

“Women Who Fooled Samson”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Judges 14-16  
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Women play a central role in Samson’s story—they are his impetus to fight and his ultimate weakness. Without the women, there would be no story to tell.

It all starts with the woman from Timnah, the Philistine, whom Samson sees and immediately wants. “Um, Sweetie,” his parents reason with him, “Couldn’t you find a nice girl from around here?” and you can hear his mother’s subtext, although she doesn’t say it, “You know, maybe you could find a woman who’s not a Philistine, the people who oppress us, from whom you are supposed to be delivering us from bondage?” But Samson is not budging. “Get her for me.” Samson, as you can tell, was a real class act guy. Actually, he sounds bit like a cave man to me. “Me like. Me want.” When his parents try to persuade him otherwise, he only grunts louder.

The narrator clearly portrays Samson as a brute, which is why the parenthetical statement in v.4, “His parents did not know this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines,” sounds like an editorial note added later. It’s as if somewhere along the way in the retelling of Samson’s story, someone cringed at Samson’s insistence on having a Philistine woman and felt the need to explain Samson’s brutish behavior and attribute it to God’s plan.

Whoever added that comment about Samson’s interest in the woman being from the Lord really isn’t doing Samson or the Lord any favors. Apparently Samson needed a reason for revenge against the Philistines. Strange, isn’t it, since all the other judges of Israel went to battle because their people were oppressed? But the oppression of his people isn’t enough for Samson. It takes a personal grudge to get him going. He is a self-absorbed man who only ever fights the Philistines when they piss him off personally. God couldn’t just call him as God calls other judges and servants; God had to manipulate a scenario so as to incite Samson’s jealousy and rage. If that’s really what it took to deliver God’s people, then even God appears to be low on options.

Interestingly, most of the story unfolds without much involvement from God, and without much commentary. We are not told if God approved of Samson or disapproved. As readers we are mostly left to make those decisions for ourselves. So what do you think? Was Samson a hero or an anti-hero?

We’ve already read chapter 14—how Samson married her, how he tells a riddle to his guests and makes a bet with them that they cannot solve it, how the guests secure his new wife’s help by threatening to burn her father’s house if she doesn’t help them (what a happy wedding!), and how she begs Samson until he tells her the answer to the riddle. When the wedding guests answer Samson’s riddle, like the gracious host and chivalrous husband that he is, Samson pouts, “If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle.” Then he kills thirty men, leaves his wife, and returns home to his parents. Hero?

The story continues in chapter 15. After some time, Samson visits his wife. But remember, she's already been given in marriage to Samson's best man. Samson shows up all this time later after deserting her and expects her to be waiting for him. He says to her father, and this is a direct quote from the Bible, "I want to go into my wife's room." And the father is like, "Uh, sorry, I thought you had rejected her so I gave her to your companion. But you can have her sister. She's even prettier." I'm hoping a father only responds like that because he is afraid.

Samson replies, "This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame," which gives us some additional insight into Samson's personal ethic. And so he catches three hundred foxes (like you do, when you're mad) and he ties them tail-to-tail with burning torches and sets them loose in the fields of the Philistines. How do you think the Philistines respond to that? Well, they find Samson's wife, take her and her father and burn them both.

You may remember it was the threat of the Philistines burning her father's house that got her to help them and betray Samson in the first place. But her previous aid means nothing to them now and without hesitation they burn her very body and her father's. What has she ever done to them but obey them? It was following their demands that led to Samson leaving her. The only time in the story she *takes* action is to help them and save her father's house. After that she is acted upon: she is left by her husband. She is given to a new husband. She is burned. She is the passive object of male impulse. The one time she takes action, it is to do as they tell her, and for what reward? When they threatened her, she became a woman trapped between loyalty to her father and loyalty to her new husband, but could either choice keep her safe? Even when she takes action, she is not in any sense free. She is bound on every side by persons more powerful than she. If she is merely God's tool to incite anger in Samson, then God is just one more character who uses her and harms her, and *that* god is no different from the Philistines who burn her, and that god is hardly worthy of our worship.

What we attribute to God's will says a lot about who we believe God to be; thus whether we understand Samson as God's gift to the Israelites or an out-of-control killer is an important theological choice.

It's worth noting that eventually Samson's own people willingly turn him over the Philistines. They are not grateful to him; they are afraid of the mess he has started. Samson agrees to go, but once they turn him over, he goes on rampage killing one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. Hero or antihero?

Also, a thousand men with a jawbone? No other character in the Bible exhibits the same raw physical strength as Samson, but physical strength doesn't equal divine favor. Just think of Goliath. Samson is like a goliath on the Israelite side and no man can take him down. He does, eventually go down, not because a man beats him but because a woman outwits him. Of course, this is not surprising. We already know Samson isn't hard to outwit. He's the classic example of brawn without brain. And we already know women are his weakness. The Philistines know this too, and they try to use it to their advantage.

