

Toward the Battle of Ramath-Lehi

INTRODUCTION

The tableau is stark and dramatic; a bound and unarmed Samson facing Philistines soldiers that are shouting to meet him.¹ In the narratives, these moments before the battle at Ramath-Lehi are meant to depict the Philistines as an overwhelming and menacing force. The Judahites, who bound Samson with two new ropes only to hand him over to the enemy, quietly vanish from the scene. Samson stands alone against this frightening foe. At this moment, details are less important than the image depicted. The numbers of the Philistine attackers cannot be determined from this image, the location is not precisely given, and Samson seems to have calmly accepted this situation as a sheep led to slaughter.

It is the moment before uncontrollable violence and mayhem erupts. While this moment, which has remained a favorite in the telling and retellings of the Samson narratives, sets the battle lines and combatants in the most dramatic way imaginable, the surrounding text supplies many clues and indications as to the details of this battle. We propose that this battle took place on the border between Judah and Philistia, as Dan had already been consolidated to a clan and was no longer a major presence in the south of Israel. More importantly, Samson seemed to have engaged an advance or elite guard of the Philistines, the numbers of which we cannot be certain. This elite guard was sent because of the danger which Samson represented to the Philistines. Furthermore, the location of the Spring of En-hakkore now must be placed in this border area. It is this battle and the

¹ Judges 15:13-14a.

account of the spring, which acts as an epilogue, which concludes the Judahite tribal memories of Samson.

The account of the battle at Ramath-Lehi combines popular imagery and precise historical and geographic details. The popular aspects do not diminish the historical elements. Rather, they enhance the understanding of the account which the first storytellers and compilers wished to convey. Also, popularity does not need to be seen as equating to mythological or folk tales. Rather, the early popularity allowed these accounts to survive and expand. Without the popularity of Samson and his successes against the hated Philistines, the moments and locations recorded might have been lost to history as well as their value to next generations. The etymologies attached to Ramath-Lehi and En-Hakkore represent tribal memories which were needed to be preserved if David was to consolidate the tribes under his kingship. David had to reconcile politics, theology, and tribal loyalties in order to secure his throne. To this end, he was to rely heavily on the popular successes of Samson.

LEHI

The prelude to the battle at Ramath-Lehi begins at the cave of Etam, where Samson is taking refuge during his ongoing campaigns against the Philistines.² We are told that the Philistines encamped in Judah and deployed against Lehi.³ The term for encamped, *חנה*, entails the connotation of laying siege. The derivative term, *camp*, refers to “temporary protective enclosure for a tribe or army”. Basic to the meaning is the image of bending or curving, which

² Cf.; J. Roskoski, “Locating Etam: Samson’s Rock of Refuge,” *Bible and Spade* 21.1 (Winter 2008) 12-20.

³ Judges 15:9.

may have derived from the “circular lines of a besieging force”.⁴

Following the reference to the Philistine encampment in Judah, the narrative introduces another aspect of the Philistine activity. The term for “deploy” seems to be more significant in understanding the scene of the battle which about to occur; *שָׁח*. The usual meaning of this term is to forsake, forego, or let lie fallow. However, derivatives of the term also entail the connotations of extending or spreading out, and deploying in the context of battle. It also takes on the image of “the spreading shoots of a vine” or the tendrils of a vine.⁵ Therefore, a very specific image is being depicted; the Philistines lay siege, in a circular encampment, in Judah as a show of power and send out tendrils or lines of soldiers across Lehi. We would suggest that these were the elite soldiers and the best guerilla fighters who were able to act effectively away from the base camp.

It has been speculated by scholars that “Lehi”, meaning “jawbone”, might refer to a specific rock formation that was thought to have resembled some sort of jawbone. This explanation is discredited by the Hebrew construction of the verse; if one specific location was meant than there would be little reason to spread out and the forces would be concentrated at this spot. One specific spot does not seem to fulfill the conditions of the text. M. Lubetski suggests that the word “lehi” should be understood as a cognate to the Akkadian legal term for “border” or frontier; “it seems that the Biblical *lehi* follows its Akkadian forerunner. Accordingly, *lehi* as a place is not a specific place name but . . . means any border- in this case, the entire borderline between the Judeans and the Philistines. . . It also stands to

⁴ V. Hamilton, “encampment”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980)1:300.

