

Judges Ch.15
“Samson’s Conflicts with the Philistines”

Introduction:

This chapter continues the story of Samson, building on the events of the previous chapter and building toward the climax that is contained in the next chapter. The narrative in this chapter focuses on the conflicts that Yahweh created between Samson and the Philistines so that he would begin the process of delivering Israel from Philistine dominion.

I. Conflict Concerning Samson’s Abandoned Bride: (vs.1-8)

In verse one we read, “*After a while, in the time of wheat harvest, it happened that Samson visited his wife with a young goat. And he said, ‘Let me go in to my wife, into her room.’ But her father would not permit him to go in.*” Unlike the previous chapter, we are given an insight into the time of the year that the events recorded in this chapter took place. We are told here that the time was that of the wheat harvest which occurred in early May after the barley harvest. The timing of the event becomes significant later in the chapter. As to how long a gap of time existed between the events recorded in the previous chapter, and those that are recorded here, is impossible to determine. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that the expression “*after a while*” signifies something longer than a couple of weeks.

Interpreting the state of Samson’s relationship to the woman he had intended to marry is difficult because there is conflicting evidence from different cultures that has led scholars to different conclusions. One view is that though a marriage was usually consummated on the first night of the wedding feast, the bride often did not go to live with the bridegroom at the end of the seven-day feast. For several months the husband would regularly bring a gift and visit the bride in her father’s house (and stay the night) until all was ready for the move (he would be preparing the home that they would be living in during the interim). Therefore, there is no reason to believe that Samson’s present was meant as a reconciliation gift for his previous behavior, but merely the expected gift on a husband’s periodic visit. In Babylon this was typically a four-month period. In the Babylonian culture archeologists have found evidence that might suggest that this period of time was considered a probation period to see whether the bride could become pregnant. There is nothing concrete to suggest that is the case here.

Another view is that the marriage was intended to be consummated on the eighth day following the feast, and that it was customary for the bride to accompany the groom to their new home (in that scenario, the betrothal period was the time wherein the groom would prepare a home for him and his bride to share). If this was the practice among the Philistines and Israelites of Samson’s day, then there would be concerns regarding the status of the marriage after Samson’s pre-mature departure without her. If this were the case, then it is suggested that the goat was given to try to smooth over whatever anger his bride might have had toward him.

Given how Samson's father-in-law responds to Samson's intention to spending time sexually with his bride (the meaning of the wording "*go in to my wife*"), this latter view seems more likely to reflect what really happened.

In verse two we read, "*Her father said, 'I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister better than she? Please, take her instead.'*" Upon his return Samson soon discovered that his bride had been given to another by the girl's father who thought Samson hated her. The expression "*thoroughly hated*" is an emphatic expression that is a translation of what grammarians call an infinitive absolute. It is expressed by using two forms of the same verb and it indicates an intensification of whatever action is indicated by that particular verb. The word "*thoroughly*" is a common English rendering, but that translation tends to fail to convey the intensity found in the Hebrew expression. Here it would convey an absolute and complete hatred. Therefore, the father is conveying in strong terms that he did not expect Samson to return nor would he have expected that Samson still considered himself to be married to his daughter (it is interesting to note that the word translated as "*hated*" appears in the instructions in Deuteronomy regarding the responsibilities of a husband if he chose to divorce his wife). This incident suggests that this Philistine father had no more affection for Samson or commitment to him than Samson's parents had expressed regarding the woman who was to be their daughter-in-law. Instead, the man was acting as a dutiful father to lessen his daughter's shame. He went out and found a convenient solution to the situation that Samson had created and gave her to one of the men assigned to accompany Samson at the wedding. The rendering "*best man*" is somewhat misleading because there was no role in Ancient Near Eastern weddings that corresponded to the modern role of a best man. It simply seems to be that this person was responsible for acting as a liaison between Samson and the Philistine community. In what would have been typical in Ancient Near Eastern culture, the father, in to avoid any appearance of impropriety, offered Samson his next eligible daughter. That the father said that the second daughter was more attractive than the first. This would have seemed to be what would have satisfied a man who made decisions based on what looked good to him. However, apparently Samson's ego was offended at the revelation that the one he had chosen had been given to another; and it is further apparent that Samson's ego was just as central to who he was as his lusts.

Samson came into this episode with the expectation that his previous actions would have no consequences. This is another characteristic of Samson throughout the narratives about him. He tends to act on impulse rather than by deliberation (something the Proverbs characterize as foolish). Nor does he ever seem to think about the consequences of his actions (another characteristic of the foolish man).

