

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

AN INSTRUMENT OF THE SPIRIT OF YAHWEH: THE STRENGTH AND GRACE OF  
GOD IN THE WEAKNESS AND PRIDE OF HIS SERVANT SAMSON IN JUDGES 15:14–20

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## Introduction

When a pastor thinks of an Old Testament example for ministry, he will no doubt think of Moses and Joshua and Isaiah and Ezra and all those who exhibited outstanding qualities of a servant of the Lord. But his mind will not quickly jump to Samson as an example to emulate in ministry. Admittedly, Samson was one of the most morally depraved judges of Israel (surpassed probably only by Jephthah), as he had a weakness for women—and Philistine women, at that!—and often acted foolishly and relied too much on his own strength. Nevertheless, Samson had a least one shining moment that may serve as an example to every pastor and minister of the gospel. This moment came when he, through the Lord’s providence, realized his reliance on the Lord for his personal survival, and thereby began to understand that the whole of his ministry of deliverance also relied on the Lord’s strength.

## Translation of Judges 15:14–20

<sup>14</sup> He came as far as<sup>a</sup> Lehi,

And the Philistines shouted a war cry<sup>b</sup> against<sup>c</sup> him.

Then<sup>d</sup> the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him,<sup>e</sup> and the cords which were upon his arms<sup>f</sup> became<sup>g</sup> like flax that burns<sup>h</sup> in the fire, and his fetters were melted<sup>i</sup> from upon his hands.

<sup>15</sup> Then he found<sup>j</sup> a fresh jawbone of a donkey.<sup>k</sup> And he stretched out his hand and took it, and struck down with it 1,000 men.

<sup>16</sup> And Samson said:

With the jawbone of the donkey,

A heap, two heaps,<sup>l</sup>

With the jawbone of the donkey,

I have struck down 1,000 men.<sup>m</sup>

<sup>17</sup> And it came to pass, when he finished speaking,<sup>n</sup> that he cast away the jawbone from his hand, and he called<sup>o</sup> the place where he was,<sup>p</sup> “Ramath-Lehi.”<sup>q</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Then he was exceedingly thirsty, and he called unto Yahweh, and he said, “You<sup>f</sup> have given into the hand of your servant this great deliverance. And now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?”<sup>s</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Then God split the hollow which is at Lehi,<sup>t</sup> and there came forth from it water. So he drank, and his breath<sup>u</sup> returned, and he was revived.<sup>v</sup> Whereupon he called its name “Fountain of the Caller,”<sup>w</sup> which is at Lehi to this day.

<sup>20</sup> And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines 20 years.

### ***Textual Notes***

<sup>a</sup> This is the locative use of עַד.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>b</sup> From the root רוּע which often appears in the context of battle (cf. Num 10:7–9; 1 Sam 17:20). The verb only occurs in the hifil. In this case, it seems to be either a war cry or a cry of triumph as the Philistines see Samson coming to them bound with cords.<sup>2</sup> The verb that follows it (discussed below) favors the interpretation of a war cry.

<sup>c</sup> The infinitive construct of קרא can also mean “to call” or “to meet” (as many translations have it), but Holladay notes that in the context of a battle it often means “against.”<sup>3</sup> Since the previous verb also often appears in the context of a battle, it makes sense to take לְקַרַּת in the same way. If taken as “against,” the presence of this verb would suggest that the Philistines are shouting a battle cry (rather than a cry of triumph), and are about to attack Samson.

<sup>d</sup> This is the sequential use of imperfect plus waw-consecutive, indicating that the narrative is moving forward.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>e</sup> In Judges and Samuel, the qal use of צלה generally has the concrete meaning “to penetrate into.”<sup>5</sup> When used of the *ruah YHWH*, it can mean “be strong, effective, powerful.”<sup>6</sup> The common translation “rush,”<sup>7</sup> however, better captures the activeness of the *ruah* while still connoting the idea of the spirit coming powerfully on Samson.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), 120.

<sup>2</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 336.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold and Choi, *Hebrew Syntax*, 84–85.

<sup>5</sup> M. Saebo, צלה, in TLOT, vol. 3, edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, translated by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1077.

<sup>6</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 306.

<sup>7</sup> See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University, 1966), 852.

