

## **The Last Words of Sisera<sup>1</sup>**

Opera Libretto by Robert Cummings Neville

### ***Synopsis***

Deborah the Prophetess is the Judge of Israel based at an oasis called “Deborah’s Palm,” near Bethel. For many years the Israelites, who occupy the hill country, have been interdicting the trade caravans of the Canaanites, who live in cities on the plains. The Canaanite city-states have been leagued by Jabin, King of Hazor, to make war on the Israelites and restore the old way of life; Jabin has been fighting the Israelite interlopers and bandits for twenty years. Sisera, a brilliant young Philistine mercenary, commands the Canaanite forces whose strength lies in nine hundred chariots of iron. Heber, a Kenite clan leader related to the Israelites, has joined Jabin’s forces, pitching his tents at the Oak of Zaananim near Jabin’s city of Hazor and the Northern City of Kedesh, an Israelite “city of refuge.” The original story is found in the Bible in Judges 4-5.

### **Act One.**

*Scene I. At Deborah’s Palm.* Men and women of Israel gather outside Deborah’s tent to sing a hymn of praise to her as mother of her people, asking her to hear their lament for having lost Yahweh’s favor. She emerges and responds that, although

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<sup>1</sup>This libretto is a theological statement and argument, in imaginative form. Music is being composed for it by Julian Wachner. The libretto is copyrighted and should not be set to music without permission of the author. The text cites and alters several translations of the Bible, notably the New Revised Standard Version, which is used with little alteration for the 83rd psalm.

Yahweh's love is never spent, it takes the form of favor only in response to faithfulness. Abinoam and Lappidoth complain to her about the threat of Jabin and his army, claiming that no one is prepared to lead Israel against Canaan. Deborah says that she is Yahweh's judge and prophet and herself will lead. But the chorus calls for a hero to lead them, and Deborah agrees to call Barak, a righteous mighty man.. When Deborah asks Barak to take command, he declines, saying that Lappidoth, Deborah's husband, would be better suited; his name means "lightning," the war-trait of Yahweh God of storms. Lappidoth and Abinoam persuade Barak to take command, his acceptance conditional upon Deborah's willingness to accompany the army to guarantee the support of Yahweh. Barak and Deborah agree to war for Yahweh, but she tells him that, because of his reticence, the honor of killing Sisera will go to a woman, not to him. He sings "Confusion to honor! To Yahweh goes the hero's glory!"

*Scene II. At the Oak of Zaananim.* King Jabin is in war council with a group of Canaanite kings and his ally Heber the Kenite who is accompanied by his wife Jael. Sisera and his mother are in attendance. Jabin opens the meeting with a rehearsal of the incursions of the Israelites and their interdiction of the caravan routes, lamenting the decline in civilized living this causes, to which the kings and Heber respond lauding high civilization, the expansion of vision through trade, and the good old days. Heber urges the Canaanites to war, although Jabin questions his loyalty. Jael interrupts to argue for peace and tolerance of the Israelites, cautioning about the might of their God. But Sisera takes Jael aside and urges her to support her husband and the Canaanites; he reveals that he loves her although she is beyond his reach. Jabin incites Sisera to war, Sisera begs Jael

to bless his warfare, Heber berates Jael for un-Canaanite enthusiasms, and Jael curses violence on all sides. Sisera's mother interrupts with a prophetic aria (echoing the prophetic first aria of Deborah) warning from a dream that the gods will desert Canaan and that Yahweh will fight for Israel. But Jabin and Heber reassert the need for war. Jael joins Sisera's mother in advocating peace. Sisera cries that he cannot win without Jael's blessing. The men resolve on war.

## **Act Two**

*Scene I. The Israelite camp on Mount Tabor.* At sunset Barak welcomes his troops and says that those tribes not represented are dishonored not to be there. The soldiers object to his battle plan, namely, to meet Sisera's chariots in the killing field of Keshon Wadi beneath the mountain. Although they greatly outnumber the Canaanites, the level ground gives the advantage to the chariots, of which the Israelites have none. Deborah says that the strategy is Yahweh's and that he will deliver them. Later at midnight Deborah prays to Yahweh for help, reminding him of the covenant promise of hegemony in the Promised Land. Yahweh responds by saying that Israel is faithful only when they need him or it looks to be to their advantage. Deborah reminds him that the Israelites are about to throw themselves into battle to pursue the covenant promise, and that this is faith. Yahweh warns about calling in the promises in Israel's time, not his. She insists, with a litany of Yahweh's promises, to which he responds with an angry litany of the suffering caused others by his support of Israel. She repeats that Israel is nothing but what Yahweh has made and that he must follow through. He agrees but warns of the ambiguities of victory. Music of Yahweh's storm arising.

