



## A Study of the Book of Judges

### Lesson 13: Samson...The Valley of Choice Vines Judges 16:1-31

Now this morning we have come to the last two episodes of Samson's life. They are both remarkable and at the same time profoundly sad. They're remarkable in that there is really nothing else quite like them in the Old Testament. By that I mean that in these two last episodes Samson displays two superhuman feats of strength that are unparalleled in the life of any other biblical character. Usually in the Old Testament, God worked the miraculous through elements of nature...fire and floods and earthquakes or frogs and flies and serpents and the like. But in the character of Samson, God works the miracle through the character himself.

Samson does the miraculous...Samson is miraculous.

Now that could not be said of Moses...or of Joshua or even a Daniel. They worked miracles...or they were involved with miracles but their miracles were miracles of pronouncement or miracles of reception. That is, they pronounced what God was going to do and God acted on their pronouncements or God acted in their lives through miraculous events and they simply received the benefit of

His actions. But God worked differently through Samson. With Samson, there was no pronouncement, only action...Samson's action. That makes these last two episodes in his life quite remarkable.

At the same time, these last two episodes are profoundly sad. They are sad because of what might have been. You see with Samson there was a potential for greatness that was different than the potential of any other character in the Old Testament. There was a potential for greatness because of his great superhuman strength but in some respects it was a potential largely unrealized. Oh there was great success but it was accompanied by great failure. Now when I say that, I do not mean that Samson's life was a total failure. Samson did accomplish a great deal but when you read his story you cannot help but wonder what might have happened had he had the spiritual character or spiritual strength of Joshua or Daniel.

But he did not. He was a remarkable man but he was a flawed man. He had a wonderful gift from God...a superhuman gift of physical strength. But his extraordinary strength was offset by some extraordinary flaws. I like the way St. Ambrose put it writing in the fourth century. He said,

Samson, when strong and brave, strangled a lion but he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes, but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned up the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame enkindled by a single woman. (*Ambros. Apol. ii., David. c. iii.*)<sup>1</sup>

Now in that sense, Samson was sort of a picture of the nation of Israel. They were blessed in a way that no other nation on earth was blessed. They had a marvelous potential and yet it was largely an unrecognized potential because of the nation's disobedience. The author intended his readers to see the parallels.

Still we are focusing on Samson and as I said, Samson is a tragic figure because he failed to recognize his potential for success. His disobedience led to disaster and to failure in completing the deliverance of his people. He only started to deliver them but that ought not to be too surprising. You see Samson's life is very similar to the general pattern and overall structure and design of the Book of Judges. In Judges, everything runs down. So it was with Samson's life. He started off well and then ran down. You can see that right off at the beginning of chapter 16.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:1**...One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her.

Now there is something intensely sad about this particular verse and the author of Judges fully expects the reader to be shocked when reading this opening verse. Now you would think that it would come as no surprise. The nation has repeatedly prostituted itself before other gods...gods who were no gods. It had done so over and over again. Look back at Judges 2:17.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 2:17**...Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands.

And Judges 8:27...

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 8:27**...Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

And Judges 8:33...

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 8:33**...No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and <sup>34</sup> did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side.

Do you see what I mean? Samson did in reality what the nation had done metaphorically. And it is shocking that he did so. In fact, we are much more apt to be shocked because he did so physically than we are that he nation did so metaphorically and I think the truth is, that we should be shocked more by the spiritual prostitution of the nation than by the physical act of Samson the Judge turning toward the services of such a woman. But we are not. It is easier to see the sin of an individual than the collective sin of the group.

