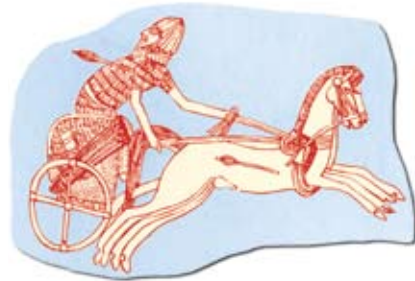


CHAPTER 4

DEBORAH AND YAEL

A Sweet Song of Victory



For the Israelite tribes scrambling to gain a foothold in their new land, the chariot forces of their Canaanite neighbors must have jarred loose dark memories of the mighty armies of Egypt. It was one thing to flee the chariots of Pharaoh in a foreign land; it was quite another to meet up with the same once back home.

(below) Like a sentinel arising from the floor of the Jezreel Valley, Mount Tabor can be seen from many vantage points both west and east of the Rift Valley, including Kedesh-naphtali, home town of Barak, and Harosheth-ha-goiim, where Sisera's army was stationed. Barak used the protection of the mountain and the folded terrain behind, in the vicinity of Kedesh-naphtali, to muster his troops, then swept around Tabor to encounter Sisera's chariots where the mountain meets the plain. (photo Garo Nalbandian)



The history of the Middle East, both ancient and modern, has not been particularly kind to women. In the fifteenth century, a Turkish lady by the name of Mihri Hatun offered the following "so, there!" advice on the relationship between the sexes:

*Woman, they say, is deficient in sense, so they ought to pardon her every word.
But one female who knows what to do is better than a thousand males who don't.*

While the days of the biblical Judges were troubled enough without dwelling on the underlying social fabric of the times, it must be noted that when Israel, awash in malaise and paralyzed under impotent male leadership, was delivered by the hands of two women, Deborah and Yael (in English, Jael), the victory was particularly sweet.

The ebb and flow of the events of the Book of Judges reflects the troubled spirit of the time between the death of Joshua and the birth of Samuel. The writer of Judges organized these events around a repetitive cycle: disobedience, invasion, a cry for help, and military victory. All told, the cycle spiraled downward: each oppression became more difficult to overcome; each judge, or, more properly, deliverer, was less wholesome than the one before.

In fact, Israel faced difficulties on a number of fronts. Although the twelve tribes were loosely united around a common set of ancestor stories, shared a religious site at Shiloh and were bound together by the covenant of Mt. Sinai, each favored local priorities over efforts for the common good. This is, in fact, a characteristic endemic to tribalism. Moreover, whatever success was found on the battlefield was negated by the inability to

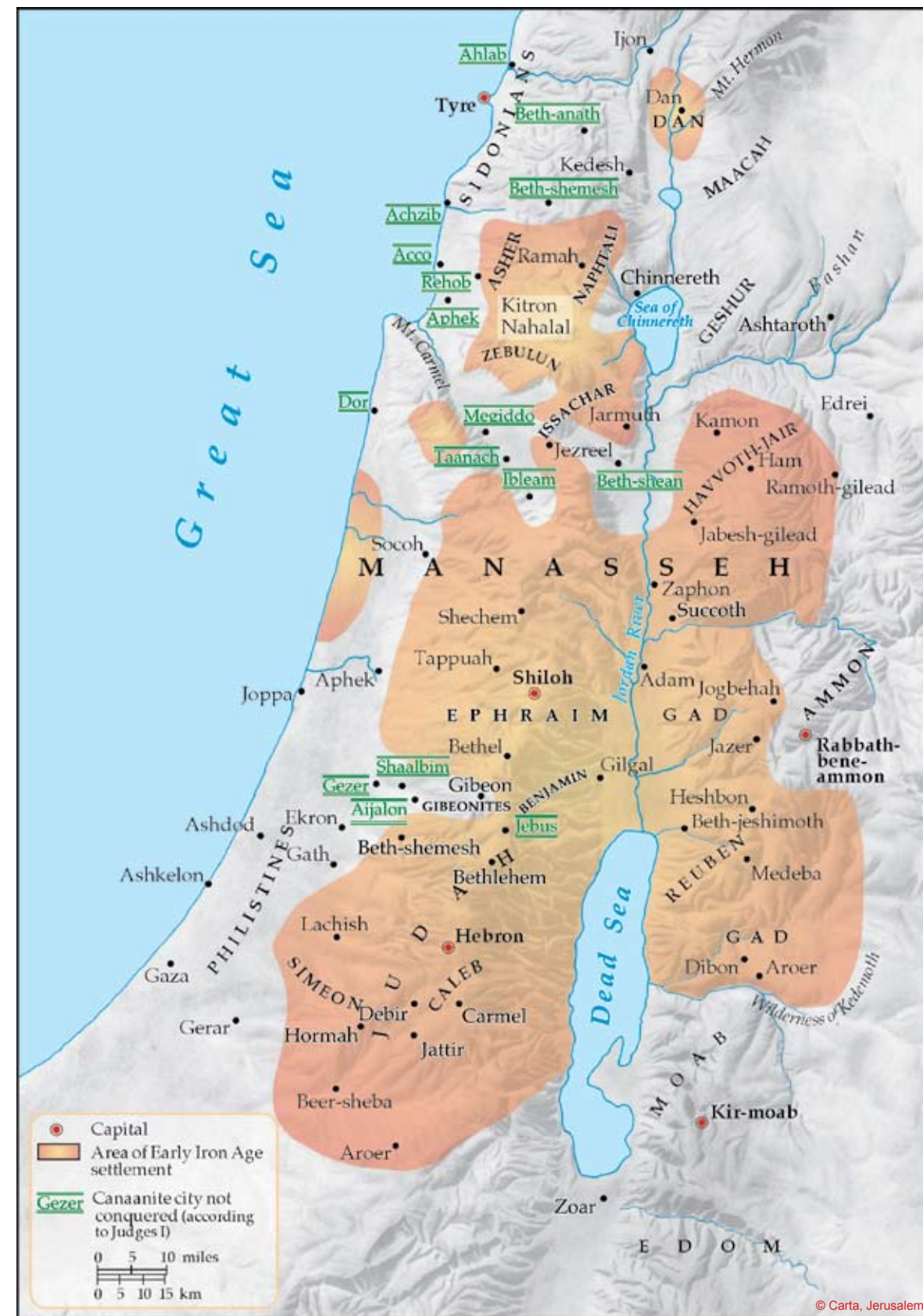
create a cooperative, wholesome environment at home, as the stories of corruption and infighting that conclude the book so well attest (Judg 17:1–21:25). On top of this, the Israelite tribes had to settle for the less-productive hill country and steppe land, while the fertile, open and economically productive valleys and plains remained under the control of the established Canaanite city-states (Judg 1:27–36).

