

**Judges 15:8.**  
**“And He Attacked Them Hip and Thigh  
with a Great Slaughter”**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Throughout Judges 15 we read of a war between Samson and the Philistines; beginning with his burning of the Philistine crops and ending with the battle at Ramath-Lehi. Striking about this clause of Judges 15:8 is its stark construction and lack of details. In the other events during this narration of the exchange we are given minute details; actions, dialogue, and locations. The clause, in 15:8 does not have numerous details, yet it depicts a graphic picture. Furthermore, the description does not translate easily into English and this has prompted many scholars to give a wide variety of translations or see it simply and an idiomatic expression for a ruthless and total victory.

However, we will argue that Samson used an early form of grappling called "*pankation*". Pankration was part of the ancient Greek athletic games.

As N. Cole explains:

"There were two types of wrestling in ancient Greece, distinguished by the definition of a fair throw and the nature of the throws allowed. In upright wrestling, or wrestling proper, the object was to throw one's opponent to the ground three times. A fall on the back, on the shoulders, or on the hip counted as fair throw, Upright wrestling was the final event of the pentathlon. The pankration was a combination of wrestling and boxing in which the fight continued on the ground,

using every attack possible, except biting and gouging, until one of the contestants gave up.<sup>1</sup>

We suggest that Samson used an early form of pankration when attacking the Philistines. While his attack was brutal, it is doubtful that he resorted to biting and gouging, as these are desperation moves and actions that Samson hardly needed to use. Samson, most likely, saw and participated in Philistine events during his sojourns into Philistine controlled regions. One must remember that the Philistines were of Grecian origin, were part of the invasion of the "sea peoples" c.1200 BC, and brought the customs, early legends, and early pankration with them, In this case, Samson would use the Philistines' physical weapons against them: embarrassing them in his victories.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF "PANKRATION"**

Pankration would be a form of fighting that would suit Samson. Based on archeology of the Ancient Near East, the average height of men was about 5ft 5 inches tall and their weight was probably under 200 pounds. Biblical clues suggest that Samson was about 6ft, 6inches tall, and, probably weighed about 300 pounds,

S. Nenova states:

Pankration is an ancient martial art which mixes wrestling and boxing. The sport can be traced as far back as the second millennium BCE in the territory of ancient Greece. Its name derives from the ancient Greek words *pan* (all) and *kratos* (strength, might, power) and literally means "all of the might" . . . Pankration was introduced as a sporting event in the 33rd Olympic games where it joined boxing and wrestling in a category called "heavy events." That special group of sports was reserved for the best athletes with the greatest strength and stamina.

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<sup>1</sup> N. Cole, *Greek Athletic Games* (Metropolitan Museum of Art,[guide book], nd.) Plate #12.

In 648 BCE, the sport had two main phases. During the first, called *Ano Pankration* (Upper Pankration), contestants had to fight upright. As the main goal was to knock down the opponent, punches, kicks and all kind of lethal blows were usually performed. The second phase, known as *Kato Pankration* (Lower Pankration) started with the first falling on the ground of some of the competitors. Here grappling, joint locking, and even strangulation was used as more effective methods of fighting on the floor.

Ancient Greek mythology refers to illustrious mythological figures as the first pankratiasts. Theseus, the founder-king of Athens, allegedly used techniques from that martial art to defeat the Minotaur (the half-human half-bull creature locked in the labyrinth of Minos). Hercules is said to have won in Pankration a contest in Olympia, as well as in another event organized by the Argonauts (the heroes that went on a quest for the Golden Fleece in Colchis). He reputedly used Pankration skills in one of his twelve labors, too. Many Greek vases depict images of the hero defeating the Nemean lion with a specific strong lock believed to be part of the Pankration fighting methods.<sup>2</sup>

Developed out of an existing ancient combat system, Pankration was part of the army training of many Greek city-states. It was the core of the military instruction of the hoplites (the famous Greek infantry). The Spartans were particularly well-trained and excelled in that art. In their last stand at Thermopylae, they allegedly used Pankration skills as their final weapon. Once the 300 lost their armaments, they fought with bare hands, feet, and teeth, relying on their abilities to use unarmed fighting techniques.