<sup>f</sup> The word for “arms” used here (sg. זְרִיעַ) often has a metaphorical sense of an “activity of power or violence.” The plural form sometimes describes military forces (Exod 30:22).<sup>8</sup> The singular form often denotes the arm of God as an “instrument of deliverance and judgment.”<sup>9</sup> In this instance the text is plainly referring to Samson’s physical arms. Nevertheless, given the ensuing deliverance and judgment that comes by the arms of Samson and the primary role of the Spirit of the Yahweh in that deliverance, it would not be inappropriate to see in the use of this word a connotation of Samson’s strength, at first bound by cords and then released by the Spirit of Yahweh, and perhaps also an anticipation of God’s arm at work through Samson’s arms.

<sup>g</sup> The *qal* imperfect *wci* of הָיָה can in this case be translated “became,”<sup>10</sup> because it is indicating a change of state concerning the cords. That this verb comes at the beginning of the phrase immediately after the *ruah YHWH* rushes upon Samson indicates that the presence of the *ruah* is the pivotal moment of the story. There is a change of state concerning Samson’s situation as soon as the *ruah* rushes on him.

<sup>h</sup> Although בָּעָרָו is in the perfect aspect, it can be translated as present here, in what can probably be termed a gnomic or proverbial usage<sup>11</sup> (though this phrase is a simile rather than a proverb).

<sup>i</sup> וַיִּמְסוּ – Some suggest “became weak,”<sup>12</sup> “vanished,” or “dropped off,”<sup>13</sup> when “fettters” is the subject. “Melted” fits the context better, however, as it aligns with the simile of “flax that burned in the fire” in the previous line. I have translated it as “were melted,”<sup>14</sup> because the stem is a *nifal*, indicating passive action, perhaps pointing to the agency of the Spirit of the LORD, rather than attributing the breaking of the fetters to Samson’s own strength.

<sup>j</sup> This use of מָצָא connotes finding a thing sought, rather than the less deliberate “happened upon,” which is sometimes a suggested translation for this passage.<sup>15</sup> Samson’s first thought was, naturally, to find a weapon to use against the Philistines, and the jawbone was the closest thing at hand.

<sup>k</sup> This is the only time in the passage where the donkey’s jawbone is indefinite. This indicates that, at first, Samson merely reached for the nearest object that could be used as a weapon, but from that moment it became the particular instrument of the Spirit of Yahweh (in the hand of Samson) used to strike down the Philistines.

<sup>l</sup> There is wordplay in the Hebrew that is not captured by this translation. Four of the first six words of Samson’s poem each have the same root (קָמַר). Due to the intentional wordplay, there

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<sup>8</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 283.

<sup>10</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 488; Arnold and Choi, *Hebrew Syntax*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 587.

<sup>14</sup> Thus, James B. Jordan, *Judges: God’s War Against Humanism* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1985), 259; Matthew Henry, *Joshua to Esther*, vol. 2 of Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell), 216.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 592, 593.

are two or three reasonable translations of the second line of the poem. One possibility is that Samson is referring to himself as a “donkey of two she-donkeys.” This would be in parallel with the last line, in which Samson is also the subject, and would perhaps be a reference to his affairs with two different women.<sup>16</sup> In favor of this translation is its intensification of Samson’s obsession with his instrument of deliverance—the jawbone of the donkey—which is the prominent theme of his poem, repeated in lines 1 and 3.

A second possibility, which is less likely, is the translation, “I have reddened them.” This corresponds to the alternative vowels in BHS 15:16 note *a*, which turn the dual noun הַמִּרְתִּים into הַמִּרְתִּים, a qal perfect 1cs verb with a defective 3mp ending, from the root הִמַּר “be red.”<sup>17</sup> This alternative is similar to the Septuagint and Vulgate renderings,<sup>18</sup> and would somewhat parallel the final line, in that both speak of what Samson did to the Philistines. It would not be a typical parallel, however, because the former line would be more specific than the latter (“reddened” [with blood] is more specific than “struck down”). Usually, Hebrew parallelism moves in the opposite direction, with the latter line explaining or interpreting the former.<sup>19</sup>

