

Immediate Context

The context and events of chapter 15 are directly connected to those of chapter 14. Samson married the Philistine woman from Timnah but flew into a rage after she betrayed him by telling her fellow Philistines the answer to his riddle. After killing 30 men from Ashkelon, he paid off his debt, deserted his wife, and went back home with his parents. Chapter 15 begins with Samson returning to visit his wife.

Judges 15:1-5 – The Fire of Samson’s Wrath

Samson’s intentions in visiting his wife are clear and without question. He intended to consummate the marriage and had brought along a young goat as a peace offering to appease his wife. Although strange to our eyes, young goats are playful and the gift would have been akin to bringing her a puppy. If female, the goat would later produce milk, perhaps produce more goats, and would eventually produce meat and a skin. This would have been a very nice gift in Samson’s day.

Does the father realize he has done something wrong? What do we learn about him (and possibly the Philistines) from his offer of recompense? **He viewed his daughters as property to be bartered when necessary. By offering Samson his other daughter, we see that he realizes what he did was wrong. Samson had legally married his other daughter and then he gave her to another man.**

What should we make of Samson’s reply to the father in verse 3? **Samson seems to acknowledge that his murder of the 30 men of Ashkelon in chapter 14 was not based in justice or righteousness but some selfish motive. However, he now feels that he has grounds for major retribution against the Philistines.**

Why does Samson direct his wrath towards the Philistines in general instead of the father? **It seems that Samson is blaming this problem on the 30 men who threatened his wife and wanted retribution upon them and their entire city.**

In Hebrew, the word for “fox” is the same as the word for “jackal.” They are both members of the dog family and look quite a bit alike and have sufficiently long tails (see the pictures below). It is possible that Samson obtained 300 jackals because they were more common and traveled in packs. Foxes are more solitary animals by nature. Either way, this would have been an amazing feat of hunting prowess.



A Middle-Eastern Fox



A Middle-Eastern Jackal

Why did Samson tie the tails of the foxes (or jackals) together? On their own, the animals would have likely tried to head for a den or away from town. However, when tied together they would be zig-zagging back and forth, creating the most potential for damage in the fields. This number would have scattered throughout the territory and we read that the loss in Timnah was catastrophic. This was the time of the wheat harvest, typically a dry time of year. Both the harvested and unharvested grain was destroyed, as well as the olive groves. This was a major economic hit to the city. The men who won the new outfits from him had lost far more than they had gained.

Judges 15:6-8 – The Situation Escalates

What is unusual about the response of the Philistines to the loss of their crops? They want to know who is responsible. Samson is identified as well as his motive. Rather than go after Samson at this point, they go after his wife's family. Perhaps they saw this as an easy way to hurt Samson and destroy his ties to their community. They may be afraid of dealing with Samson directly after the fires.

What is ironic about the fate of Samson's wife and her family? Read Judges 14:15. They experienced the exact fate that the 30 Philistine men threatened during the wedding feast. Through her sin and betrayal she brought the fate she feared upon her family.

In response to the murder of his wife and in-laws, Samson makes a vow of vengeance. Why does he also commit to "quit" after that? This remains personal to Samson and does not yet appear to be a quest for God's glory or the blessing of Israel. He probably recognizes that this personal dispute is spiraling out of control and that if he isn't careful, he may awaken a larger conflict than he feels is beyond his capacity to manage. **While he knows that he has power from God, he doesn't seem to embrace his greater purpose nor has he realized the potential of the power that comes from God.**

The phrase "struck them hip and thigh" is not a known idiom that can be easily translated in Hebrew. It probably is meant to indicate the manner in which he defeated them. This was likely a gruesome scene reminiscent of how Samson killed the lion. He may have literally tore the men of the city asunder and stacked them "hip upon thigh" in a pile.

Why did Samson go and stay in the "cleft of the rock of Etam"? The location of this rock is not exactly known, but it is within Judah's territory. He appears to be hiding from the Philistines and seeking isolation. He doesn't go home; he doesn't go to his countrymen; he goes into the wilderness and lives in a cave. He knows that what he has done is likely to instigate a larger retribution from the Philistines. They can't allow the Israelites to have a victory over them like this. Samson was spoiling the status quo. Perhaps he thought by hiding he would allow time for tensions to die down.

Judges 15:9-13 – Bound by Friend and Foe

In response to Samson's latest outburst, the Philistines assembled an army to go to Judah and search for Samson. What began as a personal dispute was now threatening to become a regional dispute.

