

JUDGES 14:15-17 | DEADLINE & DECEPTION

VERSE 15 -

Samson was celebrating a custom with 30 young men that lasted seven days, similar to a bachelor party. During the festivities, Samson presented the group with a riddle: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (v. 14). He challenged the young men to solve the riddle within seven days. If they succeeded, he promised to give them thirty pieces of linen and clothing, but if they failed, they would have to give him the same.

By verse 15, the deadline was approaching, and the 30 young men resorted to threatening the lives and possessions of Samson's fiancée ("lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire.") The phrase "have ye called us to take that we have? is it not so?" can be understood as an expression of their suspicion and frustration. They accused Samson and possibly his future wife of luring them into a situation where they stand to lose their possessions. The language conveyed a sense of betrayal or a setup, as if they were invited not for genuine fellowship or celebration, but to be taken advantage of.

Note that the text refers to "Samson's wife," but I am referring to her as his fiancée. The Hebrew word *ishshah* (אִשָּׁה) can mean both "wife" and "woman," and is sometimes used to refer to a woman who is engaged (for which the word "fiancée" did not exist in English until the 19th century). In fact, Deuteronomy 22:23-24 discusses a "betrothed" woman who is referred to as the "neighbor's wife," using the word *ishshah* (אִשָּׁה).

Ancient wedding customs were different than modern customs, and so terminology does not transfer easily. In 17th Century English, the lines between betrothal and marriage were less distinct than they are in contemporary Western culture. Betrothal was often considered a binding agreement, with social and legal implications, much like marriage itself. So, while it might seem strange to modern readers, it would not be entirely out of place for a 17th-century English speaker to refer to a betrothed woman as a "wife," especially when discussing or drawing upon biblical texts. The practice would reflect the understanding of betrothal as a firm commitment that was nearly equivalent to marriage, at least in legal and social terms.

VERSE 16 -

The woman used every degree of persuasion to convince Samson to reveal the answer to the riddle. Samson's response provides insight into other aspects of the text. Concerning the answer to the riddle, he says, "I have not told IT my father nor my mother, and shall I tell IT thee?" This hints at two things.

First, in verses 5 and 9, it is noted that Samson did not tell his parents. This makes it the third declaration. Samson's response could indicate that it was not his habit to keep things from his parents, but in this case, he did so for unknown reasons.

Secondly, this could be further evidence that the two were not yet married, with Samson's greater obligation being to his parents. After marriage, "a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife."

VERSE 17 -

The phrase "she wept before him the seven days" is perplexing because, on the seventh day (verse 15), the men enticed the fiancée. Rashi, the renowned medieval Jewish commentator, offers the interpretation that "seventh day" in Judges 14:15 refers to the seventh day of the week, not the seventh day of feasting, and that it corresponds to the fourth day of feasting. This harmonizes with the close of verse 13. It would certainly be appropriate in a Hebrew context to make a notation of the seventh day, even when it was the fourth day of events. The Septuagint says "the fourth day," but should not be taken as a definitive interpretation.

If we go with "the fourth day" then "she wept before him the seven days" is still somewhat perplexing, because there would be only three remaining days to weep. Hebrew would allow the understanding that she wept the remainder of the seven days and on the completion of the seventh day of the feast "he told her, because she lay sore upon him." The phrase "she lay sore" could be understood as "she pressed hard."

Immediately, it seems, “she told the riddle to the children of her people.” In Mark 14:9 there is the promise of a compliment. Perhaps here it would be appropriate in a more negative fashion: “Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, THIS also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.”

JUDGES 14:18-20 | VENGEANCE IS MINE

VERSE 18 -

The “men of the city” are presumably the “companions” (v. 14) who have been issued the challenge. It is not known why the terminology is different, but perhaps to reflect the change that has taken place in the relationship from young men celebrating to an adult confrontation. The men came “before the sun went down,” which would mark the beginning of the eighth day and the end of the deadline. They answered clearly, “What IS sweeter than honey? and what IS stronger than a lion?”

Samson immediately accused them of manipulating his wife, using the idiomatic phrase "If ye had not plowed with my heifer." The preparatory work, or "plowing," was done by Samson's "heifer," an unflattering reference to his betrothed wife.

Samson's riddle and his response to the Philistines demonstrate his intellectual prowess and command of language. His words are not simple or straightforward, but rather reveal a rare capacity for rhetoric and intellectual ability uncommon among young men of any era. This may provide a clue as to how Samson was able to serve as a respected judge of Israel for a period of twenty years, showcasing that he was not only a man of great physical strength but also of intellectual vigor.

VERSE 19 -

Samson "went down to Ashkelon," one of the five main Philistine cities collectively known as "the Philistine Pentapolis", which also included Gaza, Ekron, Gath, and Ashdod. Ashkelon was a large and old city situated on the coast of the Mediterranean. Today, the modern city of Ashkelon, located at the same site, is home to approximately 150,000 Jewish citizens of Israel. The city has been continuously inhabited by various populations since the days of Samson, even after the defeat of the Philistines many hundreds of years later.

The killing of the 30 men of Ashkelon is morally complex. Did Samson remain a Nazarite after the killing of these men? The later account of Samson's hair (Judges 16) would indicate that the Nazarite vows were still an important factor in the story. By the letter of the law, it is certainly conceivable that Samson “slew thirty men of them, and took their spoil” and still maintained his Nazarite status. Numbers 6:6-7, which give the prohibition against dead bodies, can be interpreted loosely as only related to family members or strictly as related to any dead body. Frankly, any interpretation we give outside the letter of the law is “oral tradition,” which should be taken as opinion.

The words “his anger was kindled” is a Hebraism, a word picture that literally says “his nostrils became hot,” but is always understood as “becoming angry.”

While many people may want to criticize Samson's supposed character flaws, I believe we need to consider several things before doing so. First, God's Spirit would come upon Samson from time to time (Judges 13:25). Second, the nation was effectively occupied by the Philistines, and Samson was the leader of the resistance movement; he was God's chosen instrument from birth for this task. Third, this entire scene was devised by God (see verse 4). Finally, even the killing of the thirty men is introduced with the phrase "the Spirit of the LORD came upon him." Therefore, it seems unfair to criticize Samson's anger issues as some kind of so-called “toxic masculinity” or as unseemly in any way.

In fact, it could be interpreted that only after the killing of the 30 men was his anger kindled, and that was toward his betrothed wife, whom he “left at the altar” and “went up to his father's house.”

VERSE 20 -

In conclusion, according to the account, "Samson's wife was GIVEN to his companion," who was presumably one of the 30 companions "whom he had used as his friend." While the English translation might suggest manipulation on Samson's part, the Hebrew text does not imply this. It is more likely that we should understand it as "the companion who used to be his friend.”