In verse three we read, "*And Samson said to them, 'This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!'*" To be blameless in this sense means that he believed he was justified in the actions he was planning on taking. Though Samson was only conscious of his desire for personal revenge, Yahweh had orchestrated this situation so that Samson's temper would lead him to do precisely

what Yahweh had ordained him to do, act against the Philistines. It was through this personal offense that Yahweh stimulated Samson to fulfill his calling and begin the process of setting his people free from Philistine oppression.

This is a sad commentary on Samson that the only way that he would fulfill his God given task was due to self-serving motives.

In verses four and five we read, “*Then Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.*” As with many animal designations in Hebrew, the word translated as “fox” seems to have been used as a more generic designation, rather than a specific title of a species. The term seems to have been applied to jackals as well as foxes. From the practical standpoint it is likely that jackals are used here, since foxes hunt alone while jackals hunt in packs. Trapping this large a number of foxes would require not only great amounts of time but would also require Samson to cover a large range of territory. Whereas acquisition of jackals would be a more manageable task in that whole packs could be captured at once. We know that at this time, both species were native to Palestine.

Samson was unimpressed with the offer of marriage to his wife’s younger sister, so he gathered those jackals to once again vent his anger on the Philistines, this time by burning their grain fields. Verses four and five record the chain of events that lead to a fight with the Philistines that is recorded in verse eight. It is in this verse that the reader learns why the narrator mentioned the time of Samson’s return to Timnah. The Philistines occupied some of the best grain producing land in Palestine. Therefore, Samson’s actions were not merely intended as a nuisance, it would be a strike against the heart of the Philistine’s economy. By this point, the stalks of grain would have already been cut and would have been lying in piles awaiting the threshing process. The standing grain is that which has not yet been cut. Also, it would be some months later in the year that the grapes and olives would be harvested, but a fire in these groves would do irreparable damage to these crops as well (thus destroying the three most central crops those in Palestine would produce – Deut.7:13; Hag.1:11). What is described here is genuinely an epic feat. How Samson ever accomplished this is something we cannot know, but the record here that he did it somehow, was undoubtedly meant to be another indicator of the great physical prowess this man had been given by God. The common suggestion (that also seems to be the best explanation) as to why Samson chose to tie together 150 pairs of these animals rather than releasing 300 individuals with torches attached to them is that if the animals would have been released as individuals they most likely would have just run quickly in a straight line, and thus they would have travelled through the crops in a way that would have set only a minimum number of fires. However, tying them together meant that the jackals would frequently be slowed down by the confusion of the two animals trying to escape in

different directions as they ran erratically through the fields; thus, they would set off far more fires this way.

In verse six we read, “*Then the Philistines said, ‘Who has done this?’ And they answered, ‘Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion.’ So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.*” When the Philistines learned that Samson caused the destruction, they retaliated by burning his wife and her father to death (apparently destroying the entire Timnite household). Some speculate that this was done in a retributive sense (meaning they burned these individuals because the crime was burning the crops), however this is unlikely since this is the same punishment that the Philistines threatened Samson’s fiancé with prior to this episode when they wanted to use her to discover the secret to Samson’s riddle. Most likely this was something common in Philistine society. There is extreme irony here, for Samson’s bride and her family suffered the very fate she hoped to avoid by manipulating Samon into telling her the secret about his riddle.

Some suggest that in calling Samson “*the son-in-law of the Timnite*” the Philistines were recognizing the legitimacy of Samson’s claim on the woman and were saying that the father had created the situation. However, there seems to have been more to their actions than a deliberation of judgment; because they chose to murder the ones they felt had precipitated the event and yet took no action against the one who was actually responsible for the destruction of their crops. Therefore, it seems more likely that they concluded it would also be easier to strike out against this woman and her family than it would have been to engage Samson. This suggests that there was some awareness of Samson’s formidable abilities among the Philistines.

In verses seven and eight we read, “*Samson said to them, ‘Since you would do a thing like this, I will surely take revenge on you, and after that I will cease.’ So he attacked them hip and thigh with a great slaughter; then he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam.*” There is more irony in Samson’s charge against the Philistines in light of what he himself had done. There also does not seem to be a lot of thought behind his statement that he would take his revenge on the Philistines and it would end there. Apparently, it never occurred to him that this would lead to an escalation in the conflict rather than bringing it to a conclusion. Still, these events were unfolding to serve the purposes of God, not Samson.