⁵ M. Wilson, “forsake”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:577.

reason that the deployment of Philistine troops is along the entire border than in a specific location. . . [It] is characteristic of army deployment for searching for a specific foe rather than for a siege of a particular location".⁶ McKenzie argues that Etam caves were a known hiding place, especially for those persons trying to escape lawful punishment or vengeance, as in the case of Samson.⁷ As recent scholarship attests, Etam was originally in Danite territory. However, with the expansion of the Philistines and Judah the Danites were now consolidated in the area of Zorah and Eshtaol; the core of Danite territory.⁸ The area of Etam, as had most of Danite territory, had passed into Judahite control.⁹ Therefore, both Danites and Judahites would know of this hiding place.

Judges 15:10 suggests a verbal exchange between the men of Judah and the Philistines. We would suggest that the Judahites engaged the Philistines, possibly in a border skirmish. The number of men is written as three thousand. However, the Hebrew term for "thousand", *eleph*, may not refer to the actual number. Symbolically it can mean an immense and uncountable amount. However, following Holladay and others, we suggest that the term refers to a military unit the numbers of which cannot be easily determined. This, seemingly, archaic meaning of the term would produce the reading that three military units of Judah engaged the Philistines. The image of the Philistines rounding up three thousand men of Judah at random seems hyperbolic and the dynamics of such an undertaking seems impossible, especially for an advance guard of the Philistines. The Judahites move to Etam, a cave into which one would have to descend through a fissure in the rocks.

⁶ M. Lubetski, "Lehi", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 4:275.

⁷ J.L. McKenzie, *World of the Judges* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 154.

⁸ Joshua 19:41, Judges 13:2.

⁹ Joshua 15:33.

The only other entrance was, and is, a path leading upwards from the riverbed. The text clearly depicts the Judahites, probably only the leaders, moving downward into the cavern. The ask Samson a question; “do you not know that the Philistines rule us?”¹⁰ While this can refer to the Philistine control over the region, it may also refer to the engagement just lost by the Judahites- of which Samson would not know.

However, often the mission of the Judahites is rendered as “delivering” Samson to the Philistines. The Hebrew word, נָתַן, has a wide semantic field. M. Fischer explains:

“The three broad areas of the verb are 1) give, 2) put or set, and 3) make or constitute. The other terms used in translation are extensions or variations of these. For example, give may be anything from physically handing a present, reward, person, or document to another to the less tangible granting or bestowal of blessing, compassion, permission, and the like. . . in its sense of put, place, set, appoint. . . this putting may be literal, as placing a ring on the hand, a helmet on the head, or a prisoner into the stocks”.¹¹

H. Wildberger argues that part of the concept of “to give” is to is the process by which a matter is “set into motion”.¹² Often, *ntn* “acquires the meaning to give what is sought, agreed to a request”.¹³ The exchange between the Philistines and the Judahites takes on a powerful significance in this context. Underlying the entire discussion is the activity of the Philistines seeking Samson. To agree so readily, as the text suggests, to be pressed into service

¹⁰ Judges 15:11.

¹¹ M. Fischer, “give”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:609.

¹² H. Wildberger, “to give”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:776.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2:781

might suggest that the Judahites lost a skirmish and their handing over Samson was the prize claimed by the Philistines. It also seems apparent from the exchange that the Judahites did not know of the purpose of the Philistines. To force the men of Judah to do this deed was a needed exercise for the Philistines, as they did not know the territory, especially the rugged terrain around the cavern, but the Judahites did know the area. We need not count the Judahites agreement as cowardice if we see it in the context of an exchange, possibly after being overwhelmed by surprise or superior numbers and weapons and coupled by not knowing the purpose of the Philistine engagement. It might simply be that they had little choice but to agree.

We suggest that the transfer of Samson to the Philistines should be understood as "as he reached the border".¹⁴ The Philistines who received Samson were probably one of the lines, or tendrils, that had spread out against the border. It is unclear as to where the Judahites escaped. Perhaps the clue might be hidden in the name of the location; Ramath-Lehi. The popular etymology has the place being named by Samson throwing the jawbone.¹⁵ However, the Hebrew term, רמת, suggests a different understanding. Scholars have often noted that the term seems to mean "height". It derives from the Hebrew, רום, which seems to have three categories of meanings; literal height, glory or exaltation, or arrogance or pride. In the instance of Samson, the popular etymology of "throwing" over the ironic glorification of the lowly jawbone against the proud the power of the Philistines seems to have been favored. However, as in some poetic uses (Prov. 25:3), this might refer to a geographic high point, literal height.¹⁶ If scholars, such as Lubetski, are correct then we might understand "Ramath-Lehi" as

¹⁴ Judges 15:14.

