

THE LENGTH OF SAMSON'S JUDGESHIP: COMPARING JUDGES 15:20 AND 16:31

INTRODUCTION

Samson, the powerful Danite who was remembered for waging a single-handed war with the Philistines, generated narratives which are rich in theological, historical, and literary traditions (Judges 13-16). A striking feature of these narratives is that they contain two unmistakable concluding formulas; 15:20 and 16:31. The verse 15:20 reads,

“Samson judged Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines”.

The verse 16:31 reads,

“All his family and kinsmen went down and bore him up for burial in the grave of his father Manoah, between Zorah and Eshtaol. He had judged Israel for twenty years.”

Often overlooked, we propose, these verses provide vital keys to understanding the compilation of the Samson narratives. We would suggest that the compilation reflects concurrent traditions, or memories, about Samson and that Samson embodied the full meaning of pre-Monarchic Judgeship. In other words, based on the placement and references to locations and people in the immediate proximity of these concluding statements it seems that Judges 15:20 reflects a Judahite tradition and Judges 16:31 reflects a Danite tradition.

The concluding statements have an identical remark, “judged Israel for twenty years”, as their common structural core. The surrounding narrative context and other elements within each statement differ dramatically. These differences, as we will maintain throughout the study, seem to suggest different points of origin. If correct, this means that the tradition of Samson's twenty-year judgeship was known beyond the confines of the Danite clan (Judges 13:2) and he was not simply a local Judge whose narratives were elevated to a national importance, as some commentators have suggested.

Samson as a “judge”

Throughout the book of Judges there are two distinctly different types of Judges. Modern scholarship differentiates them by naming them Minor and Major Judges. The “Minor” Judges were those of whom no heroic exploits are recorded; Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Some lists include Shamgar. Little is known of these men but, possibly, they were elders and magistrates whose authority derived from the organizational system originating in the time of the Patriarchs and formally installed by Moses (Exodus 18: 13-26).¹ The “Major Judges” were known for rising to leadership in times of crisis and delivering Israel from her enemies; Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. While the actions of these two groups of leaders varied greatly, they shared the same title, “judge”.

The Hebrew term, “to judge” (שָׁפַט) refers to the exercise of government, a leadership or ruling authority. While God is always the “ultimate judge”, the magistrates and elders decide by the authority of God and act for God in His stead. The Israelite Judge must preside over cases of controversy, “by way of eminence”. Also, the Judge had the authority to execute decisions. Therefore, other terms of “judicial-executive import” must be included in the understanding of the Israelite Judge; words such as “deliver, vindicate, condemn, punish” are connoted by the term.²

The “judge” has a wide range of functions. Perhaps, the best summary of these diverse duties and authorities is offered by G. Liedke; to judge “designates an action that restores the disturbed order of a (legal) community”, between two parties whose relationship is no longer intact. Whether the decision comes from YHWH or his appointed judge, “the cause of disruption between x and y is removed by the ‘judge’. . . [this] restoration of community order should be understood not only as a one-time act but also as a continuous activity” which preserves *shalom*, or well-being. This continuous aspect is the element that yields the concept of “govern, rule”. Liedke, therefore, argues that this is the “normal word” for “judging in the OT” and it was “suited for all phases of legal and institutional history” that range from authoritative decisions and actions of the Patriarchs and Judges to formal legal proceedings.³

¹ Tenney, M, ed. *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 557.

² R. Culver, “judge, govern”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody 1980) 2:947-948.

³ G. Liedke, “to judge”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols.(Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 3:1393-1395.

