

045 Samson and Delilah

The writer of Judges continues his account of Samson's problems with women in Chapter 16. The concluding verse in chapter fifteen gave the impression that the Samson cycle was completed. Yet the writer has more say as he continues to build his case against Israel in general and Samson in particular. This concluding chapter of the Samson cycle is divided into two parts and will highlight Samson's continuing love affair with Philistine women.

The Prostitute of Gaza (16:1-3)

Samson's Gaza affair is simple and brief. Sampson visits a prostitute in Gaza and the Gazites plan to capture him when he leaves the prostitute in the morning. Leaving earlier, around midnight, Samson eludes capture and escapes by picking up the gates of the city and carrying them off.

This simple story raises far more questions than it answers.

- 1) Yahweh is not mentioned. Unlike the other episodes of Samson, why is there no reference to the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him?
- 2) Why are there "no editorial comments" in this narrative?
- 3) Who is the prostitute? She is unnamed like Samson's mother and his Timnite wife.
- 4) What is Samson doing in Gaza which is 45 miles from his home and of the five major Philistines cities is the one furthest south?
- 5) Samson was well-known to the Philistines near his home but how had his reputation carried this far from his home and who was it that notified the Gazites that he was in their town at the prostitute's?
- 6) What did the Gazites surround or does the word as used here just mean to gather?
- 7) What were the Gazites planning to do to either capture or kill Samson? Block asks the question: "What were the men planning to do "until the light of the morning?" - The NIV's "at dawn we'll kill him" obscures the difficulty of the Hebrew.
- 8) If surround and out in force, how did Samson get past the Gazites and then move the city gates without alerting anyone especially if there were guard rooms with guards flanking the gates?

- 9) How did Samson move the gates without the Spirit of the Lord coming on him and if the Spirit of the Spirit of the Lord did come on him why does the writer not mention it?
- 10) We are told that Samson carried the gates to the top of a hill opposite Hebron. Is this the same Hebron that was in the territory of Caleb and if it is, “how could he carry these gates forty miles (as the crow flies) uphill from the coastal town to the highland city?”

All of these unanswered questions beg another question: “What is the purpose of this text?” Daniel Block provides us with three likely explanations. First, Block suggests that the writer is using this episode to continue to reinforce the image he has created of Samson to this point. This episode portrays “an Israelite inexorably drawn to the Philistines and continuing to be driven by his senses. He has no scruples about fraternizing with the enemy. But this relationship is even more reprehensible than the one in chap. 14, since he does not bother to marry this woman. Furthermore, in going to Gaza to fraternize with a pagan woman he has gone as far as he could from his geographic and spiritual home.” The writer, by not making mention of the Spirit of God, forces us to consider the possibility that Samson’ strength was natural rather than a gift from God.

Second, this brief episode adds to the picture being painted of the Philistines. The anger against Samson no longer confined to a backwater locale, Samson has achieved fame and recognition, and he has become the Philistines “Public Enemy #1.” Samson evidently has “a bounty on his head throughout the land.”

The third possible purpose for this narrative is that it provides the reader for the reason that Samson is in Gaza initially. Gaza is the place of Samson’s greatest, most dramatic, and deadliest episode. It is the place where all the unnamed women in Samson’s life will give way to the one named woman, Delilah, and she will be the one to bring about his destruction

Samson and Delilah (16:4-22)

Samson and Delilah is the longest episode in the Samson cycle. The themes that permeate this episode are “knowledge and ignorance,” and are reflected in the verbs that the writer uses throughout the episode. Verbs like: “to see” (vv. 5, 18); “to tell, declare” (vv. 6, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18a, 18b); “to know” (vv. 9, 20); “to declare falsehood,” that is, “to lead away from knowledge” (vv. 10, 13); “to deceive” (vv. 10, 13, 15); and the question, “How can you say” (v. 15). Daniel Block concludes that “Samson has become a riddle to the Philistines.”