In verse 2, we will see that Samson's reputation preceded him.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:2**...The people of Gaza were told, "**Samson is here!**" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "**At dawn we'll kill him.**"

Now what that means is that the people of the city of Gaza intended to gather in the morning and put Samson to death. Now there is no real certainty that they could have actually done that. But that was their plan. I think the thought was, "**We will lock the gate and we won't have to worry about him getting out of the city tonight and we will fall upon him in the morning and kill him.**"

But in God's providence, Samson had no intention of staying until the morning. Look at verse 3.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:3**...But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts,

and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

Now what that means is that Samson got up in the night and decided to leave the city. He went down to the city gate and found it closed and locked. It is possible that he even saw men camped there at the gate to prevent his leaving. But Samson paid no attention to them. Instead, he simply ripped out the two posts holding the gate...the two doors of the gate and the crossbar that held the two doors closed and put them on his shoulder and carried them away.

Now I don't want to make more of what Samson did than what he did. But I also do not want to make less of it either. The two gates would have been enormously heavy. Arthur Cundall writes this.

...the gates of ancient cities were often nail-studded and covered with metal to prevent them from being burnt during an attack, the weight may have been greater than that of the timber itself.<sup>2</sup>

Now he says that, but he doesn't even try to estimate what that weight might have been. I want to tell you this morning that we are talking about an act that was truly astounding. The gates of an ancient city would have been wide enough and tall enough for carts and horses to pass through. Because they provided protection for the city, it was important for such gates to be strong enough to resist invading armies. I think we are talking about a set of doors that might have weighed as much as a car. Obviously modern commentators don't spend much time on that fact.

Instead, they want to know the answer to questions like this, **"How come he Philistines didn't attack him when he was tearing the gates out from their**

**position in the city wall.”** Commentator George Moore puts his concern this way.

If the Philistines were lying in wait for him at *the gate of the city*, it is not easy to conceive how Samson could pull up and carry off the gates unmolested if the author imagined that the guards were asleep, he could hardly have failed to give us some intimation, — and what sound sleepers they must have been!<sup>3</sup>

Do you see what he is asking? He is asking, **“How could Samson do what he did and not make enough racket to disturb the men guarding the gate?”**

It is a good question but I think it focuses on the wrong thing. I mean if you saw a man strong enough to tear out a giant set of gates and posts sunk into the ground along with the cross beam that held them together, would you interfere? I think Samson caught them unawares. I think he surprised them and when men like that are surprised in that sort of situation, it takes them a while to gather up their courage. I remember once when I was a kid, I saw man, a drunk man, beat his car to smithereens with a hammer and not one person in our neighborhood tried to stoop him. I think Samson’s case may have been something like that.

The extraordinary thing about what Samson did is not just that he tore the gates out of the city wall but that he put them on his shoulder and carried them up the hill outside of the city.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:3**...He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

Now there is some disagreement about what the end of verse three actually means. It may mean that he simply carried them up on the hill outside the city

itself in the general direction of Hebron. Or it could mean that he carried them all the way to the hill just outside of Hebron. Dr. Thomas Constable puts it like this:

It is not clear how far Samson carried the gates. The mountain "opposite Hebron" (v. 3) is the site in question. Many commentators believe that the writer had in mind a hill overlooking Gaza in the direction toward Hebron. This is the traditional interpretation. Hebron stood about 38 miles east of Gaza and at a higher elevation. It occupied the highest hill in southern Canaan. While Samson may have been able to carry the gates all the way to Hebron, his purpose in transporting them seems to have been to mock the men of Gaza. He would probably have impressed them significantly enough if he had planted the gates at the top of the nearby hill that was clearly visible from Gaza. The traditional interpretation appeals to me for this reason. Here the emphasis is on Samson's superhuman physical strength.<sup>4</sup>

Now if he carried them all the way to Hebron...that is truly a remarkable feat. But even he didn't carry them that far and only carried them up a hill outside of the city of Gaza and placed them there in the general direction of Hebron that still would have been a remarkable feat. The real question is, **"Why would he carry their gates away at all?"**

Leon Wood answers that question this way.