The root has often related to the functions ascribed the “*dyn*”. In Semitic usage, “*dyn*”, seems to have had a much narrower set of denotations and connotations. This term seems to refer, specifically, to legal decision-making” and this person would be a “law court judge”. The term is used “sparsely” in Biblical literature and usually takes the meaning of “judgement in a juridical sense”.⁴ Some early scholars, such as C.F. Burney, pointed to the cognate “dan”, the tribe of Samson, to “*dyn*”. He argued that Shamash was the judge of the Babylonian pantheon, whose title was “dan of heaven and earth”. He takes this to suggest that the original patron of the Tribe of Dan was Shamash, which would pre-date the Exodus. He also points to “shamash” being a cognate to “shemesh”, the Hebrew word for “sun” and a root of the name “Samson”. Therefore, Burney concludes, based on these etymological connections, that a Danite being named “Samson” was the result of pagan solar mythology”.⁵ This argument has not been widely accepted by scholarship, as evidence of sun-worship in Israelite during this period is lacking. However, Burney was influential in the scholarly community seeing the Samson narratives as purely folk tales. Other early scholars have tried to point to a Greek origin for the name “Dan”, thereby creating an argument that Samson was actually a Greek hero, perhaps a Semitic variant of the growing Herakles traditions. More complex arguments have suggested that the origin of the tribe is to be found in the Greek, Danaoi. Danaus was a legendary Greek Patriarch and, according to this theory, the tribe of Dan is from his line. However, there is no primary or secondary sources attesting to this lineage and there is little justification for such an argument.

The name “Dan” seems to be a play on the word “*din*”, meaning “to judge”. We see examples of this etymology in Genesis 30:6, in the speech of Rachel, and Genesis 49:16, in the Blessing of Jacob. In each case vindication or justice will be attained. To argue that the hero, Samson, was introduced into Danite lore is a suggestion that has no credence. The tribe of Dan was under pressure first from the Amorites (Judges 1:34) and from the Philistines (Judges 15:11). It was a matter of historical circumstance, or necessity, that a Danite would rise to vindicate Dan and Israel from these threats.

Therefore, Samson was an Israelite from the Tribe of Dan. However, the idea of “*dyn*” need not be pared away from his role. On the other hand, his role should not be confined to just the juridical functions of a Judge. His role as שפט (*shpt*)

⁴ T. Mafico, “judge, judging”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY; Doubleday, 1992) 3:1105

⁵ C.f. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (London: Rivington’s, 1918) 392.

must include both the law-court and the delivering aspects of judging. We contend that the two conclusions contained in the Samson narratives indicate these complementary and the diverse aspects of the Judge of pre-Monarchic Israel were fused together in the career of Samson. Furthermore, by being linked together in one set of narratives they helped to unify diverse tribal traditions which would support the unification efforts of King David.

JUDGES 15:20

This verse is an abrupt ending, unlike the usual concluding notes of the other Judges. A cursory reading seems to indicate that this was the end of the memories and traditions regarding Samson's war with the Philistines.

P. Pett sees this verse as a turning point in the narratives;

“This may indicate that he was seen as a deliverer of his people rather than that he actually exercised authority, for his final imprisonment is included in it (Judges 16:31), although he may well have exercised local authority over this period. We actually know little about his life apart from two short bursts (Judges 14-15 and Judges 16:4-22) and this may be intended to indicate that from now on he ruled respectably and wisely, and certainly with authority. He had given Israel back some of its pride. The Philistines probably decided to leave him alone. He was not good news for them. He judged for ‘half a generation’, cut short in his prime. There is a further hint in that of what was to come”.⁶

Pett, correctly, points out that only in chapters 14-15- the middle chapters- do we see Samson acting as the charismatic deliverer. Moreover, the exploits involve Judah and Judahites, not Danites. The theme of Samson's marriage dominates the focus in Judges 14 and center on Timnah, a Judahite city (Joshua 15:56). The Philistines interacting with Judah and the Judahites are the events leading up to the climactic battle at Ramath-Lehi (Judges 15:9-17). Therefore, building on Pett, if this is a turning point of sorts in the narratives than it is the end of the Judahite memory of Samson.

D. Whedon suggests that this verse is a turning point in the career of Samson;

⁶ Pett, Peter. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". "Peter Pett's Commentary on the Bible ". [//www.studydrive.org/commentaries/pet/judges-15.html](http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/pet/judges-15.html). 2013.

“The same statement is repeated at the close of Samson’s history, (Judges 16:31,) but seems to have been introduced here to indicate the time when he first became fully recognized as judge in Israel. His previous exploits had not gained him great influence or recognition as judge outside of the tribe of Dan, as Judah’s action (Judges 15:12) shows. But we may believe when the three thousand men of Judah saw his slaughter of the thousand Philistines, they, too, acknowledged him as judge”.⁷

Whedon’s argument is supported by the accounts indicating that the Philistines only knew about Samson *after* he burned their crops (Judges 15:6).

