

## **SAMSON: JUDGE OF ISRAEL, HERO OF FAITH**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Samson, the famous warrior of Israel who stood against the Philistine army before the Davidic Monarchy, appears by name in three important texts; Judges 13-16, the narratives to which his name is attached, 1 Samuel 12:11, wherein Samuel admonishes the people for wanting a king, and Hebrews 11:32, in a roll of "heroes of faith" that was presented as those who prepared for the Messiahship of Jesus Christ. The narratives found in the book of Judges serve as a foundation for the historical recitals which follow. Each occurrence of the image of Samson reflects the shifting theological and historical contexts of Israel. Significantly, these contexts span the breadth of the Biblical Testaments. Therefore, we propose that the image of Samson and the Samson narratives embodied a theology that was grounded in the history of Israel and was a vital force in the development and culmination of "Royal Messianism", the belief in the Messiah from the line of David.

As the theology of the Messiah developed and became defined, the image of Samson also developed and his strength and heroic exploits took on new theological perceptions and Samson's importance grew beyond his war with the Philistines. The recitals which invoked his name and image introduced high points in the Salvation of Israel; the Kingship of David and Christ taking his seat at the right hand of the Throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). We would propose that the image of Samson embodied a "theology of preparation" and is one of the fundamental bonds which tie the Testaments of the Bible together. Samson began a cycle in which preparation overlapped the actions of deliverance. Within this cycle, YHWH seems to insist that a proper disposition, or preparation, is in place before an act of deliverance can begin.

In Judges 13, we see the mother of Samson being prepared for the child, with the instructions from the messenger. Her response to the announcement overlapped with Samson beginning the deliverance. Samson's act of beginning the deliverance of Israel prepared the way for David. David was prepared well by the Spirit of the Lord and his anointing (1 Samuel 16). David completed the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines which, in turn led to the preparation for the messianic line. John the Baptist, prepared for by the prophets and prefigured by Elijah began the deliverance of the people by baptizing with water, to be completed by the Messiah baptizing them with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11). This cyclical pattern of overlapping events form the anchor for the historical recitals in which Samson appears. When viewed in the span of the Biblical Testaments, there emerges a forward orientation; a goal toward which the recitals move.

Historical recitals are a part of, to use the term of T. Thompson, "Israelite historiography". They are a literary genre presenting descriptions and evaluations of the past reality and events in relation to the current circumstance. Thompson concludes that such historiographical recitals, recounting and reminding of the past, is a major element in Biblical literature because "a main component of Biblical writings is narrative about past persons and events".<sup>1</sup> The literary device of a "historical recital" is part of Israel's "theology of history". McKenzie comments that "the unity and continuity of the historical process comes from Israel's recognition of itself not only as a people, but as the people of YHWH. There is one God and one historical process. YHWH is the Lord of History whose will unfolded throughout Israelite history. The purpose of Israel is told through the storytellers and historical recitals". The purpose of such recitals was "to present a true picture of the reality of God operating in history and of man's response to God's operations".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. Thompson, "historiography", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 3:205.

<sup>2</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1966) 362-363.

Samson begins a powerful thread that moves throughout this history of interactions. To prepare for a new epoch in history entailed deliverance, setting things to right, and Samson was foundational to the messianic cycle of preparation and deliverance. Samson was to begin the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5). In doing so, Samson was the preparation for the Kingship of David. David was to finish the war with the Philistines, which Samson began (2 Samuel 5). Upon breaking the Philistine power, he is promised the Eternal Kingship, preparing for the Messiah (2 Samuel 7:16). This cycle would be completed by Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus delivered us from sin and death while preparing the way to the Kingdom of God. Therefore a clear cycle of preparation and deliverance, or salvation, which Jesus completed, was begun by Samson. Therefore, within the context of salvation, a powerful link is forged between Judges 13:5, the foretelling of the mission of Samson, and Hebrews 12:2, wherein Jesus is recognized as the One who completes and perfects the actions, of faith, of those who went before him.

