and of the consequences if they did not [Deut. 18:15+19].

**EJH:** Not listening implies a teaching or a ruling function for the judge. As "executive officer" of the tribal league, the judge would preside over intertribal councils and exercise judicial, military and cultic functions [Frank Moore Cross].

**18** And when YHVH raised up judges for them, YHVH was with the judge, and saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for YHVH repented because of their groaning due to those who oppressed and crushed them.

**Yalkut Shimoni:** All the tribes produced judges or kings, except for Simeon, because of prince Zimri's sin. This shows the severity of lewdness. **Me:** Asher? Naphtali? Reuben? Gilead might be Gad.

**Alter:** A theological reason is offered for a continuing, unstable, military situation. The judges were guerrilla commanders. A judge, exercising personal magnetism and military prowess, could for a limited time harass and drive back enemy forces that were probably superior in numbers and weaponry, but such successes were bound to be temporary. This fluctuating pattern is explained in terms of cultic loyalty and backsliding. Under the charismatic influence of the judge, the Israelites were faithful to their God; when the judge died, they reverted to their pagan practices.

**19** But when the judge was dead, they turned back, and dealt more corruptly than their fathers, to go after other gods, to serve and worship them; they left nothing undone of their practices or of their stubborn way.

**20** YHVH's anger was kindled against Israel; He said: 'As this nation has passed over (ignored) My covenant which I charged their fathers, and not listened to My voice;

**21** I will not continue to drive out any man from before them of the nations that Joshua left when he died,

**MD:** God intentionally delayed Joshua's conquest of the entire land in consonance with His Divine will – Ex.29:29+30: "I will not drive them away from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field outnumber you. I will drive them out from before you little by little, until you have increased and can inherit the land."

**22** In order to test Israel through them, whether they will keep the way of YHVH to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not.'

**Malbim:** God caused that Joshua should not drive out all the nations to serve as a test for Israel (whether the following generation would drive them out and not make treaties with them, or not). By Israel's failing this test, God justly punished them by not driving out any more inhabitants, as Joshua had warned them: "For if you turn away, and cling to the remnant of these nations, that remain with you; and intermarry with them and mingle with them and they with you" [Josh 23:12].

**Alter:** Verses 21 and 22 introduce a new, theological explanation of the incompleteness of the conquest. Given his sweeping military successes, Joshua might well have conquered the entire land, but he left some of it in Canaanite hands in order to see whether future generations of Israel would be faithful to their God and thus be worthy of taking hold of the rest of the land. God's words affirm that the people failed the test and so will not be able to complete the conquest.

**23** So YHVH left those nations, without driving them out hastily; he did not deliver them into the hand of Joshua.

**Alter:** Joshua's leaving part of the land unconquered was actually God's devising.

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From Chapter 2, we are meant to discern that what happens to the tribes in this phase of their story will be presented in cyclical form:

**1. Disloyalty to God - 2. Punishment by God - 3. Pleading to God - 4. Deliverance by God through a shofet - 5. Peace - 6. Renewed disloyalty.**

## SOME OF THE KINGS THAT JOSHUA DEFEATED, BUT WERE THEIR CITIES ETHNICALLY CLEANSED?

In the South: Jericho, Ai, Jerusalem, Hebron, Lachish, Arad, Bethel. – Jerusalem is the classic conundrum

In the North: Hazor, Taanach, Megiddo, Kedesh

## SOME OF THE CITIES AND AREAS THAT REMAINED UNCONQUERED

In the South: Kadesh Barnea, Beersheva, Bethlehem (+ the five cities of the Philistines: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, Ekron - Philistia wasn't on the Torah hit-list).

In the Centre: Coastal part of the Plain of Sharon (from Yafo to Mt Carmel), Gezer, Shiloh, Shechem, Bet Shean, Taanach and Megiddo.

In the North: Bet-Shemesh, and the coast from Mt Carmel, through Akko, Tyre, Sidon, Geval (modern Byblos) and across to Hamath in Syria (132 miles N. of Damascus).

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**Steinsaltz:** Even at the start of the wars, Joshua was not a young man (Me: c.70 -80). His battles lasted a significant amount of time. Each war necessitated organisation and transportation of his entire army. On the west side of the Jordan, the land was occupied by city-states. Each ruler controlled an area of land roughly the size of a municipality. Therefore, many battles were necessary to gain control. Joshua's army remained conscripted for many years. All that time, the warriors' families remained in the Israelite camp, requiring regular sustenance. Apparently, Joshua felt that the time had come to release his soldiers, despite the conquest being incomplete. God gave them the ability to take the entire land, but also gave them the choice as to whether they would actualise the opportunity.

