

## Judges Chapter 15 Part 2

Last week we covered the first two verses of chapter 15.

**Judges 15:1 But after a while, in the time of wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife with a young goat, and said, “I will go in to my wife in her room.” But her father did not let him enter.**

**Judges 15:2 Her father said, “I really thought that you hated her intensely (the Hebrew here is very intense indicating that her father is very animated, after all, he is trying to save himself from a severe beating and likely death at the hands of Samson for doing what he did); so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead.”**

Now we start with the repercussions of cheating Samson. Last time the Philistines cheated Samson, 30 Philistines died to provide the clothing Samson needed to make good on his debt. Now his lawfully contracted wife has been given to someone else. The law has been violated! Samson was robbed of his legal wife.

**Judges 15:3 Samson then said to them, “This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm.”**

**Blameless.** It means blameless or to go unpunished. He didn't cheat to get his wife. He did cheat with his riddle. The Philistines then cheated

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with his wife to get the answer. But in this case, there was no subterfuge on his part.

**Harm.** This is our word which basically means “evil.” Harm is an OK translation. But, “evil” is a constant throughout the book of Judges. The sons of Israel are first and foremost the perpetrators of “evil” when they abandon their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our God.

Samson is about to do harm (“evil”) against the Philistines for something that his wife’s father did to him.

Why does Samson escalate the hostilities? The Philistines are not said to do any harm to him or his wife or her father at this point. The text does not elaborate on Samson’s thinking other than saying he is “blameless.” Perhaps the Philistine legal system allowed for the father to change his mind if the groom did not consummate the marriage. The text doesn’t tell us. It doesn’t matter one way or another. It is what Samson thinks at this point. It is a matter of his perspective is important. For Samson, his perspective is the only one that matters in Samson’s mind.

Or it could be like the character “Jericho” in the movie “Criminal.” “You hurt me, I hurt you worse.”

God is using Samson to conduct economic warfare. Remember, from the author’s perspective and God’s perspective, the Philistines are the enemy. Samson, whether he fully realizes it or not, is involved in this warfare.

**Judges 15:4 Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned the foxes tail to tail and put one torch in the middle between two tails.**

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**Foxes.** These are more likely jackals rather than foxes. They are related, of course. A question not answerable with the information available here, “How did Samson find 300 jackals?” That’s a lot of jackals. He had to catch them and pen them up somehow. That is going to take some time.

From Wikipedia on the folklore associated with jackals. “Like foxes and coyotes, jackals are often depicted as clever sorcerers in the myths and legends of their regions. They are mentioned roughly 14 times in the Bible. It is frequently used as a literary device to illustrate desolation, loneliness, and abandonment, with reference to its habit of living in the ruins of former cities and other areas abandoned by humans.”

Samson is using an animal that is sometimes used to depict “desolation, loneliness and abandonment.” Indeed, Samson is alone. Although his wife’s father perhaps thought that Samson had abandoned his wife, Samson thought just the opposite. His wife’s father had broken the marriage contract giving his daughter to someone else as a wife thereby leaving Samson alone and abandoned. Someone needs to pay! You hurt me, I hurt you worse.

**Caught.** Here is a word that is used extensively in a military setting in the Torah, especially in the book of Joshua and even Judges among other books. Here are a couple of quotes from the book of Judges to illustrate this usage. In other words, the author of the book of Judges was no stranger to the military usage of this word. It interjects the tint of military warfare into the narrative.

**Judges 1:8 Then the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it (this is our word) and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire (Is this what Samson is doing?).**

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**Judges 1:18 And Judah took (this is our word) Gaza with its territory and Ashkelon with its territory and Ekron with its territory.**

**Judges 7:25 They captured (this is our word) the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and they killed Zeeb at the wine press of Zeeb, while they pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon from across the Jordan.**

In the Gideon narrative, the two leaders of Midian were “captured.” In the Samson’s narrative, 300 foxes were “captured.”