The great irony of this episode of Samson is that when the Philistines learn the truth of about Samson, Samson loses his source of power and it is not his hair but most importantly, his God. Throughout this episode we are left with the image of a man that cannot see the forest for the trees. He is so enamored with both Delilah and what he thinks are his own strengths that he is oblivious to what is transpiring around him. We wonder how this man could be so dense as to not have learned anything from the episode with the riddle and his wife and see the same issues at play here with Delilah. Perhaps it is nothing more than the fact that as Block suggest that: "In this man we witness a classic example of "all brawn and no brain."

The theme of testing is also dominant in the Samson cycle. Daniel Block provides the following examples of testing from this final episode for us.

First, the Philistine lords test Delilah: is she a Philistine, or is she Samson's lover? Second, Delilah tests Samson: Does he love her, or is he just teasing her? Like the riddle in 14:14, for Samson this test becomes a trap. Third, Yahweh tests Samson: Will he remain true to his Nazirite vow (vv. 17, 20)? Verses 15-17 contain the keys to the development of this motif as all three tests come together and Samson admits that the game is more than a test of love. Fourth, Yahweh tests Dagon: Can he stand up for himself and his people (vv. 23-30)? Fifth, Samson tests God: Will he intervene to defend his agent in the end (vv. 28-30)? Indeed in this section every speech is a test. As for Samson, the principal character, although he is able to shed the ropes and the web that bound his hair, he fails everyone's tests, ultimately being trapped in his own words.

The Stage Is Set (16.4-5)

Verse 4 is a bridge from the previous episode with the prostitute to the beginning episode with Delilah. It provides us with a great summary of Samson's problem, "he fell in love." Throughout the Samson cycle this has been Samson's problem. Samson has become the answer to the riddle in 14.18. Block declares, "Samson's love of women is sweeter than honey and stronger than a lion."

Samson's problem was not necessarily his love of women but his love of Philistine women. Samson falls in love with a woman from the valley of Sorek, which was occupied by Philistines. Instead of falling in love with a woman from the high country of Hebron, which likely would have been an Israelite woman, Samson falls for a woman who is from the lowlands and is a Philistine. Hard to read this without the refrain of "looking for love in all the wrong places" playing in your mind. And for the first time in the Samson narrative a woman is named. No one is sure what the name Delilah means. Commentators have suggested many possible interpretations but it appears that the name may simply be a Philistine name whose meaning has been lost.

In verse 5, the writer provides us with the ingredients of a modern day James Bond novel. Expectedly, an Israelite man who is a judge falling in love with a Philistine woman is going to raise some issues, and issues we have in great abundance. The Philistines are somehow made aware that Samson is in Gath and that he is in love with a woman named Delilah. The city fathers of Gath, along with other Philistine leaders from the four major cities, seek to recruit Delilah to help them capture Samson. "Like an ancient version of a spy movie, this plot involves a heroic male, a female agent, money, love, death, and ironic reversal."

These "lords of the Philistine" want Delilah to discover the secret of Samson's strength and report to them. The writer expresses their objectives in four verbs: "find out" where his great strength lies; "overpower him"; "bind" him; "afflict" him. The lords of the Philistines persuade Delilah to help them by offering her eleven hundred pieces of silver each, an exorbitant reward, if you will, of 5500 pieces of silver. Like everything that happens to Samson, even the reward for helping in his capture is exorbitant.

Working the Plan (16.6-20)

The Philistines discovery of the source of Samson's strength is made up of four stages. Each stage is similar to the others and each successive stage builds the tension and heightens the suspense.

The first attempt is reported in 16:6-9. Delilah agrees to cooperate with the Philistine lords and begins to question Samson about the source of his "great strength." Perhaps surprised at Samson's willingness to divulge the secret of his strength, Delilah relays what Samson has told her that if he is bound "with seven fresh bowstrings not yet dried," he will become like any other man. The Philistine lords give Delilah the seven bowstrings and she binds him with them. She wisely tests his statements by announcing the arrival of the Philistines, the cords disintegrated like yarn in a fire. The first attempt by the Philistines was a failure. Do you think Samson was intentionally violating his Nazerite vows by telling Delilah to use the tendons (bowstrings) of dead animals to bind him?

