

Samson and the Philistines

Book of Judges, chapters 13-16

Samson, the strongest man in Hebrew Scripture, was sort of a superhero. Samson's birth was announced by an angel of God, who told Samson's mother that his hair must never be cut, for the boy would be a "nazarite" or "one consecrated" to God from birth. She and Samson obeyed God's command.

When Samson grew to be a man, he saw a Philistine woman he wanted to marry. He asked his parents to arrange the marriage. They did so reluctantly as the Philistines were people who ruled over Israel at the time. On the way to be with his bride, a wild lion came roaring at Samson. Having no weapons, Samson killed the lion with his bare hands.

Shortly after his marriage, Samson was tricked by his Philistine bride and her family. To get even, he burned down fields belonging to the Philistines, who in turn got even by burning Samson's bride and her father. Samson took his revenge by killing more Philistines.

The Philistines, being stronger than Israelites, went to fight Samson's people. And not wanting to be destroyed, the Israelites decided to tie up Samson and turn him over to the Philistines. Samson agreed the plan. But when he was delivered into the hands of the Philistines, he easily broke the ropes that bound him, and picking up the jawbone of a donkey, he killed a thousand men.

After all this, Samson fell in love with another Philistine woman, Delilah. She was offered 1100 pieces of silver by each of the Philistine lords if she could persuade Samson to tell her the secret of his tremendous strength. Three times he told her stories that were untrue, and three times the Philistines who came to capture him were unable to lay a hand upon Samson. Finally, worn down by her repeated questioning, Samson told Delilah the truth: "A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been consecrated to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak and be like anyone else." Delilah let Samson fall asleep on her lap, then called a man to shave off the seven locks of hair on Samson's head.

Delilah then cried out, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" Samson awoke and ran out to fight the Philistines, but his strength had left him. The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and put him in prison.

After Samson had been in prison for a while, the Philistines held a big festival and everyone gathered to make fun of Samson. They brought him out of prison so he could entertain them. Being blind, Samson asked to lean against the pillars of the building. What the Philistines didn't realize was that Samson's hair had begun to grow out while he was in prison, and some of his strength had returned. Samson pushed with all his might against the two main pillars of the building, causing it to collapse on everyone there, including himself. Those killed at this death outnumbered those he had killed during his lifetime.

Solomon's Wisdom

1 Kings 3: 16-28

King Solomon – the son of king David who killed Goliath – is famous for his wisdom. There is a story in the Hebrew Bible that is often told to show how wise he was.

Two women came seeking justice from King Solomon, each claiming to be the mother of the same baby. The two women had lived together in the same house. The first woman gave birth to a baby, and three days later, the second woman also gave birth to a baby. But on the night the second baby was born, one of the babies died. Each woman claimed to be the mother of the living baby.

(Pause from reading the story to consider: "How would you decide to whom the baby belongs?")

When king Solomon was asked by the two women to make the decision about the baby, he said, "Bring me a sword." When a sword was brought, he commanded, "Divide the living child in two; then give half to one and half to the other."

Immediately, the true mother of the living child said, "Please, my lord, give her the child; certainly do not kill it." But the other woman said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it."

Solomon said, "Give the living child to the first woman; do not kill the child for she is the mother." King Solomon was wise enough to know that the true mother would give up the child rather than allow her child to be killed.

David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17

David, the son of Jesse, was the youngest of eight brothers. His three oldest brothers went off to fight the Philistines, the enemies of Israel. The other four were needed to help tend the sheep and make the cheese. David got to be the errand boy, taking food to his brothers who were fighting.

One day, while delivering food at the battlefield, David heard the Philistine, Goliath, say: "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man that we may fight together." David saw the men of Israel flee in fear before this giant of a man. But David asked: "What shall be done for the man who will kill Goliath and remove this reproach from Israel? For who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" The soldiers answered that the king would offer riches and the king's own daughter in marriage to anyone who could kill Goliath.

David's brother, Eliab, heard him talking to the men and became angry at David for asking such presumptuous questions. He told David to go back to tending sheep. But David's bold words reached the ears of king Saul, who sent for the young man.

"You are just a boy," king Saul said in disbelief when he saw David. "Goliath has been a warrior from his youth."

But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep, and whenever a lion or a bear came to take a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth. God, who saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine."

"Then go," said king Saul, "and may God be with you!" And king Saul put armor, a bronze helmet, a coat of mail, and a sword on David. But these things were so heavy David could not move. So David removed them, picked up his shepherd's staff, chose five smooth stones for his slingshot, and went forth to meet the Philistine.

When Goliath saw the youth before him, he mocked, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks? Come to me and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the wild animals of the field."

But David answered back, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied. This very day, the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

At this Goliath drew nearer to meet David, and David ran toward the battle line to meet Goliath. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it from his slingshot, and struck Goliath on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and Goliath fell face down on the ground, dead.

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled in fear as the army of Israel chased after them. And so David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and stone. David went on to live with king Saul and marry his daughter. And when he grew older, David became the greatest king Israel ever had.

Adapted from Timeless Themes: Stories from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, by Skwire, Moore, and Gowdy (Beacon Press, 1991).