

Judges 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 14 His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines.

At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel. Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring.

Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.

Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes. After some days he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion. And behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey.

He scraped it out with his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother, and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.

[1 : 2 9] His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do. As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him. And Samson said to them, Let me now put a riddle to you.

If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes. But if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.

And they said to him, Put your riddle, that we may hear it. And he said to them, Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.

And in three days they could not solve the riddle. On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire.

Have you invited us here to impoverish us? And Samson's wife wept over him, and said, You only hate me, you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is.

[2 : 3 4] And he said to her, Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you? She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard.

Then she told the riddle to her people, and the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?

And he said to them, If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle. And the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and struck down thirty men of the town, and took their spoil, and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle.

In hot anger he went back to his father's house, and Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man. Samson begins his ministry between Zorah, meaning hornet, and Eshtel from the root to question.

He ends up being buried at the same place. And the spirit of God stirs him up at the end of chapter thirteen, and one of the first results of this is his journey down to Timnah in chapter fourteen, where he sees one of the daughters of the Philistines, and wants to take her as his wife.

[3 : 46] This isn't the same Timnah as in Genesis chapter thirty-eight, but the fact that it shares the name might be significant. Samson's parents are obviously concerned about this decision.

Taking a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines seems to be a departure from the way of the Lord. Samson was supposed to be set apart, to be a Nazarite to the Lord from his birth, and now here he is marrying one of the uncircumcised Philistines.

It does not seem appropriate. Even though the Philistines were not the Canaanites, and it was possible in principle to take one of them as a wife, it did not seem to be a wise thing to do, or a righteous thing to do.

Surely Samson would be much better off taking a daughter of his own people. This isn't the only way that he seems to be bending or breaking the rules of a Nazarite in this chapter. He goes after one of the daughters of the Philistines, he leaves the path to go into a vineyard, he takes honey from the carcass of a lion, and a few chapters later, he ends up having his hair cut.

Yet the Lord is using Samson, the Lord is seeking an occasion against the Philistines, and Samson is a tool in his hand. Even in his recklessness and his lust, he ends up serving the Lord's purpose, creating enmity between Israel and the Philistines.

[4 : 58] He goes down to Timnah a second time with his parents this time, and on the way, when his parents are not with him, he encounters the lion in the vineyard. It's a dreadful, wild beast where one would not expect to encounter one.

We might ask, what Samson himself is doing in the vineyard? He's supposed to stay away from all products of the grape, and yet he's walking off the path in a vineyard. It seems strange.

There is, of course, no reference to him actually taking the fruit of the vineyard, and there may be some symbolic purpose to it. The vineyard represents Israel, and Samson, although he does not eat the fruit of the vineyard, is one who guards the vineyard, and appropriately, he's going to be the one that rids the vineyard of the beast that prowls within it.

That this incident with the lion is symbolic is suggested by the next chapter. First of all, in this chapter we read, in verses 5-6, And behold, a young lion came towards him roaring.

Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. In the next chapter, in verse 14, There's a parallel between these two statements.

[6 : 18] The lion, in the first case, in the vineyard, is paralleled with the Philistines in the next chapter. Israel, the vineyard of the Lord, is being possessed by this lion of the Philistines, and Samson, one stronger than the lion, has to come and rid the vineyard of the creature that prowls within it.

Samson doesn't tell his parents about what he did to the lion. The themes of knowing and not knowing, and telling and not telling, are very prominent ones throughout this chapter. The woman was right in Samson's eyes.

This has been a refrain, and will be a refrain, throughout the rest of the book of Judges, doing what is right in their eyes. It's not a positive indication. It suggests that Samson is following his lusts, rather than wisdom, or the way of the Lord here.

A few days later, Samson returns to take the woman, and turns aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there's a swarm of bees and some honey inside it. And he sees, he takes, he eats, and he gives to his parents, who do not know where the honey has come from.

He defeats the lion in the vineyard, like the serpent in the garden, but then he takes, and he eats, and he listens to the voice of his wife, who has been led by the serpents, in a way that brings a loss of clothing.

[7 : 32] Maybe there are themes of the fall here. The taking, eating, and giving, certainly do remind us of the forbidden fruit. And as Samson should keep himself from a dead body, the fact that he's getting food from a carcass of a lion, is at the very least, seeing how close he can get to the fire without being burned.

So there are possible themes of the fall here. In the book of Judges, there are progressive fall themes. So we start off with idolatry in the form of Gideon's ephod. Then there's the murder of brothers in the story of Abimelech.

And then there's intermarriage in the story of Samson. In the wedding that follows, there are 30 companions selected for Samson after they see him. Perhaps Samson has an imposing physique corresponding to his physical strength, and so they feel the need of 30 men to surround him.

