



Samson

Samson is one of the more famous characters in the Bible, particularly known for his extraordinary acts of strength, and his encounter with Delilah. In one the less prominent events of his life, it is commonly believed by Bible scholars, Christians, and others, that the ancient Israelite judge Samson committed immorality with a harlot in the Philistine city of Gaza, based on the scriptural account in [Judges 16:1-3](#). All one has to do is look at some of the numerous Bible commentaries to see this. Did Samson sin with the prostitute at Gaza?

When we carefully consider both the local and remote contexts of the entire Bible, sometimes we can see that things are not always what they appear to be on the surface.

THE [JUDGES 16](#) ACCOUNT OF SAMSON IN GAZA

“Then Samson went to Gaza and there he saw a prostitute, and went in to her. The Gazites were told, ‘Samson has come here.’ And they surrounded the place and set

an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, ‘Let us wait wait till the light of the morning, then we will kill him!’” (Judges 16:1-2 ESV). Some more loosely rendered versions render it as, “and went in to have sex with her” (Judges 16:1 ISV). Based on a casual reading of this text alone, it’s natural for us today, in our way thinking, find it quite reasonable to conclude that the only reason a man would spent the night at a prostitute’s place would be for his sexual pleasure.

However, the scripture, as literally translated, does not say he slept with her, or had sex with her. In that ancient pagan culture, some harlots were business women who often legally operated brothel houses combined with an inn for travelers, and, perhaps a tavern, as well. The language used here is similar to that of [Joshua 2:1](#), “spies . . . went and came to the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there” (ESV). In these cases, brothel-inn was a good place for foreigners to spend the night in anonymity.

In ancient Canaan, it was common for women operating inns or taverns to also work as prostitutes, with some rabbinic texts and historical, [Jewish Virtual Library](#) translations interpreting the biblical term for a harlot as a “woman innkeeper” or “tavern keeper”. This connection is particularly noted regarding Rahab of Jericho, who is identified in [Joshua 2:1](#) as a harlot (isha zona), but interpreted in some traditions as an innkeeper.—AI Overview

This historical fact is important to help us determine whether Samson committed immoral sin with the prostitute at Gaza.

“But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron (Judges 16:3 ESV). This literal rendering of the Hebrew does not say Samson “lay with her”, but only that he “lay till midnight”. Samson stayed in his room sleeping till midnight, then he got up and did his miraculous godly work against the Philistines. The fact

that Samson accomplished this miraculous feat after leaving the inn owned by the prostitute is an indication that “the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him mightily” (Judges 14:6 LSB). If Samson had been immoral, Yahweh God would not have infused him with his holy Spirit.

The following list is a summary of Hugenberger’s arguments regarding a positive reading of the Samson story as a whole, as well as the story of Samson and the Gaza prostitute:

1. “The biblical text nowhere states why Samson went down to Gaza” (p. 63) and, therefore, the reader should not be influenced by speculations that he was lonely or had an “irrepressible libido.”

2. The expression “he came to her,” is ambiguous and, “In the vast majority of cases the expression refers to one entering into the company of another without any sexual implication” (p. 64).

3. 16:1-3 “offers no hint of moral rebuke,” and the feat of removing the doors, doorposts, and bar from the city gates implies, “if anything, divine approbation” (p. 65).

4. The programmatic text of Judges 2:6-23^L suggests a “positive view of the judges” (p. 67). Hugenberger argues that, “many of the texts assumed to offer incontrovertible proof of egregious moral failure or infidelity toward God on the part of the judges are often susceptible to less negative interpretations” (p. 67).

6&7. Hugenberger’s two main proofs that the Samson and the Gaza

prostitute episode should be read positively are based on the parallels between Judges 16:1-3^L and Joshua 2, and the contrasts between Judges 16:1-3^L and Judges 18. For a more detailed look at the comparisons between these stories, click the link to Kennedy's post above.

7. Hugenberger also questions why God hears Samson's prayers after the Delilah episode if he is the bad character that some paint him to be.

Van Pelt shares some similarities with Hugenberger's arguments for a more positive interpretation of the Samson and Gaza prostitute story. He adds that Samson may have visited a prostitute to mask his true intent. He also notes that the similarities between Judges 16:1-3^L and Joshua 2 may be "the author's way of preparing us for the eventual destruction of that town." He questions what the author's point would be in recording that Samson had a one night stand and argues that "Samson goes to Gaza to do what Israel was failing to do."—biblestudywithrandy.com

We often hear statements like, "God uses flawed characters". Some claim, without any evidence, that Samson had a one night sexual encounter with the Gaza prostitute, and then repented. King David, for example, was an outstanding servant of God, who committed immorality and murder, but then repented and was forgiven by God (2 Samuel 11-12). Does the Bible indicate that Samson was so "flawed" that he had immoral sex with a prostitute?

