

Judges: Introduction to the Samson Cycle

This session will consist of tying up some loose ends and preparing the soil for digging into the Seventh Cycle of Judges or the Judgeship of Samson. The Samson Cycle is the last cycle in Judges. The remainder of the book after Samson, Judges 17.1-21.25, will deal with the religious and moral degeneration of Israel. Our remaining sessions in Judges should prove quite challenging. But first we need to look at the continuation of the list of secondary Judges begun in 10.1-5. Three secondary judges come after Jephthah and before Samson. Each of the brief details given for these secondary judges begins with the preposition “after” and indicates that we should understand this list as being sequential.

Judgeship of Ibzan: 12:8-10

Ibzan is another one of the judges for which there is not a lot of detail. The name Ibzan, only occurs here in the Old Testament, and comes from the root word meaning “swift.” In rabbinic tradition, Ibzan is the same person known as Boaz in the Book of Ruth, although there is no real evidence of this. There is a dispute about Ibzan residence as there are two Bethlehems, one is in Zebulun or northern Bethlehem, mentioned in Joshua 19:15, and the other is the in Judah or southern Bethlehem, the birthplace of David. Some have argued that since there is no tribal reference associated with Ibzan, it is more likely that he would be from the larger, better known, southern Bethlehem of Judah.

Ibzan, like Jair (10.4) had thirty sons and was additionally blessed with thirty daughters. He also had thirty daughters-in-law, the wives of his thirty sons, who were all from outside his clan. As for his thirty daughters he sent them abroad, meaning they were married outside the clan and likely outside the tribe. This would have cemented both clan ties and tribal ties and thus avoided inter-clan and inter-tribal conflict and extended the scope of his political influence. This would indicate that tribal identity was passed on through the father and not the mother.

It is apparent that from the writer’s perspective Ibzan was a man interested in building families and communities with sound foundations. The writer tells that he governed after Jephthah and that his tenure lasted for seven years, and he died and was buried in his hometown of Bethlehem.

Judgeship of Elon: 12:11-12

The writer of Judges gives us just the barest of information for Elon. We are that the second judge on this short list was Elon the Zebulunite. The name Elon is associated with the tribe of Zebulun, as the son of Zebulun (Gen. 46:14; Num. 26:26). Elon judged Israel for ten years, died and was buried “in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.”

Judgeship of Abdon: 12:13-15

The last of the three judges is identified as Abdon the son of Hillel, from Pirathon. The name Abdon appears as a name of a Benjamite in I Chronicles 8:23 and 8:30. The name has the meaning of “service.” He was a son of Hillel, the only appearance of the name Hillel in the Old Testament, though much later it became a very common rabbinic name. The town of Pirathon was in Ephraim, and so this shows that he was an Ephraimite.

Abdon's term is said to have been "distinguished above all as a period of peace and prosperity." He, like Gideon before him, was blessed with what was thought to be the ideal "royal" family. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, and they each rode on their own donkey, an indication that this was a time of peace and prosperity as in Judges 5:10. Abdon judged Israel eight years, died and was buried in Pirathon.

The writer's purpose for placing this short list of Judges here is likely twofold. First, it suggests that these narratives are not intended to provide us with all the nitty gritty details of the events that took place in Israel during the settlement period. The writer has taken certain accounts and shaped them to suit his thematic purposes. Secondly, we are also reminded that Israel's history was not all oppression or prosperity, but rather a blending of the two. We are well aware that the times of peace and prosperity seem to bear the marks of a false sense of peace, prosperity, and tranquility. We find ourselves looking past the moment to where the shoe will drop and Israel will find itself deeply embroiled in another cycle of sin—here enters the seventh cycle and the story of Samson.

The Seventh Cycle: Samson - 13:1-16:31

Beginning in 3:7, we have seen the gradual disintegration of the paradigm that provided the composition of the cycles of Israel's sin, Israel's oppression, Israel's cry for relief, and Yahweh's deliverance of Israel. We saw this paradigm in the story of Othniel (3:7-11), as well as in the accounts of Ehud (3:12-29) and Barak (4:1-5:31). We noticed that the writer began increasing the detail in selected segments of the paradigm even though the writer's "insertion of the Song of Deborah" in the Barak Cycle tended to blur the distinctive parts of the paradigm. In the Gideon Cycle, all the parts of the paradigm are still evident but we begin to see the writer becoming more "interested in the personality of the deliverer." We saw that starting in the Jephthah cycle the paradigm itself began disintegrating. There were no particular "references to Yahweh raising up the agent of deliverance and in the end the land enjoying peace and/or security." The breaking down of the paradigm becomes exacerbated in the Samson cycle. Let's look at five examples that support this thought.