Numbers related to 3 are also prominent in the Samson narrative, while numbers related to 7 are prominent in the Gideon narrative. The marriage feast lasts for 7 days, and there's a riddle given for 30 linen garments and changes of clothes, under and out garments.

Now, as most people would only have one of such pairs of garments, this was a pretty costly wager. To lose it would be fairly devastating. It serves as a natural occasion for conflict.

[8 : 47] It provokes the Philistines. They are unable to solve the riddle for 3 days, and on the 4th day they approach the wife of Samson. They threaten Samson's wife. They will burn her and her father's house with fire, all the people within her father's household.

They are very angry at her, as they stand to lose a lot. And so she pleads with and accuses Samson of not loving her. The foreign women in Samson's life give his enemies a lot of leverage over him.

And this case is no exception. Finally, Samson gives in, and at the very end of the appointed time, the men interpret the riddle. Now they are described as the men of the city, not just the 30.

And their answer is a sort of riddle of its own. It's posed as a question. What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? Now on one level, this could be read as a straightforward answer to Samson's question.

On another level, it could be read as a riddle of its own. What is stronger than a lion? Well, we know, Samson. Samson is like a lion himself. He's like the sun with a great mane and incredible strength.

[9 : 52] What is sweeter than honey? Love. Samson himself is the lion who ends up being defeated by love and sweetness when he could not be defeated by strength. This is a foreshadowing of Samson's defeat through Delilah.

The woman of Timnah, the prostitute of Gaza, and Delilah are far more powerful against Samson than any of the strength of the Philistine lion. It's the honey from the carcass of the Philistines that really causes the trouble.

Just as it seemed that Samson compromised his Nazarite vow to eat the honey from the lion, so he will compromise his Nazarite vow with Delilah later on in the story. This foreshadows the way that Samson will meet his demise.

And we might perhaps see the story of Israel playing out here. Israel was set apart from their birth as a special people to the Lord. Their birth was announced by the angel of the Lord, and the Spirit of God came upon them to defeat their enemies with great power.

Yet they could not resist the honey of false gods and foreign wives, and ended up suffering great loss as a result. Samson's response to the 30 men is an angry one.

[10 : 56] If they had not ploughed with his heifer, they would not have discovered his riddle. In speaking of a heifer, he's clearly referring to his wife in a very unflattering way. And in referring to ploughing, there may be some implication of sexual violation.

This also sets the scene for the way that Samson will get his revenge in the next chapter. The Spirit of the Lord now rushes upon him again. He kills 30 men of Ashkelon and takes their garments and gives those to the 30 Philistines.

Then he returns to his father's house, his marriage in tatters. His wife is given to his best man. It seems to me that there are more things going on in this story than we see on the surface.

First of all, it foreshadows what will happen in Samson's own life. The story of the lion, the bees, and Samson gives some indication of how his story will play out. It also relates to the story of Israel more generally.

Beyond this, I think there is another passage in script that might shed some light upon it. In Genesis chapter 38, verses 1 to 2, we read, It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adolamite, whose name was Hira.

[12 : 02] There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shua, and he took her and went into her. Once again, there's a story of someone going down, seeing a daughter of a foreign people and wanting to take her as his wife.

That story continues. In verses 12 to 16, In the course of time, the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, he and his friend, Hira the Adolamite.

And when Tamar was told, Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep, she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah.

For she saw that Shila was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He turned to her at the roadside and said, Come, let me come into you.

For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, What will you give me, that you may come into me? Judah then offers her a kid. Later on in the story, she is threatened with being burned with fire.

[13 : 06] In the next chapter, Samson comes with a young goat to try and meet his wife again, and fails, much as Judah failed to bring the goat to the presumed prostitute in chapter 38 of Genesis.

The woman of Timnah ends up being burned alive, as Tamar nearly was in Genesis. There seem then to be similarities between these stories. In both cases, a man goes down from his people, meets a woman of a foreign people, marries her, is diverted from the road on the way to Timnah, is led astray by his lust, and ends up being humbled as a result.

In both cases, we have elements that are similar, a goat being sent to reconnect with a woman, and a threat to burn the woman with fire. When we consider further that Judah is related to the lion in chapter 49 of Genesis, in a passage that alludes back to the events of chapter 38, and that Samson defeats the lion here in chapter 14 of Judges, and is compared to the lion as well, it would seem that there are some deep connections to be explored.

Samson, like Judah, is the lion brought low. In both cases, perhaps, these men represent the sovereignty and power and might of Israel. They are the lions of the nation, and yet they are brought low by their lust for foreign women, and in giving their strength to strange women, they end up forfeiting their effectiveness.

A question to consider. Samson is a man of the tribe of Dan. Where do we see Dan compared to a lion?