

Exegetical Notes – Judges 15:1-20
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Background: When Joshua died, the conquest of The Promised Land was only partially completed. In large part, Israel had followed the instructions of YHWH regarding the taking of the land and the destruction of the indigenous population who lived there, but Israel had not followed God completely. Large sections of the indigenous population remained and were not under Israeli control.

From the time of the occupation (around 1380 BC) until the beginning of the Monarchs (1050 BC) Israel was a THEOCRACY, a nation whose king was God. Israel was supposed to listen to and follow the word of the Lord, but as we have already seen, Israel was not good at following the instructions of YHWH. Her failure to do so left her in trouble time and again. Partial obedience to the word of the Lord is disobedience to the word of the Lord and always leads to disaster. “Judges provides many examples of the principle that OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW BRINGS PEACE, WHEREAS DISOBEDIENCE MEANS OPPRESSION AND DEATH” (Charles Ryrie). This is the constantly repeated lesson of the Book of Judges. Judges is the story of the time in Israel’s early history when “Every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6 and 21:25). This always results in chaos and disaster.

In the Book of Judges a recurrent theme emerges: Step one - The people are following the will of YHWH; Step two - The people stop obeying the word of the Lord; Step three - An enemy arises that oppresses the people of God; Step four - The people cry out to God for help; Step five - God answers Israel’s prayer by sending them a deliverer (a judge to lead her, a Messiah); Step six - The people repent and return to the Lord. Then, the process begins again. Judges simply repeats this pattern over and over again. God’s people are “stiff necked and disobedient.” God is forever faithful. If God’s people would follow God’s word, they could save themselves hardship, worry, pain, etc. But they choose to do what seems right in their own eyes.

Judges 15:1-20

Verses 1-2

Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in.

² "I was so sure you hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your companion. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead."

- Sometime after the wedding feast (see Judges 14:1-20), Samson returned to Timnah to claim his bride. He did not know that her father had given the woman to another man as that man's wife.
- When he arrived at the bride's father's house, Samson announced that he had come to claim his bride, but her father would not let him have her because she was married to someone else.
- The bride's father suggested that Samson "take" the bride's younger sister as his wife instead of the woman Samson had wanted to marry. The bride's father said that the younger sister was better looking than the bride anyway.

Verses 3-5

³ Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." ⁴ So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, ⁵ lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.

- Samson was angered by the way he was treated and decides that it is his right to get vengeance on the Philistines. His desire is to hurt them badly.
- He catches 300 foxes (or jackals), ties them together by their tails in pairs. So, there are 150 pairs of foxes. He ties a torch to the joined tails of every pair and sets them free. The frightened animals, in pain because their tails were on fire, ran through the fields and vineyards of the Philistines. The torches set the fields on fire.

- In this way, Samson destroyed the wheat, the grape vineyards, and the olive trees of the Philistines. He destroyed the three main crops grown in that area and ruined the economy of the people who lived there.

Verses 6-8

⁶ When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his companion." So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death. ⁷ Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I swear that I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." ⁸ He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.

- In revenge for the act of revenge, the Philistines, knowing that Samson was responsible for the damage, killed the bride and her father.
- Samson then swore that he would not stop attacking the Philistines to get revenge for their act of revenge. He attacked the Philistines "viciously." The word translated "viciously" literally means "leg on thigh." It is a wrestling term. It means that Samson used brute force against them.
- After his attack on the Philistines, Samson hid himself in a cave knowing that the Philistines were after him.

Verses 9-10

⁹ The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. ¹⁰ The people of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?" "We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us."

- The Philistines moved their armies against the tribe of Judah. When Judah asked why the Philistines had come against them, the Philistines replied that they were seeking revenge against Samson. They declared that their reason for moving against Judah was to get revenge on Samson.

Verses 11-17

¹¹ Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me."

¹² They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines."

Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves."

¹³ "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. ¹⁴ As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. ¹⁵ Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.

¹⁶ Then Samson said,

"With a donkey's jawbone

I have made donkeys of them.

With a donkey's jawbone

I have killed a thousand men."

¹⁷ When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.

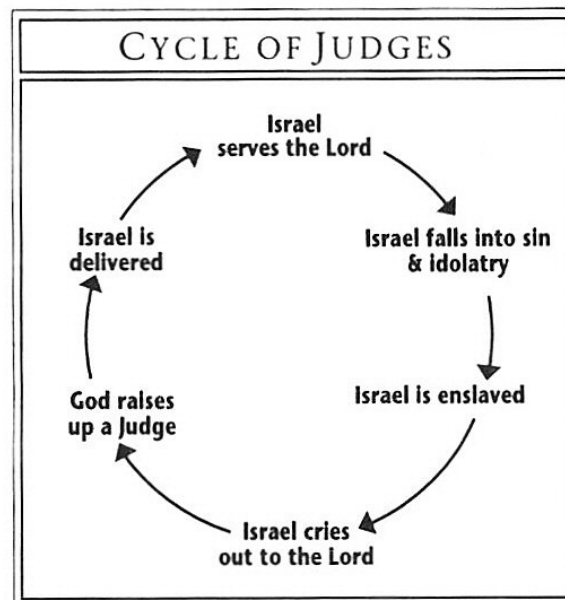
- 300 men of Judah went to the cave where Samson was hiding. They explained to him that he had put them at the mercy of the Philistines who are their rulers. They tell him that they have no choice but to turn him over to the Philistines because if they don't the Philistines will destroy them.
- Samson's explanation to the men of Judah is that he did to the Philistines only what they had done to him. And after receiving a promise from the men of Judah that they will not kill him, Samson surrenders to them. They turn him over to the Philistines.
- But, the Spirit of YHWH came upon Samson. He was given supernatural strength so that the ropes with which he was bound, though strong new ropes, cannot hold him. He is able to break the ropes as if they were nothing.
- Freed, Samson picked up the jawbone of a donkey which had recently died on that spot. (The body of a dead animal was illegal for a Hebrew to touch.) With the jawbone, Samson killed 1000 Philistine soldiers.
- Having gotten revenge on the Philistines again, Samson declared that he, not YHWH, was victorious over the Philistines. He does not give thanks to God for his victory nor for the supernatural strength which broke the ropes.
- The place where this happened was renamed after the events that happened there. It became known as Jawbone Hill.

Verses 18-20

¹⁸ Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" ¹⁹ Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.

²⁰ Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

- After the battle, Samson was thirsty. Because of his need, he called out to God asking for a drink. He acknowledged that God had given him a great victory but asked if God's intention was to let him die of thirst.
- God opened a spring from which Samson drank and was refreshed. When Samson called out to God, God was faithful to Samson. The spring was named, "spring of the caller." The name of the spring reminds us to this day that God is always faithful to those who call on him.
- Samson then led Israel as judge for 40 years, but he did not free Israel from Philistine oppression during that time.



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