

JUDGES 14:5-6 | ENCOUNTER WITH A LION

VERSE 5:

Samson, along with his parents, went down to Timnath. In the Hebrew scriptures, "down" simply means that they were traveling away from Jerusalem, without any implicit spiritual testimony.

Timnath, like most towns in the area, had vineyards, which were likely on the outskirts of the city. It is not entirely clear what type of animal Samson encountered, as the Hebrew word used for "lion" in this passage can also refer to other large carnivorous animals. However, it is known that lions once roamed the land in this region, although they have since become extinct in the area.

VERSE 6:

As we are told in Judges 13:25, "the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times," and this was one of those times. We do not know how this worked, but it seemed to give Samson great physical strength. In this instance, Samson took a lion and "rent him as he would have rent a kid" (referring to a lamb or goat). The reference seems to be to the ease with which this took place, rather than the manner of slaughter, as the next phrase emphasizes that he used only his bare hands, presumably in contrast to how one would slaughter a lamb.

It should be noted that the Nazarite prohibition of Numbers 6:6-7 was not to touch a "dead body," with examples of family members who may die at the time. It does not seem that a Nazarite was prohibited from any "dead thing," but only a dead human body.

We are informed that Samson "told not his father or his mother what he had done." This is often taken negatively, but there are various reasons he could have kept it secret. Perhaps his parents would have considered it too dangerous or would have been frightened. Would they have considered it an omen? It is impossible to determine whether the motive was evil or protective.

JUDGES 14:7 | INTERACTION WITH THE PHILISTINE WOMAN

This all seems to be in keeping with local customs of the time. Samson and "the woman" appear to be in conversation, likely discussing matters of marriage. It's natural to assume that families were involved, given that Samson's parents also went on the journey.

Interestingly, in many cultures, marriage was arranged in a business-like fashion with negotiations conducted by families. These marriages often proved successful, working as well as, or even better than, the more romantic method of falling in love followed by marriage that is seen in modern Western culture. The "secret to success" in these marriages was likely the cultural norms on the understood roles of husbands, wives, and others in society.

JUDGES 14:8-9 | A SECRET KEPT FROM PARENTS

VERSE 8 -

The text makes note of the passing of time, but no exact time is given. As in any society, likely preparations for a wedding needed to take place. It was certainly long enough for the lion's body to decay to "carcass" stage, and for bees to build a hive and produce honey. Assuming that everything here is natural, this likely would have taken several months

VERSE 9 -

The secret of the lion continues. While many take this as breaking the Nazarite vow of touching a dead body and then keeping that matter a secret, I'm not convinced that Samson has broken his vow. After all, if a Nazarite is prohibited from touching any dead animal then he would be prohibited from eating meat. It seems to me that he is more concerned that the parents not know about the lion, for reasons which we are not told.

JUDGES 14:10-14 | THE BACHELOR PARTY

VERSE 10 -

This verse has two ambiguities. First, **“his father went down unto the woman.”** Presumably this is to begin making final wedding preparations, perhaps to receive any negotiated dowry. Second, **“Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do.”** The text explicitly mentions a tradition that seems to have already faded by the time the account is written. This appears to be more of a feast of young men than a wedding feast of the families and community. It is likely some sort of tradition of celebrating and ritualizing the arrival of adult, independent status more than the marriage itself. Note that my interpretation of both ambiguities is plausible and grounded in the cultural context, but not explicitly stated in the text. However, such is true of more common interpretations as well.

VERSES 11-13 -

In verse 11, we are not exactly sure who “they” are. Perhaps the community from Timnath? Possibly whatever ritual custom is being carried out was one in which all the young men gathered, and so **“they brought thirty companions to be with him”** for the festivities.

In short order, Samson proposes a wager: if the men can guess the riddle, he will provide **“thirty sheets and thirty change of garments,”** presumably one for each, but if they cannot guess the riddle, each of them will provide him a single sheet and garment, 30 total. Note that the word **“sheets”** is “linen,” and thus the two items together involve a hefty financial sum.

I suspect that this was a display of intellectual and financial bravado, and that this, along with physical bravado was part of the custom and the fun of the young men during these celebrations.

In the end, the young men accept the wager and ask Samson to **“Put forth thy riddle, that we may hear it.”**

VERSE 14 -

The riddle is related to the lion, of which nobody is aware but Samson. Perhaps this, more than anything ethical, is the reason the text states the secrecy from the parents. Because the reader knows that the parents do not know about the lion, the reader also knows the parents cannot reveal the meaning of the riddle.

The riddle is filled with intrigue as well as Hebrew poetry. It displays Samson as one in command of thought and language, and not as someone lacking morality and intellect, as is often implied. The KJV translates the riddle as, **“Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.”** This does a good job of stating the message of the riddle. There is a poetic element difficult to convey in English that involves related root words and phonetical similarity. Perhaps something like, “From the devourer, a delicacy arose; from the fierce, a sweetness flowed” would try to capture the similarity of sounds. In any light, Samson managed a linguistic and intellectual riddle that would earn high grades in literature! The text mentions that **“they could not in three days expound the riddle.”** We are not told if there was a time-limit expressed or implied.