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The Conquest of Northern Canaan

JOSHUA xi 1-9; JUDGES iv-v

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NEW YORK

THE generally accepted theory of the above-named sources may be stated in a few words. The fourth chapter of Judges is composite in substance as well as in form; that is, it is not only a closely interwoven history made up of two original strands, but it is also a confused report of two entirely distinct battles. The Song of Deborah, Judg. 5, contains the original history of one of these battles, and Josh. 11¹⁻⁹ is a late and inaccurate version of the other. The latter passage is made to harmonize with the two theories underlying Josh. 1-12; viz. that the conquest of Canaan was accomplished in Joshua's lifetime, and that it was so speedily effected because all the tribes of Israel fought as a single army under a common leader. Consistently, therefore, a local struggle between Jabin, king of Hazor, and the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali has here been magnified into a great campaign between the confederated Canaanites on one side, and all Israel on the other. Judges 4 has added to the confusion by mixing this local struggle with the great battle inspired by Deborah and fought by Barak. I shall try to show that there is another and a better solution of the problem presented.

Of these sources, the oldest and most trustworthy is the Song of Deborah, and that must be the basis of our investigation. The Song is virtually contemporary with the event described, and reveals very clearly the situation of Israel. The tribes had crossed the Jordan singly or in groups, and had occupied the hills on both sides of the great plain of

Esdraelon. This fertile plain was a necessary possession for any people who aspired to a dominant position in Palestine; the tribes, however, had for a time found it difficult even to maintain their foothold in the hills. Then a new power came to the front in the person of Deborah, who so stirred the patriotism of Barak that he assembled a force of forty thousand men from the tribes bordering on the great plain. The Canaanites, perceiving the danger of this hostile gathering, formed a coalition under the leadership of Sisera, who was not a mere captain of Jabin's army, but a great king and the leading spirit among the native rulers. The allies mustered in the great plain, for that was the abode of many of them; it constituted the bone of contention, and there the chariots with which the people of Canaan were abundantly supplied had ample room for their deadly evolutions. The ill-armed Israelites poured down from the hills at a time when floods had swollen the river Kishon and had made the valley such a morass that the chariots "drave heavily" as beforetime in the bottom of the Red Sea. The lightly equipped Hebrews thus had a great advantage, which they used to the utmost, and they pressed home the victory, so that the resistance of the Canaanites was broken for all time, especially after Sisera fell as the disgraced victim of a woman's blow.

This ancient song tells us a good deal about the Hebrew side of the battle. Abundant praise is given to God, the giver of every victory; each tribe which responded to Deborah's call is named and praised; those who gave no heed to her summons are also named and censured; the heroic deed of Jael is given more prominence than the battle itself; and ample space is taken to portray the anxiety of Sisera's queen-mother, as she watched in vain for the triumphant return of her son. But there is only the most meagre information about the other side. We are not told what kings entered the lists, nor how many troops they mustered; we hear of horses and so infer chariots, though the latter are not expressly mentioned.

It is clear, however, from the forces assembled for the con-

test and from the subsequent history, that this was the decisive battle for the supremacy of the north; wars were waged afterward, but the original Canaanites had been reduced to impotence. Moreover, although there is no positive evidence by which we can fix the date of the contest, it is fairly certain that this struggle belongs to the early period of the Hebrew occupation. Winckler¹ confidently dates the poem in the Philistine period, on the ground of Israel's lack of armament.² This is a very slender premise, and even if it were much stronger, the date of the Song would not indicate the date of the battle described. Neither does the position of the poem in the book of Judges help much, for the compiler was not an accomplished chronologist. It seems probable, however, that the tribes could not have dwelt long in the country before they would make a desperate effort to secure control of the great prize, for no progress was possible while the enemy held the plain of Esdraelon.

We turn now to Josh. 11 and find the forces of Hazor, Madon, Shimron, and Achsaph combining under the lead of Jabin to resist the encroaching Israelites who are pressing northward under Joshua. The Canaanites are mustered in vast numbers, and their effective force is greatly enhanced by the presence of the dreaded chariots of iron. The Hebrews make a sudden attack and completely overwhelm the enemy.³ The prize of the war is the supremacy of the north. By this decisive battle, fought and won by the combined Israelites against the combined Canaanites, the resisting power of Canaan is completely broken, and the Hebrew ascendancy

¹ *Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*², p. 218.

