

044 Samson and the Timnite Affair Part 2

In our last session we left off with Samson angry at his wife for having revealed the answer to his riddle to her people, leaving his wife at her father's house and going back to his house with his parents. Samson paid his debt by taking the lives of thirty men in Ashkelon, taking their clothes and giving them to the wedding companions with whom he had made his bet. These two actions begin a change reaction in chapter fifteen that reads like a modern day suspense thriller, characterized by non-stop action. Chapter fifteen is broken into four episodes taking place in four different places, dealing with retaliation, and "reach their climax with the Spirit of Yahweh rushing upon Samson." The writer increases the action and the intensity of each successive episode, leaving us, like Samson, exhausted.

Samson Returns for His Wife (15.1-3)

Chapter 15 opens with the writer alerting us to the fact that some period of time has passed since Samson's wedding and his angry return home leaving his wife behind. We are informed in v1 that Samson returned to Timnah during the wheat harvest to claim his wife. The implication of the wording in v1 is that Samson was intending to consummate the marriage yet it could also mean that he was just interested in trying to make things right between them. In either case it seems that he thought that a young goat was the way to his wife's heart. It is clear from the subsequent events that Samson, while he returned home in an angry fit after losing his bet, had no clue that his actions might be interpreted as meaning he wanted to break off the marriage. Samson is in for a rude awakening.

As he arrives at his wife's house he is met by his father-in-law who would not let him into the house. The father-in-law then drops the bombshell that thinking that Samson wanted absolutely nothing to do with his wife, he gave her to another man. Whether or not the father-in-law's conclusion were right or wrong, what is apparent is that he held his son-in-law in about that same esteem that Samson's parents held their daughter-in-law, not very high. The father-in-law cannot undo what he has done so he offers what he thinks is a reasonable solution, he will give his younger daughter to Samson instead, telling Samson that she is even more attractive than her older sister. The father-in-law has as much luck telling Samson how to find a wife as his parents did. Almost predictably, Samson's rage is unleashed and it is directed at all Philistines.

Verse 3 describes Samson's reaction to his father-in-law's news and it isn't good news for the Philistines. "Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them."

Samson will shortly fulfill Yahweh's plan expressed in 14.4, as he alone is about to break down the comfortable coexistence between the Israelites and the Philistines.

Samson Burns the Fields (15.4-8)

These verses deal with three episodes and the chain reactions by the participants to each of those episodes all leading up to the "then he went down" in v. 8. As we learned from the writer in verse one it was the time of the wheat harvest in the Land of the Philistines. The topographical features that made

the land of the Philistines ideal for chariot warfare also made it ideal for growing wheat. Similar to our Midwest, "Philistia was grain country." By burning the grain in the fields as well as the grain that had been harvested, "Samson strikes at the heart of the Philistine economy." Not only did he burn the grain but he also burned the vineyards and the olive groves. It may be a bit of an understatement to say that Samson's methodology for accomplishing this feat is somewhat amazing but then we are reminded with God all things are possible. Today, it might take you several days to catch just a couple of foxes let alone three hundred, and to tie their tails together, to use them as a torch that would stay lit long enough to bring about the damage implied in this passage would itself take a miracle, yet, for Samson, that was all in a day's work. Surely God's hand was in this. How this was actually done will likely always remain a "mystery" to us, yet, can we be surprised by anything Samson is able to do? As Daniel Block says, regarding Samson and the burning foxes, that no matter what we may think "it fits into the picture of a man who kills a lion singlehandedly, kills thirty Philistines, breaks brand new ropes that bind him, slays a thousand Philistines with a jaw bone, and brings a house down over thousands of reveling Philistines." It would seem nothing is impossible for our superhero. As we said in an earlier lesson, all of Samson's actions are about Samson. We are only given glimpses of his personal achievements and his personal failings, and these all stem from his personal actions. The deliverers that we have looked at previously led troops against Israel's oppressors and defeated them in battle providing Israel a brief respite from their enemies. Defeating Israel's oppressors (the Philistines) is not on Samson's radar screen, his only interest in defeating the Philistine is motivated by revenge and the revenge he wants is with his own hands. He is indeed the deliverer that has the greatest potential and yet delivers the least. Block tells us: "Samson is a man with a higher calling than any other deliverer in the book, but he spends his whole life doing his own thing."

Verse 15:6 reveals the reaction of the Philistines to Samson's burning their crops. The Philistines are able to identify Samson as the man who burned the crops, but they also learn the motivation behind his actions and the Philistines' response to this information makes it seem that they side with Samson, as they learn that he was provoked by his father-in-law giving his wife to another man. By their actions against the father-in-law and his family, the Philistines seem to recognize Samson as the legitimate husband of the woman. The Philistines, perhaps thinking to appease Samson, burn Samson's father-in-law and Samson's wife to death. As we spoke of in our last session this brings about the ironic situation that Samson's wife tried to avoid when she was threatened by the companions that they would burn her and her father to death if she did not give them the secret to the riddle, and in spite of everything she and her father die anyway.

