

THE IMPORTANCE OF JUDGES 15:3-5 IN THE SAMSON NARRATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Within the Samson narratives, Judges 13-16, is a short account of Samson burning the crops of the Philistines (Judges 15:3-5). We read how, after being rebuffed by the father of his intended bride, Samson looks to cause harm to the Philistines. He catches 300 hundred “foxes”, turns them tail to tail and ties torches to the pairs, and sets fire to the torches.¹ Samson turns the foxes loose in grain, vineyards, and olive orchards of the Philistines.

The significance of this act is profound. It was springtime and the wheat crop was beginning to be harvested. The text refers to “grainstalks” and “stacks”. The text also makes reference to the olive orchards and vineyards. To burn these items, all staples in the Ancient Near East, would mean an economic disaster for the Philistine people. Also, the Philistines were trying to regain economic and military power after a devastating war with Egypt. The burning of these crops would have dealt a major blow to overseas trade agreements. This study will maintain that *this act* was the act that prompted the Philistines to mobilize against Samson. Up until this time, Samson was engaging the men of Timnah, a Philistine-controlled city, in a private exchange. These first encounters did not demand the Philistine attention and, as we will argue, may have been beneath their notice. Yet, it is this act, the burning of the crops, which begins an escalation of hostilities between Samson and the Philistines that reached its climax in Samson defeating 1000 Philistines at Ramath-Lehi (Judges 15: 14-17).

¹ The Hebrew term used, *su'al*, could mean jackals as well. This latter interpretation would be more likely as jackals are pack animals while foxes are solitary.

The account of the burning of the crops acts as a hinge, or transition, within the Samson narratives. Up until this point in the narratives, Samson actions have been localized and personal. By shifting the focus from the girl's father to the Philistine nation, and causing destruction of valuable crops, Samson now acts on a national level. Therefore, we propose that this account, with its shift in focus, is meant to ensure that Samson is seen as the national enemy of the Philistines and the national hero of Israel.

THE TIMNITE GIRL

Judges 14 begins with the depiction of Samson "going down" to Timnah. This is an idiomatic expression usually describing an area outside of Israel. She is described as a "daughter of the Philistines" or as a Philistine girl. However, we would suggest that this does not necessarily denote her ethnicity. Timnah is identified with the site known as Tel-Batashi. G. Kelm and A. Mazar theorize that the Philistine-controlled town was established as a satellite of Ekron. However, it is possible that the "Philistine population of the town consisted mainly of overlords and aristocrats, while the lower classes were descendants of the earlier Canaanites. . ."² Supporting this class structure is the pottery which was found. Excavations found the "typical Philistine pottery" and "red-slipped and hand-burnished pottery" which was characteristic of many of the Israelite sites found in the Shephelah.³ Therefore, we can conclude that Timnah was a cosmopolitan town with a distinct class structure. The ethnicity of the population was decidedly mixed. Although it is undeniable that it was controlled by the Philistines, as was the entire region. It was strategically valuable, both commercially and militarily due to its location, on the riverbed of Sorek, to Israel and Philistia. Moreover, in the diverse ethnicity of Timnah we find the first major piece of evidence which indicates that Samson's bride may not have been a Philistine.

² Kelm/ Mazar, *Timnah: A Biblical City in the Sorek Valley* Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 1995.

³ Kelm/Mazar, "Batashi, Tell El-" *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 volumes (NY: Doubleday) 1992.

The Textual Evidence

The account of Samson's marriage is found in Judges 14. The text of Judges 15 is the consequences of the actions that took place during the wedding feast. The text of Judges 14 breaks down into three blocks of material. The first four verses introduce the concept of Timnah, and its inhabitants, being dominated by the Philistines. The second block is the wedding feast, verses 4-18, in which we see the dynamics between the girl, Samson, and "the countrymen" which were generated by the famous riddle which Samson set before them. The third block, verses 19-20, shows the settling of the wager. Each of these blocks of material plays a part in understanding the interaction between Samson and the girl and her countrymen.

JUDGES 14:1-4

These verses set a definite tone and, understandably, can lead readers to assume that the entire account is a match between Samson and the Philistines. In verses 1 and 2 we read that the girl was a woman of Timnah, "of the daughters of the Philistines". This Hebrew construction clearly indicates a city dominated by the Philistines, which was argued by Kelm and Mazar. However, this construction will act as a summary statement for the following accounts. It reflects the memory of the Philistine-dominated Timnah, but also serves as a literary indicator, or guide, for the overall sweep of the Samson narratives

The appellation "of the daughters of the Philistines", similar to "sons of", is a common idiom denoting children or descendants. However, the Hebrew term "sons/daughters" also connotes the member of a group, or "people or items belonging in a category".⁴ In some idiomatic cases, a city was presented as a "mother" and the sons/daughters as its inhabitants (cf. Psalm 147: 13, Isaiah 51:18, 20; 66:8).⁵ Gesenius, describing the phrase as a "genitive of place", presents the denotation of "a native of

⁴ E. Martens, "son/daughter", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1: 114-115.

