

Toward the end of the period of Judges (c. 1130 B.C.), about 50 years after Gideon, God punished Israel at the hand of the Philistines. He allotted the enemy 40 years to exact tribute (Judg. 13:1).

But God also planned a deliverer.

Birth of Samson — a miracle

God chose to bring a champion out of the tribe of Dan. He sent an angel to visit the barren wife of a man named Manoah, promising her a son. She was warned, however, that during her pregnancy she should abstain from wine, strong drink and any unclean food (Num. 6:2-8, Lev. 11), for the child would be a Nazarite unto God.

She was told that the youth should never have his hair cut or his beard shaven; and he would grow up to challenge the Philistines and begin to throw off their yoke of oppression.

The woman immediately ran and told her husband these things. But he was skeptical. He prayed to God to send the angel again, and God obliged. This time, as before, the angel appeared to the woman. She asked him to wait while she went and found her husband. So the man then heard the message with his own ears.

Manoah's wife conceived, just as the angel had said, and bore a son. They called him Samson (meaning a "ray of sunshine"). And God was with him from birth.

A Philistine bride

When Samson was about 20, he went to Timnath, a city of the Philistines. There, infatuated by a beautiful young woman, he asked his parents to get her for his wife. But they discouraged him, saying he should marry a girl of Israel.

God, however, intended to use the woman to provoke Samson against the Philistines. And so the preparation for marriage began.

On a subsequent trip to see his future bride, Samson was attacked by a lion. Reacting suddenly to defend himself, he slew the animal with his bare hands, as if it had

Old Testament Personalities

SAMSON



Illustration by G. Dore

been a tiny lamb. No one could have been more surprised than Samson. He kept the thing a secret, however, even from his parents, for he knew the supernatural strength must have come from God.

Later, when visiting the young woman again, he stopped to look at the carcass of the lion. He saw it had been taken over by a swarm of honey-bees, and they had filled the chest cavity with honey. He took out several pieces of the honeycomb and saved some for his mother and father. Still, he didn't tell them where he got it.

The wedding day arrived, and Samson's family made a feast at the bride's home. But when the Philistines saw the intended groom — a stranger with a mass of curled hair, accompanied by a host of relatives — they were suspicious of trouble and sent 30 young men to the banquet pretending to be guests.

Samson, a bit aggravated by their presence, challenged them with a riddle, "Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judg. 14:14). He gave them seven days to solve it. If they failed, he would receive 30 shirts and changes of clothing. If Samson lost, he would furnish them each a shirt and change of clothing.

They agreed.

Three days of the wedding feast went by, and the young Philistines had no answer. On the seventh day, they became desperate to save face as well as their shirts. They took the bride to one side and threatened to burn her and her father's house, ac-

curring her of inviting them to the wedding just to bilk them out of their possessions.

Frightened, she pressured Samson with tears for the answer. He re-

fused; but she persisted, saying he didn't love her or else he would tell her. The seventh day of their honeymoon became an agonizing harangue. Finally, toward sunset, he gave in and told her the answer.

She immediately passed it to the young men, and they triumphantly told it to Samson.

He knew his wife had betrayed him and simply replied: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle" (verse 18). Meaning, of course, they had pressured the answer from his new wife.

God's spirit then directed him to the Philistine city of Ashkelon, where he slew 30 men to avenge himself, taking their garments to pay his debt. Then he angrily went home to Israel, leaving his bride behind.

The rebellion begins

A few months later, having cooled down, Samson took a gift and visited his wife's home, intending to solve their differences (Judg. 15:1). To his surprise, he found his father-in-law had given her to another man.

Now he was really angry, especially at the young men of Philistia. He decided to avenge himself by burning the Philistines' grain fields, for it was harvest time.

He began by catching jackals (foxes). When he had 300, he tied their tails together in pairs with a lighted torch between them and sent them running through the fields. His plan took considerable time, but the damage was devastating.

The Philistines, hearing that Samson did this in anger because his wife had been given to another, burned the young woman and her father to appease his wrath.

But this provoked Samson all the more. He slew many of them in vengeance and then left for refuge in Judah.

By now the Philistines were in arms against him. They brought an

army to Judah to take him captive. Fearful, the men of Judah talked Samson into giving himself up and took him bound to the Philistines.

On the return to Philistia, however, God's spirit filled Samson with supernatural strength. He broke his bonds, picked up the fresh jawbone of an ass and slew a thousand of his captors. The rest fled in terror. God then gave him water to drink from a cleft in a nearby rock.