The loyal Judahites questioned the reason for the Philistine intrusion and when they found that they were only looking for Samson, they were more than happy to oblige. Apparently Samson's reputation had spread because 3,000 men from Judah went to Samson to bind him.

Recall from Old Testament history that the tribe of Judah was one of the noblest tribes of Israel, the tribe of the promised King, and the tribe from which Caleb and Othniel (the first judge) sprang. Their words and actions give us insight into the spiritual temperature of the nation. What do we learn about them from verse 11? *They had long forsaken the command to take over the land given by God (Judges 1:1-2). They were now content servants of the Philistines. In fact, they view Samson's attacks against the Philistines as attacks against Israel because his actions riled the Philistines up.*

Some will embrace "peace" at any cost, but when moral compromise is involved it is a false peace. We see that Israel will not only allow the Philistines to take and torment Samson but are willing to use their relationship with Samson against him and participate in his capture. By this action they are strengthening the shackles of their slavery. **Are there areas of compromise in your life? Have you gone beyond compromise and become complicit in your enslavement to sin?**

Consider Samson's response to Judah in verse 11. Is this a scriptural response? Read *Matthew 7:12*. *No, Samson's response is reactive and based on personal vengeance (Romans 12:19). God was using Samson's actions to accomplish His ends but it is not the type of personal response He calls us to. We are called to be proactively righteous in our interactions so as to encourage a righteous response (treat them the way we want to be treated).*

Why would Samson allow himself to be bound by the Judahites? In my opinion, Samson's strength couldn't be used against God's people but only against their enemies. Notice that he asked the Israelites to spare his life. He probably would not have made this request if he knew that they could not hurt him. Regardless, by allowing himself to be taken to the Philistines, he was positioned to try and put an end to this dispute again by dealing directly with the Philistines. **This situation was likely a turning point for Samson as he will begin to embrace his calling and use his gifts for the greater good.**

The army from Judah used new rope (the strongest available) and tied his arms and feet and delivered him to the Philistines, practically gift wrapped. Step back from this narrative and consider the broad scope of scripture. Does this event remind you of another situation? *In a sense, Samson is foreshadowing Christ. He is hated by the Gentiles and betrayed by the Jews, even though he was empowered to be their savior/judge. This is where the comparison ends because Jesus Christ's righteousness is impeccable. Samson's righteousness has yet to be displayed in any of his interactions.*

What does this comparison teach us about the danger of spiritual compromise? What lessons can be found here for us? *We see in Samson a spiritual low for Israel that would only be exceeded at the cross. God's people were working AGAINST God's deliverer, who was given for their good. When we compromise spiritually, we not only hurt ourselves but we can find ourselves working against God and His people.*

Unlike any judge before him, Samson is one man against a thousand. We have seen some pretty amazing odds stacked against Israel before. This one is unsurpassed in Judges. **The increasingly miraculous nature of God’s working in Judges and the increasingly difficult odds displayed in the scenarios paint a picture of the spiritual state of the nation. As Israel slips deeper into sin, the odds of her redemption decrease and the more miraculous her delivery becomes. Yet as amazing as this deliverance is, it is unworthy to be compared to the work accomplished on the cross. Samson will gain mention in the Hebrews Hall of Faith (Hebrews 11:32) yet Jesus is the object of eternal and universal worship.**

Judges 15:14-17 – The Battle of Jawbone Hill

How were Samson’s bonds loosened? *The language contains a simile, “the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire and his bonds melted off his hands.”* Flax is a plant used to make linen cloth. It is not hard to imagine how easily a burning flax rope could be broken. It is unclear whether the Lord loosed the bonds miraculously or Samson received a burst of supernatural power making the ropes “like flax.” Regardless, it was a miracle empowered by the Spirit of the Lord.