First, rather than a battle of deliverance for Israel, the writer provides us with several episodes from the judge's "private life." In the Samson Cycle, the paradigm is markedly changed. Israel's sin and their subsequent oppression are not described with any detail but are simply mentioned (13:1). There is no cry of oppression by Israel and that they are being oppressed at all is just "hinted at in 14:4 and 15:11." The writer's description of "Yahweh's raising up a deliverer takes an entire chapter (13:1-14:4), but thereafter the deliverer never rallies the Israelite troops in battle against the oppressor, and there is no announcement of victory over the oppressor."

Second, the writer's prior interest on Israel's "national and tribal deliverance" is supplanted by his apparent compulsive concern with Samson's personal adventures. The writer's focus is on how Yahweh continues to deliver Samson from the precarious situations that he had got himself into with the Philistines.

Third, Israel, rather than crying out to God about the oppression of the Philistines, adopted a policy of peaceful coexistence with the enemy. We see Samson interacting with the enemy and the tribe of

Judah doing all that it can not to do anything that would “upset the apple cart.” As Daniel Block points out, “Yahweh must seek and create an occasion to disturb the relationship between oppressor and oppressed (14:4).”

Fourth, as the paradigm is breaking, we see the role of the deliverer being changed. While in the Samson Cycle, we see the role of the deliverer described in more detail than in any other cycle, the deliverer, Samson, is shown to be a greater part of Israel’s problem “rather than a lasting solution.” Samson “embodies all that is wrong with Israel.”

There is a strong case that could be made for the life of Samson, as portrayed by the writer, being a type of Israel. First, there was a supernatural element involved in both their births. Second, both Samson and Israel are called to a high life of separation and devotion to God. Third, Samson has an immature personality as Israel had an immature faith. Fourth, he is drawn to foreign women just as Israel is drawn to foreign gods and plays the harlot. Fifth, both Samson and Israel experienced oppression and bondage of the enemy. Sixth, Samson cried out to God from his oppression as Israel often did. Seventh, Samson was blinded physically as Israel was blinded spiritually. Eighth, Samson was abandoned by God and did not know it; and God hid His face from Israel, and Israel did not know it. Ninth, eventually the relationship between Samson and God was restored, and Samson’s strength was renewed, just as Israel was strengthened with the rise of a new judge.

Fifth, the writer’s interest in women, which played a critical role in the Barak and Jephthah cycles and was highlighted in the story of Abimelech, becomes almost identical to the writer’s interest in the deliverer. Women are crucial aspect of every episode of the Samson cycle. Samson’s mother is presented in chapter 13, as being the role model of Israelite womanhood, “pious, loyal, sensitive, logical, and theologically astute.” Yet, all of the females with whom Samson chooses to associate with will reflect his downward ethical and spiritual spiral. As we will see in the Samson Cycle, Samson’s tragic life story is influenced and marked by relationships with four women: His mother, his wife, a prostitute, and an antagonist.

The seventh cycle can be divided into three major parts which include the accounts of Samson’s birth (13.1-24) and death (16.28-31). The first major section is the account of Samson’s birth (13.1-24) and focuses primarily on Samson’s parents and the revelation that their child will have a special destiny. The two remaining sections are divided geographically and are self-sustaining accounts of Samson’s personal victory over the Philistines. Section two is known as Samson’s Timnite Affairs (13.25-15.20). This section reveals the prompting of the Spirit of Yahweh and Samson’s crying out to Yahweh in 15.18-20. The third section deals with Samson and his affairs with women in Gaza; the prostitute (16.-3) and Delilah (16.4-22). This section ends with his return to Zorah, in the hands of the Philistines, where he had first been stirred by the Spirit of Yahweh.

