

# Judges 13-14

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## *Lesson 6 2013 Series 1*

The formula that by now has become so familiar to us as we have read through Judges now appears for the last time (13:1a). The problem that plagued Israel from the beginning of that our journey through this record of Israel's history continues; the problem apostasy remains unsolved. The people are once again made to feel the displeasure of the Yahweh as he hands them over to the oppressive Philistines.<sup>1</sup> At this time we are told that they had been given into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

In response to Israel's sin we have become familiar with the cycle of him handing them over to an oppressive enemy. In the first five cycles, that have this formula of apostasy, Israel then cries out to Yahweh, or demonstrates repentance in some manner, but this element is missing in the final cycle (13:1). This omission is striking, but the reason for it becomes apparent as the story develops. "The

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<sup>1</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges an Integrated Reading* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1987), p. 162.

people had come to accept the Philistines as their overlords and no longer desired relief.” Even when they see the tremendous power and military prowess of Samson they refuse to rally around him, as had so often been the case in the previous narrative cycles with the judges. Even beyond this failure to follow, they even criticize Samson for his efforts and even hand him over to the enemy (15:9-13).<sup>2</sup> They have truly become sheep ready for the slaughter, comfortable in their confinement and lack of freedom.

This phenomenon is something to which human beings are particularly prone. They adapt and become accustomed to their surroundings even when those surroundings are oppressive, immoral or violent. In this instance, this acclimation to the dominance of the Philistines serves as a warning to those reading this that the same thing can happen to them. For us today the warning stands the test of time as we can so quickly accept the “new normal” that we forget our place before God and how we should relate to each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, “What’s Wrong with this Picture? Stylistic Variation as a Rhetorical Technique in Judges”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, (2009), 34.2: 171-182.



His father Manoah is from the tribe of Dan and we are told that his wife was barren (עָקָר). An angel of Yahweh (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה) appears to them announcing that Manoah's wife will conceive and bear a son (verse 3).

The angel appears to her and told her to be careful, not to drink wine or strong drink, not to eat anything unclean and for no razor to touch his head as he was to be a Nazirite ("consecrated") to God from birth. Normally a Nazirite vow was taken for a specific period of time to abstain from partaking of grapes or any of its products, whether they were intoxicating or not. The pledge also includes not cutting the hair and not touching a corpse. Such a person is called a Nazirite based on the Hebrew word נָזִיר, meaning "to separate, or dedicate oneself. The subject is dealt with in the Priestly code of Numbers 6:1-8 and the purpose of this law is to prescribe the proper ritual in the instance when the Nazirite period is aborted due to contamination by a corpse (Numbers 6:9-12) or if the rite is successfully completed (Numbers 6:13-21). When a layman undertakes a Nazirite vow, that person is given the status of

the priest, as that person is now considered “holy to the Lord” (Leviticus 21:6; Numbers 6:8).<sup>4</sup>

Actually the taboos given to someone undertaking a Nazirite vow more closely approximate those that are given to the high priest in that he may not contaminate himself by touching the dead, even those of his immediate family (Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:7). The focus of sanctity for the Nazirite is on the person’s head, the same as it is for the high priest (Exodus 29:7; Numbers 6:11b), abstention from intoxicants (Numbers 6:4) is stricter than what is even required of the high priest. Samson and Samuel were lifelong Nazirites (Judges 13:7; 1 Samuel 1:21). In this way they more closely resembled the prophets in that their dedication began not at birth, but at conception (Isaiah 49:1, 5; Jeremiah 1:5; cf. Amos 2:11).<sup>5</sup>

At verse 8, Manoah prayed to Yahweh to send the man that had brought the announcement of the conception to return in order to teach them what they are to do

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<sup>4</sup> Aaron Rothkoff, “Nazirite”, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 12 (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1972), pp. 907-910.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Rothkoff, “Nazirite”, pp. 907-910.

concerning the boy who is to be born to them. Perhaps it is the case that God knew the challenges that would be faced in raising up this boy as he granted this request and sent the angel again to them (verse 9). Manoah asks the angel what is to be the “rule of life”, “what is he to do”? The angel then repeats his words concerning keeping the Nazirite vow. He then invites the angel to stay for a meal. It is at this point (verse 16) that we are told that Manoah does not realize that this being is actually an angel. They simply thought that this was a man.