¹⁵ Judges 15:17.

¹⁶ A. Bowling, "height", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:837-838.

indicating a high point of the border or frontier. The reason this location would be used is that the garrison of Philistines would bring Samson to a high point to display his capture. The high point which served as their place of defeat also allowed the Philistines to bear witness to the battle. Supporting our suggestion of the name meaning literal height is that scholars such as H-PStähli have pointed out that root has formed “the basis for the place-names *rama* (hill), *merom* (high place) as well as for numerous PN’s”.¹⁷ Therefore, we would suggest that the place name “Ramath-Lehi” refers to a known location of strategic importance, to both Israel and Philistia, and derives from the terms “height” and “border”. The Judahites would have no place in such a spot that was designated by the Philistines; hence they disappear from the scene- not of cowardice, but in deference to the Philistine demands.

Once Samson reached the designated location and the Judahites left the scene, the Philistines came shouting (רוע) to meet him. Within the dynamics of the narratives the image is powerful. It parallels the lion that came roaring to meet him.¹⁸ It is the image of the hero standing alone before a fearsome, if not, overwhelming enemy. It can be argued that this type drastic circumstance is one of the triggers for the YHWH Spirit, as in both instances the Spirit rushed upon him. The term is meant to invoke the image of a powerful and piercing cry. Although the term is sometimes used for moments of distress, “the most common usage of all is in signals for war”.¹⁹ This was the advance guard moving in on Samson at the high point, the yells were to notify their fellow soldiers and to have them move in for the assault. However, the fearful noise of the

¹⁷ H-P. Stähli, “to be high”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 3:1220.

¹⁸ Judges 14:5.

¹⁹ W. White, “shouting”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:839.

lion's roar or the Philistine battle cry was overwhelmed by the onrush of the YHWH Spirit.

The imagery of Samson getting loose from the bonds relies on the image of fire and heat; "the ropes became as flax that is consumed by fire and his bonds melted away from his hands". Early commentators suggested that this metaphor was a remnant of solar mythology, the true origin of the narratives. This view has been largely abandoned. More recent scholars suggest that it is simply a metaphor for the ease with which Samson broke free. While the details serve this purpose, we suggest that the metaphor needs to be taken in tandem with the onrush of the Spirit. The image of fire signifies a theophany. It has long been pointed out by scholars that fire is a main element in theophanies. McKenzie points out that "fire is a sign of the presence of YHWH, for fire is the element proper to deity. . . YHWH is a consuming fire."^{20,21} Here was physical, visible sign of the invisible YHWH Spirit. In this instance the onrush of the Spirit is made manifest and now is ready to work through the muscles of Samson. It was a stark immediacy, with violent and uncontainable force, with which YHWH took to battle. Samson was the instrument, the vessel, through which the Spirit worked and the irruptions were uncontrollable even though Samson stood alone against the Philistine power.

Herein is the heart of the theology of the book of Judges. In reading the text every detail leading up to the actual battle, much like in the lion episode, is painstakingly narrated. From this detailed narration we are moved, abruptly and starkly, to a broad and panoramic description of the encounter.²² Significantly, the root of the phrase used to

²⁰ McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1965) 277.

²¹ Deuteronomy 4:24.

²² We would suggest that this episode is the foundation for Deuteronomy 32:30, as Deuteronomy seems to have originated and been compiled in the centuries

describe the rushing of the Spirit onto Samson is גלה, the same term which forms the root of the Davidic charisma.²³ This is root appears in the killing of the lion and the despoiling of the men of Ashkelon.²⁴ This term formed a singular link between Samson and David; one that would be exploited by the Davidic writers.

Once the battle is over, the rustic tone and details of the narratives resumes. The reason for such narration is stated by McKenzie: "The Hero of the Israelite heroic tale is YHWH, the God of Israel."²⁵ Elsewhere, McKenzie admits that Samson "was a witness of the saving power and will of YHWH, who ultimately delivered his people from the Philistine threat."²⁶ To the Biblical authors, once YHWH enters the fray the victory is assured and such details might obfuscate actions of YHWH and the victories would be seen to have been attained at the hand of the hero, instead of through the hand of the hero.