The second attempt is in verses 16:10-12. Delilah accusing Samson of lying to her, asks him again to give her the secret of his strength. Samson quickly gives her a more believable answer. Samson tells her that if he is bound with new ropes his strength will be like that of other men. Just like the previous time, Delilah ties him up with new ropes, and announces the fact that Philistines are attacking her. Samson easily breaks his binds.

The third attempt as told in 16:13-14 is a step closer to the truth as it at least involves his hair. Samson tells her that if she would weave the seven braids of his hair into the fabric on a loom and then tighten them with a pin, he would be as vulnerable as any

ordinary man. It is hard to envision how this would have been done. Perhaps Samson laid down close enough to the loom so Delilah could weave his hair into the fabric and tighten it with the pin. Delilah follows his instructions, Samson falls asleep, Delilah signals the arrival of the Philistines, and Sampson just pulls out the pin and was free.

The fourth and last attempt is contained in 16:15-17. After failing three times to extract the secret for Samson's strength from him, Delilah breaks out the heavy artillery, she follows in the footsteps of Samson's wife and plays the "you don't love me" card. She complains that he does not really love her and that there can be no love if Samson is not willing to share the innermost secrets of his heart with her. "This had been the issue with regard to the riddle of the wedding, and this is the issue regarding the riddle of Samson's strength." The writer's reference of Delilah nagging him to death foreshadows coming events.

In 16:17 Samson finally gives in and tells her everything. He tells her that if his hair is cut (shaved) his strength would leave him. He even explains that he is a Nazirite and that he was set apart to God since birth. Why would he tell that to a Philistine? This confession reveals more than the source of his strength; it tells us that Samson was aware that he was indeed set apart to God. Yet still it seems obvious the Samson does not take his vow seriously, he gloss over his responsibilities in fulfilling his vow; "he simply does not take it seriously. Like his strength, and the people around him, it is a toy to be played with, not a calling to be fulfilled."

It is also significant that Samson refers to God by the general designation Elohim instead of the more personal designation of Yahweh. From Delilah's perspective then his vow could have been made to any god. And Block tells us that may have been just as well: "Given the character and conduct of the man, the narrator probably was relieved to have Samson put it this way; it limited the damage he was causing for the reputation of the God of Israel."

Verses 16:18-20a reveal that like "the riddle in 14.18, sweetness has won over strength," and Delilah has won and Samson has fallen. Betrayed by love and betrayed by his own lack of commitment to his vows, Samson is now powerless.

In this last attempt, Delilah recognizes the truth when she hears it. There is no need of a test or a trial and the Philistines return again and even bring their silver with them. Delilah gets Samson to fall asleep in her lap and has a man come and cutoff Samson's seven braids. Like the previous episodes she announces the arrival of the Philistines but unlike the other times, this time she turns Samson over to them and her job is successfully completed.

Verses 16.v20b-22 is the climatic event of Samson's capture by the Philistines. In v19 the writer tells us that Samson's strength has left him. Now in v. 20 the writer reveals

the greater tragedy, that Yahweh has left him. This is the real tragedy. There can be no worse fate than to be abandoned by God and now Samson, the one divinely chosen by God has been abandoned by Him. As we have seen throughout the cycle, Samson has played with his gifts and taken them lightly, only to come to this point of realizing that everything he had, he has thrown away.

16:21 reveals a great irony of the Samson cycle. Samson, the man who did what he thought was right in his own eyes is turned into a blind man as the Philistines gouge out his eyes. Throughout this cycle Samson has come and gone as he pleased, did what he please when it pleased him and now his life is one of bondage, imprisonment and humiliation. Samson is apt proof of the adage "How the mighty have fallen." "Overnight a man with the highest conceivable calling, the divinely commissioned agent of deliverance for Israel, is cast down to the lowest position imaginable: grinding flour for others in prison."