The first event in the sequence of invasion and deliverance was in some ways an anomaly: Othniel, nephew of Caleb of the tribe of Judah, delivered Israel from a distant enemy, Aram-naharaim (or, "Mesopotamia"; Judg 3:9–11). It's difficult to reconcile this incident, briefly described, with the stories of the other judges, where each countered a local threat by a near neighbor. Perhaps the writer included Othniel's bout against an enemy from the far north to anticipate Israel's later troubles with Mesopotamian kings in the waning days of the monarchy, and thereby heighten the contrast of what was, to what would be.

Next up was the Benjaminite Ehud, whose tribal gateway city, Jericho, had been overrun by Moabites when their king, Eglon, sought to penetrate the land the same way that Joshua had successfully entered Canaan years before. Eglon got no further; his immense size, at ease in the comforts of the Jericho oasis, was no match for the lean, resourceful and wolf-like fighters of Benjamin (Judg 3:15–30; cf. Gen 49:27).

A brief note mentions Shamgar's heroic defeat of the Philistines, anticipating a similar act by Samson (Judg 3:31, 15:14–17). Linguistic evidence suggests that Shamgar was a non-Israelite associated with the town of Beth-anath in Upper Galilee, a location consistent with his appearance in the Galilee-oriented Song of Deborah (Judg 5:6). Irrespective of Shamgar's ethnicity, Philistine incursions beyond the Jezreel Valley were not to be ignored by those who lived in the area.

The next event is perhaps the single greatest episode in the book. The forces of Jabin (apparently a dynastic name for the kings of Hazor) had overwhelmed the valleys and plains of Galilee, prompting a combined response by all of the tribes that were affected, as well as some on the periphery: Zebulun, Naphtali, Issachar, Machir (Transjordanian Manasseh), Ephraim and Benjamin. Two accounts of the battle have been preserved: a blow-by-blow narrative giving a chronological sequence of events (Judges 4), and a popular victory song of the kind that



The Limits of Israelite Settlement during the Time of the Judges. Although the Book of Joshua portrays a full conquest and division of the land of Canaan by the Israelite tribes, Judges is careful to delineate between areas actually settled by Israel and those in which the Canaanite presence remained strong. In short, Israel clung to the rocky hills largely devoid of natural resources while the Canaanite city-states controlled the fertile valleys and important routes below.



Mesopotamian border marker (kudurru), c. 12th century B.C. Large nations such as Egypt, Assyria or Babylon formally marked the limits of their control with standing stones, often inscribed by the name and exploits of conquering kings. During the time of the Judges, Israel's tribal borders were too much in flux to be set in stone.

would have been sung around campfires for generations (Judges 5). Each emphasized different aspects of the whole; together, they offer a telling that is both earthy and delightful, rich in cultural detail while full of geographical common sense.

The story opens with Israel's Galilee tribes squeezed in a pincer between Jabin and his general, Sisera (Judg 4:2–3). Jabin was at Hazor, the old dynas-

tic Canaanite capital of Galilee (cf. Josh 11:10) where the great international highway connecting Mesopotamia and Egypt entered the land from the north. The army was with Sisera at Harosheth-ha-goiim ("The Cultivated Fields of the Gentiles"), which, from the evidence of the poem (Judg 5:19), must have been between Taanach and Megiddo near the point where the same trunk route approached Galilee