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## Chapter 3

**1** Now these are the nations which YHVH left, to test Israel through them, all those that had not known all the wars of Canaan.

**2** Only so that the generations of the Bnei Yisrael might know, to teach them war, which before they did not know.

**Alter:** An entirely different reason for the incompleteness of the conquest: Israel had to learn the skills of war gradually through conflict with the Canaanites before it was ready to conquer them.

**Dancy:** 2:21 - 3:2 deal with a fact that evidently embarrassed the Deuteronomic Historian, namely the continued existence of gentiles in the promised land. Not satisfied with the official explanation, that it was a punishment, he offers two others: it was a test of loyalty and/or a training for war. All three are theological solutions to a purely theological problem.

**3** The five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, Sidonites and Hivites that dwelt in Lebanon's high country, from Mt Baal-Hermon to Lebo-Hamat.

**4** They were to test Israel, to know whether they would heed YHVH's commandments, which He charged their fathers by Moses

**Alter:** Now the writer reverts to the theological explanation for the incompleteness of the conquest proposed in Chap. 2:21-23.

**5** And the Bnei Yisrael dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

**EJH:** This is the last time we encounter the term "Canaanite." Indeed, the term appears only six more times in the books following Judges. However, Canaanite influence persists throughout Judges in the form of their gods, Baal and Asherah. The real adversary is Canaanite culture.

**6** And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

**7** And the Bnei Yisrael did evil in the sight of YHVH, and forgot YHVH their God, and served the Baalim and the Asherot.

**Alter:** Asherah was the consort of the sky-god El.

**EJH:** "forgot" – the only time this verb is used in Judges. **Me:** Samuel will remind the people that it is because they forgot God that they had been oppressed by Sisera [1 Sam. 12:9].

**8** And the anger of YHVH was kindled against Israel...

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## Chapter 4 - DEBORAH

**1** And the Bnei Yisrael continued to do evil in the sight of YHVH, when Ehud was dead.

**2** YHVH gave them into the hand of Yavin, king of Canaan, ruler of Hazor; the captain of his host was Sisera, who dwelt in Haroshet-Goyim.

**Joseph Hertz:** *Sisera's town was near Megiddo.*

**3** And the Bnei Yisrael cried to YHVH; for he had **nine hundred chariots of iron**; and **twenty years he mightily oppressed the Bnei Yisrael**.

**EJH:** *Sisera symbolised the power of military technology in the service of oppressive political policy.*

**Alter:** *"iron chariots" – this is an exaggeration, possibly to emphasise the fearsome power of the chariots, because in this era the chariots were wooden, with at most iron-reinforcing elements.*

**4** Now **Deborah, a woman prophet** (ishah nevi'ah), **the wife of Lappidot, judged Israel at that time**.

**Hertz:** *The most remarkable of all the Judges.*

**TB Megillah 14a:** *There were seven female prophets: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther. **Plaut:** Also Isaiah's unnamed wife and Noadiah, an opponent of Nehemiah.*

**Radak:** *She did not foretell the future; rather she was inspired concerning her own period – "at that time."*

**Tosefta Gittin 88b:** *Although a woman may not be a judge, nevertheless she was accepted under divine instruction.*

**Ahavat Yonatan:** *A homiletic interpretation of Eyshet Lappidot is that she was a woman with a torch burning within her to punish the wrongdoer.*

**Alter:** *She is not called a judge, perhaps because she herself, as a woman, does not go out to the battlefield, but she is the subject of the verb "judge," a capacity she exercises in the judicial sense.*

**Alter:** *She is called a prophet because she has a direct line of intelligence about God's strategic plans for Israel. Thus, does she resemble the martial judges, who are invested with God's spirit.*

**5** And she sat under the palm-tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bet El in the hill-country of Ephraim; and **the Bnei Yisrael came up to her for judgment**.

**Hertz:** *She decided disputes brought to her for judgment.*

**Gunther Plaut:** *Trees were important landmarks for public business and often served as shrines; two of Abraham's revelations came to him in such a locale.*

**6** And she sent and called for Barak, the son of Avinoam from Kedesh-Naphtali, and said to him: "Has YHVH, the God of Israel, not commanded, saying: **Go** and draw around you on Mt Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from Bnei Naphtali and Bnei Zebulun?