⁵ W.E. Vine, "to build", *Vine's complete Expository Dictionary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996) 26.

that place, one born and brought up there.”⁶ There is no intrinsic connection to ethnicity with the phrase. Therefore, we can argue that the girl who was to be Samson’s bride was simply a resident of the Philistine-controlled city of Timnah. Furthermore, at the time of the writing of this account the memory of the hated Philistines would have obscured the notice of any other ethnic groups in the city.

The exchange between Samson and his father, Manoah, has generated much scholarly commentary (14:3). Manoah, in rebuking Samson with his request for marriage arrangements, describes Timnah as being part of the “uncircumcised Philistines”. The title “uncircumcised” is a derogatory title that indicates contempt. It is a common title used for the Philistines, occurring often. Clearly, Manoah is viewing the entire town as Philistine, probably, based on their domination of the region.

However, Samson argues with his father saying that the girl “is right” in his eyes. This is powerful Hebrew term. The word *yshr* means to be right as connoting “straight” or “level”. The phrase seems to be a colloquial expression: Judges 14:3, 7; 1 Samuel 18:20, 26; 2 Samuel 17:4; 1 Kings 9:12; Jeremiah 18:4; 1 Chronicles 13:4; 2 Chronicles 30:4. The phrase also recurs in the appendices of Judges (17:6 and 21:25). The phrase might be connected to the idiom “straight heart/work” (2 Kings 10:15; Proverbs 20:11, 21: 2).⁷ Gesenius presents the connotation of “pleasing to me, what I approve”.⁸

D. Wiseman points out that the Hebrew term connotes a cluster of related ideas; upright, level, straightness, and law-keeping. Wiseman demonstrates the various ways in which this term is employed. It can be interpreted in an ethical context, meaning uprightness as a “manner of life” as a “characteristic of the blameless” (Proverbs 11:5). It signifies a quality of heart and mind. Wiseman states that “when marriage was so considered by Samson, Saul and David, it can be rendered “lawful”.

Based on these common connotations, we can propose that Samson’s response to Manoah was a corrective statement, not a rebellious outburst, informing his father that

⁶ W. Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Boston: Houghton, 1885) 140.

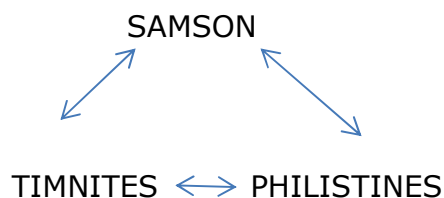
⁷ G. Liedke, “yashar”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols, biddle, trans. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:589.

⁸ Gesenius, 436.

the desired marriage was lawful and that the girl was not a Philistine. This may account for Manoah, and Samson's mother, eventually taking part in the wedding arrangements (Judges 14:5, 10). The title "right" is most likely genuine to the story as it appears twice (verses 3 and 7). This term seems to further disconnect her from the Philistines. This separation is supported by other textual clues. The name "Philistines" drops out of the wedding narrative after 14:4. This absence seems to indicate that this was a Timnite affair and the Philistine overlords took scant notice of the wedding.

Furthermore, looking ahead, in the aftermath of the riddle Samson despoiled 30 men "of Ashkelon". Curiously, there are no recorded reprisals from the Philistines after Samson pays his debt. Ashkelon was a major Philistine stronghold that would eventually be, if not already by this time, a main city in the famous "Pentapolis". The Philistines only get involved after Samson burns the fields (Judges 15:6). The marriage seems to be beneath their notice. It is unclear if the Philistines even knew Samson's identity at this point. Once again, the text is making a separation between the girl, and her family, and the Philistines.

This proposal of the Philistines not knowing Samson's identity is supported by the reference to the Philistines inquiring about who burned their fields and the answer came "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite" (Judges 15:6). Samson needed to be identified by his association with the girl's father. It seems unlikely that the Philistines would name one of their own countrymen in such a way. This designation might suggest that the girl's father was known to the Philistines in some form; possibly a townsman of well repute who gained some amount of favor. However, as their burning him and his family with fire suggests (Judges 15:6), he was not a Philistine and inspired no loyalty or protection from the Philistine overlords. The text has now established a triangular, adversarial, relationship between Samson, the Timnite, and the Philistines;



Such a relationship strongly indicates that the girl and her family were not Philistines. From a narrative standpoint, the girl and the infamous marriage serve as a lynchpin that forces a collision between Samson and the Philistines. Once the girl and her family were put to death by fire, the Timnites drop out of the narrative and Samson and the Philistines can now engage each other directly, making Samson a national enemy, as depicted in the victory song in the temple of Dagon (Judges 16: 23-25).

