

## Samson, Unique Among the Judges

*What made Samson stand out as a judge among the tribes of Israel? Was it only his great strength or his daring exploits against the Philistines?*

It was the time of the Judges. It was a time fraught with troubles and conflicts for the tribes of Israel. It was also a time that had moments of relative peace and prosperity for different parts of the fading political collective that was the people of Israel.

It was in this time and into this world that a boy was born named Samson.

Samson's life was unique in many ways, for his birth was foretold by an angel, and he was to live his life by the restrictions of a Nazarite vow, and one of those restrictions was that he would never cut his hair, and it was a vow that Samson dutifully kept until he allowed himself to be betrayed, which resulted in his capture, and eventually, his death. But there were other things that were unique about the life of Samson—other than his endurance, his fearlessness and his strength—and these are revealed in the events of his life and by the exploits he did to trouble the Philistines who were the political and economic oppressors of Israel.

Now, maybe we have never thought of Samson as just being a young man with the mind and maturity of a younger person, perhaps even a teenager, but it is from this perspective that we may get a better understanding of his life and his actions in dealing with the Philistines. For we do not find Samson conducting himself as a military general who summons the help of others, and we do not find him rallying the people of Israel to fight against their enemies.

In a real sense, Samson acted alone, and his exploits seem to reflect the mind of one who is younger and more brash, and we have clues of this from the story that shows his unwillingness to listen to the advice of his parents about his friends and the women he spends time with—those found among the Philistines.

We also find that Samson is spending his time around a small group of friends whose discussions do not center on things of great importance, and so we discover that Samson amuses his friends with riddles as they are idling their time away.

Another clue to Samson's youthfulness is the way in which Samson uses his creativity to torment the Philistines. There is a prankishness in what he does while he causes them so much trouble. We notice this in the story where Samson takes revenge upon the Philistines by cleverly devising a plan to catch three hundred wild dogs, then tying torches between their tails and releasing them into the grain fields, causing widespread devastation of a major food crop for the Philistines, along with the olives and the vineyards.

Of course, Samson may have had some help in what he did, but he was obviously the instigator of the mischief.

Still, another example of Samson's youthfulness can be found when Samson was surrounded by the Gazites who waited all night so they could kill him in the morning. Samson decided to escape at midnight, but not only did he escape, he took a gate of the city with him, and placed it on top of a hill to humiliate the Philistines of Gaza.

Now, we should expect that Samson did not become a judge in Israel because he was a relatively unknown person, and it is obvious

that his exploits against the Philistines would have given him some notoriety in Israel and certainly among the Philistines. Therefore, if we conclude that the story of Samson was recorded chronologically, with the events highlighted as they happened, we see that some of the events likely happened before he became a judge, which means that Samson was likely in his latter teenage years when he began to trouble the Philistines.

This gives us something to investigate about the life of Samson.

Consider for a moment that when Samson was a judge, so was Jephthah, as also was Ibzan—two judges who were also called upon to intervene in the affairs of the people of Israel. Also, Samuel, who is considered to be the first prophet after Moses, was a judge and a contemporary of Samson, as was Eli before him.

Now, there are different views surrounding the chronology of Samson and the period of Philistine oppression, so we need to consider that after the death of Gideon in c. 1108 BCE we find that several judges were contemporary of each other, noting also that there were judges who were in different parts of Israel—divided into three main areas consisting of the North, East and Southwest where we find Samson dealing with the Philistines.

Reasonably, we can see from the Bible that Samson was likely born about the time that Gideon died, and so we read that: “the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years” (Jdg. 13:1). Then we also see in this context that the angel told Samson’s parents that: “he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Jdg. 13:5).

Meaning that at some point in Samson’s life he would begin to deliver the people of Israel out of the hand of the Philistines—but not completely—which leaves us then to

determine when the oppression began, and even though there are different views on this issue, we can reasonably conclude that it began after the period of the Ammonite oppression when the Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines, a consequence of which was the death of Eli.

Telling us then that Samson began his judgeship with the beginning of this oppression in c. 1088 when he was about 20 years of age, and this time also marked the period beginning the judgeship of Samuel over Israel (I Sam 4:9-18).


Now, some have concluded that the Philistine oppression ended with a route of the Philistines under the leadership of Saul and Samuel, but even though this was a decisive battle it did not really end the period of oppression, which according to the chronology of events came to an end with a battle instigated by Jonathan, the son of King Saul (I Sam. 7:13).

We get the sense of this when we learn that: “there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears: But all the Israelites went down to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his share, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock. Yet they had a file for the mattocks, and for the coulters, and for the forks, and for the axes, and to sharpen the goads. So it came to pass in the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people that were with Saul and Jonathan: but with Saul and with Jonathan his son was there found (I Sam. 13:19-22).

Thus, it was at this time, about two years into the rulership of Saul, when Saul had been rejected by God regarding the establishment of his family’s lineage on the throne of Israel, and when David was chosen, that the “army” of Israel still had no weapons to fight the Philistines, but after the defeat instigated by Jonathan we see that Saul was able to fight

against Israel's enemies as he also took "the kingdom over Israel" (I Sam. 13:1; 14:47-52).

Thus, with these events we have the end of the oppression 40 years after the Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines, which allows us to conclude that Samson had died about 20 years before this defeat of the Philistines by the Israelites. For we have to remember that Samson began his judgement with the beginning of the oppression, when he was about 20 years of age, and he only judged the people for a period of 20 years until c. 1068, making Samson about 40 years old when he died (Jdg. 16:21).

Telling us then that Samson died at a relatively young age and that some of his exploits may have taken place in his late teenage years, which makes Samson quite unique among the Judges.   
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