

PHASE TWO
JUDGES 10:6 – 16:31

Introduction

⁶The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, worshipping the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus they abandoned YHWH, and did not worship him.

⁷So the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, ⁸and they crushed and oppressed the Israelites that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. ⁹The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was greatly distressed.

¹⁰So the Israelites cried to YHWH, saying, "We have sinned against you, because we have abandoned our God and have worshipped the Baals."

¹¹And YHWH said to the Israelites, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? ¹²The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites, and the Maonites, oppressed you; and you cried to me, and I delivered you out of their hand. ¹³Yet you have abandoned me and worshiped other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. ¹⁴Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress."

¹⁵And the Israelites said to YHWH, "We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you; but deliver us this day!" ¹⁶So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshiped YHWH; and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer.

This follows the regular pattern of a summary Deuteronomic introduction: apostasy, punishment, pleading and redemption (see 2:11ff; 3:7-9; 4:1-2; 6:1). It is somewhat longer than usual for we are being prepared for the second phase of the period of the 'judges', in which the oppression comes from the newly emerging kingdom of Ammon to the east of the Transjordan Israelite settlements, and the recently established Philistine presence on the Mediterranean coast to the west.

The 'Sidonians' (10:12) were mentioned in passing in 3:3. The Maonites (10:12; 'Maon' means 'dwelling') are not mentioned elsewhere. The Greek Version reads 'Midian'.

‘Mizpah’ means ‘lookout’ (from *šāpâ*, to keep watch). There is a Mizpah in northern Gilead where Laban and Jacob made a covenant (Genesis 31:49). Another Mizpah is the important political, military and cultic site in Benjamin (see Joshua 18:26). The Mizpah in this story would seem to be in southern Gilead.

17Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead; and the Israelites came together, and they encamped at Mizpah.

18The commanders of the people of Gilead said to one another, “Who will begin the fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

8. Jephthah (11:1 – 12:7)

Like Gideon (see 6:11-12) Jephthah is a ‘mighty warrior’ (11:1). Abimelech was the son of a concubine (8:31). Jephthah is the son of a prostitute (11:1). His brothers disown him so he flees to the district of Tob where he builds up his own guerilla band.

When trouble with the Ammonites begins, the ‘elders’ (*zākēn*) come to Jephthah and offer him the position of field commander (*qāšîn*, 11:6). He shows no interest. Then they offer him the office of tribal chief (*rōš*, 11:9). Jephthah accepts. His response (11:10) sounds like an oath of office.

11:1Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. **2**Gilead’s wife also bore him sons; and when his wife’s sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, saying to him, “You shall not inherit anything in our father’s house; for you are the son of another woman.” **3**Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him.

4After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. **5**And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. **6**They said to Jephthah, “Come and be our commander, so that we may fight with the Ammonites.” **7**But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father’s house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?” **8**The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “Nevertheless, we have now turned back to you, so that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and become head over us, over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” **9**Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and YHWH gives them over to me, I will be your head.” **10**And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “YHWH will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say.”

¹¹So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before YHWH at Mizpah.

Verse eleven seems to be referring to an oath of office.

Jephthah's attempt at diplomacy with Ammon (11:12-28)

Jephthah's key argument is that Israel took Transjordan, not from the Ammonites or from the Moabites, but from the Amorite king, Sihon. Israel had fully respected the rights of Edom and Moab.

¹²Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" ¹³The king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel, on coming from Egypt, took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably."

¹⁴Once again Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites ¹⁵and said to him: "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, ¹⁶but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. ¹⁷Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Let us pass through your land'; but the king of Edom would not listen. They also sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. ¹⁸Then they journeyed through the wilderness, went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, arrived on the east side of the land of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab.

According to the account in Deuteronomy 2:1-24, YHWH commanded the Israelites not to interfere in Edom, Moab or Ammon.

¹⁹Israel then sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, 'Let us pass through your land to our country.'

²⁰But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people together, and encamped at Jahaz, and fought with Israel.

²¹Then YHWH, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel occupied all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. ²²They occupied all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

Deuteronomy 2:24-37 tells the story of Israel's victory against the Amorite king, Sihon.

