

SAMSON: STUDYING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE
SESSION 9 | SAMSON & DELILAH – PART 1 | JUDGES 16:1-9

As we turn to Judges 16, we come to one of the most celebrated and enduring accounts in the pages of the Scripture—a tale that resonates through the ages with themes of love and treachery, of strength and vulnerability. It is a narrative of monumental proportions, an epic saga that has etched itself into the collective consciousness of humanity. Through the words of Judges 16, we are transported to a world where the divine and mortal intermingle, where a solitary man, imbued with God's extraordinary power, grapples not only with his inner turmoil but also with the snares of an enigmatic and beguiling figure, Delilah.

This is the story of Samson and Delilah—a narrative that unfolds with the weight of destiny and the clash of titanic forces. Within these verses, we find ourselves amid a whirlwind of emotions, witnessing the grandeur of Samson's God-given strength and the depths of Delilah's cunning.

JUDGES 16:1-3 | SAMSON IN GAZA

VERSE 1 -

Before we delve into the Samson and Delilah narrative, it's crucial to note that three preceding verses mark a significant turning point in Samson's story.

Until this juncture, we have sought to offer Samson the benefit of the doubt in our exploration. However, we must now confront this particular incident as a moment of moral challenge. After two decades of holding a position of respect and leadership in Israel, Samson journeyed to Gaza and engaged in a liaison with a **"harlot."** The Hebrew text explicitly describes her as "אִשָּׁה זֹנֶה" (ishah zonah), combining "אִשָּׁה" (ishah), meaning "woman," with "זֹנֶה" (zonah), meaning "harlot" or "prostitute." The King James Version accurately reflects this characterization by using the term "harlot."

This raises a cascade of questions: What prompted Samson's actions? Why did he venture into Gaza, a city nestled within Philistine territory? And what impelled him to partake in this liaison with a harlot? While numerous possibilities for speculation abound, the underlying motivations remain veiled in mystery.

VERSE 2 -

News of Samson's unfortunate liaison quickly spread throughout the city of Gaza, creating a buzz of excitement and intrigue. The people became aware of this scandalous affair, and whispers of a scheme to capture and kill Samson began to circulate. The city was abuzz with discussions of the renowned figure and the impending plan to bring him down.

This notoriety sheds light on the context of Samson's life. As a well-known public figure, his actions carried significant weight and consequences. The events unfolding in Gaza were a testament to the power and influence he held, as well as the dangers that came with his fame.

VERSE 3 -

Verse 3 describes how Samson, aware of the plot against him, devised a plan to escape from the city of Gaza. In the dead of night, under the cover of darkness, he rose from his place of rest and went to the city gates. The gates were the main entrance and exit points of the city, and they were typically fortified and guarded to prevent unauthorized access.

Samson did not confront the citizens directly but instead took hold of the doors of the city gates, including the two doorposts and the bar. By uprooting these heavy structures, he not only demonstrated his extraordinary strength but also disabled the city's defense system. This act of physically removing the gates would have created a path of escape for Samson, rendering the citizens powerless to stop him.

It is important to note that the text does not provide explicit details on how Samson managed to overcome the citizens who were presumably waiting for him. However, his remarkable strength and the element of surprise likely played key roles in his ability to take hold of the city gates without immediate opposition. Additionally, it is possible that the citizens were caught off guard or did not expect Samson to attempt such a daring feat.

After taking hold of the city gates, Samson carried them to a hill near Hebron. The distance between Gaza and Hebron is approximately 60 miles.

JOSHUA 16:4-20 | DELILAH'S TRICKERY

VERSE 4 -

In Judges 16:4, we are introduced to the setting of the next phase of Samson and Delilah's story—the Valley of Sorek. The exact location of this valley is not precisely identified in the text, leaving some ambiguity regarding its specific geographical location. However, it is believed to be situated near the border between the ancient territories of Judah and Philistia.

The Valley of Sorek holds significance in the narrative as it serves as the backdrop for the unfolding events and the interactions between Samson and Delilah. This valley becomes a symbolic space where the clash between their opposing forces takes place.

Delilah is a central figure in the story of Samson. She is described as an enigmatic and beguiling woman who becomes entangled with Samson, ultimately playing a pivotal role in his downfall. The text does not provide extensive information about Delilah's background or origins, leaving much to speculation and interpretation.