In the aftermath of the battle, Samson offers a victory song in which there is a wordplay on the terms "donkey" and "heap";

"With the jawbone of an ass, heaps and heaps

With the jawbone of an ass, I have smote a thousand men"

after Samson. Admittedly, many scholars interpret this verse as pagan victories over Israel. We acknowledge the merit of such theories, but would suggest that this represents a later understanding of how easily the enemies were allowed to defeat Israel. However, in the era of Samson, Saul, and David one man defeating thousands was a mark of the presence of God, cf. 1 Samuel 18:7.

²³ Samuel 16:13. The term also occurs in 1 Samuel 10:6, but most scholars see this as a different theological context.

²⁴ Judges 14:6, 19.

²⁵ J.L. McKenzie, *The Old Testament Without Illusion*. Chicago: Thomas More, 1979) 230.

²⁶ J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*. (Chicago: Bruce, 1965) 767.

The animal in question is most likely a wild ass, or onager, which was also seen as a symbol of freedom.²⁷ It is a powerful and sturdy animal, standing at least 3 feet high at the shoulder. It was then, as now, known to be sure footed so its presence in such a spot need not be questioned.²⁸

The Hebrew term, תמור , is noteworthy. We see a form of the word repeated three times in succession; “ass, heaps and heaps”. A cognate seems to mean “red”, but the connection is obscure. Yet, some translations try to convey a triple word-play with the idea that Samson bloodied them red. The most plausible understanding is that the masculine noun was used first in reference to the beast of burden. The term for piles or heaps “appear in a redundant manner to emphasize the magnitude of Samson’s victory over the Philistines”.²⁹

The Hebrew term, נכה, has the meanings of “smite” or “defeat. This term encompasses defeat of an enemy, but not necessarily killing all the men. However, this term has a group as its object and refers to making war or taking revenge. If this couplet can be considered a “victory song”, it is celebrating the defeat of an enemy- not some unimaginable scene of death.

One Thousand Men

The actual number of combatants may have been lost to history in favor of the integer. The Hebrew term, אלף, has the general meaning of “1000” and occurs frequently in enumerations. However, there are scholarly voices that contend the term contains the connotation of “any military

²⁷ Genesis 16:12.

²⁸ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 62.

²⁹ G. Livingston, “roebuck”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:299

unit, even of reduced strength”.³⁰ This understanding fits the conditions described by the Hebrew words. The line, or tendril, of Philistines to which Samson was delivered was not the full army. With the battle-cry signaling others in the area to the location, it is difficult to determine the exact number which Samson encountered. However, it seems to connote “the largest basic division of leadership in political oversight or military leadership”.³¹ Therefore, this was not a brawl between a few overmatched Philistines and Samson. Furthermore, the term always seems to suggest an indefinite number or an excessive or immense group. Based on the archaic military meaning and the symbolism attached to the number, we contend that this was a most significant triumph.

As the couplet stands, it seems to convey a degree of disbelief that this crude piece of bone could defeat the forces sent by the Philistines, the most advanced military power of the era. One might allow the possibility that this couplet is from a longer piece, or rude victory song. It might be the only piece which survived in its original form or it could be taken from the Book of Jashar, often connected with the Book of the Wars of YHWH,³² which was a known collection of the hymns of Israel’s “heroic age”. Such a victory would be consistent with the apparent contents and would most likely have been included.

After the victory song, it is written that Samson throws the jawbone from him, and the place was called “ramath-lehi”; throwing of the jawbone. This is a popular, although false etymology. The Hebrew for “height” is רמת from the root רמ . However, the term for “throw” is רמה , which means “cast” or “shoot” with the connotation of betrayal or deceit.

³⁰ J. Scott, “thousand”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1: 48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³² 2 Samuel 1:18.

Therefore, linguistically, we must argue for the meaning of “height” over “throwing”. The location was probably known before Samson’s victory, but the popular triumph allowed the actions of Samson to supplant the original meaning.

En-Hakkore

In the aftermath of the battle, in his exhaustion, Samson cries out to YHWH;

“You have given this great deliverance by the hand of your servant

Now shall I die of thirst or fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?”