Experts agree:

Pankration was introduced to the Olympic games in 648 BC, though it was likely practiced for some time beforehand. It was

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<sup>2</sup>S. Nenova, *Pankration*. (The Warden Post. www. Ancient. Eu. nd.)

later featured in the other three Panhellenic games as well, making it one of the only four events to be included in all four festivals. The sport enjoyed a reign of popularity for centuries, even finding a hold in Roman culture.

Pankration continued to be featured in the Panhellenic festivals until their abolition in 394AD under emperor Theodosius I. In the decades following his decree, all of the Panhellenic festivals slowly died out, seemingly eliminating the practice of the sport altogether. A modern movement has resulted in a fairly small revival of the sport, though this new rendition is more regulated and less violent.

To win a pankration match, the pankratiast had to force their opponent into submission, which was indicated by raising an index finger. Knocking out or killing an opponent also counted as a win, though such victories were naturally less common. In rare cases, perhaps if the match had continued for too long, the judges would call the fight to an end and determine the winner or declare a tie. There was no time limit, so the athletes had to fight without pause until one of them submitted, was knocked out, or the judges called the match.

## **Classes**

For the majority of the sport's history there was only one pankration class, so all fighters competed together. Though more agile and skillful pankratiasts stood a chance, the larger and stronger men naturally dominated the sport. The Olympic games in 200 BC introduced a younger boys' class, giving those under 18 a better chance at winning a title, though fighters were still not divided by weight. It's likely that the other Panhellenic festivals introduced a similar classification at some point as well.

As there were almost no restrictions regarding combat techniques, pankration somewhat simulated no-holds-barred, bare-handed fights to the death, such as one might have

encountered in war. It was considered the most dangerous of the three combat sports, and was so brutal that some athletes were known to have actually died while fighting, as was the case for pankratiast, Arrhichion of Phigalia.

### **Restrictions**

Biting and eye gouging were not allowed in pankration matches. All other methods of getting an opponent to submit were considered legal – even choking the opponent with bare hands or breaking the fingers. Violators would be struck by a referee wielding a whip or rod, without stopping the match. Fighters were likely not allowed to step out of the boundaries of the *skamma*, though penalties for doing so are not clear. Such absence of many regulations resulted in a sport which simulated a fight for life, in which the competitors would use whatever means necessary to overcome their opponent.

### **Fighting Style**

The modern revival of pankration in 1969 led to the development of mixed martial arts,\* and as such some similarity can be seen in the fighting styles of both sports. In an amphora, a type of pottery, painting of pankration depicts the stance (c. 440 BC). The pankratiast would face forward and slightly angled to the right, with their back slightly rounded. Their hands would be held out forward at eye level, with the left a bit further than the right, both open and relaxed. Most of the athlete's weight would be back on their right foot, with the ball of the left only touching to ground, ready to kick.

Kicking was one of the most commonly used strikes in pankration, especially kicks directly to the stomach. Bare-hand boxing strikes were used as well. Alongside striking, grappling was heavily utilized in the sport. Wrestling holds, limb locks, chokes with the hand(s) or forearm, sweeps, and takedowns were all part of the pankratiast's weaponry.

## **Matchmaking**

Greek records indicate that matches were made through roughly the same process for all three of the Greek combat sports. At tournaments, competitors would blindly draw a lot (such as a pebble or piece of clay) with a Greek letter inscribed. Each athlete would be paired with whichever other athlete drew the matching character. If there was an odd number of competitors, someone would sit that round out. The same person could get lucky and sit out multiple rounds, however it was considered doubly honorable to compete in all rounds and win.

Major festivals, such as the Olympics, likely had four rounds with sixteen athletes. There were likely preliminary matches before major games to narrow down to that number, as records indicate some festivals had thousands of fighters vying for titles in their respective sports.

