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Michael J. Smith

Liberty University, mjsmith2@liberty.edu

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THE FAILURE OF THE FAMILY IN JUDGES, PART 2: SAMSON

Michael J. Smith

THE FAILURE OF THE FAMILY IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES is seen in many of the judges, including especially the twelfth and final judge, Samson.¹ In his case the paradigm of the judge cycle from Judges 2:11–18 appears for the last time in the book, but only two of the elements are given.² “Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years” (13:1). Though this is the longest period of time in which Israel was under another nation, there is no record of the Israelites crying out to the Lord for deliverance as they had done in the past. Instead they seem to have been content to exist under foreign domination. Judah, which had begun the fight against the Canaanites (1:1–2), had dropped the goal of conquering the land in favor of a peaceful survival under the Philistines.

After Samson had sought revenge on the Philistines for killing his former wife and her father (15:1–6) by striking them “ruthlessly with a great slaughter” (v. 8), he went to hide in the cleft of a rock near Etam. When the Philistines came into the territory of Judah and the residents learned that they were seeking Samson, three thousand of the men of Judah came to bind Samson in order to hand him over to the Philistines. They argued, “Do you not know

Michael J. Smith is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.

¹ The first article in this two-part series discussed the failure of Jephthah’s family (“The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 1: Jephthah,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 [July–September 2005]: 279–98).

² Daniel I. Block notes that there are six formulaic elements in the paradigm of the judge cycles: (1) The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord; (2) the Lord gave them into the hands of an oppressing nation; (3) the Israelites cried out to the Lord; (4) the Lord raised up a deliverer; (5) the Lord gave the oppressors into the hands of the deliverer; (6) the land had rest for some years (*Judges, Ruth*, *New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999], 146–47).

that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?" (v. 11). As representatives of all Israel, the men of Judah were willing to sacrifice their Spirit-enabled judge by giving him over to the enemy rather than join him and fight for the land God had promised them. They did not want to be rescued. Their covenant commitment with God to take the land was gone in favor of living as they pleased under the Philistines. The Judahites even forcefully opposed anyone who challenged their acquiescence to living under enemy oppression. God, however, would not go back on His commitment to His covenant with Israel, and so He planned one more "spectacular" judge, Samson, to address their condition.³ With Israel no longer willing to make progress toward taking the land and living as God's people, there was need for a judge who would act alone.

The story of Samson begins with a clear focus on the theme of the family. The reader is introduced in Judges 13 to a godly family and expects that the outcome of this judge will be better than those in the past. Unlike all the other judges Samson was marked out as God's chosen instrument before he was born. The story of his birth "is a particularly elaborate version of the [annunciation] type-scene."⁴ This circumstance alone places the birth of Samson in line with the patriarchal families of Isaac, who was born of Sarah (Gen. 18), Jacob, who was born of Rebekah (Gen. 25), and Joseph, who was born of Rachel (Gen. 30).⁵ In addition Samson's mother was given the message by "the angel of the LORD" (Judg. 13:3), who had come to Gideon also (6:11). The beginning scenes in Samson's family hold promise for a great change about to come with the final judge. The scenes, however, present some subtle problems.

³ J. Cheryl Exum writes, "In the Samson story a curious kind of reversal occurs. For the first time in the Judges cycle, the Israelites do not cry out, and yet God intervenes spectacularly" ("The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 [July 1990]: 423).

⁴ Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (May 1983): 123. The annunciation type-scene begins with the introduction of a woman who is barren. She is then visited by some messenger from God who promises or predicts the birth of a child. That annunciation is followed by conception and birth of the promised child (*ibid.*, 119–20). Alter gives similar comments in "Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 149.

⁵ Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 120–23; and Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "The Role of Women in the Rhetorical Strategy of the Book of Judges," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 42.

MANOAH AND HIS WIFE

The story of Samson, which is dominated by his interactions with women, begins with a strong woman (Samson's mother) and a weak man (Manoah, his father). The presence of weak men in the Book of Judges can be traced back to the story of Deborah and Barak, in which Barak felt inadequate to proceed to war by himself and needed Deborah to accompany him. Gideon's weak faith required many testings of God's word before he was assured of victory. The irony of the weakness of Manoah, Samson's father, is enhanced by the fact that Samson himself was physically strong. His moral and spiritual condition, however, stood in marked contrast.