## **PART I; OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES**

*The Lord raised up judges to deliver them*

- Judges 2:16

In the Old Testament Samson, and the Judges, were seen deliverers of Israel from immediate threats. They stood against a parade of enemies and their influence was seen as limited to the current crisis (Judges 2:18-19). Among the accounts of the Judges, the Samson narratives were unique; we hear of a miraculous birth, a commission, charisma, and an early form of the Naziritic vows. Unlike the other Judges, Samson engaged the enemy, the Philistines, alone. Most importantly, the mission of Samson was not to be complete, it was open-ended. David was to complete his mission. But, it is this open-ended task given to Samson that allowed for the first steps in the development of the theology which surrounded his narratives. While

the legacy of Samson and his exploits found immediate fulfillment in King David, the Davidic-messianic line allowed for a renewed importance and cast of Samson's image.

### **SAMSON, THE DELIVERING JUDGE**

Throughout the Samson narratives the Philistines provide the overall historical and theological backdrop. Throughout the birth narrative in Judges 13, amidst the instructions regarding how to prepare for the unborn hero is the commission of deliverance. Herein is the concept of preparation within the context of Divine calling and human response. One might conclude that the strict injunctions placed upon the mother, though not the son, may have augmented the yet unknown gifts, strength, through which YHWH was to bring about the process of deliverance.

The role of Samson was "to begin" the war with the Philistines (Judges 13:5) that David would complete (2 Samuel 5). Unlike the other Judges, Samson was not to bring about the end of any current crisis. The Philistines were a new type of enemy and their presence on the historical stage marked a new era in the theology and history of Israel. The Hebrew term that is usually rendered "begin" has an interesting spectrum of meanings. Regarding Samson it takes on the meaning to loosen or untie; to set free. Possibly, the original connotations included the image of an initial breaking or piercing of a wall or barrier. Samson was to be the opening blow against the power of the Philistines. The Hebrew construction of this verse insists that he was to be a primary cause of the liberation of Israel. He was the means by which YHWH was about to start freeing Israel. The Philistines' control of the region was not going to be upended by a soft hand and subtle actions. Theologically, they were seen as the means by which Israel was being punished for doing evil, committing apostasy, in the eyes of God (Judges 13:1).

Yet, the narratives point to a more complex picture of Samson than just the powerful warrior who fought the hated Philistines; they depict Danite and Judahite memories of Samson. When combined, we see a

complex portrayal of a full Judge of Israel. It was to the tribe of Dan that the Nazirite was born and to whom it was foretold that the boy would begin the deliverance of Israel. Yet, his exploits were those of a Charismatic Leader and were performed in and, what would become, the territory of Judah.

Samson was a "Charismatic Leader", one endowed with the "Spirit of the Lord (Judges 13:25, 14:6, 19, 15:14), and a Judge of Dan (Judges 16:31).<sup>3</sup> The overarching theme of the book of Judges is "deliverance"<sup>4</sup> Within this context, the role of the Judge is varied; from interpreting the Law and settling disputes, to restore righteousness, to vindicate. Therefore, according to McKenzie, the Judge is a "deliverer".<sup>5</sup>

The Hebrew term, שֹׁפֵט, is commonly rendered "judge". It is used to categorize the leaders in the book, Judges 2:16 and 18. It a common root found outside of the Bible and has a broad semantic field. G. Liedke points to the "full breadth of variations in meaning" and offers the explanation that a Judge, or to judge, is a person or action "that restores the disturbed order of a (legal) community".<sup>6</sup> Often the poor and oppressed are the objects of the acts of judgement. Therefore, the term takes on a connotation of "deliver". However, as Liedke notes, the act of deliverance, or restoration, of a community does not always point to a one-time action, but should be understood as a "continuous activity, as a constant preservation" of the shalom of the community. The result is a connotation of governing or ruling Israel, as illustrated in Judges 15:20 and 16:31.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the term was seen to encompass all aspects of legal and tribal decisions and,

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<sup>3</sup> The term "Charismatic Leader" was formulated and defined by Max Weber and the burial notice in Judges 16:31 indicates that Samson was seen as a "Minor Judge" by his home tribesmen, as such a notice is usually reserved for the "non-charismatic" Judges who may have been magistrates; remnants of the Mosaic system of judges (Exodus 18: 13-26).