*Scene II. Sisera's camp in the Keshon Wadi.* At sunset of the evening before the battle Sisera exhorts the Canaanites to victory, with braggadocio about modern strategy using the chariots. Jabin, Heber, and two of the kings sing of booty, glory, and the restoration of the good old days. All sing a chorus in praise of the power of modern technology. Alone at midnight, Sisera laments that Jael is not here and they are not blessed. Dawn comes with Yahweh's storm.

### **Act Three**

*Scene I. Keshon Wadi.* The Israelites clamber down the mountain side, form up and move offstage as the storm rages. From a slight rise, Deborah chants the 83rd Psalm, calling on Yahweh to intervene as the chariots cut through the Israelite line. A mighty flood washes through, however, destroying the chariots' advantage and the Israelites route the Canaanites. Sisera calls to his troops to stand by him, to no avail. In desperation he asks Heber where his protection lies and Heber tells him to go to Heber's own tents at the Oak of Zaananim, while Heber will seek to reconcile himself to his Israelite kinsmen. All flee, with Sisera pursued by Barak.

*Scene II. Heber's tents at the Oak of Zaananim.* Sisera staggers onstage asking for water and a hiding place. Jael calls him to turn aside with her and not to fear. She gives him fermented goat's milk, a mild soporific. As he asks her to stand guard and tell anyone who asks that there is no one here, she strikes his head from behind with a mallet.

He falls against her senseless and slides between her legs to her feet, while she sings, “he sinks, he falls, he lies still at my feet,” and she drives a tentpeg through his head. With increasing madness she rises to descry and then praise the brutality of war, the violence to end violence, her holy violence as the instrument of Yahweh. Barak rushes in and is moved to see Sisera as a tragic enemy, undone by too much water in the flood, too little water in his parched flight, and denied the waters of life and love. Jael sings on, condemning all war and endorsing the purity of being an instrument of God, all with maddened distraction, while Barak is moved to awe and wonder, proclaiming Jael the elemental mother beyond morality, the one who brings to an end what Deborah started.

*Scene III. Split stage, with Sisera’s mother and friends on a balcony; Deborah, Lappidoth, and Abinoam at Deborah’s Palm; Barak, Jael, and the Ghost of Sisera at the Oak of Zaananim, and Yahweh offstage.* Sisera’s mother sings a dirge-like song of foreboding about the lateness of Sisera and her friends attempt to cheer her with the rationalization that he is gathering booty. Sisera’s Ghost at the Oak of Zaananim calls to his mother to give him water and protection from his enemies, singing of ghostly loneliness; she does not quite hear him, although she hears something, and repeats her song of foreboding over his pleadings. Yahweh’s voice is heard below their last words singing “those who long for life shall have it yet” and continues under the next song in which Deborah, Lappidoth, and Abinoam sing “Yahweh triumphs to oppress his foes and blesses Israel.” Yahweh’s song changes to “those who love death shall find it yet,” which continues under a duet between Jael and Barak. Barak sings that women are the warriors, the greater hero, Sisera, is killed, all love is unreturned, while Jael sings that Yahweh is

above all, nothing is of worth but God's will, and her murder is a sacrifice justified in God's name. Yahweh's song turns to "lives' meanings are only fragments of stories. Wholeness is only in me. Only I am pure," which continues on by itself until joined softly by Sisera's mother, Deborah, Barak, and Jael, interweaving their themes. When all the song dies away, Sisera's Ghost sings "Why am I thirsty? Why am I hunted? Tell them that no one is here." Yahweh answers, 'Come, Sis'ra, for living water. Only I say who's alone. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.'" The curtain fall to the music of the flood.

### **The Cast**

DEBORAH, the Prophetess and Judge of Israel, Soprano

LAPPIDOTH, Deborah's Husband, Tenor

ABINOAM, Father of Barak, Baritone

BARAK, Israelite Commander, Tenor

JABIN, King of Hazor, Bass

SISERA, Canaanite Commander, Bass

MOTHER OF SISERA, Contralto

HEBER, Kenite Clan Leader, Tenor

JAEL, Wife of Heber, Mezzo-soprano

YAHWEH, Bass

Three women friends of Sisera's mother, Sopranos

Two Canaanite kings, Tenor and Baritone, and a chorus of Canaanite soldiers

Mixed chorus of Israelites, SATB, with the men as Israelite soldiers.