The key term is “cries out”, קרא, as this is not a term which usually indicates a general outcry. L. Coppes argues that the root “denotes primarily the enunciation of a specific vocable or message... customarily addressed to a specific recipient and is intended to elicit a specific response. . . Usually the context has to do with a critical or chronic need.”³³ C.J. Labuschagne points to a purposeful connotation. He claims that the basic meaning “is apparently to draw someone’s attention with the sound of the voice in order to establish contact”.³⁴ He will maintain that the root is “the designation of an act that establishes contact with YHWH”.³⁵ Because of the theology associated with this action the editor of the narratives could easily have assumed that Samson addressed himself to YHWH and there was little need for Samson to use the Divine Name in his address.

³³ L. Coppes, “call, call out”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:810.

³⁴ C.J. Labuschagne, “to call”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 3:1159.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 3:1163.

Some scholars, typified by R. Boling, suggest that because this is not a pious appeal or a rallying call it should be understood as an “impudent harangue”.³⁶ Thirst and desperation seem to be the motivating factors for such an informal petition. E. Hindson observes that, unlike the pagan gods of the Philistines or the mythological figures that inhabited ancient religions, Samson was human but was given “abnormal human strength [and]not that of an untiring superman”.³⁷

Samson is attributing the victory to YHWH, in a show of complete humility. He recognizes that it is the power of YHWH that moves through the power of his muscles. This is a unique phrase, not found elsewhere in the book. Here is where we see McKenzie’s observation of YHWH being the true hero of the book, come into sharp focus and bold relief. This attribution also ties Samson closely to the Holy Warriors, from which the Nazirite devotion most likely originated. We would suggest that Samson was an early form of Nazirite, whose only restriction pertained to his hair. It was a common practice to consecrate the spoils of victory, animal or human, to YHWH. He should be understood as consecrating the victory itself, and the heaps of defeated Philistines, to YHWH.³⁸ Therefore, Samson was following the rituals of a Holy War.

He was, understandably, thirsty and physically spent. The second part of the prayer was serious in nature. Aside from the dangers of dehydration, his fear of falling to the Philistines underscores our earlier conjecture; that there were others in the area that may be responding to war cry of the garrison that attacked him. Some commentators have

³⁶ R. Boling, *Judges*, (NY: Doubleday, 1975) 239.

³⁷ E. Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971). 125.

³⁸ J. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). 98.

dismissed this part of the prayer as a literary device that was designed to maintain suspense in this epilogue to the battle.³⁹ There is little need for such a literary device as the circumstance, of exhaustion and thirst to which all in the audience could relate, and more Philistines in the area provided the tension in the aftermath. Therefore, given the physical condition of Samson and the possibility of other Philistines arriving, this stands as a legitimate petition.

After the prayer, the narrative depicts God splitting open a cavity in Lehi. The term "cavity", מַחֲטָה , is noteworthy. A cursory reading would render a bit of dental pun; water came from the cavity, or hole, in the jaw or tooth. However, this would be doubtful as the power of the pun is more obvious in modern usage and Lehi was understood as the border. Most scholars have accepted the image of "mortar" or a hollow place as the proper understanding. Scholars such as C.F. Burney and G. Cooke suggest a depression or a basin in the hillside.⁴⁰ G.F. Moore suggests that the term denotes a deep basin with a cleft in it from which water would occasionally flow.⁴¹ This depicts a small pool into which the water flowed allowing Samson to refresh himself. That a pool or hollow was formed seems to suggest that this was a regular occurrence and the Spring was known before the battle at Ramath-Lehi.

Samson drank from the water until he was refreshed. Literally, "he drunk from the water and his spirit returned and was revived". While the miraculous aspect of the account is undeniable, this short epilogue is deceptively complex. The term for revived is derived from the Hebrew term, חיה , "live" or "exist". This seems to suggest that Samson was physically spent because, as Hindson argued,

³⁹ Boling, 239- *et alia*.

⁴⁰ C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges*, (London: Rivington's, 1918) 374.

G. Cooke, *The Book of Judges*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1918) 148.

⁴¹ G.F. Moore, *Judges*, (NY: Scribner's, 1903) 346.

he was not an “untiring superman” or was a mythical hero with limitless energy- in the way Herakles/Hercules was elevated. However, the influence of Herakles must not be overlooked. Burney points out that hot springs have been linked to solar heroes, particularly Herakles. They were used to bathe and soothe the heroes when the hero was tired. However, this seems to be a cold spring, the type of which was associated with the Semitic peoples. Cold springs were used for drinking and reviving purposes. Therefore, the short account ties into the overall culture of the Ancient Near East in recognizing the connection between renewal and springs of water.