**Judges 8:13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres.**

**Judges 8:14 And he captured (this is our word) a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then the youth wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.**

Here Gideon captured a youth who he then turns against Succoth in order to capture and eventually kill their leaders. Samson captures jackals and turns them against the Philistines destroying their economy. Military warfare.

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It is like saying, An employee marches into the office of his supervisor and fires a volley of abusive language at the target. Once the emotions of the supervisor have been slaughtered, the employee retreats. You get the idea this is a “military operation.”

**Torches.** I already drew a parallel between Gideon’s use of torches and Samson’s use here in last week’s lesson. In my mind there is a question on the geometry of how Samson attached a torch to two jackal’s tail. It couldn’t burn the tails of the jackals as it would fall off too soon and be useless. Could the torch be upside down or flat such that it was dragged on the ground? This might be the most effective way. And if there was some slack between the torch and the tails, then there would be minimal or no damage to the tails until maximum damage was done. Indeed, if there were sufficient length of rope connecting the torch to the tails, it would provide a method whereby the jackals could partially encircle a tree to burn the tree (olive tree or grape vine). Most animals are afraid of fire. Hence, once lit, the jackals would run away from it. But the torch would follow them so they would continue to run.

Also, consider the time it took Samson to prepare the torches. He had to collect the materials for the torches. Perhaps he used pieces of dead trees plus pitch or tar or maybe even wax from bee hives. The construction of the torches is not detailed here. Readers from that culture would have had a better idea of how this would have been accomplished.

**Judges 15:5 When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and groves.**

**Set fire.** Samson had to have a torch himself to light 150 other torches. There were no lighters in those days.

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**Released.** The author uses the Hebrew word that is sometimes used of sending someone or something on a mission. Indeed, the LXX translates this as a form of *apostello* (to send on a mission). Here in Judges, Samson is sending the jackals on a military mission to accomplish economic destruction. And it is in the intensive form. He is sending them out with feeling. Intense emotion.

**Grain, vineyards, (olive) groves.** An observation from another commentator. “Unharvested grain, harvested grain, even vineyards and olive groves fall victim to torch-bearing foxes in clear violation of Israelite law (Exod. 22:6). The damage to grain, grapes and olives rivals that which the Midianites wreaked on Israel in Gideon’s time. (?Another link to Gideon?) These three products are the economic and dietary staples of ancient Palestine.”

Just another note on the difference between Israelites and Philistines. The Torah applies to Israelites, not Philistines. In this context, Philistines are the enemy. Samson is doing things that if done in Israel would be illegal, wrong. But, these are being done against the Philistine enemy.

**Of the Philistines.** The Author makes it clear that Samson is attacking only the Philistines, no one else.

In a few verses, Samson will be released into 1,000 Philistines who he will kill. This is merely a precursor to what is about to happen on a larger scale.

**Judges 15:6 Then the Philistines said, “Who did this?” And they said, “Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion.” So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.**

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**Who did this?** Last week I showed how this is likely a connection to the Gideon narrative. Here the Philistines see a man, Samson. They do not realize that he is appointed by God to start a war against the Philistines. Who did this? It was God acting through Samson. This is the missing answer. Like the “Blues Brothers,” Samson is on a mission from God.

**Son-in-law of the Timnite.** Irony! Samson’s wife was given to someone else. The marriage contract has been broken. Samson apparently did not want his wife’s sister. So there is no “son-in-law” relationship, yet they invoke that here. They are saying he is married when he is not. He avenged himself for his loss of his wife when the Philistines are saying he is still married. Perspective. We have here conflicting perspectives. As I sometimes say, “When a lie meets reality, people get hurt.” A lot of people are getting hurt.

