

We have seen how the literary structure of the book of Judges has collapsed.

Judges 2 provided the basic literary structure of the book.

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

God allowed their enemies to conquer and oppress them.

Then the people cried out to God for relief.

And the LORD sent a judge to deliver them.

Then the land had rest until the death of the judge...

and then the pattern starts over again.

With each judge a piece of the literary structure has dropped out.

By the time we get to Samson, all that is left is that

the people Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD (13:1),

and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines (13:1).

The people do not cry out for relief.

The LORD does not send a judge to deliver them –

rather he says that Samson *will begin to deliver them!*

And the land has no rest –

Samson judges Israel “in the days of the Philistines.”

The literary pattern disintegrates!

But in a way that makes it clear that this is on purpose!

This is not a mediocre author who just doesn’t know how to write a coherent book!

Where the pattern disintegrates, it does so in ways that call attention to the disintegration!

No – Israel does not cry out to the LORD for deliverance –

but Samson does.

Indeed, the literary skill of our author is so marvelous

that I confess that I missed one of his best puns last week.

(so thanks to the servant leadership class last week for helping me see this!)

Do you remember Samson’s little trick with the foxes.

He catches 300 foxes (or jackals) – and ties torches between their tails –

and sets them to run through the standing grain and the olive orchards.

300 jackals with torches...

Where else have we seen a judge set forth against God’s enemies with 300 soldiers?

Each of them bearing torches....?

Remember Gideon and his 300 men who lapped like dogs...?

Israel will not fight – and so Samson must find his warriors from among the dogs!

The disintegration of the literary structure of the book shows us the disintegration of Israel.

And that continues in the story of Samson's death.

As we look at chapter 16, I would ask you to think about who you identify with in this story?

Where are *you* in the story of Samson?

Think about that as we go through our text this evening!

### **Introduction: Samson in Gaza (16:1-3)**

*Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her. <sup>2</sup> The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him." <sup>3</sup> But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.*

These three verses are enigmatic.

There are many questions that emerge from this text.

Why does Samson go to Gaza?

(It is the Philistine city furthest south–furthest away from his home)

Why does Samson get up at midnight?

(Does he know that there is an ambush?)

Why do the Philistines not notice that Samson is leaving?

(carrying the gate of their city on his shoulders, no less)

And why does Samson carry the gate to Hebron?

(rather than his own home town)

Our author does not explicitly answer these questions.

In fact, our author provides no interpretive gloss at all.

There is no reference to the Spirit of the LORD.

There is no comment as to what God was doing.

But this is because the point should be clear by now.

Samson is in Gaza because he is drawn to Philistine women.

He is wandering further and further from home to fulfill his lusts.

But that is not the only reason why Samson is in Gaza.

Samson's personal reason for being in Gaza is not an honorable one.

But God's reason for having Samson in Gaza is to foreshadow what is coming.

1) Gaza is where Samson will die

but 2) Samson's carrying the gates of Gaza to Hebron foreshadows  
the connection to David, who ruled in Hebron for 7 years.  
Gaza may (for a time) triumph over Samson,  
but the gates of Gaza will fall before David, the one who finishes what Samson starts.

But still, why do the Gazites fail to notice that Samson is walking off with their city gates?

Who says they failed to notice?

Some commentators think that God put all of them to sleep.

But that is nowhere suggested in our text.

The text suggests that they were sitting quietly waiting for him.

So they saw him, all right.

And no doubt, as he approached the gate, they gripped their weapons,  
ready to attack.

But then, rather than lift the bar and unlock the gate,

Samson just lifts up the gates –

“and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all,

and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill

that is in front of Hebron.”

Sure, maybe nowadays we'd say, “huh, he's carrying the city gates away,”

and then attack him;

but in those days they believed in things like... divine power.

They've heard stories of what happens to people who attack Samson.

Maybe they would have been willing to attack him

if he had simply tried to walk out the gate,

but when he picks up the city gate, posts, bar and all,

and nonchalantly walks forty miles to Hebron,

the Gazites decide that this is not a fight they can win!

If Samson killed 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey,

imagine how many he could kill with a city gate!

