

SAMSON: STUDYING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE
SESSION 7 | SAMSON RECONSIDERED | JUDGES 15:1-8

Judges 15 chapter is almost entirely interpreted in a negative light for Samson. I am going to attempt to present Samson in a positive light. Samson is being led of the Lord (Judges 14:4), and this has to be the backdrop of the events of chapters 14-15. Looked at positively, Samson's conflicts with the Philistines begin to unsettle the power dynamics between Israel and the Philistines, which is exactly what God wants to do.

While it may be difficult for some to "excuse" Samson's behavior, his inclusion in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11:32, as one who through faith "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises," implies that his life, despite its moral complexities, had aspects that were commendable in the larger narrative.

JUDGES 15:1-8 | THE CYCLE OF HONOR

VERSES 1 -

Chapter 15 takes place some time after chapter 14. It is unclear how long, but Samson appears to have lost the anger he displayed concerning the events of the bachelor party.

The verse now takes us to the time of wheat harvest, which would have been in the springtime. Israel's feast of firstfruits was held on the Sunday after Passover, followed by the counting of weeks until Pentecost. Therefore, it was likely April or May.

We are told that Samson declared, "I will go in to my wife into the chamber." This is evidence that the marriage had been contracted but not consummated, as we put forth in session 6.

However, we find evidence that Samson did not know what we, the reader, know - that his fiancée (as we would call her) "was given to his companion" (Judges 14:28). Fortunately for Samson, "her father would not suffer him to go in."

VERSE 2 -

This verse confirms our suspicion that Samson was unaware that his "wife" had been given to another man. It is now known that the father of the bride is the one who gave her to the companion. As strange as this seems to us, it was likely fitting in local custom and not seen as odd or even impersonal.

The father says something even more out of place to our modern minds, "IS not her younger sister fairer than she? Take her." The only similar cross-references would be the story of Jacob with Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29), but the circumstances are very different. It is likely that we are unable to comprehend the viewpoint of marriage as a legal arrangement between families. It is possible that the father is simply concerned about fulfilling his part of the contractual obligation.

VERSE 3 -

Samson's declaration that he would be "more blameless than the Philistines" provokes consideration. The phrasing in the King James Version, "Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure," does indeed pose challenges for modern readers. Yet, this claim of relative innocence can be examined through the lens of Hebrew legal and ethical frameworks.

One such framework is the Law of Lex Talionis, found in several passages of the Torah, including Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. "Lex Talionis" can be translated as "law of retaliation" or "law of like for like." The concept is most commonly associated with the principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," emphasizing proportionate justice—neither excessive nor deficient in its retribution.

In Samson's case, the transgressions committed against him were deeply personal. His wife had been taken from him and given to another man, invoking a sense of betrayal and loss. According to the Law of Lex Talionis, an argument could be made that Samson was entitled to a form of recompense. Thus, when Samson claims to be "more blameless," it is not entirely without basis in the legal and ethical systems of his own culture. He perceives his forthcoming actions as a measured response to the wrongs committed against him.

Of course, the application of Lex Talionis here isn't without its complexities. Samson's personal vendetta and the scale of his retaliation raise questions. However, his invocation of relative blamelessness gains additional weight when viewed through this legal prism. Understanding this offers us another lens through which to interpret Samson's complicated moral landscape, particularly if we hold to the view that God was orchestrating events for a larger purpose, as indicated in Judges 14:4.

VERSE 4 -

We are now introduced to the relatively famous story of Samson and the 300 foxes. The foxes were tied tail to tail with "a firebrand in the midst between two tails," making a spectacular parade of 150 pairs of flaming fur-bearers in the world's first—and likely only—pyrotechnic procession.

The Hebrew word "שׁוּׁעָלִים" (shu'alim) refers to any animal of the canine family. It's worth noting that the ancient context did not make as strict taxonomical distinctions between species as modern biology does. The Latin Vulgate, in the 4th Century, translated the word as "vulpes," which means "foxes," and it has been interpreted as foxes ever since. However, there is a possibility that they were jackals instead of foxes. Jackals were prevalent in the area and tend to live in herds, while foxes are much more solitary animals.

VERSE 5 -

Finishing the account of the "pyrotechnic pooch parade," the verse coincides with the April to May timeframe. Verse 5 uses a more general word for **grain crops**, translated "corn," in verse 5 than the text does in verse 1. Verse 5 seeks to point out the variety of crops damaged through Samson's actions.

As an historical anecdote, in the 1948 War of Independence for the modern State of Israel, there was an Israeli commando unit under the name "Samson's Foxes."

VERSE 6 -

The Philistines quickly learned that Samson was behind the incident. However, instead of going after Samson, they immediately turned to the bride's father, punishing him and his daughter with death for his involvement.

The Middle Eastern culture, both past and present, places a strong emphasis on honor. The Philistines considered the father's actions dishonorable and shameful to the community. While the events of this day may be difficult for Westerners to comprehend, they were likely more aligned with local customs of justice, which may be hard to grasp with our modern Western mindset. A similar honor-driven event in our own history, however, is the Burr-Hamilton duel, in which the Secretary of the Treasury was killed by the Vice President over an offense at a dinner party.

VERSE 7 -

If the Philistines thought that their act would end the "tit for tat," they were mistaken. Samson then pledged to "be avenged of you." The term "be avenged" implies a moral or ethical stance, where Samson believes he is justified in retaliating against the Philistines. The scene had one offense, the giving away of the bride to another man, retributed in another offense, the burning of the crops. But then a new offense began, and Samson, it seems, felt honor-bound to "be avenged," and so declared that it would happen.

VERSE 8 -

We have only been given a summary of the avengement, but it sounds bloody. The phrase "He smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter" is only used here in the Hebrew Scriptures, so we can only speculate on its meaning. However, it seems to imply a thorough and likely brutal slaughter.

This is the first act of strength in which we are not specifically informed that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson. This absence could be explained in a number of ways, both positively and negatively. Had the Spirit departed? Or is the Spirit now so integrated into his life that it does not need mention? Perhaps it suggests that Samson was physically strong in his own right, even outside the strength of the Lord. His abilities here would certainly help him stand as one who would serve as a judge of Israel in a time of vicious enemies.

Those who claim this act to be "ungodly" should remember that the Lord Himself will return in vengeance. Isaiah 63:3 speaks of His return, "I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people **THERE WAS** none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury...."