

SAMSON

SAMSON'S MOTHER DREAMS OF AN ANGEL

Like many other Old Testament heroes, Samson was born to an older couple who had given up hope of having children. When his mother was pregnant, she had a dream in which an angel told her that her son would be special. Because of this, she was not to drink wine or other liquor, or to eat anything unclean. When the boy was born she was not to cut his hair, for he was to be a Nazirite. He would deliver Israel from its enemies.

When the baby's father was told this, he asked that the angel give them further instructions about how to raise their son. This the angel did, appearing again to the mother when she was out in the fields. This time she ran and got her husband, who came and asked the angel how they should raise the boy. The angel replied that they must not eat anything that came from a grapevine, or drink wine or other intoxicants, or eat anything unclean. After this the father, Manoah, offered a young goat on a rock to God and the angel ascended to the sky in the flames of the fire.

THE GIRL FROM TIMNATH

The woman eventually gave birth, and the boy was called Samson. When he was grown to manhood, he became a fighter, leading his people against their enemies the Philistines. Despite this, Samson had a weakness for Philistine girls. He saw and fell in love with one in a town called Timnath. Get her for me, he said. But his parents objected. Can't you marry a nice Israelite girl instead, they asked. Get me that one, said Samson. She is the one who pleases me.

So they all set out for Timnath, to arrange the marriage. On the way Samson killed a lion with his bare hands - but somehow his parents did not know about this, and he did not tell them. Later he found a swarm of bees and honey inside the dead body of the lion. He took the honey and gave some to his parents, still not telling them where it came from. Then they went on to arrange the marriage. They returned home, and when it came time for the wedding Samson again walked to Timnath. He looked for the carcass of the lion he had killed and found it. It too was full of bees. He scooped out the honey and ate it.

THE WEDDING BANQUET AND THE RIDDLE

According to custom, Samson and his family had to give a banquet for the girl and all her family and friends - there were thirty people altogether. At the banquet, Samson made the guests a proposition. I will tell you a riddle, he said. If you can solve it, I will give you each a new set of clothing. If you cannot solve it, you must each give me a new set of clothing - thirty sets in all. The guests accepted his challenge. This was the riddle: 'Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet.'

The guests puzzled and wondered, but they could not solve the riddle. But they had agreed to pay if they lost. So in desperation they went to the young girl and told her that she must find out the answer, or they would be seriously out of pocket. If she did not wheedle the answer out of Samson, something nasty would happen.

THE RIDDLE IS SOLVED

Frightened and upset, she went to Samson. But instead of being honest with him, she persuaded him to tell her the answer, then she relayed it to the guests. That evening, the smirking men were able to tell Samson the answer to his riddle. 'What is sweeter than honey, and stronger than a lion?' Samson saw at once he had been tricked. And he knew who had given his secret away. Using a rather crude comparison, he said 'If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have guessed my riddle!'

He was seething with anger, but he still had to pay the debt to his wedding guests. So he went down to the Philistine city of Ashkelon and there he murdered thirty men, stripped the clothes off the bodies, and gave them to the men who had answered the riddle. Then, still full of anger, he went home to his parents' house.

When his anger had died down, Samson went back to visit his wife, bringing gifts for her. But her father would not even let him into the house. 'I gave her to one of the wedding guests', he said. 'But don't worry. She has a younger sister who is prettier. You can have her.'

TAKING REVENGE

The girl's father had gone too far. Samson caught a large number of foxes, set their bushy tails on fire, then released them into the wheat fields, vineyards, olive groves and storage silos of the Philistines, causing terrible havoc. In response, the Philistines went to the girl's house and burned it to the ground, with her and her father inside. Then they went after Samson.

He was hidden in a cave. Only when his own people begged him to surrender would he come out. His own people bound him with new ropes and took him to the Philistine leaders - he did not resist. But once there, when the Philistines began to torment him, he easily broke the ropes that bound him, picked up the jawbone of a dead donkey and killed a large number of men with it.

DELILAH APPEARS ON THE SCENE

Some time later, Samson again fell in love, this time with a Philistine woman called Delilah. When they found out about it, the Philistine leaders came to her offering a large sum of money if she could find out the secret of Samson's strength.

She asked and asked, and each time Samson kept fobbing her off with false answers. If she tied him up with seven fresh tendons that had not been dried, he said, he would be as weak as a kitten. She tried it, and it didn't work. He simply threw off the tendons and laughed at her. If he were bound with new ropes that had never been used, he said, he would be weak. But she did that, and he simply broke the ropes apart. If she wove seven locks of his head into her weaving loom, he said, he would be weak. She did it, and he simply pulled his hair out of the weave.

She was angry and frustrated. Three times you have deceived me, she said - and finally he told her the truth. I am strong because my hair has never been cut. If it were cut I would lose all of my strength. This time Delilah sensed he had told the truth. She sent a message to the Philistine leaders. "Come and get him", she said.

DELILAH CUTS OFF SAMSON'S HAIR

That night when Samson was sleeping she cut off his hair, and when he awoke, his hair and his strength were gone. He was easy prey for the Philistines, who took him away and gouged out his eyes. Death would have been kinder, but they were in no mood to be kind.

Samson, now blind, was taken to the city prison. There he was loaded down with chains and set to work in the mill, turning the wheel that ground the flour. But slowly his hair grew back.

One day he was brought out to amuse a crowd at a religious festival to honor the god Dagon. He was placed on view between two large columns that supported the roof. He asked the boy who was leading him to put his hands against the pillars, then he prayed to God for strength, just one more time. He pushed on the pillars with all his might. The roof of the temple shuddered, he pushed more, then it came crashing down onto the screaming crowd of Philistines. Samson died along with the hapless people, but he was a hero to the Israelites evermore, because he killed more on that one day in the temple than he had killed all during his life-time. Samson was one of a kind.