Pankration matches were significantly rugged endeavors -- serious injuries and even deaths were "occupational hazards" of the pankratist and not considered extraordinary events. Those wishing to train in pankration did so at the *palaestra* (training hall), within a special room set aside for the exclusive use of boxers and pankratists known as the *korykeion*. This chamber contained punching and kicking equipment known as *korykos*; bags or balls filled with meal or fig seeds and suspended from the ceiling at chest level. Similarly, a sandbag was suspended approximately two feet off the floor for kicking, although some trainees preferred practicing their kicks against tree trunks. Records indicate that some pankratists possessed the ability to kick through war shields.

Yet another name for Pankration was Pammachion or Pammachon which meant total combat. Back around 1700 BC is when [experts] feel this sport originated, so it is very old. This Combat Sport originated because people in this society during this time had a real need to either view or participate in a violent sport. This sport filled the need of being a "total contest" sport,

whereas boxing or wrestling done separately didn't quite fit the bill back then.<sup>3</sup>

Despite offering an exciting and spectacular show to the fans who loved violence and blood, many times it could become extremely dangerous for the pankratiasts and there are several recorded cases in which the fight resulted in severe injuries, or even death, to one of the opponents - usually the one who was losing and refused to surrender. For that reason, and as most Greek city-states were becoming more sophisticated and civilized, the men's pankration was gradually replaced by the pankration for boys, which was a much less intense version of the sport. This version, as noted, officially entered the Games in 200 BC.

## **SAMSON AND WEAPONLESS COMBAT**

### **JUDGES 14:6**

"And the spirit of YHWH came mightily upon him and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn a young goat, although he had nothing in his hand."

This verse is keyed on derivatives of שָׁסָא, *shasa*, which means to cleave or tear apart. The term occurs in two forms in tandem with each other to emphasize the ease of the feat. The victory is given even greater magnificence by the note of Samson having no weapon. Possible proof of this battle comes in the form of a seal, or coin, found near Beth-Shemesh; close to the birthplace of Samson.

The Biblical Archeology Society (BAS) comments:

"The recent discovery of a small 11th-century B.C.E. seal at Beth Shemesh featuring a crude representation of a person next to a lion has sparked associations between the discovery and

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<sup>3</sup> B. Garvin "Combat Sports" (<http://EzineArticles.com/3707889>] 2010)

Samson's lion fight in Judges 14. . . The depiction on the seal itself appears too crude to identify with a specific individual. While the animal does bear resemblance to contemporary depictions of lions, the lack of a weapon in the figure's hand challenges the notion that this is a violent scene. In an article in *Ha'aretz*, the excavation directors suggest that "a story was being told at the time of a hero who fought a lion, and that the story eventually found its way into the Biblical text and onto the seal." A *Telegraph* article titled "Israeli Scholars Claim Possible Evidence of Samson" draws a closer tie between the seal and the Biblical figure. Both associations between the Samson narrative and the Beth Shemesh seal rely on an implicit understanding that this is, in fact, a man fighting a lion. If this can be proven, then the seal, discovered near Samson's hometown during the time of Judges, may very well be linked to Samson or a related hero figure."

The man in the seal is shown taking the stance of a pankration participant, or pankratiasts, leaning forward with one hand higher than the other. Commemorating this act of Samson might be a reaction to the early legends about Herakles and the Nemean Lion. It is, however, doubtful that this celebrates Herakles because the cult of the Greek hero was not yet fully established in this region. Additionally, the name, "Beth-Shemesh" means 'house of the sun. The word "*shemesh*", sun, forms the main root of Samson's name. So, there would be a natural connection between the man and the nearby city.

### **JUDGES 14:19**

"And the Spirit of YHWH came mightily upon him and he went down to Ashkelon and smote 30 of their men and took their clothing and gave the changes to those who explained the riddle."



Two terms in this verse suggest a type of hand-to-hand combat; נָכָה, *nakah*, and חָלִיצָה, *chalitsah*. The first term, *nakah*, means "smite" which can have a range of meanings, all of which entails a violent blow. The term is usually simplified as, "to kill". Many lexicons, most notably "Brown-Driver-Briggs, terms this as partitive, suggesting a specifically targeted group- not simply random killings to settle a wager.

