

Judges 14:1-20

Samson's Riddle of the Honey from the Lion

In this chapter, Samson kills a lion, later finds honey in its body, and proposes a riddle about it at his strange wedding to a Philistine woman, for a wager of 30 changes of garments. The Philistine guests force Samson's new wife to find out the riddle's meaning. When they tell the answer, he later kills 30 Philistines, takes their clothes and pays the debt with those garments. But he leaves his Philistine wife, who is given to the man acting as friend of the bridegroom.

Remember that the rabbis understood Jacob's blessing/prophecy about the tribe of Dan as referring to Samson:

- **Genesis 49:16-17** - "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward."

Jacob compared him to a snake because, like the snake, Samson's power lay entirely in his head — that is, in his hair — while he was also revengeful like the snake; and as the snake kills by its venom even after it is dead, so Samson, in the hour of his death, slew more men than during all his life; and he also lived a solitary life like the snake (Genesis Rabba l.c. §§ 18-19)

Samson, the rabbis said, also resembled God in requiring neither aid nor help (Genesis Rabbah 98:18, Numbers Rabbah 9:25).

"R. Simeon the Pious said: Samson's shoulders measured sixty cubits" since a tradition said the gates of Gaza that Samson placed on his shoulders were not less than 60 cubits in width. (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 10a)

He was so strong that he could uplift two mountains and rub them together like two clods of earth (Sotah 9b), yet rabbis noted that his superhuman strength, like Goliath's, brought woe upon the one who possessed it (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1).

In the Talmudic period, many seem to have denied that Samson was a historic figure, regarding him as a purely mythological personage. This is apparently the heretical theory that the Talmud attempts to refute, by giving the names of Samson's sister (named Nishyan or Nashyan) and mother (Bava Batra 91a).

Samson and Hercules

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/1970-3_131.pdf

Some scholars thought the story of Samson was actually borrowed from pagan sources because of his similarity to Hercules and other mythical figures. For instance, Hercules killed the Nemean lion bare handed, and there are many other parallels.

But aspects of the way the story is written show that one of its purposes is to *de-mythologize* the similar tales of superhuman, god-like offspring of the gods in ancient mythology.

Recall the story related in **Genesis 6:4** - "There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown."

This story got mixed in and combined with the tradition of a coming Deliverer in Genesis 3:15 who would indeed be a man and a God.

Ancient myth had transformed these "men of renown" into divine or semi-divine beings. They were not. Their descendants were the Nephilim, Anakim and Rephaim - tribes that Israel encountered and defeated as they began to conquer the Promised Land. They were big and had some enhanced skills, but they weren't immortal or divine.

But the myth literature in Sumer, and later Babylon, Assyria, Ugarit and Greece made these "giants" into divinities or semi-divine beings.

For instance, in Ugaritic myth the God EL had relations with a mortal woman that resulted in the birth of Shachar and Shalem, who themselves became gods.

In Greek myth, Zeus takes the shape of the husband of Alcmene who is away on a military expedition and has sex with her. The next night, the husband returns and also has sex with his wife. From these encounters are born twins - Hercules (the super strong son of a god) and Amphytrion, a mere human.

Samson by contrast was a real person, but there are elements in Samson's story that are similar to the myths. The story is written in a way that turns those elements on their head. It emphasizes a miracle in his birth, but not intercourse between God and a human. And instead of Samson being naturally super strong, the Spirit is the source of his power. Samson himself, though, is left looking like the frail, petty, boastful and lustful human that he was, rather than a valorous hero.

More on Samson's Name

Recall that most commentators believe Samson's name is related to the Hebrew word for the sun, *shemesh*.

Samson, as a judge or deliverer, is a type of Christ, and the Messiah is also equated with the sun.

- **Psalm 19:4-6** - the SUN is the Heavenly Bridegroom, who comes forth to run his race and returns to his place of origin, passing through the *Mazzaroth*, the constellations / signs of the zodiac.

Psalm 19 is in two parts: In Part 1 we have the message of the stars - In Part 2 we have the message of God's word, the Bible being discussed. One is set against the other in such a way that David, who wrote this Psalm in about 1000 B.C., is implying that the message in the stars and the message in the Scriptures are one and the same.