I have chosen the translation “a heap, two heaps” (often smoothed out to read “heaps upon heaps”) for two reasons. First, the feminine form of הִמַּר is not the usual word used for a female donkey, which is a reason to reject the first possibility.<sup>20</sup> Second, this translation has a stronger parallel with the final line than the other translations. “A heap, two heaps” anticipates the object of the final line, and the final line gives a more specific account of the second line—the heaps of dead Philistines tallied to (approximately) “1,000 men.” Keil and Delitzsch also suggest that “a heap, two heaps” indicates that Samson was killing men in bunches, not all at once. Presumably the Philistines fled from before him once they saw what was happening, and Samson chased them down one bunch at a time.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>m</sup> This phrase perfectly mirrors v. 15b: “He struck down with it 1,000 men (וַיִּדֶּף אֶלָּף אִישׁ).” / “With the jawbone of the donkey, I struck down 1,000 men (הִכִּיתִי אֶלָּף אִישׁ).” (In each verse, the verb is the hifil of נָכַח). In fact, Samson’s song in verse 16 is a retelling of verse 15 in the first person. It is significant, therefore, that Samson says nothing in his song about verse 14 and the Spirit of Yahweh rushing upon him.

<sup>n</sup> Lit. “according to his finishing to speak.” כְּכַלְתּוֹ (כֹּלֵה = finish, be finished)<sup>22</sup> is an infinitive construct with 3ms suffix and כּ preposition. The כּ is used in a temporal sense, which usually accompanies an infinitive construct, as it does here.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Stanislav Segert, “Paronomasia in the Samson narrative in Judges 13–16,” *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (October 1984): 456.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The Vulgate *delevi eos* (“I destroyed them”) maintains the play on words, because *delevi* can also mean “jawbone.”

<sup>19</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, vol. 7 of The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, edited by R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 388.

<sup>20</sup> Segert, “Paronomasia in Samson,” 456.

<sup>21</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, translated by James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 416.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 477.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold and Choi, *Hebrew Syntax*, 110.

<sup>o</sup> The ל-preposition following קרא is one grammatical form used for naming in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 1:5 – lit. “And God called to the light, ‘Day.’”)

<sup>p</sup> הוּהוּא is the 3ms pronoun with a relative ה prefix.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>q</sup> *Ramath-Lehi* means “Jawbone Hill.” The Masoretic vowel pointing on להי is that of the location (Lehi), not the object (jawbone). Therefore, in order to remain consistent in my translation (cf. vv. 14, 19), I have simply transliterated the Hebrew. The importance of this consistency will be made clear below in note t.

<sup>r</sup> “You” is emphasized, as Samson begins his prayer, “. . . אַתָּה”

<sup>s</sup> This could either be an exclamation or a question. Moore calls it an “exclamatory question.”<sup>25</sup> Either way, Samson is pleading with God to respond to his situation and not allow him to fall into the hands of the uncircumcised.

<sup>t</sup> With a single vowel change, this could be translated as “the molar which was in the jawbone.” Samson named the place Lehi (לְהִי) because of his exploit with the jawbone (לְחִי). מְכַתֵּשׁ typically means “mortar,” but can also denote a “mortar-like depression.”<sup>26</sup> In context, therefore, the word may refer either to a place at Lehi that was in the shape of a mortar (a “hollow”), or something in the jawbone in the shape of a mortar (likely a molar).<sup>27</sup> Thus, many of the rabbis and church fathers understood this passage to mean that after Samson threw down the jawbone God caused water to flow from one of its molars.<sup>28</sup>

There is some evidence in favor of the church fathers’ translation. In the preceding verses, for instance, when the place Lehi is obviously in mind (vv. 14, 17b), no definite article is added to the word להי. In contrast, three out the four references to the jawbone itself (v. 16 twice, and v. 17a, but not v. 15) employ a definite article. The fact that the usage here does have a definite article might suggest that the author is referring to the jawbone.

Nevertheless, the word להי here is more likely referring to the *place* Lehi, rather than to the jawbone. First, the masoretic vowel marking is that of the place. Second, the same construction (לְהִי) is used later on in the same verse to refer to the place. Third, the narrator says the spring was still at Lehi “to this day,” which seems to disprove the theory of many of the rabbis and church fathers that Samson picked up the jawbone and drank from it, because in that case it would not really be a spring, but only a temporary stream of water running out from the jawbone.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *Hebrew Syntax*, 338–339.

<sup>25</sup> George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, vol. 7 of *The International Critical Commentary*, edited by S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), 346.

<sup>26</sup> Cornelis van Dam, כַּתֵּשׁ, in vol. 2 of *NIDOTTE*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 746.