**EJH:** *"Go" – the verb, halach, appears nine times across verses 6, 8 and 9. **Me:** The time for action is now. Deborah will criticise the indecisive.*

**7** I will draw Sisera, captain of Yavin's army, to you at the brook of Kishon, with his chariots and multitude; I will give him into your hand."

**8** And 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."

**Malbim:** *Although he accepted the prophetic instruction commanded by God, he felt that without Deborah the people would not accept him.*

**9** And she said: 'I will surely go with you, but your glory will not be on the way which you go, for into the hand of a woman will YHVH sell Sisera.' And Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

**MD:** *Since Barak had shown fear in going to war alone, he would remain devoid of any honour.*

**??:** *Measure for measure. Since you diminished God's glory by making your fulfilment of His command contingent on a woman, your glory will be transferred to a woman.*

**10** And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand men went up at his feet; and Deborah went up with him.

**Malbim:** *Barak only had foot soldiers – infantry.*

**11** Heber the Kenite had severed himself from them, even from the children of Hobab, Moses's father-in-law, and had pitched his tent as far as Elon-bezaananim, near Kedesh.

**12** And they told Sisera that Barak, the son of Avinoam, had gone up to Mt Tabor.

**13** And Sisera called all his chariots to the brook Kishon, 900 chariots of iron and all the people that were with him from Harosheth-goyim.

**14** Deborah said to Barak: 'Up; for this is the day that YHVH has given Sisera into your hand; has not YHVH gone out before you?' So Barak went down from Mt Tabor, and 10,000 men after him.

**MD:** *You can no longer tarry in your secure position on the mountain, for it has been decreed that today you will be victorious.*

**Jewish Study Bible:** *Mt Tabor overlooks the Valley of Jezreel from the north.*

**15** YHVH panicked Sisera, all the chariots and camp, with the edge of the sword before Barak; Sisera leapt from his chariot and fled on foot.

**JSB:** *Nowhere else in the entire Tenach does God throw the enemy into a panic by the sword.*

**EJH:** *"God panicked" – God did the same using the same Hebrew verb in Ex. 14:24 (Egyptians at Yam Suf), Deut. 7:23 (the 7 nations) and the Southern Alliance at Bet-Horon (Joshua 10:10).*

**16** Barak pursued after the chariots and camp to Haroshet-Goyim; all of Sisera's camp fell by the edge of the sword; not even one remained.

**Plaut:** *"not one remained" – from the annals of Assyrian kings, this phrase may be an idiomatic way of describing an overwhelming military victory.*

**17** Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Yabin, King of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.

**18** Yael went out to meet Sisera, and said: 'Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not.' He turned in to her, to the tent, and she covered him with a rug.

**19** He said: 'Give me, I pray you, a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.' She opened a skin of milk, and gave him to drink, and covered him.

**20** He said: 'Stand in the door of the tent. When any man comes and asks you, and says: Is a man here? And you will say: There is not.'

**21** Then Yael, Heber's wife, took a tent-pin and placed the hammer in her hand, and came to him stealthily, and thrust the pin into his temple, and it pierced through into the ground; for he was in a deep sleep and weary, and he died.

**22** Barak pursued Sisera. Yael came out to meet him, and said: 'Come, I will show you the man you seek.' He entered; and Sisera lay dead, the tent-pin in his temple.

**23** So God subdued on that day Yavin, the king of Canaan, before the Bnei Yisrael.

**JSB:** *Neither Deborah, Barak nor Yael are called the deliverer because each of them made only a partial contribution to the victory; in practice, the true deliverer was God.*

**24** The hand of the Bnei Yisrael prevailed more and more against Yavin, the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Yavin, king of Canaan.

**Irving Zeitlin:** *After the victory of Deborah and Barak, the Canaanites never again appear as a significant military force. The Canaanites fall from view.*

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## Chapter 5 – Deborah's song of praise (and recrimination)

**1** Deborah and Barak, the son of Avinoam, sang on that day, saying:

**??:** *Deborah's singing in the presence of men was not prohibited in as much as it was divinely instructed and inspired.*

**DS:** *Being an emotional expression of cognizance and gratitude, this song became an obligatory recitation to be said in conjunction with the song of Israel's crossing of the Reed Sea.*

**Alter:** *The use of a singular verb followed by a compound subject is an indication in biblical grammar that the first of the subjects is the primary actor and the second ancillary to the action.*

**Alter:** *The scholarly consensus (Me: if only!) is that this poem is one of the oldest texts in the Tenach, perhaps composed not long after the battle it reports, around 1100 BCE.*

**JSB:** *The song conveys an atmosphere of spontaneous enthusiasm.*

**2** When breaches are made in Israel, when the people offer themselves willingly, bless YHVH.

**DS:** *These breaches were both physical (oppression by the enemy) and spiritual (we were displeasing in the eyes of God).*

**DS:** *The verse contains the major themes of the song – depicting the situation; willingness to participate in the war; praising God.*

**Dancy:** *This is the oldest reference to YHVH in the text of the Tenach.*

**3** Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; I, to YHVH will I sing; I will sing praise to YHVH, the God of Israel.

