

One of the strangest characters in the Bible is Samson. He is the final of seven judges in the Book of Judges. His story is the lengthiest of all the judges (Judges 13-16). Unlike the accounts of the other judges, the author spends much time on the events surrounding Samson's birth and death (Judges 13:11-24; 16:22-21). Before he was conceived, God gave instructions to his parents regarding Samson's life and vocation. The angel of the LORD instructed his mother to abstain from drinking wine or strong drink or eat any unclean thing (Judges 13:4). In addition, Samson's hair should not be cut, because he would be a Nazirite to God from the womb (Judges 13:5). Regarding his career, Samson would begin to deliver Israel from the power of the Philistines (Judges 13:5).

Immediately after Samson's birth, we read that "the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him up in Mahanehdan, between Zorah and Eshtaol" (Judges 13:24-25). Surprisingly, the Spirit does not lead Samson to perform any miraculous act (cf. Judges 3:10; 6:34). Instead, Samson travels down to Timnah and became involved with a Philistine woman. Although his parents disapprove of this relationship, Samson doubles down on his decision (Judges 14:3). It is at this point in the Samson saga that we encounter the verse which I believe is the key which unlocks Samson's complicated life. In response to his parents' expressed displeasure of Samson's desire, the narrator reveals that it was all in God's plan! Judges 14:4 says "However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines."

This is the first of three women associated with Samson. Each of these relationships creates some trouble for Samson and leads him to commit devastating acts of vengeance against the Philistines. First, He burns the Philistine crops in the time of wheat harvest (Judges 15:1-8); then he kills one thousand men with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:14-17); later, he uproots the city gate (Judges 16:1-3); finally, he kills 3,000 men and women including the lords of the Philistines (Judges 16:22-31). "Let me die with the Philistines", Samson howls, as he pushes the pillars apart, the house falls, and 3,000 philistines perish (Judges 16:30). This is his swan song. Samson dies with the Philistines. In an honorable act, Samson's brothers and all his father's household bury him in his father's grave. What then can we learn from the way Samson died? We surely miss the significance of Samson's final act of vengeance if we skip over the arrogance of the Philistines.

I have deliberately waited until the end of this article before citing the celebration of the Philistines when they captured Samson and gouged out his two eyes and imprisoned him (Judges 16:21). In their folly, the Philistines praised their god for capturing their tormentor. With blind jubilation they chanted, "Our god has given Samson into our hands" (Judges 16:23)! Little did they know that Samson's God, Yahweh, heard their vain rejoicing, and that He is more powerful than their god, Dagon (see 1 Samuel 5:1-7). Though Samson was blind and bounded, his God was not. As Dale Ralph Davis rightly remarks, "though Yahweh's hand may justly cast down his unfaithful servants, his ears are nevertheless open to their cries and his arm still ready to act on their behalf."