Let’s look briefly at Samson’s foes and the oppressors of Israel, the Philistines. As we will learn in this seventh cycle, Yahweh’s judgment on Israel came in the form of delivering them into the hands of the Philistines. The Philistines were not a Semitic or Canaanite group, but a people who originated from the Aegean area and arrived in Canaan from two directions: overland through Anatolia (Turkey), on down

the coast; and by sea, via Crete and Cyprus. The Philistines were intent on advancing toward Egypt until they were engaged in battle by Ramses III in 1194 BC in what is now Turkey. In an indecisive victory, Ramses III kept them from entering Egypt, but the Philistines did settle on the coast between the Sorek River in the north and the Egyptian border at Raphia in the south. The Philistines were to play a major role in Israel's history and became the main reason that Israel sought to have a king (I Sam. 8). The Philistines represented what is best described as a Minoan-Greek civilization and customs, and, throughout biblical history, they show elements of Greek thinking and culture. Now for the third time in the Book of Judges, the Philistines become a problem for Israel; the two preceding times were in 3:31 and 10:7.

The Samson Cycle represents a transition from the Philistines being dealt with by a judge to the Philistines being dealt with by a king. So, while the Ammonites were pressing Israel on the east side of the Jordan with Jephthah fighting against them, the Philistines were pressing Israel on the west side of the Jordan as Samson began his wars and his twenty years of judgeship during the Philistine oppression. The final breaking of Philistine power came not with Samson but with David in II Samuel 5.

The duration of the Philistine oppression was forty years. The forty years of Philistine oppression included the prediction of Samson's birth, the birth and life of Samson, and the twenty years of Samson's judgeship, mentioned in Judges 15:20 and 16:31. That would mean that he began his judgeship at a very young age, perhaps even before he was twenty years old. Twenty years before Samuel's defeat of the Philistines (I Samuel 7), the enemy had sent back the Ark of the Covenant after keeping it for seven months. Most of Samson's activities took place during these following twenty years. His marriage to a Philistine woman took place a year or two before the Philistine victory at Shiloh. This means that Eli (another judge and contemporary of Samson) died shortly after the first of Samson's wars on the Philistines. All Samson's activities accrued within the forty-year period mentioned. The forty years of Philistine oppression ended when Israel defeated the Philistines under Samuel in I Samuel 7.

The Samson Cycle is unique within the Book of Judges, and its uniqueness can be seen in sixteen ways. First, the period of subjection is twice as long as the longest previous oppression, forty rather than twenty years. Second, whereas Othniel, Ehud, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah all delivered Israel from the oppression of their enemies, Samson did not deliver them from the Philistines. His twenty years of judgeship was during their period of servitude, not after. Third, while other judges were raised up at a time of crisis to rescue Israel, Samson was called to do so before his birth. Fourth, of the seven references to the Holy Spirit in this book, four of these are in connection with Samson. Fifth, of the twenty-three references to the Angel of Yahweh, thirteen of these are in connection with Samson. Sixth, only Samson was a Nazirite. Seventh, only of Samson is it said, "The Lord departed from him." Eighth, Samson alone, among the judges, entered into a fateful and fatal relationship with the enemy. Ninth, only Samson died in captivity, and, upon death, still left Israel in servitude. Tenth, Samson's history connects directly with the judgeship of Eli and the story of Samuel. Eleventh, the wars of deliverance give way to a series of episodes in the deliverer's private life, and there is no record of Israel's response to the oppression of verse 1 nor a record of Samson's issuing a call to arms to defeat the Philistines. The focus is not on national deliverance but on the personal deliverance of Samson individually for the difficulties he gets himself into because of his escapades. Twelfth, Israel's attitude

toward the oppression has changed; and in place of crying out because of the burden of oppression, they co-exist with the Philistines. Samson, the deliverer, freely fraternizes with the enemy. Judah resists any action that might upset the status quo, and God must be the One who creates the disturbances and causes the deliverer to act; otherwise he would not. Thirteenth, the role of the Judge changes in that Samson fully becomes part of the problem rather than part of the problem's lasting solution. Fourteenth, there are more acts of moral and spiritual weakness ascribed to Samson than to any other judge. Fifteenth, women play a major role in Samson's life-four specifically: his mother, his unnamed first wife, the unnamed prostitute of Gaza, and the Philistine woman Delilah. Sixteenth, what is missing from the Samson Cycle is Israel's cry for help. On the contrary, as the Tribe of Judah shows, Israel seems to be content living with Philistine oppression. In our next session we will look at the account of Samson's birth (13.1-24).