Furthermore, the text suggests that he had to be identified by his relationship with his would-be father-in-law. Therefore, building upon Whedon’s argument, we would propose that the events depicted in Judges 15 shifted the nature of Samson’s exploits from those of a powerful local leader of a clan to those of a national hero.

J. Benson sees this verse as the recognition of Samson as the one who vindicated Israel, “he pleaded their cause, and avenged them against the Philistines”.⁸ The verse emphasizes the aspect of deliverance. G. Haydock argues, “the Philistines still asserted their dominion over Israel, but with greater moderation than they had done before: and both nations acknowledged the judicial authority of Samson”.⁹ Haydock points to the weakening of the Philistine force and morale with this victory of Samson. Consequently, it also made Samson into a hated target of the Philistines (Judges 16: 23-25).

Early scholars gave significance to this verse that is often lost among more recent comments. Many arguments, typified by J. D. Crossan, see this verse as a variant of Judges 16:31; “This ending to the narrative of Samson would be that of the first redactor replacing all of the omitted Judges 16. It is based on 16:31”.¹⁰ Arguments of this type are based on a cursory assessment. The scholars who follow this school of thought embrace the idea of multiple layers of redaction on the Samson narratives. The concluding notes serve as evidence for their conjectures. However, we suggest that these are part of concurrent tribal

⁷ Whedon, Daniel. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". "Whedon's Commentary on the Bible". <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/whe/judges-15.html>. 1874-1909.

⁸ Benson, Joseph. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". Joseph Benson's Commentary. <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/rbc/judges-15.html>. 1857.

⁹ Haydock, George Leo. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". "George Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary". <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/hcc/judges-15.html>. 1859.

¹⁰ J.D, Crossan, "Judges", *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1:160

memories, of Dan and Judah, unified in the best possible way under the Davidic scribal school. Part of David's national unification efforts was the uniting of the various tribal traditions. Furthermore, the dating of the compilation of the Samson narratives cannot be placed after the Davidic reign, as David broke the power of the Philistines and they ceased to be a threatening force in the region. In other words, the image of the Philistine threat would have little potency or relevance after David's reign, except for the role of being a traditional hated enemy as seen in the "oracles" in Isaiah (Isaiah 8:28-32). Therefore, we would contend that due to the structural differences of the two verses, 15:20 and 16:31, there is little reason to assume that one is based on the other.

The Name "Samson"

The way the name "Samson" is presented, in stark relief, is unique among the Major Judges' accounts. In each case, we read some form of genealogical background; the phrase "son of. . ." is the characteristic feature. It is important to note that the Ehud account contains no such note at the end. We would suggest that the reason for this omission is that Ehud is from the Tribe of Benjamin and to glorify the tribe of Saul in any way would run counter to the aim of the Davidic, Judahite, compilers of Judges. However, the defeated nation, Moab, is recalled. The Jephthah account gives his Gileadite parentage in the beginning of the account and at the end, in place of a genealogical note. The most probable reason for this is that his parentage was not known, being born of a harlot.

In Judges 15:20, the name "Samson" stands alone, with no connection to parentage or tribe. Perhaps, this omission was to prevent confusion between his Danite background and his exploits that involve Judah. Also, to be considered was the strong connection between the Davidic Kingship, being set in Judah, and the Philistines. To omit any tribal lineage would be to make Samson a national, unifying, figure which would better foreshadow King David.

Another, related, possibility is that this is an episode from the "Book of Jashar". It was incorporated into the Judahite traditions because of the featured, albeit cowardly, role the Judahites play in handing Samson over to the Philistines (Judges 15:9-13). The term, "jashar" refers to an individual who is "straight, honest, just, righteous, upright". Scholars have inferred from this term that the book contains accounts of "heroic individuals" or that Israel is the upright person to whom the title refers. The latter is a possibility as "*jeshururun*" is a variant form of the name of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:15, 33: 5, 26). The book seems to