Returning to Samson's argument with Manoah, it would seem unlikely that Samson would refer to a Philistine girl as "right". He would remember that the Philistines were a major factor in causing the Danite Migration. Only a remnant of the tribe remained in the form of "clan" (Judges 13:2). The domination of the Philistines would weigh heavily upon him, as it did the other Israelites (Judges 15:11). Therefore, it is unlikely that he would try to enter into a familial relationship with a Philistine aristocrat. It is also doubtful that a Philistine aristocrat would enter into any form of a marital union with a Danite, a subject people. Perhaps, the best illustration of the way Samson viewed Philistine women is in the text of Judges 16:1-3; he visited a harlot in Gaza.

The comment in Judges 14:4 is an unusual interruption of the narrative by the editor. It is inserted from a vantage point from the future; one who knows how the story will develop. The editor, possibly Davidic, needed to explain why Timnah, rebuilt in the 10th Century according to Kelm and Mazar, was considered a Philistine city. After David broke Philistine power, they were never a formidable threat to Israel again. However, this comment is designed to tie the story into Samson's battle with the Philistines. As the text is clearly indicating, this wedding affair is beneath Philistine notice; only the aftermath will demand Philistine attention. Therefore, this insertion is not simply an explanation of an outburst toward a father. It is a needed, parenthetical, historical note regarding the background of the town. Also, it serves the narrative purpose of making this "Timnite affair" the catalyst for Samson's escalating war with the Philistines, which will be detailed in Judges 15.

JUDGES 14:5-20

Verses 5-9: This is the famous account of Samson killing the lion. This event will figure prominently in the posing of the riddle, later in the story. We must consider this exploit in light of the findings by Kelm and Mazar. The text states that the area was around the vineyards of Timnah. Excavations have shown that Timnah controlled a major road to the inner Shephelah, making it a commercial and cultural focal point. Based on this evidence, we can argue that the sounds of the struggle between Samson and lion would have been heard by many people; travelers, vineyard workers, or merchants. It is likely, given the ferocious reputation of the lion in this part of the world, that the sounds of the struggle would bring some of these people to the scene. They would see Samson, probably exhausted, and the dead lion with no wound from a weapon. Word of this struggle would spread quickly over the commercial roads and, no doubt, reach Philistine ears. It is natural that the ease with which Samson defeated the beast would get emphasized in the retellings(14:6). Furthermore, it might also be argued that the bees making a nest in the carcass would be a familiar sight in this heavily travelled and worked area.

Verses 10-14: Herein we read about the famous riddle and wager. Verse 11 is a significant note. It is unclear as to who saw Samson and called in the "companions". The Hebrew term that is used has a broad connotative field. Its exact meaning must be drawn from the context of the account. However, it seems that the Timnite father may have gathered 30 of his own associates to be the guests. Therefore, we might assume that they were of some stature in Timnite society. The text gives no indication that Samson brought anyone, except his father, to the wedding. The posing of a riddle, a common game at such functions, and its attending wager adds another dimension to our understanding. The wager was for linen garments. Flax, needed for linen, was grown in the Jordan Valley and the coastal plain, in the vicinity. Therefore, a Philistine controlled town would have ready access to the material. It was considered a luxury article and used as ritual vestments. Therefore, it is likely that guests of the Timnite, possibly all of some social standing, would be wearing these garments or could afford such a wager. The text gives no indication that Philistines were called for the wedding.

Not to call in any Philistines would have been a wise decision on the part of the Timnite, as arousing attention or suspicion from the Philistine aristocracy would not have benefitted anyone associated with the wedding.

Verses 15-20: Herein we read the famous solution of the riddle and Samson's payment plan. Although the chronology is confused, the term "countrymen" is used by the girl (16, 17). There is no indication that the Philistines were pressuring her. Instead, the guests were pressuring her as, apparently, they did not want to pay such a heavy wager. Their threat to the wife is brutal; to burn her and her family. But, their motivation is financial, not national or ethnic (14:15).

In verse 18, we read that the "men of the city" presented the solution to the riddle, at a most dramatic moment. These men were Timnites. If this was originally a story that was meant to arouse anti-Philistine fervor or present the Philistines as Samson's enemies the text would make it clear that the Philistines presented the solution. As the text stands, the Philistines are conspicuously absent from the proceedings, further supporting the idea that this was a Timnite affair. Samson does not accept the solution well and, according to the text, he despoils 30 men of Ashkelon. It is unclear as why Samson went to Ashkelon. Admittedly, it was another Philistine city. But, it was over 20 miles away. Such a distance does not fit with the immediacy of the account. Perhaps, a better alternative to Ashkelon was "Asqalun", a city only about an hour South of Timnah.⁹ This city had fallen into relative obscurity with the establishment of the Philistine Pentapolis. Therefore, it seems likely that it was forgotten about by the time of the writing of the Samson narratives and the more famous Ashkelon, of the Philistine Pentapolis, was inserted in its place. The reference to Ashkelon would also be more consistent with the emphasis on the Philistines, established in the first block of material. Moreover, since the town of Asqalun was in relative proximity to Timnah it is likely that the ethnic profile of the population was also similar to Timnah, with Philistine overlords, and that Samson could find the payment for his wager therein.