The second term is "chalitsah", which takes on the connotations of that which is stripped from a (dead) enemy. Often, the semantic field includes armor, plunder, or spoils. It evokes images of combat. Yet, weaponry is not of prime importance in the semantic field.

It is significant that the key terms in this verse are vague with large semantic and connotative fields. Their exact meanings must be determined by the actions that are described. Specific details could not be narrated as the Hebrews would not yet be familiar with pankration. But they did understand the concept of smiting and despoiling enemies. The terms depict an image of violence and military combat.

Unlike the verse regarding the battle with lion, for which there is general agreement that it stresses the ease with which he killed the beast, this notice lends itself to a wide array of interpretations. Early commentators, going back to Origen, have tried to justify the smiting of the men as part of the divine plan to liberate Israel; they were enemies of the people and YHWH so any killing of the Philistines was seen as justified. Origen and others also tried to prefigure the Christ event. Many modern scholars offer a negative interpretation. Because of this event, J.L. McKenzie has termed Samson a "murderous bandit".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1966) 767.

However, these arguments overlook the rhetorical structure of the narratives. J.C. Exum points to a parallel structure. She argues;

“Symmetry fulfills a theological, function in the story as well as an aesthetic one. This symmetrical structuring provides a significant guide to the theological affirmation of the Samson story . . . and is the determining factor in determining the delimitations of episodes and in articulating the structure of chs 14 and 15”.<sup>5</sup>

K. Wiese argues that these chapters are a literary creation of one person who employed all available tradition material to accomplish one purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Following Exum’s theory of parallelism, we suggest that the reference to the smiting of the 30 men forms a parallel, albeit on a smaller scale, and prefiguring of Samson's battle at Ramath-Lehi. Both are violent, triumphant, depictions of the working of the Spirit of YHWH. It foreshadows and, thereby, prepares the reader for the climax of the escalation between Samson and the Philistines.

More importantly, this reveals an aspect of Samson's charisma. Anger and temper were part of its properties. According to Hebrew grammars and lexicons, anger and temper were seen as properties of the Spirit. This continuum of events suggests that ch.14 and 15 were composed by the same editorial hand, similar to the argument of Wiese. However, we maintain that this editor was part of the Davidic court.

Textually, there is a type of anger of which the Bible approves, often called “righteous indignation.” God becomes angry (Psalm

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<sup>5</sup> J.C Exum, “Theological Dimensions of the Samson Saga (VT 33, 1989) 53.

Cf J.C, Exum, “Literary Patterns in the Samson Saga; An investigation of Rhetorical style in Biblical Prose (Colombia, 1976) 71-72.

<sup>6</sup> K Wiese, *Zur Literakritik des Buches Derrichter* (Stuttgart, 1926) 52-53.

7:11). Judges 14:19 depicts an image of human anger, חָרָה, *charah*, meaning to burn, be kindled, or, metaphorically, enraged. The next term explicates *charah*. The word that is employed is אָפַח, *aph*. Its primary meaning is face, nose, nostril with the connotation of the red face and flaring nostrils being a sign of anger. It became idiomatic to denote anger, as in a burning anger.

Biblically, anger is God-given energy intended to help us solve problems. Examples of Biblical anger include David's being upset over hearing Nathan the prophet sharing an injustice (2 Samul 12). Samson was treated unjustly by the men of Timnah in their obtaining of the answer to the riddle. Both incidents of anger involved not self-defense, but a defense of others or of a principle. Biblical commentators have always questioned why a wager would provoke an irruption of the YHWH. Often overlooked, and unlike all of the charismatic Judges, Samson's actions, particularly under the power of the YHWH, are intensely singular and personal. They show that anger at an injustice inflicted against oneself is also appropriate. Anger has been said to be a warning flag—alerting others to those times when others are attempting to or have violated our boundaries, as Samson experienced. Therefore, this suggests that to set matters right seems to be one of the actions of the Spirit. Rhetorically, it prepares the reader for the violent events which will follow.