Manoah was a Danite of Zorah. His wife, who is not named, was barren (13:2). There is no mention of her praying for a child. Instead God sovereignly stepped in, with a theophany, and addressed Manoah's wife (vv. 3–5), telling her that she would conceive and give birth to a son. The son would be a Nazirite from the womb, and he would begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Because the boy was to be a Nazirite, Manoah's wife must be careful not to drink wine or strong drink or eat anything unclean herself. The boy was to have no razor come on his head.⁶ In this first scene "it is immediately apparent that the woman is the human protagonist of the story, not Manoah. He may be named, but it is to the unnamed wife that the divine messenger appears when her husband is absent. . . . It is unclear why the messenger did not appear to Manoah, but it will be noticed that throughout the story the narrator casts the woman in better light than her husband."⁷

Manoah's wife came to her husband and told him of the heavenly visit (vv. 6–7), that a "man of God" whose "appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome," had come

⁶ The Nazirite vow, recorded in Numbers 6:1–8, had three limitations: (a) the Nazirite was to refrain from eating or drinking any product of the vine, (b) he or she was to refrain from cutting his or her hair, and (c) he or she was not to touch a dead body. Normally the vow was taken for a period of time, but Samson was to be a Nazirite from birth to death (Judg. 13:7). According to Numbers 6:2 the Nazirite could be either a man or a woman. The issues involved in the Nazirite vow are more than what is discussed in the Book of Judges. "It is an act of unusual devotion to God, based perhaps on an intense desire to demonstrate to the Lord one's utter separation to him. . . . The Nazirite vow was not just an act of superior self-discipline, an achieving of a spiritual machismo; it was to be regarded as a supreme act of total devotion to the person and work of the Lord that would override certain normal and expected patterns of behavior" (Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 748–49).

⁷ Harvey D. Hartman, "The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges" (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1992), 163.

to her. She did not ask him where he was from, nor did he give his name. She then gave Manoah the message of the angel. Manoah asked the Lord to have the man of God return so that he might teach them what to do for the boy who was to be born (v. 8).⁸

God responded to Manoah's prayer and the angel of God returned to Manoah's wife while she was in the field alone. She ran to get her husband, who followed her back to the angel. When Manoah asked if he was the man who had appeared to his wife, he received a positive answer. Then when Manoah asked what the boy's mode of life and vocation should be, the angel of the Lord told Manoah that he should note what he had already told his wife, adding the instructions again for her own Nazirite purity (vv. 9–14). Manoah offered food to the angel, which the angel would not accept, and Manoah asked his name, which he declined to give (vv. 15–18). The narrator added that Manoah did not know that the man was the angel of the Lord. Manoah then prepared an offering, flames came up from the rock where he had placed the offering, and the angel ascended in the flames. When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. Manoah knew that people do not see God and live, but his wife assured him that if God was going to kill them He would not have accepted their offering nor would He have shown them what was about to happen (vv. 19–23). Manoah's wife did give birth to a son and she named him Samson. Samson grew up and God blessed him (v. 24).

Although Manoah seems to have had a great interest in the angel and his message, apparently the pervading spiritual weakness among Israelite men had invaded this home also. That the narrator intended this to be the picture is borne out in several ways. First, the angel came directly to Manoah's wife twice, and in the second appearance she needed to lead her husband back to meet the angel (v. 11). Second, Manoah is presented as a skeptical person, asking the angel many questions, which are not answered. Instead the angel referred Manoah to the information that was already given to his wife. She was given the more complete set of in-

⁸ Josephus indicated that Manoah was a very jealous man (*The Antiquities of the Jews* 5.7.2–3). Bal, Klein, and Reinhartz suggest that sexual intimacy occurred between the angel and Manoah's wife, but there is no suggestion of that at all in the text (Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], 266; Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 111; and Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," in *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 166–68).

structions. Manoah appears here like Gideon.⁹ It was difficult for him to accept the message of God and he wanted further clarification. In contrast to Manoah, his wife seemed content with the message and with the messenger (v. 6). Third, the focus is on the wife in the angel's instructions and how she is to act in preparation for the coming of their son. If any instructions are given to Manoah, it could be said that he was to help his wife keep the rules (vv. 13–14). Fourth, though Manoah was certain that they would die for having seen an angel of the Lord, his wife was more astute and gave a reasoned response to their situation (vv. 21–23). Her response demonstrates her understanding of God and His ways. Fifth, Manoah's wife, not Manoah, named Samson (v. 24).¹⁰ Fuchs observes the scene of Judges 13 and compares it with the annunciation scene with Abraham and Sarah. In this case Manoah acted more like Sarah.