Her name, Delilah, likely holds some significance as well, however, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty. The Hebrew root דלל [dalal] means “to be brought low”. But her name is not *Delal* or a more feminine rendering, *Dalalah*, but it is *Delilah*. It is possible, even likely, that the name was created by the author of Judges by combining two Hebrew words, first דלל [dalal] and then לילה (LAYELA) to make “Delilah.” If so, the name reflects the curious three verses at the beginning of the chapter that otherwise seem out of place, because LAYELA means “night.” Putting these together, the name would mean “to be brought low at night.” Since the *dalal* is often associated with “hanging low,” it is even more connected to the idea of gates being removed from their hinges.

The question is: by giving this woman a Hebrew name, was the author drawing a connection between the two stories? While it is possible, based on the text alone, we cannot fully confirm it. However, if we do not attempt to draw the connection, we would be left with other difficult questions. For example, why does the Philistine woman have a Hebrew name? And why is the story introduced with just a few words (three verses in modern translations) without a conclusion or connection? Furthermore, it is well-known that Biblical names often carried significance to the Biblical account, if not always. The speculation of the meaning of the name *Delilah* is fully in order to those who take the Word of God literally and appreciate the grammatical and historical context in which the word is found.

As we delve deeper into the story, we will witness the unfolding dynamics between Samson and Delilah, exploring the complexities of their relationship and the consequences of their interactions.

The previous speculation on the meaning of the name is not meant to imply that she was not a historical figure. Indeed, she was. However, in the people and events that God uses, there is often a subtle, behind-the-scenes tapestry written by God. This woman was loved by Samson, and love has a mysterious effect on a man. Samson was no exception.

VERSE 5 -

The philistine leaders' offer of "eleven hundred pieces of silver" to Delilah demonstrates their strong motivation to finally capture Samson and get their "payback." The considerable payment underscores just how intent the Philistines were on overpowering their enemy after having suffered humiliating losses at his hands. Rather than attack Samson directly, they devise a cunning plan to use a woman close to him, revealing their shrewdness.

Delilah's swift agreement to their terms, without any negotiation described, raises intriguing questions about her relationship with the Philistines up to this point. Was she predisposed to assist them against Samson, perhaps due to past interactions that are unspecified? Or was she simply enticed by the extravagant payment offered? Her motivations are unclear but central to understanding whether she betrayed Samson willingly for her own interests, or reluctantly under coercion.

While Delilah serves as the public conspirator engaging with Samson through deception, the Philistine leaders likely worked closely behind the scenes to strategize how to finally defeat their nemesis. More details about their private coordination could further highlight the clandestine, cunning nature of their anti-Samson efforts.

VERSES 6-7 -

Delilah's conversation with Samson is indeed direct and seemingly blunt, as she clearly asks him about the source of his great strength. Samson's evasive responses suggest that he may have been aware of her intentions and the potential danger she posed. It is possible that Samson was aware of Delilah's collaboration with the Philistines but chose to continue the relationship, perhaps driven by his affection for her.

In Judges 16:7, Samson responds to Delilah's inquiry about the source of his strength by saying, "If they bind me with seven green withs that were never dried, then shall I be weak, and be as another man." In the King James Version (KJV), the now archaic term "withs" is used. The Oxford English Dictionary describes it as, "A band, tie, or shackle consisting of a tough flexible twig or branch, or of several twisted together; such a twig or branch, as of willow or osier, used for binding or tying, and sometimes for plaiting."¹ Modern translations such as "cord" (NASB) or "bowstring" (ESV) are not as literal nor precise, though the archaic term requires the use of a dictionary.

As for why Samson provided this particular answer, it is not explicitly stated in the text, leaving room for speculation. One possible explanation is that Samson intentionally provided a false or misleading response to test Delilah's loyalty or to mislead the Philistines. By giving them a plausible answer, he may have hoped to divert their attention from the true source of his strength. His response could have been a spontaneous fabrication to appease Delilah momentarily and maintain their relationship.

VERSES 8-9 -

It was only a moment until Delilah put the plan into action, and only another moment for it to fail. The plans went so far that there were men "**lying in wait, abiding with her in the chamber.**" But Samson broke the willow straps "**as a thread of tow is broken when it toucheth the fire.**" Tow is flax, and the word picture stresses the ease at which Samson broke the withs. This seems to solve once and for all whether Samson had physical strength without the Lord, for surely the Lord was not with him on this occasion.

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "withe | with, n.", July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9874792659> - Accessed September 16, 2023