The land under dispute is territory given by YHWH to Israel. It was not taken from Moab but from the Amorite king. In diplomatic language, Chemosh, the god of Moab, is not the god of the disputed land. If the Ammonites want to take control of Moabite territory, should they not be content with the territory that Chemosh allows them. This does not include the disputed land which was given by YHWH to Israel.

The only time Balak is mentioned in the writings of the Deuteronomistic School is in the final chapter of Joshua, when YHWH is reminding the people of all that he has done for them. Balak tried to get Balaam to curse Israel, but he did not take up arms against them.

King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand.

– Joshua 24:9-10

‘Three hundred years’ is consistent with the internal chronology of the Book of Judges. The Deuteronomistic School place the building of the temple 480 years after the Exodus (see 1Kings 6:1). 480 is clearly symbolic. Historical chronology cannot be based on these figures.

In the light of the name given to this Book it is important to note verse twenty-seven in which the verb ‘judge’ (šāpat), and the noun ‘judge’ (from the same root) are both used and referred to YHWH. The authors are drawing on ancient epic tales, but their interest is in illustrating for their contemporaries the judgments of YHWH.

When the Ammonites ignore Jephtha’s second diplomatic message, the scene is set for Israel to go to war to defend its legitimate rights.

²³So now YHWH, the God of Israel, has conquered the Amorites for the benefit of his people Israel. Do you intend to take their place? ²⁴Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that YHWH our God has conquered for our benefit?

²⁵Now are you any better than King Balak son of Zippor of Moab? Did he ever enter into conflict with Israel, or did he ever go to war with them?

²⁶While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the towns that are along the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?

²⁷It is not I who have sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by making war on me. Let YHWH, who is judge, judge today for the Israelites or for the Ammonites.”

²⁸But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent him.

Jephthah's vow and his virgin daughter

²⁹Then the spirit of YHWH came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.

'The spirit of YHWH came upon Jephthah' a proof that YHWH approves of the agreement made between the elders and Jephthah.

³⁰And Jephthah made a vow to YHWH, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹then *whatever* comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be YHWH'S, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering."

Animals were kept in the house. Presumably Jephthah expected an animal to emerge.

³²So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and YHWH gave them into his hand. ³³He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

³⁴Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. ³⁵When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to YHWH, and I cannot take back my vow." ³⁶She said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to YHWH, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that YHWH has *vindicated* you against your enemies, the Ammonites." ³⁷And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I." ³⁸"Go," he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that ³⁰for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Both father and daughter are tragic figures. The story is told with profound sympathy. On the one hand Israel was forbidden to employ human sacrifice (see Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10; also Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-4). On the other hand, Jephthah, however rashly, has made a vow to God. He feels bound by his word. According to the mentality of the day he had to think that it was God's will that it be his daughter who came to him from the house. He therefore concluded that God wanted him to offer her in sacrifice. There are echoes here of Abraham being willing to offer his only son to YHWH on Mount Moriah (see Genesis 22).

This is the second time that the Ephraimites have arrived late and have objected to being ignored. Gideon was able to pacify them (see Judges 8:1-3). Jephthah tries diplomacy, but it fails and leads to an inter-tribal war. Deborah, though from Issachar, carried out her ministry in Ephraim (see 4:5), as did Tola, also from Issachar (see 10:1). Did Ephraim see itself as being the rightful seat for the ‘judge’? Perhaps this is the point of the obscure accusation in verse four.

The ‘Shibboleth/Sibboleth’ story is an interesting illustration of a word being pronounced differently in Transjordan and in Ephraim. It is also an interesting example of the impossibility of distinguishing in writing between the Hebrew consonants shin (שׁ, š) and sin (ס, ś) before the introduction of the pointing system. The result is that in order to distinguish the two consonantal sounds Sibboleth had to be written with a samek (ס).

¹The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down over you!” ²Jephthah said to them, “My people and I were engaged in conflict with the Ammonites who oppressed us severely. But when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. ³When I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hand, and crossed over against the Ammonites, and YHWH gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day, to fight against me?”