In this short account, Samson travels to Gaza, spends half the night with a prostitute, steals the city gates, and then travels with them on his back for some 40 miles to the region of Hebron. Was this a night of frustrated

passion culminating in an act of rage as most commentators suggest? Perhaps, but probably not.

Samson's story begins with a miraculous birth to a barren mother and ends with his death in a Philistine temple. The visit to the prostitute in Gaza introduces us to the second part of his life and his well-known encounter with the infamous Delilah. It is, therefore, no accident that we read of Samson visiting a prostitute in Gaza in 16:1-3. This is the same Philistine town to which he will be taken captive (16:21), and the same town in which he will kill more Philistines in his death than in his life (16:30). In other words, Judges 16 is about Samson's overthrow of the Philistine stronghold in Gaza by way of his associations with two women of questionable character.

How, then, does this episode with a prostitute in Judges 16:1-3 set us up for the rest of the chapter? What was Samson doing with a prostitute in Gaza, and did Samson have sex with this prostitute

Did Samson Have Sex with this Prostitute?

Let's begin with the second question. Did Samson engage in illicit sexual activity with a prostitute in Gaza? Most commentators answer "yes" to this question, and most translations leave little doubt in our minds.

However, the Hebrew text does not necessarily require that Samson engaged in this sort of activity. Verse one states that "Samson went to Gaza, saw a prostitute there, and he came to her." The last part of this verse, "and he came to her," is translated a number of different ways. For

example, the NIV translates the Hebrew as “he went in to spend the night with her.” The ESV and NASB go further by reading “and he went into her.” These euphemistic translations imply that Samson had sex with the prostitute.

Such renderings are certainly possible, and this expression does constitute one of the ways in which the Hebrew language can speak of sexual activity (see [Gen. 38:18](#); [Ezek. 23:44](#); [2 Sam. 12:24](#)). This expression, however, does not always carry the nuance of sexual innuendo. Perhaps the best example appears earlier in the book of Judges, in 4:22, where Barak enters the tent of Jael in pursuit of Sisera. The exact same expression that appeared in 16:1 also appears here in 4:22. But this time, notice how the translations handle the text. The ESV translates the expression, “So he went in to her tent,” and the NASB translates the same expression as “and he entered with her.”

It is clear from these examples that the various translations are rendering the same expression in different ways depending upon the context. The [Judges 16](#) text is translated with sexual innuendo because of the presence of a prostitute and what we have been taught to expect of Samson. In [Judges 4](#), however, the relationship between Barak and Jael does not appear to warrant this interpretation. The significant role of context for both translation and interpretation now leads us to ask our second question.

What Is Samson Doing Here?

What was Samson doing with a prostitute in Gaza? For most of us, this

might seem like a naïve question. Isn't it obvious? But let's think from another perspective. If you were traveling in the ancient world, you may have stopped at night in a city on your way to a final destination. Upon entering the city, you would sit in the town square and, if you were fortunate, an elder or other upstanding citizen would invite you to stay with him for the evening (see [Judg. 19:11-21](#)). Thus your presence and your purpose for visiting would become immediately clear. If, however, you wanted to enter a town undetected, it would have been a good strategy to stay with a prostitute to mask your true intent.

If you think that this point may be a stretch, consider [Joshua 2](#). When Joshua sent two spies to look over Jericho, where did the spies stay? They stayed with Rahab, the prostitute. There are, in fact, a number of elements that connect the activities of the spies in Jericho with what Samson was doing in Gaza. First, the designation for a female prostitute is the same in each account ([Josh. 2:1](#); [Judg. 16:1](#)). Second, in both accounts, the men "enter" or "go in" and stay with the prostitute (same verbs). But notice that no one ever suspects the spies in Joshua 2 of engaging in illicit sexual activity. However, we all suspect Samson of doing this very thing.

Third, the inhabitants of Jericho and Gaza discover the presence and intent of the foreign visitors and plan for their demise ([Josh. 2:2](#); [Judg. 16:2](#)). Fourth, and finally, the spies and Samson escape from the town in dramatic and memorable ways. The spies are hidden by Rahab and escape through her window during the night ([Josh. 2:15](#)). Samson also escaped during the night and took with him the city gates ([Judg. 16:3](#)).