At verse 17 Manoah asks the angel his name and there is considerable speculation as to why he asks, but the text itself perhaps gives the best answer as it says “so that we may honor you when your words come true?” He is then asked by the angel why he wants to know, but then tells him that his name is “too wonderful” or “incomprehensible” (פלאי verse 18). This adjective occurs only one other time at Psalm 139:6. The root meaning of this word is “separate” from the ordinary. The verbal form is something like “surpassing understanding” (cf. Psalm 131:1; Proverbs

30:18; Job 42:3).<sup>6</sup> It seems to me that the sense here is something approximating the English word “holy” with the element of “incomprehensible” rolled in on top.

At verse 19 the account begins of Manoah offering the goat and grain offering on the rock to Yahweh. When the flame ascends upward toward heaven the angel of Yahweh ascends in the flame and it is at this point that Manoah and his wife fall to the ground in worship. It is in the departure of the angel rather than in the arrival of the angel that revelation fully comes to Manoah and his wife. They now realize that they have been in the presence of Yahweh’s holy angel and not simply in the presence of a human sent by him. God continually provides surprises to those who seek him and they are marvelous to behold.

At this point Manoah fears that they will die because they have seen God. His wife reasons that if God had intended to kill them he would not have accepted their offering or revealed to them things that were to come. We are then told that she bore a son and named him Samson.

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<sup>6</sup> C. F. Burney, *The book of Judges: with introduction and notes* (London: Rivingtons, 1918), p. 349.

Strangely this name seems to be related to the Canaanite sun god Shemesh rather than to Yahweh. Normally when the deity provides the birth announcement, the deity also provides the name. No explanation is given for this name being given here.<sup>7</sup> Others have simply related the name to the Hebrew name for “sun” and taken it to perhaps mean something along the lines of “little sun”.<sup>8</sup> We are told that the boy grew and that Yahweh blessed him. Verse 25 indicates that the spirit of Yahweh began to stir him and gives the location. This is surely a harbinger of things to come. Extraordinary things are coming soon.

We now move into chapter 14 where it is clearly some time later, as Samson is now a grown man. He travels to Timnah which is about three and one half miles south-west of Zorah. Here he sees a Philistine woman, and it is likely the case that they were not veiled when they walked about outside as the Hebrew women would have been.<sup>9</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 330.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, The Anchor Bible series, vol. 6A (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1975), pp. 225-226.

<sup>9</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 268.



perhaps would have made her stand out as different from the other women that he had seen day by day. Samson then goes and tells his parents to get her for him as a wife, but they try to convince him to find a wife among their kinsmen rather than from the uncircumcised Philistines? Samson is insistent that he wants the Philistine woman and tells his family that she pleases him.

At verse 4 we see the hand of God in the things that Samson is doing here. They are being done in order to promote conflict between Samson and the Philistines. Some English translations do not make it clear that the conflict being promoted here is between Samson and the Philistines and not between them and God. God needs no pretext. On the other hand if Samson attacks the Philistines, he in some sense would be seen as a representative of his people and reprisals would likely follow for his people. The text here is making it clear that God had ordained that Samson should suffer a personal affront at the hands of the Philistines. He would then be in a position to take personal revenge, as an individual, against the Philistines rather than as a

representative of his people.<sup>10</sup> The narrator keeps the fact that the Philistines had dominion over Israel at the forefront of our attention at 4b.

As was the custom, Samson's parents went down to Timnah to negotiate the wedding. On the way Samson is rushed by a "young lion" that seems intent on killing Samson. We are told (verse 6) specifically that the "spirit of Yahweh rushed (רָחַץ) on" Samson and he makes short work of the lion with his bare hands. Why is this story told, and why is it given here? There has been enormous speculation, but the first thing to note is that this story prepares us for the giving of the riddle at the wedding banquet. There may also be an indication of the tremendous power and strength that Samson has, and which will ultimately be brought to bear against the Philistines.<sup>11</sup> Samson does not reveal to his parents what he has done in killing the lion. This perhaps serves to set the stage for the riddle incident and the fact that he did not reveal any of this information insures that he

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<sup>10</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 269.