<sup>4</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1966) 465.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 465

<sup>6</sup> G. Liedke, "to judge". *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 3:1393.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1394.

because of this expansive meaning, it became the common term for “judging” in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup>

It is significant that Samson seemed to personify both the delivering and magistrate type of Judge. However, the concept of “deliverance” was foundational to all acts of judging; always to restore the proper order, whether between individuals or between nations. The term, *shophet* (שׁוֹפֵט), seems to be an administrative title conferred during the Monarchy. The term only appears in the introduction of the book, where the overview of the period of Judges is presented and the period is given a theological context and understanding.

Within the accounts of the Judges who emerged on the scene to deliver Israel from oppression the term for deliver or save, ישע, is used. The term acts the root for the Christian term “Salvation” and the name, “Jesus”. The term “to deliver”, להושיע, carries a prominent theology. In the accounts of the other Judges the Lord raises up the saving Judges (Judges 3:9, 15, 6:14). In the birth account of Samson (Judges 13:5), the Lord is depicted preparing for his warrior and tasking him with beginning the deliverance process. In this part of the narratives, the themes of deliverance and preparation are coupled together in a singular way.

J. Hartley points to a root meaning of “make wide”. He explains;

“That which is wide connotes freedom from distress and the ability to pursue one’s own objectives. To move from distress to safety requires deliverance. Generally the deliverance must come from somewhere outside the party oppressed. . . The one who brings deliverance is known as the “savior”. . . Although salvation could come through a human agent, it was only because God empowered the agent.”<sup>9</sup>

He continues to place the Judges in the unfolding of salvation;

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1395.

<sup>9</sup> J. Hartley, “salvation, deliverance”. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:414.

“At various times Israel, oppressed by other nations, had to go to war to win and to maintain its freedom. . . Afterwards when Israel was oppressed by one of the surrounding nations, God delivered through a Judge. The general pattern was to endow the Judge with His Spirit in order that he could defeat Israel’s enemies. . . Although God generally used human agents to bring salvation, the obstacles surmounted were so spectacular that there unquestionably had to be special help from God himself. . . Building on this historical pattern of God’s saving deeds through a charismatic leader arose the concept of a future savior who would fulfill the role of a king anointed with God’s Spirit”.<sup>10</sup>

Samson takes on a singular place among the Judges in that the other Judges faced very local crises, the Philistines were a power on the world stage. Hartley argues that the salvation accomplished by God “reveals his universal reign” and His Kingdom “over the entire world allows him to work salvation for whomever He wills”. Furthermore, “salvation also witness to the active presence of God among his people and with his leaders. . . Thus the presence of God among his people accomplishes their deliverance from adversaries and out of trouble”.<sup>11</sup> Through his defeat of the Philistines, Samson was restoring a proper order to Israel and taking a needed step to make the name of God known to the nations.<sup>12</sup> By beginning the process of deliverance, Samson was preparing for David and, subsequently, the messianic line. That Samson was only “to begin” the process of deliverance allows for an immediate fulfillment in David and a, later, Christian fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. By the two fulfillments of his actions, the later Biblical authors saw Samson as succeeding in his mission. In other words, by virtue of this success the later authors remembered Samson well.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 415-416.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Roskoski, “Samson’s Death Account and the Ancient Theology of Territorial Dominion”, *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 11:13 (Sunday June 13, 2010).

## **Herakles**

The image of Herakles, whose original name may have been Alkides according to ancient sources, may have reached Canaan with the Philistines. The Philistines came in, what historians call, the "invasion of the sea peoples". It is generally agreed among historians that the Philistines originated in the Aegean basin, or Asia Minor. According to Egyptian records, the Philistines and the rest of the "Sea Peoples" were turned back from Egypt in 1188 BC and by 1175 BC had established a stronghold on the coastal plain of southern Canaan.<sup>13</sup> We would suggest that at this time the early stories about Herakles were brought to Canaan, coinciding with Samson coming of age as a Judge of Israel. Supporting our conjecture is the "Dorian invasion of Greece."<sup>14</sup> Most historians and classicists accept a dating of 1100 BC for the Dorian invasion, the historicity of which has been challenged, which was called the "return of the Heraclidae" (the descendants of Herakles) by the Greeks. Therefore we would date Herakles to between 1250 and 1200 BC.