⁹ G.F. Moore, *Judges* (NY: Scribner's 1903) 338. Not much is known of this city, although it is recorded in maps of the western part of Palestine by the Palestinian Exploration Fund. Moore suggests that this was the site of Samson's actions and not the heavily fortified coastal city of Ashkelon.

“THIS TIME THE PHILISTINES CAN NOT BLAME ME IF I HARM THEM”

This, a popular rendering of Judges 15:3, depicts Samson turning his attention to the Philistine nation. The question which underlies these famous words, and the subsequent actions, is why? This is the first time we hear Samson even mentioning the Philistines by name and it occurs after his “intended” father-in-law denied his request to see the girl, whom Samson thought was his wife. The shift in dynamics is abrupt and not explained by the narratives.

JUDGES 15:1-7

Judges 15:1-2 narrates that Samson intended on visiting his wife. This suggests that Samson felt that the marriage between him and the Timnite girl was valid and that he did not know that the father had her marry the “best man” at the wedding feast (Judges 14:10-20). This action, by the father, seems to have been brought about more by the concern of avoiding shame than honoring the original marriage contract between the girl’s father and Manoah, Samson’s father. In this period, marriages were arranged by the families of the bride and groom. According to J.L. McKenzie, “marriage was neither a religious nor a public concern; it was a private contract. . . The contracting parties were not the bride and groom but the families”, particularly the fathers and if the father was dead then the brother would negotiate the terms.¹⁰

The text also suggests that this was an “exogamous” marriage, the union with someone outside of one’s cultural or social group. This suggestion gains support in the girl’s words of “my countrymen” and the textual description of “her countrymen” (Judges 14:16-17). These were the “men of the city” who solved his riddle (Judges 14:18), after threatening the bride (Judges 14:15). J.D. Crossan argues that the marriage is presumed to be exogamous- “one in which the bride stays with her own family, no bride price is paid, the children belong to her family, and the groom must bring a present

¹⁰ J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1966) 548.

when he visits his wife”. It is possible that such gifts were in place of an initial “bride price”.¹¹

The father of the girl refuses to let Samson see her, offering his other daughter. This may have been in an effort to honor the contract. To deny Samson could be dangerous, but he also offered an explanation for his actions. His words, literally, translate; “I said to myself, he must surely hate her”. J.A. Soggin points out that the aspect of “hating her” was part of the Israelite formula of repudiation, which justifies the father’s actions.¹² Samson seems to have recognized the legitimacy of the father’s response and, therefore, did not vent his anger on him. However, Samson gives powerful, though curious, response to the refusal of the father;

“I WILL BE BLAMELESS, THIS TIME, REGARDING THE PHILISTINES THOUGH I WILL DO EVIL UPON THEM”

Samson, in Judges 15:3, declares his innocence while announcing his plans for retaliation. The term for “blameless”, *naqi*, refers to “persons declared innocent, free, or exempt from charges or obligations, or to innocent blood (that is, shed blood of an offending or innocent party)”. Furthermore, the term contains the “juridical notion of ‘guiltless, blameless, or innocent’. . . [and] ethical purity and hence juridical acquittal”.¹³ The connotations of Samson using this specific term has a dramatic and far-reaching impact. He seems to be announcing that he is commencing a war with the Philistines and will not be held accountable for any damages, even to those not involved with the affront. This is expanded upon with the last part of his declaration, about doing “evil” upon them.

The Hebrew term for “evil” is *ra’a* and the term has a wide range of negative connotations, depending on the context in which it is used. In a human, or profane, context the term refers to what is “detrimental in terms of its effects on man. . . [and] in

¹¹ J.D. Crossan, “Judges” , *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1:159.

¹² J.A. Soggin, *Judges*. (London: SCM Press LTD, 1981)245.