In verses 15:7-8 the intensity in this narrative is ratcheted up another notch. The Philistines are totally unprepared for Samson's response to their actions. Rather than having appeased Samson, the Philistines' actions have served to only raise Samson's anger to a greater level. Samson reacts by seeking to get revenge on those that burned his wife and her family. His response is immediate and deadly as he attacks and slaughters many of the Philistines. Samson, recognizing that his actions will make him "public enemy number one," flees to the territory of Judah and hides in a cave. We are left with a picture of Samson hiding from his enemies in a cave like a common criminal.

Samson Captured (15.9-13)

Verses 9-13 can be broken into two parts. In vv. 9-10 the Philistines enter Judah to find Samson. The Philistines suspect the Judahites are harboring Samson. The Philistines send an army large enough to deal with both the Judahites if they don't agree to help them capture Samson and an army that is large enough to find and capture Samson. Judah fears the Philistine army's presence is a prelude to war. Judah seeking to avoid a conflict with the Philistines capture Samson and turning him over to the Philistines. The commentator Daniel Block notes: "Instead of calling on Samson to lead them in battle, however, as previous deliverers had done, they try to negotiate a peace. Their question, "Why have you come to fight us" - seems innocent enough. Little do they realize that the Philistine aggression is instigated by God to break the status quo between Israel and the enemy."

The Philistines answer is simple and direct. They have come to take Samson prisoner and "to do to him as he did to us." Revenge is now their guide as it has been with Samson. The primary players are now following the rule of "do unto others as they have done unto you."

What was a localized scrap between Samson and some Philistines has now escalated into a possible confrontation between Judah and the Philistines which is exactly what God has been planning – yet Judah, rather than responding to the Philistines in any number of positive ways, takes the path of least resistance and take it upon themselves to capture Samson and bring him back to turn him over to the Philistines. Again, peaceful coexistence reigns regardless of cost. "The Judahites would rather deliver their countrymen into the hands of the enemy and live under that enemy's domination than fulfill the mandate Yahweh had given them to occupy the land and drive out the enemy."

In 15:11 we read that Judah dispatches three thousand men to capture Samson at his hideout in Elam. Consider the irony of this picture – Judah rather than using their forces against the Philistines, sends their army to go out and capture one man and bring him back to turn him over to their "enemy." It would seem that Judah believes that it has more to fear from Samson than the Philistines. This present us in the church today with an interesting analogy to consider.

The conversation between the forces of Judah and Samson speaks volumes. As previously noted Judah wants to maintain the status quo with the Philistines at all cost. They are content in their role of the oppressed and are not interested in rocking the boat and apparently want nothing to do with anyone who is interested in rocking the boat. One of the costs that Judah is willing to give up is the sacrifice of a Godly appointed leader to the Philistines. It is obvious that Samson is equally disliked and mistrusted by both Philistines and Judahites.

Samson is engaged in a cycle of revenge with the Philistines, a game of one-upmanship, he does something and the Philistines get their revenge and a bit more, then Samson gets his revenge and a bit more, and so it goes. Daniel Block observes: "When enemies with this kind of morality meet, there is no hope of resolution, only a final solution."

Verse 15.12 makes it clear that Judah is not going to challenge the rule of the Philistines, they would rather hand Samson over to the Philistines than risk a confrontation with their oppressors. Judah makes

no effort to hide their intentions from Samson – they have come to take Samson captive and hand him over to the Philistines.

Verses 15:12b-13 reveal an odd fact: Samson is afraid that the Judahites will kill him. It seems strange in the fact that Judahites told Samson that they only came to get him, to hand him over to the Philistines. Samson does not seem to trust his own people any more than he trusts the Philistines. Perhaps Samson thinks that death at the hands of his own people is more shameful or embarrassing than death at the hands of his enemies, but after asking them to reaffirm their intentions, he surrenders himself to the Judahites and allows himself to be bound with “new ropes.”

Samson’s Victory (15.14-19)

The Judahites bring Samson back to Lehi where the Philistines are camped and the Philistines upon being alerted of the arrival of the Judahites with Samson in tow charged out to meet them, shouting as if they were going into battle. As if the shouting woke Yahweh up, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson and the new ropes that bound him became like “charred flax” and dropped from his hands (verse 14).