⁴Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, “You are fugitives from Ephraim, you Gileadites—in the heart of Ephraim and Manasseh.”

⁵Then the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me go over,” the men of Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” When he said, “No,” they said to him, “Then say Shibboleth,” and he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two *contingents* of the Ephraimites fell at that time.

⁷Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in his town in Gilead.

Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson

The following three were remembered as ‘judges’ Perhaps their ministry was carried out in a period of relative peace.

9. Ibzan (12:8-10)

⁸After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. ⁹He had thirty sons. He gave his thirty daughters in marriage outside his clan and brought in thirty young women from outside for his sons. ¹⁰He judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died, and was buried at Bethlehem.

10. Elon (12:11-12)

¹¹After him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. ¹²Then Elon the Zebulunite died, and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

11. Abdon (12:13-15)

¹³After him Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. ¹⁴He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys; he judged Israel eight years. ¹⁵Then Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

12. Samson (13:1 – 15:20)

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, and YHWH gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. ²There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. ³And the angel of YHWH appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. ⁴Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, ⁵for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”

The Philistines came in from the sea (from Crete, see Genesis 10:14) at about the same time as Israel was emerging in Canaan. Their ability to work iron gave them a decided advantage in battle, especially where they could use chariots (see 1:19). Only with King David did the Philistines cease to be a threat. According to the authors of Judges the Philistines were left in Canaan as a test of Israel’s trust in YHWH (see 3:1-4). Shamgar is remembered as wreaking havoc in the Philistine territory (see 3:31).

Joshua 19:41 lists Zorah in the territory allotted to Dan. Joshua 15:33 lists it as belonging to Judah. Both are correct. Dan was unable to hold on to its tribal land because of the Philistines, and moved to the extreme north of Galilee where the Jordan emerges from Mount Hermon (Joshua 19:47). The name ‘Manoah’ (like ‘Noah’) comes from the word ‘to rest’ (nû^h). His wife is sterile, like Rebecca (Genesis 25:21) and Rachel (Genesis 29:31). This is a traditional way of highlighting a ‘miraculous’ conception.

The nazirite vow is described in Numbers 6:1-21. The two key factors are total abstinence from alcoholic drink and leaving hair uncut during the period of the vow.

The 'angel (messenger) of YHWH'(13:3) is an emissary sent by YHWH to convey a message. The words spoken by the emissary are YHWH's words, and the person who is approached by the emissary is in the presence of YHWH, though the communication is necessarily mediated. The expression was first used in the judgment speech delivered at Bethel (see 2:1-5). It occurs again in the song of Deborah (5:23), and in the commissioning of Gideon (6:11-12, 21-22).

⁶Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name; ⁷but he said to me, 'You shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.'"

⁸Then Manoah entreated YHWH, and said, "YHWH, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born." ⁹God listened to Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. ¹⁰So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "The man who came to me the other day has appeared to me."

¹¹Manoah got up and followed his wife, and came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to this woman?" And he said, "I am."

¹²Then Manoah said, "Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy's rule of life; what is he to do?" ¹³The angel of YHWH said to Manoah, "Let the woman give heed to all that I said to her. ¹⁴She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine. She is not to drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. She is to observe everything that I commanded her."

¹⁵Manoah said to the angel of YHWH, "Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you."

There are echoes here of the story of Gideon (see 6:17-19)

¹⁶The angel of YHWH said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to YHWH." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of YHWH.)

¹⁷Then Manoah said to the angel of YHWH, "What is your name, so that we may honour you when your words come true?" ¹⁸But the angel of YHWH said to him, "Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful."

We recall Jacob's request to the phantom of the night with whom he wrestled (see Genesis 32:27), and also Moses' request at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13).

¹⁹So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to YHWH, to him who works wonders. ²⁰When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of YHWH ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground.

²¹The angel of YHWH did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of YHWH. ²²And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." ²³But his wife said to him, "If YHWH had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these."

²⁴The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and YHWH blessed him. ²⁵The spirit of YHWH began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Esh-taol.