There is a town near the Bethlehem that is in Judah named Etam (II Chron.11:6), but it was too far east to be involved here, besides Samson was not in a town. The most common identification is that this is another smaller town that had been given the same name that was somewhere in the vicinity of Samson’s hometown, Zorah, on the slopes of the Sorek Valley.

Motivated again by personal revenge, Samson slaughtered many of the Philistines and then walked to a cave in the rock of Etam. Other than this statement that this attack took place, we are told nothing else about this incident. The expression “*hip on thigh*” was a wrestling metaphor for a ferocious attack that completely humbled one’s enemy. So, this was a colloquial way of referring to

completely overpowering the Philistines he attacked. The reason for Samson's withdrawal to the territory of Judah seems to be that he somehow became aware that inflicting this slaughter had antagonized the Philistines enough that they would be coming after him with a significant force.

II. Conflict Concerning Samson's Destruction of Philistine Crops: (vs.9-20)

In verses nine and ten we read, "*Now the Philistines went up, encamped in Judah, and deployed themselves against Lehi. And the men of Judah said, 'Why have you come up against us?' So they answered, 'We have come up to arrest Samson, to do to him as he has done to us.'*" It is uncertain whether Lehi (which means "jaw") is a place name or some sort of a description of the area. The Akkadian language uses the word for jaw to describe the boundary of a territory, and some have felt that the same occurs here in Judges, though it is unattested elsewhere in the Old Testament. Those who consider it a place name generally identify it with the hill country of Judah in the vicinity of Beth Shemesh. That was about two miles from Zorah and the rock of Etam. The naming of this place came after this event, so it reflects how the place was known in the author's time. We know this because the name clearly reflected what Samson did here to the Philistines.

The language in this verse is military, and it indicates the escalation that Samson's actions had created. We are told that the Philistines assembled an army and marched into Judah in pursuit of Samson, ready to fight anyone who might seek to protect him. The men of Judah recognized that the Philistines were engaged in an act of war by coming into their territory with a large contingent of armed soldiers. But, instead of asking Samson to lead them into battle against their enemies (as was done with previous deliverers) the men of Judah sought to negotiate a peace with the Philistines, showing no desire to be free of Philistine domination, showing no loyalty to their fellow Israelite, nor showing any allegiance to the man Yahweh had sent to deliver them (seemingly unconcerned about why Samson had antagonized the Philistines).

In verse eleven we read, "*Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, 'Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What is this you have done to us?' And he said to them, 'As they did to me, so I have done to them.'*" When the Judeans learned the reason for the Philistine show of force, they sought Samson. They raised up an army of their own, about 3,000 men to arrest Samson and turn him over to the Philistines. Ironically sending an army against one of their own, rather than fighting their oppressor. Apparently satisfied with the status quo, they asked Samson, why he didn't realize the destructive thing he was doing. That the Judeans spoke of the Philistines as their rulers is another sad commentary on the state of the people of Israel. They had no interest in fulfilling the destiny to which God had called them (to drive their enemies out of their land and serve God wholeheartedly in it). Instead as dutiful subordinates they were prepared to surrender their deliverer because that would appease their masters. We also here get another insight into Samson's character in

that he echoes the same reason for his actions as the Philistines did for theirs “*as they have done to me, so I have done to them*” (vs.10). Once again, the entire episode demonstrates the spiritual degeneracy of Israel at this time. Not only does no one seek out Yahweh, the only way His will is advanced is in spite of His people, not because of them.

In verses twelve and thirteen we read, “*But they said to him, ‘We have come down to arrest you, that we may deliver you into the hand of the Philistines.’ Then Samson said to them, ‘Swear to me that you will not kill me yourselves.’ So they spoke to him, saying, ‘No, but we will tie you securely and deliver you into their hand; but we will surely not kill you.’ And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.*” What we read here is how Judah allied herself with the Philistines against God’s chosen deliverer. And apparently, they were even willing to kill their deliverer if that was the only way to appease the Philistines. Samson showed no interest in shedding Israelite blood, and did well to negotiate with his people that they do not do so either. Samson, on the basis of their vow not to murder him for the Philistines, surrendered himself to the people of Judah, who in turn intended to hand him over to the Philistines. To keep Samson under control they bound him with what is referred to as two new ropes. Ropes have been found preserved in Egyptian tombs that were made of green papyrus or of date-palm fiber. In Israel the stem of the sparrow-wort, a desert shrub, was one of the most suitable and convenient materials. New ropes would have been less brittle and therefore more resilient. The idea is that according to normal circumstances, Samson was adequately restrained.