It's why I said last time that we really shouldn't think of Samson as some burly,

muscle-bound strong man.

*No man* could lift what Samson lifted.

### **1. The Betrayal of the Deliverer (16:4-22)**

My explanation of the reaction of the Gazites is confirmed by verse 5.

The lords of the Philistines have given up on attacking Samson.

Direct attack doesn't work (1,000 died the last time they tried that)

Ambushes don't work (their men are too terrified to attack Samson,

and he seems to know that they are there.)

So they decide to go back to the only method that seems to work against Samson.

Blackmail or bribe the women in order to get Samson to reveal his secrets.

<sup>4</sup> After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. <sup>5</sup> And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, “Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver.” <sup>6</sup> So Delilah said to Samson, “Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you.”

Now Samson loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek.

Delilah is the only woman named in the Samson narrative.

Not his mother

Not his wife

Not the prostitute

but Delilah—which may mean “flirtatious one” or “of the night”

Who was this Delilah?

Was she a Philistine or an Israelite?

We don’t know.

But she lived in the valley of Sorek,

which would include both Philistine and Israelite populations.

But the contrast is clear.

Samson was just up on the hill in front of Hebron.

But he will not remain on the heights.

He will “go down” once again into the lands dominated by the Philistines.

But did you notice the verb?

Samson “loved”

In the case of the Timnite, Samson “saw”

In the case of the Gazite prostitute, Samson “saw”

but with Delilah, Samson “loved.”

It’s tempting to say that this is an improvement!

He is not merely following his eyes, but his heart!

But his heart is as misguided as his eyes.

And he entrusts himself to a woman who is not trustworthy.

She will sell the man who loves her for 5500 pieces of silver.

The lords of the Philistines refer to the rulers of the 5 cities of the Philistines.

Samson has become “public enemy #1”

and the rulers of the five cities will stop at nothing to eliminate him.

So they offer 1100 shekels apiece in order to learn the secret of his strength.

30 shekels was the price of a slave (Ex 21:32)

Abraham purchased a burial plot for 400 shekels of silver

(far more than the land was worth!).

5500 shekels is an extravagant amount of money

But Samson is an extravagant problem.

The betrayal of Samson points us in contrasting ways to the betrayal of Jesus.

The deliverer of Israel is betrayed by a kiss.  
But here it is the kiss of the woman he loves—  
there it is one of his chosen disciples.  
The betrayer is lured by the clink of silver.  
Here it is a royal ransom—  
there it is but the price of a slave.

Three times Delilah coaxes and wheedles, and gets Samson to tell her the “secret” of his strength.

<sup>7</sup> Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.” <sup>8</sup> Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. <sup>9</sup> Now she had men lying in ambush in an inner chamber. And she said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he snapped the bowstrings, as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

<sup>10</sup> Then Delilah said to Samson, “Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound.” <sup>11</sup> And he said to her, “If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.” <sup>12</sup> So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And the men lying in ambush were in an inner chamber. But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

<sup>13</sup> Then Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound.” And he said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.” <sup>14</sup> So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web.<sup>[a]</sup> And she made them tight with the pin and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.

And in each episode Samson is toying with Delilah,  
but moving ever closer to the brink of disaster:  
Three times Samson lies, telling her that the secret is  
that he must be tied with fresh bowstrings  
or that he must be bound with new ropes  
or that his hair must be woven together  
(now he is getting dangerously close to the truth!).  
Each time she has Philistine soldiers lying in ambush,  
but they never reveal their presence.  
As far as Samson knows,  
this is just a game.  
This man is both extraordinarily powerful and extraordinarily stupid.

In his love for this woman he is blind.

Once again, the coaxing and wheedling are too much for Samson  
(Read verse 15)

<sup>15</sup> And she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have

*mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies.”<sup>16</sup> And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.*

Like his Timnite wife, Delilah insists that his love for her depends upon the truth.  
His wife had sought the answer to his riddle.  
Delilah now seeks the answer to the riddle that is Samson.  
If you love me, then tell me your inmost heart.

She’s right, of course.  
The problem is not that Samson tells the woman he loves about his secret.  
There was no requirement of secrecy in the Nazirite vow.  
The problem is that Samson loves the wrong woman.