M. Morford argues, convincingly, that there was a man known as Herakles;

"That he was a man before he became a god is shown by his name (which means glory of Hera), since gods do not form their names from compounds of other gods' names. Since his legend is particularly associated with the area of Argos, that part of the saga may very probably have its origin in a real man, the lord of Tiryns, who, although himself a great warrior, was vassal to the lord of Mycenae; this certainly fits with the theme of subservience to Eurystheus."<sup>15</sup>

From about 1400- 1200 BC Mycenae flourished. Such economic and political power would accommodate vassals such as Herakles.

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<sup>13</sup> W. Keller, *The Bible as History* (NY: William Morrow, 1981) 179.

<sup>14</sup> Some classicists have doubted the historical validity of this "invasion", but accept the dating, what would be a myth event.

<sup>15</sup> Morford/ Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (NY: Longman, 1977) 371.



However, around 1200 BC the Mycenaean civilization collapsed. This was the beginning of the Grecian Dark Ages and, perhaps, only the popularity of Herakles allowed his memory to survive. It was also this collapse which helped to prompt the Philistines and the Sea Peoples to begin their southward trek in the eastern Mediterranean basin.

Morford supports our dating of Herakles;

“it is better to suppose that Herakles is older than the Dorian invasions and that he is a hero common to all the Greek peoples, but associated more with certain areas (Argos, Thebes, Trachis) than others. Thus we find his exploits covering the whole of the Greek world and his legends and cult flourishing in areas of Greek colonization, such as Asia Minor and Italy (where as Hercules, he passed into the Roman state religion)”.<sup>16</sup>

The extent to which the traditions of Samson and Herakles blended is a matter of speculation, as there are sparse records of such conflation. However, it does seem most likely that the accounts surrounding these two heroes, both of surpassing strength, had some influence on each other. Furthermore, classicists have long noted that there exist layers of traditions, those seemingly of different dates and origins, within the overall corpus of Herakles accounts. We would suggest that any layers of traditions found in the Ancient Near East, particularly Israel, is a result of the early influence of the Philistines and the later colonization of the Greeks. Perhaps, the traditions of Herakles under the full power of the Greek Empire expanded to absorb some of the feats of Samson.

### **1 Samuel 12:6-12**

Samuel, in his admonishing of the Israelites for asking for a human King, presents a powerful historical recital of Israel’s neglecting the leaders appointed by YHWH, beginning with Moses (1 Samuel 12:6-12). Samuel understood that the Judges were representatives of YHWH; the people wanted a representative of themselves. He reminds them of the cycle of apostasy-oppression- salvation that marked the

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<sup>16</sup> Morford, 372..

period of the Judges. However, only the names Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, and Samson are mentioned (12:11). A question arises; Why are only these select figures mentioned?

First, these were the popular heroes who won the more decisive victories over Israel's enemies and would, therefore, be more prominent in the memory of the people. While Othniel is connected with Caleb and Judah (Judges 3:9), the actual saving deeds are not well remembered. Those listed were the leaders with extensive cycles of traditions attached to their names. Also, each leader seems to embody or foreshadow some aspect of the Davidic kingship. Gideon seems to be the archetypical model for David on the list. He seemed to be the first to balance governing Israel under the Kingship of YHWH; a true Theocracy (Judges 8:22). Barak follows, out of canonical sequence, but seems to be a model for the balance between leader and prophet, with Deborah (Judges 4:1-9). Jephthah seems to be on the list because of his generalship in battle but, moreover, because he was the illegitimate son of a harlot. He may have been remembered because he, like David, had a questionable lineage but still saved Israel. Ruth was great-grandmother of David (Ruth 4: 17, 22). Samson, rightfully, occupies the climactic position on the list. Canonically, he is the last of the Judges in the book. More importantly, Samson is a precursor to David- more so than the other Judges. Samson introduces a new form of "charisma", reception of the Spirit of the Lord (Judges 13:25, 14:6, 19, 15:14), in that he is the only leader in the Old Testament to receive the Spirit multiple times. Furthermore, the narration in Judges 13:25 suggests a repetitive experience, perhaps over some time. Literarily, it serves as an introductory notice of Samson's charisma which, possibly, could be seen to extend to his entire career as Judge. This depiction of long-term and numerous charismatic events lead to the permanent charisma of David (1 Samuel 16:13). Samson also prepared for David in initiating the war, the deliverance process, with the Philistines (Judges 13:5) which David completed (2 Samuel 5:25, 8:1).