**4** YHVH, when You went forth out of Seir, when You marched out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens also dripped, the clouds also dripped water.

**Tanhuma Bamidbar:** *The Torah was given in the presence of fire, water and desert; just as these are free to all, so the Torah is freely available to all.*

**5** The mountains melted away (like flowing water) at the presence of YHVH; this (was at) Sinai in the presence of YHVH, the God of Israel.

**6** In the days of Shamgar, the son of Anat, in the days of Yael, the highways ceased, and travellers walked on crooked paths.

**7** The leaders ceased, in Israel they ceased, until you Deborah arose, you arose as a mother in Israel.

**Me'am Loez:** Like a mother, I prayed for them and worried about them; **MD:** Like a mother, I reprov'd them to correct their ways; **Abравanel:** Like a mother, I had pity on them.

**8** They chose new gods; then was war in the gates; was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?

**9** My heart is toward the tribal leaders of Israel, that offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless YHVH.

**Alter:** The martial ethos of noble warriors prepared to risk all has a certain affinity with the Homeric poems.

**10** Riders of white donkeys ("atonot"), those that sit in judgment, and those that walk on the way, tell of it;

**Alter:** In this early period, asses or donkeys would be the mounts of noblemen or princes. **Me:** Absalom rode on a mule [2 Samuel 18:9]. **Steinsaltz:** Bilaam rode on an aton [Num.22:21].

**Plaut:** Those who ride are the rich and the leaders, while those who walk are the poor. The poet is encompassing everybody.

**11** Louder than the voice of archers, by the watering-troughs! there shall they tell the righteous acts of YHVH, even the righteous acts of His rulers in Israel. Then the people of YHVH went down to the gates.

**Alter:** Battle is often engaged before the gates of the city.

**12** Awake! Awake! Deborah. Awake! Awake! Utter a song; arise, Barak, and capture your captives, son of Avinoam.

**Alter:** It has been suggested that the choice of the verb "dabri" – "utter/speak" is motivated by a pun on the name Deborah.

**13** Then ruled a remnant over the nobles of the people; YHVH dominated the strong for me.

**14** From Ephraim whose root was against Amalek; after you, Benjamin, with your people; from Machir came down leaders; Zebulun they that handle the scribe's staff.

**Me:** Joshua, from the tribe of Ephraim, fought Amalek. Machir = West or East Manasseh? Machir conquered the territory of Gilead and Bashan on the east side of the River Jordan.

**Alter:** The tribe of Benjamin, known for its military prowess, would be a likely candidate to lead the allied tribes into the fray.

**15** And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah; as was Issachar with Barak; into the valley they rushed forth at his feet. Among the divisions of Reuben there were great resolves of heart.

**Hertz:** Reuben remained true to his character as described by Jacob on his deathbed; his cardinal sin was weakness of will, lack of self-control and firmness of purpose. None of Reuben's descendants ever became Judge, Prophet or leader. Moral character is a more important factor than hereditary right.

**16** Why did you sit among sheepfolds, to hear pipings for flocks? At the divisions of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.

**Alter:** Vv. 15 + 16 reflect a real situation a century before the monarchy in which there is no central governing force and not all the tribes can be counted on to "answer the call" in a time of crisis.

**Plaut:** "searchings of the heart" – i.e., wrestled in their minds – but not on the battlefield, where they should have been.

**17** Gilead dwelled beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher stayed by the seashore and by his inlets he dwelled.

**JSB:** Gilead = Gad and E. Manasseh. **Steinsaltz:** The tribe of Dan, or part of it, must have been residing in its original inheritance, west of Benjamin and north of Philistia.

**Dancy:** Max Weber noted that, among modern Bedouin tribes "participation in war expeditions is only indirectly compulsory through ridicule and shame."

**Dancy:** The remaining two tribes, Judah and Simeon, were presumably too far south to deserve a shameful mention.

**Me:** 5½ tribes participated – Naphtali, Zebulun, Issachar, W. Manasseh, Ephraim and Benjamin. 6½ did not: Asher, E. Manasseh, Gad, Reuben, Simeon, Judah and Dan.