### **JUDGES 15:8**

"And so he attacked them hip upon thigh with a great slaughter and then he went down and dwelt in the in the cleft of the rock of Etam."

Here again we see the interpretation of the storyteller and editor at work. There are several terms contained in the verse that lend themselves to combat imagery. The first term is נָכָה, the term *nakah*, meaning "to smite". It is the exact term used in Judges 14:19. It depicts violent imagery, but not random killing. The term the follows is אָפַח, *eth*, which has no equivalent

in English but stands as the indicator of the accusative and direct object (the Philistines).

The term "hip upon thigh" seems to be an expression that intensifies the words "with a great slaughter;" but the origin of the phrase is a matter of conjecture. The term "upon their hips and thighs", suggests injury and not, necessarily, designating to kill them, but to make them incapable of military employment, or of doing hurt to the Israelites. The idiom is a confusing construction in the Hebrew;

### **"hip upon thigh"**

The first term, "*shoq*", usually refers to the (lower) leg of a man, often distinguished from the thigh. In sacrificial animals it connotes the thigh, upper portion of the leg which might be the connotation that renders "hip", or the hind leg which is the part to eaten.<sup>7</sup> The term is a feminine noun of unknown origin. Therefore, translations vary widely; "shoulder", "leg", "thigh". Due to the ambiguous nature of the term, some translations use the adjective "ruthlessly" (NAS).

The following term, על, "*al*", is a preposition that means "upon", "over"; or "above". It appears in other less known literary functions as well; mostly as conjunctions. Cambridge Bible Scholars, followed by other commentators, claim that the image is one of limbs of the slain fall one upon another: such seems to be the force of the preposition", upon".

The final word is ירך, "*yarek*"; another term with a wide semantic field. Its primary meaning is "thigh", "loin", "side" or "base". It connotes the outer part of the thigh where a sword was worn. This term suggests that Samson's target was Philistine warriors.

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<sup>7</sup> The interpretation that the victims of Samson's rampage were part of a sacrificial rite that has been lost to history.

Taken together, the commonly used phrase "hip and thigh", is probably the best understanding of the phrase, it describes and intensifies the meaning of the previous verb, "to attack". Early commentators have suggested that its origin was in some such fierce custom as that known to the Greeks, and Egyptians as *akroteriasmos*, or *maschalismos*, in which the extremities of a corpse were cut off. In Samson's instance, the phrase depicts the piling up off limbs, or maimed bodies, similar to "a gruesome reckoning of the dead and wounded . . . a method of counting the numbers of a defeated enemy."<sup>8</sup>

The text reads that Samson's attack resulted in "a great slaughter", derived from *גְּדוּלָה מַכָּה*. The term for "great", *gadolah* is very common in Hebrew. However, the term for slaughter only occurs 17 times. While this the dominant meaning, the term, "*makah*" can also connote "blows", "stripes", or "plagues".

The term still relates to, and is governed by, the original verb "to attack". It lends a powerful structure to the verse. The term "hip and thigh" gives the minutiae of the attack, whereas this phrase offers an overall view of the attack and magnifies the scope of the attack by strengthening the verb's meaning.

### **SAMSON AND PANKRATION**

Following the lead of Judges 14:6, and commentators like Ellicott, it does not seem likely that Samson used any weapons in these encounters. Samson seemed to use the early form of combat that was known as "Pammachion or Pammachon", also known as "total combat". According to B. Garvin, here is evidence that suggests that Pankration used in not only Sports but also in Combat was around since 2000 BC. In addition to combining both Boxing and Wrestling, this sport also included techniques such as blows to the lower extremities."<sup>9</sup> This agrees completely with the description, "hip and thigh". Furthermore,

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<sup>8</sup> W. Keller, *The Bible as History*. (NY: William Morrow, 1981) 173.