There is an implied irony here as one commentator remarks. “Ironically, as Block points out, “the woman draws the solution to the riddle out of Samson to prevent her and her family being burned, but in the end she succumbs to the very catastrophe she tried to avoid precisely because she got the answer from him.” To paraphrase a phrase in common usage, “Death if you do and death if you don’t.”

**Judges 15:7 Samson said to them, “Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit.”**

**Them.** Who did Samson address this threat? The text doesn’t say. It does not matter who exactly he said this to. Again the point is, it is Samson’s perspective that counts. That is what is being emphasized. Who Samson said this to is unimportant for this narrative. The purpose is to show his thinking, his perspective his purpose in what follows.

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**Revenge.** It is reflexive. “I myself will take revenge.” If we read ahead and see what happens as a result, then we see these words have the same force as the “You hurt me, I hurt you worse.” And what is revenge. Remember my dad’s saying: “Tit for Tat, you kill my dog, I kill your cat.”

Here is a helpful comment from Trent Butler quoting “H. G. L. Peels echoes this understanding: “In the OT, however, the concept of ‘vengeance’ has a positive connotation, both from a semantic as well as from a theological point of view: ‘vengeance’ has to do with lawfulness, justice, and salvation... Even Samson’s ‘revenge,’ better ‘vindication’ (Judg 15:7; 16:28), is in accordance with the redemptive struggle against the enemy (Judg 14:4)”

**Judges 15:8 He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.**

**He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter.** The phrase in the Hebrew is difficult to translate. It begins with the causative form of the verb meaning to “strike.” The thrust of the word is that he killed them. It is used previously when Samson killed the 30 Philistines to get their clothes. Then it is followed by nouns, preposition and adjective. Almost like one of those comic strips: BAM! ZOT! WHAM! It contains a Hebrew idiom which has lost the full meaning to us. The people of that time would have understood perfectly. The idiom is “He struck them hip and thigh with a great slaughter.” You are probably thinking, where is “hip and thigh” in the translation. Exactly, it isn’t translated. It is an idiom. Like Hebrew is wont to do, it is graphical. I suppose if you disable an enemy combatant such that he cannot move (cut the hip and/or thigh) you can take your time killing him later. He isn’t going anywhere. We



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have similar kinds of idioms. To serve someone “hand and foot” is to slave over them, provide for someone’s every need.

**He went down and lived.** Once he killed a bunch of Philistines to make his point, he was done and calmly walked to a desolate place to live. Remember, jackals are associated with desolation and loneliness. So, in this narrative, Samson is the jackal.

**Etam.** It is apparently in the territory of the tribe of Judah. Here is another link to the Gideon narrative. Gideon’s people lived in caves. The word is different between the two narratives but the concept is the same. You can hide from someone and defend yourself from a position of strength.

**Judges 15:9 Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi.**

According to Trent Butler, “Verse 9 serves as the normal introduction for a battle report. The Philistine enemy stages forces for battle and conducts an opening raid to start the war.”

There is no need to hint with military jargon to see that war appears imminent but not inevitable.

Previously, Samson had to “go down” to the Philistines since they lived along the seacoast. Now, they are ready to do battle. They are going up. God through Samson has started a war, from the perspective of the Philistines. As someone said, the Philistines do not attack the tribe of Dan, which was Samson’s tribe, but the tribe of Judah. The tribe of Dan is located next to the tribe of Judah. If Etam was in the territory of Judah this would make sense.

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If the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, then the assumption would have to be that the tribe of Judah will protect one of their own even if it is from another tribe.

**Judges 15:10** The men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” And they said, “We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us.”

**The men of Judah said.** Again, the text does not explain how the communication was made. Was there a runner who was sent to the Philistine camp?

**In order to do to him as he did to us.** Vengeance. Once this ball starts rolling, it will not stop until someone is hurt so bad they have to stop.

**Judges 15:11** Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam and said to Samson, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?” And he said to them, “As they did to me, so I have done to them.” (They hurt me so I hurt them worse.)