Second, the construction of the list shows a definite progression toward David. Gideon, the first on the list is the model "theocratic" Judge. The two next Judges expand the depiction of the king. Samson provides the preparation of the "Davidic" king. This may help explain the chronological reversal of Barak and Gideon. Therefore, the list, by the figures presented, provides an introductory compendium of major issues that David would encounter in securing his throne.

Third, these Judges present a powerful representation of all Israel. Gideon, Barak, and Jephthah are from tribes in the North. Samson was from the southern tribe of Dan and the exploits attached to his name were from Judah, the main tribe of the South. Also, the sequence might also be of significance. Gideon, as suggested above, was the "classic" Judge, risen up by God and endowed with the YHWH Spirit to deliver Israel from the crisis of the Midianites. Barak and Jephthah were summoned through indirect means; Barak in association with Deborah, the actual Judge-Prophetess, and Jephthah by the elders of Gilead. Yet, these Judges were successful in their campaigns. Therefore, it is a powerful rhetorical device that Gideon and Samson anchor the list.

Samson holds a prominent place on the list of saving figures.<sup>17</sup> The Masoretic text has a unique name on the list; Bedan. Rabbinic interpretations argue that this was a truncation of "Ben-Dan" or "son of Dan", which would indicate another source placing the Danite Samson on the list. An alternate theory, which must not be dismissed, is that Bedan is another name for Jephthah. It is possible that the Gileadite Jephthah of Judges 11 should be identified with the Gileadite named Bedan in 1 Chronicles 7:17. This Judge could have had two known names, like Gideon-Jerubaal, but a later scribe omitted one.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Syriac edition, one of the more ancient versions, and a number of modern translations (NAB, among others) places Samson on the list. There is much disagreement among scholars as to whether Samuel would cite his own Judgeship. We would suggest that because his victory over the Philistines was indecisive and he was moving into the role of prophet, the anointer of the King, he would not cite himself but, rather, would invoke the name of the Judges who had the most measurable success against the Philistines and began the war which David completed.

<sup>18</sup> McCarter, 211.

Moreover, Samson is the only Judge who was from the South; Dan, with exploits in Judah. This would allow him to establish a powerful Judahite context for the Davidic Kingship which would generate the Messianic line.

Samson was a “child of promise”, much like Isaac.<sup>19</sup> Memories from both Dan and Judah became attached to him.<sup>20</sup> His Judgeship seemed to have encompassed both the magisterial or legal and delivering aspects of the position. While all of the memories attached to Samson are from southern tribes his popularity would spread from South to North, and from Dan to Beer-Sheba (Judges 20:1). We would suggest that the Danites migrating northward from Zorah and Eshtaol (Judges 18:12), the core of Danite territory and birthplace of Samson, would bring his memories with them. Samson rose to national prominence in his campaigns against the Philistines and such an image would be a powerful foreshadowing of David, who was trying to secure and legitimize the throne. As scholars such McKenzie, Harrison, Halpern, among others, suggest the national unification efforts of David would be accompanied by a unifying of tribal traditions and memories.<sup>21</sup> In the recalling Samson narratives, national geography and deliverance are combined with his popular heroics. Samson, in short, would have a universal appeal upon which David could build and capitalize. For these reasons, Samson was invoked by Samuel and capped the list- in addition to being the canonical order.