The thematic and structural parallels between Judges 13 and Genesis 18 highlight the radical shift in the characterization and respective status of the potential mother and father figures. Whereas the hospitality of Abraham is graciously accepted by the three messengers, Manoah's hospitality is rejected. The first scene uses Abraham's hospitality to enhance his uprightness, the latter exposes Manoah's hospitality as maladroitness. In the first scene, Yahweh addresses Sarah indirectly and peripherally; in the fourth scene God turns to the woman first and only repeats for her husband things already known to her. Sarah emerges from the first scene as a skeptical and parochial housewife, vastly overshadowed by Abraham's magnanimity. Manoah's wife, on the other hand, is perspicacious, sensitive, and devout, outshining her inept husband. Sarah's unnecessary interference in the course of the first annunciation type-scene parallels to a great extent the dispensable contributions of Manoah.¹¹

⁹ For a comparison of Samson with previous judges see Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 164–65, 170–71.

¹⁰ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 387–99; and Yairah Amit, "Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife' (Judges 13.11): On the Place of the Woman in Birth Narratives," in *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 146–56.

¹¹ Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the H[ebrew] B[ible]," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1984), 124–25. For further discussion of Manoah and his wife see J. Cheryl Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (March 1980): 43–59; idem, "Mother in Israel: A Familiar Figure Reconsidered," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 73–85; Hartman, "The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges," 158–71; and David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 63–68.

While it might seem that Manoah's wife is marginalized by her name not being mentioned, it may be that the narrator intended Manoah's wife, like Jephthah's unnamed daughter, to represent many women in Israel. God had picked a good home for the birth of the next judge, but even a good home in Israel had serious problems. Manoah's "spiritual awareness and reaction is slow. His wife outshines him in every regard. Questions worth pondering are these: How many other homes in Israel during the period of the judges are represented by this example? How did the lack of central spiritual leadership affect families, and how did the lack of leadership in families contribute to the spiritual chaos in the nation?"¹²

SAMSON AND HIS PARENTS

Judges 14 presents Samson's marriage and the disastrous results. After going to a Philistine city and seeing a Philistine woman, Samson returned to his parents and told them to "get her for me as a wife" (14:1-2). His parents objected, asking whether there was not someone among their own people he could pick rather than "a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines" (v. 3). Apparently they knew that intermarriage was not permitted in Israel (Deut. 7:1-3), but Block faults them for not standing firm.

On the other hand, what Samson's parents do not say is as significant as the words they utter. They do not say, 'Intermarriage with non-Israelites is forbidden by the LORD' (cf. Deut 7:1-5). Nor do they say, 'The LORD has called you to a special Nazirite status within Israel. This is one huge step lower even than compromising that call.' They do not say, 'The LORD's agenda is for you to deliver us from the Philistine oppression, not to marry them' (13:5). All this remains unsaid. To Samson's parents his proposition is simply a cultural and ethnic issue.¹³

They sinned by following through with his demand. Deuteronomy 7:3-4 instructs parents not to give their children in marriage to the nations in the land, and Manoah and his wife failed by going ahead with the arrangements for the marriage. They were part of the problem in Israel (Judg. 3:5-6), and it was a Nazirite judge, their own son, whom they were giving in marriage to a Philistine. This giving in to Samson's wish was not just the condoning of an

¹² Hartman, "The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges," 172.

¹³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 425.

unwise move: it was participation in a moral error.¹⁴ How could a Nazirite judge create future godly homes in Israel by marrying a pagan Philistine? Such a marriage is a strike against the central component of the nation, the home.

Samson's interactions with his parents indicate that not all was well in this parent-child relationship. He demanded that his parents follow through on his desire for obtaining a Philistine wife (14:3). Further, three times the narrator noted a specific lack of communication between Samson and his parents. When Samson killed a lion, he did not tell his parents (v. 6). When he returned and found honey in the dead lion's carcass, he gave some to his parents but did not tell them where he got the honey (v. 9). In this instance he broke his Nazirite vows and kept that fact from his parents. Then when his wife was pressing him to tell her the riddle, Samson told her that he had not told it to those closest to him, his parents, so he would not tell her either (v. 16). Samson seems to fit the picture of a rebellious son, in line with Deuteronomy 21:18–21, who is a threat to the advancement of the home.

In Gooding's chiasmic pattern for the Book of Judges, Samson is opposite Othniel and presents a contrast in the area of the home.