Joshua, Gates, and the Promise of Conquest

The comparison of Joshua 2 and Judges 16 and the relationship that emerges suggests that Samson's night with a prostitute in Gaza is the author's way of preparing us for the eventual destruction of that town later in the chapter. We know that the two Israelite men stayed with a prostitute in Jericho to spy on the town before destroying it. Given the larger context of Judges 16, Samson appears to be doing the same thing in Gaza. This is also why the author of the book of Judges was careful to record that when Samson left Gaza, he took the city gates with him.

In the ancient world of the Bible, the gates of a city were crucial to its defenses. Their destruction symbolized the destruction of the city. Recall the lament of fall of Jerusalem in Lamentations 2:9—"Her gates have sunk into the ground; their bars he has broken and destroyed" (see also Jer. 51:30; Amos 1:5).

But this is not the whole story. The real significance of the gates in this text is that God, through Samson, continues to be faithful to the promises he made to the Patriarchs. To Abraham, in Genesis 22:17, God promises, "Your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies" (see also Gen. 44:60). In this text, therefore, Samson is a picture of God's faithfulness to his covenant people to do for them what they repeatedly fail to do for themselves—to possess the land and all of God's good promises.

Samson in the Larger Biblical Story

It hardly seems reasonable to think of the events of Judges 16:1-3 as a one-night stand in the life and adventures of Samson. What would be the point? Rather, we see God, working against the tide of Israel's disobedience to fulfill his promises. Samson goes to Gaza to do what Israel was failing to do—possess the land and eliminate its pagan inhabitants. Like all of the judges, Samson prepares us for the coming of a king.

In fact, you may be surprised to learn that Samson is styled as David's John the Baptist. There are a number of features that connect Samson and John the Baptist. Both are born to older, barren parents (significant birth narratives), both are Nazirites for life (the only two in the Bible), and both are betrayed unto death by less-than-virtuous women. Most importantly, however, both men prepare for the arrival of a great king. Samson begins the final battle with the Philistines, but it is David in 1 Samuel 17 who slays their champion and finally eliminates the threat of the Philistines from the land.

If, however, we look at Samson and see only ourselves, then we have missed something. If we look at Samson and delight ourselves in what we wrongly think are his shortcomings, then we have misunderstand the text. With Samson, God does not repair my culturally deflated self-esteem. Rather, God shows me the beauty of his kingdom and demonstrates that I can believe his promises and, like Samson, "gain a better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35) and so "be made perfect" (Heb. 11:40).—The Gospel Coalition

CONFIRMATION SAMSON DID NOT SIN WITH THE PROSTITUTE

By giving careful attention and priority to both the local and remote contexts of the entire Bible, rather than a surface reading, we get a more accurate picture of God's faithful servant Samson. With that in mind, let's see how Samson is described in the Bible's "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews chapter 11:

"For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions . . . became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight . . . all these . . . commended through their faith"

(Hebrews 11:32-33 ESV). Samson is named as an outstanding servant of God, who was exemplary in faith, having 'conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, stopped a lion's mouth, was mighty in war, putting the Philistine army to flight'. If Samson was an immoral man, as many believe, he would not be listed among the most outstandingly faithful servants of God, who are "commended through their faith".

After a very careful review of both the local and remote contexts of the entire Bible, it is certain that Samson did not sin with the prostitute at Gaza.

THE MORE IMPORTANT LESSON FOR US

"Just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him . . . His letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15,16 NIV). Some things in the Bible "are hard to understand". While the account of Samson's stay in Gaza is quite minor in the overall scheme of things, the Biblical and historical evidence powerfully refutes assertions that much of the Bible is fictional and/or contradictory. But, why isn't the Bible written in a more straightforward and simplified way, so that its truths are more apparent to the casual reader?

God hasn't told why specifically, however, we can deduce that, while it is true that, **"whoever wishes may have the water of life as a free gift" (Revelation 22:17 NCV)**,

it is also true that everyone is urged to:

1. **“Get wisdom, Though it cost you all you have, get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7 NIV)**. This implies that there is a high price (in a sense) to acquire wisdom and understanding, the end result is worth everything.
2. **“Wisdom and . . . understanding . . . look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure” (Proverbs 2:3-4 NIV)**. This implies there is much hard work that must be done to acquire wisdom and understanding.
3. **“In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or perceive’” (Matthew 13:14 NIV)**. This implies that many will not be willing to put forth the effort required to gain an accurate understanding of the Bible.