<sup>27</sup> Holladay suggests “molar” as the translation in this verse (*Hebrew Lexicon*, 195).

<sup>28</sup> Moore, *Judges*, 347. Ambrose and John of Damascus both assume this translation (John R. Franke, ed., *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel*, vol. 4 of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, edited by Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 157).

<sup>29</sup> Moore, *Judges*, 347.

<sup>u</sup> רוח may be translated “spirit” or “breath.”<sup>30</sup> I have chosen “breath,” 1) in order to avoid the confusion of the meaning of “spirit,” and 2) because it fits with Samson’s statement that he was near death (v. 18). His breath (i.e., life) had almost left him until Yahweh caused it to return (שוב).

<sup>v</sup> Lit., “was alive.” The verb חי usually connotes health and strength in Hebrew narrative.<sup>31</sup> Thus, its use here means that Samson has little or no strength left after killing the 1,000 Philistines, and has to be revived or “rejuvenated”<sup>32</sup> by the water Yahweh provides.

<sup>w</sup> הקורא is a homonym that can mean either “the caller” or “the partridge.” Although the meaning is obvious in context, some scholars read into this the possibility that Samson did not really name the place, but only gave the existing name new meaning.<sup>33</sup> This suggestion, however, runs against the plain meaning of the text, and the scholars who suggest it do not provide any external evidence for such a claim. Thus, it appears to be mere speculation.

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<sup>30</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 334.

<sup>31</sup> Terry L. Brensinger, חי, in NIDOTTE, 2:109.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> For example, see Moore, *Judges*, 346.

## Context

The author of Judges provides this summary statement for the book:

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. . . . Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers. (Judg 2:16–19, ESV)

This passage reveals three characteristics of the period of the judges. First, the judges did not deliver Israel; Yahweh delivered Israel, with the judges as his instruments—“the LORD raised up judges for them.”

Second, the work of the judges to deliver Israel was morally right. Some have argued that many of the judges, though they were used by God to deliver Israel, were morally at fault in their method of deliverance. It is true that God often uses human sinfulness to bring about his purposes, and that many of the judges had severe moral failings. The deliverances themselves, however, are consistently presented as positive acts. To suggest otherwise would be to run against the biblical author’s own interpretation. Despite their moral failings, the judges “saved [Israel] out of the hand of those who plundered them” (Judg 2:16). The New Testament, too, has only praise for the judges’ acts of deliverance: “Through faith” the judges and prophets “conquered kingdoms, enforced justice . . . became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Heb 11:32–34). Despite these clear indications, many commentators present Samson as a failed judge who does nothing right, even in his fighting against the Philistines. We must, however, read the Samson story in light of the biblical author’s summary statement about the judges.

Third, the apostasy of Israel continued to heighten throughout the period of the judges—“whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers” (Judg



2:19). Thus, by the time of Samson, the last judge before Samuel and the kings, the corruption of Israel was almost at its peak.

In the immediate context of Judges 15, Israel has once again done “what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years” (Judg 13:1). The Lord raises up Samson during this time to “begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (13:5). The driving verse of Samson’s story comes when he marries a Philistine woman, and the author comments, “It was from the LORD, who was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines” (14:4). His marriage to this woman leads to a lost bet, the killing of 30 Philistines, the burning of the Philistines’ fields, a Philistine retaliation, and an avenging attack on the Philistines by Samson. After this, Samson goes into hiding. When the Philistines raid Lehi in Judah, however, the Judahites quickly determine to hand Samson over to the Philistines to avoid further conflict. Our passage comes as the Judahites are leading Samson into the Philistine camp to hand him over.

### **Content**

In order to explain and draw out the theological implications of this passage, we will look at three themes that appear in these verses: 1) Yahweh’s gracious deliverance of a corrupt and apostate generation, 2) the centrality of Yahweh’s strength in contrast to Samson’s weakness, and 3) Samson’s naming of two places after the fight.

### ***Yahweh Brings Deliverance through Samson***

“Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey. And he stretched out his hand and took it, and he struck down with it 1,000 men” (Judg 15:15). In light of the previous statement that “the LORD was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines” (14:14), this can only be seen as a great act of

deliverance done by Yahweh through Samson. There are two typical objections, however, to interpreting Samson's actions as morally commendable.