## The Libretto

### Act 1

Overture

#### Scene 1

[A desert oasis with a small grove of palms and several tents. A crowd of Israelite men and women, including Abinoam, is gathered in front of Deborah's tent.]

THE CROWD {Chorus}

Hail Deborah, Our Mother, Mother of Israel, come out and hear our lament!

Hail Deborah, Our Prophet, Prophet of Israel, come hear of our sorrow and plight!

Hail Deborah, Our Fair Judge, Judge of all Israel, our cause is lost with no fight.

Hail Deborah, Our Mother, Mother of Israel, see Yahweh's favor's been spent.

[Deborah emerges from the main tent, followed by Lappidoth]

DEBORAH { recitative }

Never, O Israel, say Yahweh's love is spent.

It knows no start, no stop, no bounds on any side,

Always enough, no merit denied,

Blessing all creatures, all nations, all tents.

{aria}

But God's love's not always favor.

God's love is wrathful too.

God's favor's bound to covenant:

Our faithfulness God savors,

Our unfaith loses favor.

Yahweh's our savior, bound to Israel, promising favor, expelling all others  
But only for faithfulness, loving God only, with mercy for sisters and justice for  
brothers.

Ask not from Yahweh what you've not bargained  
With faith and pure worship, and mercy and justice.

ABINOAM {recitative}

Why call us to faith when Yahweh has left us to Canaan?

LAPPIDOTH {recitative}

Were not the peoples of this land to be driven out before us?

ABINOAM AND LAPPIDOTH {duet}

Where is Yahweh's faithfulness when Canaan's army musters?

What are Yahweh's promises against nine hundred chariots?

Sisera the Mighty will roll over our ten thousand,

When Yahweh sulks at our weak faith and no one leads our muster!

DEBORAH {recitative}

I am your judge and Yahweh's prophet.

I will lead and Yahweh will fight for you.

THE CROWD {chorus, with baritone, tenor, soprano solos}

We need a hero, Mother, a hero to lead us.

Yahweh's wrath is just, and is against us.

*Our faith has failed and Yahweh's left us.*

*We need a hero, Mother, a hero to lead us.*

ABINOAM



*Why call us to faith when Yahweh has left us to Canaan?*

LAPPIDOTH

*Are not the peoples of this land to be driven out before us?*

DEBORAH

*I will call Barak.*

THE CROWD, ABINOAM, AND LAPPIDOTH

*Call Barak, call Barak, Hero of Israel,*

*Mighty in arms, mighty to muster us,*

*Stronger than Sisera, savior to lead us*

DEBORAH

*Mighty in faithfulness, well loved of Yahweh!*

ALL

*Call Barak, Call Barak! Call Barak!*

DEBORAH {recitative}

Hail Barak, Our Hero, Hero of Israel, come out and hear our lament.

[Barak emerges from another tent.]

Canaan comes upon us, King Jabin and his allies,

Sisera advances with nine hundred chariots.

Our soldiers are ten thousand but have no one to lead them.

They have no faith in Yahweh and fear he has left them,

For they know in their hearts their own faith has left them.

Come Barak, Our Hero, Hero of Israel, come to our soldiers and lead them.

BARAK {recitative}

Hail Deborah, Our Mother, Mother of Israel,  
I'll come but will not lead your soldiers.  
Yahweh's their leader and you are his judge.  
We lack not for numbers nor arms nor for valor.  
Our soldiers lack only for trust in Yahweh.  
Trust not in swords or chariots of iron,  
In horses or strength, but in Yahweh.

You lead them, Deborah, Yahweh's judge and prophet.  
Stand Lappidoth, your husband, in the van,  
Whose name means "Yahweh's lightning,"  
And call down God's fire to consume Sis'ra's chariots.

ABINOAM {duet}

*No, Barak, you lead us.*

LAPPIDOTH

*I am too old. You too are named "lightning,"*

ABINOAM

*To be Yahweh's fiery sword.*

BARAK {recitative}

I'll lead forth only if Deborah'll bring Yahweh,  
His judge and our mother to bless our poor arms.  
With Yahweh to fight for us, Deborah to bless us,  
I'll lead on to vanquish all Canaan in war.

DEBORAH {recitative}

Your faith is our strength, Barak, winsome to God.

You lead and I'll bring Him, and for you He'll come.