Othniel is the first deliverer, Samson is the last. If at the beginning it was intermarriage with Gentiles that got Israel into trouble so that they needed a deliverer, at the end the deliverer is guilty of the very same thing himself. There could not, then, be a more vivid contrast than that between Othniel the first judge and Samson the last: Othniel's wife was his incentive to drive out the Gentiles, Samson's wives were his incentive to live among, rather than drive out, the Philistines; Othniel's wife pressed him to ask of her father extra inheritance, Samson's wives pressed him to reveal his secrets (15:17 and 16:16). And whereas the introduction says that intermarriage led to Israel's serving the Gentiles' gods (3:6), Samson is the only judge in the series who, far from delivering the people, was captured and celebrated by the enemy as a remarkable instance of the triumph of their god, Dagon (16: 23–24); only by his death was that triumph annulled.¹⁵

¹⁴ Some have absolved Manoah of wrongdoing here because of the statement in 14:4 that he did not know that Samson's plan was of the Lord since God was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. It is best, however, to see this as God using a sinful situation as an opportunity to accomplish His purpose. This then was God's sovereign grace overriding sinful actions. "God reserves the right to turn even the disobedience and failure of his people to the furtherance of his own purpose; of which theme there are many examples in Judges" (D. W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," *Eretz Israel* 16 [1982]: 79). See also Herbert Wolf, "Judges," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 466.

¹⁵ Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," 73.

SAMSON AND PHILISTINE WOMEN

Samson is also a picture of the nation.¹⁶ Israel was faulted for living among and intermarrying with the Canaanite enemy. After Samson's birth narrative (Judg. 13) the rest of his life story centers on his pursuit of Philistine women. Samson is an example of Israel's "playing the harlot after other gods" (2:17; 8:27, 32).

SAMSON AND THE WOMAN FROM TIMNAH

In telling his parents to get the Philistine woman from Timnah to be his wife, Samson's reason was that "she looks good to me" (14:3).¹⁷ The narrator here illustrated and foreshadowed his theme from the epilogues, where "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). "Samson never has the sense to choose a wife like his mother; he only follows the instincts of his senses and the foreign women are more intriguing than those of Israel."¹⁸ Samson's marriage arrangement with the unnamed Philistine woman ended in disaster.¹⁹ Samson was angry because she told the Philistines his riddle and he returned, without consummating the marriage, to his own father's house. As a picture of Israel, Samson's relationship with the Philistine woman and her family showed that Israel would lose out in the end when they made covenants with the enemy.²⁰ Samson also illustrated the futile cycles in

¹⁶ "Each of the judges represents Israel and verifies a particular aspect of Israel's apostasy, but the correspondence of Israel with the figure of Samson is not merely in the form of apostasy. The comparison is implicitly more extended" (Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in Judges*, 116). For other discussions of Samson as a representative of Israel see Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 114; Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and Willard Van Antwerpen Jr., "Joshua and Judges," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 147; and Hartman, "The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges," 191, 205.

¹⁷ Hartman notes that this attraction was probably both physical and cultural (ibid., 191). Crenshaw explains some of the differences and advances in Philistine culture that would have made their women attractive to Israelite men (James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1978], 81).

¹⁸ Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in Judges*, 125.

¹⁹ The Philistine woman and her father are unnamed (14:1) as is also the harlot from Gaza (16:1). Once again the fact of their being unnamed might be the narrator's way of saying that they represent all or any Philistines.

²⁰ Samson's relationship was not good with the Philistine woman and her family from Timnah, even if they had not broken the marriage. Block notes that Samson's "reference to his wife as his 'heifer' is as disparaging in the Hebrew as it is in English" (Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 435). The father-in-law does not seem to have been dis-

the book. Just as Samson went back to his pagan Philistine wife following his own cooling off period, so Israel went back to their sin following a time of deliverance, to once again do evil in the sight of the Lord. A common weakness of Samson and Israel is that neither learned from painful experiences of covenant-making with the enemy.