The carrying away of the gate, then, must have been to impress the Philistines. He may have guessed that they were watching in the darkness, or he may have thought only in terms of their discovering the act the following day. The effect would have been the same either way. It is noteworthy that the destruction of a city's gate was particularly humiliating for a city, because gates were thought to be symbolic of a city's strength. Samson, of course, would have been aware of this.<sup>5</sup>

You see what Samson was saying to the Philistines is that there was no protection against him and his strength in the Lord. What he was saying is that the gate to their city was wherever he wanted it to be. If he dwelled in Hebron,

that was the gate to their city. If he dwelled someplace else, then that place was the gate to their city. What he was saying is that nothing they could do could contain him or stop him from going in and out as he pleased. He was saying that to intimidate them and I think it worked.

That is why the story of Samson and Delilah follow right after this story of Samson and the gates of Gaza.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:4**...Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek<sup>6</sup> whose name was Delilah.<sup>7</sup> <sup>5</sup> The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "**See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.**"<sup>8</sup>

Now the parallels between the Timnite woman in chapter 14 and Delilah here in chapter 16 are transparently obvious.<sup>9</sup> In the first place, they are both closely associated with the "**vine**" which ought to get your attention whenever you read a story about a Nazirite.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 14:5**...Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him.

Notice there the phrase the "**vineyards of Timnah.**" Then in chapter 16, the chapter we are looking at this morning, you ought to pay attention to the phrase "**Valley of Sorek.**"

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:4**...Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek<sup>10</sup> whose name was Delilah.

I bring that up because the **“Valley of Sorek”** means the **“Valley of Choice Vines.”**<sup>11</sup>

If you were a careful reader and you saw that a Nazirite was going down to the Valley of Choice Vines you would know that that might mean danger.

Now the other thing, and I am somewhat hesitant to bring this up, is that only two other people are ever presented in the text as knowing that the secret to Samson’s strength lay in his hair. If you go back and read the story of Samson’s birth in chapter 13, you will find that his father is never told about Samson’s hair. Only his mother is told and when she repeats the words of the angel to her husband, she neglects to tell him about Samson’s hair. The same thing occurs when the angel of the Lord speaks to Manoah. He doesn’t mention Samson’s hair either.

Now, I think Samson’s father almost certainly knew but the text doesn’t tell you that he knew. It only tells you that Samson’s mother knew. And then in chapter 16, the text tells us that Samson reveals his secret to Delilah.<sup>12</sup>

Now as long as his secret was with someone like his mother, someone who was covenantally faithful, he was safe. But when his secret was given to someone who was not covenantally faithful...neither was he safe.

And Delilah was not interested in covenantal faithfulness. She was interested in something else. Verse five tells us what that thing was.

**NIV Judges 16:5...Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."**

Listen to what two different commentators say about how much silver that was.

The weight of silver would be about 30 pounds from each of the five lords, making a combined total of 150 pounds, a very considerable reward.<sup>13</sup>

It would total at least 140 pounds in weight; no wonder Delilah did not give up till she had discovered the secret of Samson's strength.<sup>14</sup>

Now I tried to calculate how much money 5500 shekels of silver amounted to that is pretty hard to do. Certainly, if you went by today's value it would have only been around \$17,000. But I think it must have been much more than that. I say that because next week we are going to see a rich man in chapter 17 hire his own personal priest and as a part of his arrangement he is going to give the priest ten shekels of silver per year as a salary. And the priest seems more than happy to get ten shekels, which means that Delilah is being promised here enough money to maintain her at the same standard as that priest I am talking about for a period of around 550 years.

Now 550 years of salary, even if it is minimum wage, is a significant amount of money.

Now what the Philistine lords expected from Delilah in exchange was a little detective work. What they wanted was to know the secret of Samson's strength. Now the text is pretty simple to follow after you realize that. The one thing I want to point out is how similar Delilah's efforts to get Samson's secret about his strength are to the Timnite woman's effort to get his secret about his riddle. The Timnite woman appeals to Samson four days to tell her the secret of his riddle.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 14:15...**On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "**Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your**

**father's household to death. Did you invite us here to rob us?"** <sup>16</sup> Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, **"You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer."** **"I haven't even explained it to my father or mother,"** he replied, **"so why should I explain it to you?"** <sup>17</sup> She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people.