¹³ Fisher/Waltke, “naqi”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols. Biddle, trans. (Peabody: Hendickson, 1997) 2:598.

some instances it may refer only to its injurious effects on man, either as physical or emotional harm to the person or as painfully unpleasant experiences.”¹⁴ It must be emphasized that Samson is making a “judgment or decision”. Also, the exact meaning of “evil” in this context “depends on the person and the resources of the evaluator”. In other words, a man with the power and warrior skills of Samson could affect much more injurious harm to the Philistines than a common peasant or shepherd. As it is a conscious decision or judgment, Samson knows the scope of the war on which he is about to embark and the potential damage it will cause. Usually, such a general and absolute declaration of actions is “measured against the law” and seems to entail ethical precepts.¹⁵

Samson uses the term, “this time”, *hapayam*, to indicate his guiltlessness of the action he is about to commit. The root of this word is *payam*, whose connotations entail the meaning of “time”. However, there is sense of recurrence or repetition attached to this word. A form of this word is used in Judges 13:25, wherein the Spirit of the Lord began *to impel* Samson. Coupled with the term “began”, the recurring aspect of the word is illustrated. This statement seems to suggest that there were earlier, possibly unprovoked, exploits done by Samson against the Philistines. That he declares himself blameless “this time” might indicate some recognition, on Samson’s part, that he incurred some measure of juridical guilt for these actions. These exploits are not recorded in the narratives. Perhaps they were known only to Samson, lost in the retellings, or omitted because they slowed the story or did not serve to portray Samson as a national hero of Israel and a national enemy of the Philistines. In any case, there is a cryptic element in Samson’s words as he will, now, specifically target the Philistines.

Of greater significance is that Samson seems to recognize the girl’s father as a representative of the Philistine-controlled Timnah, even though it seems likely that he was not a Philistine. This recognition seems to be part of the ancient idea of “corporate personality”. First articulated by H. Wheeler Robinson, and adopted by Biblical scholars, the idea of “corporate personality” seems to be the ethical model which

¹⁴ G. Livingston, “ra’a”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980)2: 854.

¹⁵ H Stoebe, “ra’a”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols. Biddle, trans. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 3:1250-1254.

governs Samson's actions. This concept is based on an unbreakable connection between the group and the individual. Individuals are not considered in isolation to the group. More recent scholarship views this as corporate "representation" rather than "personality". An individual is treated as a representative, or completely identified with, a specific group. Therefore, an entire group can share the rewards or punishments brought about by the actions of a single person. In the case of the Timnite, Samson is depicted as looking to engage the Philistine nation because of the actions of one man. By extension, it can be argued that any blood that is shed is the consequence of the "Timnite", in breaking his private wedding contract with Samson and Manoah.

Clearly, Samson is distinguishing the Timnite from the Philistines. If he saw the man as a Philistine, and after breaking the marriage contract, it seems likely that Samson would unleash his anger on the Timnite. The Timnite represents the Philistine city and, therefore, creates the bridge Samson needs to attack the hated Philistines. One must accept the possibility that the Timnite gave away Samson's bride, and refused Samson's request, under pressure from the Philistines overlords who controlled the city. This declaration serves to introduce Samson's elemental sense of justice, which will develop into a declaration of "vengeance" after his burning of the crops (Judges 15:7) and further the national scope of the narratives, begun in Judges 14:1-4.

Samson's Justice

The idea behind Samson's declaration is best understood by the Biblical term "righteousness", *tsedek*. In common usage, the term applies to "legal processes" and this legal connotation forms the basis for applications. The concept is, probably, best understood as "just" or "justice". This seems to be the basis for Samson's words because righteousness refers to one who is innocent of a charge and, as we argued, Samson has declared himself legally innocent of his upcoming actions. The term also seems to imply that one has a right or claim to exact against an offending party.¹⁶

Samson is invoking the ethical aspect of the concept. This "involves the conduct of men with one another. . . righteousness is the quality of relationships between

¹⁶ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 739-740.

individuals [and] is a matter of current norms".¹⁷ Clearly, Samson is viewing the Philistines as an entity unto themselves and an active party in this relationship. While, ideally, any declaration of justice would be in accord with God's Word the relativist consideration- the reference to current norms- suggests that this was a period in Israelite history marked by individualistic justice. Such individualism faded into obscurity with the advent of the Monarchy and the full institution of the Law.

With his ethical and juridical appeal, Samson is also combining two aspects of the Hebrew ideology of "righteousness" or "justice" in a most unusual way. Most scholars agree that the Hebrew principle rested on polarities between the parties involved; the responsible party, who performs evil, and the innocent party, whose existence is disrupted. However, Samson is declaring his innocence while taking full responsibility for the evil which will befall the Philistines. While the relationship between Israel and the Philistines was always volatile, Samson is declaring his intentions, and innocence, in purposefully disrupting the relative calm interrelationship which, at that moment, existed between the two countries. In Hebrew thought, "deed and consequence" are linked and the deed is "conceived as a sphere that enshrouds the actor so that one can assume a concept of 'actions with built-in consequences'." Furthermore, by one's deed, one creates a "sphere that produces well-being and misfortune and that continues to surround one".¹⁸

Therefore, Samson is exhibiting his own elemental form of justice; similar to that which is referred to in the appendices of the book of Judges, "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25). We read truncated versions of this statement in Judges 18:1 and 19:1. This comment was taken by later editors, as commonly asserted by modern Biblical scholarship, to depict a time of lawlessness, bordering on anarchy. The framework of the Commandments is not in evidence. It is a period before the Monarchy and the codification of the Laws. Individuals, like Samson, were left to enact righteousness that they saw as being in

¹⁷ H. Stigers, "tsedek", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980)2:753.

