

SESSION 8 | THE MULTI-USE JAWBONE | JUDGES 15:9-20

VERSE 9 -

Samson was at "the rock of Etam," an unknown location likely in the land of Judah. As a result of the slaughter (v. 8), the Philistines "went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi." That is, they retaliated with stronger military control in Judah.

Recall that the entire situation was designed by the Lord, who "sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel" (Judges 14:4). The "occasion" now appears to have made things worse rather than better, and such is often the case in confronting a powerful enemy.

The location of the village of Lehi is uncertain, but it is clearly in the territory of Judah. There are two interesting facets of this name, only one of which is relevant to our story. First, the Hebrew word "lehi" means "jawbone." This, of course, will be significant to the story and displays the subtle poetic justice and humor of the Hebrew text. Second, the Book of Mormon has a major figure named Lehi, who supposedly leaves Jerusalem and comes to North America. In my opinion, Joseph Smith likely borrowed the name of the town for the name of his fictional character.

VERSE 10 -

Under the "Lex Talionis" or "law of retaliation" (see notes, v. 3), the Philistines made it known that they wanted "to do to him as he had done to us."

Samson's actions had put those around him in a difficult situation, and this opens an ethical dilemma for the men of Judah. Would they respond with fear or faith? What should they do? Should they hand over Samson to appease the Philistines, or resist and potentially face greater retribution?

The story also raises ethical considerations that are relevant today. Some criticize Samson for his behavior that escalated tensions. However, many Christian ethicists are vehemently against any activity that further fuels political tensions. This approach often fails to appreciate the greater injustice of the situation at hand. In the case of the text, chastising Samson for escalating tensions fails to recognize the broader narrative, especially in light of Judges 14:4.

VERSE 11 -

In a stark reflection of the times, a staggering 'army' of 3,000 men disgracefully turned against their own champion—and by extension, against the Lord Himself—capitulating to the Philistines in an act of shameful appeasement. Samson, undefeated as an "army of one," saw the "men" of Judah choose subservience to the Philistines.

Does this verse illustrate one of humanity's tendencies? Namely, the inclination to appease and live with the status quo instead of risking retaliation? It may be worthwhile to remember the tremendous power of people who rise against injustice, as well as the magnetic pull toward the "go along and get along" philosophy.

It is noteworthy that the "men" of Judah blame Samson for their problems. This is yet another display of the human tendency to fail in recognizing the true source of their problems.

VERSES 12-13 -

Samson allows himself to be bound by the appeasers of Judah. He appears to have confidence concerning the Philistines, not being worried about his ability to defend himself even when bound. He also seems to have a desire not to fight against his own people.

The fact that Samson's own people bind him suggests their inability to recognize the divine strength bestowed upon him. To them, Samson's muscle seemed to be a human achievement rather than a sudden and extraordinary work of the Spirit.

VERSE 14 -

When "**the Spirit of the LORD**" came upon Samson, he easily broke the cords. Samson's strength is displayed with this specific notation, as well as without it, as seen in Judges 14:8. He performs feats of superhuman strength at times, and at other times, no mention of the Lord's empowerment is shown in the text. Samson's strength seems to be a combination of his inherent physical prowess, which, at times, is further augmented by direct intervention by the Lord.

VERSE 15 -

Samson's famed killing of 1,000 men with "**the new Jawbone of an ass**" displays the super-human strength from God that he was given. The turn of events, from captive to avenger, had to have sent a startling message. And the text does indeed seem to show a period of peace that ensued afterward (see v. 20).

There is a sense of "poetic justice" in Samson's chosen weapon in the English mind, with its crude and simple nature. In Hebrew, there is "poetic humor" in the fact that the Hebrew word for "jawbone" is "Lehi," which is also the name of the town where this took place.

VERSE 16 -

The verse's structure exhibits a poetic parallelism which is a characteristic feature of Hebrew poetry. In Judges 15:16, there's a parallel between the two phrases:

1. "With the jawbone of an ass"
2. "heaps upon heaps"

followed by the repetition of

1. "with the jaw of an ass"
2. "have I slain a thousand men."

This parallelism not only emphasizes Samson's remarkable feat but also the sheer number of his enemies that he defeated with a seemingly unassuming weapon. The repetition and parallel structure give the passage a rhythmic and memorable quality, suitable for recounting a significant event.

As we mentioned in the episode with the riddle, Samson should be remembered not just for his physical strength and victories, but also for displaying every characteristic of being a strong rhetorician. This skill is useful in leadership and no doubt served him well as a Judge of Israel.

VERSE 17 -

The verse tells us what happens next after "he had made an end of speaking." This may imply that the speech, of which we only have a poetic signature in verse 16, had much more to it. It may have even been the catalyst causing the people to recognize Samson as Judge, which was more of a recognized status than an official position.

Samson gave the place a new name: Ramathlehi, which means "the heights of the jawbone." In Western terms, this might be understood as "Jawbone Hill." This name commemorated the battle, leading us to consider the possibility that this event was pivotal for the nation in recognizing Samson as the de facto leader.

VERSE 18 -

Samson gives praise to God, but quickly shows apprehension. He recognizes that the victory came from the Lord, but then worries he may "**die for thirst.**" It's unclear whether this was a real concern or just figurative speech from a worn-out warrior. However, what he says next is enlightening. He wonders whether his dead body will "**fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?**" This could be interpreted as a display of the fact that he seems to have lived a righteous and Torah-observant life, unlike most depictions. It can also be seen as a glimpse of the disdain that the Israelites had for the Philistines.

Did Samson actually face a risk of dying of thirst? It is plausible given what he had just done. On the other hand, it could be a manifestation of depression after a great victory. However, since God did send water (v. 19), it's possible that either God condescended mercifully to Samson's depression, or Samson was indeed dying of thirst.

VERSE 19 -

The miracle of water from the jawbone is often overlooked in this story. God mercifully provides water from the jawbone, causing Samson to name that location Enhakkore, "the spring of the caller." The name and context imply that the jawbone became a water fountain for Samson's thirst. What an amazing miracle!

The text mentions that Enhakkore "**IS in Lehi to this day.**" This suggests that both Ramathlehi and Enhakkore were specific locations within the community that retained the name Lehi.

Samson's "**spirit came again, and he revived.**" This verse illustrates that spiritual low places often result from physical exhaustion.

VERSE 20 -

This verse jumps ahead a bit, and the information will be repeated in Judges 16:35, which describes Samson's burial.

Although Samson's leadership was "in the days of the Philistines," it does not necessarily mean that it occurred during the 40 years of Philistine oppression (Jdgs 13:1). Rather, the 40 years of oppression were completed, and Samson then judged Israel for 20 years. However, the Philistines were not completely overcome and would later become a menace again. The 20 years of peace under Samson marked the beginning of the ultimate demise of the Philistines, as noted in Judges 13:5, where the Lord says "he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."