² Verse³; cf. 1 Sam. 13¹⁹. It must not be forgotten that we are dealing with a poem. In poetry the statement, "No shield was seen, nor spear, among forty thousand in Israel," does not necessarily imply that weapons were not to be found among the tribes, but may rather mean that there was no disposition to take the field. It would be impossible to account for such a lack of arms as the commentators generally infer from this passage. The nomad may lack everything else, but he will have a weapon.

³ This is from the oldest stratum of the story; viz. vs. 4.⁵ 7.^{8a}. Verse³ is an amplifying gloss; the value of its information may be judged from the fact that the Jebusites, who were really in Jerusalem, are here added to this northern confederation.

effectively secured. This conflict is put in the last stage of Joshua's campaigns, and so belongs to the last scenes of the conquest of Canaan.

Now it is not very probable that there were two such great battles, with essentially the same forces on each side, for the same object, and in virtually the same region. It is small wonder then that the historians have pronounced this story in Joshua a large exaggeration of a small tribal affair. Nevertheless, it would be strange if the book of Joshua, with its full accounts of the conquest of Central and Southern Canaan, had no adequate story of the conquest of the north. The more freely the author is supposed to manufacture history, the stranger this lack will appear. There is another possible hypothesis, which so far as I know has not heretofore been suggested; namely, that the story in Josh. 11 and the Song of Deborah are but duplicate accounts of the same struggle, and that the author of Judg. 4, instead of hopelessly confusing two inconsistent stories, is perfectly right in identifying Jabin's and Sisera's struggles as one and the same.

I have already pointed out the similarity of the two battles: the same goal, the same contestants, the same general field of action, the same large result. It must be frankly admitted that there are many inconsistencies; yet these are not greater than are found in other parallel stories, and are not incapable of a measurably satisfactory explanation.

The leader of the confederation was Jabin of Hazor in one case, and Sisera of unknown abode in the other,⁴ and so we assume that the somewhat obtuse editor of Judg. 4 has harmonized a discrepancy by giving Jabin the loftier station and making Sisera his commanding general in the field. Such a discrepancy could easily arise.

We have no information about the places from which Sisera drew his army. Since the battle was fought in the great plain, it is commonly assumed that only Canaanites from that region took part. But Deborah summoned Dan

⁴ Harosheth is given as Sisera's abode in Judg. 4²; the Song is silent on the subject.

from the Sea, and Gilead and Reuben from across the Jordan. The places named in Josh. 11, Hazor, Madon, Shimron, and Achsaph, cannot be positively identified; it is generally supposed that they were in the distant north;⁵ and, if this view is correct, it is still not improbable that the Canaanites in the plain would urgently solicit their aid in the common cause. In earlier days the kings of Canaan begged that troops be sent all the way from Egypt to drive back invaders similar to the Hebrews if not identical with them. Therefore there may have been a northern division in the great Canaanite army overwhelmed by the Kishon, and it may have been a question in after days who was responsible for the overwhelming disaster; perhaps the residents of the plain gave the credit to Jabin, the leader of the Galilean division, while the northern remnants with equal persistence assigned the calamitous leadership to Sisera.

In Deborah's Song six tribes actually muster for the war; but even here it is pretty clear that the brunt of the battle was borne by two tribes from the far north, Zebulun and Naphtali, the only ones mentioned in Judg. 4. For the poet first mentions all the tribes that went out to war: Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali;⁶ then he names the tribes who disregarded the summons: Reuben, Gilead, Dan, and Asher; finally he comes back to sing the praises of the two tribes who had done most to deserve praise:—

“Zebulun's tribe was a shining mark for death;
Naphtali, too, on the mountain heights.”

In Josh. 11 all the tribes of Israel, including those east of the Jordan, were, of course, engaged; that is but in har-

⁵ It is pretty certain that these places are all north of the plain of Esdraelon. Hazor seems to have been near Kadesh-Naphtali. Madon is quite unknown. Shimron may be Semûnieh, west of Nazareth. Achsaph is assigned to Asher (Josh. 19²⁸), otherwise unknown. (See Steuernagel, *Deut. u. Jos. in loc.*) Holzinger is probably right in asserting that the four cities represent the whole of Galilee (*Das Buch Josua*, p. 44).

⁶ Correcting the text in v. 15 by restoring Naphtali in place of the second mention of Issachar. This is a necessary emendation, the reasons for which may be found in Moore's *Judges*. This correction is now generally accepted.

mony with the theory of Josh. 1-12, that the conquest of Canaan was effected by all Israel acting together, a theory to which the old stories have been made to conform. This discrepancy is, therefore, of no significance.