First, many commentators note that Samson's use of the fresh jawbone of a donkey would be a violation of his Nazirite vows, because a fresh bone would still be considered part of a corpse,<sup>34</sup> and because donkeys are unclean animals.<sup>35</sup> The law concerning Nazirite vows states that "all the days that he separates himself to the LORD [a Nazirite] shall not go near a dead body" (Num 6:6). This is clearly a special case, however. Ordinarily, Samson would not touch the bone of a dead animal, but in that moment at least 1,000 Philistines were coming towards him, shouting a war cry. The divine call for Samson to do battle against the Philistines precludes Samson's Nazirite vows in this instance.<sup>36</sup> In support of this view, Samson's "finding" of the bone is clearly providential, because it comes immediately after the Spirit rushes on him. As Barry Webb writes, "It would be reading against the whole tenor of the text to suggest that Samson was at fault in taking up this jawbone, any more than the priest Ahimelech later was in taking the consecrated loaves and giving them to David and his men to eat."<sup>37</sup>

It is surprising that few commentators who discredit Samson for touching the bone of a dead donkey mention the 1,000 Philistine bodies lying in heaps around Samson. This would surely be a greater violation of the Nazirite requirement not to "go near a dead body." Samson is a judge of Israel. In this role, one must expect that he, like every other judge of Israel, is called to put Israel's enemies to death. Despite his Nazirite vows, therefore, his killing of 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone is in line with his role as judge of Israel.

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6 of the New American Commentary, edited by E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville, TN: B & H, 1999), 445; Kenneth C. Way, *Judges and Ruth*, Teach the Text, edited by Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 131.

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Ridout, *Lectures on the Books of Judges and Ruth* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1990), 230.

<sup>36</sup> Jordan, *Judges*, 259.

<sup>37</sup> Webb, *Judges*, 387.

Second, some commentators also see Samson's actions against the Philistines throughout his life, and also in this passage, as merely "personal revenge."<sup>38</sup> God may be using Samson's vengefulness to punish the Philistines, but Samson is not to be commended for his self-centered attacks on the Philistines.<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Way goes so far as to say that Samson should not have done violence to the Philistines at all but, instead, should have "appealed to the divine Judge."<sup>40</sup> The whole passage then, for Way, becomes a story about how God can accomplish his purposes through human sinfulness and selfishness, and a lesson against abusing the doctrine of God's sovereignty.<sup>41</sup>

Although it is true that God can accomplish his purposes through human sinfulness, such a lesson does not seem to be in view in this passage. The text does not suggest that Samson's actions should be seen as sinful, for two reasons. First, this account appears to be a reflection of the deliverance that came through Shamgar, who killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad (Judg 3:31), and whose actions are clearly presented in a positive light. Samson similarly kills 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone, and thus may be seen as "another, but greater, Shamgar" in this respect.<sup>42</sup> Second, the purpose of the judges, according to the biblical author, was to "save [Israel] out of the hands of those who plundered them" and to be instruments of Yahweh, who "saved [Israel] from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge" (Judg 2:16, 18). This is precisely what Samson is doing. The Philistines have just raided Lehi (Judg 15:9) and by the Judahites' own admission were "rulers over" Israel (v. 11). Samson's actions are thus in line with the role of the judges described by the author. This interpretation also has support from the

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<sup>38</sup> J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, vol. 7 of Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, edited by James Luther Mays and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), 105; K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary, edited by Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 308.

<sup>39</sup> Way, *Judges*, 132–133.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 133, 134.

<sup>42</sup> Webb, *Judges*, 386.

New Testament, which lauds Samson, along with the other judges and prophets, because “through faith” he “became mighty in war [and] put foreign armies to flight” (Heb 11:33, 34).

### *Yahweh’s Strength and Samson’s Weakness*

“Through faith” the judges “were made strong out of weakness” (Heb 11:33, 34). Yahweh’s strength in Samson’s weakness is the most prominent theme in Judges 15:14–20. This is evident particularly in three verses.

First, in verse 14, as the Philistines come out to attack Samson, “the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, and the cords which were upon his arms became like flax that burns in the fire, and his fetters were melted from upon his hands.” Before Samson can do anything against the Philistines, the Spirit of Yahweh must come upon him. The word “rushed” connotes strength or power when the Spirit of Yahweh is its subject.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Yahweh is the source of Samson’s strength. The word זרועות (“arms”) often carries the metaphorical sense of “activity of power.”<sup>44</sup> Although in this verse the word clearly refers to Samson’s physical arms, there may be a connotation that the cords binding Samson’s arms make him powerless. Only when the cords are broken can Samson act as deliverer. Furthermore, the breaking of these cords comes not by Samson’s own strength but by the strength of the Spirit of Yahweh. This verb מָסַח (“were melted”) has a nifal (passive) stem, indicating Yahweh’s agency in melting the cords.