Do you see that I mean? She starts appealing to him on the fourth day of the feast. She appeals to him until he finally cracks on the seventh day...fourth day, fifth day, sixth day, seventh day...four days.

Delilah appeals to Samson four times to tell her the secret of his strength.

In both cases there is tremendous pressure to get Samson to tell everything. In both cases there are tears and sobbing and a great deal of female hysteria.

Let's look then at the four accounts with Delilah starting in Judges 16:6. As we do, I want you to notice how Samson gets progressively closer each time to telling Delilah his secret. I want you to notice how in the third instance he actually mentions his hair.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:6...So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."** <sup>7</sup> Samson answered her, **"If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."** <sup>8</sup> Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. <sup>9</sup> With men hidden in the room, she called to him, **"Samson, the Philistines are upon you!"** But he snapped the thongs as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

Now the thongs that he mentions here in the NIV were pieces of catgut or sinew. Sinew was made from the intestines of sheep. It was often used to string bows as in bow and arrows. But this was fresh sinew...unprocessed and would have been quite easy to break.

In the second instance, Samson tells Delilah to use fresh ropes to bind him but they should have known that wasn't going to work from the time he broke the new ropes that the men of Judah had bound him with. Look at verse 10.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Judges 16:10...Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied." <sup>11</sup> He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man." <sup>12</sup> So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.**

Now in verse 13, Samson actually mentions something about his hair. Apparently, he is beginning to contemplate telling her the truth. This particular section is very strange. Apparently what he tells her is that if she will weave the locks of his hair into the fabric that is already on a loom, he will lose his power. He may have been speaking of one of those horizontal looms that ancient women used to use to make cloth. I think we are supposed to think of Samson laid out horizontally with his hair woven into the fabric on a loom so that he would more or less be pinned to the floor. But that doesn't work either. Samson simply gets up and carries the heavy loom attached to his head. It is pretty comic. But it is the last comic thing in Samson's life. Look at verse 13.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Judges 16:13...Delilah then said to Samson, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied." He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and**

**tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man.**" So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric <sup>14</sup> and tightened it with the pin. Again she called to him, "**Samson, the Philistines are upon you!**" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

Then in verse 15, Samson finally tells Delilah everything.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:15...**Then she said to him, "**How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength.**" <sup>16</sup> With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death. <sup>17</sup> So he told her everything. "**No razor has ever been used on my head,**" he said, "**because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.**" <sup>18</sup> When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "**Come back once more; he has told me everything.**" So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. <sup>19</sup> Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him. <sup>20</sup> Then she called, "**Samson, the Philistines are upon you!**" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "**I'll go out as before and shake myself free.**" But he did not know that the LORD had left him. <sup>21</sup> Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.

Look at verse 20 again.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:20...**But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

Now I think that is about the saddest text in all of Judges. Samson is stripped of his hair, his strength, his identity and even his eyesight. He is humiliated and turned from a heroic champion into a beast of burden...from one who slays with the jawbone of an ass into one who does the menial labor that an ass might do. Now that sort of humiliation was not uncommon in the ancient world. The same

thing happened to King Zedekiah later on when Judah was taken into captivity by Babylon.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>NIV</sup> **Jeremiah 52:11**...Then he put out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon, where he put him in prison (house of the mill)<sup>16</sup> till the day of his death.

And there are many records in extra biblical sources that tell us just how common the practice was.<sup>17</sup>

Verse 22 is put there I think to give the reader hope of Samson regaining his strength.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:22**...But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

Now I know you all the know the story of what happens next but I want to follow along as reread the account and as you do I want you to notice the confidence the Philistines place in their temple and in their god, Dagon...the fish god...for having delivered their enemy into their hands.