Significantly, Samuel employs a term that differs from the term in Judges for the act of deliverance, נצל . This root is found in the Bible and encompasses a connotation of a rescue or deliverance, often in a physical sense of snatching. It is a graphic term that usually takes on the understanding of “make separate”. Interestingly, this term can

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<sup>19</sup> J. Roskoski, “Isaac and Sampson: Sons of the Promise”, *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 17:17 (Sunday April, 24, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> J. Roskoski, “The Length of Samson’s Judgeship: Comparing Judges 15:20 and 16:31”, *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 18:14 (Sunday April 2, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> CF; McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 770. “ In uniting Israel and Judah in his monarchy [David] wished the traditions of the tribes to be fused into a single tradition which identify as one the nation which he had created and merge its dangerous diversities”

also refer to a personal salvation or deliverance, also containing physical imagery.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the reason Samuel used this term was in order to parallel the array of Judges to whom he refers as this term entailed the “removal or liberation from all types of restrictions”. However, this term is understood as a rescuing from an oppressor or oppression.

U. Bergmann argues;

“The background for the usage of נָצַל (Hiphil) with a divine subject is Israel’s expectation that YHWH will free the people and individuals from various types of distress and will deliver them from threats”.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this “expectation”, in the aftermath of the Judges, Samuel sees little reason for a human king and upbraids the people for their request. McCarter sees this as a powerful call to maintain the Covenant:

“The history of the relationship between YHWH and Israel is reviewed with special emphasis upon the good things YHWH has done for the people in the recent past. This historical prologue is crucial in that it demonstrates Israel's indebtedness to YHWH and thus the propriety of her obedience to the terms of the covenant”.<sup>24</sup>

He has moved from the specific judicial and salvific terms, found in Judges, and is trying to illustrate, with this powerful choice of more general terms, that YHWH has already saved Israel from many types of oppression and distress. Therefore, while we should understand this historical recital as an admonishment we must also see this as one last exhortation to faith, one last endorsement of the Theocracy which Moses and Joshua established and the Judges maintained, hence these figures being listed.

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<sup>22</sup> M. Fisher, “deliverance”, *Theological Wordbook of the Bible* 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:594.

<sup>23</sup> U. Bergmann, “to rescue”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:761.

<sup>24</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *1Samuel* (NY: Doubleday, 1980) 221.

Although Samuel is admonishing the people, it will be his hand that will anoint David and lay the foundation for the Davidic Kingship and messianic line. As has been argued by scholars, David most likely commissioned the compilation of the books of Judges and Samuel to support his argument for his legitimate throne.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in light of Davidic purposes, we would suggest that the list of Judges, originally intended as an admonishment, now serves as a depiction of a prefatory era to the Davidic Kingship. These are the men in whom David finds the definition and description of his authority as King in Israel.

### **Deuteronomy 32:30**

Adding to the development of the theology surrounding Samson is Deuteronomy 32:30. The Mosaic Blessing couches a historical recital with the framework of a final exaltation of YHWH. Herein we read the rhetorical question, "How could one man put to flight a thousand, or two men put ten thousand to flight, unless it was because their Rock sold them and the Lord delivered them up? We contend that Samson forms the theological foundation of this couplet in the Mosaic praise. We make this statement because we follow the near universal agreement among Bible scholars that the book of Deuteronomy was compiled centuries after the life of Samson. However, in opposition to most traditional interpretations, we would suggest that some traditions may have developed in the early Monarchy and reflected that theology and were received by the Deuteronomic editor. According to received interpretations of modern scholars, this verse seems to indicate some form of defeat or setback for Israel in which one, or a small number of enemies, were able to rout or put to flight a thousand or, even ten thousand men because the Lord sold them and delivered them to the hands of the enemy. Admittedly, this may have been a pressing theological issue during the later compilation of Deuteronomy and this may reflect the image of the devastating defeats suffered by Israel in the time leading up to the Exile, when the Davidic dynasty was

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<sup>25</sup> J. Roskoski, "The Davidic Theology of Samson's Charisma", *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 14:24 (Sunday June 16, 2013)

weakened. However, this interpretation would not be consistent with the early monarchy. The term for "sold", מכר, has the connotation of placing an enemy entirely in one's hands or power (Judges 7:15, 2 Samuel 5:19). Therefore, this image seems to have originated before the Monarchy and was maintained during the Davidic Kingship.