In 16:22 the writer provides us glimpse of hope with the simple statement "But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved." All is not lost.

One Final Act (16.23-31a)

Verses 23-24 report the gathering of the rulers of the Philistines and their people to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon and celebrate the capture of Samson. Samson was put on display before the crowds and caused the people to breakout in praise of their god.

Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands;

The one who laid waste to our land, and multiplied our slain.

In 16:25-27 the people called for Samson to be brought out so that he might entertain them. The Philistines brought Samson out and stood between the pillars at the center of the building. In v. 26 our attention shifts "to the man who has been placed in the center of the crowd and of the building, the man who was the victim of Philistine torture and the butt of Philistine jokes." What a pathetic image of our hero, having to ask a servant to put his hands on the pillars so that he could lean on them. Verse 27 tells us that the temple was crowded with more than three thousand spectators, some in the temple and many on its roof.

Verse 16.28 tells us of Samson making one last impassioned plea to his God, to Yahweh. His plea is in two parts. In the first part Samson asks Yahweh to remember him, to act on his behalf and secondly he asks Yahweh to strengthen him one last time so that he may "get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Finally, when deprived of strength, and about as low as one can get, Samson calls upon the God who was the true source of his strength finally acknowledging the role of Yahweh in his life

Yet again there are issues with Samson's prayer. Samson's requests are still all about him, all about him getting his revenge. He makes no requests for his people, his nation or for the purposed of his God. We should also note that Samson switches from the use of the personal God, Yahweh, to the generic term, Elohim, in the middle of his pray as he asks for his revenge. We are left to deal with Samson's total lack of concern for the divine agenda or the fate of his people. "All he seeks is personal vengeance."

In 16:29-30 Samson gets his revenge. Samson extends his arms so each of his hands could touch the pillars on each side of him and utters his final words: "Let me die with the Philistines." Then he pushes on each pillar causing them to fall and that with the weight of the crowd on the roof destroy the temple, killing more than more people that he had killed previously and he dies as he had lived, among the Philistines. The Nazirite, set apart for the service of God, dying as he had lived, with the uncircumcised Philistines. The tragedy of Samson's wasted life is summarized in the words that "he killed many more when he died than while he lived." Samson's epitaph reads "He accomplished more for God dead than alive."

Verse 31 concludes the Samson cycle. "He had led Israel twenty years."

Final Observations

Samson's life reveals the consequences of the Canaanization of Israel. Samson operates according to the "do what is right in his own eyes" rule. Throughout the Samson cycle Samson never deviates from this rule, he never operates "in anyone's interest but his own." The people that enter into his life are simply tools to be used for his benefit, for his good. There is no sense of servant leadership, where the leader puts the interests of those he is leading ahead of his own, to be found in Samson's life. When each man is doing right in his own eyes, how can he see the rights of others? This is one of the ultimate results of the Canaanization process.

Another result of the Canaanization process is that those in leadership positions will frequently operate on the "the basis of their senses rather than on the basis of principle." Samson was able to kill his enemies by the hundreds and thousands, but he was without principles. He sought to gratify his physical needs and driven by lust his relationships with women were based on his needs not principles. How could he ever "love," when the most important thing to him, was him?

Samson provides us with a classic example of the fact that often those with greatest gifts neglect the purpose(s) for which they were given those gifts and often end using their gifts for their own betterment. Like many men before and after him, Samson wasted his gifts. And that which is wasted God takes away. Samson takes his place upon the pile of human tragedy, of a life of unfulfilled potential.

As we have seen in the previous deliverer cycles, if there is anything positive to come out of Samson's life, it is only due to the gracious intervention of Yahweh. And like Samson, "if Israel will eventually emerge as an identifiable entity from the dark period of the judges, this says nothing about the quality of her leaders. Yahweh is determined to build his people. Even if she becomes her own worst enemy and her human leaders fail her in the end, by the grace of God she will triumph."