The difference of time is but trifling, as we have already pointed out. Barak's victory follows closely upon the occupation; Joshua's is the very end of the process of subjugation. The latter date has been made to fit the theory that the conquest was completed in Joshua's lifetime. Such an error presents no difficulty to the reconstruction.

A more serious matter is the difference in locality. In Josh. 11 the battle is located at the waters of Merom; the Song of Deborah places it, with vastly greater probability, in the valley of the Kishon; for the latter place would really serve as the scene of a decisive action, while the former would suggest rather a battle of merely local importance. It is true that the site of the waters of Merom is not positively known, but the identification with Lake Huleh has been so generally accepted that for the present I assume that situation to be correct. It is not easy to think that such a wide difference could be explained as the result of merely variant traditions, but it is easy to think that we have here, neither accounts of two unrelated battles, nor varying stories of a single battle, but two scenes in the same campaign.⁷

This hypothesis needs further notice. It is not very likely that the Canaanite army was exterminated in the plain of Esdraelon, however badly it was defeated. If there was a northern contingent, as I have supposed, the remnant of that

⁷ Rothstein has suggested (*ZDMG*, 1902, p. 189) that two battles are described in the Deborah Song, one being fought by the southern tribes on their way to join the army in the north, and he quotes some descriptions of the manoeuvres from Segond, *Le Cantique de Debora*. I have not seen the work of Segond, but the quotations show that he would marshal the ancient tribes after the fashion of modern military science. Thus he says, "The Canaanites deployed their army between Taanach and Megiddo, resting their right wing upon Ledjoun and turning the rear to Kishon to face south-southeast." The data are rather scanty for such definite results, and the fighting of the wild tribes was not always in accord with modern principles.

portion would certainly retreat northward and homeward. There would be no serious obstacle to their retreat, for the fighting forces of the northern Hebrew tribes had all withdrawn from this district and would be in the rear pressing the pursuit. The southern tribes of Israel would be satisfied with the victory of the plain. Their object was attained, and there is abundant reason to believe that they would not be concerned with the tribulations of their brethren. Zebulun and Naphtali, however, could not take that easy view of the situation. Any considerable force escaping to the north was a serious menace to their peace. Deborah and Barak would be sensible of the danger, and would certainly urge a hot pursuit.⁸ By the waters of Merom the enemy were brought to bay; they had reached the very spot for a stand, for here was a place where the chariot evolutions were possible, and they would scarcely pass by a battle-ground so adapted to their needs. The pursuing forces of Zebulun and Naphtali accepted the challenge, and so completely defeated the enemy that there might well arise a question whether this were not really the battle which decided the supremacy of the north.⁹

Especially would this question arise if the death of Sisera belongs to this stage of the battle. We do not know where Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, lived,¹⁰ but it seems

⁸ According to Judg. 4st, Deborah was from Ephraim, and Barak from Naphtali; Judg. 5th, corrected as above, implies that Deborah was of the tribe of Issachar. Now the territory of this tribe was partly in the great plain; we can understand, therefore, why Deborah aroused the tribes to wrest this prize from the Canaanites, and why both she and Barak were determined not only to defeat the opposing army, but to destroy it.

⁹ The Song of Deborah not only shows clearly that Zebulun and Naphtali were the leading tribes in the great struggle, but also, if we may emphasize the correct meaning of הר in vs. 15, that the fighting was not confined to the plain. הר means the wild mountain country; on the mountain heights these tribes performed the feats of valor which called forth the marked praises of the poet. If this feature of the struggle is correctly interpreted, it shows how little we know of the actual event.

¹⁰ Judg. 4th says that Heber had pitched his tent as far as the oak of Basaanim by Kedesh. In Josh. 19th this oak is one of the boundary marks of Naphtali. Conder identifies Basaanim with Khirbet Bessûm, east of Tabor, and supposes Kedesh to be a place on the Sea of Galilee. This is

to have been west of the Sea of Galilee. Sisera's army had been overwhelmed with disaster, and he had accordingly been discredited as a leader. He might easily, however, have fled with the northern division, having with him a fragment of his broken troops. After this second defeat there was nothing left for the ruined monarch except personal safety. Among the wild nomads he looked for shelter, but found his quietus instead, in the blow of a club wielded by the hands of Jael.