<sup>11</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, pp. 334-335.

can be certain that no one, not even his own parents, are privy to this information.

Verse 7, Samson goes down and talks with the Philistine woman and she continues to please him. In time, Samson returns to marry her (verse 8) and while he is on the way he turns aside to see what has become of the carcass of the lion that he had killed previously. He finds that the carcass is now infested with bees that have made honey. It is reported that in the Arabian desert the summer heat will dry up the moisture of a dead body within twenty-four hours, virtually turning them into mummies that do not emit a bad odor. Bees will not approach a carcass that has become putrid.<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that this is still an extraordinary situation, as bees are not known to commonly settle in a carcass. This is a miraculous happening, almost as miraculous as the killing of the lion in the first instance. The indication is that the hand of God is involved here.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 270.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Emmrich, "The Symbolism of the Lion and the Bees: Another Ironic Twist in the Samson Cycle", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2001), 44/1: 67-74.

Samson scrapes out the honey from the lion carcass, eating it as he travelled. When he came to his father and mother he gave them some of the honey as well. He does not tell them the source of the honey. Many think this now the second time that Samson has broken his Nazirite vow, with the first time being when he touched the carcass of the lion and now eating food that is unclean because of it coming from a dead carcass. Some do not think that the vow was broken at either of these points, as his strength is not taken away by God, but only when his hair is cut: Crenshaw cautions against coming to such a conclusion because of the peripheral role of the vow in the narrative.<sup>14</sup> Samson does not actually take the vow himself, it is imposed upon him perhaps by his mother's agreement. This is a point of stark disagreement among scholars.

Manoah travels down to the woman to complete the negotiations for the marriage. Samson then makes a feast according to the custom of the Philistines and does not follow the traditions of the Israelites. If it had been a

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<sup>14</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Samson A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1978), pp. 129-130.

custom of the Israelites no explanation would have been necessary.<sup>15</sup> We are then informed that when the people saw Samson they provided thirty companions to be with him. Some see this as a move that is intended to honor Samson and cement relations between the two people groups. Others see this as perhaps an attempt to protect Samson, while still others see this as perhaps a hostile act intended to protect the Philistines from Samson.<sup>16</sup> If this was intended to protect the Philistines they needed more men; they do not have nearly enough.

Samson entertains the wedding crowd by providing a riddle and challenges them to solve it within seven days (verse 12-13). What would normally be a safe “acting out of animosities” will in this instance turn into a violent conflict. The giving of gifts at the end of such a contest, which is meant to give a clear winner without violence, will not work in this instance. The spirit of God rushes onto Samson after the contest is complete. Over and over again the tension

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<sup>15</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 271.

<sup>16</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 336.

will be ratcheted up until the explosion of violence comes.<sup>17</sup>

The riddle is given and for three days the guests struggle with it and cannot answer it (verse 14).

On the fourth day (verse 15) they turn to the new strategy of trying to get Samson's wife to coax the answer to the riddle out of him. They threaten to burn her and her father's house with fire if she does not agree. She then goes to him and through tears, manipulation, and nagging, wrestles the answer from Samson (verse 17). Samson seems to have a particular weakness for women. Before the sun goes down on the seventh day the men give the answer to Samson (verse 18).

It is at this point that once again the spirit of Yahweh (verse 19) rushes on him and he goes down to Ashkelon and kills thirty men of the town, takes their spoil and gave their festal garments to those who had given the answer to the riddle. The spirit of Yahweh nudges the angry, humiliated, Samson in the direction of conflict with the Philistines. This is the beginning of the war that will be initiated between the

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Niditch, "Samson a Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1990), 52:608-624.

