

Judges 15-16

Lesson 7 2013 Series 1

The story of Samson continues into chapters 15 and 16 and the level of the conflict with the Philistines continues to intensify. Events begin here that will ultimately see their conclusion with Saul and David. As we move into chapter 15 there is an attempt on the part of Samson to reconcile with his wife. At the time of the wheat harvest, which is likely about May, Samson goes to visit her. The precise interval of time that has elapsed between the wedding feast and this visit is not known. It could be as much as a year after the wedding feast.¹ The father of the Philistine woman is convinced that Samson “hated” (אִשָּׁא) her and therefore had rejected her (verse 2). Basically he thinks Samson has divorced her. In light of this her father gave her to the “companion”, or “friend” (חָרֵט) of Samson, this will have been the best man. The implication is that she was given to someone else as wife.

¹ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 274.

This attempt at reconciliation by Samson to his wife and the offer of the younger sister by the father is unsuccessful.² At verse 3 it becomes apparent that this incident will become a point of provocation to initiate conflict. Younger and prettier will not pacify Samson. He has seen what is just in his own eyes and he wants that very thing with no substitution. Samson leaves the father with one parting shot that indicates that this is certainly not the end of this incident.³ At verse 3 Samson indicates that he feels justified in what he is about to do to the Philistines. It is interesting that he sees his conflict with the Philistines as a whole and not with the family of his wife.

Samson then goes out (verse 4) and catches three hundred foxes (שׂוֹנֵי לַיָּם), or the word can also mean jackal and that may be a better translation here than fox. He then ties the torch to the tails of two of them at a time and then sets the torches alight and sets them loose in the fields of standing grain, vineyards and olive groves (verse 5).

² James L. Crenshaw, *Samson A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1978), p. 77.

³ Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 340.

Needless to say utter chaos and devastation will have occurred (verse 6). A similar incident was recorded in Ovid⁴ and some have suggested that the Romans borrowed this tale from the Phoenicians who kept alive this account in Judges and then through time passed it on to the Romans.⁵

The Philistines want to know who has done this. They are then informed that Samson did, but they are also informed of the cause behind the incident and that it is because of Samson's bride being given to his companion. The result was that the Philistines went and burned Samson's wife and her father. I am not really sure what the Philistines expected this to accomplish, perhaps they blamed her and her father for inciting Samson. They may have hoped to appease him by exacting revenge for him on the people who had treated him unjustly.⁶ If that is the case clearly the two concepts of justice are very far apart.

What this incident actually did was make Samson even more determined to exact revenge on the Philistines

⁴ Ovid, *Fasti* IV 681 – 712.

⁵ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 275.

⁶ Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2012), pp. 154-155.

(verse 7). In verse 8 it says that Samson struck them down “hip and thigh with great slaughter”, (καὶ ἐπάταξεν αὐτούς ἐπὶ μηρὸν πληγὴν μεγάλην in the Septuagint only has hip or thigh one time rather than the two times that are in the Masoretic text). This is likely some form of idiom that is now lost to us. The word that is used here in both the Masoretic text (הַצָּרָה) and the Septuagint can also be translated as “plague” (πληγὴν). It is most likely that here the translation should be something like slaughter, but there is certainly more than a hint that this is something in which God is involved in, adding an additional element of mystery here.

This time after killing the Philistines Samson has the good sense not to return home. He goes down instead to a place that was likely near the town of Etam, to hide.⁷ The response of the Philistines to what Samson had done was to invade Judah and prepare for battle at a place named Lehi, which is unknown to us today (verse 9). The people of Judah seem perplexed and ask why they are being attacked

⁷ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 275.

(verse 10). The answer given is that they wish to take Samson prisoner and do to him what he had done to the Philistines. The men of Judah then take three thousand men down to the cave at Etam and let him know that he is causing trouble for them because he is upsetting the Philistines that rule over them.

Samson tells them that he is only doing to the Philistines what they have done to him. In this instance, rather than joining forces with the judge of God the men of Judah side with their oppressors and tell Samson that they have come to take him prisoner (verse 12) in order to hand him over to the Philistines. The Israelites have truly become a domesticated people that are comfortable with their oppressors, and with their loss of freedom. They have now even become compliscent in enforcing the rule of the Philistines. How far have they fallen that they would be comfortable with the rule and authority of this foreign power and even prefer it to the rule and authority of Yahweh. It appears that they have forgotten Yahweh almost

completely and at the very least he seems to have become irrelevant in their daily lives.