SAMSON AND THE HARLOT OF GAZA

Samson's second encounter with a Philistine woman was with the harlot at Gaza (16:1). There is no comment as to why Samson went to Gaza and nothing more than that he "went in to her." As a picture of Israel, Samson was still simply doing what looked good to him, but it was counter to his purpose as a Nazirite deliverer from the Philistines, just as it was counter to Israel's purpose in being a separated nation. "That Samson, like Israel, has been dedicated to Yahweh from his conception makes his—and Israel's—blithe obliviousness to ethical values all the more poignant. Both Israel and Samson are *nazirites* in that they are dedicated to Yahweh from 'conception,' and both seem more concerned with personal gratification (including the pleasures of worldly values) than with the less tangible covenant."²¹

SAMSON AND DELILAH

Samson's third encounter with a Philistine woman was with Delilah (vv. 4–20), and it resulted in his downfall. The narrator recorded that Samson loved Delilah, and yet her commitment was to the Philistines and the money she would get for learning the secret of his strength (v. 5). While she berated Samson for not loving her (v. 15), as did the woman he had married earlier (14:16), there was no love returned. The commitment from each of these women was to their own countrymen and for their own personal pleasure or safety.

Foreign women generally had no commitment to the ideals and covenants of Israel. Rahab, Jael, and Ruth in this period of history were outstanding exceptions to the rule. When Samson and Israel did what was right in their own eyes, they received the same attitude in return from the foreigners with whom they entered into a covenant. "When a woman marries, she should join her husband's community. . . . Instead, these foreign women remain loyal to their

posed to inquire of Samson's plans either, as he gave the woman away to the best man. For a summary of the results of this relationship see Hartman, "The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges," 200–203.

²¹ Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in Judges*, 118 (italics hers).

own personal interests or to those of the paternal household. Therefore, the readers are warned, they and their like are unacceptable. The results of consorting with them and other women of the same type will invariably turn out to be calamitous."²² Niditch agrees. "The message of the narrative pattern is very clear. Exogamy leads not to making peace with one's enemies but to a heightening of confrontation and destruction. No reconciliation is to be established between these enemies."²³

In the end of the Samson-Delilah story Delilah became the mirror image of Ehud. She is of the opposite sex and on the opposite side. As Ehud tricked the enemy leader Eglon, so Delilah tricked her enemy to get rid of the one who was harassing her people, and Samson is the one who was duped.²⁴ The gender change of the "hero," however, makes Samson look worse than Eglon. Samson was not entirely fooled. Delilah made three attempts before she achieved her victory. Samson's unexplained willingness to go along with her trickery mirrors Israel's foolish repetition of failure after each judge cycle. Samson's incurable pursuit of foreign women indicates that Israel simply did not learn that intermarriage with the Canaanites caused problems (cf. 3:5-6). The family in Israel was both its strength and its portal for weakness. Samson's self-centered agenda illustrates the issue that made the difference.

Samson blindly and foolishly went into bondage with foreigners. He rejected his parents' idea of establishing an Israelite home in favor of serving his own sensual desires. God gave Samson every advantage, and he threw it away in favor of doing what was right in his own eyes to his own undoing. The narrator did not explicitly say that Samson broke his Nazirite vows, but the implication is there for the reader to see. Samson went off by himself into a vineyard on his way to Timnah (14:5); he later took honey from the carcass of a dead lion and ate it (v. 9); he made a drinking feast for the men at the wedding party (v. 10);²⁵ he used the fresh jawbone of a donkey to kill a thousand Philistines (15:15); he told Delilah that

²² Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 121.

²³ Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (October 1990): 619.

²⁴ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 49-52.

²⁵ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 431.

fresh sinews could bind him (16:7);²⁶ and he willingly told Delilah the secret of his hair, knowing that she had performed all the other tests on him (v. 17). Through the four tests by Delilah, Samson became more open to her, sharing the secret of his life, only to have her use him for her own gratification in getting rich. As Samson slept on her knees, the picture of what happened brings the reader back to Sisera, who slept at the feet of Jael (5:24–27). Now, however, Samson was the enemy who was about to be killed and Delilah was the hero.²⁷ This is a picture of Israel in her harlotry (2:17). Through intermarriage with the Canaanites Israel forfeited the opportunity to build and strengthen their own families and nation and allowed their strength to become their weakness. The failure to capitalize on their strength of separated lives, focused in the homes of the nation, brought about their downfall.

Hartman notes a change of roles in Samson and Delilah.²⁸ Samson is no longer the protagonist in the story; Delilah takes that position and Samson becomes the foil. Once Delilah achieves her purposes with Samson, he reverts to his old position. The lesson for Israel is obvious: when they go outside Israel and make covenants with the enemy, they are no longer in control of the situation. The enemy takes over and they are dominated. Samson, the strong man, was no longer in control. When he was captured, that position was made very clear to him. The Philistines gouged out his eyes and made him a grinder in the prison (16:21). Block notes that the Philistines were following an ancient Near Eastern custom. Prisoners were blinded and then forced to do menial tasks of slaves and women.²⁹ So Samson, ironically, ended up doing a woman's job. The man, who had incredible strength over other men was defeated in his greatest weakness, that of foreign women, to end up emascu-

²⁶ Block indicates that sinews here refer to undried tendons taken from a freshly slaughtered animal (*ibid.*, 457).