Verse 15 describes the carnage as Samson, grabbing the jawbone of a donkey, slaughters a thousand Philistines soldiers. This reminds us of Shamgar’s victory over the Philistines using an ox goad. The writer’s mention that Samson grabs a “fresh” is interesting. A fresh jawbone would not be as useful a weapon as one that had been bleached and hardened. But more importantly, as Block points out, “being fresh it was still considered part of a corpse, in which case we witness another violation of the Nazirite vow.”

15:16 shows us again the immature side of Samson as he composes a song immortalizing his victory over the Philistines. Samson, writing his own song, takes all the credit for his victory. There is not even a hint of a mention of Yahweh in this couplet and we cannot but help ask ourselves if Samson has a clue about who is really in control and who is ultimately responsible for all that is happening in his life.

“With a donkey’s jawbone, I have mad donkeys of them;

With a donkey’s jawbone I have killed a thousand men.”

15:17 tells us that the place where this battle took place was renamed from Lehi to Ramath-Lehi, which means “Jawbone Hill.” Some commentators suggest or believe that Samson himself was responsible for the name change and that it was just another example of Samson trying to immortalize his victory. Regardless, Jawbone Hill as a name, acts as an appropriate reminder of what took place here.

Verses 15:18-19 would seem to form the natural conclusion to this chapter, with v20 being added to serve as a concluding bracket for chapters 14 and 15. The writer’s mention of Samson’s thirst is surprising and unexpected. We are drawn back from thoughts of a miraculous victory to the realization of the necessity of satisfying basic needs, in this case the need for water to satisfy our thirst. It is because of Samson’s physical need for water that he cries out to God. We would like to recognize that Samson has admitted his dependence upon Yahweh in his prayer but that would be giving Samson more

credit that he is due. Even in attempting to give God the glory, Samson shines the light upon himself. Consider:

First, it was Samson's personal need that made him cry out to Yahweh and while it could be understood as an acknowledgement of God's role in his victory, it seems more likely that it is an example of Samson whining to God that God hasn't done enough for him. This would be in keeping with Samson's on-going, self-centered, approach to life.

Second, it is almost laughable that he calls himself God's servant. Where does that come from? There is little if any evidence that we have been given that would suggest that Samson understood himself to be a servant of Yahweh, in his thinking, his attitude, or his actions. One has the impression that this is another attempt at self-aggrandizement, that he is anointing himself as God's servant rather than just recognizing that God's has anointed him His servant.

Third, look at who Samson is concerned about in his prayer to Yahweh. Does he mention his parents, his people, or Israel? Is there any concern for God's glory, for God's purposes being accomplished? No, even his prayer is all about him. He wants God to not let him die and he wants God not to let him be captured by the Philistines.

Lastly, think of the number of times that Samson has violated his Nazerite vows concerning defilement. Samson's stated concern about being defiled if he falls into the hands of the "uncircumcised" touches on the unbelievable. Did he all of a sudden "get religion?" Even in prayer it seems that Samson is consistent, his motives are purely selfish.

The shocking part of these two verses is not Samson's prayer or its content but in 15:19 we are told that Yahweh answered Samson's prayer. Not only did Yahweh answer Samson's prayer but look at the miraculously way He answers it. Elohim, the generic term for God, split open a rock, releasing water that revived Samson's spirit. Even in this Samson cannot drop the self-promotion. Daniel Block explains it this way: "Not one to miss an opportunity to leave his signature on the map, Samson named this spring near Lehi, En Hakkore, a name it still bore at the time this account was written. The name is ambiguous. It may be interpreted either as "the spring of the caller" or "the spring of the namer." In either case it focuses on him and memorializes the power of this man to manipulate and move the hand of God rather than the gracious action of God on his behalf.

Verse 15:20 marks the conclusion of the narrative of Samson's Timnite affairs, with the comment that Samson judged Israel twenty years. In contrast to earlier notes we have read after the accounts of the deliverers," there is no reference to rest for the land." In fact the mention of the phrase "in the days of the Philistines" reminds us that this period bears the stamp the Philistines rather than the Israelites. Block point out: "The narrative leaves the reader wondering how this egotistical and self-centered man could have governed Israel for two decades. The fact that he did must be seen as a fulfillment of 14:4. Samson was Yahweh's agent, beginning the work of delivering the Israelites from the Philistines."

Conclusion

The account of Samson in chapter 15 continues the writer's developing portrait of Samson the Judge. Like chapter 14 we find little if anything positive or attractive in the man or his personality. We come away with a distinct impression that he is ruthless, self-centered, and no one we would particularly care to be associated with at any level. Yet in spite of everything Yahweh continues to work. The writer has again demonstrated that God does not always operate on the basis of obedience and disobedience, blessing or curse. Here, Samson, a type of Israel, deserves nothing, and yet we see Yahweh hearing, seeing and delivering him time after time. The message of the writer to us is one of hope, that God's "agenda for his people cannot fail, despite the people's seeming determination to commit national suicide."