have been a collection of “ancient national songs”, possibly begun in the premonarchic period of Israel and expanded as more heroic exploits were done. It is possible, even probable, that this book should be identified with the “Book of the Wars of YHWH” (Numbers 21:14). Whether it is one volume or two, Jashar represents an anthology of “Israel’s heroic past”.¹¹ It is difficult to conjecture further about the nature of “Jashar”, as little is known of the work; only Joshua 10: 12-13 and 2 Samuel 1: 19-27 can be definitively proven to be excerpts of the book. However, Samson’s victory song at Ramath-Lehi (Judges 15:16) seems to be consistent with the other known texts from “Jashar” as well as the texts which sing of victories that some scholars have argued belong in the anthology (Exodus 15:1-18, Exodus 15:21, Deuteronomy 32, Judges 5 and 1 Samuel 2: 1-10). Deuteronomy 32:30 is particularly significant; “how can one man rout a thousand. . .”. This historical poem seems to have its origins in the 11th century BC, according to scholars such as Eissfeldt and Albright. The poem contains “genuine archaic language”.¹² Many scholars have made comparisons between this text and texts such as the “Song of Moses” (Exodus 15) and the “Song of Deborah” (Judges 5). However, in its final, canonical, form one must allow for homiletic expansions. We suggest that the allusion of one man defeating a thousand is a direct reference to Samson and might be evidence that this song and the account of Ramath-Lehi were found in a common source; “Jashar” or the, possible companion piece, “Wars of YHWH”. Furthermore, we would speculate that Samson’s prayer which resulted in the Spring of En-hakkore was part of the original heroic anthology (Judges 15:18). The prayer shows that the victory was from YHWH, through the hand of Samson. This type of attribution fits well with the nationalistic and Yahwistic, tone set in the known tracts from “Jashar”.

We would conclude that the triumph over a national enemy, the Philistines, would fit well with the anthology of heroism that comprised “Jashar”. Furthermore, if this was part of such an anthology, the name “Samson” would be a needed tool for identification. This book was well known to the Davidic court, as the court makes a direct reference to it (2 Samuel 1:18). Finally, heroic exploits as that of Ramath-Lehi would support the unification efforts of the Davidic Kingship. Therefore, the presence of the name, Samson, seems to indicate a commonly

¹¹ D. Christensen, “Jashar, Book of”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY; Doubleday, 1992) 3:646-647.

¹² J. Blenkinsopp, *Deuteronomy*, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1: 120.

known source from which the events around Ramath-Lehi were taken by the Davidic scribes, if he were not already known from popular circulation.

In the “Days of the Philistines”

Judges 15:20 concludes with the phrase “in the days of the Philistines”. According to E. Jenni, this phrase should be understood as “at the time of”. This understanding suggests that this conclusion did not originate in the time of Samson. Rather, it was written or told by a narrator who knew that Samson was only to begin the deliverance of Israel from Philistine power (Judges 13:5). The time of the Philistines or when the Philistines were in power did not end with the battle of Ramath-Lehi, or with the destruction of the temple of Dagon (Judges 16). Therefore, this verse must be seen as a conclusion of a memory or tradition regarding Samson. The incomplete nature of his judgeship is emphasized by the reference to “twenty years”. The number forty was seen as a symbol of a complete cycle in ancient Israel. The number twenty seems to symbolize an incomplete victory, consistent with his commission before his birth. The reference may also give us a chronological clue as to the time of his judgeship, which we will suggest below.

Also significant is the reference to the Spring of En-Hakkore. The text reads that the spring retains the name “to this day”. This construction denotes “contemporaneity with the speaker”.¹³ Therefore, the account of the battle and the miraculous water from the rock, in light of this construction, must be seen as a memory or tradition regarding the battles of YHWH which were fought by Samson.

The construction of these two verses, containing “to this day” and “in the days of the Philistines” combine to cast this particular tradition in an archaic setting, before the establishment of the Davidic Kingship but still remembered and revered. As generally accepted among scholars, the first edition of the book of Judges was written under David by his scribes. This scribal school was located in Judah, in Jerusalem. Therefore, a Judahite scribe is attesting to the Spring, which is in Judahite territory during the Davidic reign, thereby suggesting that this is a Judahite memory as the battle of Ramath-Lehi, most probably, occurred on the frontier of Judah and Philistia. The battle lines were drawn between the Philistines and Judah, as the Philistines deployed against “lehi” from a camp in

¹³ E. Jenni, “day”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:532-534.