The Hebrew term in Judges, נכה, has the meanings of "smite" or "defeat". The Hebrew term used in Deuteronomy is דף . This term encompasses defeat an enemy, but depicted the graphic image of pursuit or chasing them down. It is the descriptive term used for the Israelites' defeat of the Philistines in the aftermath of David slaying Goliath (1 Samuel 17:52). Therefore, we suggest that Davidic imagery is used in this Deuteronomistic text. However, both of these terms has a group as its object and refers to making war or taking revenge. Both this image and references are consistent with the depictions throughout Judges 15, when Samson declares war on the Philistines (Judges 15:3) and his explanation of his actions (Judges 15:11). His pursuit of the Philistines culminated with the battle of Ramath-Lehi, where Samson defeated one thousand men (Judges 15:13-18). In the Bible, only Samson has been attributed with such a feat.

Throughout the chapter in Deuteronomy we read references to "the Rock". The recurring refrain of "the Rock" also evokes the image of David. We see the title applied in 1 Samuel 22:2, 32, 47 and Psalm 18: 2, 32, and 47. The term "Rock" has been used as a divine title. More importantly, according to McKenzie, "the title clearly suggests ancient warfare; if one could establish a position on one of the precipitous crags which are so numerous in the mountains of Palestine, one could resist almost any attack".<sup>26</sup> Such imagery goes back to Samson in the cave of Etam (Judges 15:8) and, to a greater extent, Ramath-lehi where he defeated 1000 Philistines and the name means "height of the jawbone". It also seems to refer to David with his

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<sup>26</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 744.

exchanges with Saul when he hid in the “wild goat rocks” (1 Samuel 24:3).

The image of one man defeating a multitude of enemies “sold” and “delivered” by God is seen not only in the Samson narratives, but in the Davidic accounts; “Saul has killed his thousands, David his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7). Admittedly, while the total deaths of the armies was most likely attributed to the King, as was a custom in the Ancient Near East, the glory given to the one man remains. Underlying the glory of the individual was the idea that God delivered the enemies to the hero, anointed with God’s Spirit. Therefore, we would suggest the possibility that the Mosaic Blessings in Deuteronomy were part of an edited collection of traditions that was received by the author or compiler of the book of Deuteronomy.

In other words, the original referent of the image was the enemies of Israel, sold and delivered by YHWH to the warrior. However, as Israel’s sins and apostasies multiplied and Israel suffered many defeats the understanding shifted to Israel being the party which was sold and delivered to the enemy or defeated by a small number. Therefore, the passage in Deuteronomy expands upon and reinterprets the accounts of Samson and David.

### **SIRACH 46:11-12**

The book of Sirach provides a brief overview of the group of Judges. Samson, contrary to some scholarly opinion, plays an important but unnamed role in the list. Sirach praises them for their hearts not being deceived. Skehan and DiLella will argue that he was deceived by Delilah and, seem to suggest, that he abandoned YHWH.<sup>27</sup> Samson never abandoned YHWH, Skehan and DiLella are suggesting that giving the “secret” of his strength constitutes abandonment. Secrecy was never a requirement imposed on Samson. Samson’s heart was

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<sup>27</sup> P. Skehan/A. DiLella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*. (NY:Doubleday, 1987) 520. Their comment is muddled, as the text reads about the Judges not abandoning God. Yet, they stress God abandoning Samson (Judges 16:20). Admittedly, God “left Samson”, but this was part of the consequences of breaking his consecration. It left Samson unprotected, not abandoned, hence the foreshadowing comment in Judges 16:22.



never deceived about his special role and relationship with God. Nowhere is this made more clear than when he tells Delilah the source of his strength (Judges 16:18). Although Samson loved Delilah (Judges 16:4), this was a disclosure of all that he knew of his strength and consecration. To the people of the Bible, "the heart is the source of thoughts, desires, and deeds. . . Wisdom, discernment, and knowledge are seated in the heart".<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew in Judges 16 is specific; he told her all his heart". We know not the intimate exchanges between Samson and Delilah, but the text does not suggest deception – only betrayal. To deceive one is to "steal" the heart (Genesis 31:20, 26; 2 Samuel 15:16). Therefore, Samson's heart was not deceived nor did he abandon God throughout his tumultuous life.