A powerful theological distinction is made in this short account.⁴² The text refers to the reviving of his “spirit”, *ruach*. The term, *ruach*, can refer to “breath”, “wind”, or “spirit”. It is the YHWH Spirit coming upon a person which makes him or her a “Charismatic Leader”. But, this is not charismatic Spirit. The term used also does not refer to a life force, an animating element without which one will die that is used in Samson’s death scene, *nephesh*.⁴³ This term has been called a “principle of life”.⁴⁴ However, it seems to connote the physical energy needed to preserve and maintain the integrated systems of the body and the spiritual element, represented by the *nephesh*. McKenzie builds upon Burney’s comment and calls this spirit “vitality as activity, as disposition, temper, courage”.⁴⁵ Once this energy is drained completely, death follows. However, unlike the *nephesh*, this spirit can be replenished. Unlike the YHWH Spirit, the

⁴² We will only summarize, as a full analysis would take us far afield and become too voluminous.

⁴³ Judges 16:30.

⁴⁴ Burney, 374.

⁴⁵ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 840.

person in whom this spirit resides has a measure of control over its presence.⁴⁶

The ending notice suggests that because he was revived, after Samson called to YHWH the spring is called En-Hakkore, the "Spring of the Caller". While the term, "hakkore", means caller it can also mean "partridge".⁴⁷ Moore claims that the place should be translated as "Partridge Spring".⁴⁸ However, according to the narrative, Samson was the "caller" and the spring took its name from his exploit. This is a popular etymology, much like Ramath-Lehi. "Partridge Spring" was, most likely, a well-known place to refresh oneself, as the "mortar" or hollowed place suggests that this was a regular flow of water. Samson's experience seems to have supplanted the original etymology of the place. That the locations took on two meanings is form of *amphibologia*, or double meaning. Unlike the logical fallacy of "amphiboly", wherein there is a purposefully ambiguous meaning, this refers to a word that allows for more than one legitimate interpretation. In Samson's case, we see popular and linguistically correct meanings placed side-by-side. J.D. Crossan comments that these etymologies, Ramath-Lehi and En-Hakkore, were designed to commemorate the heroic deeds that were performed in this location and are not particularly interested in historical or linguistic accuracy.⁴⁹ To be preserved in this way attests to the popularity and importance of these victories of

⁴⁶ This taps into the three elements of the creation of life in Genesis 2:7; the physical form received the breath of life and it became a living soul or person. Similarly, Jesus relinquished his spirit back to the Father (Luke 23:46).

<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2013/06/27/A-Biblical-Understanding-of-Personhood-Based-on-Genesis-27.aspx>

⁴⁷ The partridge was a close relative to the quail, which has given many scholars a basis to once again connect Samson with Herakles.

⁴⁸ Moore, 346.

⁴⁹ J.D. Crossan, "Judges", *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1: 160.

Samson. The battle at Ramath-Lehi, more than other encounter, began the war with the Philistines which David was to finish.⁵⁰ Both accounts, of Samson and David, use the same Hebrew term, נכה, to describe the defeat of the Philistines which creates a literary “inclusion” between the account of Samson’s victory at Ramath-Lehi and David securing the Kingship in Jerusalem by the climactic battle with the Philistines.⁵¹ Therefore, this depicts Samson as foreshadowing David both historically and linguistically, with the Philistines as the common element.

The account ends with a note from the editor; “to this day”. This, seemingly innocuous detail gives us a hint as to the dating of the origin of these traditions. As E. Jenni has argued, the phrase usually refers “to the speaker’s context. In about 1/6 of the cases,⁵² however, the narrator refers to his own present situation . . . often the narrator concludes an etiology, the development of a current fact, from a past event, with the formula ‘until the day’ “. In short, the phrase indicates some “contemporaneity” with the speaker or compiler.⁵³

We suggest that the inclusion of this note regarding the name points to an origin in the time of Samson, when the popularity of these events would be extremely high due to the hated Philistine oppression, and a compilation during the time of David. It is widely accepted among Biblical scholars that a history of Israel was composed under David, or

⁵⁰ 2 Samuel 5:17-25.