<sup>9</sup> B. Garvin, <http://EzineArticles.com/3707889>

the Philistines were well acquainted with hand-to-combat, to which inscriptions from Egypt attest.<sup>10</sup> Therefore Samson would have incorporated such tactics in his war with the Philistines. Knowledge of these encounters, were probably learned by David, in his sojourns with the Philistines (1 Samuel 27-29). As has been argued by scholars, the first editions of the book of Judges was written in the Davidic reign.<sup>11</sup> R.Coote and D.,Ord writes; "David replaced Saul and created a strong state . . . and produced a body of lit that legitimated his rise to power over Saul's kingdom."<sup>12</sup> These victories on Philistine territory set the literary stage for David's triumph (1Samuel 5,8). Therefore, his recounting of Philistine memories would be recorded in terms that could only be approximated by Hebrew idiom. In other words, Grecian phrases and specific details could not be included in the narratives.

A further connection between Samson and David can be seen in 1 Samuel 17:34-35. Herein the young David is telling of his encounters with a bear and a lion in his convincing Saul that he should be the one to engage Goliath. Once he rescued the lamb if the beast rose against him;

"and I caught it by its beard and struck it and killed it".

This is a courageous tactic as the term beard, זָקָן, "*zaqan*", is understood as "beard" or "chin". We can assume that he grabbed the mane of the lion, or the hairy haunches that occur on both animals. This echoes pankration tactics. According to P.M. Nurse "a particularly popular standing technique was called *chancery*: "a fighter grabbed the hair of his enemy, pulling the head down

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<sup>10</sup> Keller, 171-172.

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*. 656.

<sup>12</sup> R, Coote, D Ord, *The Bible's First History* (Philadelphia: Fortress,1980) 5.

while delivering an uppercut to the throat or face with the free hand.<sup>13</sup>

David follows this with a heavy blow; herein he uses the term for “smite”, *nakah*, which occurs in much the same way as in the Samson passages above. It is significant to observe that David separates the heavy blow from the actual killing, which suggests a non-lethal strike is equated to smiting. Such a separation is not made clear in the Samson passages, Perhaps, this distinction was not made by the compiler because, with his great strength, a heavy blow from Samson may have been assumed to have been deadly. In David's instance he avoids any comparison with Samson's strength and uses the term intensify his courage and prowess in fighting the beast. Therefore, not only do the Samson encounters look forward to David through early pankration techniques but David's tactics echo Samson in his individual combat.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Judges 15:8, taken in conjunction with Judges 14:6 and 19, points to several conclusions about Samson and the narratives attached to his name. First, Samson was not a legend or a Grecian hero adapted to the Hebrew culture. These passages show that he was part of the prevailing culture of the Ancient Near East. His actions reflect the fighting styles that were common in the time of Samson, pre-monarchic Israel.

Second, the description of the encounters indicates a grappling style that the Hebrew storytellers and Davidic editors with which they were not familiar. Therefore, the Hebrew phrasing could only approximate the descriptions of early pankration. They were preserved because of their popularity and their connection to David. They would have bolstered the waning morale of the oppressed Israelites and contributed to David's efforts to unify

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<sup>13</sup> P.M. Nurse, Pankration; Martial Art of Classical Greece, Fighting Arts.com, nd.

Israel. David could capitalize on the popularity of Samson's exploits to buttress his claim to Israel's throne.

Third, Judges 15:8 proves Samson to be an expert guerilla warrior who targeted Philistine warriors. He did not kill wantonly, but with a distinct purpose, born from his sense of justice. Such a slaughter serves to compound the economic disaster brought about by the burning of the Philistines' crops. It solidifies his position as a national enemy of the Philistines, which helped to prompt the actions of the Philistines that are narrated through the rest of the chapter and the victory song in the temple of Dagon (Judges 16: 23-24).

Samson used the Philistine tactics of Pankration against them, thus humiliating and, inadvertently, helping to form a link to their hero, Herakles. Unfortunately, this link remains in public imagination to the present. But it did serve to build the internal structure of the narratives and help to set the historical stage for King David.



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