**Philistines are rulers over us.** The word for rulers found here and in Judges 14:4 connects with the Gideon narrative. The verb form of this word is used when Gideon is asked to rule over the people. Here, instead of asking Samson to rule over them, they are going to bind him and turn him over to the enemy.

**Judges 15:12** They said to him, “We have come down to bind you so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And

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**Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not kill me.”**

**We may give you into the hands of the Philistines.** They would rather let the Philistines kill one of their own rather than fight for their freedom and worship Yahweh.

**Swear to me that you will not kill me.** Samson does not want to kill any Israelites, even though they are going to give him to the Philistines who want to kill him.

**Judges 15:13 So they said to him, “No, but we will bind you fast and give you into their hands; yet surely we will not kill you.” Then they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.**

**We will bind you.** This word for binding is used only in chapters 15 and 16 for Samson. It is particularly important in the next chapter. The idea from a normal human perspective is that when someone is bound, they are confined and cannot get free. It is an impossible situation. But we see impossible situation all the time in the Bible. For God nothing is impossible. It depends, of course, on what His plan is. Remember what happened to Jesus:

**John 18:12 So the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him,**

**Judges 15:14 When he came to Lehi, the Philistines shouted as they met him. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as**

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**flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands.**

Philistines shouted as they met him. Deja vu all over again. This is a replay of the encounter with the lion. It roared as it attacked Samson. The Holy Spirit rushed upon him. He tore the lion apart with his bare hands.

**Judges 15:15 He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it.**

**Found.** This word was just used in chapter 14.

**Judges 14:18 ...And he said to them, “If you had not plowed with my heifer, You would not have found out (our word) my riddle.”**

Interesting how this word may link back to the riddle. He now has found a jawbone of a donkey

Assuming a thousand is literal, this is a lot of work and could have taken a while.

**Judges 15:16 Then Samson said, “With the jawbone of a donkey, Heaps upon heaps, With the jawbone of a donkey I have killed a thousand men.”**

Here is another riddle from Samson. I suppose you could give him the name, “The Riddler.” So far I haven’t found a commentator that wanted to tackle the nuances of this riddle. It hinges on the various meanings of “heaps.”

First, the root words for “heap” and donkey have the same three letter consonants. Some say there are several different roots with the same

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three consonants. Without getting lost in technical discussions on these roots, it can mean 1) burden, heap up, aggravate, 2) roast, burn, red 3) donkey/ass 4) flay 5) wine 6) bitumen or clay used for making buildings.

The humor of the riddle turns on these various meanings. What Samson has done is turn living Philistines into dead red carcasses like the dead donkey he took the jawbone from and made a building out of them.

Said differently, someone coming upon the complete work of Samson would find a structure like a building of human carcasses stained in blood like dead donkeys.

At some point, the Philistines decide to leave Samson alone. If he can dispatch 1,000 Philistine men of war by himself with the jawbone of a donkey. Leave him alone. He already said he was done with vengeance before this attack. And indeed, when we start chapter 16, we jump perhaps 20 years into the future. The Philistines leave him alone until he gets tripped up by yet another woman.

A few years ago, I didn't know what the difference between a donkey/ass and a mule was. Maybe you already know the difference. In case you do not, here is the explanation.

From Wikipedia:

A mule is the offspring of a male donkey (jack) and a female horse (mare). Horses and donkeys are different species, with different numbers of chromosomes. Of the two first-generation hybrids between these two species, a mule is easier to obtain than a hinny, which is the offspring of a female donkey (jenny) and a male horse (stallion).

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Male horse = stallion

Female horse = mare

Male donkey = jack

Female donkey = jenny

Mule = male (offspring of male donkey and a female horse)

Hinny = female (offspring of a male horse and female donkey)

As I delved into this topic, I found there are actually a variety of different names for them.

Mules are reputed to be more patient, hardy, and long-lived than horses, and are described as less obstinate and more intelligent than donkeys.