¹⁸ K. Koch, "tsedek", *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:1053

agreement with the will of YHWH. Ultimately, righteousness or justice was generated and measured by the actions in question being in “right order” with the will of YHWH.

Moreover, this culminates the earlier themes which moved throughout the wedding account. We saw that the editor, in a rare instance of visible intrusiveness, give a parenthetical explanation for Samson’s actions; that God was providing an opportunity to strike at the Philistines, through Samson (Judges 14:4). Therefore, according to the editorial comment, Samson’s actions were in perfect alignment with the will of God. Also, we see two references to the girl being right in Samson’s eyes (14: 3 and 7). Although hardly formal, this statement has juridical overtones. Overall, Samson’s declaration of innocence regardless of the evil he is about to perform is a mark of individual justice. The writers and storytellers took great pains, with its construction and consistency with the overall movement of the story, to show that this declaration and the ensuing war was justifiable by the will of God and the laws followed by the Israelites of this period.

Individual Justice

This rugged individualism marked Samson’s actions and gave him a special place among the ranks of heroes, much like the Grecian Heracles- better known as the Roman god, Hercules. The comparison, often made by scholars of many fields, between Samson and Heracles is valuable.

Both men were heroes, with intimate connections with their deities who were the source of each man’s invincible power according to the narratives. Yet, each man stood at a distance from the actual worship and ritual of their respective religions. While each man stood strong in his individual faith, neither became an integral part of their religions. The references to Samson in later biblical books are sparse, at best. It has been commented that Heracles “appealed to the popular imagination, [but] he appears never to have entered deeply into the religious life of the people”.¹⁹ Perhaps, this distance is

¹⁹ J.G. Winter, *The Myth of Hercules at Rome* (London: Macmillan, 1910) 173.

because religious worship is largely based on ritual, laws, and communal praise and these men represent forces that are not bound by such conditions. Yet, each man served the will of the deity of the religion. Samson began the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5). Heracles was the offspring of the purposeful union of Zeus, the father god of the Greeks, and Alcmene, Heracles' mother. He wanted to father a son who would have his great power and that would be a decisive force in the battle with the "gigantes", which was foretold by an oracle.

The individualistic natures of these men did not serve to enmesh them in the legal systems of their day. They knew the law of their periods, but were not constrained or limited by it. With their massive power and strength, when conventions of the law ceased to serve them, they moved beyond legal and societal structures and executed their individual form of justice. This ability gained for them the admiration of their peoples, but kept them at a distance from societal leadership.

Perhaps the distinguishing marks of the individualism of Samson and Heracles is their weapons. Samson, in his narratives, only used a weapon once. It was the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:15). Heracles, although an expert archer by all accounts, favored the hand-hewn club. Some classicist scholars have pointed out how these two distinguishing weapons are related. W.A. Scott has argued that "the jawbone of Samson becomes a club in the hands of Hercules". He goes on to suggest that Samson was the "original of the Heathen Hercules. . . [whose mythic cycle] united the Hebrew traditions of Joshua and Samson into one story, and added such inventions as suited their [the Greeks'] national vanity and mythological ideas. . . The Hebrew is the original".²⁰ A. Clark supports this theory. He argues, similarly, that the jawbone of Samson was changed to the club of Heracles/Hercules. There exists a homonymic relationship between the terms for "jawbone" and "club" in Greek. "Jaw" is *corre* while "club" is *corune*. Therefore the weapon of the heroes could be shifted through their linguistic similarity.²¹ The jawbone and the club represent primitive weapons, uncivilized and brutish, which stand in contrast to the armaments and structures of more "civilized"

²⁰ W.A. Scott, *The Giant Judge: or, The Story of Samson, the Hebrew Hercules* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, 1858) 43-46.

²¹ A. Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments* 2 vols (NY: Mason & Lane, 1837) 173.

people. The power which wielded these weapons sets the men apart and establishes these weapons to be a mark of the individualism associated with these heroes.

Samson, A National Hero

Scholars have presented many interpretations of the Judges, particularly Samson, over the decades. Often, the argument is some variant of the Judges' accounts originating as local popular stories, or folk tales, which were kept in circulation and later cast in a national context by later editors. It is the contention of this study that Samson was an actual national hero of Israel and enemy of the Philistines. The Philistines were a powerful army, which had the potential power to wipe out Israel. They were a national threat, confronted by Samson.

The narrative, as it stands, seems to struggle with Samson becoming a national figure. This is depicted by the abrupt shift from a personal issue with his bride's father to waging war with the Philistine nation. The storyteller, even the first compiler, needed to infuse this shift into the narrative because Samson was remembered as a national figure by Israel and Philistia alike and the narratives, up to this point, had only been focusing on local exploits. The shift had to be dramatic and forceful to be consistent with the memories attached to Samson. The speech of Samuel invoked the name of Samson (1 Samuel 12:11).²² The "victory song" of the Philistines depict Samson's acts as being on a national scope (Judges 16: 23-25).