Yet know for your reticence Sisera's fall

Will be brought not by your arm:

By a woman he'll fall.

BARAK {aria}

Confusion to honor! To Yahweh goes the hero's glory!

Adam's sons and daughters have broken, confused, stories.

[End of Scene 1]

## Scene 2

[The Oak of Zaananim, where Jabin has called a war council, with two Canaanite kings, Heber the Kenite, Jael, Sisera and his mother, Canaanite soldiers.]

JABIN {recitative}

We gather once again in this long war to fight marauding Israel.

For years they've burnt our farms and robbed our stores.

They make our roads a hazard so no caravan can pass with goods and news.

Where once our cities leagued in commerce, sending and receiving Ethiopic goods,

Anyang jade and Balkan tin, Harappan seals and steles from Akkad,

We knew of kings and star charts, marked the rise and fall of houses,

Heard from bards the strangest lore,

Now we huddle within doors, grow poor and stupid, forget the wonders of the  
world,  
And begrudge the decay of civilized law, responsible control of force, and  
peaceful curiosity.

ALL MEN {chorus}

Israel's bandits are bringing us down,  
Destroying our good lives,  
Starving our towns,  
Causing all to be warriors,  
And shield-maids of soldiers,  
Stifling our learning, our luxuries, glories,  
Crude living Israel, Egypt's good-riddance.

HEBER {recitative}

Let us strike now my friends!  
Though they're ten thousand we have our chariots.  
They're descending Mount Tabor to meet us at Keshon.  
They're crude and barbaric with no one to lead them.  
On flat land our chariots will scythe them like harvest.  
Our knowledge and modernness give us the victory,  
And with that the old times of learning and wealth.

JABIN {recitative}

Why should we trust you, kinsman of Israel?  
Why do you push us to fall on your kin?

HEBER {aria}

To you I've been loyal through trade and through war  
Because Canaan is civilized, it's worldly, loves learning.  
It's better than Egypt, whence Israel fled,  
For Canaan loves peace and world trade and much wealth,  
Its gods control rainfall, good earth, and good sex,  
Where Yahweh's demanding, jealous, and sulky.

JABIN AND HEBER {duet}

*Rouse out our soldiers and harness our chariots  
Drive back the bandits and make our land safe  
For the good days, the rich days, the days of high living,  
And Sisera's orders will shape us our victory.*

JAEL {recitative}

I pray do not do this, do not go to war.  
Remember the might of their God, their Protector,  
Who freed them from Pharaoh and drowned Egypt's chariots,  
Who led them to Canaan and set them up high  
In the mountains to claim all this land for their own.  
Our gods like rich trade goods, good earth, and good sex,  
But Yahweh likes destiny, Israel, and war.  
Pray do not fight them: seek peace and their blessing.  
Let their God be our God, be both peoples blessing.

SISERA {recitative}

Jael, prophet of my heart, do not urge this treason.

You know I've loved you, besought you, and courted you.

But what hope has a Philistine servant in Canaan?

When you chose Heber's tents, my heart was empty save for chariots,

My heart's hopes were bleak as battlefields awash in the dead.

But I honored your choice, and your husband,

And his faith to the alliance of kings.

{aria}

If you oppose us, oppose war, my honor's a shambles, empty, and vain.

We only can win with your blessing, dear Jael.

JABIN {trio}

*Sisera, stand up! Put down your reticence! Seize honor and victory!*

SISERA

*Bless our war, Jael, our chariots. O bless me!*

HEBER

*Wife, be not a prophet, remember your place.*

*We now are with Canaan, not Yahweh's race.*

JAEL {aria}

Doom comes with violence, with greed, grabbing land,

With bowmen and chariots, bucklers and shields;

War is dishonor to both sides: all lose.

Serve Yahweh, obey him: that is our place.

I curse all your warfare, alliances, hate.

I curse all your chariots, your plans, and your gen'ral.

SISERA'S MOTHER {aria}

I've had dreams of gods departing Canaan,

Walking to the desert to break like potters' vessels.

The old ways are fading; in my dreams I can't remember

How the sacrifices go. But closer and closer I see

A pillar of fire by night, a pluming cloud by day,

A face on Yahweh brighter than a thousand suns.

I've had dreams of something new arriving, dreadful, frightening.

For this war I've deep foreboding, for my son a dreadful doom.