²⁷ According to Carol Smith, Delilah fascinates some feminist writers and must be viewed in a positive light for her "positive achievement" ("Delilah: A Suitable Case for [Feminist] Treatment?" in *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 115–16). For other links between these stories see Chisholm, "The Role of Women in the Rhetorical Strategy of the Book of Judges," 43; Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, 164; and Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in Judges*, 137.

²⁸ Hartman, "The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges," 222–27.

²⁹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 462. See also Chisholm, "The Role of Women in the Rhetorical Strategy of the Book of Judges," 43–44. Niditch takes this even further and says that the cutting of Samson's hair symbolized his being castrated (Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit," 614).

lated and doing the task of a woman. The reversal of responsibilities, already seen in the Deborah–Barak story, reaches its peak in the final judge himself. Samson in his strength is an attractive figure; Samson at his end is a pathetic ruin.

SUMMARY

Samson's life is filled with the theme of the failure of the family. The story began with a family that was admirable for its pursuit of the message from the angel of the Lord. Samson had perhaps the best of beginnings for a judge recorded in the Book of Judges. From Samson's answers to Delilah, especially his open heart at the end (16:17–18), it appears that he wanted an intimate relationship with a woman. However, he never established a marriage and family of his own. Even though his parents discouraged intermarriage, it must have been so commonplace by this time that Samson determined to pursue what looked good to him. That pursuit, in the wrong direction, brought his life to an end.

Though separation as a Nazirite was a central issue in Samson's life, one that he knew (16:17), precept and practice were separate issues. The faith of Israel was so compromised that marriage to a Philistine was viewed as a cultural issue rather than an issue of religious separation. Syncretism was the rule of life as everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes. As a result of his choices Samson ended his life with no wife, no children, and even his manhood endangered. His brothers and family had to retrieve his body for burial in the family tomb (v. 31). Jephthah destroyed what little family he had, but Samson never made the beginning steps of building a stable Israelite home.

The message of the Samson story, as a parallel to the Othniel story, is that the process of building godly homes begins with a dedicated marriage. The failure of the family must be counteracted at this initial level. The story of Othniel gives the opening good example: a man who pursued a good woman for a good reason, in keeping with God's goal for the nation. Samson provided the closing bad example of the judges: a man who had great potential but who pursued the wrong women for the wrong reasons, with no apparent concern for God's goal for the nation.

The problem began with the spiritual ineptness of Samson's own father, a situation that indicated a role reversal in even the best of Israelite families. In Deborah, near the beginning of the period of the judges, there was already a need for a woman to be a spiritual spokesperson for the Lord. Men were reluctant leaders. In Jael and the unnamed woman of 9:53 there was a need for women

to step into military roles. By the end of the period of the judges women were needed to shore up individual families spiritually as seen in Manoah's unnamed wife who reflected the need of the nation's families. Even that influence could be lost, however, if their children, pictured in Samson, did not choose to pursue godly Israelite women or if the parents did not arrange for such marriages. Instead of being a powerful deliverer in Israel, Samson was captured by the enemy, who then praised their god for this victory. The great irony of his story is that the final contribution in the life of this powerful man was to perform the daily task of women, for the sake of the enemy.

While Othniel and Samson provide contrasts in marriage, Gideon and Jephthah demonstrate the impact of parents on their children. Compromised lifestyles and foolish commitments resulted in children with twisted aspirations and pagan attachments or they ended the family altogether. The final two stories in the epilogues (chaps. 17–18 and 19–21) demonstrate that spiritual failure in the home will ultimately affect the whole nation.

Joshua closed the period of the Conquest leading into a time of settlement in the land in the period of the judges with his declaration that he and his family would serve the Lord (Josh. 24:14–15). The Book of Judges records the failure of the nation to follow that example by not passing on the faith through the family to the next generation, in disobedience to the commands in the Pentateuch and especially in Deuteronomy. Samson illustrates failure at the very beginning stage of establishing a godly home with a godly wife. After following after what looked good in his own eyes, his final act was to destroy himself. Except for God's mercy and grace, Israel, in the period of the judges, would have done the same.



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