And so she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him,  
until his soul was vexed “to death.”

“To death” is an apt way of putting it!

And so he reveals all his heart to her.

Read verse 17.

*<sup>17</sup> And he told her all his heart, and said to her, “A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.”*

He had violated all the other parts of his Nazirite vow.

Only one was left.

And now he jeopardizes his calling all because of his misplaced love.

But Delilah sees that he has told her all his heart.

The lords of the Philistines had asked her to “Seduce him, and *see* where his great strength lies”

Now she sees.

The verb is not accidental!

*<sup>18</sup> When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, “Come up again, for he has told me all his heart.” Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. <sup>19</sup> She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him.*

Now the lords of the Philistines come with their money,  
and Delilah has Samson sleep on her knees.  
Once again “sweetness” has triumphed over strength,  
and the most powerful man in Israel’s history  
is proven to be a weakling in the hands of a woman.  
Once his head is shaved Delilah begins to torment him.  
This is the same word she had used in verse 6–

“How you might be bound that one could subdue (or torment) you”  
She had been up front with her agenda!  
He is subdued, and his strength left him.

Some have wondered, how could he sleep through all these episodes.  
Whether being tied up, having his hair woven, or having his hair cut,  
was this a normal sleep, or did God put him to sleep?  
The text is not especially interested in this question.  
The point is that Samson was unafraid.  
He slept soundly because he had always woken up in time.  
Who cares what is going on—the LORD is with him—right?  
God gives to his beloved sleep! (Ps 127:2)  
He sleeps secure because he has no fear.

<sup>20</sup> *And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him.*  
<sup>21</sup> *And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison.* <sup>22</sup> *But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.*

When Delilah again wakes him saying “the Philistines are upon you”  
he said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free,”  
but he did not know that the LORD had left him.

This is the third “did not know” in the story of Samson:  
Manoah *did not know* that the one who spoke to him was the Angel of the LORD (13:16)  
Manoah and his wife *did not know* that Samson’s pursuit of the Timnite woman  
was from the LORD (14:4)  
And now Samson *did not know* that the LORD had left him.

Yes, it was by his own folly that the LORD had left him.  
But while foolish in so many ways, Samson here reveals what is to happen to our Lord.  
The LORD had left him.  
We hear in Samson the anguished cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”  
Seized by his enemies, bound in shackles, humbled and humiliated,  
the one who was to deliver Israel is brought low.  
The way of deliverance is the way of the cross—  
the way of suffering, the way of weakness.  
And in Samson’s weakness, the power of God is revealed.  
Humiliation must precede exaltation.

Samson is indeed humbled.  
His eyes are gouged out—a fitting punishment for one who did what was right in his own eyes—  
one whose eyes had led him to this pass.

Once again, Samson is the embodiment of Israel.

In those days Israel had no king, everyone did what right in his own eyes.  
God had warned them of the result of this attitude.

In Dt 28:28 God said that if they did not obey his voice,  
“The LORD will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind”  
Samson represents his people.

The covenant curse has come upon the deliverer—  
and even so, it will come upon the nation.

Like Samson, Israel will be seized, blinded, exiled, imprisoned,  
and humiliated with forced labor.

But that is not the end of the story—

because once again, “the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.”

Why should this matter?

He had broken the last remnant of his Nazirite vow.

Why does it matter that his hair is growing again?

## **2. The Death of Deliverer (16:23-31)**

<sup>23</sup> Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, “Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand.” <sup>24</sup> And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, “Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.” <sup>25</sup> And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, that he may entertain us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. <sup>26</sup> And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, “Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them.” <sup>27</sup> Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained.

To understand this, we must turn to the final episode in our story.

Samson has been transferred to Gaza—the southernmost city in Philistia—  
perhaps to move him as far away as possible from any that might try to rescue him.

And they have a great feast—a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, to rejoice over the capture of Samson

And they claim that “our god has given our enemy into our hand,  
the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.”

In the midst of the worship of Dagon and their celebration over Samson’s demise,  
they call Samson to “entertain” them.

The now blinded and nearly bald Samson is led out to entertain the people.