SISERA {quintet}

*Without Jael's blessing my plans are useless, my arms are weak, my chariots  
vain.*

*Though all the signs be for us, we cannot win this war.*

SISERA'S MOTHER

*I've had dreams of something new arriving, dreadful, frightening.*

*For this war I've deep foreboding, for my son a dreadful doom*

JAEL

*Peace is the only way. Honor Yahweh and obey.*

HEBER

*For safety, for booty, for wealth and good living,*

*We make war on Israel, the bane of all Canaan.*

JABIN

*For safety, for booty, for wealth and good living,  
We make war on Israel, the bane of all Canaan.*

ALL THE MEN {chorus}

Harness the chariots, strap on the armour,  
Load up the spears and the quivers of arrows.  
Let Israel beware for we're rolling to meet them.  
Let Israel beware for we'll meet them at Keshon.

[End of Act I]

## **Act Two**

Overture

### **Scene 1**

[Israelite camp on the heights of Mount Tabor, overlooking the Keshon Wadi, at sunset, the night before the battle.]

BARAK {recitative}

Hail Soldiers of Israel, Mighty men of Benjamin, and Ephraim, and Machir,  
Chietains of Issachar, of Zebulun and Naphtali, praise God for victory!  
Woe to the warriors of Reuben and Gilead, pity the strong men of Asher and Dan,  
Their children will shame them for not being with us this day when we go against  
Canaan.

ISRAELITE SOLDIERS {chorus}

Yo Barak, Yo Deborah, we gather with trembling.



'Tis folly to fight on the flat Keshon Wadi..  
Sisera's chariots will roll through us cruelly  
At home on the flat plain that leaves us exposed.  
Let's stay on Mount Tabor and draw him to meet us.  
Dismount his chariots, we'll have him outnumbered.  
We fear the fierce charge of his ranks of machines,  
Filled with dread archers and javelins unseen.

DEBORAH {aria}

Rest your fears in faith, my warriors, follow your mighty God  
Who draws your foes in Canaan to their deaths abroad.  
They would not come on Tabor, they fight only for the plain  
To hold their towns and highways, for the old ways and for gain.  
But Yahweh gives you Canaan, for your families' promised homes,  
And will at Keshon Wadi wash the plain with Canaan's bones.

ISRAELITE SOLDIERS {chorus}

Yo Yahweh, Yo Yahweh, Yo Barak and Deborah,  
At dawn we shall march down to draw out dread Sisera.

[Lights dim to darkness, and come up on Deborah alone at midnight.]

DEBORAH {recitative}

O Yahweh, hear me now, I call you to your promises.  
We've come to claim the heritage you promised us on Sinai.  
Though many have been faithless, only faith has drawn them here.  
For they know they die at morning's light by Sisera's mighty hand

Unless you go before them and spread terror on the land.

YAHWEH {recitative}

Covenants are costly, grave, with consequences unforeseen.

In desperation or in prospect of advantages, your Israel commits itself with ease.

Where was your faith when things seemed safe, injustice paid , and  
other gods were more rewarding?

DEBORAH {recitative}

Forgive us, Lord, inconstancy:

You see the evil in our hearts.

You see also faith, O Lord.

We could have stayed among the hills,

Plundering Canaan from strongholds on high.

But we remembered your promises this land to take

And we risk all to war for your covenant's sake.

YAHWEH {aria}

You run greater risk than you know

To call me to my promises in your time, not in mine.

DEBORAH {recitative}

Remember that you promised when you set us against Pharaoh,

You promised when you struck the first-born of the Egyptians,

You promised when you led us out of Egypt with our treasures,

You promised when you drew us through the Sea,

You promised when you gave us desert water, quails and manna,

You promised when you bound us with the Law at trembling Sinai,  
You promised when you crossed us over Jordan into Canaan,  
You promised when you gave us victory over hill-kings,  
You cannot break your promise when we march on Keshon Wadi.

YAHWEH {aria}

What blasphemy is this, to recall my promises and not Israel's?

Who has paid the price for my promises to Israel, who has paid the price?

I remember Pharaoh's generosity to Jacob.

I remember Egyptian children dead, Egyptian households plundered.

I remember Pharaoh's chariots mired and broken in the Red Sea and his faithful

soldiers strewn upon the banks, death-hard like driftwood, blackening and

bloating for my love of Israel's freedom.

I remember feeding Israel who asked, "Were there not graves enough in Egypt

that they come to the desert for death?"

I remember binding the law and finding the calf.

I remember the Jordan but also the Hittites, the Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and

Jebusites,

All of whom pay with their homes for your home, all of whom pay for my

promises.