It was important to present Samson as a national figure because he began the war which David completed. It must be emphasized that, as this fact is often overlooked by interpreters, Samson was only to *begin* the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines. David was given the role of completely breaking Philistine power, which enabled him to establish Jerusalem as the political and religious capitol of Israel (2 Samuel 5). Samson was the precursor, the forerunner, to David. The

²² Some versions have the name "Bedan", which seems to be a hero known only to Samuel. Other versions name "Samuel", but this seems to be a later attempt at a "correction" to secure Samuel's place in Biblical History, as it seems unlikely that he would mention his own name.

accounts of Shamgar (Judges 3:31) and Jephthah (Judges 10:7) do not present decisive victories against the Philistines. Samson was remembered as halting the Philistine rise to power in the region. Therefore, he would be the most suitable forerunner to David.

An ongoing theme which runs throughout the Davidic narratives is that, as King, David was looking to unify Israel. Along with the political and religious unification, as resulted from the establishment of Jerusalem, came a literary unification of tribal traditions. With Samson depicted as his forerunner, David could be a figure which spanned the nation of Israel. Samson was a Danite. By the reign of David, the Danites had migrated north and established the northernmost city of Dan. However, many of Samson's exploits took place in Judahite territory which explains why men of Judah were pressed into Philistine service to hand Samson over to the Philistines (Judges 15:10). Judah was the dominant tribe in southern Israel. The phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" occurs several times in the Bible to indicate the northern and southern boundaries of Israel (Judges 20:1, 1 Samuel 3:20, 2 Samuel 3:10, 17:11, 24:2, 24:15, 1 Kings 4:25, 1 Chronicles 21:2, and 2 Chronicles 30:5). Beersheba was listed among the cities of Judah in Joshua 15:28. Therefore, with Danite roots and Judahite exploits, Samson could be seen as a national hero of Israel, spanning the entire nation. His popularity, resulting from being the only Judge with any significant success against the Philistines, could be linked to David and serve to aid in the Davidic unification of Israel.

While tribal memories and the battles with the Philistines were strong links connecting Samson to David, the onrushes of the "Spirit of the Lord" provided a literary link between the accounts of the men. In his narratives, it is said that Samson was endowed with the "Spirit of the Lord" on four occasions: a camp of Dan, 13:25; fighting the lion, 14:6; the settling of the wager, 14:19; and the battle at Ramath-Lehi, 15:14. In the latter three instances, the text is exactly the same; the Spirit of the Lord rushed mightily upon him". David, too, was endowed with the Spirit of Lord (1 Samuel 16:13).²³ We see the exact same construction; the Spirit rushing mightily. The only difference is that Samson's endowments, or charisma, were transient and irrupted only in crisis,

²³ Saul had a similar endowment, 1 Samuel 10:6, but this seems to be in connection with prophecy and not battles.

where the charisma of David was permanent. To differentiate, the Spirit was written to have rushed upon Samson whereas the Spirit rushed toward David. The “onrush clause” is peculiar to the accounts of Samson, Saul, and David. This singular construction provides an inextricable link between the accounts of Samson and David. It binds these two men together both literarily and theologically. The popularity of Samson served to buttress these bonds. David was first true king of all Israel and his success was built on Samson, the powerful national enemy of Philistia. To legitimate his throne, David had to present history and antecedent figures as pointing to his kingship. Israel was to have a Theocracy (Judges 8:23). He had to show that YHWH sanctioned his kingship in words and deeds. The popular Judge was to be the foundation for Davidic glory. David was the King of the nation of Israel. Therefore, Samson had to be cast in a national scope.

Many scholars, following J.L. McKenzie, argue that the author of the Davidic history was a scribe in David’s court and that the “history of early Israel and the history of the early monarchy” were produced by the same school of writers, most likely instituted by David himself. In uniting Israel under his monarchy David “wished the traditions to be fused into a single tradition which would identify as one the nation of Israel which he had created and merge its dangerous diversities.”²⁴ David, and his court scribes, stressed the “unity of Israel”. The Davidic scribes present history in such a way that the reader “is left to conclude that the monarchy of David is the fulfillment of the saving promise” of God.²⁵

The redacting process of the Davidic court whose purpose was to present Samson as a national figure may be called “story-stitching”. R.K. Harrison describes a practice in the Ancient Near East, wherein a series of stories or songs are strung, or “stitched” together for the purpose of describing, in something approaching epic form,” the events of a specific period in history.²⁶ The Samson narratives exemplified this practice. Within the sweep of Israelite history, David presents the epic struggle between one man, sent by God, and the enemies of Israel. It is likely that Samson performed

²⁴ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 770.