He asks to be led to the pillars, so that he may “lean against them.”

Some commentators point to the self-centered focus of Samson’s prayer:

“O Lord Yahweh, please remember *me* and please strengthen *me* only this once, O God,  
that *I* may be avenged on the Philistines for *my* two eyes.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Samson called to the LORD and said, “O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.”



And sure, Samson remains the flawed redeemer.  
There is no sinless Savior until you get to Jesus!

But do not dismiss the prayer of this humbled deliverer.  
He knew that death was near him.  
The Philistines would not keep him around forever,  
and he knew that having broken the last requirement of his Nazirite vow,  
his days as a judge in Israel were over.  
In his life God had used his folly to begin to save his people from the Philistines.  
Now, possibly for the first time in his life, he acts by faith.  
He has no promise from God that God will hear his prayer.  
Indeed, the most likely outcome will be that the Philistines will see him  
pushing in vain against the pillars of their temple—  
and they will laugh and mock him for his impotence.

Hebrews 11:32-34 tells us that by faith the judges and the prophets  
“conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,  
quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword,  
were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war,  
put foreign armies to flight.”

Samson stopped the mouth of a lion, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.  
And in some sense, that was by faith.

But the premier act of faith in Samson’s life, was when he was made strong out of weakness.

Would God hear the prayer of this miserable failure of a judge?  
Would God listen to the cry of a man who was called to be the deliverer of his people,  
but who had spent his whole life chasing after foreign women?

*<sup>29</sup> And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. <sup>30</sup> And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.*

Humbled and contrite,  
Samson now says “let me die with the Philistines.”  
He lays down his life—yes, with a certain amount of selfishness and pride—  
but nonetheless, in faith.  
And through his death he kills more than he had killed in his life.

I like how one commentator puts it:  
“Perhaps we will eventually get over our surprise  
at the kind of servants Yahweh delights to use.” (Davis, 191)

## **Conclusion: Samson's Brothers**

*<sup>31</sup> Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.*

Who are you in this story?

I hope you are not the Delilah—betraying the Deliverer of Israel for the wealth of this age.

I know you are not Samson—the bumbling deliverer, redeemed in the end.

I trust you are not the Philistines—unbelieving, uncircumcised and hostile to the God of Israel.

Who are you?

You are Samson's brothers.

Wait, Samson had brothers?

We haven't heard anything about them through all this narrative.

Only at the end, after their elder brother is dead,

do we discover that the barren woman had more children.

Manoah's wife was barren.

The promise was that she would have a son.

But apparently God then blessed her with more.

And these brothers appear at the end of the story to bury the one who had “begun”  
to deliver Israel from the Philistines.

They had not stood with him in his life,

but they stood with him in his death.

While he lived, they hid from the Philistines—

they would not follow him into battle against the enemies of God.

(he had to find his warriors among the jackals!)

But when he died, then they owned him as their brother.

Jesus's brothers deserted him too.

His disciples—those whom he had just called “friends”—

fled when the “Philistines” came to crucify him.

When the chief priests played the part of the lords of the Philistines,

and Jesus was called to come and “perform” for Herod, Pilate, and the priests,

no one stood with him.

You are the brothers of the deliverer.

Abandoned in death, alone and deserted—without any sign from heaven that he was heard—  
yet God did not forsake his anointed one.

And in his death he destroyed more of his enemies than he ever could have in life!

But unlike the brothers of Samson,

your elder brother did not remain in the grave.

And Jesus's strength did not die with him.

In his last act of laying down his life,

he destroyed not just the lords of the Philistines,  
but all the powers that held you captive.  
Sin, death and the devil have been overthrown,  
and now you have been set free to live as becomes the children of God—  
no longer hiding in terror from your enemies,  
but walking boldly and openly as the people of God,  
shining brilliantly as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

We may march down into the strongholds of the enemy,  
we may enter into Gaza, to the ruined temple of Dagon—  
not to pick up the dead body of our elder brother—  
but to proclaim his triumph over his and our enemies.  
It is the resurrected and living Jesus that goes before us,  
and in his might we proclaim the defeat of the gods of the nations.