Just as the blazing fire of the Sun dwells in the midst of the twelve constellations of the Mazzaroth, so the blazing pillar of fire was the dwelling place of Yahweh in the midst of the twelve tribes of Israel in the wilderness.

Messiah is even called the SUN of Righteousness who will blaze forth for the sake of His people in the Last Day (**Malachi 4:2**).

God's promise to Abraham in the Stars

- **Genesis 15:4-6** - "And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell ("*sephar*") the stars, if thou be able to number ("*sephar*") them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness."

"*sephar*" can mean "recount, commune, account, declare, shew forth, speak, talk, tell

Later God also promises Abraham his offspring will become as numerous as the stars and the sands. But in this instance, he is referring to something else, in which the Hebrew word for stars can also refer to constellations. In effect He says "enumerate the constellations, if you are able to list them."

By looking at the Mazzaroth constellations, Abraham could read the story of salvation that would come through the Messiah, fulfilling the promise of a Deliverer who would crush the head of the serpent in **Genesis 3:15**.

According to Paul:

- **Galatians 3:16** - ""Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He said not, And to seeds (plural) as of many; but as of one, 'And to your seed (singular) WHICH IS CHRIST!'"

- **Psalm 147:4** - "He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names."

Alternately, Samson's name could be from the Hebrew root "*shimush*," which means use or useful. Because God *uses* Samson for his own purposes.

Other scholars note that the name Samson (*Shemshon*) is more like the word for "name" - *Shemo* = "his name." Much like "Adam" = man, mankind. Samson is like an "everyman" figure.

It's also alliterative in Hebrew: "she called his name Samson" = "*shemo Shimshon*"

Judges 14:1-3 - "And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines. And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife. Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well."

The Jewish translation in **verse 3** is "Take her for me, because she is pleasing [right] in my eyes."

This is never a good basis for action, ever since Eve:

- **Genesis 3:6-7** - "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened..."

- **1 John 2:16** - "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."

But Samson embodied the increasing spiritual deadness of the whole era of the Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (**Judges 21:25**).

In licentiousness Samson is compared with Amnon and Zimri, both of whom were punished for their sins (Leviticus Rabbah 23:9). The rabbis said Samson's eyes were put out because he had "followed them" too often (Sotah I.c.).

Like others in the story of Samson, the Philistine woman he marries is not named.

It was forbidden to marry Canaanites, and frowned upon to marry other Gentiles and idol worshippers (**Exodus 34:16, Deuteronomy 7:3-4**). The rabbis excuse Samson by saying she became a proselyte before the wedding, but this is not believable.

Samson first acts as a submissive son by bringing his desire of marriage to his parents, but then he completely dismisses their objections.

Judges 14:4 - "But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel."

"it was of the LORD" - The rabbis puzzled over how God could use such a man

seemingly devoid of character and only out for himself.

"He sought" - Who is referred to here? = some say the Lord (not Samson) sought a pretense to antagonize the Philistines. Others say the phrase relates to Samson. It's not clear, so it becomes another riddle in a story of riddles. I lean to it being God's plan - Samson was rash and spontaneous, not really a planner.

"occasion" = *ta'ănâ* - the time when an animal is "in heat," meaning the perfect time for something to come to pass - fertilization of an egg to become a new life (see **Jeremiah 2:24** - "in her occasion"). As a verb it has a wider meaning - something happening at the exact right time.

But it's interesting how sexual terms are appearing all through the story of Samson.

Relations between the Israelites and the Philistines are portrayed as barely cordial. There is trade and interaction, but with the knowledge that the Philistines are in control - probably extracting tribute or taxes. Intermarriage must not have been that extraordinary. There is no ongoing warfare between the two peoples at this time. But Samson's exploits - though always portrayed as personal vendettas - give the Israelites someone to cheer for.

Apparently, God let Samson give vent to these personal outbursts and assaults against Philistines, even winking at the possibly sham marriage described here. But still, this was an outrageous act, pledging a covenant of marriage and then reneging on it and even abandoning his bride.

Honey from the Lion, Samson as a Type of Christ

Judges 14:5-6 - "Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him. And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done."

Judges 14:8 - "And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion."

Then "after a time" - i.e. after about a year of betrothal, according to the rabbis, Samson returns to take the woman as his wife.