Now the word for servant down in verse 26 is the Hebrew word for **“boy”** or **“lad.”** It is used a little like we use the word **“boy”** in English. It can mean a servant or a young lad. I think in this case it is very sad to think of the strongest man in the world being reduced to being led around by a small boy.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 16:23**...Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, **“Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.”** <sup>24</sup> When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, **“Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one**

**who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain."** <sup>25</sup> While they were in high spirits, they shouted, **"Bring out Samson to entertain us."** So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. When they stood him among the pillars, <sup>26</sup> Samson said to the servant (lad or boy)<sup>18</sup> who held his hand, **"Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them."** <sup>27</sup> Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. <sup>28</sup> Then Samson prayed to the LORD, **"O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes."** <sup>29</sup> Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, <sup>30</sup> Samson said, **"Let me die with the Philistines!"** Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived. <sup>31</sup> Then his brothers and his father's whole family went down to get him. They brought him back and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led Israel twenty years.

Now what are we to make of this account of Samson?

I think we are to understand apart from the presence of the Lord...all of the strength and ability and boldness in the world means nothing...guarantees nothing. Whatever past victories God's people may have enjoyed...whatever past deliverances they may have received count for nothing unless the Lord continues to abide with his people.

Now in the case of Samson, that presence required covenantal fidelity. In other words, it required the people of God keep God as their God. It was the allurements away from the one true God that cost God's people their freedom and their strength. It was when they toyed with the gods of the surrounding nations that they became spiritual hostages to sin and to the wiles of the devil. It was there that their strength left them.

You see the Book of Judges is a call to covenantal fidelity. It is call to obedience and to faithfulness and it is a call to follow the king that God has appointed. In the case of the original audience, I think that meant David. In our case, it means Christ. He is our faithful shepherd and king and we are to submit to His leadership and rule and to not be lured away by the delights and temptations of this present evil age.

Are there any questions?

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in...C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2...Joshua-2 Samuel*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 417-418.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur E. Cundall, and Leon. Morris, *Judges & Ruth*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 174.

<sup>3</sup> George F. Moore, *Judges* in the ICC Series (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895...reprinted in 1976), 348.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Thomas Constable's online notes on Judges chapter 16 and following (p. 92) at <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/judges.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Wood, *The Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1975), 328.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Boling, *Judges* in the Anchor Bible Commentary Series, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1975), 248. Boling notes that the Valley of Sorek means "The Wadi of Choice Vines" which was located about 13 miles south of Jerusalem. It is an interesting place for a Nazirite to be hanging around.

See also the Expositor's Bible Commentary on the Old Testament makes special notice of the name. It writes, "'Sorek' (*soreq*) means 'choice vine,' perhaps a hint that the Nazirite vow was in grave danger."

<sup>7</sup> See HALOT, 2088. "Delilah" ...דַּלִּיָּהּ n.f.; fem. of דַּלִּי, Ug. n.m. dll, daliÒli (UTGI. 665 :: Akk. DaliÒlu Stamm 277, MHB. thin thread; Saf. n.m. DaliÒl and fem. DaliÒlat (Ryckmans 1:66); II דַּלִּי "with dangling curls" (Noth 227; Malt. dliel loose hair, JSS 3:65) or (Montgomery JQR 1935:262) "flirtatious", Arb. dalla I and V to flirt, dall flirtation: Samson's Philistine wife

<sup>8</sup> Apparently a lot of money. Judges 17:10 implies that a person could live comfortably off of 10 shekels of silver per year. See Constable's notes on p. 93. "Eleven hundred...of silver" was a fortune since a person could live comfortably on "10...of silver" a year (17:10)." See also the

passages in Judges. <sup>NIV</sup> **Judges 17:10**...Then Micah said to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food."