DEBORAH {aria}

But we are what you made us, not our arms but yours.

We're faithless but bound by your mercy and call.

You have sent us forth when we would have waited for the graves in Egypt.

You cannot forsake us when we risk all for your promise.

Can we give you greater faith? We are what you made us. Do not forsake us!

YAHWEH {recitative}

I'm bound by my promise: you shall have the victory.

March down in the morning beneath my dread cloud.

But know in your heart that nothing's as it seems,

That victory's ambiguous and defeat's not the end.

I grieve for my promise, you'll grieve for your victory.

Canaan will lose but remain 'til the end.

DEBORAH AND YAHWEH {duet}

*Remember the promises binding on Israel,*

*Remember the prices so many have paid.*

*Rejoice the victorious and grieve the defeated.*

*Wonder, O wonder, whose story is told.*

[Music of a rising storm with thunder and lightning.]

[End of Scene 1]

## **Scene 2**

[Sisera's camp in the Keshon Wadi, the evening before the battle, sounds of the storm arising.]

SISERA {recitative with choral response}

Kings and captains, gather round

And we shall plan our battle.

Israel comes to level ground

To muster her ten thousand.

SOLDIERS (WITH JABIN, THE KINGS, AND HEBER)

Hey!

SISERA

The valley's narrow at the wadi,

Three hundred yards across.

With boulders high on either side

They'll come out half a mile

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

To form their shielded phalanxes.

SOLDIERS

Oh.....

SISERA

But never fear, we'll drive right through

Their center to the end,

Six files of chariots abreast

One hundred fifty ranks.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

Then wheel our chariots right and left,

Three files right and three files left  
Their stumbling soldiers will be ground  
Between the boulders and our pounds.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

One hundred fifty machines  
In three deep ranks of fifty  
Shall pound their left rear  
To the ground.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

One hundred fifty machines  
In three deep ranks of fifty  
Shall pound their right rear  
To the ground.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

One hundred fifty machines  
In three deep ranks of fifty  
Shall pound their left van

To the ground.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

One hundred fifty machines

In three deep ranks of fifty

Shall pound their right van

To the ground.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

What of their middle,

Confused on both sides?

SOLDIERS

Six ranks of fifty

Shall pound to the ground.

Hey!

SISERA

Each car has three archers

With one hundred arrows,

And also three spearmen

With ten javelins each.

SOLDIERS

Hey!

SISERA

That's two hundred ninety seven thousand

Sharp ways to kill them,

Those still not fallen

Beneath hoof and wheel,

SOLDIERS

Wow!

SISERA

For each of their measely

Ten thousand soldiers

We'll bring within close range

Twenty nine point seven ways to die!

SOLDIERS

Wow!

{Chorus}

What genius! What science!

This general can count!

Our advanced model chariots

Will make this a rout!

What genius! What science!

This general can count!

Our advanced model chariots



Will make this a rout!

Hey! Hey!

Hey! Hey!

Hey! Hey!

JABIN {quartet}

*We'll bring back the old days of learning and trade.*

HEBER

*We'll have booty and women and be rich again.*

FIRST KING

*Our towns will be safe now, and highways and fields.*

SECOND KING

*The Israelite menace at long last will fade..*

ALL {chorus}

Praise science, new weapons, praise Sisera's thinking,

Praise Jabin's alliance, our destinies linking!

[All leave except Sisera, suddenly in a somber mood.]

SISERA {recitative}

I can give them courage and all the advantage of battle array.

In the morning I will lead them with valour and strength.

But beneath my martial confidence and hero's exertions

Is a dread and foreboding I cannot allay.

Jael will not bless us.

She curses our war.

She says our gods have fled.

She says our hopes are dead.

She says only Yahweh's will counts.

She says Israel is its tool.

She says she's Yahweh's hammer.

She's mad to be so pure!

{aria}

Oh, she says she hates her husband.

And she says she cannot love me.

I still love her, but now fear her,

Jael's curse, my despair, and my death.

[The music of Yahweh's storm.]

[End of Act Two]

## **Act Three**

Overture to Act Three

### **Scene 1**

[The battlefield with a ferocious thunder, lightening, and rain storm. The Israelites led by Barak clamber down the rocks, form up and move offstage, singing to Yahweh's storm music.]

BARAK AND ISRAELITE SOLDIERS {chorus}

Yo Yahweh! Yo Yahweh!

[After the Israelites have moved offstage away from the rocks, Deborah appears high up, in armour.]

