

JUDGES 12-16 THE LIFE AND LESSONS OF SAMSON, THE 12th JUDGE

Before starting our study on Samson, there is one last incident in the life of Jephthah that shows us the value of diplomacy and the dangers of jealousy.

After Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites, as had previously occurred with Gideon's great victory, the Ephraimites are now offended because Jephthah had not taken them into account in the battle—of course—*only after* he had miraculously won over great odds. Before the battle they were nowhere to be found—but now they, as the leaders and “bluebloods” of the northern tribes, wanted to bask in the glory and participate in the spoils. They jealously looked down on their more modest brothers.

Let's read the account: “Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, ‘Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire! And Jephthah said to them, ‘My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands. So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the Lord delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me? Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, ‘You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites’ (Judges 12:1-5).

As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* explains, “In contrast with Gideon's tactful handling of a similar situation, Jephthah asserted that they had not responded to his call, so he gained victory over Ammon without their help. Insults by the Ephraimites then led to their destruction by the Gileadites. The Gileadites even killed straggling survivors who tried to ford the Jordan River to return to Ephraim. The Ephraimites were easily identified by their colloquial pronunciation of the Hebrew sound ‘sh’ which they pronounced as an *s* (in Shibolet). This civil conflict in Israel cost the Ephraimites 42,000 lives, a high price for jealousy!”

Knowing much of Ephraim and Manasseh eventually emigrated to the British Isles, it is interesting the Ephraimites also looked down on their “poorer Manassite brothers”—the U.S. colonists, and

their pride also had a lot to do with the “civil war” that ensued, called “The Revolutionary War.”

Notice what *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* says, “Gideon had soothed them by involving them in the campaign and praising their contribution. Once more Ephraim challenged another general of Manasseh, and this time the exchange did not end so amicably...the civil war was triggered when the men of Ephraim called the Gileadites ‘fugitives’ or ‘renegades.’ This insult may have been partially aimed at Jephthah's former position as a brigand chief, but more likely it stemmed from the division between the eastern and western tribes. Half of Manasseh lay east of the Jordan, occupying Gilead along with the tribe of Gad. Ephraim *looked down* on these relatives across the river, who no longer even spoke the same dialect.” History often repeats itself.

After this, Jephthah rules over Israel for six more years, and then dies. The next three judges are Ibzan (ruled 7 years), Elon (ruled 10 years) and Abdon (ruled 8 years). The only thing mentioned about them is that two of them had many sons and daughters (over 30) from multiple wives and like Gideon's troubles, we can imagine how many family rivalries this produced. This is indicative of how much polygamy ruled the day due to rampant immorality. It's no wonder Israel apostatizes for the seventh time and God punishes them, letting them be conquered by the Philistines for 40 years (13:1)

We now come to the twelfth judge, Samson--probably the most fascinating of all of them. This was the first time God called a judge even before the time of his birth and gave him supernatural strength. This would be the strongest human being ever to live, and no one has been able to match his feats. It is very likely that the Greeks later took this account and invented the concept of Hercules.

The historian Paul Johnson, in his book, *The History of the Jews*, makes the case that the Old Testament had considerable influence upon Greek culture and literature and that the Greek writers later borrowed from the biblical accounts to create their own mythology of gods and heroes. The difference is that Samson was real and Hercules was just a myth.

In the essay, *Hercules and Samson*, we read, “The narrative lines of Hercules and Samson are strikingly similar. Both are heroes of their respective cultures, both are distinguished chiefly by their great physical

strength, and both are flawed as human beings, superhuman as they are. The flaws figure prominently into their individual experience, but their behavior and growth over the period of their lives are implicated in the culture of which they are each representative. There appears to have been rough equivalence in the time period that the stories of Samson and Hercules first emerged.” It is hard to believe all of these similarities are just coincidences.

The story of Samson begins with a messenger from God visiting the wife of Manoah, of the tribe of Dan, and telling her she will bear a son that is to be consecrated as a Nazirite (see Numbers 6 for the description). This son would save Israel from the Philistines (13:2-5). Manoah wants to see him and asks God to send Him. The divine messenger appears to both and repeats the conditions for the son to be a Nazirite. Manoah wants to feed Him, but the messenger instead tells him to offer the young goat to the Lord, and then the account says, “For Manoah did not know He was the Angel of the Lord” (13:16). When this Messenger ascends to heaven in the same smoke as the sacrifice, the Bible says, “Then Manoah knew that He was the Angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to his wife, ‘We shall surely die, because we have seen God [Elohim]!’” (13:21-22).

This, therefore, is another Christophany in the Old Testament—an appearance by the pre-existent Word who later became Jesus Christ! When asked, He says His name is “Wonderful.” *The Kile and Delitzsch Commentary* explains, “The word is not the proper name of the angel of the Lord, but expresses the *character* of his name...It is to be understood in an *absolute* sense ‘absolutely and supremely wonderful’—as a *predicate belonging to God alone* (compare the same term “Wonderful” in Is 9:6).” This verse says, “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called *Wonderful* [same Hebrew term as here], Counselor, *Mighty God*...” Obviously, this is a reference to Jesus Christ.

The Bible continues, “So the woman bore a son and called his name Samson [which Josephus says actually means ‘the strong one’]; and the child grew, and the Lord blessed him. And the Spirit of the Lord began to move upon him at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol. Now Samson went down to Timnah, and saw a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines” (13:24-14:1).