Samson asks them to promise not to kill him and then he agrees to go with them. They bind him with two new ropes and lead him from that place to Lehi where the encampment of the Philistines was located. When the Philistines saw him approaching they began shouting, but the spirit of Yahweh “rushed” upon Samson and the ropes that bound him dissolved from his hands. He finds the fresh jawbone of a donkey (verse 15), which means it is still heavy and tough. When it dries out it would become light and brittle.⁸ Samson then uses the jawbone to kill a thousand men.

When he finishes with his killing he leaves reciting a poem in Hebrew (verse 16) that is filled with wordplay and filled with bravado. It should be noted that there is no mention of God or his role in this great victory over the oppressive forces that rule over God’s people. Samson seems to have become subject to something that plagued

⁸ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 277.

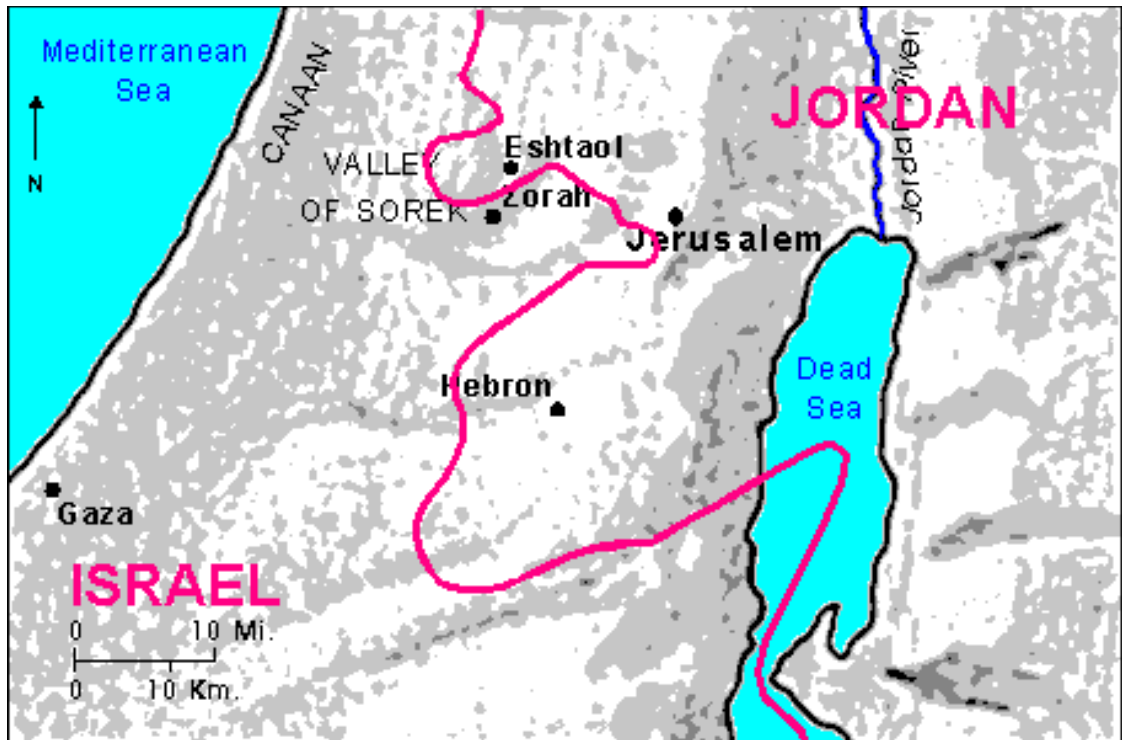
Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah he takes credit for himself. This should perhaps not be surprising us when we are told that every citizen amongst God's people does what is right in their own eyes.⁹

When Samson finishes reciting his poem (verse 17) he throws away the jawbone and the place of the slaughter becomes known as "Ramath-lehi", the "hill of the jaw". Samson does not acknowledge God or give him credit for the victory, but when he is thirsty then he calls upon Yahweh (verse 18). He indicates that he is thirsty enough to die and does not wish to fall into the hands of the uncircumcised. God then opens a place and water comes forth and revives the spirit of Samson and that place becomes known as "the spring of the one who called" (*En-hakkore*), which is at Lehi (verse 19).

At verse 20 we are told that Samson judged Israel "in the days of the Philistines twenty years". None of the other judges judged during a time when a foreign power still

⁹ Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 343.

controlled Israel.¹⁰ In most of the other accounts of the judges this would have been the end of the story, but here there is still more story to come as the story of Samson continues with the first verse of chapter 16 indicating that Samson went down to Gaza to a prostitute (16:1).