Second, in verse 15, we see that Samson’s act of deliverance comes through a simple instrument. A donkey’s jawbone is not an ideal weapon, especially for a Nazirite, who is not supposed to handle the bones of a corpse under ordinary circumstances. Nevertheless, when Samson looked around for a weapon, by divine providence that was the nearest thing at hand. This was to demonstrate the power with which the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Samson. The

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<sup>43</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 306.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

account is scarcely believable unless one attributes the deliverance to Yahweh's strength, not to Samson's. As Matthew Henry writes, "To take the bone of that despicable animal was to do wonders by the foolish things of the world, that the excellency of the power might be of God and not of man."<sup>45</sup> Just as Yahweh's strength frees Samson from his bonds, so Yahweh's strength works through Samson and the jawbone to strike down 1,000 Philistines.

Third, in verses 18–19, after Samson's "great deliverance," he is so weak that he is sure he will die of thirst and fall into the hands of the Philistines. Samson, feeling his weakness, realizes that it will take an act of Yahweh no less remarkable than the great deliverance that has just happened if he is to make it out alive. "You [emphasis] have given into the hand of your servant this great deliverance. And now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?" (v. 18). In response, Yahweh splits open a hollow, causing water to come forth from it, so that Samson's "breath (רוּחַ) returned, and he was revived" (v. 19). Samson's breath (*ruah*) all but disappears after the fight, further emphasizing that it was the Spirit (*ruah*) of Yahweh whose strength won the battle. Not only before the fight and during the fight, but also after the fight, Yahweh's strength alone preserves Samson's life and delivers him from the Philistines.

### ***Samson's Naming of Ramath-Lehi and En-Hakkore***

Samson names two places following the fight—the hill on which he killed the Philistines and the hollow where God provided water for him. Between the two namings come Samson's thirst and God's gracious response to Samson's desperate prayer. The names Samson gives to the two places show how God turns Samson's pride into dependence on God.

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<sup>45</sup> Henry, *Joshua to Esther*, 216.

The name *Ramath-Lehi* means “Hill of the Jawbone.” This name reflects the pride Samson exhibits after the fight. The central feature of his victory song is the jawbone, not Yahweh. He gives no credit to the Spirit of Yahweh, which was so clearly the source of his strength, but instead boasts, “I have struck down 1,000 men” (v. 16). Apparently Samson thinks the simplicity of the instrument he used points to his own strength, rather than to God’s. His naming of the place is an effort “to immortalize his triumph with an everlasting name.”<sup>46</sup>

Webb objects to this interpretation, arguing that Samson’s song is one not of pride but of surprise.<sup>47</sup> It is telling, however, that Samson’s song so perfectly reflects verse 15, which details Samson’s slaughter of the Philistines, but reflects nothing of verse 14, which describes the Spirit of Yahweh rushing upon him. Samson may have been surprised at how many Philistines he was able to kill with such a simple weapon, but his surprise should have led to worship not to boasting.

Immediately after Samson names *Ramath-Lehi*, however, he becomes very thirsty, almost to the point of death. In this moment, he realizes his dependence on God’s provision, and is driven to prayer, finally recognizing that not he but the Lord was responsible for the great deliverance from the Philistines. He prays, “You [emphasis] have given into the hand of your servant this great deliverance. And now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?” (v. 18). Kenneth Way thinks this prayer sounds manipulative, with Samson giving God credit merely to get his benefits.<sup>48</sup> But a dying man who realizes his dire situation is not manipulative; he is desperate. Perhaps Samson does still think he deserves some credit for the deliverance, but he knows for certain that he will die if God does not provide for him. He

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<sup>46</sup> Ambrose, in ACCS, 4:156.

<sup>47</sup> Webb, *Judges*, 388.

<sup>48</sup> Way, *Judges*, 133.

now realizes his dependence on God, and at least begins to understand that the deliverance from the Philistines, too, depended upon God.