Judah (Judges 15:9)¹⁴ The tribe of Dan was already consolidated into a clan, around Zorah and Eshtaol (Judges 13:2), possibly due to Amorite pressure (Judges 1:34). Therefore, the territory of Judah, now expanded, abutted Philistia. Based on the connections to Judah, we contend that this is a genuine Judahite tradition about Samson, which is akin to, if not part of, the writings of the time regarding the wars of YHWH or Jashar. This work was known to David and his scribes, as it is mentioned by name in the song in 2 Samuel 1. That Judah is presented as being in the forefront of the Philistine conflict is significant. David made the final conquest of the Philistines as a climactic moment in securing his throne (2 Samuel 5:17-25). We, therefore, suggest that a hero defeating the Philistines, whose tribal affiliation is not mentioned, in Judah would make a strong literary, historical, and theological forerunner to David and serve his unification efforts well.

JUDGES 16:31

The final verse of the narratives has a more detailed construction than that of the brief note of Judges 15:20. This difference, in itself, may suggest that 15:20 was part of a list or an anthology of heroes, whereas this reference is formal tribal notice, unique to the Judge. In addition to the detailed construction, one must notice that the name, "Samson", is conspicuously absent. Contrary to some arguments, which claim that the lack of a name is evidence of a formulaic ending affixed later, we contend that the absence of a name points to an origin of the verse concurrent with Samson and his exploits in Gaza, known to the Danites. In Judges 15:20 the name had to be solidly affixed to the exploits because it was narrating a piece of history. However, in this final burial notice, the text demonstrates that these exploits were inextricably attached to Samson, as soon as they occurred, and no identification was needed. Unlike 15:20, this suggests that this was an authentic tribal tradition that was preserved and not part of a canon or anthology.

All His Family Went Down and Bore Him up

It would be fruitless to speculate as to the identities of these people, except to argue that these were part of Samson's extended family and part of the Danite clan. The "clan" is a concept that does not translate well into English. It is understood as a unit of "recognizable kinship" within a tribe. It has been called a

¹⁴ The name Lehi, has been found to refer to a frontier region in many ancient records. Cf. M. Lubetski, "Lehi", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY; Doubleday, 1992) 4:275.

“protective association of extended families.” The importance of the clans, within the tribal organization, is illustrated in the allotments of land to the tribes as, repeatedly stated through Joshua 13-19, the portions of land were given according to the clans. Therefore, a vital function of the clan is to maintain the “territorial identity” of the tribe. As C.J.H. Wright states;

“So when an Israelite gave his full name, including his house, clan, and tribe, it not only stated his kinship network but practically served as a geographical address as well”.¹⁵

J. Gill comments, regarding the family of Samson;

[They came down] “To Gaza, having heard of what had befallen him there. This must be understood of his kindred and near relations, those of his father's family; though it is not unlikely that he had brethren in a proper sense, since though his mother was barren before his birth, yet afterwards might have many children, as Hannah had, whose case was similar to her's”¹⁶

Therefore, the notice, found in Judges 16:31, indicates that these were fellow clansmen. Moreover, by identification references we can argue that these were Danites living in the original tribal apportionments and before the full Danite Migration (Judges 18) took place. Logistically, it seems more probable that the Danites who were in the allotment of land, originally in the South, would have known of Samson's deeds in Gaza by virtue, if by nothing else, of the proximity of the Danite lands which abutted Philistia. Therefore, by these details the narrative is providing clear keys to the chronology of the actions depicted in the later chapters of the book of Judges.

The phrase “went down” and “bore up” has significant geographical and theological importance. These two terms are antonyms. Traditionally, to “go down” was used in describing a journey from Israel to Egypt. However, it expanded to any area outside of the Promised Land and it reflected the geography of the hilly terrain of Israel.¹⁷ Eventually, Jerusalem became the focal point these terms of motion as it was set on a hill and one either went down from

¹⁵ C.J.H. Wright, “Family”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY; Doubleday, 1992) 2:762-763.

¹⁶ Gill, John. “Commentary on Judges 16:31”. “The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible”. [//www.studylight.org/commentary](http://www.studylight.org/commentary). 1999

¹⁷ G, Wehmeier, “to go up”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols.(Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:882-883

the city or went up to Jerusalem. To go down from Israel seems to connote moving toward a place of lesser prominence or outside of the covenant.¹⁸ Therefore, that Samson's family went down to Gaza represents the coastal settlement of the Philistines, compared to the Danites who lived in the foothills of Judah. It depicted the Danites moving toward the "uncircumcised" Philistine nation, who lived outside of the Covenant with YHWH. Later, under David, the centrality of Jerusalem in his kingship would support the movement downward.