**18** Zebulun is a people that jeopardised their lives to die, as did Naphtali on the high places of the field.

**EJH:** The absence of Judah is most noticeable and may mean that Judah was not yet fully a part of the tribal league.

**19** The kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, in Taanach by the waters of Megiddo; they took no spoil of silver.

**JSB:** The battlefield was between Taanach and one of the tributaries of the Kishon near Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley, near the ancient international highway connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia.

**Plaut:** Neither Taanach nor Megiddo was then in the hands of any tribe of Israel.

**20** From heaven they fought, the stars from their courses fought against Sisera.

**Alter:** No feats of valour on the battlefield are reported, for the victory comes from divine intervention. The fact that clustered stars are referred to as the "army" or "host" (tzava) of the heavens encourages this representation of the stars battling on behalf of Israel.

**EJH:** The stars were not "gods", but creatures and servants of YHVH.

**21** The brook Kishon swept them away, that ancient brook, the brook Kishon. O my soul, tread them down with strength.

**Alter:** *An evocation of the victory over Pharaoh's charioteers at the Sea of Reeds?*

**Hertz:** *In 1799, at Mt Tabor, when Napoleonic forces fought the Ottomans, many of the latter were drowned when attempting to escape across the Plain of Esdraelon inundated by the Kishon.*

**EJH:** *God's intervention at the Kishon was proof that YHVH, not Ba'al, controlled the forces of nature, particularly the storm-flood that terrorised Sisera.*

**22** Then did the horse hooves stamp by reason of the prancings, the prancings of their mighty ones.

**23** 'Curse Meroz', said the angel of YHVH. 'Curse bitterly its inhabitants, because they did not come to the aid of YHVH, to the aid of YHVH against the mighty.'

**Alter:** *The poem wavers between understanding victory as a miraculous event and as the accomplishment of heroic deeds by brave warriors.*

**Rashi:** *"to the aid of YHVH" – speaking as though it could be done, for he who aids Israel is as if he is aiding the Divine Presence.*

**EJH:** *This is the only instance in the Tenach where the Hebrew 'ayzer 'is used of humans helping God.*

**24** Blessed above women shall Yael be, the wife of Heber the Kenite, above women in the tent shall she be blessed.

**25** Water he asked for, milk did she give; in a princely bowl she brought him curd.

**26** Her hand she put to the tent-pin, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote through his head, yes, she pierced and struck through his temples.

**Plaut:** *Why do both versions exult in the deed of a woman who deceives her victim through feigned kindness, and then proceeds to kill him in cold blood? Because, obviously, this is what happened, and the death of Sisera assured that Israel was saved, at least for the time being. To judge a war of survival by the rules of peaceful intercourse is to compare situations that are not comparable or is an example of latter-day moral arrogance. In the ancient view, Yael's action saved the nation, and that was enough to admire her courage and daring.*

**27** Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell down, destroyed.

**Alter:** *His death agony is a kind of grotesque parody and reversal of sexual assault, a common practice in warfare.*

**JSB:** *Death at the hands of a woman was considered shameful – cf. [Judges 9:54](#).*

**EJH:** *As he had humiliated Hebrew women in the past, Sisera was now humiliated by a woman's hand.*

**28** Through the window the mother of Sisera looked forth and peered through the lattice: 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariots?'

**Michael Fishbane:** *The image of Sisera's mother on the rampart, peering through the window, is a conventional scene. Compare with Michal, daughter of Saul, looking down from her royal window at the processional bearing the Ark to Jerusalem. The Hebrew is almost identical [[2 Sam. 6:16](#)].*

**JSB:** *Yael represents victory and Sisera's mother represents defeat.*

**29** The wisest of her princesses answer her; she returns an answer to herself:

**Hertz** quoting **Rashi:** *She silenced her premonitions of evil by repeating the answer that her companions gave her.*

**30** 'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A damsel, two damsels to every man; to Sisera a spoil of dyed garments, a spoil of dyed garments of embroidery, two dyed garments of broidery for the neck of every despoiler?'

**Dancy:** *Ironically, it is the wisest of her ladies who comes out with the false suggestion which the queen wishes to hear.*

**Alter:** *Damsel – the Hebrew "raham" is transparently linked to "rehem", a womb, and might be a coarser term for a captive sex slave.*

**31** So perish all your enemies, O YHVH; but they that love Him be as the sun, when he goes forth in his might. **And the land was quiet (at peace) 40 years.**