²⁵ Ibid 656

²⁶ R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 684.

many more exploits at the expense of the Philistines, as seen by his declaration of innocence “this time”, but these exploits did not “fit” the sweeping narrative which David needed to present. Moreover, Samson “doing evil” upon the Philistines because of a private marriage contract, possibly, being violated might be a rare instance in which a “seam” of the “stitched stories” is visible.

Words Genuine to Samson

Samson’s declaration of innocence and planned warfare is the “seam” which attaches the accounts of the private and individual exploits of Samson to the narration of his actions on a national theater. To determine whether these words are genuine to Samson is difficult. It seems likely that such a declaration *originated with Samson*. However, it seems to have been emended by a later, probably Davidic, editorial hand and the original words have been lost to history.²⁷ This declaration of innocence was, apparently, associated with Samson from the earliest stages of the narratives’ development. The association was powerful, which seems to indicate that it is genuine.

The narrative does not reveal to whom Samson spoke these words. Any number of witnesses, from the area around Timnah, could have heard these words. It follows that these people who witnessed this declaration were also the ones who, later, “informed” the Philistines about who was responsible for the burning of the crops (Judges 15: 6). The identity of these people was not important to the story, as the focus was solely on Samson and the Philistines. Therefore, a declaration such as this, to unnamed listeners, is consistent with the flow of the narrative.

There is also textual evidence which suggests that these words originated with Samson. The declaration implies an individual sense of justice and elemental form of righteousness. However, as we have already argued, there is a recurring theme of “being right” in an individual’s eyes which helps to frame the last chapters of the book of

²⁷ It would unlikely that a later redactor would place such an emphasis on a Philistine theme. The Philistines were no longer a viable threat after the Davidic triumph. While they were always a traditional enemy, to argue for such later redactions is not, historically, plausible.

Judges. This, as many scholars have argued, is certainly a formulaic reference to this early, kingless, period of Israel that was imposed on the original narratives. If this declaration of innocence from Samson was the work of a later scribal hand it would be more consistent, in construction and language, with the recurring theme of “being right” in one’s eyes.

The other textual consideration which points to an origin with Samson himself is the curious reference to the Philistines. Samson seems to see a need to specify the enemy. On one hand, this denotes a shift from the Timnites who cheated on the wager. On the other hand, the phrase “regarding the Philistines” allows the shift and provides an introduction for the action of burning of the crops which immediately follows and, consequently any further acts of war. Without this key phrase, the declaration could easily be understood as another act in a private exchange between Samson and the Timnites who cheated him, an exchange that is not fully recorded. Without this reference to the Philistines, the narrator or editor is left with the question of the reason for the burning of the crops of the Philistines in the next sequence of events. McKenzie, implying the difficult task of the redactor, suggests that the story of the “foxes” was originally an independent story that was woven into the text.²⁸ With this phrase, the burning of the crops is not presented as a random act of economic devastation, but part of a planned of attacks in which Samson has declared himself innocent.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The account of Samson burning the crops of the Philistines is a transitional link in the overall narratives moving the scope of the accounts from his private exploits against the Timnites to the national war he waged against the Philistine nation. The act caused devastation to the Philistine economy, as according to the textual references, it was harvest time. This was not simply a troublemaking “prank” against the Philistine-controlled city of Timnah. It was an act of national magnitude which demanded the attention of Philistine leadership and swift retribution.

²⁸ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 767.

The focus of the entire narrative is the beginning of the *actual* liberation of Israel from the Philistines. While McKenzie is probably correct in seeing this account as originally independent, it is also a very good opening salvo in a declared war. Therefore, the placement of this account by the editor seems to be the most plausible and, therefore, correct.

A question that must be considered is the purpose of Judges 14. The account takes great pains to describe the planning, ceremony, and aftermath of Samson's wedding. This long wedding narrative serves two purposes; it shows that the Timnites are not the object of God's judgment and are conduits of His will (Judges 14:4) and it introduces the reader to the strength of Samson (14:6), the wit of Samson with the riddle (14: 14), the righteous anger of Samson (14:19). The reader is also shown the violent irruptions of the Spirit of the Lord (14:6, 19). The wedding account moves us inexorably, through vivid and lively narration, to the war between Samson and the Philistines.

Samson's declaration is the historical and literary affirmation of the beginning of this war. His actions now take on a new significance, fulfilling the mission foretold to his parents (13:5) and the unusual editorial explanation in Judges 14:4. The encounter with the Philistines, always in the background, will now take the singular focus of the narrative until the climactic battle at Ramath-Lehi (15:14-15). Overall, Samson's declaration of innocence, whether genuine to the lips of Samson or a later emendation, serves the editor well as the "seam" which introduces the burning of the crops and makes Samson a national figure on an "epic" level, fit to foreshadow King David.

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