That they "bore him up" has a double meaning. First, the family had to dig Samson's body up and out of the ruins of the temple. Then they had to bring him up to Israel.

J. Gill comments;

[They] "took his body out of the ruins of the house, and brought him up on a bier, or some proper carriage, to his own country; and perhaps in great funeral pomp, as a judge of Israel; nor need it be wondered at that the Philistines should admit of it, it being usual in all ages, and among all people, to allow even an enemy to bury their dead; besides Samson's friends had done them no injury, only Samson himself, and the Israelites in general were quiet and peaceable under their government; add to this, they were now in distress themselves for their own dead, and might be in some fear of the Israelites falling upon them, and attempting to deliver themselves out of their hands, since their five lords were dead, and no doubt many more of their principal men with them; so that they might judge this was not a proper time to refuse such a favour, lest it should occasion a quarrel, which they were not in a condition to engage in; and had Israel taken this opportunity, in all likelihood they might have freed themselves from them"¹⁹

P. Pett, argues in a similar way;

"Samson's body was collected by his near kin and was given a respectable burial, and he was gathered to his fathers in the family tomb. It was to the

¹⁸ J. Hartley, "descend", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody 1980) 1:401

¹⁹ Gill, John. "Commentary on Judges 16:31". "The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible". [//www.studylight.org/commentary](http://www.studylight.org/commentary). 1999.

Philistines credit that his body was released. Possibly it was due to the great respect that they had for him as a notable enemy once he was dead. Or it may have been due to the chaos while new Tyrants were appointed. But more likely it was a fear in view of his terrible cry that they had been punished by the God of Israel for their treatment of Samson and did not want any more of it. Respectable burial was considered very important in ancient days, and they wanted him buried and out of the way and at rest where he could do no more harm.”²⁰

With this reference to the going down to Gaza and bearing him up, the singular nature of Samson’s judgeship is again in bold relief. Samson is the only Judge to have triumphed outside of Israel. Theologically and historically, this extends the boundaries of the Kingdom of YHWH and the Kingdom of Israel, which will be presided over by David. Samson begins to extend the borders that David will secure (2 Samuel 8).

Burial in the Grave of his Father, Manoah, between Zorah and Eshtaol

Zorah and Eshtaol were cities which were at the core of the Danite territory. They appear twice in the tribal allotments; Joshua 15:33 and 19:41. It seems that the list in Joshua 15 was an expanded list that was compiled under the Davidic reign and after the Philistine dominance in the region and the Danite Migration. Therefore, it could be officially counted among the cities of Judah.

The details of his burial follow a structure that is consistent with the Minor Judges. Herein we see the tribal identity of Samson. By the period of the Judges, “family tombs of inherited lands were well established”. This speaks to the importance of Manoah and Samson in the clan of the Danites, as “important individuals were buried in prominent places where their tombs would be visible and accessible. . . Men who enjoyed a special relationship with YHWH during their lifetimes were thought to continue that relationship after death and so it was

²⁰ Pett, Peter. "Commentary on Judges 16:31". "Peter Pett's Commentary on the Bible".

//www.studylight.org/commentary. 2013. The triumphant death of Samson in a Philistine temple was a cause for fear; it broke the ancient theology of “territorial dominion”- the belief that a deity was at its most powerful in the land in which it was worshipped, Cf “Samson’s Death Account and the Ancient Theology of Territorial Dominion,” *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 11:15 (Sunday, June 13, 2010)

important to know where they were buried”.²¹ This could suggest that Manoah and, by inheritance, Samson were elders or magistrates in Dan. Furthermore, it could be argued that Manoah was the man to whom Dan, now reduced to a clan in the hills by the Amorites, looked to guide them. He, with his son, also saw the growing Philistine menace arising from the coast. Such a societal position would account for the prominent grave of Manoah, which is preserved to this day.²²