The "carcass" would have been the skeleton left after the flesh had been eaten by carrion birds and the rest had long rotted away.

Interestingly, when the sun stands in the sign of Leo, i.e. in the month of May-June, bees in Palestine produce their honey.

Later, David, preparing to fight Goliath, explains to Saul how he killed a lion that was attacking his sheep (**1 Samuel 17:36**). Thus, killing a lion is linked to David, the type of Messiah.

- **1 Peter 5:8** - "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

"Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet."

Samson, here acting as a type of Christ, slays the lion (Satan) and in its place honey is found, representing the sweet grace of God. "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (**Psalms 34:8**) In this picture, evil is transformed into good. Sort of like Samson - a jerk is turned into a judge for God's purposes.

But in the end Samson finds that those who live by the sword, die by the sword.

- **Matthew 26:52** - "Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." He might have had Samson in mind.

Samson begins a cycle of violent vendetta and revenge after the Philistines tell him the answer to his riddle, and the only thing that can end it is a sacrificial death - his own.

In 2012, archaeologists excavating Tel Beit Shemesh in the Judean Hills near Jerusalem discovered an ancient stone seal that may depict the story of Samson's fight with a lion. The seal, measuring 1.5 centimeters in diameter, shows a large animal with a feline tail attacking a human figure with what appears to be long hair. It has been dated to roughly the 11th century BCE, a period many scholars consider to be the time of the Biblical judges. The seal was unearthed near the River Sorek that marked the boundary between the Israelites and their Philistine foes, indicating that the figure on the seal could potentially represent Samson or could evidence the origin story of Samson's fight with the lion.

Samson's Riddle

The story of Samson is not only filled with riddles, it *IS* a riddle.

The riddles are proposed as statements, and the answers come as questions, sort of like on Jeopardy.

There are 30 companions. When they can't determine the answer to the riddle, they threaten to burn Samson's new bride and all her household. They complain they showed up to enjoy a fine wedding feast, but now suddenly they'll have to forfeit "30 sheets and 30 changes of garments."

Normally, the groom would choose his companions including the "friend of the

bridegroom" and take the bride from her home to join him back at his hometown as part of his own clan. But apparently, since his parents were not on board with this marriage, this would be an arrangement like the one Gideon had with Abimelech's mother - as a concubine. She stayed under the covering of her own clan, the husband Gideon would visit from time to time, and her children including Abimelech remained with her and part of her clan. Abimelech tells the men of Shechem, "I am your bone and your flesh" (Judges 9:2).

Thus at Samson's "wedding" feast, the 30 companions are from his wife's clan and are Philistines.

As Philistines themselves, Samson's wife and family are completely vulnerable to threats and oppression from these wedding guests. She finds out the answer from Samson, and tells the 30 companions.

Judges 14:18 - "And the men of the city said unto him on the seventh day before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? and what is stronger than a lion? And he said unto them, If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle."

It seems like he possibly thinks they enticed the answer from her in the same way she got it from him, through sex. But this may not have been from sexual enticement, it only says she really just "tormented" him with questioning about it. The reference is ambiguous, like everything else in this story.

Rashi says - This is allegorical (as Targum Jonathan renders): "Had you not interrogated my wife."

But for whatever reason, Samson is enraged.

Judges 14:19 - "And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men of them, and took their spoil, and gave change of garments unto them which expounded the riddle. And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house."

The Spirit provided him with strength. Samson provided the anger and the intent. In any other context this would be completely wrong. The Midrash argues back and forth about why God would condone this action. The story was a riddle to the rabbis too.

Judges 14:20 - "But Samson's wife was given to his companion, whom he had used as his friend."

This is another unexpected and counterintuitive result in a story filled with surprises. When does the best man, the "friend of the bridegroom," ever end up marrying the bride?

In **verse 4**, we learned this was all "from the Lord." How could this be?

As one commentator says, "He makes even the weakness and the fierceness of man redound to His praise."

Some examples: King Amaziah of Judah foolishly made war with Jehoash king of Israel:

- **2 Chronicles 25:20** - "But Amaziah would not listen, for it was from God, so that He might hand them over to Joash, because they had sought the gods of Edom."