<sup>9</sup> Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 232-3. Ackerman's observations are very good. For example, she writes: "This comparison (that is between the Timnite and Delilah) is especially telling for, as is frequently noted, the plots of these two stories are transparently the same: women beguile Samson into revealing a secret in order that the Philistines can use this information in their fight against him. Delilah, as I have already noted, persuades Samson to reveal the secret of his godlike strength; the Timnite woman similarly induces Samson to divulge the answer to his enigmatic lion-and-honey riddle. Both then share their privy knowledge with Samson's Philistine enemies so that the Philistines might entrap him.

There are, in addition, several quite specific parallels between the two stories. The story of the Timnite wife opens with a setting in the vineyards of Timnah" (14:5); the Delilah story similarly commences by setting the scene in the "Valley of Sorek" or the "Valley of Choice Vines" (16:4). As the main action of the two stories begins, both women are urged by the Philistines to "coax" Samson's secret from him (14:15; 16:5), and both use almost identical arguments about love in order to weaken Samson's resolve (You do not love me' says the Timnite wife in 14:16; 'How can you say that you love me?' asks I Delilah in 16:15). When these arguments seem to have no effect, both subsequently "nag" or "press upon" Samson in order to get the information they want and in response in both cases, he finally "tells" them the secret they had sought to uncover. Both women, moreover, suffer three failed attempts before provoking this revelation. In the case of the Timnite wife, the Philistines are said to come to her on the fourth day of her wedding feast and set her on her task of enticement (14:15) Yet according to 14:17, Samson does not reveal the answer to his riddle until the seventh day of the banqueting, implying that the wife tried to persuade him to speak on days four, five, and six but was rebuffed. The Delilah story is more explicit: Samson lied to Delilah three times before finally divulging the secret of his great strength. He first told her his might could be overcome if he were bound by seven fresh bowstrings (16:7), then claimed he could be subdued if bound with new ropes (16:11), and next suggested he could be overpowered if seven locks of his hair were tightly woven and pinned into the fabric of her loom (16:13). Only after all these statements are proved false does Samson finally reveal to Delilah the true secret of his Nazirite vow (16:17).

The biblical tradition's point in amassing all these parallels is essentially to *force* us to read the stories of the Timnite wife and of Delilah as paired. Yet, as is often the case in the Bible's narratives, the text's ultimate aim in drawing our attention to the two stories' similarities is to highlight all the more vividly the differences between them.<sup>58</sup> In particular, Judges 14 and 16 seek to stress the ways in which they crucially diverge in their characterizations of their two women actors. Because the Timnite woman is a wife, a woman who operates very much within a world of male hegemony, Judges 14 treats her almost as incidental in the telling of her tale. She functions in the story's action primarily as an object. She is first the object of Samson's desire (14:1–4), then the object of an arranged marriage and finally the object of her countrymen's stratagem to entrap Samson (14:15). She is only subject—that is, one who speaks and takes action in the narrative—in two verses (14:16–17). Delilah, however, is a woman who is unmarried and who otherwise lives a life independent of male authority. Consequently, she can be depicted as

the primary subject of 16:4–22. It is Delilah, then, who binds Samson with bowstrings and then with new ropes, it is she who weaves seven locks of his hair into her loom, and it is she who has his head shaved as he lies in her lap, all in an effort to overcome his God-given strength. The man, Samson, is the object in this account, so much a passive agent that he is presented almost as a mannequin, making no response when Delilah binds him with bowstrings and ropes and sleeping soundly through first the weaving and then the shaving of his hair.”

<sup>10</sup> Robert Boling, *Judges* in the Anchor Bible Commentary Series, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1975), 248. Boling notes that the Valley of Sorek means “The Wadi of Choice Vines” which was located about 13 miles south of Jerusalem. It is an interesting place for a Nazirite to be hanging around.

See also the Expositor’s Bible Commentary on the Old Testament makes special notice of the name. It writes, “‘Sorek’ (*soreq*) means ‘choice vine,’ perhaps a hint that the Nazirite vow was in grave danger.”