Sirach is looking to the legacies left by the Judges, particularly Samson. Between the pillars of Dagon, we catch a glimpse of the faith-filled heart of Samson. His consecrated hair has been cut, there is no onrush of the Spirit, his eyes have been gouged out, and he has been beaten and stripped of all dignity. It is at this moment he calls to YHWH. This is the moment of pure faith that Sirach and the author of Hebrews will remember.

Sirach understands that the Judges represent the "heroic age" of Israel. He realizes that "the Judges were persons raised up by God to save the people from their enemies, [he] prays that they might enjoy a blessed memory" and legacy in their children, the people of Israel.<sup>29</sup> In his reference to "bones" and resting place", Sirach seems to follow the lead of the book of Judges. The book of Judges "shows an interest in burial places of the individual Judges".<sup>30</sup> It was noted that Samson was buried in the grave of his father (Judges 16:31), which seems to indicate that Manoah and, subsequently, Samson held a place of honor in the clan of Dan. E. Bloch argues that this speaks to the importance of Manoah and Samson in the clan of the Danites, as "important

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<sup>28</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 343-344.

<sup>29</sup> Skehan/DiLella, 520.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 517. The reference to bones might invoke 2 Kings 13:20-21. Sirach seems to employ this expression again in 49:10.

individuals were buried in prominent places where their tombs would be visible and accessible. . . Men who enjoyed a special relationship with YHWH during their lifetimes were thought to continue that relationship after death and so it was important to know where they were buried".<sup>31</sup>

Sirach recognizes the importance of this "heroic age" of Israel. He is casting them as models of faith-filled actions for the current generation. However, admittedly, for such an important era this is a very general blessing. It seems a simple concluding remark that is meant to praise the actions and memories of the Judges is inconsistent with the overall context of the recital. We would suggest that the reason for such a blessing is based in the time period in which Sirach was written; c. 200-150 BC. This was shortly before the books of Maccabees were written, as some scholars have placed its original versions as early as 135 BC. This was the height of Hellenism, the Greek empire which Alexander built. This empire spread the ideas of the "Golden Age of Greece" across the Ancient Near East, and beyond. With this spread of Grecian culture the Greek heroes and myths also arrived, particularly Herakles. The cult of Herakles, not the Roman Hercules, was growing. In 2 Maccabees 4:19 we see the corrupt High Priest Jason sending money to the sacrifice to Herakles.<sup>32</sup> This meant the apotheosis of Herakles, the reception of divine or Olympian status, was accepted by the Greeks and he was recognized as a full Olympian god. This was the Grecian hero, known for his heroic adventures, bawdy escapades, and surpassing strength. Sirach, according to most commentators, was well travelled and encompassed an eclectic type of wisdom. He would have known the growing influence of Herakles and would not risk any confusion between Greek and Hebrew heroes. The exploits of Samson and Herakles bear many similarities and Sirach would not want to open the way for any further syncretism, blending or corrupting, of Judaism with the pagan Greek religion as this was already a growing concern. Sirach needed to understate the memory

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<sup>31</sup> E. Bloch-Smith, "Burials", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY; Doubleday, 1992) 1: 786.

<sup>32</sup> Many English translations use "Hercules", but Greek texts use "Herakles".

of Samson, and the other heroic Judges, in the advent of the pervasive Hellenic culture. With this depiction in Sirach, we begin to see a shift in the perception of Samson. The invincible power and violent deliverance, identified with Samson, is now giving way to an understanding based on his devotion to God. Whereas the legacy of Herakles was still tied to his strength and power, the legacy of Samson was moving toward being seen as a man of virtue and of a covenant with God (Sirach 44:10-12). Sirach saw Samson as a man of "might" but one whose strength was subordinated to the glory of God (Sirach 44:2).

## OVERVIEW

The recitals and references to Samson, and the other early leaders, were meant to show God's power, saving will, and wisdom through his Chosen Leaders. These are exhortations and warnings, even indictments, which are to be applied to the present eras of the speaker or editor. The image of Samson looms large. His invincible power, once only seen as tool to war against the Philistines, was reinterpreted to being a sign of God's will to save and God's wisdom. His strength, always remembered, is now being invested with a more lasting value than his, sometimes, violent exploits against the Philistines.

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