Samson is unique among those raised up by YHWH to liberate Israel. There is no participation of Israel in his being established as a 'judge' (15:20), and there is no mention of Israel rallying to his leadership. He is a loner, the subject of local legends in Dan. Memories of his exploits have taken on a life of their own, embellished by folklore.

Samson's first encounter with Philistines (14:1-20)

¹Once Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw a Philistine woman. ²Then he came up, and told his father and mother, "I saw a Philistine woman at Timnah; now get her for me as my wife." ³But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among your kin, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" ⁴But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, because she pleases me." ⁴His father and mother did not know that this was from YHWH; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

God is presumed to be behind everything that happens (see Introduction pages 28-30).

⁵Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah. When he came to the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion roared at him. ⁶The spirit of YHWH rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart barehanded as one might tear apart a kid. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. ⁷Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she pleased Samson. ⁸After a while he returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. ⁹He scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion.

Manoah's reaction reminds us of the words spoken by YHWH to Moses, when Moses prayed to see YHWH's glory:

You cannot see my face;
for no one shall see me and
live.

– Exodus 33:20

The name 'Samson' (13:24) is related to šemeš ('sun'). YHWH 'blessed him' and his spirit stirs in him. He has been chosen from the womb to be YHWH's saving instrument.

¹⁰His father went down to the woman, and Samson made a feast there as the young men were accustomed to do. ¹¹When the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him. ²Samson said to them, "Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can explain it to me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty festal garments. ³But if you cannot explain it to me, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty festal garments." So they said to him, "Ask your riddle; let us hear it." ¹⁴He said to them,

"Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet."

But for three days they could not explain the riddle.

¹⁵On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband to explain the riddle to us, or we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?" ¹⁶So Samson's wife wept before him, saying, "You hate me; you do not really love me. You have asked a riddle of my people, but you have not explained it to me." He said to her, "Look, I have not told my father or my mother. Why should I tell you?"

¹⁷She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted; and because she nagged him, on the seventh day he told her. Then she explained the riddle to her people. ¹⁸The men of the town said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down,

"What is sweeter than honey?
What is stronger than a lion?"

And he said to them,

"If you had not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have found out my riddle."

¹⁹Then the spirit of YHWH rushed on him, and he went down to Ashkelon. He killed thirty men of the town, took their spoil, and gave the festal garments to those who had explained the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house. ²⁰And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.

Uncontrollable superhuman energy was assumed to be from the spirit of God. Samson leaves the scene of the nuptials at Timnah, and goes to another Philistine town, kills thirty Philistines to get the material for the wager that he lost, returns, pays his debt and angrily dismisses his new bride. As we soon discoverer this was interpreted by her father as divorce. To rub salt in the wound she is given to Samson's best man whose responsibility it was to protect her for him.

Samson's second encounter with Philistines (15:1-8)

¹After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife, bringing along a kid. He said, "I want to go into my wife's room." But her father would not allow him to go in. ²Her father said, "I was sure that you had rejected her; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?" ³Samson said to them, "This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame." ⁴So Samson went and caught three hundred *jackals*, and took some torches; and he turned the *jackals* tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. ⁵When he had set fire to the torches, he let the *jackals* go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves. ⁶Then the Philistines asked, "Who has done this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken Samson's wife and given her to his companion." So the Philistines came up, and burned her and her father. ⁷Samson said to them, "If this is what you do, I swear I will not stop until I have taken revenge on you." ⁸He struck them down *leg* and thigh with great slaughter; and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

'Leg and thigh' seems to be an expression from wrestling. He flattened them all.

Samson's third encounter with Philistines (15:9-19)

⁹Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah, and made a raid on Lehi. ¹⁰The men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" They said, "We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us." ¹¹Then three *contingents* of men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then have you done to us?" He replied, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." ¹²They said to him, "We have come down to bind you, so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines." Samson answered them, "Swear to me that you yourselves will not attack me." ¹³They said to him, "No, we will only bind you and give you into their hands; we will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock.