<sup>11</sup> See note 8, paragraph 2.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 234-5. Ackerman writes: “In fact, when we read the tales of Judges 13 and 16 in tandem, they almost suggest a transfer of power, so that whatever power Manoah’s wife was able to claim temporarily in Judges 13 is, by the climactic scene of Judges is delivered into the hands of her son’s mistress. The key here is to realize that the power Delilah is able to acquire in Judges 16 comes from her taking *from* Samson the secret of his uncut hair. Yet previously in the Samson saga, the only person other than Samson who had been said to know of this privy matter was his mother. Note in particular that in the Judges 13 birth narrative, when Manoah’s wife reports to her husband the original words of the angel’s annunciation in verse 7, she tells him only—as the angel had said to her in verse 4—that she is to drink no wine nor strong drink nor is she to eat anything unclean while she is pregnant. She does not, however, repeat the angel’s injunction of verse 5, that no razor is to touch Samson’s head once he has been born. Also the angel, when he speaks directly to Manoah in verse 14, mentions only the prohibitions against the wife’s consuming wine, strong drink, and unclean food. The uncut hair goes unremarked, a secret articulated only to Manoah’s wife and presumably, as he grows up, to Samson.

Furthermore, although the terms of the Nazirite vow outlined in Num 6:1–21 suggest that Samson, like his mother, should have been required to abstain from strong drink, and that he should also have avoided coming into contact with a corpse, it is the uncut hair that must be understood as the crucial element of Samson’s Nazirite strength. In fact, the uncut hair seems to be the *only* Nazirite element that really matters in the Samson saga since Samson is repeatedly depicted as breaking the other dicta presumably required of him: he seems to drink wine (which surely was served at the festal banquet celebrating his marriage; 14:10–17), and, in his multiple slaughtering of his Philistine enemies, he must have come into contact with a corpse (14:19 and 15:15). In addition, he engages in other clearly unorthodox behavior, eating unclean food (honey that came from a lion’s carcass; 14:9) and entering into multiple liaisons with “foreign” women (his Timnite wife, the Gazaites prostitute, and, possibly, Delilah). None of this seems to matter,

however, for as long as Samson keeps his hair unshorn, God stays with him throughout his adventures.”

<sup>13</sup> Arthur E. Cundall, and Leon. Morris, *Judges & Ruth*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 176. Note that on September 9, 2005 silver bullion was selling for about \$7 an ounce which would have made the silver of that day worth about \$17,000 in today’s money. But a priest was expected to be able to live on about 10 shekels a year which meant that 1100 shekels was enough money to put a priest up for about 110 years.

<sup>14</sup> Frank E. Gaebelein ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: V.3: Deuteronomy - 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1992), Judges 16:4-5.

<sup>15</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2...Joshua-2 Samuel*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 423-424.

<sup>16</sup> Karel van der.Toorn, “Judges 16:21 in the Light of the Akkadian Sources” in *Vetus Testamentum* 36 no 2 April 1986, p 248. Constable notes that Daniel Block believes that Samson carried the gates all the way to Hebron...almost 40 miles. See Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* in the New American Commentary series. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 451. Also see Block for a diagram of ancient city gates and the noise that would have been associated with tearing such gates free.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> BDB p. 628....נֶעֱרַר n.מ 1. boy, lad, youth. 2. retainer -- 1. boy, lad, youth a. of infant (3 months old), to be born, just born, not weaned. b. of lad just weaned. c. = youth: of young Ishmael, Isaac, Joseph (17 years old), Benj., sons of Samuel, of Jesse; נֶקֶטָן little lad. d. נֶעֱרַר with special stress on youthfulness. e. of marriageable age, warrior Absalom, Zadok. 2. servant, retainer: a. = personal attendant, household servant. b. = retainer, follower. Note. נֶכֶר occurs in Pent. as Kt with Qr perpet. נֶעֱרַרָה