What is the significance of Samson using a “fresh” donkey’s jawbone as a weapon against the Philistines? *Samson was again touching something regarded as unclean, a prohibition for the Nazarite. Practically, this would be a better weapon than an old, brittle jawbone.*



What role did Judah play in this battle? *The description of events in the narrative indicates the Judahites were present when Samson was delivered over and miraculously loosed. Yet they must have fled during the battle because there is no record of their participation or assistance and Samson is completely alone and without aid when he completes the slaughter. **One man did the work of a nation while others sat and watched.***

This is the third time we will have seen some memorable prose from Samson. The first example is the riddle he composed for the Philistines. The second was describing his wife’s betrayal by the Philistines as men “plowing with his heifer.” The poetic lines Samson speaks in verse 16 cannot be easily translated into English so as to get their full effect. Yet, he feels so impressed by what he has just accomplished that he believes it must be memorialized in a poem. It is not only spoken in poetic form but two of the words rhyme in Hebrew: jawbone and heap. Commentator Daniel Block translates the poem as,

“With a donkey’s jawbone, a heap, two heaps;
With a donkey’s jawbone I have killed a thousand men.”¹

¹ Block, Daniel, The New American Commentary, Volume 6, Judges, Ruth. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group. 1999, p445.

What is missing from Samson's poem? There is no mention of HOW this victory was accomplished... the power of God.

Samson then throws the jawbone away and names the site "Ramath-lehi," which can be translated as Jawbone Hill. In verse 16, Samson composes a Hebrew poem and in verse 17 we read that he named the site of this battle. What is going on? Remember that occurred before the days of mass media. By composing the poem, Samson was making the event memorable and easy for others to pass on. By naming the site, he was advertising his accomplishment for generations to come. Samson is pretty impressed with himself right now. This provides us an important context for what happens next.

Judges 15:18-20 – Water from the Rock

After the battle, Samson became extremely thirsty... to the point of death. No one from Judah helped Samson in battle and now no one was there to give him a drink of water. His fear was dying of thirst and the Philistines taking his body and claiming a victory. Why is a man that was spiritually empowered to defeat 1,000 men thirsty? Didn't he fight in the strength of the Lord? Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 and respond. We must lay aside our preconceived notions here and recognize that the Lord works in diverse ways to accomplish His purposes. The Lord could have strengthened Samson so that he was not thirsty or hungry after this battle (1 Kings 19:8). Recognize that the Lord was not only trying to do a work against the Philistines but also within Samson.

What was the purpose of Samson's thirst? The Lord was humbling this man. This is the FIRST time we see him cry out to God. He acknowledges that the deliverance was God's work and he calls himself the servant of Yahweh. He differentiates himself from the "uncircumcised," acknowledging for the first time the need to be a separate people. It is difficult to say whether this is the moment Samson found salvation or returned to God. Regardless, God ordained his physical thirst to address a spiritual need.

Where did the water God provided come from? The King James version states, "*God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout...*" The ESV and other literal translations state that God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. **There is absolutely no argument that God could cause water to come from a donkey's jawbone.** But, which one was it? The text gives us some clues. The answer to the question helps us understand the point of the miracle. Recognize first that Lehi is the Hebrew word for "jaw" or "jawbone."

1. Lehi (Jawbone) became the name of the area in which this battle occurred. See verses 14, 17 and 19. Translating "Lehi" as either the proper name "Lehi" or "jawbone" is the choice of the translator based on the context of the passage.
2. Samson was said to have thrown away the jawbone when he was done with it (verse 17).
3. He named the place where this miracle occurred, "En-hakkore", which means, "the spring of him who called." He called the place a spring (verse 19).
4. We are told that "it" is at Lehi (Jawbone) to this day. Either a spring of water continued to flow from the donkey's jawbone, or the spring God caused to flow from a rock remained at least until the writing of Judges.

For all the reasons listed above, it appears that this was a spring God brought from a rock.

Why does this matter? What is God trying to show us from this miracle? Some who argue that the water came from the donkey's jawbone often tie this passage together with Balaam's talking donkey (Numbers 22:28-30) and Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem (John 12:14) and use it as an illustration of preaching and preachers. Preachers are like donkeys who have been enabled to speak, carry Christ, can use the sword of the Spirit to fight the enemy and then issue the water of life. However, those who argue that the water came from a rock see a strong tie back to God performing this very miracle for the children of Israel in the desert (Exodus 17:5-6) through the hand of Moses. This miracle would remind Samson of God's greater purpose in delivering Israel and demonstrate that God's purpose and power had not changed. We also know from the New Testament that the rock had a greater meaning behind it. **1 Corinthians 10:4** - "*and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*" **The point of this passage is not to point us to the messenger of the Lord, but to the Lord Himself!** That is what the Lord is doing to Samson.

This event was a significant turning point for Samson because we read that he then judged Israel during the days of the Philistines for twenty years. Apparently not only Samson embraced his role, but Israel did as well and he helped them to be set apart from the Philistines, at least heading in a better direction than they were before.