The precise status of Manoah is unclear, but Judges 13:2 may contain an indication of his role in the clan. In what seems to be a second introductory note, we read about a “certain man” from Zorah. In light of the details surrounding Samson’s burial, this seems to speak of the status of Manoah in the clan. The construction has been likened to 1 Samuel 1:1 and 9:1, the introductions of Samuel and Saul. The term usually rendered “certain” (טקא) often connotes the image of “first” or “head”. There is often a sense of uniqueness about the term. The Samuel texts seem to have been constructed under the influence of the Samson narrative. The construction of the phrase tends to signal “the inauguration of an entirely new narrative”.²³ Therefore, the introduction of Manoah seems to suggest a new stage in Israelite history. On literary, sociological, and theological levels Manoah is the marker of a new, preparatory, action of YHWH. Much in the same way as depicted in the accounts of Samuel and Saul, Manoah is the harbinger of preparation for the integral person who is to come. While these men, the fathers in these accounts, fade into relative obscurity in light of the exploits of their sons, they are key figures in forming the integral roles which their sons will play in Israel’s history. By the singular status of Manoah, the juridical and delivering characteristics of the Judges could be fused in Samson.

He had Judged Israel Twenty Years

This burial notice omits the name of the Judge. With his unique exploits and inherited status among the Danites, there would be little reason to include the name, Samson. Without any known heirs, the tenure of his Judgeship and any authority of succession that was derived through Manoah was now over. Like the other Minor Judges’ accounts, we read how he had judged Israel. There is

²¹ E. Bloch-Smith, “Burials”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 1: 786.

²² The tomb of Manoah and Samson is found in the Jewish National Fund President’s Forest, close to the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway.

²³ P.K. McCarter, *1 Samuel* (NY: Doubleday 1980) 51

no mention of the hated Philistines, but the time frame of “twenty” parallels that which is found in 15:20. Clearly, the idea of an incomplete mission was attached to Samson throughout the tribal traditions. However, the Philistine oppression of “forty years” was also attached to Samson. Many scholars have dismissed these numbers as artificial, being derived from forty years being seen as a complete generation.

While the symbolic significance of “forty”, throughout Biblical texts, is beyond question, the purely symbolic connotations of “twenty” may be too narrow of an assessment. B.G. Wood argues, convincingly, that archaeology reveals a destruction of the Temple at Shiloh in about 1085 BC, by the Philistines.²⁴ This represents an incursion into Israel beyond the border battles with Judah and Dan and, we suggest that it was the historical marker for the Danites and Judahites which signaled full Philistine oppression (Judges 13:1, 15:11). In both conclusions, it is written that Samson “judged Israel”. While this notation is common in the Minor Judge accounts, it is not usual in those of the Major Judges. However, we would suggest that it connotes the national scope of his actions. The “forty years” of Philistine oppression would have ended with the era of Samuel, Saul, and David. Therefore, the Judgeship of Samson must be placed within the time period of c. 1085 and the Davidic era.²⁵

This conclusive evidence must be seen in conjunction with further archaeological evidence that shows a destruction of the northern city of Laish, the city which became occupied by the Danites (Judges 18), in about 1050 BC.²⁶ This was a second destruction of this city; the first has been dated to the late 13th-early 12th centuries BC, concurrent with the settling of the tribes. We suggest that this first destruction was from the Danites. This would mean that there was a dispersion of Danites earlier than the formal migration, brought about by the pressure of the Amorites (Judges 1:34). We suggest that this second destruction was done by the Danites in response to the Philistine aggression and in the aftermath of Samson’s death, which was probably the catalyst for the Danite clan to migrate northward. Eventually, the traditions of the initial dispersion and the formal “migration” were conflated. We would argue that the reason for this conflation is

²⁴ B.G. Wood, “Recent Discoveries and Research on the Conquest”, *Archaeology and Biblical Research* 4:104-110 (1991) 109.

²⁵ Most scholars place David’s birth at c. 1040 BC, which would be almost exactly 40 years, and the start of his reign at c. 1010 BC.

²⁶ Wood, 109.

that the Danite tribal identity remained in the South, regardless of the Amorite threat and any dispersion or reactions were not remembered outside of the Danites. The Danite Migration, recorded in Judges 18, relocated the identity of Dan and help shape the national borders of ancient Israel with the phrase from Dan to Beersheba (1 Samuel 3:20). Consequently, this tradition would subsume any local tradition of Danites. Based on this archaeological evidence we would suggest that the twenty years of Samson's Judgeship referred to in both conclusions should be placed between 1085 and 1050 BC.