The above view is based upon the assumption that the writer locates the battle correctly, and upon the identification of the "waters of Merom" (Josh. 11⁶⁻⁷) with Lake Huleh. It is possible that we lay too much stress upon the name of the place; if the writer has confused other things, he may also have mistaken the scene of the struggle, but it is a weak point in criticism to plead corrupt text or historical inaccuracy, as is too often done when a difficulty is encountered. The location of the waters of Merom, however, is still a problem, for the identification just named is open to grave suspicion. Indeed, it may be said positively that a battle so far in the north was out of the question in Joshua's career. To march from a campaign in southern Palestine to a struggle at Lake Huleh on the very northern borders, was impossible for Joshua in view of the many tribes of the enemy who lay in the intervening district. This identification, moreover, is nothing but a guess,¹¹ such as historical geographers are prone to indulge in. A more suitable situation has recently been proposed by Sanda, who

accepted by G. A. Smith (see art. "Zaanannim," Hastings's *Dict. of the Bible*). W. Max Müller also supposes that the Kenites dwelt in the great plain (*Asien u. Europa*, p. 174). The significance of this location will be pointed out later.

¹¹ Holzinger notes that except in 1 Macc. 11⁶⁷ מַיִם never means sea or lake (*Das Buch Josua*, p. 44). H. P. Smith says that the waters of Merom are not identified, but he uses this dictum as further evidence that the account of Joshua's battle is a later reflection of the victory of Barak (*O. T. Hist.* p. 82). Steuernagel says it cannot be the Huleh Lake, but offers no alternative; as vs.⁶ shows that the place was only distant a day's march, he contends that either Joshua had come close to the enemy, or the waters of Merom must be sought much farther to the south (*Deut. u. Jos. in loc.*).

places Merom in the northern part of the plain of Buttauf, a valley of Galilee.¹² Sanda bases his theory upon an inscription of Tiglath-pileser III, where, among a list of cities, we find *Ma-ru-um*. From the location of the other places in the list, he determines the site of Marum, as indicated above, and identifies it with Merom.¹³ To make the prefixed 'waters' intelligible, Sanda reminds us that the eastern part of the plain of Buttauf is very marshy, and that in antiquity there may have been a great pond there.

It is evident that with such a location for the waters of Merom, the theory I have proposed is both strengthened and simplified. The returning Canaanites would be heading for their own homes in Hazor, Madon, Shimron, and Achsaph in Galilee. Naturally Zebulun and Naphtali would do their utmost to crush their foes, and thus destroy for all time their troublesome neighbors. If Conder has correctly placed Basaanim, the flight of Sisera becomes clear. His own abode in the plain was no longer tenable, and his evident purpose was to cross the Jordan below the Sea of Galilee, hoping to find shelter in that unsettled region. He fled southward, but the long struggle had exhausted his strength, and he resolved to risk rest and refreshment among the Kenites. Unluckily for him, he chanced to fall into the hands of the valiant Jael.

It may seem that here is too much effort to make history out of the now generally discredited Josh. 1-12. That those chapters give an accurate account of the conquest of Canaan cannot be successfully maintained, that they contain considerable very late material is beyond doubt, and that their general view of the conquest is radically wrong is certain. But there is some older and better material in these chapters, from which we can reconstruct good history. The general account of the capture of Jericho, for example, reads like a romance, for there were no twelve tribes in the line, and the

¹² "Die Lage von Hannaton und Me Merom" in *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatischen Gesellschaft*, 1902, 2.

¹³ Zimmern had also suggested the identification of Marum with the Biblical Merom (*KAT*³, p. 59).

walls did not, *ut ego opinor*, fall down flat at the blowing of the trumpets; yet the story itself, especially combined with Josh. 24¹¹, "and you went over Jordan and came to Jericho, and the men of Jericho fought against you," contains hints of a protracted and close siege, and of a battle which must really have been fought at some time and by some tribe or tribes of Israel. There is reason to believe, therefore, that these war stories generally have a basis of historical fact, often, however, pretty deeply buried in later tradition. So the story in Chap. 11 seems to be historical in the main, and to give valuable information supplementary to the Song of Deborah.

To come back a moment to Judg. 4. The theory that this story is merely a prose version of the Song of Deborah is impossible on any hypothesis, for there is considerable information not found in the Song, and the stories diverge at too many points. The confusion which undoubtedly exists in the story in its present form comes from making a single battle out of a campaign in which there was hard fighting in two different places. The narrative in Judges 4 probably contains an independent story of the battle, which has been retouched by the editor of the book, his object being a closer harmony with the Song of Deborah.¹⁴

¹⁴ To this object we owe the statement that Sisera was the commander of Jabin's army (vs.³), the prediction that the leader would fall into the hands of a woman (vs.⁹), and the enlargement of the story of Sisera's death, the writer not comprehending the simpler and more probable version of the poem.