The people of Gaza were told that Samson had come and so they circled around Gaza and waited for him all night at the city gate (verse 2). Their intent was to wait until first light and then kill Samson, but Samson got up at midnight (verse 3) and took hold of the doors of the city ripped them

¹⁰ Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 344.

out, put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron, which is a distance of almost forty miles.¹¹ The people of Gaza were likely very fortunate not to have had a confrontation with Samson. After this incident Samson falls in love with a woman named Delilah that lived in the valley of Sorek. The “lords” (סרני)¹² of the Philistines went to Delilah and asked her to find out the source of Samson’s strength and they promised her eleven hundred pieces of silver for this information (verse 5). This is estimated to be about one hundred and forty pounds of silver from each of the “lords” of the Philistines, which were likely five in number.¹³

Delilah sets to work; it seems almost immediately, trying to gain the secret to Samson’s strength (verse 6). Samson gives her an answer that is incorrect telling her that if he is bound with seven fresh bow strings he would be as weak as anyone else (verse 7). The lords of the Philistines provide her with the bowstrings and she bound him with

¹¹ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 279.

¹² The word used here for “lords” is a Philistine loan word and not the normal Hebrew word for “lord”.

¹³ Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 349.

them (verse 8). With people waiting in hiding Delilah shouts that the Philistines are upon him and he snaps the strings easily and his secret remains intact. Samson seems to be totally blind to who this woman really is and her motivation. It appears that she does not care for Samson at all.

Delilah realizes that she has been tricked and accuses Samson of mocking and lying to her and continues her pleading to be told the source of his strength (verse 10). This time Samson tells her that if he is bound with new ropes he would be as weak as anyone else (verse 11). I think I remember someone had already tried this once, but apparently Delilah is unfamiliar with the details of the incident at Lehi. She binds Samson and this time there are men waiting right in the inner chamber, but once again he snaps the ropes like thread.

Once again Delilah accuses Samson of mocking and lying to her and asks him once again to reveal his secret (verse 13). This time he tells her to weave the seven locks of hair with a web of woven material and then made tight.

While he slept she does this. This time the story is abbreviated and she shouts and he pulls away the pin, the loom and the web (verse 14). You would really think Samson would have grown very suspicious of this woman by now. She once again accuses Samson of mocking her, but this time also accuses him of not loving her (verse 15).

This time she goes further and nags and pesters him until he is nearly tired to death (verse 16). This nagging and pestering went on for days, and finally he told her the truth about his vow to God and his hair having never been cut (verse 17). It is not the case that the strength was somehow in his hair, but as long as the symbol of his sacred calling remained the divine gift from Yahweh would be with him.¹⁴ Delilah then goes and tells the lords of the Philistines that he has really told her the truth this time (verse 18). They come with the money in their hands. They seem very eager to deal with Samson, but certainly not eager for a confrontation with him like the one that they had at Lehi.

¹⁴ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 282.

She lets him fall asleep (verse 19) on her lap and then she calls a man to shave him while he is sleeping. He was weakened and his strength left him. Once again she says the “Philistines are upon you Samson”! and he thinks he will go out as he had the other times and shake himself free (verse 20). This time is different as the narrator makes clear, the true source of his power, Yahweh, has left him. The Philistines seize him and gouge (literally “bored out”: verse 21) out his eyes. This was a common form of mutilation in ancient times (cf. 1 Samuel 11:2; 2 Kings 25:7).¹⁵ The Philistines then take him down to Gaza in bronze shackles and they put him to grinding at the mill in the prison. This was normally work that was reserved for women and the Philistines make Samson perform this work in order to insult him. Rather ominously (verse 22), we are told that his hair has begun to grow again.

Time passes and we are told that the Philistines gathered in order to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon and to rejoice over the capture of Samson (verse 23).

¹⁵ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 283.

When the Philistines perceive Samson to be in their power they begin praising their god for delivering their enemy, this one who had killed a great many of their people into their hands. When their hearts were “merry” they have Samson brought from the prison to entertain them (verse 25) and they place him between the pillars: This was at the two middle columns that supported the hall where the leading people of the Philistines were assembled.¹⁶

Samson then asks his attendant to let him feel the pillars on which the house rested so that he could lean against them (verse 26). There were about three thousand men and women in this building and it is at this point that we actually have Samson calling to Yahweh and he pleads with Yahweh to remember him and strengthen him once more for one more act of revenge on the Philistines for the loss of his eyes (verse 28). Samson still does not display a great concern for the people of Israel. He still seems self-centered and perhaps arrogant, but God is so powerful and wise that he can even use a self-centered and arrogant man

¹⁶ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 284.

to accomplish his will. Not even arrogance and selfishness will thwart the will of God.