First they try to attack Samson when he visits a prostitute, but that doesn't end up working. They wait for him to fall in love, this time with Delilah. If she will help them capture Samson, they

promise her eleven hundred pieces of silver. I'm not sure how long that kind of money would last, but it was a lot more than the thirty pieces Judas got. Delilah agrees to the plan and she tries to coax Samson into telling her the secret of his strength. The first three times he lies to her. How does she know he's lying? Because every time he gives her an answer, she tries it out on him in his sleep, then hollers to wake him, "The Philistines are upon you!" and every time he jumps up, strong as ever. How Samson didn't piece it together that she was trying to rid him of his strength, I do not know. Finally, on the fourth try, he gives in and tells Delilah the truth. She chops off his hair while he is sleeping, and the Philistines capture him.

You may know this is not how Samson's story ends. While he is imprisoned, his hair grows back and so does his strength. In the end he manages to take down an entire building on top of the Philistine's heads. He dies in the act, but so do thousands of his enemies. Hero or antihero?

It is worth noting that even though we have five chapters left in the book of Judges, Samson is the very last judge in the book. Throughout the book we see a steady decline in the people's fidelity to Yahweh, such that by the end of the book, things are as bad as can be imagined, and the narrator will report, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." It seems that Samson is the beginning of the end. Even as judge and leader of Israel, he only does what is right in his own eyes and with mixed, mostly terrible, results. Whether he is the last judge because no one will take up the mantle after him or because the people don't want a judge after living under Samson, we cannot know. All we know is that he is the last judge, and after him things go further downhill.

And what about the women in Samson's life? We've already mentioned that there is a decline in the treatment of women in the book of Judges, and the women Samson encounters are certainly no exception. His first wife, whose name we do not know, is more of a pawn in Samson's feud than a person, and she meets a tragic end. The second woman is a prostitute who barely gets a mention.

Then we arrive at Delilah, whose role is more ambiguous. She is the only woman in the latter half of Judges we know by name. She's often portrayed as a seductress and betrayer, but as one commentator points out, if this story was told from the point of view of the Philistines, Delilah would have been a hero who used what power she had to take down a bully. Even if we don't view her from the Philistine point of view, you have to admit she was persistent and resourceful. Unlike Samson's wife, she will not end up a casualty of the Samson/Philistine feud. Instead she walks away with a significant sum of cash, maybe even a shot at financial independence. I'm not suggesting that successful businesswoman equals virtuous woman. But it is worth noting that she refuses to be a victim.

We know that Samson loved her, but the story never says whether Delilah loved Samson. We can make some guesses based on prior behavior how Samson may have treated her, and it probably wasn't with dignity, so I'm not sure it's fair to expect loyalty out of Delilah. If she knew the fate of Samson's first wife, she had reason to be scared and reason to be cunning. For all we know, the Philistines offer was not just about the money. It might have been her ticket to safety. I'm speculating, of course, but the point is that Delilah's character is complicated, and we cannot properly understand her without understanding the dynamics of power that limited her

choices. She was a woman who used the weapons at her disposal to gain the upper hand. Through cunning and bravery, she helped to stop a man on a destructive path with no self-control. Once again, the narrator doesn't tell us what to think of Delilah. As readers, we are left to make our own judgments.

Many feminist critics have noted that while the poison of patriarchy runs throughout the book of Judges, it's not as if the book condones it. In fact, the greater the patriarchal oppression, the worse the people fare. As the book progresses, so does the depravity. Increasingly women are victimized and forced to make tough choices. Men are ineffectual, physically strong perhaps but morally and intellectually weak. Long gone are the days of Deborah and Barak, partners in battle and in song.

Speaking of the women in Samson's life, you have to wonder what Samson's mother thought about all this. Did she mourn how her promise from God turned out? Her son, the deliverer, who turned out to be so flawed, so rash, so self-absorbed. Did she rejoice over the Philistines who died or did she cringe at her son's lust for revenge? Surely his death was not how she had spent her years picturing his victory. Surely this was not what she had prayed for him, hoped for him, dreamed for him. Surely this was not what God had hoped for either, but alas, even a child dedicated to God from birth grows up to have free will and a mind of his own.

Perhaps this is why, eventually, God stopped sending judges and kings, and simply sent God's self—not as a warrior to defend the people but as a lowly carpenter who would suffer with and for the people. God in Christ would approach violence so differently than Samson, so differently than the Israelite kings. God in Christ would play by a different set of rules and a different understanding of power. God in Christ would seek to liberate not just his people, but all people. God in Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself. God in Christ did not seek revenge but restoration. God in Christ shattered the rules of patriarchy and formed instead a new order where all people are equal, all people are invited to the table, all people are worthy of freedom.

Samson, thanks be to God, is not the end of our story. Our story ends with a cross and an empty tomb and the women who find it and tell about it. Thanks be to God, whom we see and know most clearly in the person of Christ. Amen.