CONCLUSIONS

While the entire Samson account must be seen under the overarching image of the "forty year" Philistine oppression, the two conclusions must be understood in light of Judges 13:2, the reference to the clan of Dan, and Judges 1:34.

According to Judges 1:34, the Amorites "hemmed in" the Danites. There is not mention of Philistine interaction with the tribe. Archaeology demonstrates that the first destruction of Laish, later renamed Dan, is consistent with this time period. We would suggest that this continual problem with the Amorites prompted a dispersion of Danites, some of whom went northward to Laish and were responsible for its first destruction and settlement. This would explain the designation of "clan" for the Danites; it was the Danites who remained and retained their tribal identity. This condensed and consolidated clan rallied around Manoah and his son, Samson. With their leadership, the Amorites were kept at bay.

Concurrently, the Philistines were growing in power and making incursions from the coast. The land of Judah would now have expanded into the former Danite apportionment, thereby explaining why the Philistines interacted with the Judahites, more than the Danites, in the Samson narratives. It also explains why Samson's exploits, under the irruptive power of the YHWH Spirit, were remembered by Judah. In c. 1085 BC, the Temple at Shiloh was destroyed by the Philistines. This served as a marker for all of Israel, particularly Danites and Judahites, to see the Philistines as a threat to the nation. We suggest that shortly after this destruction the Judgeship of Samson should be placed. In c. 1050 BC, the city of Laish was once again destroyed. We suggest that the formal "Danite Migration" should be dated immediately before this event and that the Danites were responsible for the destruction. The "migration" from Zorah and

Eshtaol, according to Judges 18, was prompted by the death of Samson. Therefore, this would be the end date of his Judgeship.

Therefore, the two conclusions in the Samson narratives, Judges 15:20 and 16:31, reflect the two levels of the Judgeship of Samson. The text of Judges 15:20 reflects a Judahite memory of a deliverer who battled the incursions of the dominating Philistines and began the war of liberation which culminated in David. The burial notice in Judges 16:31 reflects the Danite memory of the juridical warrior, son of Manoah and leader of the clan, who kept them safe against the Amorites by virtue of the repetitive impulses of the YHWH Spirit (Judges 13:25). It is his death which convinced the remaining Danites migrate northward and establish a new home. Furthermore, this suggests that the chronology found in the Samson narratives and the appendices is somewhat accurate. While Judges 18 may conflate the traditions of the dispersions and final migration into one account, the death of Samson seemed to herald the end of the Danites in the South of Israel. Moreover, the two conclusions found in the Samson narratives must be seen as having independent origins of each other while depicting popular and common traditions of a Judge of Israel.

REFERENCES

- Benson, J. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". Joseph Benson's Commentary. [//www.studylight.org/commentaries/rbc/judges-15.html](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/rbc/judges-15.html). 1857.
- Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy, eds. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary 2 vols.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice- Hall, 1968.
- Burney, C.F. , *The Book of Judges*. London: Rivington's, 1918.
- Gill, John. "Commentary on Judges 16:31". "The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible". [//www.studylight.org/commentary](http://www.studylight.org/commentary). 1999.
- Freedman, D., Gen ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary 6 vols.* NY; Doubleday, 1992.
- Harris, R., ed. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament 2 vols* .Chicago: Moody 1980.
- Haydock, G. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". "George Haydock's Catholic BibleCommentary". [//www.studylight.org/commentaries/hcc/judges-15.html](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/hcc/judges-15.html). 1859.
- Jenni/Westermann, eds. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament 3 vols.* Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997.
- McCarter, P.K. *1 Samuel* . NY: Doubleday, 1980.
- Pett, Peter. "Commentary on Judges 16:31". "Peter Pett's Commentary on the Bible" [//www.studylight.org/commentary](http://www.studylight.org/commentary). 2013.
- Tenney, M, ed. *New International Bible Dictionary* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987.
- Whedon, D. "Commentary on Judges 15:20". "Whedon's Commentary on the Bible". [//www.studylight.org/commentaries/whe/judges-15.html](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/whe/judges-15.html). 1874-1909.
- Wood, B.G, "Recent Discoveries and Research on the Conquest", *Archaeology and Biblical Research* 4:104-110 (1991)