Philistines and the Samson. This act of Samson can prove problematic for modern readers, but it should not be viewed in isolation or judged by modern standards. Just as Ehud's assassination of Eglon initiated a war of liberation for the people of God this act would be viewed as an act of war against the oppressive Philistines by the Israelites.<sup>18</sup>

From the very beginning of Samson's conception it was the intent of Yahweh to use him to deliver Israel from the hands of the oppressive Philistines. He was born to ignite a conflict and the spirit of Yahweh empowered him with the strength and temperament to initiate a war. It must be noted that Samson may not have understood his actions in this light. Samson seems to be unaware of the role that he is to fulfill in being the instrument of God's liberation for his people. He is simply expressing his selfish indignation at being cheated. God, however, uses this very human, selfish, petty response to Philistine trickery as a weapon of war.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert B Chisholm, Jr., "Identity Crisis: Assessing Samson's Birth and Career", *Bibliotheca Sacra* (2009), 166: 147-162.

<sup>19</sup> Robert B Chisholm, Jr., "Identity Crisis: Assessing Samson's Birth and Career", 166: 147-162.

The story of Samson challenges our concepts of God in so many ways. God endows Samson with super-human physical strength but he in multiple other ways he seems so flawed. He has a weakness for women, a terrible temper, a disregard for purity and yet in all of this the power of God is displayed all the more prominently.



# Synopsis

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This account begins with the familiar formula of Israel doing evil in the sight of Yahweh, but missing any sense of repentance or longing for change on the part of Israel. In this instance Yahweh initiates a plan that begins with an angel being sent to the wife of Manoah, who was barren and announcing to her that she would conceive and bear a son. She is given instructions about what to eat and drink and for the hair of the boy not to be cut, as he was to be a Nazirite from birth. He was also to begin the liberation of the Israelites from the hand of the Philistines.

After some prayer there is an additional appearance of the messenger to Manoah and his wife. The message is reaffirmed to them and it is after offering a sacrifice to Yahweh that the angel ascends back to heaven in the flame. It is at this point that Manoah realizes that the messenger is actually an angel of Yahweh and he and his wife are seized by fear. Manoah fears they are going to die, but is reassured by his wife that if God had wanted to kill them he would not

have accepted their sacrifice nor told them the things that were to come. Samson is born and we are told that the spirit of Yahweh began to stir in that region.

The next thing we are told as we go into chapter 14 is that Samson is grown and he chooses a wife from the Philistines and wants his parents to arrange the marriage. His parents try to encourage him to choose a wife from among their kinsmen, but Samson insists on the Philistine. We are told that God was involved in this in order to create a pretext to act against the Philistines. While travelling down to Timnah a young lion attacks Samson and he rips it apart with his bare hands with ease. He tells no one about this.

Later when he is returning for the wedding to Timnah he goes to the carcass and finds that bees have inhabited it and made honey. He takes some of the honey to eat and gives some to his parents. At the feast for the wedding Samson gives a riddle to the thirty attendants and after three days they have not figured out the answer. They threaten the future wife of Samson in order to get her to get

the answer from Samson. She nags the answer out of Samson gives it to the guests and they repeat it to Samson who is furious. Samson goes down to Ashkelon kills thirty men of the town, takes their clothes and gives him to his thirty wedding guests to pay off his wager. We are then told that Samson went to his house and the Philistine women was given his best man as wife.

## Main Points

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1. God acts on behalf of his people even when they fail to repent.
2. God uses what we would see as flawed human beings to powerfully accomplish his will.
3. God protects his people carefully as when he sets the stage of the conflict between Samson and the Philistines rather than between Israel and the Philistines.

# Questions

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1. Why do you think God would help people who do not even want his help?
2. Why do you think God announces his intent to send Samson to Manoah and his wife?
3. Why would someone make a vow to God?
4. What does this story teach us about how God can work in the lives of his people?
5. What does this passage teach us about God's plans for people?
6. Why do you think Manoah was afraid when he realized that the messenger was an angel of Yahweh?
7. How would you react if this had happened to you?
8. What do you think this story teaches us about God?
9. What does this story teach us about how God can use flawed people to accomplish his will?
10. What do we learn about the spirit of God from this passage?
11. What questions does this passage of scripture leave in

your mind?