This slaughter began a 20-year period when Samson single-handedly protected southern Israel against the Philistines. The chain of events leading to this personal wrath were: Samson's attraction to the Philistine girl, an attacking lion, the honey, the marriage, the riddle, the betrayal of his answer, his anger, the loss of his wife. It is a remarkable example of God's hand in human affairs.

Samson, grieved by his unfortunate experience with marriage, never took another wife. He began, instead, to seek the company of harlots, which led to his ultimate downfall.

Once in Gaza, while he visited a harlot, the Philistines locked the city gates, intending to wait and kill him in the morning.

He knew their evil scheme, however, and left the house at midnight. In his escape, he tore the heavy gates — posts and all — from the walls, carried them out of the city and stood them on a hill facing toward Israel.

Delilah

The woman who finally brought Samson down was Delilah (meaning "coquette"). She lived in a town on the main highway between Israel and the coast of Philistia. She was beautiful, immoral and devilish. But Samson loved her. Whether she was Israelite or Philistine isn't known, and doesn't matter, for her first loyalty was to money.

She was offered 1,100 pieces of silver by the Philistine elders if she could find the source of Samson's strength (Judg. 16:5).

So with the promise of a generous reward, she appealed to his masculine ego and displayed a bondless curiosity about the source of his physical power. She asked him, "Is there anything you can be tied with that you cannot break?" He told her "sev-

en leather bow strings, still wet" would hold him.

On his next visit, he fell asleep, and she bound him with new bow strings. There were Philistines hiding behind the curtains to see what would happen. She shouted, "Wake up, Samson, there are Philistines here!" And he broke the bonds like scorched thread.

Delilah pretended her feelings were hurt. She chided him, saying, "You don't really love me or you wouldn't lie about your strength!"

This little game continued through two more episodes. He told her rope, never used, would bind him. But the same thing happened. Then he told her if the seven locks of his head were woven together his strength would leave. While he slept, she tried this also, but to no avail. Yet she kept wearing his resistance down with talk of mutual love and honesty.

Finally, just as his wife had worn him down in his youth — pressing him for the answer to his riddle — Delilah's feigned emotions and persistence paid off. Samson told her the truth, and she knew he spoke the truth from the heart. The strength was from God, but because he was a Nazarite from birth. If his hair were cut, the vow would be broken and his strength lost.

Taken captive

Delilah immediately called for the elders of Philistia, and they came with the money. She induced Samson to fall asleep on her knees and summoned a man to cut the seven locks from his head (evidently he had his hair divided into seven curls or braids because of the great length). Then she tied his wrists and woke him as before. But God had left him, and he had no strength.

He was taken captive. The Philistines plucked out his eyes and led him away to Gaza. There he was put into prison and bound with brass chains to a gristmill — a humiliating servitude for the champion of Israel.

But as Samson toiled day after day, grinding grain and praying silently to God, the hairs of his head grew back. The Philistines either didn't notice or didn't think it posed a threat.

Then one day there was a great

celebration in honor of Dagon, the Philistine fish god. All the lords of Philistia were gathered together — several thousand of the leading men and women. They praised Dagon for subduing Samson and ridding them of their fiercest enemy. And when they were feeling especially festive, because of the wine, they insisted that Samson be brought from the prison to entertain them. They wanted to ridicule him publicly.

His final triumph

Samson was led into the courtyard by a young lad, and the crowd roared its approval, mocking his humiliating condition. He was positioned on a platform facing his audience on the ground level, with 3,000 additional spectators seated above them on the roof. They all ridiculed him, forcing him to provide entertainment.

Samson knew the stage where he stood contained the support for the upper level, as this was a common method of construction. But, not knowing where the pillars were, he asked the lad for permission to momentarily rest against them. The boy unwittingly obliged. Upon feeling them with his hands, Samson prayed to his Creator for renewed strength, repentant for allowing Delilah to come between himself and God.

Taking hold of the two pillars, he asked to be avenged of his eyes, willing to die with the Philistines. And God gave him strength.

In one last honorable effort, he bowed himself against the pillars with all his might. They twisted, buckled and fell. The roof collapsed with a roar, hurling the 3,000 screaming spectators to their deaths, crushing those below.

Samson himself died beneath the falling debris. But he killed more of the enemy on that one fateful day than he had in all his previous years.

His brethren, hearing what had happened, came and took his body. They buried it in the family sepulcher near his father, in his homeland. He died at about age 43, having judged Israel for 20 years.

Samson was celebrated as a great champion in Israel; but more importantly, an example of faith toward God (Heb. 11:32), even to his death.

— By Art Ferdig □