⁵¹ The chapter (2 Samuel 5) is composed in such a way that the accounts of the capture of Jerusalem (6-12) is transposed with the rout of the Philistines (17-25), even though v. 17 narrates the Philistines immediate response the actions recorded in vv 1-5. This sequence makes the rout of the Philistines the climactic event prior to establishing Jerusalem as the religious and political capital of Israel (2 Samuel 6).

⁵² Incl. Judges 15:19.

⁵³ E. Jenni, “day”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:531-532.

Solomon; often called the “J” source. While some writing may have been done during the Solomonic reign, like many recent scholars we contend that David initiated the writing of the early history of Israel. David was attempting to unify Israel and the divergent tribal interests, politically and religiously. In this effort, David would have to also keep strongly held and popular tribal traditions and memories, such as these etymologies. In this way, David could keep the tribes’ loyalties and build on the popularity of the past heroes, like Samson. Solomon saw things very differently and diverged from the path of David. Solomon wanted to force allegiance to a central government without competition from tribal loyalties. He broke tribal boundaries and established tax districts, to fund his ambitious building projects, and weaken tribal ties. Therefore, such popular etymologies would be of little service to the Kings after David, beginning with Solomon. Such a notice of a popular etymology cannot be argued to be placed any later than David.

CONCLUSIONS

Judges 15:20 seems to end a distinct set of Judahite traditions and memories regarding Samson, as all of the major events in Judges 14-15 occurred in areas which were, eventually, controlled by Judah. It is an abrupt concluding formula which seems to be based solely on the influence of the Philistines.⁵⁴ That this concluding note mentions the Philistines and the second concluding formula speaks of only his judging Israel indicates the importance the image of the Philistines played in Judahite, or Davidic, theology.

⁵⁴ Cf J. Roskoski, “The Length of Samson’s Judgeship: Comparing Judges 15:20 and 16:31. 18(14) 4/2/2017.

<http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/RoskoskiJ12.pdf>

This idea of Philistine importance is supported by the preservation of the popular etymologies of Ramath-Lehi and En-Hakkore. The defeat of the Philistines and the victory of YHWH, through the hand of Samson, were such that the popular, albeit false, etymologies supplanted the known names and were preserved until the compilation of the narratives.

The narrated events leading toward the battle give us a glimpse of Philistine war strategies; their besieging and spreading out throughout the frontier of Judah and Philistia. It also suggests that Samson did not defeat 1000 men, but rather a powerful, possibly elite, advance guard of the Philistines. The actual number of men he defeated, or put to flight, cannot be determined. However, it seems as though he not only defeated the group to which the Judahites handed him, but seemed to turn back the entire besieging force as no retaliatory attacks are mentioned. It could be argued that, with this understanding, Samson defeated over 1000 men.

In the battle at Ramath-Lehi we see a turning point in the narratives; now the forward orientation toward the Davidic Kingship takes a prominent role. Linguistically, we see how the same term is used in Samson's defeat of the Philistines and David's climactic battle with the Philistines in which he broke their power; after which they were never again a major force in the Ancient Near East. Theologically, Samson was a charismatic leader; one on whom the YHWH Spirit descended. His charisma foreshadowed that of David and the "charismatic kingship". Saul was a Charismatic Leader, but was more of Judge-King as his charisma was transient and he was a transitional figure to the permanent King David. Therefore, the violent onrush of the YHWH Spirit had far-reaching, Davidic, importance.

Historically, the Philistines were a much different enemy than the Israelites had faced. Their power rivalled that of

Egypt and they ushered in the Iron Age to the Ancient Near East. They were conquerors, who led a long line of conquering nations that subjected this region. After their devastating battle with Egypt, they had to regroup. Hence, they settled on the coast of Canaan, possibly as a vassal state, as Egypt was too weak to keep control of the area. With their advanced military and political organization they began to regain their might and their rise to power would have been unimpeded if it were not for Samson. His battle at Ramath-Lehi and, later, his final stand at his death between the pillars of Dagon had a devastating effect on the Philistines. He halted their rise to power and hopes to dominate the entire region. His victory was not be complete.⁵⁵ He began the war which David was to finish.

While his early exploits caught the Philistines' attention and anger, the battle of Ramath-Lehi was different. Herein the Philistines went out to encounter Samson. They succeeded. In their defeat at Ramath-Lehi and the narratives which recount the battle and its aftermath we see the victory of YHWH through His chosen warrior and a precursor to the Kingship of David.

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⁵⁵ Judges 13:5.

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