In verse fourteen and fifteen we read, “*When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting against him. Then the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him; and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands. He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached out his hand and took it, and killed a thousand men with it.*” The scene of the Philistines coming toward and shouting at Samson was how soldiers would engage in a battle in the ancient world, and so this is not a peaceful arrest, but they had come to kill Samson. The shouting could also reflect victory chants, since they had apprehended their enemy. But God chose this dramatic moment to act in and through Samson against the Philistines. Nothing is said of Samson’s strength instead we read of what God does on His behalf; first, that the Spirit came mightily upon him, and second, the ropes are described as disintegrating on his arms as melted flax. This is not a metaphor of breaking something with physical strength, but of something simply falling apart of itself (as a result of the power of God). The jawbone of a donkey would have been about nine inches long and weighed a little less than a pound. Some interpreters suggest that since it would have been slightly curved, and if it still had the majority of the teeth in place, it would have been a fairly effective weapon. However, the narrator tells us that the jawbone was “*fresh*”, which would mean it would still have decaying flesh on it. This tells the reader two things; first, it would not be dried out yet, and thus would in fact be less effective as a weapon than an older bone, and second it was yet another dead

creature that Samson touched in violation of his Nazirite oath. The emphasis then is not on the power of Samson's weapon, but on the power that God supernaturally gave him that enabled him to be successful in this battle.

In verse sixteen we read, "*Then Samson said: 'With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men!'*" Samson slaughtered 1,000 Philistines who were armed for battle with a crude and inferior weapon. His words of triumph included a play on the dual meaning of a Hebrew word. It can mean either "*donkey*" or "*heap*" (i.e. pile). Thus, a friendlier English translation of Samson's poetic declaration is "*with the jawbone of a donkey I have made one pile after another, with the jawbone of a donkey I have killed a thousand*". The place where this happened was called Ramath Lehi, which means "*the hill (literally, height) of the jawbone*". Afterward this place was remembered as the place where heaps of dead bodies were piled up as a result of Samson's victory. If geographers are correct about where this took place then there really were no hills in the conventional sense; instead the area would be on an incline of some highlands coming out of the lowlands. Once again, the reader is to take notice that in Samson's victory song no mention is made of God at all, suggesting that Samson was not at all conscious of God's involvement.

In verses seventeen and eighteen we read, "*And so it was, when he had finished speaking, that he threw the jawbone from his hand, and called that place Ramath Lehi. Then he became very thirsty; so he cried out to the LORD and said, 'You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?'*" The next incident in Samson's life was God's provision of water for him to quench his thirst. Though the prayer sounds pious on the surface (as all do), the clue that things are not as they should is the self-oriented nature of the prayer; it is not about how God's lack of response might impact Israel, only the personal impact it would have on him. It also reflected no real thanksgiving to God, only Samson's complaint against God that He had allowed Samson to become so thirsty.

In verse nineteen we read, "*So God split the hollow place that is in Lehi, and water came out, and he drank; and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore he called its name En Hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day.*" Sedimentary rock is known to feature pockets where water can collect just below the surface. By breaking through the surface, the collected water can be released. The text does not explain in what way God opened up the rock. Though this is a common explanation for this provision, there is no reason to assume this is what is involved. Since it is a provision of God it could clearly be a completely miraculous event. Others even go so far as to assert that no spring has been located in this region that would suit the details of the passage to argue for such a supernatural interpretation.

We are told that the place where the water was provided was called En Hakkore (which means "*spring of the caller*") and we are also told that when the Book of Judges was written, this spring was still there. The name focuses on the greatness of the one who was able to move God to act, rather than exaltation of God for His

provision. Therefore, again this does not speak well of Samson's spiritual condition, nor of those who were commemorating what he did.

In verse twenty we read, "*And he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.*" Samson's leadership over Israel is summarized at this point. The twenty years (1075-1055 B.C.) would cover Samson's adult life until his death in Gaza (16:30-31). Samson was a contemporary of Samuel the prophet prior to the installation of Saul as king. The additional comment that this took place during the days of the Philistines reminds the reader that Samson did not free the Israelites from Philistine oppression.

Conclusion:

Samson had won a victory against the Philistine, but it made no difference in Israel's subjugation to the Philistines, nor did it serve to significantly weaken the Philistines militarily. Of course, Samson was not interested in ending Philistine dominion, he was only interested in maintaining his personal freedom and safety.

But the story was not over. The ongoing events that had begun with the contentious riddle would continue, and they would eventually lead Samson into a climactic confrontation with the Philistines that would begin to end their oppression of God's people.