See the same phrase in the story of Rehoboam's folly (**1 Kings 12:15**). "Behold this evil is of the Lord," says Elisha in **2 Kings 6:33**.

'Toward Timnah'

Timnah is at the heart of two biblical stories: Tamar (Genesis 38) and Samson (Judges 14–15)

The locative or directional heh suffix is used - timnathah = "toward Timnah"

Since the 1960s, Timnah has been identified with Tel Batash in the southeast Shephelah, between the eastern hill country of Judah and the coastal plain, home of the Philistines.

"Toward Timnah" becomes sort of metaphor, an ambiguous no-man's land or neutral territory of shifting allegiances and boundaries.

"Toward Timnah" happens to be the same location as the scandalous incident when Tamar, who was likely a Canaanite, disguised herself as a prostitute and had sex with her father-in-law Judah in order to obtain the lineage and inheritance she felt she was owed. Ultimately Judah has to declare "she is more righteous than I." (**Genesis 38**)

See <https://www.thetorah.com/article/judah-meets-tamar-on-the-road-to-timnah>

It seems it is somewhere around Timnah where questionable sexual and cross-cultural activity can occur momentarily. It is a place where Israelites, non-Israelites, and non-descript locals can meet and interact. Timnah becomes the locus of strange engagements between different groups. In both contexts, a woman stands at the center of these interactions. The identity of Samson's wife is, like that of Tamar, indeterminate and vague. She has no name and never quite fits into any social world.

The Rabbis learn from the wording of Judges 14:1 - "Once Samson went down to Timnah" - that this act was a descent, entailing moral degeneration (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 10a). On their way to Timnah, Samson's parents saw the vineyards of Timnah, that were planted with *kilayim* (different species planted together, which is forbidden in Leviticus 19:19). They told Samson: "Just as their vineyards are planted with kilayim, their daughters, too, are the result of intermingling," thinking that in this manner they would convince him not to marry a Philistine woman. In this context the Rabbis mention that "You shall not intermarry with them" is written in seven places in the

Torah, in order to forbid intermarriage with all the seven nations that inhabited Canaan, including the Philistines (Num. Rabbah 9:24). Samson, however, did not heed his parents, preferring instead what his eyes saw (Jud. 14:3): "But Samson answered his father, 'Get me that one, for she is the one that pleases me' [literally, is right in my eyes]"; he was punished accordingly (*middah ke-neged middah*: "measure for measure") when the Philistines gouged out his eyes, as is portrayed in Jud. 16:21 (M Sotah 1:8).

The Rabbis also learn of Samson's many liaisons with foreign women from his end. When Samson was imprisoned in Gaza he was a "mill slave [*tohen*] in the prison" (Jud. 16:21). The Rabbis understand the word "*tohen*" as meaning sin, specifically sexual misdoing, which they deduce from Job 31:10: "May my wife grind [*tithan*] for another, may others kneel over her!" Each of the Philistines would bring his wife to Samson's prison, that he might impregnate her, so that they would have a child as strong and powerful as Samson. In this vein, the Rabbis cite the popular saying: "Before a wine drinker, set wine, before a plowman, set a basket of roots." Since Samson was such a womanizer, they brought women to him (BT Sotah 10a). Samson's willful lust is now replaced by humiliating forced intercourse with the foreign women he had formerly been attracted to. With these statements the Rabbis might mean to demonstrate, once again, that Samson's beginnings determined his end and that his punishment fit the crime.

Bottom line - God works his will no matter what. But it is an insoluble riddle to our human understanding. It's the dilemma of Job, faced with inexplicable suffering. And as at Purim, we get to the point that we can no longer distinguish between "Yeah, Mordecai!" and "Boo, Haman!" Samson confronts a roaring lion in the ethically murky territory of the vineyards "toward Timnah." Samson defeats the lion, and evil is transformed into sweetness. Not only the outward opposition to God's plan represented by a "roaring lion," but also the ethical and moral weakness of Samson himself - is transformed. Samson's rash violence and foolish self-seeking are redeemed, but only by his own self-sacrifice in death at the end of the story.

"He makes even the weakness and the fierceness of man redound to His praise."

See

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samson%27s_riddle

<https://bccatholic.ca/voices/c-s-morrissey/samson-s-riddle-gives-a-glimpse-of-divine-logic>