Samson's attribution of victory to Yahweh and prayer for help should also be seen in contrast with the rest of Israel, who at this time is content to allow the Philistines to rule over her and is not calling out to Yahweh. Unlike in the times of previous judges, the people did not repent and "cry out to Yahweh" for deliverance (cf. Judg 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10). Samson's prayer (15:18) is apparently the first time Israel has called upon the Lord since the time of Jephthah (10:10).

God responds graciously to Samson's prayer by splitting open a hollow and causing water to come forth from it, reminding the reader of similar provision God made for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 17:1–7; Num 20:2–13). After Samson drinks and is revived, he gives a name to this place, too. This time, however, the naming does not reflect his pride but, rather, his gratefulness to God for answering his prayer. He names the place *En-Hakkore*, which means "Fountain of the Caller." Thus, *Ramath-Lehi* and *En-Hakkore* may be thought of as two "monuments," one praising Samson's feat, the other praising Yahweh's provision.<sup>49</sup>

Some argue that this second naming is also self-centered, because it focuses on Samson (the caller), rather than on Yahweh (the one on whom he called).<sup>50</sup> The language used in this passage, however, suggests that Samson's naming is not self-centered, but rather seeks to invite Israel to call on Yahweh as Samson has. קרא ("call") is a *leitwort* in Judges 15:14–20. The Philistines "shouted against (קרא)" Samson (v. 14), Samson "called (קרא)" the place where he killed the Philistines *Ramath-Lehi* (v. 17), he "called (קרא)" upon Yahweh to preserve his life (v. 18), and now he "calls (קרא)" the hollow *En-Hakkore* (הַקֶּרֶא) (v. 19). The significance of this

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<sup>49</sup> James A. Wharton, "Secret of Yahweh: story and affirmation in Judges 13–16," *Interpretation* 27 (January 1973): 57.

<sup>50</sup> Block, *Judges*, 447.

*leitwort* in vv. 17–19 is that Samson’s method for naming (“calling”) undergoes a change once he “calls” upon Yahweh. At first he sought to immortalize his own feat of strength; now he seeks to immortalize his act of “calling upon Yahweh.” By naming the place “Fountain of the Caller,” Samson invites the rest of Israel to call on the Lord as well, which thus far they have failed to do.<sup>51</sup> The author’s comment that the spring “is at Lehi to this day” demonstrates that it became a visible sign that all who call on the name of Yahweh will be saved, just as Samson called on him and was saved.<sup>52</sup>

### **Consequence**

This passage has direct application for pastors and ministers of the gospel, with implications also for the flocks in their care. How often do pastors think the salvation and nurture of souls rests in their own hands? How often is the result of ministry either boasting or distress because the pastor forgets whose strength he relies on? But, mercifully, the Lord brings his servants to the end of their strength, as he did to Samson, in order to teach them that it is by his strength alone that his people are saved. Even when pastors do rely on their own strength, though, there is much comfort for them in God’s gracious response to Samson, who realizes his need only after shamelessly boasting in himself.

This passage ought also to remind pastors to pray. It is only when Samson calls upon the Lord that God’s grace and power become evident to him. How many pastors go on for weeks on end, preparing sermons, ministering to their flock, preaching, and evangelizing, but forgetting to call upon the Lord as the strength and effective cause of their ministry? Just as Samson attributed the Lord’s great deliverance of Israel to his own mighty feat until his thirst caused him to call

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<sup>51</sup> Dennis Olson’s description of Samson as a “metaphor for all Israel” may not be far off (quoted in McCann, *Judges*, 106).

<sup>52</sup> Webb, *Judges*, 390.



upon the Lord, so a pastor will rob God of his glory as long as he forgets to call upon the Lord as his strength.

This is not merely a passage for pastors and ministers, however. When Samson called upon the Lord and the Lord answered, he did not leave it at that, but named the spring after his act of calling on the Lord, thus entreating all the people of Israel to do the same. In this way, Samson acted as a model for the people of Israel. In a similar way, a pastor acts as a model for the people of his flock, whether he knows it or not. Thus, the same requirement of trusting in the Lord's strength that applies to the pastor applies to his flock as well. Nevertheless, it is the pastor who first bears the burden of setting an example in this regard. May the pastors and leaders of God's church, therefore, look first unto their own souls and examine them to see whether their trust is fully in the Lord, in order that they may serve as good and faithful models for their flocks.

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