As *Nelson’s Bible Commentary* says, “Samson lived in a dark period of Israelite history. After the generation of Joshua died out, the people of Israel fell into a lawless and faithless life. The standard of God’s Word, His Law as handed down by Moses, was ignored. Samson was a product of that age, but his parents gave evidence of faith in the Lord.”

It is important here to explain a bit about the Philistines, since they turned out to be the mortal enemies of Israel for the next centuries.

Paul Johnson in his *History of the Jews* says the Philistines were far more formidable adversaries than the Canaanites. They were called the Sea Peoples, who destroyed the remains of the Minoan civilization in Crete and almost conquered the Egyptians. The wall reliefs at Karnak picture Ramses III expelling them from the Nile basin. These peoples then veered eastward and settled on the coast that still bears their name—Palestine (a Greek rendition of Philistine).

Nelson’s Bible Dictionary adds, “The Philistines were an aggressive nation that occupied part of *southwest Palestine* from about 1200 to 600 B.C. The name Philistine was used first among the Egyptians to describe the *sea peoples* defeated by Rameses III in a naval battle about 1188 B.C...The Hebrew word *pelishti* is the basis of the name Palestine, a later name for Canaan, the country occupied by God’s Covenant People.

“Little is known about the origins of the Philistines except what is contained in the Bible—that they came from Caphtor (Gen. 10:14), generally identified with the *island of Crete*.

“Liberal scholars have assumed that references to the Philistines during Abraham’s time are incorrect historically and that the Philistine occupation actually occurred in the 12th century B.C. More careful examination indicates there were *two* Philistine settlements in Canaan, one early and another later. Both these settlements were marked by significant cultural differences.

“The Philistines of Gerar, with whom Abraham dealt (Genesis 20–21), evidently were a colony of the early settlement located southeast of Gaza in southern Canaan. This colony was situated outside the area occupied by the five Philistine cities after 1188 B.C. Gerar was also a separate city-state governed by a king who bore the name or title of Abimelech...It is best, therefore, to regard the Genesis traditions as *genuine* historical records.

“The early Philistine settlements in Canaan took on a new appearance when five cities—Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza—and the areas around them were occupied by the Philistines in the 12th century B.C. Probably all of these except Ekron were already in existence when the Sea Peoples conquered them. These five Philistine cities formed a united political unit (called a pentapolis). Archaeological discoveries in the area have illustrated how they expanded to the south and east. Broken bits of Philistine pottery were found at archaeological sites in those areas.

“The Philistines possessed superior weapons of *iron* [and powerful wagons] when they began to attack the Israelites in the 11th century B.C. The tribe of Dan moved northward to escape these Philistine attacks, and Judah also came under increasing pressure.” This is when Samson enters the scene to save the Israelites.

Nelson’s Bible Commentary has a good summary of Samson’s life: “The Lord announced to Manoah and his wife that they would bear a son who would be raised as a Nazirite. This meant that Samson should serve as an example to Israel of *commitment* to God. Through most of his life, however, Samson fell far short of this mark.

“Samson’s life was marred by his weakness for pagan women. As soon as he became of age, he fell in love with one of the daughters of the Philistines. He insisted on marrying her, in spite of his parents’ objection (Judges 14:1–4). This was against God’s law, which forbade intermarriage of the Israelites among the women of Canaan [because of different religious beliefs]. On another occasion he was almost captured by the Philistines while he was visiting a prostitute in the city of Gaza.

“Samson’s mighty physical feats are well-known. With his bare hands he killed a young lion that attacked him (Judges 14:5–6). He gathered 300 foxes (or jackals) and tied them together, then sent them through the grain fields with torches in their tails to destroy the crops of the Philistines (15:5).

“On one occasion, he broke the ropes with which the enemy had bound him (Judges 15:14). He killed a thousand Philistine soldiers with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:15). And, finally, he carried away the massive gate of Gaza, a city of the Philistines, when they thought they had him trapped behind the city walls (Judges 16:3).

“But in spite of his great physical strength Samson was a foolish man. He took vengeance on those who used devious means to discover the answer to one of his riddles (Judges 14). When deceived by his enemies, his only thought was for revenge, as when his father-in-law gave away his wife to another man (Judges 15:6–7). He had not learned the word of the Lord, “Vengeance is mine” (Deut. 32:35).

“Samson eventually became involved with Delilah, a woman from the Valley of Sorek (Judg. 16:4), who proved to be his undoing. The Philistines bribed her to find out the key to his strength. She teased him until he finally revealed that the secret was his uncut hair, allowed to grow long in accord with the Nazirite law. While Samson slept, she called the Philistines to cut his hair and turned him over to his enemies. Samson became weak, not only because his hair had been cut but also because the Lord had departed from him (Judges 16:20).

“After his enslavement by the Philistines, Samson was blinded and forced to work at grinding grain. Eventually he came to his senses and realized that God had given him his great strength to serve the Lord and his people. After a prayer to God for strength, he killed thousands of the enemy by pulling down the pillars of the temple of Dagon (Judges 16:28–31). That one great act of faith cost Samson his life, but it won for him a place among the heroes of faith (Heb. 11:32). Out of weakness he was made strong by the power of the Lord (Heb. 11:34).

“Samson was a person with great potential who fell short because of his sin and disobedience. Mighty in physical strength, he was weak in resisting temptation. His life is a clear warning against the dangers of self-indulgence and lack of discipline.”

This is one of the pitfalls the Bible warns its leaders not to fall into as Samson tragically did. None of us should ever let a “Delilah” of a temptation sever our “spiritual” locks of hair (symbolizing our connection with God) and as a result, render us spiritually powerless before the Satan, our enemy.