Samson then grasps the columns and presses against them and pleads with Yahweh to let him die along with the Philistines (verse 30). This is really only the second time that we see any real indication of faith in Samson. He strains with all his might and the house falls on the lords of the Philistines and all the people who were with them. He killed more on this day than he had killed during his entire life. This is seen as a great victory for Samson and the people of Yahweh. It appears that despite the fact that a judge could no longer count on calling Yahweh's people to repentance and to rally them for wars of liberation, God finds a way to impact his people and to call attention to his presence and power.

We are then told (verse 31) that Samson's brothers and all of his family came and took his body and buried it in the tomb of his father Manoah between Zorah and Eshtaol. He judged Israel for twenty years. The story of Samson challenges our understanding of God and his relationship in

a variety of ways. The power of God comes upon this seemingly arrogant, vengeful, selfish, sinful man and in spite of the intent of Samson, God is so wise and powerful that his will is still accomplished and ultimately Samson turns in humility and petition to his God.

Hebrews 11

³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted,

tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy.
They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves
and holes in the ground.

³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for
their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since
God had provided something better so that they would
not, apart from us, be made perfect. ¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Heb 11:32–40). Nashville:
Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Synopsis

This section begins with what appears to be an attempt on the part of Samson at reconciliation as he returns to the house of his wife with a goat. Samson then finds out that her father thought that Samson hated her and basically divorced her and so he has given her to Samson's best man. Samson is offered his wife's younger and prettier sister, but Samson will not have anything other than what he came for in the first place. He indicates that he is going to hold the Philistine people responsible for what he perceives to be an injustice.

Samson then catches three hundred foxes (or jackals) and ties the tails of them together two by two, attaches a torch, lights it and then he turns them loose in the wheat fields, olive groves and vineyards with them spreading fire and chaos as they go. The Philistines are outraged and find out that Samson did this and why. They go and burn Samson's wife and father and then Samson goes and kills them. After this Samson goes and

stays in the cave at Etam and the Philistines come and make a raid on Lehi and the men of Judah ask why they have done this. They are told that it is because of what Samson did and they take three thousand men and go to Samson in order to turn him over to the Philistines.

The men of Judah bind Samson and take him to their masters the Philistines. As the Philistines see Samson they begin to shout and at that moment the spirit of Yahweh rushes on Samson and he snaps the ropes that appear to have been weakened by God, picks up a donkey's jawbone and kills a thousand men. After a taunting poem and the battle is over Samson is so thirsty that he cries out to God who causes water to come forth from the ground to quench his thirst. We are told at this point that Samson judged Israel for twenty years even though they still remain under the dominion of the Philistines.

In chapter 16 we are told that Samson goes down to Gaza to see a prostitute and the people of Gaza encircle the city, at least the gates and wait for him to come out.

They appear to have hoped and expected this to be in the daylight but Samson decides to leave at midnight and he rips out the gates and carries them away depositing them on a hill near Hebron some forty miles away. After this we are told that Samson falls in love with Delilah and that the lords of the Philistines offer her great wealth to find out the secret of Samson's great strength. Finally, after several failed attempts she finds the secret has Samson's hair cut and then his eyes are bored out. He then is led away captive and bound to prison to perform insulting work.

We are ominously told that they failed to keep his hair cut short and finally at a festival of offering to Dagon the Philistines bring the blinded Samson to their hall of celebration to celebrate and praise Dagon. Samson prays to God for his strength one last time and he pushes the columns over that hold up the roof and the building collapses killing more Philistines than he had killed during his lifetime. Samson dies in the incident and is

buried by his family with his father. He had judged Israel
twenty years at this point.

Main Points

1. God can use flawed and imperfect people and circumstances to accomplish his will.
2. God can bring even the powerful and arrogant back to him.
3. God never gives up on his people.

Questions

1. Why do you think Samson waited so long to return for his wife?
2. Why do you think he returned for her at all?
3. Why do you think Samson attacks the Philistines instead of his wife's family?
4. Why do you think the people of Judah sided with the Philistines rather than with Samson, who was their judge?
5. Why do you think God chose to use an instrument of vengeance like Samson?
6. What do you think we are meant to learn from the incident at Gaza?
7. Why do you think Samson allows himself to be tricked by Delilah?
8. Why do you think Samson fails to learn from his encounters with Delilah that she is untrustworthy and to avoid her?
9. What does this narrative teach us about the power of

love?

10. How can Samson be a hero of the faith and also have committed suicide?
11. What lessons can we learn about faith from the story of Samson?
12. What can we learn about God from the story of Samson?