DEBORAH {chant}

[From Psalm 83, chanted and not sung to melody; the music is still that of the storm]

O God, do not keep silence;

Do not hold your peace or be still, O God!

Even now your enemies are in tumult;

Those who hate you have raised their heads.

They lay crafty plans against your people;

They consult together against those you protect.

They say, "Come let us wipe them out as a nation;

[The Israelites stagger back before Sisera's onslaught. Sisera's chariot and two others pursue them and they fight soundlessly in slow motion. The only sound is the storm music and Deborah's chanting.]

Let the name of Israel be remembered no more."

O my God, make them like whirling dust,

Like chaff before the wind.

As fire consumes the forest,  
As the flame sets the mountains ablaze,  
So pursue them with your tempest  
And terrify them with your hurricane.  
Fill their faces with shame,  
So that they may seek your name, O Lord.  
Let them be put to shame and dismayed for ever;  
Let them perish in disgrace.  
Let them know that you alone, whose name is the Lord,  
Are the Most High over all the earth.

[As soon as Deborah's chant ends, the soldiers return to normal speed, clanging their weapons and shouting. Deborah sings, to Yahweh's storm melody]

{aria}

Come Yahweh! Come Yahweh! Come Yahweh!

[Suddenly the storm music stops, replace by the music of a torrential flood, washing down the mountain and with a great roar flashing through Keshon Wadi.

The Israelite soldiers scramble up the rock, but the Canaanites are overturned in their chariots. The flood subsides quickly and the Israelites, led by Barak and shouting]

ISRAELITES AND BARAK {chorus}

Yo Yahweh! Yo Yahweh!

[charge over the Canaanites while they are still struggling to free themselves from their chariots; some have drowned. Sisera attempts to rally his troupes as they flee in terror.]

SISERA {aria}

Stand by me! Stand by me!

You do not need chariots! Stand by me!

Archers nock your arrows! Stand by me!

Spearmen hurl your javelins! Stand by me!

When you've weapons and your valor, even though you've lost your chariots,

You can fight and die like heroes! Stand by me!

[But the Canaanites abandon Sisera, or fall slain, and he retreats behind a boulder where Heber is hiding.]

SISERA {duet}

*All is lost here, we must flee. Where can we find protection?*

HEBER

*I will stay and call upon the protection of kinship with Israel.*

SISERA

*Can I find sanctuary in North Kedesh, the Israelite city of refuge?*

HEBER

*No, go to my tent at the Oak of Zaananim and Jael will hide and protect you.*

SISERA AND HEBER

*Refuge, protection, where can we find it?*

*Will Yahweh give refuge to those he defeated?*

[Sisera dashes off. Barak sees him and gives chase. The Israelite soldiers see them leave.]

ISRAELITE SOLDIERS {chorus}

Run, Barak, and kill him,  
Kill Sisera the foe,  
Let Sisera the hero fight Israel no more.  
Sisera! Death! Sisera! Death!

[End of Scene 1]

## Scene 2

[Heber's tent at the Oak of Zaananim, with Jael standing in front. Sisera runs in, exhausted by his thirty mile flight from the battle pursued by Barak.]

SISERA {aria}

I thirst and I need to be hidden.  
Yahweh fought for Israel today  
And his foes are ground down.  
I thirst and I need to be hidden.

JAEL {recitative}

Turn aside, my lord, turn here to me.  
Do not be afraid.

SISERA {duet}

*Give me water, Jael, I thirst near to death.*  
*Yahweh drowned my chariots, I am alone.*

*Please give me a little water to drink;*

*For I am thirsty.*

[Jael supports Sisera and takes him into her tent. He leans against the tent pole while she pours him a bowl.]

J A E L

*Here is soured goat's milk.*

*It will give you rest.*

*Like a mother I'll sustain you,*

*You'll not be alone.*

SISERA {recitative}

Barak comes upon me like Yahweh's angry sword.

Stand at the entrance of the tent;

If any comes and asks you

"Is anybody here?"

Say, "No,"

Tell them, "No one is here."

[Sisera slumps against the tent pole. Jael goes behind him and strikes him a mighty blow to the head with a mallet. He throws his arms out and jerks back against her and slowly slides against her to the floor, slowly curling on his side into a fetal position with his hand on his head.]

J A E L {recitative}

He sinks, he falls,

He lies still at my feet.

At my feet he sinks, he falls;

Where he sinks, there he falls dead.

