

Was Samson Real?

by Lynn Andrew

Critical scholarship readily puts the book of Judges down as legend that has but tenuous connection to real history. Does it matter much? Is a work of Shakespeare of lesser worth than it would be if it reported true history? Why demand that this particular story, the biblical account of Samson's life, be historical?

Before we accept that viewpoint, let us do a quick analysis of the life of Samson as presented in the Book of the Judges of Israel, chapters 13-16.

The first thing we notice is that the four chapters divide the narrative neatly into four episodes that might well have come from separate sources. (The chapter divisions are of a much later date, but even the author could not have divided it differently.) Chapter 13 is about the promise of a national hero and the birth of a savior. Chapter 14 clearly teaches that consorting with the enemy causes conflict, not peace. Chapter 15 is a story about the hero in action, acting as an agent of Almighty God in defeating some of Israel's foes. Chapter 16 is about consorting with the enemy and a subterfuge that leads to death yet victory. It appears that the material for these stories could have been collected by an editor and worked into a narrative centered about a single hero even if the name Samson did not appear in them originally.

If such was the origin of Samson, we must give the editor credit

for a significant literary achievement. There is obvious integrity. All of the chapters are necessary not only for the integrity of the chronology but also for symmetry and balance.

First comes the foundation: the promise and birth of the heroic savior. In both the next chapter and the last chapter, women are the catalysts of conflict; and in both cases the revealing of a secret results in the crisis, yet the episodes are quite different. Sandwiched between those two chapters is the story of the battle where Samson demonstrates the fulfillment of the promise made to his parents. Evidently the editor was artistically inclined.

Moreover there are strong ironic elements: the best man marries the bride; the Israelites tie up their judge and deliver him to the enemy; love leads to tragedy and tragedy to victory. Even in these there is a purpose, and the foundational promise is fulfilled. If it began as a collection of unhistorical myths, we must allow that the editor exerted the influence of an inspired author.

Homer did much the same sort of thing, someone will say. There is no reason to be surprised at literary skill appearing anywhere; it might crop up anywhere in any age, and it has.

Before paying the author his due respect, we might take a closer look at the details purporting to belong to history and geography. Some of them are rather odd. For example, during the encounter with the angel in the initial chapter, only the name of the husband is given (and repeated). This would not be surprising except that the angel appears only to the wife on the first occasion, and again on the second occasion (in answer to the husband's prayer) it is his

wife who is favored with the visit and who then calls her husband to join her and receive the answer to his prayer from the messenger—who turns out to be the Lord himself, incidentally. The chapter begins by identifying their home as Zorah and ends by pinpointing the place where the Spirit first began to move young Samson: "in Nahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol." If there was an editor/author producing this literary masterpiece, why did he not clean up these ragged details? Either he was merely recording, not editing and authoring as we have conjectured, or he was simulating the oddities of incomplete history and being more cunning than a modern novelist.

An impediment to taking Samson literally is the story-book element: he tears a young lion apart with his hands; he captures 300 foxes and ties their tails together. But it would be a foolish mistake for those of us who have had no experience trapping foxes or manhandling lions (as some men have) to judge these things. Our imaginations are no match for reality, and that is the underlying problem.

One of the aims of the *Day and Hour* epic is to present an analogue of Samson in a setting that is more familiar and thereby providing palatable food for our imaginations. Hopefully it gives us reason to be cautious about judging the real Samson.

Again, why is this important?

The writer of the New-Testament book of Hebrews believed that Samson was a historical figure. Samson appears in a list of other Old-Testament luminaries such as Samuel and David. If the

writer of Hebrews was wrong about Samson, he could be wrong about other things. An unhistorical Samson is as dangerous to the edifice of Scripture as the real Samson was to the temple of Dagon.

Ultimately, our destiny hangs on how we regard the message of the Scriptures. Oddly enough, the integrity of the Scriptures depends on how we judge Samson. In other words, when we appoint ourselves judges over this hero of Israel, we find him judging us.

It must be admitted that this essay is something like judging a new automobile by looking at a picture of it. You have to go out and find a copy of the real car and take it for a drive. A discussion like the above really isn't worth much compared to the experience of reading and pondering those four chapters in the Bible.

For example, the episode involving Delilah, by far the most famous of Samson's escapades, is an enigma that has inspired innumerable interpretations in every form of art. As if there were not enough odd things about Samson, Bible interpreters have seen in him a type of Christ in his death—for which his beloved Delilah was responsible. When you embark on a serious study of the Bible you come to appreciate what skeptics and casual readers have no patience for. To the skeptic it seems absurd that Samson could have brought down a building holding thousands. It would be like a man with no tools or explosives bringing down a tall modern building with only his bare hands. How many have closed the Bible over such issues? The purpose of *The Day and the Hour* series is to undermine doubts that plague everyone, not only skeptics.