

Judges 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 13. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah, and his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman, and said to her, Behold, you are barren and have not born children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean. For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Then the woman came and told her husband, A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God. Very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name. But he said to me, Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death. Then Manoah prayed to the Lord, and said, O Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come again to us, and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born. And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field. But Manoah, her husband, was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me. And Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to the man and said to him, Are you the man who spoke to this woman? And he said, I am. And Manoah said, Now when your words come true, what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission?

And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, Of all that I said to the woman, let her be careful. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. All that I commanded her, let her observe.

Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, Please let us detain you, and prepare a young goat for you. And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord. For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you? And the angel of the Lord said to him, Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful? So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to the one who works wonders. And Manoah and his wife were watching.

And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.

[2 : 49] The angel of the Lord appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to his wife, We shall surely die, for we have seen God. But his wife said to him, If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these. And the woman bore a son, and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him. And the spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahanadan, between Zorah and Eshterol.

In Judges chapter 13, we see Israel under the oppression of the Philistines, except that the Philistines don't seem to be especially oppressive. The people don't cry out. There seems to be intermarriage, as we see in the following chapter. As oppressors go, the Philistines are fairly civilised and tolerant, and keeping their head down under Philistine rule seems a much better option than starting any sort of rebellion. However, God is going to shake things up through Samson. He's going to cause Samson to be an annoyance, not just to the Philistines, but also to many in Israel. When Samson actually goes about causing trouble for the Philistines, the Judahites complain and try to hand him over to them. The situation here is a bad situation, where there is little enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, so God has to raise up a troublemaker to introduce a bit of much-needed enmity and antagonism.

They are given over to the Philistines for 40 years. Perhaps we are to see the events of this chapter as occurring near the beginning of that period, in preparation for deliverance later on down the line. God's works of deliverance are often a great many years in the making.

This is an annunciation and birth story. It's the only one of its kind in the book of Judges. There are various birth stories in the book of Genesis, and also some annunciations for the birth of Ishmael and Isaac. In the book of Samuel that comes after this, there's a birth story, in the case of Samuel's birth to Hannah. The most famous birth story in the Old Testament is that of Moses. In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke begins with two birth stories, with John the Baptist and with Jesus, both of which have an annunciation, with the angel Gabriel bringing news of the birth. Here it is the angel of the Lord, which I believe should be understood to be the second person of the Trinity, and also to be the commander of the army of God. The Lord is going to start a fight against the Philistines, and the angel of the Lord, the commander of God's host, comes in order to announce the birth of one who will lead this fight. Manoah's wife, Samson's mother, is barren. She is told that she will have a son, and that her son should be a Nazirite. The other two lifelong Nazirites in scripture, John the Baptist and Samuel, were born to mothers who were barren. The law of the Nazirite is given in Numbers chapter 6.

In Numbers 6 verses 1 to 8 we read, And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine, or strong drink, and shall not drink any juice of grapes, or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall touch his head, until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long. All the days that he separates himself to the Lord, he shall not go near a dead body. Not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister if they die, shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord. As a Nazirite, the child of Manoah's wife would be a lifelong dedicated servant of the Lord. He would have to avoid wine. Like the high priest, he would have to avoid death.

[6 : 51] He would be a dedicated warrior. His head is consecrated, with the hair upon it belonging to the Lord, and the crown of hair upon his head will have to go to the Lord. Manoah and his wife, the father and mother of Samson, live in the land of the Danites, but the initial land before they moved. No name is given for Manoah's wife, which is interesting. She's the woman. And as the woman, she highlights for us the importance of women in the story of Samson. Samson's life is defined by his relationship with women, for good and ill, and mostly for ill. Like the patriarch's wife, she struggles in conceiving. And the angel comes to her when she is alone. Manoah is not involved, he can't take credit for what happens. The woman then tells her husband Manoah, and he prays for a second visit of the man of God. And the man of God visits again, the angel of the Lord. This time, once again, he appears to the wife of Manoah when she is alone, and then she has to summon her husband. Even though the angel of the Lord comes again, in answer to the request of Manoah, Manoah's part in the whole situation is downplayed.

The Lord is going to achieve this by his power, not by the power of Manoah. And when the angel of the Lord delivers his instructions to Manoah, it's mostly just to reiterate what he has already told the woman. One might imagine Manoah feeling a little frustrated.

Manoah offers the angel of the Lord some hospitality, not realising that it is the angel of the Lord. And the angel of the Lord refuses, but accepts an offering to the Lord. This reminds us, I think, of the story of Gideon as well, where the angel of the Lord receives an offering. However, while there was a peace offering there, there is no peace offering of the same kind here. There's a whole burnt offering, and the angel of the Lord ascends in the smoke of the burnt offering to the Lord. At this point, Manoah is afraid, and his wife has to speak some sense into him. Manoah fears that God is going to destroy them, since they've seen the Lord. Manoah's wife explains that if God did want to destroy them, he would not have accepted their offering. He wouldn't have displayed such wonders to them, and he wouldn't be giving them a son. The woman bears a son, and his name is called Samson, little son, S-U-N. As he grows, the Lord blesses him, and then the spirit of the Lord comes upon him to equip him for his work of deliverance. James Bajon observes of the Samson story that there is a symmetry to it. He writes, It begins with Samson and Zorah in the womb of his mother, and ends with Samson back in Zorah in the tomb of his father. It begins with a grain tribute offered up to Yahweh, and ends with Samson surrounded by sacrifices in the house of Dagon, possibly the god of grain. It begins with the sacrifice of a live animal on a rock, and ends with the sacrifice of Samson under a heap of rocks. And it begins with a secret which is kept from the first woman in Samson's life, and ends with a secret which is discovered by the last woman in Samson's life. That our text begins and ends in similar ways is not merely a literary flourish. In many ways it is reflective of the judgeship of Samson.

Samson's exploits end on a rather hollow note. It is not really clear what Samson achieves in his time as Israel's judge. He leaves Israel much as he found her, her problems unaddressed.

A question to consider. Why of all the judges in the book of Judges, is Samson the one to have an enunciation and birth narrative?