¹⁴When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of YHWH rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. ¹⁵Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down and took it, and with it he killed a *whole contingent*. ¹⁶And Samson said,

"With the jawbone of a donkey,
heaps upon heaps,
with the jawbone of a donkey
I have slain a *whole contingent*."

¹⁷When he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and that place was called Ramath-lehi.

¹⁸By then he was very thirsty, and he called on YHWH, saying, “You have granted this great victory by the hand of your servant. Am I now to die of thirst, and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” ¹⁹So God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came from it. When he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore it was named En-hakkore, which is at Lehi to this day.

‘Lehi’ means ‘jawbone’, and En-hakkore’ means ‘Caller’s spring’. In his need Samson calls upon YHWH. YHWH miraculously slakes his thirst, and Samson’s spirit returned, and he ‘came to life’.

²⁰And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

Samson and the Gaza prostitute (16:1-3)

The Deuteronomists add another part of the folklore surrounding this hero who stood up against the Philistines.

¹Once Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute and went in to her.

²The Gazites were told, “Samson has come here.” So they circled around and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They kept quiet all night, thinking, “Let us wait until the light of the morning; then we will kill him.”

³But Samson lay only until midnight. Then at midnight he rose up, took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.

Samson and Delilah (6:4-21)

⁴After this he fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

Sorek means vineyard. Delilah means flirtatious.

⁵The lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her, “Coax him, and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may overpower him, so that we may bind him in order to subdue him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.” ⁶So Delilah said to Samson, “Please tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you.” ⁷Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that are not dried out, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.” ⁸Then the lords of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not dried out, and she bound him with them.

⁹While men were lying in wait in an inner chamber, she said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he snapped the bowstrings, as a strand of fiber snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

Folklore is not a place to expect logic. Samson was betrayed by his first wife (see 14:15-20). Does he think that his charm is invincible, and that this is just a game between lovers?

¹⁰Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have mocked me and told me lies; please tell me how you could be bound." ¹¹He said to her, "If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else." ¹²So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (The men lying in wait were in an inner chamber.) But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

¹³Then Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have mocked me and told me lies; tell me how you could be bound." He said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else." ¹⁴So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web, and made them tight with the pin. Then she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.

¹⁵Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times now and have not told me what makes your strength so great." ¹⁶Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. ¹⁷So he told her his whole secret, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a nazirite 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."

Even Samson could hardly be this stupid! He ought to know by now that she will cut his hair. Perhaps he thinks the whole thing about the hair is a fairy tale, and that it will make no difference to his superhuman strength. Lust is not the only weakness in this very flawed 'judge'.

¹⁸When Delilah realized that he had told her his whole secret, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "This time come up, for he has told his whole secret to me." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. ¹⁹She let him fall asleep on her lap; and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. He began to weaken, and his strength left him. ²⁰Then she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." But he did not know that YHWH had left him. ²¹So the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes.

The action of cutting hair terminates the nazirite vow (Leviticus 6:18). When his hair is cut, he loses the energy of the spirit of YHWH.

Samson's final heroic act (16:21-31)

²¹They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles; and he ground at the mill in the prison. ²²But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

²³Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon, and to rejoice; for they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." ²⁴When the people saw him, they praised their god; for they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us."

The rhyme in this song is lost in translation – which is a good reminder to us of how much is necessarily lost when we are not reading the text in Hebrew. The following is the Hebrew text in English lettering. If the reader sounds the lines out loud, he/she will get some taste of the rhyme:

nātan 'lōhēnū b'ēyādēnū 'oy' bēnū
mah'rīb aršēnū hirbāh ḥ'lālēnū'

²⁵And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, and let him entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. They made him stand between the pillars; ²⁶and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them." ²⁷Now the house was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson performed.

²⁸Then Samson called to YHWH and said, "Lord YHWH, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes."

As it was for Gideon (see 6:22) the turning point comes when Samson recognises his need of YHWH, turns to him and prays. YHWH's response is immediate.

²⁹And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. ³⁰Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life.

³¹Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah.

He had judged Israel twenty years.

This last statement repeats the final statement of chapter fifteen, leaving the reader with the impression that chapter sixteen is a supplementary section, attaching further stories about Samson to an already completed account.