[Jael squats over him and drives a tentpeg between his dead fingers into his temple. She rises and goes to the entrance of the tent and sings to the sky, with arms flung out like Sisera's. Barak rushes up while she sings and goes behind her to find the body of Sisera.]

{aria}

All war is cursed.

It brings death, never glory.

God's anger will end war,

God's might drowns all violence.

I am his instrument, killing his foes,

I am his hammer, I'm pure, I transcend war.

BARAK {recitative}

[Reflectively, not to Jael.]

I see here a noble foe, a mightier hero than I.

He stood by his duty when comrades forsook him,

He stood by his duty when Yahweh opposed him,

When Yahweh opposed through no fault of his own.

Too much water drowned his might ,

Too little betrayed him to Jael.

The waters of love he never enjoyed.



Now waters of life are denied him

JANEL {duet}

*I am the hammer to end all war,*

*To bring peoples' ambitions to ruin.*

*I am pure, I am Yahweh's, behold I transcend all.*

*I'm the instrument of His salvation!*

BARAK

*Behold this mother mad, a blind force,*

*Yahweh's instrument of his fell promises.*

*She is mad, she's forsaken, behold she is empty.*

*She brings Deborah's start to an ending.*

[End of Scene 2]

### Scene 3

[Same stage with the previous scene darkened and lights come up on a balcony where Sisera's mother sits with her friends.]

SISERA'S MOTHER {aria}

Why is his chariot so long in coming?

Why tarry the hoofbeats of his horses?

FRIENDS {soprano trio with contralto}

*Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?*

*A girl or two for every man?*

SISERA'S MOTHER

*Spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera,  
Spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered,  
Two pieces of dyed work  
Embroidered for my neck as spoil.*

FRIENDS

*Yes, yes, that's it.*

SISERA'S MOTHER {duet}

[Sisera's ghost stands to the side of Jael's tent where the light comes up on him faintly.]

*I feel great foreboding,*

*He's not late for spoil.*

*Why does his voice seem to call me?*

*I can't hear what he says but he'll never come home,*

*O my heart fears, my heart cries, my heart grieves.*

SISERA'S GHOST

*O mother, I call you,*

*Please give me a drink.*

*I'm tired and alone and so thirsty.*

*I can't find protection, there's no one to help me,*

*When they come, tell them no one is here.*

YAHWEH {recitative}

[Voice only, from offstage, amplified to be heard repeated continuously under the other singers after being sung once alone.]

Those who long for life shall have it yet.

*Those who long for life shall have it yet.*

SISERA {aria}

O mother, where am I? I'm not here, I'm not here.

O mother, there is no one here. I'm thirsty.

[Light comes up on another part of the stage with Deborah, Lappidoth, and

Abinoam at Deborah's Palm]

DEBORAH, LAPPIDOTH, AND ABINOAM {trio}

Yahweh triumphs to oppress his foes and blesses Israel.

So perish all your enemies, Yahweh!

May your friends be like the sun

As it rises in its might!

[Yahweh's line changes at the end of their trio, sung once alone and then

continuously through the following duet.]

YAHWEH {recitative}

Those who love death shall find it yet.

*Those who love death shall find it yet.*

[The light comes up on Barak and Jael at her tent; the Ghost of Sisera is off to the side.]

JAEL {duet}

*Yahweh is above all worth,*

*Nothing here's of value,*

*My killing's a sacrifice to Yahweh's name.*

*I am pure, I am Yahweh's, I am pure.*

BARAK

*Everything is strange, confused.*

*Women are the warriors.*

*The greater hero's slain by treachery,*

*And no love's returned, Sis'ra's death was alone.*

YAHWEH {aria}

Lives' meanings are only fragments of stories. Wholeness is only in me. Only I  
am pure.

[The final quintet combines the themes of Yahweh, Sisera's Mother, Deborah,  
Jael, and Barak.]

{quintet}

*Lives' meanings are only fragments of stories.*

SISERA'S MOTHER

*O my heart fears, my heart cries, my heart grieves.*

DEBORAH

*Yahweh triumphs to oppress his foes and blesses Israel.*

JAEL

*I am pure, I am Yahweh's, I am pure.*

BARAK

*Everything is strange, confused.*

*And no love's returned, Sis'ra's death was alone.*

SISERA' GHOST {recitative}

Why am I thirsty? Why am I hunted? Tell them that no one is here.

YAHWEH {recitative}

Come, Sis'ra, for Living Water. Only I say who's alone.

I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.

[The concluding music is the sound of the flood.]

**Curtain**